Embracing India: Ruskin Bond

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I. INTRODUCTION

Ruskin Bond has voiced his profound love for India in almost all his works with unsurpassable deftness and precision. He has been able to feel the pulse of the amazing diversity of Indian life. His luminosity has illuminated the remote and dark places of the Garhwal region. He is an Anglo Indian who had witnessed India’s trail and tribulations of Independence and partition. He felt so rooted to the soil of India that even after decolonization he dared to reject his British nationality by embracing India. In an essay entitled On Being An Indian, he explains that his identity as an Indian is uncompromising. Race and religion did not make him an Indian but history did, and in the long run, its history that counts. Ruskin Bond was born and brought up in India. For him “India has always been an atmosphere an emotional more than a geographical entity” (Bond Memoir 9).

After completing his education, he went to London. Living there he realized how deeply he loved India and decided to come back to India. He writes in his Memoir “I wanted to return to India and to all that I had known and loved” (xv).

He writes further:

Even though I had grown up with a love for the English language and its literature, even though my forefathers were British, Britain was not really my place. I did not belong to the bright lights of Piccadilly and Leicester square…. I belonged very firmly, to the peepal trees and mango grooves; to sleepy little towns all over India; to hot sunshine, muddy canals, the pungent scent of marigolds the hills of home, spicy odours, wet earth after summer rain, neem pods bursting, laughing brown faces, and the intimacy of human contact (155). When Bond was in London he wrote his first novel The Room On The Roof, at the age of seventeen. He did not draw the material for this story from England where he was living but he preferred to capture the vibrant mystique of the Himalayas. His works are replete with vignettes of India with its sweet smells of small towns, ‘gulmohur’ trees, fiery summer splendor, barefoot boys riding on buffaloes etc. There are realistic descriptions of the hills, dales, flora and fauna of the Garhwal region. Despite being a British, Bond loves to breathe in Indian air. Sylvan environs of green Dehradun valley stimulate his vision and thought. It was the quintessence charm of its celestial landscape, lanquid summer days and comparatively low decibel markets and shops that attracted him in his boyhood. One can easily feel his love for India in the way in which he describes India, especially the terrains of Dehradun and Mussorie where he lives. The force of detail is very convincing, the colours, the smells, the greenery of the hills and dales, the stir of the market place, the beautiful scenes and sights all are evoked with an enigmatic accuracy. There is a photographic fidelity in the pictures which he draws in his stories of Dehradun and other places of India, which he has travelled. It would not be an exaggeration to say that his works present a kaleidoscopic view of India. Bond does not dwell upon the political, economic, religious, ethical and psychological aspects of Indian life. His imagination was caught by the beauty of nature intertwined with the melody of breezes forming a world free from all anxieties.

He confesses:

I am more at ease with the dew of the morning, the sensuous delights of the day, the silent blessings of the night, the joys and sorrows of children, the strivings of ordinary folk, and of course, the ridiculous situations in which we sometimes find ourselves. We cannot prevent sorrow and pain and tragedy. And yet, when we look around us, we find that the majority of people are actually enjoying life! There are so many lovely things to see, there is so much to do, so much fun to be had and so many charming and interesting people to meet…. How can my pen ever run dry? (Bond, Love 134). Bond has lived so close to nature in India that it has influenced his work greatly. Through his work he expresses his fondness and anxiety for nature. He expresses his deep concern for the disappearance of wildlife in India and also for the degradation of the environment in the Himalayas. The focal point of Bond’s Indianess is his passion for the Himalayas. Though his roots were in England yet he was grafted by the Indian soil and flourished by the Indian air and water. He loves to describe with rare perception and sensitivity the topography of the area, “her flora, her fauna and mountains is the aspect that his writings most appropriately delineate” (Singh 108). His observations about the natural surroundings are minute and subtle. “Who goes to the hills, goes to his mother”, these words of Kipling’s ‘Kim’ became true for Bond, who experienced a deep kinship and serenity in the midst of the mountains of India. So engrossed was Bond in the Indian life that even the changes, which took place in the life styles of Indians, did not remain unperceived by him. He gives a comparison of the colonized and the decolonized India.

He writes:

In 1940’s Delhi you were lucky to have a small table-fan, and that was effective only if the bhisti or ‘water-carrier’, came around with his goat-skin bag, splashing water on to the khusskhus matting draped from your door or window; otherwise the fan simply blew hot air at you (Bond, Home 9). But in the present days people are fascinated by materialism, “at least half of them have air conditioning, coolers, refrigerators and other
means to keep the heat at bay” (Bond, *Home* 9). Social traditions, which are so sensitively depicted in his works, are a testimony of Bond’s close association with the Indian culture. He has portrayed the subtlest details and pretexts of a Punjabi family in the story which he has featured in his book *Rusty Comes Home*. The story underlines the tradition of joint family in India. He writes that Indians prefer arranged marriages and the head of the family takes the decision. They prefer a fair girl from a respectable family. “According to Bhabhiji, Kamal’s bride should be both educated and domesticated; and of course she must be fair” (Bond, *Home* 23). Bond highlights the fact that young couples in joint families do not get enough privacy. In the story “Bhabhiji’s House” Arun wants to take his wife Shobha out for dinner but hesitates to go alone. Bond says, “Last night he wanted to eat out, at a restaurant, but did not want to be accused of wasting money; so he stuffed fifteen rupees into my pocket and asked me to invite both him and Shobha to dinner, which I did” (Bond, *Home* 27). He is much attracted towards the Indian customs and traditions. His writing is a bridge upon the two different cultures, as he mentions in his story, *Bhabhiji’s House*, “then, slowly, others in the household began indulging in morning cups of Tea. Now everyone, including the older children have ‘bed tea’. They bless my English forebears for instituting the custom; I bless these Punjabis for perpetuating it” (Bond, *Home* 18). Indian festivals and seasons enchant Bond greatly, in *The Room on the Roof*, on *Holi* festival, Rusty shakes off all the artificial restrictions of creed and colour and merges into the euphoria of pleasure and universal brotherhood, “Rusty’s transformation is marked by his participation in the spring festival of *Holi*, which signifies fertility, regeneration and wiping away of social distinctions among people” (Singh 71). Bond loves the monsoon season and especially the petrichor after the first rain. He enjoys the every bit of changing seasons with their different colours and shades. He chooses the vitality of India over the snobbish and cruel privileged world of the Europeans. Bond’s, love for Indian food is also revealed through his works. With a lot of interest he depicts the food habits of the Indians. He knows about the taste of every state like Indians. He knows about the taste of every state like his works. With a lot of interest he depicts the food habits of the Europeans. Bond *wiping away of social distinctions among people* (Bond, *Home* 18). He also shows some acquaintance with Indian meal and its serving style, “I sit cross legged and barefoot on the floor while Bhabhiji serves us hot parathas stuffed with potatoes and onions along with omelet, an excellent dish” (Bond, *Home* 19). He gives a vivid description of the Indian eatables like ‘kababs’, ‘curry’, ‘dal-bhaat’, ‘samosas’, ‘alu-gobi’, ‘tikki’, ‘chaat’. In *The Last Tonga Ride* he writes about *paan*, “Bansi spat red paan-juice across the road.” (Bond, *Hills* 129). The portrayal of conversation is also typically Indian in the fiction of Bond. The interlocutors used in his stories are largely Indian and even the British characters are Indianized to some extent. The style, usage of words and expressions are by and large dominated by ‘Indian English’ for example, “drinking a glass of nimbu panī” (Bond, *Home* 83) and “I like the sour tang of the ‘jamun’ fruit which was best eaten with a little salt.” (Bond, *Home* 14). Bond reflexively uses Hindi words in his writings. In *Time Stops at Shamli* he uses the terms like ‘shikar’ (hunter), ‘hisab’ (day’s accounts), ‘maidan’ (grounds) and ‘dhobi’ (washerman). He preferred to use Hindi names of flowers like gulab for rose and *genda* for marigold and Indian names of birds such as ‘myna’ and ‘nilkanth’. His casual use of these words indicate his proficiency with Hindi and ease with Indian culture. Bond has used the mixed code (Hindi + English) to be more realistic in the portrayal of Indian life. In *Rusty Comes Home*, when Prem comes to Ruskin for finding a job a discourse takes place in both English and Hindi in this way:

He is a little peculiar, he does not smoke neither ‘bidi’ nor ‘hookah’...

‘Do you take Bhang’?

‘No, Sahib’ (*Home* 138).

He is also fond of using Hindi proverbs, in *Song of Many Rivers* “Guptakashi and its environs have so many ‘lingams’ that saying *Jitne Kankar Utne Shankar* – “As many stones, so many Shivas” has become a proverb to describe its holiness” (Bond, *Love* 116). Bond’s language is free from the so-called “alert medium consciousness” of most of the Indian writers writing in English. He makes his readers much familiar and closer to India without trying to make India exotic. As a writer Bond does not have a sense of superiority over Indians nor does he apologize for Europeans in his stories. He seems comfortable with both cultures. Bond does not assume the hyphenated identity of Anglo India and prefers to call himself just Indian. India that Bond delineates is not one which makes sensational headlines but that which comprises the good will and humours of common people, their hardships, love and innocence. His stories revolve around characters that come across from the rural or middle urban classes. His observation about the activities of these people is very minute, “I did not live entirely alone. Sometimes a beggar spent the night on the balcony; and during cold or wet weather, the boys from the tea shop, who normally sit on the pavement, crowded into the room” (Bond, *Home* 34). Bond is not perplexed or puzzled by India’s mythical historical structure, political, social and cultural variance and togetherness as well as all aspects and convictions of Indian culture. Disparity of life standards and lack of system in India do not dissuade him rather he finds a subtle thread that binds man to man and nature. Regarding Bonds adoption of India, P.K. Singh rightly remarks: Bond’s writings give the true flavour of the Indian soil which T.D. Burton calls *national quintessence*. Bond is not an exporter of India or like R.P. Jhabvala a writer of shifting loyalties. Sharing the literary temper of Hary Derozio and Aubery, he gives his readers the true feel of Indian life he has seen and lived. His European blood seems, to be fully neutralized with the Indian spirit (Singh 7). Bond has blended into Indian culture completely. He has adopted his servant’s son as his own and lives with his family in Mussoorie. The idol of lord *Ganesha*, ‘the god of Hindus’ adorns the entrance of his house. Mulk Raj Anand has aptly stated, “Bond’s novels and stories seem to have emerged from within Indian homes” (Singh 33). His stories are a modest reflection of the socio-cultural milieu of India. They paint a real portrait of small town India and life there. His deep-rooted love for India is reflected in his choice of subject, in the texture of thought, in the play of sentiment, in the organization of material and in the creative use of language.

II. Reference


