

## Critical Approach to Location and Identity in the Stories of Ruskin Bond

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### Abstract

Ruskin Bond is a well-known Indian short story writer in English, who wrote in the light of his own life experiences, and the impressions he found about things and people he came across. He is considered to be an icon among Indian writers. Most of his novellas and short stories hide a fervent quest for identity, the concerns of which are historically and culturally inflected.

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Ruskin Bond is a well-known Indian short story writer in English, who wrote in the light of his own life experiences and the impressions he found about things and people he came across. He is considered to be an icon among Indian writers. Most of his novellas and short stories hide a fervent quest for identity, the concerns of which are historically and culturally inflected. The familiarity of the location provides him a greater sense of freedom and security and helps him a lot to establish his identity as an individual. Ruskin Bond is not so much an inventive writer as a subjective one who loves to recreate his boyhood and youth through his fictional counterparts. As such, his fiction is characterized by autobiographical mode of writing and nostalgic punctuations. He catches up the fleeting moments exquisitely by the force of his vision and skill of condensed narration. Bond himself says:

I prefer to write about the people  
And places I have known and lives  
of those whose paths I have crossed.

Diana Athill, his first publisher and one of his earliest admirers, was perhaps the first to notice this feature in his fiction. In a

letter to Bond, dated March 23, 1964, she pointed out:

Your snag is surely, that you are a writer who works best from very close to your own experience which means that one is terribly dependent on the nature of one's experience. Only so much that is of general validity happens to one and only so much of what happens to one strike down to the level from which one writes. I sometimes feel very envious of people with the other kind of mind, full of inventions. But I still like the best the kind of writing which goes inwards rather than outwards?

In his truly autobiographical book **Scenes from a Writer's Life: A Memoir**, Bond traces "my development as an individual and as a budding writer through my childhood and teens." His novels **The Room on the Roof** and **Vagrants in the Valley** both are admittedly "portraits of adolescence written by an adolescent." Both are based on real experiences of Bond, the latter taking off from where the former ends. It is not only people and individualistic traits that affect the creative vision of a writer but the place where he

lives and environs in which he breathes also cast a lasting impact on him. Early impressions of childhood spent in Mussoorie, Simla and Dehradun culminated in Bond's life long settlement in the hills. Kipling's words:

And the last puff of the day wind  
brought from the unseen villages  
the scent of damp wood-smoke, hot  
cakes, dripping undergrowth, and  
rotting pine-cones. That is the true  
smell of the Himalayas and if once  
it creeps into the blood of a man, that  
man will at the last, forgetting all  
else, return to the hills to die.

He can never part with the 'smell' of pines. Even three years' stay at New Jersey with the prospect of a bright future could not stop his ultimate return to India. He has settled in the heart of Garhwal Himalayas instead of a metropolitan city to portray each passing hue on the snow-crowned peaks and dew-dappled lawns. The soul of Kipling's Mowgli can be traced in the flying heels of Bisnu and Ramu in his stories.

The sleepy town Dehra helped Bond to recover from the loss of his dear father and odds of forced relationship with mother and stepfather. Its heavenly landscape compensated the emotional vacuum and drew him out of his gloom. Most of his stories originate from the familiar parts of the hills. His early romance with Dehra is metamorphosed in several of his stories, essays, poems and sketches. He says:

When I was a boy in Dehra in 1940,  
the place looked like a fairyland.  
It has been the inspiration for all  
my stories and my love for it will  
make me alive here and keep  
writing about the town.

What comes out most strongly through the childhood and adolescent sufferings of Bond is an acute sense of loneliness caused by his mother's desertion and father's untimely demise. He sought solace in nature, making her his friend, philosopher and guide. He says in the autobiographical poem A Song for Lost Friends:

The spirit of the tree became my friend,  
Took me to his silent throbbing heart  
And taught me the value of stillness.  
My first tutor; friend of the lonely."

The old Banyan tree to which Bond pays tribute as his first tutor and friend' represents all the hill trees which gave solace to the lonely child. In fact, like the trees, the mountains and valleys, the streams and topsy-turvy hilly tracks, the birds and butterflies-all become friends and guides of the lonesome vagrant boy. He feels inspired not to sulk but to exult in his loneliness like the Lone Fox Dancing:

As I walked home last night  
I saw a lone fox dancing  
In the cold moonlight,  
I stood and watched. Then  
Took the low road, knowing  
The night was his by right.  
Sometimes, when words ring true,  
I'm like a lone fox dancing  
In the morning dew."

Bond is a born story teller, spinning tale after tale around the hills and valleys of the Himalayan region of Tehri Garhwal which has become for him what the Lake District was for Wordsworth or the Wessex for Hardy. What impresses Bond most about the mountains is their timelessness. In their seeming permanence they remind one of the creator and the eternity:

Time passes, and yet it does not pass;

people come and go, the mountains remain.

Mountains are permanent things. They are stubborn, they refuse to move. You can blast holes out of them for their mineral wealth; or strip them of their tress and foliage; or dam their streams and divert their currents; or make tunnels and roads and bridges; but no matter how hard they try, humans cannot actually get rid of their mountains. That's what I like about them; they are here to stay."

But Bond is not a recluse; he passionately loves the world he has chosen to live in. This explains why he came back to the Himalayan valleys from the British Isles and chose to live in Mussoorie, far from the noise and bustle of the metropolitan cities of India. It was in exile that Bond felt the pull of the Himalayan mountains and valleys most acutely. He says:

It was while I was living in England, in the jostle and drizzle of London that I remembered the Himalayas at their most vivid. I had grown up amongst those great blue and brown mountains; they had nourished my blood; and though I was separated from them by thousands of miles of ocean, plain, and desert, I could not rid them from my system. It is always the same with mountains. Once you have lived with them for any length of time, you belong to them. There is no escape."

All this explains why Bond chose to settle in the Himalayan valley. The familiarity of the location provides him a greater sense of freedom and security and helps him a lot to establish his identity as an individual. Besides, having lived all his life in the serene Himalayan valley, Bond

would find it difficult to adapt himself to the cut-throat competitive atmosphere in the urban areas where everybody is pushing himself forward and striving to march ahead of others, and the space is shrinking due to industrialization. Bond Says:

The feeling of space-limitless space can only be experienced by living in the mountains."

Moreover, the hill people still retain the primitive values of honesty, faith and love for the family and neighbours. There is no fear of violence or crime because of the hill people's cordiality, kindness and credence. The simple people befriend even the strangers. In **A Wayside Teashop** Bond says:

The shopkeeper...greet me as a long lost friend, although we are meeting for the first time."

Bond's unconcealed fixation with his surroundings is evident in almost all his fictional works. Indeed, the fusion of setting and surroundings is one of the chief characteristics of his fiction. For instance, he gives a graphic description of Somi's house in **The Room on the Roof**:

It was a small flat house, covered completely by a crimson bougainvillea creeper. The garden was a mass of marigolds which had sprung up everywhere, even in the cracks at the sides of the veranda steps.....The room was cool and spacious, and had very little furniture. But on the walls were many pictures, and in the centre a large one of Guru Nanak..... on his face there was a serene expression. The serenity of Nanak's countenance seemed to communicate itself to the room."

His formative years at Dehra established the inseparable attribute of Bond with his location. While most English boys suffered from superiority complex and did not get on well with the natives, Bond had no such inhibitions and mixed with Indians freely and made friends with native lads of his age group. His Dehra friends, particularly Somi, Haripal and Daljeet, always sustained his spirit and encouraged him to realize his dream of becoming a writer. Bond recalls the dramatic entry of Somi in his life on a sunny day:

At twelve O' clock a door burst open and a great happiness entered my life.

Somi endeared himself to Bond so much so that when Bond was striving at New Jersey to carve out a career for himself as a writer, he reappeared before him in the form of a fictional entity. Bond's first novel *The Room on the Roof* is actually a wonderful narration of this friendship. Somi remains transfixed in Bond's memory as an eternal youth, energetic and friendly. Bond often dreams of Somi:

.....and it is always the same dream,  
In the dream I am a man, but he is  
still a boy. We wander through the  
fairground enjoying all that life  
had to offer."

Bond's family relations were desperate and rapid changes were taking place in his personal and social life. He was desperately in need of emotional compensation. His socialization with Indians had a direct influence on his life. His friends stood by him and rid him of his desperation to the greatest extent and did not let him face the crisis of identity. This accounts for friendship being one of the prominent themes in Bond's writings. In his fiction friendship knows no bar of

caste, colour, creed and nationality. For example, Rusty, Somi and Kishen are intimate friends though one is a Christian, another Sikh and the third one a Hindu. It is because of the magical pull of Somi's friendship that Rusty revolts against his inherent confines and moves towards uncertain future with new people in new environs. Somi always abides by him. He helps him in getting a job and a room of his own and thus drives him out of his deep sense of agony. When Rusty is desperate to leave Dehra, Somi writes an encouraging letter to him and extends emotional security to him.

It is perhaps because of the emotional support Bond got from his boyhood friends during the days of crisis that boyhood is a favourite sphere for him in his writings. Most of his memorable fictional heroes are boys in their teens, reflecting Bond in disguise. He must have passed through traumatic experiences of loneliness and isolation in his childhood due to his mother's desertion and father's premature death. His agony must have been assuaged to some extent in the bonhomie and camaraderie of his friends and companions like Somi, Kishen, Daljeet, Ranbir and others who recur under various disguises in his novels and stories.

Bond came back to India to live among the mountains and trees of the Himalayan valley but faced the problem of survival because "Dehra, then, was not a place for young men in search of a career..... The town was a sleepy hollow, a great place in which to be abducted, but a poor place to earn a living." So, he shifted to Delhi to earn a living but he "could not fall in love with Delhi, my heart was always in the hills and small towns of north India." While living in Delhi, Bond used to take

long walks, watching birds and animals "in an attempt to escape the city life that constantly oppressed me." He says:

In an odd way, it was my reaction to city life that led to my taking a greater interest in the natural world. Up to that time, I had taken it all for granted. "

**Conclusion:**

Thus, it was his love for the hills and desire to retain his identity as an individual which motivated Bond to say good bye to the rush and tumult of the city life and settle in the serene Doon valley. Personal agonies like separation of his parents and untimely death of his father when Bond

was only ten years old imparted to him an early but deep sense to belong to the world of nature and strangers. AS such, most of the plots in his novels and stories are set against the backdrop of Dehra, Mussoorie and other parts of Garhwal. His early feelings of insecurity and isolation are projected through most of his adolescent characters. Like Wordsworth's Lucy, Bond seems to have identified himself with nature. He emulates nature and by so doing he worships God:

Like the Wind, I run;  
Like the rain, I sing;  
Like the leaves, I dance;  
Like the earth, I'm still;  
And in this, Lord, I do thy will.

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