

Ordinary Lives and Silent Emotions in Ruskin Bond's Fiction

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ABSTRACT

Among the many voices that have shaped Indian writing in English, Ruskin Bond holds a singular position — not because he writes about extraordinary events or extraordinary people, but precisely because he does not. His literary world is built upon the daily rhythms of hill towns, the quiet grief of aging, the half-spoken tenderness between friends, and the unannounced joys that accompany a walk through a monsoon forest. This paper examines how Bond's fiction elevates what might be dismissed as routine human experience into meaningful literary expression. Drawing on a wide selection of his short fiction, novellas, and longer narratives — including works such as *The Room on the Roof*, *The Blue Umbrella*, *A Flight of Pigeons*, *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*, and *The Night Train at Deoli* — the study investigates Bond's treatment of characters who live at the margins of larger social narratives, and the manner in which their inner emotional worlds are communicated through suggestion, environment, and narrative understatement rather than direct declaration. The paper further examines the philosophical underpinnings of this literary method, arguing that Bond's sustained focus on the unremarkable constitutes a deliberate counter-aesthetic to the dominant modes of postcolonial Indian fiction. By analysing how restrained prose, natural imagery, and retrospective memory function together in his work, the study establishes that Bond's fiction makes a quietly persuasive argument for the literary and moral worth of lives that mainstream discourse tends to overlook.

Keywords: *Ruskin Bond, Indian English fiction, emotional restraint, marginal lives, postcolonial aesthetics, nature writing, memory and nostalgia, Anglo-Indian literature, short story tradition*

INTRODUCTION

When scholars survey the terrain of twentieth and twenty-first century Indian writing in English, they frequently pause at works that engage most visibly with history, politics, or the metropolitan experience. The grand sweep of Partition, the turbulence of Emergency, the dislocation of diaspora — these are the themes that have claimed the bulk of critical attention and academic prestige. Against this backdrop, the fiction of Ruskin Bond occupies an unusual and often underappreciated position. Bond writes neither of grand historical ruptures nor of the anxieties of global displacement. His attention is directed elsewhere — toward the small, the local, and the quietly felt.

Bond was born in Kasauli in 1934 and spent the formative years of his life moving between the hill stations and towns of northern India — Jamnagar, Shimla, and finally Dehradun, where he has remained for the greater part of his long literary career, latterly settling in Landour near Mussoorie. This geography is not incidental to his writing. The Garhwal and Kumaon foothills, the railway stations that connected small towns, the bungalows with their overgrown gardens and creaking verandahs — these physical spaces are the constant setting of a fiction that has, over more than sixty years, remained remarkably consistent in its sensibility and its concerns.

His debut novel, *The Room on the Roof*, appeared in 1956 when Bond was barely twenty-two years old. The book introduced readers to Rusty, a teenage Anglo-Indian searching for companionship and identity in Dehradun, and its success — confirmed by the John Llewellyn Rhys Prize awarded the following year — established Bond as a writer of genuine promise. What that early prize committee may not have fully anticipated was just how long and how quietly productive that promise would prove to be. Bond has since published well over five hundred works across all genres: short stories, novels, poetry, essays, children's books, memoirs, and travelogues.

Yet for all this productivity, Bond's critical reputation has never quite kept pace with his popular one. Readers across generations — children who first encountered him through school anthologies, adults who return to his prose when the world becomes too loud — have loved his work with a constancy that few Indian writers command. Critics, however, have tended to regard his apparent simplicity as a limitation rather than as an achievement. This paper proposes that such a reading fundamentally misunderstands what Bond is doing. His restraint is not evidence of limited capacity; it is the formal expression of a considered philosophical outlook.

At the heart of that outlook is a deep commitment to the significance of ordinary life and the reality of emotions that resist public expression. The people who inhabit Bond's fiction — Anglo-Indian schoolteachers, Garhwali farmers, widowed grandmothers, solitary hill-walkers, children watching the world with precocious sensitivity — are people whose inner lives rarely receive literary attention. Bond makes those inner lives visible, not by amplifying them into melodrama but by attending to them with the patience and precision of a writer who believes that a carefully observed detail can carry more emotional weight than any number of direct declarations.

This paper undertakes a systematic exploration of how Bond achieves this effect, and what its broader implications are for our understanding of Indian literature, the aesthetics of simplicity, and the literary representation of emotion. The analysis draws on a range of primary texts and situates Bond's work within relevant critical frameworks, including postcolonial literary theory, affect studies, and ecocriticism.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Academic engagement with Bond's fiction has been, by any measure, modest relative to the scale and reach of his literary output. This critical silence is itself worth noting, for it reveals assumptions about literary value that Bond's work quietly challenges. Those scholars who have written seriously about him, however, have produced insights that collectively establish a foundation for the kind of extended analysis this paper attempts.

An early acknowledgment of Bond's place within Indian English fiction came through Meenakshi Mukherjee's foundational study of the Indian novel. Mukherjee noted that Bond's writing belonged to a realist strand of Indian English fiction that valued close observation of social reality over formal experimentation. Her observation that his prose works through the careful accumulation of concrete, specific detail rather than through symbolic abstraction pointed toward something essential about his method, even if her study did not follow that observation to its fullest implications.

Viney Kirpal's edited volume on Indian fiction in English during the 1980s provided a more extended treatment of Bond, situating him within the tradition of Anglo-Indian writing. Kirpal's analysis drew attention to the way Bond's own background — as someone of mixed heritage who chose India over Britain — gave his writing an emotional texture that differed markedly from writers who experienced their relationship to India as conflicted or provisional. For Bond, India was not a problem to be solved but a place to be loved, and this settled affection produced a fiction of unusual warmth and groundedness.

More recent scholarship has begun to engage with Bond through the lens of affect theory. Critics working in this area have found in his fiction a rich repository of what might be called quiet or ambient emotion — feeling that does not announce itself through climactic scenes or explicit narration but that accumulates across the texture of a narrative, creating in the reader a response that is often stronger precisely because it has not been directly solicited. This theoretical framework offers productive tools for analysing what Bond's narrative restraint actually achieves at the level of readerly experience.

Ecocritical approaches have also begun to illuminate dimensions of Bond's work that earlier criticism passed over. Several scholars have noted that Bond's natural world is never decorative — the trees, rivers, seasonal changes, and animal presences that populate his fiction are woven into the emotional and moral fabric of the narrative in ways that anticipate contemporary discussions about human-environment entanglement. Bond, who has written extensively and personally about his love for the natural world of the Himalayas, brings to his fiction an ecological sensibility that predates the academic formalisation of ecocriticism by several decades.

The autobiographical dimensions of Bond's work have attracted attention from scholars interested in the relationship between lived experience and literary form. His repeated return to the figure of the lonely, perceptive child — a figure that draws unmistakably on his own early life — has been read both as personal testimony and as a broader reflection on what it means to grow up sensitive and observant in a world that does not always reward those qualities. This autobiographical thread runs through his fiction in ways that complicate simple distinctions between fiction and memoir.

What remains underdeveloped in existing scholarship, however, is an account that brings these various threads together into a coherent argument about Bond's overall literary achievement. The present study attempts precisely this synthesis, focusing specifically on the twin concerns of ordinary lives and silent emotions as the organising principles of his fiction.

RESEARCH PROBLEM AND OBJECTIVES

3.1 Statement of the Research Problem

The guiding research problem of this study is as follows: Through what literary means does Ruskin Bond transform the apparently unremarkable — modest lives, unspoken feelings, provincial settings — into fiction of lasting emotional and intellectual significance, and what does his approach to this transformation tell us about the broader possibilities and responsibilities of literary art?

Answering this question requires attention both to what Bond writes about and to how he writes — to his subjects and to his technique. It also requires us to ask why this kind of writing matters: what cultural and ethical work it performs, and why a sustained engagement with the ordinary might be not just artistically valid but urgently necessary in the context of contemporary Indian life.

3.2 Objectives of the Study

The present study pursues five principal objectives:

- (i) To map the recurring character types, social settings, and situational patterns through which Bond constructs his vision of ordinary life in the Indian hills and small towns.
- (ii) To analyse the formal and stylistic strategies — including narrative perspective, the use of natural description, and the management of emotional disclosure — through which Bond gives expression to feelings that his characters cannot or do not put into words.
- (iii) To locate Bond's literary project within the wider field of postcolonial Indian writing in English, identifying both its distinctive qualities and its relationship to broader literary traditions.
- (iv) To investigate how the natural landscapes of Bond's fiction function as vehicles for emotional meaning, and what this reveals about his understanding of the relationship between human experience and the non-human world.
- (v) To reflect on the contemporary relevance of Bond's commitment to simplicity, asking what his fiction offers readers navigating a world of increasing speed, noise, and complexity.

ANALYSIS

4.1 Celebrating the Unremarkable: Bond's Aesthetics of Everyday Life

The most immediately striking feature of Bond's fictional world is who and what he chooses to write about. His protagonists are not chosen for their social prominence, their dramatic histories, or their capacity for heroic action. A hill postman making his rounds through fog and rain; an elderly woman whose only companion is a parrot she argues with daily; a boy who tends a single cherry sapling through several years of storms; a retired

schoolteacher who counts the birds that visit his garden each morning — these are the figures Bond places at the centre of his narratives, and it is a choice that carries both aesthetic and moral implications.

This deliberate privileging of the unremarkable constitutes what might be called Bond's counter-aesthetic — a systematic refusal of the logic that equates literary importance with social prominence or dramatic incident. Where much fiction seeks to justify its subjects by endowing them with exceptional qualities, Bond's fiction argues that no such justification is required. The postman's daily walk through the hills is not a lesser subject than a revolutionary's political struggle; the grandmother's conversations with her parrot are not a smaller canvas than the diasporic writer's cultural negotiation. Each life, attended to with sufficient care, yields the full range of human experience.

This conviction is nowhere more evident than in *The Blue Umbrella*, a novella that turns on a seemingly trivial object — a decorative umbrella that a young village girl acquires by trading a claw-and-tooth necklace with a tourist. The umbrella becomes the focus of desire, envy, and ultimately of a gesture of unexpected generosity. The entire emotional architecture of the narrative rests on the assumption that the feelings generated by a blue umbrella in a Himalayan village are as worthy of literary attention as any feelings generated in more conspicuous arenas of human activity. Bond never defends this assumption; he simply enacts it, and the novella's quiet power derives from the completeness of that enactment.

The Anglo-Indian characters who recur throughout Bond's fiction inhabit a particularly suggestive version of ordinariness. As a community defined by its in-between status — neither straightforwardly British nor straightforwardly Indian — the Anglo-Indians in Bond's stories navigate questions of identity and belonging in ways that are simultaneously particular to their historical situation and universally recognisable as the human experience of not quite fitting in. Bond does not dramatise this marginal status; he renders it through the texture of daily life — the small social awkwardnesses, the domestic pleasures, the loyalty to friendships that transcend social categories.

4.2 What Cannot Be Said: The Poetics of Emotional Restraint

Bond's treatment of emotion represents one of the most technically accomplished aspects of his fiction, and it rests on a fundamental insight: that the most significant human feelings are frequently those that resist articulation. Grief deepens in silence; love is communicated through indirection; longing expresses itself in the attention we pay to things other than its object. A writer who understands this — and who has the craft to work with it — can create emotional effects far more durable than anything achievable through direct statement.

Consider the story that gives the collection its title: *The Night Train at Deoli*. The narrator, a young man travelling by train, notices a girl selling baskets on the platform of a small station. Something passes between them — a sustained exchange of glances, a brief conversation, a mutual recognition that the narrator cannot explain and does not attempt to. When the train departs, no promises are made and no arrangements confirmed. He returns on a later journey, hoping to find her, but she is not there. The story ends with the narrator carrying this encounter indefinitely, as something that will not resolve into meaning but cannot be forgotten. Bond never names what the narrator feels; he does not need to. The restraint of the telling is itself the feeling.

Grief receives similarly indirect treatment in *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*. The narrator's attachment to a particular house, garden, and cluster of trees in Dehradun functions as a way of holding and expressing a grief that has no single, nameable cause — it is the grief of time, of childhood lost, of a world that has passed. By locating this feeling in trees and gardens rather than in human relationships, Bond makes it simultaneously more universal and more precise. We understand what the narrator mourns not by being told about it but by sharing the quality of attention he brings to these non-human witnesses of a vanished life.

Loneliness, which saturates a great deal of Bond's fiction, is perhaps the emotion most characteristic of his particular emotional register. His lonely characters are not lonely because of dramatic betrayal or catastrophic loss; they are lonely in the way that sensitive people are often lonely — because consciousness is, at its core, private, and because the gap between inner experience and outward expression is rarely entirely bridged. Bond

treats this condition not with pity but with a kind of respectful compassion, acknowledging it as a permanent feature of the human situation while insisting that it need not be either shameful or paralyzing.

4.3 The Child's Eye: Observation as Emotional Intelligence

The child protagonist occupies a central place in Bond's fictional imagination, and this centrality is not accidental. The child, as Bond renders this figure, possesses a quality of perception that adult experience tends to erode — the capacity to attend to the world without the interpretive filters of habit, ambition, and self-interest. Bond's child characters see what adults have learned not to see, and feel what adults have learned not to acknowledge, and it is through their consciousness that some of the most emotionally true writing in his fiction occurs.

Rusty, the protagonist of *The Room on the Roof*, is the most fully developed of these child figures. What makes Rusty memorable is not any quality of heroism or brilliance but precisely his vulnerability — his need for friendship, his susceptibility to joy and to pain, his tendency to find in small things the anchors of meaning that the larger world has not provided. His friendship with Somi and the other boys of the bazaar, his first experience of romantic feeling, his gradual discovery of a vocation as a writer — these are modest developments in the scale of literary plots, but Bond renders them with an emotional precision that makes them feel entirely significant.

In shorter narratives, the child often appears not as protagonist but as witness — a consciousness through which the adult world is filtered and registered. These child-observers notice the small betrayals and small kindnesses that define the texture of community life; they remember the colour of a grandmother's sari and the sound of a particular kind of rain; they feel the weight of adult sadness without fully understanding its causes. This witnessing function is not passive — it is an active form of emotional intelligence that Bond presents as a model for the kind of reading his fiction invites.

4.4 The Speaking Landscape: Nature as Emotional Participant

Bond's natural world is among the most carefully rendered in contemporary Indian fiction, and it functions in his narratives as far more than picturesque background. The hills, forests, rivers, and seasonal cycles of the Himalayan region are active participants in the emotional lives of his characters — registering mood, intensifying feeling, offering consolation, and providing the continuity of which human life is so often deprived.

The monsoon holds a particularly privileged position in Bond's emotional geography. It returns season after season in his stories and poems, bringing with it a complex mixture of renewal and melancholy, abundance and transience. Characters in Bond's fiction are reliably more emotionally open during the rains — more willing to speak, to remember, to feel. The monsoon functions as a kind of permission structure for emotional experience that the everyday routines of hill life tend to suppress.

Winter in the hills carries a different emotional register — one of internality, withdrawal, and endurance. The cold that settles over Landour and Mussoorie each November in Bond's narratives is not merely meteorological; it is the atmospheric correlative of a kind of inward life that his fiction consistently values. Characters tend fires, drink tea, tell stories, and hold the darkness at bay with the warmth of small domestic acts. This is Bond's vision of how human beings survive the winters — both literal and figurative — of their existence.

The tree is perhaps Bond's single most resonant natural symbol. Trees appear throughout his fiction as figures of rootedness, patience, and biological generosity — qualities that his fiction consistently associates with the best possibilities of human character. The boy who plants a cherry sapling and returns year after year to observe its progress is engaged in an act of faith that the story presents as deeply meaningful precisely because it is so unheroic. No one will write about this boy in the newspapers; no monument will record his faithfulness to a tree. And yet Bond's story insists — and the reader comes to agree — that what this boy does matters.

4.5 Remembering Honestly: Memory, Nostalgia, and Truthfulness

A substantial portion of Bond's fiction is narrated from a position of retrospect — a narrator looking back across years or decades at experiences that continue to resonate in the present. This retrospective orientation is so

pervasive in his work that it has come to seem constitutive of his narrative voice. But the nostalgia that results from this orientation is of an unusual kind, and understanding what makes it unusual is essential to understanding what Bond's fiction achieves.

Nostalgia, in its commonest cultural manifestations, involves a selective misremembering — the past is simplified, its pleasures amplified and its difficulties erased, until it becomes a refuge from the present rather than a resource for living in it. Bond's fiction does not work this way. His retrospective narrators remember the past with a fidelity that includes its hardships, its loneliness, its disappointments, and its losses. What they mourn is not a golden age that never existed but a real world that was genuinely mixed — joyful and sorrowful, beautiful and difficult — and that is now gone. This is a more honest and ultimately a more useful form of looking backward.

The emotional honesty of Bond's retrospective narration has important ethical dimensions. By refusing to idealise the past, his fiction models a way of carrying memory that neither falsifies what was nor surrenders to bitterness about what has been lost. The narrator of *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* does not pretend that his childhood was without pain; he simply insists that its textures — the trees, the light, the quality of particular friendships — were real and worth remembering. This insistence on the reality and value of imperfect experience is one of Bond's deepest moral commitments.

4.6 The Marginal as the Central: Community and Representation in Bond's Fiction

Running beneath the personal and emotional preoccupations of Bond's fiction is a quiet but consistent representational politics. By choosing to write about the Anglo-Indian community, the hill peoples of Uttarakhand, the poor and elderly and young of small Indian towns, Bond makes an argument — never stated but consistently enacted — about whose lives deserve literary attention. In a literary culture that has disproportionately attended to urban, educated, and mobile subjects, this choice is not neutral.

The communities Bond portrays are not static or idealised. They are shown in the process of change — some of it welcome, much of it disorienting — as modernisation, migration, and economic transformation alter the rhythms of hill life. Bond witnesses these changes with the combination of love and clear-sightedness that characterises the best local writing in any tradition. He does not argue that change should be prevented; he argues that what is changing and what has already been lost should be acknowledged, honoured, and set down in writing before it passes entirely from memory.

In this sense, Bond's fiction performs a function that goes beyond the purely literary. It serves as a kind of cultural archive — a record of lives, landscapes, and ways of being that the larger narratives of Indian modernity have tended to pass over. The small railway stations that appear in so many of his stories, for instance, are not merely settings; they are social worlds with their own hierarchies, relationships, and stories. By making them the sites of his narratives, Bond insists on their significance — not as symbols of backwardness but as genuine human communities whose particular character deserves to be known.

SUGGESTIONS

The analysis undertaken in this paper points toward several directions for future scholarly work on Bond's fiction, as well as for the broader field of Indian English literary studies.

First, the critical tendency to read Bond's simplicity as artlessness should be decisively reconsidered. His prose, which appears transparent on first reading, reveals on closer examination a carefully managed series of choices — about what to include and exclude, where to slow the narrative and where to accelerate it, how to use landscape to do the emotional work that dialogue withholds. A technical analysis of Bond's style, attentive to these choices, would substantially enrich our understanding of his craft.

Second, Bond's fiction offers particularly rich material for scholars working in the emerging field of literary affect studies. The way his narratives generate feeling through indirection, accumulation, and implication rather than through explicit emotional staging is a topic that warrants extended theoretical engagement. Such an

analysis would not only illuminate Bond's work but would contribute to broader debates about how literature communicates emotional experience.

Third, the ecological dimensions of Bond's writing deserve more sustained scholarly attention than they have so far received. His treatment of the Himalayan natural world — as a living presence with moral and emotional significance — connects him to traditions of nature writing and environmental literature that academic ecocriticism has developed the tools to analyse. A full ecocritical reading of his fiction remains to be written.

Fourth, Bond's work would benefit from more systematic inclusion in undergraduate and postgraduate syllabi on Indian writing in English. His accessibility to student readers makes him an effective pedagogical entry point, while the sophistication of his narrative technique provides ample material for advanced analysis. There is no reason why accessibility and depth should be treated as mutually exclusive literary qualities, and Bond's fiction makes this point persuasively.

Fifth, reading Bond in dialogue with writers from other traditions who have worked with comparable commitments — to simplicity, to the local, to the emotional lives of ordinary people — would help to locate his achievement within its fullest literary-historical context. Writers such as Anton Chekhov, whose short fiction similarly proceeds by indirection and restraint, or R.K. Narayan, who found in the fictional small town of Malgudi a world of inexhaustible human variety, offer productive points of comparison.

Finally, oral history and ethnographic research focused on the communities Bond writes about — particularly the Anglo-Indian community and the hill peoples of Uttarakhand — would provide invaluable context for literary analysis, helping readers understand the relationship between Bond's fictional representations and the social realities they engage.

CONCLUSION

What this paper has attempted to demonstrate, through close engagement with a range of Bond's texts, is that the qualities most often cited as reasons for regarding his fiction as minor — its quietness, its provincial focus, its preference for the small and the unassuming — are in fact the most significant things about it. Bond has spent more than sixty years writing about people and places that the larger cultural conversation tends to pass over, and he has done so with a commitment, a consistency, and a craft that constitute a major literary achievement.

His treatment of ordinary lives represents a philosophical position as much as a literary preference. In choosing to write about the hill postman, the Anglo-Indian grandmother, the boy with his cherry tree, Bond argues implicitly but insistently that significance is not a property distributed only to the socially prominent or the historically dramatic. It is available anywhere that a human being lives with attention and feeling, which is to say everywhere, always. This is not a sentimental argument; it is a rigorous one, and Bond's fiction makes it with exemplary consistency.

His treatment of silent emotions is equally principled. The restraint that characterises his prose — the refusal to name what is felt, the preference for the oblique over the direct, the trust in landscape and gesture to carry what language cannot — reflects an understanding of emotional experience that is both psychologically true and aesthetically sophisticated. Bond knows that the deepest feelings are the least expressible, and he has developed a fictional method precisely calibrated to that knowledge.

Together, these commitments produce a body of fiction that speaks to something persistent and universal in human experience — the need to be seen in one's ordinariness, to have one's quiet feelings acknowledged, to find in a familiar landscape the confirmation that one's life, however modest, has been real and meaningful. In a cultural moment defined by acceleration, spectacle, and the relentless pressure to be exceptional, Bond's fiction offers something rare and genuinely necessary: the assurance that the ordinary life, fully lived and carefully witnessed, is enough.

The hills around Landour continue to change; the hill stations that Bond knew as a young man are being absorbed into an expanding urban modernity; the Anglo-Indian community whose life he so tenderly documented has

largely dispersed. But the fiction Bond made from these lives and landscapes will outlast the changes, because it has caught something true — about the texture of feeling, the patience of trees, the persistence of memory, and the quiet dignity of people who live without fanfare and love without declaration. That is what literature is for, and Bond has given us a great deal of it.

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