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Speaking through Symbols: An Analysis of Ruskin Bond's *Angry River* and *All Roads Lead To Ganga*

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Abstract

The recital art of a story is determined by the kind of experience and the quality of vision, which the author seeks to convey through the mutual interaction with nature. Literary works bear testimony to the fact that the artistic quality of a good story lies ultimately in something beyond method and technique. Kempton has rightly observed, "a noble theme may sound merely pretentious under poor telling" (qtd. in Bhatt 151). Form and technique make the vital elements of a work of art, for, they are inseparable from the subject matter. The tactic of communicating ideas is the mark of good fiction.

Ruskin Bond, better perceived as the 'Indian Wordsworth', is a naturalist who breathes nature into all his works, writing passionately about all its elements. Being a reputed writer, he continues to live in isolation from the bustle and hustle of large cities, ploughing his lonely furrow. He is a lover of nature, whose simple yet highly evocative style reflects a deep kinship with the majestic Himalayas. Sense of beauty, liberty and harmony are the cardinal values of his world.

Bond is a great nature writer in the tradition of Wordsworth and Thoreau. But when they are romantic or mystic in their comprehension of nature, Bond is romantic and realistic par excellence. It owes much to his long association with the trees as well as to the geological records of the Himalayan flora. His creative imagination renders them in an absorbing narrative form. His readers are fascinated not by botanical details but by the warm touch of life stimulating sense of relationship- a bond which binds not only the writer but also the reader.

Key words: *Nature, symbols, mountains, trees, dream, bond, oneness.*

Bond's style showcases his acute power of understanding and deep insight. His style becomes quite powerful according to the occasions and situations. Bond uses symbolism to convey his thoughts vividly. Symbols are so naturally woven with human

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consciousness that they automatically spring up in the train of thought. Bond does not use symbols for the sake of symbols as such, but they are a natural part of his narrative art. He has ingeniously used symbols to achieve intensity and compactness of theme.

Hill stations, especially Dehradun and Mussoorie serve as favourite backdrops for most of Bond's works. Dehradun symbolizes peaceful life with idyllic surroundings. It is a place for longing, for return to home and old friends. The Dehra of the fifties and sixties as celebrated by the writer is altogether different from the present hectic one. Mussoorie, the queen of Garhwal Himalayas, is a place of serenity and divine splendor. Both these places stand for the sharp contrast to the hectic life of thickly populated cities and towns.

In *Angry River,* the island symbolizes solitariness, where Sita's family lives a difficult life. The novel brings out the truth that each individual is like an island, till he is swept away in the current of life and starts interacting with other individuals. The island may provide an opportunity for calm contemplation but for his proper development, man needs society. Sita, though happily living with her grandparents, has no vision of life beyond the island. It is when the flood sweeps away the embankments and the island is submerged into water, Sita is introduced to the real world of life and relationships.

Forests, besides being a natural habitat of animals and birds, emerge as a secure place for human beings too. Trees that hold major concern of the writer are symbols of the perennial source of life. It springs out of the constant threat that lurks in his mind that, "If people keep cutting trees… there'll soon be no forests left at all, and, the world will be just one vast desert" (qtd. in Bhatt 173). Trees are closely associated with companionship and shelter. For Bond, trees are an eternal source of companionship, among which he finds peace of mind. In *All Roads Lead to Ganga,* he writes,

> The great deodar forests are found along the upper reaches of the Bhagirathi valley and the Tons in Garhwal; and in Himachal and Kashmir, along the Chenab and the Jhelum, and also the Kishenganga…. I grew up amongst these trees, and some of them planted by Grandfather grew with me. (93)

In *Angry River,* the big peepal tree becomes a symbol of generosity and magnanimity. The heavy flood uproots the tree, which is as old as the island. Sita clings to its branches like an infant to her mother's bosom: "With the tree almost on its side, she had to cling tightly to her branch to avoid falling off" (*Angry River* 51). In Indian

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mythology, peepal tree is the most sacred, its heart shaped leaves symbolize the physique of Lord Krishna, broad at the shoulder and tapering down to a very thin waist.

The spinning of season's wheel symbolizes great changes in the psychology and life of people in Bond's works. It brings relief from heat and dust. It is a festive season for lizards, spiders and snakes. Agitated minds are cooled down by the sight of dark heavy clouds gathered in the sky. Rain symbolizes freshness; storm denotes impending terrible doom, madness, violence and devastation. Nothing passes unobserved in nature from the eye of a careful interpreter. Bond puts it in the lines, "The sky was dark with monsoon clouds. It had rained all night, and in a few hours it would rain again" (*Angry River* 7). In *Angry River,* Sita's grandfather tells "Sita about other floods and storms which he had experienced as a boy" (77).

Being a great devotee of nature, Bond learns the art of living through natural objects. He is fascinated by the sound of a brook pattering somewhere in the forest. Water stands for purity, blossom, creation and harmony. Bond says, "Be like water, taught Lao-tzu, philosopher and founder of Taoism. Soft and limpid, it finds its way through, over or under obstacle. It does not quarrel; it simply moves on" (*Rain in the Mountains* 105). Man's belongingness with the essential elements is the specific feature, which distinguishes Bond from other writers. River symbolizes life and continuity. In *Angry River,* the river shows that life has to go on, even after terrible disasters. Sita learns the true fact from the river that life is not stagnant, but continuous.

Mountains symbolize endurance. Whatever humans do to mountains, they endure everything patiently. Bond says that it is this feature that attracts him towards the mountains. Mountains also stand for wealth and benevolence. Expecting nothing, mountains give in abundance. Every human being must learn the art of living, following the enduring nature of mountains. On the other hand, mountains are also stubborn. They are permanent things and refuse to move. Bond writes, "Time passes, and yet it doesn't pass (it is only you and I who are passing). People come and go, the mountains remain. Mountains are permanent things. They are stubborn, they refuse to move" (*All Roads Lead to Ganga* 1).

There are a few inanimate objects that act as symbols in *Angry River.* For instance, the rag doll of Sita whom she calls Mumta is her only friend on the lonely island. Mumta symbolizes companionship. Sita communicates with the doll in a heart to

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heart talk sometimes like a friend, at other times like a mother. "Since there were no other children on the island, Sita shared her secrets with the rag doll, whose name was Mumta" (*Angry River* 16). Sita shares everything with Mumta and feels comfortable in her presence.

Another such object is hookah, which once belonged to Sita's great grandfather, now belongs to her grandfather. When the flood water starts surging in her hut, she hurriedly keeps it safe in the trunk. The hookah emerges as a symbol of heritage, a tradition handed down from one generation to another. The walking stick symbolizes supportiveness and it is one of Sita's most valuable possessions. It is the walking stick of Sita's grandmother which is made of Shisham-wood. As she is sick, the stick is of no use and it just rests in one corner of the hut.

The big tin trunk stands as a symbol of safety as it holds many valuable objects. It belongs to Sita's mother and there is nothing in it except a cotton-filled quilt. Sita stuffs the trunk with everything useful and weighs it down so that it will not be carried away by the current of water. Sita packs the hookah in the trunk. Grandmother's walking stick finds a place in the trunk, so do a number of small tins containing the spices used in cooking- nutmeg, caraway seed, cinnamon, coriander and pepper and a bigger tin of flour and a tin of raw sugar. Even if Sita has to spend several hours in the tree, there will be something to eat when she comes down again. So the trunk here acts as a treasure holder, containing things, precious to Sita.

Bond brings in religious references in his works. He believes in essential worth and goodness of man. He has a firm faith in God and knows that people are not true to the expectations of the Supreme power. He is the Ultimate power who protects people from every evil, pain and difficulties. The river in *Angry River,* is a part of nature and in this way every individual is a part of nature, a part of the Supreme power. The problems of modern times are emphasized and highlighted in a religious context.

On one side where nature is angry with people, Bond conveys the message that behind every object of nature there lies the ray of God. On the other side as sacred forms of God, he emphasizes that nature is the ultimate soothing power and is equally responsible for the well being of people. "God has, in fact, written two books, not just one. Of course, we are all familiar with the first book he wrote, namely Scripture. But he has written a second book called creation" (Bacon). God wants His people to listen to the

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call of nature and preserve the moral values which are essential for life. As a writer, Bond is highly inspired by God Krishna and it is evident through his description:

> Grandmother had looked after her, had gently touched her fevered brow, and had told her stories- stories about the gods- about the young Krishna, friend of birds and animals, so full of mischief, always causing confusion among the other gods; and Indra, who made the thunder and lightning; and Vishnu, the preserver of all good things, whose steed was a great white bird; and Ganesh, with the elephant's head; and Hanuman, the monkey-god, who helped the young Prince Ram in his war with the King of Ceylon. (*Angry River* 28)

Personal names are used as symbols representing individuals. In *Angry River,* Bond makes use of religious symbols which act as effective tools throughout the novel. When Sita is caught in the flooded river, a boy named Krishan protects her showing that the Supreme Ultimate is responsible for people's safety. Sita is compelled to think that the preserver of her life is actually God Krishna. She thinks, "He looked blue in the moonlight, the colour of the young god Krishna, and for a few moments Sita was confused and wondered if the boy was indeed Krishna…" (*Angry River* 62). Sita feels safe with the boy when the boy plays the flute for her. When he says, "I will play the flute for you" (65), she feels an eternal joy in the music.

Sita can be compared to the Sita of *The Ramayana.* Like the Sita of *The Ramayana,* Bond's Sita endures every obstacle with patience. She is smart enough to tackle the hindrances in her life. She has the presence of mind to act according to the situation. Without losing hope, she bears the hardships of life thus saving her life. Sita can be compared to a deodar tree, which is the most godlike of Himalayan trees. Like the deodar tree, Sita stands erect and dignified, though in a strong wind the deodar may hum and sigh but does not bend to it.

Bond has painted Krishan as an adventurous adolescent in *Angry River*. The novel becomes a universal predicament when Sita assumes her protector Krishan as Lord Krishna. The particular situation in which he finds himself and aftermath of his actions imparts him extra dimension. A close analysis of Krishan reveals that he symbolizes a definite journey of self from innocence to experience. There is constant movement towards ripeness. Bond describes his physical appearance in the lines, "He was a slim,

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wiry boy, with a hard flat belly; he had high cheekbones, strong white teeth. He was a little darker than Sita" (*Angry River* 54). Krishan symbolises as a savior figure who saves Sita from the deluge, thus enhancing the idea that he is Lord Krishna.

Dream is one of the techniques used by Bond to accentuate human psychology. He has used this technique in *Angry River* to bring out the inner turmoil of characters. Sita dreams that the boy and Lord Krishna are one and that she is sitting beside him on a great white bird, which flies over mountains, over the snow peaks of the Himalayas, into the cloud- land of the gods. As Krishan plays the flute for Sita, she is carried away again into the land of dreams and "they were riding on the bird once more, Sita and the blue god, and they were passing through clouds and mist, until suddenly the sun shot out through the clouds" (*Angry River* 65). This dream of Sita symbolizes her yearning to live a happy and satisfied life.

Folk songs are closely associated with Indian villages. People who work in farms and fields sing folk songs not to experience the pain and weariness of their work. The pure and blessed music symbolizes the touch of nature and subjects related to nature. In *All Roads Lead to Ganga*, Bond gives instances of folk songs being sung in Garhwal families. After dinner, people sing songs remembering those who are separated from their loved ones and their homes in the hills. An old Garhwali folk song goes like this:

> Oh mountain swift, you are from my father's home-
> Speak, oh speak, in the courtyard of my parents,
> My mother will hear you. She will send my brother to fetch me…
> Will I ever reach my father's house? (*All Roads Lead to Ganga* 24)

Bond's use of symbolism has raised his novels to a higher level. His use of different techniques shows his considerable insight and craftsmanship. His techniques not only add charm but also give meaning to his works. The novels *Angry River* and *All Roads Lead to Ganga* show how they are finely patterned by Bond using his techniques in a unique way. The novels also depict how he has excelled as a writer by using various literary devices skillfully. Apart from the mentioned mechanism (symbolism), the ability of Bond lies in his strength of universalizing the present circumstance of nature and its assets.

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