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RUSKIN BOND'S WRITINGS ATTUNED WITH THE WORLD OF FLORA

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ABSTRACT

Ruskin Bond is better known as the Wordsworth of Indian English writing. He is primarily considered as a nature writer. His writings are filled with extensive description of flora in all its manifestations. After Bond shifted to Mussoorie, he trekked the Himalayan region at length and explored the vegetation and prominent flowers, trees, orchids, bushes and shrubs there. He has particularly mentioned the eastern and western Himalayas which he felt are home to rich Indian floral wealth. The focus here will be on Ruskin's extensive description of the flora with a prime concern for readers to develop eco-consciousness and love for nature.

Key words: Himalayas, Flora, nature, landscape, orchids.

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INTRODUCTION

Ruskin Bond has vividly and extensively explored the fascinating world of flora. His knowledge of the world of flora is astounding. He has been trekking up the Himalayan foothills since long. The way he describes hundreds of species of trees, plants, shrubs, and flowers, leaves his readers amazed. He writes like an expert botanist, but what is more important, he writes like a highly eco-sensitive being who is in love with all creations of the cosmos. While describing the flora on the mountains, he informs his readers how the flora changes dramatically while ascending the foothills. His stories revolve round these beautiful surroundings of Himalayan landscape. In his books he gives far-reaching details about the plants that are found there, right from their botanical names and characteristics to their habitat. He informs his readers that there are over a million species, with thousands being discovered each year. Most of his work is based on these beautiful hills. He is in

kinship with them and though not religious, considers himself 'a nature worshipper':

One of my earliest memories is of picking my way through a forest of flowering cosmos; the flowers nodding down at me in friendly invitation . . . Since then, the cosmos has been my favourite flower-fresh, open, uncomplicated living up to its name, cosmos, the universe as an orchard whole.¹

Bond elaborately explains the world of flora and delves deep into their characteristics features. His book *The Book of Nature* is an elaborate work on flora. This book shows his efforts of many years as he explores each and every detail about them. A perusal of this book reveals that he has described four categories of flora: trees, orchids, flowers and general small plants like grass and bushes. He is so keenly interested in their life that he has tried to find out the details about them and he has thoroughly succeeded in his endeavour. He starts with their scientific names, then goes on to describe their characteristics, their medicinal, curative and

commercial uses and many more such details. Bond also looks into the historical and religious importance of the trees as well, such as about historical importance of sal tree and mahua. Similarly myths associated with peepal and banyan are also incorporated in his writings. He also notes various uses of trees like deodar, mango, rhododendron, bamboo and many others.

In *The Book of Nature*, Bond elaborately mentions various trees which have always played an important role in his life. He describes all the prominent trees, from the tree of wisdom to the sacred trees, with their distinct characteristics. In his childhood he enjoyed the company of litchi, mango, guava, jackfruit and lemon tree. Later he shared companionship with trees like grand banyan, the sacred peepal, the sal and the shisham. In the hills, he appreciates the beauty of stately deodars and fragrant pines. He remarks that poets feel ecstatic over the joys of nature. He is particularly impressed by the words of playwright and social critic George Bernard Shaw who wrote that except during the nine months before he draws his first breath, no man manages his affairs as well as a tree does.

Ruskin's other book *The Wonderful World of Insects, Trees and Wild Flowers*, comprehensively describes the amazing world of flora. Trekking up the Himalayas, he gives a detailed description of India's forest wealth. He enlightens his readers that overall India has rich floral wealth and it is richest in the eastern and western Himalayas. The hills are interwoven in blossom and greenness. He says that it is not possible to give a complete account of plant life there, so he presents a few significant species to the readers so that they may have an idea about the floral delights that await them when they visit there. In the essay "Foothill to Treeline" Bond writes:

The valleys, winding down from snowy heights, and carrying streams from the snows to the scorching foothills, are full of vegetation which seldom loses its vivid green. To give a complete account of plant life between, say Siliguri and Darjeeling or Kangra and Kulu, or Almora and the Pindari Glacier, or Nandprayag and Tungnath, would be well-nigh impossible.²

Describing in detail the orchids, Bond writes in "Foothill to Treeline" that magnificent and rare orchids grow in profusion on rocks or decorate moss-grown branches with their fragile loveliness. He informs his readers that there are more than forty orchids spread across the Himalayas. Many orchids grew in the forests of moist eastern Himalayan: *Vanda teres*, muffling its stick-like foliage in beautiful purple flowers; *Arundina* is stiff and precise in form and grows like a reed, but in early monsoon gets decorated with large mauve blossoms.

Commenting on the flora of the Eastern Himalayas, Bond writes that the atmosphere and soil are too humid and they admirably suit the immigrant *Clyptomaria*, a cedar introduced around 1920 from Japan. It is trim, beautiful and straight and is frequently found at altitude between four and six thousand feet. It grows quickly and has the power to withstand all kinds of weather. Presenting an exhaustive catalogue of the different flora found in the Eastern Himalayas, Bond writes:

At an elevation of four to seven thousand feet all the herbal flora of temperate Europe is found: violets, buttercups, cowslips, barberry, primrose, St. John's wort, dandelion, stonecrop, periwinkle, commelina, meadow sage, wood sorrel, blackberry, dog rose, sorrel, balsam, poppies, anemones, wild carrot, clover, nettles, wild geranium, nightshade, saxifrage, and alpine rock cress, to list only a few of the many hundreds of wildflowers found at these altitudes from Kashmir in the west to Arunachal Pradesh in the east.³

Delving deep into the history of some plants, Bond writes that apples were first introduced in the Himalayan valleys by European settlers who started the first big orchards: Wilson at Harsil (near Gangotri), Banon in Kulu, and Wheeler in Ramgarh. Now a days, about two hundred varieties of apple grow in Ramgarh region, along with peaches, cherries and apricots.

As for the rhododendron, Bond remarks that it is one of the most admired trees throughout the Himalayas. It has magnificent clusters of pink or crimson bells that explains the origin of the generic

name, rhodon(rose), dendron (tree), rose tree. It grows at an altitude of eight thousand feet in the Northwestern Himalayas. It is considered to be one of the most beautiful of all the Himalayan trees. It has gnarled trunk and deep crimson flowers in masses. Analysing in detail the rhododendron, Bond writes:

The flower of the rhododendron is also credited with curative properties, but I am not sure just what it is supposed to cure. The hill people make a pleasant jam from the flowers, and I have seen a party of noisy black bulbuls getting drunk by imbibing too much of the nectar. The flowers are in bloom in March and are look like tongues of fire leaping out of the dark forest.”⁴

Describing another tree namely the oak, Bonds observes that even though rather untidy, it is hospitable to birds and insects. It is a good tree for the privacy of birds, its crooked branches spreading with no particular effect in mind. At times the tree seems uninhabited, but when there is a whirring sound, may be of a helicopter or any other thing, a party of long tailed blue magpies stream across the forest glade. The tree is home to the birds all the year round.

Describing the bamboo, Bond observes that it is the most gigantic of the grasses, it varies greatly in size as it has many genera and species. Many beautiful bamboos flourish in the hills. They are used in a variety of ways: the lepchas convert them into drinking vessels, some are used in floating heavy logs, while others in roofing. Bond says that Dehradun was earlier noted chiefly for its clusters and avenues of large bamboos, to use the words of Capt Sleeman “forming the principal feature in the beauty of the Doon ever since the valley became known to us.”¹⁸ Today, there are only a few corners left in Dehradun where great bamboo trees can still be seen. Most of them have died out or have been cut down.

Bond bestows great praise on mango, and refers to it as ‘king of fruits’ and ‘the nectar of the Gods’. He counts many uses of mango such as one can eat ripe mangoes fresh from the tree; or one can make pickles or chutneys or jams; or in the form of aam papad; or relish it as mango-shake or squash

and even its kernel pounded into flour, can be used in place of wheat. Moreover, there are more than three hundred different varieties of mango and each has its own unique flavor. Bond considers mango tree to be one of the stateliest trees in India. Its groves are a common and familiar sight all over the country from the lower slopes of the Himalayas to Cape Comorin. It has religious significance as well. Its leaves are specially considered sacred and are used on auspicious occasions. Besides the rich world of trees, bushes and plants, Bond’s works are filled with detailed descriptions of a large variety of flowers also. He confesses that flowers are indeed the most beautiful creation of nature. He has a fascination for them and wants to know each of them by their name. He finds the trees with the blossom the most enchanting. In this context he writes:

I don’t think I could have got through life without the company of flowers. They sustain and stimulate. My desk is just a place of work until one of the children places a vase of flowers upon it, and then it becomes a place of delight. Be it a rose or a chrysanthemum or a simple daisy, it will help me in my work. They are there to remind me that life has its beautiful moments.

When I step out for one of my walks, I look for wild flowers, even the most humble of flowers hiding on the hillside. And if I do not know their names, I invent their names, because it’s nice to know someone by his or her name...⁵

Two categories of flowers have been described in his writings, domesticated and wild. Along with mainstream flowers, he is equally fond of wild flowers as well. Out of a crowd of teeming flowers, Bond describes a few personal favourites among which he finds commelina the best. It takes one’s breath away. Its pure pristine blue colour does that and it reflects the deepest blue of the sky. It appears as if from nowhere towards the end of the monsoon and is around for two weeks and then disappears again until the following monsoon. Bond confesses that: “I stand dumb before it; and the world stands still while I worship.”⁶

In his *The Book of Nature*, Bond not only discusses the mainstream flowers, but also discusses the wild flowers that no one has ever heard of. These flowers grow in woods and hills. He remarks:

The flowers of our woods and hills are often so difficult to identify that we are tempted to improvise - to find rare plants in places where they do not grow, and to discover other plants that no one has ever heard of. Even botanists make mistakes - unless they are the fanatical types, of whom it has been said that they visit their mothers' graves only to study the plants that grow on them!⁷

Bond also mentions some common wild flowers which grow in the vicinity of the hills. One such flower is the oxalis or wood sorrel. It is all over the hill slopes during the rains. Its flower is of pretty mauve colour, set amidst a cluster of heart-shaped leaflets. The hill people commonly call it khattamitha (sour-sweet) because its leaves have mild acidity. Cows are fond of it. Sharing an interesting information regarding the pungent quality of its leaves, Bond says that the cow's milk which has eaten wood sorrel cannot easily be turned into butter.

Bond also describes the main flowers of Kashmir such as saffron, ban gulab etc. in great detail. Saffron is a spice derived from the flower of the saffron crocus. Kashmiri saffron is famous for its aroma and colour, as it is used in cooking as a seasoning and colouring agent. It is world's most expensive spice by weight. Bond notes that the saffron crocus is an autumn-flowering plant, the flowers are violet with long tubes, sweet-scented. The dried stigmas of this crocus constitute the genuine saffron for trade. Wild yellow roses too are found in Kashmir, Lahaul and Tibet. Ban-gulab (*Rosa macrophylla*) is the great red rose tree that grows over a wide range in the northwestern Himalayas. Its fruit becomes very sweet and is savoured. It is one of the most beautiful of the Himalayan plants.

While expressing his fondness for flowers, Bond also discloses to his readers that most cultivated flowers were basically wild and they were named after the botanists who first domesticated them. For instance, the dahlia is named after Mr.

Dahl, a Swede; the rudbeckia after Rudbeck, a Dutchman; the zinnia after Dr. Zinn, a German; and the lobelia after Monsieur Lobel, a Flemish physician. So all these botanists are credited for bringing to Europe many of the flowers that they found growing wild in tropical America, Asia and Africa. Bond comments in a lighter vein: "But I am no botanist, I prefer to be the butterfly, perfectly happy in going from flower to flower in search of nectar."⁸

Bond confesses that he loves flowers in all forms, colours, appearances, shapes and sizes but his favourites are those with their own distinctive fragrance. Nevertheless he emphasises that he would be the last person to belittle a flower for its lack of fragrance, as there are many blooms such as the dahlia and the gladioli which have hardly any scent but have striking colours and appearance. Rose is an all time favourite of the world, a joy to all. But there are other less celebrated blooms which have a lovely, sometimes elusive fragrance all their own. A connoisseur of flowers, Bond makes subtle distinctions even between the fragrances of different flowers such as snapdragons, jasmine etc. Bond admits that he has a special fondness for antirrhinums or snapdragons, as they are more commonly known. They secrete the gentlest of fragrances, Zephyr-like, when one walks past the bed of those flowers. The bees equally love the snapdragon. Bond notes:

If I sniff hard at them, I don't catch any scent at all. They seem to hold it back from me. But if I walk past a bed of snapdragons, or even a single plant, the gentlest of fragrance is wafted towards me. If I stop and try to take it all in, it has gone again! I find it quite tantalizing, but it has given me a special regard for this modest flower.⁹

Bond thinks that some flowers can be quite tricky because they have no scent. But if one brings one's fingers gently over the leaves and then bring them to one's face, one will be touched by the most delicate of aromas. An interesting bit about some plants is that their leaves are more fragrant than their blooms. For example, the lemon geranium is valued more for its fragrant leaves than for its rather indeterminate blue flowers. Same is the case with

verbena and mint, whose leaves when crushed have a refreshing aroma. But Bond also knows that not all plants are fragrant. For instance the multi-coloured lovely dahlias are scentless. Asafotida has such a smell that it will keep even strong men at bay. Enlightening more on the varieties of smells, Bond says that close to Mother Earth, there are many delightful smells. He writes:

When I lie on the summer grass in the Himalayas, I am conscious of the many good smells around me- the grass itself, redolent of the morning's dew; bruised clover; wild violets; tiny buttercups and golden stars and strawberry flowers and many I shall never know the names of . . .¹⁰

Bond's another favourite is the soft scent of petunias growing near the doorstep and pine needles on the hillside and great bunches of sweet peas placed on his table. It appears as if calendula has no scent but when touched briefly it has the most delicate of aroma. Very often Bond connects the world of flora and fauna with human beings: a beautiful flower makes him ruminate about the person who grew it. As Amita Aggarwal appropriately remarks: "He enjoys writing about an 'underrated flower' like petunia. For him not only the flower, but also the person, who grows it, is interesting enough to be the subject of his stories."²⁸ Bond confesses that he admires those people who are close to nature:

I might even write a story about someone who grows petunias because such a person must obviously have sterling qualities. I might even delve into the love life of a petunia grower because those who love flowers must by their very nature, be loving.¹¹

Bond even notices the most sensitive things about nature which ordinary person would never notice. He observes and asks, 'Do falling petals make a sound?' and answers in the affirmative because he has heard even the tiniest and softest of sounds made by falling petals, like the drift of falling snow. Similarly dahlia, a big flower drops its petals with a very distinct flop.

Like a true lover of nature, Bond often wonders as to where have all the trees gone? He expresses his sense of loss at the cutting away of so

many trees by the P.W.D. He says that he had watched the walnut and oak trees grow before his eyes, just when they were felled by the callous P.W.D. for building yet another road in the mountainside. Eco-sensitive as Bond is, he terms this felling of trees as 'slaughter'. He is specially unsettled by the fact that generally people do not understand the value of trees. He is horrified to visualize a barren hillside where there would be no birds because the hills won't have any trees.

Exhorting his readers to plant trees, Bond remarks: "Let us also earn the blessings of future generations by planting not only more peepal trees - which are quite capable of looking after themselves - but all kinds of trees for shade and shelter, fruit and flower, beauty and utility."¹¹

Ruskin Bond thinks that without the company of Nature he could not have got through life. The beautiful world of Nature has sustained and stimulated him be it a rose or a chrysanthemum or a simple daisy, it has always helped him in his work. The flowers remind him of the beautiful moments of life. If he does not know their names, he invents them because he believes that it is nice to know someone by its name. When he steps out for walks, he keenly observes wild flowers even the most humble of flowers, hiding on the hill side.

Bond avers that nature's perfection can be seen in a tree's every leaf, flower, and seed. A man can learn a lot from the natural world. He believes that trees have an enduring presence in our lives; they are our connection to the past, even in the midst of change. Waxing eloquent about trees, he writes in a poem:

. . . I listen to their whisperings,
Their own mysterious diction;
And bow my head before their arms
And ask for benediction.¹²

To sum up, Bond has written about many the varieties of flora both wild and domesticated. He has described the vegetation of entire Himalayan range, elaborating their characteristic features. His tales are full of descriptions of flora of the hills, the landscape, the seasons and with interesting characters. His writings, therefore are a celebration of nature in its fullest form. Being in perfect harmony with nature, he is replete with goodly emotions and feelings. He believes that nature is

a pure bubbling life force, which quickens every object and creature to act, to respond, to grow and to die. Though not an environment activist Bond is nevertheless a genuine nature lover. Being a resident of the hills he feels that he has moral responsibility towards preserving the pristine purity of nature. With this study it is obvious that it is not only the moral responsibility of the writer to be in love with nature but every layman has an important to play in it.

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