
A STUDY ON RUSKIN BOND'S ART OF CHARACTERIZATION

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ABSTRACT

Ruskin Bond's great strength lies in his art of characterization. He is a master creator of characters and he has left behind a whole galaxy of characters. Characters are very central in his art. Bond's stories are peopled with big and small men and women. They are ordinary, simple, educated and uneducated men and women like house servants, shop-keepers, schoolboys, thieves, gardeners, beggars, wrestlers, school-teachers, farmers, soldiers, drivers and so on. Bond's world is the world of the poor and the middle class people. Bond's greatness can be seen in the originality and naturalness of these characters. His stories are not books printed on paper but worlds full of real living and breathing people. He is no creator of card board characters; his men and women, angry, hungry, strange, foolish, honest live their own lives in the books. And they are moving and acting most of the time. His characters are true human beings. He always writes serious stories but that does not stop him from creating such characters. He is equally good at creating very interesting situations. His stories are like pan-vision films with hundreds of people suffering, acting and moving all the time.

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INTRODUCTION

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Bond's true greatness lies in his sharp observation, his knowledge of the joys and pains of ordinary, humble folks, his great sense of humour and above all his kindness for the saints and sinners alike. He rarely talks of philosophy in his books. He is just a great storyteller. His characters are realistic and live. He is a short-story writer who recognized that a character may not remain the same throughout the story but he or she can grow or develop or deteriorate as a result of what happens in the short story. He acquired an immense amount of knowledge of human nature, psychology, there is feelings and then applied them to the depiction and exploration of the character. He has created a large number of characters.

Stories hang about Bond in Dehra and Mussoorie that even a conversation with him, finds its way into some of his fictional character. He holds an interesting conviction that no two persons are alike. It is their stark individuality that attracts him. Plots of stories are woven around their individual traits, which are highly captivating and surprising.

Endowed with a great insight into the psychology of man he is motivated to write about what is uncommonly common in human nature. Therefore, his prime concern while writing a story is to highlight the extraordinary in an ordinary type of man. The story moves with the development or

some revelation in the character within the folds of a given situation. Resultantly, there are a number of moving character-portraits bright and serene in varied colours and shades.

Bond is the writer of hills and small towns. Most of his characters-men, women and children of various age and class belong to the high hills and valleys of Garhwal. They are born in small tranquil villages and hamlets. They are the people of soil-farmers, traders, vendors, chawkidars and schoolteachers etc. Boys and girls of different age play a pivotal role in many of his stories. His observation of adolescent psychology is unsurpassable. After R. K. Narayan, it is Bond who has related himself so naturally to the innocent world of children. He loves them because they are as natural as nature itself. His courtship with children started when he was at the verge of middle age maturity. Hypocrisy of the grown ups forced him to peep into the innocent world of children. The glaring contrast of the young and the old world is manifested through characters corresponding to their age and spirit.

Though Bond's range of characters are large. He is the most consummate author of hills and it is impossible to ignore the universal appeal of his characters. Like any man, they are greedy, kind, shy, sensuous, brave, stubborn, loving, friendly and crooked. They may take away other's life to protect themselves. Cold-blooded murders are also a part of Bond's gallery; he deals with them with equal felicity, focusing upon the mysterious background of their being so. Bond lays emphasis upon the circumstances of a person for his idiosyncrasies.

Bond's portraits are not static. In spite of their seeming inactiveness, they steadily move towards maturity. The process of development is conspicuous in both young and old. They are remarkably pliant to harmonize with the people and surroundings. We can classify them as types and individuals both. They are gripping and tantalizing as individual human beings, while representing their particular class to which they belong. It has always been interesting to trace the source of these creations. During his long walks, Bond meets many people and some of them get deeply imprinted in his memory. They become a part of his 'mental luggage'. He revives them through stories. Critics may accuse him of particular obsession, but it is quite natural that some of our meets linger with us.

Bond's extensive gallery has a variety of pen portraits ranging from man and woman, young and old, rich and poor, simple and complex, autobiographical and fictional. Some of them like Rani, Markham and Sensualist are meant for psychological observations, while some like Kishen Singh, Pritam and Hari are regional simpletons. Some characters such as Sita, Suraj, Vijay and

Rusty etc. have allegorical connotations and some are autobiographical or semi-autobiographical portraits. Bond has created a few caricatures too like Sita Ram and uncle Ken. His world is not of male dominance; girls and women are not less gripping than men in his stories.

Autobiographical nature of his fiction makes him an Indian Charles Lamb. The dilemma of growing up is powerfully presented through Rusty, his favourite autobiographical hero of the stories *Rusty, The Boy from the Hills*. Through him Bond speaks of his own tribulations standing at the threshold of manhood. Rusty's sensibility, his urge for friendship and above all his Indianness are truly of Bond himself.

Doing father, who takes away his son on the slopes of Dehra for planting saplings in many of Bond's stories, is Mr. A. A. Bond, his loving father. The writer is so deeply attached to his father, that he brings him back to life whenever he has to talk of a father in the plot of his story.

Another character of semi-autobiographical touch is Dukhi, the gardener, in stories like "A Job Well Done" and "The Room of Many Colours." The character emerged out of Bond's early reminiscing of Granny's gardener sat on his haunches weeding and proyning the hedge. He is lovable because he grows flowers. His frail body is camouflaged in the flowers, grass, bushes, weeds and soil around him. Dukhi, one of the most humble men of Bond's worlds, surprises his readers by a sudden act of heroism in the story "A Job Well Done". It may be a case of court claummy, but Dukhi feels no remorse for killing Major Sahib who forces him to make the pigeons homeless by closing the old well in the garden.

Some of Bond's characters have deep psychological implications. They are the men of split personality. Though each human being possesses duo phase, some have to act perforce antagonistically when caught in a dilemma. Their conflict gears up the story. They are essentially good at heart and their goodness is put to a rigorous test under heavy pressure of situation. Sometime they dissimulate wickedness through gentle profile like Uncle Bill and sometime they act as a traitor to their own self like Inspector Lal.

In semi detective story "A Case for Inspector Lal" Keemat Lal is made up of such stuff that is unlikely to be found in his profession. The character originates from a real official who was of Bond's close acquaintance. He does not act like Holmes, but does peep into the mystery of Rani's murder case. A policeman who is trained to maintain law and order is also expected to use his discretionary powers at times. Inspector Lal, whose promotion solely depends on solving the case, falls a victim to these two codes face to face. A girl, named Kusum, is the murderer in

prima facie, but the motive behind murder is truly to protect herself against the melodramatic intentions of Rani. Inspector Lal is scared of the girl's future in remand home. Bond has picked the crux so emphatically that the suspense is shifted to the discretion of Mr. Lal. Inspector Lal closes the 'file' of case and of his promotion forever. His victory as a man smiles upon his failure as a professional, "I should never have been a policeman." The honest submission reaffirms his faith in humanity as the ultimate concern in life.

The character can grow or deteriorate during the course of the short stories. The characters do not remain the same by the end of the short story as they were at the beginning. Bond firmly believes that man is a curious mixture of vice and virtue, even those whom we call villains, are not devoid of the streaks of nobility. That is why we say that he creates round characters and not flat ones. The characters undergo a change as they naturally react to their circumstances and environment. Each one of his characters grows and evolves for good or bad circumstances and environment plays major part in their being so. His stories give a sort of psychological treatment to bring them back into positive tenor. Ram Bharosa in the story "The Blue Umbrella" is such a pliant character. Being the only shopkeeper in a small hill-village, he is awfully possessive of anything that is valuable and beautiful. His exclusive position in the village squirms when a poor girl named Binya, owns a beautiful umbrella. In his mad pursuit to vindicate himself, he gets socially alienated. The worst happens when he tries to steal the umbrella and children derogate his name from 'Ram the Trustworthy' to 'Trusty Umbrella thief'. The egocentric man gets ultimately confined to his house-shop, which nobody visits now. He even loses his appetite. Financially dwindled, socially alienated Ram Bharosa hardly looks like a man. Bond portrays his extreme fall, but a sudden turn in the situation revives him miraculously. Binya, the co-victim of 'umbrella vanity', realizes the cause of his miseries and relinquishes the umbrella. Ram Bharosa by now has paid much for his greed; he has also realized that true joy lies in sharing, not in possessing. Both his anguish and reversal are genuine. New Ram Bharosa is born who values Binya's frank smile above all riches.

In the other story "Death of a Familiar" Sunil is the central character and his age is only twenty. He is bad man and a good for nothing fellow in the beginning. But contact with Narrator and Maureen, as a schoolteacher at Simla, brings him to the right path and he becomes worthy to marry Maureen. However, in the end of the story he dies. Bond declares his view on the

desirability of the growth of character in a short story through Sunil in "Death of a Familiar". It is rightly said that character is not a state but a process.

Further it is not defined for all time but it grows or deteriorates in the light of opportunities and environment. Bond's characters develop gradually as we come to know them. They go from weakness to strength or from strength to weakness, according to the work that they do and the thoughts that they cherish.

Some of Bond's creations have supernatural shade, they are normal human beings, but placed in such circumstances, that enforce them to be interpreted as weird creatures. They are alienated mysterious looking persons passing the ordeal of life. Markham in the story "When Darkness Falls" is a war veteran condemned to die for the world. In a tragic accident Markham has lost one of his eyes, part of his nose and flesh of his side face a ravaged physique sufficient to make an onlooker yelp out of fear. This is how a real flesh and body Markham lives in a cellar for many years without daylight and morning breeze. Markham is an embodiment of horrible ordeal for no fault of his own. His urge for company, which finds a pathetic substitute in a shrew that visits his cellar, makes him more destitute. When suffocation becomes unbearable, he walks on the deserted road in the silence of night, sometime horrifying a casual passerby. Darkness of supernatural implication devours Markham. His impatient attempts to play old notes on Piano in the stillness of night reflects his desperate move for normal life. In spite of suffering from utter sense of vacuum, Markham is not foolish dreamer and he tries hard to adjust with his horrible truth, "but how long can a mind remain normal in such circumstances ?" (Bond: 2001:14).

Markham is a normal mind handicapped by physical abnormality. His desperate insistence to take him as a normal soul makes him highly pathetic.

Overwrought Rani in the story "The Room of Many Colours", is also a product of circumstances. She appears insane; her discordant talks, obsession for bright glasses and dazzling jewellery in contrast to the dark room where she sits, impart her a bizarre shade. She is nameless; perhaps her state of being Rani has dwarfed her individual self. The pall of mysteriousness surrounds her, being confined to her rooms situated at the top of the ruined palace. It is further intensified by repeated references of ghost, snakes and lizards. Being cut off from the main stream of life, she affects pathetically her state of being Rani through gems and pearls in all her fingers.

Her insistence to be treated as normal one is as pathetic as Markham's, "Quite normal Mrs. Khanna. . . I'm quite normal." (Bond :2001: 16). Both Rani and Markham struggle to come out of

their deceptive shells Markham yearns for a normal life and Rani for a normal womanhood. Whatever seems bizarre about her is only an illusion, or an escapade from the leaden force of circumstances. Her anxiety to protect snakes in the garden because they were princes who died unmarried; speak of the tragedy of a queen whose status denied her the natural bliss of matrimony.

The story "Susanna's Seven Husbands", is about a vamp of obscure traits. Susanna, the lady of seven husbands, is a cynosure of city youth. She is sought after for her wealth and beauty. The list of her wooers is quite long. Seven out of them marry her to die within the year of their matrimony. The lady is generous in her bounties, but rigorous towards her menials. Highly unpredictable Susanna becomes a prodigy of fear and fascination. Bond portrays her character on three possible lines – first, she kills her husbands for some bitter childhood impressions that prompt her to dominate the opposite sex, second, it is simply her nature to hunt for new adventures, third and sheer chance is responsible ultimately for deaths in succession. But for the people of her town she is an enigma, a lady of supernatural prowess.

In the story, "Bus Stop, Pipalnagar", Bond reveals the reality of life through Suraj's character. Suraj is the central character in the story. He is an orphan and a refugee. He works as a helper in a teashop; but when he starts having epileptic fits, the shopkeepers ask him to leave. He has saved some money, and with it he buys a small stock of combs, buttons, cheap perfumes, and bangles, and converting himself into a mobile shop, goes from door to door selling his wares in the Pipalnagar. He loves his life. He sees positive attitude to life. He is ambitious and optimist.

In this way, Bond gives us philosophy of life through Suraj's dialogue; "Let us go where there are no people at all. . . I am a little tired of people. I see too many of them people".

Vijay in the story "Sita and the River" becomes a blue skinned god, Krishna, to save Sita from the angry river. He is by all means a normal village boy but his appearance on the scene when Sita is struggling hard for life, transforms him into God. For a girl, who grows with the stories of mythical Gods and Goddesses in her blood, it is quite natural to accept her protector as Godhead. Vijay not only saves Sita, but also introduces her to the real world that lies beyond her island. Melodies pouring out of his flute, and lustrous blue of peacock feather fill her life with a lively spectrum of sound and colour.

Besides these multi dimensional characters, Bond has penned simple regional representatives who smile amidst the hardships of hill life. Bisnu in "Panther's Moon" is a small Garhwali boy,

the only school going boy of the village, Manjari. He covers almost ten miles daily to reach his school. His day begins after bowing before the image of lord Ganesh. He loves his pet, Sheroo, the people of his village, jungle and fields around. Trauma of the panther does not deter him. Kishen Singh in the story "The Tunnel" who belongs to the rural class understands the forest and its creatures very well. He is scared of the city and its people because they bring havoc in his peaceful surroundings. The confidence, with which he drives away the dreadful panther from the tunnel, is a sign of his being in their close communion. But he feels uncomfortable to cope with the ways of 'civilized man'. His observation, " it is safer in the jungle than in the town. No rascals out here".

A character is so much harmonized with his surroundings that they appear to share oneness. The lean and spindle legged Dukhi remains camouflaged in his garden.

Dukhi is deeply rooted in the objects of the garden where he works. Life for him is not a matter of one year succeeding another, but of five "Seasons – winter, spring, hot weather, monsoon and autumn – arriving and departing". The old Kitemaker with hollow cheeks, mehendired beard is like a kite, 'torn and stuck in the old banyan tree'. The maker dies and the 'stringless kite' too flits in the blue sky.

To be concluded, in the book "Friends in Small Places", it is mentioned that Bond's characters are not the sort who make the headlines but are nonetheless, remarkable for their quiet heroism, their endearing idiosyncrasies, and their heartwarming ability to find happiness and contentment in everyday events.

Ruskin Bond lays emphasis on characters rather than incident in short stories. He can visualize a character by means of his sympathetic insight. He can convince us by his knowledge and good analysis that the actions of his characters, which appear contradictory to us all, arise out of some deep motive.

In short, Ruskin Bond made his characters absolutely real. His men and women really appear to be creatures of flesh and blood.

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