

Reflection of the Indian Ethos in Ruskin Bond's Selected Writings

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Abstract

This research paper talks about Ruskin Bond, an Anglo-Indian writer, who is of British descent, living in India. The Indian aspect is always present in his stories. Here, it is an attempt to glean that particular aspect through some of his selected works. The psychological framework of the writer shows up in his crisis of identity with colonial dilemma in most of his works, reflecting the cultural belief systems of the people living in hilly regions of India. The paper also recognizes his contribution to mainstream literature and it shows Ruskin Bond as the writer who is much more than just a 'children's story writer.'

Keywords: English Literature; Indian Ethos, Indian Literature; Indian Philosophy; Ruskin Bond.

I

Ruskin Bond has been living in Mussoorie and Dehradun for almost fifty years now, drawing inspiration by the rivers, hills, valleys and people. He also writes about the common Indian man, a common man seen on the road, small shops, vendors, street dogs, etc. catches his attention and thus he thematically deals with their struggles of the day. With the sprinkling of abundant Nature around his words provides hope and love that is eminent. With this distinct flavor he nourishes the soul of the reader. With his words he brings alive the Nature of India with its various colors. He makes it sure that his stories have a flavor of local environment.

Even before India got its independence, several British and Anglo Indian families had begun to leave. In his autobiography, *Scenes from a Writer's life: A Memoir*, which is about his childhood in British India. He calls those British 'poor whites' as they had no future or any prospect in England. Colonization didn't only uproot the natives but also left the Colonizers with similar effect. "I suppose I qualified as a 'poor-white'," says Bond (*Scene 46*). Just after finishing his school education, he had to move to England to find a publisher for his first book.

The thing he realized in England was that undoubtedly his roots belong to this country and his family, his ancestors were from here, yet he was unable

to feel at home in this country. He longed for India, and waited eagerly to return. Identity crisis was a major issue in India when he was there because there he was treated as an outsider but not as much an outsider as he was treated in England. This dilemma was faced by several colonial children. There are many autobiographical and fictional writings in which the lead characters are torn apart due to identity crisis.

The writings speak of India as 'the lost world' of their 'golden' childhood. There was a sense of displacement in Bond also, all the more brought by the British relatives whom he used to call 'champions of Empire.' They constantly criticized him for being 'too Indian.' Despite his aunt being an Anglo-Indian and his uncle a South-Indian doctor, they wanted him to become more British in his manners. It was in England that he realized fully that India was not only his home but also that he is born to be in India among his Indian friends. He left his British identity and chose to be an Indian (Khorana 26). His longing for India made him run far away from England and its soil, when he still was "only a boy to take up the challenge of being a writer in a changing India of post-independence era." (Aggarwal 6).

This much love and dedication for his country, for India "is something really striking to note in the life and literature of a person who is having Anglo-Indian blood flowing through his veins" (Navlani 161). He loves everything about India and the cultural diversity of the country attracts him the most. He enjoys it a lot when people admire India for its unity in diversity. For example, once he was in a taxi which was Delhi bound, he got mesmerised by the rural scenery which began from the outskirts of Dehradun up to the fringes of Meerut. He also witnesses the flip side of the beauty and writes "the litter that accumulates wherever there are large centres of population; the blaring of horns; loudspeakers here and there. It's all part of the picture. But the picture as a whole is a fascinating one..." (*The India I Love* 51).

The writings of Bond reflect the 'real India', which acknowledges the true Indian persona and spirit. There have been many interpretations of India by other British writers who have looked down upon the Indians, as people devoid of civilisation. Colonial authors created the stereotypes and the best examples among the writers is of Kipling's *Kim* and Forster's *A Passage to India*. Both of these writers have portrayed colonial India from the perspective of the British colonisers, degrading it to the level of a land which is full of muddle, mystery, lethargy, inactivity and paganism. Both the texts are set in India and show the colonial attitude of not only Kipling and Forster, but also of every British writer in colonial India

II

Philippa Levine through her book *Sunrise to Sunset* (2007) has figured out the factor that had made India attractive for the British colonisers. She says

that after the failure of the American colonies and the trade in the East Indies, India became immediately a centre of attraction and attention for them. British ruled India for almost two hundred years. India became the principal training ground for the British officials. They vehemently claimed their right to stay and exploit the country the way they wanted in the pretext of extending benefits of civilisation. In the words of Kipling India was 'a white man's burden.' They considered themselves superior to Indians and they established themselves by political and military coercion. They attacked and destroyed the soul of India by systematically uprooting them culturally. And to increase the effect of this process of ruining the cultural identity of Indians, they wrote literature which was more of a weapon than the source of correct information. It is apparent that Kipling's "characterization of colonial life became the medium through which the British viewed their work..." (Boehmer 52) In other words, authors like John Masters, Kipling and Forster carried on the venture to produce a discussion through their texts which helped in shaping the mind sets of Indian people in favour of the British colonisers.

The stereotyped attitude of Forster and Kipling came into being because of the general feeling of superiority over the colonised nations in the minds of British. From the perspective of the superiority in British and inferiority in Indians a study of *Kim* and *A Passage to India* has revealed the prejudices that both the authors had in their minds.

Kipling's protagonist Kim has white complexion, is Irish and has received education from St. Xavier's school. Forster's Aziz, a typical Indian, who tries his best to win the confidence of the British Colonisers. Though towards the end of the novel, he is a changed man, who protests against the inhuman behaviour of British against him.

It is said that a country is recognised through its literature. Everything about India has been written and every aspect of it has been explored by various authors but mostly it is to mock or ridicule at it. Recently Indo-English fictional writing is focussing on the impact of western culture on India and on the benefits of it. Ruskin Bond is alone such writer who writes about the beauty of India. Though, his writings are mostly about the people living in the Himalayan regions, nevertheless they are interesting and engaging.

For him India is:

The India that I love does not make the headlines. The India that I love comprises the goodwill and good humour of ordinary people; a tolerance for all customs; non-interference in other's private lives; a friendly reciprocation

at all times; a philosophical acceptance of hardships; love and affection, especially in children. (*The India I Love ix*)

The British People who were born in the colonial era, considered themselves superior to the natives or the Indians who were colonized, just like Indians thought of themselves as inferior and timid in their own country. Ruskin Bond has never taken himself to be superior to any one, bereft of any ego, the humbleness and polite human nature has come to stay in him. He is the humblest and polite human being who enjoys being with the locals of hill stations, nor has he ever apologized on behalf of Europeans in his writings. Neither has he supported or criticized any culture. He believes in humanity and accepted and loved the Indian common people as they were without any malign and prejudice.

III

His renowned novella, *a flight of Pigeons*, speaks of European Diaspora. While the story revolves around the connections of hegemony in a cross-cultural and political circumstances, it principally is about the impact of congregation on the few individuals, torn apart from their own people.

The novella focusses on the 1857 rebellion. It begins with the narration by the lead character Ruth Labadoor, whose father gets murdered before her own eyes in a church, by the bunch of Indian revolutionaries. LalaRamjimal, who was not only served the Labadoor family, but at the same time was a dear family friend, comes to rescue Ruth and her mother Mariam from the wrath of the revolutionaries and does everything to keep them safe and secured.

Meanwhile Javed Khan, the pathan leader, kidnaps both the women and take them to his own home. Ruth and Mariam slowly dropped the European mannerisms and adapt to the Muslim lifestyle and don the Muslim identities. It seems that their superiority of race is diminished because of their gender. Power positions seems to reverses once again when the British army took hold of the Delhi Sultanate and captures Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar. Now Indians begin to run for their lives as the British make it a point to punish the rebels of the revolution. Still under Javed Khan's hold, Ruth and Mariam become courageous after getting news of the victory of the British over Indians, get into their original identity of being Europeans.

The story sheds light on the colonial dilemma. After many years of being subjugated and colonized by the British, India had been struggling to get in terms with its own culture and national identity. Moreover, the damage done by the Imperialists seemed to be deep rooted. There was cultural alienation and 'uprootedness.' Indians felt lost and defeated in their own minds. Because the British crushed the soul of India by attacking their belief

system, their faith and identity. They had no idea where their country was going. People were in flux as to what to call their own or whom to listen. This disturbing issue has been the theme of several contemporary writers.

These were the difficult times that India as a country faced at that time. Colonizers and the colonized people, both were looking for their identities, looking for their real homes. Bond belongs to the era and represents the India where Indians were aware of the revolutionary ideas being imbedded in their psyche, yet they understood their responsibilities as human beings and did everything to help their British friends who were stuck in the cross fire. Ruth and Mariam get helped by not only their own people, but also by the Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs in their difficult times. A flight of pigeons is one such story that speaks that how Indians stand united in their diversity and have it in them to forget the differences and choose humanity when extreme situations surface. Mariam, doesn't forget the kindness showed towards her and her family by Javed Khan and his family. Later, she makes sure that his family is safe from the repercussion of the British. She uses her influence to ensure their safety. Ruskin Bond through the story shows that mostly Indians are misjudged and are considered as narrow minded. Through the characters he tries to show that humanity reigns high in the veins of Indians, that they have it in them to protect people putting aside all kinds of differences. Ruskin Bond tries to reestablish the faith in humanity and that it is possible to co-exist with the differences.

IV

Bond seems to be awed by the Indian myths, beliefs and customs. He through his writings bring them to life and it appears that he enjoys writing them. For example, in his work *Ghost Stories from the Raj*, he has come up with the collection of ghost stories written by British officials and soldiers during colonial era. In the Introduction to the book, he has said humorously:

“Haunted India, in fact! For the British, coming from a land where haunted houses and castles were the norm, were fascinated by the wonderful variety of supernatural manifestations that they found in India [...] The stories of this period tell us something about colonial attitudes—ranging from paternalistic to the cynically indifferent...”
(x-xii)

The stories depict an image of India which shows it as a country with bizarre and irrational beliefs. But for Ruskin Bond they are the stories of his land and he adds his wit and humour in them to make them entertaining to his readers. Indo-English Literature in the postmodern times consists of some of the weaknesses or shortcomings which have greater impact on the

readership of its writers. Moreover, Indo-English writers have never actually portrayed an

ordinary Indian man. It has failed in doing justice to the common man of India. Characters in the Indo-English fictional works have words put in their mouths in a language or a dialect that is not at all related to the Indians. Hence it is not a credible account of Indian culture or ethos.

Bond's characters are experiential, having their own defects. They have been inspired from the real life, have names like Kishen and Binya and are steeped in the Indian spirit. Their conversations are written in English which make the entire thing a bit awkward. It is because English is not the native language of India. Hence, there is no readership to be found at the grassroots level. The literature written in this language has readers who have English as their second or third language.

Bond is well aware of this fact and knows that it can be a major issue. But with this knowledge he is also aware of the human nature and what are its requirements. He touches the chord with the readers with his simplicity and expression. He writes with love and passion that gets reflected in his writings and that's the reason that over the years his popularity has increased and his works are being translated in several Indian languages. However, it took years for the fame that he deserved to reach on to his doors. But he was never too hungry for name or fame. He kept writing short notes, stories, poems, novellas and numerous essays with love and energy. Yet, critics have preferred to focus on the writers living on the foreign lands than on the ones who write within the country. Ruskin Bond has been categorised as a children's story writer. But the truth is that his stories have something for every age group. His child characters are more mature than the adults. It's all because of our neo-colonialist attitude. It's when an Indian writer gets acclaimed and appreciated by the people in abroad, that we begin to value their work. "For example, we eulogize post-1980 Indian English novelists because they have been honoured abroad and place them above old writers like R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Raja Rao and Arun Joshi" (Das 145). The Bond's works are not carefully discussed in foreign lands. It could be because he hasn't advertised himself like others have done. Nowadays writers have become celebrities. It is seen that his works are still able to survive in times when creative writing is treated in a professional way, when all kinds of promotions and controversies are built up to highlight the 'product'. He has preferred to stay away from the limelight, unlike his contemporary writers.

After the colonisation it is the industrialisation and then urbanisation that is gradually eating up the Indo-English literature and this literature has

become more about the city life than the rural or the countryside people of India. It can be said that the real India has been buried and forgotten in the debris of the ugly urbanisation. A major chunk of literature has begun to sprout from the expatriates and writers developed in the campuses of universities and colleges. Their perception of India and other things remain limited to the corridors of the universities. They try to make their writings serious and deep by inculcating unnecessary murky details.

Bond admits the growth of cities in unmanageable pace “villages are turning into towns, towns into cities, and cities into mega cities. A reader once told me that the Dehradun I write about doesn’t exist anymore” (Dhar 2014). However, he has derived all of his inspiration from the small towns he has lived in or have been in and he will continue to write about them more from his memory as they’re vanishing fast. There is a tremendous work done on the darker side of the urban India, Bond’s works continue to dwell on the things that offer tranquillity and peace which appears to have been long lost from the lives of people.

His readers have increased over the years, or perhaps to have some respite from this tormenting world. He gives its credit to the increasing numbers of publishers in India. The accessibility to books have increased and fortunately reading has never gone out of fashion. Indo- English literature of the present times is not appreciated as the precursors of it have gained the world wide popularity like RabindraNath Tagore, RK Narayan, Toru Dutt and so on, or it can be said that all eyes have been directed to BhashaLiterature. In some countries this literature has received the deserving academic acclamation.

Bond’s stories are adored and loved by his readers. Many of them have been included in the curriculum of Indian schools and colleges, such as *Woman on platform number 8*, *Time Stops at Shamli*, *The Night Train at Deoli*, and *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*. Because of his gentle writings and personality, he gets invited to several literary fests, book signings and fairs which keep happening in many parts of the country. Many movies are made on his novels like *A Flight of Pigeons*, *The Blue Umbrella* and *Junoon*. He has won the National Award of Best Children’s Film. His first novel *Room on the Roof* has been serialised, produced by BBC (Wikipedia 2012). Things like this have increased his readership.

Unlike the other writers of his time, he is not the one whose writings revolve around the love and sex. Though he has written some tremendous moving love stories like *Love of long ago*, *Love is a Sad song*, *Time Stops at Shamli* and others but these stories talk about several things at one time. His stories deal with many emotions and there is always nature and human values involved. With this the love he writes about is most of the times unrequited or platonic.

His novella *The Sensualist* have the theme of sex but it is not as explicit as the other novels nowadays are. But Bond was charged with obscenity. He is not a person who gives undue importance to sex. He believes that love is much more than the physical plane. He values the feelings and emotions and so do the characters he creates, again a reflection of true Indian ethos.

V

There was a time when in novels British Raj was praised and glorified. But with the end of British, there arose an Indian form of novel and the entire genre was redefined. Interestingly, Bond began to write stories and novellas for children. It was the time when writers were engaged in reviving the national pride in the hearts of people. While his contemporaries were busy in writing for the adults, he started off by writing the literature for children. He believes that its more difficult to write for children as compared to adults as they have to be kept entertained and hooked on every page and he feels that writing for children keeps him lively. Bond's stories mostly portray difficult lives of the children living in the Himalayan regions of India. Bond himself had a difficult childhood and he hardly had any loving or dotting adult during that period of his life. Hence, through his art he tries to fulfil his desire of having loving relatives as we find in Indian families. His creations like the famous Grandfather and Grandmother, also the beloved of Uncle Ken is all born out of his imagination.

The issues that he had to face come alive in his writings like identity crisis, separation of his parents, lonely childhood and search for love and "The Room on The Roof" was one such novel that encompasses all these elements. It is an intensely autobiographical work, written at an early age of seventeen, when the writer went to England to explore the better prospects for the publication of his work. It was a crucial period in his life and became one of the major turning points in his life. He has given a vivid account of his love and longing for India in his famous book, "The India I love." He writes, "I am going back in time, to a period when I was caught between east and west, and had to make up my mind just where I belonged. I had been away from India for barely a month before I was longing to return. The insularity of the place where I found myself (Jersey, in the Channel Islands) had something to do with it, I suppose. There was little there to remind me of India or the East, not one brown face to be seen in the streets or on the beaches." (56)

He didn't plan on what he would write for publication but he kept a journal in which he wrote all that he was feeling at that time. Later, that journal took the shape of John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize winner novel "The Room on The Roof." Through his words he penned down the warm memories he

had of his beloved India and through his narration of the festivals and Indian customs it becomes more evident that he loved every aspect of this country which sometimes either gets overlooked or criticised by many writers. There is a beautiful and vivid description of Indian “Chaat” shop in the book which like many other scenes and descriptions are spell binding:

“Rusty had no idea what was meant by the word chaat, but before he could refuse the invitation Somi had bundled him into the shop from which the smoke still poured. At first nothing could be made out; then gradually the smoke seemed to clear and there in front of the boys, like some shining God, sat a man enveloped in rolls of glistening, oily flesh. In front of him, on a coal fire, was a massive pan in which sizzled a sea of fat; and with deft, practised fingers, he moulded and flipped potato cakes in and out of the pan.” (15)

His children’s stories are not fairy tale like or for any kind of amusement or entertainment, nor they are preachy. They are the representatives of the lost Indian values, sense and responsibilities. They stand true to the Gandhian famous thought “You must be the change; you wish to see in the world.” Every story consists of several layers, they may be very humorous or mysterious, still they will be full of surprises. For example, his story “Masterji” brings forth the limitations or inadequacies of public schools in small Indian towns. Children of today’s generation are more attracted to edgy fiction. They read about witches, wizards and vampires. Ruskin Bond’s stories have all the elements. They have suspense, mystery and adventures but they aren’t as sensational as others. The stories of Enid Blyton and Rowling might have attracted the readers for time being but they don’t give anything relevant specially to Indian children. For some India is found in its countryside or villages, some say it is in the big cosmopolitan cities whereas the India that Bond relates to is found in his writing, this conundrum of the Indian society which is less understood by people of foreign descent and even by those elite Indian writers. But Bond finds joy and a lingering hope which always carries a fragrance of fresh air from the hills.

His stories and essays show how the people living in the small towns have deep connection with the nature around. His writings have contributed tremendously to post independence and post-colonial literature and has given dual perspective, this hybrid quality that is found in his writing, makes it rich with depth and complexity which is a rare combination.

He is one of the few authors who can tell a story spontaneously, revealing at each level highest degree and measure of feelings and emotions. His refined, beautiful yet simple having a natural flow of a hilly brook, carrying in it the elixir which every earthly being seeks for.

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