

# Nature's Treasure in Ruskin Bond's *Dust on the Mountain*

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## Abstract

A common philosophical belief suggests that a priceless treasure lies within everyone's heart, yet people often overlook it searching elsewhere and finding nothing. This treasure, though invisible externally reveals itself when one cultivates deep admiration and appreciation expressing these sublime emotions to the world. The renowned writer Ruskin Bond celebrated for his connection to the hills and the "smell of the Himalayas" engages ecocritical readers by highlighting the innocence, purity and simplicity of nature which ultimately enriches human life. While city life may appear to offer treasures and pleasures, tempting people with promises of employment and opportunities. This paper does not underestimate urban living instead it emphasises the inherent goodness, beauty and wealth present in one's native land. It stresses the importance of recognising the true value of one's roots. It promotes that individuals are the rightful owners of their homeland not estranged descendants of an unknown master. By exploring this narrative, the paper seeks to inspire readers to cherish and preserve their native surroundings while finding profound fulfillment within their own environment.

**Keywords:** Ecocriticism, Ruskin Bond, *Dust on the Mountain*, Urban Migration, Native Land, Nature, Environmental Consciousness, Rural Identity, Urbanisation

All human beings are travellers on this beautiful earth. During their time here, they live on the land and enjoy the care and security that nature provides. Nature is kind and loving, like a mother who holds them close to her heart. Joseph Rudyard Kipling rightly said, "Who goes to the hills, goes to his mother". William Wordsworth often called the poet of nature wrote in *Tintern Abbey*, "Nature never betrays the heart that loved her". Nature has blessed them with everything they need for a healthy and peaceful life. It gives them peace and calm and helps them stay simple and good.

Sadly, when human beings disturb and destroy the gifts of nature for selfish reasons, nature fights back with earthquakes, floods, droughts and other disasters. But after these storms, nature settles down and becomes generous again. As it is said, "Nature gives. And takes away. And gives again". They often blame nature for problems like droughts or lack of rain. The truth is, nature changes its ways to help them but they fail to see the treasures in their own land and wander elsewhere in search of happiness.

'God is the skillful architect who fashioned the cosmos out of chaos by 'bringing out order from the primitive disorder.' In the Doctrine of Creation nature was given the prime place. God created light, atmosphere, earth, plants, birds, sea creatures, land animals and thereafter created man to guard, watch, preserve and protect them all.' St. Bonaventure would call creatures, no matter how small by the name of 'brother' or 'sister'.

On other hand, in the hymn of St. Francis of Assisi, he calls the creatures as Brother Sun, Sister Moon, Brother Wind, Sister Water and Brother Fire. The purpose of his creation is to have communion and interdependence with one another. Moltmann speaks of ‘the community of all creation with God as head in which the humans are expected to have a relationship of sympathy, participation, delight and accompaniment with all creatures.’

There is a good amount of treasure hidden within oneself and in all of God’s creation. No earth is waste, no soil is useless and no land is barren. They are treasure hunts available in plentitude for humanity. As it is given in the Bible “Ask, and it will be given to you. Seek and you will find. Knock, and the door will be opened to you”. Nevertheless, God has given us plenty before asking but it is the committed responsibility of every human being to search and knock on the door of the Earth to find the principal treasure buried. Nature is resourceful, hospitable and a treasure hunt entrusted to humanity as trustees and guardians to till and to keep. Cragon says, “Human beings must be the ‘authors of life and not proliferators of death.’ Pope Benedict XVI spoke of an “ecology of man”, because man too has nature that he cannot manipulate at will”. Bill Devall states that “Man is an integral part of nature, not over or apart from nature”. Thus, nature and man’s life are so interlinked that it is not easy for human beings to separate themselves from its influence.

Human beings are often reminded of the intrinsic goodness and benevolence of nature through various ecologists and literary writers such as Ghosh, Desai, Roy, Bond, Thiruvalluvar, Wordsworth, Emerson and Thoreau, who made considerable contributions to the fostering of ecology and sustainability of ecosystems. Ruskin Bond, an internationally acclaimed writer has been a significant contributor to nature and the environment. His stories are situated on the hill of the Himalayas where he loved to reside in the hills, mountains and nature. In his *Book of Nature* Bond says, “Living in the hills or near the great forests or near the sea does of course make it easier to engage with the natural world. When we walk close to nature, we come to a better understanding of life; for it is from the natural world that we first emerge and to which we still belong”.

Most of Bond’s work stimulates and motivates people to have an affinity and appreciation for one’s own Mother Earth. He does not hue his works with imagination. Instead, he portrays the true landscape of nature, hills and the town of Mussoorie to the reader without any fictional embellishment. He helps the reader to find the treasure of nature in one’s own native than searching elsewhere. Ruskin who had decided to settle in London permanently returned to India where he found the treasure of peace, love, wealth and contentment instead of abroad. One such story, *Dust on the Mountain*, speaks about a young boy, Bisnu who decided to move to town but after sometime made the decision to return to his home.

Circumstances had forced Bisnu, a twelve-year-old boy to leave home, his caring mother and his lovable sister and move to the town of Mussoorie. For a child, home is a reality and considered the best place of relaxation. ‘A home is also a place where one feels ‘the sense of belongingness, the sense of freedom, the sense of power, the feeling of love, attraction, jealousy, joy and satisfaction.’ “Home to a child is not merely a dwelling place but also an attitude. For a real child or a fictional character, it is a place of comfort, security and acceptance, a place that meets both physical and emotional needs” (Stott and Francis 223). Michael Allen Fox says there is no place like home “Home is where the heart is”. Bisnu decided to leave his home and migrate to the town called Mussoorie for a purpose. Why do people migrate to the city? There are two types of migration: voluntary and imposed. People migrate voluntarily to the city on the grounds of socio-political imbalances being experienced under a nation’s regime. In ‘The Ruined Cottage’ the Pedlar directly alludes to this period of hardship for the nation:

*You may remember, now some ten years gone,  
Two blighting seasons when the fields were left  
With half a harvest. It pleased heaven to add  
A worse affliction in the plague of war.*

These lines speak about the protagonist deciding to leave home in order to join the militia hoping that the payment he receives for signing up will help his family. Some migrate to the city for literary heritage and some notable writers such as William Shakespeare and Charles Dickens lived and flourished as great writers in London. James

Shergold Boone struck a different tone: “Cities are the centres and theatres of human ambition, human cupidity and human pleasure”. For T.S. Eliot, “City is a place of both excitement and estrangement”. Bond says, “Frustrated young men and women dream of a better life and from which few escape into the bigger world”. There are situations in which a government attempts to move a group while offering people a wide range of alternatives due to war or extreme drought and poverty they experience.

In the story *Dust on the Mountain*, Bisnu leaves home to find treasure in the town called Mussoorie rather than in his own place. Mussoorie has long been known as the “Queen of the Hills”. The economy in Mussoorie is primarily dependent on tourism. Tourists come primarily from New Delhi, Punjab, Haryana and other northern and southern states. Bisnu knew that a lot of rich people come to the hills for their holidays where they spend their money. On the other hand, the poor do not make any attempt to visit tourist centers in the city because of poverty and the fear of travelling to new places. However, cheap labourers are found in the city doing menial jobs like washing dishes and cleaning floors for low wages. The protagonist of the story Bisnu finds a job at a cinema theatre as a tea seller for minimum pay with a condition that he can drink any amount of tea but if he breaks a glass, the cost of it will be deducted from his salary. Secondly, the customer will be always right even if the customer is the one causing the problem. Bisnu accepts the deal and begins working at the cinema hall. He finds two other boys of his age, Chittru and Bali who have also come to Mussoorie to make money in order to feed their family.

Bisnu feels that his salary still cannot meet the needs of his family, so he decides to look for a job elsewhere. After a few days of work in the cinema hall, Chitru advises Bisnu to work at the limestone quarries where he will be paid more than working at the cinema theatre. Chittru who had been at the quarry before begins to describe the mountain to Bisnu on the way to the quarry. The mountain was full of wild strawberries which he used to gather. Now all he sees are clouds of limestone dust hanging in the air. “The hill station, with all its glitter, was just a pretty gift box with nothing inside; a body without a soul”.

The mountains were blasted, and the mountain remains naked. The ruthless behaviour of men is the cause of the destruction of trees and the depletion of natural resources. A mountain is a place of great resource and ‘spiritual enlightenment.’ It always attracts people because of its beauty, goodness, dignity, simplicity and innocence. Bond says in his introduction to *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* that “Once you have lived with the mountains, there is no escape. You belong to them”. Nevertheless, the mountains were blasted and they remain naked by the irresponsible attitude of men.

Bisnu gets a job as a cleaner for Pritam, the truck driver who carried limestone from the quarry. He notices that the hills were bare and dry. Most of the forests seem to have disappeared. Dust is found everywhere, including the truck, which is completely covered with dust. A wave of nostalgia sweeps over Bisnu, who grew up amidst the walnut, the chestnuts, the oaks and pine. He wonders ‘if one day they would suffer the same fate, and his own mountain range would become a desert like this one. No trees, no grass, no water, only the choking dust of mines and quarries.’ This presumption deeply distresses and pains Bisnu despite his being employed in the quarry on the account of poverty at home and he remains speechless and motionless. The nostalgia that arose from the heart of Bisnu becomes a clarion call to the present generation to curb deforestation, denuding nature and destroying the ecosystem.

Deforestation is a global problem which threatens human lives and environmental sustainability. Deforestation, in general causes several societal and environmental problems such as bare hills and forest birds becoming homeless. Bond says “Forests birds, all of them will now be in search of some other stretch of surviving forest. The only visitors will be the crows, who have learnt to live with and off humans and seem to multiply along with roads, houses, and people”. Ruskin Bond prophesied through Bisnu, the evils of deforestation and other environmental imbalances amidst a rapidly increasing population and burgeoning technology. The author tells us that deforestation is not the only factor destroying the trees in the Himalayan region, but also the general carelessness of people. For example, campers make fire and forget to extinguish them, which can spread

and grow into a huge forest fire destroying everything on their way.

*“Thousands of Himalayas 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 campers had been carried up the mountain with the help of the dry grass and strong breeze. There was no one to put it out. It will take days to die down by itself”* (Bond 289).

Ruskin Bond’s stories reveal his love of nature and particularly of trees. They are firmly rooted in Dehra. The landscape of the place haunts him without end. Like Wordsworth’s visit to *Tintern Abbey*, Bond’s stay at Dehra helps him to build an intimate relationship with the hillside, trees, and birds that become an integral part of his life. To live without them becomes painful for him. By doing violence to nature, man has caused ecological imbalances which ultimately harm him. In *Rain in the Mountains*, Bond describes cutting down of trees this way, “They cut them down last spring, with swift efficient tools, the sap was rising still, the trees bled, slaughtered to make furniture for fools”. The author invites us to be extra careful in nurturing the trees. The trees are the oldest living things on Earth, very reliable in their relationship to man, including extreme usefulness in the oxygen cycle. They are integral participants in the precipitation cycle that provides rain and snow necessary for human beings to till the earth.

Trees become saviours in the lives of people and the earth, yet only a few realise their importance. Pritam and Bisnu were going to the quarry to load limestone. Ignoring the valley with its hairpin bends or the possibility of a stray mule in the middle of the road Pritam drove the truck faster than usual. The truck went straight over the edge, bouncing over the rocks, rolling over twice where it came to rest against the trunk of a scraggy old oak tree with only minor damage. Pritam whispered to Bisnu, “But for that tree, the truck would have ended up at the foot of the mountain, and I wouldn’t be here talking to you. I’d have been in some other world now. It was the tree that saved me”.

This is a great realisation for Pritam who concretises the saving nature of the old tree to the young boy Bisnu. In the short story called *The Angry River*, Sita profoundly acknowledges the saving nature of the tree during a flood by clinging to the

branch of the tree. In *Cherry Tree*, the grandfather advises his grandson to plant a cherry seed who then was able to find delight in the growth of the tree. These stories among others convey the very important message to children that planting and protecting trees will help take care of the Earth, and in doing so will take care of plants, and animals. Ruskin Bond talks about his father who made a hobby of planting trees. “He was planting trees for the benefit of the earth and for the birds and animals who live on it and need more food and shelter”.

The elders advised the children to save, protect and grow trees, something truly realised by Bisnu after the accident. Like a prodigal son, he realised that he would go back to his village and work on his land. “It’s better to grow things on the land than to blast things out of it”. Many people who move to other countries return to their native land, for there they find social security and acceptance and the opportunity to discover themselves without the interference of others. Bond considers India the best place to stay. His attachment to India is inborn in him, he cannot forget the warmth and affection he finds among the Indian People. The memory of hills, mountains, rivers, flowers and the smell of mangoes in the air remained with him always. So, he returns to India where he has been living for a long period of time. As Mr. Harrison often reminded Bond, “You belong here, to this house, this road and these people. Don’t go where you don’t belong”.

By the end of the story, Bisnu comes to the realisation that the hidden treasure is not in the place of dynamite where they denude and devastate the forest but in his own very land where he promises to work, till the earth and cultivate growing things. He says to himself, “This was my home, and these were in my fields”. Even the snow was his. When the snow melted, he would clear the fields, nourish them and make them rich. Bond also exhibits his love for trees through the story of how Bisnu was saved by a tree upon which the truck came to rest before plunging farther down the gorge to certain death. Bisnu’s realisation that planting and tending to trees, which are always helpful to human beings, is conclusive evidence of the importance of trees to Bond’s worldview.

Through the story *Dust on the Mountain*, Ruskin Bond conveys a clear message to save and protect

nature. Bond has an unending love for nature and has admired it since his boyhood. He encourages readers to become eco-defenders, eco-promoters and eco-lovers. He advises, “not to cut down trees without replacing them. For every tree that is felled, we must plant two. Otherwise, one day there will be no forests at all, and the world will become one great desert”. Bond says, ‘nature is delicate and sensitive.’ The more you love it, the more it will prosper. Yet in this age of technology, when economic growth is all important, nature is being neglected.

Deforestation simply for the sake of establishing new industries will one day, if not curtailed be responsible for the destruction of humanity. He felt not much has been changed. “Time passes and yet it actually doesn’t pass; people come and go and the mountains remain. Mountains are permanent things. They are stubborn and refuse to move even when you blast holes out of them for their mineral wealth, strip them of their trees and foliage or dam their streams and divert their currents”. Planet Earth is permanent, yet there is no guarantee that humans will survive especially if we do not realise our prime responsibility to love, care for, protect and promote nature.

### Conclusion

In the past, people had no banks to protect their wealth from invaders or thieves, so they hid it underground. But the real treasure has always been the land, a gift from God that gives peace, happiness and satisfaction to those who care for it. God entrusted us to work the land, nurture it and enjoy its blessings. In *Dust on the Mountain*, Ruskin Bond reminds us to find this treasure within ourselves and in the world around us rather than looking elsewhere.

This realisation gave Bisnu the strength and pride to love and care for his land. Bond’s story is a reminder for us today to protect and value nature. His writings inspire us to live simply and find happiness in the beauty of the natural world. As Frank Lloyd Wright said, “Nature is the manifestation of God. I go

to nature every day for inspiration”. Bond’s message encourages us to live in harmony with nature and appreciate its blessings.

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