

A TÊTE-À-TÊTE WITH RUSKIN BOND

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Ruskin Bond is a prolific Indian writer in English, whose ever expanding readership shows his immense popularity both among children and adults. Bond's contribution to Indian English literature as novelist, short story writer, poet, dramatist and essayist testifies his excellence to master over a wide range of genres in his literary career spanning over more than sixty years. Though often dismissed as a simplistic children's writer by the cosmopolitan Indian critics and scholars, Bond is undeniably one of the foremost best selling writers of the country. A serious critical probe into his writing will reveal a multi-layered text that involves a conscious use of craft and style.

It was my privilege to meet the writer in his residence at Landour Cantonment, Mussoorie, on the misty morning of 28 April 2005. An attempt to take a serious interview rolled gradually into a cosy tête-à-tête with the writer.

Gangopadhyay: You have said that your style is “Deceptively Simple”. What do you mean by that? Does it mean you use “simplicity” as a mask to camouflage serious artistic purposes?

Bond: When I was in school, one of my teachers's used to say, “Write simple, Ruskin”, and since then I have been practising that. When I started writing at the age of seventeen, I could not write bombastic words, so I tried to write in a simple way. It was nothing deliberate. It was natural. Moreover, when I'm writing for children, I have to write in a simple language so that they can understand. And when I have children as characters, they speak in a simple way. It is all about developing a style that is simple and comprehensible.

Gangopadhyay: Why have you chosen Mussoorie as a place for settling down? Why not any metropolitan city?

Bond: For a practical reason. I have always lived here, studied in Shimla and lived in Dehra. So, Mussoorie is like my hometown. I can go for a visit to the cities, but I don't think I want to settle there. I chose Mussoorie for another practical reason, so that I'm not far away from my publishers who are based in Delhi. It would have been difficult if I had settled in Darjeeling. I stayed and worked in Delhi earlier, but I prefer the hills for residence.

Gangopadhyay: Whereas the Indian English contemporary writers focus on the socio-cultural-political issues of India, your work revolves mainly around a domestic life and world. Can you explain why?

Bond: No, I'm not interested. Not that I'm not aware of the social, political, economic India. There are other writers to deal with it. There are always two kinds of writers – subjective

and objective. I'm always the subjective kind. The world that I deal with is different. Pollution of environment, problems of deforestation have been my subjects. In this way, you may say, I touch social issues.

Gangopadhyay: Initially you experienced a lot of problems in establishing yourself as a writer. You left for England to publish your first book. It is only since 1980s that your popularity in India started growing by leaps and bounds. To what would you ascribe this success?

Bond: We had more magazines to write for in 1960s and 1970s, like *The Illustrated Weekly*, *The Times of India*, *The Statesman*, *The Hindu*, and most of these newspapers would have literary supplements. But major newspapers, these days, have supplements for fashion and cookeries. Magazines have become more specialized now, dealing with films, society and automobiles. So the magazine market for stories has completely vanished. Even the literary supplements of a newspaper are rare. You seem to get only books now. Well, I ascribe my success to both the publisher as well as to my maturity as a writer. There is also another factor. English readership has grown over the last two-three decades. One reason may be that in the early days readership was exclusive to one class of people. But now it is more general. The middle class has expanded, and almost all of them send their children to English medium schools. May be in a small percentage, yet the readership has increased. This is very good news for writers and publishers. In spite of the fact there are other diversions by way of entertainment, television or Internet, people do read. For me, reading was my recreation in school. But I still remember in our class of thirty five students, only three or four would go up to the library for books. So there is no doubt that reading has been and will be a minority pastime always.

Gangopadhyay: What do you think about the marketing strategies of Rupa and Penguin (your chief publishers) regarding your books? Do you think they can be improved?

Bond: Rupa is a small family business, between father and son. They take me to several reading tours. Last year they took me to Kolkata. They have taken me to other places as well, Jaipur, Allahabad, Bombay. They give more individual attention to their author. Penguin, on the other hand, is a huge multinational conglomerate. It has got a little bureaucratic over the years. It is a big name, after all.

Yes, Rupa is trying hard to find different strategies apart from book promotion, readings, tours. Recently they brought out postcards of me [shows the postcards]...see how possessively I am holding my book! They have improved on colours and used cartoons. They have made me into a cartoon figure! But I don't know if they will succeed! [laughs].

As for Penguin, the ones [cover designs] I ask them to change they don't, and the other I don't want them to change, they do! They have been very sloppy with their proof readings. However, Penguin is an international name and authors like to have that name. But you get discontented authors, too. My Rupa sales are growing up. Actually in the last two and a half years they have doubled my Penguin sales. I'm now publishing more with Rupa because I'm earning more with them.

Gangopadhyay: How would you rate your success and popularity abroad? Do you have any plans of promoting it?

Bond: I don't have any popularity or readership abroad. It was long back in the 1980s that I used to publish my children's books there, but no longer now. I don't think I would bother to build up any readership there. It's strange to say, but I make more money writing my book here in India. JhumpaLahiri is a New York writer. But she is also an Indian, writing about Indians. So her readership is both American as well as Indian. My stories are more of the sentimental kind. And I think they have more appeal to Indians than to the West. JhumpaLahiri

and others are Americans, catering to American readership, just the way I have become Indian. Tagore is more Bengali and Indian than to be read in the West.

Gangopadhyay: Do you think media attention has now become an indispensable part of literary success? You seem to avoid media focus, why?

Bond: Visual media has become very important. 20-30 years ago the writer was a name, well known for the popularity of his work. If you passed him on the streets, you wouldn't even recognise him. He was anonymous. Once in England I happened to pass Graham Greene without even recognising him. But now times are changing. Authors have become a part of the celebrity. I suppose writers, these days, give too much importance to media – book reading, signing, appearing on T.V. and so on. May be with an established name it is not that vital, but for a new writer it might be helpful. I manage to keep media under control. T.V. interviews are usually very boring. I'm of course a bit out of the way [pointing out to the height of the hills] and so someone has to make real efforts to come up here! [laughs]. They always ask the same questions. No, media can't affect popularity. By and large, media has been kind to me; reviews have been warm, interviews quite friendly. So many people are already familiar with my name, even if not with my work. May be they have read my stories in school. Often I meet old men who come up to me and say that they read my stories in school, and now their children or grandchildren are reading them. They feel they have an ownership over me. It feels good to have been able to cater to three successive generations.

Gangopadhyay: Do you think literary awards, specially the global ones, are based on non-literary considerations rather than literary ones?

Bond: Quite possibly. You have a lot of people, may be, pushing and pulling. Writers and publishers try to get selected. It is what you call "lobbying". Awards have become another means of publicity. For Bookers many publishers get together and make various moves to get their authors selected. It is nothing but another way of increasing sales and building media hype. Most of them, however, are also works of merit.

Gangopadhyay: You have a vision of a simple, serene and rustic India. Would you say you like to create a pastoral India?

Bond: I guess one can't really, even if one wants to. It is less and less pastoral and more and more industrial and competitive. But there is still place for pastoral and rustic elements. In the imagination, in the mind, in the past, one can create the pastoral.

Gangopadhyay: How would you define the "Indianness" in your work?

Bond: I don't know, may be it's just grown with me from my childhood. Never tried deliberately to achieve Indianness. I guess I'm very Indian in my outlook, thinking, and ways of life. But it's also true that I owe so much to the English language and to its heritage. It is almost like "double inheritance".

Gangopadhyay: You are often identified as an Anglo-Indian writer. Do you agree?

Bond: No. I have an Indian identity. Perhaps, "Indo-Anglian" as P. Lal would coin it. I am an Indian writer in English. Anglo-Indian is a term signifying a certain composition. I don't see why I should be called an Anglo-Indian.

Gangopadhyay: What are the conflicts that you experience in India for having European roots?

Bond: To tell you the truth, the conflicts were not serious in the context of writing. But may be in my early life when I had to get adapted to my mother marrying again, and had to adapt myself to my step-father's home, who was a Punjabi-Indian, I faced a lot of conflicts. In writing, I cut off myself from reality and be on a different plane altogether. May be that's why I can write

about romance, romantic people, children, animals. These have no conflict with my social conflict. Again, there is the solace of nature. The things I enjoy most, don't conflict with my social climate.

Gangopadhyay: Do you feel like an exile in India?

Bond: I felt I was an exile when I lived in England. There was not a soul from India and I was very homesick. Though London was more cosmopolitan, but I didn't feel I really belonged there. Though people have sometimes mistaken me as "Angrez", but that's only until they get to know me. But it doesn't hurt my feelings. Nobody has told me – you are not an Indian, so why are you living here? Of course, people sometimes ask, when are you going back to England, or, why aren't you going back?

Gangopadhyay: What do you think you have in common with the contemporary Indian English postcolonial writers?

Bond: I think "postcolonial" should be applied to writers of 1950s and 1960s, like Mulk Raj Anand, Bhabhani Bhattacharya, G.V.Desani. But it's a different era now. Vikram Seth, for instance, is not writing over colonial hangover, but about Delhi in the 1980s. It's another generation he is talking about. Postcolonialism ceased in the 1980s, though it's our nature to carry certain baggage with us. I was twelve years old at the time of Indian independence. I don't have any recollection of riots, Dandi March, or independence struggle, as I was in a boarding school then. It would be somebody older than me, who can go back to the postcolonial era, may be, Khushwant Singh.

Gangopadhyay: Do you think it is justified to group you with Allan Sealy, since both of you have European origins?

Bond: Seally is a different type of writer altogether. No, I don't think you should categorise writers according to roots or racial origins. But this is what everyone does. It is like calling V.S. Naipaul an Indian, whereas he is a British West Indian.

Gangopadhyay: You have often been described as "our resident Wordsworth in prose". How far do you think you are indebted to Wordsworth?

Bond: I think it is a casually used comparison. I read Wordsworth as a school kid, but I'm not a great worshipper of Wordsworth. I'm rather fond of Walter de la Mare, who wrote both stories and poetry. I go for that sort of lyrical or poetic language.

Gangopadhyay: In your use of the Indian English language you seem quite restrained. You prefer to write in chaste Standard English. How would you explain this?

Bond: It becomes messy if an author tries to mix both the languages. R.K. Narayan didn't use local dialect. However, Anand did, and finally made it difficult for his foreign readers. Why mix the two languages? Why clutter up English with local expressions? Satyajit Ray wrote both in English and Bengali. He doesn't use Bengali expressions in English, except for the names. Of course, it depends upon an individual writer.

Gangopadhyay: When two small town/village Indian characters speak in your fiction, they speak in chaste English, with no grammatical errors or fumbling. Would you say that you don't intend to Indianise your characters through speech?

Bond: In real life the characters speak in Hindi. In prose, I simply translate it to English. I can't use dialogues as it is spoken. For the rustic characters, I keep the language as simple as possible. Its only when two English-speaking people talk that I use sophisticated English language. "It's a dangerous road" – in Hindi it would be "khatarnakraasta". So, I translate without any frills, without any qualms.

Gangopadhyay: Your writings revolve around an appreciation of nature. Are you influenced by the Western or the Indian concept of nature? Do you think you have constructed your own philosophy of nature?

Bond: Hard to think in terms of philosophy. To some extent, may be the philosophy of going with the flow of life. The Indian concept, I assume, is acceptance of nature as it is. It is appreciation and acceptance of the darker side of nature when it can be indifferent to mankind. I do get inspired by earth renewing itself with spring and the change of seasons, particularly in India. That is, I suppose the Romantic concept of nature. However, it is the Indian philosophy, the philosophy to accept nature as it is, that shapes my writings.

Gangopadhyay: Would you say that your ecological concern takes the form of activism in art? How much do you think people like SunderlalBhuguna or Vandana Shiva influence your sense of environmentalism?

Bond: I am more of a nature person. That way I don't go out on streets. But I write about environment, so in that sense you can call me an activist. I don't go out to meet much people. I work on my own.

Gangopadhyay: You have tried your hand in short stories, novels, essays, poetry. Which one are you most comfortable with and why?

Bond: I enjoy writing personal essay at this stage of my life because I have become more reflective and contemplative. Earlier I enjoyed writing short stories. Publishers are not very keen on publishing poetry, so I slip them into my prose collections. I don't have the staying power for long novels. I get bored with my characters. Short stories can be finished within two or three sittings. I suppose short stories suit Indian life better. Life is a short one in India!

Gangopadhyay: *A Flight of Pigeons* has been made into a film. Do you have any other offers from the film industry? How far do you consider celluloid as an important medium to popularise the author?

Bond: Vishal Bhardwaj of *Makdi* fame is making *ChatriChor* from my *Blue Umbrella*. He has given me one lakh. See, the rates have gone up. For *Junoon* I received Rs. 60,000, but that was way back in 1970. SouravShukla of *Satya* is writing a script of "The Eyes Have It" and has given me a cheque already. To some extent, films and serials can help in popularising an author. But *Junoon* again did not do much for me or for my books. May be television is a better medium. There are so many channels and so many viewers watching it. This way an author may reach a greater number of people.

Gangopadhyay: Your texts are already taught at the school level, and now a few colleges and universities in India have introduced them too. Do you think you have been introduced a little late in higher studies?

Bond: I'm growing up! I'm going to college! [laughs!] I don't have any regrets for being introduced late. I have no regrets as a writer. I'm very fortunate that I earn my living from what I most enjoy.

Ganhopadhyay: What is your advice to the young, budding writers of India?

Bond: Make sure you can write, first. It is amazing to see the number of publishers making their living today. Most of them are "vanity" publishers, to whom authors have to pay for publishing their works. No writer of his or her worth should pay for publishing.