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The Hills Have a Voice: An Ecocritical Reading of Ruskin Bond

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Abstract: In recent decades, eco-criticism has emerged as one of the most dynamic fields of literary scholarship, forging a meaningful dialogue between ecological thought and the study of literature. It interrogates how texts engage with the natural world, foregrounding the ways in which human culture is both shaped by and implicated in ecological systems. This paper undertakes an exploration of selected works of Indian English fiction through an eco-critical and postcolonial lens, aiming to trace the multiple ways in which these narratives construct, question, and re-imagine human - environment relationships. Rather than treating nature as a decorative or static backdrop, the study approaches it as an active and dynamic participant in the narrative process, influencing character development, social movements, and moral choices. By situating the analysis within the frameworks of deep ecology, environmental justice, and postcolonial theory, the research highlights how literary texts engage with urgent global concerns such as environmental degradation, forced migration, and the search for sustainable coexistence. The study demonstrates that the selected works articulate an evolving ecological consciousness, moving from portrayals of sacred landscapes and harmonious coexistence with nature to urgent depictions of ecological disruption brought about by colonial exploitation, globalization, and human intervention. These narratives underscore the writers' engagement with environmental history and their implicit advocacy for ecological ethics. The research affirms that literature functions as a vital space for reflecting on humanity's relationship with the natural world, offering critical insights into contemporary challenges such as climate change, environmental displacement, and the need for sustainable futures.

Keywords: Eco-criticism, Indian English fiction, Environmental awareness, Ecological wisdom

Eco-criticism has emerged in recent decades as one of the most dynamic and interdisciplinary fields of literary study, responding to global ecological crises and the 'greening' of the humanities. William Rueckert first coined the term in his influential essay *Literature and Ecology: An Experiment in Ecocriticism*, where he called for a 'recycling of literature' to create ecological consciousness, arguing that literary texts, like ecosystems, are intricate networks of energy exchange. This positioned literature as an active participant in ecological thought, not merely a reflection of human culture. Cheryll Glotfelty, one of the founding figures of the Association for the Study of Literature and Environment (ASLE), later defined eco-criticism as "the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment" (Glotfelty xx). Her landmark anthology *The Ecocriticism Reader*, co-edited with Harold Fromm, formally established the field and insisted that literature could no longer be examined in isolation from the planet's ecological well-being. This intervention invited literary scholars to recognize that narratives shape, and are shaped by, the material conditions of the earth. Building upon this foundation, Laurence Buell's *The Environmental Imagination* extended eco-criticism beyond nature writing to include all forms of literature that engage with environmental questions. Buell proposed that a work may be considered environmentally oriented when "the nonhuman environment is not merely a framing device but a presence that

begins to suggest that human history is implicated in natural history" (Buell 7). His subsequent work *The Future of Environmental Criticism* marked the 'second wave' of eco-critical studies, integrating concerns with urban environments, environmental justice, and global ecological perspectives (Buell 22). Greg Garrard later systematized the field by offering a thematic framework in *Ecocriticism*, organizing its concerns around pollution, wilderness, apocalypse, dwelling, animals, and the earth. This taxonomy allows critics to trace recurring motifs and ideological positions within literary texts, giving the field greater conceptual clarity (Garrard 3-5).

Although the theory originated primarily within Anglo-American academia, it has since developed into a global intellectual movement. Jonathan Bate's *Romantic Ecology* reinterpreted Romantic poets, particularly Wordsworth, as early environmental thinkers who resisted industrial modernity and celebrated human intimacy with the natural world (Bate 32). More recently, Timothy Morton's theorization of "dark ecology" and "hyperobjects" has complicated earlier notions of nature as benign or distant, emphasizing the entanglement of human and nonhuman systems in ways that destabilize traditional binaries (Morton 15). Postcolonial eco-criticism has emerged as an especially significant strand of this global discourse, interrogating the intersections of colonialism, land appropriation, and ecological exploitation. Graham Huggan and Helen Tiffin

argue that colonial regimes not only subjugated peoples but also restructured ecosystems through extractive economies and monocultures, leaving enduring ecological scars (Huggan 4). This framework is particularly relevant to Indian English fiction, which frequently portrays land as contested territory and explores the entangled histories of ecological and cultural dispossession. Ecofeminists such as Vandana Shiva and Carolyn Merchant have contributed further by linking the domination of nature with the oppression of women. Shiva observes that women are often the first to resist ecological destruction because of their intimate connection with subsistence practices that sustain communities (Shiva 45), while Merchant traces how the Scientific Revolution transformed the view of nature from a nurturing mother to a machine to be controlled, legitimizing exploitation (Merchant 164). These frameworks enrich the study of literature by illuminating representations of women as doubly marginalized, socially and ecologically, offering an intersectional perspective on oppression and resistance.

In India, eco-critical studies have expanded rapidly over the past two decades, drawing on both Western theoretical models and indigenous traditions of ecological thought. N. Selvamony's *Essays in Ecocriticism* is among the first comprehensive Indian anthologies, charting how Indian writers respond to environmental concerns through fiction, poetry, and drama (Selvamony 12). P. D. Sharma's *Ecology and Environment* provided early scientific grounding that has informed later literary applications. Scholars frequently stress the importance of traditional ecological knowledge embedded in classical texts such as the *Ramayana* and *Mahabharata*, where rivers, mountains, and forests are revered as sacred and integral to moral order. This sacred geography continues to shape modern narratives, ensuring that representations of nature in Indian fiction are never merely descriptive but are infused with spiritual, cultural, and political resonance.

Ecology and the environment form the dominant theme in Ruskin Bond's works, with the scenic hills of Dehradun and Mussoorie providing the backdrop for much of his writing. Bond consistently expresses concern over humanity's careless exploitation of nature, using his stories to emphasize the interdependence of humans and the natural world. His empathy for animals and his lyrical descriptions of the Himalayas create a sense of intimacy, warmth, and reverence for nature in readers' hearts. Many of his stories are set in Landour and Mussoorie, reflecting his lifelong association with the region where he spent much of his childhood and learned to love nature from his grandfather. Bond not only celebrates the flora, fauna, and tranquility of the Himalayas but also mourns their gradual degradation caused by deforestation, overgrazing, and human neglect. He warns that such exploitation will lead to declining rainfall, barren peaks, and an ecological crisis that will ultimately

harm humanity itself. Through his over three hundred short stories, Bond blends evocative portrayals of Himalayan beauty with urgent calls for environmental awareness and preservation. Ruskin Bond's *Copperfield in the Jungle* foregrounds the tension between human intrusion and the sanctity of the natural world. The narrative, though autobiographical, is more than a childhood recollection; it is a subtle critique of anthropocentric attitudes toward nature. The young protagonist, who remains unnamed but is twelve years old, accompanies his Uncle Henry and his sporting friends on a shikar expedition into the Terai forests of the Siwaliks. The lush, vivid reconstruction of the jungle atmosphere not only serves as a backdrop but also becomes a central character, emphasizing the interconnectedness of all life forms. The story problematizes the practice of hunting for pleasure rather than necessity. While the protagonist can, to an extent, comprehend the idea of killing animals for food (a survival-based interaction) he struggles to reconcile with the senseless killing of innocent creatures for sport. This moral discomfort reflects an early ecological consciousness, one that resists the commodification of nature and its reduction to mere trophies. His gentle temperament and instinctive empathy for animals reveal a biocentric worldview, in which the forest and its inhabitants are valued for their intrinsic worth rather than their utility to humans. Thus, it becomes a narrative about awakening ecological ethics, portraying a child's resistance to the exploitative impulses of the adult world. It celebrates compassion over domination, reminding readers that the natural world is not simply a hunting ground but a living, breathing ecosystem deserving of respect and protection.

No Room for a Leopard is a poignant meditation on deforestation and its consequences for the non-human world. From an eco-critical perspective, the story dramatizes the displacement of wild animals caused by rapid ecological degradation. As deforestation reduces the forest cover in the hills and surrounding regions, leopards and other creatures are forced into valleys and human settlements, resulting in encounters that are often fatal. The narrative captures one such tragic moment when a trusting leopard is mercilessly killed by a group of shikaris. The leopard's death is not only an individual tragedy but a symbol of the broader collapse of ecological balance, echoing William Rueckert's argument that literature can "apply ecological concepts" to reveal "the interconnectedness of all life" (107). The writer also contrasts the innocence of children with the utilitarian mindset of adults. The children in the narrative are instinctively drawn to nature and regard its creatures with affection and empathy. Their worldview is biocentric, affirming the intrinsic value of the leopard as a living being rather than as a commodity. Adults, by contrast, embody an anthropocentric logic, prioritizing profit over compassion. The leopard's skin is reduced to an object of economic value, its life rendered

expendable for monetary gain. This tension mirrors what Cheryll Glotfelty terms the “environmental crisis” within literature, wherein human exploitation of nature reflects broader cultural and ethical failures (xxi). Through the shattering of this once-idyllic world, the story becomes an indictment of human greed and ecological irresponsibility. The story insists that environmental destruction is not merely a physical loss but a moral and emotional rupture, disrupting the harmony that once existed between humans and the natural world. By presenting the leopard as a trusting and innocent victim, Bond elicits a powerful ethical response from readers, urging them to reconsider the cost of deforestation and the commercialization of wildlife.

Dust on the Mountain examines the ecological consequences of deforestation while simultaneously tracing the moral and emotional awakening of its protagonist, Bisnu. Through an eco-critical lens, the story reflects what Cheryll Glotfelty describes as the “environmental imagination,” where literature seeks to reframe human engagement with nature (xix). Bisnu’s journey begins as a search for employment but gradually becomes an education in ecological ethics. His village, stripped of its tree cover due to commercial exploitation, suffers from water scarcity and drought, demonstrating the direct connection between deforestation and climate imbalance. Bond’s narrative vividly details the loss of the Himalayan ecosystem, oaks, deodars, maples, and pines, trees that have taken centuries to grow, destroyed not only by logging but also by human negligence. The image of campers leaving fires unattended, resulting in forest infernos that consume thousands of trees, underscores human irresponsibility and the devastating impact of what William Rueckert calls the “energy pathways” of ecological destruction (111). In Bond’s portrayal, nature’s suffering becomes an implicit critique of anthropocentrism, inviting readers to recognize that the damage inflicted on the environment ultimately endangers human survival. The climactic moment, when Pritam the truck driver narrowly escapes an accident because a fallen tree prevents his vehicle from going over the cliff, serves as a symbolic reminder of the protective role of forests. This epiphany transforms both Bisnu and Pritam, aligning them with what Lawrence Buell identifies as an “environmentally oriented consciousness” that seeks to safeguard the biotic community (7). The conclusion underscores the moral imperative of reforestation and environmental stewardship, framing the preservation of nature as essential not only for present survival but also for the well-being of future generations. Bond once again raises a poignant question in *Dust on the Mountains* through the character Bisnu, who asks, “Why are there no trees here?” This inquiry reveals the underlying reality that:

There were trees here once, but the contractors took the deodars for furniture and houses. And the pines were tapped to death for

resin. And the oaks were stripped of their leaves to feed the cattle—you can still see a few tree-skeletons if you look hard—and the bushes that remained were finished off by the goats! (Complete 291).

Through this narrative the writer reinforces his vision of ecological ethics, urging readers to see trees not as mere resources but as life-giving entities integral to the continuity of human and non-human existence.

An Island of Trees is a quiet but powerful meditation on the enduring relationship between humans and the natural world, conveyed through the intergenerational dialogue between Koki and her grandmother. The grandmother recalls her father’s unwavering devotion to trees, describing how he treated them not as passive objects but as living companions. His passion for planting saplings, even in difficult terrains and during the monsoons, reflects a visionary ecological ethic, he planted not merely for human use but for the earth itself, for the animals, birds, and future generations who would depend on the forest for survival. This deep sensitivity transforms the garden into a space of communion, where loneliness gives way to a sense of companionship when shared with someone who reveres nature. The narrative laments the rampant destruction of trees, reminding readers that a treeless world would be a nightmare for all life forms. The most moving moment arrives when the grandmother, after two decades, revisits the island where her father once planted trees. Though the animals regard her as a stranger, the trees seem to recognize her presence, as though extending a silent welcome. Touching their bark feels like reconnecting with old friends, and she is overjoyed to see that the saplings have grown into a thriving forest, fulfilling her father’s dream. In this way, *An Island of Trees* becomes not only a story about memory and belonging but also a gentle manifesto for ecological stewardship, affirming that love and compassion can heal the relationship between humans and the more-than-human world.

Ruskin Bond’s short stories, with their simplicity and depth, transcend mere representations of nature to embody a profound ecological vision. Far from serving as passive backdrops, his landscapes articulate the intricate, symbiotic relationship between humans and the natural world. His works illustrate the great chain of being that connects all life forms, emphasizing interdependence and mutual sustenance. As Lawrence Buell observes, “literature that reorients us toward the environment must make us imagine its processes as vital to our own” (7), and Bond’s narratives precisely achieve this reorientation. In the context of today’s ecological crisis, his works acquire renewed relevance, urging readers to recognize nature not as a resource to be exploited but as a nurturing presence deserving of respect and reciprocity. Cheryll Glotfelty argues that “ecocriticism takes an earth-centered approach to literary studies” (xix), and Bond’s

fiction embodies this approach by encouraging a shift from anthropocentrism to biocentrism. His narrative voice becomes a gentle yet firm call to cultivate environmental ethics such as sincerity, compassion, and loyalty toward the earth, ensuring that the balance of the ecosystem is preserved for future generations. Thus, Bond's fiction emerges as both literature and moral lesson, aligning with the aims of eco-criticism, which seeks to heal the fractured relationship between humanity and the environment.

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