

Weaving Values into Words: Ethos and Ethics in the Works of Ruskin Bond and Sudha Murthy

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Abstract

The reflection of ethos and ethics in literature offers profound insights into human values, cultural norms, and moral choices. This study examines how Ruskin Bond and Sudha Murthy, two eminent voices in Indian English literature, integrate ethos and ethical considerations into their narratives. Through selected works, the paper analyzes how both authors convey moral sensibilities, reinforce cultural identity, and inspire humane values, rendering their works timeless and relevant across generations.

Keywords: Ethos, Ethics, Indian values, moral literature

INTRODUCTION

Literature has long been recognized as both a mirror and a mold of society, simultaneously reflecting the values of a given culture and shaping the moral sensibilities of its readers. From the epics of antiquity to the prose of the modern era, authors have woven into their narratives the concepts of ethos, the moral character and cultural identity of a community, and ethics—the guiding principles that define right and wrong. These ideas are not confined to philosophical discourse; rather, they function as lived realities, shaping human relationships, influencing social conduct, and fostering a shared sense of meaning across generations. Within the field of Indian English literature, ethos and ethics often emerge as intertwined forces that preserve cultural heritage while addressing the evolving moral challenges of contemporary life. Among the many authors contributing to this literary tradition, Ruskin Bond and Sudha Murthy hold a distinctive place. Their writings, though divergent in style and thematic focus, share a commitment to portraying the human condition with moral clarity and cultural depth.

Ruskin Bond, through works such as *Dust on the Mountain* and *No Man Is an Island*, draws upon the serene landscapes of the Indian Himalayas, crafting narratives suffused with a quiet humanism and a deep reverence for nature. His ethos is rooted in simplicity, intimacy with the natural world, and an appreciation of everyday human interactions. Ethical values in his stories often unfold subtly, revealed through the actions, choices, and transformations of his characters rather than through overt moral instruction.

Sudha Murthy, in contrast, approaches storytelling from a perspective shaped by social engagement and lived experience. Collections such as *Wise and Otherwise*, *The Old Man and His God*, *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read*, and *The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk* reflect an ethos anchored in Indian traditions, community life, and grassroots realities. Her ethical vision is conveyed through direct, purposeful narratives that emphasize honesty, humility, compassion, and social responsibility. Many of her stories function as moral parables, encouraging readers to reflect on their own values and actions. While Bond's reflective, nature-infused prose and Murthy's pragmatic, socially conscious style may appear to inhabit different literary terrains, both converge in their underlying belief in ethical living and the preservation of human dignity. Their narratives speak not only to an Indian audience but also to a global readership, demonstrating that culturally specific storytelling can hold universal moral resonance.

This study undertakes a comparative analysis of selected works by Ruskin Bond and Sudha Murthy, with particular attention to how ethos and ethics are interwoven in their storytelling. By examining their thematic concerns, narrative techniques, and moral vision, the paper aims to contribute to the broader discourse on the role of literature in shaping ethical consciousness and sustaining cultural identity in an age of rapid social change.

Ethos and Ethics in Literature

Ethos refers to the spirit, moral character, or guiding beliefs of an individual, community, or culture, often conveyed through literature. Ethics, by contrast, concerns moral principles that govern behavior. In literary works, ethos shapes characters' motivations and perspectives, while ethical dilemmas and

resolutions drive narrative development. Through ethos and ethics, literature not only entertains but also educates, offering direct or subtle commentary on the right ways to live and interact with others. Bond and Murthy incorporate these elements organically. Their stories are not overtly didactic but communicate values through authentic depictions of honesty, compassion, humility, and respect for relationships.

Ethos and Ethics in the Works of Ruskin Bond

Ruskin Bond's literary universe is deeply infused with the ethos of the Indian hill regions; marked by simplicity, harmonious coexistence with nature, and a gentle but persistent engagement with ethical questions. His narratives often eschew overt moralizing, instead allowing values to emerge organically from everyday experiences. Despite his Anglo-Indian lineage, Bond demonstrates a deep affinity with Indian cultural sensibilities, portraying the customs, landscapes, and moral fabric of the country with authenticity. His work reflects not only the aesthetics of Himalayan life but also its moral compass, rooted in humility, empathy, and respect for the interconnectedness of all beings.

Celebration of Innocence and Simplicity

Bond's celebration of innocence manifests most vividly in his portrayals of rural life and morally formative encounters. Works such as *The Blue Umbrella* (1980), *The Thief* (1986), and *The Night Train at Deoli* (1988) depict youthful protagonists negotiating moral dilemmas, often leading to personal transformation. In *The Blue Umbrella*, the young village girl Binya's act of relinquishing her beloved umbrella to a remorseful shopkeeper reflects generosity, forgiveness, and the relinquishment of ego in favor of human connection (Bond, *The Blue Umbrella*). In *The Thief*, a fifteen-year-old orphan discovers the value of trust and self-respect under the guidance of a compassionate employer, underscoring the ethical power of kindness and second chances (Bond, *Collected Short Stories*). *The Night Train at Deoli* captures a different shade of innocence—an ephemeral romance that, while never fulfilled, leaves a lasting emotional imprint, suggesting that fleeting moments can hold enduring moral significance.

Deep Connection with Nature

For Bond, nature functions as both a physical setting and a moral touchstone. His essays in *Rain in the Mountains* (1993) embody a reverence for the environment, advocating a life lived in harmony with ecological rhythms. The short story *The Cherry Tree* portrays a young boy's tender care for a sapling, serving as an allegory for patience, nurturing, and the rewards of sustained effort (Bond, *The Cherry Tree*). In *The Panther's Moon*, animals are depicted with empathy, inviting readers to consider coexistence over human dominance. Bond's prose—suffused with imagery of mist-draped mornings, the hush of pine forests, and the music of monsoon rains—offers readers more than scenic beauty; it provides a meditative space where nature encourages reflection on humility, impermanence, and moral balance.

Human Relationships and Compassion

Interpersonal relationships in Bond's works are often grounded in compassion, mutual respect, and cross-cultural understanding. In *A Flight of Pigeons* (1978), set against the turbulence of the 1857 revolt, compassion transcends entrenched religious and political divides, suggesting that empathy is a force stronger than historical animosity (Bond, *A Flight of Pigeons*). Whether through enduring friendships, the tenderness of family bonds, or spontaneous acts of kindness between strangers, Bond's narratives consistently reveal the quiet resilience of human connection. His characters embody a form of ethical living that is understated yet profound—rooted not in grand gestures, but in the everyday practice of decency.

Ethos and Ethics in the Works of Sudha Murthy

Moral Education through Storytelling

Sudha Murthy's works exemplify the power of storytelling as a vehicle for moral education, weaving ethics seamlessly into everyday scenarios drawn largely from her personal encounters and grassroots experiences in rural India. Her collections *Wise and Otherwise* (2002) and *The Day I Stopped Drinking Milk* (2012) combine engaging narratives with moral instruction, offering lessons on honesty, humility, compassion, and social responsibility. Through simple yet poignant vignettes, Murthy transforms ordinary situations into moments of ethical reflection. For instance, in *Wise and Otherwise*, the story of an elderly man abandoned at a temple illustrates the consequences of selfishness and neglect, underscoring the value of filial piety and human dignity (Murthy, *Wise and Otherwise*). By grounding her moral lessons in familiar cultural contexts, Murthy ensures that her readers, especially young audiences, can relate to and internalize these values.

Upliftment of the Underprivileged

Murthy's ethos is deeply intertwined with her commitment to the upliftment of marginalized communities, reflecting her dual identity as both a storyteller and a social worker. *Three Thousand Stitches* (2017) recounts her efforts in rehabilitating former devadasis, highlighting education and dignity as transformative tools for social change. Her narratives in *Wise and Otherwise* demonstrate that even modest acts, such as providing a scholarship or mentoring a child can create generational impact. These works not only document acts of charity but also challenge societal prejudices, revealing how empathy and proactive engagement can dismantle entrenched inequalities. Through these stories, Murthy reframes philanthropy not as an act of condescension but as a moral duty arising from shared humanity.

Humility and Simplicity

Central to Murthy's ethical vision is the belief that true worth lies in humility and simplicity. *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read* (2004) conveys the importance of gratitude, respect for learning, and lifelong intellectual curiosity. The grandmother's determination to learn Kannada at the age of sixty-two challenges societal assumptions about age and education, while also emphasizing that the pursuit of knowledge transcends social and generational boundaries (Murthy, *How I Taught My Grandmother to Read*). Murthy often juxtaposes the moral clarity of her humble characters with the vanity of the privileged, reinforcing the idea that material wealth does not necessarily correspond to ethical integrity. Her plain-spoken narrative style mirrors the simplicity she advocates, ensuring that her ethical messages remain accessible to a wide readership.

While both Ruskin Bond and Sudha Murthy engage deeply with ethical themes, their narrative ethos emerges from distinct yet complementary sources. Bond's moral universe is anchored in the rhythms of nature, the intimacy of personal relationships, and the quiet contemplation of life's fleeting beauty, often conveyed through a lyrical and meditative style. In contrast, Murthy's ethos is rooted in the moral and social fabric of contemporary India, articulated through purposeful, anecdotal storytelling that draws directly from lived experiences and cultural traditions. Bond's ethics emerge subtly, through understated narrative moments, whereas Murthy's are often delivered with directness, framed as explicit moral takeaways. Yet, despite these stylistic divergences, both converge on a shared conviction: that enduring goodness resides in small, consistent acts of kindness, forgiveness, and empathy, and that moral transformation is attainable for anyone willing to act with sincerity and compassion.

CONCLUSION

The literary landscapes of Ruskin Bond and Sudha Murthy present a profound and complementary dialogue between ethos and ethics, each articulating a distinctive yet convergent vision of Indian morality, cultural continuity, and human interconnectedness. Bond's oeuvre, suffused with the lyricism of nature and the understated depth of emotional resonance, reveals a moral universe in which simplicity, harmony, and quiet reflection serve as guiding principles. His portrayals of rural life and the natural world offer a contemplative ethical framework—one where moral insight emerges organically through human relationships, patience, and a deep respect for the environment.

In contrast, Murthy's narratives emphasize direct social engagement, community upliftment, and the active practice of ethical principles in everyday life. Drawing from her lived experiences and philanthropic work, she crafts stories that celebrate humility, resilience, and the transformative power of compassion. Her works encourage readers not only to reflect on ethical ideals but to embody them in tangible, socially constructive actions.

Together, Bond and Murthy demonstrate that the sustenance of moral life is not dependent upon grand, performative gestures; rather, it resides in the small, deliberate choices made in the flow of daily existence. Whether through Bond's meditative storytelling or Murthy's pragmatic moral instruction, both reaffirm that kindness, forgiveness, humility, and empathy are the quiet forces that preserve the moral fabric of society.

In their different narrative modes, they also embody the philosophical underpinnings of Indian cultural thought: Bond's nature-infused moral sensibility resonates with the Upanishadic principle of *Vasudhaiva Kutumbakam*—the idea that the world is one family—while Murthy's social activism reflects Gandhian ideals of *seva* (selfless service) and *sarvodaya* (welfare of all). By synthesizing these values into their literary worlds, Bond and Murthy preserve and transmit the essence of Indianness, affirming that cultural memory and ethical practice are not static relics, but living, dynamic forces essential to the human condition

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