

VIGNETTES FROM NATURE AND ENVIRONMENT: A RE-READING OF RUSKIN BOND'S SHORT STORIES

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Abstract

The paper would primarily attempt to establish, how Bond's short stories act as a document on Nature, along with the altering moods of mankind. An attempt would be made to elucidate how Ruskin Bond has often taken the stance of an environmentalist, needless to say that of a nature lover to project various environmental issues in his short stories and at times has given his commentaries on the miracles of nature, easefully weaving them with the multilayered nuances of human emotions.

Key Words : Ruskin Bond, nature, environment, short stories

Hailed as one of the most eloquent narrators of short stories, the Indian author with a British lineage, Ruskin Bond has palpably dealt with the myriad shades of human emotions, seamlessly surpassing the boundaries of age. His stories have ever emerged victorious in carving a coveted niche in the hearts of the readers by keeping lingering trails and dregs of unquenched desires for a little more. Perhaps there lies the magic of Mr Bond. He foments an insurmountable urge for fulfilment, strategically keeping the ultimate wishes unfulfilled. A sad satiety pervades his fictions to shower upon the readers the mellowed pleasures of melancholy and nostalgia. Readers have never failed to relate to the subtle intricacies of human relations, the most laconic yet poetically poignant human emotions and the trajectory on which the human psychology has been depicted by Bond in his bountiful reserve of fiction. However, it would somehow be an injustice to confer upon Bond the mere credit of scripting the filigree nuances of human emotions in his fictions, as coupled with that, Bond has successfully captured the various moods of nature that have amazed mankind with the unpredictable whims and acts of benevolence time and again. While the capricious nature has often acted as an elixir to lift up man's spirits by making him oblivious of the ruffled rues of life, it has also been at times the apparent foe to mankind, by being playfully flippant, vulnerable, despotic and indifferent to the human prayers and petitions. Yet, no matter how, nature has featured in Bond's fictions, it has compelled mankind to fall in love with it repeatedly.

Before embarking on the topic of concern, certain things need mention, for they claim to have an active correlation with Bond's dealings with nature. Ruskin Bond spent a considerable period of his childhood at Vijaynagar, Jamagar (Gujrat) and Shimla and later on after his father's demise he went to Mussoorie in the Dehradun district of the present north Indian state of Uttarakhand. He was born to Edith Clarke and Audrey Bond, in Kasauli, in the Punjab States Agency of the then British Colonial India. His parents having separated, when he was a kid of four years old, Bond was more attached to his grandparents, who lived at Mussoorie. He shifted to Mussoorie at an early, impressionable age and unfailingly developed inextricable bonds with his grandparents. Most interestingly Bond's infinite love for nature too claims to have its roots in the abode of his grandparents as he primarily imbibed this love from them. The overpowering Himalayan exuberance, particularly that of the colossus ranges of the Garhwal, Mussoorie and Dehradun, its Elysian beauty, stupendous glories, mirthful miracles and therapeutic charm, as noted by Bond in his fictions, thus cannot miss the mark. The human microcosm easefully merges its boundaries with that of the macrocosm and nature in some way or the other integrates the two, crafting yarns of human preoccupations with it. These tales feature in galore, a wide range of animals, the myths associated with them, a large array of the Himalayan flora and fauna and the highland trees that serve humans with bountiful natural resources such as the sal, teak, mahogany, peepul, shisum and deodar. All these natural elements along with the human world frame a composite whole and the fine lines of difference between them are imperceptibly blurred, each mingling into the core of the other.

Like Wordsworth's nature girl Lucy Gray, Sita of Bond's short story 'Sita and the River' is a maiden whose free spirits abound nature. Like young Rusty, she too is shown to stay with her grandparents and is seen to be quite enlightened about the tit bits of nature. While conforming to the patriarchal bindings, she has learnt from her grandmother, the household chores such as 'cooking, sewing, grinding spices, cleaning the house, feeding the birds', stereotypically fitting to the so called 'female' roles, her grandfather has taught her 'other things like taking a small boat across the river, cleaning a fish, repairing a net, or catching a snake by the tail!', as a foil to her stereotypically attributed female roles.-(Ruskin Bond, Collected Fiction ' Sita and The River' page-155). To her own credit, she has bagged the accolades of mastering the skills of climbing the peepul tree, leaping from one rock to the other in the shallow water and swimming in an inlet, where the water is comparatively less turbulent. Like Tagore's Chitrangada, Bond's Sita is also a girl, groomed as a boy and nature witnesses from the very scratch her being groomed like that. The story 'Sita and the River' projects nature in a very interesting manner indeed. It gives an account of a river, having its source in the mighty Himalayas. It reaches up to the Bay of Bengal. The river has been merciless to the islanders and anticipation about its overflowing the embankments is noted in the story since the expository prologue. Ultimately it is also noted to cause flood that ruthlessly snatches away from little Sita some of her most coveted possessions. On behalf of Sita, the narrator contemplates in despair, 'She had always loved the river. Why was it threatening her now?' Quite poignantly, the same story features a mammoth peepul tree that has taken up the role of the benevolent protector or saviour, while the river is shown to take mankind for its sport. It is noted to shower gifts in bounties. It has provided refuge to the migratory birds from the mainland; its shade has made a canopy for the family residing under it and most significantly it has injected the belief in Sita that she would be saved from the catastrophe of being engulfed by flood, by the peepul tree that stands steadfast and firm since twenty years, fighting against many odds of nature. The narrator thus mentions- 'If the tree hadn't been there, such a well known landmark, she might have floundered into deep water, into the

river.” – (Ruskin Bond, Collected Fiction, ' Sita and the River' page 163). How beautifully Bond has juxtaposed in the story both the wrathful and the benevolent facets of nature.

Moreover like an Ecologist, he has shown how nature promotes a sustainable development of resources by facilitating the economic development of the humble rustic folk, through his depiction of the functional utility of the marigolds- ‘The marigolds were sometimes made into garlands, and the garlands were sold during weddings or festivals in the nearby town.’- (Ruskin Bond, Collected Fiction, ‘Sita and the River’, page-153)

Moreover, within a span of few pages we find the mention of a large array of animals and birds and Sita is noted to share a strange bond with them. She is carefree, and hardly shudders at the thought of taming the snakes. Her spontaneous handling of the serpentine creature is noted in the lines, “She had no quarrel with the snakes. They kept down the rats and the frogs.” The narrator’s hint at the importance of the ecological food chain in the lines cannot be overlooked. We find the narrator referring to a large group of animals portraying the exotic reserve of the highlands. We note the mention of not only snakes but also that of black scorpions, rats, frogs, hyaena, elephants, somber stag, python and simultaneously that of the domestic goats and hens.

Bond has appreciated the presence of a balanced nature having a right proportion of humans and animals, flora and fauna. The symbiotic processes that continue among the various aspects of nature, help retain the ecological balance. The human dependence on nature is noted throughout the story. The fisherman’s family is noted primarily to survive on fishing. Sita’s grandfather thus thinks about the marketability of the fishes caught. For assuaging the hunger, Sita depends on the simple yet nutritious natural resources such as goat’s milk and a handful of dried peas. The human connection with the good earth and the roots is also noted in Sita’s licking up the lip smacking raw mango juice when the boy in the boat offers her orchard fresh mangoes that were intended to be sold in the market if not the flood had distorted the boy’s plans. Thus nature and humans in Bond’s short stories are often noted to make a single united whole complementing each other.

In an interview with Amita Agarwal, Ruskin Bond had acknowledged “problems of deforestation, pollution, and environmental decay of wild life have been the subject matter of most of my stories and essays.” The number of short stories in which the narrator has talked about nature from almost an environmentalist’s perspective is undoubtedly huge and all cannot be highlighted within the span of a few pages of the article. However from the rich harvest of the author, some can be taken into consideration to establish the views. The doleful serenity of the majestic Himalayas, the seasonal changes of its colour, the splendour of the warm sun across the mighty ranges, the solitary highland lass, the wee little flowers, the school children walking down the meandering highland path sharing the pearl emotions of the budding adolescence, the humble folk of the hills devoid of guile, friends hailing from different cultures in the colonial India of the British Raj, the abounding presence of love, the fleeting regrets and transient joys life and last but not the least the unperturbed cadence of nature has formed the building blocks of Bond’s narrative.

Bond’s short story ‘The Prospect of Flowers’ would be a brilliant example to cite and show how the narrator has made use of nature to shape a human character. The protagonist of the story Miss Mackenzie, an elderly yet not a grumbling spinster, rather a polite and a spirited one is shown to share an intrinsic bond with nature. She lives amidst the serene hills in the Himalayan Mulberry Cottage. A cat shares the snug refuge with her and the wide range of the Himalayan flora, the dahlias, chrysanthemums, gladioli, the highland orchids, the wild

begonia, the purple salvia, the blue gentian, the purple columbine, the anemone and the edelweiss are close to her heart. She grows few of them in her small garden plot and during the chilly winter she waits eagerly for the mountain autumns and springs when the colourful primroses would set a riot of hues, bringing the little boy of the local English medium school, Anil back to her. Miss Mackenzie, although encountered the boy first when he had trespassed into her garden in search for the wild flowers, the confident, frolicsome and appealing composure of the boy could not let her retain her rigidity for long. They knew not when their common love for the wild flowers brought them closer and the elderly lady and the teenage boy started sharing a bond of unstinted happiness over the book 'Flora Himaliensis' and the prospect of the wild flowers, living the momentary joys of life to the hilt. The glum winter reminds her of the youthful springs of her life and the visage of the boy who had shared his youth with her. No matter what had changed, the hills didn't. 'The Prospect of Flowers' did not falter to ring in the same notes of promises to her. Miss Mackenzie's chord with her very own Himalayas could not be snapped so easily. The closure of her solitary life crafted a fulfilling epilogue, taking her 'away to the mountain where the blue gentian and purple columbine grew.' - (Ruskin Bond, Collected Fiction, 'The Prospect of Flowers', page 89). Her breath waned in the highland ether just like Thomas Wilson's life in W. Somerset Maugham's short story 'The Lotus Eater', fades secretly in the island of Capri, Italy. The author's narration reads 'He was found one morning on the mountainside lying quite peacefully as though he had died in his sleep. From where he lay he had been able to see those two great rocks called the Faraglioni which stand out of the sea. It was full moon and he must have gone to see them by moonlight. Perhaps he died of the beauty of that sight.' (Modern Prose, Edited by Michael Thorpe, 'The Lotus Eater', page 87.)

'My Father's Trees in Dehra' is indeed an infinitely sensitive narration of an ardent nature lover. The story not only charts the development of human civilisation amidst nature and depicts the close knit connection of nature with the myriad shades of human emotions, but it also make valuable comments on the gruelling environmental problems like deforestation and the reckless felling of trees due to the advent of manifold technological developments. The story gives an account of young Rusty's coming back to the home town Dehra at a matured age, his revisiting the locality and gleaning memories of the distant past. The eco friendly atmosphere of the hill town is replete with the human emotions. The author begins the story with the line, '***Our Trees Still Grow*** in Dehra. This is one part of the world where trees are a match for man. An old pipal may be cut down to make way for a new building; two pipal trees will sprout from the walls of the building.' The train window acts as a vista to bring before the narrator diamond memories of childhood as his vision overlooks the grey hills and the highland path spotted with the sal, Shisham, trailing vines, clumps of bamboo and the lanes fringed with eucalyptus, jacaranda, laburnum and the plots of land raising the mangoes, lichis and papayas. The grills of the veranda would rarely be spotted without the wild bougainvillaea and the garden plots were ever matted with the carpet of marigolds. The maple and the palm trees were the staple. However the author notes, how the advent of technological progress had replaced the wicket-gate of the grandfather's house with the high built brick wall, the lawn had faded into oblivion barring the huge jackfruit tree that still stood as a sentinel, and the sal trees had thinned out.

Bond brilliantly fuses human existence with nature by depicting the frail old figure of the poor street vendor walking down the path lined by the lichi trees, carrying a cumbersome box with him. The feeble man awaited his death after losing all his near and dear ones and associates. Bond's note crafts a pen picture of him, "He has outlived the trees. He is like an old tree himself, gnarled and twisted. I have the feeling that if he falls asleep in the orchard, he will strike root here, sending out crooked branches. I can imagine a small bent tree

wearing a black waist-coat; a living scarecrow.”- (Ruskin Bond, Collected Fiction, ‘My Father’s Trees in Dehra, page- 116)

It is interesting to note that through the story, ‘My father’s Trees in Dehra’, the narrator zeroes in on environmental issues like deforestation. Although not so close to his mother, Bond shared an enlivening and healthy relationship with his father, and would often wait for him for the daily dose of chit chat. Thus he is noted to say, “As soon as my father rejoined me, the atmosphere lightened, the tree itself become more friendly.”- (Ruskin Bond, Collected Fiction, ‘My Father’s Trees in Dehra, page-119). When young Rusty is noted to question his father about the purpose of planting saplings between the sal and the shisham trees ambling through the jungle path, his father would reply, “If people keep cutting trees, instead of planting them, there’ll soon be no forests left at all, and the world will be just one vast desert.”- (Ruskin Bond, Collected Fiction ‘ My Father’s Trees in Dehra, page119.) This casts light on the attempt undertaken by both the father and the son towards promising the future generation a sustainable development of natural resources as its paucity would pose serious threats to human existence.

The short story ‘The Coral Tree’ artistically highlights the little bundles of glory that nature shower on mankind. The ecstasy of the morning spells of rain pelting down to soak the red earth brings out the irresistible petrichor and symbolically establishes the presence of the little girl having black eyes. The crystal rain drops and the freshly drenched red earth hints at the purity and the freshness of the girl. The coral tree that stands upright in front of the house somehow acts as a silent spectator of the pact of friendship getting signed and acknowledged by the narrator and the girl in reticence. The story brings out the implications and importance of nurturing trees that grow and survive, fighting against many environmental odds.

‘Death of the Trees’ is another significant short story penned by Ruskin Bond that seems to be almost an environmentalist’s chronicle bringing out the dire consequences of the reckless felling of trees due to the construction of new roads, slithering their ways through the mountains, by PWD. The projects undertaken by PWD have not faltered to destroy the highland flora and the walnut, deodar, maples and pines have borne the brunt of the civilised moves of mankind. The author brings out the sheer tragedy of the reckless deforestation in his accounts like, “the walnut was one of the first to go. A tree I had lived with for over ten years, watching it grow just as I had watched Prem’s son, Rakesh, grow up...” He could feel the plight of the felling trees with the same pathos that he had felt for his young brother, who died on road to Delhi. Thus the author’s note, “both victims of the roads; the tree killed by the PWD, my brother by a truck.”- (Ruskin Bond, Collected Fiction, ‘Death of the Trees, page-492).

The author also comments on how the waste land, post deforestation would look like. Hardly the scarlet minivets would be noticed in their sportive spirits in the verdurous gloom of the dark foliage, the long- tailed magpies would fade into oblivion, the barbet’s relentless cry from its perch on top of the deodar tree would be heard no more and the forest birds would change their destinations for some alien land of which the author would be clueless. The only things that would multiply would be the humans, the crows, the brick made concrete buildings, the honking of the motor horns , just to make way for an overburdening claustrophobia of a hollow land or something like T.S. Eliot’s ‘ cactus land.’ Bond raises crucial questions and we cannot help being sceptical as to whether the springs in the offing would be silent or eloquent and even if eloquent would they be pleasing to the ears or not.

The importance of planting trees is scripted by Bond in his short story 'The Cherry Tree', where the young boy Rakesh is promptly instructed by his grandfather to plant the cherry seed, when the boy was pondering about what to do with it. His grandfather instantaneously says, "Plant it." Rakesh not only plants it but also takes care of it, saving it from the environmental perils but a time comes when he forgets all about it. Nature knows no deception. Thus the cherry tree grows up to Rakesh's utter amazement to shower upon him the blissful joy of creation.

Apart from all these stories, we find Mr Bond intriguingly depicting the connection between the humans and the animals, often to create some gripping tales and ingenious plots. Here examples would flow in plethora as the flora and fauna form an integral part of almost all of Bond's short stories and fictions. Yet to be precise, mention could be made of the story 'Escape from Java', where giving an account of the perilous sharks, Bond crafts a taut and interesting plot juxtaposing the humans and the animals. To cite a few more examples, mention could be made of the stories like, 'The Monkeys', 'The Tiger in the House', 'Eyes of the Cat', 'The Leopard', 'Tiger, Tiger, Burning Bright' and more. We note how Biniya of 'The Blue Umbrella' has some connections with her cow Neelu, how Bishnu faces a man eater panther, and how Kishen Singh drives a wild beast out of the tunnel in Bond's fictions.

Examples are plenty to be taken into account and the writer lacking the organised precision has nearly failed to bring all of them within the limited pages of the article. Thus she has primarily chosen a few prominent stories from the wealthy granary of the celebrated author and has humbly tried to show how environment acts as part and parcel of Bond's narrative. Many more stories are left behind to be excavated and explored. However, with this handful of examples it can be concluded that no matter how nature turns vengeful at times in Bond's narrative, its malicious effects on mankind is not remembered for long. The negative and pernicious workings of nature turn out to be evanescent, making palpable its effervescence and its altruistic preoccupations with mankind. The author has loved to his core the down pour in the mountains, the sunlit mornings drooping down the zenith of the hills, the golden dusk across the pine, maples, chestnut and the deodar vegetation and the winter noon's caressing warmth. He has ever been highly sensitive to all these gifts of nature. We can note the author's sensitive connections with nature in the passage like, "All night the rain has been drumming on the corrugated tin roof. There has been no storm, no thunder, just the steady swish of a tropical downpour. It helps me to lie awake; at the same time, it doesn't keep me from sleeping. It is a good sound to read by-the rain outside, the quiet within - and, although tin roofs are given to springing uncountable leaks, there is a feeling of being untouched by, and yet in touch with, the rain." ('Rain in the Mountains, Notes from the Himalayas' page, vii).

Bond's growing amidst nature, finds a palpable expression in his poem 'Walnut Tree.' –

The walnut tree is the first to lose its leaves,

But at the same time the fruit ripen,

The skin splits, the hard shell of the nut

Stands revealed. Yesterday (the last August)

You climbed among the last few crumpled leaves,

Slim boy in a walnut tree, your toes
Gripping the tender bark, your fingers
Fondling walnut, while I waited and counted,
And there were twenty-three walnuts on the grass.
We cracked them open with our teeth.
They were still raw but we could not wait:
The walnuts would age and I might grow younger! - .”

(‘Rain in the Mountains, Notes from the Himalayas’ page, 130).

In ‘Scenes from a Writer’s Life’, Bond proclaims, ‘the cosmos has been my favourite flower-fresh, open, uncomplicated- living up to its name *cosmos*, the universe as an ordered whole.’- (page 5). Truly, the author was in love with the ‘fresh, open and uncomplicated.’ Thus his writings mostly deal with the understated humour and compassion, the playful eccentricities of bosom cronies, the fleeting joys of life, and last but not the least, the silent miracles of the all pervasive nature. He almost imbibed the Wordsworthian philosophy of ‘pantheism’ and considered that every wee little object of nature, be it the bumble bee, the beetle, the unnamed colourful flower sprouting its head beside the highland rock or the feather light maple leaf falling imperceptibly on the grassland being shaken by the crisp zephyr, every little bit of nature has got the life force. The concept of animism, referring to a palpable consciousness embedded in the omnipresent nature and in its objects, pervades all through his narrative. Thus Bond’s writings do remind us time and again of nature’s ‘nameless, unremembered acts of kindness and of love’ as scripted by William Wordsworth in his ‘Lines Composed a Few Miles above Tintern Abbey, on revisiting the Banks of the Wye during A tour, July 13, 1798.’

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