
“Reading Beyond the Textbook: The Pedagogical Significance of Ruskin Bond’s Short Stories in High-School and Undergraduate Education”

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Abstract:

Literature plays an important role in the intellectual, emotional, social, and ethical development of young learners. In the Indian educational context, there is a growing need for literary texts that are culturally relevant, accessible, engaging, and capable of connecting academic learning with everyday experience. Ruskin Bond occupies a significant position in Indian English literature because of his distinctive treatment of childhood, nature, friendship, family, compassion, social relationships, and the ordinary experiences of life. His simple yet evocative prose makes his stories particularly suitable for young readers while offering sufficient thematic and stylistic richness for advanced literary study at the college level. This paper argues for the systematic inclusion of selected stories by Ruskin Bond in high-school and undergraduate curricula. Through an examination of stories such as *The Blue Umbrella*, *The Cherry Tree*, *The Night Train at Deoli*, *The Eyes Are Not Here*, *The Thief’s Story*, *The Tunnel*, and *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*, the paper demonstrates how Bond’s fiction can develop reading skills, imagination, environmental awareness, empathy, moral reasoning, cultural consciousness, and critical thinking. His stories also provide opportunities for interdisciplinary learning through ecocriticism, childhood studies, Indian English literature, social values, and education. The paper concludes that carefully selected Bond texts can make literature education more meaningful, inclusive, and connected to the experiences of contemporary learners.

Keywords: Ruskin Bond, Indian English Literature, Curriculum, Children’s Literature, Environmental Awareness, Childhood, Values Education, Literary Pedagogy, Ecocriticism, Young Readers

1. Introduction

Literature is more than a collection of texts prescribed for examination. In an educational environment, literature can become a means of developing imagination, emotional intelligence, ethical awareness, cultural understanding, and critical thinking. The selection of literary texts therefore has considerable importance in shaping students’

attitudes towards reading and learning. Texts included in school and college curricula should not only possess literary merit but should also provide opportunities for students to relate literature to their own lives and social environment.

Within Indian English literature, Ruskin Bond occupies a distinctive position. Born in Kasauli in 1934, Bond spent much of his life in different parts of India, particularly in the Himalayan region. His literary career includes novels, short stories, essays, poems, memoirs, and children's literature. He has written more than 500 short stories, essays and novellas and more than fifty books for children. His literary contribution has been recognized through honours including the Sahitya Akademi Award, Padma Shri and Padma Bhushan.

Bond's popularity among young readers is closely connected with his ability to transform ordinary experiences into meaningful literary narratives. A tree, a railway station, a village shop, a schoolboy, an old man, an animal, a mountain path, or a brief encounter between strangers can become the centre of one of his stories. His writing avoids unnecessary complexity and frequently employs humour, tenderness, observation, and nostalgia.

The educational value of Bond's writing lies particularly in this combination of **simplicity and depth**. His language is accessible to learners, while his themes encourage deeper interpretation. Consequently, his stories can function effectively at different educational levels. A high-school student may read *The Cherry Tree* primarily as a story about a child's relationship with a growing tree, whereas a college student can examine the same story through the theoretical perspectives of ecocriticism, childhood studies, symbolism, or environmental ethics.

There is therefore a strong pedagogical case for introducing selected stories by Ruskin Bond into high school and college curricula. Rather than treating his works merely as children's entertainment, educators can use them as serious literary texts capable of supporting linguistic, aesthetic, ethical, environmental, and cultural education.

2. Literature Review

Existing scholarship on Ruskin Bond has generally focused on his representation of nature, childhood, Indian landscapes, human relationships, nostalgia, simplicity, and children's literature. Critical studies increasingly recognize that his seemingly simple narratives contain significant social and ecological dimensions.

The educational significance of Bond's writing has been acknowledged in Indian academic resources. An educational unit on Bond's children's stories emphasizes the importance of suitable themes, language, characterization, atmosphere, fantasy, and values in literature written for young readers. It also identifies Bond as one of the important Indian writers associated with children's literature.

Dutta's discussion of Bond in *The Primary Teacher*, an NCERT journal, identifies him as an important Indian writer and highlights the influence of hill-station life and childhood experiences on his writing. Such observations are relevant to curriculum studies because Bond provides students with literary representations of Indian landscapes and experiences rather than relying exclusively on texts rooted in distant cultural settings.

Recent scholarship has further expanded the discussion of Bond's literary contribution. Samanta and Sen examine his role in Indian children's literature and emphasize themes such as childhood, nature, storytelling, values, and young readers. Their study supports the argument that Bond's writing possesses both literary and educational significance.

Environmental criticism provides another important direction. Parashar, Baid, and Chavda examine Bond's short stories through bioregionalism and argue that his narratives can contribute to environmental awareness and a renewed relationship between human beings and nature. Their research connects literary reading with sustainability and the Sustainable Development Goals, suggesting possibilities for using Bond's stories in interdisciplinary education.

Similarly, studies of the major themes in Bond's short fiction emphasize his close relationship with the Himalayan environment, his representation of ordinary people, and his concern for ecological relationships. Bond's publications themselves demonstrate the breadth of his engagement with childhood, nature, family, friendship, animals, and ordinary Indian life. *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*, for example, brings together fourteen stories that revisit childhood, family, friends, hill communities, and the landscapes of Garhwal. Although previous scholarship has examined Bond's themes and contribution to children's literature, there remains scope for a more focused pedagogical argument concerning why his short stories should be systematically included across high-school and undergraduate curricula. The present study addresses this question by connecting specific stories with educational objectives.

3. Ruskin Bond's Suitability for the High-School Curriculum

3.1 Accessibility of Language

One of the strongest reasons for including Bond in school education is the accessibility of his prose. His sentences are generally clear, his vocabulary is manageable for learners, and his narratives develop through recognizable situations.

This does not mean that his writing lacks literary sophistication. Instead, the apparent simplicity allows students to concentrate on characterization, setting, imagery, symbolism, theme, and narrative technique without being overwhelmed by linguistic difficulty.

For students learning English as a second language, Bond's stories can therefore serve two purposes:

1. Developing language proficiency; and
2. Introducing literary appreciation.

His stories can be used for vocabulary development, comprehension exercises, paragraph writing, creative writing, dialogue writing, speaking activities, and literary interpretation.

4. Childhood and Imagination

Childhood is one of the central dimensions of Bond's fiction. His young characters experience curiosity, friendship, fear, adventure, loneliness, discovery, and affection.

The Cherry Tree: *The Cherry Tree* provides an excellent example. Rakesh plants a cherry seed and gradually develops a relationship with the growing tree. The narrative transforms an ordinary act of planting into a story about patience, growth, responsibility, and wonder. For high-school students, the story can generate discussions about:

- childhood curiosity;
- patience and perseverance;
- responsibility towards living things;
- the relationship between humans and nature;
- growth and maturity;
- observation and scientific curiosity.

At the college level, the same story can be examined symbolically. The growth of the tree can be interpreted alongside the emotional and intellectual development of the child.

5. Environmental Education through Literature

Environmental education has become increasingly important in contemporary education. Literature can complement scientific knowledge by encouraging students to develop an emotional relationship with the natural world.

Bond's fiction is particularly valuable in this regard. Trees, birds, rivers, mountains, animals, rain, forests, and changing seasons are not merely decorative elements in his stories. They frequently become integral parts of the narrative.

Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra

The title itself foregrounds the significance of trees and ecological continuity. Bond's stories repeatedly invite readers to observe and appreciate the natural environment.

The Cherry Tree

The tree becomes a living presence in the child's world. Students can therefore move beyond learning environmental facts to considering questions such as:

- Why do humans develop emotional relationships with trees?
- What does environmental loss mean to communities?
- How does literature influence ecological consciousness?
- Can storytelling encourage sustainable attitudes?

This makes Bond especially useful for interdisciplinary teaching involving **English, environmental studies, social science, and value education**. Research has specifically demonstrated the potential of Bond's short stories to promote environmental awareness through bioregional and ecocritical approaches.

6. Human Values and Moral Education

Bond's stories frequently explore kindness, generosity, forgiveness, friendship, compassion, and personal transformation without becoming excessively didactic.

The Blue Umbrella

The Blue Umbrella is particularly suitable for value-oriented education. Binya's beautiful blue umbrella becomes the object of desire and jealousy in her village. The conflict surrounding the umbrella ultimately creates an opportunity to discuss envy, generosity, forgiveness, material desire, and human relationships. The story can encourage students to think critically rather than simply memorizing a moral lesson.

At school level, students can identify the values represented in the narrative. At college level, the story can lead to discussions about:

- materialism;
- social relationships;
- economic differences;
- desire and possession;
- transformation of character;
- forgiveness as an ethical response.

The story remains culturally relevant because it presents moral questions through ordinary village life rather than through abstract philosophical discussion.

7. Empathy and Human Relationships

Literature can develop empathy by allowing readers to experience situations from perspectives different from their own.

The Night Train at Deoli

The story presents a brief encounter between the narrator and a young girl at a railway station. The narrative's emotional power emerges from uncertainty, separation, memory, and the significance of brief human encounters.

For high-school students, the story can develop emotional reading and discussion of relationships. At college level, it provides opportunities to study:

- memory and nostalgia;
- transience;
- loneliness;
- narrative perspective;
- symbolism of the railway journey;
- uncertainty and incompleteness.

The story demonstrates that literature does not need an elaborate plot to create emotional significance. **8. Social Responsibility and Transformation**

The Thief's Story

The Thief's Story offers a valuable example of transformation through trust and education. The relationship between Hari Singh and Anil demonstrates how kindness and the opportunity to learn can influence an individual's choices.

This story is particularly relevant to educational discussions about:

- the importance of education;
- trust;
- compassion;
- second chances;
- personal transformation;

· ethical decision-making.

Rather than presenting morality as a rigid set of rules, Bond creates a situation in which students can consider why a person's behaviour changes.

Such stories can support classroom discussions in which students learn to distinguish between **moral judgment and moral understanding**.

9. Representation of Ordinary Indian Life

Another important reason for including Bond in Indian curricula is his representation of everyday Indian settings.

His stories frequently portray:

- small towns;
- hill stations;
- railway stations;
- village communities;
- ordinary families;
- schoolchildren;
- shopkeepers;
- travellers;
- workers;
- animals and birds.

This representation gives students an opportunity to recognize the literary value of ordinary life.

Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra, for instance, draws upon childhood, family, friends, hill communities, and places associated with Bond's life. His work consequently contributes to an understanding of **Indian English literature rooted in Indian landscapes and experiences**.

10. Literary Skills and Critical Thinking

Bond's stories can also serve as effective texts for developing literary-critical skills. Students can study:

Setting

The Himalayan landscape and small-town environment often influence the mood and meaning of the narrative.

Characterization

Bond creates memorable characters without excessive description.

Narrative Voice

Several stories employ first-person narration, enabling students to examine reliability, memory, subjectivity, and perspective.

Imagery

Nature imagery provides rich material for close reading.

Symbolism

Objects such as the blue umbrella, a tree, or a railway station can acquire symbolic significance. **Irony and Humour**

Bond frequently uses gentle humour and irony rather than aggressive satire.

Theme

His stories allow students to identify and analyse multiple themes rather than searching for a single predetermined moral.

Thus, Bond's apparently simple stories can gradually introduce students to sophisticated literary concepts.

11. Ruskin Bond at the College Level

The inclusion of Bond should not be restricted to school education. His writings are equally valuable for undergraduate English courses.

At college level, selected stories can be approached through contemporary literary theories.

Story	Possible Critical Approach
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Story <i>The Cherry Tree</i> <i>The Blue Umbrella</i> <i>The Night Train at Deoli</i> <i>The Thief's Story</i> <i>The Tunnel</i> <i>Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra</i> <i>The Eyes Are Not Here</i>	Possible Critical Approach Ecocriticism, Childhood Studies Ethics, Materialism, Social Relationships Memory Studies, Narrative Theory Ethics, Education, Social Responsibility Childhood, Nature, Fear and Courage Autobiographical Writing, Ecocriticism Narrative Perspective, Perception, Identity
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At the undergraduate level, students can therefore progress from **reading for enjoyment** to **reading for interpretation and critical analysis**.

12. Development of Reading Culture

One of the major challenges in contemporary education is encouraging students to read beyond textbooks and examination materials.

Bond's short stories can contribute to the development of a reading culture because they are:

- relatively short;
- engaging;
- accessible;

- emotionally appealing;
- culturally familiar;
- suitable for classroom discussion.

His large body of work also provides opportunities for students to progress from individual stories to collections and longer narratives. His bibliography includes hundreds of short stories and numerous books for young readers. The short-story form is particularly useful in educational settings because teachers can complete a text within a limited number of classroom sessions while still allowing time for interpretation and discussion.

13. Pedagogical Applications

Bond's stories can be taught through learner-centred activities rather than conventional lecture-based approaches.

Classroom Activities

Teachers can ask students to:

- maintain reading journals;
- write alternative endings;
- describe a natural landscape;
- identify environmental themes;
- compare childhood experiences;
- perform selected dialogues;
- prepare character maps;
- conduct group discussions;
- write reflective responses;
- identify literary devices;
- connect the story with contemporary environmental issues.

For example, after reading *The Cherry Tree*, students could observe a tree near their school and prepare a short descriptive essay. After reading *The Blue Umbrella*, students could discuss the difference between **wanting something and needing something**.

Such activities transform literature from passive reading into active learning.

14. Cultural and Ecological Relevance

Bond's literature is particularly significant because it combines cultural representation with ecological consciousness. His stories preserve details of places, people, customs, landscapes, memories, and local experiences. His literary world is predominantly Indian, even though his language and literary tradition are English.

This makes him an important figure for Indian English literature courses because his works demonstrate how English can be used to represent distinctly Indian experiences. His close attention to the natural world also makes his fiction relevant to present-day environmental education. Scholars have argued that Bond's stories can help learners reconsider the relationship between human beings and their local environments.

15. Why Bond Should Be Included in the Curriculum?

The argument for including Bond's stories can be summarized through the following educational objectives:

Educational Objective Language Development Reading Skills Imagination Emotional Development Moral Reasoning Cultural Awareness Critical Thinking Creativity Literary Appreciation	Contribution of Bond's Stories Clear prose and accessible vocabulary Engaging short narratives Childhood, adventure and nature Friendship, loneliness, compassion Environmental Awareness Trees, mountains, animals and ecological relationships Trust, forgiveness, generosity and responsibility Indian landscapes and communities Symbolism, narration, characterization and themes Scope for writing and performance activities Imagery, humour, irony and narrative technique
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The curriculum should therefore select texts according to educational level rather than simply adding Bond's stories as supplementary reading.

16. Conclusion

Ruskin Bond's short stories deserve a meaningful place in high-school and college curricula because they successfully combine literary simplicity with thematic richness. His stories speak to young readers through familiar experiences while simultaneously introducing important questions about nature, childhood, friendship, morality, social relationships, memory, identity, and human responsibility.

Stories such as *The Cherry Tree*, *The Blue Umbrella*, *The Night Train at Deoli*, *The Thief's Story*, *The Tunnel*, and *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* provide diverse possibilities for literary and educational engagement. They can improve students' reading abilities while also encouraging imagination, empathy, environmental sensitivity, ethical reflection, and cultural awareness. The greatest strength of Bond's fiction is perhaps its ability to make the ordinary meaningful. A tree, an umbrella, a railway station, a journey, or a child's small experience becomes an opportunity to reflect upon larger questions of human existence. This quality makes his writing particularly valuable in an educational system that seeks to develop

not only academically competent students but also sensitive, imaginative, socially responsible individuals.

At the high-school level, Bond's stories can function as accessible entry points into literary reading and value-based learning. At the college level, they can support sophisticated approaches involving ecocriticism, childhood studies, narrative theory, Indian English literature, cultural studies, and environmental humanities. His inclusion in curricula would therefore represent not merely an addition of another popular writer but an opportunity to broaden the pedagogical possibilities of Indian English literature.

In an age when education increasingly emphasizes interdisciplinary learning, environmental consciousness, emotional development, and learner-centred pedagogy, Ruskin Bond's fiction offers an especially appropriate literary resource. His stories remind students that literature can be simultaneously **simple and profound, local and universal, entertaining and educational**.

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