

Treatment Of The Elderly In Ruskin Bond's Short Stories

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Abstract

It is a worldwide phenomenon that the older population has increased tremendously over the years as the life expectancy of individuals has improved as a result of great strides in health care. This has resulted in concerns and apprehensions about shifts in family values, relationships between the family members and financial adjustments. The younger generation is seen to be moving away from the traditional joint family due to several reasons, chiefly due to better educational and career opportunities. Although this has led to economic stability, it has several downsides too. The elderly, who are in need of emotional, financial and community support have been relegated to the side-lines, often neglected, and deprived of the warmth of human connection.

“As long as a man has ability to earn and save, so long are all his dependants attached to him. But when he becomes old and infirm, even his family does not care to even speak a word with him.” - Adi Shankaracharya

The celebrated author Ruskin Bond has addressed several social issues in his short stories such as loneliness in old age and the mental fragility of the aged. He is deeply conscious of the myriad problems that are at the core of the alienation felt by the people of an advanced age and his stories give the readers an empathetic rendering of the twilight years of their lives. In *The Kitemaker*, *The Prospect of Flowers*, *The Garlands on His Brow* and *The Cherry Tree*, Ruskin Bond has painted a vivid picture of the conditions in which older people find themselves and jolt the readers into realigning their values so that the elders can be find peace and contentment toward the end of their lives.

Introduction

The Prospect of Flowers, by Ruskin Bond, is the tale of Miss Mackenzie, an elderly single lady who lived alone in one of the picturesque hill stations of India. Among all the old and dilapidated buildings, her clean and well-maintained house stood out indicating that the owner is a stickler for discipline and orderliness. The writer states: But amongst these neglected mansions stands a neat, whitewashed cottage called Mulberry Lodge (55). Ruskin Bond stresses on this aspect again when he states: She was clean, sprightly, and wore old-fashioned but well-preserved dresses. Once a week, she walked the two miles to town to buy butter and jam and soap and sometimes a small bottle of eau de cologne (55). She had live in that hill-station all her life and was set in her ways. After India attained freedom when all her relatives had left for Britain she had decided to stay back. She subsisted on her meagre pension and the food parcels sent by a friend from New Zealand.

Ruskin Bond gives an indication of her solitary life by stating: Like other lonely old people, she kept a pet, a large black cat with bright yellow eyes. In her small garden she grew dahlias, chrysanthemums, gladioli and a few rare orchids (56.) As she had spent her entire life in the mountains she had gained a great deal of knowledge of the local flora and fauna of the region. She had few visitors (56) writes Ruskin Bond, and the only people who visited her were the padre from the church, the postman and the milkman. Into her lonely life Anil, a schoolboy comes in like a breath of fresh air, full of the enthusiasm of youth. They share a common interest of flowers and plants

and this delights Miss Mackenzie as she is passionate about her garden and also the wildflowers in the Himalayan region. They develop a sweet friendship and Ruskin Bond writes warmly: the old English lady and the small Indian boy sat side by side over cups of hot sweet tea, absorbed in a book of wild flowers (57).

Anil reminded Miss Mackenzie of her brother as a young boy and she felt an overwhelming sense of affection for him. Anil liked to visit her because there was a wonderful smell of baking at her house and she reminded him of his own grandmother, but underlying this was also the fact that a small boy can sense emotions far better than grown-ups. Anil intuitively sensed that the elderly lady was lonely. When it was time for him to return to his hometown, she gifts him her precious book of flowers.

The ensuing winter was cold, with rain sleet and snow. Miss Mackenzie stayed in bed because it was the warmest place in the house. She wrapped herself in her woollens and comforted herself with a hot water bottle and the cat for company. Ruskin Bond paints a vivid picture of how difficult it is for an old person to take care of himself as every aspect of everyday life becomes a torture. Poor Miss Mackenzie has to stay in her damp bed as her hot water bottle bursts causing her to fall ill. She has no one to help her and dies uncared for. Ruskin Bond creates an awareness of the hardships faced by the elderly who are left to fend for themselves. Miss Mackenzie's love for the place of her birth made her stay on in India long after all her relatives had left, but as the years progressed she became weaker and lonelier. With no one to care for her or keep a track of her daily well-being she died a lonely death. The writer has given his readers food for thought, forcing them to consider extending basic compassion toward the elderly. Society worldwide is focussed on applauding the achievers while not sparing a thought for the very people who were responsible for raising them to great heights.

The Garlands on his Brow is the short story of a renowned wrestler named Hasan, who was reduced to begging in his old age. At the height of his popularity, he was considered the undisputed hero of Dehradun and was the best wrestler of the town as he had defeated all the others. People used to flock to the grounds to watch the wrestling matches. Due to his skills, he was employed by a local Maharani and enjoyed many favours in her household, but after her death he falls on bad times. Wrestling was no longer an attractive sport due to the changing times and he finds no employment and has no other option but to become a beggar. It is then that the author recognises him as the hero of his youth. Ruskin Bond is full of sorrow at the fate of a once strong and proud man. At the end of the story the wrestler is found dead on the streets with no one to claim his dead body. Ruskin Bond refrains from identifying the body as a mark of respect to the departed soul, as he did not want people to scorn a once important personality. The writer has brought into focus the vulnerability of human beings and the ultimate reality which is the fate of all life on earth. Whether it be a king or a pauper old age is a lonely phase of life and it becomes all the more pathetic when there is no support from loved ones. Ruskin Bond has depicted how society has no time for the aged and the infirm, for people past their glory and for people who can no longer be financially independent. Through his stories he has tried to create an awareness in older people too, that they have to make adequate provision for their old age when money can make the trauma of old age a little more bearable.

The Kitemaker is the story of Mahmood who was an expert kitemaker in his younger days. Those were the days when kite flying was a respectable sport for grown-ups and Mahmood as an expert kitemaker had made special kites for the Nawab. When the Nawab passed away his descendants could not sustain the luxury of kite flying and patronize Mahmood. Though he stayed with his son and his family he was lonely. When he was young and had been unwell, people had anxiously enquired about his health, but now that he was older he was neglected as the younger generation was too busy in their own world. His old set of friends were no more and one of his sons had stayed on in Pakistan after the partition of India. The children he had made kites for had grown up and were struggling to make ends meet and did not have time to waste on the old kitemaker. Fortunately he had the company of his grandson, with whom he shared a close affinity and made kites for. He passed his time sitting under a tree and dreaming of the good old days. Ruskin Bond has captured the quintessential loneliness at the deepest level of the elderly who feel a loss of dignity when their livelihood is redundant. Professions like making kites and wrestling do not generate enough money to cope in the present materialistic society and the youth is moving into urban spaces to earn their living. The elderly are left to fend for themselves, and even if they have family who support them they feel a huge emotional void in their lives. Ruskin Bond has brought out this aspect of the evening years in his stories time and again and given his readers the opportunity to ponder on this malaise in society.

In stark contrast to the three stories taken up earlier, *The Cherry Tree* highlights the wisdom and experience of the elderly and the impact it can have on young minds. A young boy, Rakesh, comes to stay with his grandfather during the holidays. Both Rakesh and his grandfather have a deep and abiding love for each other. One day when Rakesh comes home with a few cherries, his grandfather encourages him to plant the seed. He suggests the best place to plant it where it can achieve its maximum growth. Subtly and kindly he teaches Rakesh the basics of gardening and the art of nurturing. Ruskin Bond is hinting that practical life lessons are far more valuable than sitting stiffly in a classroom and learning by rote with the aim of clearing the examinations.

Over the ensuing months Rakesh learns how to care for the small cherry tree. He encounters many pitfalls along the way, such as it being carelessly chopped down by the woman cutting the grass, and being partially eaten by a wayward goat. But the cherry tree had no intention of dying and continued to grow and blossom into a healthy tree in spite of the many drawbacks it had suffered. When Rakesh observed the many setbacks the cherry tree had endured, he felt despondent and ready to give up. But his grandfather continued to reassure him that these were only minor troubles which they had to overlook and not give up on the tree. Rakesh not only understands that he has to care for the tree under all circumstances, but also grasps the fact that the same principle applies in a person's life also. The reader is given a message that perseverance is the key to success and that one should not be disheartened by minor inconveniences.

As the tree grows so does Rakesh. One day both Rakesh and his grandfather are lying in the shade of the leaves of the cherry tree. Rakesh quizzes his grandfather why they find that particular tree so special, when there are so many other trees in the forest. Grandfather wisely answers that they have an attachment and affinity for that tree because they were responsible for planting it and taking care of it. The readers are presented with the astute wisdom of the elderly grandfather who takes up the analogy of the tree to highlight that the same is applicable to human beings also, as they are able to become the best version of themselves with care and encouragement. Through the character of the elderly grandfather, Ruskin Bond also conveys the value of respecting the Supreme power who has given life to all beings. When human beings are able to create and nurture they get an inkling of the value of preserving the riches which are bestowed on the planet.

In this story Ruskin Bond has depicted the rich life experiences of the elderly and how it can be passed on to the next generation. In a world where the elderly are often neglected and side-lined, it is crucial to note that they have much to contribute to the world if they are given a chance. The youth are generally in a hurry to get on in the world, but their lives can be enriched by being compassionate towards the elderly who have cheerfully done their duty in enhancing the lives of their children.

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