A Challenge to Stereotypes and Biases of Society in Select Short Stories of Ruskin Bond

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Abstract— *The present paper mainly focuses on Ruskin Bond's two short stories, "The Woman on Platform 8" and "The Night Train at Deoli," from the perspective of stereotypes and biases found in society and how the characters oppose or challenge them. Both short stories, with the railway stations as their settings, are from the same collection of the writer entitled The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories (1988). It is a qualitative study of Ruskin Bond's these two selected short stories. Here the researcher attempts to textually analyze them and see how the main characters challenge stereotypes and biases of society. A study of these short stories clarifies that major characters are against the social stereotypes and biases. The middle-aged woman in the first short story "The Woman on Platform 8" strongly contradicts people's belief that strangers on the railway stations are always harmful for them. In the same way, Arun also dislikes the suggestion of his friend's mother to not talk with those people who are strange or unknown. Moreover, the eighteen-year-old college student not only behaves kindly and politely with the poor basket seller girl at Deoli Railway station in the short story "The Night Train at Deoli," but also falls in love despite her low social status, which is usually unacceptable in Indian society.*

Keywords— *Woman, Railway Station, Boy, Stereotype, Bias*

I. INTRODUCTION

A stereotype is "a set idea that people have about what someone or something is like, especially an idea that is wrong" ("Stereotype," Cambridge, n.d.). Whereas Merriam-Webster Dictionary (n.d.) defines bias as the "inclination of temperament or outlook *especially* : a personal and sometimes unreasoned judgment." In this way, stereotypes' and 'biases' both indicate the negative connotations of the two words. The stereotypical and biased people are prejudiced; they judge people or things on the basis of their preconceived ideas rather than on the basis of facts and evidence.

Stereotypes are found in various forms in society. They may be racial, gender, demographic, political, activity (Coffman, 2015), ethnic, age, occupational, religious, and national. The stereotypes and biases are not good for any society, as they discriminate, distract , and divide people on the racial, male/female, and other traits. Moreover, they are also responsible for limiting scopes of progress for those people who are not in the mainstream of society or are marginalized (Chaires, 2015). Godsil et al., (2016) also find them very dangerous in many ways for a major section of society that includes women and girls. Here the role of media becomes very important in this regard/context because it is a powerful source for spreading information in modern times. Recently, it is used in both ways—either in conveying authentic news or for the dissemination of misinformation for misguiding people. But its use to make people aware of facts and realities may be very effective in removing stereotypes and biases from society (Milovanovic & Saleem, 2022).

Like media narratives, literature is also closely connected to society. It not only reflects society but also shapes and changes it. Literature incorporates a variety of issues or themes. Here literary characters protest and oppose the problems found in their surroundings. They speak in favor

of positive changes as replacements of systems that are harmful for people (Alfarhan, 2024). In this way, society and literature are inseparable from each other. The presence of literature is always felt in society. Briefly speaking, it has the power of promoting changes in society, opposing predominant notions or ideologies, and offering details about the lives of those people who are considered nothing or mean in society (Panikkar, 2012). Ruskin Bond's short stories selected for this study also endorse these things.

II.   RUSKIN BOND: THE AUTHOR

Ruskin Bond (b. 1934) is a well-known contemporary writer of India with so many novels, short stories, and essays among his works (Gupta & Bond, n.d.). He is especially acclaimed in the country as one of the leading writers of short stories (Jain & Satkunananthan, 2024). However, Bond's debut published work, *The Room on the Roof* (1956), is a novel (Mirza, 2004). Its sequel, *Vagrants in the Valley,* was published in 1987. His works such as *Angry River*, *Flight of Pigeons, The Blue Umbrella,* and *Susanna's Seven Husbands* (novels and novellas), *The Beauty of All My Days: A Memoir,* and *Lone Fox Dancing: My Autobiography* (autobiographical works) (Singh, 2020), *The Night Train at Deoli and other Stories*, *The Neighbour's Wife and Other Stories, When Darkness Falls and Other Stories, Time Stops At Shamli and Other Stories, My First Love and Other Stories, Friends in Small Places,* and *Collected Fiction* (Bhatt, 2005) strongly represent his greatness as a writer. He is a realistic writer in the sense that he talks about environmental issues and tries to make people aware of them (Qadar, 2019). His writings also cover subjects of identity in relation to person and culture—personal and cultural identity (in short), pre-independent and post-independent observations, issues of local and global importance, and children and adolescents (Khorana, 2003). He actually positions children in the center or main spots of most of his writings. In this way, he reveals the protagonists or other characters' thoughts in order to provide them a space to make them express their ideas or perspectives (Pal & Prajapati, 2021). Besides all the above, he is a writer deeply colored in Indian color. Many of his works, for instance, *The Room on the Roof* , *Ghost Stories from the Raj, A Flight of Pigeons, Friends in Small Places, The India I Love,* and *Delhi is Not Far,* provide vivid descriptions of Indian ethos, tradition, and values and show how deeply Indianness is instilled in him and his writings (Kumar & Tyagi, 2021; Sharma, 2020; Trivedi, 2012). His short stories are also full of similar themes, subjects, and issues (Bhatt, 2005), as has been mentioned above.

III.   REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Scholars and researchers have studied literary works from the perspectives of stereotypes and biases.

3.1. Short Stories

3.1.1. Breaking the Stereotypes: A Historical Analysis of Gender 'Justice' in Tagore's Short Stories

The researcher centers the study that Tagore challenges stereotypes through the female characters of short stories such as *"Chokher Bali," "Nostonirh," "Gribala," "Strir Patra," "Kankal,"* and *"Musalmaneer Golpo."* He finds the women in Ravindranath Tagore's these short stories portrayed as courageous, forward-looking, and resiliently challenging the male-dominated society that creates problems in their ways (Sarkar, 2021).

3.1.2. Women Stereotypes in Shi Zhecun's Short Stories

As it is clear from the name, the article provides an analysis of *An Evening of Spring Rain* and *Exemplary Conduct of Virtuous Women*—short story collections by Shi Zhecun that were published in the year 1933. It studies how women are represented and analyzes the way the picture of a New Woman became a cause of debate in China. The researcher finds these works have basically stereotypes, such as a woman with an enigma, a wife with estrangement, a woman with inhibition, and a woman with prostitution. The short story writer uses the description of the aforementioned types of women and the way men perceived them; she not only challenges the different imposition of modernity on these women but also dismantles the picture or stereotype of this New Woman (Rosenmeier, 2011).

3.1.3.Breaking the Stereotypes: Portrayal of the Woman in the Selected Short Stories of Shashi Deshpande

The researcher here studies two short stories, "The Window" and "An Antidote to Boredom," by Shashi Deshpande. Her analysis shows that the writer of these short stories portrays women with differences from those ideal or traditional women of India. These female characters oppose or defy long-time traditions and stereotypes of their society. They challenge their marital lives and seek happiness outside their marriages; the woman in "An Antidote to Boredom" has an affair with another man besides her husband, and the woman in "The Window" is a lesbian attracted towards a landlady (Gour, 2021).

3.2. Novels and a Play

Kimsey (2011) studies fifteen novels from young adult literature in order to see gender stereotypes and prejudices on the basis of sixteen earlier fixed parameters or characteristics. She does not find any gender bias in her sample because characters from the two given genders show features that are in contradiction to their stereotyped belief

or norm. Jaiswal et al. (2021), in their review paper, attempt to analyze what the effect of fictional works is on people and society in terms of shaping biases or prejudices in them. They find that, though not strongly, it (fiction) causes/influences prejudice or bias on a personal and societal scale. Nandi et al. (2024), in order to look into the matter of stereotypes and bias, examine the images or pictures from five textbooks that are taught in primary classes of the Indian state of West Bengal. Naik & Chaudhary (2024) argue that Mahesh Dattani is very active in challenging various stereotypical beliefs in his plays, wherein his subtle characters are in open opposition to what society generally expects.

The study of the aforementioned works clarifies that many of them are centered around gender-based stereotypes and biases and none of them is from Ruskin Bond. The researcher/reviewer has no knowledge of any study of the short stories "The Woman on Platform 8" and "The Night Train at Deoli" from the perspective of challenging stereotypes and biases. Moreover, this study not only takes into account to challenge gender stereotypes and biases but also some others from the two short stories.

IV.　OBJECTIVES

- To identify the characters who challenge stereotypes and biases in in selected short stories
- To examine various themes or issues raised in these short stories in the context of characters' challenging stereotypes and biases
- To show the importance of human virtues and positive mindset in removing stereotypes and biases
- To recall and remind the significant role of female characters, i.e., a woman a girl, in changing society

V.　METHODOLOGY

The two short stories "The Woman on Platform 8" and "The Night Train at Deoli" have been thoroughly studied in order to see how various stereotypes and biases have been challenged by Ruskin Bond with the help of relevant characters. Therefore, it can be called a qualitative textual analytical study (Arya, 2020; Griffin, 2013).

VI.　DISCUSSION AND ANALYSIS

"The Woman on Platform 8" is the first short story in Ruskin Bond's collection "The Night Train Deoli and Other Stories." The story centers around a twelve-year-old boarding school student, named Arun, waiting alone for the train at the railway station, as his parents are confident or

believe that he can travel alone. On the other hand, "The Night Train at Deoli" is also from the abovementioned collection. An eighteen-year-old college student is going from Delhi to Dehra during his summer vacation in order to visit his grandmother. The two student characters from both stories meet two female characters: Arun, with a woman of more than thirty, and the college student with a poor young girl. Their coming across and the progress of the stories provides the writer with the opportunity to challenge social stereotypes and biases through their characters.

6.1. Humanization of Marginals

The short stories provide faces to the women in "The Woman on Platform 8" and the basket seller girl in "The Night Train at Deoli." Though the story is silent about the social background of the woman, she appears at the railway station without anyone with her and helps and entertains the boy without any evil intention. In this way, she shows her humanity and challenges the societal stereotype and bias that one should not talk with strangers and they are always harmful. The girl who sells baskets at the Deoli railway station is a representative of marginalized communities. She is, of course, poor, with old clothes and without footwear, but with grace and dignity as her qualities. She questions the poor villagers' insignificance and facelessness-related stereotype. The college student is attracted to her because of her humanistic qualities.

6.2. Gender Roles

The two short stories defy gender roles assigned to women in traditional society to limit them to only domestic work. The woman of "The Woman on Platform 8" is neither weak, diffident, nor financially dependent on anybody; she herself buys food for Arun. She is also able to look after Arun without any evil intention and travel alone. Similarly, the basket seller girl of "The Night Train at Deoli," instead of confining and engaging herself to domestic responsibilities, sells baskets at the railway station.

6.3. Social and Economic Condition

Despite its not explicit mention, it is confirmed that the woman in the short story "The Woman on Platform 8" belongs to a higher class and is economically stable. She respectfully and kindly treats Arun despite a huge gap between their ages or irrespective of social and economic status. In "The Night Train at Deoli," the college student is from a privileged class and in good economic condition, whereas the girl belongs to the marginalized community and sells baskets at the railway station to earn money. Unlike the college student, she cannot think of education. However, the characters of both stories come closer and connect together to challenge the biases that people from different economic and social classes should not talk and come closer.

6.4. Ephemeral Relationship

The boy Arun from Ruskin Bond's "The Woman on Platform 8" lives only a few hours with the strange woman at the railway station. The college student of the short story "The Night Train at Deoli" is also for a very short time with the basket seller girl when they meet for the first time when the train stops at Deoli railway station. The woman and the college student are empathetic towards Arun and the basket seller girl. Arun is very impressed by the woman in the same way the basket seller girl is by the college student, though she also impresses him. The two examples from short stories suggest or are against the bias, that there is no need for lengthy conversations in order to establish significant connections with others who are strange and fill the division or gap found in society among different kinds of people.

6.5. Caring and serving nature

The woman in "The Woman on Platform 8" is neither a family member nor a relative of Arun, yet her behavior is of very nurturing nature for the lone boy. She dedicates herself to serving and caring for Arun. The college student in "The Night Train at Deoli" of course likes the basket seller girl, but love is not much flourished between them. Even then, he also becomes concerned for her when he does not find her during his third train journey. It is his worry, concern, and sense of responsibility for the girl that he asks people at the Deoli railway station about her. The two instances challenge the stereotype that only family members, relatives, and familiar people think about and care for a person genuinely.

6.6. Conformity vs individuality

The social category of the female protagonist of the short story "The Woman on Platform 8" is unknown. Irrespective of her societal or social role, she helps and cares for Arun. The teenager boy in "The Night Train at Deoli" is from a high social class, but he is also attached to and caring for the poor girl. These things indicate that people should individually help those who are in need. Individuals, no matter what social class they belong to and how the overall behavior of that particular class is towards marginalized and needy people, can challenge and bring positive changes in society.

It is clear from this study that Bond challenges various forms of stereotypes and biases found in society through the major characters of short stories in order to bring positive changes in people's lives. But he does not criticize, satirize, mock, or defame any characters because he takes life positively and he wants to see the presence of affection and mutual understanding among people (Patel, 2019). He introduces the characters in his fictional writings that are like those who are found in real life. Consequently, when a reader reads any such pieces (like the short stories "The

Woman on Platform 8" and "The Night Train at Deoli"), she/he finds it as an actual world where she/he herself/himself lives (Dhirhe, 2010). His main female characters are obviously simple. However, they are abound with qualities like compassion, care, love, and patience that make them great despite their simplicity (Verma & Chaudhary, 2024), as the characters in the short stories studied here. His basic concern in her short stories is to portray positive things found in human instinct or nature (Mirza & Bond, 2004). These are the important things that help Bond challenge stereotypes and biases and form a healthy society.

VII.   CONCLUSION

A variety of stereotypes and biases are present in society and they are not good for any society. Media and literature can play a crucial role in helping people challenge and remove them. This study dealt with the perspective of literature. Ruskin Bond is an Indian author who challenges stereotypes and biases through his short stories, "The Woman on Platform 8" and "The Night Train at Deoli," taken for the analysis. Here the characters revolt against various stereotypes and biases they find around them. Ruskin Bond's creating realistic characters and situations brings the feeling of familiarity and similarity for the people living in the real world. Consequently, the chances of eradicating many social evils increase as many characters who are like them challenge social problems and form a good society.

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