



Bond's Bond with Children: Portrayal of Childhood in Ruskin Bond's Selected Stories

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Abstract:

Ruskin Bond is one of the finest storytellers in India at present. His writings have mesmerised the readers over the years. He is a prolific writer. He is popular for his exclusive collection of short stories. His stories are semi-fictional and semi-autobiographical. It offers a fresh charm and an essence of simplicity. Most of his stories are set in the hilly regions of Dehra, Mussoorie, and other similar places in the Northern Himalayas. Bond's love for Nature is exhibited through his stories. He has also expressed his love for the children through his stories. Children are the protagonists in most of his stories. They are innocent and inquisitive. They enjoy the simple joys of life. They like adventures. They are also brave, helpful, and friendly. They share a close affinity with nature. They are respectful to their elders. Bond has depicted the pleasures and complexities of childhood and growing up. His stories are marked by their subtle emotional sensibilities. This reflects his sensible understanding of children's minds. It also represents the void of his heart, as he was deprived of having a pleasant and secure childhood. Consequently, Bond's portrayal of childhood is often wrapped in the veil of solitude. This paper will explore the vast universe of children through a reading of Bond's selected stories.

Keywords: childhood, solitude, innocence, bravery, vision of life.

Ruskin Bond was born in 1934 in Kasauli in Himachal Pradesh. He grew up in Jamnagar, Dehradun, New Delhi, and Simla. He went to England in the early 1950s. There, he felt alienated. He confessed in a conversation with Shabir Hussain Mirza, "...I always wanted to come back to India because my roots were particularly in this area, Dehradun where I had grown-up" (152). When he was in England, he revised and edited his first novel, *The Room on the Roof*, which was written when he was only seventeen years old. It was published in 1956. He came back to India by then. He was awarded the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize in 1957 for this novel. Since then, he has written many short stories. He has also shown his excellent craftsmanship as a poet and essayist. Novellas, including *Vagrants in the Valley* and *A Flight of Pigeons* are acclaimed as fine literary masterpieces. Bond is the recipient of the Sahitya Akademi Award, the Padma Shri, and the Delhi government's Lifetime Achievement Award. These recognitions mark his illustrious career as a writer. He has been an avid reader since childhood. He told Shabir Hussain Mirza: "Books like *David Copperfield* I liked the most and the idea of becoming a writer was much influenced by the character of David by Dickens" (154).

Ruskin Bond lives in the mountains where the cool breeze rustles through the forests of pine and deodar, birds fly among ancient trees, animals lurk in nearby jungles, and the valley resounds with the sweet chirping of birds and the humming of insects. He loves the natural milieu. Bond asserts in his introduction to *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*: "Once you have lived with mountains, there is no escape. You belong to them" (xi). His stories are set in the foothills of the Himalayan mountains. Amita Aggarwal in *The Fictional World of Ruskin*

Bond observes, "R.K. Narayan created Malgudi a town of his dream and creative fulfilment; Hardy's Wessex provided him creative essentials, in the same vein Ruskin Bond's vision gets quickened by sylvan environs of Dehra Valley. The town emerges as a powerful symbol of his belongingness to India" (73). The vivid description of the locale fascinates the readers. S.K. Desai notes, "Bond's sense of belonging to the mountains fills the stories with a fresh, clear air that belongs to them, the Himalayas" (101).

Bond expresses his love for nature in his stories. He cheerfully notes in *All-Time Favourite Nature Stories*, "The simplest things in life are the best- / A patch of green, / A small bird's nest, / A drink of water, fresh and cold, / The taste of bread, / A song of old; / These are the things that matter most" (1). His stories depict the simple lives of ordinary people, their joys, sorrows, pleasures, and problems. The Himalayan flora and fauna, the hills, rocks, rivers, pools, and the common folk and their natural locale provide endless resources for his stories. While writing the introduction to his book *All-Time Favourites for Children*, Bond explains: "Well, if you like people and find them interesting, you won't run out of stories. If you like birds and animals and flowers and trees and the world around you, you won't run out of ideas. Stories and ideas for them are swirling around you if you keep your eyes and ears open" (viii). Children are an integral part of his stories. His stories delve deeply into human psyche and offer glimpses of everyday life. T. N. Dhar aptly remarks that the stories of Bond are "touching and pleasing because he writes out of love, compassion and sympathy...Reading his stories is an invitation to pleasure and peace" (156).

Bond's memoirs refer to his childhood days. His childhood was a series of turbulent events. His parents separated when he was very young. Bond was sent to a boarding school. Bond loved his father very much. He always longed to spend time with his father. But unfortunately, he lost his father when he was only ten. He had a hard time adjusting to his mother and stepfather. His childhood was disturbed. Aggarwal argues, "Lack of wholesome parentage filled his tender mind with an intense sense of insecurity, which still haunts him" (8). Bond was deprived of a joyful childhood, and this solitude is often reflected in his portrayal of children. Bond asserts in *Scenes from a Writer's Life*: "I don't suppose I would have written so much about childhood or even about other children if my own childhood had been all happiness and light. I find that those who have had contented, normal childhoods, seldom remember much about them; nor do they have much insight into the world of children" (4).

Bond's stories are an exquisite fusion of semi-autobiographical and semi-fictional elements. Bond has expressed his love for writing stories for children in an interview with Shabir Hussain Mirza: "Children's stories I too enjoy writing because I was always good at writing about childhood and so as I grew older I found it more interesting to write for children and about childhood" (153). His stories depict a vast universe of children from different socio-economic backgrounds. Most of them live in the foothills of the northern Himalayas. They are simple and innocent, drawn to the sweet pleasures of rustic life, basking in joy and merriment. They cherish simple things in life. They are brave, open-minded, and emotional. They love nature. They understand the values of cooperation, generosity, and solidarity. They love and respect elders and make friends easily. They strongly believe in harmony. These children are adorable, vibrant, and lively. They also enjoy adventures. Bond has a deep understanding of the child's mind, and his refined sensitivities shine through his portrayal of children in his stories. His depiction of childhood is often shrouded in the veil of loneliness, which, in disguise, becomes a blessing as it enables children to be self-contained and self-reliant. Aggarwal observes that Bond's stories "spring up like cosmos from the very Himalayan soil. He is a keen and perceptive observer of children in rural, peculiarly, Himalayan India; their capacity for hard work, their innate spirit of adventure, and most of all their intimacy with nature. The children of nearby villages, of hills, middle-class children working in the fields or going to school inspired him to peep into their ordinary shells. Bond's greatness as a writer lies in the fact that he very easily visualizes something special, or heroic in their day-to-day life" (88).

"The Woman on Platform No. 8" seems to be an echo of Ruskin Bond's personal experience. In the story, Arun, a boy of about twelve years old, was waiting at a railway station to board a train to go to the boarding school. He came alone as his parents considered him "old enough to travel alone" (Bond 25). He was trying to pass time by doing different things, but after a while he felt "bored and a little lonely" (Bond 25). Then he

came across a woman who looked very kind and gentle. Arun remarks, “She seemed poor, but there was a dignity about her that commanded respect” (Bond 25). After learning from Arun that he had been waiting alone on the platform for the train, she generously offered him some food. Arun hesitated, but soon the suspicion vanished. They went to the station dining room, and Arun had tea and delicacies like “samosas and jalebis” (Bond 26). They were talking, and soon a bond of attachment grew between them. Two strangers were bound by love and affection. When Arun’s friend Satish’s mother asked Arun about the woman who was accompanying him, the woman promptly replied, “Yes, I am Arun’s mother” (Bond 27). When it was time to bid adieu, Arun said to the woman, “Goodbye...goodbye-Mother...” (Bond 29). This story captures the feelings of a lonely child who was all alone on a busy railway platform at night. The absence of his parents created a void in his heart. It seems that he was yearning for a compassionate parent to accompany him at that late hour of the night. The woman appeared to be a motherly figure to Arun, and the void of loneliness disappeared. She showered unconditional love, and Arun felt secure and at ease.

Arun bears a similar resemblance to Ruskin Bond’s own experience, as he too suffered from isolation and loneliness after his father’s untimely demise. He also longed to be loved and adored by his mother. The void is reflected when Bond states in *Scenes from a Writer’s Life*: “When I got down from the train at the Dehra Dun station—one of several boys in the ‘Dehra party’—I expected to be met by my mother, or at least someone from her household. But although I waited on the platform for at least an hour, until it was emptied of passengers, porters and vendors of every description, no one who looked even remotely familiar came up to where I sat on my tin trunk, beside my bedding roll, attaché case and hockey stick. Even the platform dogs had slunk away, for I had nothing to offer them, my school sandwiches having been consumed the night before. Other children had been met by parents and relatives and had dispersed to their homes...A feeling of insecurity began to creep over me—a 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” (32). Aggarwal aptly comments that “The Woman on Platform No.8” is “the manifestation of his vision of an ideal mother who understands her kids, who patiently bears their tantrums and exerts lovingly for their healthy development. Infact, Bond achieves in fiction what he could not get in real life (8).

“The Blue Umbrella” is a wonderful tale of a little girl named Binya who lived in the Garhwal Himalayas. She was “quite sturdy, fair of skin, with pink cheeks and dark eyes and her black hair tied in a pigtail” (Bond 4-5). One day, while grazing her cows, she came across a group of picnickers: “They were holiday-makers from the plains” (Bond 6). They were well dressed. Binya admired their clothes, listened to their “unfamiliar accents”, and gazed at “the sight of all their food” (Bond 8). Suddenly, she saw “a bright blue umbrella, a frilly thing for women, which lay open on the grass beside its owner” (Bond 8). Binya was attracted to the blue umbrella: “The umbrella was like a flower, a great blue flower that had sprung up on the dry brown hillside” (Bond 8). She exchanged her pendant, “a leopard’s claw”, which was considered “a lucky charm” (Bond 5), for the blue umbrella. She was happy and proud to own the blue umbrella. It was her rich possession. There was something special about the blue umbrella that “Secretly, everyone admired it...It was so light, so pretty, so bright a blue” (Bond 41). Most of the villagers “were a little envious of Binya’s blue umbrella” because “No one else had ever possessed one like it” (Bond 39).

Ram Bharosa, the owner of the village tea shop, was “astonished to see Binya’s blue umbrella” (Bond 20). He wanted to grab the umbrella from the little girl: “Ram Bharosa had set his heart on having Binya’s blue umbrella” (Bond 37). Seasons rolled by, and “Ram Bharosa still desired it. He did not want to sell it; he wanted to own it...and the more he saw the umbrella, the more he wanted it” (Bond 49-50). Rajaram, a boy who started working at Ram Bharosa’s shop, tried to steal the blue umbrella for him, but he was unsuccessful. When the villagers found out that Ram Bharosa had tried to steal Binya’s blue umbrella, they stopped coming to his shop. Ram Bharosa “had suffered the tortures of greed, the despair of loneliness” and “From ‘Ram the Trustworthy’ he became ‘Trusty Umbrella Thief’...Ram Bharosa had lost his own appetite, and ate and drank very little. There was no money coming in” (Bond 68-70). He was left in a wretched condition. Seeing him in a miserable state, Binya felt sad and guilt-stricken: “But had she loved the umbrella too much? Had it mattered more to her than people mattered? She couldn’t help feeling that, in a small way, she was the cause

of the sad look on Ram Bharosa's face...and the ruinous condition of his shop” (Bond 71-72). Binya's conscience allowed her to give the blue umbrella to Ram Bharosa, who had longed for it for months. Binya also learned that sharing things with others brought happiness and peace of mind. The story critiques humanity's obsession with material possessions. Binya set herself free from that bondage. That generous act of the little girl also changed the wicked and mischievous Ram Bharosa. He also learned the value and joy of sharing. The blue umbrella was “always left open outside the shop, and anyone who wants to borrow it may do so; and so in a way it has become everyone's umbrella. It is faded and patchy, but it is still the best umbrella in the village” (Bond 76-77). The story emphasises social cause over individual self-interest. Aggarwal aptly points out that “The story is a tribute to the basic goodness of man. It reveals the truth that human vices are not inborn. Man is conditioned by the circumstances and children possess better understanding and broader view of life” (88).

“Sita and the River” narrates the story of a brave girl named Sita who lived with her grandparents on an island. During a monsoon, her grandmother fell ill, and her grandfather took her to the hospital in Shahganj. Sita was left alone on the island. The river water was rising due to heavy rain, and Sita saw that “There was water everywhere” (Bond 226). To escape the deluge, she climbed the peepul tree. Sita “crouched miserably in the fork of the tree, watching her world disappear” (Bond 229). The river swirled around her. She found that the tree was moving with the river. Yet, she did not lose hope. She held firmly to the branches, knowing that as long as she clung to the tree, she would be safe: “The tree was her friend. It had known her all these years and now it held her in its old and dying arms as though it was determined to keep her from the river” (Bond 231). This shows a strong affinity between humans and nature. On the one hand, nature is shown as a destroyer, ravaging everything; on the other, it is also protecting life. While drifting in the current, Sita was rescued by a boy named Vijay. They soon became friends. Together, they bravely fought the raging river and saved themselves. They arrived at a village. A farmer and his son accompanied them to the railway station. On the way, they visited a fair and there they made some wonderful memories to cherish forever. Later, Sita and Vijay boarded the train to Shahganj. There, Sita finally reunited with her grandfather. Unfortunately, she had lost her grandmother. When they returned to the island, her grandfather was saddened to see that the tree was gone. He “marvelled at Sita's escape” (Bond 249) and said, “It was the tree that saved you” (Bond 249). He also added that at the awake of adversity, Vijay became her saviour as well. The rain soon stopped, and life returned to normal. The story exhibits the bravery of a young girl and a boy in the face of a natural disaster. Helping others in need reflects a core human value. Vijay exemplifies this trait perfectly. Through Sita's journey, Bond shows her resilience. When Vijay remarks that they are “part of the river” (Bond 251), they come to realise that human beings are part of nature. Human beings and nature must thrive together for a harmonious co-existence. Aggarwal notes that the story “has all the ingredients of classic adventure story; vivid descriptions, the gathering of tension, a touch of fear, a bit of fantasy and finally a happy ending (88).”

The children in Bond's stories often share a close bond with their grandparents. Bond admits in *Scenes from a Writer's Life*: “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” (34). “The Cherry Tree” is about a little boy named Rakesh, who lived with his grandfather “on the outskirts of Mussoorie” (Bond 602). Following his grandfather's advice, he planted the cherry seed. Over time, the tree grew, encountering many obstacles. Rakesh took care of the tree and loved it the most. The cherry tree became their favourite. His grandfather observed, “We planted it ourselves...That's why it's special” (Bond 605). The story highlights a child's close bond with nature and his love for preserving it. The concluding line of the story is very remarkable. While touching the cherry tree, Rakesh whispered, “...is this what it feels to be God?” (Bond 605). This illustrates the boy's intuitive understanding that nature is an abode where God resides, and conserving nature is a form of worshipping God.

“Getting Granny's Glasses” is a touching tale of an eleven-year-old boy named Mani and his grandmother. Granny's “eyes had grown steadily weaker, and the glasses had grown older. They were now scratched and spotted, and there was very little she could see through them” (Bond 2). It needed an urgent replacement. The eye hospital was in Mussoorie. It was decided that Mani would accompany Granny to Mussoorie. It was a

long journey. The story presents a realistic account of the hardships of people who live in the hills. Due to the unavailability of suitable transport and natural disasters like landslides, Mani and his grandmother had to walk long distances to reach Mussoorie. When they reached Mussoorie, Mani was mesmerised to see the town bubbling with life. They had spent the night in a dharamsala. The next morning, they visited the eye hospital and consulted the doctor. Granny's eyes were thoroughly checked, and she got a new pair of glasses. Granny was elated to see Mani as he had grown into "a fine boy" (Bond 40). While returning, she "looked eagerly out of the window" of the bus, and "Each bend in the road opened up new vistas for her, and she could see many things that she hadn't seen for a long time-distant villages, people working in the fields, milkmen on the road, two dogs rushing along beside the bus, monkeys in the trees, and, most wonderful of all, a rainbow in the sky" (Bond 41-42). This story shows that Mani and his grandmother share a close bond. Mani is portrayed as a sincere and responsible young boy. During their journey, he is always aware to take care of Granny's comfort. Taking care of the elders, loving and respecting them, and being empathetic to their problems are some important human values. Mani sensibly exhibits these attributes. This story also highlights that there is a child in all grown-up people. When Granny's vision improves after getting her new glasses, she rejoices like a child, marvelling at every sight she encounters.

Ruskin Bond excels at his art of characterisation and his understanding of a child's mind. Written in Bond's simple and elegant style, the stories reflect the fleeting moments of joys and sorrows in childhood, along with the inevitable struggles of growing up. Bond's portrayal of childhood is simple, straightforward, honest, and realistic, with a gentle touch of tenderness and emotional subtlety. Children in Bond's stories embody his optimistic vision of life. Their innocence and simplicity, bravery and resilience, heartfelt connection with nature, and empathetic response to humanity offer hope in a world that is in a relentless conflict with corruption, immorality, and decadence.

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