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The Feminine Spectrum in Ruskin Bond's Short Stories: Between Patriarchy, Nurture, and Subversion

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Abstract

Despite the fact that the author has been acclaimed by critics both for his depiction of the Himalayan landscape and for his portrayal of India, which he portrays in his short stories as a small town country, it is possible to state that his female characters are far from being stereotyped. The article shows that the author did not concentrate his attention on depicting his idealistic female characters. On the contrary, he created multi-faceted women who can be characterized by the ambiguity of their behavior and actions. In this way, by means of writing, Bond does not convey any ideology regarding the position of women in the society and depicts women as fragile and strong, obedient and rebellious agents. This complexity and contradiction are the reasons why the author's women are so believable and interesting. Being placed in an environment of a fast-changing society, Bond's women give readers many opportunities for discussion of issues related to gender, memory and identity in Indian English literature. Ultimately, this is an argument that suggests the true contribution of Bond to literature is not that he has an overtly feminist message to convey. Bond does not instruct his readers on how to view issues of women's suffrage and gender equality. The contribution of Bond to literature is his portrayal of women in all their complexity. His women are depicted as struggling against the oppressive nature of social norms while trying to remain faithful to their personal desires for freedom. His women are portrayed as being both weak and strong. They are obedient and rebellious at times.

***Keywords**: Ruskin Bond, Indian English Literature, Feminist Criticism, Gender Studies, Patriarchy, Female Agency, Short Stories, Hauntology.*

Introduction

Understanding Bond's World of Women

Among the most loved authors in India is Ruskin Bond. In his lifetime which spans more than sixty years, he has written about hills of Himachal Pradesh, small towns, nature, and everyday life of common people. His works are simple, heart warming and humane in essence. Millions of people across generations have grown up reading his stories and identifying with the characters he creates.

However, on closer scrutiny of the works of Ruskin Bond, particularly the characters of women in his stories, we see that there is an intricacy involved here. These women are complex characters and they cannot simply be termed as being weak or strong, traditional or modern. They are all these different things at different times. Some of them are accepting of the societal roles allotted to them while some are subversive in their actions. Some are powerful women who would go to any lengths to safeguard their family members.

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And that is why the representation of women in Bond's stories is so intriguing. He refuses to present his female characters as mere stereotypes. Instead, he presents them as real people with their own strengths and weaknesses, their own desires and fears. In addition to that, he presents his women as living in the world that is dominated by the patriarchal values, where women have to abide by particular norms and standards of conduct. However, he shows women who succeed in being who they are despite these restrictions.

We consider the variety of female characters presented by Bond in his short stories. In our analysis, we examine those women who appear to accept the role assigned to them in their social surroundings, those who demonstrate unexpected strength and compassion, and those who openly defy the norms restricting them. It is clear that Bond's women possess the variety of behaviors and personalities.

The World Bond Writes About: Small-Town India

The majority of Bond's works are based in small towns of North India, especially the hill stations of Himachal Pradesh. These are communities which respect tradition and move slowly towards changes. The people know one another, the same families live in the same villages for generations, they know everything about each other.

In such society, the institution of patriarchy is firmly entrenched in its very essence. The term "patriarchy" refers to the social order where the men dominate and women should submit to the will of the male members of the society. Small-town India shows many examples of how patriarchy can function there. The woman is expected to be a good wife and mother. She is supposed to be obedient, humble and self-effacing. She should be devoted to her family and stay at home.

It doesn't mean that all the females in the world of Bond are unhappy. Some of them get satisfaction from doing their traditional duties and feel happiness in being good mothers and wives. They take pride in taking care of their families. They are admired by their communities because of their virtuous qualities. Nevertheless, there are some limits. Women cannot do everything that men do. There are some things that men can decide about, and women have no right to make those decisions.

Bond is not an idealist. He depicts the limitations that women experience. Nevertheless, he doesn't write any essays about liberation. It's not an activist but a storyteller. And his stories are about real life of women who are sometimes happy, sometimes unhappy and sometimes fight with their destiny.

It is very important to remember this point. Bond is not making any political statements on the issue of feminism or gender issues. He is simply narrating some good stories of ordinary people. But since he does it sincerely, it turns out that his stories contain many truths about the life of women in India. And this is what makes them interesting for gender studies scholars.

Women Seen Through Men's Eyes: The Male Gaze

One of the popular representations of women in the literature by Bond is through the perspectives of the male narrator. Most of the short stories written by Bond are viewed from the male perspective. The world is seen through the eyes of a child or an adult man. When seeing women from the male perspective, they tend to be viewed as objects of desire or of memory rather than individuals.

The best example of such representation is the short story "Night Train at Deoli". The story depicts how a young man travels through a small station Deoli on a night train. In the station, he sees a girl selling baskets. He sees the girl in a series of meetings in different months through the train window. He gets fascinated with her to a great extent and is unable to get her out of his mind. He thinks about a whole new life with her and dreams of saving her from the miserable life and taking her away.

And that’s the catch: he never really communicates with her. He never finds out her name. He never discovers what she thinks and feels. She never utters a single word. She is described in very poetic language. She has "pale skin, accentuated by the gleam of shining black hair, and dark, troubled eyes." But she does not have a voice of her own. She only exists in the imagination of the young man.

"The male gaze" is defined as seeing a woman from a male perspective, treating them more like objects of sexual desire rather than human beings. The unnamed girl in the story "Night Train at Deoli" is just "the basket-seller girl." The girl does not say anything and does not do anything. The girl is just there, silently and beautifully, to be contemplated by the male protagonist of the story. The girl is not a human being with her own story; she is a symbol of the male protagonist's longing and solitude. The female characters in many other stories written by Bond tend to follow this same pattern. The women are

portrayed as beautiful, gentle, and nurturing. The women are mothers, grandmothers, and aunts who look after the men in the stories and comfort them.

There is a certain point of view from which Bond writes his stories. Bond writes about a man who is part of a patriarchal society, where women are perceived through the lens of male perception. And he is open about it. There is no attempt to portray the world of equal people, because it just doesn't exist.

However, here comes a twist in "Night Train at Deoli." Despite being written in a patriarchal society and depicting a traditional relationship, there is a subtle form of rebellion present in this story. A young man is a student at a university coming from a respected family, while a basket-selling girl is an underprivileged member of society. In traditional India, such relationship was impossible due to the class division. However, the young man doesn't give a damn, he just loves her for what she is. His love of the girl belonging to a lower class is an act of defiance of the class hierarchy. Though this girl herself doesn't say anything, her mere existence is a rebellion. She is a poor girl loved by an upper-class boy.

Women as Mothers and Caretakers

Where some of Bond's women appear through the eyes of the male gaze, some Bond's women are portrayed as powerful images of nurturance and compassion. They are mothers, grandmothers, and maternal figures. They give warmth and love to everyone around them. They are the heart of the story. They bind families together. They offer their wisdom and compassion.

"The Woman on Platform 8" is the best example of this category. It is a story about a little boy who stands alone at the railway station waiting for his mother. His mother has kept him waiting because she is late. However, while he is waiting for her, a middle-aged woman approaches him. This woman is a stranger to the boy, and in Indian culture, strangers are always scary. The children are always warned about speaking to strangers. But this woman is not like that. She is compassionate and warm. She buys him snacks. She converses with him. She makes him comfortable.

In the beginning, the boy is puzzled; why is this strange woman treating him so kindly? He was told that he shouldn't believe in strangers. However, little by little, he starts accepting her affection. He feels at ease with her. He feels almost like his mother for him. When the boy's real mother finally appears, he feels conflicted. Of course, he loves his mother, but at the same time, he feels the connection with this strange woman who unexpectedly treated him so kindly.

This tale is remarkable due to the fact that the main character doesn't follow the established conventions. Society expects from women to be careful and avoid talking to unknown children. Society believes that strangers are always dangerous. However, the lady ignores all these conventions and rules. Her actions are dictated only by one thing – compassion. She sees the miserable child, and she wants to help him.

Mother on platform 8 is a maternal figure too, but she is not a natural mother. She is an anonymous woman who behaves like a mother for a moment. Therefore, the essence of motherhood in the novels by Bond does not lie in biology. Motherhood in the stories is the same for any woman because it is characterized by care, compassion, love and protection. This is a significant point because it proves the possibility for any person to become a maternal figure if they have the mentioned qualities.

Other stories depict the mothers who sacrificed everything for their kids. They feed their kids when they lack food themselves. They protect their kids from all possible harm. They work hard to improve their lives. Such mothers are not weak people; they have their own strengths too. It is the strength of love and determination. They will do anything to support their children.

The grandmothers in Bond's stories are equally significant. On numerous occasions, he talks about his grandmother or about grandmothers in general. These women are loving and wise. They tell tales. They offer sound counsel. They preserve tradition and continuity. They link the current to the past. Through them, Bond highlights the role of older women in Indian society. They are not considered worthless and unnecessary. Rather, they are venerated and respected. They are the custodians of family and cultural history.

It would appear that such nurturing women are traditional. However, they also have their own form of power. It is the power of love. It is the power of compassion. It is the power to comfort. In an unfriendly and hostile environment, they provide solace. They are the glue that holds everything else together.

Women Who Fight Back: Strength and Rebellion

Here comes the most unexpected element in Bond's portrayal of women. In the society that Bond writes about being a patriarchy, he also creates female characters who are strong-willed, defiant, and rebellious. They do not conform to their traditionally assigned roles, but rather resist them. They openly express their opinions, fight for their rights, defend their families with all their strength.

The most vivid example of such a female character is provided by the novel A Flight of Pigeons. It unfolds against the background of the 1857 uprising that was a period of chaos and unrest in India. Khan Begum is a Muslim woman who faces a very difficult situation when she has to defend her daughters from British soldiers and from other threats. She does not surrender to fear, but rather becomes fierce and determined.

The description of Khan Begum is quite unique. She is "tremendously defiant, furious, witty and tenacious." She defends her daughters "like a watchful tigress." Her voice sounds "thunderous." This is no weak and obedient woman. This is a woman who would go as far as she could to defend her family. The comparison of Khan Begum with goddess Durga is also interesting. Durga is a Hindu goddess, famous for her power and ferocity. That comparison is quite meaningful as well since it clearly demonstrates that Bond considers the strength of women to be almost sacred.

That is what makes Khan Begum really unique. The point is that this character has nothing to do with the traditional stereotypes about Indian women. She is active and outspoken. In a situation of a crisis, she becomes the one to lead, to make the decision, to protect others. Such a woman is absolutely different from quiet and submissive females from other short stories. Even in the stories that depict passive women, there are signs of rebellion. Thus, in "The Woman on Platform 8" the strength of a woman is her compassion. This woman rebels against the social norm by being kind where one is not supposed to show kindness. This too is a form of rebellion since this kind of rebellion is against fear and suspicion. This is also a rebellion against the expectation that we should only show kindness to the ones we know.

Bond has written several stories about women who have unhappy marriages but manage to survive through these marriages. For instance, in one of her stories, there is a married woman known as Sushila who is not happy with her husband since he does not give her any happiness. She does not love him nor does she hate him. All she does is fulfill her duties in her family and marriage just like everyone expects of her. However, she is very honest when talking to her husband. She tells him, "I am not happy and I do not love him, but neither I am so unhappy that I should hate him.

Bond talks about poor women who are proud. They do not beg or plead for anything. They earn their livelihood through their own labor. Even though they are not well off financially, they have their pride and dignity. This is another form of power. It is not based on struggling against society; rather, it is based on survival with dignity.

The Deeper Meaning: Women, Memory, and Trauma

Some scholars have even gone further than the traditional feminist scholars and read Bond's narratives about women in terms of the theory of hauntology, which comes from the works of a renowned philosopher named Jacques Derrida. Hauntology is simply a difficult term for a rather simple idea. It refers to the haunting of the past in the present. The ghost in this case is no mere fictional monster. The ghost is a symbol for something that needs attention. The ghosts refer to trauma, pain, and memories that are yet to be dealt with.

The narratives of Bond about women do not just focus on the women. They focus on how the women are tied up with trauma and memory. In the narratives of Bond, women are frequently represented in the form of spectres or ghosts. The ghosts do not necessarily take the form of ghosts but they are spectral in nature. They are attached to spaces and places.

It is possible to interpret the story "The Woman on Platform 8" from such a perspective as well. Even though the character of a woman is not an actual ghost, it can be considered as such. She appears out of nowhere; comforts the young boy; then leaves without saying a word. She appears as an answer to the emptiness in the life of the boy. The fact is that his real mother is absent, therefore, the figure of the mysterious woman appears as a substitute for the absent one. She is called a "spectre of maternal care."

In addition, in the story "Topaz," Bond depicts a woman who is associated with a certain place. The house in "Topaz" is haunted by the memory of a woman. Even though she is absent, her presence is felt there. There is some association between the woman and the architecture of the building.

This adds yet another dimension to Bond's stories. This means that Bond's women are more than mere literary figures. Rather, they are symbols of larger issues. These symbols include trauma, memory, love, loss, and nostalgia. Not all of them are completely fleshed out, but they hold significant symbolic weight. Even their ghostly and silent presences beg our attention and compassion.

The Spectrum of Womanhood

Women lie along a spectrum, rather than occupying just one position.

One of those positions is that of women who appear to accept their place in the scheme of things. They are wives and mothers. They fulfill their responsibilities. They are quiet and docile. They are viewed by the male gaze as fantasies or desires. These women are not rebels against the system. They do not fight the system. They exist within it, although they may not like it.

The middle ground is occupied by the nurturing women. These are the mothers, the grandmothers, the mothering women. They offer love and warmth. They are the heart of their family. They are active, yet they do not fight the system. They operate within it, find meaning within it, and fulfill their roles as caretakers and nurturers.

Finally, on the far end of the spectrum are the women who are defiant. These are the Khan Begums of Bond's world. They are strong. They say what needs to be said. They protect their family fiercely and unhesitatingly. They break the rules, when necessary. They are not shy about speaking out and being powerful.

What is amazing about Bond's presentation of the female character is that he presents all these kinds of women. He does not present only one type of the woman's nature. He does not claim that "All women are like this" or "All women are like that". He proves the diversity of the woman's nature, showing that she may be both weak and strong, both traditional and rebellious, both passive and active. She may be both a mother and a warrior. She may be both silent and noisy. She may be both an object of desire and the master of her destiny.

Such diversity proves the realism of the Bond's representation of the female image. The real woman is not the uniform creature. She has various personalities, various situations, various decisions. Some of them agree with their traditional role, while others struggle against it. Most of the women find themselves somewhere between these two extremes.

There's a question, which always arises that "Is Bond a Feminist Writer"?

Nevertheless, Bond has himself pointed out that he has no interest in what he calls "modern drawing room feminism". In other words, he finds no inspiration in the kind of feminism which revolves around the educated and rich women talking about their issues. He is much more interested in women, especially ordinary women and even poor women who have to struggle for survival. These women have their own dignity and strength.

Bond never writes any manifesto or political statement. He never tells the readers how to interpret the works. He only presents them stories. Through these stories, we come across some women who are satisfied with their traditional roles. Some do not have any intention to rebel against the male dominated society. Some are fulfilled as wives and mothers. Such stories are not feminist in nature, at least not from the modern perspective. However, there are women who rebel. There are some women who are rebellious, bold and brave. There are some women who are defiant and do not abide by the set norms and standards. These stories are definitely more feminist in nature as they demonstrate women's ability to be leaders and fighters.

Conclusion

In summary, there are many women characters in the short stories of Ruskin Bond. They are diverse and cannot be categorized into one stereotype. The female characters range from being subjected to patriarchal society, nurturers of the family members, to those who resist the patriarchal society and fight for their families.

Ruskin Bond acknowledges that in a patriarchal society, women are bound by societal laws, family norms, cultural traditions, among other expectations. In such a context, Bond has portrayed women who are kind and courageous in his writings. Women in small town India do not enjoy total freedom as portrayed in other cultures.

Bond does not attempt to portray a message in terms of how women should be or should behave in a particular way. This is because women are unique and complex in nature. Ruskin Bond has been able to portray the diversity and uniqueness of women as they exist in reality.

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