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Research Article



The Evolving Themes of Innocence and Experience in Ruskin Bond's *A Season of Ghosts*

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Abstract

Ruskin Bond's literary works are often celebrated for its simplicity and timeless charm worldwide. Among his diverse oeuvre, *A Season of Ghosts* is a compelling narrative, delving into the journey between innocence and experience. This present research paper is an exploration of the evolving themes of innocence and experience within the context of Bond's *A Season of Ghosts*. Through a multidimensional approach, the study focuses on a comprehensive analysis of characters, plot, and narrative techniques, employed in Ruskin Bond's *A Season of Ghosts*. Hereto, it seeks to explore the transformation of characters and how they navigate the shifting terrain between innocence and experience, highlighting the nuances of their personal growth. Besides, this paper investigates the influence of external forces on characters' perceptions of innocence and experience from socio-cultural and historical perspectives. Thus, Bond's *A Season of Ghosts* is significant for a close reading with its thematic exploration in order to throw light on how it reflects not only the maturation of the characters but also the multifaceted themes of loss, nostalgia, and the passage of time. Moreover, the study adds to a nuanced understanding of Ruskin Bond's fascinating way of storytelling as well as his potential to navigate the delicate balance between innocence and experience in his literary writings.

Keywords: Innocence, Experience, Socio-Cultural Context, Transformation, Maturation, Personal growth, Narration, Indianness, Self discovery

Ruskin Bond, a name that resonates deeply within the world of literature, is celebrated for his ability to craft tales that possess a rare simplicity and enduring charm. Bond's stories align with the simplicity of life and human connection, much like early primitive stories portraying the timeless themes of innocence and experience. H.E. Bates believes that story made its mark much before poetry came into existence. He says, "storytelling began before poetry, in the days when some primitive 'tribe' gathered round a fire in a forest clearing, watching its evening meal cook and someone told of his days adventures" (Bates, 17). Apart from this, M. Rama Rao, points out tracing the role of the short stories in modern Indian writings:

We have had in India stories which lie embedded in the hymns of the Rigveda, or scattered in the Upanishads and the epics, the stories which constitute the Panchtantra, the Hitopadesh, the Sukasaptati, the Dasakumaracharita and the Vetala-panchvimsati in Sanskrit, the Buddhist Jatak Katha in Pali and a host of similar stories in modern Indian languages. (Rao, 216)

In his autobiographical work, *Scenes from a Writer's Life* (1997), Bond articulates his in-depth propensity towards introspection. He presents the writer's keen desire of exploring the depths of inner thoughts, emotions, and experiences, which showcases his commitment in creating stories that are mainly rooted in personal projection and self-discovery. Being a subjective writer, Bond loves to recreate his childhood through his fictional counterparts and his experiences. Bond writes, "I still like best the kind of writing, which goes inwards rather than outwards" (*Scenes from a Writer's Life*, 1). Over the years, Ruskin Bond's body of work has found a special place in the hearts of readers worldwide and this is evident from the following:

I don't suppose I would have written so much about childhood or even about other children if my own childhood had been all happiness and light. I find that those who have contended, normal childhood, seldom remember much about them: nor do they have much insight into the world of children. (4)

The concept of ghosts is rooted in oral culture which can also be traced back to the early storytelling of ghosts connected with Hindu religious traditions. In his article "Indian Ghosts: A Love Affair", Tabish Khair notes, "India has always had its ghosts, though (as we shall see) how the living relate to the dead in India is often narrated a bit differently in Indian ghost stories" (Khair, 270). Bond's stories showcase a remarkable imagination in his writing. While he is widely recognized for his stories brimming with love for nature and a gentle touch of magic, Bond also delves into the realms of horror and terror, proving his versatility as a storyteller. He possesses a profound understanding of how to create an eerie atmosphere that lingers in the minds of readers without scaring them. Bond says:

I have the temper of a child, and a tendency to be mischievous. And I still retain a childlike trust in grown-ups...I think I have remained young because I have always had children around me.... I love to watch them grow. Adolescence is a fascinating period and I keep going back to it in my fiction. (*Rain in the Mountains*, 251)

Ruskin Bond's artistic abilities lie not only in his captivating storytelling but also in his unique capabilities to transport readers to the enchanting landscapes of the Himalayas and beyond. His narratives often serve as windows into the human soul, capturing the essence of life's simplest yet most profound moments. In their book, *Ruskin Bond: A Critical Evaluation* (2012), M.P. Sinha et al observes about his art of storytelling, "In the art of narration he has very few equals and his place as a short-story writer of children and novelist of the adolescents is secure in Indian English literature" (Sinha, 183). Bond's works resonate with readers of all ages, transcending cultural and

generational boundaries. Moreover, in her book, *The Fictional World of Ruskin Bond* (2005), Amita Aggarwal represents Bond's love and understanding among all creatures. She observes, "Bond aims to spread love and understanding among all creatures of the world and children are the most active recipients of his vision" (Aggarwal, 91). Within this vast literary landscape, one of Bond's exceptional creations, *A Season of Ghosts*, emerges as a poignant narrative that explores the intricate journey from innocence to experience.

The existence of ghosts, spirits, and apparitions remains a subject of debate and confusion among readers and critics alike. However, Bond skilfully intertwines the supernatural with his narratives, making them convincing and engrossing. S. Asha in her article "A Moving Spectrum of Life: Ruskin Bond's Ghost Stories" states, "Bond's ghost stories are subtle. The drama comes from the subject matter and the manner in which people tell the stories rather than from the extraordinary behaviour of the supernatural beings" (Asha, 20). Bond not only adds a chilling tone to the ambiance but also infuses it with a nostalgic and romantic essence. The result is a collection of spine-chilling sagas that elicit both gripping and thrilling sensations in the readers. In his book *A Season of Ghosts*, Bond curates a mesmerizing assortment of eerie, spine-chilling, and creepy ghost stories that transport us to the mysterious woods of Mussoorie, brought vividly to life through the presence of Ruskin Bond's ghosts. This we see in one of the stories of when he encountered the ghost, he gives chilling delineation:

'Someone just jumped off the bridge,' I said breathlessly. 'She's been swept down the river!' The watchman was unperturbed. 'Gulabi again,' he said, almost to himself; and then to me, 'Did you see her clearly?' 'Yes, a woman with long loose hair—but I didn't see her face very clearly.' It must have been Gulabi. Only a ghost, my dear sir. Nothing to be alarmed about. (*A Season of Ghosts*, 16)

Bond very realistically delineated the co-existence of ghosts in human society where people don't get scared with her presence rather are sympathetic towards her as she took her life after knowing the treacherous implicity of her husband with another woman. For people of that place, she is still as she was when alive and so the watchman gives an innocent characterisation of Gulabi, "Gulabi was different, childlike and ingenuous, and he decided he would marry her" (17). After marriage in a few years Wilson made a fortune. He built timbered houses at Harsil, Dehradun, and at Mussoorie. Gulabi did all she could have wanted; in time she bore two little sons. When he was outstation on work, she nurtured their children and also their large apple orchard at Harsil. And soon the evil day befall upon her when Wilson met the Englishwoman,

Ruth, on the Mussoorie mall, and started to share his affections and his wealth. Soon a big house was built for her as well. Now the time he shared at Harsil with Gulabi and his children receded. Gulabi brought up her children in native style. She soon came to know stories of Wilson's compliance with the Mussoorie woman and, finally one day, she confronted him and vented her resentment, asking him to leave the other woman. He tried to manipulate her and told her not to listen to baseless gossip. When he was trying to reconcile her, she picked up the flintlock pistol, tried to shoot him. The bullet missed him and Gulabi ran out of the house, killing herself by drowning in the river. Thus, the image that she had, people still consider her ghost as childlike, spontaneous and innocent.

Here Bond's storytelling aligns with the traditional concept of the suspension of disbelief, as proposed by Coleridge in his *Biographia Literaria*. This theory suggests that the suspension of disbelief in the supernatural is an essential element of storytelling. Meaning, in order to truly enjoy the work, the reader must suspend their doubts and logical reasoning. Bond masterfully achieves this suspension of disbelief in his tales by immersing the readers in an atmosphere of mystery and terror. Through his vivid descriptions, even the simplest objects of nature are transformed into supernatural phenomena, captivating the readers' imagination, and ensuring their willing acceptance of the fantastical elements presented.

In his narratives, Bond employs well-crafted plots to evoke a sinister atmosphere, abounding with thunder, lightning, and whispering figures illuminated by the flickering glow of candlelight. One of his remarkable skills lies in crafting an atmosphere that exudes menace and unease. Through vivid descriptions of thunderclaps and flashes of lightning, he sets the stage for a tale that is about to unfold, instilling a sense of foreboding in the readers. This we see in a story entitled On Fairy Hill he expresses his astonishment upon a back when he found tiny fairy creatures vanished with his clothes:

When I came to, perhaps an hour later, the little people had gone. The fragrance of honeysuckle lingered in the air. A deep rumble overhead made me look up. Dark clouds had gathered, threatening rain. Had the thunder frightened them away to their abode beneath the rocks and roots? Or had they simply tired of sporting with an unknown newcomer. (22)

He was mesmerized with the presence of these creatures and when these creatures— merely of two inches height— were exploring his physique transported him to a realm of heavenly and soothing experience. He finds these creatures presence an inexplicable and mesmerizing and thus says:

I have no idea how long I slept. When I awoke, it was to experience an unusual soothing sensation all over my limbs, as though they were being gently stroked with rose petals. All lethargy gone, I opened my eyes to find a little girl—or was it a woman?—about two inches tall, sitting cross-legged on my chest and studying me intently. Her hair fell in long black tresses. Her skin was the colour of honey. Her firm little breasts were like tiny acorns. She held a buttercup, which was larger than her hand, and she was stroking my skin with it. I was tingling all over. A sensation of sensual joy surged through my limbs. A tiny boy—man?—also naked, now joined the elfin girl, and they held hands and looked into my eyes, smiling. Their teeth were like little pearls, their lip's soft petals of apricot blossom. Were these the nature spirits, the flower fairies, I had often dreamt of? I raised my head, and saw that there were scores of little people all over me. The delicate and gentle creatures were exploring my legs, arms and body with caressing gestures. Some of them were leaving me with dew or pollen or some other soft essence. (22)

What sets Bond apart is his ability to transform his vivid imagination into tangible and palpable experiences for his readers. His descriptive dexterity is truly remarkable, allowing readers to immerse themselves in his haunting and atmospheric worlds. By skilfully painting vivid images with his words, Bond invokes scenes that are both intense and terrifying. This we see when he further says when I wake up, I found no existence of any fairy creatures and they also took his clothes along with them and this was very terrifying for him as the atmosphere soon started turning from pleasing to horrifying and the clouds started hovering which led to heavy rain. And without clothes, shivering in the cold, he returned from there. By skilfully painting vivid images with his words, Bond invokes scenes that are both intense and terrifying. Through his evocative writing, readers can feel the hair-raising chill of the night air, sense the pricking of goosebumps on their skin, and experience the heart-pounding anticipation of the unknown.

Bond's stories go beyond merely providing entertainment; they challenge readers' perceptions and beliefs. By incorporating supernatural elements into his narratives, he prompts readers to question the boundaries between reality and the unseen. His tales invite contemplation on the existence of the supernatural and the power of the human imagination. Through this thought-provoking exploration, Bond invites readers to expand their horizons and consider the possibility of a world beyond the veil of the ordinary:

You don't have a bell on your cycle,' I said. He said nothing, just smiled at me with his head a little to one side. I put out my hand, and I thought he was going to take it. But then, quite suddenly, he was off again, whistling cheerfully though rather tunelessly. (12)

When he encounters a boy on bicycle and considers him as a controller, he presumed him as a reckless, lively boy of 15 years old. Later on, he came to know that the boy died long ago in 1950 in a road accident. Now he could only make guesses. And to turn his conjuncture into certainty, he tries find an old resident only who could remember the boy and about his death due to an accident. Thus, he visited old Miss, a retired teacher from Woodstock, Marley at Pine Top. She had a very vivid memory, as she had lived in that hill station for more than nearly half a century. She said Michael indeed was a guy with innocence and obedience; "Michael was a charming boy—full of exuberance, always ready to oblige" (12). She further said hill corners weren't meant for racing around on a bicycle. Then that time the road was being widening for motor traffic, Michel while cycling smashed himself into a truck which was coming uphill, loaded with rubble. He was taken to hospital and doctors did try their best to save his life but he succumbed to his injury. She further said to Bond that he must have seen his grave that's why he appeared to him. Here Michael is also portrayed out of his character when he was alive and encountering his ghost writer could only sense the presence of a soothing companion not a figure to get afraid of. Thus, Bond very realistically presented the story with a touch of realism. In this context, it may be perplexing to comprehend why Bond incorporates the existence of ghosts, which is often regarded as mere superstition. However, the inclusion of supernatural elements in his stories may serve as a hidden expression of his personality. It is a facet of his being that may not be apparent on the surface but exists within the shadows of his psyche. This unexplored aspect of himself is akin to a face "lonely in the crowd," or the concept of alienation, to reaching out across the boundaries of our world to catch a glimpse of the inhabitants of the other world, much like the writer himself, who may feel a sense of loneliness in his own existence. Bond uses children in his works as the vessels for imaginative processes. Ruskin Bond, like Henry James, advocates that the subject of a storyteller evolves from experiences. As Jame's states:

Experience is never limited, and it is never complete; it is an immense sensibility a kind of huge spider web of the finest silken threads suspended in the chamber of consciousness and catching every air-borne particles in its tissue, it is the very atmosphere of the mind, and when the mind is imaginative, much more when it happens to be that of a man of genius it takes to itself the faintest hints of life, it converts the very pulses of the air into revelations. (James, 10-11)

Bond's remarkable ability of capturing the very essence of experience, and translating them into enchanting stories, mainly his children's stories quite resemble what Henry James discusses in his essay *The Art of Fiction* (1948). James emphasises the richness and broader experience and how the same can be transformed into fiction by skilled writers. Similarly, Bond's writing manifests his art of transforming the nuances of life into compelling stories which creates a relatable world to the readers. In the context of the supernatural encounters in Bond's *A Season of Ghosts*, S. Asha opines:

Each story in *A Season of Ghosts* has something different to offer to readers of all age groups. Bond as a master storyteller is well aware of human psychology. The appeal of Bond's fictional encounters with the ghosts lies in the way he presents them (Asha, 20)

Bond's writings explore his unique skills as a writer of children's literature and delves into the world he creates in his stories. Through his descriptive language, Bond paints vivid landscapes that enable readers to smell the fragrant Himalayan pines, hear the sounds of nature, and feel the overwhelming fear of ghosts. The beauty of the hills and the importance of the relationship between humans and nature resonate throughout the author's narration. The characters in Bond's stories exemplify this unity amidst diverse conditions on Earth, as portrayed by the author. Ruskin Bond showcases the reality of nature in his works, he maintains an optimistic tone when imparting lessons to children about viewing the struggles of life on Earth. The benevolent force of nature permeates his narratives, even as he acknowledges its occasional harshness. Just as spring follows autumn, brought forth by the rain, the natural logic of life is evident even in his ghostly tales. The realization that we are an integral part of nature minimizes many of the problems and sufferings that plague us in the new millennium.

To conclude, through an exploration of the themes of innocence and experience within Ruskin Bond's *A Season of Ghosts*, the present study focuses on Bond's narrative that aptly navigates the transition from childhood innocence to complex adulthood, reflecting human experience. Through a critical analysis, the study explores Bond's art of storytelling that encapsulates universal themes, transcending cultural and generational boundaries. Thus, Bond's *A Season of Ghosts*, a timeless narrative, offers a multifarious dimension of innocence and experience, making a mark on the literary realm.

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