

A Critical Appraisal of Ruskin Bond's 'The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories'

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ABSTRACT

Ruskin Bond's 'The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories' with 30 simple short stories is a compilation of some of his best work. The tales are a slice of life and an ode to the place & times Ruskin Bond grew up in. Primarily set in Mussorie, Dehradun and Shimla, where Bond has spend a good part of his life (he still lives in Mussorie), his love for the hills, nature and the people living there clearly reflects in his writing. The central theme of all the stories in Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories is 'Love' in some shape.

1. Introduction

Ruskin Bond has been a very important Indian English writer of British descent. He occupies an outstanding position among the contemporary Indian English writers. He has written short stories, novels, poems, essays, travelogues and many other things. He is being awarded the N. D. Mehra Memorial Award for 2003 for his contribution to children's literature at the New Delhi World Book Fair. He has been nominated for Astrid Lindgren Memorial Award 2005. He is the only Indian author to figure among the 87 nominees from 33 countries. Ruskin Bond got the Sahitya Academy Award for English writing in 1992 for his book *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* and honoured with the prestigious Padamshree by the Indian government in 1999 for his life time contribution to Indian English literature.

Ruskin Bond has published a number of collections of short stories. His favourite subjects or themes are pets, animals and a variety of the have-nots, including waifs, orphans, abnormal children, restless adolescents and frustrated old men whom he portrays with genuine compassion.

2. The Night Train At Deoli And Other Stories

In The Night Train At Deoli And Other Stories, Bond has written short stories on mysticism, animals, waifs, orphans, abnormal children, nature, love and the portrayal of people. In short. Bond has given us variety of themes. Some stories on animals e.g. in 'The Monkeys', 'Panther's Moon' and 'The Leopard'. In these stories animal play very important roles.

In the story of 'Panther's Moon'. Bisnu is the central character. He has a big dog called Sheroo. Everyday, except Sunday Bisnu walks for five miles to school; and in the evening, he walks home again with his dog, Sheroo. There is no school in his own small village of Manjari. The nearest school is at Kemptee, a small township on the bus route through the district of Garhwal. Bisnu's village lay right at the bottom of the mountain, a drop of over two thousand feet from Kemptee. There are no roads between the village and the town.

One day, Sheroo had been seized by a Panther, and killed. So next morning, when Bisnu's mother gives him his food, she tells him to be careful and to hurry home that evening. A panther, even if it is only a cowardly lifter of sheep or dogs, is not to be trifled with. And this particular panther had shown some daring by seizing the dog even before it was dark. At last, one day the people kill the panther by axes. In this way, Bond reveals the struggle between men and animals.

Some of Bond's most favourite themes are waifs, orphans and abnormal children. He has written thirty books for children in the course of his long writing career. In The Night Train At Deoli And Other Stories. Bond has written some stories on waifs e.g. in 'The Thief' and 'The Boy who Broke The Bank'.

In 'The Thief', the thief's age is only fifteen and he is waived. He is the central character in this story. He is a thief and a good for nothing fellow in the beginning of the story. But contact with narrator brings him to the right path and at the end of the story he becomes a good servant in the narrator's house.

In the other story, 'The Boy who Broke The Bank.' Nathu is the central character. He is a sweeper boy in the Pipalnagar Bank. He has no idea about the Pipalnagar Bank's collapse. Because in the last sentence of this story, Nathu says.

'I wonder how it could have happened'¹

'Bus Stop, Pipalnagar', this story's theme revolves around the orphan and abnormal child, Suraj. Suraj is the central character in this story. In this story the narrator describes Suraj's life. He is an orphan and abnormal child. He did not know whether his parents were dead or alive, as he has lost his parents at Amritsar railway station during the days of the partition. When trains, coming across the border from Pakistan, disgorged themselves of thousands of refugees or pulled into the station half-empty, drenched with blood and littered with corpses.

Finally Suraj stays at an orphanage for two years and when he is eight and feels himself a man, he runs away. He works for some time as a helper in a teashop; but when he starts having epileptic fits, the shopkeeper asks him to leave, and the boy finds himself on the streets, begging for a living. He begs for a year, moving from one town to the next and ending up finally at Pipalnagar. By that time he is twelve and really too old to beg, but he had saved money; and with it he bought a small stock of combs, bottoms, cheap, perfumes and bangles and converting himself into a mobile shop, goes from door to door selling his wares. Pipalnagar is a small town and there are no houses, which Suraj hadn't visited. Everyone knew him, some had offered him food and drink, and the children liked him because he often played on a small flute when he went on his rounds.

Another theme in Bond's stories is mysticism. In *The Night Train At Deoli And Other Stories*, he has written some story on mysticism e.g. in 'A Face in the Night'. 'The Monkeys' and 'The Man Who Was Kipling' are adequate, though by no means brilliant. In 'A Face in the Night' in the beginning of the story, the Narrator states.

It may give you some idea of rural humor if I begin this tale. I was walking alone at night when I met an old man currying a lantern. I surprised that the man was blind. I asked old man if you cannot see, why do you carry a lantern. He replied that he carried this so that fools do not stumble against me in the dark. This incident has only a slight connection with the story that follows, but I think, it provides the right sort of tone and setting.²

In this way Mr. Oliver is the central character in this story. He is a bachelor. He is an Anglo-Indian teacher in school at Simla. He has been teaching in the school for several years (He is no longer there).

One night Mr. Oliver carries a torch. When its flickering light falls on the figure of a boy, who is sitting alone on a rock. Mr. Oliver senses that something is wrong with a boy. The boy appears to be crying. His head hung down, he holds his face in his hands and his body shook convulsively. It is strange because soundless weeping so Mr. Oliver feels distinctly uneasy. Mr. Oliver says, well – what is the matter ?" But the boy will not answer or look up. His body continues to be racked with silent sobbing. Come on boy, you shall not be out here at this hour. Tell me the trouble. The boy looks up. He takes his hands from his face and looks up at his teacher. The light from Mr. Oliver's torch falls on the boy's face – if you can call it a face. He has no eyes, ears, nose or mouth. It is just a round smooth head – with a school cap on top of it. And that's where the story should end – as indeed it has, for several people who have had similar experiences and dropped dead of inexplicable heart attacks. But for Mr. Oliver it did not end there. The torch falls from his trembling hand. Mr. Oliver turns and scrambles down the path. He runs blindly through the tress and calling for help. He is still running towards the school buildings when he sees a lantern swinging in the middle of the path. Mr. Oliver has never before been so pleased to see the night watchman. Watchman says, "What is

it, Sahib ?" Mr. Oliver answers, I see something-something horrible. A boy has no face, eyes, nose or mouth nothing, watchman says, Do you mean it is like this, Sahib ? And he raises the lamp to his own face. The watchman has no eyes, no ears, and no features at all – not even an eyebrow ! The wind blew the lamp out and Mr. Oliver had his heart attack.

Another Bond's most favorite themes are childhood and boyhood. In *The Night Train At Deoli And Other Stories*. Bond has written some stories on childhood and boyhood. He is at his best in evoking a mood of nostalgia for the vanished sights and scenes of boyhood and childhood of the pathos of the inexorable march of time, as in 'The Photograph', 'A Guardian Angel', 'My Father's Trees in Dehra', 'A Job well Done'.

In 'The Photograph', the narrator is ten years old. He describes 'his grandmother's past life. And he talks about grandmother's old photograph. He finds it in the box of old things.

In 'A Guardian Angel', the narrator describes his Aunt Mariam's life and nature. And also describes his childhood's life. In the last sentence of this story. Narrator says. 'She is the very special guardian angel of my childhood'³

In 'My Father's Trees in Dehra', the Narrator describes his family member's life and also describes his childhood. His childhood passes at Dehra. In the last sentence of this story, Narrator says. 'My father's dreams are coming true and the trees are moving again.'⁴

In 'A Job Well Done', the Narrator reveals two characters. First character is his step, father, Major Summerskill. The other is Dhuki, who is a gardener in his house. In this story, the narrator talks about his step-father's nature. Mr. Major Summer skill is a tall hearty, back-slapping man, who likes polo and pig-sticking. He is quite unlike my father. Because my father has always given me books to read, but the major says I will become a dreamer if I read too much. So he takes the books away. In this way in this story, the narrator hates his step. In short, in all these stories the middle-aged narrator visits a scene of his boyhood and childhood and feels the impact of the change both in the setting and him.

Bond also deals with the theme of Love. In 'introduction' of *The Night Train At Deoli And Other Stories*, Bond says. "Well that's it. I am fifty-four now. No more love stories, and no more falling in love"⁵

Most of his love affairs are unfulfilled. Like 'The Night Train at Deoli'. It is a love story involving narrator and a young girl, who selling baskets on the platform of Deoli. And in this story narrator meets this girls only twice at Deoli station and then this girl, never meets again.

In 'Love is a Sad Song', the narrator describes his love affair with Sushila. After some time Sushila forgets him, in the last sentence of this story, the narrator says. 'I may stop loving

you, Sushila, but I will never stop loving the days I loved you'⁶.

In 'A Love of Long Ago', the narrator meets Kamala and spends some days with her. But end of this story the narrator lost Kamala. Because Kamala marries with another person and she lived in Delhi. In short, the narrator's love remaining unfulfilled in all cases but he never forgets them.

Another important theme in Bond's stories is Nature, the great affinity between trees and men. It is not simply a matter of nature description as a narrative technique, but a genuine feeling for the natural world, which has it somewhat of a Wordsworthian quality about it.

Bond sees man and nature in his own way. He considers men and women as poor creatures because the world is too much with them. This theme of the influence of Nature on man is the noblest part of Bond's teaching. Bond's most of title and description depends, upon nature like 'The Coral Tree', 'The Window', 'The Night Train at Deoli', 'Bus Stop, Pipalnagar', 'The Prospect of Flower's', 'The Cherry Tree', 'My Father's Trees in Dehra'. 'Panther's Moon', 'The Leopard', 'Sita and the River', and 'When You Can't Climb Trees Any More' etc. In all these stories Bond describes nature and it's beautiful treatments.

Nothing is ugly or common place in this world. Everywhere he recognizes personality in nature. From his earliest childhood he regards the streams and hills. The flowers and stars as his companions. When his thoughts became mature, he believed that the nature is the reflection of the living God.

Ruskin Bond's great strength lies in his art of characterization. He is a master creator of characters and he has left behind a whole galaxy of characters. Characters are very central in his art. Bond's stories are peopled with big and small men and women. They are ordinary, simple, educated and uneducated men and women like house servants, shopkeepers, schoolboys, thieves, gardeners, beggars, wrestlers, school-teachers, farmers, soldiers, policemen and drivers and so on. Bond's world is the world of the poor and the middle class people. Bond's greatness can be seen in the originality and naturalness of these characters. His stories are not books printed on paper but worlds full of real living and breathing people.

Bond's true greatness lies in his sharp observation, his knowledge of the joys and pains of ordinary, humble folks, his great sense of humour and above all his kindness for the saints and sinners alike. He rarely talks of philosophy in his books. He is just a great storyteller.

In 'Introduction' of his book *Friends in Small Places*. Ruskin Bond himself rightly says.

Meet some of the people I can never forget. Not..... because they were of great importance or stature but because their individuality made them stand out from the common place. It was not money or success but pride in themselves that set them a part⁷

Bond's characters are realistic and live. He has drawn a few characters belonging to the upper classes but most of his characters are villagers. Like Bisnu, Chitru, Sanjay, Saru, Mela Ram, Kalam Singh, Hukam Singh, Phambiri, Sher Dil Are all the rustic characters. Through their comments we get a lot of information about the gently and the village community. In Bond's young age he knows these rustics well and he carefully observed their speech and manners. He makes full use of his memory and he makes the portrayal of his rustics realistic by making them speak in dialect.

Regarding his delineation of ordinary people. He gives us the thoughts of the ordinary humble men and women, he has known, and sets them against a very unromantic background. They are neither extraordinarily silly, nor extraordinarily wicked, nor extraordinarily wise; their eyes are neither deep and liquid with sentiment, nor sparking with suppressed witticism; they have probably has no hair breadth escapes or thrilling adventures; their brains are certainly not pregnant with genius, and their passions have not manifested themselves at all after the fashion of a volcano. They are men of complexions more or less muddy. Whose conversation is more or less muddy and disjointed? Yet this common people, many of them, have a conscience and have felt the sublime prompting to do the painful right; they have their unspoken sorrows and their sacred joys; their hearts have perhaps gone out towards their first born, and they have mourned, over the irreclaimable dead. His characters appear to be living beings and not the creations of excited imagination. Each one of them has his own peculiarity of speech or manner. His full-scale characters are all drawn from his family circle, close friends and acquaintances. When his short stories appeared the readers could easily trace the originals of most of the characters.

In 'Introduction' of *The Night Train At Deoli And Other Stories*, Bond himself says, "I prefer to write about the people and places I have known and the lives of those whose paths I have crossed. This crossing of paths makes for stories"⁸

3. Conclusion

In conclusion we may say that, Ruskin Bond made his characters absolutely real. His men and women really appear to be creatures of flesh and blood. He can never forget the people like Arun, the old kite maker, Mehmood or the epileptic boy, Suraj or the inspector Keemat Lal etc. These characters are not only for the stories, but also they are my most favourite persons. It means that they are unforgettable people for the author.

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