

Treatment of Ghosts in Ruskin Bond's Stories.

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Abstract - Ruskin Bond is born in May 1934, in Kasauli. We have mainly found Ruskin Bond in our school life through his celebrated collection of short stories. His stories for children gave him recognition as a singular figure among authors who writes for young readers. At the age of seventeen, he wrote his first novel *The Room on the Roof*. He was awarded the Padma Shri in 1999 for his contributions in the field of children's literature. Bond writes in a very lucid, extremely enjoyable style that leaves the readers wanting for more. Ghosts in Bond's stories are comic and melodramatic. He writes his stories based on his own life experiences and the impressions left on him by people or things are reflected in his works. This paper examines how Bond's yarning of stories evoke an insatiable craving for more within the readers as he traverse the realms of suspense and the supernatural. It also examines how nature plays a vital role in Bond's stories as well as how haunting can be used as a powerful metaphor that influences and moves the plot forward.

Index Terms –Ghost stories, Bond, Haunting, Nature, Horror and Mysterious atmosphere.

I. INTRODUCTION

Stories are something that almost every adult likes, and this fascination grows from the childhood when the child is introduced to a world of stories. Children often listen to tales that are magical, a world filled with witches, goblins and demons that scares them whereas fairies, unicorns, princes and princesses makes their eyes shine with delight. In India and particularly in Bengal, a child is well aware of tales from the *Panchatantra*, *the Jatakatales* and *Thakurmar Jhuli*. The captivation for incredible suspense is a part of every growing child. This curiosity is fuelled by the tales of the supernatural. Ghost stories are a popular form of literature where supernatural elements play a vital role in moving the plot. "How are we to account for the strange human craving for the pleasure of feeling afraid which is so much involved in our love of ghost stories?" (Virginia Woolf). Woolf opines that we love to get frightened, we enjoy the feeling as long as the situation is under our control. The incredible interplay between certainty and doubt, between the rational occurrences and the unsolvable events, between the unknown and the known are perhaps the primary source from which ghost stories instill fear in the minds of the readers. Ghost stories encompass a wide range of interpretations, yet they possess a common element that questions the established rational order and the observed laws of nature. They do so by introducing elements that are seen as alien, dangerous, creepy and highly marginalized in society. Ghost stories can be used as medium to explore the psychological depths of a human mind by giving it a form that varies from ghostly apparitions like Banquo's ghost in *Macbeth* to haunted mansions and to more nuanced narratives. Ruskin Bond with his unique characterization and eloquent narration delves into the world of suspense and supernatural that gives us an opportunity to engage with the primal aspects of human existence and to rediscover the sense of awe that leaves the reader wanting for more.

II. RISE OF GHOST STORIES AND ITS EFFECT ON SOCIETY.

The late nineteenth century saw the rapid rise of ghost stories. "Julia Briggs explains that the "remarkable success" of prose ghost stories from the mid-1800 to early 1900s "was closely connected with the growth of a reading public who consumed fictional periodicals avidly..." (Prasil, iii-iv). Often read aloud among middle-class families, these magazines included ghost stories because "they provided short self-contained episodes which could be printed beside the full-length serials" continuing issues after issues. Jack Sullivan mentions that the rise of the ghost stories were a part of the Edwardian interest with the extraordinary as well as the reflection of the restlessness that infused society and culture of the time. The economic changes in the society also impacted the rise of ghost stories. We find ghosts appealing maybe because our minds, just like our bodies, crave exercise and we enjoy exercising our emotions, even those that would be unpleasant in real life. We also love to unknit a mystery, and ghost stories are often like detective stories in this regard. Finally, we like the idea that what we experience in our daily lives might have another aspect, one that connects to a broader experience or knowledge, even if it's bleak or frightening. This is because we like to imagine that there is a veil, beyond which the past and present becomes similar, and dramatic events are being re-enacted, just beyond our powers of perception. Mankind's everlasting quest for disentangling the truth behind the existence of the paranormal that lives in the shadowy realm and awaits patiently to ensnare people with their claws.

Bettelheim suggests that fairy tales and tales of the supernatural can be satisfying and remediating for the child as well as for the adult. Freud believes that humans create a space free of tension between pleasure and reality, known as the realm of fantasy or pure imagination. This realm includes a child's dreams, thoughts, daydreaming, fictions, and artistic creativity. This space is created by the conflict between pleasure and reality. The child creates a fantasy world in which elements of the real world are rearranged in a way that pleases them. Adults hide their fantasies, but the child invests this world with reality and takes it seriously. This creates a sense of connection between the two worlds. Real life stories, according to Bettelheim, can cause psychological problems, or create falsehood about reality in the minds of the children. He suggests that traditional fairy tales, with the darkness of abandonment, haunting atmosphere, death and dark entities allows children to cope with their fears in a symbolic way. By participating in and interpreting these tales of fantasy on their own, the children would get a greater sense of purpose and meaning, leading to their emotional growth.

Oral tradition is an essential part of all societies where the audience participates and can even modify them accordingly to see if they fits the community's needs. It helps by educating the young and teaching vital lessons about the life and past. Ghost stories are rooted in oral literature and folklore, focusing on the supernatural. In England, an enthralling situation emerged with the rise of the Renaissance:

the narration of creepy and ghostly tales through oral tradition. These tales, often embodying elements of the supernatural, magical or fantasy, were sometimes referred to as "winter's tales" or "old wives' fables," even though they were not constricted by season or by age of the storyteller. This oral tradition of storytelling evolves into England's social custom wherein families get together for meals and enjoy sharing stories with each other. The connection between ghost stories and oral tradition can be traced back to the 6th century India, where folklores often had demons to make people fearful of the unknown. They were commissioned by temple authorities and Brahmins as entertainment. Later Victorian colonial influence changed Indian ghost stories from mythological to fictional. This was evident in fiction, stage, photographs and drawing room scenes, such as in Christopher Marlowe's *Dr. Faustus*, Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* and Emily Bronte's *Wuthering Heights*.

III. THE POWER OF HAUNTINGS.

Hauntings can be considered a useful metaphor. In spite of the existence of ghosts, the tales surrounding them can bestow on us motivation and prompt us to live with increased attentiveness to potentialities. A ghost in a story can act as a messenger and can deliver information that the living characters are unable to access. Ergo, it is foreseeable that supernatural entities have made enchanting and captivating appearances throughout Western literature, whether they are the revelations of Hamlet's deceased father or the psychological apparitions haunting the pages in Henry James's *The Turn of the Screw*. On a similar note, *The Good Earth*, alongside works like *Beloved* and *Lincoln in the Bardo*, scrutinizes the ubiquitous tale of parental guilt. Its narrative showcases delving into the realms that exhibit the vulnerabilities of the mortal bodies as Ben tragically passes away leading his father to become obsessed with discovering the intricate connection between teeth, spirits, nutrition and the material body. Intriguingly, the ghost of Ben merely watches his parents rather than directly communicating with them, serving as an interpretative medium to comprehend their actions for the readers, providing insights that children seldom have the opportunity to grasp. In Amy Shearn's view, McAuliffe mentions about writing from a ghost's point of view: "He's a child-ghost, and some of the sections that he narrates are very much spoken from a child's sensibility, but being dead also provides him with a sort of omniscient vision of the world, of the past and the future." (Shearn)

IV. RUSKIN BOND AND HIS ART OF STORYTELLING.

As a writer, Ruskin Bond is a painter of language. Having grown up in the hills, surrounded by nature, in Mussorie, Dehradun, Shimla and Jamnagar, Bond forms a unique connection with Mother Nature. He paints captivating images from his experience with nature and invites the readers to be a part of his imagination. His stories are simple ones about people's daily lives. He has always highlighted the friendly relationship between nature and man in most of his works. He is a prolific writer and master storyteller which is evident from the wide range of his writings that includes his love for nature, unrequited love, crossing boundaries set by society and his relationship with his parents that affected his childhood. Bond is a connoisseur of the mysterious and macabre but he also tries to see the best in everyone and everything. This treatment is even extended to the ghosts in his works. The ghosts appear to be appealing to the readers.

In an interview with the Press Trust of India, Bond mentions "I have always felt that the ghosts are not out to scare us or harm us. They are revisiting old haunts or places that were connected with them. Maybe, for some particular reasons or maybe simply because they are wandering around." He further says people do get frightened by them maybe because these ghostly entities are different from us: "They can pass through walls. They don't depend on transport like we do. They are supernatural beings, so we the living feel a bit uneasy about them." (PTI).

In one of his short stories, titled "Pret in the House", Bond talks about a mischievous Pret that used to live happily on the branches of an old peepul tree but started to dwell with the narrator's family. The Pret instead of being scary, menacing or bloodthirsty behaves like a mischievous child who derives pleasure from tricks played on the family members. "When Aunt Minnie came to stay, things got worse. The Pret seemed to take an immediate dislike to Aunt Minnie. She was a nervous, easily excitable person, just the right sort of prey for a spiteful ghost. Somehow her toothpaste got switched with a tube of Grandfather's shaving cream, and when she appeared in the sitting room, foaming at the mouth, we ran for our lives. Uncle Ken was shouting that she'd got rabies." (Bond, p78). When a child reads this story, he/she finds it bone-tickling rather than bone-chilling. Bond in the story displays the Indian belief that ghosts and other creatures dwell on certain types of trees. He borrows various superstitions from the Indian folk tales rather than the Western tradition. Ghosts in Bond's stories are comic and melodramatic. He writes his stories based on his own life experiences and the impressions left on him by people or things are reflected in his works. During Kolkata Literary Meet, Bond shares a story from his childhood where he was told not to open his mouth under the peepul tree or the ghost would jump into his stomach ruining his digestion forever. This belief can be traced in his short story 'Pret in the House', "At night, people avoided walking beneath the peepul tree...the Pret would jump down your throat and ruin your digestion."

4.1 THE ART OF CONVINCING: BOND'S UNIQUE APPROACH TO CREATE FRIGHTENING TALES.

Bond's stories indicate the agony in his life. He uses writing as a way to liberate himself from the shawl of loneliness that has wrapped him from his teenage days. Bond skillfully draws the atmosphere of helplessness inspired by the insecurity he felt as a child. "Until death do us part", is a very popular and romantic phrase used by people to indicate only death can separate them but what if it is death itself that connects people, helps to quench the longing of passions? In Bond's "Listen to the Wind" the narrator listens to the story of an unrequited love between Robert, a young Englishman and a local hilly girl. Both fell in love breaking the barriers of discrimination and lack of communication. They dreamt of a happy future together. But society became a huge obstacle between them. Being the daughter of a high-caste Brahmin, her father refused to accept them as it would ostracize them from their society. Robert, too knew his parents wouldn't accept this relationship because an Englishman marrying a local hilly girl was unacceptable in the English society. When they run away from home they took shelter at Pari Tibba from the tremendous rain and lightning. But fate made her own plans for them. As soon as they arrived at the ruins, the storm began, bringing with it torrential rain, thunder, and lightning. In a vain attempt to shield themselves from the effects of nature, they had undoubtedly gathered beneath the crumbling roof of the ruins. But the weak, deteriorated ceiling offered little shelter when lightning hit. The next morning their charred bodies were found. The common belief is that the souls of those who die with unfulfilled desires never leave the earth. People on the hills often hear the voices of two star-crossed lovers reverberating in the winds. Villagers still claim the hills are haunted by the presence of the long-dead lovers, but the truth is only known by the hills. Nature that symbolizes hope, comfort, and life here becomes a danger to life. Maybe the ill-fated lovers who couldn't meet because of society finally becomes one after death. Death becomes the connecting factor between two souls. The wind that rustles in the pine trees carries the voice of the lovers.

“My ghosts are pretty gentle and harmless. I was once told by a nine-year-old girl that she read my ghost stories, but she was not scared enough. She asked me can't I make them more frightening? “I said I could not.” (PTI). Bond says at the Tata Steel Kolkata Literary Meet. According to Bond, kids love ghost stories because at the back of their mind they know it is just a story. His tales contain the elements of terror, panic and grisliness which makes the stories an interesting affair. The way Bond weaves his stories makes an unconvincing situation real and convincing. This can be best seen in his “The Haunted Bicycle” where the narrator passing through the lonely jungle saw a boy waiting in such late hours, which was surprising. The narrator while giving the boy and his sister a ride suddenly discovered the boy's hand had grown long, hairy and black. Their tone became menacing as they shouted to keep cycling. The magic of the atmosphere and the transformation of the innocent into something dreadful creates gripping and thrilling sensations for the readers.

4.2 NATURE AND BOND

Bond has a deep passion for the environment. He writes for her and breathes through her. Nature plays a dual role for him. While it provides new themes and ideas for him, it also re-energizes his creative vigour. His creativity is sparked by the simple natural beauty that blends with the melodies of the air to create a distinct universe devoid of dissonant tones. While Nature can be a fair beauty inspiring harmony, peace and tranquility, it can also transform into a dark beauty rousing fear, illusions and even presenting death. Bond's “The Wind on Haunted Hill” portrays how nature can give birth to horror. The story is about eleven-year-old Usha, her younger brother Suresh and a slightly older girl, Binya. On a windy day, Usha decided she has to go to the bazaar but her brother was not ready to let her go alone. “Won't you feel scared returning alone?” he asked. “There are ghosts on Haunted Hill!” The hill was haunted because according to Usha's grandfather during a terrible storm, one of the houses was hit by lightning “and everyone in it was killed. Even the children.” (Bond, p23). Wildflowers bloom on the crumbling walls of the ruins, a wild plum tree that covers with “soft, white blossoms” and lizards whose deep plumage glistens in the sunshine serves as a precursor to a bright and lovely day.

As Burke argues, “dark, confused, uncertain images have a greater power on the fancy to form the grander passions than those have which are more clear and determinate.” (Burke, p79). The narration of the ghost story begins here. The hills are described as having a few trees and bushes that are stunted to add to the sinister feeling, as well as the ruins of a small settlement. Ghosts have been known to reside in ruins and forests with stunted trees, and this is not overlooked by the author. Usha's return journey starts with her apprehensions heightening due to the heavy downpour of rain, flashes of lightning, and the silence of the crickets and the flying of crows. The presence of the towering ruins enhances the feeling of imminent dread, prompting Usha to seek momentary refuge within their crumbling remnants.

The author sets the pace of the story with the vivid support of nature and its vagaries. Usha being frightened, reminisces her grandfather's story about lightening. Suddenly she sees “two small figures- children!” crouching in front of the unused fireplace as the climax heightens here with the blue streak accompanied by thunder. The reader feels the suspense and fear looming in the atmosphere but is relieved when Suresh and Buniya meets Usha and accompanies her back. But Bond, being a master of suspense ends the story by making the children hear “‘Goodbye, goodbye...’ Usha heard them calling. Or was it just the wind?” Ruskin Bond by presenting Nature's mysterious aspects in the background, along with other elements is able to create stories which invokes a sense of fear and dismay to the unknown.

V. CONCLUSION

For Ruskin Bond the first twenty years of his life are very significant, although they are not of great achievement, they are, in fact, formative years. He faced several setbacks, tragedies but he never deserted hope and continued to struggle. It was his unwavering optimism and deep affection for life that motivated his energetic and animated actions. Bond treats the supernatural uniquely. The supernatural characters are furnished with various and interesting traits like amusing, tragic, mischievous and vicious. They represent a moving spectrum of life. Bond is an avid reader who is greatly influenced by writers like Kipling, M.R. James, Hugh Walpole, Satyajit Ray and Rabindranath Tagore. The way Bond's stories unfold leaves the readers wanting for more. Ghosts in Bond's stories can coexist with humans. Nature is attached to mystery; it evolves from something harmless where children can play in into something wild and ferocious. This transformation and duality can be seen in Blake's *Songs of Innocence and of Experience*.

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