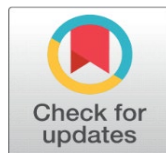
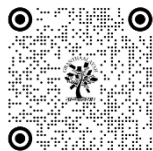


# THEMATIC STUDY OF "THE STORY OF MADHU" BY RUSKIN BOND

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## DOI

[10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i2.2023.5813](https://doi.org/10.29121/shodhkosh.v4.i2.2023.5813)

**Funding:** This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

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## ABSTRACT

This research paper makes a thematic evaluation of Ruskin Bond's delicate short story, "The Story of Madhu". Through an attentive review of the text, this study tries to find out the major themes which stem out in the narrative, as childhood innocence, adolescence, human relationships, nature and environment, attraction and adorations. Conducting a thematic study of any work of art facilitates the reader gaining a deeper meaning of the text. It helps in grasping the resemblance of the text with other works of art. By tracking out the literary devices and narrative techniques practiced by Bond, this research finds out the ways in which Bond carves an impressive portrayal of childhood. The outcomes of this theme-oriented study will contribute in developing the greater understanding of complexities and significance of relations in life. This study also brings the understanding of Bond's power of observation in his literary writing and grasp the importance of his works in Indian literature. This study considers on the socio-cultural perspectives of this story and also focuses on the significance of Bond's themes in literary and cultural debates in the present time, making it a worthy contribution to the field of literary studies.

**Keywords:** Ruskin Bond, Thematic Study, Symbolism, Childhood Innocence, Nature, Human Relationships, Identity, Indian Literature

## 1. INTRODUCTION

### 1.1. RESEARCH QUESTION

- 1) What are the dominant themes in 'The Story of Madhu' and how do they reflect the author's perspective of human relations and childhood?
- 2) What role is played by nature in shaping a child's growth?
- 3) How does 'The Story of Madhu' explores the complexities of human relations: in context of childhood, friendship and family?
- 4) What message does Ruskin Bond convey through the themes of 'The Story of Madhu' to the society?
- 5) What are the stories other than 'The Story of Madhu' that resemble or offer compare and contrast study?

## 2. METHODOLOGY

This study follows qualitative research methods. The main focus of the research is on themes, characters and literary devices. It follows close reading, highlights passages suggesting thematic patterns, symbolisms and imageries. This study collects data from the passages of the story itself. It analyses data, observing the binary opposite, thematic layers and narrative structure. This study limits itself to the thematic study of the narrative.

## 3. LITERATURE REVIEW

The book 'a critical evaluation' offers critical study of the story of Madhu. A book 'Ruskin Bond a study of human emotions suggests thematic insights and resemblance of this story. Md. Mijanur Rahaman's article 'Exploring the Theme of Love and Romance in Ruskin Bond's Selected Amorous Stories'. UP board old English book for intermediate contains Tagore's short story 'Home Coming, and Poetry Foundation website page offers Wordsworth's poetry collection.

## 4. INTRODUCTION

Ruskin Bond is one of those writers who have seen the pre- and post-independence era of India. Bond has written posthumously. His writing touches a great number of genres in literary field like novels, short stories, travelogue, poems, autobiography, diary, short notes, journal articles etc. Bond has experimented with a variety of themes through his work. He develops his stories on emotional grounds. Although 'The Story of Madhu' is a short story, the underflow of a number of themes keeps shimmering from behind. A deep study would be fruitful in placing the story on social, cultural, emotional and psychological platforms.

## 5. THEMATIC ANALYSYS

Theme of Observation and Curiosity: The story starts with sudden observation by the narrator "I saw a young girl of about nine, wearing torn clothes, darting about on a pathway and along the high banks of the tank". (BOND, 2021) Simultaneously he saw that the girl was also noticing him, "sometimes she stopped to look at me; (BOND, 2021) observation and curiosity are the basic traits of nature. They not only belong to human being but the animal offsprings also learn through their observation. These traits help in growth, learning and development.

Theme of Initial hesitation and encouragement: Hesitation is the result of not being familiar with someone or something. It restricts one from doing something but the mechanism of encouragement, motivation internal or external pushes one to perform something. The girl's hesitation restricted her but curiosity enforced her to have a look at the narrator. He says, "when I showed that I noticed her, she felt encouraged and gave me a shy, fleeting smile." (BOND, 2021)

Theme of Interest developing: Interest is the outcome of small achievements because achievements bring appraisals and encouragement. An honest welcome from someone also develops interest. Bond says, "the next day I discovered her leaning over the garden wall, following m, following my actions as I paced up and down on the grass." (BOND, 2021) The girl was not receiving any restrictions but light welcoming gestures from the narrator which encouraged her move into the garden.

Theme of the formation of bond: The earlier paragraph of the story describes the growing comfort, confidence and interest between the narrator and the small girl. Their strengthening bond is candid which is the outcome of their growing familiarity due to every day small meets. The narrator remarks, "In a few days an acquaintance had been formed." (BOND, 2021). It was the formation of deep rooted relationship and emotional bonding that the narrator says, "I began to take the girl's presence for granted, and even to look for her; and she, in turn, would linger about the pathway until she saw me come out of the house." (BOND, 2021)

Theme of emotional involvement: The regular observation from the narrator leads him to emotional involvements and bounds him to interact with the small girl, who was shifting from just a stranger to an acquainted one. The narrator notes, "One day, as she passed the gate, I called her to me. 'What is your name? I asked. 'And where do you live?' (BOND, 2021)

Theme of unconventional family: Having an introduction of Madhu the narrator came to know that she lived with her grandmother and she was not her real grandmother. He recounts, "I discovered later that the old lady was not her grandmother but a childless woman." (BOND, 2021) Thus Madhu had no conventional family as father, mother, brother and sisters. This may have been the reason behind her interest in the narrator who welcomed her with open heart.

Theme of girl child abandonment: The narrator found out that Madhu was an orphan child. The phrase "The baby girl on the bank of the tank" (BOND, 2021) has deep meanings. It indicates many reasons behind that. It may be due to poverty that her parents left her there simultaneously the social mentality where girls are devalued or being unable to legitimate one's parenthood could have created the situation of abandoning the baby girl.

Theme of compassion, social responsibility and hope: The old woman found the girl on a pond bank. Being childless she saw hope of enjoying motherhood with the infant girl. Her compassion and concerns for the girl child shows her broad mindedness at such a senior age. She dares to bring up the child. The narrator records, "The wizened old woman had, out of compassion, brought up the child as her own." (BOND, 2021) Thus Madhu came as the hope of happiness whether it be the life of the old lady or the life of the narrator.

Theme of observing capacity in children: Through Madhu the narrator mentions the fast-learning capacity in their early growing years. Children show great grasping power if they are loved, cared and guided well. In the story the narrator arranges a local teacher to teach Madhu. He amazingly finds, "In a few weeks Madhu was surprising us with her capacity of absorbing knowledge." (BOND, 2021)

Theme of educational curiosity: Education opens mind; it creates more curiosity in the learner in the form of rising interest in particular subject. So was with Madhu as she started learning lessons her curiosity found path. The narrator remembers, "She always came to me to repeat the lessons of the day, and pestered me with questions on a variety of subjects. How big was the world? And were the stars really like our world? Or were they the sons and daughters of the sun and the moon?" (BOND, 2021)

Theme of trust in relation: The narrator starts feeling deeply bonded with Madhu. Their relationship was founded on trust. The narrator remarks, "She sat on the grass beside me, reading aloud, or listening to me with a look of complete trust and belief". (BOND, 2021) Madhu symbolises complete trust. It was all trust that Madhu's grandmother never appears in the story to search her, or Madhu revised her lesson sitting beside the narrator further it was the narrator's trust in himself that he had pure feeling for Madhu without any hidden desires.

Theme of loneliness and togetherness: The story runs on the theme of loneliness and togetherness. There are three individuals the old lady, the narrator and a small girl of nine, Madhu. All of them were alone and none of them fails to grasp the opportunity of being together with someone. The old lady adopts an orphan girl child, the girl develops attachment for the narrator, and the narrator himself admits, "All the love that had been lying dormant in me during my years of self-exile surfaced in a sudden surge of tenderness". (BOND, 2021)

Theme of societal limitations: As Madhu enters her adolescence, the narrator started feeling his responsibility of keeping distance from her. He knows the social limitations. He accepts that: "I began to feel certain responsibility towards her.

It was dangerous, I knew, to allow a child so pretty to live almost alone and unprecedented, and to run unrestrained about the grounds. And in a censorious society she would be made to suffer if she spent too much time in my company." (BOND, 2021)

Theme of poverty Vs richness: The narrator gets shocked seeing the poor condition of Madhu's mud hut when he went to her house to see her. He felt regretted to find the condition of her hut. He remarks in full grief, "It struck me then how little, during all this time, I had thought of her physical comforts there was no chair; I knelt down, and took her hand in mine." (BOND, 2021) As the narrator held her hand he says "She recognized my touch, and a smile passed across her cheek." (BOND, 2021) These lines express the idea of that even being poor Madhu was emotionally rich. She had a great value for their bonding the following lines are quite supportive to this idea, "In a corner lay Madhu's little treasure. I recognized among them the presents which during the past four years I had given her. She had kept everything. On her dark arm she still wore a small piece of ribbon which I had playfully tied there about a year ago." (BOND, 2021)

Theme of unnoticed dip into a relationship: The little growing girl Madhu had no idea how pure, innocent, charming and honest emotions she had for the narrator. She did not know or recognize her growing feelings for the narrator. It was sheer friendship she could define about that relationship. The narrator flares, "She had given her heart, even before

she was conscious of possessing one, to a stranger unworthy of the gift." (BOND, 2021) It was an unnoticed dip into a different relationship, more intimate than friendship.

Theme of overwhelming love and care: Madhu was seriously ill. "She knew she was dying, but she did not resent it's happening." (BOND, 2021) She slowly pressed the narrator's hand and questioned, "Who will read to you under the tree? She went on. Who will look after you/ she asked with the solicitude of a grown woman." (BOND, 2021). It was her care and concern which was fountaining such overwhelming thought for the narrator. Madhu was slipping to unconsciousness but she was thinking of him only. She symbolizes care and concern mechanism of every female.

Theme of contrasting circumstances: The story ends with the contrasting circumstances of life. "The old woman was standing at my shoulder. A hundred years – and little Madhu was slipping away." The same theme underflows again when the narrator observes, "I think shew knew that she was dying but she did not recent it's happening." She shows her concerns about who will take care of the narrator. On another place where the narrator gets struck to see the living conditions of Madhu with whom he spent three years but never tried to know her living conditions. "The wizened old woman had, out of compassion, brought up the child as her own." (BOND, 2021) A lady who herself was reaching her hundred, dares taking responsibility of an infant baby girl, who not only needed love and care but protection too.

## 6. LITERARY DEVICES AND TECHNIQUES

Imagery and symbolism: Ruskin Bond's writing is always full of imageries. He is an expert in holding the hand of the readers and make them feel, visualize, hear and taste what he serves through his word imageries. In 'The Story of Madhu' he uses the visual imagery in the stating. When he says such as "obscure town near the Himalayan foothills", "beneath an old mango tree", "lying over the garden wall" etc. He uses auditory imagery when he hears "her voice brimming with laughter", kinesthetics imagery is created when Madhu "flitting about between the trees" or "stalking squirrels and Mynahs" further the narrator uses simile to show the frailty of the young child. "She was very slight and frail, like a flower growing in a rock. Vulnerable to wind and rain." Further Bond uses natural imageries and imageries related to emotional state "clapped her hand with pleasure" unfolds Madhu's joy and excitement. "Blossoming into a woman" relates her to the imagery of growth and development.

Ruskin Bond's stories are rich in symbols. He uses them to draw deeper lines and give more meanings in less words. His symbols indicate the underflowing themes such as "the small district town"-his own life, "books"-a great love for reading, "old mango tree"-a pious tree in Hinduism where a pure relationship fruits. "the rented house"-short time relationship or short duration refuge, "torn clothes"- poverty, "gate"-the gate to heart to relationship, "Madhu"-sweet bonding, nutritious, bringing happiness, pure medicine for all pain, "baby girl"- glimpses of the social mentality, "nosegay"- fragrance bunch of colourful flowers, delicateness, " middle of June"-middle of relationship, " mud hut"- crude, immature, temporary relationship, "dark room"-negativity, "chair"-symbolises comfort, "ribbon"-relationship ,bond, "school"-separation, fear, forceful treatment, "old women"- resilience and death.

Narrative structure: The story of a small girl who grows a bonding with a stranger whom she meets by chance. They develop a truthful, dependable and pure relationship. It could be defined as a friendship of a small girl of nine with a senior boy in his late twenties. The narrator feels societal restraints when the girl enters in her adolescence. The story touches the climax when the narrator declares to send her to a mission school and the falling action takes place with the girl falling ill. The resolution occurs with her lying unconscious or may be dead.

There are three characters in the story. They symbolise different age groups. The major character is the girl and the narrator and minor character is the grandmother. The whole story revolves around Madhu and offers to study the emotional development from just an innocent small girl into a concerned young friend.

The story is set in the foothill of Himalayas and Shivalik range. A small district of the mountains surrounded by forests and narrow paths. The story develops under an old mango tree of a rented house which had a small garden. It was surrounded by some huts and a pond.

In the story of Madhu, the climax takes place when the narrator declares to send Madhu to mission school. The most powerful words "But why?" from Madhu turn the whole story upside down. Madhu gets shocked. she didn't want to leave the narrator. She somehow agrees to go but superficially, separation from the narrator was a great loss for her, which the narrator couldn't understand.

Madhu's falling ill and suffering from high fever takes the story towards falling action. the narrator's plan to separate the girl from himself get stuck with the cot of the mud house. His words had great value for Madhu. The evening, the dark room, the silence, fever all work as symbol of approaching end. The story of Madhu arrives at the end with the passing away of the young girl. The loneliness of the narrator takes a U turn and meets him once again.

## 7. CRITICAL ANALYSIS

Author's intent: Ruskin Bond intends to offer a story of an orphan and abandoned girl child who wishes to fulfil her emptiness of family relations in a stranger. Bond draws a picture of contrasting people in the same society where some resonate with the conservative mentality and some stand with the idea of broadmindedness. Simultaneously the author focuses the physical and psychological growth of a female child in a suggestive manner. How words can deeply impact an adolescent can be understood reading this story.

Thematic resonance: Bond's 'The story of Madhu' strikes out the theme of growth of a child in the lap of nature. Bond records that, "She was there every morning, chasing butterflies, stalking squirrels and mynahs, her voice brimming with laughter, her slight figure flitting about between the trees." (BOND, 2021) His observation resembles the theme of growth and education in 'Three Years She Grows' by Wordsworth:

"She shall be sportive as the fawn  
That wild with glee across the lawn  
Or up the mountain springs;  
And hers shall be the breathing balm,  
And hers the silence and the calm  
Of mute insensate things."

Besides the gesture of presenting nasegaj even having no money by the girl, in turn to the narrator for his gifts of small toys and dress, indicates her emotional sublimity. Wordsworth in his poem 'The Rainbow' says "Child is the father of man." That a child with all innocence can touch such levels of maturity which are expected from elders. Further the illness of Madhu reminds the reader the story by Tagore, 'Home Coming' in which Pathik a mischievous village boy is sent to his maternal uncle by her mother who could not bear the separation from his mother and fell ill and suffers death. Sinha, Jauhari, and Dave also support this idea "'The Story of Madhu' is a tragic story. It can be compared to Rabindranath Tagore's 'Home Coming'." (M.P. Sinha, 2012) Same way Madhu could not bear the approaching isolation. Thus, Bond showcases a heart throbbing story of tender togetherness and touching separation.

Comparison with Bond's other work: Bond's 'The Story of Madhu' can be compared focussing on the theme of attachment with Bond's another story with leading female character, 'The School Among the Pines'. In both these stories female protagonists are small girls who are attached to something. One is attached to further studies and one is attached to the narrator. Binya in 'School Among the Pines' sacrifices her comfort and determines to go to next hill faraway village to pursue her studies while Madhu sacrifices her life with high fever for not being able to bear the separation from the narrator. Both of them are sharp girls. Both enjoy study. Both have the sense of responsibility. Sangeeta Budhiraja says, "'The Story of Madhu' is thematically used in another story, 'Most Beautiful' wherein the narrator successfully succeeds in proving that humane treatment, love and affection are most powerful cure." (Budhiraja, 2020)

## 8. CONCLUSION

Summary of finding: Besides describing the themes of childhood innocence, human relationships, nature's influence etc. there is a universal appeal in the theme of observation and curiosity that steps further with the theme of hesitation and encouragement. Hesitation can be created by demotivation and encouragement can be created by motivation. The narrator has well used the character of a growing girl to put the theme of hesitation and encouragement. The theme of developing interest suggests that it could be grown externally and internally.

The story suggests that growth of any relation is reciprocal. Relationship is a mutual and roundup development. It works on a spiral format. Further the theme of emotional growth is showcased through the development and evolution of relationship.



Being orphan can be a cause of someone's finding happiness in other's company. Madhu would have founded every family relation in the narrator that drew her close to the narrator. It suggests an unknown relationship may contain all relations.

Describing a girl child's delicateness has a message to the society also. It is a try to raise feeling and concern in those who illtreat other's children. It has the message that every child is soft and delicate as a flower. She should never be thrown and abandoned. Every child is a social responsibility. A child girl should be brought up with love and care.

Significance of the story: The significance of this short story is that it encapsulates a number of theories as of child psychology, anthropology, geography, culture and society, naturalism, existentialism, nihilism etc. In Bond's story it's rare that children meet death. "Madhu is a category apart from all other female characters in the novellas and stories discussed in this study. (Budhiraja, 2020)" Sinha, Jauhari, and Dave say, "This short story narrated by an adult about an adolescent is not only touching and technically perfect but also a true depiction of the adolescent heart and emotions. An adolescent is still unaware of the ways of the world. He or she is emotionally tied to his or her near and dear." (M.P. Sinha, 2012)

## 9. FUTURE RESEARCH

The story of Madhu presents the scope of study in the field of ecocriticism, autobiographical elements, cultural and social contexts, compare and contrast studies, English language teaching. Apart from ever discussed ecocriticism in Ruskin Bond, feministic approach, Marxism, psycho analysis, deconstruction and structuralism also offer fields to future research.

## CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

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