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## Echoes of Eco-Acoustics: An Acoustic Ecological Reading of Ruskin Bond's *Birdsongs in the Hill*

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### Abstract

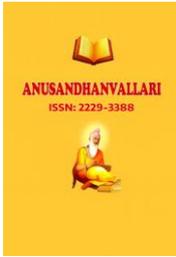
Acoustic ecology investigates the connection between humans and nature through sound, focusing on the relevance of natural soundscapes. In *Bird Songs in the Hills*, Ruskin Bond presents the vivid and unique soundscape of the Himalayan hills. Bond emphasizes the importance of listening to the soundscape as an ecological act, encouraging readers to immerse themselves deeply in the environment as a means for ecological awareness. He connects soundscapes to local legends, highlighting their cultural significance. By illustrating a harmonious coexistence between bird and human presence, Bond's work subtly advocates for acoustic ecology as a tool for conservation and sustainable living with nature. This study analyzes *Birdsongs in the Hills* using acoustic ecology, suggesting that preserving soundscapes can foster ecological awareness, cultural heritage, and environmental stewardship.

**Keywords:** Acoustic ecology, Ruskin Bond, soundscapes, bird calls, biodiversity, cultural heritage, ecological awareness, Himalayan hills.

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### 1. Introduction

Acoustic ecology, an emerging branch of ecocriticism called acoustic ecology focuses on the auditory dimensions of ecosystems, exploring the deep connections between humans and the environment through sound. Acoustic ecology investigates the sounds of the natural world and their portrayal in literature, studying how immersive soundscapes shape our ecological perception. Pioneered by environmentalist R. Murray Schafer in the 1970s, as part of his work on soundscapes and environmental awareness, acoustic ecology suggests that natural soundscapes—such as birdsong, wind, water, and animal calls—are vital elements of ecosystems, reflecting their health, biodiversity, and equilibrium. Schafer (1994) emphasizes that “the soundscape constitutes an integral component of our environment, shaping both human perception and ecological understanding” (p. 5). Similarly, Farina (2017) defines ecoacoustics as “the ecological analysis of acoustic signals to quantify biodiversity, monitor ecosystem health, and detect subtle changes in environmental integrity” (p. 17).



Ruskin Bond, the celebrated Indian English author whose literary contributions have profoundly shaped the landscape of contemporary literature, is known for his evocative storytelling and simple yet humorous way of writing. Bond's works, which are drawn from inspiration from his experiences in the serene hills of northern India, frequently explore the theme of the human connection to nature. His ability to blend fictional, autobiographical, and poetical elements made him an acclaimed writer of stories that resonate with readers of all ages. His narratives are alive with the melodies of birds, the “rustling of leaves,” and the rhythmic ‘patter of rain,’ all of which create an intricate soundscape that enhances the sense of place.

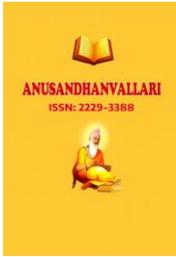
In *Bird Songs in the Hills*, Ruskin Bond identifies the unique soundscape of the Himalayan hills, presenting bird calls as vital characteristics of ecological awareness. The connection between humans and nature through sound is investigated here, focusing on the relevance of natural soundscapes. Bond's depiction of these bird songs emphasizes the importance of listening to the soundscape as an ecological act, encouraging readers to immerse themselves deeply in the environment. Additionally, Bond connects soundscapes to local legends, highlighting their cultural significance. By illustrating a harmonious coexistence between bird and human presence, Bond's work subtly advocates for acoustic ecology as a tool for conservation and sustainable living with nature. This study analyzes *Bird Songs in the Hills* using acoustic ecology, suggesting that preserving soundscapes can foster ecological awareness, cultural heritage, and environmental stewardship.

## 2. Objectives

The primary objective of this study is to the natural soundscapes explained in Ruskin Bond's *Bird Songs in the Hill* and to analyze how natural soundscapes that enhance ecological awareness using acoustic ecological ideas. Focusing on Bond's observation of bird calls, background murmur of nature, and the auditory soundscape of the Himalayan region, the study examines how these elements shape readers' perception of nature and its sounds. It Further investigation has been done on the ecological significance and impact of sound in literature by applying the theoretical frameworks of acoustic ecology. (Schafer, 1994; Farina, 2017). The research also explores the cultural and symbolic dimensions of soundscapes. Bond interconnects natural sounds with local mythical stories, legends, and cultural narratives. Since the study integrates ecocritical literary theory with science it acquires an interdisciplinary relevance.

## 3. Methodology

Though an interdisciplinary framework, the methodology demonstrates how literature can function as a medium for ecological perception and environmental awareness. The study



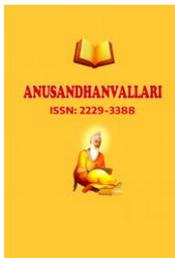
investigates how literature contributes to ecological awareness, and environmental stewardship. Primarily employing close textual analysis, focusing on Bond's depiction of bird calls, human–nonhuman interactions and the stories and legends intertwined with the Himalayan ecosystem. The interpretation of these soundscapes is underpinned by the theoretical frameworks of acoustic ecology and ecoacoustics, drawing on the works of Schafer (1994), Chion (1994), Gage (2016), and Farina (2017). This theoretical perspective enable the study to review 'sound' illustrating the relationship between literary imagination and environmental science. This interdisciplinary rereading of the contemporary ecocritical discourse facilitates to explore natural soundscapes, biodiversity, ecosystem health, and environmental change, cultural meanings and symbolic significance.

### 3. Literature Review

Ruskin Bond's 'Bird Song in the Hills' is analysed through the lens of acoustic ecology, focusing on how the observation or bonding with the natural soundscapes results in ecological understanding and closeness. He closely watches various bird sounds in the mountains, where birds are often heard more than they are seen, and "it is often easier to recognize a bird from its voice than from its colourful but brief appearance" (Bond, 2015, p. 123). Schafer (1994) similarly notes that "soundscapes provide essential information about the health, composition, and functioning of ecosystems, often revealing what the eye cannot see" (p. 33). By emphasizing the aural perception of birds over visual observation, Bond not only mirrors ecological science but also introduces readers to the subtle sensory dynamics that define environmental experience.

Ruskin Bond skillfully portrays the enchanting beauty of avian melodies that fills the air in the Himalayan hills. His description of the bird songs lingered hilly areas hails the dawn, Bo vividly illustrates the unique characteristics of diverse birds, from the cheerful chirping of sparrows to the resonant calls of the koel. The colourful presence of these birds and their chorus songs evoked in him a soulful connection to the hilly habitat. Bond's attention to these individual sounds goes in line with Farina (2017) who states that "each species contributes a unique acoustic signature to the soundscape, creating a network of interdependent signals that reflect the biodiversity and functional stability of ecosystems" (p. 65).

The serene hill station, inhabited by these bird visitors, elicits curiosity and freshness in the narrator's mind and thoughts. His descriptions encourage the readers to listen keenly to the sounds of nature that surrounds him. Krause (2012) emphasizes that "listening attentively to a soundscape can heighten ecological awareness and reveal the interdependence of species and their habitats" (p. 51). The constant presence of bird songs reflect the richness and diversity of the natural soundscape, drawing the attention of readers to the biodiversity of the Himalayan

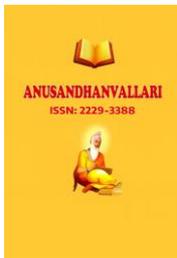


hills. His subtle descriptions of these sounds foster an eagerness in readers to observe and understand the environment more closely.

In his work, *Ecological Indicators and Acoustic Ecology*, Stuart H. Gage explains how ecoacoustics allows us to examine the health of ecosystems, noting that by listening to the environment, we can gain insights into biodiversity, environmental shifts, and the status of certain species (Gage, 2016). Sound serves as a marker of presence in Bond's writing; he describes how difficult it is to spot birds "against the dark green of the trees or the varying shades of the hillsides" (Bond, 123), yet they are rarely silent. Their sounds are crucial in recognizing their presence, reinforcing the ecological idea that the sounds of nature, like birdsongs, enable humans to remain connected to the environment. He notes, "Birdsong is with you wherever you go in the hills, from the foothills to the tree line; and it is often easier to recognize a bird from its voice than from its colorful but brief appearance" (Bond, 123). This quote emphasizes how birdsong dominates the acoustic environment in the Himalayan hills. It helped him identify the birds through their sounds rather than their foliage or color, highlighting the integral role these sounds play in the landscape, allowing humans to sense and appreciate nature.

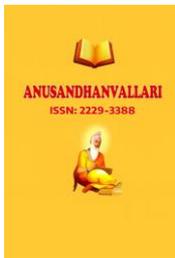
R. Murray Schafer defines soundscape in his work *The Soundscape: Our Sonic Environment and the Tuning of the World*, stating, "The soundscape is any acoustic field of study. We may speak of a musical composition as a soundscape, or a radio program as a soundscape, or an acoustic environment as a soundscape..." (Schafer, 1977, p. 1). A soundscape refers to the acoustic environment that can be heard in a particular locality, comprising all sounds, both natural and human-made (Schafer, 1977). Schafer's work, along with the concept of biophony introduced by Bernie Krause (Krause, 1993), highlights the importance of understanding soundscapes in ecological contexts. Soundscapes play a vital role in shaping the atmosphere and character of a place.

Ruskin Bond gives a detailed description of the diverse bird calls in the hills, such as the "monotonous, far-reaching call" of the barbet and the "joyful and penetrating notes" of the Grey-Headed Flycatcher-Warbler, which form the region's soundscape. His observations of these sounds point to the acoustic richness of the hilly environment, urging readers to tune into nature's symphony. His illustrations of diverse bird species through their calls highlight both the ecological soundscape of the region and the area's biodiversity. He could identify various bird species through their calls. He notes, "The barbet is one of those birds which are heard more than they are seen. Summer visitors to our hill stations must have heard their monotonous, far-reaching call, pee-oh, pee-oh, or un-nee-ow, un-nee-ow" (Bond, 123). This highlights how the bird's presence is often perceived more through its sound than its appearance. Bond further describes, "Barbets love listening to their own voices and often two or three birds answer each other from different trees, each trying to outdo the other in a shrill shouting match" (Bond, 124). The imagery of barbets engaging in a "shouting match" emphasizes the importance of



sound in their behavior. Regarding the Grey-Headed Flycatcher-Warbler, he observes, “Its song (if you can call it that) is not very musical... our little warbler does his best, incessantly emitting four or five unmusical but joyful and penetrating notes” (Bond, 124). This description illustrates how birds can be identified through their distinct acoustic signatures, even if their calls aren’t melodious. Bond also mentions, “Another tiny bird more often heard than it is seen is the Green-Backed Tit, a smart little bird... it constantly utters a sharp, rather metallic but not unpleasant call which sounds like ‘kiss me, kiss me, kiss me...’” (Bond, 125). The repetitive and sharp sound of the Green-Backed Tit’s call is likened to words, helping the reader imagine the bird's presence through sound. Additionally, he notes, “The nightjar has a huge frog-like mouth but is best recognized by its long tail and wings and its curiously silent flight. After dusk and just before dawn, you can hear its curious call, tonk-tonk, tonk-tonk—a note like that produced by striking a plank with a hammer” (Bond, 126). This comparison vividly captures the nightjar's peculiar sound. Finally, he poetically describes the whistling thrush: “And then, emerging from the depths of that sunless chasm like a dark sweet secret, came the indescribably beautiful call of the whistling thrush” (Bond, 126). This description emphasizes the beauty and emotional impact of the thrush’s song, resonating with the natural silence of the hills. “The bird starts with a hesitant schoolboy whistle, as though trying out the tune; then, confident of the melody, it bursts into full song, a crescendo of sweet notes and variations that ring clearly across the hillside” (Bond).

Another bird is the Grey-Winged Ouzel, who “throughout the early summer makes the wooded hillsides ring with his blackbird-like melody” (Bond, 125). This bird’s song is not just a call but a rich, resonant echo that blends harmoniously with the natural sounds of the forest, creating a serene atmosphere that enhances the beauty of the Himalayan landscape. From his vivid presentation of the species, the Nightjar is a group that makes sounds: “After dusk and just before dawn, you can hear its curious call, tonk-tonk, tonk-tonk—a note like that produced by striking a plank with a hammer” (Bond, 125). The Nightjar’s call adds a mysterious quality to the night, as its distinctive sound reverberates through the stillness, reminding listeners of the unseen life that thrives in the dark. Its silent flight and elusive nature make its call even more intriguing, highlighting the interplay of sound and silence in nature. The Yellow-Backed Sunbird, described as “the most common visitor when it is covered with pale pink blossoms, who emits a squeaky little song as he flits from branch to branch” (Bond, 126), is a delightful sight in the blooming landscape. Its bright yellow plumage contrasts beautifully with the soft pink blossoms, and its cheerful song creates a lively ambiance, drawing attention to the interconnectedness of flora and fauna in the ecosystem. The Paradise Flycatcher: “While traveling over the boughs, they utter twittering notes with occasional louder calls, and now and then the male bird breaks out into a sweet little song” (Bond, 126). This bird is known for its striking appearance and graceful movements, and its melodic variations add a delightful



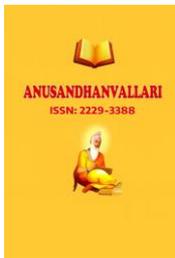
dimension to the soundscape of the hills. The occasional bursts of song serve to attract mates, showcasing the intricate relationships that exist in the natural world.

Listening plays a crucial role in understanding our impact on soundscapes. Acoustic ecology emphasizes the significance of active listening as a means to engage with the environment. By paying attention to natural soundscapes, individuals can become more attuned to ecological processes and changes within ecosystems. This type of listening fosters a deeper connection with nature, encouraging an understanding of ecological balance and the importance of conserving natural habitats. Michel Chion notes in *Audio-Vision: Sound on Screen*, “We have become a visually biased society, but in an acoustic environment, we would be forced to acknowledge relationships between all things” (Chion, 1994, p. 21). Schaffer’s concept of listening awareness and Krause’s biophony further reinforce the idea that sound can reveal ecological relationships otherwise imperceptible (Krause, 1993; Schaffer, 1977).

Ruskin Bond’s narrative is filled with examples of the peaceful coexistence of bird sounds and human presence. The nesting birds near his window suggest a harmony that developed with nature. By immersing himself in these soundscapes, Bond subtly advocates for preserving the natural environment. “Its song (if you can call it that) is not very musical, and Douglas Dewar in writing about it was reminded of a notice that once appeared in a third-rate music hall: The audience is respectfully requested not to throw things at the pianist. He is doing his best” (Bond, 125). He is ready to cope with or appreciate the efforts of the little beings. His connection to birds through their songs emphasizes a sustainable relationship with nature, where listening to these soundscapes fosters ecological literacy. The writer is always enchanted by the “fine singer” sunbird, which is seen in Kumaon and Garhwal. The sentence “When I first came to live in the hills, it was the song of the Himalayan whistling thrush that caught my attention” (Bond, 124) shows his interest and passion in observing birds’ sounds. At any situation he could observe and enjoy the birds’ song. “As I write, there is a strong wind rushing through the trees and bustling about in the chimney, while distant thunder threatens a storm. Undismayed, the whistling thrushes are calling to each other as they roam the wind-threshed forest” (Bond, 125).

As the months passed, he grew used to my presence and became less shy. Once the rainwater pipes were blocked, and this resulted in an overflow of water and a small permanent puddle under the steps. This became the whistling thrush’s favourite bathing place. On sultry summer afternoons, while I was taking a siesta upstairs, I would hear the bird flapping about in the rainwater pool. A little later, refreshed and sunning himself on the roof, he would treat me to a little concert—performed, I could not help feeling, especially for my benefit (Bond, 126).

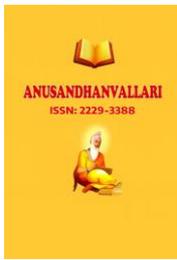
Soundscapes are integral to cultural heritage, with many communities forming deep connections with the sounds of their environment, including the calls of local wildlife and the rhythms of natural elements such as rivers. The local legends tied to the calls of birds reveal a



profound cultural and spiritual relationship between people and birds. For instance, the story of the barbet's call symbolizes “injustice.” In parts of the Garhwal Himalayas, there is a legend that the bird is the reincarnation of a moneylender who died of grief at the unjust termination of a lawsuit. Eternally his plaint rises to heaven, un-nee-ow, un-nee-ow! which means, ‘injustice, injustice’ (Bond, 123–124). While the whistling thrush is linked to Krishna’s music. These legends demonstrate that sound not only serves an ecological function but also shapes human narratives and identities, enriching the cultural soundscape. It was Govind, the milkman, who told me the legend of the whistling thrush, locally called Kastura by the hill people, but also going by the name of Krishan-patti. According to the story, Lord Krishna fell asleep near a mountain stream and while he slept, a small boy made off with the god’s famous flute. Upon waking and finding his flute gone, Krishna was so angry that he changed the culprit into a bird. But having once played on the flute, the bird had learnt bits and pieces of Krishna’s wonderful music. And so he continued, in his disrespectful way, to play the music of the gods, only stopping now and then (as the whistling thrush does) when he couldn’t remember the tune (Bond, 126–127).

Furthermore, protecting soundscapes can play a vital role in environmental conservation efforts. Preserving natural sounds is crucial for maintaining ecosystem integrity and biodiversity. He is very much eager to conserve nature. He explains an incident of not opening his window for saving a bird’s nest as a perfect example of his environmental stewardship. “It meant, of course, that I couldn’t open the window, as this would have resulted in the nest toppling over the edge. Fortunately the room had another window and I kept this one open to let in sunshine, fresh air, the music of birds, and, always welcome...” (Bond, 127). By humorously comparing the bird’s call with nature, he reveals his inextricable bond with the natural world. “The postman’s call may not be as musical as birdsong, but this writer never tires of it, for it heralds the arrival of the occasional cheque that makes it possible for him to live close to nature” (Bond, 127).

In *Bird Song in the Hills*, Ruskin Bond illustrates how bird calls reflect the principles of acoustic ecology (Schafer, 1977; Gage, 2016; Krause, 1993; Chion, 1994). He highlights the importance of listening to nature as a means of engaging with and understanding the environment. Through his descriptions of bird sounds, Bond reinforces the idea that these natural soundscapes are essential for both ecological balance and human connection to nature, advocating for a deeper ecological awareness through sound. *Bird Song in the Hills* clearly illustrates that, by focusing on environmental sounds, acoustic ecology promotes a new way of understanding and interacting with the environment, encouraging individuals to become more attuned to ecological health through their auditory experiences.



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#### 4. Findings

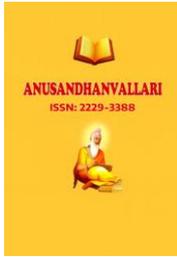
*Bird Song in the Hills* contributes significantly to the field of acoustic ecology and literary ecocriticism. By beautifully encapsulating the detailed and nuanced calls of various birds, Bond posits it as a mode of ecological engagement, complementing ocular observation. The auditory experience complements visual observation, emphasizing that the perception of nature through sound enhances ecological understanding and appreciation. Bond's attention to the diversity and distinctiveness of avian calls illustrates the richness of the Himalayan soundscape and reflects the interconnectedness of species within the hilly ecosystem. The narrator facilitates readers to perceive minute ecological processes and interdependence that might otherwise remain unnoticed. The cultural and symbolic relevance of the soundscapes, as reflected in the legends associated with bird calls, indicates the deep connection between human communities and the natural world. The narrator's careful interactions with birds and his respect for their habitats exemplify ecological stewardship and conservation-oriented behavior, cultivated through attentive listening and mindful presence of the environment. Thus, the birdsongs in Bond's narrative function as aesthetic embellishments, vital indicators of biodiversity, cultural heritage, and ethical engagement with the environment, and emphasize the need to foster sustainable human–nature relationships.

#### 5. Limitations and Research Gaps

Most studies on ecoacoustics and acoustic ecology focus on scientific and environmental monitoring rather than literature oriented, often ignoring the rich literary representations of soundscapes that can convey ecological awareness and cultural heritage. More analysis is possible to explore how natural sounds, such as bird calls, enrich environmental ethics and foster emotional connections with nature.

#### 6. Conclusion

In *Bird Song in the Hills*, Ruskin Bond illustrates how bird calls reflect the principles of acoustic ecology. He highlights the importance of listening to nature as a means of engaging with and understanding the environment. Through his descriptions of bird sounds, Bond reinforces the idea that these natural soundscapes are essential for both ecological balance and human connection to nature, advocating for a deeper ecological awareness through sound. 'Bird Song in the Hills' clearly illustrates that, by focusing on environmental sounds, acoustic ecology promotes a new way of understanding and interacting with the environment, encouraging individuals to become more attuned to ecological health through their auditory experiences.



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