


Indian Fiction in English
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Module - 10
Lecture - 36
The Writings of Ruskin Bond

Good Morning and welcome to yet another session of the NPTEL course, Indian Fiction in English. Today's lecture is an overview of the writings of Ruskin Bond. At the outset of this lecture, I draw your attention to a comment made by one of the leading critics, Hayman in 2003.

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o "It has taken the better half of fifty years for Ruskin Bond, one of India's most prolific writers in English for adults and children, to receive the critical attention that he deserves" (Heyman 2003)

He remarks, it has taken the better half of 50 years for Ruskin Bond, one of India's most prolific writers in English for adults and children, to receive the critical attention that he deserves. I want you to bear in mind from beginning of his lecture that, there is very little scholarly attention which has been given for Ruskin Bond or his works. We do have a lot of biographical information about him.

But the scholarly attention the critical framework for looking at his works have been relatively less and sometimes even absent. It is in this context that we try to survey his works. We do not have too many secondary material for reference. I relied mostly on certain book reviews and a number of interviews that Ruskin Bond has given during his lifetime. One does not know what exactly is the reason for this limited critical attention on his works.

But it needs to be pointed out that, in spite of that he is one of the best loved writers in English in India and this is something, this is more or less like a fact which remains undisputed. And a number of a, few randomly google or try to find certain information about Ruskin Bond. You would find that he has been seen as an enduring writer as a prolific writer who continued to produce for more than 5 decades.

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Ruskin Bond (b.1934)

- o A child of the British Raj ✓
- o A prominent Indian writer who lives in the Himalayan town of Mussoorie
- o A novelist, short story writer, poet, essayist - for children, young adults and adults
- o Sahitya Akademi Award (1992); Padma Shri (1999); Padma Bhushan (2014) ✓

Ruskin Bond was born in 1934. He is of British decent. He has been described in these various ways. He is described as a child of the British Raj, as a prominent Indian writer who lives in the Himalayan town of Mussoorie. That is something that has always accompanied all descriptions about Ruskin Bond like the other Anglo-Indian writer Allan Sealy. He also chooses to live on the hills.

And we do not find Bond like Allan Sealy inviting fame, inviting recognition. We find them staying away from this limelight which currently Indian English Fiction is enjoying. Ruskin Bond can be described as a novelist, a short story writer, a poet and an essayist. And the remarkable feature of his writing is that he writes for children, for young adults and adults. His fiction, his writing, it has been considered as enduring by people of all cultures and all ages.

He has received the Sahitya Akademy Award in 1992, The Padma Shri in 1999, and Padma Bhushan in 2014. His literary output has been prolific.

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Writings

- o Six novels ✓
- o Over 200 short stories ✓
- o 4 volumes of autobiography ✓
 - o Writing life, personal life, invented life
- o About 400 newspaper articles
- o 5 collections of essays
- o 4 poetry collections
- o Started publishing in 1951 at the age of 17

His writings comprise of 6 novels, over 200 short stories, there are 4 volumes of autobiography, 400 newspaper articles, 5 collections of essays, 4 poetry collections and he started publishing in 1951 at the age of 17. This corpus, this body of writing is so huge that perhaps extensive nature of this itself is a daunting task for any researcher who would like to work on Ruskin Bond.

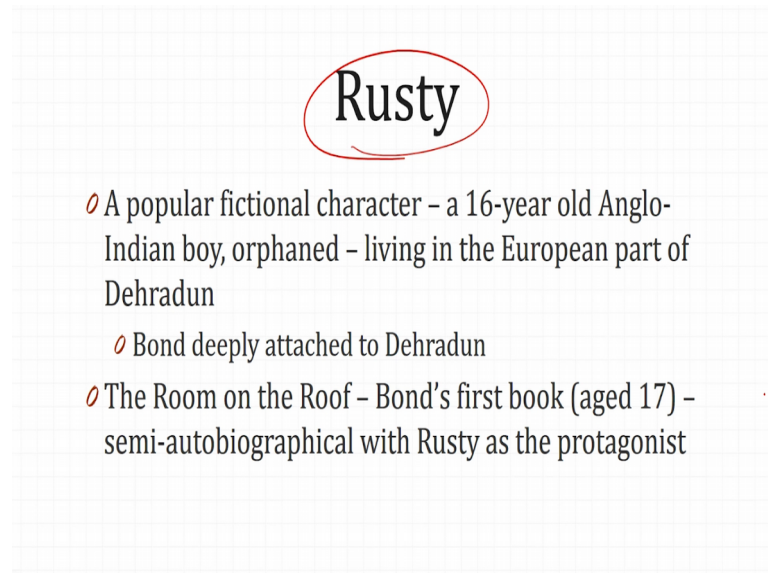
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- o Influenced by life in the hill stations
- o Anglo-Indian experiences
- o Changing aspects of India - witnessed the colonial, postcolonial and post-independence phases of India
- o Considers himself a 'visual writer'

Ruskin Bond was influenced by life in the hill stations. We find him writing about his life in Mussoorie in most of his works. His Anglo-Indian experiences have also shaped the way he write, the way he think and the way he approach literature. He also has this rare achievement of having witnessed the various changing aspects of India. He has witnessed the colonial. He has witnessed the postcolonial phase, post independent decades of India.

He considers himself as a visual writer. He says that he first picturises the story in his mind before he starts writing it. So, we do find that graphic nature that near to life description in most of his writings.

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One of the most popular fictional characters that Ruskin Bond invented was that of Rusty. Rusty is a 16-year-old Anglo-India boy who is orphaned at a young age and he lives in the European part of Dehradun. Bond has often said that this is based on the way his own childhood experiences were shaped. Bond did not have a happy childhood, he often talks and writes about it.

And we find a certain kind of a replication of his own experiences and his own thought process as an adolescent in Rusty's fictional personam. And Bond's deep attachment to Dehradun is also visible in the way Rusty behaves and in the way Rusty situates himself in Dehradun. The Room on the Roof was Bond's first book. It was written when he was just 17 years old. It is a semi-autobiographical novel with Rusty as the protagonist.

Even in one of the recent interviews that Ruskin Bond gave, he did remark that The Room on the Roof remains as one of his favourite novels, one of his favourite writings ever. Since Bond also wrote this novel as a teenager, we do find a lot of real-life graphic descriptions in this work. There is a category of stories by Ruskin Bond which has now come to be known as Rusty Stories.

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Rusty-stories

- o The Room on the Roof ✓
- o Vagrants in the Valley ✓
- o Rusty the Boy from the Hills ✓
- o Rusty Runs Away ✓
- o Rusty and the Magic Mountain ✓
- o Rusty goes to London ✓
- o Rusty comes home ✓
- o The Adventures of Rusty ✓

These are the titles: The Room on the Roof, Vagrants in the Valley, Rusty the Boy from the Hills, Rusty Runs Away, Rusty and the Magic Mountain, Rusty goes to London, Rusty comes Home, The adventures of Rusty. We also find a close relation between Rusty's life and his narration and Bond's own experiences. In the contemporary where identity remains a highly contented notion, Bond has been quite clear about his idea of being an Indian.

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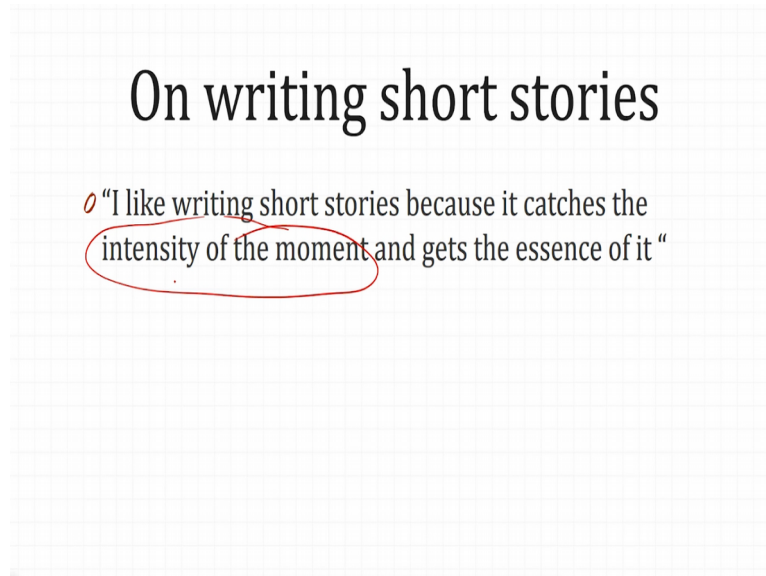
On Being an Indian

- o "Race did not make me one. Religion did not make me one. But history did. And in the long run, it's history that counts"
- o "I always wanted to come back to India because my roots were particularly in this area, Dehradun where I had grown-up"

In his own words, Race did not make me one. Religion did not make me one. But History did. And in the long run, it is history that counts. This is extremely significant. He is of British descent, he can be classified as an Anglo-Indian but it is not that identity that he holds on to. He considered himself as an Indian and that identity being shaped primarily by the historical incidents and the history that he has participated in.

And even while he was away, while recounting his thoughts on being away from this nation, Bond again clarifies that he wanted to come back to India because, my roots were particularly in this area, Dehradun where I had grown up. Here Ruskin Bond and his views on Indian identity can be seen as being starkly different from the ones that we have observed as part of this course. About his writing experience, Bond has clarified in multiple occasions that his favourite task is that of writing short stories.

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I like writing short stories because it catches the intensity of the moment and gets the essence of it. And just like Bond words said, in most of his stories it is difficult not to pay attention to the intensity of the moment which is captured very well in the climax of the stories. And some of those stories will have an unexpected twist but the intensity nevertheless remains the same. And some of them will be in a very matter of fact tone of narration. But it will be very intense, so intense that you would feel as if you are really re-reliving that moment with the author.

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“The Man who was Kipling”

- An imaginary meeting with Kipling's ghost
- Gives a sympathetic view of his works

There are some very interesting stories that Bond wrote. He himself has spoken about these stories in some of the interviews that he gave. One of his favourites is, The Man who was Kipling. It was an imaginary meeting with Kipling's a ghost. And in this story Bond himself has said that he tries to give a sympathetic view of Kipling's works. There is a certain shared history that Kipling and Bond has.

Rudyard Kipling as we know is a British man who lived and wrote in India. He also wrote about India and Bond's relation with India is also slightly ambivalent in that sense. He is of British decent but he has also lived and wrote about India. And when Bond is writing about Kipling it does have a different import altogether. And Bond's view on Kipling and his works and Bond's dialogues with Kipling, they also tell us about certain shared historical past which can be looked at, which can be reviewed from a different perspective now.

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“The Boy who Broke the Bank”

o A humorous story

The Boy who Broke the Bank is also considered as a humorous story and again one of those stories about which Bond has often spoken about.

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“The Eyes Have It”

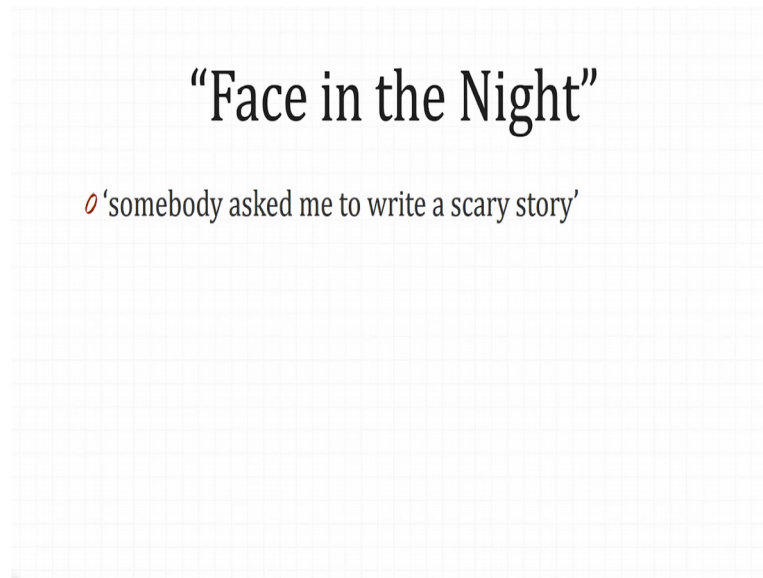
- o About a young man who tries to find out what a girl in the carriage looks like
- o The unexpected ending - the girl is also blind

The Eyes Have It is a story about a young man who tries to find out what a girl in a train carriage looks like and there is an unexpected ending to this story. The girl also turns to be blind and it is a very captivating story. Bond himself has said about the story that initially it was devised in a different way and in the process of writing he decided to give it a different ending and it has really worked well too.

And it is said that even blind people who have listened to this story, they found it so heart wrenching, they found it so real to life. That many have asked Bond about his uncanny ability to think and write like a blind man when he was not blind himself. And Bond being not a

boastful kind at all, he just says always that he imagines the story in his mind and he just tries to write it in the way he picturised it. So, as he himself said, that he is a visual writer we find a lot of examples, we can find lot of examples from his own works which stand testimony to this visual nature of this, his narration.

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A Face in the Night is categorised as a scary story and Bond says that he wrote it because somebody asked him to write a scary story. It is based on a folk tale which he heard in Lucknow and he says that on being asked to write this scary story, he tried to loosely reinvent the tale which he was already familiar with.

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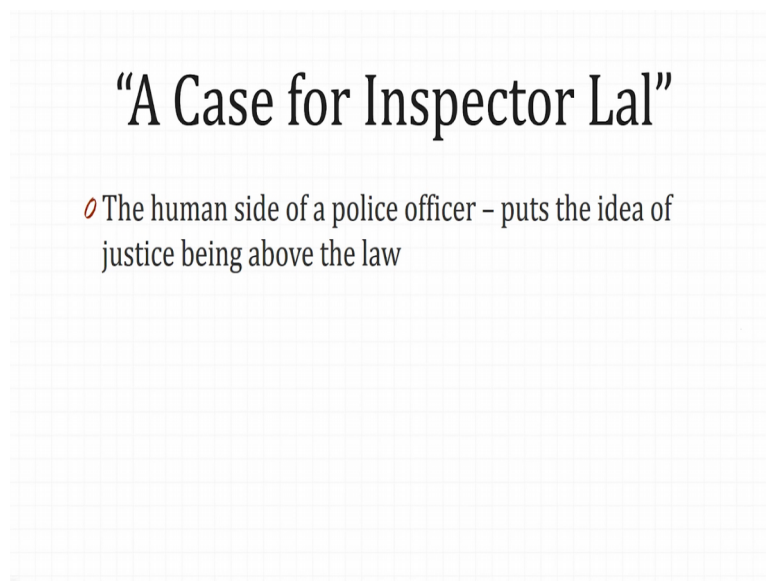


The Garlands of his Brow deals with certain profound themes. It is about Hassan who is featured as a victim of destiny and age. Main theme of the story is to highlight the irony of

fate when heroes go out of popularity. And this is also a story about which Bond has spoken much about. He also tells us that heroes be it literary personalities or sports persons. There is a certain limelight and fame that they enjoy when they are in their most productive self.

But as time goes on, as fate and old age catches up with them the popularity also weans away. It is about a story which tries to talk about this weaning popularity and how these things are very fleeting and quite meaningless. And we also see Bond's own views getting reflected in terms of his attitude to fame to popularity on being labeled as celebrities or heroes.

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A Case for Inspector Lal is a story which brings a human-side of a police officer. It puts the idea of justice being above the law. And we too find a human touch in most of Bond's stories. That is also an underlying ethics an underlying belief system. A value system that he believes in. He is not sceptical about articulating certain systems of values and systems of faith that he believes in, that he has faith on.

Most of his characters come across is being very convincing. And in one of Bond's own interviews, he has tried to reason this out and being asked about this ability to conceive and to present convincing characters.

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Convincing characters

o "I suppose it is all about empathy. Putting oneself in the other person's shoes or under the skin of the characters concerned and trying to understand how they feel or react to certain situations. I guess it is a sympathetic impulse, of empathy with characters or people"

Bond says, I suppose it is all about empathy. Putting oneself in the other person's shoes or under the skin of the characters concerned and trying to understand how they feel or react to certain situations. I guess it is a sympathetic impulse of empathy with characters or people. And this certainly comes across as a convincing rational response especially when we get to read more about Bond's life and his response to people around him. Bond has also written a couple of Satirical or humorous stories.

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Satirical/humorous stories

- o "Crow for All Seasons" ✓
- o "A Handful of Nuts" ✓
- o "Landour Days"

Those titles are: Crow for All Seasons which also incidentally one of his favourite stories. A Hand full of Nuts and Landour days. Coming back to this initial question and concern that we began with; the lack of proper academic research on Bond. Recently in one of the interviews that he gave to the Sahitya Akademy Journal, he did talk about this start of the research on his works and on being researched.

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On being 'researched'

o "it is nice to know that somebody is taking my work seriously because it doesn't happen often. This has happened in recent years. In fact, I don't think anybody paid much attention to my writing when I was actually producing most of my stories, novellas. Suddenly much attention is being paid now. I feel comfortable while writing rather than talking about my own work"

This is his response. It is nice to know that somebody is taking my work seriously because it does not happen often. He himself is aware of this acute lack of research. This acute absence of scholarly attention on his works. This has happened in recent years. In fact, I do not think anybody paid much attention to my writing when I was actually producing most of my stories, novellas. Suddenly much attention is being paid now. I feel comfortable while writing rather than talking about my own work. Perhaps addressing this gap, we find a recent work published in 2011;

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The Anglo-Indian self in Ruskin Bond

o Debashish Bandyopadhyay, 2011

o A chronological reading of Bond's works

o "What was I anyway? English, like my father? Or Anglo-India, like my mother?" (Bond, The Indian Express)

o "In a land full of people of diverse origins I decided I'd just be myself, all-Indian, even if it meant being a minority of one"

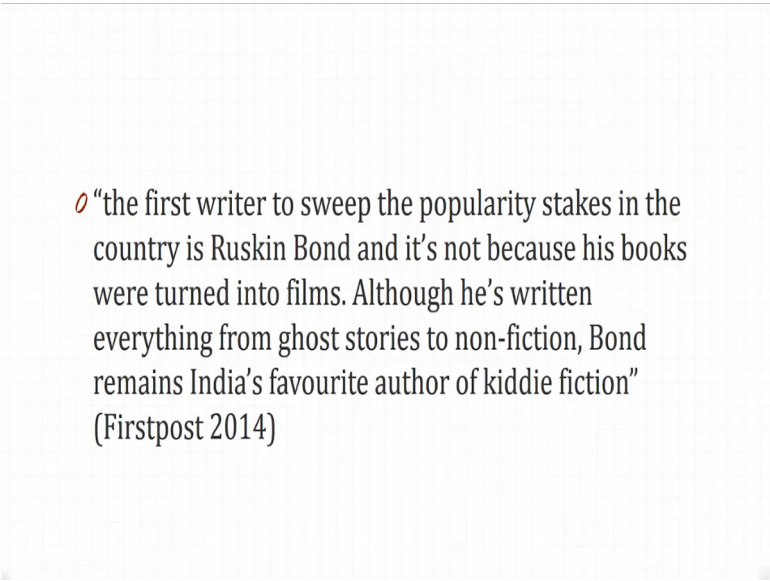
By Debashish Bandyopadhyay. It is titled The Anglo-Indian Self in Ruskin Bond. It is a chronological reading of Bond's works, trying to see how his Anglo-Indian self is also depicted in most of his works. But Bond himself has not really held on to this Anglo-Indian

identity much. Here we can again find a lot of similarity with Allan Sealy's work in writings. The Anglo-Indian identity which they possess, it is not presented in an extreme fashion, not presented in a phonetic way.

Rather they are more skeptical about this ambivalent positioning of themselves within the context of India. In an interview given to the Indian Express, Bond wonders, What was I anyway? English like my Father? Or Anglo-Indian like my Mother? And in another context, he has also spoken about his choice of being labeled as an Indian. In a land full of people of diverse origins, I decided I just be myself, all-Indian, even if it meant being a minority of one.

And this is very interesting because that is, the Indian is the identity that he chooses. We do not find him engaging with this, them in a theoretical or in a more profound way but nevertheless in the simple statement with the way he approaches the complex idea of identity is very, very clear. As mentioned earlier in recent times there is a lot of interest in talking about Bond and the kind of popularity that he had been enjoying for over 5 decades.

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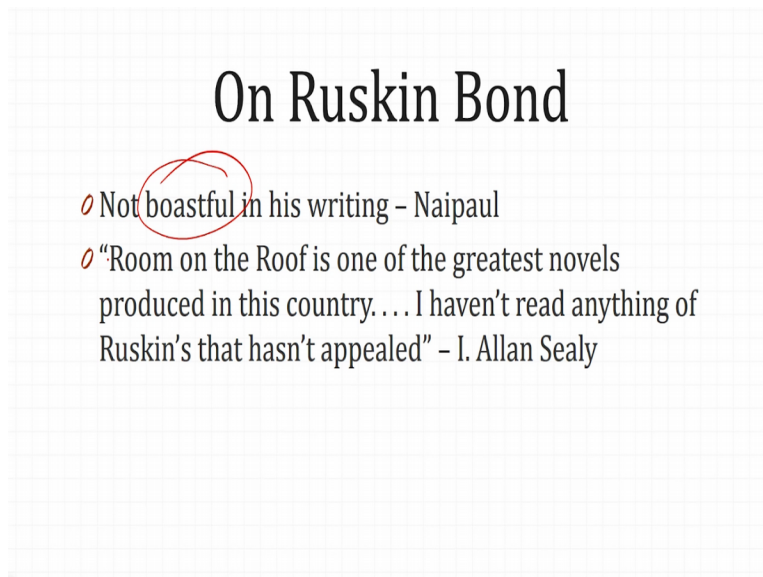
o "the first writer to sweep the popularity stakes in the country is Ruskin Bond and it's not because his books were turned into films. Although he's written everything from ghost stories to non-fiction, Bond remains India's favourite author of kiddie fiction" (Firstpost 2014)

A feature that appeared in first post in 2014. It said, the first writer to sweep the popularity stakes in the country is Ruskin Bond. And it is not because his books were, of course 2 of them were turned into films. Although he has written everything from Ghost stories to non-fiction, Bond remains India's favourite author of kiddie fiction. But he is also been seen as the most loved author, not just by children but also by adults.

And in terms of popularity, again it comes across as a rather strange thing that this, in spite of this high popularity and in spite of the many discussions on the wonderful meritorious quality of his work, it has received very little attention in terms of scholarship. As we wrap up this lecture, I leave you with 2 comments made on Bond by 2 of the other leading writers.

V.S. Naipaul once remarked that, of the other Indian English novelists;

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He does not find Ruskin Bond's writing boastful. And there is a certain way in which Naipaul manages to situate Ruskin Bond's narrative as being more authentic, more human and less boastful. Allan Sealy while he disagrees with Naipaul on many other things. He is quick to agree with Naipaul especially on his opinion about Ruskin Bond. And Allan Sealy's own words, Room on the Roof is one of the greatest novels produced in this country. I have not read anything of Ruskin's that has not appealed.

I think this is a wonderful quality that we need to acknowledge and in the context of the many discussions that we have had as part of this course on Indian English Fiction in terms of nation, secularism, the nation narratives, the many postcolonial themes which were found to be dominating the narrative. We find that Bond's works though they have not really received, the kind of scholarly attention that they have received, one cannot disagree with this element.

We find most of the critics, most of the reviewers agreeing with it, that it is difficult to come across anything of Ruskin that would not appeal us. On this note we wrap up this lecture. I thank you for listening and look forward to seeing you in the next session.