

# A THEMATIC ANALYSIS OF THE GARHWAL HIMALAYAS IN THE WORKS OF RUSKIN BOND

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**Abstract:** For Ruskin Bond mountains are an integral part of his being. He writes about the hills, mountains and rivers which continue to influence him as they have been home to him for more than fifty years. Be it his schooling in the hills of Shimla or his home in Mussoorie, the mountains have always had a special place in his affections. He grew up amongst those great blue and brown mountains. He says that anybody once lived with the mountains for any length of time then they belonged to them. There is no escape. Ruskin's poems are nature centric in which writer expresses his thoughts and expressions, through the objects of nature. Mountains are his sole passion and through his stories, he articulated his first love. The Garhwal Himalayas find a special place in all his writings.

**Key Words** - Mountain, Mother Nature, Hill station, Mussoorie, Garhwal, Himalayas, Ruskin Bond.

The First Nobel Laureate of England, Rudyard Kipling wrote:

“Who goes to the Hills, goes to his Mother”<sup>1</sup>

For Ruskin Bond, these words of Kipling from ‘Kim’ rang true. Whether it was school in the hills of Shimla or living in Mussoorie, the mountains have always had a special place in his affections. Today, at eighty-five, it still seems to him like living in the bosom of a strong, sometimes proud, but always confronting mother. Every time he left the valley of the Doon, the homecoming always became increasingly difficult for him. He puts it simply:

“Once the mountains are in your blood, there is no escape”<sup>2</sup>

Like a Modern day Whitman, he is content celebrating the ravines, slopes, valley, brooks and forests with amazing accuracy. This comes from his natural familiarity with the region. The celestial beauty of the Garhwal Himalaya finds its way into the landscape of his numerous stories, essays, poems and novels. In a poem, ‘Garhwal Himalayas’ he finds:

*Deep in the crouching mist, Lie the mountains.  
Climbing the mountains are forest  
Of rhododendron, spruce and deodar-  
Trees of God, we call them-soughing  
In the wind from the passes of Garhwal;  
And the snow-leopard moans softly  
Where the herdsmen pass, their lean sheep cropping  
Short winter grass.  
And clinging to the sides of the mountains,  
The small stone houses of Garhwal,  
Their thin fields of calcinated soil torn  
From the old spirit-haunted rocks.  
Pale Women plough, they laugh at the thunder,  
As their men go down to the plains;  
Little grows on the beautiful mountain  
In the east wind.  
There is hunger of children at noon; and yet  
There are those who sing to sunset  
And the gods and glories of Himaal,  
Forgetting no one eats sunsets  
Wonder, then, at the absence of old men;  
For some grow old at their mother's breasts,  
In cold Garhwal.<sup>3</sup>*

The poem juxtaposes the beauty of the region against the harsh living conditions where there are few job opportunities and men join the increasing male exodus to the plains in search of livelihood.

Bond's mountains are an integral part of his being. He writes about the hills, the rivers and the mountains which continue to influence him as they have been home to him for fifty years and more. For him, time passes as it remains stationary. For men may come and go, the mountains remain forever. Their massifs are stubborn and refuse to go away. Garhwal is a wonderful place especially in the eyes of the young and for minds filled to the brim with stories and tales. Here every little place, cave, rivulet or brook is, to this day, dedicated to some saint or ascetic for whom that place meant something special.

The Garhwal Himalayas is a sweeping term taking within its ambit, the hills north of the Dehradun which formed the erstwhile kingdom of the Rajahs of Garhwal. It was an independent state until overrun by the Gorkhas in 1789. After the Battle of Nalapani in 1815, it was ceded to the East India Company. Earlier, in the Battle of Kurbura, the rajah had been killed, while his son took refuge in the territories under the British. He was sought out and placed on the throne of his ancestors, to rule over a portion of the ceded country, which was given to him and his heirs in perpetuity after the Treaty of Singhauli. This portion has since been commonly referred to as Tehri Garhwal. Extending from the foot of the hills to the borders of Tibet, and from the Alaknanda branch of the Ganges to the western branches of the Tons river, being about eighty miles in length and breadth, and forming a complete section of the Himalayan ranges from the plains to the snow.

It is here that the hills rise abruptly off the valley floor of the Doon to nearly 8000 feet. These hills are long. Narrow and extremely tortuous ranges, leading up from the plains to the snow, though with an infinite variety of twisting and turnings. Take, for instance, the first on the spine of which stands Mussoorie.

Living in the Channel Islands, or in the dizzle of London, Ruskin Bond remembered the Himalayas at their most vivid. He had grown up amongst those great blue and brown mountains. They had nourished his blood and though he was separated from them by thousands of miles of oceans plains and deserts he could not get rid of them from his system. It is always the same with mountains. As he says that anybody once lived with them for any length of time they belonged to them. There is no escape. Ruskin's poems are nature centric in which writer expresses his thoughts and expressions, through the objects of nature, which in turn are in his poems. They carry the message and the influences of those objects upon the personal building of individual. Thus Ruskin expresses himself through objects.

Ruskin describes it, as he walks about in the hills of Garhwal, in a beautiful poem:

*Come Roaming With Me  
Out of the city and over the hill,  
Into the space where Time stand still,  
Under the tall tress, touching old wood  
Taking the way where warriors once stood;  
Crossing the little bridge, losing my way,  
But finding a friendly place where I can stay.  
Those were the days, friend when we were strong  
And strode down the road to an old marching song  
When the dew on the grass was fresh every morn,  
And we woke to the call of the ring - dove at the dawn.  
They years have gone by, and sometime I falter,  
But still I set out for a stroll or a saunter  
For the wind is as fresh as it was in my youth,  
And the peach and the pear, still the sweetest of fruits,  
So cast away care and come roaming with me,  
Where the grass is still green and the air is still free.<sup>4</sup>*

During the rains, clouds enveloped the valley but left the hill alone, an island in the sky. Wild sorrel grew amongst the rocks, and there were many flowers, clover, convolvulus, wild begonia, dandelion-sprinkling the hillside. These were the things which Ruskin had remembered these and all the smell of pine needles, the sliver of oak – leaves and the red of maple, the call of the Himalayan cuckoo, and the mist, like a wet face-cloth, pressing against the hills.

Closeness with the Himalayas has blessed him divine insight. He realises that God unfolds his supreme powers through all big and small objects and man can proceed towards him by harmonizing the finite and infinite. With a child like innocence one can perceive the culmination of oneness. Mountains are his sole passion and through his stories, he articulated his first love. Hills have been an obsession for the writer.

Ruskin's beautiful poem which gives a remarkable description of the hill station of Mussoorie:

*Hill station*

*There is nothing to keep me here  
Only these mountains of silence  
And the gentle reverse of shepherds and woodmen  
Who know me as one who  
Walks among trees.  
Madam, misanthropist? They make  
Their guesses smile and pass slowly  
Down the steep path near the cottage. There is nothing  
To Keep me here, walking  
Among old trees.<sup>5</sup>*

Early in summer the grass on the hills is still a pale yellowish green, tinged with brown, and that is how it remains until the monsoon rains bring new life to everything that subsists on the stony Himalayan soil then, for four months, the greens are deep and dark and emerald bright. Ruskin describes the mountains streams, rivers, which flow through the Himalayan region. There is a small river which couldn't be seen due to thickly forested mountain in the hills of Garhwal. These small rivers were used by the villages, woodcutters, milkman, shepherds, and mule drivers. The trickle of water came down the hillside. The water is cold and sharp but very refreshing. The water of the river is blue and white and wonderful.

Along the rivers banks grows lush vegetation. Of these plants some become friends and they don't have to be spectacular dahlias, or fragrant roses. Most garden flowers are summer friend, gone in the winter when time are difficult up in the mountains. Those who stand by you in adversity, plant or human, are your true friends. There are never many of them around. A good friend, which was extremely generous, is the variegated ivy. It is growing outside Ruksin's home and when the windows are open, a cool breeze from the mountain floats in, rustling the leaves of they ivy. This breeze can turn into a raging blizzard in winter on an occasion, even blowing the proof away but right now, it's just a zephyr, gentle and balmy. Ivy plant seems to like Ruksin's room and have begun to grow even inside the room.

Ruksin says that he did not have an outside garden that the hillside is too steep anything but the sturdiest of shrub, but there are a number of plants that grow in here, near the windows, along the sunlit walls on cupboards and boxes, and behind the chairs. Rugs are ruined, and so is furniture, but he has always held furniture to be superstition. Rugs can always be thrown away or given away to rug-collectors! Loyalty in plants, as in friends must be respected and rewarded. There are many plants like dandelions, hydrangea, asparagus fern and many other plants that grow only on the rocky soil of the hills of Himalayas which needs hardly any care, as it grows on its own in the rocky soil.

A poem on royal ferns by Ruskin Bond puts it thus:

*The Fern*

*The slender maidenhair fern grows firm on a rock  
While all around her, the water swirls and chatters  
And then disappears in a rush  
Down to the bottom of the hill.  
When I'm surrounded by troubled water, Lord,  
Let me find within a rock to cling to,  
And give me the quiet patience of the maidenhair  
Who has learned to live with the rock.<sup>6</sup>*

Ruskin Bond gives a remarkable description of the local people in meeting on the Tehri Road while he walks in the area. The human personality can impose its own nature on its surroundings. At a dark windy corner in the bazaar, one always found an old man lunched up over his charcoal fire roasting peanuts. He passed away last summer. Then, a few weeks ago, there was a new occupant of the corner, a new seller of peanuts. One are no relative of the old man, but a boy thirteen or fourteen, cheerful, involved, exchanging good natured banter with his customer. In the old man's time it seemed a dark gloomy corner. Now it's lit up by sunshine, a sunny personality, smiling, chattering old age gives way to youth. Leaving the main bazaar behind, Ruksin Bond walks some some way down the Mussoorie - Tehri road, a fine road to walk on, in spite of the dust from of an occasional bus or jeep, there are continual vista of the snow ranges to the north and the valley and rivers to the south. Dhanolti is one of the lovelier spots, and there is rest house here, where one can spend an idyllic weekend.

Ruskin Bond walks on lonely roads alone, and he is aware of the life pulsating around him. It is cold night, door and windows are shut, but through the many chinks, narrow fingers of light reach out into the night. Vignettes of a shopkeeper going through his accounts or a college student preparing for his examination, or someone coughing and groaning in the darkness of the old bazaar. There are bakers, tailors, silversmith and wholesale merchants who are the grandsons of those who followed the mad sahibs to the hill

top in the thirties and forties of the last century. Most of them are plainsmen, quite prosperous even though many of their houses are crooked and shaky. Although the shopkeepers and tradesmen are fairly prosperous, the hill people those who come from the surrounding Tehri and Jaunpur villages are usually poor. Their small holdings and rocky fields do not provide them with much of living, and men and boys have often to come into the hill-station or go down to the cities in search of a livelihood. They pull rickshaws, or work in hotels and restaurants.

Ruskin describes a place in Mussoorie known as 'Hill of the Fairies' behind Woodstock school. The locals also call it 'Fairy Hill' or 'Pari Tibba' – a lonely uninhabited mountain lying to the east of Mussoorie, at the height of about 6,000 feet. Ruskin had visited it occasionally, scrambling up its rocky slopes where the only paths are narrow tracks made by goats and the small hill cattle. Rhododendrons and a few stunted oaks are the only trees on the hill side but at the summit is a small, grassy plateau ringed by the pine trees.

The author wonders why Pari Tibba is struck by lightning so often. It has always been something of a mystery to him. Some say that it is haunted. Many years after the site was abandoned by the settlers, two young runaway lovers took shelter for the night in one of the ruins. There was bad storm and they were struck by lightning. Their charred bodies were found a few days later. They came from different communities and were buried far from each other, but their spirits hold a tryst every night under the pine trees.

Ruskin wonders as to who could have seen ghost on Pari Tibba after sunset. The nearest resident is a wood cutter who makes charcoal at the bottom of the hill. In April and May Pari Tibba is covered with the dazzling yellow flowers of St. John's Wort ('Wort' meaning 'Herb'). St John's Wort could be connected with the fairy legend of Pari Tibba. It is said that when flowers die, they become fairies.

There is yet another legend connected with the mountain. A shepherd boy, playing flute discovered a beautiful silver snake basking on a rock. The snake spoke to the boy, saying "I was a princess once, but a jealous witch caste a spell over me and turned me into a snake". "This spell can only be broken if someone who is pure in heart kisses me thrice". Many years have passed and he has not been able to find someone who is pure at heart. Then the shepherd boy took the snake in his arms and he put his lips to its mouth, and at the third kiss he discovered that he was holding a beautiful princess in his arms. There are snakes on Pari Tibba, and though they are probably harmless, he had never tried taking one of them in his arms. Once, near a spring he came upon a checkered water snake. Its body was a series of bulges. Biologists probably have their own explanation for the frogs, but Ruskin is perpetuating the fairy legends of Pari Tibba.

In the month of January the hillside looked very pretty, with a light mantle of snow covering trees, rusty roofs and vehicles at the bus stop, and concealing our garbage dump for a couple of hours, until the snow melted. The wind blow through the houses like a knife under the roof. There are some lovely old houses in the Landour Canonment but sadly, the majority of them lie empty for most of the year. Their owners, the famous and wealthy, live elsewhere and visit the hill-station mussoorie about once a year, for a weekend's relaxation. It's dream to own a house in Landour. But once a property has been bought and done up nicely, it's usually forgotten. A different situation prevails in the civil station of Mussoorie. There we have an acute shortage of accommodation for local residents, not helped by a complete ban on any sort of building, be it hostel or private residence.

From November to March one can take a walk up to Lal Tibba around the Landour without meeting a soul, except for a milkman whose home is down in the valley. A chowkidar from from one of the empty houses, some of the local residents at the top of the hill may be seen. Mussoorie, like other hill station in India, came into existence in the 1820s or thereabout when families of British colonials began marching to the hills in order to escape the scorching heat of the plains. Small settlements grew into large hill stations, and were soon vying with each other for the title of 'Queen of the Hills'.

Ruskin describes the hill-station in his poem:

*Midwinter, Deserted Hill Station*

*I see you every day  
Walk barefoot on the frozen ground;  
I want to be your friend,  
But you look the other way.*

*I see you every day  
Go hungry in the bitter cold;  
I'd gladly share my food,  
But you look the other way.*

*I hear you every night  
Cough desolately in the dark;  
I'd share my warmth with you,  
But you look the other way.*

*I see you every day  
Pass lonely on my lonely way;  
I'd gladly walk with you,  
But you turn away.<sup>7</sup>*

**References:**

- <sup>1</sup> Prabhat K.Singh, *The Creative Contours of Ruskin Bond*, Pencraft Publications, New Delhi, 1995, p.182.
- <sup>2</sup> Prabhat K.Singh, *The Creative Contours of Ruskin Bond*, Pencraft Publications, New Delhi, 1995, p.182.
- <sup>3</sup> Ruskin Bond, *The India I Love*, Rupa & Co., 2004, New Delhi, p.53.
- <sup>4</sup> Ruskin Bond, *The India I Love*, Rupa & Co., 2004, New Delhi, p.01.
- <sup>5</sup> Ruskin Bond, *Rain in the Mountains*, Penguin Books India (P) Ltd., New Delhi, 1993, p.218.
- <sup>6</sup> Ruskin Bond, *Rain in the Mountains*, Penguin Books, India (P) Ltd., New Delhi, 1993, p.238.
- <sup>7</sup> Ruskin Bond, *The India I Love*, Rupa & Co., 2004, New Delhi, p.87.

