

A Moving Spectrum of Life: Ruskin Bond's Ghost Stories

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ABSTRACT

In an age of science one finds it difficult to digest any fictional encounter with fairies and ghosts and, yet they do exist in the psychology of each society both in the East and in the modern West. Stories of mysterious agents figure in every literature. Ruskin Bond portrays the magic of supernatural elements in his stories. He has written fantastic tales of ghosts and spirits which evoke mass appeal. In *A Season of Ghosts* Bond works on an age-old question which fascinates both the young and the adult reader. He tells us that we need not believe in ghosts to see them. This book is not just a collection of ghost stories. Some of the stories are reminiscent of childhood tales replete with fairies and *rakshasas*. The treatment of the supernatural is unique. The agents of his supernatural who are endowed with different traits; humorous, witty, vicious and tragic present a moving spectrum of life. They are derived from myths and legends of the hills. The stories are set in the picturesque locale of the hills of north India. The twist in the ending of some of these ghostly tales surprises the reader. This paper seeks to critically examine Ruskin Bond's craftsmanship, his thematic concerns, his art of characterization, and his vision of life in these stories. It will attempt to analyse the outcome of Bond's experiment in theme and technique, his use of narrative devices like first-person narration, third-person narration, flashback, narration within the narration, as well as the myths, symbols, and poetic overflows which are ingeniously incorporated in these narratives.

KEYWORDS

A Season of Ghosts; Ruskin Bond; Narration

In an age of science, one finds it difficult to digest any fictional encounter with fairies and ghosts, yet they do exist in the psychology of each society both in the East and in the modern West. Stories of mysterious agents figure in every literature. Ghost stories are a popular form of literature in which supernatural elements are central to the plot, character and theme. Ruskin Bond ventures into the world of horror and mystery in his unique style using simple words and expressions in his portrayal of the magic of

supernatural elements in his short stories. His fantastic tales of ghosts and spirits evoke mass appeal. They present a moving spectrum of life. This paper seeks to critically examine Ruskin Bond's craftsmanship, his thematic concerns, his art of characterization, and his vision of life in select stories which figure in the volume *A Season of Ghosts*.

Short stories have been a perennial source of delight and instruction to humanity. Its origins lie in myths, fables, legends and ballads. Tutun Mukherjee

states that "the short story offering varieties and contingencies of situations, zeroes in on the moment of crisis, which never fail to convey a degree of mystery, elision, or the uncertainty of the unexpected" (2004:94)

H.G.Wells definition of a short story also includes all its characteristics. He states that it is,

The jolly art of making something very bright and moving; it may be horrible or pathetic or funny or profoundly illuminating having only this essential that it should take from fifteen to fifty minutes to read aloud (Mundra & Sahni : 1965: 139)

While Somerset Maugham insists on adherence to form, Poe advocates unity of impression and singleness of purpose. The genre of the short story has appealed to the young and the adult alike. The fascination for incredible suspense is a part of every growing child. Tales of the supernatural have an immense capacity to arouse curiosity. According to Peter Penzoldt, both the notions of terror and horror are fundamental elements of short stories dealing with the supernatural- the writers of truly powerful stories about the supernatural usually do not need devices of material or physical terror. It was in the late nineteenth century that the contribution to the use of the supernatural saw a rapid rise. Jack Sullivan cites that the rise of the ghost story was a part of the Edwardian fascination with the extraordinary as well as the reflection of the restlessness that infused society and culture of the time. The growth of the popularity of the ghost story can also be seen as a reaction to realism that permeated the writings of that period. Plato states that, " a child cannot distinguish the allegorical sense [of a story] from the literal sense" (*Republic*, II, 377). He insisted that mothers and nurses should not

scare children with mischievous stories of spirits that go about by

night in all sorts of outlandish shapes. They would only be blaspheming the gods and at the same time making cowards of their children (*Republic*, II, 380).

His negative caution is that these stories can create 'the presence of falsehood in the soul concerning reality'. Rousseau also believed that, the fable exposes a world in which people flatter and lie for profit, and does so in a manner that invites the child to admire the vices the story describes. The most assertive, argument for the value of fantasy stories has been made by Bruno Bettelheim (1976). He drew heavily on Freud in arguing that fantasy stories are vitally important for young children's psychological health. Real-life stories, in his view, are much more likely to cause psychological problems, or create falsehood about reality in the soul, than are fantasies. Real-life heroes can be oppressive to young children's developing sense of themselves, emphasizing the child's insignificance in contrast to the confidence, goodness, or power of the hero. Bettelheim argues against Plato and Rousseau by stating that stories which stay close to the child's everyday real world, are more likely to confuse the child as to what is real and what is not, because children lack the experience to sort what may be real but unusual from what is false but plausible. The value of fantasy is that children recognize very early that it is different from their everyday world.

Oral tales were told by adults for children as well as for adults. They were interactive and closely connected to the customs, beliefs and rituals of tribes and communities. The audience could participate and even modify the tales to fit the needs of the community. While most ghost stories focus on the supernatural many of them have their origins in oral literature and folklore. Kaidan tales find representation in Japanese and Chinese literature; Ghost stories form a large part of legends and folklore in Danish literature.

These stories can be seen as attempts to share cultural traditions and legends. Many of them are passed down generations within families and never reach the world. They are found within most cultures, modern or ancient, east or west. Ghost stories usually present a haunting experience with a ghost. Some of them are targeted at teaching a moral lesson. Children enjoy ghost stories as it awakens them to the strange new world of the supernatural and unseen. Bettelheim considers that fairy tales and tales of the supernatural can be enriching and satisfying to the child and the adult alike. 'For a story to enrich a child's life it must stimulate his imagination, help him to develop his intellect and to clarify his emotions, be attuned to his anxieties and aspirations, give full recognition to his difficulties, and suggest solutions to problems that perturb him, promote confidence in himself and his future.' The child identifies with the heroes of the stories and is encouraged because they mostly have happy endings. Bettelheim suggested that traditional fairy tales, with the darkness of abandonment, death, witches, and injuries, allowed children to grapple with their fears in remote, symbolic terms. If they could read and interpret these fairy tales on their own, he believed, they would get a greater sense of meaning and purpose. By engaging these socially evolved stories, children would go through emotional growth that would better prepare them for their own futures.

Ruskin Bond brings together some of his ghost stories which feature impressive characters who encounter chilling horror. Bond's ghost stories are subtle. The drama comes from the subject matter and the manner in which people tell the stories rather than from the extraordinary behaviour of the supernatural beings. In the oral tradition, people commonly report merely feeling some type of "presence," a cold feeling in the room, or strange noises and nothing

more (Guiley 1992, 13). Each story in *A Season of Ghosts* has something different to offer to readers of all age groups. Bond as a master storyteller is well aware of human psychology. The appeal of Bond's fictional encounters with the ghosts lies in the way he presents them. He takes up the issue of credibility of these stories, when asked whether he believed in ghosts, he replied 'Well, I don't believe in them. But I keep seeing them. Seeing, they say, is believing, but I am not so sure. You can see a magician or conjurer cut a man in half, but you will believe what you see only if he fails to put the two halves together again.' (Bond: 1999: VII). Some of the stories are directly influenced by his early boyhood memories, the stories of Kipling like the 'phantom rickshaw' told by his father charmed his tender mind. He has acknowledged the influence of the stories of M.R. James, Hugh Walpole, H.G. Wells, Walter De La Mare, Sheridan, Kipling and Satyajit Ray. They inspired him to conjure up ghosts, witches and demons in his tales. It is a make-believe world of unearthly creatures, which have been a part of this earth from time immemorial. The charm of these tales lies in the freshness of tone and intensity of narration. Many of the stories are reminiscent of childhood tales replete with fairies and *rakshasas*. The treatment of the supernatural is unique. The agents of his supernatural who are endowed with different traits; humorous, witty, vicious and tragic present a moving spectrum of life. They are derived from myths and legends of the hills. The stories are set in the picturesque locale of the hills of north India. These hills reverberate with the remembered voices, the experience, indeed the ghosts, of all those who ever lived in the times when manners were gentler, the landscape greener, the roads less crowded. After all, ghosts are very sensitive to the "noise of the passing traffic" as stated by Gargi Bhattacharjee. Supernatural agents inhabit the natural denizens of the thick forests of deodars and

pinetrees with the mists rising from the hills. There is also the haunting presence of the old dak bungalows with their chandeliers, long corridors and winding staircases. Bond's task as a ghost story writer has been helped by the existence in India of a fictional landscape peopled with *rakshshasas*, *pishaches*, dervishes and witches that are the staple of every respectable bedtime story. Ruskin Bond transfers the readers to the plot of the story and paints the picture with his wordcraft.

Most of Bond's ghosts are homely presences; they have no malignant designs on humans like the ghost of the school boy on a speeding bicycle in 'Whistling in the Dark'. Bond employs Person narration to present an account of an encounter with a benevolent spirit. The subjective narrator may be an unreliable narrator who spends most of the story trying to convince the reader of something. Bond tries to make the story convincing by employing the technique of an intimate encounter. As he sees the spirit, his curiosity is aroused, and a trail of investigation leads to the knowledge that a boy of about fourteen named Micheal Dutta had met with a fatal accident some fifty years ago. In his lifetime he used to carry errands for people in the neighbourhood. In order to take the reader into a world of 'willing suspension of disbelief', he characterizes the spirit as a jovial bicycle rider in his school uniform with no intention to scare anyone. Bond draws his readers into sharing his emotions that ghosts only revisit the places they inhabited during their lifetime. His psychological approach to the supernatural was influenced by American author Lafcadio Hearn who wrote: "The ghostly always represents some shadow of truth. The ghost has always happened in our dreams and reminds us of forgotten experiences, imaginative and emotional" (qtd in Introduction Time stops at Shamli 10).

The child spirit Bond encounters on various occasions moves freely in the hills

which Bond admires so much. They belong as much to the spirit as it does to him. It is out of this conviction that Bond weaves this story. Bond also longed for companionship. In the story, the poetic refrain 'My echo', 'my shadow' and 'me' emphasizes this point. It is during such a contemplative moment that he confronts the spirit. Bond endows the spirit with living characteristics through the narration of Mrs. Marley. A convincing description of the dress, the lively smile and the generous attitude exemplify Bond's mastery of characterization. The carefree attitude of the boy spirit is in contrast to Bond's, who grapples with his identity. Bond's ability to combine fantasy and reality is also manifested as the protagonist investigates the circumstances which led to the death of the bicycle rider thus bringing in the detective vein which fascinates every growing child. In "Reunion at the Regal" we feel the author's sense of loss and experience his bewilderment. The setting goes back to the most sensitive and nostalgic time of his childhood. He encounters the spirit of a long-lost friend. The story is autobiographical as Bond traces the good times spent with his friend in the hills, his sojourn abroad, his return and his brief stay in Delhi. The writer humorously imagines himself as a ghost at one point in the story. The friend who longed for him, wrote letters and considered the author his best friend. As they "nurtured their paths and their lives took different directions", "they lost track of each other". The author's desperate longing for the friend's presence is manifested in the form of the ghost and this happens only after he is told about the friend's demise. The plot of the story is woven around the opening 'If you want to see a ghost, just stand outside New Delhi's Regal Cinema for twenty minutes or so'(41).

In the story "Wilson's Bridge" Bond is an objective participant on a tour with an elderly and a young couple. Here Bond uses

a distinct narrative style. He begins in the first person but transfers the narrative powers to the watchman who narrates the historical context more convincingly. As the watchman intimates Bond about a century-old tragedy- The doomed history of the beautiful Gulabi, the consort of Englishman Wilson, who made his fortune from the timber of the Dehra forests, comes up. Bond seems to distance himself from the existential dilemma of identity. As the narration within narration re shifts to the present, Mrs Ray kills herself thereby re-enacting a century-old tragedy. The young Mrs Ray emulates Gulabi as she jumps off the rails of "Wilson's Bridge". In this act, there is a convergence of the past and the present still leaving an open- ending. We wonder whose ghost would appear on the bridge next time.

Bond's conservationist ideas are most evident in "On Fairy 'Hill". It is a filigree description of an imaginative land of elves and fairies. This is a Lilliputian fantasy peopled by two-inch fairies and elves; the only difference is that these creatures instead of shooting arrows at the author as in Swift's tale, leave him with soothing dew and rose petals. Just across from Bond's residence--the Ivy Cottage--in Landour, Mussoorie stands a lonely limestone hill, devoid of the flora it boasted of in the past. In his history of Anglo-Indian Mussoorie and Landour: Days of Wine and Roses--Bond refers to this hill as "Pari Tibba" (Hill of Fairies) (16), which some seventy or eighty years ago was well forested with deodars and pines. Anglo-Indian families lived in beautiful cottages on it. The population began to dwindle after Independence and a large-scale exodus of Anglo-Indians to English-speaking countries took place and the houses fell into ruin. It is this historical past that constitutes the object of our narrator's dream. Such houses filled with Anglo-Indian boarders existed on Pari Tibba in

the past; their absence now causes a feeling of desolation in the narrator, who finds in the trace 'a metonymic correlative for his loneliness'. Bond, the biographical self, dislikes old things and old places falling into ruin. His yearning for the past that no longer exists, in reality, informs his desire for it. The story confirms Bettelheim's observation that the 'fairy tale is therapeutic because the patient finds his own solutions, through contemplating what the story seems to imply about him and his inner conflicts at this moment in his life.'(Bettelheim:25)

The story having a typical Indian strange folklore strain is 'The Rakshasas' which is a third-person narrative. Third-person narratives can sound more formal than those written in the first person. They allow a distance from the main characters not possible when the person involved is telling the story in his own voice. It also gives authors more flexibility, allowing them to change the point of view to another character without confusing the reader. The story is derived straight out from an oral narrative. It has a narrator Bibiji who narrates a tale wherein goats and queens suck blood, kings have a fetish for collecting wives, and there are singing waters and conserved bones which can be used to bring back the dead to life. The story has a polarity of characters rightly inducted with a mission to condition the reader to distinguish between the good and the evil as Bettelheim states, 'Polarities of the characters permits the child to comprehend difference between good and the evil.'

It is his lyricism, the ability to see life as one flowing continuum that gives him the ability to look at ghosts look ghosts so squarely. Bond's humane touch to his writing and his ability to write ordinary things in an extraordinary manner made him very popular among the fraternity of readers.

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