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INDECISION: A COMMON THEMATIC STRUCTURE IN RABINDRANATH TAGORE'S *THE POSTMASTER* AND RUSKIN BOND'S *THE NIGHT TRAIN AT DEOLI*

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ABSTRACT

Indecision is a major term in Psychology. In literary discourse it is exhibited in a variety of ways. It is a major organizing principle in many short stories. Particularly, Rabindranath Tagore's *The Postmaster* and Ruskin Bond's *The Night Train at Deoli* this device is common. In both the short stories the protagonists fall in love with helpless, poor girls. They pity them and exhibit strong desire to take them along with them and thus rescue them out of the abject poverty. However, as a dramatic twist, both Tagore and Ruskin Bond make their protagonists quit the girls to their lot and go to their destinations for good and thereby underline the perpetual human dilemma in terms of illusion verses reality. Cathartic end of the stories shed more light on human process of decision making.

Key words: device, desire, dramatic twist, dilemma

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INTRODUCTION

Every human being experiences in decision sometime or other in their life. Dilemma, fear of consequences, lack of proper knowledge of the task, psychological unpreparedness often leads to indecision. Indecision means "a wavering between two or more possible courses of action." (Perrault 837). When it comes to short stories it enhances the characterization on the one hand and facilitates the dramatic twist on the other. Other synonyms for indecision are uncertainty, hesitation, inconclusiveness, irresolution, unsureness and ambivalence etc. Consequently its reflection in literature is simply inevitable and it has been thematized by many great writers. William Shakespeare's play *Hamlet* shows how indecision destroys a young and ambitious prince of Denmark. Robert Frost's poem *The Road Not Taken* describes how despite dilemmas, choices have to be made.

Rabindranath Tagore's *The Postmaster*

Rabindranath Tagore's short story *The Postmaster* is about a Calcutta groomed gentleman who took charge as a postman in a remote village named Ulhapur. However, after a few days he found himself a fish out of water as the far-flung village did not provide him any attraction that usually a city did. In order to tide over

this desperate situation, he tried to engross his wandering mind in writing poems but to no avail. This did not work; his loneliness and homesickness grew unabated. Amidst all this dramatic development he enjoyed the company of an orphan girl Ratan who made the post office her abode. She helped him in doing household chores and in lieu he gave her food. Coupled with the homesickness and the changed climate he fell sick and grew weaker and weaker and at last he applied for transfer. However, days later, the application was rejected and he opted to resign and quit the village and go back to Calcutta.

As another postman arrived and he was about to leave he offered almost all of that month's salary to Ratan. But overwhelmed by the emotional outburst she asked him not to worry about her as she would also quit the place very soon. As he embarked on a boat for Calcutta there were moments when he thought he could go back and take Ratan with him to Calcutta, but for some unknown reasons he could not do so. On the other hand, Ratan, with robust optimism, stared at the river and waited for her 'Dada' to come back and take her along with him. However, he never came back.

The story is about the relation between a man and a girl. The love between them is pure and pristine. Ratan is probably below thirteen. She is orphan and helpless. The postman was not merely a source of bread and butter, but of love and affection, safety and security; he was both mother and father to her. On several occasions, the postman tried to revive memories of her family life and gradually she began to call him 'Dada' meaning brother. And to some extent she too played those roles in the postman's life. When he was sick, she called the doctor and served him medicines, lighted tobacco and prepared meals as well. Tagore reinforces the womanhood motif repeatedly in this short story and enlarges its context and implications.

"In the loneliness of his exile, and in the glooms of the rains, his ailing body needed a little tender nursing. He longed to remember the touch on the forehead of soft hands with tinkling bracelets, to imagine the presence of loving womanhood, the nearness of mother and sister. And the exile was not disappointed. Ratan ceased to be a little girl. She at once stepped into the post of mother, called in the village doctor, gave the patient his pills at the proper intervals, sat up at night by his pillow, cooked his gruel for him, and every now and then asked, 'Are you feeling a little better, Dada?' (Tagore)

The turning point in the story occurs when the line of communication between the two miserably failed. The postmaster resigned the post and went back to Calcutta for he needed a woman's care – mother or wife. In fact, the real cause of the postman's uneasiness in that remote village was lack of human company. He always complained that he had no human company in the far-flung village, but he failed to perceive the presence Ratan who was a human being after all. This is why when the letter arrived bringing the news of rejection of his application for transfer, she was sure the postman would surely take her with him to Calcutta for she thought he too might not live without her. His immediate reply 'what an idea!' crash-landed her dream.

The root cause of the postman's loneliness is his urban life style. This was also root cause of Ratan's impending distress as she lost a father and mother once again. She was moved by the postman's exhibition of practical attitude when he weighed love in terms of money. Tagore wants to bring home the psychological truth that there are recess in human mind where the complex process of decision making takes place and we are often unconscious of it. He wants to lay bare the working of human mind before us. The postman too was pretty sensitive to the orphan's plight and this was why as the boat started moving he thought he could go back and bring her with him, but he had no courage to do that. This was not possible because the boat had already gone away from the bank of the river.

'At one time he had an impulse to go back, and bring away along with him that lonesome waif, forsaken of the world. But the wind had just filled the sails, the boat had got well in to the middle of the turbulent current, and already the village was left behind, and its outlying burning ground came in sight.' (Tagore)

Ruskin Bond's *The Night Train at Deoli*

In this short story the author portrays a young eighteen years old boy who stops during his train journey, stops at a small station named Deoli and meets a beautiful basket seller girl and falls in love with her.

The protagonist used to travel from Delhi to Dehra Doon, his grandmother's place, during the summer vacation. During one such journey he happened to meet a young poor basket selling girl on the platform of Deoli where the train stopped for full ten minutes. He was so fascinated by the girl that he found himself buying a basket and paid her one rupee. After two months during his return journey they revived their old association and the young boy held her hand promised he would come back and meet her. The beauty and memory of the beautiful girl disturbed him all that year and with great hurry he left for Dehra and as the train stopped he stepped out of the train and searched for the girl on the platform, but to his dismay she was not there. Desperately, he tried to find out her whereabouts. The new station master did not know anything about her and the tea vendor could remember her but failed to tell anything about her. As the train moved he jumped in and left the station. His dream of meeting her and taking her with him to Delhi remain unfulfilled.

Ruskin Bond describes young boy's yearnings for a young and beautiful girl. He met her twice but could not muster enough courage to take her along with him. In this short story too there is no impressive dramatic twist towards the end; instead it ends with in a quiet fashion. He was young and his attraction was partly due to her physical beauty. His emotion was a mixture of love and responsibility for her. Taking her from Deoli was his dream which he could not translate into reality for want of courage. In fact he got two opportunities, lasting for a few minutes, to take her along with him, but on both the occasions he could not muster courage. Therefore, fear was also one of the reasons for his indecision. The reference to film is also highly suggestive. By this the writer means that such episodes look convincing only in films; in real life situation such things seldom happen.

"Somehow, I couldn't bring myself to bring journey at Deoli and spend a day there. (If it was all fiction or a film, I reflected, I would have got down and cleared up the mystery and reached a suitable ending for the whole thing.) I think I was afraid to do this. I was afraid of discovering what really happened to the girl." (Bond)

There is a parallel inducted in this short story in order to reinforce the idea of indecision. This is why in the earlier part of the story when the train stops at Deoli and the writer notes that no passenger gets in or gets off the train and there was no movement on the platform and it created the impression that Deoli was not a very big city and despite all this he felt great attraction and curiosity about the town that existed beyond the station walls. Out of sympathy for the people who live there cut off from the rest of the world, he determines that one day he would break his journey and spend a whole day amidst the simple people of Deoli. But after some time the bell rang, the whistle blew and the train moved out of the station and his plan remained unfulfilled. This is the first precursor of indecision and later it figures up as an integral part of the narrative. This indecision on the part of the writer is reinforced in the later part of the narrative when the writer met a very beautiful basket seller and made up his mind to take her along with him and probably marry her. In next April, he alighted from the train at Deoli and did not find the girl there. The dream was never translated into reality. The first reason for his indecision is his physical attraction towards the girl and after reaching Dehra his memory became blurred and his mind was occupied by many other things.

"But when I reached Dehra the incident became blurred and distant, for there were other things to occupy my mind. It was only when I was making the return journey, two months later, that I remembered the girl. (Bond)

During the second visit he sensed some sort of responsibility for the girl and thus the feeling of love gave birth to responsibility and care. He began to care for her and determined to converse with her and as he met her he held her hand and promised that he would come back. Thus hope played an important role in his indecision. Universalism is also a major theme in both the stories. Both the protagonists did not know the name, religion, creed, family background of the girls and despite this they love and pity them. The crux of the narrative is the relationship that transcends blood ties and religion. They are full of remorse for having failed to act.

Both are city bred educated people while the girls mentioned in these short stories are uneducated and rural. The cause of indecision has not been explicitly revealed. We can fairly conclude from their reflections at the moment of parting. There are vexed reasons. Reluctance to face the unknown is also the

pertinent reason of indecision. The young man in Ruskin Bond's short story admits the fact that he is not able to cross the station and see for himself what has happened to the girl. There are scattered yet crucial references which show that the protagonist lacked initiative, courage and confidence to execute the task.

'All right, give me one,' I said, and I took the one on top and gave her a rupee, hardly daring to touch her fingers." (Bond)

He seems to have inadequate information about the girl he has fallen in love with. The young man believes that with a brief acquaintance and interaction that lasted only for some minutes was not sufficient to take any final action. That he has very little information about the girl also contributes his indecision. When the train slowed down at Deoli, his anxiety was due to the fact that he was in confusion what would he do if she meets him again.

"What could I do about finding a girl I had seen only twice, who hardly spoken to me, and about whom I knew nothing – absolutely nothing – but for whom I felt a tenderness and responsibility that I had never felt before." (Bond)

Does the protagonist really intend to meet the girl? The genuineness of his desire is under a question mark. He is afraid of talking to her. Earlier, he admitted that while paying a coin he did not dare to touch her hand. He was very shy. A radical shift occurs after the first visit. Their relationship was marked by 'responsibility'. Probably this shift too, contributes to his indecisiveness.

"I was nervous and anxious as the train drew in to Deoli, because I was wondering what I should say to the girl, and what I should do; I was determined that I wouldn't stand helplessly before her, hardly able to speak or do anything about my feeling." (Bond)

The postmaster whose age is not explicitly stated by Tagore is a city dweller and miserably fails to adjust and adapt the rustic environment of Ulhapur. His desperation is caused by his being away from the Calcutta life. Thus this story is about city versus village. This further figures up as a major cause of his indecision when it comes to lift the orphan girl Ratan from the wretched life of the village. Similarly Ruskin Bond's young man too, drops the plan of meeting the girl due to this city aspect. He too, lived in Delhi and hence showed great hesitation in taking her along with him. He too had the impulse to break his journey and go into the village and find out the girl, but here too the whistle blew and the train began to move away from the station. Our subjection to mechanical necessities of life often come in the idealistic vision of life. The train in Bond's story and the boat in Tagore's story are symbols of these mechanical necessities that fetter human beings.

'As Deoli platform receded, I decided that one day I would have to break journey there, spend a day in the town, make enquiries, and find the girl who had stolen my heart with nothing but a look from her dark, impatient eyes.' (Bond)

His delay in taking her with him has a chain of reasons. She admitted that she was not going anywhere. That's why the young man thought that he could carefully chalk out the scheme of taking her out of Deoli sometimes in future and so there was no hurry at all. Secondly, only a ten minute halt once a year was not any way sufficient to reach any final decision.

'I have to go to Delhi,' I said.

She nodded, 'I do not have to go anywhere.' (Bond)

It looks that Bond's protagonist was not mentally fully prepared to meet the girl and take her along with him. He was not sure of his determination. He was uncertain of the consequence. He was probably more carried away with the beauty aspect than responsibility. Bond's protagonist was rather coward who dared not go into Deoli because he wanted to live in uncertainty and maintain the mystery. He preferred ignorance and he failed to face the reality. He wanted to end the story there. He admitted the fact that he passed through Deoli many times, but only hoped to see her on the platform, but never stepped down and searched her in the town. He likes to console himself with a hope. Both the protagonists undergo a process of catharsis by hoping and dreaming.

"In the last few years I have passed through Deoli many times, and I always look out of the carriage window, half expecting to see the same unchanged face smiling up at me. I wonder what happens in

Deoli, behind the station walls. But I will never break my journey there. I prefer to keep hoping and dreaming, and looking out of the window up and down that lonely platform, waiting for the girl with the baskets.”(Bond)

Conclusion

, both Tagore and Bond thematized indecision in these short stories. Tagore’s protagonist comes into action when time has passed. Ruskin Bond’s protagonist is sensitive to the plight of the young and beautiful teenager selling basket and it was her physical beauty that attracted the adolescent. Bond states that there are ideas that thrill us but not all of them are feasible and we cannot translate most of them into reality. A human being may have many wonderful ideas and plan but they often remain potentialities. Not all the potentialities come in to reality due to societal pressures.

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