



Railway Romance in the Short Stories of Ruskin Bond

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Abstract

The introduction of railways during the British Raj brought a revolutionary change in political, economic and social life of India. Though the Indian political leaders led by Gandhi showed a mixed reaction to it, its emergence opened a new avenue in the literary world of the Indian as well as the British writers. Ruskin Bond is a prolific and popular Post Independence Indian writer of British descent, and his works, especially his short stories, abound in reference to the railway stations, trains and the train journeys in different parts of Northern India. In his railway stories he uses the scope that the railways give to have brief encounters of different types. One is the encounter between trains and the people who love watching them. The second is between strangers, mostly the male and the female, who feel a strange attraction and enjoy the romance that ends when the train leaves or one gets down at the destination. This temporary relationship often leaves behind longing and fond memories. And the third is man's meeting or engagement with nature. The present paper aims at exploring the romance that lurks in his railway stories. Bond presents how the travelling on a train or seeing a train run through forests or tunnels in the hills creates a romance or feeling of excitement or mystery in the young observer. Here Bond also shows the romance of short relationship of love between a man and a woman, and that of various hues. Besides, romance enjoyed in company with nature near the railway station or observed from the train window can be noticed in these stories.

Key Words: railways, woman, love, romance, nature, relationship, excitement, memories.

Introduction

With the introduction of railways in the year 1853, India witnessed drastic changes taking place in all her corners. The extension of the railway in the following years connected and integrated remote parts of India and brought people together. This not only helped the spread of trade and commerce but also engineered a qualitative change in the social and political life of the English colonizers and that of the Indian

natives. Louis Harrington, in his article 'The Train Nation: the Railway as a Leitmotif in South Asian Literature' agrees with Richard Cronin's observation made in his book *Imagining India*:

Dalhousie planned the railways to tighten British rule of India, to make it more efficient. But the trains had one effect that Dalhousie did not foresee. They made possible the birth of the idea that was finally to put an end to the Raj, the idea that India was a nation.

These changes naturally influenced the writers and the literary output of the British and that of the Indians became filled with numerous references to the railway stations and trains. The Indian Railway occupies a dominant position in the works of Pre Independence writers like Rudyard Kipling, and again the train appears as a motif in such Post Independence writers as Jim Corbett, Khushwant Singh, Intizar Hossain, Satyajit Ray, Manoj Das and Ruskin Bond.

Ruskin Bond is predominantly a nature writer. Having grown up in nature's lap in the foothills of the Himalayas, Bond evinces a Wordsworthian love and insight in the workings of nature and her elements. It is strange that he feels an interest in the machinery like trains and has written stories about them and has edited a collection of railway stories. In *Soot Gets in Your Eyes* that forms an introduction to *The Penguin Book of Indian Railway Stories*, Bond explains that his interest in the railway is instilled by his family tradition:

Few know that my maternal grandfather, William Clerke, was Assistant Station Master at Karachi in the 1920s, or that my uncle, Fred Clark... was Station Superintendent at Delhi Main during World War II. Occasionally, during school holidays, I would stay with Uncle Fred in the bungalow near the station (xi).

Bond has a natural love for railway platforms and his railway stories are autobiographical, the fictionalized forms of his experiences during the railway journey in various parts of Northern India. About the genesis of the train stories he adds:

...I love railway platforms. I spent a great deal of time on them when I was a boy, waiting for connecting trains to Kalka or Saharanpur or Barrackpore or Rajkot. The odd incident stayed in my memory and when, in my late teens I started writing short stories, those memories became stories... (xiii).

Trains nurture the idea of nationhood and form a kind of unity in diversity as they gather many people from different regions under a single roof. They also provide people a scope to travel far and wide and explore the landscape, the natural vegetation, the men and women on their way. Moreover, they open up a possibility of meeting between strangers and formation of relationships. Often the relationship is that of romance, a strange and magical attraction felt by a man and a woman. The

meeting may be brief but it has lasting impressions. Manzur Hossain, a character with a romantic frame of mind in Intizar Hossain's short story 'A Stranded Railroad Car', finely describes the matter:

...you get to see a face or two which, which in its infinite charm, becomes etched on your heart for ever; it stays with you and you are never quite able to forget it' (Bond, Indian Railway Stories 127).

In this paper an attempt will be made to explore the romance associated with Bond's railway stories, especially 'The Tunnel', 'The Night Train at Deoli', 'The Eyes Have It' and 'Time Stops at Shamli'. And that romance is not confined to man woman relationship; it includes a young observer's pleasurable excitement and sense of mystery resulting from the trains passing by or beautiful landscape presented by nature.

The word 'romance' is diverse in its significance. Historically, the word means a story about love, chivalry, adventure and exciting events that was prevalent in the Medieval English literature. Apart from the sense mentioned above, the *Cambridge Advanced Learner's Dictionary* provides two other meanings: 'a close, usually short relationship of love between two people' and 'the feeling of excitement or mystery that you have from a particular experience or event (1103). Romance is related to love but not synonymous with it. Love is a universal constant; it indicates strong attachment or passion, devotion, care and involves sacrifice. It is changeless. Romance, on the other hand, is a brief attachment and is not as serious as love. It indicates a gesture that shows one's feelings of love. If love is the content, romance is its expressions in forms of actions such as giving flowers, blinking the eye, dining together or dating. Romance creates the excitement and it may strengthen a relationship by supplying excitement and mature into love or it may end in a friendship. It is a thing that helps one pulsate with life and sustain it.

The movement of trains with passengers on board has always fascinated people, especially young ones. It creates a brief spell and produces a feeling of wonder and delight. The Oscar winning Bengali author and film director Satyajit Ray loved trains and had used the train as leitmotif in many of his films. Vijay Nair in his article 'Ray and the Railways' published in *The Hindu* sheds light on what he calls 'the enduring love story between Satyajit Ray and trains ...which feature prominently in many of his movies'. He continues: 'The leitmotif of the railways defines the Apu trilogy.' In 'Pather Panchali' the bitter quarrel between the teenage girl Durga and her little brother Apu is forgotten at the appearance of the train, and they are reunited. In 'Aparajito' the approaching of the train raises hope in the dying mother about the arrival of her son Apu. In 'Apur Sansar' the distraught hero wants to end his life under the railway carriage. Railways again appear in his 'Nayak and 'Sonar Kella'.

Bond's love for trains and railway platforms are no less deep than the Bengali filmmaker. Like Ray's, the Indian Railway is one of his favourite subjects. His love of

trains with the humanity on move is revealed when he compares them to the passing by of the 'world and his wife' in the introduction to his edition of Indian Railway stories. If the passengers form the world, the train is their beloved wife who leads them forward (Soot Gets in Your Eyes xiii). 'The Tunnel', which is autobiographical like most of his train stories, is a story of the boy Ranji's adventure. Bond projects himself in the character of Ranji. His love of trains is actually Bond's. The story centers around Ranji's love of trains that symbolize modernity and advancement in the hills surrounded by jungles, and his adventures associated with it. He cycles a long distance to see the train coming out of the tunnel. Such is the intensity of his love that he takes a journey uphill through the jungle to reach the place defying the scorching summer sun. The sight of the train making its exit from the long tunnel is the fulfillment of his long cherished dream. Train appeared be a dragon but it was beautiful. It brought him joy. Bond describes Ranji's meeting with the train thus:

...the steam engine shot out of the tunnel, snorting and puffing like some green, black and gold dragon, some beautiful monster out of Ranji's dreams. Showering sparks right and left, it roared a challenge to the jungle (Time Stops 86).

After a week when he travels on the night train with his father, he notices the lamp held by the tunnel watchman Kishen Singh and feels the same wonder and excitement when the train enters the tunnel and goes out again. Thus 'The Tunnel' could be seen as a love story between Ranji or Bond and the train.

Bond creates here an atmosphere similar to that found in the medieval romance. The boy Ranji takes the perilous uphill journey alone. He travels through the jungle, and the railway tracks looked like 'two straight black serpents' (Time Stops 86). The train was a dragon of three colours. Bond's description of the tunnel echoes the description of the enchanted castle of the romances:

The walls of the tunnel were damp and sticky. A bat flew past. A lizard scuttled between the lines. Coming straight from the darkness into the light Ranji was dazzled by the sudden glare (Time Stops 87).

It is enough to produce an eerie feeling. And finally, Kishan Singh and Ranji discover a leopard on the railway tracks and scare it away to save its life. Both of them come out to be the triumphant heroes who welcome the modern science but also preserve the serenity of the jungle.

'The Eyes Have It' is not a romance between men and train but a tale of romance between the blind narrator and a young girl who meet in a train compartment. The narrator is young and romantically bent. His heart is full of love. He cannot find one to objectify his love. The rhythm of the girl's footfall in the train is enough to produce in him effusion of feelings. At the earliest opportunity the narrator attempts to strike a conversation. He employs various means to draw the attention of the woman and please her. First of all he tries to conceal his blindness

from the girl. When the girl says that she will get down at Saharanpur he wittingly says that 'Then I had better not get too familiar' (The Night Train 21). These words have an underlying suggestion that he wants to be more familiar. Again when the girl expresses his admiration for Mussoorie in the month of October, the narrator gives a description of the place that befits a Romantic poet:

The hills are covered with wild dahlias, the sun is delicious, and at night you can sit in front of a logfire and drink a little brandy. Most of the tourists have gone, and the roads are quiet and almost deserted. Yes, October is the best month (The Night Train 22).

The description of nature is very sensuous and indicates his awareness of and sensitivity to the beauty of the place. And the deserted street in the night with a few people drinking brandy in front of a log fire evokes a sense of luxury and romance. It is a romantic setting for love making. Brandy that intoxicates and fire that ignites aptly describe the alluring backdrop. The narrator had obviously designed his words to touch the chord of her heart and transport her to a world of beauty and passion and love. But her feelings are not as deep as the narrator's. She does not feel any sadness to think that the journey is coming to an end. Her words bear it out: Thank goodness it's a short journey. I cannot bear to sit in a train for more than two or three hours' (The Night Train 22).

On the contrary, the mere knowledge that the girl will get down soon at her destination, that their brief meeting will come to an abrupt end, instilled in the narrator a mad desire to infinitely prolong the encounter: 'Yes I was prepared to sit there for almost any length of time, just to listen to her talking' (The Night Train 23). The narrator even began to inwardly accuse the girl of forgetting him as soon as her journey ends. He would remain faithful and her memories would linger in his mind for a much longer period in his mind: 'As soon as he left the train she would forget our brief encounter; but it will stay with me for the rest of the journey and for some time after' (The Night Train 23). The narrator is like Wordsworth who listened to the melodious song of the solitary reaper spell bound, and when he had to go ahead leaving the girl and her song alone, he said: '... the music in my heart I bore / Long after it was heard no more'.

Hair of a woman has always stirred the imagination of poets. And it is a fact that much of feminine charms depends on hair. It is a woman's precious possession. Naturally the narrator who was under a spell of the girl wished to know how she was wearing her hair. As he was blind, he had to make a guess. He guessed that she might be wearing her hair in a bun or it was plaited or it was hanging loose over her shoulders or perhaps it was cut short. As the girl stood close to him just before leaving, he smelt the perfume coming out of her hair. He felt an uncontrollable desire to touch it but the moment he raised his hand she moved away. He aptly describes her hair as 'tantalising' for it was elusive and unattainable. Her hair made him a Tantalus, the Greek mythological figure who was punished by Zeus by being made to stand in

water which receded whenever he attempted to drink it and under fruit laden branches he could not get at. And the girl was like the 'unravished bride' in Keats' 'Ode on a Grecian Urn' who could be chased but never reached. The moment got 'etched' in his mind and became permanent.

As the girl got down from the train, the narrator was left alone. Sadness gripped him. The song of the carriage wheel seemed to be a continuous groan. The world grew darker. Here love remains unrequited and elusive for the narrator as is the case in the love stories 'A Love Long Ago', 'The Story of Madhu', 'Love is a Sad Song' and 'Time Stops at Shamli'. The visually impaired lover is a projection of Bond whose British upbringing and financial problems were the handicap that stood in the way of the fulfillment of his love affairs. But typically the lover in Bond gets joy in recalling the happy moments spent in the beloved's company. In 'The Eyes Have It' the narrator felt a disappointment but still it became sweet as the fond memories of this brief encounter lingered like the perfume of the girl's hair. The episode with the girl was a 'reverie', a day dream, a stay in the magic world of beauty, love and romance. It formed happy moments that never lasted long. A fellow passenger broke into this reverie when he revealed a hard truth about the girl- her beautiful eyes being completely blind. This revelation must have changed the narrator's perception about the girl and his own blindness, for as Bond says about the story in the 'Introduction' to *The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories*:

...two people meet, their paths cross, and though they may part again quite soon, their lives have been changed in some indefinable way.

Like 'The Eyes Have It', 'The Night Train at Deoli' was written in the 1950s, the Romantic phase of Bond's long writing career. But the setting of the latter is not a moving railway carriage but a railway platform at Deoli station where the Dehra bound night train arrives early in the morning. It is here that 18 years old narrator met the basket girl who stole his heart 'with nothing but a look from her dark, impatient eyes' (The Night Train 40). Driven by an inexplicable spring of love natural to an adolescent, he got off the train, and the young nameless girl responding to the author's speechless message in the eyes, came near him to sell baskets. The narrator bought one, but as the girl was about to speak the guard blew his whistle. He had to part with the girl who was looking at him and smiling on the platform, but her image lingered in his mind: 'I sat awake for the rest of the journey. I could not rid my mind of the picture of the girl's face and her dark, smouldering eyes' (The Night Train 38). On his return journey he met her again and it produced in him an unexpected thrill and she was pleased too. Both of them responded to the budding love spontaneously. He felt an impulse to put the girl on the train and take her away with him. He overstayed his time, and this time again he had to be back on the train which had already started moving, with great reluctance. From this time he could not forget her. She lived in his mind throughout the year.

But to his great disappointment he could not see the girl on the platform on the journey from his college. He asked the station master but he could not tell him anything about her. Restless at her grandmother's place, he again came to Deoli to enquire about her in great detail but it was in vain. He wanted to break his journey one day but he could not:

Somehow I could not bring myself to break the journey there, and spend a day there... I think I was afraid of discovering what really happened to the girl. Perhaps she was no longer in Deoli, perhaps she was married, or perhaps she had fallen ill (The Night Train 40).

Whatever the truth may be, the narrator wanted to leave it there but certainly he wished to preserve and recollect the happy moments, and so whenever the train passed Deoli station, he expected to 'see the same unchanged face smiling at' him and preferred 'to keep hoping and dreaming, and looking out of the window up and down that lonely platform, waiting for the girl with the baskets' (The Night Train 40).

'Longings after something lost' is a recurrent theme in Bond, and in 'The Night Train at Deoli' he shows the 'longing for something, someone, just out of reach'. The narrator may try to hold in check the happy but fleeting moments but he does not have the courage and strength to do this. Bond's observation in this regard is revealing: '...the hero...tries to prevent that moment from passing... but it is only the strong among us who can alter events, change trains so to speak, and very often cause derailment' (Introduction ii). The narrator could not find out the girl but he certainly respected their feelings of love, their brief romance whenever he passed Deoli. And like Shakespeare who eternized his love in his poetry, the narrator made his love for the basket girl permanent and unfading in his fiction.

'Time Stops at Shamli' is a story of unrequited love written when Bond was in his late thirties, still unmarried. The setting is neither a train compartment nor a railway platform but a hotel a mile away from Shamli station. Though Bond does not mention it in 'Soot Gets in Your Eyes', it is the Dehra Express that lands the narrator in Shamli and trains serve as a motif here. The train's delay drove the narrator to get off and spend the day in Shamli which so far remained an enigma. The *tonga* driver took him to a hotel of Mr. Dayal. In the late afternoon when he awoke after a sleep in the lap of nature, he met a 'young woman in a pink sari and with a red rose in her hair' (Time Stops 52) smiling at him from the swing. It was Sushila, his lost love, but now the wife of Mr. Dayal. Their passion resurged and both of them swayed under a renewed impulse. The narrator changed his plan to catch a train and leave Shamli that evening. He walked with her, kissed her and they lay together on the grass and dangled their feet in the water of the mountain river. Their love came as rains in their dry lives. The following words show the romance in the rain and are Keatsian in vein:

...it was raining steadily, and Shushila's hair came loose and streamed down her body. The rain fell harder...Shushila's sari was plastered to her body,

accentuating her ripe, thrusting breasts, and I was excited to passion, and pulled her beneath a big tree and crushed her in my arms and kissed her rain-kissed mouth (Time Stops 56).

This let loose a flood of emotion, and the narrator proposed Shushila to leave the place and come away with him. At the touch of the narrator during the storm at night, she gets inflamed with a sudden emotion and said, 'If I come with you, I will be at the station before the train leaves.' She also added: 'I will get there before you. But if I am not there, then do not wait; do not come back for me. Go on your way. It will mean I do not want to come' (Time Stops 63).

Next morning, the narrator waited on the platform until the bell rang for the train to leave, but there was no sign of Shushila. She refused to elope with her former lover. Her practical sense debarred her from being carried away by emotion. Society, sense of responsibility and concern for the members of her family came in conflict with her romance and made her take this stand: '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 (Time Stops 57). But at the station the eternally romantic lover managed not to feel disappointed. Rather he felt that satiety mars the fulfillment and estrangement keeps the beloved always fresh and beautiful. He says:

Unattainable, Sushila would always be more bewitching and beautiful than if she were mine. Shamli would always be there. And I could always come back, looking for Major Roberts (Time Stops 66).

Bond's commitment to nature is what distinguishes him from the rest of the Indian English writers. Naik strikes at a vital truth when he remarks:

...special feature of Bond's stories is his acute responsiveness to nature, the great affinity between trees and men. It is not simply a matter of nature description as a narrative technique, but a genuine feeling for the natural world...' (262).

Nature is a living presence in all his short stories and she is the thread that unifies them. Bond maintained a 'nature notebook' while travelling in trains and he kept note of the wild life observed during the journey. He once wrote a piece called 'Wild Life on Railway Journey'. In 'The Eyes Have It' the blind narrator's love of nature is evident in his sensuous description of the natural landscape of Mussoori. And again while he was making a pretence of studying the landscape from the train window, he felt sad at his knowledge that there was no animal left in the forest near Dehra, and this bears out his concern for the forest and its animals that are fast disappearing and moving towards extinction. Nature is also present in abundance in 'The Tunnel'. The peace and serenity of the jungle is disturbed by the serpent like railway lines and monster like trains. The opening lines of the story highlight the nature civilization dichotomy that characterizes the story:

It was almost noon, and the jungle was very still, very silent. Heat waves shimmered along the railway embankment where it cut a path through the tall evergreen trees. The railway lines were two straight black serpents disappearing into the tunnel in the hill side (Time Stops 86).

The scaring away of the leopard from the railway track under the tunnel and thus saving its life from the train reflects the author's desire to keep the life of the jungle intact in the wake of the advancement of science and the machinery.

Nature's pervasive presence is consistently shown by Bond in and around Shamli. It serves as the background of the story. He continues: 'Shamli is a small station at the foot of Siwalik hills, and the Siwaliks lie at the foot of the Himalayas, which in turn lie at the feet of God' (Time Stops 35). Shamli station is surrounded by jungle. Sitting in the train compartment, he felt a breeze that was blowing down the platform and it whispered of the arrival of autumn in the hills. And again 'outside the station there was a *neem* tree and under it stood a *tonga*' (Time Stops 37). Here Bond uses a green language that is no less important than the language of man.

In the railway stories women play a vital role. Their presence bewitches the narrator and they penetrate his emotional core. From an ecocritical perspective, Bond's love for women may be interpreted as his love for nature. The ecocritics stand in opposition to the anthropocentric view of nature. In this view nature should always serve the interest of man and in literature she is made to symbolize man and reflect human emotions. A scientific enquiry into the physiology of a woman reveals that she has much in common with the workings of external nature. One very common thing is the beauty and the power to conceive and produce. And poets have not unreasonably characterized nature as female. The blind girl in the train compartment or the basket girl on the railway platform represents nature. And Shushila is described in terms of nature. The narrator's love for them is his love for nature. And their disappearance and the narrator's longing to possess them is the gradual vanishing of the natural vegetation in India and his desire to keep her intact and in her pristine health and dignity respectively. Man and nature is involved in a symbiotic relationship and one's disappearance is a threat to the other. So the romance in the railways becomes a saga of a brief and pleasurable encounter between man and nature.

Conclusion

The quality that distinguishes railway romance is its transience. Bond has selected a train compartment or a railway station to depict a transitory relationship, for here people are always on the move; they come, travel, meet and depart. The spell of the relationship that the journey offers is broken whenever the boy or the girl gets off. But it leaves behind fond memories that give sustenance to the partners. Bond did not believe in a permanent relationship between a male and a female. In marriage the lovers get bored of each other after a couple of years; it turns out to be a relationship

of loveless social contract as is the case of Shushila. The failed marriage of his parents might have influenced him in the formation of such a notion about marriage. Bond's conception seems to be that if a person gets satisfaction in a transient relationship, there is no reason why he or she would prolong it. And love is a vital need of our life. Our life, as the people on the train, should be dynamic and so should our love. The romance, though ending after a brief spell, gets imprinted on the mind and provides sustenance in the days ahead.

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