



Ruskin Bond's The Thief: A Paradoxical Study of Human Nature

Ruskin Bond, a recipient of many prestigious awards including: Sahitya Academy, Padma shri and Padma Bhushan, is an Indian author of British origin. He is a master story teller who wins everyone's hearts with his genuine concern for human beings. He plays a very vital role in the growth of children's literature in India. Bond is called the master delineator of children's psychology. The literary oeuvre of Bond reflects India before his eyes. Simplicity of narration and characterization is the hallmark of Ruskin Bond's creativity. Bond is a writer of common man with his delights and sorrows and his ordinary hopes and aspirations. It has been rightly commented:

Bond fabricates a simple unambitious, innocent world where man does not cut each other's throat for his advancement. His characters struggle hard for their survival but the 'weariness, fever and fret' have not disillusioned them. The plots of his novels and stories emerge from the silent sympathies of human soul which he has stored up in his consciousness. (Aggarwal 18)

Ruskin Bond, through his creative writings tries to assert strongly that human beings, inspite of their weaknesses and limitations, are the fantastic creation of God. True love, faith and trust have the potential to bring about radical change in the life of even an incorrigible criminal. The writer, here, explores a new avenue in humanities. The present research paper focuses on the gradual transformation in the personality of a thief.

The story 'The Thief' has been told to in the first person by the narrator, who began his career as a thief, quite early in the life. Very soon, he mastered the art of stealing and being a keen student of human faces, he could understand where to try his hand. He used to change his name every now and then to hide his identity and presents himself before the readers bearing newly adopted name 'Deepak'. He happened to come across his would be victim Arun at a place where two wrestlers were fighting for a victory. Arun watched them with great interest forgetting the world around him for the time being. He looked innocent enough to be deceived easily.

Deepak planned carefully to win his trust. He offered to work for Arun but his request was turned down politely as Arun could not afford to pay him for his services. However, it was agreed that Deepak would cook and receive free lunch as wages. How could a teen ager chap who had spent his time so far in making theft, cook well to please his master? But there was no end to Arun's generosity. He taught Deepak not only to cook but also to write for himself. It was not a small obligation as such. Very few persons on the earth deem it worthwhile to spare time for the betterment of the lives of the other persons.

Deepak should have opened a new chapter in his life by beginning to live as an honest person. But as the proverb says, old habits die hard. Instead of giving positive response to the confidence placed in him, he continued to earn whatever he could by foul means. Whenever he went for shopping, he gave wrong figures to Arun and asked for more than he actually spent. Poor Arun never questioned his integrity. Deepak remarks:

I would take my time buying the day's supplies and make a profit of about twenty-five paise a day. I would tell Arun that rice was fifty-six paise a pound (it generally was), but I would get it at fifty paise a pound. I think he knew I made a little this way but he didn't mind. He wasn't giving me a regular wage. (*Fantasy 9*)

The readers hardly admit Ruskin Bond's view that it does not pain a thief much to rob a rich or a greedy person for he deserves it. But to steal from the pocket of a Godly person like Arun is an unforgivable sin. Deepak's long experience made him utter the following words:

It's easy to rob a greedy man because he deserves to be robbed. It's easy to rob a rich man because he can afford to be robbed. But it's difficult to rob a poor man, even one who really doesn't care if he's robbed. (*Fantasy 10*)

None can dare betray such an upright person, in whose dictionary, there is no such word as 'mistrust'. These angels have been sent to the earth only to be deceived and duped by the so called worldly wise, practical persons. The trouble with innocent, child-like persons, whose heart is as clear as sky, is that they see no evil anywhere and treat all on equal footing. Only an Arun can treat totally a stranger like Deepak as a member of the family and would keep nothing secret from him.

It was a windfall for Deepak when he saw Arun putting a hundred rupee notes under mattress. It was an easy job for him to bring out the treasure. He ran away to the railway station with stolen amount in his hands. The following passage brings out his hesitation:

When I reached the station I did not stop at the ticket office (I had never bought a ticket in my life) but dashed straight onto the platform. The Amritsar Express was just moving out. It was moving slowly enough for me to be able to jump on the footboard of one of the carriages but I hesitated for some urgent, unexplainable reason. I hesitated long enough for the train to leave without me. (*Fantasy 11*)

It was a big sum for him and he cared a little if he didn't get wages for some time. He had left Arun's home with an idea never to return but something lying deep in the heart of his hearts forced him to think afresh. There can be no sane critic than a man's own conscience. It is a torch-bearer. Deepak realized that it was absolutely wrong step to take advantages of one's innocence. Deepak feels a pinch of conscience and thinks:

I have made a study of men's faces when they have lost something of material value. The greedy man shows panic, the rich man shows anger, the poor man shows fear. But I knew that neither panic nor anger nor fear would show on

Arun's face when he discovered the theft; only a terrible sadness not for the loss of the money but for my having betrayed his trust. (*Fantasy 11*)

A little bit of gain would invite a lot of miseries for him. It was a sin against God himself. Was it fair to run away with someone's hard earned property? Was it a fault on the part of Arun to put blind faith in him, and not to utter a single word admonishing him for his misdeeds? Had he continued to walk on the path paved for him by Arun, he could have lived a decent and honourable life. Deepak felt sorry for him and rushed towards Arun's home. It was still night and Arun was fast asleep. Deepak put the notes back where Arun had kept them.

The next morning Arun gave him a five rupee note by way of wages and offered him to teach more than merely writing a name. He behaved quite normally as if nothing serious had happened. His silence pierced Deepak. There can be no great punishment. Ruskin Bond brings before us such noble characters whose magnanimity of heart appeals us. Arun is not an average person who gets pleasure in settling account and sends the wrong doers behind the bars. 'Tit for Tat' is not his policy. Before the readers finish reading the story, they can see a divine thief Arun standing before them to steal their hearts.

Deepak's repentance is equally important for, it is better late than never. One may begin and continue to live as a hard core criminal but it is in his hands to die as a saint. An Indian student need not to be reminded the story of transformation of the dreaded robber 'Valia' into rishi Valmiki. For every misguided Deepak let there be Arun to show the right path. There is no sense in looking at everybody with questioning eye for there lies immense pleasure even in being deceived with full knowledge. Swami Vivekanand preached us not for nothing, 'Be deceived for hundred times and yet remain good'. Amita Aggarwal rightly observes:

The story aims to reveal that even a thief can discriminate panic stricken on the face of a person robbed from the shocking reaction of his friend towards the abominable act. The thief fails to enjoy his accomplishment because the target is not a sufferer at all. The story presents a drama of complex human psyche. The moment thief realizes that it is he who has been robbed of trust, the most valuable thing in life, he repents and returns to regain it. The story indicates that the line that divides a man as good or bad is very thin almost indiscernible and one can dodge it easily. (103)

References:

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