

Chapter VI

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THE ART OF RUSKIN BOND

“ ‘I give to the world that which is in my heart’ wrote composer Franz Schubert, and I have tried to do the same”

Ruskin Bond in Rain In The Mountains

In recent times no Indo-—Anglian short writer has received such an acclaim from the readers as Ruskin Bond. The reason for this is not far to seek.

The short story as an art form has flourished in the modern age of “sick-hurry and divided aims” because it is short and crisp with no superfluous words or trimmings.

The success of a short story hinges on its totality of impression, its artful construction, its flexible narrative and its singleness of effect whether it is in the development of character, presentation of theme or in the creation of mood.

But the most important feature of the short story is its “sense of mystery”. Eudora Wetley in “The Atlantic Monthly” has rightly observed:

“Every good story has mystery of allurements. As we understand the story better, it is likely that the mystery does not necessarily decrease; rather it simply grows more beautiful”.¹

Bond's increasing popularity as a short story writer is not only due to the presence of the above characteristics in his works, but also because of the endearing quality of his stories. They touch the innermost cord of the reader's heart and leave a lasting impression on his mind.

The diversity afforded by the short story by including stories on assorted subjects of varying lengths, ranging from tragedy to comedy, from satire to farce, and differing widely in presentation, is hardly found in any other genre of literature.

As real art lies in the short story, this chapter aims at highlighting Ruskin Bond's short story as a work of art with emphasis on how he achieves it.

The evolution of the short story began even before man could read or write. To aid themselves in constructing tales, the earliest storytellers relied on stock phrases, fixed rhythms and rhymes. Consequently many of the oldest narratives of the world (like *The Epic Of Gilgamesh*, *The War Of The Gods*, *The Story Of Adapa*, *The Heavenly Bow* etc.) were in verse.

The ancient Egyptians however, wrote their narratives largely in prose, reserving verse for their religious hymns. Most of these were highly didactic and had very intricate plots.

It was during the second, third and fourth centuries B.C, the Hebrews first wrote their rather sophisticated narratives which are now a part of *The Old Testament* and *The Apocrypha*. *The Old Testament* books of Ruth, Esther and Jonah are undoubtedly some of the most famous short stories in the world.

The earliest stories from India are not as old as those from Egypt and the Middle-East. Though *The Brahmanas* (c.700B.C) function mostly as theological appendixes to the four *Vedas*, few are composed as short, instructional parables.

Perhaps the most interesting short stories are the later tales in the Pali language called *The Jataka*. Though these stories have a religious frame, their actual concern is with secular behaviour and practical wisdom.

The Pancha-tantra (c.500 B.C)—an anthology of amusing and moralistic animal tales, is another collection of Indian short stories, being one of the world's most popular children's books.

Most of these ancient Indian short stories or tales as they are popularly called, come from much older material. They vary in their subject matter from the fantastic story of a transformed swan to a more probable and realistic tale of a loyal but misunderstood servant.

But these ancient tales, whether from India, Egypt or the Middle-East do not constitute the short story as the nineteenth and twentieth century writers have defined the term. However, they are of great significance because they constitute a large part of the milieu from which the modern short story has emerged.

The short story as we know it today emerged simultaneously in Germany, the United States, France and Russia.

In Germany, there has been relatively little difference between the stories of the late eighteenth century and those in the older tradition of Bocaccio.

In 1795 Goethe contributed a set of stories to Schiller's journal, *Die Horen*, that were obviously created with *The Decameron* in mind. But Goethe did not call them short stories (Novellen) although the term was available to him. Rather, he regarded them as "entertainment" for German travellers.

However, a new type of short fiction was near at hand---a type that accepted some of the realistic properties of popular journalism. In 1827, thirty two years after publishing his own "entertainments", Goethe commented on the difference between the newly emerging short story and a tale. According to him, a short story is a tale that concerns itself with events that have actually occurred. Christoph Wieland and Friedrich Schleiermacher, the two famous German critics also agreed that a short story has to be realistic. Sensitive to this qualification, Heinrich Von Kleist and E.T.A.Hoffman called their short works on fabulous themes "tales" rather than short stories.

Ludwig Tieck explicitly rejected realism as the definitive element in a short story. He envisioned the short story as primarily a matter of intensity and ironic inversion. According to him, a story did not have to be realistic, so long as the chain of events was entirely in keeping with the characters and circumstances.

So by allowing the writer to pursue an inner and sometimes bizarre reality and order, Tieck and his followers kept the modern short story open to non-journalistic techniques.

The short story evolved in two strains in the United States. On one hand there appeared the realistic story that sought to deal objectively with seemingly real characters, places and events. The regionalist stories of G.W. Cable, Bert Harte and Sarah Orne Jewett are of this kind.

On the other hand, there developed the impressionist story that was given shape and meaning by psychological attitudes of the narrator. Due to this element of subjectivity, these stories seemed less objective and less realistic in the outward sense. To this category belong Edgar Allen Poe's tales in which hallucinations of the narrator provide the details of the story.

Some writers like Washington Irving contributed to the development of both types of story. While he wrote several realistic stories (like "The Sketch-book", "The Alhambra"), he also wrote stories in which the details were taken not from ostensible reality but from within a character's mind. Much of the substance of "The Stout Gentleman" is reshaped and recharged by the narrator's fertile imagination, and *Rip Van Winkle* draws upon the symbolic surreality of Rip's dream.

However, despite the emergence of different strains in the art of the short story, all short story writers had to confine themselves strictly to the matter at hand.

This could be a straightforward account of events as they happened and through them portray the elements of character as Guy de Maupassant does in "The Necklace" or Pearl Buck does in "The Refugees". Or it could be a brief

delineation of one or two central characters through whom the entire theme of the short story is unraveled as in Anton Chekov's "The Bet" or Saki's "Dusk" and "The Open Window".

Some writers like Somerset Maugham, D.H.Lawrence and Virginia Woolf used the short story as an effective medium to indulge in an in-depth psychological study of man.

Ruskin Bond's greatness as a short story writer, lies first and foremost, in his brilliant and straightforward delineation of characters. A versatile and skilful creator of characters, he uses these unforgettable characters to unfold his themes before his readers.

As has already been mentioned in the previous chapters of this dissertation, Bond has the highest regard for the unlettered villagers and children. The individuals who populate his stories command our respect and admiration because of the vitality imparted to them by his own transparent belief in their reality. They are ordinary individuals of whom he has first hand knowledge. Thus he presents such innocuous characters as goat-herds, basket-sellers, hawkers, sweepers, gardeners, tonga-drivers, shopkeepers etc.

What sets them apart is their quiet dignity and their distinct individuality. These lend a unique charm to their characters and transform them into fascinating personalities. His characters may differ in age, sex, state of life, virtues and vices. But the one factor common to all of them is their life and their vitality.

In the introduction to his collection of stories entitled *Friends In Small Places*, Bond frankly admits that his characters stand out “not because they are of great importance or stature but because their individuality makes them stand out from the common place. It is not money or success but pride in themselves that sets them apart”.²

He is wholly objective in the portrayal of his characters. There is nothing ingenuine about them. Most of them possess a childlike simplicity that lends a distinct charm to their personality. They are all “wonderfully” human and are moved by similar passions and emotions common to all mankind. One cannot but agree with Urmi A. Goswami, when in her review of “A Season Of Ghosts” she remarks:

“He (Bond) writes about ordinary people in not so ordinary situations in extra-ordinary ways”.³

Bond deals not with intellectual complexities but with the emotional life of his characters. He excels in creating characters that are social misfits – lonely and misunderstood by everyone. His empathy with the humble and the lowly, in their joys and sorrows, triumphs and failures, enrich their personalities and they are transformed by the writer from ordinary to extra-ordinary beings.

Kishen Singh, the railway watchman (in “The Tunnel”) and old Mehmood (in “The Kitemaker) are a few of Bond’s memorable characters, picked up from the unnoticed crowds of humanity.

Kishen Singh's courage and sincerity not only endear him to young Ranji, but also elevates him from a simple railway employee to a character worthy of respect and admiration.

This fourth grade railway worker posted near a tunnel in a remote jungle meticulously discharges his duty. He maintains his lonely vigil on the tunnel, keeping it free from obstacles and giving timely warnings of danger. His awesome sense of responsibility comes to the fore when he risks his own life to save a leopard from being run over by the Night Mail.

When he becomes aware that a leopard has strayed into the railway track, he fearlessly strides into the tunnel, armed with only an axe and a lamp. His aggressive stance and his shouts reverberating through the tunnel frightens the leopard. It quietly slinks away from the tunnel and disappears into the surrounding forest.

Kishen Singh's quiet heroism sets him apart from other men. It gives him a new identity — from a humble employee to a hero worthy of adulation. He is indeed one of Bond's most memorable characters.

Old Mehmood (in "The Kitemaker") is another fascinating creation of the author. This kitemaker is at a stage of life where the heartlessness and the unscrupulousness of the society are visible to him at the same time. He is caught in the twilight of double vision in which many elderly people are involved. He finds himself abandoned by the very people who had made him famous.

His mind drifts back and forth from his present ignominy to his glorious past, when he was sought after both by the royals and the commoners, for his extra-ordinary kites.

His failure to keep pace with the rapidly changing times has made him an anomaly amongst his own people. Both Mehmood and the ancient banyan tree of the village “have become permanent fixtures that are of no concern to the raucous, sweating mass of humanity that surround them.”⁴

Caught in the vicious web of poverty and neglect, this old kitemaker cloisters himself in his own little world centering round his grandson. He is content to watch little Ali grow under his proud patronizing eyes. Even in his final moments, his only thought is of making a new kite for Ali.

And herein lies the greatness of this simple kitemaker. Accepting rejection with stoicism, he surmounts adversities with quiet dignity that leaves a lasting impression on our minds. He is certainly among Bond’s most impressive characters.

Many of Bond’s short stories are impressionistic wherein he focuses on the impressions registered by events on the character’s minds rather than on the objective reality of events themselves.

In his stories dealing with the occult, we find a creative mind at work—distorting, fabricating and fantasizing—rather than an objective picture of actuality.

It is “the subconscious fear of the unknown holding the septre of man’s worst terrors”⁵ that Bond exploits in these stories. His task has been rendered easy by “ the existence in India of a fecund fictional landscape peopled by rakhshasas, pishaches, dervishes and witches.....”⁶

Like his human characters, these pre-natural presences are also natural denizens of the Garhwal Himalayas — of the forests of pine and deodars “ where the spirit world is still very much a part of experience of the people.....”⁷

While dealing with these supernatural characters, Bond’s mythopoeic imagination often takes a macabre turn as in “Something In The Water”, “The Night Of The Millennium” or “The Prize”.

“Something In The Water” (with a faint pointer to the Loch Ness monster myth) deals with a giant succubus lurking in the depths of a dark tree lined pool in the deodar forest. Those who venture into the pool are sucked in by this primeval past. Nothing is left of them, save a mangled mass of flesh and bones.

Most of Bond’s creatures of the night display a “disregard for wealth as the rich whizkid Prasad finds out to his cost”⁸ in “The Night Of The Millennium”. This is a story that brings the reader face to face with a blood-coiling mockery of progress.

Like Keats’ “La Belle Dame Sans Merci”, the strange widow sitting on one of the tombstones in the dark cemetery attracts the protagonist by her weird intensity. Unperturbed by the eerie surroundings, Prasad hungrily moves towards

her, his young body aflame with desire. With the cellphone in his pocket, he is confident of summoning his driver and body-guards at the shortest notice.

Here, Bond acquaints us with a type of wasting power of passion. Through mistaken choice, the unsuspecting protagonist gets involved with a woman who “claws at his flesh, sucks his blood and contemptuously gives his cell-phone and his bones to the clamouring jackals”.⁹

“The Prize” is another horrendous story where drunkenness, revelry and death join hands. It is the tale of a young Booker prize hopeful. In course of a dreadful nightmare he sees his body carved up at the dinner table by the drunken jury. Horrified by the scene, he rushes to his bed. But he finds it already has another occupant – his own dead body, with the legend “Better Luck Next Time” carved on it.

These supernatural stories reveal that, like Poe and Baudelaire, Bond to a large extent, is also fascinated by the so called “Terror School” and the cult of the “Gothic” that were the features of the romantic revival in Britain and Europe.

As already mentioned in Chapter III, Bond is often conscious of a malevolent providence working against humanity. His supernatural tales along with other works like “The Funeral”, “The Guardian Angel”, “The Story of Madhu” etc. bear testimony to this fact.

We also find that despite his inherent faith in the innate goodness of man, the notion of evil is not altogether absent from the author’s mind or his works. His

frequent division of characters into camps of unassailable virtue and unmitigated cunning and depravity points to an essential Manichean habit of mind.

In the "Encyclopaedia of Philosophy", Vol V, of Paul Edwards, the Manichean dichotomy is stated thus :

"The chief characteristic of Mani's system is a consistent dualism which rejects any possibility of tracing the origins of good and evil to the same source. Evil stands as completely independent principle against good and redemption from the power of evil is to be achieved by recognizing this dualism and following the appropriate rules of life.....

The present world and man in particular, presents a mixture of Good and Evil, the result of a breach of the original limits by the powers of Evil.

The whole purpose of the founding of the universe was to separate the two principles and restore the original state of affairs by rendering Evil forever harmless and preventing any future repetition of intermingling."¹⁰

Thus we find that William Jones in Bond's "He Said It With Arsenic" stands in stark contrast to the endearing widow of "Platform No 9". His malevolent motivation is as incomprehensible as the other's innate goodness.

Jones' portraiture is unrelieved in its darkness. A male nurse in the city hospital, he derives unholy pleasure from death. A ruthless murderer "the thing came to him naturally. No extreme violence, no messy shootings or hackings or throttling. Just the right amount of poison, administered with skill and discretion".¹¹

He is so incurably evil that despite the changing circumstances, his character does not undergo any change. At no time does he give the faintest indication of a better nature lurking beneath his depravity. Towards the end he even tries to poison his own nephew, in whose house he was a guest.

A polarity of moral absolutes creates an unbridgeable gap between this compulsive killer and his nephew -- the narrator, his only living relative in this world.

Bond entralls us not only through his masterly delineation of characters, but often (as in "A Case For Inspector Lal") by combining suspenseful plot with ultimate questions about suffering, faith and meaning of life.

He specializes in analysis and exploration of conflicting emotions like love, compassion, selflessness on the one hand and hypocrisy, vanity and tyrannical domination on the other.

His stories treat timeless issues like love, hate, birth, death etc. with great psychological profundity. His penetration into the darkest recesses of the human mind together with his unsurpassed moments of illumination has had a tremendous impact on Indo-Anglian fiction of the twentieth century.

Bond's art has a deep human quality. The chief instruments of his art are not only his brilliant characterization but also his subtle humour, his heart-rending pathos and the poignancy and flavour of their unique fusion.

Like Maupassant's works, Bond's stories also contain an underlying passion. He is acutely aware of the kind of conditions that impoverish the human spirit and induce the worst behaviour. His writings suggest tolerance and sympathy. Unlike the sardonic humour of Voltaire, Swift and Pope, Bond's humour is marked by geniality and freshness of outlook. It ranges from gentle humour to horseplay, from caricature to mild farce.

His multitudinous humour runs most richly through his children's stories especially "The Adventures Of Toto", "The Conceited Python", "A Hornbill Called Harold", "Cricket For The Crocodile" or through stories like "A Boy Who Broke The Bank".

"A Boy Who Broke The Bank" deals with a highly farcical situation, where a simple, innocuous statement of Nathu, the disgruntled sweeper of The Pipalnagar Bank, is so grossly misinterpreted that it brings the bank on the verge of veritable collapse.

When Nathu complains to Sitaram that he has not yet received the month's salary from the bank, the town-dhobi conveys this piece of information to Mrs. Srivastava. The lady passes it on to her friend Mrs. Bhusan. The manner in which Mrs. Bhusan receives the news shows the protean nature of Bond's humour :

"Shocking!.....If they (The Pipalnagar Bank) can't pay their sweeper, they must be in a bad way. None others could be getting paid either".¹²

Soon the little town is abuzz with the rumour that its main bank is on the verge of bankruptcy. Panic spreads quickly as people rush to the bank to withdraw their savings. It is amusing to note how “on learning that the bank was about to collapse, Ganpat (the lame and disabled beggar) astonishes everyone by leaping to his feet and actually running at top speed in the direction of the bank”¹³ to withdraw his saving of a thousand rupees.

Here is a brilliant example of Bond’s ability to perceive the trenchant irony of situation and derive humour from it.

As the irate crowd indulges in rampant acts of vandalism, the front steps of the bank becomes cluttered with stones and broken pieces of glass and furniture. The writer’s urbane and semi-farcical humour comes to the fore in Nathu’s bewildered reaction to the whole scene, the next morning : “Who would have thought the bank would collapse !.....I wonder how it could have happened.”¹³

Most of Bond’s stories possess the unique quality of evoking our sympathy and compassion. Their moving pathos is to a large extent responsible for their tremendous appeal.

This pathos has its source not only in his own life but also in his ability to see into the very core of reality. It is the expression of a gentle and benevolent mind who is able to delve deep into the inner life of things and feel the wretchedness of his fellow-brethren.

Highly touching are the stories where Bond reminisces his own unhappy childhood. Pathos is the prevailing note in these works for they deal with incidents and emotions that are irrevocable. Most of his autobiographical works (like “The Funeral” and “Coming Home To Dehra” etc) arouse our deepest sympathy because they are replete with nostalgic self-pity.

As already mentioned in Chapter I, in “The Funeral”, the young protagonist’s shock and bewilderment at his father’s death, his irresistible urge to stop the burial of the body and his long and lonely walk from the cemetery reflect the writer’s own anguish at his father’s death.

Again “Coming Home To Dehra “ recounts another agonizing phase in Bond’s life. There is touching pathos in his recollection of his lonely homecoming following his father’s death.

His step father’s indifference, his mother’s insensitivity and his sense of alienation from them are apparent in the lines wherein he remarks :

“ My stepfather barely noticed me..... I was fortunate of having a room of my own. I was desirous of my own privacy as much as my mother and stepfather were desirous of theirs.

My stepfather was ready to put up with me provided I did not get in the way.

And, in a different way, I was ready to put up with him provided he left me alone. I was even willing that my mother should leave me alone.”¹⁴

From the above study, it is obvious that Bond writes in different moods in different stories. It is his style that conveys these varying moods to us.

His literary works display a wonderful harmony between matter, manner and expression. Sometimes he is witty and playful, sometimes grave and didactic and some times even philosophical and pathetic.

The most remarkable feature of Bond's style is his language. It is his language that really speaks. We are hypnotised by the felicity of his language.

He uses pure and limpid English, natural and easy in its run and tone. His language has a strange degree of translucence and is beautifully adapted to communicate the different Indian sensibilities. It is gentle, smooth and racy and devoid of lengthy and obscure phrases and expressions.

Bond uses common English idioms without bringing any change in their structure. His elusive and guileless style of writing is such that what is left unsaid often seems more important than what is said.

"The Night Train At Deoli" is a powerful illustration of his masterly style and his superb power of narration. It is a passionate account of enduring love that stands out "amongst light cameos of small town and rural folks."

In rich, sensual language, Bond describes his protagonist's encounter with the young, enigmatic basket-seller in Deoli railway station. She captivates him with her striking beauty and her "dark, smouldering eyes".¹⁵

As he vacillates between adolescent inhibition and his desire to express his love for her, she disappears from his life. Frantic enquiries about her proves futile. Though many remembered the beautiful basket-seller, none could reveal her whereabouts. This story is a typical example of Bond's creative skill and his ability to create a powerful effect through the use of simple language and situation. Highly poignant are the lines where the hero remarks :

“In the last few years I have passed through Deoli many times and I always look out of the carriage window half expecting to see the same unchanged face smiling up at me. But I will never break my journey there. It may spoil my game. I prefer to keep hoping and dreaming and looking out of the window up and down that lonely platform, waiting for the girl with the baskets”.¹⁶

We find that Bond weaves wonders with words. Most of his stories depend a lot on diction and his diction draws on the simplest and the most spontaneous of emotions. The beauty of his sentences, the subtle rhythm in the combination of words and their evocative power stir our imagination.

In some cases, this effect is produced by the simplest of words. In “The Eyes Have It”, Bond projects the underlying pathos of the story thus : “..... I don't remember her, he said, sounding puzzled. It was her eyes I noticed, not her hair. She had beautiful eyes but they were of no use to her. She was completely blind. Didn't you notice?”¹⁷

The same is true in the deceptively simple lines describing the narrator's abiding love for his dead aunt in "The Guardian Angel".

"But inspite of a broken wing and a smile, it was a very ordinary stone angel and could not hold a candle to my Aunt Mariam, the very special guardian angel of my childhood."¹⁸

"The Woman On Platform No 8" again highlights Bond's unique skill of expressing intense feelings and emotions in plain, simple English. Arun's deep regret while parting from the kind stranger who had showered him with maternal affection is apparent from his simple remark :

"I didn't wave or shout, but sat still in front of the window, gazing at the woman on the platform She was looking at me as the train took me away. She stood there on the busy platform, a pale, sweet woman in , and I watched her until she was lost in the milling crowd."¹⁹

But "A Case For Inspector Lal" marks Bond's consummation in the choice of words.

As has been already mentioned in Chapter III of this dissertation, when Inspector Keemat Lal finds that forced by circumstances, Kamala has murdered the Rani, his pity for the young girl outweighs his desire to bring her to justice. He handles the case with amazing sensitiveness. Suppressing the case, he allows her to go scot free. For this humanitarian act, he pays a heavy price. He is transferred and

denied promotion. More a cerebral character than a brash cop, Keemat Lal realizes he is a misfit in his profession.

As he sadly expresses his feelings to the narrator, we notice Bond's skill in making highly original and expressive statements :

"His (Inspector Keemat Lal's) last words to me were 'I should never have been a policeman'".²⁰

Many of Bond's stories begin and end in sheer, shimmering poetry. "Whistling In The Dark" begins with such lyrical lines as :

"The moon was almost full. Bright moonlight flooded the road. But I was stalked by the shadows of the trees, by the crooked oak branches reaching out towards me....."²¹

When such sentences set the mood of the story, we can almost "feel the creaking of the branches in the darkness, the rustling of the leaves in the faint breeze and the trees reaching out for us."²²

Walking down the desolate moonlit road, the narrator is not unnerved by the eerie bodiless whistling emerging from the encircling mist. More so, because "the mystery whistler turns out to be a phantom bicycle rider who is as genial in death as in life".²³

Here Bond leaves enough room for his readers, to have chance meetings with phantom schoolboys along the dark, treacherous mountain paths. A little poem sums up the story that has a Walter de la Mare type of ending .

“We three

We’re not alone

We’re not even company

My echo,

My shadow

And me”²⁴

In his short stories Bond assumes multiple roles – of the narrator, the listener and the tireless vagrant in the valley, who sees and experiences much more than anyone else would have the “luck or the pluck” to experience. In this connection Swati Ghosh rightly observes:

“We would not wander atop Pari Tibba, our hair won’t brush against a skyful of twinkling stars and we would never be caressed among fragrant honeysuckles and prickly pine needles by elfin fingers who cross the night with little green lights.”²⁵

Bond possesses the unique quality of taking his readers along with him. He lends us his eyes, his ears, his emotions and we end up as ones lost in love for the rugged mountains and its simple inhabitants.

Like all great writers, Bond’s art is based on the principle of selection and rejection. He deals with everything with surety and unerring instinct. The excellence of his poetic art lies in his unfailing sense of balance and proportion. His

short stories brilliantly project his art with their balance, economy, simplicity, emotional intensity and logical evolution of thoughts. His poetic art is indeed hard to emulate and master. Herein lies his greatness as a short story writer.

In conclusion it can be rightly said that through his observations and experiences Ruskin Bond projects his vision of life – a vision tinged with realism, love, compassion and fellow feelings for his race. It is this broad vision of life that enables Bond to transcend narrow selfish interests and identify himself with the toiling humanity. And his art has gone a long way in shaping his vision of life which progresses from the particular to the universal.