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## **Regional Thoughts, Traditions, Customs, Beliefs, Folklore and Superstitions in the Works of Ruskin Bond**

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### **Abstract:**

Literature in its various forms has always depicted life. It has been man's voice for many years and has evolved with man. Since literature was born out of human need, whatever affected man affected literature. Literature is intertextual and the major events in the history of mankind do have a significant bearing on it. The historical, economical, social, spiritual, psychological condition of man, his domestic and worldly matters are reflected in it. Ever since literature came into existence writers have faithfully captured and presented their own gamut of experience which includes their thoughts, feelings and experiences in their works. They have their own perspectives, motives and concerns which knowingly or unknowingly form an indispensable part of their work. The sense and power of the place is more stronger in the case of regional writers. They love and respect the ideal region which they create in their works. Feeling and experiencing life in their respective regions, they romantically and realistically portray it on paper through their words. While emphasizing the landmarks, culture, language, customs, traditions, superstitions, occupations and day to day life of the people of the region they create a nostalgic ideal place which is close to and in harmony with nature. The changes brought about by modern progress in the rural place created by them are unacceptable to the writer as they disturb the delicate harmonious balance.

The paper aims to discuss the use of regional thoughts, beliefs, traditions, customs, superstitions and folklore in the works of Ruskin Bond.

**Keywords: Life, human need, thoughts, feelings, experiences, region, customs, traditions, beliefs and superstitions.**

Regional writing depicts local customs and has the power to give a unique value to ordinary rural lives.

In a thousand ages of the gods I could not tell thee of the glories of Himachal. So a poet confessed at the dawn of Indian History, and no one since has been able to do real justice to the Himalayas. We have climbed their highest peaks, but still the mountains remain remote, mysterious, primeval. No wonder, then, that the people who live on these mountain slopes, in the mist-filled valleys of Garhwal, have

long since beamed humility, patience, and a quiet reserve. (Bond, Notes From a Small Room 22-23)

“Ruskin Bond expresses the warmth of rural life or the life of small towns where things are generally coloured by superstition and ritualistic traditions with a touch of originality.”(Singh 8) It is true that Ruskin’s world is precious not because of the plot or the characters’ thought, but, the authenticity of whatever he describes. “Bond, who has lived far from the madding crowds for decades, is a keen and perceptive observer of people, particularly children, in rural (mostly Himalayan) India – their capacity for hard work, their innate spirit of adventure, but most of all their intimacy with nature.”(Singh 229)

Talking about Prem who belongs to the village Koli, Pauri Garhwal in the short story “From Small Beginnings,”(Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra) Ruskin mentions that in his region the bride price was two thousand rupees. In the Memoir of Dehra Dun; G.R.C. Williams, Assistant Superintendent of Dehra Dun 1871, who is credited with writing the first official record of Dehra Dun; mentions that while in the hills it was a custom for the bridegroom to buy the bride from her father, in the valley the bride always received a dower of Rs. 10 to Rs. 500, partly in cash and partly in clothes, furniture and ornaments. Like most hill folk the reason for marriage was that Prem had a younger brother and his mother was unwell most of the time so she needed someone to help her in the fields, with the cows and in the house.

Every family has its few terraced fields, narrow and stony, usually perched on a hillside above a stream or river. They grow rice, barley, maize, potatoes – just enough to live on. Even if they produced sufficient for marketing, the absence of roads makes it difficult to get the produce to the market towns. There is no money to be earned in the villages, and money is needed for clothes, soap, medicines, and recovering the family jewellery from the money-lenders. So the young men are forced to leave their villages to find work, and to find work they must go to the plains. The lucky ones get into the Army. Others enter domestic service or take jobs in garages, hotels, wayside teashops, schools.....In Mussoorie the main attraction is the large number of schools, which employ cooks and bearers. (Our Trees Still Grow 86-87)

The plight of hill folk is again mentioned in the short story, “The Last Truck Ride.” Nathu, a twelve or fifteen year old boy who is a resident of a village in the hills, is forced to leave his family and come down to the town in the valley to look for work because the potato crop has failed. There being no money for buying salt, sugar, soap and flour, the family had nothing to eat except onions and antichokes. It is usually seen that the hill people who come down to the plains from Tehri and Jaunpur villages are poor as their small land holdings and rocky fields do not yield much. So men and boys come down to the hill stations and the plains to

work as rickshaw pullers, cooks, watchmen and waiters in hotels and restaurants. But no matter what the hardships are the hill folk who go to the plains sooner or later return to their homes in the mountains in Ruskin's stories. The fast paced and selfish life of the cities does not suit them. They realize that remaining poor in the pocket is better than becoming poor at heart. Prem comes back to the hills and Nathu too returns with the wisdom that it is better to cultivate and nurture the land than to destroy it. Binya, the village girl in *The Blue Umbrella* realizes that the blue umbrella – a material object from the plains is not more valuable than goodness. Only by giving it away is she able to bring back peace and happiness in the village. In the essay, "A Lime Tree in the Hills," (Notes from a Small Room) Gajadhar, who lives in a small village called Manjari above the little Nayar river possesses the fine physic of the Garhwalis and wishes to join the army.

Ramu, the village boy is well versed in folklore. He tells Ruskin that many birds are sacred. The blue jay and God Shiva are both called Nilkanth. Lord Shiva has a blue throat like the bird because he had swallowed a deadly poison intended to destroy the world. Lord Krishna loved squirrels. He would stroke them with his long fingers. That is how they have four dark lines down their backs from head to tail. The legend of the barbet is mentioned in "Trees From A Window" and "Landour Days – June" also. People living in the Garhwal Himalayas believe that the barbet is the reincarnation of the soul of a money lender who died of grief because his lawsuit was unjustly terminated. The barbet's call "Un-nee-ow, un-nee-ow" is infact the money lender's cry of "Injustice, injustice." The legend about the Himalayan Whistling Thrush which Ruskin Bond has heard from a boy from a village is that one day Lord Krishna fell asleep near a stream. While he was sleeping a small boy took away his flute and played it once. When Lord Krishna woke up and could not find his flute he became very angry and changed the boy into a bird. The boy became a whistling thrush and having learnt a few broken pieces of the Lord's song began to sing as the whistling thrush does, stopping now and then in the middle of its song.

Some people living on the mountains and in Dehra Dun are superstitious and they believe in ghosts, demons, spirits and witches. In his record of the Dehra Dun of 1873 and before, the *Memoir of Dehra Dun*, G.R.C. Williams makes a note of the different supernatural beings and beliefs of the people of Dehra Dun. He first mentions the Perchasan or Choorel, who though human in shape has its feet turned backwards. It is a sign of evil omen and a harbinger of death for the person who sees it. Then there is the witch who has the power to make things happen through her incantations. It was also believed that men frequently died off, suddenly, after building houses inside fairy circles. Miss Ripley Bean, Ruskin's neighbour in Mussoorie and Mrs. Singh his neighbour in Dehra Dun used to tell Ruskin tales about ghosts and spirits that they had seen and heard about. Mrs. Singh, who came from a village near Mainpuri told Ruskin many supernatural tales from her village which he put in his stories. Sitting on her string cot and puffing her hookah she introduced Ruskin to the world of churels, the ghosts of immoral women, who appeared naked with their feet facing backwards; vampires, ghosts who took the form of

snakes and animals, and the munjia, the spirit of a brahmin youth who had died before his marriage. It is believed to live in the branches of a lonely peepal tree. The munjia upsets tongas, cycles and bullock carts when annoyed. If anyone passes beneath a peepal tree at night without covering his mouth or snapping his fingers in front of it, the munjia dashes down his throat and ruins his digestion. Mrs. Singh also taught Ruskin a mantra to be recited whenever he was threatened by ghosts, “Bhut, prēt, pisach, dana, Chhoo mantar, sab nikal jana, Mano, mano, Shiv ka kahna \_ (Bond, *The Lamp is Lit* 12) Ruskin Bond is equally fascinated by the world of ghosts and supernatural beings. Many of his stories are based on legends of ghosts of Anglo-Indians, soldiers, memsahibs, their children and their dogs who are believed to still haunt hill stations.

The hills are not devoid of the supernatural. Pari Tibba is a hill situated on the eastern flank of Mussoorie at a height of about 6000 feet and is covered with oaks, deodars and rhododendrons. The hill is also called the Burnt Hill because of the frequent lightning strikes that it receives. It is believed that the early settlers tried to build their houses on this hill but they failed to inhabit them as they were struck by lightning. The hill is associated with the supernatural and finds a mention many times in Ruskin’s stories for either its natural beauty or its eerie nature. Called the Hill of the Fairies by the local people who believe that fairies live on the hill, it is believed that the ruins on the hill are haunted. Ruskin Bond tells about one such tale which he has heard in “Listen to the Wind.” The local people believe that the ruins on top of the hill are haunted by the ghosts of two lovers. The two lovers had run away, taken shelter in a cottage on the hill and were killed by lightning. Miss Mackenzie tells Ruskin about the tragedy that took place twenty five years ago. Miss Mackenzie had met Robert, a tall eighteen year old young man at his parent’s house some weeks before the tragedy. Robert was born in the hills. His father was a magistrate. His parents were planning to return to England after Robert’s father retired. Robert fell in love with a hill girl, the daughter of a land holder from the village behind Burnt Hill. He was walking through the forest when he heard her sweet song and fell in love with her. He located the girl’s father and asked for her hand in marriage. The girl’s father who was a Brahmin refused as he didn’t want the good reputation of his family to be ruined by marrying off his only daughter to a foreigner. Robert did not try to persuade the girl’s father nor did he tell his own parents as he knew they wouldn’t agree. He continued to visit the oak and pine forest and meet the girl. As he knew the local language he was able to convey his feelings to the girl. Time went by and the girl also fell in love with Robert. They both decided to run away. They met one night in the ruined building on Burnt Hill. Just as they reached there a storm broke out, lightning struck the place, and their charred bodies were found on the yellow stones of the old building. From that day onwards they are believed to haunt the place. There is another legend connected with the mountain. It is believed that once a shepherd boy, playing on his flute found a beautiful silver snake. The snake told him that it was a princess once and a witch had cast a spell on it. The spell could be broken only if someone pure of heart would kiss it thrice. The shepherd boy took the snake and kissed it thrice. The snake became a beautiful princess. In the month of April and May, the mountain is covered with the yellow flowers of St. John’s Wort, which is believed to

possess magical and curative properties. “Whispering in the Dark,” plays with the fear of the supernatural. The story is again set in the hills. The haunted house that the narrator sees during the storm is or was an old world house made up of limestone rock that stands or stood on the outskirts of the hill station. After a series of unusual happenings the narrator remembers the stories that he used to hear as a boy. There were two spinster sisters, one was beautiful and the other plain, who used to live in the house. They used to lure rich elderly gentlemen into the house and suffocate them in the night. The deaths had appeared quite natural and the sisters were never caught. Even when the surviving sister confessed it on her death bed no one believed her. The incidents had taken place many years ago and the house had since then fallen down. The story, “Eyes of the Cat” is inspired by a local legend of the Garhwal region which tells how humans can transform into animals to teach their adversaries a lesson. In the story, Binya a poor village girl is repeatedly insulted by her teacher. She transforms herself into a leopard on a full moon night and kills the teacher.

The denizens of trees are not only birds and animals but also ghosts. “Ghosts of a Peepul Tree” (Notes from a Small Room) makes us aware of the belief of the villagers that ghosts like *prêts*, *bhuts*, *pisach* and *munjia* live in the peepul trees. *Prets* and *bhuts* are the spirits of dead men. The *prêt* is believed to be a good ghost and called “*Purwaj Dev*,” an ancestor god. It often takes the form of snakes, is fed with milk and is respected by the household. It lives in its former house or a garden or a peepul tree. There is a story about the *prêt* which goes - Once there was a villager in whose garden a *prêt* lived in the form of a snake. The villager used to beat his son. He changed his ways when the snake threatened to bite him. The lady of the house used to give milk to the snake and in return it used to rock her baby’s cradle and protect it. The *churel* is the ghost of a woman who changes shape after death and is believed to haunt a house or a village. The *churel* is covered in hair, has the ears of an ape and two or three feet long toes. Sometimes her feet face backwards. She is believed to trouble men more, the result of unfair treatment by them when alive. Lying along the branches of a peepul tree over a footpath she stretches her toes, grips men by the neck and suffocates them. The *pisach* has no body or shape and it lives in a peepul tree or graveyard. The *Vetal Panchvishi* tells a story about a wife who falls in love with a man when her husband is away. When he returns she still goes to meet her lover at night. One night before she reaches the place a cobra bites the lover and kills it. A *pisach* who lives in a nearby peepul tree gets into the body of the lover and bites the woman’s nose off. The husband is arrested but on search the lover’s body with the nose are found and the wife is driven out of the city. The *munjia*, another spirit that dwells in a peepul tree is believed to rush out at tongas, bullock carts and bicycles and upset them. At night if any man yawns under a peepul tree the *munjia* is believed to enter through his throat.

In “*Binya Passes By*” (*Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*) the villagers in Binya’s village as is common among the hill folk, make their girls wear dhotis which is a rough homespun sari before they are twelve years old. The girls in the further hills wear a long flounced skirt. In The

Blue Umbrella Binya and her brother Bijju wear a leopard's claw around their necks as it is considered as a lucky charm to keep away evil spirits. The silver locket with a bear's claw which Ram Bharosa gives to Binya is considered even more lucky than the leopard claw one. The old people still believe that to be bleed by leeches is a remedy for many ailments. Whenever Ram Bharosa has a headache he applies a leech to his temple. Some other beliefs are that the chuchundars are lucky as they bring money. In "Trees from a Window" (Notes from a Small Room) Ruskin Bond tells us about an old belief that the hill people have about the kernel of the walnut. They believe that as it is shaped like the human brain it is a cure for disorders of the mind. The rhododendron flower is also believed to have curative properties. The hill people make jam from the flowers and it has an intoxicating affect on black bulbuls.

In "Looking for the Dehra I Knew" Ruskin Bond tells the reader a little known legend about the Suswa river which flows the length of the Doon valley. Kasyapa, the Hindu sage once gave a great feast to which all the gods were invited. On his way to the feast Indra, the God of rain met 60,000 bakhils (pygmies) of the Brahmin caste who were unable to cross a cow's footprint filled with water which was a vast lake to them. Indra laughed at them. The bakhils became angry and in order to take revenge they began to make a second Indra who would replace the present one. This they could do only by means of penance and mortification. The sweat flowing from their tiny bodies made the river known as "Suswa" or flowing waters. Indra was alarmed and he requested Brahma, the Creator to intervene on his part. Indra was able to retain his position as the rain God. This mythological belief regarding the origin of the Sooswa or Suswa river is also recorded in Memoir Of Dehra Dun by G.R.C. Williams. In "Great Spirits of the Trees," there is a mention of the "Kalp- vriksha," an enormous old mulberry tree, believed to be over a thousand years old, which is still cared for at Joshimath in Garhwal. It is believed that the great Sankaracharya, during his sojourn in the Himalayas often meditated under this tree. "I have read about the local legends and folk tales like the one about Suswa river, the Whistling Thrush in various books and the gazetteer." (Personal Interview)

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