



Exploring The Theme of Love and Romance in Ruskin Bond's Selected Amorous Stories

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ABSTRACT:

In the realm of contemporary Indian English literature, one cannot overlook the profound influence of Ruskin Bond. His name is synonymous with this literary era, earning him immense recognition, especially among young readers. Through his works, both short stories and novellas, Bond has made a significant mark on Indian literature by deftly handling his essential human values, love, and romance.

Ruskin Bond stands as a towering figure in the post-Independence Indian English fiction landscape. Notable among his novels are "The Room on the Roof" (1957), "Vagrants of the Valley" (1993), "Delhi Is Not Far" (written in 1960), and "A Handful of Nuts" (written in 1995). What sets him apart is his ability to infuse a healthy sense of humour and an optimistic outlook on life into his writings. Unlike R. K. Narayan, Ruskin Bond often draws his characters and stories from the bustling metropolises of real life. His narratives revolve around the lives of both youth and children, and his stories are a testament to his unending affection for nature, trees, mountains, and the rich biodiversity of the Himalayas.

In essence, this paper sheds light on Ruskin Bond's deep connection with the themes like friendship, childhood, and various facets of love.

KEY WORDS: Unrequited love, Platonic love, marriage, parting, children, adolescents

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I. INTRODUCTION

The theme of love and romance is quite common in any piece of literature. Over the centuries romantic love has been presented by English literature in its variegated facets. Love itself has many forms as defined by Francis Bacon in relation to all sort of its variety:

"Nuptial love maketh mankind; friendly love perfecteth it; but wanton love corrupteth and embaseth it." (Bacon, 28). Love in marital life, according to Bacon, is the driving force for the creation of life and love in the form of friendship makes such life worth living. The unrestrained love of debasing desire, on the other hand, is ruinous unsavoury and unworthy. In addition, there are other facets of love such as spiritual love, unattainable love, and unrequited love.

The concept of the Platonic and unrequited love is exquisitely exemplified in the amorous stories of Ruskin Bond. There is love between the lover and the beloved of opposite sexes and the love is of two forms namely the 'love at first sight' and the 'love arrived at'. Bond always deals with the innocent love which exists in the minds and hearts of the characters. This love readily appeals to children as well as adolescent psyche. According to Joseph Mukalel, Ruskin Bond's amorous stories are not tainted by passionate love that exists in sex. Many of his stories touch upon the sexless love. To him, love is the ultimate solution to human misery and problems of life. Joseph Mukalel observes:

This love does not have the impatience of Shelley, neither does it have the intellectualism of Milton and Coleridge. It is also devoid of the grotesque element of Browning and the ferocious nature of Byron. It is near to the homeliness of Wordsworth, the love that can go deep into the inner most layers of human heart. (Mukalel, 77) The following short stories are the preferred texts to analyse Ruskin Bond's varied attitudes towards love:

The Night Train at Deoli

Love is a Sad Song
Time Stops at Shamli
The Story of Madhu
Binya Passes By

Ruskin Bond (born 19 May, 1934) is the most prolific and the most popular short story writer of India today. He has brought out several collections of short-stories. Bond's most notable collections include: *The Room on the Roof*, *The Blue Umbrella*, *The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories*, *Delhi Is Not Far*, *Rusty*, *the Boy from the Hills*, *Time Stops at Shamli and Other Stories*, *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*, *Roads to Mussoorie*, *The Neighbour's Wife and Other Stories* to name a few. The Indian Council for Child Education has recognised Bond's role in the growth of children's literature in India. He was awarded the Sahitya Academy Award in 1992 for *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*, his novel in English. He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1999 and the Padma Bhushan in 2014. Ruskin Bond is a keen observer of children and their behaviour. His love for the hills and mountains has made him create characters who are the true sons and daughters of the country. So, Bond's stories are regarded as foundational in the development of young adult and children's literature in India. His books fill a void in young adult reading because many adolescent novels are limited to mystery and adventure stories, school stories and novels of formation and education. According to Khorana,

Bond has refrained from the post-colonial fad of writing the formulaic Enid Blyton -style mysteries and adventures that are so popular in India. He places great importance on good books for young readers, and his stories express empathy for children, respect for their intelligence, and faith in their ability to shape the future. (Khorana, 145)

II. THE NIGHT TRAIN AT DEOLI

Ruskin Bond is devoted to write about the children as well as adolescents. Falling in love is probably the most romantic feeling for a juvenile writer. Ruskin Bond has written several amorous stories. Of these, *The Night Train at Deoli*, *Love is a Sad Song*, *Time Stops at Shamli*, *The Eyes Have It* have been written when the writer was in his twenties.

The first amorous story discussed here is *The Night Train at Deoli*. The story begins with a description of the station.

The train would reach Deoli at about five in the morning when the station would be dimly lit with electric bulbs and oil lamps and the jungle across the railway tracks would just be visible in the faint light of dawn. Deoli had only one platform, an office for the station master and a waiting room. The platform boasted a tea stall, a fruit vendor, and a few stray dogs; not much else because the train stopped there for only ten minutes before rushing on into the forest. (Bond, 21)

The Night Train at Deoli deals with one-sided Platonic love of an adolescent for a basket seller at Deoli railway station. In this story an eighteen-year-old boy waits for the basket seller whom the young protagonist first came across on the platform during his train journey. The narrator was so much enamoured of the basket seller that he vows:

This time I did not forget her. She was with me for the remainder of the journey and for long after. All that year she was a bright, living thing. And when the college term finished, I packed in haste and left for Dehra earlier than usual. My grandmother would be pleased at my eagerness to see her. (Bond, 23)

The story *The Night Train at Deoli* is a dream of love. A youth does not want his dream of perfect companionship to be broken and so the narrator does not drop at the Deoli station and go to the town to find out about the girl. Here the love of the protagonist is innocent and naïve which adds an elegance of simplicity to the story with its concluding lines:

"I prefer to keep hoping and dreaming and looking out of the window up and down the lonely platform, waiting for the girl with the baskets. I never break my journey at Deoli but pass through as often as I can. (Bond, 24)

The above quoted heart wrenching lines from *The Night Train at Deoli* attest to Bond's attitudes to love as well as his fondness for train journey. Indeed, Ruskin Bond wrote a lot about falling in love with girls at train platforms. But, most of them hardly reciprocated his encounters with them. Although the protagonist's love for the basket seller in the story is ephemeral, it is nothing but 'love at first sight,' a celebrated concept in literature. 'Love at first sight' is a phrase that refers to the fact that sometimes just seeing someone for the first time can be the basis for a powerful feeling of attraction towards that person. Physical appearance often plays pivotal role in interpersonal attraction. Here the narrator seems to be an alter ego of the writer himself who believes in the lingering effect of love experienced during the frail travelling coincidences.

The story *The Night Train at Deoli* presents one side relations of the narrator with an unknown girl of Deoli. The love expressed in the story can be called a Platonic love. As a matter of fact, the story is semi-autobiographical in nature and it portrays the relationship between a young girl who sells basket at the railway station of Deoli and a traveller. It is difficult to give any name to the sort of relationship which is found in this

story. The bond between the narrator and the girl is strong enough to keep themselves alive in each other's memories long after. The story depicts nothing else than the love at the first sight. Deoli railway station seems to be a fictitious one or it may have existed when Ruskin Bond was young. However, we are not concerned with the existence of Deoli in our real world; it is a place enveloped by romance and mystery.

III. LOVE IS A SAD SONG

Ruskin Bond's story *Love is a Sad Song* (1975) is a wishful reminiscence of an unsuccessful love-affair by a self-critical lover-narrator whose reflection of his affair with a girl almost half of his age opens interesting avenues of psychoanalytic study. The semi-autobiographical story invites the reader to have a critical look into it not because that it depicts the universal conflict between passionate love and strictures of society. Here the female protagonist named Sushila is a sixteen-year girl whereas the male protagonist is about thirty.

In *Love is a Sad Song*, Bond recounts his unrequited love by narrating the details of Sushila's arrival to the hills, their falling in love, singing a sad song and whispering:

"Gently, fervently, I kissed your eyes and forehead, your small round mouth, and the lobes of your ears, and your long smooth throat; and I whispered, Sushila, I love you, I love you, I love you' in the same way that millions and millions of love-smitten young men have whispered since times immemorial. (Bond, 387).

Like other Bondian love stories, this story has been written in the first person. It has been based on the unsuccessful relationship of Ruskin Bond with Anil Chopra's cousin, Sashi Kishore. The elders of both the families did not approve of their relation because of the big age gap. So, the love treated in the story is a sort of unacceptable in the light of the social norms. The story delineates the pathos of unreciprocated love in the concluding line: I may stop loving you, Sushila, but I will never stop loving the days I loved you (Bond, 410).

In the story Sushila and her soul mate Arun experience all the eternity in life. Despite such action, Sushila leaves him without any assurance but the poor lover remains in the fragrance of their intimacy. Bond's opinion is very simple, if a person senses excellence in a temporary relationship, why should person remain for years expecting inseparability which never happens in life. Here we can link the author's pessimistic experience of life that he experienced when his mother divorced and married another Punjabi person.

IV. TIME STOPS AT SHAMLI

In the story, *Time Stops at Shamli* (1989) Sushila is the wife of a hotelkeeper. She is a loveless wife, a young, beautiful, and gifted with a frolicsome spirit. She appears to be ubiquitous. The narrator's mood of resignation is quite discernible in the story. This story deals with an extramarital love that seems to be one of social taboos. It reveals a truth, discovers the hidden treasures, gives an opportunity to the protagonist to re-live the past though only in fancy. The candid confession is worth noting in the following lines:

The uplift I was experiencing in this meeting with Sushila, who had always, throughout her childhood and youth, bewitched me as no other had ever bewitched me, made me reckless and impulsive. (Bond, 101)

So, Ruskin Bond's amorous stories and novellas showcase the author's deep appreciation of love in its varied aspects. He writes in the "Introduction" to *The Rupa Book of Love Stories*: "Why so many great love stories end in sadness and tragedy? Whether it's Laila Majnu, Romeo and Juliet, ...Antony and Cleopatra...hero and heroine seem doomed to dying in each other's arms". Bond's love stories are quite enthralling like Shakespeare's plays with 'infinite variety' of love. In his love stories, two individuals are attracted to each other, but there is no fulfilment or lasting relationship because their love is selfless without any physical bonding. Almost all the characters of Ruskin Bond present a shade of relationship in their own ways. The descriptions of the two stations Deoli and Shamli are quite distinct. Although these stations are purely fictitious, Bond has depicted in such a way that they appear real places for the young adolescents and the grown-up male-female characters in the amorous stories. A few trains stop at Deoli and Shamli and the narrator thinks why the trains stop there as nobody comes and goes on the stations, but these are the places where the plot of Bond's stories is crafted.

Ruskin Bond's love stories are often about the unrequited love in which the real happiness of the lover lies in living the bygone days rather than lamenting the loss of the person. Ruskin Bond in the "Introduction" to *The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories* says this: "I can't really write unless I am in love with my subject." In all honesty, love and human emotions hold a different meaning in Ruskin Bond's stories. He has always listened to his heart. His mother and relatives did try to dissuade him from becoming a writer but he did not listen to any body. Further, he was asked to make a career in England and get settled there which he found impossible to live. In England, while struggling to adjust with the climate and people, he discovered how much in love he is with India, its flora and fauna, and of course the people. He could not write anything except about India and his Indian friends. He longed to go back and so he came back to India never to leave it again even if it meant he had to live meagrely.

Ruskin Bond's vision of love turns out to be multi-dimensional. It is palpable and its thrill can be felt in the self and the things around, be it an animal, a tree, or a human being. His celebrated characters such as Rusty, Sushila, Ula, and Sunil represent varied facets of love. Rusty in *The Room on the Roof*, the sensualist in *The*

Sensualist, and the writer in *Delhi Is Not Far* are all great literary lovers. The protagonist of *Delhi Is Not Far* expresses his views in these words: "Few things, reassure me. The desire to love and be loved, the beauty and ugliness of the human body, the intricacy of its design... some time I make love as a sort of exploration of all that is physical. Falling in love becomes an exploration of the mind." Kamala, on the other hand, is a twenty-three-year-old prostitute married to a "husband who is happy only if (she) can make herself attractive to others". (Bond, 33).

V. THE STORY OF MADHU

In Ruskin Bond's *The Story of Madhu*, several themes are explored, including friendship, connection, innocence, loss, loneliness, and acceptance. The story is narrated in the first person by an unnamed narrator, and it becomes evident that Bond delves into the theme of friendship. Despite the age difference, the narrator forms a deep bond with Madhu. Throughout the story, the narrator remains a constant presence in Madhu's life. However, it is only when Madhu is on her deathbed and the narrator visits her home that he truly comprehends her.

Despite their four-year friendship, the narrator had never visited Madhu's home before, seeing only one facet of her joyful personality, one that revels in play and learning. The narrator is acutely aware of potential criticism regarding his relationship with Madhu, to the extent that he decides to send her to another village for education. This decision reflects his desire for transparency and openness in their relationship.

The theme of innocence is prominent in the story, with the narrator striving to shield Madhu from the harsh realities of life. He values her innocence and hopes for her swift education, allowing her to discover her own voice and freedom. The narrator might find it challenging to let go of Madhu, and circumstances may force him into an unavoidable sacrifice. This becomes evident when Madhu falls ill, and the narrator visits her home for the first time. He realizes the profound impact he has had on Madhu's life, as the simple ribbon he gave her still adorns her wrist, underscoring the deep connection between them.

The theme of innocence is self-evident in the story and the narrator ensures that Madhu should remain as innocent as possible. Perhaps he does so because he himself realises the importance of innocence to a child. That a child should not be burdened with the criticism that envelopes people's lives and holds people back. If anything, the narrator longs for Madhu to be educated as soon as possible so that she can find her own expression and freedom. Though at the same time it is clear to the reader that the narrator may be unable to let go of Madhu. He may not necessarily be prepared to make the required sacrifice. However, the narrator may not necessarily have a choice in the matter particularly when Madhu gets sick and the narrator visits her at her home for the first time. It is at this time that the narrator realises how much of an impact he has had on Madhu's life. The simple ribbon he gave her the previous year still remains wrapped around her wrist. Highlighting to the reader just how important the connection is between Madhu and the narrator.

The setting of the story may also hold some significance as Bond appears to be highlighting the fact that the narrator does not wish to relate to the world in a manner that many twenty something year olds might want to be. He is happy to live as he sees fit without applying any pressure on himself. He is as isolated as can be and this suits the narrator. He longs for nothing in life once he has Madhu by his side. Though as mentioned he is conscious of what people might think. The grandmother's role in the story should not be underestimated. If it were not for her Madhu would have no home. She through altruism has helped Madhu through life. Where others may have abandoned Madhu. The grandmother does not. Even in death the grandmother is beside Madhu holding her hand tight as she is dying.

The end of the story is also full of pathos as the narrator feels the weight of Madhu's death on his shoulders. He knows that he has encountered someone that he will never forget and who he cannot let go of. Such was Madhu's sway on the narrator. It is also possible that the narrator unlike the grandmother does not accept the fact that Madhu is dead. He simply cannot comprehend how someone so young could pass away. It is also noticeable that the narrator in his loneliness realises that his life will change for ever. No longer will he be the care free man that he was now that his life has opened itself to cynicism. Life will never be the same for the narrator. The loss of Madhu has such an impact on the narrator that the reader feels as though the narrator's direction in life has changed and will remain changed permanently. He may have only known Madhu for four short years however she has had a powerful impact on his life. In short, Ruskin Bond made his characters real children and adolescents with genuine feelings of love. His men and women really appear to be creatures of flesh and blood.

VI. BINYA PASSES BY

In the story *Binya Passes by* the writer deals with an innocent Garhwal girl who falls in love with the narrator Bond. Everything appears to be happy for a while until the grandmother of Binya finds out about the affair and sends her away to her maternal uncle's home. Thus, the narrator's love ends on a tragic note. Ruskin Bond's short story *Binaya Passes By* explores the theme of love in a subtle and poignant manner. The story revolves around the personality of the narrator, a quiet and introverted man who lives a simple life in a small

Himalayan town. The protagonist's love for Binya, a beautiful and vivacious woman who passes through the town, is central to the narrative. The story also touches upon the contrast between the narrator's idealized vision of love and the reality of Binya's transient presence.

Binya represented something else---something wild, dream-like, fairy-like. She moved close to the spirit-haunted rocks, the old trees, the young grass. She had absorbed something from them---a primal innocence, an unconcern with the passing of time and events, an affinity with the forest and the mountains, and this made her special and magical. (Bond, 345-46)

The concept of the innocent love is beautifully explored in the story. The narrator started making enquiries about Binya when the former did not see the latter for a couple of days. The story ends with Binya leaving the place without even telling him. It raises the questions about the nature of romantic love and its intersection with reality. The author's love for Binya is unrequited, and this unfulfilled longing becomes a central element of the story. It portrays the pain and languishment that can accompany one-sided love. He idealizes Binya, seeing her as a source of inspiration and beauty in his otherwise mundane life. His infatuation with her represents the transformative power of love, even if it remains unattainable. As Binya passes through the town only once a year, the narrator's love is sustained by the memories of their brief interactions. This highlights the enduring nature of love and its ability to persist even in the absence of immediate gratification. The protagonist's character embodies a sense of loneliness and isolation, which is mitigated by his love for Binya. It suggests that love can provide solace and purpose in the lives of individuals who might otherwise feel disconnected from the world. In *Binya Passes By*, Ruskin Bond masterfully explores the complexity of human emotions, especially the bittersweet thrills of unrequited love. Through protagonist's character, the story invites readers to contemplate the power of love to shape and transform our lives, even when it exists as a distant and unattainable dream.

VII. CONCLUSION

Ruskin Bond has captivated readers with his heartfelt love stories. His unwavering commitment and enduring passion have seamlessly woven him into the tapestry of imaginative love narratives. His approach to love stories is crystal clear - he's a remarkable writer who channels his passion into crafting tales that touch the heart. Across all his amorous stories, a common thread emerges, and it leads to a poignant realization.

The essence of love in his stories remains consistent, underscoring a bittersweet truth. Love is a powerful force that we all desire, seeking recognition, tenderness, and acknowledgment. Bond's exploration of love, whether through words or actions, evokes a mix of pleasure and pain for both the lover and the beloved. His overarching portrayal of love becomes poignant when he portrays the sorrow of friends or lovers parting ways. Consequently, themes of separation become recurrent in his stories, such as *The Story of Madhu*, *The Coral Tree*, *The Eyes Have It*, and more.

The depiction of the innocent love in Bond's amorous tales can inspire essential human values like care, compassion, sympathy, and empathy. Ruskin Bond is, therefore, a trailblazer who not only shapes the content, form, and structure of his stories but also seeks to transform the mindset of his readers.

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