



# Gardens as Sacred Spaces - An analysis of selected works by Ruskin Bond

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## Abstract

Ruskin Bond, one of India's most celebrated writers in English, frequently portrays gardens as spiritually charged spaces that mediate the relationship between humans and the natural world. In his works, gardens function not merely as physical settings but as sanctuaries of solace, reflection, and emotional renewal. Through vivid depictions of flowers, foliage, birds, and insects, Bond presents gardens as intimate sites where characters cultivate a deeper ecological consciousness and experience moments of quiet spiritual communion with nature.

**Keywords:** Ecology, Spiritual Ecology, Garden, Sacred Space, Ruskin Bond.



## Introduction

Spiritual ecology is a field of study that explores the relationship between spirituality, religion and the environment. Spiritual ecologists believe that spiritual factors are at the root of the ecological crisis. The spiritual aspect of the spiritual environment can be studied only by individuals or groups of individuals in nature. It may include mysticism, rituals, ceremonies, sacred places, and landscapes. This paper analyzes the garden as a sacred space in Ruskin Bond's writings and focuses on how gardens have become a place of regeneration, contemplation, remembrance, life-sustaining power, and communication between humans and nature.

Anthropologist Leslie Sponsel, in *Love in the Time of Ethnography*, highlights how concepts such as biophilia and topophilia are deeply intertwined with sacred places and the broad framework of spiritual ecology. He emphasizes that the innate human affinity for life and living systems (biophilia), along with emotional attachment to specific places (topophilia), often manifests through reverence for sacred landscapes. These connections, Sponsel suggests, are fundamental to understanding how individuals and communities perceive, interact with, and spiritually engage with the natural world.

Spiritual ecology is composed of three interrelated components: intellect (scientific and academic), activism (environmental), and emotion (personal spirituality in nature). The third component often motivates the other two, encompassing biophilia and topophilia. Spiritual ecology calls for fundamental rethinking about the ultimate causes and solutions to the environmental crisis. The main principles of spiritual ecology are unity, interconnectedness, and interdependence of all beings and things. Rooted in the spiritual and moral value of nature, it advocates respect, reverence, and caring stewardship.

This article argues that Ruskin Bond's representations of gardens function not merely as scenic backdrops but as sacred spaces that cultivate ecological consciousness, spiritual renewal, and ethical intimacy with the natural world. Unlike conventional Indian ecological writing that often foregrounds mythological landscapes, wilderness spaces, or environmental crisis, Bond situates the sacred within the immediacy of everyday, cultivated nature—small gardens, orchards, courtyards, and hedgerows that become sites of contemplative encounter. In Bond's essays and stories, gardens operate as liminal zones where the human and more-than-human worlds interact without hierarchy: they shelter memory, foster healing, nurture cross-species companionship, and function as pedagogical spaces



in which children and adults alike learn ecological care. By foregrounding the micro-ecologies of domestic and semi-wild gardens, Bond presents a uniquely intimate, affective, and accessible model of spiritual ecology rooted in sensory experience rather than grand cosmologies. These sacred garden-spaces challenge the anthropocentric rhythms of modern life by slowing perception, revitalizing attention, and encouraging forms of relational ethics that extend beyond human boundaries. Ultimately, Bond's garden writing demonstrates that sacredness is not confined to temples or wilderness; it emerges through ecological attunement, reciprocal care, and everyday practices of dwelling—a perspective that reorients readers toward a more humble, interconnected, and spiritually grounded way of inhabiting the world.

### **Gardens as Spiritual and Emotional Landscapes**

Ruskin Bond, a renowned Indian writer in English, consistently highlights the intimate relationship between humans and nature, with gardens occupying a particularly meaningful place in his personal life and literary imagination. In Bond's narratives, gardens are never mere physical spaces; they evolve into spiritual and emotional refuges where characters encounter peace, introspection, and healing. His detailed descriptions—of blossoms stirred by the wind, the rustle of leaves, and the gentle presence of birds and insects—create a sense of sanctity that transforms the garden into a sacred space. Through these evocative details, Bond illustrates how gardens nurture inner stillness, encourage ecological sensitivity, and become sites of quiet meditation and rejuvenation.

Discussion of sacred spaces in the natural environment usually focuses on mountains, rivers, and forests but often neglects gardens. Yet gardens can serve as intimate sacred spaces closest to our homes, communities, and hearts. They hold memories—of childhood, family, food, seasons, and sensory experiences of earth.

### **Material and Spiritual Dimensions of Nature**

Modern ecological writings focus primarily on material dimensions of environmental crisis while ignoring spiritual aspects. The separation of humans from the natural world leads to a spiritual crisis where one loses connection with the universe. To restore this connection, humanity must recognize the sacredness embedded in nature.

Gardens embody this sacred essence because horticulture transforms natural spaces into lived environments. Gardens are both physical and symbolic spaces—it



is here that humans participate in the cycles of planting, growth, decay, and rebirth. This rhythm binds humans to the earth. Thus, gardens become sacred spaces where the inner growth of humans parallels the outer growth of plants.

The Latin root of “sacred” means sanctuary. A garden is a sanctuary—a refuge from the noise of the world, where spiritual and emotional balance is restored.

### **Gardens as Sacred Places for Living**

Gardens were a source of comfort to Bond, a love inherited from his grandmother whose garden in Dehra overflowed with flowers, shrubs, and fruit trees. For Bond, gardening is therapeutic. Whenever he feels stuck in his writing, he retreats to his hillside garden to weed, prune, or water—rituals that revitalize his mind.

Bond illustrates this healing power through characters such as Baldev, a busy manager who begins his day by admiring dew on the *Antirrhinum* plant, gaining strength for the day’s challenges. Cyril, another character, grows plants in the verandah of his rented room. Though poor, he finds joy and purpose in gardening. Bond himself turns to flowers to cope with stress.

Gardens foster relationships described in familial terms—plants become companions, friends, or children. Bond tells of an aunt who waters flowers even in the rain, insisting that her watering is “her own rain” (33–34). For Anne Powell, watering plants each morning is a spiritual act that gives new life to flowers daily. Bond writes, “There is no need to go to church; the garden itself is a church” (48 ).

### **Planting as Sacred Ritual – Bond’s Biophilia and Topophilia**

One of Bond’s clearest expressions of the sacredness of gardens appears in “The Cherry Tree.” Here, planting becomes a spiritual ritual that unites biophilia, topophilia, animism, and sacred ecology.

Rakesh’s nurturing of the sapling illustrates biophilia—his deepening emotional bond with the tree. As the tree grows beside him, the backyard becomes a topophilic space in Yi-Fu Tuan’s sense: emotionally resonant, familiar, and beloved. When Rakesh touches the cherry leaf and feels something “divine,” Bond subtly evokes animistic spirituality, suggesting that plants possess vitality and presence.

Grandfather’s remark “It is special because we planted it(137)” highlights planting as a sacred ecological act that transforms ordinary soil into sacred space. The garden becomes a repository of memory, continuity, and life.



## Trees, Spirits, and Animistic Ecology

Bond often integrates Indigenous and animistic understandings of nature. His reference to the Kashmir Iris—placed on graves and believed to mediate between humans and divine forces—shows how plants can function as spiritual messengers.

His commentary on the mahua tree reveals topophilic ties within tribal communities. For the Gonds, the mahua is not merely food; it is a symbol of survival, identity, and inheritance. The tree anchors emotional, spatial, ecological, and temporal dimensions of topophilia. Its flowers sustain the poor during drought; its seed oil provides light, cooking fuel, and soap.

Animism appears vividly in the story of Munjia, the spirit dwelling in a peepal tree. Bond's grandmother warns him not to shout near the tree lest the spirit enter one's mouth. While Bond does not insist on belief in such spirits, he encourages readers to love trees, acknowledging the deeper cultural reverence behind these stories.

This animistic ecology underscores that the natural world is alive, attentive, and morally responsive.

## Gardening as Stewardship and Ecological Ethics

Bond often acts as a “plant doctor,” rescuing diseased or abandoned plants and nursing them back to health. His preference for “unplanned,” spontaneous gardens over Bacon's formal, methodical style reveals his belief in the wild sacredness of nature.

Gardening becomes an ethical practice—an act of stewardship, care, and reverence for life.

## Conclusion

This article highlights the role of gardens in healing ecological damage, enhancing human well-being, and addressing environmental crises. It asserts that a spiritual response is essential to ecological restoration. Gardens function as sacred spaces that preserve ecological wisdom, foster intergenerational relationships, and sustain spiritual and emotional balance.

Rooted in spiritual ecology, gardening recognizes humans as integral parts of ecosystems. In gardening, humans reconnect with soil, seasons, and cycles of life—experiences that renew the spirit. As Bond's writings illustrate, gardens become sanctuaries of meditation, prayer, nourishment, memory, and renewal.



By urging readers to “return to the garden,” Bond invites a life aligned with nature’s rhythms, grounded in humility, gratitude, and spiritual attunement. Through these everyday sacred spaces, Bond reawakens ecological consciousness and affirms the sacredness of all life—from the tiniest seed to the vast rhythms of the earth.

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