

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.

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