

‘ENDEARING CROOKS’ IN THE SHORT STORIES OF RUSKIN BOND

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Abstract

Ruskin Bond’s largesse towards wrong-doers; his restraint from being judgmental and magnanimity in accepting and condoning human flaws and trespasses, however grave they be, lends an unusual positivity to his writings and casts him in the mold of Humanism. The apparently vile and villainous characters in Bond’s short stories are sketched as endearing rather than evil and cute rather than culpable. The author advocates and justifies self-preservation and survival as natural instincts and on his scales he weighs intention heavier than action. Bond’s apparently reprobate characters, straddle the canvas of life from childhood to old age; queens to beggars; law-keepers to dacoits; relatives to strangers and so forth and through them Bond looks into the fundamentals of living with a rare sensibility.

Keywords: *Wrong-doers, Judgmental, Magnanimity, Humanism, Self-preservation*

Indignation at human misdoings is discernibly absent in the writings of Ruskin Bond who has successfully created knavish characters that may be best described as ‘endearing crooks’. They may misuse a corpse, forge, have extra-marital affairs or feign to be crippled, yet it is difficult to despise or denounce them, rather, they often rouse our compassion and clemency. In a personal interview Bond expressed his largesse and munificence towards human faults and foibles stating,

“I know that there is evil in the world... but I’ve never known anyone completely evil and I’ve always found the better qualities of goodness and truth dominating. I do try to bring out the best in people, in human beings because it is there in almost each one of us. There are exceptions ... it’s just due to circumstances or lack of sensitivity or mental development. Most writers often have characters that are very evil and cruel, but I cannot honestly say that I’ve come across someone who is totally evil”.

The benign large-hearted acceptance of varied shades of divergent and defaulting human beings casts Bond in the mold of Humanism, which may be expounded as:

[A] system of views based on respect for the dignity and rights of man, his value as a personality, concern for his welfare, his all-round development, and the creation of favorable conditions for social life. Humanism is opposed to fanaticism, rigorism, intolerance, and disrespect for the views and knowledge of others. (178)

Exemplifying Bond’s distinctive brand of Humanism are the characters of Dilawar Singh, the head constable of Ahirpur police station and Lala Ram Das, a wealthy, miserly money lender in “Dead Man’s Gift”. They are juxtaposed as contrasts of human nature. Dilawar Singh was handsome, gregarious, sporty and passionately fond of his mare, Leila whom he had purchased on partial credit. He needed money to keep Leila and adopted the ruse of black-mailing the niggardly Lala with a chance corpse that he sighted at the edge of a stream. Lala realized that even though he was innocent the constable would use his office to implicate him and have him arrested so he gave the hush money demanded by Dilawar Singh and the corpse having served its purpose of extortion was pushed back into the stream.

On the scales of justice, Lala was the wronged party. Though innocent he had been incriminated to arrange for the shortfall in Dilawar Singh’s funds, yet Lala emerges as execrable and stingy, and Dilawar Singh, despite his materialistic, villainous streak unfolds as a venial character whose flamboyance is charming. A little later in the story, it is learnt that Dilawar Singh died of a fall from his mare and Lala provided oil to light the constable’s funeral pyre. In spite of the apparent providential justice meted out to Dilawar Singh, he remains an exorable character, while Lala in spite of his ostensible generosity remains inexorable. Bond, like Carl Rogers who propounded the humanistic and phenomenological theory of the self, practices “unconditional positive regard” which is defined as accepting a person “without negative judgment of ... [a person’s] basic worth”. (78)

The misdoing of another keeper of law is seen in “Hanging at the Mango-Top” in which a dacoit gang led by Mangal Singh Bundela, captured Inspector Hukam Singh and Sub-Inspector Guler Singh. Mangal Singh decided to hang Hukam Singh, but as a good sport he gave Guler Singh a chance to fire six shots with a rifle to sever the rope that suspended his senior. Guler Singh was a fair marksman, but guided by recollections of several occasions when his superior had wronged him, he deliberately sent the shots off the mark.

Guler Singh had been directed by emotions of revenge and rivalry. Nonetheless, Ruskin Bond portrays him as a condonable, not a condemnable character, perhaps because Bond, like his forerunners in the tradition of Humanism, has “proclaimed freedom of the individual, opposed religious asceticism, vindicated man’s right to pleasure and the satisfaction of earthly requirements” (178).

The character of Inspector Keemat Lal who features in “Who Killed the Rani?” and its shorter version titled “A Case for Inspector Lal” displays a benevolent side of the keepers of law. After having solved a murder mystery the Police Inspector was overcome with tender emotion for the culprit and ‘unsolved’ the case, even though it meant delaying his own promotion. Kusum /Kamla, the young protagonist in the two stories, had reacted to advances made towards her and had inadvertently committed a murder. The Inspector decided to prioritize his emotions over his duty to uphold the law. In conversation with a friend, Inspector Lal vented: “Perhaps it could only have happened in India – and to a person like me ...This sudden compassion for the person you are supposed to destroy. Instead of being furious and outraged, instead of seizing the girl and marching her off to the police station, I stroked her head and said silly comforting things.” (94) Interestingly, the character of Inspector Keemat Lal is based on a police officer who had once befriended Ruskin Bond. About him, Bond writes that he “is no Holmes or Poirot; he is a bit of a plodder, but he gets there in the end. And he has what other brainy techs seldom have — a vulnerable nature, a touch of humanity, a streak of compassion, which make him a nice man to know” (x). About the character of the Rani who had been inadvertently murdered in the story, Bond writes: “She existed too — a rather unfriendly neighbour, who was both feared and detested by those who had to deal with her” (x).

Dilawar Singh’s exploitation of a chance corpse and Guler Singh’s vindictive grudge against his superior, contrast sharply with Keemat Lal’s overbearing magnanimity towards a young girl. Dilawar Singh and Guler Singh had sacrificed humanistic principles for materialistic considerations, while Keemat Lal had sacrificed materialistic gains for humanistic reasons. However, Bond has an ambivalent approach and apparently champions humanistic psychology which as expounded by Joseph Friedman, [I]s strongly supportive of phenomenological and clinical approaches to the study of the human position in the order of life... The symbolic dimension of consciousness is of special interest. It is in this realm of our lives – a uniquely human realm – that meaning, value, culture, personal decision and responsibility are expressed and manifested.

The character of Mr. Khushal, a teacher gone crooked in “Masterji” is as admitted by Ruskin Bond, inspired by one of his school teachers.–The narrator was aghast to see his ‘Masterji’ handcuffed to a policeman at a railway station and made an earnest enquiry. His unabashed teacher stoically replied: A trivial matter...Nothing to worry about... Even a great teacher like Socrates fell foul of the law...It was simply a question of false certificates...the matriculation certificates I have been providing all these years to the poor idiots who would have never got through on their own!...so many printing mistakes...You can’t find a good press these days,...It isn’t fair to hold a boy back in life simply because he can’t get through some puny exam... I don’t give my certificates to anyone. They come to me only after they have failed two or three times.” (105-106)

The narrator then recollected how Mr. Khushal had actually encouraged him to copy out the Hindi question paper at an examination, and had even awarded him pass-marks for neat handwriting!

Humanistic psychology acknowledges that the human mind is influenced by both, the unconscious and societal forces, some of which may be negative and noxious. Further, intentions and ethical values are psychological forces which are foremost among the determinants of human behaviour. All of Mr. Khushal’s ‘wrong’ deeds had originated from a humanistic motive which endear him to the reader. For Bond, as for the originators of the tradition of Humanism: “[M]an was born “good” or at least was ethically neutral until corrupt philosophy and inequitable institutions perverted his will” (15-16).

“Chachi’s Funeral” is another engaging narrative which illustrates the incongruous congruity of human relations. Chachi, as ten-year-old Sunil’s aunt was called, had struck Sunil for having dropped a honey jar. A furious and hurt Sunil then retreated to his secret hiding place with a desire to kill his aunt. His

cousin, Madhu who was his confidante offered to assist him, albeit imaginatively. The confederates drew Chachi's sketch with a red heart in the centre and Sunil stabbed it; set the drawing aflame and drained the ashes. The fantasized murder and symbolic funeral complete, Sunil was struck with remorse. He began to weep and reflected that after all he didn't hate Chachi so much that he should want to murder her. He returned back home and unexpectedly embraced his aunt who though initially suspicious about her nephew's sudden affection patted him and led him towards the kitchen.

Sunil and Chachi, both simple folks, had been gripped with an emotion of anger, leading to violence of different kinds; real and symbolic, but it ebbed because though anger is inherent in living beings, hatred is not, and revenge and remorse are co-existing states of mind. Besides, as Bond counsels, "Each one of us is a mass of imperfections, and to be able to recognize and live with our imperfections, our basic natures, defects of genes and birth – hereditary flaws – makes for an easier transit on life's journey" (7).

Ruskin Bond's largesse and condonation do however occasionally stretch to implausible limits as in the story "A Job Well Done" which recounts the murderous drowning of the narrator's step-father, Major Summerskill by Dhuki, the gardener. The blustering Major had been repeatedly instructing the gardener to seal an unused well which was home to a flock of pigeons, but the gardener ignored the instruction. When Dhuki was pulled up one more time by the Major for his roguery he simply tipped Major Summerskill over the well boundary and sealed it. The sole witness of this homicide was the narrator and he chose to keep quiet about the incident. This narration has however simplified a bizarre murder case to ridiculous limits. Major Summerskill may not have endeared himself to the gardener, but he surely did not deserve a death sentence and the probability of a little boy remaining so complacent and undisturbed about so ghastly an incident is unconvincing. Another questionable aspect in the story is the likelihood of clearing away all evidence of a murder case so deftly and in so short a time. Yet, ironically, the Major's impression endures as that of an abominable loudmouth who needed to be silenced, while Dhuki and his young confederate emerge as benign heroes, probably because of the compassion they show towards the pigeons and their general love for Nature.

Another incredulous short story by Ruskin Bond which is inspired by the humanistic facet of universal acceptance of mankind's misdeeds is "He Said It with Arsenic". The 'He' in this story is William Jones or Uncle Bill who was a nurse by profession and a perverse destroyer by passion. Uncle Bill used to dispense arsenic to get unwanted persons out of his way and had served a prison term for his doings, but the unreformed Uncle returned to make an attempt on the life of his only living relative, his nephew. The nephew was familiar with his uncle's criminal instincts, yet he extended to him hospitality and even though he saw through the attempt on his life, for namesake courtesy, he complimented his Uncle's genteel behavior.

The apparent platonic relationship shared between Leela, wife of a Customs official and her neighbour, Arun, seven years her junior in "His Neighbour's Wife", is a tale with a twist in the tail. Leela was on the lookout for a suitable match for Arun when her husband unexpectedly passed away and Arun made a spontaneous proposal to marry her, which she accepted. The timing and progression of the relationship between Leela and Arun certainly raises suspicion, nonetheless the story presents a fascinating 'humanistic psychological' outlook on life. The proponents of this branch of psychology address the nature of human experiences and the aspect of objectivity in personal experiences.

On lines similar to the aforementioned narrative, are the twin stories, "Love is a Sad Song" and "Time Stops at Shamli" in which the character of Sushila is portrayed both as an infidel beloved and an unfaithful wife. Her behaviour is inconstant and irresolute, yet her beloved continues to harbour deep and sincere feelings for her and these feelings get transmitted to the reader who is left wondering whether he has any moral right to condemn her when her lover continues to dote on her. Besides, her comprehension about the sanctity of marriage gives her personality a traditional and conservative edge which overwhelms her perfidy.

'Come away with me,' I said. 'Leave the place...'

'Why can't you come?'

'I am married, it is as simple as that.' ...

'You are too practical.' I said.

'If women were not practical, most marriages would be failures.'

'So your marriage is a success?'

'Of course it is, as a marriage. I am not happy and I do not love him, but neither am I so unhappy that I should hate him... Don't be a fool. I am always here and you can come to see me, and nobody will be made unhappy by it. But take me away and we will only have regrets.' (271)

Humanism has molded mundane views and has proclaimed the right of men to freely develop their 'natural essence.' This liberality makes Sushila's character and conduct condonable, even though her cozening and deceit are her misdoings. Her husband, Mr. Satish Dayal is the wronged party, yet one cannot help arguing in Sushila's favour. Her husband was apparently not her choice and she had been wasted on him. Her superiority in comparison to him made them a mismatched couple and the return of her beloved served to heighten her awareness of their matrimonial mismatch. However, Sushila had the sensitivity and familial responsibility not to end her marriage.

Echoing similar infidelity in love is the character of Sudheer, the Lafunga i.e. loafer in *The Young Vagrants*. He shared his heart with two beloveds; Hastini and Mrinalini and very unabashedly admitted to the latter: "I love her because she is so comfortable, I love you because you are so sweet. Can I help it if I love you both?" (747). Even though Sudheer's conduct is abominable, he has points for grace and is not entirely an aversive character. He was a sincere, generous friend to Rusty and reassured him: "I have enough for both of us, so let us live on till it is finished and let us be happy" (730). Besides, "He practiced crime as a fine art and believed that thieves, even murderers had to have certain principles" (715).

Ruskin Bond's attitude like that of the Christian Humanists is anthropocentric. [I]nstead of regarding man as a fallen, corrupt and sinful creature, their idea of truth and excellence is based on human values and human experience. They strive for moderate, achievable, even worldly aims, rather than revering ascetism. (100)

Another winsome character penned by Ruskin Bond is that of Aunt Mariam in "The Guardian Angel." She was an unconventionally good-looking woman who had an abundance of understanding and reveled in untidiness. She was the narrator's maternal aunt and entered his life when his mother passed away. Aunt Mariam gave the little boy the reassurance that he needed, particularly at that tragic turn in his life, and kept him in her custody for a little over a year.

The little boy had gathered that his aunt had in some way disgraced the family and realized that she had nocturnal visitors, but she was tender, truthful and selfless. She sent her nephew to a boarding school in order to keep him away from the influence of her socially unacceptable profession. Ruskin Bond like, Humanists such as Carl Rogers see people as basically good or healthy – or at least, not bad or ill. In other words, they see mental health as the normal progression of life and mental illness, criminality, and other human problems, as distortions of that natural tendency which Rogers called self-actualization. (91-92)

Even Sunil, the compulsive trouble-shooter in "Death of a Familiar" who felt pleased when chased by creditors and brothers whose sisters he had teased and husbands whose wives he had molested, strikes a chord of sympathy. Sunil had joined the narrator on a holiday to Shimla where nature and a beloved apparently seemed to reform him, before his father's objections to his romance upset his plans. Sunil was ultimately jilted in love, became a drunken wastrel and was later stabbed to death by two men whose wives he had seduced.

Another 'enchanted rascal' penned by Ruskin Bond is Kundan Singh in "The Amorous Servant". Kundan was licentious, borrowed money, gambled, overslept, had a voracious appetite and drank raw country liquor. He once brought home a woman who was ten years older to him and introduced her as a distant relative. The bubble of euphoria of the couple burst when the husband of the lady arrived on the scene. The dishonourable husband however settled for a paltry sum of twenty rupees to balm his injured pride. Shortly after the incident, Kundan Singh, a chronic debauchee had a liaison with the local butcher's daughter. This affair came to an abrupt end when the girl's father threatened to castrate him.

When the narrator moved to another town he helped Kundan to secure a job in a restaurant. Six years later the narrator re-visited the town and went to look up for his flamboyant, lecherous friend, but learnt that Kundan had moved out after a year and his whereabouts were unknown. However, the restaurateur's five year old son was a look-alike of Kundan and quite certainly an evidence of another one of Kundan's illicit affairs.

The next that the narrator learnt about Kundan was when he came across his photograph in a military journal as a martyred Indian soldier. The narrator ruminated:

I could not help feeling rather proud of Kundan Singh. And a little envious. His youth had been free and easy; he had sown his wild oats and before he could become old and decrepit and useless, he had died a hero. That is something very few of us are able to achieve. (69)

Perhaps, Ganpat, the beggar in “The Boy Who Broke the Bank”, remains the most ‘endearing crook’ created by Ruskin Bond. He alarmed everybody by displaying incredible alacrity when the news of the crash of Seth Govind Ram’s Pipalnagar Bank reached him.

Old Ganpat the beggar had a crooked leg. He had been squatting on the pavement for years, calling for alms. In the evening someone would come with a barrow and take him away. He had never been known to walk. But now, on learning that the bank was about to collapse, Ganpat astonished everyone by leaping to his feet and actually running at top speed in the direction of the bank. It soon became known that he had a thousand rupees in savings! (37)

Ganpat had gulled people for years and had received pity in the place of punishment, yet in the ultimate analysis, Bond’s munificent stroke makes him emerge as cute rather than culpable.

In his generous Humanism, Ruskin Bond seems to have objections about nothing. His perspective apparently suggests, ‘So what? It happens! – We’re only human beings and the devil does take possession of us occasionally.’ He models the significance of the human personality as an autonomous centre organizing the various aspects of life while his magnanimity mirrors the words of American author and historian, James Adams, “There is so much good in the worst of us, and so much bad in the best of us, that it ill behoves any of us to find fault with the rest of us.”

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