

Life as Touchstone – Bond in Bond's Stories

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Abstract

Autobiographies are a representation of the life and experience of the authors. It acts as a soothing factor of the author to express his feelings. Ruskin Bond is one such autobiographer who gives out his own feelings, life and lost things in his works. His short stories are not only the narration of events but gives out his own experiences. The scenes, the backdrops, the incidents, situations and events depicted in his stories project a part of his personality and this is depicted in his subject to make them authentic and interesting. Bond depicts his personal life without hesitation. The first person narration in Bond's stories not only underlines the autobiographical elements in them but also lend a sense of authenticity to them. The writer presents the autobiographical elements in the stories like "The Funeral", "Coming Home To Dehra", "Picnic at Fox Burn", "The Woman on Platform No: 8" and "A Love of Long Ago". He is a living legend who has been ceaselessly portraying life and experiences through short stories. The researcher has deliberately dealt in this topic how Ruskin bond has craftily incorporated his life and experience in the short stories listed above.

Keywords:

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An autobiography is the history of a life of a person written by himself. Autobiographies constitute a very important and unique genre of literature. In this process, the writer's experiences are universalized. The experiences are universal because they communicate experiences as experiences. Secondly, it is narrated in the way that it becomes relevant to and is experienced by anybody who reads it. People cannot be great creative writers but they can write autobiographies and can make them come alive with the investment of quality. Autobiographical writings depend upon the motives with which the writer writes and the imaginative quality of vividly expressing and experiencing life with which he is gifted. In writing a story, the writer should be able to tell it vividly and coherently which is more than just sequential. Thus, some autobiographies are indeed good literature.

Ruskin Bond's stories are found, which lends them an authentic sense of deeply felt and lived life. Unhealthy nostalgia leads to sickening sentimentality and simplistic romanticism. Bond has written stories that delve deep into human psyche and unfolds human mind in relation to nature and environment. The scenes, the backdrops, the incidents,

situations and events depicted in his stories project a part of his personality and this is depicted in his subject to make them authentic and interesting. Bond's shyness and his reclusive nature and the quietude of his life owe much to his sharpened senses.

Bond longed for maternal love in his childhood. But his mother eloped with another man when he was four and his wish was not fulfilled. In spite of his mother's absence, his father took extreme care for him. They both together explored so many places. His father sent Bond to a boarding school. Frequent bouts of malaria and jaundice took him away. Being driven away from his parental care and affection his childhood days became unworthy. His sufferings were too much for his stage. As he was longing for love in those days, he submitted himself to those who showered their affection to him.

Adolescence is the crucial period in human development as individuals being to develop stance towards the world on an identity. At this stage, people learn to express and manage emotions. Bond in this stage longed for the love of a girl. He has written many love stories. The craving for affection was common with Bond's earlier stories and the same trend continued in his later stories too. He had never hesitated to share this trails to his readers. At seventeen, he was too young and inexperienced. He got a tea boy job in a firm. He then went to a grocery store for a pittance. Then he got a good job in the Public Health Department.

In the later stage of his life, Bond found happiness only in the homes of his friends. One among them is Prem and his family. They become an integral part of his life. Bond had an unpleasant childhood because of the separation between his parents. But he had a magical childhood by confining himself to the world of nature. At the age of four, he happened to live with his father. Bond's earliest memories are of walks with his father, chasing butterflies and waving to passing trains. He gathered worldly knowledge by posing questions, about insects, people, trees, steam engines, comics, animals, birds, leaders and other countries to his father who had never lost patience with the endless questions of a seven year old boy.

Bond has spent most of his life in hills and the mountains with the valleys, flora and fauna, children, senior citizens, small town officials, damsels which provide him the inspiration and material for his work. He praises hills and mountains in his stories for they are his companions. As a short story writer, he finds that a railway station and platforms give him plots for some of his best stories. He confesses that he has personal weakness for railway platforms. Sometimes, he buys a platform ticket to spend hours on a bench watching trains coming and going and passengers arriving and departing. Vendors selling various things, guards blowing their whistles, porters arguing with passengers and the stationmaster on the Old BB and C1 Railway have something to do with his stories. Still there is some engine soot in his blood. To Bond, there is nothing like an Indian railway station anywhere else in this world.

Bond though considered as a minor writer by world standards, he conjures up images of a lost world in English that dying. He thrusts the core of life and presents age-old mysteries. He transcends the superficiality of outward circumstances. To Bond a remote village in the hills, a ruined house, an ancient family, all become characters and actors. He feels and speaks with them. This greatness distinguishes him from all other writers. Bond in his stories presents tenderly the age-old theme of love. Bond says that he cannot write unless he is in love with his subject. Longing after something lost is the pre-dominant theme of histories. Bond's major theme is love and friendship

Bond depicts his personal life without hesitation. The first person narration in Bond's stories not only underlines the autobiographical elements in them but also lend a sense of authenticity to them. To read Bond's stories is to visit the Maplewood in Dehra and to transport one's self into the quiet realm of nature and Garhwal hills and there in lays his success as a story teller. He gives much importance to friendship in some of his stories and it is only because of his friends, he could become a personal writer.

The short stories of Bond are based on his own experiences which he felt in the blood and heart. The writer presents the autobiographical elements in the stories like "The Funeral", "Coming Home To Dehra", "Picnic at Fox Burn", "The Woman on Platform No: 8" and "A Love of Long Ago".

The story, "The Funeral" is a moving account of Bond's father's death though he did not virtually witness it. Through the fictitious child, he articulates his own sorrow, his own prayer to get his dead father revived in some or the other way. This story is a pathetic narration of Bond's miserable loneliness. When the story opens Aunt M. says, "*I don't think he should go*" (TIME 11).

It is the discussion to take the boy along with the funeral procession of his dead father whose coffin lies in the next room. Padre Lal does not like to have children at funerals. His father who is dead is so much loved by the boy because his mother lives with another husband and she is far away from them. Now the boy is nine years old. He does not speak and cry. All their neighbour and relatives are there as his father moved with everybody very well. His coffin is lifted by able-bodied men on a small hearse, drawn by a pony. The boy sees the procession through the window. As it is misty, everyone is wet. He goes to the veranda. Then the gardener asks whether he needs anything. The boy shook his head. The gardener thinks that the boy will be sent to an orphanage. The boy slips out of the house by the back door and makes his way into the lane through a gap in a thicket of dog-roses. It is the same road he has often taken with his father during their evening walks.

"*God has need of your father*" (TIME 13). In these words, a well meaning missionary has tried to console him. So many unanswerable questions arise in the boy's mind. He sees the coffin being lowered. Then he sees

some of them throwing handfuls of earth over the coffin before moving away. The grave is almost covered. He thinks of his father's saying, "*The strongest man in the world is he who stands alone*" (TIME 13). The boy puts his hand out expecting his father's warm, comforting touch and finds there nothing and no one. He lowers his head so that none can see his tears. Parent-child relationship is generally a matter of psycho-analysis and social observation. But in entire corpus of Bond's fiction it emerges as a persistent theme. Bond's personal infantile trauma owes much to the depiction of this relationship. Bond does not believe in any compulsion for healthy relations, but parental relations are beyond excuses. They are at the top priority. An unnatural experience of his childhood never allows him to forget those unhappy days of his life. He is nostalgic in many of his stories because he has not grown like a normal child. The emotional vacuum still persists in his consciousness. His right upon parental guidance is unquestionably natural.

"*Coming Home to Dehra*" is a pathetic and moving story about the author's return to Dehra after his father's death and comes to his mother and step-father. Bond was eleven when he was coming to Dehra. After his mother's separation, he lived with his father and he saw his mother before four years and his step-father once or twice. When Bond's father was working at New Delhi, they took long walks together, exploring the ruined tombs and forts, went to movies, collected stamps, bought books and made plans to go to England after the end of the war. He had a happy time which ended with his father's death. Bond's father's periodic bouts of malarial fever made Bond to stay with Bhisti's son and he took his meals with an Anglo-Indian family. His father's friends advised him to put Bond in a boarding school and he did so. His father wrote to him regularly. His father was transferred to Calcutta. He suffered from malaria and jaundice and then he died. On that day his class teacher called Bond and said, "*God wanting your father in a higher and better place*" (COMPLETE 437) and he came to know that his father had passed away and cried. His head master took away his father's letters and then asked him to get them from him when he would leave the school at the end of that year. Bond gave the letters unwillingly. He hated his head master because when he left the school, the headmaster said that he did not have any letters from Bond. Bond was very much disappointed.

Bond reached Dehra and he felt worthless because he expected some one to receive him at the railway station. Bond arrived at his grandmother's house by a Tonga. They went together to meet his mother. A servant opened the door and informed him that his mother and his stepfather had gone to Motichur and they would return that evening. They had left even a six months old baby at home. Bond was astonished to hear that it was his half brother. Bond's mother arrived that evening and kissed him. His step father was indifferent towards him. He was given a private room and he confined himself in that room. There was no trace of his father's death in the house. When he opened the windows in

his room the thoughts of his father disturbed him.

The story "Picnic at Fox Burn" depicts the haunted spot experiences by the writer together with his friends namely Rakesh, Mukesh and Dolly. This story maps out the frightened experience, Bond encountered in his friend's company. Fox-Burn was a neglected old bungalow that had fallen or pulled down and which had provided shelter for bats, owls, stray goats, itinerant sadhus and for the restless spirits of those who once dwelt there. It had been a picnic spot for the kids who wanted to see the ghost. The Fox-Burn was owned by an elderly English Woman, Mrs. Williams who ran it as a boarding house for several years as her children were settled in far away lands. After Mrs. Williams, the chowkidar stayed there but he heard the voices of the old lady calling, "*Shamsher Singh, open the door! Open the door, I say and let me in!*" (TREASURY 106)

The friends discussed among themselves that Burn was a Scottish, meaning stream or spring and foxes might have come to drink at the spring. That's why it was named as Fox Burn. Bond found shelter beneath a large chestnut tree which was special during summer seasons. The other kids were scampering about on the grass. They all decided to go back to their home. They searched for Dolly and could not find her. She came after sometime and told her friends that she was playing with two children a boy and a girl. They set off the winding path and Dolly stopped and waved to someone. They asked:

"Who are you waving to, Dolly?"

"To the children"

"Where are they?"

"Under the Chest nut trees"

"I can't see them"

Dolly said "No... They can see me" (TREASURY 108).

According to the friends, Mrs. Williams might have revisited her old house that day and her children were playing there with Dolly under the chest nut trees.

"The Woman on Platform No: 8" is the story of the author, a story dedicated to a woman who showed her empathy towards him. It is the manifestation of his unfulfilled childhood. It was Arun's second year at Boarding school and he was sitting on platform no: 8 at Ambala station. He was about twelve at that time. He was standing alone waiting for the train. He began to stare at the railway tracks after being bored watching over the wanderings of the human beings.

Suddenly a woman came close to him. She asked about his loneliness and where he was going. He replied that he was going to school and he could travel alone and then introduced himself. She held the hands of Arun and took him to the canteen. Though out of shyness and suspicion he wanted to resist, he could not. After taking tea, samosa and jalebi they went to the station platform again. When they reached there, Arun met his friend, Sathish and his mother. The woman and Sathish's mother conversed. The two kids talked about their school and also their new head master. When Sathish's mother asked about Arun's mother, the

woman lied that she was his mother. And a little later, Sathish's mother advised Arun not to talk with strangers while travelling. But Arun replied that he liked strangers and when they were speaking, the train arrived. The two kids got into the train and placed themselves at the open windows. The train started moving. Sathish and his mother waved their hands to each other. But Arun did not wave or shout he watched the woman until she was lost from his sight.

There are some people whom Bond could never forget in his life time. In this story, Ruskin Bond talks about the women whom he met in the railway station when he was twelve. He saw a woman standing near him. The woman looked very simple. She did not wear any jewels and was dressed in a white saree. Bond liked her for the simplicity of her dress and for her deep soft voice and the serenity of her face. She invited him to the canteen and she talked well to him. Her behaviour did not make him feel her to be a stranger. She made him forget his loneliness. When Sathish's mother asked:

"I suppose you are Arun's mother" she answered.

"Yes I am Arun's mother". (COMPLETE 5)

Bond hated hypocrisy and lying. But when she said so he could say nothing against her word. He expresses his feeling as:

I was unable to speak a word. I looked quickly up at the woman, but she did not appear to be at all embarrassed, and was smiling at Sathish's mother. (COMPLETE 5)

When Sathish's mother advised him to be careful with the strangers, he glared resentfully at her and moved close to the woman who had befriended him. By that time, the train arrived. At last to show his affection he kisses her. He expresses his love for her through the lines:

She stood there on the busy platform, a pale sweet woman in white, and I watched her until she was lost in the milling crowd. (COMPLETE 7)

The story "A Love of Long Ago" depicts Bond's love affair with Kamala who was his neighbour. Bond has not hidden anything happened in his life, even his love affairs. Bond lived in a room above Moti-Bibi's grocery shop. He was twenty two at that time. Kamala, his beloved was seventeen. She too loved him.

"What is your work?" she asked me one day.

"I write stories."

"Will you write about me?"

"Some day." (COMPLETE 221)

Kamala's young brother worked for Moti-Bibi, the land lady and through him Bond met kamala at first. She was meant something special to him. Kamala was so poor but Bond at that time was even poorer. Kamala's parents decided to marry Kamala with a widower of forty years old. The widower had land and could offer so much to Kamala's parents. Though Bond had enough courage to declare his love to Kamala's parents he did not do on account of his poverty. Bond told Kamala's brother that he would earn well one day and the boy denied it. Bond did not have parents to speak on his behalf nor did he land himself by writing best sellers.

When he told his plan to elope, she laughed. Bond thought of the consequences. Finally, she got married to the widower. When she left for her husband's house, she asked Bond for some of the plants he owned and nourished on his small balcony. Bond said:

"Take them all", I said "I am leaving, any way"

"Where are you going?"

"To Delhi to find work. I shall come this way sometimes."

"My husband's house is on the Delhi road. You will pass that way. I will keep these flowers where you can see them." (COMPLETE 223)

When ever Bond returned he caught a glimpse of the first floor balcony filled with ferns, palm, marigolds, zuincas and nasturtiums. But one day when he returned, he could not find that balcony gardened. He wondered what had happened to Kamala. He called Kamala but no one was there to answer. He enquired about her in the locality. The old man died and Kamala had gone back to her village as she had no child. Bond glanced once more at the deserted balcony at the withered drooping plants. Ruskin Bond is a living legend who has been ceaselessly portraying life and experiences through short stories. Bond says:

Some people become an integral part of our life; others are ships that pass in the night. (RAIN 241)

The charm of his characters lies in the empathy of their creator. He loves them indiscriminately. His search for the extra-ordinary in a seeming humdrum lives, makes these commoners real heroes of life. He displays a unique balance among them, in spite of their palpable differences of nature, dialect and attire because to Bond they are essentially human and true to life.

List of Abbreviations:

RAIN	-	Rain in the Mountain
COMPLETE	-	The Complete Stories and Novels
TIME	-	Time Stops at Shamli and Other Stories
TREASURY	-	Treasury of Stories for Children

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