

# Ruskin Bond is an Autobiographer with reference to the Short Story: “The Funeral”

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## INTRODUCTION

Ruskin Bond is India's one of the most loved authors of children. Many of the children have grown up reading his simple narrative stories and novels. He portrays India the way Indian children know about their country, where nature has a great role to play. Children's stories are interesting informative and imaginative. They become powerful mode of shaping the mindset of children. Children's literature and eco-criticism have been separate issues till now. Bond's stories acknowledge the efforts to bring these two fields together. It is a perception that the relationship between children and nature is twofold. On the one hand, children are presumed to have a privileged relationship to nature where they have the hope of enjoying the pleasures. On the other hand, the child has no necessary connection with nature, no experience or understanding of it, so it is presumed that the onus lies on elders to make the children aware of their natural surroundings. The writers of the pamphlet believe that such experiences play a crucial role in shaping lifelong attitudes, values and patterns of behaviour towards natural environments. This belief is based on two premises. First is the assumption that children who are not exposed to the natural environment and its concern at an early age can never acquire the respect and value of nature. Second is the more fundamental notion that interaction with the environment is an important part of healthy child development. Bond shows his serious concern for nature. Reading his stories, children are introduced to the world of nature and gain awareness of the protection of the environment which paves way for healthy child development.

Bond's autobiographical mode of writing and nostalgic punctuations is the manner of Dickens and Charles Lamb. Bond is, no doubt a personal writer and has aptly called himself an 'Indian Charles Lamb'. The books most influenced him were Charles Dickens' *David Copper Field* and Hugh Walpole's *Fortitude*. He felt in David's story his own tale narrated. He empathized with David Copper Field – in loss of parents, sense of insecurity and struggle for a meaningful life. He identified with young David in his childhood and wanted to grow up to be a writer like him. Bond presents himself as a boy who lost both his parents in this story “The Funeral”. Bond narrates the emotional feeling of the boy over the death of his father in a melting way. The child's thought of his father when he stands alone hurts the reader. In the beginning, the boy Bond seemed that he was not affected by the death of his father but after leaving him in the grave, the absence of his dear father pricks him and pangs him heavily. In spite of his childishness, he can understand and bury his longing as he thrusts his fists deep down into his pockets.

The short story “The Funeral” is a moving account of Bond's father's death and it is a pathetic narration of Bond's miserable loneliness. Through the fictitious child, Bond articulates his own sorrow, his own prayer to get his dead father revived in some or the other way. Bond confronts the pangs of the loss of his father by writing “The Funeral”. Bond, in this short story exposes the intensity of adults who decide what is good for the orphan child. The child protagonist was shattered when his dear father suddenly died. The protagonist of the story, like Bond is unable to understand the words of the missionary ‘God has need of your father’ (Bond, *Treasury of Stories for Children* “The Funeral”. 231).

Bond projects his personal life without hesitation. It makes his story authentic. Bond is an autobiographer who gives out his own feelings, life and lost things in his works. His stories are not only the narration of events but give out his own experiences. Ruskin's father compensated for the vacuum caused by the absence of mother. He bestowed his sole love and concern on Bond despite his failing health. His rejuvenating and friendly company and his affection never made Bond realize the absence of his mother. The comforting company of his beloved father helped him to overcome the loss of his mother. He was deeply attached to his father and lovingly created and recreated him in his stories. Ruskin was enjoying a good time but for his father it was a trying period. Frequent bouts of malaria had undermined his constitution and a severe attack of jaundice killed him. The blissful period of Bond's life received a jolt with the death of his dear father. The untimely death of his indulging father, his emotional anchor was the shattering and traumatic episode of his

childhood is reflected in this story “The Funeral”. The childhood memory is associated with the episodes and images in his stories.

Bond came to know about the death of his father when he was in his school. Mr. Murtough, a kind but inept teacher broke the news of his father’s death that made the matter worse to handle. No one has made an arrangement for Bond to attend the funeral of his father who was everything for him. This made it difficult for him to reconcile with this irreparable loss which Bond renders in this story. Even after years he failed to accept the death of his father. Secretly he wished his return.

Hence the moving story “The Funeral” brings us close to the irretrievable loss that Bond faced at a very young age. Bond renders his deeply felt nostalgia in this story. When the story begins, there is a discussion, to take the boy along with the funeral procession of his dead father. The coffin lies in the next room. The clergyman does not like to have children at funerals. The boy speaks nothing, sits in the darkest corner of the darkened room. His face does not reveal what he thinks and feels. Nobody seems to consider this boy, neither uncles nor aunts. His mother was hundreds of miles away with another husband and he had not seen her since he was four, and he does not remember her now. The house is full of friends, relatives and neighbours. The condolence words passed back and forth like dragon flies on the wind. Everyone was present and it is the first time they had the run of the house, for his father had not been a sociable man. (Bond, *TOSFC* “The Funeral”. 229-230).

A small hearse, drawn by a hill pony is arranged and several able-bodied men lifted the coffin and maneuvered it into the carriage. The cemetery was a mile down the road and those who did not have cars would have to walk the distance. The boy stared through a window, waited until everyone had gone and then he left the room and went out on the veranda. He slipped out of the house by a back door, reached the main road and followed the procession of mourners at a distance. As he was walking, he recollects his days of walking with father during their evening. It was the same road he had often taken with his father. The boy knew the name of almost every plant and wild flower, various birds and insects which had been described and pointed out to him by his father.

The gardener of the house looking aggrieved not for the death of his father but, because of the damage done to the flower beds by the mourners and the thought of losing a job. The house would pass into other hands, the boy would go to an orphanage and there were no people who kept gardeners and the cook would be out of job soon and he was always in demand (Bond, *TOSFC* “The Funeral”. 230).

Young Bond was fond of gardener who fostered Bond’s love for nature by teaching him about the different flowers their names and their cultivation. An elderly gardener of his grandmother Dukhi is a good companion of Bond during the troubled period. The spoiled garden represents the loss of life; loss of protection and security, his father provided the boy. Garden signifies the boy’s life. The well maintained garden soothes an agitated mind and it is feast for eyes and soul but now it is damaged by the relatives and neighbour who came to attend his father’s funeral. As the garden without plants and flowers, the boy lost his essence of life, slipped out of the house to join his father’s funeral. The boy walked to the cemetery. He viewed the higher ranges of the Himalayas and the eternal snows. He recalled his excursions with his father in the slopes of Dehra. These excursions nurtured him a great naturalist and environmentalist. After his father’s death, the trees and plants around him assumed the role of a guardian spirit.

Bond comments on the graves in the cemetery laid out that their incumbents happened to rise one day, the first thing they would see, would be the glint of the sun of those snow-covered peaks. The site had been chosen like that. The boy did not seem as if anyone would be able to thrust aside the massive tombstones and rise from their grave to enjoy the view. Bond draws out the similarity that the rest of the dead seemed as eternal as the snows even the earth quake could not burst those stones asunder and thrust the coffins up from the earth. The boy wondered that why people had not made easy for the dead to rise.

That evening, the mist laid low on the mountains so that sometime one could hardly see the familiar peaks. Sometimes the stars too were all covered. It seemed as if the mountains were going to be lost in the mist, the higher peaks pushed out, dimmer stars were veiled and the brighter one shone through. It seemed as if nature itself paid her condolence for the death of his father, she was hidden in the mist as the day of mourning. Even supposing the clouds had covered the face of the mountain, the mountains would still have stood steady fast. These mountains render the boy comfort and hope that the mist of sadness may blow up from the eternal mountain. The strength of hill lies in him. Just like mists, the feelings of joy and sorrow go and come but the human beings like hills and stars abide forever. Bond fantastically reveals the eternal force of hill here.

The boy saw the coffin being lowered and some of them throwing handful of earth over the coffin before moving away. The grave is almost covered. The missionary consoled him by saying that 'God has need of your father'. There are series of surprising questions arise in the boy's mind; Had God laid claim to the thousands of men, women and children who had been put to rest here in these neat and serried rows; what could he have wanted them for? Of what use are we to God when we are dead? Was that other, better world down in the depth of the earth? How could anyone, even Samson, push his way back to the surface again? Superman did it in comics? (Bond, *TOSFC* "The Funeral". 231).

The children always want to extend the realm of their experience and knowledge by questioning about the things around them. They have countless questions about life. They love to inquire about each and every sight they see and questions that often put grown-ups in a tight spot. This inquisitiveness of children emanates from their innocence, their curiosity to know the world and their snoopy nature. Bond projects very vividly and forcibly this insatiable curiosity of children. The boy, protagonist of this story "The Funeral" asked series of questions to himself, did not expect someone to answer him. The reader can notice the same questioning attitude of the child in another Bond's short story "The Room of Many Colours" (Bond, *TOSFC* "Room of Many Colours". 192-193) where the child asks his father number of questions. Like the boy protagonist of the story "The Funeral", the child in "The Room of Many Colours" asks his father many questions. The series of questions started from where the insect has come and the chain of questions finds no terminal till his father loses patience: where does the sea go? Does it go to the end of the world? Have you been around the world? And my grandmother in India likes England; what does 'different' mean? Will we always be in India? Can we take Ayah with us? How long have we been here?

The outstanding characteristic of children which differentiates them from adults is that they are not grown and they are growing. When the child grows he tries to master both an outer world and an inner world of emotions. In both of these realms there are many experiences to be fathomed from the questions asked above by the boy. As the child fathoms them he gains strength from doing so. There are external demands for the boy in "The Funeral" that he has to live alone and he has to take care of himself. He understands the real situation and tries to fulfill these demands and needs, he grows stronger. It helps the child cope with and master those problems of importance in his life. The questioning attitude is one of the psychological significances which help the child know and understand his emotion that has been disturbed by the demise of his affectionate father. Bond experiences the same in his childhood. Life and experience of Bond have psychological impact on his children characters. This short story is one among them.

The boy in "The Funeral" also asked questions of that sort to himself and does not have interest in the logical explanation. If his father answers one, he raises the other. The children love to ask questions but they prefer imaginative answers to logic one.

When the coffin was lowered, the boy was surprised at how far down it seemed to go. Super man could push his way back to the surface as did it in comics but his father was a gentle soul who wouldn't fight too hard against the earth and the grass and the roots of tiny trees. He compromised himself that his father would grow into a tree and escape that way. He could unite himself with his father when he is put away like this, thought the boy he will get into the root of a plant and then he will become a flower and then may be a bird will come and carry his seed away and in this way he will get out somehow (Bond, *TOSFC* "The Funeral". 232).

The mourners departed in twos and threes. They did not see the boy behind the wall as they were getting hungry. The boy stood there until all had gone. He noticed the gardeners and caretakers were filling the grave. He did not know where to go and he felt a little afraid and he was late too. The grave was almost covered. He walked away from the cemetery. The road ahead of him, empty, swathed in mist. He was alone. He remembered his father's words that the strongest man in the world is he who stands alone. But, now he was alone and he could not feel very strong. The authenticity of the word pains him and he longs to have his father's amiable warm, comforting touch. He thought of his father was beside him that they were together on one of their long walks. Instinctively he put out his hand for his father's warm touch. But there was nothing and no one. The moment he felt that his father is no more wrecks every heart in tears along with the boy. He stands alone. The mist comes to his rescue that it hides his crying. Though a small boy, he reacts as young man who is confident of himself, does not want to show his loneliness and depression, clenched his fists and pushed them deep down into his pockets. He sheds tears and lowers his head that no one would notice his tears. He consoles and comforts by saying that his father will find a way out of the grave and he will get out somehow. This unusual, heartfelt emotional experience of Bond's childhood never allows him to forget those unhappy days of his life.

At the end, the boy thinks his father coming back to life through new shoots. Nature serves as a means of defying death and redeeming his sense of loss and loneliness. "The Funeral" mourners expressed stereotyped sympathy, priest's cold voice, and the coffin going deep into the entrails of the earth and ghostly silence spread around, cast a depressing impact on the boy who could hardly understand it. The small boy relates all his queries in relation to nature and tries to clear him positively. This positive approach manures him in his upcoming life in spite of the sufferings and the hardships that he faces independently. In most of Bond's stories, after depression and disappointment, there is hope lurking in the mind of the character which pulls him towards the future. In the story "The Funeral" the boy hopes to meet his father when he will find a way out. Even now, Bond, the boy after more than five decades is rummaging those loving hands and eyes. Through this story Bond pays homage to his bibliophile father for introducing him into the wondrous world of nature and books, thus sowing the seed of his creative zeal.

After his father's tragic end, Bond found the hills kind enough to provide him a formidable sense of parental security as the trees seem to know him, whisper among themselves and beckon him nearer. The trees and plants around him assumed the role of a guardian spirit. They appeared to be shaping spirit of his dear father. In the stories like, "My Father's Trees in Dehra", "When You can't Climb Trees Any More" "Coming Home to Dehra" and in "The Funeral" he imagines his father coming back to life through new shoots. Nature emerges as a great healing force to dissipate his gloom and loneliness. The innocent boy in "The Funeral" finds way to evade death with the help of nature. The story "The Funeral" ends with the optimism of the boy that as the plant is shooting out of the soil, the boy's father also will be resurrected in the form of new shoots somewhere and he can be able to meet him one day in the same way.

Bond is a devoted short story writer. He enjoys it because of its brevity and the free play it allows with themes, style and characterization. Bond's stories are marked by restraint, retentive and moderation both in theme and style. His penchant for short story and novella, first person narrative, lucid language and digression free plot are characteristic traits of his writing that attract young readers. The children enjoy the first person narrative because it gives them an idea that a child is narrating the story. The young Indian children become the ardent readers of Bond because of the simplicity of his language and exactness of expression.

#### **WORK CITED**

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