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## **From Solitude to Society: A Thematic Study of Ruskin Bond's Short Stories**

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### **Abstract:**

This paper examines the primary thematic concerns present in the short stories of Ruskin Bond, one of India's most cherished and prolific storytellers. Through close readings of representative tales—such as "The Night Train at Deoli," "The Thief," "The Eyes Have It," "A Face in the Dark," "The Woman on Platform 8," "Time Stops at Shamli," "Panther's Moon," "The Kite Maker," and others—this study argues that an ethics of attention and tenderness toward everyday life characterizes Bond's fiction.

The analysis highlights recurring motifs such as childhood and innocence, nature and the Himalayan landscape, solitude and companionship, nostalgia and memory, liminal spaces and journeys, the supernatural and the uncanny, class and marginality, and the human capacity for kindness. In doing so, it emphasizes Bond's narrative signatures: a deceptively simple style, a preference for first-person perspectives, a painterly attention to place, and open endings that allow ordinary moments to resonate with meaning. In conclusion, the paper situates Bond within the broader context of Indian English short fiction, arguing that his thematic palette—while

consistent—remains generative, continually re-enchanting small-town India and the intimate dramas of everyday life.

**Keywords: Ruskin Bond; Indian English short story; childhood; nature; nostalgia; liminality; supernatural; Dehradun; Mussoorie; empathy.**

For over sixty years, Ruskin Bond has consistently written about the small-town lives, landscapes, and relationships that connect the Himalayan foothills. Born in 1934 and closely associated with Dehradun and Mussoorie, Bond's body of work includes novels, novellas, essays, poems, and more than a hundred short stories. Among these, it is the short story—the concise, vivid vignette—that has most clearly established his voice. Bond's stories avoid sensationalism and polemics; instead, they focus on quiet revelations, overlooked individuals, and the essence of place. The result is a collection of work that, while often described as "simple," is thematically rich and structurally sophisticated.

This paper explores Bond's short fiction through its recurring thematic concerns. Rather than apply a rigid theoretical framework, the approach is inductive and text-centered: it organizes stories around motifs that frequently appear throughout his work. The thesis proposed here has two main points: first, that Bond's themes center around the ethics of attention—his belief that ordinary lives and moments deserve to be observed with patience and affection; and second, that these themes are intertwined with the geography of the Himalayan towns and forests he calls home. In Bond's writing, place is never simply a backdrop; it acts as a character, catalyst, and companion.

The paper is structured into eight thematic sections: childhood and innocence; nature and the Himalayan imagination; solitude, companionship, and chosen families; nostalgia, memory, and

time; liminality, travel, and thresholds; the gentle supernatural; class, marginality, and everyday ethics; and love, loss, and the bittersweet. Following these sections is a brief note on narrative technique, culminating in a conclusion that positions Bond within the context of Indian English literature and suggests directions for further study.

### **Literature Review:**

Scholarship on Ruskin Bond has steadily increased, although it remains less extensive than the work focused on contemporaries like R.K. Narayan. Critics often describe Bond's writing as "deceptively simple," a simplicity that conceals both structural sophistication and thematic depth. Studies have examined his connection to place, his evocative depictions of the Doon Valley, and his child-centered narratives that neither belittle nor moralize. Some analyses highlight his Anglo-Indian background and its impact on themes of belonging and liminality, while others explore his ecological sensibility—particularly how trees, rivers, and rain hold both moral and aesthetic significance in his fiction. Additionally, there is a body of work on Bond's ghost stories, which avoids graphic horror in favour of a playful and wistful uncanny atmosphere.

What remains under-discussed is how these themes intertwine within the short story form and how Bond's recurring motifs work together to produce ethical effects, specifically empathy toward marginalized individuals and attentiveness to everyday life. This paper aims to contribute to this discussion by mapping these convergences through close readings of representative stories.

### **Methodology and Corpus:**

The analysis follows a qualitative, interpretive method centered on close reading. The corpus includes frequently anthologized stories—*The Night Train at Deoli*, *The Thief*, *The Eyes Have It*,

*A Face in the Dark, The Woman on Platform 8, Time Stops at Shamli, The Kite Maker, Panther's Moon, Most Beautiful, The Funeral*, and select sketches of Dehradun and Mussoorie. The aim is not to be exhaustive but illustrative: each tale is read for how it activates recurring themes and how those themes are inflected by setting, point of view, and tone.

### **Childhood and Innocence: The Moral Imagination of the Young**

If one were to name Bond's cardinal theme, it would be childhood—not as a sentimentalized zone but as a vantage point from which the world is perceived afresh. Stories such as *The Thief* and *The Woman on Platform 8* showcase children and adolescents as moral centers who expose adult hypocrisies or catalyze moments of grace. In *The Thief*, the young narrator-novice thief meets Arun, the man he plans to rob. Arun's unexpected trust disarms the boy, who confronts himself in a mirror more formidable than any policeman: his own conscience. The ending, which withholds easy closure, favours a moral awakening over a punitive aftermath. Bond treats the boy's capacity for change as credible and significant.

*The Woman on Platform 8* offers a complementary view: a mysterious woman's maternal kindness to a schoolboy momentarily suspends the rigidities of social roles. The story is less about plot than about the felt experience of being seen and cared for, however briefly. Bond suggests that one's moral education often occurs in unscripted encounters rather than formal lessons.

Childhood in Bond is also the vantage of wonder. In *The Eyes Have It*, even as the narrator is visually impaired, his attention to voice, scent, and small bodily cues reconstructs the co-passenger as a figure of curiosity and attraction. The twist—that she too is blind—does not

render the preceding tenderness moot; instead, it underscores Bond's theme that perception is relational and partial. The story becomes an allegory for how we "see" each other beyond sight.

Furthermore, Bond's children are not isolated from the world's hardness. *The Funeral*, with its autobiographical undertow, confronts loss directly: a boy grapples with the death of a parent, and the narrative honours his grief without pity. Across these stories, innocence is not ignorance. It is a mode of openness—available to children and adults alike—that permits ethical recognition.

### **Nature and the Himalayan Imaginary: Place as Presence**

Nature in Bond is not a backdrop. It is a mentor, mirror, and companion. Whether it is the deodars of Mussoorie, the monsoon-fed streams of Dehradun, or the shimmering heat of the plains, the landscape in Bond's stories exerts narrative pressure. Characters walk, wait, and wonder in relation to trees and hills that seem to watch back.

In *The Night Train at Deoli*, the wayside station itself becomes a liminal glade. The platform lights, the cool dawn air, and the chill of the rails render the transient encounter between the narrator and the basket-selling girl both real and dream-like. When the narrator returns later to search for her, the absence feels geological, as if a small habitat had vanished. Bond's prose often invests the natural world with a delicate agency; rains arrive like confidants, winds bear gossip from the hills, and trees become landmarks for memory.

Stories such as *The Kite Maker* literalize this bond with elements. The old artisan's kites are sky-writing—brief, gaudy presences that carry his spirit upward even as modernity erodes his craft. The ecological subtext is not polemical but palpable: nature shelters human aspiration while also reminding characters of transience. Rivers flood; seasons turn; and with them, so do fortunes.

Bond's descriptive economy invites a phenomenology of place. The reader senses not just what a hillside looks like but how it smells after rain, how it feels to sit on a sun-warmed rock, how the light softens at dusk. Such sensuous detailing grounds the stories, allowing small human dramas to acquire resonance against the patient backdrop of mountains and sky. In this view, nature is not escapist pastoral; it is a shared habitat where moral life unfolds.

### **Solitude, Companionship, and Chosen Families**

Bond's characters are often alone but rarely lonely in a pathological sense. The solitude they inhabit is porous, open to sudden companionship. Railway compartments, tea stalls, bazaars, school hostels, and cantonment lanes become stages for fleeting solidarities.

*Time Stops at Shamli* dramatizes this halt in ordinary time. The unnamed narrator—adrift, mildly disenchanted—stumbles into Shamli, a town that seems suspended between departure and arrival. The relationships he forms there are brief but essential, offering respite from itinerancy. Bond presents companionship as a series of gifts, rarely lasting but never trivial. The value of a conversation with a stranger on a rainy afternoon is not discounted because it ends; its very precariousness heightens its meaning.

In *A Face in the Dark*, the schoolmaster Mr. Oliver wanders through the pine forest, his lantern flickering. The story plays with solitude's perils—the mind's tendency to project fear—yet it ends not with nihilism but with a curious doubling that turns terror into a kind of bemused acceptance. Even in his ghost stories, Bond refuses to isolate his characters in existential dread for long. Someone—or something—always answers back.

Bond's chosen families—neighbours, vendors, hostel wardens, eccentric bachelors—reveal a social ethic grounded in everyday caregiving. Children in his stories often find protectors beyond

biology: the woman at the platform, the kind shopkeeper, the retired colonel next door. This informal web softens the jaggedness of life and lends his fiction its warm afterglow.

### **Nostalgia, Memory, and the Texture of Time**

Few writers render nostalgia with the restraint Bond achieves. His nostalgia is not a wholesale rejection of the present; it is an acknowledgement that memory reorders experience and charges certain places with affective weight. The boy who once saw a girl on a platform at Deoli cannot shake the memory, not because she is an idealized love but because the scene crystallizes a version of himself—attentive, hopeful, young.

Bond's treatment of time leans toward the cyclical. Monsoons return; bazaar smells persist; old houses reappear in different tales with altered tenants. This recurrence lets the reader feel that stories converse with each other across years. Yet within this cyclicity, time also thins and thickens. A five-minute halt at a station becomes the dense center of a life's recollection; a rainy afternoon elongates as if to contain a revelation.

Importantly, Bond resists the saccharine. Nostalgia is often threaded with loss: crafts fade (*The Kite Maker*), railway halts are upgraded and sterilized, and small shops give way to neon. The sadness is gentle but real. Bond's answer is not to freeze time but to honour it—to write it down, thereby preserving memory without embalming it.

### **Liminality, Travel, and Thresholds**

Trains, stations, buses, hill roads, and crossroads populate Bond's stories because he is interested in thresholds—moments between. The short story, with its preference for the decisive instant, is a natural form for such liminality. A stranger enters a compartment and leaves; a town appears

and disappears behind a bend; a summer turns to monsoon. These hinge points carry emotional charge.

*The Night Train at Deoli* is perhaps the paradigmatic threshold story. The narrator exists between school and home, adolescence and adulthood, belonging and longing. The basket girl, too, is a figure of liminality: both familiar and unattainable, ordinary and luminous. The station is a literal threshold where time seems to pause—a platform between lives.

Railways recur not merely as colonial infrastructure but as democratic corridors of encounter. The anonymity of travel allows for confessions and kindnesses unlikely at home. In *The Eyes Have It*, the darkness of the compartment becomes a space where the narrator and the co-passenger can be vulnerable. The story reminds us that liminal spaces—like stories themselves—temporarily suspend the rules, allowing different kinds of seeing.

### **The Gentle Supernatural: Playful Hauntings and Human Echoes**

Bond's ghost stories are saturated with atmosphere, not gore. *A Face in the Dark* exemplifies his craft: the eerie is introduced via everyday senses—the rustle of pines, the wobble of lantern light—and the uncanny arrives as a wry twist. The child with a featureless face, and later the watchman with the same absence, unsettles without traumatizing. The point is not to terrify, but to suggest that the world may be more complex than we assume.

Other tales feature benign hauntings: a friend returns in a dream; a house holds the faint odour of a former tenant's perfume; a tune is heard after the musician dies. Bond's ghosts tend to be echoes of human attachment, not malevolent forces. They stand for the persistence of feeling, the refusal of memory to be entirely private. In this register, the supernatural and nostalgia kiss: both are modes through which the past remains sensuously present.

This aesthetic aligns with Bond's ethical stance. Violence is rare in his supernatural tales, and when it does appear, it is quickly overshadowed by humour or tenderness. Even fear becomes communal—a story to tell over tea in the bazaar. The supernatural, then, is a way of enlarging the circle of the familiar rather than erecting a barricade of dread.

### **Class, Marginality, and Everyday Ethics**

Though rarely didactic, Bond's stories are attuned to class and marginality. Vendors, rickshaw-pullers, domestic workers, petty thieves, and craftspeople are treated not as backdrops but as protagonists and moral agents. *The Thief* foregrounds a boy caught in economic precarity who nonetheless refuses the determinism of his circumstances. In *The Night Train at Deoli*, the girl selling baskets—a figure easily overlooked by hurried travellers—becomes the focal point of desire and memory. *The Kite Maker* mourns the erosion of artisanal livelihoods in the face of mechanized modernity, yet it does so without polemics; the old kite maker's dignity and quiet pride convey more than any sermon.

Bond's ethical universe prizes small acts. A coin pressed into a palm, an umbrella shared in a downpour, a ride given up for an elderly passenger—these gestures carry the moral weight in his fiction. Justice, when it appears, is restorative rather than retributive. Arun's decision not to expose the thief, and the boy's decision to return, point to the possibility of transformation through trust.

This is not to romanticize poverty or marginality. Bond acknowledges vulnerability and exploitation. But his stories insist that the poor are not reducible to their lack; they are subjects of desire, humour, and creativity. The ethical horizon is intimate and everyday, not abstract or ideological.

## **Love, Loss, and the Bittersweet**

A Bond love story often begins with a glance and concludes with a lasting aftertaste. "The Night Train at Deoli" embodies this notion: love is seen as both an event and an afterglow, a constellation formed in seconds that continues to shine in memory. Similarly, in "The Eyes Have It," attraction is conveyed through voice and presence rather than visual certainty, challenging the dominance of sight in romantic narratives.

Bond's lovers rarely experience grand story arcs; they fit within the confines of the short story's structure, focusing on luminous moments. Loss is inherent in this structure, not as a tragedy but as an essential aspect of beauty. You cannot hold onto a summer evening or a gentle hill breeze; you can only feel and remember them. This bittersweet tone is central to Bond's appeal. Readers identify with their own small, unique moments and find them dignified in his prose.

In some stories, the bittersweet shades darker, especially where death intrudes. *The Funeral* mourns yet affirms; grief is not a privatized abyss but a shared ritual that rebinds community. Even here, Bond's syntax remains spare, resisting rhetorical flourish in favour of clarity. The emotion is achieved not by intensifiers but by the patient's presentation of detail.

## **Narrative Technique: Style, Point of View, and Form**

Bond's thematic steadiness is anchored by formal choices that amplify his concerns as follows;

**1) Simplicity with Precision.** His sentences are clear, often short, and loaded with sensory detail. This stylistic economy suits the child's perspective and the adult's reflective gaze alike. It also permits the unobtrusive arrival of the uncanny.

**2) First-Person Intimacy.** Many stories use first-person narration, which grants access to thought while foregrounding subjectivity and partial knowledge. In *The Eyes Have It*, the blind narrator's perceptual limits become a structural device that produces the climactic recognition.

**3) The Sketch and the Vignette.** Bond treats scenes like watercolours: washes of colour, a few confident strokes, and a suggestion of form that invites the viewer's completion. The short story's brevity becomes an aesthetic of invitation rather than limitation.

**4) Open Endings.** Closure is often emotional rather than narrative. Endings leave characters poised on thresholds—disembarking, turning a corner, or watching the rain—emphasizing process over resolution.

**5) Dialogic Quiet.** Dialogue in Bond is colloquial and brief, often punctuated by silence. What remains unsaid carries as much meaning as what is spoken, especially in cross-class interactions where politeness, pride, and vulnerability interlace.

**6) Place as Character.** Detailed evocations of Mussoorie, Dehradun, Shamli, and anonymous stations function like recurring characters who carry history into each new tale. The reader's familiarity with these places generates a serial intimacy across stories.

Continuously, Ruskin Bond has a comparative glance at Indian Short Story Writers as follows:

Placing Bond alongside R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, and Khushwant Singh clarifies his distinctiveness. Like Narayan, Bond inhabits a circumscribed geography (Malgudi for Narayan; the Doon valley and the hills for Bond) and cultivates a gentle irony. Unlike Anand, whose fiction often foregrounds systemic injustice, Bond typically sidesteps overt social critique in favour of intimate ethics. With Singh, he shares an eye for pathos among the common folk, but

he avoids Singh's acerbic political commentary. Bond's Anglo-Indian heritage surfaces not as identity politics but as an undertow of outsidership, lending his liminal settings extra charge.

Bond's closest kin may be found in the Anglo-Indian and hill-station literary traditions: Jim Corbett's jungle narratives (minus the hunt), Kipling's railway tales (without the imperial swagger), and the Himalayan memoirists who write the mountains as living presences. Yet Bond's sensibility is unmistakably his own—anchored in postcolonial India's everyday pluralism, wary of grand narratives, committed to kindness.

### **Brief Analyses of Selected Stories**

#### ***The Night Train at Deoli***

A young man's encounter with a basket-seller at a small station becomes a lifelong memory. The story illustrates liminality (the halted train), nature's presence (the dawn air, the tracks), and the bittersweet quality of love. The narrator's repeated attempts to return enact a ritual of remembrance, transforming private nostalgia into a narrative gift for readers.

#### ***The Thief***

A boy who steals by habit meets Arun, whose trust disarms him. The heart of the story is ethical: the possibility of self-reform grounded in someone's belief in your better self. The spare style and restrained ending prevent sentimentality, preserving the complexity of the boy's choice.

#### ***The Eyes Have It***

Perception structures reality. The narrator's blindness—and the revelation of the girl's blindness—turn seeing into an act of listening and imagining. The story problematizes assumptions about disability while celebrating the intimacy of ordinary conversation.

### ***A Face in the Dark***

A schoolmaster encounters a faceless boy and, moments later, a faceless watchman. The tale's circular uncanny suggests that fear may be a property of the perceiver and that the world's mysteries are not always malign.

### ***The Woman on Platform 8***

Maternal care appears in the guise of a stranger. The story dramatizes how social categories—stranger, mother, child—can rearrange themselves in moments of need, foregrounding the trust that underwrites communal life.

### ***The Kite Maker***

Modernity erodes artisanal labour, but the story refuses pure elegy. The old man's kites still rise, if only in memory. Bond articulates loss without resentment, allowing dignity to be the kite maker's final legacy.

### ***Time Stops at Shamli***

The town of Shamli is geography and mood: a pause in time that permits self-recovery. Here, Bond uses setting to stage an inward journey, aligning landscape with emotional weather.

### ***Panther's Moon***

While more plot-driven than many of Bond's quiet tales, this story dramatizes the interface between humans and wilderness. The panther is not simply a threat; it is a magnificent co-inhabitant, and the community's response—fear mixed with respect—continues Bond's ecological ethic.

### **Ethics of Attention: Bond's Humanism**

Threading through these stories is a humanism that does not announce itself as doctrine. Bond pays attention to a child's hesitation, to an old man's hands, to a girl's basket, to the rain's percussion on a tin roof. This attention is ethical because it refuses to reduce people to their functions. A thief is not only a thief; he is a boy who eats mangoes, likes the feel of crisp notes, and longs to be trusted. A vendor is not only a service provider; she is a person with a face that will haunt a man for years.

In an era inclined toward spectacle, Bond's quiet insistence on the seen and the felt is countercultural. He suggests that the heroic lies not in epic feats but in the diligence of noticing, in the patience to let small truths accumulate. The short story—compact, luminous—is his chosen vessel for this ethic.

### **Language, Humour, and Tone**

Bond's diction is accessible without being bland. He rarely employs ornament for its own sake; when a metaphor appears, it works like a window, not a mirror—letting the reader see through to the scene rather than admire the sentence. Humour flickers throughout: a self-mocking aside, a wry observation about small-town gossip, a child's literalism that undoes adult pomposity. This humour is rarely cruel. It springs from affection for human foibles.

Tone, in turn, is modulated by setting. Hill rain invites introspection; bazaar chatter invites banter; the hush of a forest at dusk invites the uncanny. Bond's tonal palette ranges from wistful to playful, from tender to eerie, with smooth transitions that keep the reader within a coherent sensibility.

Ruskin Bond's short stories persist because they testify to the enduring appetite for meaning in ordinary life. His thematic concerns—childhood's moral clarity, nature's companionship, solitude's porousness, nostalgia's honesty, liminal journeys, gentle hauntings, everyday ethics, and bittersweet love—combine to form a recognizable, hospitable world. The very consistency that some critics mark as a limitation appears here as a discipline: Bond returns to his chosen ground the way one returns to a beloved lookout point, finding that the light is always slightly different.

Placed within Indian English literature, Bond occupies a niche distinct from satirical urban chroniclers and overtly political novelists. He is a cartographer of the small and the near, the mountain path and the platform bench, the apartment balcony where rain arrives like an old friend. If his fiction rarely scales the grand argumentative heights, it excels at building a durable commons of feeling—a place where readers can rest, remember, and reenter the stream of life a little more attentive, a little more kind.

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