

Major Themes in The Short Stories of Ruskin Bond

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Abstract

Ruskin Bond has been living in Mussorie for nearly forty years now and has made the Himalayas a part of his life. Ruskin Bond is inclined towards nature but since writing poetry is not lucrative, he continues to be a prolific writer of short- stories, essays, travel pieces, and novellas and he writes about people, places, animals and plants of Himalayas. He also acts as a historian of the region, writing a lot about the past of Mussorie and its surroundings, recording legends and anecdotes told to him by the hill folk and the old British residents. It was after coming to Mussorie that nature became the object of his attention, and his writing reflects the deep kinship and serenity that he experiences in the midst of the mountains. He admires the natural beauty of the source of Ganges River as it burst from its icy originating place, sounds of birds and mountains and rivers, the towering Deodar trees and flower strewn valleys. Ruskin's stories breathe his great love and sincere concern for nature which takes care of us like our mothers. Hence, we need to prove sincere, selfless, honest and loyal toward it by inculcating in us a true sense of environmental ethics and ecology.

Key Words: Anglo-Indian, Autobiography, Love, Ecology, Nature

Ruskin Bond, who is popularly known as a children's writer, was born in a Himalayan hill station called Kasauli on 19 May 1934 of Anglo-Indian lineage. An exponent of the literary genre of semi-autobiographical fantasy, Bond recasts his experiences of living through the anxieties and pleasures of cultural hybridity in India during the Nationalist Freedom movement and afterwards. Most of his novellas and short stories hide a fervent quest for identity, the concerns of which are historically and culturally inflected. The appeal of the Indian atmosphere especially that of the cultural and ecological space of small towns, was so fervent that Bond felt the conditions of staying in England from 1951 to 1955 quite alienating. This brief sojourn, however, was fruitful in that the nostalgic memory of his Indian life triggered his first novella, a *Bildungsroman*, entitled *The Room on the Roof*. The title fetched its seventeen-year-old author the prestigious John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize. Back in India, Bond continued to submit freelance stories and essays to English-language papers and journals published from India.

Another significant event of his life was his acquaintance and friendship with Prem Singh. In *From Small Beginning* included in *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* which is dedicated to Prem Singh and his family, Bond narrates how Prem Singh at the age of sixteen, asked for help in finding a job. At that time Prem Singh's uncle was already employed by Ruskin Bond for his own domestic chores but by Ruskin Bond's efforts Prem Singh was sent elsewhere, after a few years Prem Singh took his uncle's place and began working for Bond. Prem Singh came from a village near Rudrapur in Pauri Garhwal on the higher peaks of Himalayas. Prem Singh married when he was eighteen, and since then Ruskin Bond did not let them go away anywhere else..Today Ruskin Bond leads a conventional family life with Prem Singh, Chandra, and their

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three children, two daughter in laws and three grand children. The children call him Dada giving him a feeling of belonging to a family. Living with the adopted family he still sees himself as the goalkeeper from his soccer- playing days at Bishop Cotton School.

A careful consideration of the structure of the story "Whispering" will show how the temporally embedded intertexts lead thematically to the biographical, psychological, and sociological contexts of Anglo-Indian subjectivity. A fantastic story of uncanny nature, it was conceived and written in the early 1970s when Bond was suffering from loneliness and melancholy. It is a curious example of how fantasy can be employed in a self-reflexive manner in demonstrating the play of desires and their defenses in the formation of a limited identity. The plurality of the textualized subject like polyvalent intertexts creates a metafictional parody of the historiography self by both enshrining the past and questioning it simultaneously. The first person narrator of "Whispering" has lost his way in the thick mist that shrouded the hill he is walking on a "wild night" (337). A frenzied desire for a companion amidst physical and emotional loneliness is supplied by the nature around him. He is trying to recall the mountain path when a flash of lightning provides him with a glimpse of a barren hillside and a limestone house "cradled in mist" (337). "It was an old-world house [...] on the outskirts of a crumbling hill station" (337). He gets into the house and finds signs of care and tending all around, unusual for a long-closed house. The room is neatly furnished with antique furniture, vases on the mantelpiece, and portraits, painted in oil and watercolors, hanging on the wall. He imagines somebody there, for that would be natural for a house maintained so well. But no one answers his call. In the bedroom, he finds himself confronted by his own image in a full-length mirror. He thinks he also sees the reflection of a pale oval face with burning eyes and golden tresses in it. Taking off his soggy clothes, he feels as though prurient gazes ogled at his nakedness. Sliding under the bedclothes of a neatly made four-poster bed, he discovers there is no pillow. Whispering begins in the darkness with one voice sometimes being cut off:

"Mine, mine, he is all mine..."
 "He is ours, dear, ours."
 "You're late for supper..."
 "He lost his way in the mist."
 "Do you think he has any money?"
 "To kill a turtle you must first tie its legs to two posts."
 "We could tie him to the bed and pour boiling water down his throat."
 "No, it's simpler this way." (339)

As he sits up and lights the candle, the whispering stops. He sees himself in the mirror again, but this time his image is superimposed on that of a girl with golden hair and shining eyes holding a pillow in her hands. As a young boy, he heard of a popular myth of two spinster sisters who lured rich men to their boarding house and smothered them to death at night. He tries to allay his fears thinking that it is the memory of this story that appears to him as a dream now. But hardly has he gone back

to sleep when he feels a suffocating embrace and a phantom kiss on his face. His hands move reflexively to clutch at the thing on top of him, but it is only a pillow that has somehow fallen over him. Frightened to stay in the "tortured house" (340) any longer, he relights the candle and moves into the front room to discover that one of the portraits on the wall, unnoticed before, is that of the girl who appeared with him in the mirror and kissed him in his sleep. He opens the door to encounter a wizened old hag, who sweeps past him into the house. He takes to his heels. Outside, the real world of rain and leeches on the mountain paths is preferable to the torments inside the house. He feels relieved to have escaped the fearful company of the dead.

In this story, the author fantasizes the past in a self-reflexive manner. He constantly demands that the readers suspend disbelief in the eerie conjurations, yet at the same time provides logical clues to rationalize what was happening. Like a self-conscious interpretation of the imagoes ("eerie conjurations") at the Symbolic level, the effect is that of a conscious rewriting of subjective desire. Fredric Jameson explains how in literary works opposition between individual psychology and social norms is mediated by a generic structure capable of functioning both on the level of individual gratification and on that of social structuration: "Repression of the private or individual relevance of the fantasy, or in other words, its universalization, on the one hand; and the substitution of a formal play for the immediate gratification of wish-fulfilling content on the other - these two 'methods' as Freud calls them correspond to a dual interpretive system that runs through all of his reading of texts" (341). Categories of individual experiences fall between the subject's "actual" relationship with his or her historical situation and its projection in a "psychobiographical form" (344). The level of the generic form - here fantasy - in its cultural and social transference passes through individual case histories. Jane Gallop refers to Jameson in her attempt to explain how the Symbolic register in the Lacanian schema is reached through the Imaginary: "The symbolic can be reached only by not trying to avoid the imaginary, by knowingly being in the imaginary" (60). In Lacanian epistemology, according to Jameson, acts of consciousness "imply a structural coordination between the Imaginary, the Symbolic, and the Real" (349). Extreme psychic conditions in which either the Symbolic loses its reference value or an overemphasis of the Symbolic at the expense of the Imaginary are considered pathological by Jameson. The symbol is an imaginary figure in which man's truth is alienated. "The intellectual elaboration of the symbol cannot disalienate it. Only the analysis of its imaginary elements, taken individually, reveals the meaning and the desire that the subject had hidden within it" (Rifflet-Lemaire 138). Conjunction of the "old-world house" in Bond's story works on the Symbolic level. But inherent in the signifiers "limestone rock" (337) and "old-world" can be read imagoes which stem from the author's actual experiences of living in Mussoorie in the "old" days when a limestone hill existed with Anglo-Indian houses upon it. The nostalgic memory of the subject's experience becomes the Imaginary which in the generic form of the narrative is transferred into the Symbolic of the "house" enveloped in "mist." The Real itself being absent works virtually through the "structural coordination" of the Imaginary

and the Symbolic. The historical self lives its wish-fulfilling desire through a "psychobiographical form."

Ruskin Bond has been living in Mussorie for nearly forty years now and has made the Himalayas part of his life. Ruskin Bond is inclined towards nature but since writing poetry is not lucrative, he continues to be a prolific writer of short- stories, essays, travel pieces, and novellas and he writes about people, places, animals and plants of Himalayas. He also acts as a historian of the region, writing a lot about the past of Mussorie and its surroundings, recording legends and anecdotes told to him by the hill folk and the old British residents. It was after coming to Mussorie that nature became the object of his attention, and his writing reflects the deep kinship and serenity that he experiences in the midst of the mountains. He admires the natural beauty of the source of Ganges River as it burst from its icy originating place, sounds of birds and mountains and rivers, the towering Deodar trees and flower strewn valleys. Ruskin Bonds early short- stories written in Mussorie were mainly about those individuals he had met in the small towns and villages of hilly area of India. Ruskin Bond has always lived in small towns in India, he always loved the people of hills as he found them innocent and honest. Many of his stories emerge from his imagination and bear upon his emotional attachment to Indian society. Bond's stories are largely autobiographical, Bond states the fact that there is more fiction than reality in his stories but he writes in first person to give the authenticity to his stories. Ruskin Bond's focus of attention is the issues of everyday life, he does not think much over social issues like his contemporary writers. The only social issue he writes about is nature. He believes that others have dealt with issues such as caste and class more effectively than he can.

Many of Bond's stories display his love of nature. They show how man is associated with nature, and how nature is being disrupted by modernization and scientific revolutions. In "*All Creatures Great and Small*," Bond describes a grandfather's love for animals and nature. While this is not a true story, because in reality he never got the love of his grandfather, in his autobiography he only mentions about his grandmother. Bond is concerned with the rapid disappearance of forests and animal wealth. In "*Time Stops at Shamli*," he writes about a stag's head mounted. He apparently does not like hunting rather he loves animals. Half of his stories have been inspired by the animals, he is seen around him. In his autobiography, Bond raised the voice in the favour of animals and suggested that there must be some rights of animals like human beings on earth.

Today, in literature eco-critics encourage creative writers to think seriously about the environmental issues and find out how language and literature can help them in transmitting values with profound ecological implications and thereby restore the pristine aesthetic beauty of the earth. The current ecological threat is the main focus of all especially the literatures. This seriousness for ecology has led to the emergence of the new school of eco-criticism which traces the relations between writers, texts and the world (ecosphere). It not only talks of the application of ecology and ecological

principles to the study of literature but also theoretical approach to the interrelational web of natural, cultural and supernatural phenomena. Most ecological work shares a common motivation – the awareness that we have reached the age of environmental crisis or limits, a time when the consequences of human actions are damaging the planet's basic life support system. This awareness creates in us a desire to contribute to environmental restoration not only as a hobby but as a representative of literature. Eco-critics encourage others to think seriously about the aesthetic and ethical dilemmas posed by the environmental crisis and about how language and literature transmit values with profound ecological implications. Ruskin Bond's dominant theme is ecology and environment. Natural scenic hills of Dehradun and Mussoorie always constitute the setting of his works and reflect his ardent faith in the healing powers of nature. He forwards his worry for the unthoughtful cruel actions of man towards nature. Through his short stories for children, he presents a very significant message to everyone—the importance of nature in our life. He always emphasizes on the friendly relationship between man and nature as both are interdependent and interrelated. This is why he feels pity for the unsympathetic and cruel actions and attitude of modern humans towards nature. In fact, his empathy with nature and his animals comes through in this unique collection of stories and poems. His prose invariably emerges as nature friendly leaving a strong warmth, love and security in the hearts of the readers. He forges an intimate relationship with the Himalayas. He preaches through his works the significance of landscape and peculiar ethos through carefully mastered words. His stories breathe a deep love for nature and people. He presents highly mesmerizing descriptions about the flora and fauna of the Himalayas.

Many of the Bond's stories are set in Landour Cantonment in the upper reaches of Mussoorie. His works will forever preserve the tranquility, beauty and serenity of the Garhwal Himalayas. As a child, he spent long childhood days in Mussoorie imbibing a love for nature from his grandfather. The natural scenic heights and hills of Dehradun and Mussoorie almost constitute the real setting of his works and reflect his ardent faith in the healing powers of nature. The highly deteriorating condition of the region was not a welcome change for such a nature lover who couldn't stop to talk of it in his writings especially stories. Recently, though heavy emphasis was laid on saving the trees yet the actual progress has been very insignificant and negligible. Even today, the trees are destroyed and cut down ruthlessly sans replacement and thought for a better future. Overgrazing and ruthless assault on herbs causes damage to the meadows and pastures. The absence of forests will finally lead to less precipitation in the form of rain and snow leaving the grand beautiful awe inspiring peaks without their white mantle. Thus, dryness will harm the essence of humans. He has written over three hundred short stories. Though he brings a vivid picture of the Himalaya yet he deals with different aspects of this region – from natural beauty to recent environmental degradation.

No room for a Leopard is about deforestation and its accompanying aftermath. It

presents the pathetic condition of the animals after deforestation. It is a very moving account of the killing of a trusting leopard by a group of shikaris who sell the skins of leopards in Delhi and earn money. Deforestation becomes the main cause of the leopard's searching for refuge in the hills and surrounding areas, many animals have been driven under duress for food into the valleys inhabited by human beings. Even the killing of leopards indiscriminately can be added to rapid deforestation. Losing natural shelter would mean putting animal to death. They fail to feel secure and move toward human dwellings. Pertinently, deforestation brings humans and nonhumans closer to each other. We came into close contact with the folktales, langurs, red foxes and even a sinewy orange-gold leopard. As he had not come to take anything from the jungle, the birds and animals soon grew accustomed to his face. They began to recognize his footsteps. After sometime, his approach did not threaten and disturb them. The birds would no longer fly away; they would remain perched on a boulder in the middle of the stream while he got across by means of other boulders only a few yards away; the langurs in the oak and rhododendron trees would just watch him with some curiosity and continue to munch up the tender green shoots of the oak. In addition to this all, when one day they saw a leopard poised on a rock twenty feet above the young narrator, they tried to warn him of the hidden danger by grunting and chattering. Hence, they showed their concern for him. A deep bond got established between the narrator and the animal world without their ever exchanging a single word. On the whole, Ruskin's stories breathe his great love and sincere concern for nature which takes care of us like our mothers. Hence, we need to prove sincere, selfless, honest and loyal toward it by inculcating in us a true sense of environmental ethics and ecology which have been literary speaking the main gist or focus of any eco-critical study.

Another common theme in Bond's work is unrequited love. Bond's first real experience with love happened when he was in England to make his career. He fell in love with a Vietnamese girl, Vu Phuong. He describes her as a pretty, attractive and soft-spoken girl. They passed much time with each other. They had very innocent relationship. They walked clasping each other's hands, and she made tea for him. She returned to Vietnam to visit her family, she never came back to him. In Ruskin Bond's love stories, the paths of two individuals cross briefly on life's journey; they are attracted to each other but there is no fulfillment or lasting relationship. Most of his stories are related to unanswered love where the "joy" of the lover lies in remembering past happy moments rather than in possessing the object of his love. Bond presents a whole range of love stories from the carefree and natural love between a male and a female, to a love hampered by the restrictions placed on the female by her family, to one in which the female's spontaneous feelings are corrupted by social considerations. The love stories are always told in the first person; mostly involve an unnamed protagonist in his thirties who falls in love with a young teenager. While relationship between two individuals with such a vast age difference may disturb some readers, suggesting sexual abuse, this is far from the case. It is a mutual relationship where the youth of the female partner denotes an age of

innocence, a state of pure, unrestrained love when she gives in naturally to her physical and emotional needs. For instance, as Ruskin Bond writes in the introduction to *The Night Train at Deoli*, The male protagonist cherishes the memory of the brief encounter as a perfect love. Bond's love stories is always loyal and steady, the female is erratic, immature, or susceptible to the social considerations of respectability, status, financial security, and social approval. His love stories are exposing of the intricacies involved in arranging a marriage and the controls placed on men and women.

He takes up the real situation in life and writes stories related to them. He is never harsh or deadly to his characters. He joins the sweeper boy, sleeps with him and holds his broom and bucket that is way of his life, he follows. In fact Ruskin Bond is living legend who has been portraying life and experiences through various genres of literature. Ruskin Bond has contributed in making three generations of Indian school children into readers. His short- stories, poems and essays- even those written forty or fifty years back- are widely authorized in school texts, and his books are recommended for reading in many schools throughout the country where English is the medium of communication.

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