

## THEME OF FRIENDSHIP IN RUSKIN BOND

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Ruskin Bond is the only British-Indian writer in English to institute a status mainly on the basis of his achievement as a short story writer for children. He portrays the effects of children who are unaware and innocent about social realities. This paper is an attempt to bring out the theme of friendship in his short stories “The Thief,” and “The Last Truck Ride” and “The Window”. “The Thief” tells us the friendship between Hari and Arun who are different in their professions as well as nature. Hari Singh is a clever thief at the tender age of fifteen. During one of his stealing adventures he meets Arun, who earns just enough for his existence by writing for Delhi and Mumbai magazines. He is a simple, kind, easy going - quite suitable for Hari Singh’s purpose. The story is about the change that takes place in Hari after he comes in contact with Arun. Here the older one is the mentor. Contrary to this, in “The Last Truck Ride” Nathu, a Nature loving child character becomes the mentor of Pritam Singh, a fifty year old truck driver. Pritam Singh is a matter of fact man, who was only bothered about earning his living for which he was dependent on his years old truck. Another story “The Window” is about the innocent bond of love between a young boy and a little girl of ten and the replenishing and rejuvenating effect which Nature imparts to them. Bond’s stories plunge deep into human psyche and unfold the human mind in relation to Nature, environment and society. Bond strives to hold strongly the principle values of life from getting smoldered. Bond as a master storyteller is well aware of child psychology.

Ruskin Bond is the only British-Indian writer in English to institute a status mainly on the basis of his achievement as a short story writer for children. He is a front ranking fiction- writer of Indian English Writing. In due course of a writing career spanning over five decades he has written more than a hundred short stories, two full-length novels, three novellas and a number of essays. He has received many Awards during his writing career. Bond’s stories plunge deep into human psyche and unfold the human mind in relation to nature, environment and society. The incidents and situation depicted in his stories are not wholly fictional; It is due to the depiction of reality that one can correlate their feelings. He projects a part of his personality into history to make it authentic and interesting. Ruskin Bond, though reasoned and comprehensible, has a deep impression about the reader’s mind. He is not content only to depict the things as they happened, he delves deep into the circumstances and reasons. He examines his characters from the inside and investigates how their minds work. His writings are well-finished and are amalgamated works of art. Bond’s graceful writings directs readers to contemplate both universal truths as well as a thoughtful exploration of questions that perplex his children characters. There is an engaging quality to his writing that transcends the regional locale and the autobiographical element—that

is, evident in the behaviour of children's endeavour to survive against odds and to preserve what is beautiful and meaningful.

Friendship as a theme has played an important role in many of Bond's writings. He discusses about child-parent, student-teacher relations, about friendship, simple, educated and uneducated men and women like house servants, shop-keepers, school boys, thieves, beggars, wrestlers, school-teachers, farmers, gardeners, soldiers and so on. In each story, Bond shows respect for the intelligence of children to discriminate between right and wrong and allows them to resolve their inner conflicts as they gain experience and understanding, focusing on their own individuality. He is the pioneer of modern children literature in India. Bond as a master storyteller is well aware of child psychology. He portrays the effects of children who are unaware and innocent about social realities. This paper is an attempt to bring out the theme of friendship in his short stories "The Thief" and "The Last Truck Ride" and "The Window". Regarding the aspect of the theme of friendship in his stories Bond says:

Friendship had been a theme in many of my stories...many of them – 'The Thief', 'The Crooked Tree' 'Madhu', 'The Woman on Platform No.8'- were about friendships, bonding, developing out of shared experience or two people just thrown together at random.<sup>1</sup>

The story "The Thief" is a remarkable one as far as friendship is concerned. Hari Singh is such a clever thief at the tender age of fifteen that he even keeps changing his name for the sake of hiding his identity so that he will not be caught by police. After doing a theft he goes away from the locality purposely. Thus, during one of his stealing adventures he meets Arun in a wrestling match. Arun was simple, kind, easy going - quite suitable for Hari Singh's purpose. "I want to work for you", said the thief to Arun who was a writer and did not mind having a helper at home. Arun wrote for Delhi and Mumbai magazines and earned just enough for his existence. But paying regularly to a servant was not possible for him right now. So he made it clear to Hari Singh, he will not be able to pay him anything, except food and a place in his house to sleep. Hari Singh readily agreed although he knew nothing about cooking for which he was engaged by Arun. Apart from cooking Arun taught Hari how to write his name, and also promised to teach him to write full sentences. Hari on his part thought that an educated thief can accomplish many things in future. Slowly a bond of friendship began to develop between the two. Arun was most trusting towards his helper and never realized how much money Hari cheated him of in the shopping of grocery and other essential items.

After some months Arun was able to sell one of his books to a publisher for which he earned a handsome amount of money which he kept under his mattress not realizing Hari Singh's evil intentions. At night the thief in Hari was awoken and he stole the whole money while his unsuspecting master was fast asleep. He headed straight away towards the railway station. Without wasting time even to take a ticket Hari reached the platform where a train was about to depart. He could have gone away but he started vacillating between the thief in him and his conscience which was reminding him what he would lose – the trust of his worthy master and friend Arun. The good company of Arun had started influencing him positively as a result of which Hari could not run away from him as he always had done in the past. For the first time he felt guilty. So instead of escaping he went back and found his master- friend still sleeping peacefully. Hari managed to keep back the stolen money in its place without waking Arun. In the words of Hari, who is also the first person narrator of the story :

" I had been working for Arun for nearly a fortnight and apart from shopping hadn't done much to exploit him. I had every opportunity to so. I

had a key to the front door... He (Arun) was a most trusting person I had ever met. And that was why I couldn't make up my mind to rob him."<sup>2</sup>

We can understand from the story that it was adverse circumstances which were responsible for making a thief out of Hari. He was an orphan, poor, illiterate and unemployed. But the same adversity along with an insight into human psychology made him philosophize about people and the circumstances that had taught him to be a clever thief. In the first place it was his selfish motive that inspired him to go back. Arun had promised to teach him to read and write whole sentences. Hari, by this time had realized that being able to read and write is something great. In his excitement at the sight of a good amount of money he forgot about it. But afterwards while he was in the railway station he started realizing:

It was a simple matter to steal (and sometimes as simple to be caught) but to be really big man, a wise and successful man, that was something. I should go back to Arun. My affection for him, my sense of sympathy, but most of all my desire to write whole sentences, drew me back to the room."<sup>2</sup>

Although a thief, Hari realized the value of education. On the other hand it was Hari's concern for Arun that drew him back. A sense of sympathy was one of his weaknesses and also through hesitation over a theft he had often been caught in the past. He realized the fact that a successful thief must be pitiless. He was fond of Arun. His affection for Arun, his sense of sympathy but most of all his desire to write whole sentences, drew him back to the room. Next day morning Hari was unable to face Arun. He was thinking, after all Arun must have come to know what he had done with the money. Especially while he was heading towards the railway station it was raining heavily due to which the paper money had gone wet.

But Arun behaved very normally as if he knew nothing. When Hari woke up Arun had already made tea. Arun stretched out his hand towards Hari. There was a five Rupee note in his hand. It was offered as salary, a good amount in the form of salary for a domestic help in those days. Hari's heart sank as he realized that Arun knew everything that happened on the previous night. "The note was still wet from the last night's rain."

"Today I will teach you to write a little more than your name" said Arun.

This story contains a lot of social values. In the first place both the characters have good social values ingrained in them. Hari, although a thief, knew the value of education, the achievement of which will make anybody great and self-reliant. On another level he did not want to betray his 'Guru'. It was also the good qualities of Arun which influenced Hari and helped him to give up theft. The world today needs more and more people like Arun who is more human, to transform people like Hari, who become convicts not by choice but by influence of adverse circumstances. Here Arun is a mouth piece Ruskin Bond himself whose writings have lot of good societal influence especially on children. This story also inspires people not to ill-treat child servants if at all they have any. Children should be given all the opportunities for education which will mould their attitude towards life in a positive way and will enable them to become responsible citizens. True friendship can bring about miraculous transformations. This is the message given by Ruskin Bond through this short story.

Friendship between human beings and Nature is the main theme of the story "The Last Truck Ride" by Ruskin Bond. As indicated in the title, we expect some tragic end in the story of the "The Last Truck Ride". But it is not as bad as we expect. Due to the positive influence of Nature the impending calamity is averted and the life of Pritam Singh, the driver of the truck and his companion Nathu is saved. Nathu, an orphan, poor but sturdy and sensible boy is a lover of

nature and would have worked in Nature and earned his living. But due to the draught of the previous year there was no scope for this in near future. Ultimately, although, against his own will he had to join Pritam Singh as a cleaner. Pritam Singh was about fifty and was planning to wind up his driving work within a year. He usually drove his Truck very fast so that he will be able to make two trips a day on the hillside from where lime stones were cut off Nature and sent to far off places for sale by contractors.

An amicable companionship developed between Nathu and Pritam Singh who spent most of their daytime together. They cared for each other and shared not only food, tea and other edibles but also aspects of their emotional needs by indulging in fun and frolic during work and leisure time. Nathu was pained by the cruel stripping of the hillsides of their beautiful lime stones. But Pritam never had any such feelings. He was a matter of fact man, who was only bothered about earning his living for which he was dependent on his years old truck.

As indicated before, Nathu was a lover of Nature. Although a child, he knew that if you protect Nature, It will reciprocate positively. If you give love to Nature it will give you back love. But if you trouble Nature, It will reciprocate the same. The name Nathu itself is reminiscent of Nature. Pritam Singh was not aware of this aspect of Nathu's character. Once, both of them were driving uphill. As usual the truck was running in high speed, at the same time blasting of stones was in progress on both sides of the road. When Pritam Singh became aware of this he brought the truck to a halt. "Let's wait a bit", he said. They sat in silence, staring through the windscreen at the scarred hills about a hundred yards down the road. There was no sign of life around them. Suddenly the hillside blossomed outwards, followed by a sharp crack of explosives. Earth and rock hurtled down the hillside. Nathu watched it in awe as shrubs and small trees were flung to the air. The narrator emphasizes the fact that :

"It always frightened him (Nathu) - not so much the sight of rocks bursting asunder, but the trees being flung aside and destroyed. He thought of his own trees at home – the walnut, the pines, - and whether the mountains would all become a desert like this particular range. No trees, no grass, no water – only the choking dust of the lime stone quarries."<sup>3</sup>

When the chaos created by the blasting was getting over, Pritam Singh blew the horn so that the people will know that he was approaching. Soon he reached his destination and parked outside a small shed. Bond gives a delineation of the site of the blasting which is very casual for the workers or rather a means of earning for them. But for a lover of Nature like Nathu or Bond himself it is a heart rending procedure:

A short distance away some labourers were hammering at chunks of rock, breaking them up into manageable blocks. A pile of stones stood ready for loading, while the rock that had just been blasted lay scattered about the hillside." (T L T R.19)

While the laborers were loading the truck Pritam Singh and the contractor had a tea-break. Although Pritam invited him Nathu preferred to give a helping hand to the laborers. The contractor immediately made it clear to Nathu not to "expect to be paid for that". For him every extra paise spent was a paise off his profits. Nathu retorted, 'Don't worry, I don't work for contractors. I work for Pritam Singh.' (T.L.T.R.20)

"That's right", called out Pritam. 'And mind what you say to Nathu- he is nobody's servant!'

Within one hour the truck was full with stones. Pritam started the truck and Nathu jumped in beside him. Soon, as usual, Pritam Singh started driving very fast. Some labourers were

sitting on the loaded stones. They started singing. Nathu was feeling very dizzy. The door beside him rattled on its hinges. He warned Pritam not to drive very fast but the latter ignored. A stray mule appeared in the middle of the road. Pritam swung the steering wheel over to his right; but the road turned left, and the truck went straight over the edge. The labours sitting on the top leapt from the back of the truck. But the truck pitched forward...turned on its side and rolled over twice before coming to rest against the trunk of a scraggy old oak tree. Had it missed the tree, it would have plunged a few hundred feet down to the bottom of the gorge. Nathu had landed on a bed of nettles and was not really hurt. Pritam Singh had broken collar bone, a dislocated shoulder, and several fractured ribs. But the doctors said he repairable- which was more than could be said for his truck.

‘The truck is finished’ said Pritam, when Nathu came to see him a few days later, in the hospital after his last truck drive.

‘Now I will have to go and live with my sons’ continued Pritam. ‘But you can get work on another truck.’

‘No’ said Nathu. ‘I’m going too’

‘And what you will do there?’

‘I’ll work on the land, it’s better to grow things on the land than to blast things out of it.’ (T L T R 23 ). Here Nathu is the mouth-piece of Bond who uses him to convey a great message to us: Protect nature, it will protect you.

Another story of Bond “The Window” is exclusively about the magic of Nature, how Nature can be the best friend of any human being who is prepared to love her. This story is autobiographical because like the protagonist of this story Ruskin Bond also had lived for few years in his youth in a room which was on the roof of a building. Likewise, the narrator of the story was living in a room on the roof of a building which had a particular window from where he could enjoy the magic of Nature. One day a little girl came to the building along with her aunt for a short visit to her relatives. And a friendship developed between her and the narrator. The bond of their innocent friendship was sealed by nature – the magic of Nature which they enjoyed through the open window. The narrator introduced the little girl to the magic of Nature – how Nature can give thrilling company to human beings who are prepared to reciprocate the same. To the narrator and the little girl Koki,

“... window was more than anything else. It gave us the power of detachment: we were deeply interested in the life around us, but we were not involved in it”. “It is like cinema,” said Koki. “The window is screen, the world is the picture”<sup>4</sup>

From the window they together enjoyed the panorama presented by Nature. Says the narrator:

“The banyan tree, just opposite, was mine, and its inhabitants my subjects. They were two squirrels, a few myna, a crow, and at night, a pair of flying foxes. The squirrels were busy in the afternoons, the birds in the mornings and evenings, the foxes at night.” (T. W.24.)

Thus Nature seen through the window became a common bond of friendship between the narrator and Koki, the little girl. There was no other bond between them:

“I only knew that her name was Koki, and she had come with her aunt for summer months; I didn’t need to know any more about her, she didn’t need to know anything about me.” (T.W. 26).

They together tried to make flower beds on the terrace. But it rained at night and the whole thing was washed away. Nature cannot be created artificially, or nothing can replace Nature in life of man.

It is conservation and respect for Nature which is the most important message conveyed by Ruskin Bond through two of these stories, “The Last Truck Ride” and “The Window”. Wordsworth attributed a spirit to Nature and worshiped Nature. But Ruskin Bond here takes a further step and depicts Nature as a deity who has the capacity to change the destiny of human beings. He very strongly emphasizes his view through these stories: Protect Nature and it will protect you in return. If we protect Nature, It will reciprocate positively. If you give love to Nature it will give you back love. But if you trouble Nature, It will reciprocate the same. More than anything nature has a replenishing effect on human beings. Remain in the company of Nature so that one can be pure not only in body but also in mind.

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### References

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3. Ruskin Bond, *No Man is an Island*, (Rupa Publishers, Mumbai 2013 ) 19. (Hereafter mentioned as ‘T L T R’ in the body of the text)
4. Ruskin Bond, *No Man is an Island*, (Rupa Publishers, Mumbai 2013 ) 27. (Hereafter mentioned as ‘T. W’ in the body of the text)