

HUMAN RELATIONS AND ENTANGLEMENTS: HIGHLIGHTING LIFE'S PREDICAMENTS IN RUSKIN BOND'S "THE GUARDIAN ANGEL"

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Abstract: Depiction of inextricable ties between human beings irrespective of age remains a pivotal aspect of literature. There have been a plethora of portrayals considering amiable connections between different young children and elder individual in numerous literary depictions, showcasing tenets involving both categories. What strikes in depiction of two contrasting categories is that inherent values and individual inclinations tend to find a critical resurfacing in the face of a mundane plot which calls for theoretical introspection. "The Guardian Angel," one of the significant short stories penned down by the master, Ruskin Bond, remains a pivotal testimony to how innocence of children gets nurtured by warmth and care of elders, often paving way for a conducive and holistic development of the central character. The story, in a very playful demeanour, leads readers to contemplate varied dimensions which regulate growth, maturity, and emotional connect of the narrator with his aunt, Mariam. The paper, hinging on the concept of "childhood discovery" propounded by Philippe Ariès argues that there are multiple contrasting characteristics and features in life of the narrator which are place against character of Mariam, denoting glaring points of contradictions between a child and a grown up individual. The paper also espouses ideas related to Bond's focus on contemplating positions of children in his stories which become representative of otherwise predicaments of human lives which can manifest uninformed. The research follows a qualitative methodological structure, in that, it makes an analytical study of the plot.

Keywords: child, childhood, elder, dimension, holistic

A child's character, in any piece of writing, always warrants a thought-provoking depiction considering inherent playfulness which a child comes with in general. Since advent of literary writings, it can well be argued that that caricatures of children play indispensable roles in literary explications. Different dimensions pertaining to their characters vividly get reiterated which bring in multiplicities of human lives to the forefront. It is also remarkable to note that myriad characteristics related to psychological positioning of different characters also find an articulation. Alongside their entanglements with elders, self-positioning of children also becomes integral to comprehension of their personality in various writings. Ruskin Bond, in his short stories, has resorted to a very subtle yet potent technique of dealing with numerous child characters as his treatment remains to be very vigorous. At the same time, readers also find a very captivating angle to understanding their

personality as Bond amalgamates their lived experiences with love which they receive either from their parents or from other members of their family. In dealing with psychological attributes of several child protagonists, Bond has very deliberately presented them in light of deprivation of love from their own parents. This aspect of deprivation remains a pivotal feature in many of his stories. In this regard, it can very well be stated that lack of parental love and care from other family members lead to development of an altogether different personality in his children protagonists. This, in ways more than one, appeals to diverse audience group.

“The Guardian Angel,” arguably, one of the prominent short stories by Ruskin Bond, deeply engrosses readers in introspection of the cordial bond between the young narrator and his aunt, Mariam. It is seen that she emerges as not only his caretaker but also his guide in every aspect. What this story leads to is a critical dimension of children who long for warmth and comfort in lap of elders, at times, finding themselves in precarious situations which otherwise call for fruitful negotiation. The character of narrator, considering different intricacies which are identifiable of his childish nature, can be argued to be linchpin of the story as diverse traits of personality tie it in one single thread. Bond’s own childhood amidst the hills of Dehradun can be argued to be a very remarkable factor in portrayal of different dimensions of children in his stories. It was stated that “one who lives in a suave atmosphere, develops suave thoughts and aspirations, gets suavity in life” (Sahi 9). The story presents the narrator to be devoid of his parental love and it was his aunt who turned out to be his utmost support in the absence of his parents. The author, as readers are shown, finds himself at a painful position of an orphan just at the tender age of six when his mother, a patient of tuberculosis, gave way to fatal demise. His mother’s death marked the advent of what was an unforeseen troubled life in the young narrator’s life.

Bond presents that his mother lost her life at night and the author was ignorant of this ill-fate. As readers learn, what followed was a trial of painful surrounding scenario which was coupled with gloom and loneliness. It engulfed narrator’s life only to be saved by aunt Mariam, appearing as a God-like figure to him in such situation of despondency and utter melancholy. Bond presents that she took the young child to her home with her which was located at the vicinity of a nearby market. The character of aunt finds a notable parallel with Bond’s own female caretaker during his early lives. Readers can connect numerous personal elements in the story which find manifestation in different instances, leading to emergence of diverse yet personal perspectives. Reminiscing on the entire topsy-turvy turn of his life, the narrator remarked

I woke up to experience, for a day, all the terrors of abandonment. But the same evening Aunt Mariam arrived. Her warmth, worldliness and carefree chatter gave me the reassurance. I needed so badly. She slept beside me that night and next morning, after the funeral, took with her to her rooms in the bazaar. (The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories 3)

The notable Indian English writer, K.R. Srinivas Iyengar once remarked in relation to dealing of Bond with children characters, “he is undoubtedly a writer with talent and he does understand the mind of young people” (512). Development of mental aspects of the narrator in relation to the care of his aunt is one of pivotal aspects of the story. It showcases how Bond makes a very deeper probe into his psychological ramifications, leading to gradual development of his personality. This portrayal is inextricably tied to how the narrator stays away from paying heed to different comments and remarks by his other family members concerning character of Mariam which is indicative of a matured portrayal of his psychoanalytical reconfiguration. Philippe Ariès argues that phase associated with childhood of an individual is one of the most integral phases which needs to

be accepted as a distinct entity in a person. His idea of “discovery” of childhood dates back to his claim that it was only in seventeenth century when human childhood was regarded as a specific phase which has its own intricacies and value. He also put forward his idea that different modern developments played a key role in encapsulating ideas related to development of one’s childhood. It was in 1960s when he came up with a thundering postulation something called as childhood of an individual was almost absent before what is understood as contemporary modern age.

Different arguments put forward by Ariès find a direct parallel with narrator of the story as he was only six when he became an orphan, a phase which can well be equated with childhood. Varied experiences in his life which were nothing less than arduous, in ways more than one, orchestrated his ontological belongingness with his aunt. His deprivation of parental love, his traumatic positioning to lead a life devoid of physical presence of parents, his encounters with other forces of the society all combined together to form his childhood. In a general sense, an individual’s childhood is placed against a matured phase of adulthood which finds an artistic manifestation in the narrator’s life. That stated, this becomes a very reductionist comprehension of inherent essence associated with one’s childhood. Considering the story, childhood can be attributed to narrator’s gradual growth with his aunt away from complexities and manipulations of society. As a guardian, Mariam has been caricatured accurately with her concerns for the narrator so that he can be protected from various evil forces which also steadily paved way for development of a cordial relationship between them. As he remarks, “she was a joyous, bubbling creature - force of nature rather than a woman – and every time I think of her, I am tempted to put down on paper some aspect of her conversation, or her gestures, or her magnificent physique.” (The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories 84).

Growth of a child in the warmth of elderly love is a primary thematic concern in the story as it was seen that she used to extend her tremendous love for him, making him her centre of attraction. There are no notable instances in the story when readers find he was either beaten up or rebuked by his aunt, indicating she showered immense love and care. That childhood care can go a long way in development of a matured self towards later part of an individual can easily be observed in narrator’s life when he, after contemplating his aunt’s behaviour towards him during his childhood, christened her “guardian angel.” By presenting Mariam’s character as a lady with compassionate values and comfort for young kids, Bond greatly enabled a psychological study of her. She becomes the epitome of humanistic values which aid strengthening of human bonds and relations regardless of age. Thus, an elderly figure is placed in light of protector for the young in this story. She acts as a shoulder to lean on right throughout, grating the young kid a space of comfort. What it did was that he could nurture his own self in the right direction. Bond explicates importance of love and care in individual relations when he remarks, “love is undying. The love that gives protection, even as you may guardian Angel, gave me protection long after you have gone and continue to give this Very day ...and love beyond death – a love that makes life alive” (Aggarwal 39).

One of the significant aspects of aunt Mariam’s character is a probing sense of womanliness which appears to be very relaxing for the young kid. As it was already stated by Bond, he had to bear trauma of losing his parents at a very tender age of six, making him completely dependent on her. Apart from her love for the young boy, readers can also sense an inherent quality of a staunch figure in her; she has been presented to be a dignified lady with her values intact. However, as readers come across, she falls prey to carnal desires of men in due course of the story which is indicative of her vulnerability as a woman. With that being

contextualized, she made sure that evils of prostitution did not affect the young kid. She made him move out of her home by sending him to a boarding school, indicating her concerns for his better upbringing. Aziz Haider makes a significant observation considering presentation of women by Bond as he says that a woman in his stories

is just like a creation of nature, as simple as a flower plant with its flower, whose beauty lies in its very being. It exists and is admired for his existence. Woman is there right from the stage of a little girl to the old grandmother of the author hero. She is like Eve in paradise before the fall of man. She is the caring mother of an ugly boy, she is the neighbour's wife who is eager to find a bride for him and ends up as his wife herself as the only suitable bride for any bachelor, there is that guardian angel who has the dignity and piety of a noble woman and yet practices prostitution. The woman characters in Bond have something in their mould which makes them quite distinct from those of the other short story writers. (126)

It is an important factor to acknowledge that an individual's mind gets affected by various forces of society along with nuances of unconscious mind. Ethical values which were imparted by aunt Mariam to the young kid turned out to be greater psychological forces in his life. This, significantly, led to his structuring as a matured being during his later part of his life. At the same time, company of his aunt can also be studied to be a major determination of his own behaviour during his course of life. Bond presents that she was constantly visited by different men at her home amidst the marketplace, an indication of precarious position of a lonely lady who was making both ends meet on her own. This act of regular visits by different men can also be studied to be a scenario of a filthy market area- a space generally inhibited by local thugs and goons who prey on women body for their bodily pleasure. Readers also witness that the narrator, initially, did not support her decision to send him to boarding school away from her as he developed a cordial bond with her after the demise of his parents. However, Mariam turned out to be a strict parent as she made efforts to convince him to go to the boarding school. This was done so that he becomes capable enough to look after her during her old age after becoming successful in his life. As she convinces, "ten years from now I will not be able to make such a living. Then who will support and help me? An illiterate young fellow, or an educated gentleman? When I am old, my son, when I am old...." (The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories 86).

The character of young narrator becomes a very important subject of psychological study in the story as he does not only become a mundane and passive object who gets dictated by his aunt. In him, readers find a sense of judgement and rationality in moving with the ramification of his external environment while abiding by his aunt's care and love. Bond's children characters generally possess tremendous power of judging different aspects of this world. They generally belong from rustic and humble backgrounds which make them rise up societal ladders by dint of her hard work. Considering his portrayal of children, Bond makes a notable statement

In writing about children one has to adopt a less subjective approach, things must happen, for children have no time for mood pieces. I have so strong an empathy with children I can enter into their minds. As children we are individual; it is only as we grow older that we acquire a certain grey similarity. ("Introduction" 2)

Individuality associated with human mind is one of the fundamental concerns pertaining to psychological field of study which finds notable manifestation in the narrator's character. Bond, although

presents him in company and observance of his aunt, does not shy away from granting him his inherent individuality in terms of his behaviour. He has been presented to be an individual with his own ability to question and make reasoning judgement in different situations. Expressing his underlying ideas and feelings appears to be his hallmark in the story. There many instances when he blatantly refused to accept various remarks and statements laced with prejudices concerning his aunt being put forward to him by different family members. Showcasing a strong ability to decide according to situations and scenarios, the young narrator also observes that she was never treated with affectionate behaviour by her parents whenever she visited his home. Readers are also made aware that aunt Mariam was the own sister of narrator's mother. In this regard, it can be inferred that both the sisters did not share a bond of love which made the narrator's mother treat her own sister with disapproving behaviour. The author also observes that her visit to his home was very scanty in nature, an indication of presence of an unseen divide between them.

Differences in behaviour of elders in opposition to young kids gets an amplified portrayal in the story as the young kid was seen to be wandering in uncertainty when his aunt was not called for during his mother's illness. To his utter surprise, this behaviour by his own parents was baffling for him as Mariam, for him, was an epitome of love and care. It vividly showcases presence of differences between comprehension of elders and young kids by depicting oppositional behaviour. The character of aunt is also shown to be in light of psychological studies as she did not express any hesitancy in her mind to welcome her sister's son after her demise. Thus, unlike her sister who turns out to be arrogant and hostile, Mariam emerges as a lady who expresses love, concern, care, and nurture as evidenced by her treatment towards the narrator. It can also be attributed that parental loss is a phenomenon which can never be fulfilled or replaced. But, aunt Mariam made her best efforts to treat the young boy with utmost love and affection. She tries her best so that he comes out of this phase of trauma and melancholy at the loss of his mother, elevating her status as an individual to heights beyond his comprehension. Regarding portrayal of innate human values amidst presence of evil forces in this world, Bond remarks

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. ('Introduction' 3)

Philippe Ariès argues that idea of one's childhood always comes in contestation with how it is placed against being an adult as after a certain period in an individual's life, the person is no longer considered a child. As can be observed in the story, gradual progress of the young kid depicts a significant idea which Ariès espouses- placement of a child amidst worldly features and intricacies coupled with hurdles. He argues that these often lead to problems in terms of holistic development of young children. One of the vital features associated with Ariès' notion of discovery related to childhood is an associated realism that adorn portrayal of a child both in literary and artistic depictions. This can be equated with how the narrator in this particular story gets portrayed- in a natural light with all his insecurities, idiosyncrasies, and doubts intact. These also prominently make the story align with sentiments and feelings of readers. Regarding portrayal of children in different writings from seventeenth century onwards, Ariès remarks, "it was in the seventeenth century that

portraits of children on their own became numerous and commonplace. It was in the seventeenth century, too, that the family portrait...tended to plan itself around the child” (22).

The story captivatingly portrays that a lady who was vehemently discarded by her own family members turned out to be a life-saver for the young kid. It was her care and love for him that gradually played immense role in nullifying his pain, making him acquaint with an altogether different physical landscape. Affection and kindness go a long way in making young children feel at home at an otherwise physical landscape. These are traits that found notable manifestation in life of the young narrator as he never received motherly love in his life even when his mother was alive. This elevates both character and personality of Aunt Mariam to matchless heights in his eyes as he could sense a motherly figure in her, transforming herself into an epitome of immense love. It is a notable feature to state that attributes like that of solace and comfort appear indispensable in lives of young children. Their psychological traits get influenced and moulded by behaviour which influence their growth at a young age. Aunt Mariam emerged as an angel for him not only for her care but also for her hold on him. Her strong personality led to his growth as an individual who has not lost track of goodness during his gradual development as a tender kid. As his fate would have it, Bond portrays that he became subject to numerous murmurs of people surrounding his vicinity as his comparatively fair appearance emerged out to be a favourite topic for them as against a little coloured appearance of his aunt. Bond presents the following conversation to substantiate to his readers

“Is it true that his father was an English man?”

“Mariam-bi says so. She never lies”

“True. Whatever her faults- and they are many- she has never been known to lie.” (The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories 89)

Entanglements of human life, regardless of age and geography, find a very truthful depiction in the story with workings of cognitive ability of humans as evidenced by relationship between Mariam and story’s narrator. In the story, much like in human life, these two characters are portrayed away from any artificiality in terms of their ontological positioning. This further elevates kid’s character as he has been shown to be maturing in his aunt’s company almost naturally far away from any malice influence. His growth can well be equated with Bond’s growth during his early period as a kid as he, too, was a victim of not-very-healthy childhood. Bond’s different autobiographical accounts reveal that his mother had to separate from his father at an early after their marriage, leading to deep psychological impacts in his mind. Also, Bond was deprived of parental love as his father passed away when he was very young. These draw parallels with the kid of this story which borders on these personal elements of Bond’s life to a great extent. The lonely life of this young kid resembles grippingly well with loneliness which Bond had to encounter as a child. This indicates his growth to be even more profound and painstaking in terms of its deprivation of care and affection from his own parents. In relation to Bond’s constant engagement with children and different aspects of growth pertaining to children’s life, he echoes that it was his troubled childhood that makes him constantly revisit thematic concerns connected to children. This, to considerable extents, facilitated him to delve deep into its various nuances. He explicates

I don’t suppose I would have written so much about childhood or even about other children if my own childhood had been all happiness and light. I find that those who have contented, normal childhood, seldom remember much about them; nor do they have much insight into the world of children. (Scenes

from a Writer's Life 4)

Ariès' arguments pertaining to gradual evolvement of children in literary depictions after seventeenth century find a vital substantiation in his illustration that contemporary writings dealing with various intricacies of children showcase them to be strong beings. It comes as a contrast to earlier depictions of them being meek and unsure in their natural surroundings. It also finds a powerful justification in portrayal of the narrator as he has been shown to be a young boy who, in loveable company of his aunt, grows up to be confident. Also, Bond presents him to be devoid of any trace related to being vulnerable when it comes to tackling external societal forces. Readers learn that this young narrator gets viewed and observed by eyes of adults, getting situated in a different physical surrounding without any masked and layered portrayal. Descriptions related to his aunt's fear for him when she was frequently visited by unknown men to satisfy their carnal desires can be argued to be a proper appropriation of elements which validate his childhood. A strong portrayal of his personality can also be observed in his unchanged behaviour when outside comments by various individuals regarding Mariam did not alter his notions towards her. Bond, thus, presents a very determined young boy who revered Mariam to extreme limits, not allowing external noise to deviate him from his path of devotion towards her.

Readers can also notice a strong sense of attachment between Mariam and the young boy in his resentment at arrival of strangers to sleep with her as this displaced him from her. Bond showcases that upon their arrival, he had to make temporary arrangements to sleep in a store room which he heartily detested. That stated, readers also learn that there was an inherent happiness in his mind as he was well aware of their temporary presence in his aunt's life. This is a clear reiteration of love which young kids harbour in their lives from elders, echoing a psychological influence that stays throughout one's growth. Childhood innocence is an integral part of one's growth that shapes and realigns how an individual views external surroundings. Although his aunt resorted to an immoral means of survival in society, the kid self-introspected that she could not carry out any other work as she was completely illiterate with ability to somehow write a few letters. It can well be observed that Bond does not portray aunt Mariam's character in a judgemental light as she not been censored by him, indicating his deep comprehension of individual predicaments. There are also no favourable statements by Bond when it comes to extending his support towards the narrator's mother when she ill-treated Mariam. Moreover, when numerous individuals visited Mariam at her house, readers could not find any justified remark by the author; an indication that he never made any judgement regarding any individual in the story.

The story takes a remarkable turn towards the end which appears to be thundering psychological jolt in life of the kid. During his visit to this aunt on his holidays from boarding school, he learnt that she was no longer there. What went behind the scenes at his stay away from her was utter displeasing for him as manipulations from his relatives led the court to decide that aunt Mariam was not fit for giving company to him. The reason, as readers are given the details, for this was her immoral way of leading her life which led the boy to be sent to home of another relative who had immense reputation in the society. His separation from his aunt was seen as a heart-breaking incident both in his upbringing in also in his growth as a child as he developed inextricable attachment with her. Regardless of this separation, his reversion remained same and aunt Mariam was always an angel for him who moulded his childhood with immense care and concern for him. After his growth, Bond depicts that he made a visit to that old house of Mariam where he used to stay as a kid only to find that it was no longer there with his aunt succumbing to a feeble heart. Mariam's death appeared to be the death knell to their connection- one that traversed numerous boundaries and refuted multiple

claims made by society. Bond makes a very artistic portrayal of her grave away from the city in the form of an angel having distorted wings, signifying her deep value in the narrative. Creation of her tomb can also be argued to be a strong statement made by the writer to showcase that irrespective of what others thought about her, Mariam was considered an angel by the narrator and she remained one even after her death.

The story, in this way, turns out to be a delectable masterpiece which hinges on psychological imprints resulting from love on minds of young children. A rudimentary reading makes it appear to be a mundane tale between a lady and a small boy; however, underneath this mundane portrayal remained layers of thematic concerns that tied the narrative together. Bond prominently delves deep into traits involving individuality of the kid which make him stand out as an autonomous being with ability to judge and decide according to different situations. Readers also find a strong reasoning in him when the kid quashed aside different remarks related to aunt Mariam made by the society, oozing his individuality out to the fore. Love of aunt Mariam acted as perfect glue for the kid to acclimatize with external surroundings during his growth. This tale, thus, remains a pivotal testimony to power of love on young minds that can transform and mould them regardless of situation they become a part of in their lives.

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