

THE TREATMENT OF FRIENDSHIP AS A FUNDAMENTAL VALUE FOR CHARACTER- BUILDING IN THE WORKS OF RUSKIN BOND

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ABSTRACT:

Values are generally customary norms attributed to individuals and circumstances that form part and parcel of society. Morals and ethics serve to be the spine of a civilized society. Every individual is expected to abide by certain moral values laid down by the society. Literary works being the accumulated knowledge of generations serve as a goldmine for extracting values and ethics as they mirror society in its myriad hues and colours. In this context, Ruskin Bond is a prominent writer whose stories prove to be a potential tool to develop value consciousness in his readers.

This paper aims to kindle the sensitivity of the readers towards values of Friendship through Ruskin Bond's stories titled *Untouchable*, *The Fight*, *The Woman on Platform no. 8* and *The Eyes have it*. Ruskin Bond is an author who has consistently held human values to be the ultimate goal which man should strive for. Friendship transcends man-made barriers to create a special world for friends. He has depicted through these short stories how the bonds of friendship can be forged even in the most adverse of circumstances.

KEYWORDS: Values, Society, Circumstances, Regeneration, Transcendent, Friendship

INTRODUCTION:

The world today requires a vision, a creative impulse entrenched in a motivational force which helps re-discover the best value system. A regeneration of both body and soul is the dire need of the hour. Values are said to be derived from life, from the environment, from the self, society, culture, and beyond all, from the ideal transcendent dimension of human existence and experience. Value system is the foundation of a civilized culture. However, in the present age we can see a tremendous void in the lives of people as far as values are concerned. Man has made immense strides in the areas of science and technology, but has neglected to nourish his inner being. With the erosion of the joint family system and people migrating to cities in search of jobs, caring for the values of love and friendship among others has lost its priority. The youngsters of today need to be familiarized with ethics, morals and values that can sustain a human being on his journey of life. It is here that literature plays a crucial role in inculcating values through the easy medium of stories and tales that gives the reader an opportunity to find and treasure the values that are so essential for character building.

It is said that 'giving' is one of the fundamental joys of life. Giving and receiving material goods is a means of providing temporary happiness, but giving of one's heart and soul in the act of friendship is more binding and lasting. In this context, Ruskin Bond's stories depicting friendship are a great source for imbibing this fundamental value for character building. Ruskin Bond is an Indian writer of British descent who chose to make India his home. Dedicated to the art and craft of writing he weaves tales of the ordinary people of the small towns and villages of India. In his stories we get an insight into how enriching a value based life can be. His characters are far removed from the mechanical life of grimy cities and find true riches on living life honourably. His writing is coloured by life in the remote settlements at the foothills of the Himalayan mountains where he lived his early life and it is the innocent and simple values of these people that he writes about.

His stories are steeped in describing how values affect a person for the short term and how they shape his long term personality. This paper would focus on four short stories of Ruskin Bond where he depicts the many different aspects of friendship. The selected stories are 'The Woman on Platform no. 8', 'Untouchable', 'The Fight' and 'The Eyes Have It.' Through these stories, Ruskin Bond has tried to reduce the gulf between people

through the enriching bond of friendship, irrespective of their caste, age or region. The foremost requirement in friendship is the willingness to accept the other person for what he is, as the crucial impediment which comes in the way of friendship is one's ego. In these four stories, true friendship blossoms when the characters set their egos aside and are willing to see the world through the eyes of a friend. When the characters start viewing from their friend's perspective they feel elevated and energized. Friendship is a value that can be cultivated when both parties seek to fulfil a deep craving to connect to a higher consciousness. The entire emphasis is on the individual's value based inner thinking that goes towards his character building. Muhammad Ali, a famous boxer asserts:

Friendship is the hardest thing in the world to explain. It's not something you learn in school. But if you haven't learnt the meaning of friendship, you really haven't learnt anything.
(goodreads.com)

The Fight is the story of two youngsters, Ranji and a Punjabi boy *Suraj*, who start off as antagonists but end up as friends. Ranji resents the Punjabi boy encroaching on the pool, as he considers it his own private space. They decide that only a hand to hand fight can resolve this issue, but the results of that are inconclusive. They agree to continue the fight the next day, but both are reluctant to resume their hostile behaviour. It is Ranji's swimming skills that finally brings them closer. The Punjabi boy is generous in his praise and Ranji responds by agreeing that the Punjabi boy is indeed a '*Pahalwan*'. Earlier they had boasted about their community and superiority but true friendship is formed when they start respecting each other. A half-hearted fight between the two hostile young people culminates in mutual respect. Respect is the foundation for building all relationships, especially friendship. When Suraj realizes that skill in wrestling is not the only criterion for superiority and that Ranji is an expert at swimming and diving, he is overcome with admiration. Ranji is glad of the breakthrough that has been made and gladly concedes that Suraj is nothing less than a '*Pahalwan*'. All animosity is forgotten; the boys develop a deep sense of kinship that is unspoken but felt intensely by both the boys. '*They looked at each other with honest, unflinching eyes, and in that moment love and understanding were born.*' (Bond, Ruskin. No Man is an Island 3). There is no materialistic gain expected or demanded as their friendship goes beyond such mundane worldly matters. Their bond is the richer for that and has the potential to last for a longer time. Their generosity of spirit is the igniting force behind the warmth they feel for one another. It is rightly said that *Friendship is a relationship of mutual affection between two or more people.* (Wikipedia Friendship).

Friendship combines trust, loyalty, support, communication and empathy and is one of the most important relationships one can have in the course of his lifetime. Ruskin Bond states in his autobiography, *Lone Fox Dancing*, that a low caste sweeper boy had a deep influence on him and led him to write the story of the friendship that developed between them. The story is titled 'Untouchable' and is the tale of friendship evolving out of the circumstances that two boys find themselves in. Society dictates that a 'sweeper boy' and a 'white boy' - the son of a Sahib - cannot have any kind of interaction, let alone form any sort of friendship. The author had been warned not to have anything to do with the sweeper boy and abides by the rules. He remains aloof and snubs any overtures of friendship made by the sweeper boy. Both the ten-year-old boys are separated by man-made regulations that seem unsurmountable. It is powerful Mother Nature that is instrumental in breaking the shackles of hypocrisy thus enabling the boys to discover the fundamentals of humanity. The ice is broken when Ruskin Bond is startled by a centipede. His frightened screams of revulsion alert the untouchable sweeper boy who comes running in. It may have been common occurrence for the young Indian boy, for he is unfazed by the little creature. He picks up a book and crushes the insect, perhaps thereby symbolizing that book knowledge is useless to handle practical situations. Presence of mind is required to deal with tough situations and the sweeper boy has been toughened by the indignities he has had to face due to his low caste.

The scenario changes when the young Ruskin Bond is left alone at home one night. He misses his father and is worried about him. The ferocious storm raging outside frightens Ruskin Bond and compels him to seek out human company. He goes to the kitchen in search of the untouchable sweeper boy who is equally scared by the magnitude of the storm. When both of them admit to their vulnerability the basic human connection is formed and the two boys are comforted and Ruskin says that he was '*happy and safe.*' (Bond, Ruskin, No Man is an Island 6)

When Ruskin Bond reaches out to touch the cold shoulder of his new-found friend, all the man-made rules, of white and brown, natives and sahibs, lower and higher caste, break down and their raw basic nature is revealed. It is a new kind of friendship born out of surviving in times of danger and loneliness and knowledge that we are all equal in the eyes of God.

Depth of friendship does not depend on length of acquaintance, says Rabindranath Tagore and this is apparent in Ruskin Bond's *The Woman on Platform no.8* and *The Eyes Have It* (web source). In these touching stories, Ruskin Bond, gives us glimpses of how friendship can take root in an instant, without any ulterior motive. Such friendships are not bound by conventional norms and regulations but find their existence in the purity of hearts.

The lonely lady in *The Woman on Platform no.8* seems to be suppressing some deep inner sorrow which she does not express throughout the story, though her attachment to a schoolboy indicates that she is reminded of her son. When she sees a young boy in a potentially dangerous situation, she becomes extremely agitated and her nervousness can be sensed by the readers. Probably she had lost her son on that same platform and visits that place frequently to keep the memory of her son alive. When she sees Ruskin Bond standing alone she speaks lovingly to him. Though initially Ruskin's main aim is to have a hearty meal, he slowly begins to be mesmerized by the woman's maternal love. Ruskin Bond writes,

She took obvious pleasure in watching me eat, and I think it was the food that strengthened our friendship, for under the influence of the tea and sweets I began to talk quite freely, and told her about my school, my friends, my likes and dislikes (Bond, Ruskin. No Man is an Island 153).

Ruskin had initially thought of refusing her invitation but she takes him by the hand and this friendly contact compels Ruskin to go with her. Every time she is overcome by deep emotion she clutches on to his hands and this touch is reassuring for her. She presses his hand in gratitude when she is soothed by his kind and gentle words. They make no demands and respect each other's private lives. The story undergoes a dramatic turn when they meet the mother of another student. She declares that she is Ruskin's mother and Ruskin sees the grace and dignity with which she handles an awkward situation. As the train moves out of the platform he leans out of the window and instinctively kisses his new 'mother', which is the final seal of their friendship. This friendship is a depiction of one of the purest forms of love, in an unexpected place, between two unlikely people. Probably the two may never meet again, but that does not diminish the value of the friendship that has been forged. For the lady, it is a warm memory that she can draw comfort from and a lonely school boy finds the solace of familial comfort at the impersonal railway platform. This encounter, leading to an easy friendship highlights the values of friendship. Though their meeting was brief, their friendship was pure and eternal. Those moments on Platform no.8 saw a young boy and a lonely woman connect on a sublime level, giving us a glimpse of an unspoken, emotional friendship.

The Eyes Have It is a poignant short story of a brief encounter between two young people who are visually impaired. Both do not know this trivial detail about each other. Trivial, because this in no way comes in the way of the comradeship that develops between them during the course of a short train journey. The narrator, who is already seated in the train, is acutely perceptive as he says he knew the girl who entered the train was wearing slippers from the flapping sound that they made. She is startled by his opening remarks for she too is blind and had no idea that she had a co-passenger. She quickly recovers her composure and the next few minutes of the journey passes by in a conversation between the two that expects nothing from each other. The writer states that he could have sat there for quite some time listening to the voice of the girl who conveys a sense of calm. This non-judgmental and non-invasive conversation is the totality of their friendship and Ruskin Bond in the story *The Eyes Have It* says that the warmth of their closeness would stay with him for quite a time in the future... *people who cannot see...have to take in only the essentials, whatever registers tellingly on their remaining senses (Bond, Ruskin. Falling in Love Again 2).* The friendship did not require them to see the outer trappings of beauty, wealth, social standing, gender, caste, creed, race, age or any of the other rigid rules laid down by society. Their rapport was born out of respect for each other which is a strong foundation for friendship.

CONCLUSION:

Ruskin Bond is a seemingly simple writer who writes about situations we all find ourselves in at some time or the other. His deft handling of the emotions and feelings of his characters brings into focus how values are crucial to the well-being of people and is what is required in the world of today. His stories of friendship flowering in this harsh materialistic world give hope that working towards developing our inner selves can give value to our life on earth. Ruskin Bond gives us an insight into the happiness that can be experienced if man realizes the value of human dignity and universal love. This paper has been an attempt to explore the virtuosity with which Ruskin Bond presents to the reader these values through the medium of the short story.

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