

Liberal Feminism and Ruskin Bond: An Exploration of Bond's Women World

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DOI: 10.53032/TCL.2021.5.6.30

Abstract

Indian history has been a deponent of ups and downs in the position of women. In the Vedic era, they attained the highest place in society. Later in post-Vedic era they were accused of many disabilities and their freedom was banned. In middle age their position became very pathetic. So a necessity is felt for reconsideration of women's condition with the angle of Indian attitude. In contemporary age, many efforts are being done to resolve this social injustice. Indian intellectuals have been advocating for equal rights, equality, and co-operation between both genders for long ages, but it was in the British period when women uplift started. The result of all efforts made in this direction is that women have started to establish new dimensions in various areas, e.g., in education, politics, social, economic, administration, and in games and sports. In the literary area their contribution can also not be underestimated. Many female writers such as Arundhati Roy, Jhumpa Lahri, Shashi Despande, Shobha De and many others are raising their voices for women rights and women empowerment. Today women-deliberation has become a vivid question in every area of life so much that prominent male writers are also giving them a special niche in their writings. In male stream, Ruskin Bond is carrying this trend forward to maintain a balance between the two genders. The present paper is an endeavor to prove that Ruskin's literature searches the way for women empowerment within democratic system.

Keywords- Empowerment, Feminism, Gender, Women

The Creative Launcher

An International, Open Access, Peer Reviewed, Refereed, E- Journal in English

Editor-in-Chief- Dr Ram Avadh Prajapati

“Yatra naryastu pujjanteante ramante tatra dewta,
Yatraitastu na pujjante, sarvaastratratrafalaah kriyaah”

The shlok from Manusmriti renders the ancient ideology when Indian culture and thoughts taught to maintain a well marked niche for women; the shlok also adumbrates the time when women scholars, e.g., Gargi, Apala, Ghosa, Maitrai etc. were entitled to recite Vedas and performing ‘Hawans’, and it reminds about the rituals of the place where worship of god was thought preposterous until He was adored with His affined ‘Devi’. India is a land where women have collaborated with men cheek by jowl in every field of life whether by bringing up offspring to make good citizens within the boundaries or by ploughing the fields to produce grain. Gradually the scenario changed and women lost their place in the patriarchal society. It was the middle age when women faced much degradation; history and sociology explain many causes for this change. But after the negligence of ages, women are being the center of attraction once again, and this time, litterateurs, as predecessors had done, are bestirring to establish the fact that men and women are equal and no advancement of society is feasible if there exists gender distinguishing. Whereas the question concerns the contribution of Indian literature, many names come home to, e.g., Rabindranath Tagore, R. K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand, Kamini Roy, Kamla Das, Chitra Banerjee Divakarni, Meenakshi Reddy Madhavan, Anita Desai, Kiran Desai, and countless list of writers who have given voice for melioration in women conditions, but doing this, they would have been inculcating the other half-part of society. So and so they have opened up women’s problems and are achieving their goal making them powerful, through their writings; but along with that they have yeaned an endless gender conflict. But when we cast our eyes towards Ruskin’s literature, we find him in the queue of liberal feminists such as Betty Friedan, Gloria Steinem, Rebecca Walker, and Naomi Wolf. We always are surprised at his quaint creativity that upends the gender conflict and makes the women empowered. Ruskin presents himself as a star in the galaxy of Indo-English writers who are keeping on maintaining the respectability of both genders and are still contributing in women empowerment.

Literally, Bond knows the importance of both parts of society, and echoes the message of social equality. That is why women have identical representation in his stories. Unlike contemporary feminist literature, his literature is bilateral, viz.; his stories render the gamut of urban and village women in the society. Women in his literature enter into male dominant areas without hesitation and they are shown aware of their lives and decisions. He has carved many facets of women’s emblems, with intensity and weightiness. Though Ruskin is known to Nature and children writings, yet his contribution in women-deliberation is significant. Since he writes for children, he strives to sow seeds of respect for women at an early stage.

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Art of characterization is the soul of any story and Bond is the master of this art. Ruskin excels in the portrayal of simple, elemental nature, so his female characters are better and more graceful than his male characters; for women are more elemental, nearer to Nature than men are. Though Bond's literature belongs to 'Dehra or the parts of Garhwal hills', this does not mean that he portrays women characters, having topical or local interest; he deals with the universal passions of women and so they are universal in their interest. They appeal to people of all ages and countries. Ulla, Maureen, Sushila, Madhu, Meena, Aunt Mariam, and Mariam Labadoor are some representative feminists who indicate the changing attitude of new women. Aijaj Haider's remark is notable in this concern, "woman in Bond's stories, is a single separate being, she has pure freedom, free from any contamination of man" (*The Creative Contour of Ruskin Bond* 125). As a master storyteller of hilly regions, he presents the true picture of the women in hills, for they have to play an important part in their families. These women are very strong and sturdy like man; for instance, in 'The Sensualist', Roop's mother represents such women who "labored more like a pack mule than a man" (*The Complete Stories and Novel*, 936).

Bond puts forward a tenacious image of women. They are not a symbol of fruition in his works; rather they are 'Ranchandi', who stand against their exploitation. They are shown to be potentially viable in extricating their problems. In the novella 'Who Killed the Rani', Kusum killed Rani to defend her chastity. Bond's creativity compels him to write on abstruse subject like sex, but his characters enjoy it as a celebration of human not as wild animals do. Woman's wrath over man's mischief and a sense of dignity come into view in the novella "The Sensualist", when one day an overpowering hill woman finishes off the sensualist's pleasure hunting. Implicitly, Bond's creative world has some nice pictures of women; but having a fresh and tender nature, they live according to their own codes. In the story 'The Girl from Copenhagen' Ulla is a girl who wears tight jeans and an act of love making is only a medium of refreshing her body. Maurine in 'Death of a Familiar' is another feminist who make love with Sunil for enjoying freedom, and to live life of her own, she walks out from his life. In fact in creating his women world, Bond demonstrates his psychological analysis for this sex. His observation and imagination make him able to present women as they are and they should be.

Bond does not use the word 'woman' only to present the bodily identity of females; rather he makes it illuminating beyond the limit of body in human form. Women are complement to men, yet they have their own separate entity. He ignores neither males, nor females. His females appear as 'Sankat Mochak' for males at times. In the novella 'The Room on the Roof' Meena makes efforts to support her alcoholic and monetary perished husband, in spite of there being many disputes between them. She goes to Delhi in search of a suitable job for him. Likewise, sentiments such as sacrifice and immolation are not reserved only for males, so women are presented as stalwart and intrepid in his literature. Challenging the male dominance,

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his heroines prove their importance in continuing the balance of society. Bond's 'The Most Potent Medicine of All' is a narration of this theory in the form of a story. In the story, Wang Chei's wife makes a vital potion that is the life blood of her own heart for the survival of her husband, and thus becomes a paradigm of sacrifice. Another sublime aspect of life is in the story "The Blue Umbrella" in which Binya, a witty girl sacrifices his umbrella to Ram Bharosa only to make him happy. Both the stories deliver a common message that neither women nor men can develop, ignoring each other. Though as a regional writer Bond's subjects are Nature and children, yet the question of woman's identity has been a major issue to him and he deals with women's desires, needs, experiences, and psychologies. There is no struggle between tradition and modernity; rather he presents economical, prosperous, free, emotionally mature and intellectually aware women in his literature. Aijaj Haider writes, "Woman in the stories of bond appears in her varied roles, at different stages of her ages and in various moods. In whatever role she is, she has a persona in which there is a new unitary outlook resulting from the fusion of the east and the west" (*The Creative Contour of Ruskin Bond*, 126).

Bond exposes the changing image of women, who are changing with time and with social development. His pen has shared its part in waking up the sleeping soul of women. Ulla like heroines does not want to nab in any assumptions. She passed her days and nights according her own codes, laughing loudly in the wrong places and clapping her hands when no one else does. She is the image of dogma free modern woman who is not slave of or depend on male, but wants to underlie individual existence. In the story Ulla asks to her partner to slip into bed, "are you not coming?" without feeling shy. Likewise, the girl of thirteen years in "The Story of Madhu", Binya, in "Binya Passes By", Sushila in "Love Is a Sad Song" and "The Time Stops at Shamli" are the examples of liberated women in Bond's stories. When he presents Sushila indulges in adultery, in spite of being married, he is writing for the younger generation that does not want to follow any tradition.

Bond's literature is the literature of the women of the present era; where they are not the objects of veneration, but demand gender equality. They are not mere decorative pieces in the houses, nor are they tender enough, rather they break these myths. In the story 'The Panthers Moon', Puja symbolizes every female who is plucky, and are ready to face every danger to save their near and dear ones, as Puja does. Bond describes the gallant of her;

'I am coming with you', said Puja.

'No, you cannot go', said her mother. 'It's bad enough that Bisnu is in danger. You stay at home with me. This is work for men.'

'I shall be safe with them,' instead Puja. 'I am going mother!' And he jumped down the embankment into field and followed Sanjay's father through the village. (*Dust on the Mountain*, 448)

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In patriarchal society, when males do not estimate the value of women's contribution, for they have deployed them either as housewives or as domestic ladies, Bond depicts women having tender nature within a stout body, performing their duties. Sita in the story "Sita and the River" is an icon of modern females who are able to survive even in odd conditions. Quoted lines from the story are enough to show the hardships that she and her grandfather suffer, "For three nights they slept under a crude shelter made out of gunny bags. During the day, Sita helped grandfather rebuild the mud hut" (*Dust on the Mountain*, 249). Thus Bond makes an effort to sustain social development, permitting his heroines to manage their own lives, and that is why his female characters are not for four walls, rather they fancy to go worldwide, as the innocent girl wants to go 'to America, and Africa and Japan, and Honolulu' (*Dust on the Mountain*, 6).

Certainly, Bond has broken the myth that only women can produce certified or reliable literature for women, based on their experiences. Women's pain spills in his literature with the same extent as contemporary women writers have been doing, but with a difference. In women's literature, readers are compelled to shed tears on the condition of women, but in Bond's stories there is a search for responsible factors to heal it. though the word 'prostitute' is a slur on society, yet Bond dives deep to expose the compulsions that force a woman to join the business and Aunt Mariam comes out as a woman of sublime character who to bring up her orphan nephew accepts this disrespectful business, so in the last of story she gets her place again in society; when after twenty years, the boy gives her a spiritual colour, calling her "the very special guardian angel of my childhood" (*Dust on the Mountain* 383). Likewise he portrays women like Kamla, Mrinalini and Meena who suffer discrimination, but together with they are entitled to speak freely their wishes and desires, so they are not oppressive, rather they compete with male dominance unhesitatingly. De facto, Bond excises every weakness of women that has been putting them on margins and his writings present feminism in exact words.

As a good fiction writer, Bond is endowed with the skill to create living characters and therefore we see that he has given his readers a wealth of exquisite psychological and social studies of men and women. His female characters never get to end and their vitality never runs dry. They are not like delicate machines set going on for an allotted course of fictional writings, rather they have everlasting freshness and power. His female characters are witty and are free from every bond. They are educated, out of veils, free from superstitions and traditional dogmas, yet Indian ideals are their rudeshimer. In this sense it is appropriate to call him liberal feminist whose aims are to achieve equality between men and women, and to abolish domestic violence and sexual harassment, and the whole procedure that he applies for the empowerment of women is democratic, viz., he does not advocate of achieving it by force. No doubt, Bond raises his voice for women and this attitude came to him in his early age. Amita Aggarwal's comment is enough to entitle him a great feminist:-

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Bond' women form a different category. They being a very important creation have been portrayed with care and ease. Bond presents a confluence of the east and the west ethos in portrayal of his women they are not shown as a victim of male predominance, at the same time they are happy to confine themselves to domestic chores. (*The Fictional World of Ruskin Bond*, 107)

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