

NAVIGATING THE PATH FROM INNOCENCE TO EXPERIENCE: AN ECOCRITICAL READING OF RUSKIN BOND'S *OUR TREES STILL GROW IN DEHRA*

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ABSTRACT

The present paper is an ecocritical reading of Ruskin Bond's famous short story anthology, Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra, focusing mainly on the transformative journey of the characters from innocence to experience. It aims at exploring embedded ecological causes interwoven into the narratives, through an investigation of the natural world. It also throws light on the shared relationship between human development and the manner in which the environment impacts it. The paper manifests the ecological dimensions within the narrative of Ruskin Bond's Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra through the lens of Ecocriticism, a theory propagated by Cheryl Glotfelty. The purpose of this paper is to analyse and examine this theory from Indian flora and fauna and its impact on the human psyche. Especially those of the impressionable children. It also examines the path from innocence to experience, conducting an in-depth analysis of the ecological elements in order to explore the role of nature in forming the protagonists' experiences and personal growth. Hereto, the study applies various research methodologies including qualitative, ecocritical, thematic, and textual analysis in order to trace the portrayal of nature and its metamorphic impact on characters. Thus, the analysis unveils how Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra as an eco-allegory, wherein the growing relationship between the protagonists and the natural world is a symbol of the journey from innocence to experience.

Keywords: Ecocriticism, human psyche, innocence, experience.

Brought up in the hills, the scenic beauty of the Himalayas greatly influenced the writing of Ruskin Bond. Even though famously known for his contribution to children's literature, he also received critical attention for mainstream literary works. His literary works consist of novels, poetries, and countless short stories and essays. Bond's writing can be categorised as post-independence Indian literature with themes that are heavily inspired by the English Romantic literary moments. His first book came out when the author was just 21 years old. Even though his first novel documents his experiences of the formative years, through the multitude of characters readers from across the age group can enjoy his works.

When Bond began writing in the 1970s, he drew inspiration from his own experiences, giving his works a semi-autobiographical touch. Bond does not shy away from letting readers know about his struggles with loneliness, and alienation from the adults in his life. He also does not let the sadness and loneliness that he felt creep into readers' lives. By giving it a humorous hint without compromising on the sanctity of the emotions that he felt. This results in shared experiences among the readers and the characters in his works. Bond beautifully incorporates the melancholy of his childhood

experiences with the innocent beauty of the hills, rains, and the people.

In his 50 years long literary career, he has written more than 100 short stories in the spectrum of genres, excelling in all. These genres include fiction, romance, non-fiction, autobiography, travelogue essays, ghost stories, stories about the pre-independence era, revenge, and surrender, etc. His writing style is seamless like a continual flow of water, and that comes from his exceptional power of imagination and by choosing the themes true to his heart.

The literary works of Ruskin Bond are a perfect amalgamation of innocence and experience. He is like an artist who draws inspiration from the elements of nature and paints aesthetically with words. In comparison with visual art, Bond's works can be closely associated with the works of Vincent Van Gogh. Both masked their sufferings in their works and provided aesthetic pleasure to their audience. In his work, readers can witness his immense respect for human life, his affinity with nature, his admiration for the value of relationships, and mostly appreciation of the ordinary things of daily life. Prabhat K. Singh in his book *The Creative Contours of Ruskin Bond* states:

The literature of Ruskin Bond is a harmonious combination of the songs of experience and the ceremonies of innocence. It is an attempt to rouse the world to the 'Delight of the unseen Player', to set us in tune with the 'Dance of life' itself. (Singh, 1)

Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra is a collection of short stories by Ruskin Bond. It documents the journey of Bond from his childhood to the times when he became a grown man. He tells many tales interwoven with his own life experiences with a fictional and satirical touch to it. Bond explored the time he spent in war-torn Java with his father and eventually their escape to India. Before coming to the titular Dehra, Bond also documents the days he spent in other parts of India like Bombay now Mumbai, and Delhi among others. Bond eventually settled in his home state, a small town nestled among the foothills of the Himalayas.

He was momentarily inspired by the mystical and mythical realm that surrounds the mountains, and the anthology under study is a great example of that. Readers get to experience the majestic beauty of the Himalayas and the people that inhabit the land. This brings the semi-autobiographical elements and themes to his works. Bond craftily entwines people and nature together. Especially children. Their innocence and experiences are reflected through nature and vice versa. Stories find mention of the flora and fauna indigenous to the hills. In order to do so, small villages, hills, and cottages are also frequently mentioned. His way of describing shows the pride and deep love he has for the places and the people he grew up with.

Bond himself says:

"Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra" is a captivating collection of autobiographical stories that transport readers to the author's idyllic childhood in Dehradun, while also reflecting on the passage of time and the importance of preserving our natural heritage. (Bookindex.in)

Ecocriticism is a literary endeavour stemming from the last decade of the 20th century that focused on the relationship between literature and the environment. This movement began as a way to bring awareness about the environment and its conservation through literary works. In 1991 MLA (Modern Language Association), organised a session called 'Ecocriticism: the greening of literary studies' to further this effect. It was actually William Ruckart who coined the term Ecocriticism

in his essay, *Literature and Ecology* (1978). This term was popularised by Cheryl Glotfelty, through her essay, "Literary Studies in the Age of Environmental Crisis" published in the book *The Ecocriticism Reader: Landmarks in Literary Ecology* (1996). Glotfelty was of the opinion that the environment is an integral part of human life. The human psyche is shaped by the environmental factors and elements that surround us. Therefore, humans should take its importance and conservation as seriously as they take issues like sexism and racism seriously. She even likened this movement to the phases of feminism. Cheryl Glotfelty states:

Ecocriticism is the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment. Just as feminist criticism examines language and literature from a gender-conscious perspective, and Marxist criticism brings an awareness of modes of production and economic class to its readings of the texts, ecocriticism takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies. (1996: xviii).

Ruskin Bond, being an ardent environmentalist, also advocates the idea of the conservation of the environment in his short story "Death of Trees", "Never Mind. Men come and go; the mountains remain". (*Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*, 94).

Ecocriticism mainly includes the examination of nature as a literary theme, the critique of human impact on the environment, and the consideration of eco-consciousness in literary works. As per Ecocriticism, humans are not superior to nature but are mere co-functionaries, similar to flora and fauna. Human habits and psyche change as the environment around them changes. This essay will focus on the environment and the role it plays in shaping human's journey to innocence and experience by analysing *Our Trees Still Grow In Dehra*. The previous research has been done on Ruskin Bond's works in the context of ecocriticism, and his writings through an ecocritical lens. Ruskin Bond's literary works beautifully depict the harmony between humanity and nature. Moreover, Ruskin Bond's writings investigate how it touches upon the environmental concerns and the consequences of human actions on the environment, including deforestation and wildlife conservation.

In his poignant short story, *The Cherry Tree*, Bond endeavours to instil environmental consciousness and ecological sensitivity in young readers by

narrating the tale of a boy's earnest desire to plant a cherry tree. The narrative unfolds in the tranquil outskirts of Mussoorie, where a six-year-old boy named Rakesh lives with his grandfather. This tale mirrors the genuine connection shared between Ruskin Bond and his own grandfather, serving as a canvas to explore Rakesh's personal growth and his profound bond with the natural world. The symbolic act of planting the last seed of a cherry fruit in his garden becomes a pivotal moment in Rakesh's life, orchestrated with the guidance and assistance of his grandfather.

As the storyline of "The Cherry Tree" progresses, Rakesh's commitment to the cherry tree becomes a testament to his unwavering attachment to nature. Regardless of the changing seasons, he diligently tends to the tree, even during rainfall, "Even when there was rain, Rakesh would sometimes water the tree. He wanted it to know that he was there" (*The Cherry Tree*, 135). This quote from Bond's work encapsulates the essence of Rakesh's dedication, highlighting how he nurtures the tree with genuine care, wanting it to feel his presence and devotion. Through this narrative, Bond not only tells a touching story of a boy and his tree but also subtly encourages readers, especially the young ones, to embrace eco-consciousness and foster a deeper understanding of their ecological footprint.

Bond also showcases to readers how innocent children and experienced adults view the nature that surrounds them. The boy who wants to take care of rain as an experienced adult is happy when trees are cut:

They get in the way so much, don't they? According to my milkman, the only useful tree is one that can be picked clean of its leaves for fodder! And a young man remarked to me: 'You should come to Pauri. The view is terrific, there are no trees in the way!' (Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra, 94)

Hereto, Ruskin Bond's *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* investigates within the framework of Ecocriticism by analysing the depiction of nature, ecological issues, and the human-nature relationship. It reads the textual elements of Bond's work through a qualitative research method with an analysis of the relationship between nature and human experience. Herein ecocritical reading of Bond's *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* is the primary method highlighting its ecological aspects. It aims to showcase how nature is portrayed here in this story collection in the context of ecological

themes, throwing light on the author's views regarding environmental causes. Apart from these, thematic, textural analysis involves studying recurring themes or patterns in terms of the treatment of nature, the impact of human actions on the environment, and the journey from innocence to experience within a text.

The prologue *Maplewood: An Introduction* revolves around Maplewood Cottage in Mussoorie where the writer wrote many of his stories. He describes the natural beauty especially the forest surrounding the cottage that was under the supervision of an eighty-six years old English lady Miss. Mackenzie. Bond being a struggling writer is grateful for the place because here he was dreaming about building a career as a writer. Nature and mountains gave him hope and inspiration to work. Further, he explained the pain of seeing the forest cut down for the requirement of modernization especially for someone who flourished in the place, "If it has gone, don't write and tell me: I'd rather not know." (ix). Bond would love to be in a state of innocent ignorance rather than be a heartbroken adult.

Escape from Java narrates Bond's escape from Batavia, now Java during World War II. He lived with his father and after the Japanese attacked the island they were in the process of moving. After the bombing incident where Bond and his friend, could have been a causality of war, his father hastens the process to get them out of there. They take the seaplane off the island to escape to India. Unfortunately, plane crashed and Bond, his father, and other passengers had to spend days in the ocean for rescue. Even in their adversities, people often find solace in the nature with which they are familiar. It is evident in the dialogue of Mr. Muggeridge, "This is more like it," he said. "You can have all the sun and sand in the world. Give me a rainy day in England!" (13)

After a few days, much to the pleasure of survivors they witness seagulls flying, an indication of the land nearby. Eventually, survivors are rescued by a fishing boat and everyone goes their way. Readers never find out the whereabouts of Sono or the Bond and he ever had a reunion. However, Bond's father gave him hope:

'Perhaps your friend Sono will look up at the sky tonight and see those same stars,' said my father. 'The world isn't so big after all.' 'All the same, there's a lot of sea around us,' said Mr Muggeridge from out of the darkness. (12)

Through these lines, Bond infers profound knowledge to the readers. No matter where we are, what our race, class, and gender is, everyone is part of the same nature. All the celestial beings are the same for everyone.

“Untouchable” is a story about the innocent friendship between the titular untouchable belonging to the Sweeper community and Bond. In the story, Bond is staying alone at their bungalow as his father is sick with malaria. Bond dislikes mosquitoes because they make his father sick. He is also worried that mosquitoes will also give him sickness, “That mosquito, I reasoned, gave the malaria to my father: now it is trying to give it to me!” (25) Bond, because he had a bad experience with one of the natural elements once, now considers that all the insects are the same. He even finds small centipedes repulsive. One night Bond gets scared due to lightning and he rushes to the kitchen to stay with the sweeper boy who turns out to be scared himself:

The lightning flashed, and his teeth and eyes flashed with it. Then he was a blur in the darkness. ‘I am afraid,’ I said. I moved towards him and my hand touched a cold shoulder. ‘Stay here,’ he said. ‘I too am afraid.’ (27)

The scary experience embarks the journey of a beautiful friendship between two innocent souls.

“All Creatures Great and Small” unlike other tales in this anthology focuses on the animals. It documents the time when Bond had to stay with his grandparents in Dehradun. His grandfather is fond of animals and has a menagerie of pets that he keeps adding to. The cohabitants of Bond's house are not conventional domestic animals such as cats, dogs, or even goats but monkeys and even a python. Although grandmother often complains about the animals, she doesn't do much to expel them from their home. True to grandfather's love for animals Bond presents several anecdotes of Toto the mischievous monkey, a young python that was fond of its own reflection but not visiting Aunt Mabel, a tortoise, a few frogs from the nearby pond, etc. She even takes keenness for them as time passes. Grandfather on the other hand treats animals as if they are synonymous with humans.

Grandmother nearly fainted at the sight of the python curled around Grandfather's throat. ‘You'll be strangled!’ she cried. ‘Get rid of it at once!’ ‘Nonsense,’ said Grandfather. ‘He's only a young fellow. He'll soon get used to us.’ (33)

The story celebrates the gift of nature and coexistence. Unfortunately, once Bond leaves the town, he doesn't see those animals often but still, the memories and the experiences that he accumulated in their proximity stay with him. He often relishes those memories like the birds that migrate to warm places every winter.

“Coming Home to Dehra” narrates Bond's return to Dehradun after his father's death. His grandmother brings him to meet his mother, but she is away on a hunting trip. However, Bond doesn't care much for his mother's absence. Throughout the story, Bond mentions his father and the time they spent together during their vacations. His father had died and he was to stay with his mother and stepfather. He remembers the news of his father's death but has not seen his dead body; he yearns for closure. He still harbours hope that he might see him again. He writes:

I suppose if one is present when a loved one dies, or sees him dead and laid out and later buried, one is convinced of the finality of the thing and finds it easier to adapt to the changed circumstances. (44)

When his mother returns from the hunting trip, she and Bond exchange courtesy greetings. Bond is not too sad about his mother's ignorance of him, instead, he finds solace in his room, from where he can see nature:

There was a big window to my room, and I opened it to the evening breeze, and gazed out onto the garden, a rather unkempt place where marigolds and a sort of wild blue everlasting grew rampant among the litchi trees. (44)

Upon analysing this story, it is easy to conclude that sometimes, nature plays the role of the guardian who protects us from unwanted misery. There is no need for words to be spoken or even soft touches to be shared, just being in the proximity of natural beings, one can feel at home even in the alienated house. Bond craftily tells readers about the healing nature of the environment, where even an innocent child who is grieving the loss of his parents finds comfort. Bond lost his father physically and mother emotionally. Instead of being harsh like society and forcing Bond to be an adult in the absence of his parents, nature gives him an opportunity to be a child who just wants to grieve his father in his own way.

“The Last Tonga Ride” speaks of an unconventional friendship between young Bond and Bansi, a middle-aged Tonga driver. He also

talks about the ill effects of modernisation. Technological advancements not only harm nature but even humans as well. From the beginning of the story, Bond gives several instances where small activities in the lap of nature aid in strengthening his friendship with the Tonga driver. In “The Last Tonga Ride”, Bond says, “The tree made the first move, the first friendship it allowed a leaf to fall.” (51). They spend time discussing birds and animals that inhabit the area. Soon after his father's death, Bond's grandmother decides to take him to England, a place that is much more developed and industrialised than India. Bond is keen on keeping his friendship with tonga driver Bansi Lal unaware of the cycle of life and time. Bansi on the other hand, rich in experience is aware of the hard times that will soon follow. He says, “Times are changing, Memsahib. Do you know that there is now a taxi— a motor car—competing with the tongas of Dehra? You are lucky to be leaving. If you stay, you will see me starve to death!” (57)

“As Time Goes By” is a story of three friends, Somi and Dal. He narrates their frolics and mischievous play together. Bond finds a little pond hidden behind the forest and this strengthens the friendship between them. Boys are different in their liking of the activities that they like to do, it is their love for pool and nature that brings them together, “I think it was the pool that brought us together more than anything else. We made it a secret, private pool and invited no others.” (80)

As time passes, boys grow up and carve their different paths in life. Unfortunately, one of them dies and Bond loses touch with the other boy. The memories that he had collected with them during their time together at the pond stay with him. Bond once visits the area where the pond was located only to find out that it is dried up. However, as a poetic rebalance of nature, there is another stream and another pond nearby. Bond looks through the thick forest and finds a bunch of young kids making merry in the new pond the same way he and his friends used to, “ I found another stream and another pool and about half-a-dozen children splashing about in the water.” (80). Nature always finds a way to bring balance and harmony to those who are willing to enjoy it. Children are more prone to indulge themselves in the proximity of it, while adults choose to reminisce about the time that had once been spent in the lap of nature.

In the story, “Desert Rhapsody”, Bond writes about his experiences while staying at a rest house on the

outskirts of Jodhpur. He spends most of his time in the verandah staring at a nearby pond. He does this partially because he had found scorpions in his room and partially because it reminded him of the similar memories that he had in his childhood. Bond often contemplates reliving those memories but he knows societal constraints, “But the pond looked inviting.” (106), but he doesn't barge into it. with youthful kids having fun in the water just like his old days. He admires the buffaloes and cormorants that visit the place. Unfortunately, for Bond, he discovers after the night that he spent with scorpions that there are also reptiles that are accommodating the place. Bond, who has no tolerance for them, chooses to leave the place by early bus. Caretaker Bhim on the other hand is not bothered about scorpions and snakes as he is accustomed to their presence. As he is leaving the place, he finds sudden comfort in the tranquil ambience of the desert and its inhabitants:

I waited on the veranda, taking a last look at the pond. It was certainly safer outside than in the house. The buffaloes were back. So were their young minders. So was the cormorant. And the tortoise was there too. It was all very peaceful—just another tranquil day in the desert. (108)

Similar to Bond, another modernist writer D. H. Lawrence, a fervent advocate of the religion of blood, yearned for a profound connection with the Earth and pined for the vivid sensory delights that enveloped him. He also rejected the discordant march of material progress, which he believed dulled human sensibilities and rendered life mechanical. Lawrence found solace in tramping around the hills. Each step offered him a plethora of sensations and impressions, thrilling his nerves with every encounter, passerby, and sound during his contemplative walks. For him, being in the lap of nature was in its truest sense the only way to be alive.

Bond also advocates the same notion through his stories and characters. He carefully interconnects innocence with the beauty of nature and harsh experiences with mechanical growth and modernisation. Characteristic of Bond's creations not just his characters but the world that he creates through his words is their primitive innocence and unwavering faith in nature, embodying attributes like innocence, simplicity, and purity. They present the idealised version of life's finest quality—the ability to derive happiness and contentment from

everyday occurrences. His prolonged intimacy with Nature granted him a unique understanding of its inhabitants. From butterflies and caterpillars to beetles and squirrels, he meticulously observed the charm of these tiny creatures, recording a photographic narrative of their ways and habits like a biologist. In his eyes, these creatures were not inferior to humans but vital contributors to the intricate tapestry of the globe.

Our Trees Still Grows in Dehra is a collection of short stories by Ruskin Bond, even then each story is very closely interlinked with each other. In this book, he traces his life from childhood through teenage to adulthood. It encapsulates the places where Ruskin Bond's life and work flourished. The spectrum of stories is wide ranging from childhood tales to his struggles as a young writer. The stories and language are simple in tone and tenor with a relaxed casual narrative style that is both melancholy and uplifting in places. In the Himalayas, from the confines of pines, deodars, and maples to modernised city life, the stories portray human life cultivated in an idyllic paradise.

Key findings and insights in Ruskin Bond's *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* from the lens of ecocritical reading reflect the deep and profound connection between characters and nature, symbolising the journey from innocence to experience. Children are often on the positive and benevolent side of nature. They find fruits, flowers, ponds, and the blossoms of their first love in nature. Adults on the other hand are always at the loggerheads or often find dried ponds, scorpions or suffer because of excessive modernisation. However, there are some people like Bond's grandfather, who find comfort and pleasure in the

lap of nature because they have not lost their sense of innocence. The narratives vividly show how association with the natural moulds individuals embedding wisdom and self-awareness and fostering ecological consciousness.

Ruskin Bond unequivocally asserts that human progress is intricately tied to nature; without it, advancement is futile. His writings convey a consistent message to readers worldwide through his variety of characters and stories. He explores diverse themes like love, pets, orphans, nature, and contemporary life. Bond's creative world revolves around the landscape and social milieu of his formative years, establishing a profound correlation between nature and humanity. His stories, set in recognizable Indian locales, impart knowledge and present vividly dramatised ideas. Bond's narratives, with a moral and didactic tone, showcase his genuine affinity for the natural world, marking him as an environmentalist writer with Romantic themes with a Wordsworthian quality.

To conclude, Bond's *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* can be easily interpreted as an allegory of the human journey. The growing relationship between characters and nature in the stories symbolises the transition from innocence to experience for the way characters adapt themselves to the natural world. They undergo a transformative process, reflecting the deep changes that occur as an individual confronts challenges in life. Bond's vivid projection of the beauty of nature and its role in shaping the characters' lives, signifies the awakening of wisdom and self-awareness. It also explores how our connection with the natural world serves as a metaphor for the universal path from innocence to the nuanced depths of experience.

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