
HIMALAYAS: A SOURCE OF RUSKIN BOND'S LIFE & WORK

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INTRODUCTION

Ruskin Bond, who has been living in Mussoorie for over forty years, has made the Himalayas and nature a part of his life and work. He finds endless material for stories in the trees and wild flowers, birds that are an integral part of the mountains. Through his works of fiction and non-fiction he explores his own and his protagonists' changing and smooth relationship with nature. His response to nature is instinctive as is visible in one of his verses.

Like the wind, I run
Like the rain, I sing
Like the leaves, I dance
Like the earth, I am still
And in this, Lord
I do thy will.

(Bond: *Rain in the Mountains*, 144)

Most of Bond's title and descriptions depend upon nature e.g. *The Coral Tree*, *The Window*, *The Prospect of Flowers*, *The Cherry Tree*, *My Father's Tree in Dehra*, *Panther's Moon*, *The Leopard*, *Sita and the River*, *When You Can't Climb Tree Any More*, *Dust on the Mountains and Garland of Memories* etc.

Bond had gone to England in search of identity but his restless mind could find solace only in the exotic valleys of Himalayas. Wherever he went away at times, he returned as soon as possible. So he made his final escape to Himalayas and settled in Dehra. He says, "It was while I was living in England, in the jostle and drizzle of London, that I remembered the Himalayas at their most vivid (Bond: *Rain in the Mountains*, 92).

His characters come generally from the hills whom Bond meets during his walk and travels. To name a few among them, there is Binya who holding her blue umbrella, runs after her cow, Neelu. There is Dukhi weeding and pruning in the garden. Bisnu, who confronts the man-eater panther in the village Manjari, Sita who devises her sports around the old banyan tree in her

lonely island, Ali who files the kites that is made by his grandfather Mahmood are some of his favourite characters. They are born in the hills.

Bond feels that Nature appears as a great formative influence for those who is filled with love for her chooses to live with her in total affinity. One who worships nature, gets love, joy, wisdom and peace. In the story, *When You Can't Climb Tree Anymore*, the protagonist's grandmother says, "A Blessing rests on the house where falls the shadow of a tree" (Bond: *The Complete Stories & Novels*, 216). Elsewhere again Bond believes that "...shade giving trees symbolize the harmony between man and nature and our ancestors... had reverence for them" (Bond: *A Garland of Memories*, 35).

Himalayan flora and fauna and its eco-system has to be preserved even at the cost of so called development represented through and quarry –mining. *Dust on the Mountain* is the story in which a child Vishnu has to work on a truck for helping his poor family under a spell of drought and crop failure. The drunken driver and his helper Vishnu escape death because of the tree which stops the truck from falling into a gorge. Both feel obliged to the Himalaya for it and Vishnu decides: "I'll work on my land. It is better to grow things on the land than to blast things out of it" (Bond: *A Garland of Memories*, 301).

R.K. Narayana created Malgudi a town of his dream and creative fulfillment, Hardy's Wessex provided him creative essentials, in the same vein Bond's vision gets quickened by sylvan environs of Dehra valley. The town emerges as a powerful symbol of his belongingness to India. Bond's passion for the Himalayas is the focal point of his Indianness. He realizes that mountains are the soul of India. There is no doubt that Bond, like sage in the Himalayas, feels his soul transcending towards divinity. He draws magnificent pictures of the Himalayan splendour through his narration. His fictional heroes also experience a sublime force in the hills charging their spirit. The protagonist of *Delhi Is Not Far* forgets his own frailties in the vastness of mountains,

I don't think that a man can be complete untill he has lived in the hills of course we are never complete, but there is something about a mountain that adds a new dimension to life. The change in air and altitude makes one think and feel and act differently.

(Bond: *Delhi Is Not Far*, 3)

The spirit of hills and mountains is the natural safeguard for the hill people. That is why they feel secure. If the mountains provide children with a carefree and sheltered life, they also lead them to a realization of their spiritual affinity with the various manifestations of nature. Whether it is a cherry tree, noisy bazaar which is at the heart of every Himalayan town, a window on the roof from which to view the world, a hidden pool, or an old banyan tree, a single image serves as a symbol of harmony with nature. In *A Little World of Mud*, a story in grandfather's private zoo, the scummy muddy pool behind the house becomes the microcosm of the world to Rusty. It is here that the lonely British child meets Ramu the buffalo herder, and learns of the diversity of nature. Ramu although uneducated is well versed in Hindu mythology and the folklore surrounding the various animals and their predators that live at the pond. Although Ramu belongs to a different culture and religion young Rusty discovers that Ramu shares the same opinions regarding the sacredness of all life as does his Christian grandfather. Another haven that Rusty has is the old banyan tree in his grandfather's home in Dehra. In the branches of this ancient tree Rusty reads, plays with squirrels and observes nature and human life passing by. Like the squirrels and birds that lie in the tree, Rusty also keeps his most treasured possessions in a hole in the tree.

Bond's stories are generally set in a small isolated Himalayan town or village which still retains its inherited values of basic honesty, faith and love for the family and neighbours. Parents don't worry about the safety of their children who roam freely without fear of violence or crime because people from the hills are quick to smile, hospitable and trusting. Against such a benign atmosphere, Bond envisions his own and his protagonists' childhood as a long summer afternoon of gaiety, play and carefree abandon. His Characters swim in the pools, take naps under shady trees with butterflies and beetles humming lazily overhead, climb mango and litchi trees, ride bicycles down precipitous hills and explore river and mountain paths. The timeless magical atmosphere of the hill station in summer or during vacation quickly envelops his stories.

Even when the children are in potentially dangerous situations, nature serves as a protective mother. When in *The Adventures of Rusty*, Rusty and his friend Daljit run away from the strict regiment of their British boarding school in Shimla to explore the mysterious world beneath the mountains. They take shortcuts through Himalayan jungles, wade through mountain streams, and come face-to-face with a tiger, yet no harm comes to them.

Mountains and hills have not been a obsession for the literary writers so far. They have been portrayed as a background in so many stories and novels, but hills as a great divine force especially, kind to writers, are characteristics to Bond. For him mountains are permanent things. They refuse to move. He has become a part of this particular range. By living here for so long, he is able to claim a relationship with the trees, wild flowers, even the rocks. He says, The sea has been celebrated by many great writers ... But I can't think of anyone, comparable for whom the mountains have been a recurring theme... but to me as a writer the mountains have been kind.

(Bond: *Rain in the Mountains*, 198)

Bond regards himself as a child of the Himalaya as he cannot go away and remains in the Mussoorie hills permanently. Probably he develops his view of Himalayas from the children to whom mountains help in forging a spiritual affinity with different forms of nature. He has discovered the 'hidden pool' girdled with hills where his child characters feel a cryptic pull and get lured by the simplicity loftiness and depth of the Himalaya. In his poem *Hill Station*, Bond writes, "There is nothing to keep me here, only these mountains of silence". In a way, mountains symbolize the highest level of humility and goodness.

"Who goes to the hills, goes to his mother!" And these words of Kipling's *Kim* came true for Bond. Whether it was school in the hills or living in Mussoorie, the mountains have always had a special place in his affections. It is an honest realization of a writer who always keeps his window open. One can easily discern that his purpose is to highlight the contrast of two lives. Hills preserve innocence and faith. Whereas, people of plains boast of their intellect; they mock at the simple beliefs of hill folk, taking them to be a sign of backwardness and ignorance.

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