

Treatment of Nature in Ruskin Bond's Short Stories

Dr. Disha Sharma

Assistant Professor

B.S.M. College of Engineering, Roorkee

ABSTRACT

Ruskin Bond is one of India's most distinguished writers at work today. His name immediately brings to mind the colourful images of unsullied Himalayas in particular. His stories loom the benevolent and brooding presence of the Himalayas describe with illimitable lyricism in prose Reared up in his Arcadian World of the Garhwal hills, landscape with pine knolls, gurgling streams and wild flowers, he writes softly with his gentle and Lucid prose the nostalgic stories of quaint bazaars remote railway stations and small towns. Nature has held the greatest fascination for Bond. In his fictional world, nature is not a mere embellishment but forms a part of human life exercising a vital influence upon it. A kinship between the moods of nature and those of human mind is clearly revealed in his fiction. The moods of nature enter into the human life and play their part in the story. The silence and serenity of nature suggest the presence of something which guides all souls. The preponderance of personal life can be largely seen in his treatment of nature. His personal life is highly responsible for a close connection between the environment of his birth and upbringing in the beautiful hills of Garhwal and his superb handling of natural themes. Bond has been fortunated in his birth place and his boyhood home which provided him an exceptional opportunity to watch the landscape, insects, birds and beasts.

Key Words: Treatment, Nature, Garhwal, Himalayas, Fictional World

Treatment of nature in Ruskin Bond's short stories

Ruskin Bond is a great novelist, essayist, poet and short story writer. He is one of the most distinguished writers of India at work today. He has written over 500 short stories that have appeared in a number of magazines and anthologies. Some of his stories are based on nature. He has described nature in a very efficient

manner. In these stories his love for nature is revealed. His love for nature is remarkable. He described nature as a human being. His name immediately brings to mind the colourful images of the different aspect of nature, the primordial and unsullied Himalayas in particular. His stories loom the benevolent and brooding presence of Himalayas describe with illimitable lyricism in prose. Reared up in his Arcadian world of the Garhwal hills, landscaped with pine knolls

gurgling streams and wild flowers, he writes softly, with his gentle and lucid prose, the nostalgic stories of quaint bazaars, remote railway stations and small towns. From the window of his bedroom cum stud, he looks at the stretch of mountains covered with silver oak and pine. He observes all the goings – on in the street below, the later become inspiration for his writings. He writes with a quiet charm about everyday events, capturing the changing colours of the mountains and Doon Valley with an astonishing ease. In a small cottage of Mussoorie, with no modern gadgetry, it is obvious that bond leads a Spartan life.

Nature has played a significant role in shaping Bond the man and the artist. The hills and the rivers, the flowers and the trees have all gone into shaping his personality. They figure in his stories very often and bind them together in a pattern. Nature thus is a dominant feature in the stories of Bond. I have had the honour of meeting Mr. Ruskin Bond in person and having a dialogue with him in his cottage at Mussorie and hence I began with his own words:

“I feel in tuned with Nature, at home, particularly in the mountains,

Because in the mountains you do get a mystical feeling, there is the

Elevation, the austerity. The mountains make you feel small. Whereas

Perhaps if you are living in a city you are not aware of nature. Basically,

You're alone with nature and realise how insignificant you are. So many

Be it is good for the ego, makes you feel humble. You do not find so

Many humble people in the cities”.

These sentiments voiced by Bond, speak volumes of his attitude towards the elements of nature. Over the years, he has established a symbiotic tie with these elements and communicates with them in an unique language. He speaks solace in the lap of nature from the higgledy- piggedly world. Nature is his inspiration. It provides him the impetus for his writing. “Living in the hills”, says Ruskin Bond, “I never seem to fall short of ideas almost anything can trigger off from the world of Nature. I've lived in big cities and have been desperate for ideas”.

In a career spanning five decades, Bond has sketched a unique literary landscape of simple but dignified prose. The result is that he is among the few writers in English whose works are enjoyed by young and old alike. Though his novels and short stories, he has created an enchanting world which has captivated the readers of all age groups. He enjoys a committed readership for being a writer with a difference. Ruskin Bond is considered the most successful freelancer in India because he remained stuck to his pen and paper against all odds. His status is distinguishable in the modern times where even creative writing is being dealt with in a businesslike manner in which all kinds of gimmicks are played to highlight the product. Writers also revel in controversy, the more, the better. Bond is far from all the razzmatazz of the business unlike his contemporaries. He has proved himself to be a long distance runner. He is writing for the last fifty years and has been consistently good and original and this has been made possible because he writes what come straight from his heart.

Description of natural beauty is Bond's forte. But his treatment of nature is quite different. While Shelley weaves mythology out of nature in all her splendour so that it becomes a character in his stories – omniscient and omnipotent. Not many

writers bring in nature to the point of making it a part of the story, or part of the character or its effect on people. If somebody for instance writes a story of a tree they might just mention the tree, but he goes into more detail with descriptions of not just the tree, but of what lives in the tree, its effect on the people around it and so on.

Ruskin Bond is one of the major contributors to the cultivation and development of the short fiction in India. This genre kept a low-profile till the first half of the twentieth century. But today Indian English short story stands on the threshold of immense possibilities. Bond has played a vital role in taking the Indian English short story to a significant position along with the writers like R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao, Manohar Malgonkar, Nayantara Sehgal, etc. Bond is considered to be one of the pioneers to use the short story from Bond finds that the short story being a flexible form of writing eminently suits to portray the diversity of life.

Although nature is a recurring and predominant feature in most of Bond's stories, a few of them stand apart for an exceptional handling of the subject. The story 'From Small Beginning' from the Sahitya Akademi Award winner volume of short stories *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* (1991) is one such story. It is marked by subtle descriptions of Nature in Abundance. Bond has given some mystic accounts of the beauty of the scenes around Dehra. The following passage from the story bears testimony to this:

Last Summer I spent a night on the pine-knoll,
sleeping on the grass

Beneath the cherry tree and I felt the power
of a small cherry tree

.....it's a big world and momentous events are
taking place all the time.

But this is where I have seen it happens.”

These lines bring to our mind the following lines from William Wordsworth's 'Tintern Abbey':

“And I have felt/ A presence that disturbs me
with the joy/or elevated

Thoughts, a sense sublime/ of something for
more deeply interfused

..../ A motion and a spirit, that impels/ All
thinking things, all objects of

All thoughts/ And rolls through all things”⁴

Though Bond in the course of the dialogue I had with him, denied having any 'Mystical Revelation' from nature like Wordsworth, yet he perceives in it a divine presence. Similarly in *Binya*, the protagonist of the story "Binya Passes By" from the volume *Our Trees Grow In Dehra* (1991), Bond sees a primal innocence, an unconcern with the passing of events, an affinity with the forest and the mountains, *Binya* is reminiscent of Wordsworth's *Lucy* who grew 'Under Sun and Shower' and absorbed the beauty and innocence of Nature.

Like Wordsworth, Bond can also be called the 'harbinger of nature' for his devotion to her. His literature is marked with an exoteric view of the world termed as mysticism which brings men into a spiritual relation with the infinite. Spiritualising nature is the most distinguishable quality of Bond's literature, though he never seems to be intentionally occupied in observing any spiritual meaning in the object of nature. He not only takes delight in her but also gives a separate life and soul to her. This is the result of his implicit faith in the divinity of nature as he has felt it from time to time. Mulk Raj Anand has compared Bond's pantheism with a common Indian man's inborn devotion towards the *Tulsi* plant which he worships every morning

The treatment of nature has been dealt with in the works of other writers also but generally their treatment is confined merely to the external forms, thus it serves only as a backdrop. In Bond's fictional world, nature is not a mere embellishment but forms a part of human life exercising a vital influence upon it. A kinship between the moods of nature and those of human mind is clearly revealed in his fiction. The moods of nature enter into the human life and play their part in the story. The silence and serenity of nature suggest the presence of something which guides all souls.

Bond has a penchant for details as those of colour, texture, shape, smells and sights, which he religiously lays down in his stories as for instance in 'The Prospect of Flowers' from the volume entitled 'The Night Train at Deoli (1988)'. This story highlights his elaborate knowledge of the different varieties of flowers in the hills.

The countless references to the beautiful colours and sweet scents in Bond's writings are attributable to his inclination towards nature and indifference towards the city life. This seems to be the reason why Bond does not want to write about urban life. This is how a man's personal life and surroundings may affect his style. Replaced by the exhausting tempo of city life, whether in London or in India. Bond regained his roots in his favourite haunt- Garhwal Himalayas. Walking in the woods and sharing thoughts and feelings with nature, he considers the city life unpleasant, gloomy, artificial, immoral and dishonest with all its maddening roar. He loves to retreat to an agrarian world which belongs to the past, away from the bustle of the cities where modernity has not yet made life complicated and where man is still firmly attached to his roots. His literature is a feast for his readers, especially for a nature lover

and all those who are concerned with reserving wild- life and green heritage.

His meticulous observation of the cycle of nature finds expression in the story 'Bus Stop Pipalnagar' again from *The Night Train...* the author has not only captured the essence of life in a small town with its warmth and friendliness, the scenery of the landscape around Pipalnagar is also rendered beautifully in words. The following lines at the end of the story support this point:

"A landscape of thrusting hills, terraced hills, wood-covered and wind

Swept. Mountains where the god speaks gently to the lonely, hills of

Grass and grey rock, misty at dawn, hazy at noon, mitten at sunset,

Where fresh torrents rush to the valleys below". Nobody could have

Served us better with such a splendid feast of colours and with such

Accuracy which lends his prose a lyrical quality. There is Keatsian

Sensuousness in such description for Bond too is keenly respondent

To his senses."⁵

This enables him to play down details of texture, colour, smell and sound before his readers as is amply displayed in the following passage: "... the smell of pine needles, the silver of oak leaves and the red of a maple, the call of the Himalayan Cuckoo and the mist like a wet face-cloth, pressing against the hills."⁶ It is like John Keats writing of "Autumn's red-lipped fruitage/ blushing through the mist and dew ..."

But Bond's vision of nature is broad, for the reason that he does not behold only its external

aspects, but perceives in its elements a deeper significance, an inner meaning. Nature pleases not only the senses, but also provides him spiritual comfort, particularly the trees. The trees he says are the guardians of his conscience and hence he works under their “highly principled supervision” to use his phrase. His attitude is almost akin to that of the Hindus who respect and worship the tree cult can be traced to the Vedic times. Chitra lekha Singh and Prem Nath in their book entitled *Hinduism* have expressed the following view: “The Waving of leaves of trees, it was believed by primitive minds, snowed that the tree held spirits. Grooves of tree have been looked upon as the abode of Gods since time immemorial.”⁷

The preponderance of personal life can be largely seen in his treatment of nature. His personal life is highly responsible for a close connection between the environment of his birth and upbringing in the beautiful hills of Garhwal and his superb handling of natural themes. Bond has been fortunate in his birth place and his boyhood home which provided him an exceptional opportunity to watch the landscapes, insects birds and beasts. It also endowed him with the ability to appreciate the beauties of natural world, genuine feeling for the beauty of nature. He has succeeded in identifying himself completely with Garhwal. He exhibits first-hand knowledge of Geography and sociology of this region. His life is incomplete without mountains around him. The charm of the hills and their flora and fauna have shaped and nourished his creativity. He procures an insight and vigour from nature by taking shelter in her lap. It is otherwise doubtful, if he had been brought up in some city, he would have been inspired to the same extent by nature. That is why the place which has been capitalised the most by bond is Dehra. One can reconstruct the complete image of Dehra and

its environs from a close study of Bond’s fiction. Dehra is synonymous with trees in the fictional world of bond. He depicts the love and respect people of Dehra have for trees. It is true that he has exploited a particular place and region so vividly but at the same he has been successful in giving it the much required universal appeal.

Due to deeply rooted love for tree, Bond has made a plea for stopping the relentless cutting down of them, which is disturbing the delicate balance of nature. Man in his ruthless urban advance has destroyed nature’s harmony which has produced devastating results. Bond’s obsession with trees has come down to him from his father so much so that the prospect of a world without trees is a nightmare to him. Bond’s writing is a brilliant record of his concern for the environment. There may not be a vehement expression of the affairs of the modern world in his stories, but concern for the preservation of Nature is a recurring theme. In his book *Rain in the Mountains* he writes: “I am told that this entire region (Tehri & Devprayag) is ‘eco-fragile’, one of those words bandied around at seminars all over the world. I am not an expert in these matters ... but I should think most of our earth is eco-fragile, having had to put up with hundreds of thousands of years of human civilization.”⁸

Nature has held the greatest fascination for bond. He can get away with successive paragraphs at a stretch and make them all convincing to the reader. Nature pulsates with life in his works and he shows great assiduity in describing her. His sublime devotion to her is remarkable and unparalleled. The splendour, innocence, beauty, serenity, purity, vastness, infinity and vitality of nature as presented by Ruskin Bond, cannot be portrayed by a mere story-teller. He is not an average driven naturalist but he is a ‘natural naturalist’. He has not studied flowers, birds or

insects as a scientist but a lover of nature. There is hardly any aspect of his beloved hills that has not been touched, seen or felt by him. It is because of his emotions and feelings for nature that he can rise to the heights of poetic prose. Descriptions of nature display his powers at their best. It evokes various feelings and emotions in the heart of the reader too. He has never lost his sense of wonder and he makes his readers also see the gentle miracle behind each natural phenomenon. He directs them to the loveliness and wonders of the world.

Wordsworth is often criticized for his limitations regarding the treatment of nature. His treatment is considered one-sided or unrealistic because he did not present nature 'red in tooth and claw'. Bond's treatment cannot be termed as such because he has portrayed nature's ambivalence which creates as well as destroys. He takes keen interest in both beautiful and rugged aspects of nature. He does not avoid the rough, abrupt and violent things in nature besides dealing with smooth, musical and elegant aspects of nature. Dealing with both beautiful and direful aspects makes Bond's portraiture of nature realistic. In the stories 'Angry River', Earthquake and 'Flames in the forest', Bond has dealt with destructive forces of nature. He is aware of the fact that man is helpless in the face of natural calamities but the reaction of the characters displays Bond's balanced attitude regarding life. The factor which is noticeable and remarkable in these stories of Bond is the extraordinary reactions of ordinary human beings who remained quite normal even after the disaster was over. They understand that nature manifests in myriad forms and ways. If sometimes it is furious, it is kind too. Their reactions cannot be termed as unrealistic or idealistic because there are thousands of people in India or other countries who are victimised

by the fury of nature every year in one way or the other. They are not able to run away for they cannot afford to do so. They live in constant fear of disasters. It develops their resilience in the face of tragedies and this is what one perceives in Bond's fiction.

This kind of treatment brings Bond amongst those few people who possess the exceptional capability of finding glory, things of interest, happy situation even in the totally negative and chaotic atmosphere. His preponderant optimism makes him believe that life is a beautiful gift of God and there are still reasons left to smile. He has a genuine interest in life. He believes that the world with all its glories and triumphs, its joys and fears, is a fitting place for man's actions and activities. Bond considers everything equally important, even the smallest and most insignificant things have significance in the fictional and non-fictional world of Bond. His treatment of subjects takes in its all encompassing wide range any one and anything. It also give versatility to his art.

Another aspect of this philanthropic zeal is that his compassion is not restricted up to human beings. His concern for wild life and environment finds an outlet through his writings. He has also expressed his anguish towards the threat posed to the rich bio-diversity and natural wealth of hilly regions. He has highlighted the hyperactive role human beings are playing today by interfering with nature. It is causing wide-ranging destruction of mankind, animal kingdom, trees and plants by bringing drastic change in the weather and climatic conditions. He warns through his stories and feels that this is causing a serious and disastrous impact on all the inhabitants of the world.

Bond described his love for nature as "Instinctive (but also accepts that his attitude

has been influenced by Thoreau's *Walden* and Richard Jafferie's *The Story of My Heart*). The enchantment of nature are medicinal for him, they sober and heal. Cities on the other hand do not give the human senses room enough. It is therefore that Bond has chosen to make the hills his home. For him the essence of life is in the smell of the wet earth, in the embrace of the mountains and the benediction of trees. For these he came back from England and for these he has chosen to live in Mussoorie.

References

- Kavita Navlani, *The Fictional World of Ruskin Bond in Indian English Fiction* edited by K.A. Agarwal, (Jaipur: Book Enclave 2007) p.235-248.
- Ruskin Bond, *Dust On The Mountain* (New Delhi: Penguin Books 2009)
- Edmund Fuller, *Man in Modern Fiction* (New York: Random House, 1958), p . 258.
- Ruskin Bond, 'The Mountains are closet to Heaven', Interview to Sumita Paul, *The Times of India* (July, 1996).
- Ruskin Bond, 'From Small Beginnings', *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India Ltd., 1991), p.84.
- William Wordsworth, 'Tintern Abbey', *The College Anthology of British and American Verse*, eds. A.K. Hieatt & William Park (Boston: Allyn and Bacon, Inc., 1964).
- Ruskin Bond, 'Bus Stop Pipalnagar' *The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories* (New Delhi: Penguin Books India Ltd., 1988), p.59
- Ibid.*, op. Cit., p.59.
- Chitralkha Singh & Prem Nath's 'Flora in Hinduism', *Hinduism* (New Delhi: Crest Publicity House, 1996), p. 189.
- Ruskin Bond, *Rain in the Mountains: Notes from the Himalayas* (New Delhi, Viking by Penguin Books India, 1993),p. 236.
- Thereau, quoted in Jeal Porte, *Emerson and Thoreau: Transcendentalists in Conflict*(Bombay: Lalvani Publishing House, 1969), p. 162.