

Chapter V

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REALISM IN BOND

In literature, realism attempts to describe life without idealization or romantic subjectivity. Though realism is not limited to any one particular age or group of writers, it is generally associated with the literary movement of the nineteenth century France, more specifically with the French novelists – Honore' de Balzac and Gustave Flaubert.

These writers were of the opinion that the romantic impulse that had led to the development of escapist literature depicted life not as it really is, but as it should be. They felt the romantics, with their focus on the spiritual, the abstract and the ideal, were being dishonest about life. They strongly believed every author had an ethical responsibility to be honest.

Thus Flaubert and Balzac in *Salammbô* (1862) and *La Comédie Humaine* (*The Human Comedy*) respectively brought their readers face to face with the baser instincts of man and society that militate against human aspirations. They presented life in its grim nakedness and their works were often tinged with realistic irony.

Realism in literature has been concerned with the commonplaces of everyday life of the average, ordinary individual, where character is the product of social forces and environment becomes an integral element in the dramatic complications.

Realism has been a continuing impulse in twentieth century fiction and it has often been put in the service of a reforming design.

The post war literature about the sufferings of the oppressed (in society, prison, ghetto, totalitarian state etc.) and of human degradation, are bitter cries against man-made systems. In all these, the realistic details go much further than anything conceived by the early realists.

Charles Dickens, Anthony Trollope and George Eliot in England, Ivan Turgenev, Leo Tolstoy and Fyodor Dostoyevsky in Russia, William Dean Howells in the United States, Gottfried Keller and Thomas Mann in Germany — all these writers incorporated realistic elements in their works.

While George Eliot felt the social novels should portray human beings as they really are and the unreality of their representation is a great evil, other realists like Theodore Dreiser, Leo Tolstoy and Henry Ibsen wished to depict life honestly in the hope that seeing social conditions accurately would lead to the improvement of those conditions.

However “Naturalism” – a late nineteenth century and early twentieth century movement, aimed at an even more faithful, accurate and unselective representation of reality. It is an extreme, usually pessimistic form of realism. It emphasizes determinism – biological, environmental and socio-economic, and sees humans driven by their own instincts.

Emile Zola, the leading exponent of naturalism in his essay “Le Roman Experimental” (1880) opined that novelists, like scientists, should examine

dispassionately the various phenomena in life and draw indisputable conclusions. Like Balzac and Flaubert, Zola too created detailed settings meticulously researched, but tended to integrate them better into his narrative, avoiding the long set piece description so characteristic of the earlier fictionalists. Again, like Flaubert, he focused on ordinary people with often debased motives. But his novels laid special emphasis on heredity and rejected the selfdefining hero who transcends his background.

Other naturalists like J.K.Huysans, Guy de Maupassant, George Moore, Gorky and Hauptmann concerned themselves mainly with the harsh and often sordid aspects of life. In fact, many of Maupassant's short stories were designed to bring out hypocrisy and dishonesty as the central forces in human life.

But as the writers strove to depict "the truth", many of them began to lose faith in one shared objective reality. Many realists like Henry James, Virginia Woolf, James Joyce, William Faulkner , Arthur Miller etc. turned inwards to depict life as it seems to one's perceiving consciousness. They felt realism and its off shoot — naturalism, laid excessive emphasis on external reality and ignored the complex workings of the human mind. So they moved their focus increasingly inwards highlighting the subjective, individual impressions of reality. This psychological or poetic realism that they began to portray was a new type of realism. This realism closely examines the passions, emotions and sentiments governing the character and the actions arising out of natural instincts and desires.

Ruskin Bond, like a true realist, apprehends life with sensitive awareness and gives us a photographic presentation of reality. His short stories highlight the ordinary, the familiar and the commonplace in a manner that emphasize their correspondence to life as it actually lived.

But he is not content with merely chronicling his observations. While analyzing and introspecting on life and human problems, Bond attempts to record the multifarious thoughts and feelings of his characters. He tries to reflect all the forces, both external and internal that influence the psychology and the behavioural pattern of his characters. Thus, in striving to express the transcendent truth, he transcends the mundane and the material.

His works project his rare humanity of insight and his inherent belief in life being a sustained struggle between the privileged and the oppressed, the affluent and the impoverished, the crafty and the credulous. He is conscious of the need to diagnose the social and psychic dangers besetting man and society and tries to find the means by which they can be combated. In short, Bond is concerned with what Margaret Berry calls "the universal experience of man". His short stories contain a unique blending of naturalism and psychological realism out of which emerges his composite vision of life.

This chapter is intended to study Bond as a realist with ^auniversal vision of life.

In an interview to Soumitro Basu , Bond candidly remarked:

"I prefer to write about people and places I know and about the lives of those whose paths I have crossed. So I prefer to write stories that are related to moments in my life, scenes I have witnessed and personalities I have interacted with".¹

With his brilliant evocative power, Bond presents plausible human beings against the backdrop of rural India and finds enduring beauty in simple, ordinary and commonplace things.

Like Hamlin Garland who dwelt on the Midwest Plains of America or Sarah Orne Jewett who depicted the New England village life or Thomas Hardy who set his characters in that southern corner of England to which he gave the old name Wessex, Bond focuses attention on the life and environment of the remote Garhwal Himalayas.

But unlike other Indian and Western writers, who have employed the Himalayas as settings for their stories, Bond explores the majestic mountain range in a meaningful way and "finds endless materials for stories in the trees and wild flowers, birds and animals, rocks and rivers and the simple hill – folk who are an integral part of the Himalayas."²

This local colour so evident in his works reflects his belief in the importance of the environment affecting the personality and the life of his characters. His familiarity with the Garhwal Himalayas spanning over six decades, has fostered an abiding relationship with them. His works intimate us with this

alluringly picturesque landscape and the simple, mountain people with whose manners, habits, customs and psychology he is most familiar.

This regionalism that lends a unique charm to Bond's works is especially evident in "A Lime Tree In the Hills", wherein he presents the inscrutable and unchangeable nature of the lofty Himalayas in the lines:

" I wake up at first light, focus on a pattern of small, glossy leaves and then through them see the mountains, the mighty Himalayas, striding away into the immensity of the sky.....

No one has been able to do real justice to the Himalayas. We have climbed their highest peaks, but still the mountains remain remote, mysterious, primeval"³

Like Thomas Hardy, Bond does not confine himself to the general features of the topography, but concentrates on the minutest details. His description of the misty mountains and lush green forests, the rivulets winding down the mountain slopes, the hills covered with a wild profusion of flowers, the small rice fields flanked by steep valleys – all these reveal a realist who has combined the precision of a cartographer with the accuracy of a botanist to present a picture that is unique in its beauty and grandeur .

While immersing his readers in the opulence of the natural landscape of his native Garhwal, Bond like a true realist, uses highly descriptive language to describe the sights and sounds. He, thereby creates a texture that suggests meanings, but avoids explaining or interpreting the significance of a scene. This is

especially evident in his brilliant evocation of the colours and moods associated with the different Indian seasons.

With an amazing felicity of words he portrays the brutal summer heat with its associated dryness and discomfort in the lines:

“.....Anil , aged thirteen, walked about in his vest and shorts, his brown feet white with the chalky dust that flew up from the ground. The earth was parched, the grass brown, the trees listless, hardly stirring, waiting for a cool wind or a refreshing shower of rain”.⁴

The marked shift in mood that accompanies the onset of the monsoon is again eloquently expressed in the lines wherein Bond observes “ With the first rains of summer, the parched earth opens its pores and quenches its thirst with a hiss of ecstasy Now, almost overnight, new grass springs up. There is renewal everywhere, and the damp earth releases a fragrance sweeter than any devised by man.

Small children run out of their homes to romp naked in the rain, buffaloes which spent the summer listlessly around tanks gone dry, now plunge into a heaven of muddy water”.⁵

However while describing a scene, Bond does not give just a pictorial account of the scene. He goes to the heart or the spirit of the scene by providing the insider's point of view. His description of the cold chilly winters in the mountains with its accompanying desolation and gloom bears testimony to this fact.

“..... It was winter and I could not lie on the frost-bitten grass. The sound of the stream was the same, but I missed the birds and the grey skies came clutching at my heart and the rain and sleet drove me indoors.

..... The snow lay heavy on the branches of the oak trees and piled up in culverts – and the grass and the ferns were pressed to sleep beneath a cold blanket, but the stream flowed on under the whiteness towards another river, towards another spring.”⁶

Bond does not confine himself to being merely a nature artist and presenting elaborate pictures of the landscape of his native hills. He minutely observes the society he dwells in and presents highly realistic pictures of the social milieu, often charged with gentle irony and light humour. His short stories contain a microcosm of the manners, habits, customs and beliefs of the simple hill people and the very prosaicness of their life style binds them to reality.

Like T.S. Eliot who wrote of streets, houses and people, Bond too frankly admits to having derived his inspirations “from the nearby villages and their good-natured people as also from the old houses and old families of Landour and Mussoorie hill stations.”⁷

His artistic excellence lies in his highly authentic exploration of facts in an absolutely impartial manner. His writings address themselves mainly to the isolation of man in society, the estrangement of the individual not only from his kith and kin, but often from himself, the problems of exploitation, oppression.

greed, hypocrisy, deceit and the pressing finality of death. But like Albert Camus , Bond realizes the necessity of defending such values as love, truth, goodness, self sacrifice, moderation and justice and rejects the dogmatic aspects of both Christianity and Marxism.

His primary concern has been the delineation of the individual vis-à-vis the society. His short stories are tinged with social consciousness. He is keenly aware of the fundamental incongruities of life. He accepts reality as it appears before him and presents the contradictions and paradoxes in man and society. Thus, in his works, appearance and reality, virtue and vice, reasons and passion, beauty and ugliness, hope and despair, tears and smiles are inextricably interwoven.

While dealing with human follies and foibles, Bond does not, like Hardy, present a world of unrelieved gloom and suffering. While exposing and probing the ills in society and man, his inherent faith in the essential goodness of man leads him to create characters who embody finer human qualities like compassion, selflessness, righteousness etc. that ennable the lives of those they come in contact with and elevate them from the mundane reality of their existence.

Like James Joyce's *Dubliners* , Bond's short stories are interconnected by the their background and their moods. Like the Dublin portrayed by James Joyce, Bond's Garhwal too is a cold and inhospitable place. It is inhabited by simple, sensitive and hardworking, peasants with whom the author seems to side with. With an almost Dickensian gusto, Bond vividly presents the plight of these underdogs against the backdrop of social malaise and touchingly portrays their

trials and tribulations, their miseries and sufferings. Their psychology, their mental inertia and the chill penury of their existence are highlighted in the lines wherein he sadly observes :

“ And clinging to the sides of the mountains

The small stone houses of Garhwal,

Their thin fields of calcinated soil, torn

From old spirit haunted rocks,

Pale women plough , they laugh at thunder.

As their men go down to the plains

Little grows on the beautiful mountains

.....

There is hunger of children at noon and yet

There are those who sing of sunset

And the gods and glories of Himaal

Forgetting no one eats sunsets

Wonder, then, at the absence of old men

For some grow old in their mother's breast

In cold Garhwal”⁸

The sense of fatalism so evident in the above poem appears again and again in Bond's works. Like the characters of R.K. Narayan and Mulk Raj Anand, most of Bond's protagonists are humble rustics possessing the typical Indian attitude that everything in this world is preordained and nothing can alter their situation in life.

As has been already mentioned in Chapter IV of this dissertation, the villagers of Ahirpur (in 'A Dead Man's Gift) meekly accept the tyranny and oppression of the village usurer. Despite leading a sub-human existence, they abjectly surrender themselves to the traditional sense of fatalism, so common among the Indians.

Again as we have seen in the previous chapter, in Megchand the shopkeeper (in "A Wayside Inn") and the old man (in "The Dust in the Mountains"), the same sense of fatalism predominates. Living in remote inaccessible villages of Garhwal, they place themselves at the mercy of their gods and their destiny, firm in their conviction that "what is to be will be".

They endure physical sufferings with calm stoicism and are content to live with their ailment rather than seek expert medical advice in Delhi. Like the villagers of Ahirpur, they too submit themselves to divine providence, firm in their belief that nothing can alter their fate in life.

Like R.K. Narayan, Bond in his short stories, chooses a central character through whose view-point he presents the various aspects of society. His protagonists are invariably average common men, struggling towards maturity—

such maturity as they can achieve within the accepted social framework. They are aware of social changes but they do not commit themselves to any fixed ideology. They are mostly simple, hardworking, honest and credulous people who are pitted against the forces of dishonesty, hypocrisy and insidiousness, so rampant in modern society.

In Daya Ram (in "Going Home") Bond presents the Indian Everyman who embodies in his person the doubts, fears and the confused spectacle of millions of ordinary people.

As this simple peasant jingles his small bag of coins to cheer up the morose child, little does he realize the agony this kindly gesture would ultimately cost him. The petulant child repays his generosity by suddenly flinging his money bag out of the running train. Seeing all his money being thrown out of the train-window, the horrified Daya Ram lunges for the alarm chord to stop the train and retrieve his money. But he stops short on hearing the angry protestations of his co-passengers. They rebuke him for attempting to stop the train on the flimsiest of excuses.

Here Bond ironically projects the psyche of the common man when he remarks, "Daya Ram who usually listened to others stood in suspended animation"⁹

However, on learning that he has lost all his money, his co-passengers helpfully advice him to " leave the train at the next station and go back for it."¹⁰

When, after a long arduous walk, he finally recovers his money bag, he goes into a tea-shop to celebrate his good luck. But his joy is short lived. In the shop, he encounters a group of thugs who engage him in a game of cards. Taking advantage of his naivety, they subtly swindle him of more than half his money. He loses his remaining money when he innocently goes to aid a "distressed stranger" across the street. In the process his pocket is deftly picked by the crook. By the time Daya Ram realizes his mistake, it is too late to recover his money.

Through the unfortunate experience of this simple peasant, Bond focuses attention on the commonly accepted belief that "things are not always what they appear to be." His highly authentic projection of the recurrent clash between appearance and reality brings the reader face to face with the fact that in modern world false face often hides the truth that lies in the heart.

Daya Ram's confrontation with hypocrisy and deceit leaves him broken and emotionally battered. But it does not make him bitter or resentful. He is only dismayed to find that his faith in his fellow brethren is belied. Bond gives us an insight into the psyche of this 'common man' in the lines.

"He (Daya Ram) was not worried (except by the thought of his wife) but he was a little hurt. He knew that he had been tricked, but could not understand why?"

He had really liked those people he had met at the tea-shop and he still could not bring himself to believe that the man in rags had been putting on an act."¹¹

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The half-empty train that finally takes Daya Ram home is symbolic of the emptiness in his mind. Bewildered and benumbed by his insalubrious experiences, this simple villager finds it difficult to understand or accept the repugnant behaviour of the scoundrels in whom he had placed such implicit trust.

In sharp contrast to Daya Ram, is Satish's mother (in "Platform No 8"). With cynicism and scepticism acquired through years of experience of the city life, she warns young Arun, travelling alone, against befriending strangers.

But ignoring her advice, Arun befriends the kindly women he meets on the railway platform. He instinctively realizes that this simple and unassuming women would under no circumstances dupe him. With her maternal concern, the stranger endears herself to the young boy and in that short time he begins to feel an almost filial affection for her. Thus he takes umbrage when Satish's mother rebukes him for not paying heed to her advice and angrily retorts: "I like strangers".¹²

Like Arun and Daya Ram, most of Bond's characters try to reach out to others. They make sincere effort to establish healthy rapport with man and society. It is true they are often frustrated and disappointed. But they do not give in to despair. For like Bond, they too realize that in this cold and heartless world, there is warmth and comfort in deep, trusting companionship.

In his short stories, Bond has very effectively projected the mysterious incongruities in human motivation. The characterization of the thief (in "The Thief") William Jones (in "He Said It With Arsenic") and Mr. Kaushal, the Hindi teacher (in "Masterji") are reminiscent of R.L. Stevenson's *Dr. Jekyll And Mr. Hyde*. In these characters, the two selves are fully internalized and the conflict between good and evil is traced to its ultimate source in the duality of human nature.

The jovial and compassionate Mr. Kaushal's sympathies lay firmly with his pupils especially those weak in studies. He never hesitated to help them during examinations and always ensured that they secured pass marks in his subject.

This large-hearted teacher's actions are motivated by his belief that "it is unfair to hold a boy back in life simply because he can't get through some puny exam"¹³

But his kindness does not stop with helping his students pass their school examinations. It extends to supplying false matriculation certificates to his unsuccessful pupils "who would never have got through on their own."¹⁴

He has no compunction in establishing a lucrative business of selling fake certificates to his students and herein lies the duality in his nature. He is benevolent, compassionate and helpful but at the same time crafty, unscrupulous and dishonest.

When the long arms of the law catches up with him and he is arrested on charges of fraud and forgery, he is totally unrepentant. He suffers from no pangs of conscience nor does he appear to be ashamed or embarrassed by "the handcuffs or by the stares of his fellow-passengers. Rather, it was the policeman who looked unhappy and ill at ease".¹⁵

Being arrested by the police is to him a " trivial matter". It is nothing to worry about, for, as he reasons with the narrator " even a great teacher like Socrates fell foul of law".¹⁶

Through the characterization of Mr. Kaushal Bond brilliantly portrays the irreconcilable duality of human nature.

In his short stories Bond has also vividly presented the effect of guilt. It more than any other force, motivates change in many of his characters.

It is this feeling of guilt that causes a change in the character of the young thief (in "The Thief") and becomes the cause behind his noble conduct. When he secures employment as a cook in Arun's house, little does he realize the change that would ultimately come over him.

As has already been mentioned in Chapter III of this dissertation, the thief's sole intention of entering Arun's house is to rob his master at the first opportunity and then disappear. But even after a fortnight, he cannot bring himself to swindle his benefactor.

Arun not only trusted him completely but tried to educate him by teaching him to read, write and count. It is his gratitude for this kindly man that comes between the thief and his profession.

However, when he finally succumbs to temptation and steals Arun's money, he tries to justify his actions by assuring himself.

" If I don't take the money, he'll only waste it on his friends He doesn't even pay me"¹⁷

He quickly leaves the house intending to board the Amritsar Express and leave the town as fast as possible. But as he reaches the station a change comes over him. He finds the Amritsar Express moving out of the station but he "hesitates long enough for the train to leave without him."¹⁸

As he stands alone in the desolate station, he is overcome by a feeling of remorse. His anguish is apparent in the lines:

" I kept thinking of Arun. He would still be asleep, blissfully unaware of his loss.....

I knew that neither panic, nor anger nor fear would show on Arun's face when he discovered the theft, only a terrible sadness not for the loss of the money but for my having betrayed his trust."¹⁹

He retraces his steps back to Arun's house to return the money. It is the terrible guilt-complex that leads the misguided youth to eschew his life of crime and brings about a radical transformation in his character.

Bond is not content with exploring his characters' changing relationships with themselves, society and other individuals. As Murli Das Melwani rightly puts it, Bond realizes that " nature is a power that changes the personality."²⁰

In many of his short stories, Bond examines his protagonist's changing relationship with nature. They come to the realization of their spiritual affinity with creation through different facets of nature.

As already mentioned in Chapter II of this dissertation, in "Angry River" nature manifests itself as a mighty river that tumbles down from the snowy Himalayas. Bond examines little Sita's changing relationship with the river and shows how she matures through her dynamic confrontation with the flooded river.

Living in a tiny island in the middle of the river, Sita's attitude towards the river is both practical and reverential. For her the river is the sole provider. Her relationship with the river is therefore one of submission and faith. But with the onset of the monsoon, Sita's harmonious relationship with the life sustaining river undergoes a profound change. The benign river transforms before her eyes into a fierce monster thundering down the hills, bringing death and destruction in its wake.

As Sita climbs to the safety of the old peepal tree, before her eyes the river assumes the image of the Destroyer or Lord Shiva engaged in " tandav" the cosmic dance of destruction.

As already mentioned in Chapter II, Sita is initially perplexed and horrified by the strange behaviour of the river. But as she struggles for survival the realization slowly dawns on her that what she is witnessing is only a manifestation of the duality of nature.

So from a highly confused state, Sita progresses to a state of understanding where she is able to perceive and accept the river in both its benevolent and destructive manifestations.

Thus Bond's conception of characters is highly imaginative and poetic and his execution of them shows his grasp of reality. While portraying his characters, he moves away from standard characterization towards new levels of humanity, delving deep into their psyche and the innermost recesses of their hearts. Their souls are laid bare before us. We find they have similar sentiments and are torn by similar passions. They are racked by fears that each one of us may have experienced at sometime in our lives. This is mainly because they are governed by elemental feelings common to all. Bond's characters therefore acquire an unmistakable universality. The human conflict in his hands becomes symbolic of the universal conflict between good and evil, the right and wrong, the powerful and the weak. His characters become larger than life as they struggle not only against their inner forces but also against the hostile forces of society. Thus in his hands, the particular assumes a universal significance. He can move away from the particular to the universal because of his realism which is mundane on the one hand and philosophic and poetic on the other.

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