

**A STUDY OF RUSKIN BOND'S
VISION OF LIFE WITH REFERENCE
TO
HIS SHORT STORIES**

*A DISSERTATION
SUBMITTED IN PARTIAL FULFILMENT OF THE
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DECLARATION

This is to certify that the subject matter of the dissertation is a record of work done by the candidate herself under my guidance and that the contents of this dissertation did not form a basis of the award of any previous degree to her or to the best of my knowledge to anybody else and that the dissertation has not been submitted by the candidate for any research degree to any other University.

Date 10.7.03

Benny W. Bangice
.....
Signature of the Supervisor/Guide

To: Justice Brand
re: my short story here
I prepared me to write this
description.



Ruskin Owen Bond (1934 -)

“A writer has to live and write within his nature, and this is what I have done and this is what I would do again.”

Ruskin Bond in *When Darkness Falls And Other Stories*.

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P R E F A C E

W H Y R U S K I N B O N D

PREFACE

I first read Ruskin Bond when I was doing my under-graduate studies. Shyam Benegal's film 'Junoon' had, in those days evoked such widespread interest, that I became curious to read the original from which it had been adapted.

Thus I read *A Flight Of The Pigeons* and became acquainted with Ruskin Bond. This acquaintance continued over the years as I read his novels, his numerous essays, poems and short stories.

My personal liking for Bond deepened as I read his short stories. I was fascinated by the people and the unique literary landscape mapped out by the author in these stories. It became apparent to me that though Bond embarked on his literary career as a novelist (*The Room On The Roof* being his first novel), his creative genius has found its fullest expression in his short stories.

These stories include tales of varying lengths on assorted subjects, ranging from tragedy to mild satire, from comedy to farce and they differ widely in tone and presentation.

Masterly craftsmanship is evident in the fine structure of these stories where Bond's unerring eye for drama is balanced by his instinct for simplicity. A master of distillation, he illuminates entire codes of values by means of a few telling details.

Focussing on ordinary situations in the lives of ordinary people, he reveals envy, greed, hypocrisy, selfishness, vanity and sometimes even cruelty. He depicts petty limitations, the dissimulations and pretensions inherent at different levels of society.

Yet, besides these meaner inclinations of humanity, goodness, compassion, honour, love, integrity and generosity of spirit feature too. By his own admission, his very broad personal experience has enabled him to hone his power of observation.

In “An Unsolicited Foreword” to *My First Love And Other Stories* Bond stated that he wrote the short stories to “share a particular experience with others”¹ and “to try to touch the heart”² of his readers.

Most of his short stories can be read at different levels of meanings. At a cursory glance, his “The Night Train At Deoli” is about a shy and sentimental boy’s love for a girl selling baskets at a wayside railway station. But a close reading of the story reveals that it deals with the perennial human conflict between dream and reality.

The narrator’s brief encounter with the girl takes on the proportions of a beautiful dream which he knows would be lost if he were to dig beneath the surface. So though he often passes through Deoli, he never breaks his journey there to find out what has happened to the girl who vanished from his life as suddenly as she had entered it.

Similarly “The Angry River” again illustrates the deeper layers of meanings hidden beneath an apparently simple child’s tale .At one level “The Angry River” is an account of a little girl’s desperate struggles for survival against the flooded river. But at another level, Bond uses the river as a symbol “to show man’s harmony with nature and through it project a transcendental vision of life”.³

In this short story, Bond explores his protagonist’s changing relationship with the river, from a deep love and gratitude for its many boons, to an awareness of its duality, to an understanding of its mystical nature.

As Sita confronts the “angry” river, she understands and accepts her changed relationship with the river. She realises that she is not being punished for her past sins because the mighty river in spite is not an instrument of God’s wrath, but only a manifestation of the duality of nature.

Mysteriously, a young boy named Krishnan appears in a boat and saves Sita’s life. Trying to calm the frightened girl, he philosophically explains “ We cannot fight the river. We must go wherever it takes us.”⁴

If we examine the story closely, we will find embedded in the narrative characters and episodes that “link Sita’s experiences with those of the mythological characters, and prompt us to view her fate with the same sense of awe and wonder associated with the stories of the Gods”.⁵

Krishnan, a simple cowherd, reminds us of Lord Krishna, who spent his childhood as cowherd in Gokul. Like Lord Krishna, “Krishnan too plays his flute to express his harmony with creation.”⁶

Sita and Krishna, the two principal characters of the Ramayana and the Mahabharata are worshipped by the Hindus as the incarnation of goddess Lakshmi and her consort Lord Vishnu. Thus through this simple story Bond, “manipulates our perspective to regard Sita and Krishnan, “as the divine couple reincarnated again and again on this earth to help alleviate human suffering.”⁷

As the flood waters recede Sita resumes her normal life on the island. She cannot erase the memory of Krishnan from her mind. As she gives up all hopes of seeing him again, he suddenly appears.

As the two children sit happily by the riverside, Sita remembering her horrific experience remarks, “Sometimes the river is angry and sometimes it is kind”.⁸

But Krishnan gently tells her “we are a part of the river. We cannot live without it”.⁹

Through this remark, Bond tries to focus both Sita and the reader’s attention beyond “a dichotomous thinking towards a higher level of understanding of the multifaceted and simultaneous attributes of the river. Like Lord Krishna, Krishnan helps Sita relate to the river as to the macrocosm or the totality of everything in the universe.”¹⁰

Perhaps like Arjun, in the Mahabharata, Sita too will learn that nothing in this Universe is destroyed. The river is eternal and as it flows through the length and breadth of the country, it mystically unites all the diverse people who dwell on its banks.

Bond tries to show us that the changing moods of the river only symbolize the continuous process of creation, preservation and reabsorption.

One cannot but resist quoting Meena G Khorana again when she remarks that “in progressing from an active intellectual state to a calm philosophical contemplation of her communion with nature, Sita is one step closer to a search or awareness of the enlightened state of ‘moksha’ or ‘nirvana’.”¹¹

“The Angry River” and “The Night Train At Deoli” were the two short stories that fascinated me. They gave me a new insight into Bond’s works. What I found interesting was that each of these stories contain the germ of his life vision and his life attitude.

So I began to think seriously on whether I could embark upon my Ph.D dissertation on Bond’s vision of life with reference to his short stories.

A creative writer’s world owes much to his varied experiences. These experiences leave an abiding impression on his mind while developing his vision of life. Unless we situate the writer in his background, his vision of life can not be properly understood and appreciated. Accordingly I have divided my thesis into six chapters.

By vision we mean how Ruskin Bond has looked at life and presented his observations in terms of his literary works. There is no writer without a vision of life. And every writer's vision is unique. The most successful criticism is that which studies a writer in relation to his creative works. Since Bond has shown his excellence in his short stories, this present dissertation aims at exploring Bond's life vision which his short stories so amazingly manifest. Few critical literatures on Bond have paid adequate attention to this subject.

In the *first chapter*, I have explored Ruskin Bond, the author, his family and upbringing. I have studied his childhood, his adolescence, his search for roots, and the positive and negative influences in his life. Autobiographical snatches from his short stories have not been lost sight of. An effort has also been made to judge the different literary influences on his life and his works.

In the *second chapter*, I have studied Bond's attitude towards nature. I have attempted to trace how by remaining in the lap of the Himalayas, Bond has retained his vision of the wholeness of nature both in his life and his works. An effort has been made to show how his life vision and consequently that of his fictional characters are the natural outcome of living close to nature.

In the *third chapter*, I have studied some of Bond's major children's stories and through them tried to project his vision of childhood. Children play a very important role in most of Bond's short stories. From a study of his works, it becomes apparent that the author has the highest regard for children. In fact, in an

interview to Ipshita Pal, he candidly states “.....I don’t think of children as children. I think of them as adults. Many a time they show more wisdom.”¹²

In this chapter I have attempted to study such stories where he deals with the deprived and under-privileged children from the impoverished lower strata of society, the child labourers and the inhuman conditions under which they are compelled to work and grow. While analyzing these highly sensitive tales of suffering and woe, I have found the soul of the writer.

The *fourth chapter* is a study of Bond’s attitude towards life and society. It aims at highlighting Bond’s short stories as articulate statements of humanistic values and forceful manifestoes of human rights. Such a study shows the author’s unqualified endorsement of human dignity.

In the *fifth chapter*, I have analysed the realistic elements in Bond’s short stories. Here emphasis has been placed not only on the external, material reality but also on the complex reality of human psychology. I have tried to show how Bond shifts his focus increasingly from external reality to inner reality--- the subjective impressions of reality.

The *concluding chapter* studies the art of Ruskin Bond. This chapter highlights the exceptional range of Bond’s technique and the full range of his art. Here I have tried to emphasize on the factors that have made Bond an undisputed master of story telling.

Since no thesis is complete without a bibliography, I have prepared the same following the instructions as laid down in the MLA Handbook.

I will be failing in my duty if I do not acknowledge my special debts to my supervisor Dr. B.K.Banerjee. Encouragement received from him went a long way in shaping this present dissertation. I owe a lot to him.

I am also thankful to Professor Amitabha Roy, Professor of English, Rabindra Bharati University, Professor Sova Chatterjee, Professor of English, Jadavpur University and Dr.Chandanashis Laha, Reader in English, North Bengal University. I sought their valued advice while writing this dissertation.

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Suchishmita Datta

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Chapter I

Chapter I

THE WORLD OF RUSKIN BOND – HIS LIFE AND ITS

INFLUENCE ON HIS WORKS

“.....We don’t become writers in the school of creative writing. We become writers before we learn to write”--- Ruskin Bond in *Scenes From The Writer’s Life : A Memoir*.

Few writers have been as overwhelmingly and consistently autobiographical as Ruskin Owen Bond. Accordingly, a biographical literature has been produced about him, as without a fair knowledge of the artist himself, his creative being cannot be understood. In this chapter my aim is to highlight three important areas of Bond’s development as a writer—

- (a) His life and its influence on his works.
- (b) His obsession with childhood.
- (c) The role of women in shaping his life and his works.

(a) Ruskin Bond’s Life And Its Influence On His Work.

One of the most popular writers of Indo-Anglian fiction, Ruskin Bond’s works are distinguished by their immense variety and their alluring simplicity. They project a lively image of India coupled with an abiding love for the underdogs of our society. A multi-splendoured personality, Bond began writing very early in

life. His journey from a struggling amateur to a highly acclaimed author was fraught with great hardships and disappointments. His stories, poems and articles were repeatedly rejected by editors, some of whom even “scribbled little notes of encouragement on the rejection slips”¹. These early rebuffs had a catalytic effect on his literary genius. They whetted his creative appetite and strengthened his resolve to pursue his self chosen vocation. Like all great writers, Bond drew inspiration from his own life, which was not a run of the mill one.

Born in 1934, in Kasauli, a little town in Himachal Pradesh, India, Ruskin Owen Bond was named after John Ruskin, the famous Victorian essayist, for whom his father had great respect and admiration. From a tender age he witnessed a strained and volatile relationship between his parents. His mother was only eighteen when she married Aubrey Alexander Bond, her senior by fifteen years. A fun loving extrovert, she loved parties and outdoor life. Her husband, a sedate introvert, enjoyed domesticity and was most comfortable when engaged in domestic chores at home. With such diametrically opposing temperaments, their marriage was doomed from the beginning. Their enormous age difference only heightened their incompatibility.

Ruskin was only eight when his childhood was marred by his parent’s acrimonious separation. His mother walked out of their house, one day, never to return. She deserted her children in pursuit of her own personal happiness. She was by then already involved with a Punjabi gentleman whom she later married.

This domestic upheaval left a deep scar on young Ruskin's sensitive mind. It gave birth to a feeling of insecurity and helplessness in him. In *Scenes From A Writer's Life- A Memoir*, he remarked "That early feeling of insecurity was never to leave me, and in adult life, when I witnessed quarrels between people who were close to me, I was always deeply disturbed—more for the children, whose lives were bound to be affected by such emotional discords".²

Ruskin held his mother singularly responsible for breaking up his home and disrupting his childhood. He could not share his frustrations with his siblings as Ellen, his younger sister was mentally retarded and William, his brother was only a baby.

But he could not reconcile himself to his parent's estrangement. Later in "A Room Of Many Colours" he gave expression to his pent up grief and frustration when he remarked: "Most other children had their mothers with them, and I found it a bit strange that mine couldn't stay. Whenever I asked my father why she'd gone, he'd say 'You'll understand when you grow up'. And if I asked him where she'd gone, he'd look troubled and say, 'I really don't know'. This was the only question of mine to which he didn't have an answer".³ His father's helplessness in the face of his incessant queries only heightened young Ruskin's confusion.

Aubrey Bond earned his livelihood teaching the children of Ram Vilas Palace in Jamnagar. Here Ruskin spent the first six years of his life, with his parents, in the Tennis Bunglow near the Palace, happily playing with his sister in

its sprawling lawns. But this was a highly transient phase in Ruskin's life. Within the next two years his parents' marriage collapsed and his happy family life broke up forever.

With the outbreak of the Second World War, his father left Jamnagar and joined the Royal Air Force in 1941. He was then over forty years old. He was posted in the cipher section of the Air Headquarters in Delhi. Weighed down both by the failure of his marriage and by his work, Aubrey Bond found it difficult to look after the needs of his growing son. So perforce, Ruskin had to be sent to a boarding school at Mussoorie.

Panic-stricken at the thought of separation from his only emotional anchor in life, Ruskin tried to persuade his father not to send him away. Though still very young, he realized his father's emotional dependence on him and was reluctant to leave him alone. Like Anil in "The Prospect of Flowers", he sensed his father's acute loneliness. This loneliness later became an integral part of his own life. It recurs again and again in different forms in almost all his works.

But Ruskin had to attend school any way. Separated from his father for the first time in his life, he took an aversion for the school and suffered from bouts of homesickness. The discipline and the monotonous routine of the convent made him feel stifled and he longed to escape from this terrible existence. The letters and postcards which he regularly received from his father, were his only relief holding the promise of books, toys and stamps awaiting his return home.

However, in the middle of the term, his mother unexpectedly arrived, one day, and abruptly withdrew him from the school. Ebullient by this sudden respite, he did not question this unconventional step. But her subsequent behaviour left him puzzled and perplexed. Without halting at her mother's place at Dehra, as Ruskin had expected, she took him straight to the railway station and put him on a night train bound for Delhi. His initial euphoria having subsided, apprehension now took its place. He was greatly relieved when at the end of his long and lonely journey, he found his father waiting for him at the Delhi railway station.

From the conversation between his father and his uncle Fred Clark, he gathered that his parents' marriage had been legally terminated. Though shocked by the news, Ruskin was thankful to have been put under his father's custody. He was confident that unlike his mother, his father would "stand by him, no matter how difficult the circumstances".⁴

Thus, while his regard for his mother reached its nadir, his love and admiration for his father steadily grew until it almost verged on hero worship. For Aubrey Bond, looking after his minor son was a period of great "trial and tribulation." Father and son together led an almost nomadic existence, changing lodgings from tent house and brick hutment to a small flat and finally an apartment in the Scindia House.

Aubrey Bond optimistically hoped the war would end soon. He wanted to leave his painful memories behind and start life afresh with his son in England. He had great dreams for Ruskin. He planned to give him a head start in life by sending

him to a reputed school in England. Blissfully happy in his father's company, Ruskin, however, did not miss school at all and "would have been quite happy never to have gone to school again".⁵

By nature a loner, Aubrey Bond had few friends. So on weekdays while he was away at work, Ruskin remained alone in the house. But he was never lonely. His father's books, stamps, postcards, his scrapbook and album and old gramophone records were company enough for him.

In retrospect, he recalled the two years he spent with his father were the happiest period of his life. "He did his best for me, dear man. He gave me his time, his companionship and his complete attention".⁶ Bond immortalized this idyllic phase of his life in his highly nostalgic work "Life At My Own Pace".

This unconventional lifestyle had a lasting effect on young Ruskin's psyche. He developed a type of eating disorder almost verging on bulimia nervosa.

Once, when left alone in the house for ten days, while his father was hospitalized for malaria, he ate a whole tin of jam in one sitting. In his *Scenes From a Writer's Life : A Memoir*, he himself confessed, "This tendency to over indulge has been with me all my life."⁷

Pulled down by recurrent attacks of malaria and his frequent transfers, Aubrey Bond found it difficult to provide stability and companionship to his growing son. So Ruskin had to leave for a boarding school for the second time in

his life. This time he was admitted to the Bishop Cotton Prep School in Simla. Thus began another uncertain phase in the young boy's turbulent life.

In school, Ruskin became an instant celebrity as word spread that his father was a pilot who flew bombers and fighter planes. The awe and admiration his father's profession evoked among the school boys, enhanced Ruskin's self-confidence and made him very proud of his father. He basked in the reflected glory and did nothing to dispel the rumours. He could not bear to see his father crash from the pedestal in which he had been placed. So he refrained from divulging the truth. After all, he knew "there wasn't much glamour in codes and cipher although they were probably just as important".⁸

Ruskin settled down in his new school "without much fuss".⁹ But his holidays were always spent with his father helping him "with his stamp collection, accompanying him to pictures, dropping in at Wenger's for tea and muffins, and bringing home a book or a record".¹⁰ He treasured every moment spent with his father.

He gave a moving account of those happy times and the values he imbibed from his father in "My Father's Trees In Dehra". For this impressive work, he was awarded the Sahitya Academy Award in 1992 for English writing in India. His father too found in his young son "someone to come back to; someone for whom things could be planned; someone who could learn from him".¹¹

In 1944 Aubrey Bond was transferred to Calcutta. He was happy to have finally got the opportunity to look after his aging mother and his retarded daughter. But little did he then realize that Calcutta was to be his final destination. Weakened by previous bouts of malaria, he succumbed to a severe attack of cerebral malaria that very year. He was then only forty-six.

His father's death was a crushing blow to young Ruskin. His world crumbled around him and he felt orphaned and lost. Engulfed in grief and self-pity, the dazed ten year old questioned the working of the Almighty God: "If God were love, why did He have to break up the only loving relationship I'd known so far?"¹² Buckling under this personal tragedy, young Bond broke down and had to be confined to the school infirmary for a few days.

Engrossed in her own life, his mother did not come forward to lend a comforting shoulder to her disconsolate son. Nor did she deem it necessary to mourn the death of her estranged husband. By then, she had ceased to exist for her eldest son. Ruskin did not think she could replace his father in his life or fill the emotional void left by his untimely demise.

His intense grief found expression through the young protagonist in "The Funeral". The distraught child became a pen portrait of Bond himself as he struggled to cope with his irrevocable loss. Like him he had none whom he could turn to in his hour of grief

In “Going Home To Dehra” Bond recalled the trepidation with which he went. Little did he then suspect what was in store for him.

On reaching Dehra railway station, he got his first shock when he found there was none to receive him at the station. The poor boy had expected that like his father, his mother too would eagerly await his arrival at the railway station.

Despite a long wait when no one turned up, he slowly collected his baggage and made his way towards an uncertain future. For the second time in his life he was overcome by a feeling of terrible insecurity, “A feeling of insecurity began to creep over me—feeling that was to recur from time to time and which was to become part of my mental luggage for the rest of my life”.¹³

In his mother’s house, Ruskin felt like an unwelcome guest. Her unenthusiastic welcome only increased his discomfort and distress. “My mother gave me a perfunctory kiss.....I was accustomed to more intimate caress from my father, and the strange reception I received made me realize the extent of my loss”.¹⁴

Ruskin took an instant dislike for his stepfather from the moment he met him. He held him responsible for alienating his mother from her family when they needed her most. This is apparent from his remark : “I hated him and did not think much about my mother for marrying him”.¹⁵

Mr. Hari, his stepfather has been brilliantly represented by Major Summerskill in "A Job Well Done". By pushing the Major unobtrusively into a deep well, Bond imaginatively terminated his mother's relationship with him.

But reality was far removed from the world of imagination. His parents had a highly frivolous lifestyle, fun and entertainment being their main concern. They went out every night and returned home only in the wee hours of the morning. They were oblivious of the distress it caused to their children, especially young Ruskin. Racked by worry he remained awake the whole night awaiting their return home. His anxiety is evident in the lines :

"I would often wonder how I would cope if they had a fatal accident coming home, or if some avenging tigress got her own back in the jungle. Would I have to look after my sister, baby brother and two half-brothers? And where would the money come from?"¹⁶ This mental agony continued night after night and he was powerless to do anything about it.

"Hari had little or no time for a boy of ten who was dumped on him".¹⁷ His irresponsible conduct coupled with his erratic lifestyle and his total indifference towards Ruskin widened the rift between them. Ruskin was glad his stepfather ignored him because he felt he "hadn't the sensitivity to make a 'go' of being a father".¹⁸

Mr. Hari was a businessman without any business acumen. A spendthrift, he lived beyond his means and was never able to make timely payments. Before

long, due to outstanding arrears in house-rent, he was forcibly evicted from his house along with his family. While he went to live with his first wife, Ruskin with his mother and her large family had to suffer the ignominy of seeking shelter in their grandmother's house.

Totally disillusioned, Bond turned away in utter disgust from the world of reality in which he had become so acutely uncomfortable and sought refuge in the world of books. "I began to read whatever books came my way,.....It provided me with an escape from the reality of my situation. And it was during those first winter holidays in Dehra that I became a bookworm, and ultimately, a book lover and a writer in the embryo".¹⁹

Thus at the tender age of ten, when reality seemed to sink its talons on him, Ruskin sought comfort in reading and in books. In an interview to Anindita Ramaswamy he remarked, "As a boy, reading was my religion, it still is. It has helped me discover my soul. Later, writing helped me record its journey".²⁰ So the young boy who became a writer had reasons like insecurity, loneliness and fear that goaded him on to writing.

Among the authors who left their indelible mark on Bond were M.R.James and Algernon Blackwood, whose works became the inspiration for his ghost stories, along with William Sarsyan, the American short story writer, P.G.Woodhouse, A.A.Milne, Pauline Smith, Owen Wester, Hugh Walpole, Andre' Gide and Walter de la mare. But it was Charles Dickens who enthralled him, as he could identify many of his beleaguered child protagonists especially with David

Copperfield. *The Diary of A Nobody* --was another special book that influenced him throughout his life.

Mr Hari's perpetual financial problems would have certainly disrupted Bond's education. But fortunately, after his father's death, the Royal Air Force began to sponsor his school education. The school that he had once joined with utter reluctance now became his only sanctuary. He no longer looked forward to going home during vacation. He felt much safer in the secure haven of his boarding school in Simla.

Afraid of expanding the horizon of known faces, Bond became a loner. Books were his only company. His passion for reading led him to the large lending library of Ideal Book Depot. A considerable part of his education was derived from this lending library.

Suffering and pain are an integral part of life and growth. By the time Bond was sixteen, the adversities of life had transformed him from a docile youngster into a rebellious teenager. His last year in school was spent in perpetual revolt against everything -- traditions, conventions, authority and rules. His rebellion stemmed from his frustration at the mindless monotony of school life. He felt he was wasting his precious time in school. Catapulted by circumstances resulting in pre-mature adulthood, he was impatient to begin life afresh. Now his only ambition was to become a writer for which he felt he required no formal education. Fortunately, he was put in charge of Anderson Library and soon it became his "retreat and private academy".²¹

In December 1950 Bond passed out of Bishop Cotton School. But he did not get himself enrolled in any educational institution for higher studies. He had no further plans of pursuing formal education. From then on his education was wholly derived not from classroom lectures, but from libraries and second hand bookstores.

By the time Bond was seventeen he had written a large number of articles, stories, essays and poems. He sent his works to different publishing houses, but they were all rejected when the publishers discovered how young their author was. In desperation he began writing as an old man, recalling the experiences of youth. Ironically, the ploy worked and his writings were published in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* and *The Sunday Statesman* .

Despite this early success, Bond could not rid himself of a strong feeling of restlessness. England, the hub of literary world seemed to beckon him. He felt it was the right place for a young writer like him. He visualized establishing personal contacts with renowned writers in England. He dreamt of great opportunities coming his way. He aspired to have his works published and acclaimed by the greatest literary critics of the world.

Thus exuberantly the young lad sailed for England. Little did he then foresee the disappointments that awaited him.

When he landed in the Channel Island where his aunt lived, Bond's dreams died a quick death. He found England very different from the Utopia of his dreams.

Here he hardly met anyone who had time or sympathy for a struggling writer. To make both ends meet, he was compelled to take up one mundane job after another. Thus he drifted aimlessly for more than a year, working for three months as a junior clerk in a solicitor's office, then as an assistant in a travel agency and finally as a junior clerk in the Public Health Department. By then frustration had begun to overpower his psyche. He realized the utter futility of his stay in Jersey. He felt to be a writer he had to move to London.

The three years Bond spent in London were the most restless period of his life. He took up the first job that came his way. In his *Scenes From A Writer's Life : A Memoir* he confessed, "it didn't seem to matter what I did, provided it gave me enough to pay for my board and lodgings and left me free to write on holidays and in the evenings".²²

He led a nomadic existence, constantly moving from one cheap lodging to another, eating scanty meals at snack bars and small cafes. His irregular lifestyle coupled with his inadequate meals resulted in severe malnutrition and he was afflicted with the Eale's Disease — a rare form of tuberculosis of the eye.

He found pleasure in pain at the thought that he could now count himself "among the 'greats' who had also suffered from this disease in some form or another—Keats, the Brontes, Stevenson, Katherine Mansfield, Ernest Dowson".²³ He felt that if tuberculosis could inspire him to write like them, he would be quite "happy to live with a consumptive eye".²⁴

His hopes were belied when a month's treatment at Hampstead General Hospital completely cured him. He no longer had an excuse for not going back to his dreary job of selling photographic parts at Photax. But he devoted his evenings to completing the draft of his first novel *The Room On The Roof* that he had begun in 1952. This novel written under such trying circumstances won him the prestigious John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial prize in 1957. Also written in his teens was another brilliant novella *Vagrants Of The Valley* which was a continuation of the thought expressed in his first novel.

While in London, Bond met Thanh, a Vietnamese student with whom he developed close friendship. It was Thanh's sudden tragic death that prompted him to write "A Tribute To A Dead Friend", where he paid moving tribute to his dear friend.

Thanh introduced him to Vu-Phuong, a soft-spoken, demure Vietnamese girl. He was enthralled by her delicate manners and captivated by her subtle charms. For the first time in life, he was madly in love and did not feel ashamed of betraying his conscience.

Though Vu-Phuong did not turn down his proposal of marriage, she left the country and he never heard from her again. Dejected by her rejection, Bond sadly remarked: "At twenty-one, we all aspire to be romantic heroes (or heroines), often with disastrous results. It is an awkward age, you either need money or a beautiful figure to get away with it, and I had neither".²⁵

He never again asked any other woman to marry him. Like a swift, fleeting shadow, Vu-Phuong entered and departed from his life. But he could never forget her. She appeared again and again in several of his autobiographical works like “Girl From Copenhagen” and “A Tribute To A Dead Friend”. “The Night Train At Deoli” is another work inspired by his highly transient relationship with this elusive and enigmatic girl.

Vu-Phuong’s departure left a great void in his life. Disillusioned by the turn of events, he lost interest in London and began to yearn for familiar environment in India. This is apparent from his remark :“The affection, the camaraderie, the easy-going pleasures of my Dehra friendships, the colour and atmosphere of India, the feeling of belonging—these things I missed”.²⁶ So, on a cold March morning in 1955, he bade adieu to the land of his forefathers and started back for India.

On reaching his home in Dehra, Bond decided he had “enough of doing uncongenial work and henceforth would make a living from freelance writing”.²⁷ Thus began the most productive phase in the young writer’s life. Though he received a pittance for his literary works, and lived in great penury, he did not despair or abandon writing. However, in the Seventies the wheel of fortune turned when *The Christian Science Monitor* in Boston, *The Blackwoods* in Edinburgh and *The Asia Magazine* in Hongkong began publishing his articles and stories. His children’s stories too were published and received worldwide acclaim.

In 1986, the Penguin Books published his first novel. In 1996, this publishing company published a special Omnibus edition of his *Complete Short*

Stories And Novels, thereby placing him among the ten great Indo-Anglian writers. But the crowning glory of his literary career came in 1999 when he was awarded the *Padma Shri*—a high civilian honour of India for his outstanding writings in English. A twenty-six episode serial based on his short stories was also televised and aired by the Doordarshan throughout India. His novel *A Flight Of Pigeons* was made into a highly acclaimed Hindi film *Junoon* by the reputed director Shyam Benegal. Thus came to fruition Bond's dreams of becoming a writer.

Bond never allowed himself to be led into marital shackles of life. His disenchantment with the institution of marriage stemmed from his parents' disastrous union and their acrimonious separation.

Immunized by his painful childhood, he grew up independent and in full command of his life and emotions. "I think I have always been pretty much in charge of my own life (made easier by the fact of not having any expectations from family of relatives)".²⁸

Ironically, the love and affection that he had craved for all his life, came to him not from his own relatives but from a young domestic help with whom he had no blood links. Prem not only took care of his house but also provided him with the emotional anchorage he had so desperately sought from his own people.

Like the family of the recluse, Bond's family expanded as Prem married and brought home his young wife. They had three children. Bond's ties with the family deepened and strengthened with the arrival of each child and before he

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realized it, they had become an indispensable part of his own life. He indulgently watched the children grow under his loving care and attention. For him it was sheer bliss to have found people he could at last call his own. They brought “love and laughter” into his lonely life. He did not “want to be away from them even for a day.”²⁹ His emotional dependence on this unique family especially the children is apparent from his own confession: “ Raki, Muki, Dolly..... they have grown up under my roof, they are with me now, and God willing, they and their children will be with me when I die. If I finally close this window and leave this town for another place, they will go with me. If they grow up and go away, I will stay near them. That is what love is all about. Staying there prepared to render service”.³⁰

Thus Bond lives a quiet life in his cottage in the mountains with his large adopted family. Having weathered the stormy turbulence of his childhood and his early life, he has finally found happiness and contentment in life. Grateful to what life has ultimately given him, he remarks: “Life hasn’t been a bed of roses. And yet, quite often I’ve had roses out of season”.³¹

(b) Bond’s Obsession With Childhood.

Bond recurrently turned to childhood as a treasure trove for his works. Childhood, in fact, became an objective correlative for him. Though “years bring the philosophic mind”,³² the mature mind cannot deny its roots in childhood. In Bond’s case, childhood was the most sorrowful period of his life. Earlier in this chapter an account has been given of the vicissitudes of the writer’s childhood

days. In this section, I have attempted to analyse how Bond's childhood has stimulated his creative oeuvre.

Relegated to the care of an 'ayah', Ruskin was deprived of healthy emotional interaction and sympathetic concern of his mother from a very early age. His parents' incompatibility added to his woes. Their rancorous relationship and open hostility created such stress in his young mind that every time he witnessed their quarrels, he was filled with terrible apprehension and dread.

As has been already mentioned, by the time he was eight years old, his household disintegrated on account of his mother deserting them. The disconsolate child helplessly watched his home crumbling like the proverbial house of cards, and he was powerless to do anything about it.

He was hardly ten years old, when he received the biggest shock of his life, a shock greater than even his mother's desertion. It came upon him as a bolt from the blue, the devastating news of his father's sudden death. The unexpectedness and the finality of this terrible incident brought him almost to the brink of physical and mental breakdown. It was the darkest period of his life. Of this highly traumatic period and his heart-rending uncertainties, Bond has given bitter abbreviation in "The Funeral". The young protagonist became a facsimile of the writer himself as "he sat in the darkest corner of the room, his face revealing nothing of what he thought and felt. Nobody else mattered – neither uncle, nor aunts nor fond grandparents, least of all the mother who was hundreds of miles away with another husband".³³

His father's death made Bond realize the futility of life. Death, for him became the most horrendous reality of childhood. It unexpectedly terminated the only loving relationship he had known in his young turbulent life. The fragility of life and death with its associated tragedy thus became a recurrent theme in his writings.

Young Madhu in "The Story Of Madhu", fell prey to the hydra-headed monster as she was just blossoming into a young maid. Oblivious of the dreams and aspirations of this little orphan, death heartlessly ended her life at a time when it had just been irradiated by the warmth and affection of the protagonist in whom she found the father she had never known. Powerless to withstand death, she helplessly watched herself being sucked into its demonic jaws. It concluded her short life with a finality that left the distraught protagonist wishing that he had met her earlier.

Death again wrought havoc in the lives of the youngsters in "The Guardian Angel" and "The Funeral". It snatched away their parents when they were least expecting it. The protagonist of "The Guardian Angel" was hardly six years old, when death intervened to change his life forever. He woke up one morning to discover to his horror that death had stealthily crept in at night and had taken his mother away from him. Benumbed by this unexpected turn of events, he felt abandoned and lost.

Having endured this soul-shattering experience himself, Bond understood the fears and uncertainties of the young child, and gave heart-rending expression to the little orphan's grief in the lines:

“My mother had married an Englishman who died while I was still a baby. She herself was not a strong woman and fought a losing battle with tuberculosis while bringing me up.

My sixth birthday was approaching when she died, in the middle of the night, without my being aware of it. And I woke up to experience all the terrors of abandonment”.³⁴

His parents’ separation followed by his father’s untimely death convinced young Bond that loving relationships do not endure in this world. Like Hardy’s protagonists, he discovered that whenever he “pursued a loved one, that person proved elusive”.³⁵

His mother’s insensitivity and tactlessness only heightened this belief. He bitterly resented her indifference to his father’s death. For he had seen, how, despite their estrangement, Aubrey Bond had never ceased to love her.

In a way, Ruskin held his mother solely responsible for his father’s death. This is apparent from his dialogue with her;

“.....your father didn’t know how to enjoy himself. That’s why we quarreled so much. And finally separated. You’ve always blamed me for leaving him, haven’t you ?

I was very small at the time. You left us suddenly. My father had to look after me, and it wasn’t easy for him. He was very sick”.³⁶

But young Bond was storing up much more than unhappiness. He developed an uncanny alertness to derive inspiration from his adversities. By the time he went to live with his mother and his stepfather, he was no longer a normal young child. He had by then acquired a maturity beyond his years. This is apparent from his own confession:

“Had I grown up with other children I might have developed a taste for schoolboy anarchy, but, in sharing my father’s loneliness after his separation from my mother, I had turned into a pre-mature adult”.³⁷

As already mentioned in the previous section, his mother’s indifference coupled with his stepfather’s coldness made Ruskin feel totally unloved and unwanted in his new home. A highly sensitive lad, he could not rid himself of the feeling that he was alone in the world. He “felt distanced from the family and could find happiness only in the homes of friends or between the covers of books”.³⁸

This early disaffection encouraged him to become independent. He remembered his father’s saying that “the strongest man in the world is he who stands alone”.³⁹ He felt he too was capable of standing up without any support. His feelings are clear from his candid statement:

“Although at times I have tottered, or come down with a loud thump, I think I have managed to maintain my independence..... both as a writer and as an individual”.⁴⁰

Though youth is a period of frivolity and irresponsibility, Bond, deprived of the guidance of his parents, appeared in many ways to be highly responsible. Yet he could not develop an insular attitude towards his own kith and kin. While commenting on his stepfather's indifference towards him, he sadly remarked, "He never had a harsh word for me. Sometimes I wish he had!"⁴¹

Lonely and hurt, he withdrew further into himself. One cannot but agree with R. Atteth's remarks that, "very few writers understand the fear of childhood the way Ruskin Bond does, their insecurity with the dark, their eagerness for the familiar".⁴²

As has been already mentioned before, his stepfather's unstable financial status coupled with his reckless lifestyle often brought the family to the very brink of financial bankruptcy. On one occasion when the entire family was evicted from their rented house, young Bond was aghast and mortified. This was totally a new experience for him. He could never have dreamt of a similar situation when his father was alive. Humiliated and hurt, he sought to escape from this bleakness by taking refuge within the secure walls of his boarding school in Simla.

For the first time in his life Bond was confronted with poverty and want. While childhood is the most carefree period of life, Bond's childhood was a period of stress, trauma, deprivation and unhappiness. Though his childhood was the most difficult period of his life, these early years proved to be of immense value to him as a writer. It brought him in close contact with the harsh realities and gave him a first hand knowledge of life. This early exposure to reality provided him with

inspiration for many of his haunting stories like, “The Story Of Madhu”, “The Untouchable”, “The Woman On Platform No 8”, “The Guardian Angel” and “The Funeral”.

In Bond’s works, the train became a vibrant symbol, wrecking and building human relationship, educating and disillusioning men as it sped on towards its destination. In “The Eyes Have It”, the blind protagonist bewitched by the voice of his companion travelling in the same compartment tried to cement his friendship with her. Afraid that his physical deformity may come between him and the girl, he made a “pretence of studying the landscape”. ‘Have you noticed’, I ventured, ‘that the trees seem to be moving while we seem to be standing still?’

‘That always happens’, she said. ‘Do you see any animals?’

‘No’, I answered quite confidently. I knew that there were hardly any animals left in the forests near Dehra. I turned from the window and faced the girl and for a while set in silence.

‘You have an interesting face’ I remarked. I was becoming quite daring and it was a safe remark. Few girls can resist flattery”.⁴³

Oblivious to his feelings, the train sped on and soon brought to a close the memorable encounter with this beautiful girl. “ ‘Goodbye’, the girl said. She was standing very close to me. So close that the perfume from her hair was tantalizing. I wanted to raise my hand and touch her hair but she moved away. Only the scent of perfume still lingered where she stood”.⁴⁴

She alighted from the train and was soon lost in the milling crowd. He knew he would never meet her again but her memory would continue to haunt him for many days to come.

While the speeding train withered relationships in the bud, the railway platform became the womb that gave birth to many beautiful and memorable associations. In "The Woman On Platform No 8", young Arun, in the course of one of his numerous solitary sojourns from boarding school to his home, met a kind stranger on the railway platform. Seeing the lonely little boy, she came to him, and showered him with such maternal love and affection that momentarily she alleviated his misery and desolation. He forgot his loneliness and began to confide in her. She gave him a patient hearing. Soon an unbreakable bond of friendship and mutual trust was established between the benevolent stranger and the young boy.

Through Arun, Bond reflected his own desolation and desperate yearning for company in the course of his long and lonely train journeys from the boarding school to his home in Dehra. In this connection it is difficult to resist the temptation of quoting R. Atteth once again: "The night train was once real which hooted its lonely cry and streamed into the empty night of a railway station with a lonely school boy on it".⁴⁵

Young Bond was so intensely lonely that he turned to nature for companionship and emotional succour. Unlike Wordsworth, who in his early years felt threatened by the menacing presence of nature, Ruskin thrived in nature's

benevolent company. He made nature the sole custodian of his conscience and his soul.

“The trees stand watch over my day to day life.....I have no one else to answer. So I live and work under the generous and highly principled supervision of the trees..... ‘What would they think?’ I ask myself on many occasion. ‘What would they like me to do?’ And I do what I think they would approve of most!

Well, its nice to have someone to turn to.....”⁴⁶

So from a tender age, Bond developed a unique rapport with nature. He discovered the trees gave him “ a feeling of security, as well as privacy and a calm heaven”.⁴⁷ His works are permeated by his great love and admiration for nature . He found it easier to establish camaraderie with nature than with human beings. While totally uninhibited in the midst of nature, he was extremely shy in his dealings with man.

His own reserved nature together with the social ostracism he faced from European and Anglo-Indian communities on account of his mother, made it difficult for him to acquire friends from identical background.

Isolated and alone, he turned to the servants for companionship. The poor simple workers were only too willing to be his friends. Dhuki, the gardener in “A Job Well Done” and “The Room Of Many Colours”, Bansi, the tonga-driver in “My First Love”, the young sweeper boy in “The Untouchable” and numerous other characters like them that one comes across in Bond’s short stories have all

been inspired by his early memories and association with this lower class of society.

His close contact with the underprivileged and exploited class made him feel their deprivation, suffering and hardships beneath their veneer of placidity. He observed how poverty and want robbed the beleaguered children of their most precious possession---their childhood. Often forced to earn their livelihood from a very early age, these unfortunate youngsters were jettisoned from babyhood to premature adulthood. Bond's sympathy for these oppressed and under privileged children is apparent in his brilliant portrayal of young Bisnu in "The Dust In The Mountain", Mohan in "The Visitor", the sweeper-boy in "The Untouchable" and numerous other characters like them.

Like him, these children waged an unequal battle with fate, which wrecked their childhood happiness and often pushed them to the very brink of nervous breakdown. They fought valiantly against this malevolent destiny. Endowed with Bond's basic optimism, they were confident that the dark clouds which cast long shadows over their lives, would soon disperse and the benevolent and life sustaining sun would shine upon them again.

As mentioned previously, Bond was a loner and had hardly any friends, Omar was the only boy in school with whom he could establish mental rapport. Perhaps their similar nature and identical backgrounds drew them close to each other.

Like him, Omar was a quiet and withdrawn child, who had lost his father in a tribal conflict in the Frontier beyond Peshawar. But the partition of India following Independence brought to a close his friendship with this young boy. The communal riots that flared up all over the country after the partition of Bengal and Punjab had its effect in this remote Public school in Simla. For security reasons, all the Muslim boys studying in the school had to leave for their home in Pakistan. Omar was among them.

Significantly, the eight years Bond spent in The Bishop Cotton School in Simla remained only a cherished memory. It could hardly provide him with inspiration or materials for his creative works. This typically British Public School was in total discordance with the harsh Indian setting. It set such elevated standards that neither the teachers nor the students could uphold them. According to Bond, “the traditions even in prep school such as ragging and caning, compulsory games and daily chapel attendance, prefects larger than life, and Honours Boards for everything from School Captaincy to choir membership”⁴⁸ though aimed at inculcating leadership qualities, could hardly prepare the young boys for the tough practical battles of life. So it had “nothing to hide. Worse, from the writer’s point of view, there was nothing to reveal.”⁴⁹

Thus it is hardly surprising that Bond’s few good friends like Ranbir, Bhim, Haripal, Dipi, Somi, Chotu and the Lals became acquainted with him after he had left school. While the Lals appeared as the Kapoors in “The Room On The Roof, and Haripal appeared in the guise of Suraj in “The Fight”, the others found their

way into the pages of his *Scenes From A Writer's Life : A Memoir* where he gave nostalgically sentimental accounts of them.

All through the traumatic early years of his life, Bond yearned for a normal and carefree childhood. In many of his children's stories, he gave a "free rein to his imagination" and projected the unremitted joys of childhood. He presented endearing pictures of homes teeming with people who loved and cared for each other. He portrayed dwellings vibrant with laughter and happiness.

In his "Grandfather's Stories" like "A Crow In The House", "The Conceited Python" and many other works, he created a home. he often wishfully dreamt of — a home with indulgent grandparents, doting parents, affectionate aunts and uncles, a home where a child was free to pursue his own interests and keep weird pets without the fear of punishment.

Of his own grandparents, he sadly remarked: "Calcutta Granny, I had seen only once. My maternal grandfather had died when I was just a year old. So I'd missed the companionship and attention that grandparents can often give".⁵⁰

Yet, his stories are replete with affectionate and caring grandparents who thrived in their grandchildren's company and often became little children themselves as they indulged in childish intrigues and pranks for the amusement of their grandchildren. All his fictitious grandfathers have been modelled on his maternal grandfather, who from all accounts was a wonderful person. Everyone

who had known him had a kind word for him. Bond's regret at not having known this unique individual is apparent from his wishful remarks:

“Uncle Bertie told me that grandfather was a quiet, reclusive sort of person who never lost his temper with anyone. His favourite pastime was watching jugglers and street acrobats! I wish I had known him”.⁵¹

His maternal grandmother was the very antithesis of his grandfather. A quiet and reserved woman, she did not believe in any show of affection. She hardly had any special fondness for her grandchildren. She did not dote on them or crave their company. Her formidable nature prevented young Ruskin from developing any kinship with her.

It was Miss Kellner, her elderly tenant who became Bond's inspiration for portrayal of the loving and indulgent grandmothers that one comes across in “The Photograph”, “The Angry River” and numerous other stories.

These idyllic pictures acquire special significance when viewed in the context of the writer's deprivation of such filial love and affection from his grandparents during his early years. One cannot but be touched by the heart-rending pathos in his remarks: “In some of my children's stories I have written about fun-loving grandfathers and doting grandmothers, but this was just wishful thinking on my part”.⁵²

Bond's unusual upbringing, his trials and tribulations, his struggles and sacrifices and the momentous events of childhood that altered his life and his

thinking, became an inexhaustible fund from which he drew materials for his works that have almost become classics in modern times. One cannot but agree with his remarks : “..... those who have had normal childhoods seldom remember much about them; nor do they have much insight into the world of children. Some of us are born sensitive. And if, on top of that we are pulled about in different directions (both emotionally and physically) we might just end up becoming writers.”⁵³

Bond’s works which took their colours from the personal events of his life, especially his childhood became inseparable from the circumstances in which they came into being.

As in Dickens and Lamb, in Bond’s case too the biographical incidents, especially of his early years have been closely interwoven in his prose and poetry. His writings are therefore influenced by his remembrance of the past – a past marked by the presence of sorrow and tragedy but beautified by a high human affection and sympathy and a spirit of endurance that has given Ruskin Bond a special place among the Indo – Anglian writers.

(c) Role Of Women In Bond’s Life And His Works.

Women have played a very important role in shaping Bond’s life and his works. Deserted by his mother at a very early age and divested of his father’s company shortly afterwards, on account of latter’s death, he was deprived of meaningful human relationships during the most crucial period of his growth and development.

Psychoanalysts are of the opinion that the foundation of the child's personality, behaviour and attitudes have their genesis in the early parent-child interaction within the home. A child being separated from the father has difficulty in establishing satisfactory social relationships and experiences high levels of anxiety. He lacks warmth and affection except for his mother.

But what happens to the child who is denied the love and sympathetic concern of his mother?

Bowlby and his associate psychologists are of the view that "maternal coldness" or maternal separation based upon family conflicts or child rejection has a damaging effect on the child's psychological growth and adjustment. Such a child becomes socially withdrawn and depressed.

It is obvious that the insecurity, loneliness and the sense of isolation that Bond experienced as a child was a manifestation of his psychological frustration on account of parental deprivation. The "minimum mothering"⁵⁵ he received as an infant made him instinctively turn to his 'ayah' for emotional support. He made her his surrogate mother and sought from her the tender love and affectionate companionship he failed to find from his own mother. So great was his loyalty and devotion to his governess that he found virtue in every thing she did and became fiercely protective towards her. This is evident from his remarks:

“.....when one of my parent’s guests called her ugly without really taking a proper look at her, I would exclaim, ‘No, she is beautiful !’ The vehemence of my reply would disconcert the guests and embarrass my parents”.⁵⁵

Though only a paid servant, the ayah, a sensitive individual understood the child’s dilemma. She adored him and was totally devoted to him. She treated him with such tenderness that it compensated for his mother’s aloofness. She shielded him from everyone including his parents. Happy and secure in her company, he thrived in her munificence. Like a doting mother she indulged him in every possible way. Sometimes, on his insistence, she even joined him in the bathtub when his parents were not in the vicinity. This close physical proximity worked wonders for the little child’s psyche as is evident from his own remarks :

“We would wallow together in the long marble bath tub She scrubbed and soaped me, while I relaxed and enjoyed the sensation of her rough hands moving over my back and my tummy”.⁵⁶

She often punished him for his errant behaviour and he welcomed her punishments. He knew her admonitions would be followed by remorseful tears. Overcome by a feeling of guilt, she would soon gather him in her arms and smother him with hugs and kisses. So, he did not mind being punished by her again and again. Her bounteous love made him feel very special indeed.

He lost her when she fell in love with Bansi, the local tonga-driver. Her subsequent marriage with the tonga-driver took her away from him forever.

Dismayed by the news of her departure, he could not understand why she wanted to stay with Bansi rather than with him. He was pained by the thought that she did not realize how much he needed her. Highly aggrieved he felt she had betrayed the faith and trust he had reposed on her. His frustration and grief at her departure is evident from his heart-rending abbreviation in “My First Love”.

“Ayah tossed her bedding and a few belongings into the tonga, and then came to say goodbye to me. But I had hidden myself in the jasmine bushes, and though she called and looked for me, I would not emerge. Sadly, she climbed into the tonga at last unable to bear my misery any longer, I came out from behind the bushes and ran after the tonga, waving to her. Bansi reined the horses, and Ayah got down and gathered me up in her arms; and when the tonga finally took her away, there was a dazzling smile on her sweet and gentle face --- the face of the lover whom I was never to see again”.⁵⁷

As already mentioned before, Bond’s maternal grandmother, was a reticent woman, not given to any undue show of affection. An introvert, she lived alone and considered her grandchildren mere intruders into her privacy. She lived a quiet life on her own terms and did not enjoy the company of people, especially her own relatives. Describing her strange lifestyle, Bond remarked:

“She sat alone in the evenings playing Patience, a card game which does not require another person. Her tenant Miss Kellner, did the same but she was a cripple and could not move from her chair. It never occurred to either of them to play each

other at cards, though Miss Kellner did occasionally go outto bridge parties in other European or Anglo-Indian households".⁵⁸

Grandmother's cold reserve discouraged any familiarity with her, so young Ruskin turned to the warm and humane Miss Kellner and found in her the ideal grandmother he often visualized in his imagination.

During his school vacations, on the pretext of visiting his grandmother, he often went to visit the lonely old Miss Kellner. Grateful for his company, she welcomed him, played card games with him and loaded him with 'goodies' from her well-stocked larder. A crippled spinster, she often unburdened herself to him. And he did not betray her trust. He visited her not only because he enjoyed her company but also because he sensed her terrible loneliness. In Miss Kellner, he found a friend and confidant to whom he could go whenever he was hungry, lonely or depressed. She never disappointed him.

It is ironical that despite his own bitter experiences, Bond does not display any trace of resentment or hostility towards women. On the contrary, he idealized women and presented quite endearing pictures of womanhood. Most of his female characters have been endowed with admirable qualities and sublime motherly tenderness. They are gentle, self-effacing and self-denying individuals. It is apparent that by creating such idealistic characters like Wang Chei's wife in "The Most Potent Medicine Of All", Aunt Mariam in "The Guardian Angel", the benevolent stranger in "The Woman On Platform No 8", Bond has subconsciously tried to obliterate the corrosive effect of the women in his own life.

Wang Chei's wife stands in sharp contrast to his own mother, whose relentless pursuit of her own happiness, impervious to the pain and suffering she thereby caused, not only unsettled her own life but also wrought havoc in the lives of her husband and her minor children. Unlike his mother, Wang Chei's wife is the epitome of unstinted love and selfless devotion. With a love that defies logic, she prepares a potion out of her own flesh and blood to cure her husband's illness. Confident this potion prescribed by Lu Fei, the renowned physician would relieve his suffering, she mutilates her own body to cure her husband.

A comparison between Bond's mother and this simple woman again becomes inevitable. His mother's love for his father could not withstand the test of time. She left him, according to her own admission, because "he did not know how to enjoy himself".⁵⁹ Wang Chei's wife, on the other hand, willingly sacrifices her life to cure her husband's simple disease. This rustic nameless woman totally subsumes her own identity with her husband's name and personality.

Her immense love for her husband had so clouded her logic that it had prompted her to make a potion out of her own blood. She voluntarily laid down her life for him because she loved him "with the same intensity as on the day they first fell in love, twenty years ago".⁶⁰ Through this simple Chinese woman, Bond gives expression to his idea of unparalleled love, fidelity and devotion that he looked for in his mother, but in vain.

In "The Guardian Angel", he pays glorious tribute to another form of love—maternal love. Here he shows how motherhood bestows a peculiar dignity on even a foster mother like Aunt Mariam. Like Wang Chei's wife, she too becomes an embodiment of matchless love.

Humiliated and disowned by her family on account of her dubious profession, Mariam arrives on the scene shortly after her sister's death and takes charge of her disconsolate son. She ungrudgingly takes the little orphan to her own house, cares for him and brings him up with such tender care that he soon forgets the trauma of his mother's death. Her "warmth, worldliness and carefree chatter"⁶¹ restores his confidence and she fills the emotional void left by his parents' death.

So great was his attachment to his aunt that every night before he fell asleep, his aunt would kiss him, very softly, on his closed eyelids. He never fell asleep until he "had received this phantom kiss".⁶² The little child loved sleeping with his aunt for it gave him a tremendous feeling of security, and well-being. He resented the nights when his aunt had male visitors and he had to sleep in the adjoining room. He knew she could not do without them for they were her only source of income.

He had implicit faith in her. Her lax morals and "nocturnal visitors" could not reduce even an iota of his regard for her. Beneath her veneer of worldliness the child had glimpsed his real aunt—a person full of warmth, tenderness and generosity.

A woman with a great soul, Aunt Mariam is one of Bond's most endearing characters. A spinster, without a family of her own, she provides a home to her orphaned nephew and brings him up as her own son. But when other relatives connive to deprive her of the custody of the child, she gives him up without a murmur of protest. Like a typical self-effacing mother, she realizes that in her company her "ladla" would have everything he desired, except respectability, which she could never give him. She snaps her links with him so that he can avail of the best chances in life. She is indeed an inspiring character.

It is interesting to note that in his works Bond presents a variety of women characters. Though he eulogizes matchless love and unparalleled devotion, he also portrays the different facets of passionate, erotic love.

In "Love Is A Sad Song", the protagonist's obsessive love for Sushila is reminiscent of Bond's similar love for Vu-Phuong. This love is characterized by the same ardency and fervour that characterized Bond's love for Vu-Phuong. But like Bond's love for the Vietnamese girl, the protagonist's love for Sushila, is not based on strong foundations and is therefore predestined to disappointment. Vu-Phuong married a rich American and drifted away from Bond's life. Sushila likewise marries the elderly Mr. Dayal, and the lovers lose contact till six years later they suddenly come face to face in a dilapidated hotel in Shamli. When the lovers meet again in "Time Stops At Shamli", they are both older and wiser not only in years but also in experience. When the protagonist meets Sushila's husband for the first time, he is shocked and appalled by her unbelievable compromise. This

is apparent from his remarks : “I could think of nothing she had in common with Mr. Dayal. I felt her charm and attractiveness and warmth could not have been appreciated, or even noticed by that curiously distracted man. He was much older than her..... He was obviously not her choice, but her parents, and so far they were childless.....Children could have made up for the absence of passion or was there passion in Satish Dayal ?”⁶³

He urges Sushila to break away from this loveless bondage. He offers to take her away so that she can escape from this stifling relationship. But with wisdom beyond her years, Sushila rejects his plans outright:

“What happiness would we have living in the hiding from everyone we knew.....I am always here and you can come and see me, and nobody will be unhappy by it. But take me away and we will only have regrets”.⁶⁴

The protagonist understands and appreciates the logic behind her statement and he leaves Shamli without Sushila. Gradually with the passage of time, Sushila, like Vu-Phuong becomes a distant dream. He realizes, like Bond, that such beautiful women are best left alone. This prompts him to remark : “unattainable, Sushila would always be more bewitching and beautiful than if she were mine”.⁶⁵

One cannot help feeling that throughout the story of Sushila, Bond echoes his own sentiments about Vu-Phuong, the emotions so beautifully expressed in one of his poems :

“But I will wait until bright parrots bring
 Shri!l portents of another spring;
 And I will love you with the same sweet pain,
 If you and summer care to come again”.⁶⁶

Bond’s female characters stand out clear and distinct from one another. He shows a great power of differentiation in portraying them. Though he often idealizes woman, his portrayal of women is conditioned by his keen sense of the realities of life. He displays an amazing depth of understanding of the human nature on the whole and the feminine psyche in particular. Especially noteworthy is his portrayal of the complete facets of woman in general and the Indian woman in particular.

Bond’s women like Sushila (in ‘Love Is A Sad Song’) and Kamla (in ‘A Love Of Long Ago’) are no hardened logicians, nor are they frigid unemotional robots. They are young, sensitive and alive with emotions. Yet, they enter into loveless marriages arranged by their elders. Despite their incompatibility with their husbands, they are willing to withstand a lifetime enslavement rather than face the social ostracism that accompanies a woman following a failed marriage. Weighed down by their oppressive marriages, they grow old before their time. Like most women, they place the greatest importance on their economic security. They are unwilling to barter it even for their own personal happiness.

So seventeen years old Kamla resigns herself to spending her life with her aged husband chosen by her family. Similarly, ensconced in the cocoon of a secure marriage, Sushila refuses to elope with her former lover. She is ready to withstand a hopelessly ill-adjusted union as the natural "price of security".⁶⁷ With his deep insight into the Indian feminine psyche, Bond realizes that in the ultimate analysis a woman values security more than love.

While ill-matched arranged marriage is the fate that often awaits most Indian women, the situation is aggravated by the Joint Family system, so widely prevalent in India. Bond realizes that the joint family becomes an impediment to a couple's enjoying the fullness of each other's company and establishing a relationship based on dependence and reciprocity. Denied the requisite privacy, they hardly get to understand each other and remain virtual strangers for the greater part of their lives. The wife is reduced to a subservient position and has hardly any say in family matters. Thus he portrays Sushila's mother as a victim of this draconian family system. Suppressed by her mother-in-law's tyrannical ways, she is reduced to the position of an unpaid servant with a slightly superior status. She is totally marginalized. She is not allowed to have any say in the running of the family. She is even denied the right of deciding the welfare of her children. One cannot but sympathise with her when she pathetically remarks:

"..... I don't have much say in the family. I do not have any money, you see. It depends on others, especially her grandmother".⁶⁸

Without income or any source of livelihood, Sushila's mother is totally dependent on the big joint family. She realizes her vulnerability and stoically accepts her subservient position in the family hierarchy. She hardly has any choice in the matter. Bond's sympathy for such unfortunate women is evident in the lines:

"I warmed towards her----towards that simple, straightforward, uneducated woman (she had never been to school, and could not read or write) who might still have been young and pretty had her circumstances been different".⁶⁹

It is interesting to note that while Bond idealized the Indian woman, he often presented harsh details about the younger generation of Western women. While giving a realistic picture of their lifestyle in India, he has portrayed them as vain, shallow, frivolous, often sex-obsessed and given to alcoholism. He has depicted them as living in a closed world from which they refuse to come out. He has presented them as insensitive characters, who do not try to understand the problems in India or look at India from an Indian point of view. The world of these women revolves round parties and gossip, their main occupation being dancing, frivolity and flirting.

Thus, Miss Bun in "Miss Bun And Others" is the epitome of frivolity and opportunism. She falls in love with a professor and elopes with him. But her love for him wanes swiftly. She tires of him within two days of their elopement. Unlike Kamla and Sushila, who cling to a loveless marriage, Miss Bun deserts her professor the moment she realizes she does not love him anymore. By the third day

she is back in her house, after “having first made him buy her three dress pieces, two pairs of sandals, a bottle of scent and a satchel for her school books”.⁷⁰

Equally shallow is Miss Deeds, the English school-teacher in “Time Stops At Shamli”. An alcoholic and in perpetual debt, she becomes a major liability for Satish Dayal and his hotel staff, on account of her drunken behaviour and non-payment of hotel bills. A woman of lax morals, she is not averse to spending her nights with strangers. This is apparent from the lines :

“Miss Deeds in the center of the room was executing a tango on her own. It was obvious that she had been drinking heavily. We took an arm each and helped Miss Deeds, feet dragging across the room. We got her to her room and onto her bed. When we were about to withdraw, she said ‘Don’t go my dear, stay with me.....’ With my hand on the door knob, I said, ‘which one of us?’..... You dance divinely, Mr. Writer. Do stay with me. Daya Ram can stay too if he likes.”⁷¹

Miss Deeds is the facsimile of a woman of similar name whom Bond had encountered while residing with his mother at Green Hotel. In his *Scenes From A Writer’s Life : A Memoir*, he contemptuously describes Mrs Deeds and her seventeen year old son as “ the flotsam of Empire, jettisoned by the very people who had brought them into existence”.⁷²

Equally deprecatory is Bond’s delineation of the character of Charlotte Taylor in “The Good Old Days”. A vain and frivolous woman, she rejects many suitors in her youth. When she finally decides to settle down, she finds there is

none willing to marry a middle-aged spinster. Engulfed in a morass of self-pity, she starts drinking heavily. Like Miss Deeds, she becomes an alcoholic and loses all sense of propriety. Bond's disdain for such weak-willed women is apparent from his derisive remark :

“All over the place she was when she was drunk. Lost her powers of discrimination. She even took up with a barber !”⁷³

Thus in his works, Bond has analysed various classes of women but from a purely subjective point of view. While ventilating his prejudice against certain women, he expresses his admiration for most of them. His own unfortunate experiences in life could not embitter his outlook on women mainly because of his compassionate nature, his cheerful disposition and his ability to take a sane and balanced view of things. There is an element of pathos in most of his female characters. He has portrayed them with such sympathy and tenderness that one cannot but infer that he has wilfully endowed them with qualities that he failed to find in women in his own life.

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Chapter II

Chapter II

RUSKIN BOND AND THE MUSE

“ There’s nothing to keep me here,
 Only these mountains of silence
 And the gentle reserve of shepherds and woodmen
 Who know me as one who
 Walks among the trees.
 Madman, misanthropist ? They make
 Their guesses, smile and pass slowly
 Down the steep path near the cottage
 There’s nothing
 To keep me here, walking
 Among old trees”.
 Ruskin Bond in “Hill – Station”

No critical study of Ruskin Bond is complete without a reference to his in-depth love for nature. As Cumberland had shaped the poetic being of Wordsworth, likewise Mussoorie which abounds in breath-taking natural beauty has gone a long way in moulding Bond’s vision of life.

The present chapter accordingly, studies Bond in relation to his attitude to nature and shows how his short stories are enriched by nature, which has in fact entered the very soul of the writer.

Bond has an instinctive love for nature. Unlike John Donne, he does not rationalize nature or try to impute metaphysical strains in it. He has a remarkable perception of the world of senses. His heightened sensual awareness makes him delve deep into his surrounding environment in such a way that he loses himself in the simple enjoyment of nature. As nature unravels itself before him with its sights, sounds, scents and colours, it casts a spell on him and he becomes its ardent admirer and chronicler.

Like John Keats, Bond brings to the fore the symphony of nature vibrant with the songs of the earth. His heightened awareness enables him to distinguish and decipher the songs of the Himalayan birds and derive immense pleasure from their quaintness. In "Birdsong Heard In The Mountains", he observes the elusive Himalayan birds who are recognizable by their shrill voices rather than by their fleeting appearances. The barbet's "monotonous, far reaching call"¹ can be heard for a mile while the green-backed tit is recognizable by its rather metallic voice. The tiny warbler announces its presence by constantly emitting "four or five unmusical, but nevertheless joyful and penetrating notes".² But it is the whistling thrush that captivates Bond, as it makes the hills reverberate with its enchanting melody. Like Keats's nightingale in "Ode To A Nightingale" it "sings of summer in full-throated ease".³ Its ebullience cannot be dampened even by the icy winter.

Amidst the barren desolate landscape it often bursts into a sweet melody as it flits from one snow-laden tree to the other. Bewitched by its titillating notes and its lack of confidence as it begins its notes, Bond becomes its ardent admirer. His fascination for this quaint Himalayan bird is seen in the lines:

“When I first came to live in the hills, it was the song of the Himalayan whistling thrush that first caught my attention. I was sitting at my window, gazing out at the new leaves on the walnut tree. All was still, the wind was at peace with itself, the mountains brooded massively under the darkening sky. Then emerging like a sweet secret from the depths of a deep ravine came this indescribably beautiful call.

It is a song that never fails to enchant me. The bird starts with a doubtful whistle, as though trying out the tune, then confident of the melody, it bursts into full song, a crescendo of sweet notes and variations ringing clearly across the hillside”⁴.

Bond is again Keatsian in his expression of nature in its rich, pictorial details. His short stories contain vivid descriptions of his native Garhwal hills. He infuses them with such vigour and vitality that they come alive before the mind’s eye. Unlike Shelley’s vague and abstract images, Bond’s images of nature are sensuous, colourful and concrete. His “A Mountain Stream” contains numerous vivid images of nature. Here he divulges his passion for tramping through the forests as it enables him “to feast his eyes on the foliage that sprang up in tropical profusion—soft, spongy moss, great stag fern on the trunks of trees. mysterious and

sometimes evil looking lilies and orchids, wild dahlias and climbing convolvulus opening its purple secrets to the morning sun".⁵

Bond however, is not content with mere visual contact with nature. Like a passionate lover, he yearns for intimate physical contact. His craving turns him into a compulsive walker, as rambling in the forests not only provides him with the opportunity of enjoying the beauty of nature but it also gives him the chance to come in close physical contact with nature. This habit of wandering has thus become his "strongest passion, even stronger than the desire for wine, women and song".⁶

In "Great Trees I Have Known", Bond gives expression to his feeling of joy in establishing intimate contact with trees like the deodar, the oak and the pine. His ecstasy is apparent in the lines: "To return to my trees I went among them often, acknowledging their presence with a touch of my hand against their trunks—the walnut's smooth and polished, the pine's patterned and whorled, the oak's rough, gnarled, full of experience".⁷ He is fascinated by the bare branches of the walnut tree in winter. Stripped off all their leaves, they remind him of the naked arms of a woman. His feelings are clear in the lines: "Standing on its own was a walnut tree and truly this was a tree of all seasons. In winter the branches were bare but they were smooth and straight and round like the arms of a woman in a painting by Jamini Roy".⁸

But it is the deodar with its unsurpassable beauty and grace that captures Bond's imagination. To him its character and elegance make it a vibrant

representation of “ creation in its most noble aspect.”⁹ Bond’s admiration for this tree is apparent in the lines:

“ No one who has lived in the Himalayas would deny that it is the most godlike of all Himalayan trees. It stands erect, dignified, and though in a strong wind it may hum and sigh and moan, it does not bend to the wind. The snow slips softly from its resilient branches”.¹⁰

However, unlike Keats, Bond does not align the beauty of nature with the beauty of art. While his sensuousness leads to imagination, he finds himself incapable of gaining intellectual stimulus from the inanimate objects of art. He finds the wilting rose more vibrant than the Taj Mahal, which to him is nothing more than a cold, lifeless marble structure. This indifference to the artificial beauty of art prompts him to remark, “If someone were to ask me to choose between writing an essay on the Taj Mahal or the last rose of the summer, I’d take the rose—even if it was down to its last petal. Beautiful, cold, white marble leaves me—well, just a little cold”.¹¹

So during the cold winter months as the hills turn an arid brown, Bond undertakes long arduous walks through the crowded streets of Dehra to catch a glimpse of a garden alive with beautiful flowers. His joy knows no bounds when he discovers a small patch with a wild profusion of colourful flowers. His ecstasy is evident in the lines, “There were no sweet peas and the small fountain was dry. But around it, filling a large circular bed were masses of bright yellow California poppies.

They stood out like sunshine after the rain, and my heart leapt as Wordsworth's must have, when he saw his daffodils. I found myself oblivious to the sounds of the bazaar and the road, just as the people outside seemed oblivious to this little garden. It was as though it had been waiting here all the time, waiting for me to come and discover it".¹²

The landscape of Garhwal is all pervading in Bond's treatment of nature. It forms the background of most of his short stories. His affinity with the mountains of Garhwal stems from his lifelong familiarity with them. They are the only bridge between his present and his idyllic childhood. They provide him with a feeling of "limitless space" and immense freedom. His attachment for these mountains originates from his deep-rooted reverence for them and not because they provide him with inspiration for his writings. He candidly states that though, "the mountains are magic, let's face it, hill-stations are by now tawdry, tatty places, and Mussoorie is no exception. Tourism and private schools are its *raison d'être*. The odd writer has come this way but has usually hurried on elsewhere. I stayed on because of my personal reasons. It had nothing to do with my writing. Although I love to sit in the shade of a friendly chestnut tree, notebook on my knee, I can write just as well in a crowded railway compartment or a seedy hotel verandah—and have frequently done so".¹³

His unique tie with Garhwal has strengthened with time and has made Bond appreciate the tropical nature of the orient. Though English by birth, the writer's heart is enslaved by India. His brief stint in England makes him realize the intensity

of his love for the Garhwal hills and he longs to be back amidst the familiar landscape of his home. He inevitably compares the English landscape with the landscape of Musoorie and finds it wanting in all respects. In "These I Have Loved", he candidly states :

"Once we visited the garden at Kew and in a hot house, moist and smelling of the tropics, I remembered the East and some of the simple things I had known—a field of wheat, a stack of sugarcane, a cow at rest and a boy sleeping in the shade of a long, red fingered poinsettia---And I knew I would go home to India".¹⁴

As mentioned in the previous chapter, the void created by his father's untimely death augments young Ruskin's craving for love and affection. But contrary to expectation, he fails to find the emotional anchor amongst his own kith and kin. As we have seen, even his mother disappoints him by her superficiality and insensitivity. Like Wordsworth, he turns in desperation to the familiar nature of his home for emotional purgation, firm in his conviction that,

" Nature never did betray
The heart that loved her".¹⁵

His unwavering faith in nature is evident in the lines from "The Banyan Tree" wherein he states:

"I remember you well, old banyan tree
As you stood there spreading quietly

Over the broken wall.

While adults slept, I crept away

Down the broad verandah steps, around

The outhouse and the melon ground

Into the shades of afternoon

Those summers in India no one stirred

Till evening brought the Fever-bird

And the mem-sahibs rose with the Rising moon

In that June of long ago, I roamed

The faded garden of my father's home.

He'd gone away. There was nothing to do

And no one to talk to.....

I must have known giants have few friends

(The great lurk shyly in their private dens)

And found you hidden by a dark green

Wall of aerial roots.

Intruder in your pillared den I stood

And shyly touched your old rugged wood.

And as my hand explored you, giant tree

I heard you singing".¹⁶

As Bond turns to nature for succour, he is overwhelmed by her rapturous welcome. When he visits the pine-knoll after a lapse of several months he finds the trees dancing joyously to celebrate his home-coming. In "From A Small Beginning", he gives expression to their reaction in the lines:

"When the trees saw me, they made as if to turn in my directionThe trees remembered me. They bowed gently in the breeze and beckoned me nearer, welcoming me home".¹⁷

For Bond, the summer night spent in the pine-knoll becomes a salubrious experience. As he lies awake for long hours, savouring the sights and sounds, "listening to the chatter of the stream, the occasional tonk-tonk of the nightjar or watching through the branches overhead the stars turning in the sky",¹⁸ he is filled with a great sense of well-being. He returns to the pine-knoll again and again for peace and comfort.

Bond is akin to Wordsworth in his belief that there is essentially no difference between one form of life and the other. Like Wordsworth he too believes the spirit of nature is interlinked with the spirit of man. So he invests each natural object with such feelings and emotions that it acquires its own distinct identity and individualism. He accepts nature as his "guardian angel" and is convinced that so long as he is in her midst he will come to no harm.

In "Miss Bun And The Others" he identifies himself with the traveller who dreams of a clear mountain stream while dying of thirst in a parching desert. The vision of cool, sparkling water provides the dying man with spiritual sustenance. He recovers and sets out in search of the mountain stream of his dreams.

He discovers the spring in the course of a trek through the Himalayas and builds his permanent residence close to it. He is convinced that "as long as he remained by the spring, he would never feel unsafe; it was where his guardian spirit lived".¹⁹

Likewise Bond is reluctant to leave Garhwal as he is convinced that his "guardian spirit" dwells amidst the lofty Garhwal mountains. He makes his feelings clear when he remarks : "I feel safe near my own spring, my own mountain, for this is where my guardian spirit lives".²⁰

Bond has an inherent dislike for the city life. Like Baudelaire and T.S.Eliot, he feels the city has a torturing effect on the soul of man. The crowd and the noise make him apprehensive. Amidst the sea of humanity, he feels isolated and lost. He then yearns for the familiarity of his home in the hills and does not like to leave his native hills even for a brief period to pursue his work in the city. In "A Mountain Stream" Bond evinces his attachment for the Garhwal hills in the lines:

"There is a brook at the bottom of the hills. From where I live I can always hear its murmur, but I am no longer conscious of the sound except when I return from a trip to the plains.

And yet I have grown so used to the constant music of the water that when I leave it behind I feel naked and alone, bereft of my moorings. It is like getting accustomed to the friendly rattle of the tea cups every morning, and then waking one day to deathly stillness and a fleeting sense of panic”.²¹

Bond resembles Wordsworth again in his ability to recollect natural beauty in tranquillity. Beautiful scenes are captured and encased in his mind to provide him with pleasure and intellectual sustenance at a later date when the scenes are no more. When depressed or troubled he conjures up these natural scenes in his mind's eye. They become the manna of his soul and soothe his agitated mind. In “A Dream Of Gardens”, he envisages his grandmother's garden with its maze of flowerbeds and masses of flowers. The vision of this beautiful garden once owned by his family rejuvenates him and he longs for such a garden that is “spacious and gracious, and full of everything that's fragrant and flowering”.²² His feelings are apparent in the lines;

“I suppose it was this garden of my childhood that implanted in my mind the permanent vision of a perfect garden, so that whenever I am worried or down in the dumps, I close my eyes and conjure up a picture of this lovely place, where I am wandering through forests of cosmos and banks of rambling roses. It does help to soothe an agitated mind. I wouldn't call it meditation. Contemplation, rather”.²³

In “Coaxing A Garden From The Himalayan Soil”, while expounding the other benefits of owning a beautiful garden, Bond recollects how the ninety year old Annie Powell got up early each morning to water her flower-beds. Her

obsession with this early morning ritual stemmed from her belief that “the flower and leaves glistening with water gave her a new lease of life every day”.²⁴

After their occasional fights, Bond’s grandparents would make their way to the center of their garden. The flowers and the vegetables always made them forget about their disagreements and encouraged them to launch into animated discussion. Bond’s humorous observation on the sobering effects of the garden is seen in the lines :

“Grandfather looked after the Orchard. Grandmother looked after the flower garden. Like all people who had lived together for many years, they had their occasional disagreement.

Grandfather would proceed to sulk on a bench beneath the jackfruit tree, while at the other end of the garden grandmother would start clipping a hedge with more than her usual vigour. Silently, imperceptibly they would make their way towards the vegetable patch. This was the neutral ground. My cousins and I looked on like U. N Observers. And there among the cauliflowers, conversation would begin again and the quarrel would be forgotten. There’s nothing like home grown vegetables for bringing two people together.

Red roses for young lovers. French beans for longstanding relationships”.²⁵

Bond is aware that a garden cannot solve all human problems, yet he is confident that “a little digging and friendly dialogue with the good earth can help reactivate us when we grow sluggish”.²⁶ His personal experience proved that a

garden can also provide intellectual stimulus to a writer. He puts forward his views on the beneficial effects of the garden when he remarks :

“Whenever I’m stuck in the middle of a story or an essay, I go into my tiny hillside garden and get down to the serious business of transplanting or weeding or pruning or just plucking off dead blooms, and in no time at all I’m struck with a notion of how to proceed with the stalled story, reluctant essay or unresolved poem”.²⁷

In the modern age of scientific advancement, every thing has been brutally rationalized. Bond hopes some mysteries of nature are left untouched by science. While he is very eloquent about nature, he is not unaware of nature’s violent facets that ^{are} highly inimical to man. Like Thomas Hardy, he realizes the immutability of nature and the mutability of human life. He is aware of the greatness of nature and the littleness of man. He is conscious of the relentless character of natural laws and man’s puny struggles to evade them.

So he is filled with apprehension when nature unleashes her fury on mankind. In “Listen To The Wind”, Bond dwells on the destructive facet of nature when he describes the Pari Tibba — a barren hill. It is devoid of life and dwellings as everything in this ill-fated hill has been repeatedly struck down by lightening and razed to the ground. Even the two lovers running away from society in search of their personal heaven are not spared. Nature connives with man to punish Robert and the young hill girl for flouting social norms and wrecks their happiness. During a stormy night, as the lovers take shelter in the ruins of the Pari Tibba, nature

singles them out for destruction and unleashes her fury on them. Their wishful dreams remain unfulfilled. They are struck down by lightening, charred and reduced to dust.

In “Sita And The River”, Bond presents another violent aspect of nature in the form of a mighty river in spate. Little Sita lives happily with her grandparents on a deserted island in the middle of a river. But serious illness compels her grandfather to evacuate his wife to the mainland hospital and the little girl suddenly finds herself all alone. Grappling with her loneliness, she is distressed by the sight of a terrible storm raging in the hills. Heavy rains in the hills cause the river to rise rapidly till it floods the plain and the island. Sita is confronted with the worst crisis of her life as she battles for survival against the flooded river.

In sheer desperation she seeks refuge in the branches of the old peepal tree in the hope that it would save her from the hungry river. She is perplexed by the sudden fury of the river she loved so dearly and wonders why it is now threatening her. Her bewilderment turns to terror when she sees the havoc caused by the river. Her horror and helplessness is apparent in the lines:

“Some thing went floating past the tree. Sita caught a glimpse of a stiff, upraised arm and long hair streaming behind on the water. The body of a drowned woman. It was soon gone, but it made Sita feel very small and lonely, at the mercy of great and cruel forces. She began to shiver and then to cry”.²⁸

As the river blazes a trail of destruction, the old peepal tree which had withstood many floods, loses its battle with thundering river. It loses its hold on the firm earth and like a defeated soldier falls into the river. Sita reposing her faith in the tree does not despair even in the face of this new peril. She is confident the old tree would protect her and ensure her safety. The little girl's unwavering faith in nature is apparent in the lines:

“And tree moved out on the river and the little island was lost in the swirling waters, Sita forgot her fear and her loneliness. The tree was taking her with it. She was not alone. It was as though one of the gods had remembered her after all.

The branches swung Sita about, but she did not lose her grip. The tree was her friend. It had known her all these years and now it held her in its old dying arms as though it were determined to save her from the river’.²⁹

From the branches of the tree, Sita observes a crow's nest being overturned and the eggs falling into the river. The mother crow flies desperately overhead cawing loudly, and hoping that her nest and some of her eggs would be saved. But in the end, she has to accept the inevitable. Like the mother crow, Sita too is now reconciled to her changed relationship with nature. As has already been mentioned in the Preface, Sita no longer feels any guilt that she is being punished by the gods for her past sins. She realizes that the angry river is not an instrument of God's wrath but only a manifestation of the duality of nature.

Like Sita , Bond cannot erase from his mind nature's bounteous essence by its contrary aspects. The destructive elements of nature rather deepen his respect for her.

So he cannot reconcile himself to the wanton destruction of nature as a result of man's insatiable thirst for wealth and power. He too feels like Wordsworth that God's

“..... most dreaded instrument

For working out a pure intent

Is Man arrayed for mutual slaughter”³⁰

Bond becomes a pagan in his nature worship as he is convinced that nature is not just a conglomeration of inanimate objects but “ a presence and a power, a spirit and a guide leading beyond itself”.³¹

In “Great Trees I Have Known” he nostalgically recalls the days in the past when nature was venerated as she occupied a special place in the minds and hearts of man. Early man's belief in dryads, naiads and nymphs dwelling in the trees led to their conservation as none dared felling trees for fear of incurring the wrath of the gods. But in modern times, the trees have fallen prey to man's lust for material aggrandizement. As a result even sacred groves have disappeared.

Bond attributes the cause of this new malady to man's total indifference to nature. Modern man has ceased to believe that trees and bushes are an integral part of life. Bond deplors this unhealthy attitude and projects his views in the lines:

“The trouble is, hardly anyone (with the exception of the contractor who buys the felled trees) really believes that trees and shrubs are necessary. They get in the way, so much don't they ? According to the milkman, the only useful tree is one which can be picked clean of its leaves for fodder! And a young man remarked to me , “You should come to Pauri. The view is terrific, there are no trees in the way”.”³²

Man has not confined himself to the destruction of trees alone. His greed has led him to ransack the bowels of the earth in search of metals and minerals. In “Dust In The Mountains”, young Bisnu is appalled by the destruction he witnesses as he approaches the limestone quarry where he goes with Chitru in search of employment. Through the blanket of dust he notices the mountain top blasted away by miners in their search for rich limestone. There is a deathly calm as birds and butterflies, flowers and shrubs have all disappeared. In a way he becomes Bond's spokesman when he voices his dismay at man's desecration of nature in the lines:

“There was a sharp crack of explosives and the hillside blossomed outwards. Earth and rock hurtled down the mountain. Bisnu watched in awe as shrubs and small trees were flung into the air. It always frightened him – not so much the sight of the rocks bursting asunder, as the trees been flung aside and destroyed. He thought of the trees at home – the walnuts, the chestnuts, the pines – and wondered that if one day they would suffer the same fate, and whether the mountains would all become a desert like this particular one. No trees, no grass, no water – only the choking dust of the mines and quarries”.”³³

Even the wild animals are not spared. Deprived of their natural habitats by the indiscriminate felling of trees and man's constant encroachment upon the forestland, they are relentlessly hunted for pleasure and profit. As a result the wildlife is on the verge of extinction. In many of his short stories Bond expresses anguish at this wanton killing of wild animals and stresses the need for their preservation.

In "The Leopard" he is filled with exhilaration when he comes across a leopard in the forest close to his home in Musoorie. He encounters this rare animal several times in course of his walks through the forest and develops a strange attachment for it. The leopard initially perplexed, acknowledges his presence "in the friendliest way" by ignoring him completely. Bond describes its reaction to his presence thus:

"It was not looking towards me, but had its head thrust attentively forward in the direction of the ravine. Yet it must have sensed my presence because it slowly turned its head and looked down at me. It seemed a little puzzled at my presence there, and when to give myself courage, I clapped my hands sharply, the leopard sprang into the thickets, making absolutely no sound as it melted into the shadows".³⁴

Bond's happiness turns to dismay when he finds a party of hunters chasing the leopard. They doggedly pursue it for its skin, which, he is told, is sold in Delhi for more than a thousand rupees.

His dismay turns to remorse, when the next day he sees the hunters emerging triumphantly from the forest carrying the lifeless body of the leopard, shot both in the head and neck. In a strange way he holds himself responsible for the death of this animal. Convinced that he had made the leopard "confident, too confident, too careless, too trusting of the human in his midst",³⁵ he is tormented by a feeling of guilt and cannot reconcile himself to its death. His anguish is apparent from his pathetic questions:

"Did the leopard trusting one man make the mistake of bestowing his trust on others? Did I by casting out all fear--- my own fear and the leopard's protective fear--- leave him defenseless?"³⁶

While condemning this wanton killing of wild animals Bond cautions man against destroying nature and wildlife. He feels that one who destroys them, slowly destroys himself. His feelings are similar to the Red Indian Chief Seattle who, about a hundred and fifty years ago had warned the human race of the danger of desecrating the environment and wildlife thus:

"What is man without beasts? If all the beasts were gone, man would die from great loneliness of spirit. For whatever happens to beasts, soon happens to man. All things are connected."³⁷

Man is becoming increasingly dehumanized as a result of deliberately snapping off his vital links with nature. His life is embroiled in senseless competitions for reaching superficial goals. His relentless striving for power and

self has made him emotionally bankrupt. So he frantically pursues fraudulent sadhus and spurious 'godmen' in the hope of attaining mental bliss. But it eludes him as the rituals intended for the uplift of his spiritual well-being are performed for the promotion of his selfish desires. Thus his acts of charity and benevolence performed for ensuring his prosperity, happiness and good health are mere fakes and in no way help him to achieve the mental tranquillity that he so desperately craves for.

Bond firmly believes the mental peace which eludes modern man, can be attained through careful observation and understanding of nature. He tries to impress upon man the need to pause a while and contemplate the beauty of nature, for beneath it are hidden the greatest truths of life. He urges the human race to inculcate patience, fortitude and tolerance by loving and respecting nature. Accordingly in "Silent Birth", he informs:

“When the earth gave birth to this tree,

There came no sound:

A green shoot thrust

In silence from the ground,

Our births don't come so quiet --

Most lives run riot --

But the bud opens silently

And flower gives way to fruit

So must we search

For that stillness within the tree

And silence within the root".³⁸

In "The Fern", he implores man to learn from nature the spirit of camaraderie and the ability to withstand hardships. Realizing his own fallibility, he invokes the Gods to bestow on him the patient strength of the maidenhair fern so that he can withstand all pressures and follow the right path. Thus he prays

"The slender maidenhair fern grows firm on a rock

While all around her the water swirls and chatters

And then disappears in a rush

Down to the bottom of the hill.

When I'm surrounded by troubled waters, Lord,

Let me find within a rock to cling to,

And give me the quiet patience of the maidenhair

Who has learned to live with the rock",³⁹

Bond's basic optimism however does not allow him to lose faith in the inherent goodness of man or of nature's power of rejuvenation. Though deeply

grieved by the ruthless destruction of the environment and wildlife, he is confident of life's capability of propagating itself.

His belief in this unique power of life is evident in 'Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright'. The old tiger, who lived in harmony with the villagers dwelling on the outskirts of the forest by the Ganges is forced to take a confrontationist path owing to sudden shortage of its natural prey. As the famished animal attacks the villagers' cattle it comes into direct conflict with their enraged owners. They hound him with guns, axes, spears and sticks till badly wounded he falls into the river. But the Ganges carries him away from the agitated villagers to a distant land where life was waiting for propagation. Bond's optimism comes to the fore in the lines :

“ as the river water oozed out of his mouth , and the warm sun made new life throb through his body , he stirred and stretched , and his glazed eyes came into focus . Raising his head, he saw trees and tall grass.

Slowly he heaved himself off the ground and moved at a crouch to where the grass waved in the afternoon breeze. Would he be harried again, and shot at? There was no smell of man. The tiger moved forward with greater confidence. There was however, another smell in the air—a smell that reached back to the time when he was young and fresh and full of vigour—a smell that he had almost forgotten but could never quite forget — the smell of a tigress!

He raised his head high, and a new life surged through his tired limbs. He gave a full-throated roar and moved purposefully through the tall grass. And the

roar came back to him, calling him, calling him forward—a roar that meant there would be more tigers in the land”.⁴⁰

Bond’s firm belief in the immutability of nature is again forcefully expressed in “My Father’s Trees In Dehra”. An avid conservationist, Aubrey Bond along with his young son often went beyond the river bed in Dehra, planting saplings, flowering shrubs and cuttings. During one such tree planting session, he told the impressionable young lad a beautiful story of how the trees once moved like man. But they are now rooted in one place due to a spell cast on them. He assured his son that one day the wicked spell would be broken and the trees would move again. Fascinated by the story, young Ruskin spent a very pleasant day with his father enthusiastically planting tamarind, laburnum and coral tree saplings and cuttings in a barren island in the middle of the river. Soon after, he had to part with his father to attend a boarding school. Three months later he received the shattering news of his father’s death.

Years later, Bond returns to Dehra again. By then his grandparents were dead, their house had been sold and he remained the sole surviving member of the family. While visiting his familiar childhood haunts, he instinctively makes his way towards the barren island nostalgically recalling the wonderful moments he had spent with his father there. As he reaches the island, he is amazed to find the once barren island covered with a thick forest and teeming with birds, insects and red coral blossoms. He recalls his father’s light-hearted prophecy made to a little boy

years ago. His father's prophecy has finally come true in this remote corner of the world. Ecstatically he declares:

"..... The trees seem to know me. They whisper among themselves and beckon me nearer. And looking around, I find that other trees and wild plants and grasses have sprung up under the protection of the trees we planted.

They have multiplied. They are moving. In this small forgotten corner of the world, my father's dreams are coming true, and the trees are moving again".⁴¹

This unique experience in Dehra accentuates Bond's conviction that so long as there are nature lovers like the bank Manager in "Trail To The Bank" or animal lovers like little Ramu (in "Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright") or Kishen Singh, the railway watchman (in the "Tunnel") who at great personal risk tries to save endangered animals from being killed, there is " still hope for this old world".⁴²

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Chapter III

Chapter III

TREATMENT OF THE JUVENILE IN BOND

“Growing up has always been a difficult process for me and I gave up trying many years ago. I decided that there was little point in becoming an adult if I could remain a child and make a living.

I think I have remained young because I have always had children around me. Not just children in my own family but other children too. I love to watch them grow. Adolescence is a fascinating period and I keep going back to it again and again in my fiction.”--- Ruskin Bond in *The Rain In The Mountains*.

Popular aphorisms like “ The child is the father of man” document our belief in the importance of childhood experiences to the personality development and behavioural pattern of mature individuals. George G. Thompson has rightly remarked, “The principles of psychoanalysis, criminology and psychosomatic medicine emphasize the importance of childhood experiences”.¹

Ruskin Bond is among the few Anglo-Indian writers who has delved deep into the child psychology and has taken childhood and adolescent experiences as the essence and theme of most of his moving short stories. Therefore the objective of this chapter is to examine how childhood figures in Bond. It specially aims at highlighting the traumas of his beleaguered children for whom childhood becomes a curse, who grow surmounting terrible adversities but gaining valuable experience.

Bond's children are spontaneous, natural and trusting. But with "earthly freight", their childhood innocence wanes. Their journey from innocence to awareness is often so rapid that it leaves them baffled and bewildered.

In his proletarian stories like "The Dust In The Mountains" and "The Untouchable", Bond dwells on the predicament of children belonging to the underprivileged and working class. Caught in the fierce struggle to eke out a living for themselves and for their impoverished families, his harassed youngsters are cheated out of their childhood and catapulted to premature adulthood. These miniature adults when subjected to inhuman labour remind us of Dick in Dickens's "Oliver Twist". Like him they acquire "limbs like those of an old man". Unwittingly they become victims of a deplorable nexus of our capitalistic society. Their innocence and naivety are exploited and they are made to work for a pittance for long hours under inhuman conditions. Their trauma reminds us of similar ordeals faced by Dickens' child protagonists, for whom the factory whistle was as horrific as death itself. These children, like Lamb's little "chimney sweepers", are often forced into sub-human existence. Their childhood is lost in the oppressive soot and fumes of their workplace, where they are engaged in a terrible tussle to earn their livelihood.

"The Dust In The Mountains" is a comprehensive account of pain, suffering and struggle punctuated by rare moments of hope and relief. The focal point of the story is young Bishnu and the pathos of his situation is sustained by Bond's

emphasis on the young lad's utter helplessness against the merciless rhythm of society.

Besides Bishnu, the story also narrates the harrowing experiences of two other young boys in the hands of different exploiters. The oppressors change but the oppressed remain the same till Bishnu meets a saviour in Pritam Singh, an old truck driver and his outlook towards life changes.

Bishnu's nightmare begins when acute poverty compels him to abandon his native hills and seek employment at a tea-stall in a cinema hall in Mussoorie. His subsequent experiences turn the tea-stall into a veritable hell where he is condemned to a sub-human existence. He becomes the butt of vulgar jokes and horrid humiliations by unsympathetic customers. His misery is accentuated when he is assaulted by a college student on whose shoes he accidentally spills some tea. Complaining brings no redressal. His employer only remarks , "The customer is always right. You should have got out of the way in time".²

Bali and Chitru, the other two youngsters working at the tea-stall fare no better. Bali tries to supplement his meagre earnings by sticking posters all over the city at night, after the closure of the tea-stall. Homeless, the young lads take shelter in the foyer of the cinema hall , where they are exposed to the inclement weather of the hills. The utter hopelessness of their situation is evident in the lines :

"The cinema hall is carefully locked up after the last show so that they (the young lads) could not settle down in the expensive seats as they would have liked !

They had to sleep in the foyer, near the ticket office, where they were at the mercy of the icy Himalayan winds.”³

Their deplorable plight is reminiscent of the homeless labourer lying huddled on the pavement in Mulk Raj Anand’s *Coolie*, “pillowing his head on his arm, shrinking into himself as if he were afraid to occupy too much space”.⁴

These young boys also live under constant threat of losing their jobs. The month of September finds them without employment as the cinema hall closes down for the winter.

While Bali goes to Delhi to seek his fortune, Bishnu and Chittru try to find work at a limestone quarry. Chittru, being bigger and older is immediately employed as a labourer at the quarry. Bishnu becomes aware of his terrible predicament when he is rejected by the quarry foreman on account of his puny size. Dismissing his pleas for employment, the foreman contemptuously remarks:

“You’re too small. You won’t be able to break stones or lift those heavy rocks and load them into the trucks. Be off boy. Find something else to do”.⁵

Totally disillusioned, he turns back towards Mussoorie rejecting the job in the labourer’s canteen. He feels the washing and cleaning he did during his previous job is enough to last him a lifetime. In this state of utter dejection he encounters his Messiah in Pritam Singh, an elderly truck driver who offers him the job of his truck cleaner.

By now Bishnu is acutely conscious of the sinister workings of the class system. He realizes the root cause of his misery and humiliation is his poverty. He is overwhelmed by the humanity of the old Sikh who transcends the master-servant divide and treats him as his equal. For the first time in his life, Bishnu comes in contact with a compassionate employer. It fills him with a new gusto for work. His buoyant juvenile spirit now being reawakened, he mocks at the miserly contractor, who apprehending payment, stops him from helping Chittru load the truck.

“Don’t expect to be paid for helping”, said the contractor for whom every rupee spent was a rupee off his profits. ‘Don’t worry’ said Bishnu, ‘I don’t work for contractors. I work for friends’.⁶

From Bishnu’s behaviour it is apparent that dignity and nobility are not the monopoly of the rich. The poor have their greatness as well. By making a poor, deprived child like Bishnu the hero of his story, Bond has proved conclusively that the struggles of a poor waif can be as engrossing a subject as any great epic.

In the Indian social scene class consciousness is inextricably linked with caste consciousness. Bond’s children often become the victims of this hydra-headed monster. It vitiates their childhood and eats into the very fibre of our society. Despite innumerable legislations for its removal, the caste system still continues to hold our people in its vicious grip, resulting in the segregation and subjugation of the lower castes.

“The Untouchable” written when Bond was only sixteen years old, records a day in the life of a young sweeper boy, vividly projecting the pathos of his situation. It presents the picture of degradation and helplessness while emphasizing on the need for redemption and change.

The sprightly sweeper boy is rebuffed by other children as he belongs to the inferior caste. He is treated as the scum of the earth. His very proximity defiles them.

For the ten year old Bond, cocooned in his shell of loneliness due to his father’s hospitalization, “solitude is no bliss”. Yet he does not dare to flout the social norms and seek the companionship of the sweeper boy. The warnings of his neighbours ring loud and clear in his ears : “Don’t play with the sweeper boy. He is unclean. Don’t touch him. Remember he is a servant”.⁷

Due to the terrible mental bias afflicting our caste-ridden society no amount of cleanliness can rid the poor sweeper boy of the taboo of untouchability. Bond brilliantly grasps the irony of his situation when he remarks :

“The sweeper boy all day he pattered up and down between the house and the water tank with the bucket clanging against his knees. Back and forth with a wide, friendly smile..... At every trip to the water tank he bathed and returned dripping and glistening from head to toe.

I (Bond) dripped in sweat. It was below my station to bathe in the tank where the gardener, water-carrier, cooks, ayahs, sweepers and their children

collected. I was the son of a 'sahib' and convention ruled that I did not play with a servant child".⁸

Here Bond stresses not only on casteism but also on the pronounced class consciousness of the Indian society which has been influenced by values inherited from its colonial past and also those brought in by the forces of materialism. Thus the affluent classes take a snobbish pride in segregating themselves from the less fortunate working class. So despite his friendly overtures, the sweeper boy bearing the cross of a servant and an outcaste, finds himself totally isolated. In many ways he reminds us of Bakha, the young sweeper boy in Mulk Raj Anand's *Untouchable*, before the reality of his situation overtakes him. Like Bakha he is unresentful and duty-conscious, never shirking his work. Despite being repeatedly snubbed by Bond, he ungrudgingly comes to guard his house at night.

The terrible storm that breaks out in the middle of the night is purgatorial. It purges young Bond's mind of all misconceptions and misapprehensions. Alone in his bedroom with the fierce storm raging outside, Bond starts hallucinating. In the darkness terrible phantoms swim across his eyes, till soaked in cold sweat he rushes towards the kitchen, seeking solace in the sweeper boy's company. He finds the young outcaste sitting quietly in a corner of the dark room. Conditioned by circumstances, this young boy has learned to passively accept everything--be it physical storm or mental upheaval caused by abuses and insults. His plight is touchingly described in the lines :

“The boy sat on the bare floor. ‘What is happening ?’ he asked. The lightning flashed, and his teeth and eyes flashed with it. Then he was a blur in the darkness.

‘I am afraid’, I said. I moved towards him and my hand touched a cold shoulder. ‘Stay here’, he said, ‘I too am afraid’. I sat down, my back against the wall; beside the untouchable, the outcaste..... And the thunder and lightning ceased, and the rain came down, swishing and drumming on the corrugated roof. ‘The rainy season has started’, observed the sweeper boy, turning to me. His smile played with the darkness, and then he laughed. And I laughed too, but feebly. But I was happy and safe ”.⁹

In the young pariah’s company, Bond realizes that though the world is cold, unfriendly and often a hostile place, there is warmth and comfort in trusting companionship. He now understands that beneath the veneer of maturity, the sweeper boy is a child like him, with similar feelings and emotions. His heart reaches out in sympathy for this unfortunate outcaste. He accepts the untouchable as his companion in loneliness, thereby negating the class and caste distinctions embittering human relations.

Bond’s children contend not only with the malaise of class and caste consciousness but they also become victims of the gender bias that holds the Indian society in its mesmerizing spell. Bond’s basic nativity makes him dwell on the plight of the ‘girl child’ in our male dominated society, where she is grudgingly accorded a secondary status from the moment of her birth. Thus from her

childhood, she is conditioned to a life of servitude. Her entire life is a monotonous drudgery. She is only a temporary member of the family to be disposed of at the earliest through marriage. Her entire childhood is zealously devoted to training her for a life of greater servility in her husband's house. Her family becomes the worst offender, as conditioned by generations of male domination, they often deny her the basic minimum rights like healthy food, education and normal childhood.

Puja in "The Panther's Moon" helps her mother in the house and fields while her younger brother Bishnu is allowed to attend school. While he hurries to school in the morning, she goes to the field for ploughing. He is given breakfast before leaving and carries packed lunch. Puja has to take her meals later with her mother. After her domestic chores in the evening, she tries to learn from her younger brother a little of what he has learnt during the day at school. For young Puja school is only a distant dream.

Similarly in "The Blue Umbrella", Bijju goes to school while his younger sister Binya cannot be spared by the family to do the same. She is entrusted with the task of grazing cows in the mountains. Her predicament is clear in the lines :

"If the cows didn't come home at the right time, Binya would be sent to fetch them. Sometimes her brother went with her, but as he was busy preparing for his exams, he didn't have much time to help her".¹⁰

Her dress is a cumbersome sari that greatly hinders her movements as she runs about the hillside in search of fuel and fodder. The pathos of her situation lies

in her family's unwillingness to allow her to behave like a normal little child. The lines in "Binya Passes By" makes this amply clear :

"Her dhoti, a rough homespun sari—was faded and torn; an impractical garment for running about in the hillside, but the village folk put their girls into dhotis before they were twelve".¹¹

More distressing than this is the Indian system of arranged marriages where a young girl is condemned to a life with a man chosen for her by others. In "A Love Of Long Ago", adolescent Kamla is married to a forty year old widower. Her marriage is not a union of hearts but a game of convenience played by her opportunistic parents. All attempts by her young suitor to stop this disastrous marriage is resisted by her parents. They happily sacrifice her at the altar of greed and conventions. This is evident from the young suitor's pathetic remarks:

"When I discovered that plans were afoot to marry her to a widower of forty, I plucked up enough courage to declare that I would marry her myself. But my youth was no consideration. The widower had land and a generous gift of money for Kamla's parents. Not only was this offer attractive, it was customary. What had I to offer ? A small rented room, a typewriter and a precious income of two to three hundred rupees a month from freelancing".¹²

Like Kamla, fifteen years old Sushila too (in "Love Is A Sad Song") passively accepts the wealthy elderly man her family selects as her groom. Even at that young age she becomes reconciled to the compromise, that is her marriage. It

is significant that like typical Indian girls, Bond's female characters do not revolt against the injustice meted out to them by their parents and society. They meekly accept what life has to offer and are resigned to their fate.

However, twelve year old Kusum is a case in exception and behaves in a manner radically different from Bond's other female characters. She is the unluckiest of them all as at a very young age she confronts experience in the most sordid incident a child can face. Unwittingly she becomes a victim of that evil in our society where young girls are forced into prostitution from a tender age to gratify libidinous men. Though she fights hard to preserve her chastity, she has to pay a heavy price for it.

Kusum does not anticipate the horror that engulfs her as she innocently walks into the Rani's house. The Rani acting as a procuress, introduces her to Mr. Kapoor, a wealthy elderly businessman. His lewd advances fill her with dread and as she resists, the infuriated Rani tries to force the old man on her. Panic-stricken, the desperate girl hacks the Rani with the axe lying in the corner of the room.

Thus in trying to save herself from physical degradation, little Kusum becomes a murderer. The Rani's betrayal becomes synonymous with the betrayal of implicit faith and trust placed on the adults by innocent children. Kusum no longer dares to trust anyone any more. When questioned by the Inspector as to why she is always on her own, her cynicism comes forth in her caustic remark : "It is safer when I am alone".¹³

Most of Bond's children remain in fruitless pursuit of happiness and the ideal world remains out of their reach. From a very early age they become aware that life is not a bed of roses but founded on recurrent adversities. Poverty and diabolical social norms are not the only cause of their sufferings.

Death becomes the major catalyst that precipitates the crisis in the life of his juvenile protagonists. Like Thomas Hardy, Bond has also projected the malevolent fate in the garb of death working against his children, wrecking their lives and happiness.

In "The Funeral", it chooses a ten year old to cruelly sport with and leaves him bewildered and devastated. The sudden death of his father, who had been the center of his little world grips him with a sense of hopelessness and solitariness. His sense of abandonment and his loneliness are reflected in the lines :

"He sat in the darkest corner of the darkened room, his face revealing nothing of what he thought and felt. His father's coffin lay in the next room, the lid fastened forever over the tired, wistful countenance of the man who had meant so much to the boy. Nobody else had mattered – neither uncles nor aunts nor fond grandparents. Least of all the mother who was hundreds of miles away with another husband."¹⁴

Too young to comprehend the sinister workings of fate, the young boy wonders at the words of the well meaning missionary who consoles him saying that

God has taken his father because he needs him. Unconvinced, he questions himself with pathetic naivety :

“ Of what use are we to God when we are dead ?”¹⁵

In “The Guardian Angel” too the shadows of death looms large over the young protagonist. It orphans him before his sixth birthday and leaves him lonely and disconsolate. However as already mentioned in Chapter I of this dissertation, his aunt Mariam arrives like the proverbial effectual angel. She provides him with emotional succour and soon becomes a “mother substitute”. But fate intervenes to cut short his brief interlude with happiness. Forced to a life of prostitution on account of her illiteracy, Mariam worries about the effect of her unconventional profession on the boy. To enable him to grow up in a normal healthy atmosphere, she sends him to a boarding school in Simla despite his protests.

His Utopian existence comes to an end with his departure for the school for he never sees his aunt again. She becomes entangled in a litigation with her relatives who take away from her the custodial rights over the child on account of her unethical profession. Thus the psuedo moralistic society again comes between the young child and his happiness.

Much later as a young man he tries to pursue the mirage of happiness so briefly glimpsed during childhood. But he finds the opportunity is lost forever. Death intervenes to take his aunt away from him. The sorrow that grips him when he discovers his aunt’s grave rings clear in the lines:

“I found her grave in the little cemetery on the town’s outskirts. One of her more devoted admirers had provided a handsome gravestone surmounted by a sculptured angel. One of the wings had broken off and the face was chipped which gave the angel a slightly crooked smile.

But inspite of the broken wing and the 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”.¹⁶

Most of Bond’s child protagonists find it difficult to accept the terrible finality of death. But Madhu (in “The Death Of Madhu”) accepts the inevitability of death and faces it with calm stoicism. She meets death even before she is properly acquainted with life. She realizes the fruitlessness of fighting death. She accepts it as her destiny and ungrudgingly gives herself up to it.

Abandoned as a baby, she is found by an old washerwoman who takes pity on her and adopts her. She grows amidst terrible deprivation, with hardly any chance of experiencing the joys of childhood. As in the case of Bond’s other children, for a brief period, her dismal life brightens up when she meets a young man who takes a paternal interest in her. She searches for and tries to find in him the father whom she never saw. She lavishes him with unremitted love and affection. She appears like a whiff of fresh air and changes his entire outlook towards life. She fills him with a new sense of purpose. This is evident from the lines :

“My interest in Madhu deepened, and my life so empty till then became imbued with a new purpose. As she sat on the grass beside me, reading aloud or listening to me with a look of complete trust and belief, all the love that had been lying dormant in me during my years of self-exile surfaced in a sudden surge of tenderness”.¹⁷

But like Bond’s other children, Madhu’s encounter with love and happiness turns out to be highly transitory. The young man decides to equip her with formal education to enable her to carve a niche for herself in the society. He makes arrangements to send her to a mission school in the next district. But here too fate intervenes in the guise of a fatal illness to cut short her dreams of a bright and beautiful future. Just before leaving for school, she falls terribly ill. Visiting her for the first time in her squalid hut, the protagonist is shocked to find life ebbing away from the little girl. His anguish rings loud in his words:

“She didn’t seem to hear me. I think she knew she was dying, but did not resent it happening.

‘Who will read to you under the tree?’ she went on. ‘Who will look after you?’ she asked, with the solitude of a grown woman.

‘You will Madhu. You are grown up now. There will be no one else to look after me.’

The old woman was standing at my shoulder. A hundred years – and little Madhu was slipping away. The woman took Madhu’s hand from mine and laid it gently down.

I sat by the cot a little longer and then I rose to go, all the loneliness in the world pressing upon my heart.”¹⁸

Significantly, in Bond’s hands the father becomes the pivot round whom the entire life of his children revolves. The mother is only a distant, hazy figure lurking in the background. The father becomes an epitome of virtue and goodness. Unlike Paul in D. H. Lawrence’s *Sons And Lovers*, his children do not have any mother fixation. Like Bond, they are closely attached to the father and shower him with unremitted love and affection. For them, he becomes a mini divinity whom they place on a pedestal. They revere him and worship the very ground he treads on.

The stepfather, on the other hand, is the very antithesis of the father. He is an apathetic individual, devoid of finer feelings and sentiments. He is unimaginative, and heartless. He is responsible for separating a mother from her child and wrecking their home and happiness. He pales into insignificance when compared with the benign and benevolent father.

This antipathy for the stepfather is evident in “A Job Well Done”. Forced to stay with his mother and stepfather after his father’s death, the young protagonist observes:

“He was quite unlike my father. My father had always given me books to read. The Major said I would become a dreamer if I read too much and took my books away.

I hated him and did not think much about my mother for marrying him.”¹⁹

The child’s unsalubrious attitude towards his stepfather manifests itself in a highly strange and unconventional behaviour. His pent up frustration is converted into a kind of unholy glee as he watches Dhuki the gardener push his loathsome stepfather into a deep well.

His mother’s new suitor does not perturb him any more. He has found a unique way of getting rid of tiresome stepfathers. This is evident from his conversation with Dhuki:

“A good sahib,” observed Dhuki ‘ See how well he wears his sola topi ! It covers his head completely.’

‘He is bald underneath ,’ I said.

‘No matter. I think he will be alright.’

‘And if he isn’t,’ I said, ‘we can always open up the well again.’²⁰

Dispirited and alienated, the young child finds himself incapable of normal human sympathy. Displaced from a carefree and idyllic atmosphere following his father’s death, his transformation is startling and tragic.

Bond's love for the mountains and his aversion for city life has already been discussed in the previous chapter. His dislike for urban life stems from his inherent distrust of urban values. He holds them responsible for corrupting the normal simplicity of human beings, especially the highly impressionable children.

Sunil's delinquency in "Death Of A Familiar" is the result of urban culture. It is the result of his being a product of "Anglo-Indian Public Schools, of films, Indian and American,..... Of hippies, drugs, sex magazines and the sub-tropical terai".²¹

A typical urban adolescent, Sunil is "forever in search of new adventures and sensations"²² to alleviate his boredom. Having grown up on perverted values, he regards women as mere objects of sex to be trifled with for one's own pleasure.

"Both he and the other boys of Shahganj had grown up to look upon girls as strange exotic animals, who must be seized at the first opportunity. Experimenting in sex was like playing a surreptitious game of marble".²³

Caught in no man's land between childhood and adulthood, his entire perspective towards life becomes distorted. The big dons of the underground mafia become his heroes. He dreams of emulating them and gaining power through terrorizing the masses. Thus he remarks, "I'll be a big crook one day, and the people will be scared of me."²⁴

Expelled from numerous schools for stealing and womanizing, his intemperate habits finally get the better of him. He meets his nemesis in Maureen, a

school teacher, with whom he falls madly in love. For him she represents the “remote and romantic” beauty that he has seen in films.

An unusual relationship develops between this young boy and the older woman. For Maureen it is just a diversion from her dreary school routine. When she is finally tired of him and rejects him, he is totally shattered. Like the heroes of numerous films he has seen, he gives vent to his pent up frustration by “hitting the bottle”, and this ultimately destroys him. His self destruction becomes apparent in the lines :

“He was finding a panacea for lovesickness in rum and sometimes cheap country spirit. The money that he now borrowed was used not to pay his debts, or to incur new ones, but to drink himself silly. I (the protagonist) regretted having been the first person to have offered him a drink. I should have known that Sunil was a person who could do nothing in moderation”.²⁵

Thus when the protagonist meets him after a considerable lapse of time, he is shocked by Sunil’s physical transformation.

“He was completely different person from the handsome, cocksure youth I had met at the wrestling match. His cheeks were hollowed and he had not shaved for days. I knew when I first met him that he was without scruples, a shallow youth, the product of many circumstances. He was no longer so shallow and had stumbled upon love but his character was too weak to sustain the weight of disillusionment”.²⁶

Sunil's final attempt to resurrect himself from ruination ends in a pathetic failure. He tries to attain respectability by seeking employment in a paper factory. He is optimistic of salvaging his life, for he remarks :

"I'm not going to think. I'm going to work in a paper factory. I shall become respectable. What an adventure that will be !"²⁷

But this becomes Sunil's final adventure in the series of adventures in his short life. Even before he can start working, he meets a pitiable end, when he is murdered in a dark alley one night. A product of urban culture, he is ultimately destroyed by the urban values that he had nourished.

The old man in "The Dust In The Mountains," aware of the hazards of urban existence, warns the rustic Bishnu of the perils of city life. Lured by the dreams of "easy money" in the cities, young village boys often become pawns of the unscrupulous sophisticates who employ them for their illicit activities. The nightmare starts when they fall into the dragnet of law-enforcing authorities. No one comes to the rescue of these unfortunate youngsters. They are condemned to a life of imprisonment, forgotten by everyone except their dear ones in the distant villages, who soon give them up as lost forever.

Thus Bond's children while trying to find a foothold in a world where cruelty is the main key are ruthlessly put down time and again. But despite their adversities, they never allow their vision to be eclipsed by pessimism or cynicism. This is because Ruskin Bond never allows his vision to be clouded even for a

moment by morbidity. He recognizes the pervasiveness of evil in our world but at the same time he does not allow his children to lose their goodness, innocence or their basic optimism.

His young thief in "The Thief" is a case in point. Misled by urban values to a life of pilfering, this young delinquent undergoes a radical change when he comes in contact with Arun. Arun represents the goodness so rarely encountered in this world. A simple minded young man, he teaches the youngster not only to cook but also to read and write. However despite his kindness, the young lad waits for an opportunity to swindle him and then escape. The opportunity soon presents itself, when one evening, Arun brings home a bundle of notes and keeps it under his mattress. With deft hands the thief steals the money at night and runs away to the railway station. But before long he is overcome by a tremendous sense of remorse. He cannot reconcile himself to the fact that he has robbed the man who not only gave him shelter and employment, but had placed implicit trust on him. Tormented by the thought of this betrayal of trust, he retraces his steps back to Arun's house to return the stolen money. His inherent goodness triumphs over his baser instincts. His naivety rings through his words :

"I was fond of Arun. My affection for him, my sense of sympathy but most of all my desire to write whole sentences drew me back to the room".²⁸

A study of Bond's juvenile characters cannot be complete without reference to those adults who despite being grown-ups do not lose their fundamental innocence, goodness or their childlike traits. As a result, they find themselves

hopelessly inadequate to cope with the intricacies of the world. A typical case in point is Inspector Keemat Lal in "A Case For Inspector Lal". When he establishes the identity of the Rani's murderer, he behaves in a manner totally unbecoming of a policeman. He suppresses facts of the case so that young Kusum does not face trial and stigmatization.

Even when Kusum tries to kill him on realizing that he has discovered her deadly secret, he does not ruthlessly suppress her. Instead, he behaves in a manner that is totally unthinkable in this deadly world of crime and lawlessness. This is clear from his confession :

"Instead of being furious and outraged, instead of seizing the girl and marching her off to the nearest police station, I stroked her head and said silly comforting things".²⁹

Keemat Lal realizes that Kusum's act of killing the Rani was not pre-meditated. It was an impulsive act, the result of fear and desperation. So his final intuitive judgment is fair to the culprit. It exemplifies a victory of goodness and childlike instincts over his professionalism. It costs him his promotion in the police hierarchy. This unsuccessful policeman realizes that his naivety makes him a misfit in his profession and he sadly confides to anyone who cares to listen to him. "I should never have been a policeman".³⁰

However he raises a very significant and pertinent question at the end of the story.

“Tell me Mr.Bond, what would you have done if you had been in my place?”

I considered his question carefully for a moment or two, then said, ‘I suppose it would have depended on how much sympathy the girl evoked in me. She had killed in innocence.....’

‘Then you would have put your personal feelings above your duty to uphold the law?’

‘Yes. But I would not have made a very good policeman.’³¹

In this story too, as in his other works, Bond’s idealism comes to the fore.

His children never lose their innocence, goodness or their basic faith in life despite repeated batterings by fate. Surmounting adversities, they grow, enriched by their experiences, never resentful of what life has to offer but always optimistic of a bright future.

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Chapter IV

Chapter IV

A STUDY OF RUSKIN BOND IN THE HUMANISTIC PERSPECTIVE

“If I am not for myself

Who will be for me ?

And if I am not for others

What am I ?

If not now, when ?” — Ruskin Bond in “ Mountains In My
Blood”

Ruskin Bond probes deep into human problems, both social and psychological. His works reflect his deep and abiding commitment to human values.

Despite his impassioned love for nature, he is no recluse nor does he roam about in an imaginary world. He is acutely aware of the misery and sufferings of his fellow brethren. He is highly sensitive to all forms of oppression, exploitation and injustice. Like Dickens, his genius lies in his fellow feelings with his race; it enables him to transcend narrow, selfish interests and identify himself with the toiling humanity. Twentieth Century humanists like Wilfred Owen and Sasson took recourse to poetry to voice their disenchantment with war and project the horrors of war with its accompanying gloom.

disillusionment and fear. Bond uses his poetry, short stories and novels to promulgate his sympathy and compassion for the underdogs of society. He takes recourse to art to project their poverty, wretchedness and despair and to bring about an awareness of their terrible plight. His main endeavour is the realization of an ideology by which man will acquire a true understanding of himself and thereby lay the foundation of ethical behaviour that will result in the birth of a just social order.

This chapter aims at studying Bond in the humanistic perspective, with particular reference to his passionate espousal of the cause of the oppressed, exploited and the down-trodden.

The term “humanism” was first used by the nineteenth century German scholars to designate the Renaissance emphasis on classical studies. So humanism was the European Renaissance revival of interest in western classical literature. It was pervasively secular and oriented to human rather than theological concerns, unlike the Bible, the other great source of Western thought.

The term “Humanism” was itself derived from Latin *humanitas*, an educational and political ideal that was the basis of the entire movement. *Humanitas* meant the development of human virtue to its fullest extent. It implied qualities like benevolence, compassion, understanding and mercy along with other subsidiary qualities like prudence, fortitude and judgement. The purview of the Renaissance humanism therefore included not only realistic

social criticism but also Utopian hypothesis. It called for the reform of culture and the transformation of the passive and ignorant society of the middle ages into a new society that would reflect and encourage the greatest human potentialities.

The early humanists returned to the classics, because classical thought offered insight into the heart of things.

The intellectual stars of the Renaissance, Petrarch, Erasmus and Sir Thomas Moore commented upon and made available to a wider audience the great philosophical works of Greece and Rome. They emphasized on logical reasoning, critical thinking, religious tolerance and focused on humanity rather than on the gods. While Erasmus eulogized the classical learning that had rid the mind of ignorance and superstition, Moore negated the long held Christian belief that “consolation for the miseries of this present life is a picture of life to come”.¹ He advocated happiness as the primary goal of human existence and protested against the “contempt for well-being and honourable pleasures”.²

Thus the humanistic movement of the sixteenth century was a secular literary movement, which aimed at the reawakening of the moral and intellectual nature of man. But battered and scarred by the two world wars, Modern Age has given a new meaning to ‘Humanism’. Modern Humanism challenges racism, sectarianism, nationalism, ethnicism, sexism and other forms of bigotry. It propagates a fervent belief in individual freedom and a passionate hatred for all forms of authoritarianism. It condemns environmental degradation and

destruction, and the arrogance of humans who take everything for themselves without regard to other life forms on the earth. It insists on judging and interacting with man as humans and not as objects or classes. It condemns the subordination of labourers and women and stresses on their emancipation from their lower- class status.

Though the bourgeoisie have been successful to some extent in providing trade, commerce and civilized social system to the community, it has resulted in the weakening of human sympathy and understanding.

Thus under the influence of Karl Marx, Fredrick Engels, Auguste Comte and John Stuart Mill, modern humanists have aimed at reducing the domination of capital over labour, of the affluent over the impoverished, and of man over women.

While Marx and Engels have advocated communism as the ultimate means of human salvation, in Comte we “ find a man of true disinterestedness, wishing pathetically for social order in which man might be industrious, happy, benevolent and peaceful”.³

David Ehrenfeld in his book “The Arrogance of Humanism” has described at length man’s total disregard for the safety and survival of other life forms on the Earth, his ignorance of inter connectedness of nature and his misguided focus only on his own development, progress and interests.

Modern humanists, therefore not only work against discrimination, war, nuclear militarism but they also strive to preserve the bio-diversity of our planet

and protect its natural eco-systems. So they advocate environmental regulations, restrictions on the creation of nature preserves etc. Steven .D. Schaferman in his "Address to the Unitarian Universalist Congregation of Butter Country" very comprehensively stated that modern "humanists stand for the building of a more humane, just, compassionate and democratic society using realistic ethics based on human reason, experience and reliable knowledge—an ethics that judges the consequences of human actions by the well-being of all life on Earth".⁴

An avowed humanist, Bond creates in his readers an awareness of the dehumanizing evils crippling our society. He attempts to stir the springs of tenderness in them and activate them for the removal of these evils so that a just and humane social order can come into being.

His humanistic sympathies, egalitarian convictions and his altruism compel him to speak like Gorky, of man's condition "not only to show how awful it is" but also to suggest what man could be. Appalled by the poverty and deprivation of the simple hill-folk in his native Garhwal, his heart reaches out in sympathy for them. There is increasing interaction in his works between his characters and the social and cultural milieu. Society often assumes the role of a corporate villain and individual malefactions become symptomatic of prevalent abuses.

The demoralized and browbeaten rustics are his recurrent subjects. Bond portrays the social evils that wreck the lives of his characters. Bereft of money, the most essential commodity for primary human existence, these

hapless villagers unwittingly fall prey to all forms of exploitation and social abuse. Forced by circumstances, they accept their subjugation with calm stoicism. They are often deprived of fundamental human rights and denied basic human dignity. Yet they put up with their life of servitude and its accompanying humiliations and injustices with passive resignation.

In "Dead Man's Gift", the impoverished villagers of Ahirpur are lured into the enticing monetary trap of Lala Ram Das, the village money-lender. Like Shylock in Shakespeare's "Merchant Of Venice", Lala is not content till he has extracted his "pound of flesh" from these wretched village folk. Powerless to extricate themselves from his vicious debt trap, they allow themselves to be exploited and turned into veritable slaves to appease him.

Bond shows the hopelessly trapped condition of these villagers in debt. His basic humanism is revolted by this vicious system of usury rampant in Indian society. He launches a frontal attack on Lala Ram Das, and other human leeches like him, who drain the life-blood out of our society. His revulsion stems from his abhorrence to all forms of exploitation and is traceable in his deep compassion for fellow-men.

Bond makes Dilawar Singh, the thanedar of Ahirpur, his mouthpiece as he launches into virulent attack on Lala Ram Das. This accounts for Dilwar Singh's pointed question to the bania:

" Hello, what's this ? Is this one of your unfortunate debtors ? Have you taken his life as well as his clothes ?"⁵

The crafty 'thanedar,' who under the cover of darkness, had propped up the naked corpse against Lala's main door, now feigns astonishment as he watches the terrified bania trying to get rid of the dead body. Bond almost gloats over the plight of this spurious exploiter, as seeking mercy, he goes down on his knees before the head constable. The cornered usurer now tries to buy his freedom by gifting Dilwar Singh the money he had earlier refused, even as a loan.

Bond's poetic justice becomes evident as Ram Das is caught in a way more intricate than the ones he had painstakingly woven for his hapless client. As nemesis overtakes Lala, Bond's basic humanism comes to the fore. Unable to suppress a tinge of pity at his miserable plight, Bond remarks :

"The unfortunate Ram Das realized that he was in an evil predicament. True, he was innocent but before he could prove this, he would be arrested by the police whom he had scorned and flouted. Lawyers would devour his savings. He would be torn from his family and deprived of his comforts.....".⁶

However, such poetic justice as is meted out to Lala Ram Das is possible only in the ordered world of art. It is not a fact of nature. In life, virtue is not always rewarded, as the wicked often prosper and go unpunished. While a few Dilawar Singhs do exist, the majority of the law-enforcers in our country often connive with the affluent and powerful to torment the poor. Death, for these wretched creatures often becomes the only alternative to their doomed existence.

Entire families are ruined as the tortured men resort to suicide to escape from their irrevocable debt trap.

Death certainly releases them from their misery, but their debts are bequeathed to their heirs. Like their fathers before them, the children are compelled to bear this cross throughout their lives and are often crushed beneath its weight. Here Bond reflects on how man's struggle to come out of his misery only makes it worse.

While usurers like Ram Das sap the villagers of their psychological strength, simple diseases drain them of their physical energy. The deplorable lack of medical facilities in rural India, compels the old man (in "Dust In The Mountains") to travel from his remote village to distant Mussoorie for the treatment of a simple ailment. He becomes Bond's spokesman as he voices the terrible predicament of the villagers who often die due to lack of timely medical treatment.

" Doctors don't like coming to villages,.....there's no money to be made in the villages. So we must go to the doctors in towns".⁷

Like him , Megchand (in "A Wayside Inn") epitomizes the stoic suffering of the rural populace. A teashop owner in the desolate wilderness of Garhwal, acute stomach pains forces him to leave his native village to seek treatment in Mussoorie.

Bond laments the lack of basic medical amenities in the Indian villages. Served mostly by the primary health centers, without doctors and medicine, the villagers are denied the basic minimum required for healthy existence.

Medical practitioners refuse to come to the villages as no money can be made from these poverty-stricken areas. Through characters like Megchand and the old man, Bond expresses his own disenchantment at the ethics of the modern physicians. Thus Megchand becomes highly sceptical when directed to go to Delhi for advanced medical treatment.

“Whenever someone is ill, they say : “Go to Delhi!” Does the whole world go to Delhi to get treated?”⁸

Past experience has made Megchand painfully aware that the medical profession is infested with human sharks, who on the pretext of medical treatment drain their patients of their resources. Often forced to sell their land and property to meet the awesome expense of medical treatment, many villagers are ruined by the city doctors rather than by their diseases.

Megchand, like others of his clan is reluctant to go to the big city for treatment because he realizes the utter futility of such treatment. He is aware how poor and unimportant people like him are neglected or overlooked by the big physicians of the cities. He states a painful truth when he sadly remarks :

“My uncle was told to go to Delhi for an operation. He went from one hospital to another until his money was finished and then he came back to the village and died within a week.”⁹

Like the old man (in “Dust In The Mountains”) Megchand is content to live with his ailment rather than “die amongst strangers”¹⁰ in a big city. Bond castigates this deplorable erosion of human values and sympathises with the unfortunate rustics, who endure pain with patience and fortitude often looking towards heaven for the alleviation of their suffering and misery.

Thus he realizes the importance of education in a country like India where poverty, untouchability, casteism etc. continue to hold sway. Education not only helps in the moulding of human personality but it facilitates the exercise of judgement and responsibility necessary for eradication of these social evils.

Though English by birth, Bond “grew up as an Indian with no division of loyalties”¹¹. His heart bleeds for the little children of our country who are denied the opportunity of learning the three R s. While it is true that our Constitution guarantees free education to all children up to the age of 14, yet few can avail of this opportunity. A large number of Indian villages lack the infrastructure of even a primary school.

In “The Panther’s Moon”, the children of Manjari do not attend school. as this remote mountain village has no center of education. Like other children

born and bred in penury, these children too are engaged in manual labour to augment the family's meager income.

But Mohan (in "The Visitor") and Bisnu (in "The Panther's Moon") are notable exceptions. Possessing great grit and determination, these young lads are ready to brave all odds in order to acquire education. Through them Bond reflects the secret longings and aspirations of the impoverished children who "wanted to read and write as well as anyone in the world".¹²

A destitute, Mohan sells knick-knacks at street-corners during the day and spends his evenings beneath the pavement lamp, lost in his world of books. Bisnu trudges five miles uphill through a thick forest to the nearest school at Kemptee, their village's only link with the civilized world. His problem is compounded when Sheroo, his faithful dog is killed by a prowling predator while returning home from school. With his annual examinations a few weeks away, Bisnu has to temporarily suspend attending school as "there was no one to accompany him and it was too dangerous to go alone".¹³

His struggle for education acquires a tragic proportion when he is himself attacked by the man-eater while on his way back from school. Sick and cold with fear he takes refuge in the branches of a Himalayan spruce, fervently hoping it would save him from the panther. Remaining motionless in the tree, he sends up "a prayer to all the gods he could think of".¹⁴ The village search party manages to locate the missing boy only late at night when they hear his frantic cries ringing through the dark, desolate forest.

Bisnu and Mohan epitomize the suffering children of our country. Through them, Bond focuses attention on the plight of thousands of Indian youths, who undergo herculean struggle to acquire the minimum basic education. It often breaks their spirit and many abandon their pursuit in despair.

Bond is saddened by the plight of these unfortunate children, whose dreams of improving their lot through a decent education is nipped in the bud. Weighed down by poverty and illiteracy, they are defeated even before they start their journey through life.

Bond's passionate espousal of the cause of the deprived and the downtrodden stems from his inherent desire for a social order where every man is treated with a sense of dignity irrespective of his caste, creed, status or position in life. He is painfully aware of the influence of money and power in determining an individual's position in the modern world. He has also seen how society discards, without compunction, those who have outlived their utility. Bond is deeply pained by the heartlessness of modern society, which while idolizing the achievers ruthlessly segregates itself from the failures and fallen heroes.

In "The Garlands On His Brow" and "The Kitemaker", he presents a study of the trauma and suffering of Hasan and Mehmood, the two great heroes of yesteryears. Unfortunately they are now rejected and forgotten by the very people who had once showered accolades on them. They both belong to the modern age where "life has become fast, unreflective and the people are too

busy counting their gains to bother about the idols of their youth".¹⁵ And herein lies their tragedy.

When Hasan (in "The Garland On His Brow") gives up a promising career in wrestling to become the promiscuous Rani's paramour and bodyguard, he hardly realizes the heavy price he would have to pay for this choice. His fortunes plummet and his life takes a turn for the worse when the Rani suddenly expires. Without the Rani's indulgent support, he suddenly finds himself without money or employment. He returns once again to the professional wrestling arena. But age and good living having already taken their toll on his body, Hasan finds himself hopelessly inadequate to meet the challenges of the new young professionals and he is defeated again and again. His spirits break. Hurt and humiliated he finally withdraws from the ring altogether. Ill-equipped for other professions, it is not before long, that this rejected wrestler finds himself on the streets. Acute poverty drives him to beg on the streets of Dehra, the place that had once given him so much wealth and fame. Its people who had once flocked to him with admiration and awe, now desert him.

Hasan's terrible plight takes Bond's mind back to the past and compels a comparison between the limitations of our mechanistic age and the golden age of the past "when a man was praised for his past achievements and his failures were tolerated and forgiven".¹⁶

Similar comparison is again drawn in "The Kitemaker", to highlight the insensitivity of the modern age. Like Hasan, Mehmood, the famous kitemaker

(in “The Kitemaker”) falls on evil days when the rapidly expanding city swallows up the fields, leaving very little space for kite-flying. Kite-flying soon becomes an obsolete sport. With the changing environment there is a marked change in people’s attitude towards this sport, as, “adults disdained them and children preferred to spend their money at the Cinema”.¹⁷

Thus along with kite-flying, Mehmood, its most famous craftsman slips out of public memory. Bond infuses heart-rending pathos in the old kite-maker’s nostalgic reminiscences of the past :

“..... great battles were fought, the kites swerving and swooping in the sky, tangling with each other until the string of one of them was severed..... Kite-flying then was the sport of the Kings. There was time, then, to spend an idle hour with a gay, dancing strip of paper”.¹⁸

Through characters like Mehmood and Hasan, Bond expresses his disenchantment with the modern age “ where everyone hurried, in a heat of hope and delicate things like kites and daydreamers were trampled underfoot”.¹⁹ His innate goodness cries out in protest against the apathetic attitude of modern society that causes untold human suffering. He is highly aggrieved, like Wordsworth, when he sees “what man has made of man”.²⁰

He is convinced that the root cause of all human suffering is modern man’s insensitivity and indifference towards his fellow brethren. His kitemaker’s tragedy lies in the fact that in the modern world he has become an

anomaly like the old banyan tree under which he sits daydreaming. “Both are taken for granted—permanent fixtures that were of no concern to the raucous, sweating mass of humanity”.²¹

Bond is equally perturbed by man’s total disregard for all other life forms on earth. As already discussed in Chapter III, he is horrified by man’s insensitivity and greed that have led him to plunder and ransack the environment for his own selfish ends. In the process, man has upset the delicate balance in the already fragile eco-system.

Yet despite this dismal scenario, Bond does not lose faith in the inherent goodness of man. His optimism stems from his belief in the duality and diversity of human nature. Like John Stuart Mill, he is convinced that “ human nature is not motivated solely by self-interest or by consideration of pleasure and pain, but it is capable of self-sacrifice”.²² Thus, while on the one hand his world is often infested with rogues, cheats and villains, side by side there exists characters who epitomize goodness and compassion, generosity and benevolence.

He presents cheats like Mr. Khushal, the school teacher (in “Masterji”), who has no compunction in making money by selling fake matriculation certificates to his young, impressionable students. Along with such villiany there co-exists his ideal characters like Wang Chei’s wife (in “The Most Potent Medicine Of All”) and Aunt Mariam (in “The Guardian Angel”). They enrich

and ennoble the lives of those they come in contact with and make the world a much more pleasant place to dwell in.

As we have seen (in Chapter I of this dissertation) in Wang Chei's wife, Bond creates a symbol of selfless devotion and limitless love. She sacrifices her life to redress her husband's physical suffering and cure his simple ailment. She mutilates her body for "she has read in the book of Lui Fei that only her own flesh and blood could cure her husband and these she had unflinchingly taken from her soft, generous bosom".²³

This simple Chinese housewife gives a new meaning to existence through her unparalleled sacrifice. It is her utterly unselfish nature coupled with her immense love for her husband that leads her to the ultimate self-sacrifice. This act ennobles her character and raises her to almost heroic proportion. While we are appalled by her action, Bond seeks and finds justification for her magnanimous gesture:

"You were right, Lui Fei, old sage. What more potent ingredient are there than love and compassion".²⁴

Here Bond acquaints his readers with that "deep' abiding and cherishing love"²⁵ that sustains human relationships, a love that has increasingly become a rarity in the modern world. It is the love that Wang Chei's wife had for her husband of twenty years, a love that Bond still cherishes for his father, long dead. It is "a love beyond Death—a love that makes life alive"²⁶ and

meaningful. Thus in Bond's world love is the only force strong enough to break all bonds and release the capacity for genuinely altruistic action.

Bond is also fascinated by the diversity, vibrancy and vigour of life. He accepts the sublime and the sordid, the pleasures and pains, the joys and sorrows that make up life. His catholicity of outlook makes him espouse the cause of the weak and the oppressed underdogs of our society.

In "Most Beautiful" he reaffirms his genuine human response to love and compassion through his highly sensitive portrayal of the character of Suresh, the young retard. His basic humanism enables him to penetrate the veneer of physical grotesqueness to the noble heart trapped within a hopelessly deformed body.

Suresh's physical deformity not only sets him apart from other children but makes him an object of their ridicule. After rescuing him from a bunch of stone-pelting children, when the narrator takes the bleeding child home, he is shocked by his father's inhumanity. Unable to accept his only child's deformity, the father's frustration manifests itself in his total indifference towards his son. Suresh is treated as a freak of nature and ostracized not only by other children but also by his own father.

Overcome by a feeling of pity for this tormented and lonely child, the narrator gives him companionship and even manages to teach him to swim. This

new skill “ gave him a certain confidence, made his life something more than a one dimensional existence”.²⁷

The narrator treats the young retard as a normal human being. He is therefore, terribly disappointed when Suresh receives the news of his imminent departure for Delhi with utter indifference :

“I felt a little hurt by his apparent indifference. Did our weeks of companionship mean nothing to him?”²⁸

The narrator here fails to appreciate the fact that the mentally handicapped Suresh cannot react to a situation like a normal child. But when the realization dawns on him that his friend is leaving him forever, the young retard reacts in a way that leaves the narrator speechless with wonder and amazement.

Braving the taunts and jeers of the evening crowd, Suresh hobbles through the crowded market to the railway station. As his train pulls out of the station, the narrator suddenly notices the young boy desperately limping after the speeding train, trying to stop its departure. Thus in his own clumsy way, Suresh displays his love and gratitude to his friend. At that moment, despite his physical grotesqueness, Suresh becomes for the overwhelmed narrator the “most beautiful boy in the whole world”.²⁹

Through Suresh, Bond affirms his belief that physical deformity often camouflages a noble heart. Therefore one should not judge an individual purely by his physical appearance, nor allow himself to be prejudiced by physical

ugliness or deformity. For beneath it may lurk a golden heart, and a pure heart is certainly more beautiful than a perfect body.

Bond's humanistic philosophy surfaces in the final paragraph of the story as the narrator tries to assuage the suffering of the young child's tormented mother.

“Suresh is my only son. My husband is disappointed in him. I love my son. Do you think he is very ugly?

Ugly is just another word, I said like beauty. They mean different things to different people.

What did the poet say ?----‘Beauty is Truth’ and ‘Truth is Beauty’.

But if beauty and truth were the same thing, why have different words? There are no absolutes except birth and death.”³⁰

Bond's short stories are an articulate statement of humanistic values and a forceful manifesto of human rights. In them he envisages a society freed from class, creed, discrimination, prejudice and authoritarianism and so argues the necessity of defending values like justice, equality, tolerance, moderation and truth. Like a messiah, he preaches the creed of love, compassion, benevolence and selflessness amongst fellowmen. He believes like Col. Mahindra in Mulk Raj Anand's “The Old Woman And The Cow” that “We must build a new life here on this earth and not in heaven..... and at the back of all wretchedness

there is the soul of man. The soul remains even when wretchedness has passed.

And the deepest good builds on the deepest human being, the whole man".³¹

And herein lies the true humanistic philosophy of Ruskin Bond.

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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 *Salamambo* (1862) and *La Comedie Humaire* (*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 a universal 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 preciseness 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 ennoble 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

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

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 woman he meets on the railway platform. He instinctively realizes that this simple and unassuming woman 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 Murlī 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 benovolent 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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* * * *

Chapter VI

Chapter VI

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 ingenuous 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.

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