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Motherhood as Reflected in Ruskin Bond's Story *The Woman on Platform 8*

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Abstract

The story "*Woman on Platform 8*" is the manifestation of his unfulfilled childhood. The boy Arun, in this story, travels alone because his parents do not spare themselves for him. The stranger woman on railway platform compensates his want for a true mother. In most of his stories boys are in the lead role. Here Arun plays a vital role who is sensitive, energetic, curious and innocent. Bond relives his own boyhood through his fictional incarnation, Arun "*The Woman on Platform 8*" is the manifestation of his vision of an ideal mother who understands her kids, who patiently bears their tantrums and exerts lovingly for their healthy development. Bond achieves in stories what he could not get in real. He frankly admits in *Scenes from Writers Life*:

"I don't suppose I would have written so much childhood or even about other children, if my own childhood had been all happiness and light" (p.4)

Bond shares his childhood anxiety to be with his mother in this story.

Keywords: childhood, mother, human relationship, the boy Arun, love, peace, kindness compassion and humanism

1. Introduction

"Ruskin Bond strikes at the very core of human relationships as seen through the eyes of his characters. There is a typical Ruskin Bond touch of nostalgia with a tinge of sadness which remind us of old classics" Rachael Macbean comments on Bond's writing in his article on "*The Best of Bond*".

The story "*Woman on Platform 8*" is the manifestation of his unfulfilled childhood. The boy Arun, in this story, travels alone because his parents do not spare themselves for him. The stranger woman on railway platform compensates his want for a true mother. In most of his stories boys are in the lead role. Here Arun plays a vital role who is sensitive, energetic, curious and innocent. Bond relives his own boyhood through his fictional incarnation, Arun. In "*Ruskin Bond's Life and the Shaping Influences*" Amita Aggarwal opines:

"Bond yearnings for the cuddles of a fond mother are visible in many of his stories" (p.8).

"The Woman on Platform 8" is the manifestation of his vision of an ideal mother who understands her kids, who patiently bears their tantrums and exerts lovingly for their healthy development. Bond achieves in stories what he could not get in real. He frankly admits in *Scenes from Writers Life*:

"I don't suppose I would have written so much childhood or even about other children, if my own childhood had been all happiness and light" (p.4)

Bond's Childhood

Bond shares his childhood anxiety to be with his mother. The boy Arun's feeling of insecurity, loneliness, humanism of the woman, the mystery of railway platform are revealed sensitively. The story is permeated with love, sympathy, warmth and fellow-feeling. In "*Tender and Authentic*" he expresses that Bond's stories take the form of an intense though short lived encounter, in which a moment is charged with significance and affirms some truth of the human heart.

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Senior Bond's gifts for the boy Bond were those of children classics by well-known writers, picture post cards and diaries. Bond's relationship with his father is a mixture of love and adulation. His father profusely compensated the vacuum caused by mother's unmotherly step. Senior Bond gave to young Bond all that is expected from loving parents. But lack of whole some parentage filled his tender mind with an intense sense of insecurity through the boy Arun in this story.

"Woman on Platform 8". In Scenes from a Writer's Life Bond renders "A feeling of insecurity began to creep over me-a feeling that was to recur from time-to-time and which was to become part of my mental luggage for the rest of my life" (p.32).

Bond's Reflection

Bond reflects the same feeling in this story. "The Woman on Platform 8" is the story of the author, a story dedicated to woman who showed her empathy towards him. It was Arun's second year at boarding school and he was sitting on platform no: 8 at Ambala station. He was about twelve at that time. He was standing alone waiting for the train as his parents considered him old enough to travel alone. The boy has lost interest in all that went on along the busy platform: the cries of the various vendors, the men who sold cards and lemon, the sweet-meat-seller, the newspaper boy as he has been waiting for a long time. He began to stare at the railway tracks after being bored watching over the wanderings of the human beings. The boredom is a result of the pain of loneliness which is reflected upon his face.

The Strange Encounter

There are some people whom Bond could never forget in his lifetime. In this story, Bond talks about the women whom he met in the railway station when he was twelve. He saw a woman standing near him. The woman looked very simple. She did not wear any jewels and was dressed in a white sari. He liked her for the simplicity, and the serenity of her voice and face. Her behavior did not make him feel her to be a stranger. She made him forget his loneliness. When Arun's classmate Satish's mother asked her, is she Arun's mother? She answered her that I am Arun's mother. Bond hates hypocrisy and lying. But when she said so he could say nothing against her word. He expresses his feeling as: "I was unable to speak a word. I looked quickly up at the woman, but she did not appear to be at all embarrassed and was smiling at Satish's mother" (p.15).

His sense of loneliness and insecurity is suddenly vanished by a woman who came close to him. She asked him in a soft voice 'Are you all alone' my son? Bond portrays her:

"I saw a pale face, and dark kind eyes. She wore no jewels, and was dressed very simply in a white sari" (p.13).

Bond's rhythmic words parade the simplicity, kindness and the warmth and love, the boy Arun felt. The white color symbolizes, purity, serenity and love and peace that each mother should possess. Though she seemed poor there was a dignity about her. She asked about his loveliness and where he was going. Arun replied that he was going to school and he could travel alone and then introduced himself. For the boy, she is a stranger, but her tender, warm and caring words reminds him of his mother. Like an average Indian, Bond also believes that relations are predestined. The role of intuition in bringing people closer is remarkable. The two strangers meet and feel quite familiar with each other. It may be a matter of accumulated consciousness or pre-birth impressions which

every child carries with him. Anita Aggarwal shares his view related to this that the closeness of the boy and the stranger woman appears to be the natural product of such pre-birth accumulated impressions.

The woman held the hands of Arun took him to the canteen. Out of shyness and suspicion he wanted to resist, but he could not. Normally, the reaction of every child towards stranger is this coyness and doubt. Her concerning words erases the strange feeling of doubt and shyness. The boy Arun starts liking her for the simplicity of her dress and for her deep, soft voice and the serenity of her face and her gentle hand. He cannot refuse her invitation to have tea, samosas and jalebi. In the company of the woman, Arun began to thaw and take a new interest in this kind woman. The strange encounter renders some effect on the young boy. She behaves as if she were his mother:

"She took obvious pleasures in watching me eat, and I think it was the food that strengthened the bond between us and cemented our friendship" (p.14).

The boy feels free and begins to talk about his school, his friends, his likes and dislikes and soon he forgets that they were strangers. He accepted her for she had been a quite, kind and gentle woman as mother. She is a mother icon for Arun. Though initially suspicious, Arun gradually grows intimate with her, and accompanies her to the railway canteen where he has his fill while answering her questions dipped in affection.

Bond's Humanism

Bond's mother separated from his father when he was only four. Nothing his father said could bring his mother back home. The lady in the story resembles his aunt he stayed with, after the divorce to a great extent. He liked his aunt who looks good care of him. Her age, look and even the colors of the sari wrapped around her body as described in "*The Woman on Platform 8*"

The lady portrayals reflect a peculiar aspect of Bond's humanism that appeals positively to the notion of a core humanity in terms of which people can be observed and appreciated. A touch of compassion is essential to make this earth a seat of human bliss. The compassionate woman showers human kindness, warmth and affection which evades the loneliness and disinterestedness of the boy Arun. She brings momentous happiness in his life. Two strangers turn out to be friends in the bliss of humanness. Bond's characters are always at the mercy of other people, they may be strangers, in their loneliness and depression. Arun, a boy who is under the company of mother like woman, she helped him to come out of his monotony, provides him a parental care for a while which is forbidden to him by fate.

"*The Woman on Platform 8*" is a marvelous presentation of two opposite attitudes to life, embodied two women on the railway platform. The stranger woman who gives tea, samosa and her pleasing company to the boy travelling alone, is in sharp contrast to Satish's mother who is ostentatious and incredulous. After finish their snacks, the woman and the boy went to the station platform again. When they reached there, Arun met his friend, Satish and his mother. The stranger woman and Satish mother conversed. The two kids talked about their school and also their new head master. When Satish's mom asked about Arun's mother, the woman lied that she was his mother. Later Satish's mom advised Arun not to talk with strangers while travelling. But Arun replied that he liked strangers.

The Compassionate Woman

The boy and the woman are epitome of faith in essential nobility of man where as the mother of Satish represents inherent suspicion along with other attributes. Therefore, one is moved to see how a pale, sweet, stranger face gets kiss, the seal of affection on her forehead by a stranger boy on the platform at the time of departure. The strangeness turns into friendliness and motherliness is an embodiment of humanness lurks in the mind of every Indians. Bond requires such humanity, compassion in every human being to lead the children and to sow the seed of it in their childhood. This humanism drives the home and nation towards peace and serenity. Amita Aggarwal reflects Bond's view:

"There are no strangers in India. People meet, they exchange pleasantries according to their age, as son, daughter, sister, grandmother and grandfather. Their address in itself is sufficient to remove their alienation and strangeness" (p.75).

Bond, though an Anglo Indian he never lost his sense of belonging. He likes and loves to be an Indian hence he belongs here. In India family relations are closer, warmer and more reliable than any other thing. The strange woman who is pale, gentle and kind, wears white sari may be a representation of India, where he abides, enjoys the warmth, kindness and serenity and sharing the relationship of Indian brotherhood. It is a replica of mother India where he forgets his times of trials and tribulations, always comforted and consoled by the compassionate mother, nature, in India.

Motherhood of a strange Woman

Human touch is the soul of Indian culture. There are not strangers in India. People meet and inquire about each other without being misunderstood. Even a small boy Arun puts faith in the stranger woman because of her motherly concern. Her touch, her kind words and her perceptions makes the boy accept her, his mother for a while in the platform. Both touch unhesitatingly each other out of love or regards and mutual understanding. Bond longs for this parental care and affection. The boy Arun reflects Bond's lovingness, which he missed in his childhood. In *Scenes from Writer's Life* Bond depicts:

"Human contact! That was what i missed most. It was not to be found in the office where I worked or in my land lady's house... the freedom to touch someone without being misunderstood. To take someone by the hand as a mark of affection rather than desire... And fulfillment to be among strangers without feeling like an outsider. For there are no strangers in India" (p.155).

In *"The Woman on Platform 8"*, the train arrives. Arun and Satish occupy the window-side seats.

Satish's mother runs off at the mouth but this lady remains silent. Her eyes do the talking instead. As the whistle rings out, Arun leaned out of the window then, and put his lips to her cheek and kissed her.

"I looked straight into the eyes of the woman who held my hand and she smiled in a gentle, understanding way. I leaned out of the window then and put my lips to her cheek and kissed her" (16).

She was looking at him as the train took him away she stood there, a pale sweet woman in white and Arun watched her until she was lost in the crowd. It is a sign of motherly love towards which Bond always craves for.

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