

## Remembering Nature: Ecological Memory and Environmental Ethics in Bond's *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*

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 <https://doi.org/10.26572/tc2613508>

*Reviewed and accepted version first published on August 5, 2026*

**Abstract:** Ruskin Bond's *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* is frequently discussed as nostalgic nature writing, yet its ethical engagement with everyday ecological relationships remains insufficiently explored. This article addresses that gap by examining how ordinary landscapes, memories, and human–nonhuman encounters cultivate ecological responsibility beyond romantic appreciation of nature. Adopting an ecocritical approach informed by environmental humanities, the study employs close textual analysis to investigate the interconnected themes of ecological memory, place attachment, and everyday environmental ethics. It argues that Bond transforms familiar Himalayan spaces into sites of ethical reflection, where environmental care emerges through lived experience rather than ideological discourse. The study contributes a fresh perspective to Indian English ecocritical scholarship and contemporary sustainability debates.

**Keywords:** Ecocritical Reading; Ecological Memory; Environmental Ethics; Indian English Literature

## Introduction

Among contemporary Indian English writers, Ruskin Bond occupies a distinctive position for his sustained engagement with the Himalayan landscape and the intimate rhythms of everyday life. Rather than presenting nature as a distant spectacle, Bond consistently portrays it as a lived environment shaped by memory, affection, and ethical responsibility. His collection *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* brings together semi-autobiographical stories that revisit Dehra, Landour, and the Garhwal hills through personal recollections and ordinary encounters with trees, birds, seasons, and local communities. These narratives reveal that, in Bond's writing, landscape functions not merely as a physical setting but as a repository of cultural memory and ecological relationships. Indian English nature writing has increasingly attracted scholarly attention because it connects literary imagination with environmental concerns emerging from rapid urbanisation, biodiversity loss, and changing human–nature relationships. While ecocritical scholarship has significantly broadened discussions of environmental representation in literature, studies on Bond have largely highlighted nostalgia, childhood, regional identity, autobiographical narration, or the aesthetic beauty of the Himalayan environment. Such readings illuminate important dimensions of his work, yet they leave comparatively unexplored the ethical significance of everyday ecological experience and how memory shapes environmental consciousness.

This article addresses that gap by examining *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* through an ecocritical perspective informed by environmental humanities. Instead of treating memory as a purely sentimental recollection, the study investigates how remembered landscapes encourage ecological awareness, strengthen place attachment, and foster an ethics of care grounded in ordinary experience. Close textual analysis explores recurring images of trees, forests, seasons, birds, and domestic spaces, demonstrating how these elements construct meaningful relationships between humans and the more-than-human world. This study argues that Bond transforms familiar Himalayan landscapes into ethical spaces where everyday encounters with nature cultivate ecological responsibility. By foregrounding ecological memory as a mode of environmental understanding, the article offers a fresh interpretation of Bond's nature writing. It contributes to ongoing debates in Indian English literary studies, ecocriticism, and environmental humanities.

## Literature Review

Ruskin Bond has long been recognised as one of the most significant voices in Indian English nature writing because of his sustained engagement with the Himalayan landscape and the ordinary lives shaped by it. Critical discussions generally describe his fiction as an exploration of childhood, memory, regional identity, and the enduring intimacy between human beings and the natural world. *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*, a collection of semi-autobiographical stories, has received particular scholarly attention for preserving the ecological and cultural landscape of Dehra and the Garhwal hills through personal recollection and everyday experience (Bond). Recent studies further observe that Bond's narratives cultivate environmental sensitivity by portraying forests,

trees, birds, and changing seasons as active participants in human life rather than as decorative settings.

This body of scholarship has largely developed within the framework of ecocriticism. Glotfelty defines ecocriticism as the study of the relationship between literature and the physical environment, thereby encouraging literary criticism to move beyond exclusively human-centred concerns (Glotfelty and Fromm). Building upon this foundation, Buell argues that environmental literature reshapes readers' ethical understanding of place by revealing the interconnectedness of human and non-human existence (Buell, *The Environmental Imagination*). Garrard further demonstrates that contemporary ecocriticism extends beyond the celebration of wilderness to engage with questions of environmental ethics, sustainability, justice, and cultural practice (Garrard). These theoretical developments have significantly influenced interpretations of Bond's fiction, where the Himalayan environment is viewed as a living presence that nurtures emotional growth and ecological awareness rather than serving as a passive background.

More recent developments in environmental humanities have widened this conversation by integrating literary studies with history, philosophy, ethics, and cultural memory. Instead of treating environmental crises solely as scientific or political concerns, environmental humanities investigates how stories, memories, emotions, and everyday practices shape ecological consciousness. Such an interdisciplinary perspective is particularly relevant to Bond's writing because his narratives rarely employ explicit environmental activism. Rather, they depict ordinary encounters with trees, birds, gardens, rain, and village life that gradually cultivate habits of care and responsibility. These quiet acts of coexistence reveal that ecological values often emerge through lived experience instead of ideological assertion (Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*).

Despite the growing scholarship, an important critical gap remains. Existing studies predominantly interpret *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* as autobiographical nature writing, a nostalgic recollection of the Himalayan past, or an ecocritical affirmation of environmental consciousness. Comparatively little attention has been devoted to examining how ecological memory functions as the foundation of everyday environmental ethics within the collection. The ethical significance of remembering landscapes, preserving ordinary ecological relationships, and transforming personal memory into environmental responsibility has not received sustained critical analysis. Addressing this gap, the present study brings ecocriticism into dialogue with environmental humanities to argue that Bond constructs remembered landscapes as ethical spaces where environmental responsibility develops through affection, familiarity, and everyday ecological practice. This perspective not only offers a fresh interpretation of Bond's nature writing but also contributes to broader discussions of ecological memory and environmental ethics in contemporary Indian English literary studies.

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## Theoretical Framework

The present study adopts an interdisciplinary framework that brings together environmental humanities, ecological memory, and everyday environmental ethics to examine Ruskin Bond's *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*. While ecocriticism provides the primary interpretative lens, these complementary perspectives make it possible to explore not only how nature is represented but also how literary narratives cultivate ethical relationships between human beings and the more-than-human world. Such an integrated approach shifts attention from descriptive landscapes to the cultural and moral meanings embedded in everyday environmental experience.

Environmental humanities has emerged as a significant field that connects literary studies with history, philosophy, ethics, cultural studies, and environmental thought. Rather than treating environmental degradation solely as a scientific or political problem, it investigates how stories, memory, emotions, and cultural practices influence ecological understanding and public responsibility. The concept of ecological memory further strengthens this framework by explaining how remembered landscapes shape environmental values across generations. Environmental humanities broadens ecocritical inquiry by bringing literary studies into conversation with history, ethics, philosophy, and cultural studies. Rather than viewing environmental challenges solely as scientific or political concerns, it examines how narratives, memories, emotions, and everyday cultural practices shape ecological understanding and responsibility. This interdisciplinary perspective also questions the rigid separation between nature and culture, emphasising their continuous interdependence (Heise et al.; Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*). Such an approach is particularly relevant to *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*, where ecological awareness emerges through ordinary encounters with trees, forests, animals, and familiar landscapes. Bond's narratives suggest that environmental care develops through lived experience and enduring relationships with place, making everyday life an important site for cultivating ecological ethics.

In literary studies, ecological memory extends beyond recollections of the past; it represents an enduring relationship between people and place in which memories of trees, forests, rivers, seasons, and local communities contribute to environmental identity. Bond's recollections of Dehra and the Himalayan foothills therefore function not merely as autobiographical reminiscence but as narratives that preserve ecological knowledge and reinforce emotional attachment to threatened landscapes. Memory, in this sense, becomes an ethical mode of environmental understanding rather than a nostalgic return to the past.

The third component of the framework, everyday environmental ethics, focuses on ordinary practices of care, coexistence, and responsibility instead of exceptional acts of environmental activism. Environmental ethics within the humanities increasingly recognises that sustainable ecological relationships are cultivated through habitual interactions with local environments and everyday moral choices. Bond's narratives repeatedly foreground such seemingly modest acts—observing seasonal change, caring for trees, respecting animals, and maintaining emotional connections with familiar

places. These experiences transform ecological awareness into lived ethical practice. Accordingly, this integrated framework enables the present study to argue that *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* constructs ecological memory as the foundation of everyday environmental ethics, thereby extending conventional ecocritical readings through the broader interdisciplinary insights of environmental humanities.

### Textual Analysis and discussion: Remembering Landscapes

In *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*, remembered landscapes are not passive backgrounds but active participants in the narrator's emotional and ethical development. Bond reconstructs childhood through sensory memories in which trees, rain, forests, and familiar surroundings become inseparable from personal identity. The physical landscape is therefore transformed into a living archive that preserves both individual experience and ecological consciousness. Such a narrative strategy reflects what environmental humanities identifies as the intimate relationship between memory, place, and environmental perception rather than a nostalgic recollection of a lost past (Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*).

The recurring presence of trees establishes one of the strongest symbols of continuity in the collection. Their significance lies not merely in their physical existence but in their ability to preserve emotional attachment across time. During moments of solitude and uncertainty, the surrounding trees create an atmosphere in which silence, movement, and memory coexist. The rustling leaves, the dense jungle, and the shifting light repeatedly remind the young narrator that the natural world possesses its own vitality independent of human anxieties (Bond 26–27). Instead of presenting trees as decorative landscape features, Bond allows them to become enduring witnesses to childhood, loss, and emotional growth. This perspective resonates with ecocritical arguments that literary landscapes participate in shaping ecological imagination rather than simply representing scenic beauty (Glotfelty and Fromm).

Rain occupies an equally significant position within these remembered landscapes. Before the storm arrives, the oppressive summer heat, rising dust, and unsettling stillness generate a sense of isolation and vulnerability. The sudden transformation brought by thunder and rainfall alters not only the physical environment but also the narrator's emotional state. As the rain falls upon the corrugated roof and the fragrance of wet earth fills the room, fear gradually gives way to comfort and reassurance (Bond 27). Bond's description avoids romantic excess. Instead, rainfall becomes a restorative ecological force that reconnects human emotions with seasonal rhythms. Such moments illustrate how environmental experience is mediated through ordinary sensory encounters rather than extraordinary natural spectacles.

The mountain environment further strengthens this relationship between memory and identity. Recalling his return to Dehra after his father's death, Bond situates personal grief within the broader landscape of sal forests, open wilderness, and the Himalayan foothills. These places do not erase loss; instead, they provide emotional continuity during a period of profound uncertainty. His recollections of long walks,

forests, fresh earth after rain, and the quiet beauty of the region demonstrate that landscapes retain emotional meanings long after specific events have passed (Bond 39–41). Memory therefore becomes inseparable from geography, suggesting that attachment to place also nurtures ecological belonging. Childhood memories throughout these narratives emerge through small environmental details rather than dramatic incidents. The scent of damp earth, the cool fragrance of khus screens, the sounds of rain, and the presence of forests create an ecological vocabulary through which the narrator reconstructs the past (Bond 40). These recurring images preserve lived experience while simultaneously affirming the value of local environments. From the perspective of environmental humanities, such remembered landscapes challenge the separation between culture and nature by demonstrating that personal memory is deeply rooted in ecological surroundings (Rose et al.).

Rather than idealising nature, Bond portrays landscapes as spaces where emotional resilience, remembrance, and ecological awareness gradually evolve together. Trees, rain, forests, and childhood experiences become interconnected expressions of ecological memory. Consequently, the remembered landscape functions not simply as a setting for autobiographical narration but as an ethical space that encourages readers to recognise the enduring relationship between human life and the more-than-human world.

### **Ecological Memory, Place Attachment, and Everyday Ecological Relationships**

In *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*, remembered landscapes gradually evolve into places of ethical belonging where memory, perception, and everyday experience shape ecological consciousness. Bond does not reconstruct childhood through nostalgic recollection alone; instead, he reveals how repeated encounters with trees, forests, rain, animals, and familiar surroundings cultivate enduring relationships with the more-than-human world. Environmental memory therefore functions as a lived experience rather than a retrospective idealisation of nature. The landscapes of Dehra become active participants in the narrator's emotional growth, illustrating that attachment to place emerges through continuous interaction with local environments instead of detached appreciation. Such a perspective reflects environmental humanities, which understands place as a dynamic relationship sustained through memory, cultural experience, and ecological interdependence (Rose et al.; Nayar).

Bond's close attention to sensory detail demonstrates how ordinary environmental experiences shape this ecological awareness. During the narrator's lonely childhood, the summer heat, drifting dust, dense jungle, and monsoon silence mirror a deep sense of emotional uncertainty. Yet the arrival of rain transforms both the landscape and the narrator's inner world. The fragrance of wet earth, the rhythmic sound of rainfall upon the roof, and the cooling air replace fear with reassurance, suggesting that seasonal change possesses restorative as well as ecological significance (Bond 26–27). Rather than treating nature as a picturesque backdrop, Bond integrates environmental processes into the narrative's emotional structure. Human feeling and ecological rhythm become inseparable, encouraging readers to recognise the intimate reciprocity between lived experience and the natural world.

This relationship deepens through the narrator's return to Dehra following his father's death. Memories of sal forests, wilderness, damp earth, and long walks remain inseparable from personal grief, demonstrating that landscapes preserve emotional continuity during periods of loss (Bond 39–41). Bond carefully avoids sentimental excess. Instead, the remembered environment becomes a repository of ecological memory where individual identity remains rooted in familiar places. The persistence of these natural images suggests that environmental attachment survives even when personal circumstances change, reinforcing Lawrence Buell's argument that literary landscapes actively shape ecological imagination rather than merely reflecting physical settings (Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*).

The banyan tree marks the fullest expression of this developing attachment. Bond introduces it not simply as an impressive feature of the landscape but as an ancient living presence possessing agency, history, and ecological significance. Before climbing, the narrator pauses respectfully, uncertain whether the tree itself will accept his friendship (Bond 51). This hesitation is crucial because it replaces human mastery with ecological humility. The falling leaf that appears to welcome the child transforms an ordinary natural event into an act of reciprocal recognition, establishing a relationship founded upon respect instead of possession. Through this subtle narrative gesture, Bond challenges anthropocentric assumptions and reimagines place as a shared ecological space where belonging is earned through attentiveness rather than ownership.

Bond's representation of the banyan tree moves beyond visual description to construct a living ecology where human presence forms only one part of a larger network of life. As the child climbs through its branches, parrots, squirrels, insects, and a hornbill appear one after another, revealing the tree as a shared habitat sustained by multiple species rather than a solitary natural object (Bond 51–52). The narrative perspective is significant here. Instead of claiming mastery over the landscape, the narrator slows his movements, observes quietly, and gradually learns the rhythms of the creatures around him. This close narrative focus unsettles anthropocentric assumptions by presenting coexistence, rather than dominance, as the foundation of ecological belonging. Bond's careful attention to multispecies interaction reflects the ecocritical insight that environmental relationships are built on interdependence rather than hierarchy (Garrard).

The journey with Bansi extends this ecological awareness from the banyan to the wider landscape. Travelling through mango orchards, tea gardens, sal forests, and finally the mountain stream, the narrator experiences place as something discovered through movement and participation rather than detached observation (Bond 54–55). Bond's descriptions remain restrained, yet they are rich with sensory detail. The landscape unfolds gradually, inviting both narrator and reader to recognise its ecological continuity. Equally revealing is the scene in which Bansi washes the tired pony before attending to himself. Though seemingly ordinary, the gesture embodies an ethic of care that extends to humans, animals, and shared natural resources. Environmental responsibility, therefore, emerges through habitual actions instead of

explicit moral instruction, illustrating what Deborah Bird Rose and her colleagues identify as everyday ecological ethics grounded in reciprocal relationships (Rose et al.).

Bond further deepens this ethical vision by lingering over seemingly minor details. The blue jays crossing the sky, the persistent sound of crickets, and Ayah's environmental knowledge rooted in local traditions all enrich the narrator's understanding of place (Bond 53–55). Such moments resist spectacle. Instead, they demonstrate that ecological consciousness develops through attentive observation, cultural memory, and sustained coexistence with the more-than-human world. Bond ultimately suggests that lasting environmental responsibility begins with learning to inhabit familiar landscapes respectfully rather than merely appreciating their beauty (Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*).

### Everyday Environmental Ethics and Ecological Responsibility

The concluding essays in *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* shift the narrative from ecological belonging to the ethical implications of environmental loss. In "Death of the Trees," Bond does not argue for conservation through direct political commentary. Instead, he records the gradual disappearance of familiar landscapes with quiet restraint, allowing everyday observation to become a source of ecological reflection. Trees are portrayed not merely as elements of the physical environment but as enduring companions that preserve memory, continuity, and a sense of place. Their destruction therefore signifies the loss of lived relationships rather than the simple removal of vegetation. Bond develops this idea through a close recollection of the walnut tree standing outside his window. By tracing its seasonal transformations—from fresh spring leaves to the golden colours of autumn—the narrator reveals how years of attentive observation have woven the tree into his personal history (Bond 93). The narrative dwells on these recurring seasonal details instead of the act of felling itself, suggesting that ecological value is created through long-term familiarity rather than economic usefulness. This careful narrative focus encourages readers to perceive environmental change as an emotional and ethical rupture.

The essay becomes more poignant when Bond describes both the young deodar tree and his younger brother as "victims of the roads" (Bond 93). The comparison does not collapse human and non-human suffering into a single experience; rather, it exposes how unchecked development simultaneously disrupts ecological continuity and personal life. Bond's understated language strengthens this insight, inviting reflection instead of sentimentality. The ethical scope of the essay broadens further as disappearing forests are linked to the silence of scarlet minivets, barbets, and long-tailed magpies whose habitats vanish with the trees (Bond 93–94). Biodiversity loss is thus experienced through absence rather than statistics. By foregrounding multispecies relationships, Bond demonstrates that environmental crises are also crises of shared coexistence, a perspective that closely aligns with environmental humanities scholarship (Rose et al.).

Bond's ecological vision also challenges the utilitarian attitudes that frequently govern human relationships with nature. He recalls conversations with people who

regard trees merely as sources of fodder or welcome their removal because open hillsides provide a clearer view (Bond 94). These seemingly casual remarks perform an important narrative function. Without openly condemning the speakers, Bond exposes a mindset that values immediate human convenience while overlooking the ecological significance of forests. The contrast between these perspectives and the narrator's enduring attachment to the landscape sharpens the ethical tension running through the essay. Through this understated technique, Bond questions development that neglects environmental continuity and the intricate web of life sustained by local ecosystems. His critique aligns with ecocritical thought that rejects purely instrumental views of nature and calls for more responsible human–environment relationships (Garrard).

Equally significant is Bond's restrained narrative voice. He neither romanticises the past nor calls for dramatic environmental activism. Instead, he quietly records the disappearance of familiar landscapes and acknowledges the dignity with which trees continue to exist even in the moment of their destruction (Bond 94). This narrative restraint invites readers to reflect rather than merely react. Ecological grief becomes a form of ethical awareness, encouraging careful observation instead of emotional excess. Lawrence Buell similarly argues that environmental literature expands moral imagination by reshaping the ways readers perceive and value the more-than-human world (Buell, *The Future of Environmental Criticism*). *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* presents environmental ethics as an everyday practice rooted in memory, attentiveness, and coexistence. Bond suggests that sustainable futures cannot be secured through policy alone; they also depend upon preserving meaningful relationships with local landscapes and the diverse forms of life they sustain. By linking ecological memory with environmental responsibility, his narratives offer a distinctive contribution to Indian ecocriticism and environmental humanities, demonstrating that lasting ecological consciousness begins with ordinary acts of care and sustained engagement with the places people call home.

## Conclusion

*Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* demonstrates that ecological consciousness is shaped not through dramatic environmental campaigns but through sustained engagement with ordinary places and everyday experiences. Bond's narratives reveal how memories of trees, forests, rivers, birds, and seasonal rhythms cultivate a lasting sense of ecological belonging. These familiar landscapes become ethical spaces where human identity develops alongside the more-than-human world. As a result, environmental responsibility emerges as a lived practice grounded in care, attentiveness, and coexistence rather than abstract ecological ideals. Ecological memory, place attachment, and everyday environmental ethics function as interconnected dimensions of Bond's environmental imagination. His portrayal of the banyan tree, mountain streams, local communities, and the gradual disappearance of Himalayan forests invites readers to recognise the moral significance of ordinary ecological relationships. The essay *Death of the Trees*, in particular, transforms environmental loss into an ethical reflection on the consequences of unsustainable development while avoiding rhetorical exaggeration or ideological certainty.

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