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### **Wilderness in Ruskin Bond's *Dust on the Mountains***

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#### **Abstract**

Throughout reading short stories one realizes how the most fundamental stories of Indian culture also narrate tales of human existence. The *Pañcatantra* fables written in Sanskrit have also originated in India addressed to children that have stories that have been tailored distinctively to the evident needs of the child. Most of these stories are immersed in the Indian culture in which children grow up. Interestingly, Ruskin Bond as a story writer focuses on the epistemological foundation of the stories while incorporating fiction and personal experiences and, at the same time, with ecological concerns. His stories then become an assortment of experiences and anecdotes to understand the postulate in the story of humanity and the wilderness. This research paper is a study of Bond's *Dust on the Mountains* that examines the stories as an expression of the narratives of civilization and wilderness. The aim of this paper is not only to read the book of stories that bridge different interdisciplinary subjects defining and describing wilderness but also to explore how the narrative speaks to readers with a wide range of backgrounds and interests. The study incorporates an ecocritical perspective to examine the metanarrative that frames both author's and readers' imagination, perception, and way of life.

**Keywords:** Wilderness, Ecocriticism, Nature, Narration, Metanarrative, Biological Growth

Ruskin Bond has been a popular Indian writer who has written various seminal texts about stories and as a writer, he lives in these stories. His stories are primarily texts that are written for children sharing his experience of recollecting memories as he grew and accumulated human experience, often deriving new sense out of them. Our stories explain to us where we came from and nudge us towards a future they have imagined. Bond's short stories have been written to narrate his views of the natural world and inspire humans to love nature with its wilderness. His short story books invite readers to experience life on the Indian hills, encouraging them to make conscious choices to live amidst nature as responsible citizens, and thus readers have been able to live these stories in reality.

Bond was born in Kasauli in 1934 and has lived in Jamnagar, Dehradun, New Delhi, and Shimla for years while he was growing up. His writings have emerged from his lived experiences. He had written his first novel when he was seventeen which was entitled *The Room on the Roof*. Ever since he won the award for the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize for his first work in 1957 he has written more than five hundred short stories, essays, and novellas. These stories have been published in more than forty books that have been published for children. He has been awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1993, the Padma Shri in 1999, the Delhi government's Lifetime Achievement Award in 2012, and the Sahitya Akademi's Bal Sahitya Puraskar in 2013. In 2014 he was honoured with the Padma Bhushan.

Throughout reading his texts one realizes how the most fundamental stories of Indian culture also narrate tales of human existence. The *Pañcatantra* fables written in Sanskrit have also originated in India addressed to children that have stories that have been tailored distinctively to the evident needs of the child. Most of these stories are immersed in the Indian culture in which children grow up. The primary aim of these stories is to strengthen the epistemological foundation of the adult that the child will become in the future. Besides this, the stories offer a possibility to elders to connect with children in a humorous, creative, imaginative, and compassionate approach to nature.

Interestingly, Bond as a story writer focuses on the epistemological foundation of the stories while incorporating fiction and experiences and, at the same time, with science and culture. His narrative seeks answers for what most Indians consider to be unquestionable truths in ancient myths or incontestable facts in science. His stories then become an assortment of experiences and anecdotes to understand the postulate in the story of humanity and the wilderness. Therefore, this research paper is a study of Bond's book *Dust on the Mountains* that examines the stories as an expression of the narratives of civilization and wilderness.

The aim of this paper is not only to read the book of stories that bridge different interdisciplinary subjects defining and describing wilderness but also to explore how the narrative speaks to readers with a wide range of backgrounds and interests. It is, therefore, imperative that the study incorporates an ecocritical perspective to examine the metanarrative that frames both author's and readers' imagination, perception, and way of life.

Bond believes that human encounter with stories commences at birth. According to him, his stories offer a distinct study of children's culture in India. The children and representations of civilized reality have been deliberated upon in his writings that also entail philosophical, anthropological, and sociological concerns. Christopher Schliephake mentions in the Introduction to *Ecocriticism, Ecology, and the Cultures of Antiquity* that ecocriticism has now broader meaning in the international outlook. He mentions that new scholarly inquiry is branching out ecocriticism to not only the representation of wilderness and nature in literary texts but is also an 'inclusive conceptualizations of the term "environment"... into its programmatic fabrics. (2)' He further discusses the ever-increasing field of Environmental Humanities as one that explores the relationship between nature and culture like literary and cultural studies disciplines.

Wilderness thus becomes another way of seeking an answer to the question of representation of nature by Ruskin Bond. His stories in *Dust on the Mountain* further investigate the meanings that humans have always found in nature and wilderness. These meanings are time and again expressed in conventional regard the author has for specific hills and mountains. In particular, mountains have been, and in many cases still are, protected by local people living in Mussoorie. The wilderness then is also witnessed as a refugium where species of animals and plants persist. The stories are a fine illustration of this aspect of Bond's writings. His sense of rapport with the natural environment emerges throughout his work as a dynamic sense of communion with the universe in which not only animals but mountains, rocks, trees, and plants come to life.

The skeletons of a few trees remained on the lower slopes. Almost everything else had gone—grass, flowers, shrubs, birds, butterflies, grasshoppers, ladybirds. A rock lizard popped its head out of a crevice to look at the intruders. Then, like some prehistoric survivor, it scuttled back into its underground shelter. ("Clouds of Dust," In *Dust on the Mountains* 32)

The subject of questions raised for mankind at large in the stories incorporates a problem that underlies all others, and is more deeply interesting than any other to Ruskin Bond is the ascertainment of the relationship between man and nature with its aspect of wilderness. Throughout the book *Dust on the Mountain*, the stories reflect on the term wilderness being utilized by the writer as a character including animals in their natural habitat. It is therefore that the word wilderness also denotes the spatial dimension of existence of both living and non-living rudiments.

Bond's stories have human characters who share the landscape without infringing upon each other's idea of living life. In one way it would then be apt to witness wilderness as a collective topos in Indian story writing popular for its variety of animals and trees, the association humans have with wilderness, and natural disorder. These characteristics additionally make wilderness a distinctive feature of Bond's stories that refers to socio-environmental relationships.

The stories are entitled to establish the premise in the stories for their ontology of wilderness translated in the titles namely "A Long Dry Summer," "The Road to Mussoorie,"

“The Picture Palace,” “Clouds of Dust,” “The Loudest Motor Horn,” “Over the Edge,” “The Hills of Home.” Greg Garrard calls such writings as “wilderness narratives” and states: “The word ‘wilderness’ derives from the Anglo-Saxon ‘wilddeoren’, where ‘deoren’ or beasts existed beyond the boundaries of cultivation.... although as the forests receded and the wilds were colonised the word attracted new connotations. (60)”

Writing for Bond is like hunting while his stories become a new species like living creatures. In the stories, wilderness is shown as a world that exists for its cause while it becomes a space in time that is unrestrained. The stories in *Dust on the Mountain* are stories about the life of the central character Bisnu who chooses to go out to Mussoorie in order to make money by working in the Picture Palace but returns to the land he loved as ‘This was his home, and these were his fields. Even the snow was his. (“The Hills of Home” 64)’

The diction of the stories detains the sense of cyclicity natural to expected lifecycles and seasons. Bond shows in the first how ‘winter came and went’ while ‘dry summer went its scorching way’ and people had to wait later for monsoon. The story reflects on the changing climate of the tropical country India with the mountains having long dry summer. The point of writing about changing weather is to value the times when seasons followed their natural rhythm. While seasonal variations have been shown impacting the cropping pattern and food production each year, Bond shows that there is a considered logic in the practice of local people migrating to Mussoorie; only to return to find solace and to create an ecological balance in the mountain that sustains and preserves the wilderness. Such cyclicity according to him is considered integral to the stories and the real world.

The narratives articulate the dexterity and density intrinsic to Indian cosmopolitics and relate the relevance of such consideration to perspectives on sustainability. Bond however also shows the contrast so as to show ‘how many times humans occupy contested geocultural space:

At night they sat outside their small house, watching the fire spread. A red line stretched right across mountain. Thousands of Himalayan trees were perishing in the flames. Oaks, deodars, maples, pines—trees that had taken hundreds of years to grow. And now a fire started carelessly by some woodcutters had carried up the mountain with the help of the dry grass and a strong breeze. There was no one to put it out. (5)

The elements of wilderness have been mentioned in various motifs in the stories to present the purpose of preserving unique wildlife, wilderness, and playful values of hills. The first two objectives are for the most part created by descriptions of the deep ecology of hills which is juxtaposed against human intervention thereby reflecting the contradictions of maintaining balance in ecology within the geographical space of the stories. For this purpose, wilderness is conceptually offered to readers in the stories with the brief mention of animals in the narrative. The sphere of human understanding: of wildlife is presented literally in reference to the biological factors, the psychological perspective, and the theoretical framework focusing on the semiotic, symbolic, and textual references given in the stories. The amalgamation of these three characteristic elements can be witnessed in the following lines:

The birds were silent, or simply absent. The Himalayan barbet, who usually heralded the approach of the monsoon with strident calls from the top of a spruce tree, hadn’t

been seen or heard. And the cicadas, who played a deafening overture in the oaks at the first hit of rain, seemed to be missing altogether. (6)

These lines emphasize that the existence of birds and trees in the wilderness makes them an agent of life essential for the larger cosmic harmony of plurality not only within a fraction of humans living on mountains or species but widely in society. The stories further illustrate how chaos is central to nature and wilderness for its complex and dynamic system. Bond purposely puts the elements of wilderness in motion to correlate the movement of humans to establish the relationship between man and nature. In the story “Clouds of Dust” he states:

The dust hid the next mountain from view. When they did see the mountain, they found that the top of it was missing—blasted away by dynamite to the quarries to get at the rich strata of limestone rock below surface.... A rock lizard popped its head out of a crevice to look at the intruders. Then, like some prehistoric survivor, it scuttled back into its underground shelter. (32)

This representation of wilderness chains the creation of a variety of stories within the entire collection representing symbiotic relationships, thus including an intermittent outbreak of human and other animal civilizations. Consequently, wilderness provides a situation of steady improvisation to the writer to evolve his characters in situations of human interests, conflicts, and impulsiveness in an unpredictable, yet suggestive of the harmonious and cosmic way of life on the mountain.

Interestingly, the stories of wilderness also replicate the commotion of lived life on the mountain. Therefore, the sequence of events has no singular arrangement or conventional ending. Bond ensures that his stories do not necessarily lead to a number of conclusions and hence offer an array of voices and perspectives through his mouthpiece characters. His views on how the natural environment is affected by man’s intrusion are starkly marked in his description of the loudest truck horn shattering the silence of the mountains (“The Loudest Motor Horn, 39) which is contrasted with the vivid images of the mountain scenery as wildfowl tried to flee to more silent regions after hearing loud horn. Readers also empathize with Bisnu who witnesses the aftermaths of blasting hills that have increasing dust which was ‘whiter, stinging the eyes, irritating the nostrils’ (46). He has near-hysteria at the moment when he views how humans could be threatening proximity wilderness disturbing ecological balance:

‘There was a sharp crack of explosives, and the hillside blossomed outwards. Earth and rocks hurtled down the mountains.... It always frightened him—not so much the sight of the rocks bursting asunder, as the trees being flung aside and destroyed. (46)

It is these events in the stories that affirm how Bond’s contribution to wilderness preservation through his prolific writings assists readers in developing a new environmental consciousness. At this point, it is imperative to discuss some works by ecological critics whose works distinctively mark how things are and how things should be. Indian environmentalist, Ramchandra Guha, specifically argues in his lecture entitled “The Rise And Fall Of Indian Environmentalism” :

.... in India environmentalism was driven not by leisure but by survival. There was an unequal competition over resources such as forests, fish, water, and pasture. On one

side were local communities who depended on these resources for subsistence; on the other, urban and industrial interests who appropriated them for profit. State policies had tended to favour the latter, leading to protests that called for a fairer and more sustainable use of the gifts of nature. (T. N. Khoshoo Memorial Lecture)

As a literary writer Bond's stories have instances of intriguing philosophical insight and propose visionary strength emphasizing the indispensable need of establishing ecological balance in nature. His vision has intimidating consequences for the humans with their notions of affecting wilderness since it suggests that wilderness is only purposeful if humans are absent from it. Maneka Gandhi, the Indian Union Cabinet Minister for Women & Child Development, and an environmentalist, has also pragmatically pointed out about human behaviour affirming that "We are so close to the red line, we may wake up tomorrow and discover there is nothing left to save."

The myth of uninhabited wilderness is put forth by Bond as well he mentions several episodes in his stories where he argues that pollution, devastation, explosion, climate change, global warming have become a local phenomenon. He points out how many children might never experience natural seasons and will live in an environment formed out of contamination. Thus the idea of wilderness in its purity is presented in the narrative with the existence of human existence suggesting the responsible approach of humans in everyday life.

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