
Beyond the Hills: Manifestations of Indianness in Ruskin Bond's Short Stories

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Abstract

This research paper explores the intrinsic quality of "Indianness" in the selected short stories of Ruskin Bond, specifically analyzing *The Night Train at Deoli*, *The Cherry Tree*, *The Blue Umbrella*, and his autobiographical reflections in *The Boy from the Hills*. While Bond is of British descent, his literary consciousness is deeply rooted in the Indian ethos, transcending mere geographical settings to embrace the philosophical and cultural rhythms of the sub-continent. This study argues that Bond's manifestation of Indianness is not political but humanitarian and ecological, characterized by a celebration of the ordinary, a reverence for nature, and the spiritual value of renunciation. Through a close textual reading, the paper examines how the protagonist's longing in *The Night Train at Deoli* mirrors the quintessential Indian sentiment of unfulfilled romantic yearning, and how *The Blue Umbrella* allegorizes the conflict between material desire and traditional innocence. Furthermore, *The Cherry Tree* is interpreted as a metaphor for resilience and the Indian concept of *Aranyaka* (forest life), where the self-matures in unison with nature. The paper concludes that Bond's narrative voice serves as a bridge, validating the simple, rustic Indian experience as a subject of profound literary worth.

Keywords: Indianness, Eco-criticism, Himalayan Literature, Post-colonial Identity, Humanism, Cultural Assimilation, Viraha, Ethos

Introduction

Ruskin Bond has long been hailed as the sentinel of the Himalayas, a literary figure whose prose flows with the quiet cadence of a mountain stream. However, to brand him merely as

a "nature writer" or a creator of pastoral idylls is to overlook the profound socio-cultural tapestry he weaves. Bond represents a unique anomaly in the post-colonial canon: a writer of British lineage who claims an Indian identity not by blood, but by the relentless loyalty of the soul. This paper seeks to investigate the "Manifestations of Indianness" in Bond's oeuvre, positing that his work is a sustained meditation on an identity that values community over individualism, contentment over ambition, and a harmonious coexistence with the natural world.

The "Indianness" discussed here is not the clamorous nationalism of the metropolis but the enduring, quiet resilience of the hinterland. It is found in the dust of the railway platforms, the mist of the pine forests, and the unhurried lives of small-town bazaars. Bond's India is a landscape of sensory immediacy and emotional depth. Through a insightful evaluation of *The Night Train at Deoli*, *The Cherry Tree*, *The Blue Umbrella*, and *The Boy from the Hills*, this study aims to demonstrate how Bond constructs an authentic Indian reality that is universal in its emotional appeal yet culturally specific in its ethos of endurance and renunciation.

Review of Literature

Existing scholarship on Ruskin Bond has predominantly focused on three areas: his role as a children's author, his ecological concerns, and his autobiographical candor. Critics like Meena Khorana have analyzed Bond's work through the perspective of the "bi-cultural self," highlighting the tension between his British heritage and Indian upbringing. Similarly, eco-critics have often compared him to Wordsworth, citing his pantheistic approach to nature. However, there is a paucity of research that explicitly deconstructs the *texture* of his "Indianness" as a philosophical stance. While excessive critical attention has been paid to the "Euro-Indian" hybridity of his identity, fewer studies focus on how his narratives embody indigenous Indian concepts such as *Tyaga* (renunciation), *Viraha* (longing/separation), and the *Guru-Shishya* (mentor-disciple) dynamic. This paper attempts to fill that gap by moving beyond the biographical fact of his foreign descent to analyze the indigenous spirit of his fiction. It challenges the notion that Bond is an "outsider looking in," arguing instead that he is an "insider looking deeper."

Methodology

This research employs a qualitative, textual analysis approach. The primary texts—*The Night Train at Deoli*, *The Cherry Tree*, *The Blue Umbrella*, and *The Boy from the Hills*—are subjected to a close reading through the dual lenses of Post-colonial Theory and Cultural Studies.

Cultural Assimilation: The study examines how Bond dissolves the "Self vs. Other" binary, adopting a narrative voice that is indistinguishable from the local consciousness.

Thematic Explication: The paper identifies specific cultural markers—resilience, fatalism, community bonding, and spiritual ecology—to define "Indianness."

The methodology is interpretative, seeking to decode the symbols and motifs (the train, the umbrella, the tree) as cultural artifacts that carry the weight of the Indian experience.

Discussion

The Poetics of Landscape and Resilience: *The Cherry Tree*

In *The Cherry Tree*, Bond moves beyond simple nature writing to explore the Indian philosophical concept of resilience. The story charts the growth of a cherry tree alongside the growth of the boy, Rakesh. This relationship is emblematic of the Indian *Aranyaka* tradition, where the forest is not a resource to be exploited but a teacher to be revered.

"It was very small, five months old, a tiny plant, lost in the tall grass... Even so, the next year, there were blossoms on the tree."

Bond manifests the cherry tree as a metaphor for the tenacity of life in the Indian landscape. Bond's focus on the survival of the tree against goats, grass-cutters, and the monsoon rains reflects the "Indianness" of resilience. It mirrors the struggle and eventual blossoming of the common man, suggesting that true belonging to the land is earned through patience and nurturing.

The tree faces the harshness of the elements—goats, scythes, and caterpillars—mirroring the rural Indian struggle against the vagaries of fate. Yet, the tree persists. Bond writes:

"The cherry tree had no intention of dying... Next year there were blossoms, small pink, fragile, quick to fall."

This persistence reflects a uniquely Indian optimism—a stoic acceptance of hardship coupled with a refusal to be defeated. The dynamic between Rakesh and his grandfather further illustrates the *Guru-Shishya* tradition, where wisdom is passed down through observation rather than didactic instruction. When Rakesh touches the bark and asks, "Is this what it feels like to be God?", he arrives at a Vedantic realization of the oneness of all life, a core tenet of Indian spirituality.

The Romance of the Ephemeral: *The Night Train at Deoli*

The Night Train at Deoli captures the romantic mysticism associated with the Indian Railways—the lifeline of the nation. The story is a masterful study in *Viraha*—the aesthetic of separation and longing that permeates Indian classical literature and folklore.

"I sat up awake for the rest of the journey. I could not rid my mind of the girl's face and the way she had looked at me. But when I reached Dehra, the incident became hazy and distant..."

These lines illustrate the dichotomy between the liminal space of the small-town railway station and the bustling urban reality of Dehra. Bond's "Indianness" is often found in these

"hazy" moments of connection with the common folk. It highlights a romanticized, yet grounded, Indian sensibility where the journey—and the quiet souls met along the way—is more significant than the destination itself.

The protagonist's encounter with the basket-selling girl is brief, yet it defines his emotional landscape. Bond validates the small-town Indian experience, elevating a mundane railway stop into a site of profound memory. The protagonist's decision not to break the spell of the memory by seeking her out again reflects an Indian acceptance of fate (Kismet) and the beauty of the unfinished. As the narrator muses:

"I never see her, but my heart is still with her, and I think that one day I will see her walking up the platform..."

This suspension of time, preferring the sanctity of memory over the crudity of reality, distinguishes Bond's emotional texture from Western pragmatism. It celebrates the silent, unrequited love that is often the subject of Indian ghazals and poetry.

Materialism vs. Renunciation: *The Blue Umbrella*

The Blue Umbrella offers a potent critique of the consumerist materialism entering the rustic Indian sphere. Binya's umbrella is an object of desire, a foreign artifact that disrupts the village's equilibrium. It represents the "Other"—beautiful but alienating.

Ram Bharosa, the shopkeeper, represents the corruption of the soul by material want (Lobha). However, Bond's "Indianness" shines through in the resolution. The story does not end in litigation or violence, but in *Tyaga* (sacrifice). Binya's decision to give the umbrella to Ram Bharosa is an act of high spiritual value, restoring his dignity and communal harmony.

"The umbrella was faded and patchy, but it was still the best umbrella in the village."

The "patchy" nature of the umbrella symbolizes effectively the acceptance of imperfection (*Wabi-sabi*, though in an Indian context, the beauty of the worn). The story asserts that true wealth in the Indian context lies in relationships, not possessions.

"Everything is forgotten, except the umbrella. It has become a part of her, like her own arm or leg."

Bond captures the innocence of rural Indian life, where a simple object can become a symbol of status, envy, and eventually, sacrifice. Bond explores "Indianness" through the moral compass of the village. By the end of the story, when Binya gives the umbrella away, Bond suggests that the Indian spirit finds greater fulfillment in community and kindness than in the possession of material beauty.

The Authenticity of Belonging: *The Boy from the Hills*

"The past is always with us, and the hills are the keepers of our secrets."

In his autobiographical reflections, Bond identifies his "Indianness" not by blood, but by geographic soul. This line emphasizes that his identity is rooted in the Himalayan topography. For Bond, being Indian is an act of "staying"—a commitment to the mountains and the memories they hold, proving that home is a place where one's secrets are understood by the landscape.

In his autobiographical sketches, Bond explicitly addresses his identity. He writes, "I am an Indian because I love the land and the people." This is not a citizenship defined by documents but by *Ras* (emotional flavor). Bond's narrative voice in these memoirs is devoid of the colonial gaze; he does not exoticize the poverty or the chaos of India. Instead, he embraces it with a humanist compassion, validating the lives of the marginalized—the tonga drivers, the gardeners, and the stray boys—as integral to the definition of India.

Conclusion

The analysis of Ruskin Bond's selected stories reveals that his "Indianness" is a complex, multi-layered construct. It is not merely a matter of setting stories in Dehradun or Mussoorie, rather, it is a deep philosophical and emotional alignment with the Indian way of life. Bond redefines Indian identity as fundamentally ecological. To be Indian, in Bond's universe, is to recognize one's kinship with the leopard, the pine tree, and the monsoon rain. Bond pushes back against the grand narratives of history to focus on the micro-narratives of daily survival. His "Indianness" is found in the dignity of the common man. Unlike Western narratives that often prioritize acquisition and conquest, Bond's stories (like *The Blue Umbrella*) often resolve through giving up, aligning with the ancient Indian virtue of non-attachment.

It is felt that future scholarship could fruitfully explore Bond as a "post-colonial healer"—a writer whose work attempts to heal the trauma of the colonial rupture by suggesting a syncretic identity where the British and Indian legacies can coexist in the peaceful silence of the hills. His work stands as a testament that identity is not inherited, but inhabited.

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