

Bioregional Identity and Ecological Intimacy in Ruskin Bond's Short Stories *Sita and the River* and *The Cherry Tree*

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Abstract

This paper explores bioregional ethics in Ruskin Bond's short stories *Sita and the River* and *The Cherry Tree*. It examines how Bond's portrayal of nature reflects a deep moral connection between humans and their local environment. Through the characters' sensitivity to place, especially the innocence of children, Bond emphasizes harmony, care, and ecological belonging. The study highlights how both stories illustrate the principles of bioregionalism—living ethically within one's natural surroundings, respecting local ecosystems, and recognizing human dependence on nature. By presenting nature as a moral teacher and companion, Bond promotes an environmental consciousness grounded in empathy and stewardship. His narratives remind readers that ethical living begins with understanding and preserving the ecological balance of one's immediate landscape.

Keywords: Ruskin Bond, Bioregional Ethics, Ecocriticism, Nature, Place-Based Harmony.

Introduction

Ruskin Bond, one of India's most beloved storytellers, has dedicated his literary career to depicting the rhythms of life in the foothills of the Himalayas. His fiction captures the intimacy between human beings and the environment, turning everyday encounters with trees, rivers, birds, and mountains into moral and spiritual experiences. Among his many works, *Sita and the River* and *The Cherry Tree* stand out for their portrayal of the deep bond between children and the natural world. These stories highlight how early contact with nature shapes ethical awareness and belonging. This paper examines these stories through the lens of bioregionalism a philosophy that emphasizes living in harmony with the ecological characteristics of one's region. Bond's stories demonstrate precisely this ethic: a life of coexistence grounded in local ecology, love, and reverence for the natural world.

Ruskin Bond is an eminent contemporary Indian writer of British descent. His wide array of short stories, novels, essays, poems, travelogues, and articles in newspapers and magazines have inspired many an aspiring writers for the past six decades. Bond's dominant theme is ecology and environment. Natural scenic hills of Dehradun and Mussoorie always constitute the setting of his works and reflect his ardent faith in the healing powers of nature. He forwards his worry for the unthoughtful cruel actions of man towards nature. Through his short stories for children, he presents a very significant message to everyone –the importance of nature in our life. He always emphasizes on the friendly relationship between man and nature as both are interdependent and interrelated. This is why he feels pity for the unsympathetic and cruel actions and attitude of modern humans towards nature.

The natural scenic heights and hills of Dehradun and Mussoorie almost constitute the real setting of his works and reflect his ardent faith in the healing powers of nature. The

highly deteriorating condition of the region was not a welcome change for such a nature lover who couldn't stop to talk of it in his writings especially stories. Recently, though heavy emphasis was laid on saving the trees yet the actual progress has been very insignificant and negligible. Even today, the trees are destroyed and cut down ruthlessly sans replacement and thought for a better future. Overgrazing and ruthless assault on herbs causes damage to the meadows and pastures. The absence of forests will finally lead to less precipitation in the form of rain and snow leaving the grand beautiful awe inspiring peaks without their white mantle. Thus, dryness will harm the essence of humans.

Ruskin Bond has expressed his concern for nature which has been exploited by human beings in the name of urbanization and modernization and how the harmful effects of humans' exploitation of nature directly affect human life and living space. Bond's short story *Sita and the River* is the narrative of around Sita and her old grandparents, who live on a small island, in the Ganges. The small family depends upon the nature and natural resources like, fishing, getting fruits and vegetables on the island itself. They have a small hut, built against the rocks on the island. A huge peepal tree stands in the middle of the island. Hens, a few goats, fishes complete their existence. Sita remembers her grandmother's depiction of young Krishna as a "friend of birds and animals"; Indra as the cause of "thunder and lightning"; Vishnu, whose steed was "a great white bird"; Ganesh with "an elephant's head"; and Hanuman as "the monkey God". Hindu theologians believe that the entire earth is appearance of God; God is in all things and all things are God. The presence of the Divine pervades the Universe; the eternal triangle is made up of God, Nature and Man.

In *Sita and the River*, Ruskin Bond narrates the story of two children whose courage and resilience are tested during a devastating flood. When the river overflows, Sita is left alone on the island as her grandfather takes her ailing grandmother to the town for medical

aid. As the water rises, Sita safeguards a few family heirlooms in a trunk and climbs a peepul tree for safety. The tree, however, is uprooted and swept downstream, carrying her along. She is rescued by a boy named Vijay, who helps her into his boat, and after drifting with the current, they finally reach the shore. Eventually, Sita is reunited with her grandfather in Shahganj, and together they return to the island to rebuild their life. Vijay gifts her his flute before parting, symbolizing a bond born of shared struggle and the harmonizing power of nature.

The story may be read as a wilderness romance, where love and life blossom amidst nature's bounty and unpredictability. Bond presents a tranquil world marked by simplicity, contentment, and a profound interdependence between human life and the natural world. The river, though destructive, also becomes a source of connection and renewal—it safeguards Sita through the peepul tree, unites her with Vijay, and restores her sense of belonging. The narrative culminates in a symbolic reflection: "Sometimes the river is angry and sometimes it is kind," says Sita, to which Vijay replies, "We are part of the river." This dialogue encapsulates Bond's bioregional vision—nature is not an adversary but a living force that encompasses both fury and benevolence.

Through Sita's adventurous spirit and her intimate familiarity with the landscape, Bond explores the ethical relationship between human beings and the natural world. Even amid destruction, nature is portrayed as a compassionate teacher, guiding humanity toward endurance, humility, and harmony. The flood becomes a metaphor for life's unpredictability, while the river symbolizes continuity, transformation, and moral wisdom. Ultimately, Bond articulates a bioregional ethic grounded in respect for nature's dual character—its capacity to nurture and to challenge—and affirms that true belonging arises from coexistence with the living environment.

The story commences with the depiction of the river and hints its approaching role

in the forthcoming events:

In the middle of the river, the river that began in the mountains of the Himalayas and ended in the Bay of Bengal, there was a small island. The river swept around the island, sometimes clawing at its banks but never going right over it. More than twenty years had passed since the river had flooded the

island and at that time no one had lived there. (177)

In “Sita and the River,” Ruskin Bond presents a delicate yet powerful portrayal of the intimate relationship between a child and her natural surroundings. The river, which floods the island, uproots the lone peepul tree, and carries Sita away, becomes both a destructive and regenerative force in her life. Rescued by the village boy Vijay, Sita later returns to the island with her grandfather after the waters recede—an experience that deepens her understanding of nature’s duality, its capacity to nurture and to devastate. Sita had by now experienced both the generative and destructive aspect of nature. Ten-year-old Sita lives on an island in the midst of the river with her grandfather and grandmother. There is the only house and the only family on the island where she lost her mother when she was two or three. Only ten years back they had come to live on that island. A small hut has been built into a huge rock as if the hut built on the rock stood firm. They had goats grazing on the short grass and the leaves of the thistle and hens followed them. There was a melon patch and a vegetable patch and also a small field of marigolds. The landmark of the island is a three-hundred-year old peepul tree, the only tree on the island. Bond makes a naturalist’s statement saying:

Peepul trees will grow anywhere - through the walls of old temples, through gravestones, even from roof top. . . Even during the great flood, which had occurred twenty years back the peepul tree had stood firm. (177)

Sita's upbringing reflects the traditional ecological knowledge passed down through generations. From her grandmother, she learns domestic and nurturing skills; from her grandfather, practical survival skills like boating, fishing, and handling snakes. Her education is experiential and place-based, shaped by her immediate environment rather than formal schooling. Despite her isolation—cut off from the world beyond the river—Sita develops a profound familiarity with her landscape. Her comfort in walking barefoot across slippery rocks, her ease in handling snakes, and her instinct to protect rather than harm them exemplify her harmony with nature's rhythms. Even her interactions with creatures like snakes and scorpions reveal a bioregional ethic: she distinguishes between the benign and the dangerous, understanding the functional role of each within the ecosystem. Sita's rag doll, Mumta, becomes a symbol of her imaginative companionship and emotional resilience, underscoring the theme of solitude mitigated by nature's presence. Through such subtle details, Bond crafts a narrative that celebrates self-reliance, ecological sensitivity, and the moral education derived from living intimately within one's environment. The story thus stands as a gentle yet profound articulation of bioregional ethics, where learning, identity, and survival are all shaped by the moral geography of place. Ruskin Bond provides a compelling reason for Sita's attachment to her rag doll, Mumta—if she had secrets, she needed a friend to share them with. Since there were no other children on the island, Mumta became Sita's only confidante and emotional companion. Sita, depicted as a child of nature, embodies innocence and an instinctive bond with the natural world. When her grandfather must take her ailing grandmother to Shahganj for medical treatment, Sita remains alone on the island, surrounded by the swelling river and heavy rains. Though she has been left alone before, this time she feels uneasy, sensing the power and unpredictability of the rising river.

The next morning, her grandfather departs with his small boat, taking her

grandmother and their three goats with him, intending to sell the goats to pay for medical care. Before leaving, Sita's grandmother blesses her, and the little girl reverently touches her feet—a gesture reflecting Indian familial piety and continuity of tradition. Left alone with her hut and the peepul tree, Sita confides in Mumta, promising not to abandon her. The doll functions as a symbolic extension of maternal affection, linking Sita emotionally to her late mother and grandmother. Though seemingly insignificant, the rag doll represents life, companionship, and the human need for connection. It alleviates Sita's loneliness and becomes her sole treasure amid isolation.

Bond portrays Sita as a child of remarkable courage and sensitivity, who learns to confront nature's fury with faith and resilience. As Brinda Bose observes, Bond's strength lies in his ability to accept nature's dual temperament—its fury and its kindness, both vividly expressed through the river's changing moods. When the floodwaters enter the hut, Sita instinctively gathers her family's few valuables and runs toward the safety of the peepul tree. The tree, a landmark of stability and endurance, becomes her refuge as the river's waters rise dangerously. From the tree's branches, Sita witnesses the destruction around her—floating debris, drowned animals, and even the lifeless body of a woman. The loss of her beloved doll Mumta intensifies her grief, yet she finds solace in the realization that she, too, is a part of the river, a participant in the greater rhythm of life and death.

As the peepul tree begins to loosen from the softening earth, Sita clings to its branches while it is swept away by the current. The tree, though dying, seems to embrace her protectively, as though determined to keep her from harm. Bond endows the peepul tree with symbolic vitality: once standing proudly at the island's center, older even than Sita's seventy-year-old grandfather, it has long provided shelter for birds and insects. Even in its fall, it fulfills its purpose by preserving human life. In this moment of peril, Sita perceives the tree as a living guardian an embodiment of nature's compassion. Through

this powerful imagery, Bond affirms a bioregional ethic grounded in interdependence, reverence, and moral kinship between human beings and the natural world.

In *The Cherry Tree*, Ruskin Bond seeks to cultivate eco-consciousness and ecological awareness in young readers through the simple yet profound act of a boy planting a tree. The story follows six-year-old Rakesh, who lives with his grandfather on the outskirts of Mussoorie. It traces both his physical growth and his evolving bond with the natural world. One day, while returning home from the bazaar, Rakesh buys cherries and, after eating them, finds himself holding a single seed. When he asks his grandfather whether cherry seeds are lucky, his grandfather replies, “Nothing is lucky if you put it away. If you want luck, you must put it to some use.” Acting on this advice, Rakesh plants the seed in a shady corner of the garden—an act that becomes a metaphor for ecological awareness and moral growth. A year later, Rakesh rediscovers the sprouting twig, realizing that it is the cherry tree he had planted. Following his grandfather’s counsel, he begins to water it regularly, demonstrating care, responsibility, and emotional engagement with the natural world. Bond writes, “Even when there was rain, Rakesh would sometimes water the tree. He wanted it to know that he was there” (85). This moment underscores Bond’s vision of interdependence and empathy toward nonhuman life. Through Rakesh, Bond instills a sense of stewardship, portraying the boy’s nurturing relationship with the cherry tree as parallel to the grandfather’s nurturing of Rakesh himself. The boy even surrounds the small twig with pebbles to protect it, symbolizing his growing moral awareness and commitment to care. As Rakesh matures, so does the cherry tree. By the time he is eight, “the cherry tree was up to his chest,” signifying their shared journey of growth. Bond’s narrative reinforces the ecological maxim that human character, like nature, flourishes through nurturing and patience. He emphasizes the intrinsic value of nonhuman life, rejecting anthropocentric hierarchies and viewing trees as sentient companions. Bond’s

own affinity with nature resonates in his reflection from *Once Upon a Mountain Time*: “The trees and I know each other quite intimately, and we have much to say to each other from time to time” (215).

The bond between Rakesh and the cherry tree evolves into one of mutual recognition. When Rakesh observes a praying mantis perched on the tree and allows it to stay, he acknowledges the tree as a living ecosystem. His compassion marks a pivotal moment of ecological understanding the recognition of interspecies coexistence. In the story’s concluding dialogue, Rakesh asks, “There are so many trees in the forest. What’s so special about this tree?” His grandfather replies, “We planted it ourselves. That’s why it’s special.” Rakesh then whispers in awe, “Just one small seed... I wonder, is this what it feels to be God?” (85). This revelation captures the moral essence of Bond’s eco-centric vision the joy of creation and the sacred responsibility of nurturing life.

Through this story, Bond conveys a powerful message about environmental stewardship and the ethical connection between humans and nature. The narrative, though simple in form, becomes a moral parable on the value of a forestation, patience, and care. What begins as a casual act of planting a seed transforms into an enduring lesson in ecological ethics. In a world threatened by urbanization and ecological neglect, *The Cherry Tree* stands as a gentle yet profound reminder that every act of care toward the earth no matter how small can cultivate harmony, hope, and moral renewal.

Thus, *The Cherry Tree* offers a poetic remedy to the man-made crisis of environmental degradation, particularly the destruction of flora. If “Death of the Trees” concludes on a note of consolation, “The Cherry Tree” ends on a note of renewal and hope. Through this story, Ruskin Bond envisions nature’s resilience and humanity’s capacity for ecological restoration. He celebrates the symphony of life—the joyous sounds of birds and insects that mark the end of oppressive heat and herald the rejuvenating promise of the

monsoon. The cherry tree, now blooming with fresh blossoms, becomes a living symbol of rebirth and continuity.

Both Rakesh and his grandfather are enthralled by the vibrant harmony of the natural world surrounding them. When Rakesh wonders what makes their cherry tree special among so many in the forest, his grandfather's response—"We planted it ourselves"—reveals the moral center of the narrative. This statement emphasizes the value of personal responsibility and emotional investment in nature's welfare. Rakesh's tender gesture—feeling the smooth bark, running his hand along the trunk, and touching the tip of a leaf—illustrates a moment of profound communion between human and nonhuman life. The tactile experience becomes transformative; it bridges the divide between the observer and the observed, nurturing empathy, intimacy, and belonging.

Bond privileges this "loving touch" over distant admiration, suggesting that true ecological awareness arises from direct, affectionate engagement with nature. In *Book of Nature*, Bond recalls his own childhood experience of planting a cherry seed at the age of seven, mirroring Rakesh's act of creation. The story thus carries autobiographical undertones, reinforcing Bond's lifelong commitment to environmental harmony. The central theme of "The Cherry Tree"—the growth of both the tree and the child—symbolizes moral and ecological maturity. Bond's gentle appeal that "everyone must have a tree of his own" serves as both a personal plea and an ethical directive: even if one does not worship nature, one can still love it. Through this vision, Bond advocates a compassionate, participatory approach to ecological ethics rooted in care, coexistence, and hope.

Conclusion

Ruskin Bond's *Sita and the River* and *The Cherry Tree* together articulate a profound vision of bioregional ethics, emphasizing an intimate, moral, and reciprocal

relationship between human beings and their natural surroundings. Both stories reflect Bond's deep-rooted belief that human identity and moral growth are inseparable from the ecological contexts in which life unfolds. In *Sita and the River*, nature emerges as both nurturer and challenger, guiding the young protagonist toward resilience, self-awareness, and harmony with the river that sustains and tests her. In *The Cherry Tree*, the simple act of planting and nurturing a seed evolves into a spiritual lesson in responsibility, care, and coexistence. Through these narratives, Bond translates ecological philosophy into accessible human experience. His portrayal of children Sita and Rakesh as central figures signifies innocence, empathy, and the possibility of ecological renewal. Their evolving relationships with nature underscore the core principles of bioregionalism: living ethically within one's place, valuing local ecosystems, and recognizing the interdependence of all life forms. Bond's landscapes are not mere backdrops but living presences that shape human emotion, ethics, and identity.

Ultimately, Bond's stories advocate a shift from dominion to belonging recognition that humans are not masters of nature but participants in its vast, interconnected design. His works invite readers to rediscover reverence for the natural world and to cultivate a sense of ecological responsibility grounded in affection and mindfulness. By celebrating the beauty of local landscapes and the moral lessons they impart, Bond's fiction stands as a quiet but powerful call for environmental consciousness and ethical coexistence an enduring reminder that the future of humanity depends upon the compassion with which we treat the earth that sustains us.

Conflict of Interest: The corresponding author confirms that there are no conflicts of interest to disclose.

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