



Research Paper

Journey of life as a theme in Ruskin Bond's 'The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories'

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ABSTRACT: Ruskin Bond, known as the pioneer of children literature has written well-crafted stories which throw light on various aspects of human behaviour, love for nature and his experiences in the town of Deoli. His stories are mostly autobiographical and his language is simple. By reading his stories, the reader falls in love with his depiction of beautiful ideas like innocence, simplicity and deriving immense pleasure in little things. Ruskin Bond's 'The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories' revolves around the simplicity of nature and the journey of a man from childhood to adulthood; from ignorance to wisdom. This journey makes a man realise that whatever occurs in his life transforms him into a more sensible individual.

KEYWORDS: human behaviour, nature, innocence, journey

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I. INTRODUCTION

'The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories' is a collection of 30 short stories which takes an individual into a journey from his childhood to adulthood. Childhood, the initial stage is the most beautiful part in an individual's life. He grows familiar with new faces like that in the very first story, 'The Woman on Platform 8', where Arun, a school going child met an old lady who kept him company till the train arrived. She was generous at heart because of which Arun agreed to go to a canteen with her to have some food. After spending some time with each other both of them became good friends. After having food, they went to the platform where Arun met his friend Satish and Satish's mother. Satish's mother upon seeing the old lady assumed that she is Arun's mother and addressed her as such. Arun upon hearing this didn't utter a single word as he felt comfortable with the old lady. When the train arrived, Satish's mother asked Arun not to talk to strangers but he in his innocence replied, "I like strangers" (Bond, The Woman on Platform 8, 16)

A man in his childhood is highly sensitive. He, upon seeing what the outside world is all about, tries his best to make it a better place to live in. Such can be seen in the story, 'The Cherry Tree', where Rakesh, a six year old boy shows his sensitiveness towards a cherry tree. "One day he found a bright green praying-mantis perched on a branch, peering at him with bulging eyes. Rakesh let it remain there. It was the cherry tree's first visitor. The next visitor was a hairy caterpillar, who started making a meal of the leaves. Rakesh removed it quickly and dropped it on a heap of dry leaves. Come back when you are a butterfly, he said" (Bond, The Cherry Tree, 136). The writer shows his sensitiveness not only to the cherry tree but also to the caterpillar, probably keeping in mind the food chain of nature.

Sensitiveness of the writer towards all creations of God manifests loudly in the story 'The Story of Madhu' where the narrator became so much emotionally involved with Madhu, a little girl in the neighbourhood that he decided to help her learn how to read and write and so he arranged for a local teacher who will teach Madhu. Later, when Madhu fell ill, he visited her and by looking at her showed his concern by recollecting how much he had thought about her: "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. I knew, from the fierce heat of her body, that she was seriously ill." (Bond, The Story of Madhu, 131)

In the story, 'Panther's Moon', the writer has shown his sensitiveness towards the problems which the poor children face; the education system faces in the rural India. Bisnu, the main protagonist of the story has to travel 5 miles every day to reach his school, "Five miles to school. Every day, except Sunday, Bisnu walked five miles to school; and in the evening, he walked home again. There was no school in his own small village of Manjari, for the village consisted of only five families." (Bond, Panther's Moon, 149) These poor children have no other option rather than to adapt themselves to this kind of difficult situations. But, for the sake of proper

education, they make their mind forget all the pain and with time they grow accustomed to this kind of an environment.

A man upon reaching the stage of adolescence goes through a lot of behavioural changes. He has a different outlook towards the outside world. These behavioural changes make him understand what is good for him and what is not. Such is the case in the story, 'Chachi's Funeral'. Chachi's Funeral is one of the best specimens, which indicate Bond's understanding of child and growing up's psychology in an effective manner. His child and growing up characters behave in the most normal way as found in any social setup. Anger is temporary and love is permanent, is the central idea of this story. Bond indicates how temporary the young boy's anger can be. In this story, Sunil, a 10 year old boy was so much fed up of his aunt that he made up his mind to kill her. To this, his cousin Madhu made a small picture of his Chachi on a piece of paper and with the help of a red crayon made a big heart in the region of Chachi's stomach. She then asked Sunil to stab his aunt on the red mark and Sunil did the same. But then he repents for his act and says, "Perhaps we shouldn't have done it"(Bond, Chachi's Funeral, 30). This sense of guilt is the strength of adolescents.

'The Thief' from 'The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories' is a story about Deepak, a thief who is 15 years old. He is taken as a cook by Arun, a man of about 20 years. Arun took good care of Deepak by teaching him how to write. One fine day, Deepak stole some money which was lying under Arun's mattress and went to the station to catch the Amritsar Express. The story takes an unbelievable turn when Deepak hesitates to go away. He begins to repent for breaking his master's trust and came back to Arun's house. In Adolescent phase, an impulsive human being turns into a mature one. Sense of morality has found its way to a man's heart. Deepak becomes an ambitious boy from a professional thief because he listens to his inner voice saying, "The knowledge that I had a hundred stolen rupees in my pyjamas only increased my feeling of isolation and loneliness."(Bond, The Thief, 41)

An adolescent person often gets infatuated towards beautiful things around him. The perfect example for this can be seen in the story, 'The Night Train at Deoli' where the narrator fell in love with a poor basket seller whom he encounters at a small station while on his way to Dehradun. He meets the girl only twice, never to see her again, but she remains in his memory ever after. He, upon departing from her still remembered her face, "I could not rid my mind of the picture of the girl's face and her dark, smouldering eyes."(Bond, The Night Train at Deoli, 53)

Another example of adolescent infatuation can be seen in the story 'A Love of Long Ago', where the narrator got infatuated towards Kamla who used to tend the flowers of balcony garden and often met him in afternoons. He was fascinated towards her beauty, "She had a laughing face, mischievous, always ready to break into smiles or peals of laughter. Sparkling brown eyes. How can I ever forget those eyes?"(Bond, A Love of Long Ago, 243)

A sense of understanding develops in the mind of an adolescent. He understands what a person is going through when he is lonely, sad and what that person aspires for. This clear understanding can be seen in the story, 'The Prospect of Flowers', where Anil, a young boy was caught plucking some flowers by Miss Mackenzie from her garden. Anil showed deep interest in flowers as in future, he wanted to become a botanist. By looking at his love for flowers, Miss Mackenzie gave him a book, *Flora Himaliensis* which was published in 1892. After that, Anil often visited her several times and upon seeing him, she remembered her brother Andrew. Although Anil didn't resemble her brother but still, it was him who could look through the heart of the lady and could sense her loneliness to a better extent than an adult, "And why did Anil come to see her so often? Partly because she knew about wild flowers, and he really did want to become a botanist. And partly because she smelt of freshly baked bread, and that was a smell his own grandmother had possessed. And partly because she was lonely and sometimes a boy of twelve can sense loneliness better than an adult. And partly because he was a little different from other children." (Bond, The Prospect of Flowers, 113)

After crossing the phase of adolescence, a man reaches the stage of maturity where it becomes easy for him to judge between truth and lies, reality and dreams and above all, he becomes ready to face each and every kind of situations which he encounters in his life. The best example for this can be found in the story, 'Bus Stop, Pipalnagar'. In this story, the narrator shares his experiences in the town of Pipalnagar. One of the experiences show how a matured person for the sake of humanity helps people in need. The narrator was taking a walk in a wheat field where he found a boy who was having fits. The narrator quickly rushed to a Persian well, dipped the end of his shirt in water and soaked it well. He then went towards the boy and sponged his face because of which the boy felt relaxed. The boy upon waking up introduced himself as Suraj and later both of them became good friends. Another experience shows how the narrator was concerned towards Suraj that when he saw that Suraj was sleeping outside the narrator's house since the previous night, he said "Have you been sleeping here all night? I asked. 'Why didn't you come in?' 'It was very late' said Suraj. 'I didn't want to disturb you'. Someone could have stolen your things while you were asleep."(Bond, Bus Stop, Pipalnagar, 62)

A mature person looks into the depth of a particular situation and accordingly finds a suitable solution for it. This can be seen in the story 'A Case for Inspector Lal'. In this story, Inspector Keemat Lal narrates a

case to a little boy which was very sensitive as it was about the murder of the Rani of Panauli. At first, it was difficult to catch the culprit but after thorough investigation, it was clear that a small girl called Kusum was the murderer. The Inspector upon realising the sensitiveness of the matter interrogated the girl in private and he came to know that it was an act of self-defence. Kusum had no intention of murdering the Rani, but the situation was extremely horrible as Kusum was being harassed by one of Rani's friend, Mr Kapur. Kusum after so much of effort managed to free herself but when the Rani sprang at her, she in desperation and panic took an axe and hit the Rani on her head. After that, Kusum in fear ran away. Inspector Lal after knowing the actual truth didn't arrest Kusum. When the narrator asked him that why he didn't do anything, the Inspector replied, "I couldn't have the girl put away in a remand home. It would have crushed her spirit. (Bond, A Case for Inspector Lal, 121)

Maturity holds control over a person when he despite of facing constant hardships stand out to be a strong person and take a step further to make things better for living. The story 'A Guardian Angel' throws light on this idea. In this story, the narrator after losing his parents started living with his aunt whose name was Mariam. She was the perfect example of an angel who didn't pay heed to what people were talking on their backs. She like a mother took good care of her nephew but when things were going out of control as she was being constantly visited by a man to get her favours, she decided that time has come to send her nephew to a boarding school so that he won't get affected by such comings and goings of that man. Her nephew was not in favour of her decision and so she like a teacher convinced him to go to boarding school, "Ten years from now I will not be able to make such a living. Then who will support and help me? An illiterate young fellow, or an educated gentleman? When I am old, my son, when I am old...." (Bond, A Guardian Angel, 86)

A matured person knows that with time, things go through a sea change and one must adapt himself to such kind of an environment. Although there are certain things which do not sound good but that doesn't mean one must stop living his life. In the story 'The Kitemaker', it can be seen that an old kite maker reminisces about the former days where kite flying used to be the most favourable sport of almost everyone, "But the old man remembered a time when grown men flew kites, and great battles were fought, the kites swerving and swooping in the sky, tangling with each other until the string of one was severed. Then the defeated but liberated kite would float away into the blue unknown. There was a good deal of betting, and money frequently changed hands." (Bond, The Kitemaker, 102) Keeping these things in mind, he also throws light on the present reality which has destroyed the very essence of the real happiness, "Not many people bought kites these days. Adults disdained them, children preferred to spend their money at the cinema. Moreover, there were not many open spaces left for the flying of kites. The city had swallowed up the open grassland that had stretched from the old fort's walls to the river bank." (Bond, The Kitemaker, 102) But this kind of situation didn't make Mehmood, the kite maker to stop living. He continued to make kites for his own amusement and also for his grandson Ali. Here, the writer focuses his attention towards the changing lifestyle of people where they have grown so much accustomed to luxuries that they have gone away from the real happiness.

Old Age is the final stage in a person's life. A person in his or her old age is always in need of a company with whom they can share their lifelong experiences- some may be mischievous, child-like or childish, finding a person to talk to or discuss the days gone by- a nostalgic sense of remembrance is always a very yearning feeling at this turn of life. This kind of a situation occurs in the story 'The Photograph'. In this story a young boy finds a photograph of his grandmother and while she was knitting a woollen scarf asked her about the beautiful girl captured in this photo. To this his grandmother replied that she was, "a very wicked girl" (Bond, A Photograph, 22). The writer in this story shows how old people are in need of their dear ones with whom they can have a conversation for a longer period of time just for the sake of spending more and more time with them.

People in their old age can easily feel that death is approaching near but they aren't afraid of death. It seems as if they know that their time has come to depart from this world and join the Almighty. But, the way they welcome death is extremely wonderful as for them they aren't departing away but taking their first step towards the most beautiful part of the world that is heaven. The story, 'The Kitemaker' is a perfect example to throw light on this idea. Mehmood, a former kite maker is about to take his final breath when, "The voices in the street grew fainter, and Mehmood wondered if he was going to fall asleep and dream, as he so often did, of a kite so beautiful and powerful that it would resemble the great white bird of the Hindus, Garuda, God Vishnu's famous steed. He would like to make a wonderful new kite for little Ali. He had nothing else to leave the boy." (Bond, The Kitemaker, 104)

II. CONCLUSION

In this compilation of stories by Ruskin Bond, the author takes the reader along as he travels on the path of nostalgia commencing from his life's dawn to dusk. With his simple and autobiographical style of writing, he makes the reader know or realise the experiences, learning, appreciating life's problems, the culture and philosophy of life as posed by rural India. As the reader goes ahead with these stories, he slips into the life of the author.

Ruskin Bond once attended 'Times Lit Fest' in Delhi on November 26-27, 2016 where he faced an interview with 'Times of India'. There he was asked a question regarding 'from where he finds his stories', 'what motivates him to write' and 'how he develops his plots and characters' he replied, "Well I guess people are stories. If you understand people, you find stories. Then I love the natural world-nature, wildlife, animals, and birds. I write a lot out of my own life too. And the older I have got, the more there is to look back upon: people I have known, friends, incidents, adventures. You don't run out of inspiration."

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