

CHAPTER 6

**Life in the Hills: An Ecocritical Reading of Ruskin Bond's Select Writings**

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**Abstract**

The virginal beauty of the Himalayas is alluring and people flocking to the Himalayan towns to enjoy its pristine pulchritude and simple life is a testimony to it. So, what is it like living in the hills? Is it a simple, uncomplicated and happy life as the tourists envision or a life full of struggles? And if it is indeed a life full of struggles then how have the Himalayan communities managed to survive in the lap of nature for so long? Nature, as Raymond Williams notes has an “extraordinary amount of human history” (Williams, 1980, 67). This history albeit is a complicated one where on one hand, you will find communities (in this context, the Himalayan communities) co-habiting and co-existing peacefully with nature and on the other hand you will find Nature being severely damaged due to human interventions in the form of industrialisation and commercialisation. Our relation with nature thereby has reached a highly critical point. This paper seeks to explore this complicated relationship between man and nature that traces its roots to the Age of Enlightenment. Although Enlightenment ushered in an era of a modern and scientific world, it nevertheless exploited natural resources brutally and this exploitation still continues. It is in this context thereby ecocriticism becomes an important literary discourse and to further probe this, I will be analysing Ruskin Bond's writings to examine man's relationship with nature and 'beings' of nature and demonstrate how modernity has suffocated nature. Bond's bond with nature is not just about enjoyment and enrichment but a bond that implores him to cultivate environmental consciousness among people so reflected in his choices of protagonists, which will be discussed in the final section of the paper.

**Keywords:** *Nature, Himalayan landscape, Ecocriticism, Ruskin Bond*

### **Life in the Hills: An Ecocritical Reading of Ruskin Bond's Select Writings**

Listen to the night wind in the trees,  
Listen to the summer grass singing;  
Listen to the time that's tripping by,  
And the dawn dew falling.  
Listen to the moon as it climbs the sky,  
Listen to the pebbles humming;  
Listen to the mist in the trembling leaves,  
And the silence calling.

-Ruskin Bond, "Sounds I Like to Hear".

The lines quoted above beautifully depicts the virginal beauty of Himalayan landscape and it is this "silence" of the hills that captivates people to flock to the Himalayan towns and enjoy its pristine beauty and simple life. The Himalayas greets you with "pine needles, the silver of oak leaves and the red of maple, the call of the Himalayan cuckoo and the mist, like a wet-face- cloth, pressing against the hills" (Bond, 2017, p. 124) and at night you get to enjoy the tonk-tonk of nightjars, celebratory hoots of owls, the sharp call of a barking deer, the cry of a fox and the sounds emanating from the trees especially that whispering sound as the wind whooshes by through the cracks of the trees, as though the trees have come to life. To be surrounded by oaks, deodars, pine trees, fireflies and other 'beings' of nature then is a feeling in itself. "There is no such thing," Ruskin Bond (2017) points out, "as perfect peace and quiet except perhaps in a monastery or a cave in the mountains" (p. 33). And perhaps it is in search of this 'perfect peace' and solitude that people flock to the mountains.

A short Himalayan retreat thereby has become quite the rage today. Few months back, I too went for a Himalayan retreat and travelled to Uttarakhand covering places like Haridwar, Rishikesh, Devprayag, Guptkashi and Ukhimath. Wishing to soak in more of the Himalayan air and peace, I

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went trekking up to Chandrashila, which is located at a height of about 4,000 metres above sea level. The dense forests, treacherous snow-covered pathways and jagged alleys, though dangerous it might be, and the majestic view of the Himalayas infused a renewed sense of life in me. At that moment, I started envying the people living in Himalayan habitats for residing in a ‘perfect place’ in contrast to living in a choked city like Delhi. However, there were moments when I also encountered the difficult living conditions of the people there and what saddened me most was the destruction of nature in the name of development. Stone crushers, excavators, truck cranes strewed all over the place with smoke billowing from asphalt mixers. In light of these then, what is it like living in the hills? Is it a simple, easy and happy life as the tourists envision or a life full of struggles? And if it is indeed a life full of struggles then how have the Himalayan communities managed to survive in the lap of nature for this long? Nature, as Raymond Williams (1980) notes has an “extraordinary amount of human history” (p. 67). This history albeit is a complicated one where on one hand, you will find communities (in this context, the Himalayan communities) co-habiting and co-existing peacefully with nature and on the other hand you will find Nature being severely damaged due to senseless human interventions in the form of industrialisation and commercialisation. Our relation with nature thereby has reached a highly critical point. The chapter thus seeks to explore this complicated relationship between mankind and nature that traces its roots to the Age of Enlightenment. Although Enlightenment ushered in an era of a modern and scientific world, it nevertheless exploited natural resources brutally and this exploitation still continues. It is in this context thereby ecocriticism becomes an important literary discourse and to further probe this, I will be analysing Ruskin Bond’s writings to examine mankind’s relationship with nature and ‘beings’ of nature and demonstrate how modernity has suffocated nature. Bond’s bond with nature is not just about enjoyment and enrichment but a bond that implores him to cultivate environmental consciousness among people so reflected in his choice of protagonists, which will be discussed in the final section of the chapter.

**Dialectics of Nature and Modernity**

The study of relationship between humans and nature has been in existence since the ancient times. Plato, Ralph Waldo Emerson, John Stuart Mill, Friedrich Engels, Henry David Thoreau have been some of the most influential contributors to this arena of study. However, the destruction of nature due to human activities in recent times, has accelerated the need to adopt the model of conservation.

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George Perkins Marsh's phenomenal book *Man and Nature* (1964) in this context is highly significant as it talks about the dastardly impacts of human actions on the environment. Nature, as Edward Hoagland says is our widest 'home'. But we are clearly not taking enough care of our 'home'. In the name of development, trees are being felled, mountains have been robbed off their virginal beauty with unregulated constructions and its drastic consequences have had to be borne by 'beings' of nature- birds and animals. Man's questionable rendezvous with nature started from the Age of Enlightenment itself which aimed at "liberating human beings from fear and installing them as masters" as Horkheimer and Adorno state in their book *Dialectic of Enlightenment* (2002) and "Yet the wholly enlightened earth is radiant with triumphant calamity" (p. 1). The propulsion to modern science and modernity ultimately leading to the rise of capitalism rests solely on the domination of nature, the damning ways through which nature was and has been brutally terrorized and exploited in the name of Enlightenment and development. Enlightenment and modern science are based on the principle of 'instrumental reason', whereas Horkheimer points out in his book *Eclipse of Reason* (1947), things are reduced to serving a single purpose and for producing surplus value and for preserving the system. Instrumental reason thereby destroys the qualities and peculiarities of things (qtd. in Born 82). Nature then becomes a mere resource to be exploited and looked at from the prism of science's modern thought. It is stripped off of its natural resources and even though we are aware of large-scale destruction of nature and its catastrophic consequences, 'instrumental reason' still does not let us put an end to it in order to preserve the capitalistic system. The modern capitalistic world has atrociously devalued and sidelined the Romantic bond with Nature in favour of technocratisation of the world. Thus, what we have is the unchecked and unregulated destruction of nature. Ruskin Bond's oeuvre is filled with such testimonies and the present chapter thereby will reflect on these aspects.

If we are to consider critical thinking as one of the main principles of modern science, then ecocriticism as a critical tool becomes highly significant today. Coined by William Rueckert in his critical essay "Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism" (1978), ecocriticism is a study of the relationship between the physical environment and literature. In the words of Cheryl Glotfelty (1996), ecocriticism is the "study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment...[and] takes an earth-centred approach to literary studies" (p. xviii). It thereby examines environmental issues with an aim to cultivate environmental consciousness among

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people. For noted ecocritic Scott Slovic (2000) however, there can never be a single definition of ecocriticism as “it is being re-defined daily by the actual practice of thousands of literary scholars around the world” (pp. 160-161). Ecocriticism is highly significant today as it critiques modernity’s presumption of knowing the natural world scientifically, manipulating it technologically for economic gains thereby reducing nature to only a commodity and ultimately depriving humans from their basic needs of subsistence. Humans thereby are alienated from nature and communities. Ecocriticism thus examines environmental concerns, highlights nature’s sufferings at the hands of man with an aim to find ways to reconcile with nature again. Earth, as McKibben notes in *Earth: Making a Life on a Tough New Planet* (2010) has been altered artfully due to humanistic forces and in the process, nature is dying. What makes nature real, mystical and intriguing is its independence. The death of nature thereby is the death of an idea. Nature thus, has been “reduced to a problem that needs to be worked out through human intervention” (Rangarajan, 2018, pp. 3-4). Ruskin Bond’s writings then become very important for they not only exhibit the environmental concerns plaguing the world today but also shows us ways to reconcile with nature.

**Bond’s Bond with Nature**

The majestic beauty of nature and the near-perfect life in the Himalayas gets captured beautifully in Bond’s writings. Bond (2017) admits that in Himalayan towns especially Mussoorie one is greeted by the gentle “sound of birds, the sound of the water flowing through valleys, the singing of the hill people [and] the smell of the pines...” (p. viii). The Himalayan communities live a simple life—make bread from maize, catch fish in the mountain streams, grow potatoes like the character of Mr Mani from Bond’s story “A Long Walk for Bina”, graze cattle or cut grass and fodder for them. Small fields of corn, barley, mustard and onions could also be found on the banks of the river and on the terraced hills. Often when the pumpkins are ripe, bears would come and carry them away. It is in search of these simple pleasures of life that people take a Himalayan retreat. But is life in the Himalayas a perfect life or is it a life full of struggles for the Himalayan communities? The hills might be beautiful but as Bond (2016) points out in “A Village in Garhwal”, “it does not provide much of a living for its people. Most Garhwali cultivators are poor” (p. 207). The scenery might be beautiful but what use there is if the people remain poor or have to walk long distances to get their basic supplies? “A Long Walk for Bina” aptly projects this apathy. In this beautiful story, Bond (2016) provides a scathing critique of the inhospitable living conditions of the people of Himalayas.

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Bina, her brother, Sonu and her friend, Prakash have to walk several miles daily just to reach their school in Koli which is situated on the other side of the mountain. It is a primary school but, if Bina were to study and enrol herself in class 6, then she has to walk several more miles “every day to Nauti, where there [is] a high school going up to class 8” (p. 121). There is no electricity in Bina’s village. Forest fires are a regular occurrence in the month of June “destroying shrubs and trees, killing birds and small animals” (p. 134). With the arrival of the monsoons, the “lower Himalayas would be drenched in rain, mist and cloud” leading to a rise in water levels and small cascades which were once the playgrounds for Bina and her friends, soon turned into waterfalls. Life in the Himalayas is difficult and not simple as Bond highlights in “A Long Walk for Bina” and “A Village in Garhwal”, with landslides and heavy snow isolating villages from towns for days. “To the outsider, life in the Garhwal hills may seem idyllic and the people simple,” as Bond (2016) writes in “A Village in Garhwal,” but, “the Garhwali is far from being simple and his life is one long struggle, especially if he happens to be living in a high altitude village snowbound for four months in the year, with cultivation coming to a standstill and people having to manage with the food gathered and stored during the summer months” (211).

And yet the people of the hills are always cheerful and show immense hospitality towards guests and tourists. “Somehow”, as Bond (2016) points out “they have managed to wrest a precarious living from the unhelpful, calcinated soil” (p. 207). Somehow, they are never tired of walking long distances preferably because they have grown used to it. Somehow they never go to sleep in empty stomachs because “there is always the wild fruit”- the purple berries, wild strawberries and the small cherries (p. 210). When you have the bounteous nature by your side to quench your thirst and hunger, you learn to co-exist with nature and ‘beings’ of nature. Encounters with leopards, tigers, bears and monkeys do not scare them anymore for they have developed a common language to respect nature and a common understanding not to provoke one another as a means to co-exist and co-habit the mighty Himalayas peacefully. The leopard “knows we are here”, Prakash says in “A Long Walk for Bina”, “but she doesn’t care. She knows we won’t harm them...there’s still plenty of space for all of us” (p. 138). “The Tunnel” is another such story where Bond (2016) exemplifies that if made an effort, humans and animals can co-exist beautifully. The story revolves around Suraj who witnesses an uncanny relationship of mutual trust and understanding between Sunder Singh, the watchman and a leopard, who “minds its own business” and visits the “range for a few days

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every month” (p. 67). However, when the leopard strays into the tunnel one night, Sunder Singh risks his life to drive out the leopard from the tunnel and saves it from being hit by the train:

But won't it attack us if we try to drive it out?,” Suraj asks. “Not this leopard,” Sundar responds. “It knows me well. We have seen each other many times. It has a weakness for goats and stray dogs, but it will not harm us...And remember, there is nothing to fear”. (p. 69)

“The Tunnel” thus highlights the efforts of one man to save wildlife; a ‘being’ of nature. As he advances into the tunnel with his lamp, Sundar Singh becomes the perfect embodiment of a firefly, glowing in the darkness and showing the pathway to railway passengers, animals and most importantly, showing a way to humans in dealing with wildlife. His act exemplifies what Robert L. Thayer (2003) terms as ‘Spiritual Hypothesis’, where you share deep attachment to life and places thereby offering a “deepened sense of personal meaning, belonging and fulfilment in life” (p. 71). Sundar thus, is a symbol of hope and his efforts pave a way that teaches us that if we try and make an effort, man and wildlife can indeed co-exist peacefully and animals do not have to die for man’s progress and development. The moment humans reconcile with nature and ‘beings’ of nature, the moment animals and birds realise that you have not entered their wild habitat to take anything from their home, as Bond (2016) highlights in his essay “Man and Leopard”, they grow accustomed to your “presence; or possibly they recognize [your] footsteps. After some time, [your] approach [will] not disturb them” (p. 275).

**Bioregion and Bond: A Dialogue**

A community, culture and its bond with nature is connected and defined by a place. In this context, bioregion or life-place is what defines mankind’s relationship with nature. Elaborating on bioregion, Thayer (2003) states:

A bioregion is literally and etymologically a ‘life-place’- a unique region definable by natural (rather than political) boundaries with a geographic, climatic, hydrological, and ecological character capable of supporting unique human and nonhuman living communities. Bioregions can be variously defined by the geography of watersheds, similar plant and animal ecosystems...and by the unique human cultures that grow from natural limits and potentials of the region. (p. 3)

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A bioregion or life-place thus helps in building respect and attachment to a place and its inhabitants (humans and other life forms). Such a place, according to Edward O. Wilson creates ‘biophilia, which is the feeling of affinity and wholeness with all forms of life and according to Yi-Fu Tuan it creates ‘topophilia’, which can be defined as the effusive bond between people and place. Bond consciously creates such ‘bonds of places’ in his stories which not only attempts to repair mankind’s bond with nature and ‘beings’ of nature but also warns of the impending *eremozoic era*<sup>1</sup>- the era of lonely and desolate life. Such bonds with place/s though as stated by James W. Gibson in his celebrated book *A Reenchanted Wood* (2009), has been mutilated in modern times. Thus, although we have a set of humans who make an effort to co-exist with nature, we also have another set of humans who exploit nature and its resources in the name of development.

**Mankind-Nature and its Many Complexities**

Mankind’s complicated relationship with nature is adroitly highlighted by Bond (2017) in “Things I Love Most” where he is pained by the felling of trees to make way for furniture:

They cut them down last spring

With quick and efficient tools,

The sap was rising still.

The trees bled,

Slaughtered

To make furniture for tools. (p. 114)

This exploitation of the great forests still continues with truckloads of logs ending up in the timber yards of the plains. In the name of building strategic roads, the trees in the vicinity of Bond’s Maplewood cottage in Mussoorie were felled and “the hillside was rocked by explosives and bludgeoned by bulldozers” (Bond, 2017, p. 29). And that is when he decided that it was time to move on. Like Bond, animals too in the face of human intervention in their ‘wild homes’ move elsewhere in search of food and new home. The entire Himalayan region is an earthquake prone zone and yet dams are being built. Construction of such dams by desecrating the mountains as Bond (2016) highlights in “A Long Walk for Bina” are being carried out thereby killing not only the



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environment but also driving out animals from their homes like the leopard roaming around Bina's village: "The animal had made this area its own since being forced to leave the dam area" (p. 137). The "jungles aren't what they used to be...", Bond (2016) rightly points out in his essay "To See a Tiger" (268). Jungles have ceased to become the natural abode of animals and have instead become the perfect hunting ground for men looking out for perfect leopard skins to be sold in the markets of Delhi and adjoining areas. Highlighting this aspect in his essay "Man and Leopard", Bond elucidates how nature and beings of nature have been reduced to mere commodities to satisfy man's greed for money. Such acts of modernity then have suffocated nature essentially destroying not only the natural community but also human community.

Mankind considers nature to be its property. Its relationship with nature has been reduced to a utilitarian relationship governed by commercial and monetary values. Its relationship with nature then is not of respect but of privilege. Aldo Leopold's (1970) concept of land ethic in this context is pivotal as he includes soils, waters, plants, animals and the land too to define community. Conservation for him is a "state of harmony between men and land" (p. 243) and it is this state of harmony that Bond so passionately preaches in his writings. As per the Gaia hypothesis propounded by renowned chemist, James Lovelock and microbiologist, Lynn Margulis, the earth is 'living'. It is "a complex, sentient, self-regulating system in which all organisms and their inorganic surroundings are closely coupled to maintain optimum conditions necessary for life" (Rangarajan, 2018, p. 53). The well-being of earth and environmental ethics then is the need of the hour.

### **Conservation and Environmental Ethics**

Every year on April 22 and June 5, we celebrate Earth Day and World Environment Day to create awareness about environmental protection and adopt practices and ethics for its conservation. However, a large number of world's population is yet to adopt effective environmental ethics. Environmental ethics largely revolving around mankind's interaction and relationship with the environment, is also about the ethical nature one has adopted or should adopt regarding environment. It is through environmental ethics that one can reconcile with nature. In a bid to reconcile with nature then common grounds needs to be discovered as Rueckert (1996) suggests "upon which the two communities-the human, the natural-can coexist, cooperate, and flourish in the biosphere" (107). In this context, ecological vision needs to be developed that can be further

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translated into specific programmes of action whereby man become environmental conscious, respect nature and wildlife, adopt ethical practices and engage in sustainable living. Humans have an ethical responsibility towards the environment and must therefore engage in healthy and cooperative activities. The concept of urbanatural roosting formulated by Ashton Nichols in his book *Beyond Romantic Ecocriticism: Toward Urbannatural Roosting* (2011) thereby is highly significant. Citing the example of birds who roost peacefully without damaging the natural world, Nichols urged humans to follow the same path and adopt a sustainable lifestyle.

**Bond and his Eco-freak Protagonists**

Bond's bond with nature and his love for wildlife so posited in his writings aptly reflects his environmental concerns. His writings impart the way towards adopting effective environmental ethics through the innocence of his protagonists and makes us critically aware of the human nature that is deeply engrossed in mutilating the earth. In his bid to promote ecologically cooperative activities then Bond's writings and his choice of protagonists who are mostly children, is a conscious decision to cultivate environmental consciousness amongst children right from their childhood. Bina's lamentation at the displacement of animals due to the construction of dam, her desire to become a teacher in order to teach "children about animals and birds, and trees and flowers" (Bond, 2016, p. 139) and Suraj's act of saving the leopard with Sundar Singh in "The Tunnel" needs to be seen from the prism of an ecological vision. Without ecological vision, nature and society per say will perish.

**Green Voices**

Literature has immense creative potential. It can single-handedly "imagine radical change and inspire people to become agents of transformation" (Ammons and Roy, 2015, p. 2). It prompts mankind's consciousness to sit up, take note of nature's beauty, protect it and save the world from irreparable damages. When Wordsworth's heart leapt up at the sight of a rainbow and he wished to die rather than lose his love for nature in the poem "My Heart Leaps Up", he stirs our consciousness and carries forward an important environmental tradition. In the same tradition, Wordsworth (2006) also laments in the poem "Lines Written in Early Spring", at the state of humans and a world overtaken by cruelty and greed often at the cost of nature:

I heard a thousand blended notes,

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While in a grove I sate reclined,

In that sweet mood when pleasant thoughts

Bring sad thoughts to the mind.

To her fair works did nature link

The human soul that through me ran;

And much it grieved my heart to think

What man has made of man. (stanza 1-2)

Like Wordsworth's poetry, Bond's writings too, touches upon the consciousness of his readers. Like Wordsworth, Coleridge and others, Bond is one among those 'green voices' whose writings have led to desirable environmental action. To sum up, Man's entelechy is technology which has forced him to mis-see and mis-use nature. In the words of Yeats, things indeed have fallen apart and man's exploitation of nature has only brought about anarchy and catastrophic climate change. The way forward then is to use technology not to exploit nature but to envision creative and cooperative ways to co-exist with nature and promote sustainable living, something which Bond always reflects in his writings.

### Notes

1. The term eremozoic era has been coined by biologist Edward O. Wilson to refer to mass extinctions due to human activities.

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