



# Ecology Revisited: A Study Of Tree Tales Of Ruskin Bond

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**Abstract:** Trees are the most beautiful, sublime and incredible specimen of nature. But today we are cutting and uprooting them for our benefits and robbing nature of its pristine beauty creating a deep chasm between human-nature relationship. Ruskin Bond the doyen of children's literature in India admires and worships nature. He explores its myriad forms and paints them beautifully on the canvas of his short stories. This paper proposes to study and examine some of the tree tales penned by Bond through an ecocritical perspective and to determine that how skillfully his nature writings render into eco-writings bestowing a dose of eco-optimism to the children.

**Key Words:** Nature, Tree tales, Ruskin Bond, Children, Environment

**Introduction:** Ruskin Bond the renowned children's author is a dendrophile who love and admire trees to such an extent that they find a special place in his writings. He believes that trees are the sublime creation of nature and has the power to rejuvenate us. They are the true friends who never forsake us and always inspire and generate positivity in our hearts and minds. Bond's *Book of nature* exquisitely expatiates on the importance of trees in his life. He writes, "The trees watch over my day-to-day life. They are the guardians of my conscience.... I do what I think they would approve of most." (121)

Like Wordsworth, he also believes that nature is our best teacher and one can experience and learn a great many things from her. He persuasively comments "We do not stop learning from the natural world. The earth, the seas, the heavens have still so much to tell us. Nature's notebook is never closed" (*Book of Nature* 274) Bond's infinite love, admiration and reverence for nature is reflected in his writings very conspicuously.

Bond's grandfather and father were great nature lovers and Bond inherited this trait from them. His fiction is replete with nature descriptions and it has always been a part of his imagination and creation. He does not write about nature but he writes through it, allowing it to speak, to express in its own way. R. Sumathi in her article fittingly remarks, "Nature is fully responsible for his aesthetic development. He keenly observes everything in nature. Even the silence of the forest is meaningful and communicates something to him. His affinity with nature is unchanging. His description motivates the readers, particularly the child readers to love nature" (364). Bond's children's stories emphatically demonstrate Barry Commoner's first law of ecology that 'Everything is connected to everything else' (29) and he believes that if we contravene this law we have to face serious ecological and social problems because both man and nature are interrelated and interdependent.

Trees hold a special place in Bond's life. He grew up playing with and climbing on trees. In his childhood trees are his playmates, in youth they are his friends and in old age they are his sage companions. He efficaciously remarks "Trees have always played an important part in my life. The litchi, guava, mango, jackfruit and lemon trees of my childhood. Later, the grandeur of the banyan, the sacred peepal, the sal and the shisham. And here in the hills, the stately deodars and fragrant pines." (*Book of Nature* 120) In his short stories for children he depicts trees as living, breathing entities and if we love, admire and value them, they also beckon and communicate with us. Sadaf Siddiqui states that "For Bond trees are not non human entities instead he feels a connection with them too" (187)

His extraordinary dexterity in depicting and describing the beauty, serenity and utility of trees has been best exemplified in his captivating children's short stories like 'My Father's Trees in Dehra', 'When You Can't Climb Trees Any More', 'Dust on the Mountains', 'An Island of Trees', 'The Tree Lover', 'My Tall Green Friends', 'The Sacred Trees', 'The King and the Tree Goddess', 'The Tree of wisdom', 'The Cherry Tree', 'When the Guavas are Ripe', 'Garden of Thousand Trees', 'The Gentle Banyan' etc. In the present paper I will focus on few of these tree tales from an ecocritical lens to establish the view that how Bond through his scintillating stories arouse eco-consciousness among children.

**Methodology:** In this paper Qualitative data analysis method is used to study and analyze some tree tales of Ruskin Bond through an ecocritical stance and to establish the view that his tree tales very deftly render ecological messages to children raising their environmental awareness.

**Discussion:** Despite his British lineage Ruskin Bond is emotionally attached to this land and its people. His adherence to Indian culture and traditions is deep rooted. Bond's extensive knowledge of Indian mythology and folklore which he has gained from the townsfolk and rich Indian literature is best exemplified in his noteworthy story 'Sacred Trees' in which he describes various trees revered in India along with the related folklore or myth. In India, since time immemorial our ancestors accord great value and reverence to trees as they are essential for all of us. Bond begins the story thus: "Explore the history and mythology of

almost any Indian tree, you will find that at some period of our civilization it has held an important place in the minds and hearts of the people of this land.” (*Book of Nature* 144)

In this informative story he highlights the religious relevance of various trees like neem, mahua, champa, palas or dhak, babul, peepal, mango and kalp-vriksha through relating folklores and myths associated with them. Since ages Indians are indulged in tree worshipping and consider them as the abode of Gods and Holy Spirits. Amita Aggarwal mentions:

Bond shares many Indian conceptions about nature. His attitude is not that of a naturalist only. At times he is very close to paganism which forms a part of Indian psyche. He is an ardent worshipper of nature and diligently raises the cause of nature through fiction. He strengthens his point by quoting from myths and legends prevalent among common folk. (79)

The thought behind this practice of our elders is to arouse feeling of reverence and gratitude towards these green deities and save them from the reckless and selfish behavior of humans who otherwise take them for granted following their anthropocentric view.

Bond is not only a pantheist who worships nature and sings about nature spirits but also a botanist who skillfully details the fascinating and complex structure of these various trees including their major parts as trunk, branches, leaves, fruits and flowers. And as a poet he writes about the winged friends of these trees who visit them and whose presence make them more sprightly and buoyant. At the same time as an unconscious environmentalist he shows his angst against deforestation and appeals to respect and conserve these green friends of all living creatures.

He further states in this story that modern consumerist and selfish man do not adhere to the religious relevance of these trees and cut them and destroy the whole jungles to feed their greed which is bigger than their need, also, that due to the rising population and spread of urban areas, forests are disappearing resulting in ecological imbalance. Bond expresses his concern for the dwindling number of trees and appeals to the readers to at least love and preserve, if not worship them for their incredible contribution in our lives. He grieves and pleads in these words: “But now, alas, even the hallowed groves are disappearing, making way for the demands of an ever-increasing population. A pity because every human need a tree of his own. Even if you do not worship the tree-spirit, you can love the tree.” (*Book of Nature* 149)

‘The Tree Lover’ is another truly green story echoing green messages for young children. ‘The Tree lover’ is the eponym of Rusty’s grandfather who was fond of planting trees. For many years he served in the Indian Forest Service due to which he developed a natural liking for and understanding with trees. After retirement he planted number of trees in his compound and then extending his love beyond the four walls he planted many more trees in the nearby forest, accompanied by Rusty during the rainy season. One day Rusty protested innocently that why are they planting saplings at such a place where no one would come to see them. His grandfather answered him that “We’re planting for the forest and for the birds and animals who live here

and need more food and shelter” (Bond, *Rusty the Boy from the Hills* 25). So in this way Bond expresses his own views regarding need and utility of trees for all creatures great and small. He also articulate his anxiety about deforestation and informs Rusty that if mankind keep on cutting trees incessantly, one day this earth will turn into a barren land. Bond writes: “But men are cutting down the trees without replacing them. For every tree that’s felled’ we must plant two. Otherwise, one day there will be no forest at all, and the world will become one great desert.” (25)

Through discussion between grandfather and Rusty he not only apprise children about the consequences of tree cutting but also instruct them to plant trees and save the green layer of earth.

In this story Bond conveys the valuable message that the green layer of earth is the lifeline of the ecosystem and we cannot imagine our lives without it. Trees are indispensable part of earthly life and all life forms in some or the other way are indebted to them. Without trees our earth would become a vast ‘Wasteland’. They are necessary not only for human existence but also for the countless birds, arboreal animals, insects and spiders that live on trees and depend on them for food and shelter. Besides this, trees are valuable as they provide oxygen, food, timber, medicines, and many more things essential for our survival. Bond comments that: “The tree sums up nature’s perfection which can be seen in every leaf, flower, seed, and creatures great and small” (*Book of Nature* 274)

His love for nature unconsciously turns him into an ecologist and he espouse for the cause of nature and environment. Yatharth Vaidya mentions: “Humans have been destroying trees and other natural resources for selfish purposes. If the destruction or exploitation of natural resources persists in such a way, the world will soon become barren and the whole environment will be spoiled” (190).

‘When the Guavas are Ripe’ is an adventurous story that delineates impact of nature on child behavior. In this story Ranji and his friend Koki and her six year old brother Teju’s escapades in the guava orchard is described beautifully by Bond. He emphasizes that when children come out of the four walls of their house and schools and spend some time in lap of nature they enjoy and learn so many things as nature is stimulating and activates their senses. Kids who play outdoors are more creative and imaginative, they design their own games and enjoy in their own style. In this story Bond highlights about the old-fashioned game of tree climbing and the joy children derive from this outdoor activity. Ranji one of the chief protagonists is desperate to climb the guava tree.

“I feel like getting into those guava trees,” said Ranji to himself. “It’s months since I climbed a tree”. (*Ruskin Bond’s Children’s Omnibus* 186).

Thus, we see that such physical outdoor activities make children environment friendly and help them in their growth process making them smarter, healthier and happier than children who live indoors and have lost touch with nature. Bond very subtly conveys this view through the conversation of Ranji, Koki and the guard of the orchard. He writes:

What lovely guavas,” said Koki, smiling sweetly. There weren’t many people who could resist that smile! “True,” said Ranji, with the air of one who was an expert on guavas and all things good to eat. “They are just the right size and colour. I don’t think I’ve seen better. But they’ll be spoilt by the birds if you don’t gather them soon. (191)

Amidst nature they become free spirited and learn to interact and respond. They also become social and gain understanding and experience of life.

Will you come again tomorrow?” Asked Gopal eagerly, when the guavas were finished....”Come tomorrow and I’ll tell you another story.” “We’ll come tomorrow,” said Teju, looking at all the guava trees still laden with fruit. Somehow it seemed very important to Gopal that they should come again. It was lonely in the orchard. Koki sensed this, and said, “We like your stories”...They climbed over the wall and waved goodbye to Gopal. (192)

‘Death of the Trees’ is a poignant portrayal of gradual destruction of trees in the name of development. In this story Bond articulates his disquietude over evadable felling of trees to construct a new road in the hills. He writes:

Twenty oaks have been felled. Just in this small stretch near the cottage. By the time the bypass reaches Jabarkhet, about six miles from here, over a thousand oaks will have been slaughtered, besides many other fine trees- maples, deodars and pines- most of them unnecessarily, as they grow some fifty to sixty yards from the roadside. (Bond 492)

Bond demonstrates that man has turned blind towards nature and his human centric approach adversely affects the ecological balance. As a result of deforestation number of birds and animals become homeless and forced to migrate to some other surviving forests. Thus, through this story the writer not only communicates his anguish and pain for the green trees but also warns the readers to be cautious and save the earth from dying a slow death.

‘My Tall Green Friends’ is a fascinating story that details the magnificent presence of the walnut, the deodar, the oak and the pine trees that surround the author’s cottage. Bond has lived with these trees for many years and admires their resplendence from his cottage window. He has seen them growing and felt a kind of attachment with them as if they are his friends and companions,. He describes the beauty, utility, grandeur and seasonal characteristics and behavior of these trees and acquaints the readers from the wonders of nature. Deodar is his favourite tree and he believes that it is a divine tree like peepal and therefore should be revered and protected. He writes: “It is a sacred tree in the Himalayas; neither worshipped nor protected in the way that a peepul in the plains, but sacred in that its timber has always been used in temples floors, doors, windows, walls and even roofs. (143)

The title very well explicates the special bonding between Bond and the trees. He feels that these mountain trees know him, they are aware of his presence as Bond used to watch them growing and whirring from his window, listening to them when they whisper to share their secrets. Amita Aggarwal expresses her view thus: “Trees are the archetypes of friendship. This relationship is completely free from the stylistic ways of other worldly relationships.” ( 60)

‘The King and the Tree – Goddess’ is an engrossing tale through which Bond explicates the generosity of trees and the destructive and acquisitive approach of human beings. The story is of a king who one day decides to build a palace, unique and magnificent “supported by one column only and that column was to be made from the tallest tree in the kingdom” (*Ruskin Bond’s Children’s Omnibus* 194). Consequently, he gave orders to cut the tallest Deodar tree in his garden. The tree Goddess who resides in that tree appears in the dream of the king and requests him to change his mind. She pleads before the king saying:

But consider, Oh king! For hundreds of years I have been worshipped by the people of all the villages in your kingdom, and nothing but good has gone out from me to them. The birds nest in me. I send a most lovely shade upon the grass. Men rest against my trunk and wild creatures rub themselves against me. The earth blesses me, and sends up new plants and herbs under my protective arms. I bind the earth with my strong roots. Children play at my feet, and women returning from the fields seek refuge in my coolness. (*Children’s Omnibus* 196)

Bond delicately weaves ecological messages in his fiction and imparts knowledge to children on sensitive issues like tree preservation. The personification of the Deodar tree in the form of tree- goddess and her plea is actually Bond’s entreaty to save trees.

Conclusion: Since time immemorial we are using trees in all kinds of ways and benefitting ourselves, taking them for granted. In our daily busy life we never think of caring and preserving them. As a result numerous kinds of trees are endangered today and heading towards extinction. Now is the time to pause, to think and to act; to save the nature, to thank the nature for everything that it has given to us so benevolently. The underlying theme of the tree tales of Ruskin Bond sensitizes the child readers to respect the trees for their magnanimity and bounteousness. His vibrant stories inspire children to value and recognize the vital place of trees in the ecosystem and persuade them to translate their admiration and gratitude into an urge to protect trees and forests. Thus, making our existence on this earth a more meaningful and beautiful experience.

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