



Home, identity, and the Himalayas in Ruskin Bond's writing

Kaveri Shivaraj Kamashetti^{1*}, Dr. S G Dollegoudar²

¹ Research Scholar Department of English, Sharnbasva University, Kalaburagi, Karnataka, India

² Research Guide Dean, Faculty of Languages, Sharnbasva University, Kalaburagi, Karnataka, India

Corresponding Author: Kaveri Shivaraj Kamashetti

Abstract

This article explores the concept of "dwelling" in the works of Ruskin Bond, focusing on how his narratives transform physical spaces especially the Himalayan foothills into emotional, ecological, and cultural sanctuaries. Drawing from Martin Heidegger's existential philosophy and Gaston Bachelard's phenomenology of space, the study examines how Bond's characters negotiate identity, belonging, and displacement through intimate relationships with nature.

Through close readings of texts such as *The Room on the Roof*, *The Hidden Pool*, *Angry River*, and *The Cherry Tree*, the article argues that Bond's literary landscapes are not passive settings but active agents in shaping human consciousness. The ecology of belonging in Bond's work offers a counter-narrative to colonial alienation and modern ecological disruption, proposing a harmonious coexistence between humans and their environment.

Keywords: Himalayas, ecological belonging, Anglo-Indian identity, place attachment, postcolonial literature

Introduction

Ruskin Bond's literary universe is deeply rooted in the Himalayan foothills and small-town India, where nature and memory converge to create spaces of profound emotional resonance. His narratives consistently explore the human need for belonging, often through the lens of displacement, nostalgia, and ecological intimacy. For Bond, an Anglo-Indian writer occupying a liminal space in post-independence India, the search for home becomes a defining theme, one that is resolved not through societal integration but through a deep, sensory connection to the Indian landscape. This article investigates how Bond's concept of "dwelling" transcends physical habitation to encompass psychological, cultural, and spiritual dimensions, offering a powerful vision of home rooted in ecological stewardship.

This exploration aligns with the principles of Indian ecocriticism, which examines the intricate links between literature, culture, and the environment within the subcontinent. While Bond may not be a formal ecocritical theorist, his work intuitively embodies the movement's core tenets. The formal advent of modern ecocriticism in Indian academia can be traced to initiatives like the course in Tamil Poetics focusing on literature and ecology introduced by Nirmal Selvamony at Madras Christian College in 1980. Bond's writing, however, serves as a literary precursor, capturing an ecological consciousness that laments deforestation and advocates for a harmonious human-nature relationship long before it became a widespread academic discourse.

To unpack the layers of Bond's vision, this article employs a dual theoretical framework. First, Martin Heidegger's seminal essay "Building Dwelling Thinking" provides a lens to understand dwelling as an ethical, existential act of being-in-the-world a mode of caring for and preserving one's environment.

Second, Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* helps illuminate how physical spaces, particularly natural ones, become internalized sanctuaries of memory, dream, and

imagination. By applying these philosophies, this article will argue that Bond constructs an "ecology of belonging" that challenges the alienation inherent in both colonial history and modern environmental crises. Through an analysis of key texts, this paper will explore how dwelling manifests as emotional attachment, the insider-outsider paradox, the celebration of transience, and a critique of ecological disruption, ultimately defining home not as a fixed location but as a dynamic, living relationship with the world.

The Phenomenology of Dwelling: A Theoretical Framework

To fully appreciate the depth of Bond's literary landscapes, it is essential to first establish a theoretical understanding of "dwelling." For Martin Heidegger, dwelling is the fundamental character of human existence. In "Building Dwelling Thinking," he argues that to dwell is not merely to occupy a shelter but to exist on the earth in a way that is mindful and caring. He posits a "fourfold" of earth, sky, divinities, and mortals, and suggests that true dwelling occurs when humanity brings these four elements into a harmonious relationship. This involves "sparing and preserving" the earth, a concept that stands in stark opposition to the modern tendency to exploit nature as a mere resource. For Heidegger, a bridge does not just connect two banks; it allows the river to be a river and gathers the landscape around it. This philosophical perspective provides a powerful framework for analyzing Bond's characters, who often find their authentic selves not by conquering nature, but by living gently within it, preserving its integrity.

Complementing Heidegger's existential focus, Gaston Bachelard's *The Poetics of Space* offers a psychological lens on our relationship with intimate spaces. Bachelard explores the "phenomenology of the soul's relationship to its home," arguing that a house is not just a geometric object but a "psychic state" and a repository for memory, dream, and imagination. He extends this concept beyond man-made

structures to natural "nooks and corners"—nests, shells, and forest clearings—which can evoke powerful feelings of refuge and belonging. For Bachelard, these spaces are not backdrops for life but are integrated into our very consciousness, shaping our sense of self. This "topo-analysis" is particularly relevant to Bond's work, where characters often form their deepest attachments to non-traditional dwellings: a rooftop room, a hidden pool, or a cherished tree. Bachelard's ideas allow us to see these natural spaces as extensions of the characters' inner worlds. By synthesizing these two philosophies, we can approach Bond's work with a richer understanding. Heidegger provides the ethical and ecological dimension, helping us see dwelling as an act of stewardship and responsible coexistence. Bachelard provides the intimate, psychological dimension, revealing how landscapes become internalized as sites of emotional sanctuary and identity formation. Together, they allow us to appreciate Bond's fiction not just as stories set in nature, but as profound meditations on what it truly means to be at home in the world.

Dwelling as Emotional and Ecological Attachment

In Bond's fiction, the act of dwelling is primarily an emotional and ecological pact rather than a claim of ownership. This is powerfully illustrated in his debut novel, *The Room on the Roof*, where the protagonist, Rusty, an orphaned Anglo-Indian boy, finds liberation by escaping the oppressive, colonial rigidity of his guardian's home. His new dwelling, a modest rooftop room, is not grand, but it is his own. This space symbolizes a profound act of self-discovery and reclamation of identity. The room opens up to the sky, the bazaar, and the rhythms of Indian life, allowing Rusty to connect with the world on his own terms. It becomes his sanctuary, a place where he can be his authentic self, perfectly echoing Heidegger's notion that true dwelling is a way of being-in-the-world. The room is less a physical structure and more a vantage point from which Rusty begins to form a relationship with his environment and his community, thus truly beginning to "dwell."

This theme of nurturing nature as a form of rootedness is crystallized in the short story *The Cherry Tree*. Here, a young boy named Rakesh plants a cherry seed on a whim. The story follows the life of the tree as it struggles against the odds—eaten by a goat, cut by a scythe, and weathered by the monsoon. Rakesh's quiet, persistent care for the sapling becomes a metaphor for resilience and the creation of a home through an ecological act. He does not own the land, but by planting and nurturing the tree, he establishes a deep, personal connection to it. The tree's growth mirrors his own, and its eventual blossoming becomes a shared triumph. This simple act reflects a profound ecological pact, where the act of giving life to another being anchors him to the landscape. It is a quiet form of dwelling, constituted not by walls and a roof, but by a reciprocal relationship of care and growth.

Nature as the Ultimate Home

For many of Bond's characters, a deeper sense of belonging is found not in man-made structures, but in the living, breathing world of nature. This is a recurring theme that suggests human dwellings are secondary to the primary home offered by the earth itself. In his autobiographical work, *Rain in the Mountains*, Bond's personal reflections

articulate this sentiment directly. When he writes, "The trees remember me," he is not merely being poetic; he is suggesting a reciprocal, conscious relationship with the land, where his identity is recognized and affirmed by the non-human world. This sense of kinship with nature provides a stability that human society often lacks.

This idea is fictionalized in many of his stories. In *Angry River*, a young girl named Sita lives on a fragile island that is swept away by a flood. Her survival is predicated on her intimate knowledge of the river and her ability to find refuge in a sacred pipal tree. The river is both a destructive force and a life-giving one, and the tree is not just a perch but a living entity that offers her solace and protection.

Similarly, in *The Blue Umbrella*, a girl named Binya trades her lucky leopard's claw necklace for a beautiful blue umbrella. The umbrella becomes part of her identity, but when she sacrifices it out of compassion for an old shopkeeper, she re-establishes a more profound connection with her community and the landscape. The deodar trees and the mountainsides are the constant, true home that remains after the material object is gone. In these narratives, nature aligns with Bachelard's idea of a "psychic state," where the landscape itself becomes a repository of memory, imagination, and deep emotional security, offering a more enduring sanctuary than any physical house.

The Outsider-Insider Paradox: Anglo-Indian Identity and Place

Bond's Anglo-Indian heritage is central to his ecological vision, placing him and his characters in a liminal position—neither fully British nor entirely Indian in the post-independence social fabric. This duality, this condition of being both an insider and an outsider, is reflected in characters like Rusty, who must navigate their cultural in-betweenness. For them, a secure identity cannot be found in nationality or social acceptance, but rather in a tangible, sensory connection to a specific place. Nature, in this context, becomes the ultimate arbiter of belonging, a non-judgmental realm where one can be truly at home.

This theme is powerfully portrayed in the essay "A Far Cry from India," where Bond describes his alienation during a stay in England. The experience intensifies his ecological and emotional closeness to India, which he recalls through a cascade of sensory details. He writes, "I knew I did not belong there and I disliked the place intensely". What he longs for is not an abstract idea of India, but its physical reality: "the languid, easy-going, mango-scented air of small-town India: the gulgulmohur trees in their fiery summer splendour... the scent of wet earth after the first rain". This catalogue of sensations—smells, sights, sounds—constitutes his authentic home. It is a belonging rooted in the body and the land, which stands in stark contrast to the cold, windswept English waterfront that feels utterly alien. It is precisely Bond's outsider status that enables this reflective, deep ecological vision. Unable to take social belonging for granted, his characters must actively create it through their relationship with the natural world, making the Indian landscape the primary site of their emotional and cultural anchoring.

Transience, Folklore, and Storied Landscapes

Bond's fiction consistently challenges the conventional notion that home must be a permanent, fixed structure. He celebrates transient dwellings—railway stations, forest

clearings, and hidden pools—as equally valid sites of belonging, suggesting that dwelling is constituted by meaningful experience rather than longevity. In the story "Time Stops at Shamli," a railway waiting room, typically considered a "non-place" of anonymous transit, is transformed into a temporary sanctuary filled with memory, longing, and profound human connection. The fleeting encounter in this transient space leaves a more lasting impact than years spent in a permanent house, illustrating that the intensity of experience, not its duration, is what creates a sense of home.

This experiential notion of dwelling is further enriched by Bond's infusion of Indian folklore and myth into his landscapes, linking natural spaces to a deep cultural memory. This act transforms a generic landscape into a "storied" realm of belonging. In "The Tunnel," the presence of a hermit's dwelling within a railway tunnel evokes India's ancient ascetic traditions, sanctifying a modern, industrial space with a timeless spirituality. In "Hanuman to the Rescue," the narrative reimagines sacred ecology through the langurs who inhabit a temple, blurring the lines between the animal, human, and divine worlds. By weaving these mythic and folkloric elements into his settings, Bond connects his characters to a history that transcends their individual lives. This aligns with Mircea Eliade's concept of sacred spaces, where myth transforms a place from profane to sacred, giving it a center and making it a true point of orientation in the world. For Bond, a place becomes home when it is imbued with stories, memories, and a sense of the sacred, whether it is a permanent mountain cottage or a temporary stop on a train journey.

Environmental Stewardship and Its Disruption

While much of Bond's work celebrates a harmonious human-nature relationship, it also serves as a subtle critique of modernity's destructive impact on the environment. His narratives often present a model of ecological stewardship, only to show it threatened by external forces of greed and carelessness.

The novella *The Hidden Pool* serves as a powerful case study of this dynamic. For the three boy protagonists, the secluded pool in the Himalayan foothills is a secret sanctuary, a natural dwelling they care for and protect. Their relationship with the pool embodies ecological stewardship; it is a space they belong to through respect and care, not ownership^[33].

This idyllic relationship is violently disrupted by the arrival of contractors who use dynamite for construction, an act of modern, extractive industry. Bond writes, "Half the hillside tumbled into the pool, and Anil along with it". This explosion symbolizes the destructive intrusion of a worldview that sees nature as an inert resource to be exploited. The boys' subsequent attempt to "enlarge our pool by building a dam" can be read as a well-intentioned but ultimately flawed human response to control and manage nature. Their efforts are undone when a natural torrent of water, fueled by heavy rain, bursts their dam and floods the ravine^[36]. This sequence suggests a complex ecological lesson: while stewardship is vital, nature's power ultimately transcends human control. True dwelling requires co-existence, not domination. This fictional episode echoes Bond's real-life laments over deforestation, where he mourns felled oak trees as a personal and spiritual loss,

underscoring the fragility of our natural dwellings and the urgent need for a more respectful mode of being.

Conclusion

Ruskin Bond's literary landscapes offer a profound and enduring meditation on dwelling as an ecological and emotional practice. Moving beyond the simple provision of shelter, his work redefines home as a dynamic and reciprocal relationship with the living world. His characters, often displaced or occupying society's margins, find a true sense of belonging not through property ownership or national identity, but through acts of stewardship, the cultivation of memory, and a deep sensory engagement with nature. They teach us that a home can be a rooftop room, a nurtured cherry tree, or a temporary railway station—any place where a meaningful connection to the world is forged. By weaving together personal history, philosophical inquiry, and cultural memory, Bond constructs a powerful ecology of belonging. This vision serves as a poignant counter-narrative to the alienation wrought by colonial legacies and the escalating crises of modern ecological disruption. In an era marked by environmental precarity and widespread displacement, Bond's work remains more relevant than ever. It invites us to reconsider our own relationship with our environment and to find home not in a fixed location, but in a mindful, caring, and attentive way of dwelling on the earth.

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