

NATURE'S CHILDREN IN THE SHORT STORIES OF RUSKIN BOND

DR RANJIT KUMAR PATI

READER IN ENGLISH

S.K.C.G.AUTO COLLEGE

PARALAKHEMUNDI, (ODISHA), INDIA.

Abstract

Children's Literature comprises of those books written and published for young people who are not yet interested in adult literature. The writer of this field needs to understand the complicated psycho-social perception of the kid generation-what instills in them a sense of wonder, awe, love and fantasy. Human beings are born with some potential qualities. Both positive and negative qualities develop in children as their minds mature. Ruskin Bond's stories exhibit this characteristic of children. His stories reflect pantheism, adventure, audacious exploration, courageous journey, dignified human beings and comprehensive view of life. Ruskin Bond's child characters have a special attraction for various aspects of nature like streams, hills, trees, flowers, fruits, animals and birds. Most of them face the problems of life with strong heart and courage. They learn the art of living in harmony with nature. When other writers strain in vain to see God in temple or in church, Ruskin Bond sees God in the raindrop.

KEY WORDS : *pantheism, adventure, audacious exploration, harmony, awe, love, fantasy*

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Human beings are born with some potential qualities. In the course of their growing up, those qualities come into light, sometimes spontaneously and sometimes prompted by the social environment they live in and the compulsion of the situation they face. Ruskin Bond's stories exhibit this characteristic of children. They belong to the hills, to the environment, so are very significant as its part. All these characters are round, growing persistently, maturing in their perception of life. They remain unknown, unsung, far from the glittering paraphernalia of urban sophistication. Bond's child characters have a special attraction for aspects of nature like streams, hills, trees, flowers, fruits, animals and birds and the like. They are also adventurous to a great extent. They courageously confront ferocious animals, undertake dangerous journeys through forests and so on. Parvez Hamid Khan writes thus:

'Ruskin Bond's total empathy with nature and his deep love for animals comes through his sensitively told stories.'¹

The story *The Window* expresses his love of nature and natural beauty as a child through Rusty. He watches the beauty of nature through a window. The old Banyan tree, to which Bond paid his tribute as the first friend and tutor, is, in fact, not the only tree. It is an archetype. It represents all the hill trees, which gave their shade and affection to the lonely child. And, in fact, not only trees, but the mountains and valleys, the streams and hilly topsy-turvy tracks, all become intimate friends and guides of the lonesome vagrant child.

This is both the strength and the weakness of Bond's stories. He is a born storyteller like Scheherazade, spinning tales after tales around the hills and valleys of the Himalayan region of TehriGarhwal, where he has spent all his life and which become for him what the Lake District was for William Wordsworth or the Wessex was for Thomas Hardy. He claims a kinship with the mountains as well as the flora and fauna of the region :

'I like to think that I have become a part of this mountain, this particular range, and that by living here for so long, I am able to claim a relationship with the trees, wild flowers, even the rocks that are an integral part of it. Yesterday, at twilight, when I passed beneath a canopy of oak leaves I felt that I was a part of the forest. I put out my hand and touched the bark of an old tree, and as turned always, its leaves brushed against my face, as if no acknowledge me.'²

The underlying philosophy of Pantheism, enriched with Christian piety and Lao-tzu's Taoism resounds in Ruskin Bond who looks upon water not merely as constituting the pool, or the river or the stream, not even as a source of life but as life itself :

'Each drop represents a little bit of creation—and of life itself.'³

The Window in his small study-cum-bedroom facing vast stretch of the hills and the valleys provides a pristine view. Tehri road below his cottage leads him to the unlooked for delights of nature. He observes them intently passing and happening around the window. His window is always open to welcome a little bird, a homesick vine or the fragrance of rain drenched earth.

The Trail to the Bank, Picnic at Box Burn, Up at Sister's Bazaar, Meetings on Tehri Road are vivid accounts of the nearby places and far interiors of Garhwal region. Their specific features such as crop, monsoon, animals, trees, people, conveyance, food, houses and the like are knitted in the narration rendering a comprehensive view of the life in the hills. *How Far is the River* is born out of innocent curiosity of a small boy who wants to reach the river he has heard of. But the big mountain is between the river and the boy is too little to cross it. One day the spirit of boyhood gets strong and he starts his quest. The person he meets on the way, the objects he delights in are a part of his quest as exciting as the reward itself. This is how the search begins :

'Between the boy and the river was the mountain, I was a small boy, and it was a small river, but the mountain was big. The thickly forested mountain hid the river, but I knew it was there and what it looked like.'⁴

From the Pool to the Glacier is similar long account of the audacious exploration of four boys. One of them is Rusty who discovers a pool hidden down the ravine in shadow on a rainy day while coming back from the school. The pool becomes a favorite rendezvous of the friends, a secrete place for swimming and hatching new adventurous plans. Here are more courageous accounts. *Four Boys on a Glacier* is an exciting story of four brave boys who trek up to the glacier situated at high altitude in Kumaon hills. Their trekking route gives them an opportunity to closely observe the life and beauty of the Himalaya and thus to form an enduring relationship with them. Besides, it turns to be an opportunity to learn the art of living in harmony with nature with least interference and extortion of their sources.

Ganga Descends gives a comprehensive picture of the origin of the holy river Ganga. The essay is a beautiful confluence of fact and imagination, past and present, myth and geography. Ganga which emerges in Gangotri and flows down in the sea after covering 1500 miles is a constituent of religious, geographical, natural and historical-cultural life of Garhwal Himalaya. Since ages it has been a source of life and renunciation. The importance of Ganga is twofold - biological and religious. Bond writes:

'Bhagirathi is beautiful, almost caressingly so, and people have responded to it with love and respect, ever since Shiva released the waters of the goddess from his tangled locks and sped plain-wards in the tracks of Prince Bhagirath's chariot.'⁵

The role of birds and animals in the narration is not secondary to man. In many stories and poems they are the focal point of narration and act as a protagonist e.g. in *The Tiger*, *Tiger Burning Bright*, *The Crow for All Seasons*, *The Leopard*. The depiction is very true to their nature and highly imaginative too. The understanding between the writer and the animal is also shared by the reader. It helps in generating a relationship which is based on mutual trust.

In his efforts Bond is close to a naturalist, he not only records Himalayan fauna but also raises deep concern for their preservation. His books render a valid account of their life, the threats they face, and their role in maintaining the chain of existence. Bond simply visualizes their activities in terms of human emotions. It serves two purposes - firstly it makes the whole account lively and interesting and secondly it helps generating understanding of their nature. This approach is little similar to Kipling's *Jungle Book*. Like Kipling his purpose is not to draw any didactic lesson but to reinforce the fact that animals, birds and insects are as significant and dignified as human beings.

Four decade long association has acquainted him with a good variety of birds; each one unique in colour, form, sound, and size and perching and food habits enough to make any ornithologist vying. His approach is not that of a scientist. He believes that every living creature including plants is endowed with the instincts of apprehension, love and care. He takes them as normally as human being, at times more friendly and delightful than any man made relationship. The personified delineation of crows, whistling thrush and many other birds transform them into memorable characters as we see in the essays *Thus Spoke Crow*, *Owls in the Family*, *The Crow for all Seasons*. Owl is known as an ill omenous bird; a harbinger of death, decay and destruction. Bond uses its whoo-whoos to intensify the gloom in the air at night. But owl is depicted like any other bird shy, suspicious of man, loving as mother, playful and innocent as child.

The forest at Himalayan foothills is known for elephants. Dense forest rich in foliage and streams is a natural habitat of the elephants. Relationship of man and elephant is one of the oldest one in human history. Bond eulogizes the age long trust in the story *White Animal*.

In his stories, Bond reminiscences grandmother's garden at Dehra. It was a complete maze of flowerbeds of all shapes and sizes. He still inhales the heady fragrance of flowers in the vases rising from within. It is the perfect garden of childhood that blooms forever in his unconscious mind.

The story *The Prospect of Flowers* exemplifies a school boy's attraction for flowers. The name of that boy is Anil. His attraction drags him into the garden of Miss Mackenzie with the purpose of plucking wild flowers. When caught by the lady, he expresses his great interest in flowers. He even used to play truant from school in order to gather them. *The Story of Madhu* also shows the similar attraction of a small girl Madhu towards the things of nature :

'She was in the garden every morning, chasing butter flies, stalking squirrels and mine, her voice brimming with laughter, her slight figure flitting about between the trees.'⁶

Another story *The Cherry Tree* is one of the best examples of a small boy's great interest in trees. Rakesh lives with his grandfather in Mussoorie in the Himalayan foothills. He has a growing interest in observing trees, fruits and flowers and planting trees. One day, he plants a cherry seed in the garden. The small cherry tree comes up and grows in the course of time. It offers great pleasure to the boy. His time passes in close contact with the tree:

'He went into the garden and lay down on the grass beneath the tree. He gazed up through the leaves at the great blue sky, and turning on his side, he could see the mountain striding away into the clouds. He was still lying beneath the tree when the evening shadows crept across the garden.'⁷

Sita and the River is a story that narrates the love for adventure of two children. They are Sita and Vijay. Sita is a parentless girl brought up by her grand-parents. Her situation has taught her to fight against everything odd from her very childhood. She lives with her grandparents on an Island in the midst of by the river. One day when her grandfather has gone to the hospital in town with her ailing grandmother, Sita faces a severe problem. It rains heavily and the water of the river rises. The small village is flooded with water very soon.

Vijay a little boy comes with his small boat and saves Sita. Then start their courageous journey by boat. They move through forests that are drowned in the flood. After an adventurous journey, they reach a village. They move to the town from there and meet Sita's grandfather.

Such an adventurous quality is manifested by another little boy, Bishnu in the story, *Dust on the mountain*. He lives with his mother and sister, Puja in a small village. As his father is dead, the maintenance of the family rests on this small boy. Though a small boy, he has courage to earn and run his family.

The story *Tiger, Tiger Burning Bright* also expresses the theme of adventure. Ramu and Shyam belong to the Gujar community, a nomadic community. They tend buffaloes in the forest. They earn their livelihood by selling milk and butter. Both the boys are about twelve years old. They are very brave and courageous. While tending buffaloes they encounter tigers and bears, but they are not afraid of them. They play games of hide and seek with wild animals.

Children's adventure and inclination to nature are also observed in *The Room on the Roof* and *Vagrants in the Valley*. Rusty is the major character in these works. He is found inclined to nature deeply. With friends he also undertakes many deeds in nature. Therefore he often escapes from his tension-ridden and helpless circumstances into the world of nature. In chapter four of *The Room on the Roof*, he is found away from the soil of city with his friend Ranbir :

'Ranbir and Rusty moves round the hill, keeping at the trintage of the jungle until they had skirted not only the European community but also the smart shopping centre.'⁸

In *Vagrants in The Valley* Rusty and his friend Kishen, who had been separated after the death of Kishen's mother, are remitted in Hardwar and start on an adventurous journey

through the jungle to reach Dehra. While walking through jungle, they face many incidents adventurously. The first is when they courageously cross a river.

Bond's deliberate decision to come back and settle in India despite the success of his first novel, *The Room on the Roof*, was anything but practical and professional. Besides, by rejecting England and consciously choosing India as his motherland, perhaps Bond also might have touched the colonial sentiments of the British. It is not surprising, therefore, that despite the warm reception to his first novel, the British literary world practically chose to slam the door on him, and ignore his later writings except the children's books.

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