

Landscapes Real and Imaginary: A Comparative Study of the Short Fiction of R K Narayan and Ruskin Bond

Shyamshree Basu

India is a country with geographical diversity and as such the geographical setting of the fictional narratives penned by Indian writers are diverse as well. R.K.Narayan's India as represented through Malgudi is quite different from the India represented in the fiction of Ruskin Bond. Like Narayan, Ruskin Bond is another author whose stories are set in and around a particular region and the sincere depiction of landscape, characters and situations make these stories undeniably Indian. This paper attempts to compare Narayan's and Bond's oeuvre as manifested in their short stories and to observe whether the various narrative strategies by which their imaginative rendition of a particular place and its people create an authentic sense of 'Indian ness', faithful to the context in which they are writing.

R.K.Narayan in his Introduction to *Malgudi Days* had written about the impossibility of trying to convince his readers that Malgudi did not exist on any map of India, however meticulously it might have been made. He writes:

I am often asked, "Where is Malgudi?" All I can say is that it is imaginary and not to be found on any map... If I explain that Malgudi is a small town in South India I shall only be expressing a half-truth, for the characteristics of Malgudi seem to me universal...

I can detect Malgudi characters even in New York: for instance, West Twenty-third Street, where I have lived for months... possesses every element of Malgudi, with its landmarks and humanity remaining unchanged...

Malgudi has been only a concept but has proved good enough for my purposes. I can't make it more concrete however much I might be interrogated. (Narayan, Author's Introduction, *Malgudi Days* pp. x-xi)

Thus Narayan has created Malgudi as a quintessential Indian town but the characters inhabiting this fictional space embody universal characteristics that may be found in any other person living in a completely different context and culture. The town Malgudi as imagined in *Malgudi Days* is a small town set in pre-Independence India but as noted above this definition is not an absolute one since there might be a Malgudi in a certain New York neighbourhood which exhibits a certain timeless quality.

Ruskin Bond's India does have a fixed geographical basis. It is the foothills of the Himalayas or more precisely the small towns that are scattered in that particular geographical orbit. Bond unlike Narayan, is unequivocal about the geography of his stories. In his Introduction to *Time Stops at Shamli and other Stories*, Bond observes:

Small-town India -that's *my* India. The India of Shamli and Shahganj, Panipat and Pipalkoti...and thousands of others along the rivers, along the coasts, straddling the mountains or breaking up the monotony of scrub and desert. Taken together, they set the cities at naught. They are the heart of India, an untapped source of vast human potential, largely ignored except when elections come round...

Small towns don't change in the way that cities change. It is still possible to find the old landmarks and sometimes the old people. There is a timelessness about small-town and cantonment India that I have tried to capture. (Bond, Introduction, *Time Stops at Shamli and Other Stories* 9-10).

Thus Bond and Narayan are story-tellers who have a fondness for places which remain pristine despite the steady march of development around them. The characters who are a part of this landscape have a quality of innocence about them which makes it impossible for the reader to imagine him to be anywhere else but in that geographical setting. Yet Bond's characters like that of Narayan's could be living anywhere in the world. The local and the universal can blend seamlessly in their stories.

Since Ruskin Bond's stories are set in a picturesque landscape, nature is an ever-present reality in his short stories. In fact Bond's characters are individuals who are defined by nature and sometimes seem to be the extension of the Himalayan landscape. Thus the pastoral trope is evident in the most of his stories especially 'Time Stops at Shamli' and 'Binya Passes By'. In the former story Bond, the peregrine comes to Shamli, an obscure station, on a whim and meets a host of colourful characters. Among them is a child called Kiran and her mother Sushila, the author's first love. Thus an old, forgotten railway station is transfigured into an idyllic space where the author relives some of his old memories and makes new ones too. Shamli's landscape is dotted with a temple, a few shops, fields of corn and maize and a solitary factory. The town is also unusual because it has a single hotel and only a single tonga to commute prospective boarders from there to the hotel.

Sushila's presence in this sleepy town is almost unreal. The author is at first surprised to see her there but accepts the magic of the moment as godsend. The author and Sushila relive their precious memories and even share a stolen kiss in the garden. The author asks Sushila to come with him and leave Shamli but she is reluctant to walk out on her marriage. At night on the second day of his stay in the hotel a part of the hotel collapses in the rain. As the boarders huddle up together for the rest of the night, Sushila tells the author that she would be at the station the next day and leave Shamli with him. However, she also tells him that if she was not there he should go ahead without her. The next day the author reaches the station and does not find Sushila there. He goes ahead with his journey and the hope that perhaps, in the distant future he might be coming back to Shamli again. His final observations while leaving Shamli were:

Shamli station looked the same as it had the day before. The same train stood at the same platform, and the same dogs prowled beside the fence. I waited on the platform until the bell clanged for the train to leave, but Sushila did not come. Somehow, I was not disappointed. I had never really expected her to come. Unattainable, Sushila would always be more bewitching and beautiful than if she were mine.

Shamli would always be there. (Bond, *TSSOS* 66)

Thus Sushila becomes an extension of this enchanted space called Shamli and the author relives his youthful memory of his love for her. But the author knows that he has to go away and leave Shamli and Sushila as one who has to get up and abandon

a beautiful dream. Thus in this story the author's love for the pristine beauty of the hills reunites him with Sushila. Shamli seems to have cropped up from his own imagination and thus Sushila too in the end seems to signify something unreal and unattainable to the writer. At one point in the story the author remarks that he had grown old but Sushila would remain young forever. Thus Shamli or the small town India that Bond idealizes through his characters and settings project the country as a timeless space and Sushila or Kiran become an extension of this natural space-beautiful as well as enigmatic.

'Binya Passes By' (anthologized in *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra and Other Stories*) is yet another story which idealizes a small town setting and uses a similar pastoral trope as 'Time Stops at Shamli'. Like Sushila Binya becomes an idealized figure representing the author's lost youth and as well as an extension of the landscape in which she appears quite unaccountably as if by magic. The author first hears her melodious voice, singing a song and later meets her. The encounters become frequent and Binya's presence casts a special glow on each and every season. On one occasion the author savours the physical contact he has with her and kisses the inside of arm. But Binya disappears from the author's life as suddenly as she had appeared in it. The author confesses his scepticism regarding love and sums up quite succinctly what Binya meant to him:

Binya represented something else-something wild, dream-like, fairy-like .She moved close to the spirit-haunted rocks,the old trees ,the young grass;she had absorbed something from them-a primeval innocence ,an unconcern with the passing of time and events,an affinity with the forest and the mountains;this made her special and magical. (Bond, *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* 77)

It is evident that Bond's idealization of the women in his stories is Wordsworthian in manner .Although geographically recognizable, these vignettes of small -town India are idealized representations of a particular region and the memories it evokes while the author is passing through the region. Seen from an eco-critical perspective these stories are stories that are inextricably linked to the mountains of India and the characters inhabiting Bond's fictional universe are also extensions of the same natural space. Although in an interview Bond has stated that he is not an environmental activist but issues close to nature have touched him and he has tried to depict them in his own unique manner. Thus Bond's oeuvre may be related to the pastoral trope of Eco-critical theory. According to Greg Garrard the pastoral trope has a classical antiquity but is also evident in the works of Cather, Thoreau and one may add Barbara Kingsolver as well as Alice Walker to the list. Bond may be a Romantic pastoralist of the Wordsworthian variety if we might use a category proposed by Garrard.

Narayan's evocation of Malgudi may be defined in eco-critical terms as well but obviously with reference to a different trope and a different category. According to Garrard pastoral tropes might be limited since they do not suggest a mode of practical existence as an immediate reality. He writes:

Pastoral and wilderness tropes typically imply the perspective of the aesthetic tourist... However, other literatures explore the possibility of coming to dwell on the earth in a relation of duty and responsibility. 'Dwelling' is not a transient state;it

implies the long-term imbrications of humans in a landscape of memory, ancestry and death, of ritual, life and work (Garrard 108).

Thus Malgudi may be defined as a dwelling, a space created by the author to observe the rhythm of life of the inhabitants and their myriad stories contribute to the sense of a community living a timeless existence in a forgotten part of South India. Although Narayan has stated that his characters may be found anywhere Satyajit Ray had once lauded Narayan for his verisimilitude in creating an authentic South Indian landscape. Narayan records this encounter he had with Ray in his essay 'Misguided Guide'. He writes:

I recalled a talk with Satyajit Ray, the great director, some years earlier, when I met him in Calcutta. He expressed his admiration for *The Guide* but also his doubts as to whether he could ever capture the tone and atmosphere of its background. He had said, "Its roots are so deep in the soil of your part of our country that I doubt if I could do justice to your book, being unfamiliar with its milieu (Narayan, *A Writer's Nightmare and Other Stories* 211).

What Ray had observed about the novel *The Guide* can be applied to Narayan's Malgudi stories too. The small South Indian town is a microcosm of universally relevant stories and situations. But the town with its roads (Vinayak Mudali Street, Lawley Road), its parks (Town Hall Park), its cinema halls (Palace Talkies) and its characters emerges as a real South Indian small town in the pre-Independence era. Compared to Bond, Narayan is more committed to observing the social /cultural space as environment rather than observing the natural or the aesthetic appeal of it.

In one of his stories 'Lawley Road' he explores the vagaries of an emerging national identity in a small town of newly liberated India. The story recounts an incident in Malgudi regarding the statue of one Sir Frederick Lawley. The narrator is a character who recurs in most Narayan stories as the Talkative Man. According to the Talkative Man, the Chairman of Malgudi Municipality decided to raze the statue from its prominent place in the town square and invited tenders to that effect. The narrator himself offered a tender as he wanted to sell off parts of the statue and get rich easily. But nothing like that happened. He incurred sufficient expenditure while moving the statue but as he was contemplating selling it to finance his schemes of monetary gain the scenario changed completely. The council had decided to raze the statue because it clashed against the burgeoning patriotic sentiments of the country. Sir Frederick Lawley was a despot and his statue should not be a fixture at such a prominent place in the town. As the news made its way to the papers a lot of people reacted very vehemently to this. It turned out that Sir Lawley was an altruist who even opposed the colonial rule in India. The public ire was now directed at the Talkative Man who was trying to sell off the statue. In order to reverse the situation the Talkative Man appealed to the Chairman of the Municipality to acquire his house as a heritage property with his own money and gift it to the nation. This strategy would cover the losses for the Talkative Man and also endear the Council Chairman to the people of Malgudi as a patriotic citizen. The Chairman avails the offer to save his fledgling political career and once again becomes a much respected leader of the community.

The story traces the geography of Malgudi very carefully and chronicles how

Kabir Lane came to be the new Lawley Road after the house became a heritage property. But more importantly the story shows characters in just independent India who wanted to appear patriotic but failed terribly as they did not know how to respond to their colonial heritage. The small community of Malgudi therefore captures the innocence of a generation which was yet to arrive at a evolved sense of patriotism and national identity. But like Bond the characters who populate Malgudi landscape are simple folk engaged in small jobs and the daily routine of their lives is centred around Malgudi. In other words the characters in the stories become integrally related to the landscape. In a story like "The Martyr's Corner" Narayan traces the slow decline of Rama's thriving snack-shop due to political unrest in Malgudi. Rama has to shift his shop from the busy locales of Market Road to an obscure lane. Quite naturally his business is affected and he has to close his shop and take a job elsewhere. Rama, however, does not mourn his ill-luck but compromises from being an entrepreneur to a waiter. In a number of stories Narayan shows the protagonist assailed by some misfortune or other but finally reconciling himself to his fate. In fact, there is a strange serenity about these people which enables them to carry on their lives in their familiar environment, in the familiar setting of Malgudi. Their small town existence can therefore be definitely related to the trope of dwelling one encounters in ecocriticism, although the environment is more a social/cultural one rather than the naturally idyllic one that we find in Ruskin Bond.

Raja Rao in his Foreword to *Kanthapura* had spoken about the concept of *Sthala-Purana* or legendary history and had claimed that every village in India had this unique kind of mythology associated with it. Malgudi, or the town of Malgudi as captured in the stories of *Malgudi Days* also creates this unique space where the characters are authentic enough to have roots in the soil of that part of the country (to use Satyajit Ray's words). The stories make Rao's hypothesis seem plausible that every village and small town has a history and a mythology which is as elaborate as a Purana. Narayan's stories also create a community that helps us to perceive India in a historicized perspective somewhat like Sherwood Anderson's anthology *Winesburg, Ohio* which imagines a fictional town during the time of the Great Depression in America. Bond's idealization of the small towns of the Northern regions of India is no less authentically done. Although it might be difficult to establish a particular historicized context for his stories, Bond tries to portray an India that is timeless even when his stories are set in modern day India. Perhaps, the strain of nostalgia running through these stories makes it difficult to place them within a historicized context, but Bond's verisimilitude cannot be faulted since there are regions and communities living in that part of India who are also strongly bound to the soil and the air of the mountains. Bond's stories (written in the first-person narrative voice) enable him to create his own *sthala-purana*.

Though Bond and Narayan have very different narrative techniques and characterization methods both of them have been successful in constructing a valid Indian identity for their characters, settings as well as their stories. Narayan and Bond's short fiction reveal a India which is made up of ordinary characters living their lives in an environment that is constant and timeless. Although this India is hard to find today it does persist in some remote corners of the country. Narayan and

Bond's India reminds us of a India that has disappeared for the most part or is by and large invisible .But the reader and the critic must remember that this is the India – peaceful, serene, living in complete harmony with nature and environment-that needs to be preserved as a legitimate Indian identity at par with the diasporic or global or post-colonial Indian identity.

Works Cited :

- Bond,Ruskin. "Time Stops at Shamli." *Time Stops at Shamli and Other Stories*. New Delhi : Penguin Books, 1989.35-66. Print (Abbreviated as TSSOS in the text).
- Bond, Ruskin. "Binya Passes By." *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1991.70-78. Print.
- Garrard,Greg. *Ecocriticism*. Abingdon Routledge, 2007. Print.
- Narayan, R. K. "Lawley Road." *Malgudi Days*. Madras : Indian Thought Publication, 1996.99-105. Print
- Narayan, R. K. "The Martyr's Corner." *Malgudi Days*.Madras:Indian Thought Publication, 1996. 111-117. Print.
- Narayan, R. K. "Misguided 'Guide'." *A Writer's Nightmare*. New Delhi: Penguin Books, 1990. 206- 217. Print.
- Rao,Raja. "'Foreword' to *Kanthapura*." *Creating Theory: Writers on Writing*. Ed. Jasbir Jain. New Delhi : Pencraft International. 2000.82-83.Print.