Chapter IV

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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 w 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 Meghchand 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 unparalled 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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