

Biodiversity in the writings of Ruskin bond

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Abstract

This paper aims at discussing extensively the teeming world of flora and fauna as described by Ruskin Bond in his writings. He is more like an expert botanist and has recorded in his writings the numerous varieties of trees, flowers and shrubs that cover the hills. He takes his readers on an adventurous trip to the mountains and he informs them how the flora changes dramatically as one ascends the foothills, then the temperate zone and then even higher. Simultaneously fauna has also been elaborately described by Bond ranging from the smallest insect, to the largest of animals as elephants and tigers. This paper aims at exploring the various dimensions of biodiversity in the works of Ruskin Bond. His works are imbued with in-depth search on plants and animals of the Himalayan region. Ruskin Bond, an icon among Indian writers of English and known as Indian Wordsworth in prose, grew up with an awareness of his 'natural surroundings'. Most of Bond's work is based on the biodiversity spread across beautiful Himalayan hills. Bond himself proclaims that he is keen nature lover. He finds solace in her lap and loves to write about her. According to bond, his relationship with nature is eternal and with every passing day it keeps on renewing and he feels more close to her. His heart is closest to the celestial hills and mountains in Garhwal region.

Keywords: Himalayas, flora, fauna, nature, landscape, biodiversity

Introduction

Bond has always been interested in gathering information about natural world around him. For this he extensively studied the astounding world of biodiversity present in the planet i.e. flora and fauna. He meticulously describes numerous varieties of vegetation and animal kingdom including wild and domestic animals, birds, reptiles and insects. His description of their characteristics leaves his readers awestruck. He seems to be in love with all the natural creatures of the cosmos so has explored them like an expert botanist or zoologist. Most importantly he is highly sensitive towards nature. This is not a religious relationship but of friendship and he believes that he is 'a nature worshipper':

"One of my earliest memories is of picking my way through a forest of flowering cosmos; the flowers nodding down at me in friendly invitation. Since then, the cosmos has been my favourite flower-fresh, open, uncomplicated living up to its name, cosmos, the universe as an orchard whole ^[1].

He has made mountains his home, which in turn is home to a number of natural creatures. Living in vicinity with them Bond vividly describes the biodiversity and while he describes flora, he enlightens his readers that the flora changes altogether as one mounts the foothills, then the temperate zone and then even higher. The backdrop of almost all his stories are picturesque landscapes of Himalayas. He is at his narrative best when he is penning the Himalayas and in its various manifestations. Himalayas is home to a wide variety of flora and fauna. He opines that nature has carved everything perfectly whether it be plant or animal, big or small. He thinks that there is a lot to learn from the natural world, the earth, the seas, the heavens and

the like. He acknowledges the trees presence in the lives of humans. They are the past connections of humans. Admiring trees for their magnificence, he writes a poem in their glory:

" . . . I listen to their whisperings, their own mysterious diction; and bow my head before their arms and ask for benediction ^[2].

Bond's *the Book of Nature* has been written like a botanist, after thoroughly researching flora. He has tried to explore every possible detail about plant kingdom. In this book he has classified flora into four categories, plants, orchids, flowers and trees. He has succeeded in fervently describing the features of all these. He begins with their botanical names then describes their general characteristics to medicinal, curative and commercial uses. He has also highlighted the mythological importance of trees like peepal, banyan, tulsi, mahua and many others. He also informs his readers of the innumerable uses of trees and plants such as deodar, peepal, mango, rhododendron, tulsi, mahwa, bamboo and many others.

After Bond shifted to Mussoorie, he became highly interested in the biodiversity of the region. He has always been a nature lover and avid walker and walked past the Himalayan region exploring its vegetation and habitation. In his writings, he chiefly mentions the Himalayas - eastern and western which he informs his readers, are covered by rich Indian floral wealth. He gives details about the magnificent and rare orchids grown in the vicinity of Himalayas like *Vanda teres*, *Aerides* and many more. According to his findings Himalayas is the house of rich flora wealth and it is so densely covered that it becomes difficult to have a complete account of every species there. Still he has tried to give an elaborate account of the

important plants there, so that when his readers visit there they are not alien to the surroundings and are aware as to what awaits them. Bond writes in the essay "Foothill to Treeline":

"The valleys, winding down from snowy heights, and carrying streams from the snows to the scorching foothills, are full of vegetation which seldom loses its vivid green. To give a complete account of plant life between, say Siliguri and Darjeeling or Kangra and Kulu, or Almora and the Pindari Glacier, or Nandprayag and Tungnath, would be well-nigh impossible^[3].

As Bond moves ahead in his writings, he informs the readers that he has researched about the flora particularly of the Himalayas in the eastern region. He found out that the soil and atmosphere in that region is humid. It is suitable to *Clyptomaria*, which is a cedar and was relocated from Japan in the year 1920. *Clyptomaria* is grown at four and six thousand feet altitude. Out worldly they are beautiful, having trim and straight gait. They appear all of a sudden and can sustain in all types of weather. Bond presents a comprehensive detail of mainly all types of flora that is grown in the Himalayas in the eastern region. He writes:

"At an elevation of four to seven thousand feet all the herbal flora of temperate Europe is found: violets, buttercups, cowslips, barberry, primrose, St. John's wort, dandelion, stoncrop, periwinkle, commelina, meadow sage, wood sorrel, blackberry, dog rose, sorrel, balsam, poppies, anemones, wild carrot, clover, nettles, wild geranium, nightshade, saxifrage, and alpine rock cress, to list only a few of the many hundreds of wildflowers found at these altitudes from Kashmir in the west to Arunachal Pradesh in the east^[4].

Besides giving comprehensive details about trees, plants, shrubs and bushes, Bond also describes in detail flowers of different kinds. He considers them the most beautiful creation of God which have been his companion throughout. His fascination for them leads him to search and know every flower by its name. As per their traits he has categorized them into two types, domesticated and wild. He assures his readers that he is equally fond of both mainstream and wild flowers and does not deem anyone inferior to other. His personal favourites among domesticated ones are *Commelina*, balsam, pink crocus and many others. Among wild flowers he likes wild roses, dog rose, oxalis, varieties of sorrels and many others. He simply loves all flowers irrespective of their colour, form, size, shape and appearance. However, he discloses the fact that his personal favourites among flowers are the ones with their distinctive fragrance such as snapdragons, jasmine and many others. He also appreciates the trees with the blossoms. Elaborating the beauty of flowers, he pens down the following lines:

"I don't think I could have got through life without the company of flowers. They sustain and stimulate. My desk is just a place of work until one of the children places a vase of flowers upon it, and then it becomes a place of delight. Be it a rose or a chrysanthemum or a simple daisy, it will help me in

my work. They are there to remind me that life has its beautiful moments.

When I step out for one of my walks, I look for wild flowers, even the humblest of flowers hiding on the hillside. And if I do not know their names, I invent their names, because it's nice to know someone by his or her name^[5].

If Bond does not know the name of a flower which he discovers, he tries to find out. As far as the famous flowers are concerned, he found out that they got their name from the botanist who discovered them. For example, dahlia got its named after Mr. Dahl, the zinnia after Dr. Zinn and so on. He also notes some peculiar flowers having fragrant leaves, for example, lemon geranium.

Along with the world of flora, the teeming world of fauna too has been described extensively by Bond. He delves deep into the amazing world of insects, birds and animals. A great variety of animals, birds and insects are described minutely and fondly. Not only does he describe the large and magnificent animals like elephant, tiger but also the minutest of creatures like ant and many more. He does not fail to mention even the so-called repulsive creatures like snakes, lizards and owls. Bond also writes affectionately about animals and birds such as buffaloes, elephants, crows, owls etc. which are normally the butt of ridicule. Among animals, one animal which has specially captured the fancy of Bond is buffalo, which he feels is a carefree creature, always lost in its own world. In his essay "The Magic of the Monsoon," he call them solid and earthbound creatures and also tells the readers that buffaloes like warm days and cool, soft mud. He is really satisfied to watch them wallowing in mud, or chewing over a mouthful of grass, absolutely unaware of everything else. They watch with sleepy, indifferent eyes and tolerate the pecking of crows. To get neck-deep in water was their only aim in life, he quips humorously:

"The common monsoon sights along an up-country road are often picturesque - the wide plains, with great herds of smoke-coloured, delicate-limbed cattle being driven slowly home for the night, accompanied by troops of sheep. Then you come to a pond, where the buffaloes are indulging in a sensuous wallow, no part of them visible but the tips of their noses^[6].

Bond describes animals, birds and insects like a naturalist. He has been closely associated with the world of fauna and written a lot of stories about them. He is empathetic towards them and understands their habits and way of living. The stories that he writes about them comes naturally from his pen. Every creature that he depicts gives a feeling that he knows them personally, he has been their friend throughout. Nirranjan Mohanty remarks in this regard:

"Bond has humanized the world of nature to consecrate his own joy in the living. Bond's love for the insects and animals that make their living under the fostering care of nature strengthens his tie with nature and his understanding of it. He realizes that these animals and insects form a part and parcel of nature^[7].

Bond projects all the beasts, birds and insects as heroes. He considers them at par to man in every manner. He believes that they are a vital part of eco- system and therefore necessary for a balanced life in the planet. He praises tiny creatures, butterflies, cicadas, caterpillars, ants, beetles, moths, squirrels, owl, bluejay, hoopoe and others are equally charming in the eyes of Bond. In some of Bond's stories related to animals, love between animal and man is depicted. Even animals understand love and reciprocate the love of those who empathize with nature and do not harm them. He believes that animals also have the same feelings as men have and they have equal right on earth as men. He calls leopards fascinating creatures. He says that they are "Lithe, sinewy, powerful – beautiful, in fact"^[8].

Ruskin Bond describes the charm of elephants in his autobiographical book *Notes from a Small Room*. He says that everyone likes elephants which are a combination of power with gentleness, a childish sulkiness with good humour and great girth with a ballet-dancer's poise. No one ever speaks harsh words against these huge creatures. In Hindu and Buddhist folklore, the elephant is a firm favourite; the Hindu God Ganesh has an elephant's head. Even though elephants are not sacred like cows, they are held in great affection.

According to Bond, elephants are held in great esteem because they are intelligent, hard-working and obedient. They are friendly to man and adjust to their ways. They reciprocate love, are nimble, strong and wonderful to look at. They can walk on the streets patiently coping up well with the traffic. Though India is home to many wild elephants, Bond classifies them as domestic animals because they feel quite at home with human beings. In his own words:

"Wild elephants are usually rounded up by tame elephants, who exert an immediate civilizing effect on their brethren! But elephants can be unpredictable. I have seen a tame elephant rescue marooned villager from an island in the middle of a flooded river; yet on another occasion this same elephant went berserk and smashed up the village post office"^[9].

Bond mentions even the minutest of creatures like ants in his writings. He praises them for their diligence and considers them epitome of hard work and consistency. They never stop working and are always striving hard to store the grain for hard times. This is the reason that they have been mentioned and praised thoroughly by Ruskin Bond and other poets as well. Bond admires their determination and grit to reach their destination:

"And if an ant moves across my desk, I shall record its transit. The world may be in a state of financial and political turmoil, but that does not mean ants should stop going about their business. Ants are determined creatures, who will be in the sugar-bowl no matter how high on the shelf you place it"^[10].

Amidst the strong breeze, Bond describes the chirpiness of the birds. He notices that the king crows have taken up residence in the oaks. He wonders why they are called crows. He finds them to be slim, elegant black birds, with long forged tails and their call, far from being a caw is quite

musical, though slightly metallic.

Bond has studied a lot about insects as well. He minutely knows the details of most of the insects. He writes that few insects like moth, honeybee and mosquito have certain similarities. They look different from one another yet each is an insect and therefore similar. Moth has six legs, like other insects, and its body has three subdivisions, a head, a centre part, and an abdomen. He imparts a useful information to his readers telling them that firefly is the smallest creature in the world. It has a minute body which has a length of fifth of a millimeter and cannot be seen with naked eyes. It can very well be compared with iota of dirt. Yet it is finely built with perfect small wings and on its legs it also have little combs for cleaning itself. Bond has captured such minute details in his writings and has termed it nature's perfection. Insects are one creatures that we get everywhere. They are there in the soil, in the air, in the water, in the forests and even in the polar regions along with polar bear. They are tough boned and are able to sustain in almost every condition and are very energetic. They can hop around anywhere and everywhere. Some insects are miraculously beautiful with varied colour and sizes. Describing the astonishing feats of these insects Bond writes that a fly, though very small can jump over one hundred times its own height; a mosquito has a wing-beat of three hundred per second; and a dragon-fly can conquer a speed of nearly sixty miles an hour. Apart from their natural traits, Bond also counts the losses incurred by some of the insects that destroys and wastes our crops and fields which in turn leads to the loss of great amount of money. They are also the reason of the infectious diseases — especially flies and mosquitoes.

Notwithstanding all this, the survival of these insects is important for maintaining the cycle of Nature. Bonds tells that if all the insects will vanish from the earth, then this will disturb the ecological system and as a result living beings would vanish too. This may lead to the fall of mankind as well. This will hamper the growth of flowers, plants and vegetables as without insects transfer of pollen grains is not possible. Fish and birds mainly feed on insects and so without insects they will starve and when they starve other animals dependent on them would also starve. It's an ongoing cycle that cannot be disrupted. While observing the world of insects minutely, Bond notices that some of the insects produce a peculiar music of their own. As such, he honours the insects with the title of 'musicians'. He observes how during the monsoon season when everything comes to life, these musicians are stirred to their greatest activity. In rainy season, the insect orchestra sings melodiously. : "At the height of the monsoon, the banyan tree was like an orchestra-pit with the musicians constantly turning up."¹¹ The whole environment seems to ring and murmur to their music. During monsoon life rejuvenates and greenery spells its bound everywhere, and then the clear brightening sky seems to lighten up with the symphony of natural music played by insects.

Bond finds the cicadas the best of the musicians and a class by themselves. They are considered to be the great musicians and their screaming chorus rings through the forest. Each species of the cicadas plays its distinctive music. Tracing the history of cicadas from the ancient period of Greek civilization Bond writes that the ancient Greeks were acquainted with cicada's talent well. They liked its melodies very much and caged him so that could

hear them as and when he sings. They used to choose only the males as the females, like most insect musicians, were completely dumb.

Ruskin Bond is gifted with a rare sensibility of a naturalist that can listen to the voice of the nature in its various manifestations. He can very well listen to the voices of the trees, of the birds, animals. He is sensitive enough to enjoy the melodies of the insects. So it is only natural that Bond's works are imbued with a strong eco-consciousness. Whether it is a graphic description of the teeming world of flora and fauna, or a precise mapping of the contours of the earth, or a narration of the myths associated with mountains, trees and plants, along with a simultaneous portrayal of the complex relationship between man and environment: all these are warp and woof of Bond's works. So complete is his affinity with the macrocosm around him that he writes about all forms of nature – from the tiniest ant to the mighty elephant, from a drop of water to the vast ocean – with equal felicity. Hence it can be affirmed that Ruskin Bond's stories, essays, poems and travelogues have an extremely rich potential for inculcating and nurturing the essence of biodiversity among his readers, while at the same time making them aware of the dangers of deforestation and pollution of environment.

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