



Portrayal of Indian Railways in the works of Ruskin Bond

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ABSTRACT

Indian Railways, the premier transport organization of the country, is the largest rail network in Asia and world's second largest under one management. This has fascinated many writers to describe Indian railways in their works at length. Writers like Rudyard Kipling, Khushvant Singh and Mahatma Gandhi have described Indian railways in their works. Ruskin Bond's abiding fascinations is the Indian Railway system, particularly the noise, the cacophony and the unique culture that each railway station seems to spontaneously generate and sustain. In his three major novels and many of his short stories Bond gives detailed portrayal of Indian railway as he has a special fascination for Indian Railways since his childhood and used to visit Railway station frequently. In Delhi is not Far Bond mentions his childhood fascination:

The railway station, half a mile from the bus stop, had always attracted me. As a boy I had been fascinated by trains (as I suppose most boys are), and waved to the passengers as the train flew through the fields, and was always delighted when one of them waved back to me (P, 14).

In the present Research Paper, I am interested to study Indian railway, its significance and its present day relevance depicted by Bond. I also want to study what Bond symbolizes through the description of overcrowded railway compartment of Indian railway. I also wish to propose to study how Bond represents India through the description of Indian railway, how hard is to travel in ordinary compartment and how Bond shows unity in diversity of India through railways.

Keywords : North India, Indian Railways, Indian-ness, Portrayal, Travelling Sensibility

Portrayal of Indian Railways in the works of Ruskin Bond.

Ruskin Bond has ample experience of traveling by trains especially in North India, therefore he is fully aware of the over crowded railway compartments that do not allow comfortable journey. It is very difficult to get into the unreserved third class compartment, which are always overcrowded. In his famous novel Room on the Roof, a young boy Somi advises his friend Rusty not to travel in third class compartment in his letter. Through this letter Bond comments on the hardship of traveling in third class compartment.

"Do not ever travel in a third- class compartment. All the way to Amritsar I had to sleep standing up, (Sic) the carriage was so crowded" (P, 644)

Bond amusingly comments on the population blast in India through a train compartment in his other novel Vagrants in the valley. According to him the train is a machine where the individual beings are swallowed by the mass; the individual identity evaporates into a whole. As Bond writes,

Your leg, you discover, is not yours but your neighbour's, the growth of hair on your shoulder is someone's beard and the cold wind whistling down your neck is his asthmatic breath; a baby materializes in your lap and is reclaimed only after it has wet your trousers; and the corner of a seat which you had happily thought was you're your own green spot on this earth is suddenly usurped by a huge Sikh with a sword dangling at his side (761).

The train becomes a symbol of the password for the democracy 'en mass!' This uncomfortable condition of third class compartment is further described elaborately in his another novel Delhi is not far, When the compartment is jam packed, it is difficult for the people to get sleeping berth. They can hardly stand and have to pass night without sleeping. As, Arun, the protagonist of the novel, narrates his miserable condition in the train:

We slept fitfully that night, continually shifting our positions

on the hard bench of the third class compartment; Suraj with his head against my shoulder, I with my feet on my bedding roll (P, 85).

Mahatma Gandhi also had the similar experience while traveling in the third class compartment. He too narrates how it is troublesome to travel in third class railway compartment. He traveled all over the country for the purpose of studying the conditions under which the lower class people travel. He Observes in Third Class in Indian Railway and Other Essays:

I have now been in India for over two years and a half after my return from South Africa. Over one quarter of that time I have passed on the Indian trains travelling third class by choice. I have travelled up north as far as Lahore, down south up to Tranquebar, and from Karachi to Calcutta. Having resorted to third class travelling, among other reasons, for the purpose of studying the conditions under which this class of passengers travel, I have naturally made as critical observations as I could. I have fairly covered the majority of railway systems during this period.

Ruskin Bond has also portrayed the scenario of the railway platforms. When the train arrives at the platform, all the passengers try to prevent people from outside entering the compartment that is already crowded. He depicts the situation in Vagrants in the Valley:

There was a jam on the platform while men, women and children pushed and struggled, and it was several minutes before anyone could get in or out of the carriage doors (P, 669).

The railway platforms usually remain silent and lonely. But during the time of the arrival of the train all of a sudden we find a lot of activities on the platform. Bond has mentioned the on- goings of the platform in The Room on the Roof,

On the station platform the coolies pushed and struggled, shouted incomprehensibly, lifted heavy trunks with apparent

ease. Merchants cried their wares, trundling barrows up and down the platform- soda water, oranges, betel nut, halwai sweets. . . . (P, 647)

The description of railway waiting room does not escape from the minor observation of Bond. In *Vagrants in the Valley*, he describes railway waiting room at length where Kishen and Rusty pass some time there as they have to wait till their train arrives. Here they meet an American who is trying to popularize steel plough in northern India.

Ruskin Bond has a lot to comment about the irregularity of trains. Some trains never run on time and if at all they run on time they disturb the schedule of other trains. He ironically comments in his novel *The Room on the Roof* about the irregularity of Hardwar Mail

Being the Hardwar Mail, this was but natural. No one ever expected the Hardwar Mail to start on time, for in all its history, it hadn't done so (not even during the time of British), and for it to do so now would be a blow to tradition. Everyone was for tradition, and so the Hardwar Mail was not permitted to arrive and depart at the appointed hour; though it was feared that one day some young fool would change the appointed hours. And imagine what would happen if the train did leave on time- the entire system would be thrown into confusion for, needless to say, every other train took its time from the Hardwar Mail (P, 647-48).

While traveling in railways, some people do not care to buy tickets. Of course, traveling without ticket is an offence and railway department has appointed officials to prevent this but some people escape from being caught and consider it as an adventure. According to Bond it is not a challenging task to travel in railway without ticket. Even if caught, they have to spend a month in the jail where they will at least get free lodging and boarding.

This Railway journey and longer waiting on the railway platform subsequently became responsible for the creation of his railway stories like 'The Night Train at Deoli,' 'Time Stops at Shaml,' 'The Woman on Platform 8,' 'The Tunnel,' 'Tiger in the Tunnel' and 'The Eyes Have It'. As he says in his biography *Scenes from a Writer's Life*,

But 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 such as 'The Night Train at Deoli,' 'The Woman on Platform 8,' 'The Tunnel,' and 'The Eyes Have It.'

His short story 'The Tiger in The Tunnel' is also set against the back ground of railway line that passes through a thick forest. The story is about Baldeo, a railway watch man, who is responsible for signaling whether the tunnel is clear or not so that the train passes through safely. In this story Bond draws our attention towards the life of the poor railway watchmen like Baldeo whose lives are always in danger as they have to work in lonely places day and night where wild animals may attack at any time. Bond describes in detail how the train enters the deep cutting which leads to the tunnel in the thick forest.

The station, a small backed by heavy jungle, was a station in name only; for the train only stopped there, if at all, for a few seconds before entering the deep cutting that led to the tunnel. Most trains merely slowed down before taking the sharp curve before the cutting (P, 30).

Bond also depicts in detail the design of the steam engines used earlier, now replaced by diesel or electronic engines with the passage of time.

At the next station the driver slowed down and stopped train to water to the engine. He got down to stretch his legs and

decided to examine the head-lamps. He received the surprise of his life; for, just above the cow catcher lay the major portion of the tiger, cut in half by the engine (P, 34).

His short story 'The Great Train Journey' has the back ground of railway too. It is a story of a young boy Suraj who wanders near the railway station. In his other stories Bond has mentioned passenger trains but in the present story he writes about a local goods train which transports apples. When Suraj is in the compartment that is full of the apple crates, soon the train starts moving. First, he enjoys the journey but when he remembers his parents who might worry if he does not reach at home by evening. The train stops at one station where the crates are unloaded. Soon the train starts moving further that makes Suraj worry. Meanwhile, the train draws into the station. To his greater surprise, the train reaches at the station of his home town. He comes to know that this has happened because the direction of the engine was changed.

Bond's short story 'The woman on the Platform No.8' describes the narrator's stay at the platform of Ambala railway station. He passes time at the platform, till the train arrives, walking here and there. Bond describes the scene of the platform when the train arrives. The narrator meets a woman who has a pale face and dark eyes and develops friendship with her. She offers the narrator snack. The narrator's friend Satish and her mother arrive at the station. The mother of Satish takes this woman to be the narrator's mother and talks with them. The train is late. The mother of Satish complains about waiting for train till midnight and adds that young boys should not be sent like this as she is afraid of strange and suspicious characters wandering around.

The setting of Bond's 'Eyes have It' is also a railway compartment. The narrator undertakes a journey to Mussoorie. He is alone in the compartment till Rohana. At Rohana a girl gets in the compartment. The narrator, who is blind, starts conversation with the girl without letting her know about his blindness. The conversation goes on and the narrator flatters the girl in romantic manner. The train stops at Saharanpur where the girl is supposed to go. She bids good bye to the narrator and gets off. The author discovers at the end from the man who has entered the compartment, to his greater surprise that the girl was also completely blind.

You must be disappointed,' he said. 'I'm not nearly as attractive a travelling (sic) companion as the one who just left.'

'She was an interesting girl,' I said. 'Can you tell me-did she keep her hair long or short?'

'I don't remember,' he said sounding puzzled. 'It was her eyes I noticed, not her hair. She had beautiful eyes but they were of no use to her. She was completely blind. Didn't you notice? (P, 27-28)

'The Night Train at Deoli' by Bond, portrays Deoli railway station that is small about thirty miles from Dehra from where the dark forests of Indian Terai begin. The train stops there for full ten minutes, though nothing ever happen much there. The station has only one platform where the train reaches early in the morning at about five. Bond gives the description of the station as,

Deoli had only one platform, an office for the station master and a waiting room. The platform boasted a tea stall, a fruit vendor, and a few stray dogs; not much else because the train stopped there only for only ten minutes before rushing on into the forests (P, 44).

While going by the night train in order to visit his grandmother at Dehra the narrator meets a young girl, who is selling baskets at Deoli railway station. The narrator is attracted towards her. The narrator, while returning from Dehra, once again finds the basket selling girl at Deoli railway station. She recognizes the narrator at once. They can not talk much as the train leaves but the narrator promises to come again. The girl is not

seen when the narrator again visits the station in next vacation. He impatiently inquires about this girl to the station master and the owner of the tea stall but fails to know her whereabouts. He has never been able to see the girl afterwards but the station has a special fascination for the narrator.

Bond's 'Going Home' is also set in the back ground of railway. It is the story of a farmer Dayaram who returns from Hardwar to Dehra by train. He arrives at Hardwar to immerse the ashes of his brother in the holy water of the Ganga. While traveling in the crowded third class compartment of the train, his cloth bag falls from his hand. He gets off as the train stops after sometimes but has to walk back to the spot where his bag fell down. He reaches the previous station and gets it from the station master whom somebody handed over. Dayaram is pleased and celebrates his unexpected recovery of his bag by drinking but is cheated finally by a man. Now he still has his ticket to Dehra and leaves for forgetting all happenings.

Bond's description of Indian railways is full of varieties. He describes the on goings of railway platforms, hardship of traveling in third class compartment, various experiences on platform, railway engines, tunnels, railway waiting room,

passenger trains, goods trains and hard life of poor railway watchman. Nowhere have we felt his description unreal though sometimes funny. Bond never intends to criticize Indian railway system; or hardship in traveling in third class compartment rather he symbolizes the over crowded railway compartment as microcosm of India. Taking the cosmic view of hardships in journey by train, it signifies India in miniature. It is the experience of living in India, Over-crowded, personal spaces intercepted by others, though the compartment is full, hundreds of passengers can accommodate themselves, rush to get out and get in, coolies – their act to pull luggage overhead is something like myth of Sisyphus. Through the description of Indian railway Bond draws our attention towards the unity in diversity in India. Thus, Indian Railways is India on the track – engine and compartments want to break through but the tracks holds them back and engine toils hard, puffing up smoke, compartments squeak in pain yet always on move without complaining. The same way the unity in India has sustained. This also signifies how an average middle class Indian Common Man lives his life. They want to break through but Indian conditions, environment holds them back... they toil hard and squeak in pain but all in vain.

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