Indo-Anglian Poetry and Ruskin Bond

"The Past is always with us, for it feeds the present....."
CHAPTER-II

INDO-ANGLIAN POETRY AND RUSKIN BOND

After having a glance over the origin and development in Indo-Anglian poetry in the first chapter, let us now study Ruskin Bond’s contribution to the development of Indo-Anglian poetry. He has also followed the imprints of the Indo-Anglian poets like Toru Dutt, Rabindranath Tagore, Sri Aurobindo Ghose, Sarojini Naidu etc.

Though Ruskin Bond is from British descent, he has made Indian soil its nature, land and a country itself the subject of his poetry because Ruskin Bond was born and brought up in India. Almost all the themes of his writings mark him as an Indian writer. He looks at India as an insider and a participant. Therefore, in spite of his British origin, he has been included in the list of Indo-Anglian authors as his writings have the undeniable stamp of authenticity, since he mostly writes about what he knows best.

Life of the great modern Indo-Anglian poet Ruskin Bond has been peculiar one. It seems that he never enjoyed his childhood as usual. His parentage is also peculiar one. In his own words he
writes — “There are struggles, setbacks, failures but hope and optimism have been blighted ——”¹

He further writes, – “Being a child of changing times, I had grown up with divided loyalties; but at the end of the journey I had come to realize that I was blessed with a double inheritance. And I was determined to make the most of it.”²

Quite pitiable Ruskin expresses his agony in these words, – “And for me, it makes up for the lonely childhood years when I felt distanced from family and could find happiness only in the homes of friends or between the covers of books.”³

Ruskin Bond was born in Kasauli in Himachal Pradesh and grew up in Jam Nagar (Gujarat) Deharadun and Simla. His father Aubrey Alexander Bond worked in R.A.F. He noticed Ruskin's keen interest in English poems, short-stories, novels and essays, therefore, he named him ‘Ruskin’ after the Victorian essayist and guru of art and architecture ‘John Ruskin’. He was also given a christian name ‘Owen’ which means in Welsh ‘brave’ but it was seldom used and he himself never really bothered about it simply because this name as he thought, was not suitable for him for the reason he never regarded himself as a brave man. He was attached to his father more affectionately than his mother. After getting divorce by his father from his mother, Bond and his father settled
themselves separately and his sister Ellen was to stay with ‘Calcutta Granny’ – his father's seventy-year-old mother, Ellen Clerke. At one place in his autobiographical book ‘ Scenes From A Writer’s Life’ Ruskin writes in praise of his father, – “The two years I spent with my father were probably the happiest of my childhood — although, for him, they must have been a period of trial and tribulation. Frequent bouts of malaria had undermined his constitution; the separation from my mother weighed heavily on him, and it could not be reversed; and at the age of eight I was self-willed and demanding.

He did his best for me, dear man. He gave me his time, his companionship, his complete attention.”

In 1944 his father died due to repeated attacks of malaria fever and then jaundice. After the death of his father Ruskin had to live with his mother and step-father, His step-father was fond of drinking and hunting. But Ruskin did not like hunting. So, whenever his step-father went for hunting he fringed headache and remained all alone at home. There he used to read different types of books.

At present Ruskin is living in Mussoorie, queen of the hills with his adopted family. Ruskin has been living in India since birth so his whole taste is Indian. His favourite dishes are risotto
(pullau) and ‘Kofta curry’, hot ‘jalebis’ and ‘puries’. These are completely Indian dishes and show Ruskin’s Indianness.

Ruskin is a well-known writer of fact and fiction and a raconteur par excellence. For over forty five years, he has been writing novels, short-stories, essays, poems and children books. In his writings he has portrayed the Indian reality which he himself has experienced and observed and that has become a part of his career as a novelist, a short story writer and a poet. His three collections of the short stories, The Night Train in Deoli, Time Stops at Shamli and Our Tree Still Grew in Dehra have been published by Penguin India. For this last collection Our Tree Still Grow in Dehra he received the Sahitya Akademi Award for English Writing in India for 1992. He has also edited two anthologies, The Penguin Book of Indian Ghost Stories and The Penguin Book of Indian Railway Stories.

Ruskin Bond has an extreme love for India and her natural surroundings which is frequently reflected in his works and it makes him a great Indo-Anglian poet like others. After his father’s death, he left for England but his mind was never at rest, his heart was always throbbing to enjoy beauties of the Garhwal Region. In his essay At Home In India he writes — “I am almost paranoid at the thought of going away and then being unable to come back.
This almost happened to me when as a boy, I went to England longing to return to India, and did not have the money for the passage. For two years I worked and slaved like a miser (something I have never done since) until I had enough to bring me home”5.

Ruskin Bond started his writing career as a novelist. When he was seventeen, he wrote his first novel The Room of the Roof. This novel brought him John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize in 1957. Vagrants in The Valley was also written in his teens and picked up from where The Room of The Roof leaves off. These two novels were published in one volume by Penguin India in 1993. After this in early 1995 a collection of stories, essays, poems and a novella were brought out in a volume titled Delhi Is Not Far: The Best of Ruskin Bond. Some Cinema-films also have been made on his books. On his ‘The Flight Of Pigeon’ a movie named ‘Junun’ was made by Shashi Kapur Production. Of late a picture-film on his novel ‘Blue Umbrella’ has been made by Vishal Bhardwaj under the title ‘Junun’ This film was shown in the Goa film Festival. In this way Ruskin has written a lot of literature in respect of short-stories, novels and children books. So he is mainly known as a short-story writer and a novelist in the history of Indo–Anglian Literature.
Though chiefly known for his short-stories and novels, he has also written some short and long poems which reflect the poet in him. Poetry is just like an entertaining part of Ruskin’s Literature. His poems are simple and short songs for him because whenever Ruskin is tired of short-stories and novels and essays, he begins to write some short poems only to refresh his mind. These poems work like soothing balm for Ruskin. So his poems are not in narrative form. They have mere song like quality. This is the reason that he has not written poems in a regular way. He has only written them off and on.

Not only that there is also another reason of his less poetry writing. The reason is that poetry is not a vogue of to-day. Most of the readers and the publishers like short-stories and novels to go through and publish but there are a few readers and publishers who are interested in poetry. Ruskin is a living Indo-Anglian writer and is still writing. So he wants to write what is liked by his readers. At present he is writing children books, short stories and even poems. In 2004 in A Little Night Music, a recent collection of Ruskin’s poems, he himself says in this respect, – “Every now and then I indulge myself with a little poetry or light verse-something that I enjoy doing, even if the results are not always published. It is very hard to sell books of poetry, and publishers
are naturally reluctant to take them on. Over the years, I have slipped my poems into collections of stories and essays — one way of getting them published!

For a couple of months last summer, I gave myself up to this favourite pastime of mine, and wrote the verse - all new - that appear in this slim volume. Some of the poems are for children: others for older readers.

I enjoyed writing every one of them, and I hope that enjoyment will prove infectious, and that you, dear reader, will derive some pleasure for them too."

Through this statement Ruskin Bond wants to draw the readers’ attention towards his poems. Poetry is his liking but he wants to keep pace with time. So he writes according to the taste of the modern generation.

Ruskin may not be so great a poet as say Wordsworth, Shelley and Keats but he has certainly earned a place of distinction at home and abroad. Ruskin is a poet of this age and his name is very familiar in India because of his various themes specially for his Nature lyrics.

Ruskin has composed his poems in four books — ‘Delhi Is Not Far’, ‘Rain In The Mountains’, ‘The Rupa Laughter Omnibus’
and ‘A Little Night Music’. His first book ‘Delhi Is Not Far’ was published by Penguin Books India (P) Ltd. This book is not merely a collection of his poems but essays and short-stories also. In this book there are only ten poems.

Ruskin's second book ‘Rain In The Mountains’ was also published by the previous publisher. This book is also not shere a collection of poems but essays and short-stories too. Ruskin's ‘Rain In The Mountains’ contains 24 poems.

The third book ‘The Rupa Laughter Omnibus’ was published by Rupa, Co. In this book there are only three poems.

His fourth book ‘A Little Night Music’ was also published by the same publisher. Ruskin's this book is the only seperate collection of poems. In this book there are 34 poems.

Ruskin’s first poem, was published in ‘The Illustrated Weekly of India’ in 1952 as he himself asserts his first attempt on poetry :-

“The evening was pleasant, and I sat on the veranda of the white house (a hotel which was built when I was a boy here), and wrote a poem called ‘Parts of Old Dehra’ :

Parts of old Dehra remain - - - -
A peepul tree I knew

(59)
And flying foxes
In a mango grove
And here and there
A moss-encrusted wall
Old bungalows
Gone to seed
And giving way
To concrete slabs"

('Parts of Old Dehra')

Ruskin’s poetry is a collection of various themes such as — Nature, harmony between Man and Nature, moral philosophy, human love and sympathy and autobiographical note.

Ruskin is completely a Nature poet. Most of his poems speak of his deep love and concern for Nature. In his poems Ruskin conjures up the images of the jungles in the lower regions of the Himalayas. One can almost breathe in the fresh mountain air and sometimes also catches glimpses of animals like tigers and small insects as if into the dense foliage. His love for Nature is more comprehensive, many sided, all inclusive than that of Wordsworth’s. He loves to paint not only the spring time, beauty of Nature or what Coleridge called “Nature in grove” but also the other seasons of the year according to the Indian weathers.
Ruskin’s description of Nature is quite different from Keats’ or Wordsworth’s. It is only because he is out and out an Indian poet. So he has painted real beautiful Indian natural phenomena in his poems. His poetry talks about banyan tree, walnut tree, Deodar tree, peepal tree, neem tree, jamun tree, cherry tree and peaches’ tree not only about oak tree or elm tree as is expressed in Keats’ or Wordsworth’s poetry. Ruskin Bond has been brought up under the shadow of these trees, so he has expressed them in his poems. In his non-fictional book ‘Rain In The Mountains’ Ruskin indites, – “Dehra was a good place for trees, and Grandfather’s house was surrounded by several kinds — peepul, neem, mango, jack-fruit and papaya. There was also an ancient banyan tree. I grew up amongst these Indian trees, while some of them were planted by Grandfather and grew up with me.

There were two kinds of tree that were of special interest to me — trees that were good for climbing, and trees that provided fruit.

The jack-fruit tree was both these things. The fruit itself – the largest in the world – grew only on the trunk and main branches. It was not my favourite food, and I preferred it cooked as a vegetable. But the tree was large and leafy and easy to climb.”
Like Toru Dutt Ruskin is a poet of trees. Banyan tree is one of his favourite trees because he was brought up under the spreading branches of a banyan tree which grew behind his house. He has mentioned of banyan tree in his poems and short stories. For this tree he has composed a separate poem ‘Banyan Tree’. This poem may be compared with Toru Dutt’s ‘Our Casuarina Tree’ because in ‘Our Casuarina Tree’ Toru Dutt expresses the recollections of her childhood. In the same way in ‘Banyan Tree’ Ruskin expresses the recollections of his childhood. Trees work as an inspiration for his poetry. At one place Ruskin himself writes, “Deodars have often inspired to poetry. One day I wrote:—

“Trees of God, we call them;
Planted here when the world was young,
The first trees.
Their fingers pointing to the stars.
Older than the cedars of Lebanon”.

(Mountains In My Blood)

These lines show that trees are not only inspiring objects for Ruskin but also a symbol of God for him. He is a worshiper of trees because Ruskin’s upbringing is Indian and for Indians some trees are like god and therefore, they are worshiped and Ruskin
Bond is also among them. This above stanza about trees not only shows his faith in trees and God but also displays his Indianness.

Ruskin’s description of Nature is not limited to trees only but also to almost all the beautiful surroundings of Nature. He has described hills, mountains, gardens, weathers and beautiful small creatures as — tree’s cricket, lizard, dragon (an imaginary serpent), butterflies, birds etc.

Ruskin’s poems also bring forth the harmony between Man and Nature. His description in this respect is praiseworthy. He describes almost all the beautiful natural objects with man. Ruskin tells that there is a lot of similarity between Man and Nature. He describes it not only in his poems but also in his short stories. ‘The Kite Maker’ is an apt example of it. In ‘The Kite Maker’ Ruskin compares Mahmood (character) with banyan tree and his grandson Ali with mimosa plant as he writes, – “Mahmood was like the banyan, his hands gnarled and twisted like the roots of the ancient tree. Ali was like the young mimosa planted at the end of the courtyard. In two years both he and the tree would acquire the strength and confidence that are characteristic of youth.”

In the same way Ruskin’s most of the poems show the harmony between Man and Nature. Love Lyrics For Binya Devi is one of them. In it Ruskin says :—
“Your eyes, glad and wandering,
Dwelt in mine,
And all that stood between us.
Was a blade of grass
Shivering slightly.
In the breath from our lips.
But grass will bend.”

(Love Lyrics For Binya Devi)

The above stanza is a good example of his description about harmony between Man and Nature. In it the poet describes Binya Devi’s beautiful eyes which attract him. She is standing in the grass - field. The blades of grass come between their eyes. But the breath coming out of their lips bends the blades of the grass and it makes their way clear to kiss. In such a lovely experience the whole of the world swings before them. The sky appears to be spinning and the trees hushing up.

In the fourth stanza of his long poem ‘A Song For Lost Friends’ Ruskin shows a great harmony between Man and Nature. In it he shows the banyan tree as a real companion of his life because it not only removes his loneliness by singing a song but also teaches him a lesson of stillness. Here Banyan tree plays the
part of a true human being and shows a real association of Nature with Man as Ruskin writes in the following lines:

“The spirit of the tree became my friend,
Took me to his silent throbbing heart
And taught me the value of stillness
My first tutor; friend of the lonely.”

(‘A Song For Lost Friends’)

Moral philosophy is an another theme of Ruskin’s poetry. His poetry bears the stamp of moral lesson as he speaks of the truth of life and death in his poem The Words that which “Causes life causes also decay”. This poem is full of moral philosophy of the poet. In the following lines of this poem the poet says about moral philosophy:

“This body of ours,
contains within itself the powers which renew
its strength for a time, but also the causes which
lead to its destruction”.

(The Words)

The above stanza is an apt example of Ruskin’s moral philosophy. Here Ruskin imparts moral lesson. He says that human body contains within itself power which can renew its strength
for a moment. Also it can remove the causes of its destruction. He further says which cause life causes also decay and death. Always keep it in your mind. Never forget this universal truth. In this way his poetry is not merely descriptive but interpretative and visionary.

Though Bond is a great Nature poet and a poet of moral philosophy, he is still greater as a poet of Man. He draws their lovely feelings, the cold winters and all-to-brief summers, the immense of failure of the wilderness of death and disaster. Emotional and physical alienation is a major theme in his poetry. He has composed several poems about simple people living in the countryside, in the language really used by them. Ruskin has high heart for small creatures and lowly people whom he loves from the core of his heart. ‘A Song For Lost Friends’ is one of his favourite poems about human love and sympathy. In it the poet expresses his sympathy for human beings that can be seen through this expression :—

“*The gardener, who looked after the trees,*

*Also dug graves. One day*

*I found him working at the bottom of a new cavity*

*‘They never let me know in time’ he grumbled.*

(66)
Last week I dug two graves, and now without warning
Here's another ————”14.

(A Song For Lost Friends)

Autobiographical note is another theme of Ruskin’s poetry. His poems are his best biography and give us his complete view of the world. In some of his poems he takes his readers into his confidence and chats with them about his memories of different places, his relations and friends. Others abound in references to his personal likes and dislikes, beliefs and faiths, and affections and sympathies. In this way many of his poems provide the readers with facts and details about his own life and personality. Ruskin has composed in his poems whatsoever he has experienced throughout his life. Through his poems he tells about the recollections of his childhood. ‘A Song For Lost Friends’ is Ruskin’s long autobiographical poem. This poem is a collection of his several small autobiographical poems such as ‘As A Boy’ and ‘Banyan Tree’ etc. In this long autobiographical poem Ruskin remembers the recollections of his early boyhood and writes:—

“As a boy I stood on the edge of The railway - cutting
Outside the dark tunnel, my hands touching
- - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - - -
The whistle of the engine hung on the forest's silence.
Then out of the tunnel, a green gold dragon
came plunging, thundering past -
out of the tunnel, out of the grinning dark.

My father took me by the hand and led me,
Among the ruins of old forts and palaces,
We lived in a tent near the tomb of Humayun
Among old trees”.15

(A Song For Lost Friends)

Ruskin's this poem is an autobiography because in this poem
Ruskin has expressed all the recollections of his childhood and
boyhood. If we study this poem carefully, there is no need go
through his autobiography separately because he has described
all the incidents of his life through this poem in a musical way
but in a nutshell.

Not only that, in the beginning of the poem Ruskin very
beautifully describes the real meaning of autobiography in a single
sentence giving the actual reference of ‘the past’ and ‘the present’
that are the part and parcel of the autobiographical note because
without past we can not realise the importance of present and
without present we can't feel the importance of past. So both these
tenses are the inseparable ones to invent a real autobiography.
Ruskin reveals this philosophic autobiographical note in the following sentence:-

"The past is always with us,
for it feeds the present."16

(‘A Song For Lost Freiends’)

The poetic genius of Ruskin Bond is imaginative, simple, lyrical and symbolic. He is quite at home in imagination, simplicity lyricism and symbolism. Ruskin’s poetry abounds in imagination and lyricism, music and melody. An example of his poetic imagination can be seen in the following lines:—

“I’m watching the stars from my window,
The trees are stretching their arms in the dark”17.

(‘So Beautiful The Night’)

The thing which strikes heart and mind is the extreme simplicity of his poetry. He writes on the simplest subjects and describes in the most lucid and simple manner. It is the simplicity of Bond which endeared him to ordinary readers. They admire him to go to him again and again, for they can understand and appreciate him without any trouble. Ruskin’s poetry is, in fact, easy and simple but this apparent simplicity of his poetry is very complex. On the surface there might be merely a plain and simple
narration or description and the poem may be enjoyed as such. But careful reading reveals the hidden and deeper meanings. He has equally keen eyes for the sensuousness and the beauty in Nature. Ruskin’s simple diction is very effective in creating profound thought. He has presented beautiful images of the things on personal knowledge and he writes of them with sympathy and understanding. Almost all the poems of Ruskin are teemed with simplicity. His Nature poem ‘Look For The Colours of Life’ is a fine example of his simplicity. In it Ruskin very carefully draws natural objects of Nature giving them natural colours. This simplicity can be illustrated in the following lines :

“Colours are everywhere,
Bright blue the sky,
Dark green the forest
And light the fresh grass;
Bright yellow the lights”

(‘Look For The Colours of Life’)

Ruskin’s this poem not only shows his simplicity but also his sensuous word – picture because Ruskin has very carefully portrayed the natural colours of life.

Like the five outstanding Indo-Anglian lyric poets — Toru Dutt, Aurobindo Ghose, Ravindranath Tagore, Sarojini Naidu and
Harindranath Chattopadhyaya, Ruskin Bond is also a lyric poet. But Ruskin’s lyrics are somewhat different from the lyrics of these outstanding poets. If his lyrics are not like those of Manmohan Sarojini Naidu and Harindranath it is only because he has a different notion of lyric poetry. Most of his short and long poems are beautiful lyrics which are very easy and simple. They are not written in a very difficult literary style. In his lyrics there can be seen no metre and rhyme but only simplicity and democracy which was always the poet’s favourite subject. Still, Ruskin has used rhyme pattern in some of his lyrics of late. Ruskin’s lyrics can be divided into three parts — love lyrics, Nature lyrics and the lyrics which deal with themes of his childhood. But he is very famous in India specially for his Nature lyrics. ‘Love Lyrics For Binya Devi’ is an apt example of his lyrical quality. This poem shows Ruskin’s craftmanship in respect of lyricism because in it Ruskin displays almost all the above three parts of his lyricism — love, Nature and the themes of his childhood. The present stanza is an apt illustration in this respect :

“We turn and kiss,
And the world swings round,
The sky spins, the trees go hush
Hush, the mountain sings —
Though we must leave this place,
We've trapped forever
In the trembling air
The last sweet phantom kiss."¹⁹

(‘Love Lyrics for Binya Devi’)
according to Ruskin life is a gamble in which a man can be winner or loser as is illustrated in these lines:-

“Cupid, with his famous dart,
Struck me just above the heart –
‘Life’ he said, is just a gamble,
You'll take to her without preamble”.\textsuperscript{20}

(‘A Nightmare’)

In the poem ‘Lost All My Money’ Ruskin explains that city life is a symbol of sickness and sorrow. Living in cities means living in a miserable condition and sorrow and his loss of money is a symbol of absence of spiritual grace, therefore, Ruskin prays to God to help him. Ruskin uses symbolic words in his poems that are rich in symbolic expression. ‘The Kite’ is one of them because this poem is full of different types of symbolic words presenting Ruskin’s real symbolic quality.

In the same way Ruskin uses a very different type of word ‘dragon’, ‘an imagery serpent’ to enrich his symbolic poetry because this word has seldom been used by other symbolic poets as this word ‘dragon’ does not exist and it is an imagery part of human life.
CHAPTER-II

REFERENCES


