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SIGN OF ECO CRITICISM IN BOND'S "OUR TREE STILL GROW IN DEHRA"

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A Sahitya Academy Award Winner for his book 'Our Tree Still Grow in Dehra' (1992) and honored with the prestigious Padmashree Award (1999), Bond occupies an outstanding position among the contemporary Indian English Writers. Though his creative consists of six novels, three collections of verse, more than one hundred short stories, a short play for Radio and over thirty books for children, he is better known as a prolific writer of short stories. Bond has published eight collections of short stories which appear under the single cover *Ruskin Bond's Collected Fiction* (Penguin,1999). These stories are indeed convincing portraits of life. Someone has rightly said:

"For Bond life is not about dramatic and momentous incident, but of tranquility lost and regained, of love and romance and Nature, where time is the catalyst to change"¹

Dehra and Mussorie has been the inspiration of all his short stories and his love for the twin locales make him live there and keep writing about the towns in

the new hues and tones of life- like colors of everyday life.

In terms of length he was quite opposed to lengthy narratives. He opined that even his novels must be finished in one sitting, otherwise the evanescent charm which characterizes them will disappear. He further adds that it is difficult to recreate that mood when one pauses half-way, and that mood is almost important in Bond. Thus, Bond's flair for short stories influenced his novelistic method by pruning and by evoking atmosphere.

This short story writer, Ruskin Bond, had great fascination for Nature. From time immemorial Nature with all her mysteries and beauty has been a perennial source of inspiration for all writers in different languages of the world. It has been a source of joy and faith in life. The writers have approached Nature according to their mental makeup and the life around them. Some fall in love with her eternal beauty whereas some are keen to love from one impulse of vernal wood. This is what William Wordsworth, one of the chief exponents of Romantic era, expresses in

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one of his poems entitled “The Table Turned”:

“One impulse from a vernal
wood

May teach you more of man
Of moral evil and of good

Than all the sages can.”²

Bond is an ardent lover of Nature. He breathes through her and writes for her. And in his treatment of nature he is very much similar to Wordsworth. Bond like Wordsworth regarded Nature as his teacher. So, we find in his stories there is an implicit indication of his healthy acceptance of life with the capacity to learn and enjoy from Nature as a teacher. And Wordsworth renders the same feeling when he asserts that I wish either to be considered as a teacher or nothing else.

Bond’s imagination is flared up by the quaint beauties of Nature. The quaint beauties of Nature, intertwined with the melody of breezes and free from discordant notes, attract him. Such is the backdrop of most of his stories, which look like a clear stream of Nature flowing freely through the dark caverns of the modern world. Bond’s creative process is still very much active in exploring and contemplating the hills and trees, in and around Dehra. Like Wordsworth, for Bond, Nature is a living presence. It is her power that changes man.

He muses on Nature with a poet and a heart which says:

“Nature never betrays the heart that loved her”³

In fact, the entire corpus of his work is a magnificent document of his deep association with Nature. Bond is a celebrated writer of hills. Nature acts in dual role for him. It provides him new themes and background for his stories. At the same time, it charges and refreshes his creative vigor. There is a unification of self with the universe. Bond’s small -town world is surrounded by forests, hills and trees. M. k. Naik says:

“It is not simply a matter of nature description as a narrative technique, but a genuine feeling for the natural world which has somewhat of a Wordsworthian quality about.”⁴

Bond has made Himalayas a part of his life as an individual and of his work as a writer. He finds endless material for his stories in the trees and wild flowers, birds and animals and simple hill folk who are an integral part of the mountains. Through his stories Bond explores his own and his protagonist’s changing relationship- from the freedom of childhood to the deep love for and communion with various manifestations of Nature. He seems to be obsessed with his landscapes- the hilly

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terrain, mountain streams, cool lakes and ponds and huge trees.

In “Our Tree Still Grow in Dehra,” a short story collection by Bond, Nature is dominant everywhere. It plays a vital role throughout the stories. In the very first piece of this collection, “Maplewood-An Introduction,” Bond describes the cottage which he hired on an impulse because of its idyllic setting. The setting of the cottage against the scenic background has been done with great care. A beautiful sight is enough to make him recall

“I trembled with excitement because I had never seen such a marvelous tree before.”⁵

So, after relinquishing his job in Delhi, he settled in Maplewood cottage which was set in the shadows of Bahahissar Hills and Paritibba. Bond’s adherence to flora and fauna and of hills and dales is a result of his commitment to the place he was born in and settled afterwards. His detailed description of ravines, slopes, valleys, brooks and forests with great geographical accuracy are due to his natural familiarity with the region.

R. K. Narayan created Malgudi, a town of his dreams; Hardy’s Wessex provided him with creative essentials, in the same vein Bond’s vision gets quickened by sylvan environs of Dehra Valley. But Bond

does not subscribe to the blind deification or adoration of Nature. He considers Nature as an integral part of human world. Nature’s bounties make him realize her latent benevolence. He is not forgetful of the realities of autumn, heat, storm or floods. But it is ultimately the benevolent force of Nature that prevails. Negative phase of nature is transient or ephemeral. Autumn is followed by spring, drought by rain. This is what we get in another story of this collection “Untouchable.” In this story at the beginning we find that the storm fills young Bond with fear. The lightening and the roar of clouds grip him with fright and also the sweeper boy. But it is against this terrifying background that they unite and become friends. So even the sinister aspects of Nature bring something positive in its wake.

Bond avoids intellectualism of Nature. He feels that too much application of cold logic distorts reality. On the other hand, it seems that he has been gifted with the eye of a mystic. Mystery seems to be a product of the writer’s closeness to Nature in all its manifestations and ramifications. A close reading of his short stories reveals Blakian mystery together with the theme of innocence and experience. He observes the growth of plants as virtually moving, stretching their limbs to embrace each other. This is what can easily be traced in “The Last Tonga Ride.” In it, it is noticeable that as the hero returns to his old

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paternal house to revive his relationship with the tree, its friendly touch, even after the lapse of many decades replenishes his heart:

“As I climbed, it seemed as though someone was helping me. Invisible hands, the hands of a spirit in the tree touched me and helped me climb.”⁶

His faith in the living organism of the trees and plants reminds one of Sri Aurobindo’s poem ‘The Tree’. In this poem he visualizes the branches of the trees as their hands raised towards heaven, probably seeking the assistance of divine in getting themselves released from earthly bondage. For Bond, tree appears as archetypal fellow beings. He feels the power of the sky, the earth and the small cherry alike.

Along the flora and fauna, Bond shares a kinship with animals as well- especially pets. He treats and speaks of them with kindness. His sense of isolation brings him closer to them. This is what we get in his story entitled “All Creatures Great and Small.” In this we find Bond enjoying the company of pet animals of which his grandfather was very much fond of. It is found that instead of having brother and sisters to grow up with in India, he had as his companions an odd assortment of pets, which included a monkey, a tortoise, a

python and a Great Indian Hornbill. Further, he also describes the frequent mud bath which he enjoys on buffalo backs in the company of Ramu.

Bond is a writer of extraordinary organic sensibility. His senses are receptive not only to the sight but also to the sounds of Nature. For example, in “The Last Tonga Ride” it appears that crickets and grasshoppers are telephoning each other from tree to bush on the arrival of rain. Again in “Binya Passes By” it is seen that the cicadas are singing in the forest after first rainfall. And in yet another story “All Creatures Great and Small,” the entire household is awakened by a loud and fearful noise of a number of frogs which had been brought by grandfather once.

In Bond’s stories Nature is not merely celebrated nor does it act as a backdrop of his plots but it also constitutes one of his major thematic concerns. He shows his concern for the Nature and the falling of the trees. The planned destruction of the trees on mountain slopes is the theme of many of his stories. Roads help the people no doubt, but they also make the hills easily accessible to the money mongers. In “Death of the Trees” Bond has shown his deep concern regarding the falling of the trees and its ill-effects. In the very beginning of the story he opines that:

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“The peace and quiet of the Maplewood hillside disappeared forever one winter.”⁷

It was because the tree was no more there. Again, in journals he wrote: already they have felled most of the trees. The walnut was one of the first to go.... Another tree was the young Deodar. All this shows his great fascination and affection with trees and ultimately Nature. He laments over the loss of these trees with which he was grown up. Again, the line

“Everywhere, birds and animals are finding it more difficult to survive, because we are trying to destroy both them and their forests.”⁸

in “All Creatures Great and Small” shows his deep concern for Nature. Robert Pague Harrison has rightly demonstrated in his remarkable book “Forests: The Shadow of Civilization” that imperialism has always brought with its deforestation and the consuming of natural resources. In the beginning Bond talking about his childhood and describing the beautiful lawn he had in his grand-father’s house. He used to live with his grand-parents. In the house there was a big banyan tree over which he felt an ownership. He describes the pets used to live there firstly the squirrel which became his friend whom he usually feed him with his hands. The squirrel used to delve into

his pockets and helped himself to whatever he could find. In the spring, when the banyan tree was full of small red figs, birds of all kinds would flock into its branches, the red-bottomed bulbul, cheerful and greedy, gossiping rosy-pastors, and parrots and crows, squabbling with each other all the time. During the fig season, the banyan tree was the noisiest place on the road. He built a small platform halfway up the tree on which he often spent his afternoons. One day he saw an exciting thing, fight between a snake and a mongoose. The cobra stood on the defensive, swaying slowly from side to side, trying to mesmerize the mongoose into making a false move. The mongoose knew the power of his opponent’s glassy, twinkling eyes, and refused to meet them. He fixed his gaze at a point just below the cobra’s hood, and opened the attack. His grand-father had unusual pets; a baby elephant in his North India house and a cassowary bird. But the cassowary bird was different no one had ever seen such a bird before not in India. Grand-father had picked it up on a voyage to Singapore, where he had been given the bird by a rubber planter, who got it from a Dutch trader who brought it from Indonesia. The house was full of pets there were spotted owlets a small bird fully grown one is no larger than a thrush and they have none of the sinister appearance of large owls. Bond put the outlets under his bed and then they were on the window ledge just inside the mosquito netting. The owlets became regular

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members of his household and were among the few pets that his grand-mother took a liking to. She objected to all snakes, most monkeys and some crows that he had all these pets time to time. He says while looking back on these childhood days, he carries a picture of grand-mother in her rocking chair with a contended owllet sprawled across her aproned lap in his mind. While she was taking a nap, owllets had crawled up her pillow till his head was smuggled under her ear both grand-mother and the owllet were snoring. He and his grand-parents moved from Dehra to Lucknow with all the pets they had parrots, small squirrel, Timothy, a cub. Timothy was discovered by grand-father on a hunting expedition in the Terai jungle near Dehra, and when the tiger was six months old, he was put into a zoo. Bond always had the dream of possessing a garden of his own. Not a very formal garden certainly not the stately home type with its pools and fountains and neat hedges as described in the essay 'of Gardens' by Bacon but to be a little untidy, unplanned, and full of surprises. Which gives him a few surprises at times? He talked about the admirer of the nature poetry of Wordsworth who decided to have his own field of nodding daffodils, and planted daffodil bulbs all over his front yard. And Annie Powell who at the age of ninety, was up early in the morning to water her lovely garden. Then he talked about his grand-parents' house surrounded by a beautiful and well-kept garden. Grand-

father looked after the orchard; grand-mother looked after the flower garden. He wished that he had been old enough to prevent that lovely home from passing into other hands.

Bond spoke of Delhi when it had begun to grow. Many new colonies sprung up on the outskirts of the capital. There were no gardens; the treeless colonies were buffeted by hot, dusty winds from Haryana and Rajasthan. To escape from the city life that constantly oppressed him, he walked across the main road into the fields, finding old wells, irrigation channels, camels and buffaloes and sighting birds and small creatures that no longer dwelt in the city. In summer and winter, he scorned the dust and the traffic and walked all over Delhi, in search of quiet spots with some shade, a few birds, flower and fruit. He spent many of his afternoons lying on the grass near India gate. He describes the bushes that he liked it the most, they may have been in the ground a long time thirty or forty years or more continuing to remain a bush, man-sized and approachable. Bushes are ideal for binding the Earth together and preventing erosion. He loved to live in the mountains where crime and random violence were comparatively less.

Thus, Bond's attitude and description of Nature begins from simple delights and culminates into humanism. His fiction

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gently brings us back to Nature in order to regain our primitive innocence of faith.

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