

## **FEMALE PROTAGONISTS & SOCIAL REALISM IN RUSKIN BOND'S SELECTED SHORT STORIES: A CRITICAL STUDY**

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### **Abstract**

Indian history has different aspects of women's position in India. During the Vedic era they had the highest position in society, in the post-Vedic, their liberty was prohibited. In the middle, they were weak but now at present the women's role & their contribution to the society, have been changed & recognised with the course of time. Indian intellectuals have been promoting equal rights, equality and cooperation between the genders for a long time. However, education & awareness through social reformers & writers also play an important role to bring new dimensions in the lives of Indian women. As a result, women are shining in various fields, such as education, politics, literature, socio-economic, administration, games and sports. In the literary field, women writers' contribution cannot be underestimated. Through stories of past & present writers reflect the Indian society by portraying different characters. Bond, who is a great children writer, portrays his female characters with great care. His female characters are lively and caring, with great common sense and powers of observation. Bond meticulously depicted the thoughts, feelings, likes, dislikes, sufferings, and disappointments of female characters. This paper is an attempt to analyse Ruskin Bond's attempt to challenge different women characters through his short stories which he certainly observes through the eyes of his own personal relations, the societal mind set of Indians with the course of time. The female characters of his short stories range from a small child to a grandmother. These characters are as powerful and have left a strong impression on the readers. This article reflects light on his women protagonists in his two short stories – The Angry River, and The Woman Platform No.8 for the critical analysis. His variety of female characters, facing different challenges of life, mesmerize the young minds and teach them valuable lessons to face the challenges of life with great courage, hope & strength.

**Keywords:** Impression, challenges, protagonist, common

## Introduction:

Ruskin Bond is known for his signature simplistic, emotional & witty writing skill. Ruskin Bond has earned his name & fame through his bestselling work. He is an Indian writer of British descent. He is the author of several bestselling short stories, novellas, essays, collections exclusively for children. He won the prestigious John Llewellyn Rhys Prize for his first novel, *The Room on the Roof*. He is also graced with Sahitya Academy Award [1992], Padam Shree [1999] & Padam Bhushan [2014] for his contribution to Children's Literature. His short stories affect an individual's thinking, understanding, perception and personality and reinforce different set of behaviour on different kinds of characters. His writing style consists of emotions, irony, humor, and metaphor that can easily make a write-up engaging to the readers. His variety of female characters, facing different challenges of life, mesmerize the young minds and teach them valuable lessons.

Art of characterization is the soul of any story and Bond is the master of this art. The characters are the mouth piece of Ruskin Bond's optimistic approach towards life. As Amita Aggarwal in her book, "The fictional world of Ruskin Bond states, "The essence of Bond's vision lies in the positive approach towards life". If we read his stories minutely, we can find that all the women protagonists of his stories have some commonality—they are simple, compassionate, loving, caring patient, and have a great personality. Bond always shows sincerity in depicting the woman characters, he found them extraordinary and devour with simplicity. All the characters are equally powerful, sweet and close to reality. The author of this paper intends to explore the never ending hope that seems to be the motto of his characters as they struggle through the adverse circumstances of life. Ruskin Bond, through his characters presents the real pictures of the hilly as well as city life which appear like a paradise through the lens of the readers. Ruskin Bond gives lots of importance to the children as protagonists and antagonists in literature. Despite of various adversities the female protagonists in his stories display exemplary conduct and high moral values.

*The Angry River* is a 1972 children's novel by Indian author Ruskin Bond illustrated by Trevor Stubley. It was published in India and England and translated into Dutch, French, and Hindi 'The Angry River' is one such short story that reflects the positivity of life in spite of all the sorrows and hardships that accompany it. The story revolves round the character of a small girl called Sita. The hut she lives in, is built on an elevated area of an island, surrounded with water. She is generous and not at all demanding like other little girls of her age. Sita is a simple & an obedient child, taking care of her old grandparents, doing all household chores. She enjoys her life with the company of her grandparents, hens, three goats, peepal tree & her doll Mumta, made of rags. Being an emotional child, she always shares her feelings with the doll. As the story proceeds her grandmother falls seriously ill. Her grandfather decides to take her to city for her treatment. From here the story takes U-turn in her life.

Sita is an optimistic girl & holds on to life positively. When she saw rain water gushing into her hut, while her grandparents were away, she packed all her important stuff of her hut as per the instructions of her grandfather. This shows she has values of relations & things. Keeping that thing in mind that one day she is going to come back to her hut. When she almost drowns as the tree she clings to, uproots. She doesn't give up hope & learnt a lesson of survival from the crow in the tree she has held on too. The crow amidst all calamities tries to save its eggs in its nest. She is very emotionally disturbed looking at the drowning cattle, loss of property, floating

tins, caning chairs, wooden slippers etc. and this age is too small to witness the adverse effects of flood.

In the end, Sita is rescued by the boatman boy, Krishan . He comes to her life as a ray of hope. She happily eats the mangoes offered to her. This shows an emotional bond between both of them .The sudden demise of her grandmother and lose of her doll couldn't shake her positive outlook. To remain cheerful and creative she even learns how to play the flute gifted to her by Krishan.

By looking at the character of Sita , the young readers can get the inspiration to be courageous, strong ,loving , caring, optimistic, obedient & responsible to face the challenges of life. Bond created the character of Sita , who possess all the mentioned features:

-Image as a strong child –Sita is the female protagonist of “The Angry River”. She faces obstacles during flood very valiantly and wisely. This shows Sita is strong and determined enough to face the challenges of life. The story portrays beautifully Sita and her spirit of adventure to save herself from the angry river and her intimacy with nature.

-Caring & Responsible: Sita is a simple, caring, responsible & an obedient child, takes care of her old grandparents, doing all household chores. She enjoys her life with the company of her grandparents, hens, three goats, peepal tree & her doll Mumta, made of rags. One day when her grandmother was not well, she said to her grandfather, “When you are hungry, tell me, I will make the bread.”[The Angry River]. This shows her caring nature towards her grandparents.

-Obedient: While leaving to the city for grandmother’s treatment, the grandfather instructed Sita that in case of heavy rainfall and if the water in the river becomes too violent, she must climb a tree in order to reach a safe spot far away from the angry river. Thus gets insight from her grandfather about preventive measures during the flood. Hence, in the absence of her grandparents, when rain doesn’t stop and water begins entering the hut, she hurriedly leaves the hut to perch on the peepal tree, as per the guidance of her grandfather.

-Optimistic & Positive attitude: Sita is an optimistic girl & holds on to life positively. When she saw rain water gushing into her hut, while her grandparents were away ,she packed all her important stuff like- grandfather’s hookah & white cotton shirt, grandmother’s walking stick , tins of spices, raw sugar etc. This shows she has values of relations & things. Keeping a ray of hope in mind that one day she is going to come back to her hut.

-Tenacious by nature: Sita is moved and inspired by the courage, determination and persistence shown by the crow to protect its nest. She has learnt her lesson of survival from the crow in the tree she has held on too. The crow amidst all calamities tries to save its eggs in its nest. This shows her far sightedness.

-Nature Loving: Sita and her Grandfather’s return to the island represent their attachment and adjustment to live in the same land irrespective of the troubles and loss they face. They again dared to built their hut on the same island in the midst of nature.

“Angry River” is a heart touching story by Ruskin Bond which shows the difficult life of a little girl and her grandparents living on a riverine Island. The author beautifully describes the wrath

of nature, the struggle of survival and the essence of humanity. Facing all the hardships, she grows emotionally, socially, psychologically & intellectually with the course of time. By the end of the story she is capable to think creatively, solve problems, pay attention, make judgements & form conclusions. From the character of Sita we learn the beautiful lesson of the art of living.

“The Woman on Platform 8” is a short story written by Ruskin Bond. It is narrated in first person by a schoolboy named Arun, and recounts an encounter with a mysterious woman at the station. The story was first published in The Illustrated Weekly of India between 1955 and 1958. The story "The Woman on Platform", penned down in 1950s, in Dehra at the start of Bond's struggling writing career. The story is semi-autobiographical; just as the character Arun, even Bond attended a boarding school in the north. Bond's father had passed away when the author was young, so he was independent and looked after himself. He was supervised by his mother and her new husband, but they were not as close to Bond as his father was. Therefore, even in this story, though the boy Arun had to take a train and travel north to his boarding school at the Ambala Station, he had to do it all alone without the supervision of his guardians. Arun, like Bond, used to travel independently. In the story, the protagonist, Arun was about a twelve-year-old schoolboy. It was his time to return to his school, so he sat on the platform no.8 at Ambala station. His train would arrive probably at midnight. So, he continued to walk up and down the platform, feeding broken biscuits to stray dogs and searching books from the bookstall. Very soon, he lost interest in his surroundings. He felt lonely and bored. Suddenly, Arun heard a soft voice from behind. It was a woman in a white saree, looked pale and had kind dark eyes. After a brief introduction, she invited Arun for some refreshment at the station dining room. Arun felt shy to go along with her. But the woman's tenderness made him go along with her. While eating, he told her about his school, friends, likes, and dislikes. The woman spoke very little and listened to him without hesitation. Arun's school friend Satish, along with his mother, appeared on the platform. Satish's mother thought of the woman standing near Arun as his mother. Before Arun uttered a word, the woman said that she was his mother. Satish's mother said that many suspicious characters are hanging around & one should be very careful of strangers. Satish's mother looked sternly at Arun and advised him to be cautious in the absence of his mother and never talk to strangers. At that time, Arun said, 'I like strangers'. After some time, the train arrived on the platform & before the train left the station, Arun called the woman as 'mother' & continued looking at the woman until she disappeared in the crowd.

This story reflects new dimension of strangers whom we come across during different course of our life time. Today it's really very difficult to trust any strangers but this story instils in us to still have faith in humanity. The woman of platform no.8 proves to be one that portrays different features of its female protagonist:

-Simple & soft by nature: The woman has pale face, and dark eyes without jewels, and wears a very simple white sari. Arun also likes her for the simplicity of her dress, and for her deep, soft voice and the serenity of her face. Her behavior does not make him feel her to be a stranger.

-The Compassionate Woman: She remains always with him at the station till his train arrives and when she meets Satish's mother, who inquires about the woman's identity, she at once says that “I am Arun's mother. Here we see the affection and firm determination in her voice that a mother has. Her behavior makes Arun forget his loneliness.

-Motherhood of a strange Woman: She is a complete stranger to Arun but she invites Arun for dinner & orders tea, samosas, and jalebis. At once he begins to take interest in her. He relaxes and shares all his details with her. He responses to the care and affection showers on him. And

this way we see a clear reflection of tenderness of motherly love. We also witness the genuine generosity of her when a boy leaps off the platform and runs across the rails & as a mother she takes care of him. Her motherly touch, her kind words and her perceptions make Arun accept her as his mother for a while at the platform. This story about love and affection transcends all barriers of Kinship. Arun's calling her mother at the time of parting is a sweet gesture of recognition of a loving relationship.

The lady portrayals reflect a peculiar aspect of Bond's humanism that appeals positively to the notion of a core humanity in terms of which people can be observed and appreciated. A touch of compassion is essential to make this earth a place of human bliss. The compassionate woman showers human kindness, warmth and affection which evades the loneliness and disinterestedness of the boy Arun. She brings momentous happiness in his life.

The strange lady in the story *is* a mother icon without being virtually so. Her simplicity of attire and understanding of a boy's psychology are highly evocative. Her selfless love is not of this earth. In the story, Arun travels alone because his parents cannot spare the time to be with him. The story also reflects the character of Arun who being a child is smart enough to travel alone. He has the vision to recognise the person whom he interacts. This indicates Arun and Bond's respect for good people. It is the manifestation of Bond's unfulfilled childhood and his vision of an ideal mother who understands her kids, who patiently bears their tantrums and mould them lovingly for their overall development. Bond ends the story with a hint that he would never see the woman again, but her memory would always haunt him for the rest of his life. Bond usually writes stories of real people he has met over his lifetime.

### Conclusion:

Ruskin Bond's stories and his characters teach readers the concept of honesty, hard work, contentment, patience, love and above all optimism. Their cheerful smiles and determination at the time of adversity motivates readers to face their problems with similar attitude. These characters are the beacon of life for the young and old alike. The features of female protagonists of Ruskin Bond represent Indian culture how to be social in society to face any adversity showing basic values of love, compassion, strength, gratitude in our lives to bind the world which we all feel proud to follow since ages. Ruskin's unique writing style captivates readers with its simplicity. His works often reflect the beauty of nature, the joys and struggles of life, and the innocence of childhood. Bond's ability to weave enchanting narratives has earned him a special place in the hearts of both young and old readers alike. His stories encourage us to let go of worldly desires for genuine happiness & keep on lingering in our minds long after reading, prompting introspection and reflection. His women characters are liked by most of the young readers, due to ethics like empathy, charity, love, compassion and strength make them stand apart from the ordinary group of people. Ruskin Bond's most of the work is based on the past as he thinks that past is always with us, for it feeds the present. His literary works are a reflection of the memories from his childhood, early boyhood, and manhood. His simplicity, modesty, and shyness influenced both his life and writing style. In his stories, he highlights various social issues and suggests potential solutions to them.

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