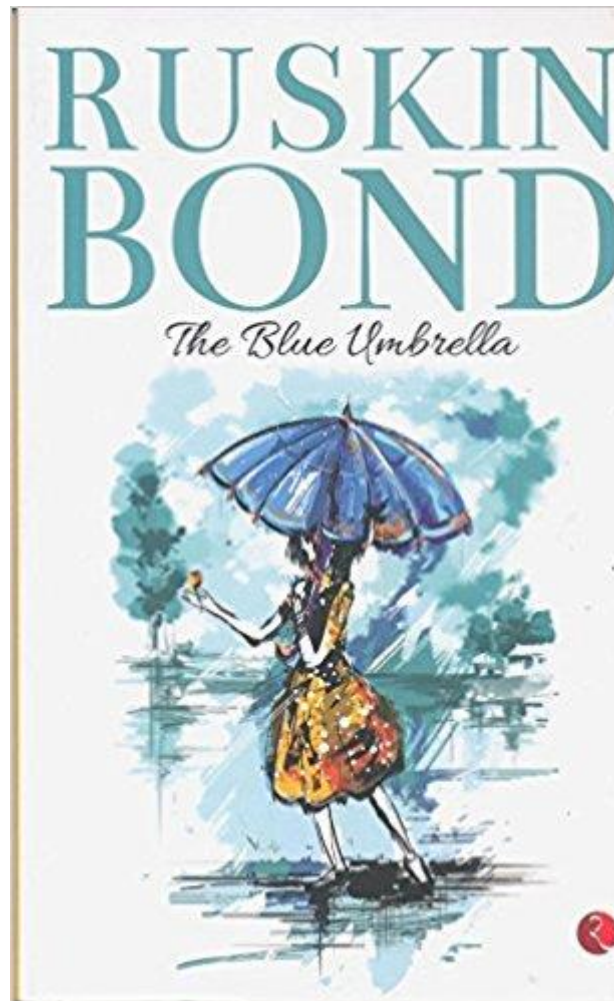


A Study on the Flora of Garhwal in Ruskin Bond's  
*The Blue Umbrella*

Dr. K. Kaviarasu

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**Ruskin Bond's Works**

Ruskin Bond's works have inspired several writers over the decades. His novel *The Flight of Pigeons* has been adapted into the acclaimed Merchant Ivory film *Juno*. The *Room on the Roof* has entered has been taken for T.V. series in BBC. His short stories have been incorporated in the school curriculum all over India. *The Night Train at Deoli*, *Time*

*Stops at Shamli, Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* are published for school children. *The Blue Umbrella*, published in 1972, became more popular and was made into a film.

### ***The Blue Umbrella***

Bond narrates the pine forest of the Himalayan region throughout this story. These pine forests are the largest in the Indo-Pacific areas. It covers areas of India and also other countries like Bhutan, Nepal and Pakistan. In India, the Himalayan subtropical pine forests stretch across the low hills of the Great Himalayan range. He shows the intimacy of Binya and cows with the pine trees. The Himalayan pine forests are not ideal abodes for species. However, as per the record of some of the experts, these Himalayan forests provide habitation to multitudes of endemic bird species that came to this region from the nearby eco regions.

Several mammals are found in the forests. Nearly one hundred and twenty species are found here. Due to deficiency in under woods and crops, the herbivores do not find the eco region of Himalayan subtropical forests suitable for living. The Himalayan pine forests have faced several threats from the modern society. Overgrazing, cultivation, exploitation for fuel woods have brought degradation of this eco region.

### **Oak Trees**

Ruskin Bond refers the Oak trees often in this story. Oak trees are seen the temperature areas of the Himalayas. The main use of the timber is as fuel and the leaves are a good fodder and hence they are ruthlessly lopped for this purpose. Oak trees are prone to fungal diseases that may induce rotting of the inner part of plant. Besides fungi insects often attack oaks and induce removal of the leaves. 78 species of oaks are listed as endangered because of the habitat destruction, over exploitation, diseases and introduction of invasive species.

Oaks have spirally arranged leaves, with margins in many species. Some have serrated leaves or entire leaves with smooth margins. In hill stations of India, besides fuel wood and timber, the local people use oak wood for making agricultural implements. The leaves are used as fodder during lean period. Oak bark is also rich in tannin, and is used by tanners for tanning leather.

Many species of oaks are under threat of extinction in the world, largely due to land use, changes in the housing, livestock grazing and unsustainable harvesting. There is a continuing threat to these forests from exploitation for timber, fuel wood and charcoal. In the Himalayan region of India, oak forests are being invaded by pine forests due to the increase in temperature.

### **To Reverse Negative Course**

Civilization has made man change his ways and it takes negative course. Man will learn to attune himself to Nature. He will be lifted and he will gradually come to see how community throughout the great ocean of life outweighs apparent dissimilarity. In the midst of discord he will realize the great harmony. The outlook is endless, for the goal is at infinity. The realization can come not in the life time of any one man, but through the efforts of successive generations.

According to Sir Jagadish Chandra Bose, excessive specialization in the West has led to the danger of losing of the fundamental fact that there can be but one truth, one science which includes all the branches of knowledge. India through her habit of mind is peculiarly fitted to realize the idea of unity, and to see in the phenomenal world an orderly universe.

### **Remarkable Similarity Between the Life of Plants and Animals**

After hundred and fifty different lines of investigation Jagadish Chandra Bose discovered a remarkable similarity between the life of plants and animals. The secret of plant life was thus for the first time revealed by the autographs of the plant itself. This evidence of the plant's own script removed the long-standing error which divided the vegetable world into sensitive and insensitive. The remarkable performance of the Praying Palm Tree of Faridpore, which bows, as if to prostrate itself, every evening, is only one of the latest instances which show that the supposed insensibility of plants and still more of rigid trees is to be ascribed to wrong theory and defective observation.

Jagadish Chandra Bose, a keen observer of plants, in his essay, *The Voice of Life*, elucidates that the plants adopt themselves to the changes of environment and grow depend upon the variations of the soil. Bose has carried out many investigations and says,

My investigations show that all plants, even the trees, are fully alive to changes of environment; they respond visibly to all stimuli, Even to the slight

fluctuations of light caused by a drifting cloud . . . . The growth of plants and its variations under different treatments, is instantly recorded. Authorities expect this method of investigation will advance practical agriculture.

(Chandra Bose)

### ***My Father's Trees in Dehra***

Bond describes many trees in his short story "My Father's Trees in Dehra". He says, I have to walk only a furlong to reach my grandfather's house. The road is lined with eucalyptus, jacaranda and laburnum trees. In the compounds there are small groves of mangoes and papayas. The poinsettia thrusts its scarlet leaves over garden walls. Potted palms are popular with Indian housewives. On the other side of the road there is an orchard of lichi trees. This is not the season for fruit, and there is no one looking after the garden. (36-45)

The very sensitive and eco-friendly short story, "My Father's Trees in Dehra", recounts the author's visit to Dehra after many years. The climate of Dehra was moist and the landscape was green with a wide variety of trees. His father loved trees and planted many, and was happy among them. Bond recalls a childhood incident when a tendril from a creeping vine moved away from him and after about twenty minutes touched his father's feet, as they sat together on the veranda steps.

His father not only planted trees in his own garden, but also in the woods around Dehra. He remembers going "armed with cuttings and saplings", into the jungle, "planting flowering shrubs between the sal and sheesham trees." His father has said if people keep cutting trees, instead of planting them, there'll soon be no forests left at all, and the world will be just one vast desert.

The young Bond spends an entire day, planting trees on a small rocky island, and his father tells him that the trees used to move and they will move again. His father passes away, and it is after many years that Bond revisits the land of his childhood. Going across the dry river bed, he tries to locate the island, and his eye is caught "by the spectacular red plumes of the coral blossom", and he sees that koels and parrots live there, and a number of other shrubs, grasses and plants have grown up under the trees he and his father had planted. The

author feels that the trees “know” him, and they “whisper”, and “beckon” him near to them. He says, “They have multiplied. They are moving. In this small forgotten corner of the world, my father’s dreams are coming true, and the trees are moving again” (36-45).

### **Ultimate Environmentalist**

Bond is the ultimate environmentalist, growing up so in Dehra, with a father and grandfather who are close to nature and want to protect both plant and animal life. Planting trees are necessary, and it is the moral duty of man to nurture this love of trees and impart it to their children. This is going beyond one’s own garden, and beautifying the world at large, and creating shelter for birds, butterflies and animals, is the largesse that Bond gives out to the world.

### **Garhwal and Garhwalis**

Ruskin Bond portrays Garhwal in the entire story very beautifully. Garhwalis the land of many forests. This region was made up of many small forts which were ruled by chieftains. The region consists almost entirely of rugged mountain ranges running in all directions and separated by narrow valleys, which in some cases become deep gorges or ravines. The only level portion of the district was a narrow strip of waterless forest between the southern slopes of the hills and the fertile plains of Rohilkhand.

He refers to a peepul tree that grows beside a temple. It is the only tree in the street. It juts out from the temple wall growing straight and tall, dwarfing the two-storey houses. One of its roots, breaking through the ground, has curled up to provide a smooth, well-worn seat. He enjoys the cool breeze beneath the peepul. Even when there is no breeze, the slender heart-shaped leaves revolve prettily, creating their own currents of air. No wonder the sages of old found it a good tree to be beneath. No wonder they called it sacred.

### **Cherry Trees**

Ruskin Bond in his narration in *The Blue Umbrella* refers the cherry tree in a few instances. He describes a cherry tree that grows crookedly out of the rocks and hangs across the chasm. Binya climbs the tree as agile as mountain goat. Cherries are delicious and colourful. They are packed with antioxidants and offer many health benefits including help with insomnia, joint pain and belly fat. Cherries are good source of melatonin, which help us

regulate our sleep cycles. Researchers found that rats who were fed whole tart cherry powder, in a high fat diet, did not gain as much weight or body fat as rats who did not eat tart cherry powder.

The Alzheimer’s Association includes cherries as one of the memory boosting foods because they are rich in antioxidants. Tart cherries provide cardiovascular benefits. The anthocyanins, which are pigments giving tart cherries its red colour, may activate PPAR which regulates genes involved in fat and glucose metabolism. This reduces the risk of high cholesterol, blood pressure and diabetes, according research from the University of Michigan Health System. Cherries have the highest antioxidant level of any fruit. Antioxidants help the body fight the free radicals that make us look old. Drinking one glass of tart cherry juice daily slows down the aging process, according to the scientists from the Michigan State University.

Eating cherries lowers the risk of gout attacks by 35 percent. It is found in a study with 633 gout patients, done by Yuqing Zhang, professor of medicine and public health at Boston University. Cherries are very high in potassium which helps regulate heart and blood pressure and reduces the risk of hypertension. Cherries help reduce bad cholesterol levels. The pain and discomfort of swollen joints were reduced when tart cherry juice was consumed twice a day for three weeks in a study of twenty women ages 40 to 70 with inflammatory osteoarthritis.

Knowing all these medicinal benefits of cherries, Bond frequently refers the cherry in his literary works. In his “Love Lyrics for Binya Devi” describes,

I know you’ll come  
When the cherries are ripe;  
But it is still November  
And I must wait  
.....  
You’ll come to stain your lips  
With cherry juice, and climb my tree;  
Bright goddess in dark green temple,  
Thrusting your tongue at me. (254)

## **Bilberries**

Ruskin Bond narrates bilberries that are seen in the Himalayas. The fruits of bilberries are juicy and sour. It has a long medicinal history in Europe. It has been used to treat anything from kidney stones to Typhoid fever. During World War 2 British pilots noted that Bilberry jam before a flight dramatically improved night vision. Modern research now supports these claims.

Bilberry contains which are potent antioxidants that strengthen blood vessels and capillary walls, improve red blood cells, stabilize collagen tissues such as ligaments and cartilage and has cholesterol lowering effects. In the past, dried bilberries have been used to treat diarrhea because it acts as an astringent to gastro intestinal tract. Tea brewed from dried bilberry fruits has also been used to soothe a sore throat or sore mouth tissue.

In folk medicine, bilberry leaf has been used to treat a number of conditions including diabetes. Limited evidence from a few animal studies shows that it may have a decreasing effect on blood sugar. Recent research showed that bilberry extract has promising anti activity, both preventive and curative. It also has shown anti-cancer properties in animal experiments. When administered to diabetes patients, bilberry, normalized capillary collagen thickness and blood sugar levels in humans and animals. It is clear that Ruskin Bond likes to develop awareness of the importance of the plants and herbs among the young readers.

## **Need to Save the Plants**

Bond reiterates the need to save the plants which are the potential for man's health. These plants are the source of vitamins, proteins and give energy to lead a healthy life. He inspires the children to plant these living treasures in their surroundings. He pleads the children to save the planet by planting more plants. The readers are tempted to preserve the cherries and bilberries for the future generation.

## **Children and Flowers**

Ruskin Bond rejoices the children with the depiction of flowers such as giant lilies. The giant Himalayan lily is truly a king amongst flowering bulbs. In fact, it is the largest in height. It was first discovered by western explorer in Nepal and introduced into commercial production in Britain in the 1850s. In their natural habitat these magnificent plants can grow

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up to an incredible four meters tall and carry as many as 20 large, white, sweetly fragrant flowers. These flowers are produced on a single stem that emerges from each bulb. Sadly, the bulb dies after flowering but it would have produced a number of new offsets which carry on the genetic line.

The giant water lily adapts to the environment by growing thorns on the bottom of the leaves to protect itself from fishes and other predators that might want to eat it. Another adaptation is the rim around the edges of the leaves. These rims help protect the leaf from birds and insects that might want to eat to leaves. The third adaptation of this giant water lily is that the flower only lives for three days, it traps the beetles that come to pollinate the flower inside its core and then releases all its pollen on these beetles. This enlarges the percentage of pollen that gets transported to other flowers for pollination.

There are two sides to the giant water lily's effect on the ecosystem. The negative part being that no other plant species can live under the giant water lily due to its size. The water lily's leaves are massive in size and they cover most of the surface of the water. This means that no sunlight can reach the rest of the water. Therefore, no algae can grow, and with no food source, animals that feed on algae cannot exist. On the other hand, these lilies are very helpful to some species, for example, the Lily Trotler. The Lily Trotlers walk on the leaves and obtain their food source from the water lily. It is not mentioned anywhere that the giant water lily is an endangered species. Therefore, it is most likely that it is a common species. These giant water lilies were also brought from their natural habitats to laboratories where researchers are trying to discover more about this particular species and are trying to hybridize these lilies to make different cultivars of the flower.

Ruskin Bond narrates the giant lilies with the beautiful background and he compares them with the leopards. As an admirer of lilies, he says, "The rains set in, and the sun only made brief appearances. The hills turned a lush green. Ferns sprang up on walls and tree trunks. Giant lilies reared up like leopards from the tall grass. A white mist coiled and uncoiled as it floated up from the valley. It was a beautiful season except for the leeches" (TBU 33).

## Description of Seasons



Bond refers the winter season as cruel at the beginning, but later he calls it as a kind month. He adds life to the season as the season gives life to the living beings on the earth. Seasons change and make changes in the world, brown into green and green into brown, dry land into wet land and wet land into dry land. He quotes on winter, “The cold, cruel winter wasn’t far off, but somehow October seems longer than other months, because it is kind month; the grass is warm and gentle and pine-scented” (TBU 46)

Ruskin Bond’s love for nature is so overflowing that he considers himself as a devotee of trees, leaves, fruits and flowers. He believes that these natural gifts are directly linked with the God who creates everything in the earth. One has to read “In the Garden of My Dreams” to realize Bond’s reverence for and his relationship with nature. He describes,

A sun-lover, I like plenty of yellow on the hillsides and in gardens-sunflowers, Californian poppies, winter jasmine, St. John’s Wort, buttercups, wild strawberries, mustard in bloom. . . But if you live in a hot place, You might prefer cooling blues and soft purples-forget-me-nots, bluebells, cornflowers, lavender. (188-190)

### **Nature as a Friend**

It is worthwhile to refer Rabindranath Tagore, a great lover of nature. According to Tagore, Nature is friend, Philosopher and guide. He prefers the company of Nature to share his thoughts and emotion. The festival of plantation is a regular feature in Santiniketan. In *Gitanjali* he writes,

The same stream of life  
That runs through my veins night and day  
Runs through the world and dances in rhythmic measures.  
It is the same life that shoots in joy  
Through the dust of the earth in numberless blades of grass  
And breaks into tumultuous waves of leaves and flowers.  
It is the same life that is rocked in the  
Ocean-cradle of birth and of death, in ebb and in flow.  
I feel my limbs are made glorious by  
The touch of this world of life.  
And my pride is from the life-throb of ages

Dancing in my blood this moment. (Tagore)

Ruskin Bond joins with Tagore as he portrays and praises nature as worthy as the later. Tagore has never compromised in depicting nature in his writings. He transforms the aesthetic value to the readers from his mind through his songs. The above song depicts how he is interrelated with nature in mind and body. In the same way, Bond portrays the natural elements in all his writings.

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