

International Journal of Scientific Research and Reviews

Reverence to Nature and Reflection of Indian milieu in selected writings of Ruskin Bond: A short story writer

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ABSTRACT

This was where I belonged this was where I would stay, come flood or fury.

-Ruskin Bond

The writer who sought emotional support and security in the cradle of the hilly region, who could feel the kindness of the Himalayan hills and trees of Dehra and Mussoorie, who felt the essential mountain sap and spirit flowing in his blood, and received strength from them as if from his ancestors. He is Mr. Ruskin Bond: a writer who has, with intense depth and sensitivity, absorbed the essence of the culturally synergetic contemporary Indian society. An exemplary novelist, short story writer and children's author of repute with a writing career spanning forty years. In his works, he has recreated the Indian-ness in depth with true and significant understanding. No wonder these hills, i.e. Nature, is not merely a source of beauty to gaze at, but a spiritual hinge through which one may cleave to the old values of honesty and love to maintain an everlasting relationship. Ruskin Bond not only loves India, but also its people and traditions without any prejudice. In his works, Mr. Bond often gives us an ample description about Indian milieu particularly social customs, festivals and religious gods. The researcher propose to explore Ruskin Bond's natural description in particular to India.

KEY WORDS: Nature, India, Relationship, Customs, Short Story.

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INTRODUCTION

One impulse from a vernal wood

May teach you more of man,

Of moral evil and of good,

Than all the sages can.¹

The lines beautifully encapsulate Ruskin Bond's deep association with the natural world that has sustained and inspired him over the years. He is the writer who has sought emotional support and security in the cradle of the hilly region, due to his sad childhood, who could feel the kindness of the Himalayan hills and trees of Dehra and Mussoorie, who felt the essential mountain sap and spirit flowing in his blood, and received strength from them as if from his ancestors. He has with intense depth and sensitivity, absorbed the essence of the culturally synergetic contemporary Indian society. He is an exemplary novelist, short story writer and children's author of repute with a writing career spanning forty years. In his works, he has recreated the Indian-ness in depth with true and significant understanding. No wonder these hills, i.e. Nature, is not merely a source of beauty to gaze at, but a spiritual hinge through which one may cleave to the old values of honesty and love to maintain an everlasting relationship. Ruskin Bond not only loves India, but also its people and traditions without any prejudice. In his works, Mr. Bond often gives us an ample description about Indian milieu particularly social customs, festivals and religious gods.

DISCUSSION

- ***Reverence to Nature:*** The devotion of nature is ever present in Bond's work and runs through it like life-blood. It is difficult to escape the magic which his 'nature-religion' exerts. Like a true devotee of nature, he finds ample delight in exploring its myriad vistas and engraving it with accurateness on paper. He speaks to Nilima Pathak on communing with nature:

For me nature is very personal. That's because I have lived very close to it up in the mountains for the last 35 years. But even before that I was quite in kinship with forests and the general flora of the country. In India, and particularly in the Hindu religion, there's a very strong element of nature. Many of my books and stories have for the last many years had the strong element of the natural world.²

Bond passionately radiates his fiction with evoking images of landscapes, hilly terrains, water spots, mountain cascades, the rippling and gurgling brooks, trees, host of birds and medley of animals. This diverse phenomenon of nature and its manifestations are not set in contrast with each other but in concordance and the euphony create an ecstatic state. The salient feature of Bond's treatment of nature is its uniformity. The gentle soul of Bond experiences strange and captivating beauty and sensation in every aspect of nature – trivial or significant, beautiful or ugly. Pantheistic Bond asserts that every part of nature has its own value and own role to play. As for Bond, the trees and plants assumed the role of guardian-spirit after his parents' separation and soon after his father's tragic demise. In the stories like "My Father's Trees in Dehra", "When You Can't Climb Any More", and "Coming Home to Dehra" he imagines his father coming back to life through new shoots. The story "The Funeral", gives a moving account of his father's death. The priest's cold voice and the coffin going deep into the entrails of the earth and ghastly silence spread around, cast a depressing impact on the young boy who could hardly understand it. Here, nature emerges as a healing force to dissipate his gloom and loneliness. The innocent boy imagines to elude death with the help of nature.

Perhaps he would grow into a tree and escape that way! If ever I am put away like this...I'll get into the root of a plant and then I'll become a flower and then may be a bird will come and carry my seed away.³

Here nature becomes a powerful means of defying death and redeeming his sense of loss. It is an affirmation of bond between man and nature. The hero in "The Last Tonga Ride" returns to his old paternal house to revive his relationship with the tree. Its friendly touch, even after the lapse of many decades replenishes his heart:

As I climbed, it seemed as though someone was helping me. Invisible hands, the hands of a spirit in the tree touched me and helped me climb.⁴

Bond's association with animals, birds and insects is like that of a naturalist. By his long association he has acquired a unique understanding of their habits. Almost dozen of his stories render a fascinating account of human encounters with animals and birds. Leopard, acts as a central character in some of his unforgettable fables like "Panther's Moon", "The Leopard", "Tiger, Tiger Burning Bright" in which the dreaded beast denotes royal grace and its extinction is bound to affect the very soul of this country:

*There was another thing that had gone with the tiger,....a thing that was being lost everywhere – something called nobility.*⁵

The charm of tiny creatures like butterflies, beetles, bluejaya, squirrels, hoopoe etc. is equally irresistible. Even snakes, leeches and lizards which are objects of general repulsion are closely observed. Like a true artist Bond foresees an imaginative drama of feelings and responses in their seeming triviality. The story *Crow for All Seasons* is an interesting account of a crow, which thinks human beings are stupid. Its honest confession ‘how much we depend on humans’ reveals the law of interdependence of nature. Bond elevates these beasts and birds as heroes and do not consider them inferior to man in any way as they too constitute a vital part of daily life. These stories also serve to call us back to our natural living and to preserve the ecological balance. The hero of the story “Last Time I saw Delhi” says good bye to the capital. He shuns ‘*chaotic rush of traffic, the blare of horns even in the corridors of hospital, indifference of people to each other’s safety ...feverish desire to be first to get anything.*’⁶

Bond, a true devotee of nature not only records it in its fullest form but also advocates its preservation and conservation. Unlike his contemporary authors, who talk about socio-political turmoil, he takes up the cause of ecology and environment through his stories. He has been writing about the steady decline of the forest cover due to growing industrialization, urbanization and about the ruthless destruction of the natural habitat of the creatures of the jungle. “The Tree Lover” and the “Prospect of Flowers” reveals Bond’s concern for trees which deserve our love, care and protection. He pleads for favourable responses for trees. He quotes George Morris:

Woodman, spare the tree! Touch not a single bough!

*In youth, it sheltered me. And I protect it now.*⁷

The writer puts up in his fiction environmental consciousness and reminds us of our dependence on the earth and its resources. In the short story *Dust on the Mountain* he shows how the trunk of a “scraggy old oak tree” saved the life of a truck driver Pritam Singh. In a subtle way he proposes that humans should be responsible towards it. He writes with a strong eco-consciousness and like Maneka Gandhi and Sunder Lal Bahuguna, he speaks for the cause of animals and plants. He believes nature is a part of community not a commodity to be used and thrown. The grandfather in *Rusty the boy from the Hills* shares the same view. He urges for gentle behaviour towards animals. He says: *It is also important*

*that we respect them’...We must acknowledge their rights. Everywhere birds and animals are finding it more difficult to survive, because we are trying to destroy both them and their forests.*⁸(RBH 19)

Bond is unable to understand the strange pleasure man derives by killing innocent animals. The false pride of man has brought many species on the verge of extinction. Therefore, we can observe that the entire corpus of Bond is a magnificent document of his profound association with nature and his questing of spirit through it. Bond shares the common romantic belief that so long man is in nature’s lap; he enjoys freshness of mind, spiritual insight and security and joy is his constant companion. Pantheistic Bond perceives ‘Mother Nature’ as infinite power and longs for observing her divine splendor in the objects of the world which he considers being his imitations. He has grown oneness with the environment and desires the same from the readers: “*When we walk close to nature, we come to a better understanding of life; for, it is from the natural world that we first emerged and to which we still belong.*”⁹

• ***Reflection of the Indian Milieu:***

*This was where I belonged this was where I would stay, come flood or fury.*¹⁰

It is a well known fact that Ruskin Bond was drawn to nature due to his mother’s desertion of their family and his father’s untimely demise. The non-demanding nature, with its open arms gave him strength, meaning and sustenance. Gradually he was drawn deeper and closer to the very unique world where there was no sorrow, no rejection, only love, understanding and sharing. No wonder, he tried to overcome his loneliness by seeking love and security among the green and blue surroundings. In the prologue to his *Memoir, Scenes From A Writer’s Life*, Bond truthfully records his deep feelings and his sense of gratitude towards India in general, and its mountainous region in particular:

*And as I grew out of my teens I began to love the country that I had, till then, taken for granted- to love it through the friends I made and through the mountains, valleys, fields and forests which had made an indelible impression on my mind (for India is an atmosphere as much as it is a land)- with the result that, no sooner had I set foot on the West, than I wanted to return to India and to all that I had known and loved.*¹¹

With the above realization, Bond, in fact, accepted the country as Mother India and submitted himself fully to the patronage and loving care of its natural surroundings. His stories are firmly rooted to

the Indian soil and are redolent of its culture and float as gently as lily pads on the surface of Indian life yet suggest the depth beneath. In many of the short stories of Bond we come across myriad examples and frequent references of routine Indian life and its customs and festivals. These descriptions reveal the sound knowledge of Bond about Indian conventions.

It is a common sight in Indian streets where we find cows wandering here and there. People of India consider cow as mother or “Mata” and therefore pay due respect to her and do not harm it. In his story ‘*The Blue Umbrella*’, Bond describes the cows of different colours. People in India give different names of women to different cows according to the colour of their body.

Neelu—Blue—was the name of the blue-grey cow. The other cow, which was white, was called Gori, meaning the Fair One. They were fond of wandering off on their own, down to the stream or into the pine forest....

The cows preferred having Biniya with them, because she let them wander. Bijju pulled them by their tails if they went too far.¹²

In another story, *A Flight of Pigeons* he describes an ancient Indian custom of piercing nose and ears among Indian women to wear ornaments. Indian women are fond of wearing different kind of jewelry on different occasions. Bond discusses about this custom through the conversation between Kothiwali and Mariam. According to the Indian custom a wife or husband is not supposed to call each other by name. Bond comments this custom, when he describes the domestic affairs of Lala Ramji Lal’s family:

Lala’s wife was a young woman, short in stature with a fair complexion. We didn’t know her name, because it is not customary for a husband or wife to call the other by name; but her mother-in-law would address her as dulhan, or bride.¹³

Bond is also fascinated with the hues and variegated shades of Indian life exhibited during its different festivals. These are shown in his writings with minute details.

In *Room on The Roof* Bond presents the festival of Holi which is very famous in Hindu community of North India. Holi is the festival of colours. This is the day on which people celebrate the coming of spring by throwing colours on each other and shout and sing in order to forget their misery. He also

mentions the significance of the festival of Holi through the mouth of Ranbir who invites Rusty to play Holi with him.

*You do not know about Holi! It is the Hindu festival of colours! It is the day on which we celebrate the coming of spring, when we throw colour on each other and shout and sing and forget our misery, for the colours mean the rebirth of spring and a new life in our hearts... You do not of it.*¹⁴

Further, Bond describes how people enjoy the festival. Children and young men of the town form groups, well- equipped with stock of colours. They also use bicycle pumps and bamboo stems, from which were squirted liquid colours. Children come out of their home the whole day, shouting and making noise in the streets. Generally, if anybody does not come out of his house to play Holi, his friends reach the home and tries to make him play Holi by any means. This day people forget all their problems of life and get engrossed in the fun as Rusty who also forgot at least for one day his guardian and his home. Thus, Bond describes the significance, purpose and the way of celebration minutely in this novel. His description is quite realistic and interesting.

Bond's another writing *Delhi is not Far* presents the depiction of a well known festival Janmashtami. Lord Krishna's birthday is celebrated on this day. When Lord Krishna was born, there was tremendous rain and storm. As Bond describes,

*It was Lord Krishna's birthday, and the rain came down as heavily as it must have done the day Krishna was born in Brindaban.*¹⁵

In *A Flight of the Pigeons* Bond describes *Sawan* the 'monsoon festival' especially celebrated in North India by women. They put on their new colourful dresses and swing to release their feelings. It seems to us that Ruskin Bond is thoroughly familiar with this festival chiefly celebrated during the rainy season.

*It was the day of the monsoon festival observed throughout northern India by the women folk, who put on their most colourful costumes, and relax on innumerable swings, giving release of feeling of joy and abandon.*¹⁶

Bond's description of this festival is vivid and delightful. This description reveals his sound knowledge about this festival. In *Vagrants in the Valley* we find the reference of the festival of the Full Moon. He also gives us the detail about the evil effect of it. It is strongly believed by the people that the Full Moon does strange thing to some people. When the Moon is full, it is not advisable to sleep in the moon light. Here, Bond comments on the supernatural Indian belief about the Full Moon.

*When the Moon is at the full, some converse with spirits, others lose all their inhibitions and dance in frenzied abandon; some love more ardently' and few kill more readily. 'Do not sleep in the light of a Full Moon,' warn the pundits, 'it will bewitch you, and turn your beautiful but evil thoughts.'*¹⁷

In *Delhi is not Far* we observe the reference of the festival of Raksha Bandhan. This festival stands for as the symbol of love between brothers and sisters. On this day the sister ties Rakhi to her brother to seek protection and the brother gives a gift to his sister. In the novel Kamala ties Rakhi to Arun and Suraj as she has adopted them as their brothers.

CONCLUSION

Thus, we can witness Bond's imagination which incorporates legends, mythology, history and details of everyday Indian life. Bond, a keen observer, successfully captures the hard-to-pin down characteristics humdrum of Indian reality: a day in a joint family; a busy scene at a railway platform; an old vendor unable to carry the heavy load; a stray buffalo blocking the road; young children bathing in the pool; the tantalizing smell of wet earth after the first rain. Bond's minute observation of external scenes filtered through his nostalgic vision, his extraordinary perception of myriad colours and shades of Indian ambience and his effusive love for India radiate through every line and image of his writing. Hence, Bond's magnificent evocation of real India in the hills and its treatment contribute toward making him one of the greatest story-tellers of present times.

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