

Beastie as Bestie in Ruskin Bond's *Animal Stories*

A.R. JEMI

Reg. no. 12425, Research Scholar Research
Holy Cross College (Autonomous), Nagercoil
(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar, University, Tirunelveli- 627 012)

Dr. SELVA MARY GOKILA S. GEORGE

Supervisor
Holy Cross College (Autonomous), Nagercoil
(Affiliated to Manonmaniam Sundaranar, University, Tirunelveli- 627 012)

Abstract

Bond's narration indicates his attitude of love and understanding towards other creatures. His treatment of animals and birds is so much interesting that it keeps joining the reader with the bent of mind of the author. It seems that he has portrayed the real picture of an animal before the readers. For most animal species, keeping in touch with other animals of their species is often essential for their survival. Animals communicate with one another for a variety of reasons including hunting for food, warning others of approaching danger and attracting a mate. Animal communication can be easily identified around the world and noises such as whistles, chirps, bellows, screams, howls, grunts and squeaks are common throughout the entire habitat.

Keywords: Animals, birds, nature, love, creatures.

Beastie as Bestie in Ruskin Bond's *Animal Stories*

In *Animal Stories*, Bisnu and his pet dog Sheroo dash into the shallow stream early in the morning. They feel fresh after every plunge and slowly with the current; they swim across to a small inlet which formed a fairly deep pool. This is obvious in the lines, "He gazed for a few moments at the goose pimples rising on his flesh, and then dashed into the shallow stream.... Sheroo hated cold water at this early hour. Now he contented himself with sitting on a smooth rock and gazing placidly at the slim brown boy splashing about in the clear water..." (4).

In "Uncle Ken's Rumble in the Jungle", Uncle Ken is fascinated when he sees a number of spotted deer and pheasants. On a particular evening, he sat on the veranda of the rest house in the forest and listened to the trumpeting of elephants and the chanting of hundreds of frogs. When Uncle Ken sang one of his favourite songs, instead of receiving an answering love call he was answered by more strident jackal calls, not one but several. Early next morning, he renewed his efforts to track down the red jungle fowl but it remained elusive. Returning to the rest house weary, Uncle Ken exclaimed: "There it is- a red jungle fowl" (AS 159). But it turned out to be the caretaker's cock bird, a beautiful one all red and gold, but not the jungle variety.

A squirrel acquaints Bond's home, when the former's abode in the oak tree gets waterlogged. This squirrel is bold enough to climb on the dining table looking for tidbits which he always finds because Bond leaves them there deliberately. Bond happily says, "I am not looking for pets; these are simply guests" (AS 172). The writer is startled to see an emerald-green praying mantis sitting on his writing pad. When he gives the insect a prod, he moves off in

a leisurely way. The praying mantis disappeared for a couple of days and then Bond found him on his dressing table preening himself before the mirror.

Bond's most interesting visitor comes at night, when the lights are still burning. It is a tiny bat which prefers to fly in through the open door, and used the window only if there is no alternative. His aim is to snap up the moths that cluster round the lamps. This particular bat flies in low like a dive bomber, zooming in and out of chair legs and under tables. Once it passed straight between his legs and Bond searched in his book shelves to find explanation for this erratic behavior. To his delight, he found a volume named Sterndale's *Indian Mammalia* and he found what he was looking for:

A bat found near Mussoorie by Captain Hutton, on the southern range of hills at 1800 metres; head and body about three centimeters, skims close to the ground, instead of flying high as bats generally do. Habitat Jharipani, north-west Himalayas. Apparently, the bat was rare even in 1884". (AS 173)

For a writer alone in the wilderness, even a weird bat is a welcome comrade. According to Bond, bird-watching is more difficult in the hills than on the plains. Large gardens make bird-watching much easier on the plains but on the mountains one has to be quick of eye to spot a flycatcher flitting from tree to tree. Some birds remain silent and people learn of their presence from their calls or songs. Bond speaks of barbets and warblers in most of his works. The wings of barbets are green, washed with blue, brown and yellow. In spite of these bright colours, the barbet is not easily distinguished from its leafy surroundings. It flies above the highest tree-tops and seldom comes down to the earth.

Another miniature bird more often heard than it is seen is the Green-Backed Tit, a smart little bird about the size of a sparrow. It constantly utters a sharp rather metallic call which sounds like 'kiss me, kiss me, kiss me'. Another fine singer is the sunbird found in Garhwal and Kumaon. The hill people call this bird Kastura or Kasturi, a name also associated with the whistling thrush. The whistling thrush has a yellow bill while the ouzel has red-bill. Nightjars are birds coming out at dusk on silent wings to hunt for insects.

In Mussoorie the caw of the house crow is replaced by the deeper note of the corby. Instead of the crescendo shriek of the koel, the double note of the cuckoo is a feast to the ear. The melodious kokla green-pigeon is substituted for the eternal cooing of the little brown dove. The softer call of the slate-headed parakeets replaces the harsh cries of the rose-ringed species. The dissonant voices of the seven sisters no longer issue from the bushes and their place is taken by the spiteful but more pleasing calls of the Himalayan streaked laughing thrushes.

When Bond first came to the Himalayas, it was the whistling thrush that caught his attention. He did not see the bird that day. It kept to the deep shadows of the ravine below the old stone cottage. The next day Bond was sitting at his window gazing out at the walnut and wild pear trees. Emerging from the depths of the sunless chasm like a dark sweet secret, came the enchanting call of the whistling thrush. Then he found the whistling thrush perched on the garden

fence. Birds become amiable once they find a person's presence comfortable. Same is the case with Bond. The whistling thrush grows used to his presence becomes less shy as the months passed.

Once the rain water pipes were blocked and this resulted in an overflow of water and a little permanent puddle under the steps. This became the whistling thrush's favorite bathing place. While Bond was taking a siesta upstairs, he would hear the bird flapping about in the rainwater pool. Some days later, the bird joined with its female to give musical performances, "sometimes they sang duets and these, no doubt, were love calls, because it was not long before the pair were making forays into the rocky ledges of the ravine, looking for a suitable maternity home" (AS 179).

After almost three years, Bond comes to a conclusion that these are birds of all seasons. They are liveliest in midsummer but even in the depths of winter, with snow lying on the ground, they would suddenly start singing, as they flit from oak to pine. Whistling thrushes usually nest on rocky ledges near water. Once Bond was away from Mussoorie and when he returned he found a large bundle of ferns, lichen, grass, moss and mud balanced outside on the window ledge. Peering through the glass, he was able to recognize the untidy bundle as a nest. Bond deliberately grew cherry trees which attracted the birds when they are blossomed with flowers and fruits. When the trees were covered with pale pink blossoms, the most common visitor was a tiny yellow sunbird, who sang a squeaky song as he flitted from branches to branches.

Bond uses similes to compare birds with humans. He says, "Just as some vegetarians will condescend to eat meat, the sunbird (like the barbet) will vary his diet with insects. Small spiders, caterpillars, beetles, bugs and flies fall prey to these birds. I have also seen a sunbird flying up and catching insects on the wing" (AS 180). Like an ornithologist, Bond speaks about different features of multifarious birds. He says the flycatchers are gorgeous birds with a ghost-like flight. Although they are mostly insectivorous, there are some meat-eaters and they also take a little fruit. So these birds occasionally visit the cherry trees and while flying above the boughs, they utter twittering notes with occasional loud calls.

Bond is accustomed to the sights and sounds of nature. He first saw a leopard when he was crossing a small stream at the bottom of a hill. The ravine is so deep that for most of the day it remains in shadow. This encourages many birds and animals to emerge from cover during the hours of daylight. As a result, the ravine has become a little haven for wildlife, one of the few natural sanctuaries left near Mussoorie. Bond is a great admirer of nature that every morning he strolls down a narrow path which is teamed with trees on both the sides. He says,

Nearly every morning and sometimes during the day, I heard the cry of the barking deer. And in the evening, walking through the forest, I disturbed parties of Kalij Pheasants. The birds went gliding into the ravines on open, motionless wings. I saw pine martins and a handsome red fox. I recognized the footprints of a bear. (AS 42)