

RUSKIN BOND'S WRITINGS – A HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract

While history is a factual record of events, literature is its selective representation with emotional overtones. To understand events recorded by history it is essential to understand the social, cultural and political background against which the events occurred and this is the calling of literature. In Ruskin Bond's writings literature and history which are anyway inextricably intertwined merge to form a literary fabric that is both enlightening and enchanting. He takes his readers on a sojourn to unfrequented places; introduces them to uncelebrated heroes and informs them about unarticulated events of history. Bond's narrations make history vivid, picturesque and pleasurable, scaled of pedantry and pedagogy that may impede interest in the subject. Bond's variant handling of the subject is able to re-introduce the delights of history to his readers. In the ambit of his writings Ruskin Bond covers divergent people, places, inventions, incidents, passions and pastimes and presents a wholesome, well-garnished platter of history and literature.

Keywords: History, Literature, Intertwined, Vivid, Uncelebrated, Unarticulated

British by descent, but Indian by choice, Ruskin Bond may well be classified as a contemporary historian who both, informs and entertains through narrations about uncharted places, unfamiliar events and unsung heroes of Indian history intertwined in his writings. Bond's archival chronicles are however, not of a pallid and pedantic ilk and are not narrowed down only to political circumstances and occurrences; rather they give a kaleidoscopic view of the socio-cultural milieu of bygone times into which the author skillfully transports the reader. "Historical fiction provides an opportunity to vicariously live the events of the past, learn about heritage and develop a sense of the sweep of history" (Creany 26) Ruskin Bond is a capacious contributory towards that end who admits, "I've always found history interesting, and it helps me when I have a story to write" (14).

The canvas of history in Bond's writings is spread over centuries and covers a range of events and characters – the 1857 uprising for India's independence; the genesis of towns and cities; the nomenclature of locations; the ingress of food items in Indian culinary; Sufi saints, emperors, ambassadors, dacoits, passions, pastimes and much more.

Set in the cantonment town of Shahjahanpur in the year 1857, an eventful year in Indian history, Ruskin Bond's novella, A Flight of Pigeons presents a segment of socio-political history with particular reference to a British mother Mariam, her daughter Ruth and Javed Khan, a Rohilla Pathan rebel who was besotted by Ruth. Bond's interest in the lives of those who had survived the 1857 uprising prompted him to visit Shahjahanpur since he believes and recommends that "History is best enjoyed by visiting the scene of actual events, and allowing the imagination to wander back and forth in time" (xi). The small town, Bond observed, was as if stalled in time with landmark locations standing unaltered as mute witnesses of a grave historic event. From this visit evolved Bond's novella in which he has objectively reflected upon the universality of human emotions, be they of the subduers or the subdued. He has also showcased the altering power status between the Indians and the British which has symbolically lent the title to the novella. Like pigeons which when disturbed, take flight, circle and return to rest again, the British were briefly vanquished, took flight, but returned like homing pigeons, hence, A Flight of Pigeons. Bond's narration is replete with tales of hospitality and hostility; passion and perfidy; decorum and dignity. The narration is a simple, chronological representation of a turbulent time in history. It follows chronology and depicts real events and characters without being overly sentimental.

Interestingly, renowned writer, Ismat Chughtai, chanced to read Bond's story in a magazine in 1975 and shared it with filmmaker, Shyam Benegal who in 1978 based a film titled Junoon on it. In an Unpublished Personal Interview Mr. Benegal described A Flight of Pigeons as "...a charming story which brings out the transformation of the relationship between the British and the Indians. Pre 1857 there

was trust, honour, an absence of hate and an animate conscience. Post 1857 the scene had changed. This is reflected through the love angle of the story. Javed Khan could have abducted Ruth and killed Mariam and the other members of her family, but there was a conscience in his relation that was based on a larger context of trust which the Indians and British did share up to then; a sense of honour made him refrain. The events of 1857 mangled relationships and destroyed trust.”

Tracing the genesis of towns and cities Ruskin Bond has accredited Colonel William Linnaeus Gardner, a European who served in a Maratha army for having given India, the first of her hill stations with the conquest of Almora and Mr. F. J. Shore, the Superintendent of Doon to be the de facto finder and founder of Mussoorie, erstwhile Mansuri which was so called because of the abundant growth of a shrub known as ‘mansur’ in the local dialect, in the region. About the establishment of Shimla, Bond has written that during their invasions, the Gurkhas captured most of the region surrounding Shimla. Subsequently the British intervened and pushed back the Gurkha forces and restored the territories captured by them to their original rulers, with the exception of Shimla which they retained “for services rendered!” (86).

Bond has also recorded interesting information about the history of Karnal, a town near Delhi. According to legend the town was founded by Karna, the famed hero of Mahabarata. Centuries later, in 1739, the town became the location of one of the most bloody and effectual battles in Indian history when the Persian invader, Nadir Shah routed the Mughal forces in just two hours. A little over a century later Karnal had a historical resuscitation when it came into prominence during the uprising of 1857 as a refuge for the East India Company and a few decades later almost the entire cantonment population of Karnal was wiped out by cholera and malarial fever.

The history of the town of Nahan, the capital of the State of Sirmur, which is currently in Himachal Pradesh, has also been traced by Bond in his enlightening book, *The India I Love*. According to legend, the town and the royal family of the State were destroyed by an earthquake which was the result of a danseuse’s curse. The king of Sirmur had challenged a nautch girl to walk a tightrope in exchange for half of his kingdom. The dancer accepted the challenge, but forewarned the king that a curse would befall him if he was treacherous. Disregarding the girl’s warning, the king had the rope severed just before the end of her tightrope walk and the dancer plunged to her death. Ostensibly, the earthquake that subsequently destroyed Nahan was an outcome of the danseuse’s curse.

Tracing the nomenclature of certain locations Ruskin Bond has interesting information to share. Instances in point are that Hardy Falls in Mussoorie got its name since it was discovered by the boys of a school who were accompanied by their Principal, Mr. Hardy; Mossy Falls got its name since a particular Mr. Moss, affectionately known as Mossy happened to slip and fall there and, the local bus stop at Guptakashi is popularly known as ‘Bhookh Hartal’ i.e. ‘Hunger Strike’ bus stop because the town dwellers had to actually resort to a hunger strike to get a bus stop sanctioned for that less frequented place.

The history about the ingress of potatoes in Indian cuisine also finds a place in Ruskin Bond’s narrations who acknowledges an Irishman by name of Captain Young, better known as Captain ‘Jung’ in Indian circles for his contribution to Indian cooking. Captain Young loved the taste of potatoes and missed them in his diet while he was in India where the food item was yet unknown. When Captain Young received a supply of potatoes from his hometown he planted them on Indian soil and encouraged the people of Garhwal to grow them too. “The humble aloo made life much more interesting for chefs, housewives, gourmants and gourmets...For aloo-mutter and aloo-dhum, Our heartfelt thanks to Captain Young!” (88).

In “The Tomb and City of Tughlaq Shah”, Bond has apprised uninformed readers about the reason behind the desertion and abandonment of the city of Tughlaqabad seven centuries ago. An altercation arose between the hallowed Sufi saint, Hazrat Nizam-ud-din Auliya and Sultan Ghiyas-ud-din Tughlaq of Delhi, perhaps because the latter asked the former to return the gifts that he had received from the earlier Sultan. The offended saint uttered a curse: “Ya Base Gujar, Ya Rahe Ujar” (64) translated to mean that may it be inhabited by Gujar goatherds or remain uninhabited. Subsequently Tughlaqabad, the city of Tughlaq Shah was abandoned and its inhabitants, as prophetically declared by Hazrat Nizam-ud-din Auliya were Gujar goatherds.

An enlightening prosaic poem penned by Ruskin Bond titled “At the Grave of John Mildenhall in Agra” immortalizes the first Englishman who set foot on Indian soil in the year 1564. The traveler sought Emperor Akbar’s permission to remain in his kingdom for a while. His request was complied with. Indian history then chartered a divergent course as over three hundred years passed before the last

English imperialist left Indian soil. John Mildenhall, the path breaker among the Englishmen to come to India has been inappropriately sidelined by historians, while many less significant Englishmen who followed him have been glorified and immortalized,

In his writings Ruskin Bond has acknowledged the contribution of Frederick Wilson, popularly known as 'Pahari' towards both the boom of the timber trade and ecological doom of the forests in the Tehri region. This enterprising Englishman leased the forests from the local Raja and arranged for logs to be floated downstream from where they were sawn and dispatched to buyers in towns. Another business venture of Mr. Wilson was building a 350 feet suspension bridge supported by deodar tree trunks at Bhaironghat above the Bhagirathi River. The influence and affluence of this early British entrepreneur on Indian soil was so imposing that he even minted his own coins which as narrated by Ruskin Bond, are on display at the collection of J. M. T. Gibson of Mayo College, Ajmer.

Long overdue acknowledgment has been given by Bond to Sir Proby Cautley, a selfless unacknowledged messiah among Englishmen who spent a while in India. Sir Cautley is accredited with conceiving and building the Ganga canal which took five years to be built out of millions of bricks baked in his own kiln. The canal was plastered with lime reinforced with jaggery, ground lentils and jute fibres. When the canal was formally opened in 1854, its main channel was 348 miles long; it had 306 branches and over 3000 distributaries. It irrigated 7,67,000 acres of land in 5,000 villages and even included a half kilometre aqueduct which in those times was an engineering feat. Sir Cautley also conducted fossil expeditions in the Siwaliks; wrote about a submerged city in the Doab; the mineral wealth of the Himalayas and gold washings in the Siwalik Hills. Revering the genius and inane modesty of this samaritan, Ruskin Bond writes: "I think of the man who spent more than twenty years of his life in executing this magnificent project, and others equally demanding. And then his work done, walking away from it all without thought of fame or fortune" (20).

Recounting the profligacy and sadistic humour of Nawab Asaf-ud-daula Bond has written that the wasteful Nawab had 4000 gardeners, 1000 hunting dogs, 300,000 fighting cocks and pigeons and one of his favorite sports, introduced by a certain Colonel Mordaunt, was the racing of old women in sacks. Other interesting vignettes of social history that can be found in the narrations of Ruskin Bond include the etymological origins of the name of the drink 'Punch' which is a derivation of the Hindi word 'panch' i.e. 'five' representing the drink's five ingredients and the popularity of the 'hookah' as a fad and fetish among Europeans who called it the 'hubble-bubble', its elaborate decoration and its dedicated attendants known as a 'hukka-bardars' who were responsible for the upkeep of their master's hookah. Bond has also written that Calcutta rarely saw ice before 1833 till when a cargo of apples packed in ice arrived there and, the ice fetched a higher price than the apples; that in Bombay two monsoons was the average life expectancy of an Englishman in the seventeenth century and during the period 1801-1850 the average life-span of a Briton in India was calculated at thirty-one years for a man and twenty-eight years for a woman.

Also incorporated in the writings of Ruskin Bond are interesting capsules of information about legendary characters such as the dreaded outlaw, Sultana Daku from Najibabad who was betrayed and hanged to death by the British; the contribution of Margaret Noble, an Englishwoman, who converted to Hinduism, took on the name Sister Nivedita and wrote a travelogue enlisting and describing sacred Himalayan shrines and the legendary Sir Jim Corbett who gunned down a dreaded man-eating tiger who, in seven years accounted for more than three hundred victims.

The taken-for-granted postman also receives his share of attention in the writings of Bond who narrates that there was a time when the carrying of mails was a hazardous venture, and the mail-runner used to be armed with a sword or spear for self-defense. At night, he would be accompanied by both torch-bearers and drummers, yet they were frequent victims of man-eating tigers. The historic occasions when India's first train steamed off a distance of thirty-four miles in an atmosphere of great revelry from Bori Bunder in Bombay to Thane and the day when Mussoorie was electrified also find their place in the writings of Ruskin Bond.

In his narrations Bond has resuscitated Gabbar Singh Negi, a Garhwali brave heart who was the first Indian to be awarded the Victoria Cross for valour in World War I, and has given reverential due to unacknowledged stone masons, Mahboob Khan and Ramji Mal for their patience and skill in working for ten long years at a pace of six inches a day to restore Shah Jahan's Hall of Mirrors in Agra Fort.

In 1976, on the occasion of the eighty-seventh birth anniversary of Pandit Jawaharlal Nehru and at the instance of the Jawaharlal Nehru Memorial Fund, Ruskin Bond penned Man of Destiny, a biography of

India's first Prime Minister. This concise presentation is a dexterous piece of historical writing that brings alive the character and persona of Nehru including the etymology of the surname Nehru; Jawaharlal Nehru's best friend in childhood; the occasion and venue of the first meeting of Nehru and Gandhi; the occasions when Nehru was imprisoned and his longest term of imprisonment. The book also details the Chinese aggression of 1962 when 20,000 Chinese troops broke through the hitherto impregnable Se-La Pass to take over 36,000 square kilometres of Indian territory.

In his book, *Coming Round the Mountains – In the Year of Independence* Bond has subtly included historical facts about the gory communal violence and displacement of civilians that marked 1947, a watershed year in Indian history. And, his very recent publication, *A Little Book of India – Celebrating 75 Years of Independence* is a racy encapsulation of the history of independent India from the day of its political freedom to the COVID 19 pandemic.

Beckoned by rectitude, Ruskin Bond, in the ambit of his narrations, makes frequent seamless forays into the past and establishes the infrangible connect between history and literature. He incorporates history in his writings; embellishes it with the artistry of literature and garnishes it with his intellectual and emotional interpretations. Bond may well be accredited for enriching the appeal of history and amplifying British historian, C.V. Wedgwood's observation that "Without the imaginative insight which goes with creative literature, history cannot be intelligibly written." (Wedgwood)

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