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A Critical Study of Ruskin Bond's Fiction in the Light of Indian Feminism

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Abstract:

Ruskin Bond, a worshipper of nature; takes us to the misty hills and lush green valleys through his writings. He primarily focuses on the relationship between man and nature. A reader can easily get immersed in the beauty of Nature while reading livelier depiction of nature in his short stories and novellas. He deals with the gradual development of human beings in the lap of nature from early childhood to old age. Moreover, he is primarily known as a children's writer. Most of his short stories are appealing equally to children as well as adults. He artistically infuses fiction with the element of reality and brings a fulfilling experience to the reader. He explores the inner psyche of his character while delineating a character. His characters are taken from every walk of life; from a common man and woman to a thief or from an adolescent to an ascetic. He delineates his characters as he meets and observes them in the society. Different shades of human psychology are revealed through his writings. Moreover, he also depicts the feminine face of adulthood through his writings. Men and women are depicted with equal zeal; in the true spirit of humanity. At the same time, he precisely portrays the subsidiary place given to women in Indian society. He not only talks about the female aspirations, emotions and mindset but also about the hierarchy that fosters the male-dominance. In the present paper an

attempt has been made to study Ruskin Bond's treatment given to the female characters in his short stories and novellas; selected for the study.

Keywords: Humanity, male-female, Indian society.

Introduction:

According to feminism, men and women should have equal rights in all domains of political, economic, and social life. All feminist theories revolve around this. Patriarchy is considered as the actual cause of women harassment. The majority of feminists want to see patriarchy eliminated from society. Feminism is not any particular discipline that states men against women; instead, it fights against how society has socially conditioned men and women to think. Most of feminist historians in the west contend that any movements that fight for women's rights should be categorized as feminist movements, even if they did not self-identify as such. Three chronological periods, or "waves," of modern Western feminist history can be distinguished, each with slightly different goals depending on earlier achievements. The late 19th and early 20th centuries, first-wave feminism aimed to eliminate legal injustices, particularly excluding women from voting. The 1960s–1980s second wave of feminism widened the discussion to encompass gender roles, cultural disparities, and the place of women in society. The term "third-wave feminism" (the 1990s to the 2000s) is used to describe a variety of feminist movements that are considered as a continuation of the second wave and a reaction to its perceived shortcomings. Even if there are no watertight compartments, they are all a result of the first wave of feminism. Whereas, in Indian context, Feminism though relates its root to western feminism, has its own inferences and connotations.

Indian Concept of Feminism:

Indian society has remained male dominated for ages; though there were Sadhus and Sadhvis/ Aryika treated equally for their participation in social and religious activities, during ancient times. Indian women had to suffer a lot due to their secondary place in society. Social structure was so arranged that; if by chance, any of the women tried to raise her voice against patriarchal anarchy; her voice was suppressed by the male dominated social order. She had to bear un-assumed cruelties of patriarchy.

In India, "feminism" encompasses a range of movements that champion equal political, economic, and social rights for women, along with equal opportunities. Indian feminists, like their counterparts worldwide, strive for gender equality. This includes securing political rights, access to healthcare and education, and the right to equal pay for work. In India's patriarchal society, feminists have also addressed cultural issues such as inheritance laws and the practice of widow immolation, known as Sati.

Pre-independence and post-independence are the two major stages of Indian feminism. During the pre-independence period it was developed through the revolutionary movement. The British colonization is what brought western civilization into contact with Indian society. In those days, western society had a relatively developed view of gender equality. Indian women were consequently concerned about having the same rights as Indian males. Indian women's rights are credited to Maharashtra's Savitribai Phule, a reformer, an educator, and a poet. She and her reformist husband Jyotiba Phule established a contemporary Indian girl's school in Pune at Bhide Wada in 1848.

After independence civic rights were given to women by the Indian constitution. Measures such as The Marriage Act of 1954 and The Hindu Code Bill of 1955-56 proved instrumental in empowering women. It helped to control domestic violence to some extent. Women have become more aware of their rights and equal status because of the functioning of various commissions and committees working for them. After independence many Indian writers and social reformers also voiced against gender inequality that contributed to women empowerment. The writers like Suniti Namjoshi, Namita Gokhale, Anees Jung, Shashi Deshpande, Manju Kapur, Bapsi Sidhwa, Manju Kapur, Shobha Day have significantly contributed to the canon of Indian feminism.

Ruskin Bond's contribution to Indian English Literature:

Ruskin Bond's contribution to Indian English Literature is marvelous. He significantly contributed to the genre of Children's literature with his short stories and novellas. It has made a tremendous impact on shaping the genre of Children's literature in India. That is why he has been awarded the Sahitya Akademi Award in 1992, the Sahitya Akademi Bal Sahitya Puraskar in 2012, the Padma Shri in 1999 and the Padma Bhushan in 2019. Regarding his contribution to Indian English literature one of the scholars; Bill Aitken says that "Good writing originates from genuine feeling and for all the flimsiness of the Bond corpus I still value it above the more literary products of writers like George Orwell and Graham Greene on the strength of his vision. Ruskin is world-affirming, pointing out the miracles of daily life, whereas the industrial gloom of Orwell and Greene places of despair overall they describe." (qtd. in Aggarwal 179)

The present study has importance in Indian Feminist criticism in particular. Women's oppression has been the theme of most of the writers writing in English. However, women's

oppression projected by an Anglo Indian writer like Ruskin Bond adds special flavor, because of his close observation of Indian society. So the present investigation will add to the arena of Indian Feminism. It is one of the specialties of Bond, he develops his narrative from giving the physical appearance of his character and he delves deeply into the inner workings of his characters. A reviewer of his work, Soma Banerjee, stated that Bond's works are "internationally acclaimed due to his deep insight into human nature. They reveal his tolerant attitude and warm sympathy for people." He beautifully brings out different shades of human nature through characterization.

Ruskin Bond, in his fiction, presents the life of ordinary people and their routine life. His protagonists are not superheroes but ordinary men and women living in Indian society. They are part and parcel of Indian culture. He believed that, though he was born to a British couple, he is a true Indian. In his 'Memoir' he mentioned that, "Even though I had grown up with a love for English language and literature, even though my forefathers were British, Britain was not really my place. I did not belong to the bright lights of Piccadilly and Leicester Square; or, for that, to the apple orchard of Kent or the strawberry fields of Berkshire. I belonged, very firmly, to peepal trees and mango groves.; to sleepy little towns all over India, to hot sunshine; to muddy canals, the pungent scent of marigold; the hill of home; spicy odours, wet earth after summer rain, neem pods bursting; laughing brown faces and the intimacy of human contact." (154-155)

In most short stories the subject is himself and narrates the life experiences by adding some fictional element into it. Though the characters are imaginary, they appear real while exploring the stories of Bond. In this regard the reflection made by Professor Bernard J. Paris in the preface of his book entitled, *'Imagined Human Beings: A Psychological Approach to Character and Conflict in Literature'* throws light on characters in fiction and their resemblance

in real life. He mentioned - "What fascinates me most about literature is its portrayal of human beings and their relationships. For many years I have been developing a psychological approach in which I try to understand the behaviour of realistically drawn characters in the same way that we understand the behaviour of real people. These characters are not flesh and blood creatures, of course, but are imagined human beings who have many parallels with people like ourselves."(xi)

The main objective of the present research paper is to study Ruskin Bond's Fiction in the Light of Indian Feminism. For this, close textual analysis has been done on the basis of primary sources. Qualitative research methodology has been adopted for the present investigation.

Delineation of Female characters:

Bond's female characters fit the stereotype image of "Indian women". Traditionally, an Indian woman; when she is a child; is supposed to follow the decisions of her parents, after marriage she should follow her husband, and in her old age she had better obey the decisions made by her son. Ruskin Bond realizes the secondary position given to Indian women; as he was brought up in Indian society. He also observed the treatment given by his stepfather to his mother, though belonging to Anglo-Indian society. Ruskin Bond, in his fiction successfully portrays the ancillary image of Indian women. He narrates the tragic condition of female characters in his short stories and novels. Ruskin Bond very well describes how women are stereotypically thought to be a burden for men. Moreover, he delves into the inner worlds of his female characters, examining their aspirations, feelings, and perspectives. He sensibly draws the contemporary male-centric culture, under which his feminist standpoint can be noticed certainly.

While narrating the female characters, Bond explores the intersection of gender with other social factors such as caste, religion, class and culture providing a multifaceted view of Indian women. His main concern is to deal with the intricacies of human relationships. In this regard Nora N. Shaw, a research scholar, in her book entitled '*Ruskin Bond of India*' observed that "The epicentre of Bond's fiction is, invariably- human relationships, the drawing together and falling apart of individuals- man and man, man and woman, man and nature. The creatures are real with flesh and blood however, the world they inhabit is essentially a dream world, in which more often than not, both time and space get frozen" His narratives are firmly anchored in the Indian setting, providing a glimpse into the effects of traditional values and modernization on women's lives.

His female characters have different roles like- daughter, wife, mother and grandmother. They are entangled in male dominated society in such a way that they aspire to be free human beings, but social taboos, customs and traditions do not allow them to liberate themselves. For example in "*The Room on the Roof*" Meena Kapoor had to undergo suffering because of her careless drunkard husband. Because of her circumstances she had to marry Mr Kapoor, almost double her age. Similarly, the character of Sushila in 'Time Stops at Shamli' had to get married forcefully to Satish Dayal, the hotel owner. She was in love with the narrator but sacrificed it for the sake of her parents. The female characters like Kamla and Mrinalini in novels like "*Delhi Is Not Far*" and "*Vagrants in the Valley*" could not free themselves from the restraints of responsibility. In *Delhi Is Not Far*, Seth Govind Ram derives pleasure from females and has an inner feeling of possessing a mistress to satisfy his physical urge.

It is also noteworthy that his female characters appear livelier in natural surroundings. There is a close connection between nature and his female characters. For example in "*The*

Cherry Tree", the character of the grandmother epitomizes wisdom and connection to the natural world, offering gentle guidance to the narrator.

Another feature of his female characterization is, though female characters are not the protagonist in many of his short stories but play pivotal roles in the overall development of the story. In stories like *"The Night Train at Deoli"* or *"The Blue Umbrella"*, female characters contributed significantly to the emotional fabric of the story. Similarly the story *"Woman on Platform No. 8"* shows a stranger woman's intimacy with the boy and her boldness when she says that she is Arun's mother while answering his friend, Satish.

However, the special feature of Bond's female characters is, they are not feeble; instead they are competent to shoulder any responsibility. He wants to convey that though women have been given a subsidiary place in Indian society, they have full potential and capabilities to face any challenges in life.

Conclusion:

After analyzing the female characters portrayed by Bond, it is evident that he dealt with the subservience position of women in Indian society, however, it would be audacious if we label him explicitly a feminist. No doubt, he deals with the feminist concerns in the Indian context and describes the position of women as he sees it but that does not publicize himself as a feminist writer. The intricacies in the relationships between men and women are the major concern of his stories. He does not talk about right or wrong; rather he mirrored society through his writing and let the reader decide. However, he does not proclaim that he is a feminist writer but succinctly touches on the subsidiary place given to Indian women. He frequently depicted the female characters with profound emotional depth and they are often characterized by traits such as

simplicity, strength, sensitivity, and resilience. Overall, Bond's writing captures the subtleties of human nature and the intricate lives of his characters, often viewed through a nostalgic lens and a deep appreciation for the natural world.

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