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An Enduring Bond: The Mighty Himalayas in Ruskin Bond's Writings

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Ruskin Bond, an icon among Indian English writers, commands an outstanding position in the field of Indian English writing. Well known as a short story writer, poet, writer of novellas and travelogues, he has made great contribution in the development of English literature in India, having authored six novellas, over two hundred short stories, thirty-five books for children, four volumes of autobiography, about four hundred newspaper articles, five collection of essays and four poetry collections so far. Winner of Sahitya Akademi Award and Padma Bhushan Award, he has written so extensively on the Himalayan region, its ravishing peaks, rivers, gorges, ravines, lakes & shrines that his name has become synonymous with the Himalayas.

Ruskin Bond has been a tireless adventurer exploring the dark, unfathomed wilderness of the mountains. He has forged an enduring relationship with the Himalayas, frequently exploring their glaciers, ravines, forests and rivers. In fact, these various manifestations of nature are such an inalienable part of Bond's personality that he could not forget them even for a moment. The great Himalayas symbolize eternity, divine illumination, universal belongingness and accord with nature. In the Himalayas lies the real India. Giving a pen-portrait of the contours of the mighty Himalayas, Bond comments very aptly: "One of the remarkable features of the Himalayas is the abruptness with which they rise from the plains, and this gives them a verdure that is totally different from that of the plains." (Ruskin Bond, *Ganga Descends*, 26). When Bond was seventeen, he was sent to London to carve a niche for himself in literary field. It was during his stay there, being thousands of miles away from the mountains that he realized intensely what these mountains meant to him. He asserts that once mountains enter into the blood of man, he can never forget them: he always returns to be with them. This same feeling of belongingness gripped Ruskin, when he was in London. He longed to be near the Himalayas. He acknowledged this umbilical relationship with nature and longed to be back to them. He acknowledges his passion for the mountains in the following words:

It was while I was living in England, in the jostle and drizzle of London that I remembered the Himalayas at their most vivid. I had grown up amongst those great blue and brown mountains; they had nourished my blood: and though I was separated from them by thousands of miles of ocean, plain and desert, I could not rid them from my system. It is always the same with the mountains. Once you have lived with them for any length of time, you belong to them. There is no escape. (Ruskin Bond, *Rain in the Mountain*, 92)

The same yearning for mountain gripped him when Bond was in Delhi for a few years. He grew restless and felt that the hills were calling him. He was not writing much at the time and to write he felt that he had to get closer to nature, to forests and mountain streams. In his own words: “. . . and if the words were to come with the old fluency I needed a magic mountain.”(Ruskin Bond,*Notes From The Small Room*, 95). Bond puts a question to himself, “What else do I love and remember of the Himalayas?”(*Notes From The Small Room*, 115). Answering himself, he wrote that he remembered most “. . . the smell of fallen pine needles, cow-dung smoke, spring rain, bruised grass. The pure water of mountain streams, the depth and blueness of the sky-enchanted things that are common to mountains almost everywhere.”(*Notes From The Small Room*, 115).

After coming to Mussoorie, Bond settled first at Maplewood Cottage which was situated between the shadows of Balahissar hills at the back and the PariTibba in the front. At the front side, there was a prominent forest which kept his morale high. He developed natural familiarity with the region as he had always been a part of it and the result was the detailed descriptions of ravines, slopes, valleys, brooks and forests with great geographical accuracy. His numerous stories and write-ups depict the celestial beauty of Garhwal Himalayan landscapes graphically. Living at such a high altitude gave Bond the feeling of being alone with nature, as the windows of his cottage opened onto the forest. In the Introduction to *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*, he writes that it was a ‘timeless sort of a place’ and that he felt an immediate emotional connection to the natural scenery around the cottage. He further adds:

There were two large windows, and when I pushed the first of these open, the forest seemed to rush upon me. The maples, oaks, rhododendrons, and an old walnut, moved closer, out of curiosity perhaps. A branch tapped against the window-panes, while from below, from the ravine, the deep-throated song of the whistling thrush burst upon me. (*Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*, X).

Later on, Bond shifted to Ivy Cottage in Landour, where he still resides. It is high enough in the mountains for a lonely walk in the hills. In the words of Bond himself, the house seems to have blended in with the environment. It seems to lean towards the mountain as if to embrace it and provides a twofold vision of the highest Himalayan peaks towering above like gods and of the plains visible in the distance below. Providing a graphic view of the mountainside where his house is situated, Bond writes that below his house is a forest of oak and maple and rhododendron. At the bottom of the hill the path leads on to a grassy edge. The stream moves by the edge, tumbling over smooth pebbles over rocks worn yellow with age on its way to the plains and to the little Song river and finally to the sacred Ganges:

In May and June, when the hills are always brown and dry, it remained cool and green near the stream where ferns and maidenhair and long grasses continued to thrive . . . During rainy season, the stream became a rushing torrent, bushes and small trees were swept away and the friendly murmur of the water became a threatening boom.”(*Rain in the Mountain*, 96).

Bond once wrote that it’s hard to realize that he has been there all these years- forty-eight summers and monsoons and winters and Himalayan springs- because, when he looks back to the time of his first coming here, it does seem like yesterday:

That probably sums it all up. Time passes and yet it does not pass; people come and go, the mountains remain. Mountains are permanent things. They are stubborn, they refuse to move. You can blast holes out of them for their mineral wealth; or strip them of their trees and foliage or dam their streams and divert their currents; or make tunnels and roads and bridges; but no matter how hard they try, humans can't actually get rid of their mountains. That's what I like about them; they are here to stay. (*Rain in the Mountain*, 197).

Bond likes to think that he has become a part of these mountains, this particular range, and that by living here for so long, he has forged a relationship with the trees, wild flowers, even the rocks that are an integral part of it. While writing about the hills in the essay "Ganga Descends" he describes the heights at which different varieties of trees grow:

At elevations of 4,000 feet, the long-leaved pine appears. From 5,000 feet there are several kinds of evergreen oak, and above 6,000 feet you find rhododendron, deodar, maple, the hill cypress, and the beautiful horse-chestnut. Still higher up, the silver fir is common; but at 12,000 feet the firs become stunted and dwarfed, and the birch and juniper replace them. At this height raspberries grow wild, amongst yellow colt's-foot dandelion, blue gentian, purple columbine, anemone and edelweiss. (*Ganga Descends*, 27).

Bond thinks that if we trouble these gigantic creatures i.e. the mountains, too much, slash them and destroy them young, they will simply evacuate themselves and stride away. Whole forests would be on the move, over the next range and the next, far from the irk of man. He has seen many forests and green places gradually diminish and vanish. When there is deforestation there is an uproar. In a tone of light sarcasm, Bond remarks that it has become fashionable to be an environmentalist. But in fact the number of those who really know and care about environment is abysmally low, that's why there is so much of deforestation. But even now it is not too late to save the little greenery that is left, remarks Bond. He suggests that a beginning can be made by restricting the property developers who have been spreading their tentacle far and wide. Bond feels that nature has especially blessed the hills and so all those who live in the cities miss out the charisma and freedom that nature offers in the hills. Being a resident of hills, Bond is the privileged one and therefore, returns to enrich his eyes with a look at the rich foliage that springs up in tropical profusion, soft spongy moss, and great stag fern on the trunks of trees, mysterious looking lilies and orchids. He is grateful to mother nature and prays to the benevolent God for providing him the opportunity to live with the mountains. He prays: "And I would thank my God for leaves and grass and the smell of things and the smell of mint and myrtle and bruised cloves and the touch of thing, the touch of grass and air and sky, the touch of the sky's blueness." (*Rain in the Mountain*, 96-97).

Bond not only graphically describes the Garhwal Himalayas but also explains the characteristics of its inhabitants. He has observed that people living on the mountain slopes in the mistfilled valleys of the Garhwal Himalayas are full of humility, patience, and a quiet reserve.

Bond feels that the Himalayas have been an everlasting source of inspiration for writers since ages. He personally holds mountains in high esteem as he believes that to him, as a writer, mountains have been kind from the beginning, since the time he came to live amidst them. He

began writing for children only after he came to live in the hills. The overall tone of his writings is that man can only aspire for the sublimity and nobility which mountains stand for. With their unshakable spirit they inspire man to remain unmoved by storm and disaster. Besides such connotative suggestiveness, mountains exert deep emotive influence upon the psychology of man. It is believed that once a person lives with the mountains for any span of time, he develops a sense of belongingness with them.

Bond frequently notes in his writings that a person feels change in air as he reaches higher altitude in the mountains that inspires him to act and think differently. The mountains pour serenity and spiritual ecstasy into innocent hearts, apart from being the favourite resorts for heat oppressed urbanites. They serve as a powerful background in many of Bond's stories and plots. They perform as mother symbols too. Many of Bond's characters have a peculiar feature of primeval innocence, mountains also have the same. Manish D. Bhatt aptly remarks: "His writings largely revolves around the Himalayas, the Doon Valley and the other places in today's Uttarakhand. He portrays this nature in terms of its relationship with humans." (Manish D. Bhatt, *Ruskin Bond As a Short Story Writer: A Critical Study*, XII).

Being a lover of nature, Bond's writings reflect the deep kinship and serenity that he experiences amongst the mountains. His joy knows no bounds as he comes across the natural beauty in the form of their individual manifestations such as the source of Ganges river as it ruptures from its icy womb, sounds of birds and mountain rivers, the towering deodar trees and flower strewn valleys. He loves Himalayas for their permanence, their ability to: ". . . keep their secrecy and reserve, remaining remote, mysterious and spirit-haunted." (*Ganga Descends*, 13).

For his essays, short stories, travelogues and novellas, Bond finds endless material in the form of people, places, animals, plants of the Himalayas. Bond continues his journey of writing as there is never dearth of material for stories in the mountains. Sometimes it is the stream, at other times, it is wild flowers, birds, trees, ferns, insects etc. Moreover, on the other hand there are nearby villages, old houses and old families of the Landour and Mussoorie hill-stations that provided him with ample material for his stories.

Bond believes that the under-populated areas of the planet like the sea, the desert, the mountains seem to appeal to the solitary individual, may he be a writer or an adventurer. He feels that the sea has been celebrated by many great writers such as Conrad, Melville, Stevenson, Masefield – but he cannot think of any one writer for whom the mountains have been a recurring theme. He must turn to the Taoist poets from old China to find a true feeling for mountains. Kipling does occasionally look to the hills, but the Himalayas do not appear to have given rise to any memorable Indian literature, at least in modern times. Bond has an intensity to complement his own self with mountains and that's what brings him closer to them. Whereas most of present-day writers concentrate on social, psychological, political and cultural disintegration of man, Bond seems to be giving preference to the divine beauty of the hills and dales in Garhwal Himalayas.

Based on his research and travels in the Garhwal hills, Bond records the Indian side of Mussoorie's heritage in his book *Ganga Descends*, a collection of sixteen essays. This book is the celebration of the glory of the mighty Himalayas, the world's greatest mountain mass, which

extends some 1,500 miles from east to west. In these essays, Bonds gives his readers glimpse of the life style of the remote villages and narrates his expeditions to historical landmarks and famous Hindu pilgrimage sites. The description of the places in *Ganga Descends* are not of regular tourist interest because they are at the extreme end of the Himalayas. Hence only a lover of nature or an ardent pilgrim would plan for a voyage there. Each essay describes the natural scene and local people with loving care and the eloquence of a poet.

While portraying the contours of the earth, some of Bond's metaphors are so apt that they leave an indelible imprint on reader's mind. For example, he calls hill-top 'an island in the sky'. Another panoramic view of the contours of Himalayas is provided in the essay "Along the Mandakini" wherein Bond describes graphically two rivers at their confluence at Rudraprayag. One is Mandakini coming from the Himalayan heights beyond Badrinath which is joined with the waters of the Alaknanda, coming from the glacial snows above Kedarnath. Both are considered to be revered rivers, and are fated to become the holy Ganges further downstream. Bond instantly fell in love with the Mandakini. He writes:

While the Alaknanda valley, especially in its higher reaches, is a deep and narrow gorge where precipitous outcrops of rock hang threateningly over the traveller, the Mandakini valley is broader, gentler and the terraced fields wider, the banks of the river a green sward in many places. Somehow, one does not feel that one is at the mercy of the Mandakini whereas one is always at the mercy of the Alaknanda with its sudden landslips and floods."(*Ganga Descends*, 37).

As Bond travels up the Mandakini valley, and then crosses over into the valley of the Alaknanda, he is immediately struck by the contrast. The Mandakini is gentler, richer in vegetation, almost pastoral in places; the Alaknanda is awesome, precipitous, threatening and seemingly inhospitable to those who must live and earn a livelihood in its confines. Bond states that the Ganges originates from the very heart of the Himalayas. In this essay he also refers to the statement made by the writer and traveller Baillie Fraser who visited Gangotri in 1820: "We are now in the centre of the Himalayas, the loftiest and perhaps the most rugged range of mountains in the world." (*Ganga Descends*, 61) Bond guesses that maybe this is Fraser's realization that one is at the very centre and heart of things that gives all an almost primeval sense of belonging to these mountains and to this river valley in particular. Praising the beauty of the Bhagirathi, Bond further says that in the mountains, the Bhagirathi is the most beautiful of the four main river valleys of Garhwal. He hopes that it will remain so, provided its water is not polluted by human race and is not stripped off its virgin forests. Eulogising Bhagirathi further Bond writes:

The Bhagirathi seems to have everything – a gentle disposition, deep glens and forests, the ultra vision of an open valley graced with tiers of cultivation leading up by degrees to the peaks and glaciers as its head. (*Ganga Descends*, 62)

Bond has an eternal relationship with the Himalayas and he has been a tireless adventure. In almost all his writings he graphically explores the beauty of the mountains, glaciers, gorges, rivers and many other natural landscapes of the Himalayan region. They are very much part of his writings as they are embedded in his in his being. He praises the mighty Himalayas and feels that a man is incomplete if he has not lived in the mountains as they add new dimension to life. He is fascinated by all natural forms as seas, rivers, streams, lakes and many more. Some of his descriptions are so vivid that one actually feels his presence at that very place of description.

While exploring the mountains, particularly the Himalayan range, Bond finds out that Himalayas are the dwellings of God that is why most of the rivers, rocks, trees and vegetation play their part in mythology. He is more close to pantheism as he considers nature his religion. He admires nature in all its manifestations, flora, fauna, mountains, rivers, sea. Writing about nature was never a conscious effort on his part, his inclination grew towards it as he has always lived close to nature.

Bond has been rambling around the Himalayas since long, this has helped him in discovering new vistas of nature. Sometimes he explores something new which is untouched by human habitation. He is not an environmentalist in the conventional sense of the word: he is not directly involved in the issues related to nature but he has done much to protect environment by drawing the attention of his readers through his writings. He has a firm conviction that if the smell of the Himalayas creeps into a man's blood, he will return to the hills again and again, and will strive to live amongst them always.

Bond has depicted the pictorial beauty and mystical significance of Badrinath, Kedarnath, Gangotri, Yamunotri, Tungnath and other places of pilgrimage in the Himalayan range. Among the holy shrines situated in the Himalayas, Tungnath temple has specially fascinated Bond's imagination and he has given vivid description of his journey to this serene temple in his essay "The Magic of Tungnath". He describes the adventurous trek from Chopta to Tungnath whose distance is only three and a half miles, but in such a short distance the ascent is steep 3,000 ft., and the traveller (pilgrim) feels that it is a perpendicular path. He then describes the temple of Tungnath, located at a little over 12,000 ft., which is the highest shrine on the inner Himalayan range. To reach there, one bypasses some of the most enchanting temperate forests in the Garhwal Himalayas which gives a feeling of upliftment that can be experienced almost anywhere along the Tungnath range.

Bond also explores another lesser known place, Dui Tal, a small lake, which lies cradled on the hill above Ukhimath, at a height of 8,000 feet. In his essay, "A Village in Garhwal" Bond ventured in Manjari village of Garhwal and gives a vivid picture of the rising sun which has climbed the mountains but has not yet reached the narrow valley. Coming back to the excursions near home in Mussoorie, Bond informs his viewers about the famous tourist spot "Gun Hill". He writes that once visitors to Mussoorie frequently found themselves persuaded to climb to the top of a local peak called "Gun Hill", from which one could have a view of the greater Himalayas. Describing another contour of the landscape, i.e. the journey through the Siwaliks to Dehradun, Bond remarks that it really begins at the Mohand Pass.

Thus it is evident that Ruskin Bond, living in Mussoorie for more than five decades now, has made the Himalayas part of his life and work as a writer. He fully agrees with Kipling's words that "who goes to the hills, goes to his mother." (*Rain in the Mountain*, 1999). He believes that living in the hills was like living in the bosom of a strong, sometimes proud, but always comforting mother. It became increasingly difficult for a person to go away. In fact, it is an enduring relationship that Bond has forged with the mighty Himalayas.

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