

**A Bent- Double Beggar: A Study of Narrative Technique in the
Short Story of Ruskin Bond**

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According to Percy Lubbock, the craft of fiction is the most important and intricate part of writing. The short stories of O'Henry, Guy de Maupassant, Edgar Allan Poe, and our own Ruskin Bond are so popular and intriguing because of their artistic value. This research paper attempts to critically analyze the narrative techniques used in one of the stories of Ruskin Bond titled The "Bent-Double Beggar" taken from the book *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*, for which Bond received the prestigious Sahitya Academy Award in 1992.

Key Words- narrative, focalization, diegetic, mimetic.

The versatility of Ruskin Bond as a short story writer takes full swing in his nature stories, where his stories are not just about the background of nature but deal with nature as a power that influences our mind and soul. This influence is rather of the sort of Wordsworthian philosophy of nature. To be precise, Bond has a deep insight which lies at the very core of nature.

Bond has always shown in his stories that nothing is common or ugly in nature. To him there is always an essence hidden in every part of it, but a microscopic view is required to find such meanings. Bond always had a craving for the beauty of nature since his childhood. Most of the writers have presented external beauty of nature, whereas Bond

emphasizes upon the influences and relations between nature and man. So it is nature which makes Bond to pen down something on paper. Of this influence of nature Bond says, “I doubt if I have ever written a story or essay or work-a-day article unless I have really wanted to write” (Agarwal 43).

When Ruskin Bond became a mature writer, the conception of man and nature had taken a paradigm shift in his tales. His stories became more appealing, more refined with their meanings and also artistically accomplished. Bond writes to ease his soul, and writing for him means an interaction with the world. He is a careful craftsman of stories which arguably make him one of India’s most loved and enjoyed short story teller of all times. He is simple but at the same time very precise to put and carry forward his emotions and ideas through his narration.

The art of narrating a story is determined by the experience and the quality of vision, with which the author seeks to convey the story through the interaction of character and plot. Works by eminent writers like Ruskin Bond, O’ Henry, Guy de Maupassant, Edgar Allan Poe etc. in the genre of short stories resemble to the very fact that there is an artistic value of such creativity.

Thus, the art of narration becomes more important than what the actual story is all about. And in the related process, the short story is the best applied form in the field of literature. As Percy Lubbock has rightly observed that, “.. it is the craft of fiction which is the most intricate and essential part of writing”. (*The Craft of Fiction* , cited in, *The Fictional World of Ruskin Bond* 142).

This research paper attempts to critically analyse the narrative techniques used in the story “The Bent -Double Beggar”. The story is taken from the book *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*, which is a collection of nature stories by Ruskin Bond. This critically acclaimed work won the prestigious Sahitya Akademi Award in 1992.

The six narrative techniques to be traced out in the same story are:

1. Mode of telling.
2. Focalization.

3. Narrator.
4. Handling of time.
5. Thoughts and speech of the story.
6. Framing of the story.

The story starts in a diegetic mode which is intended by the writer to give an artistic flow to the tale. Since an entirely mimetic story tends to be very long, the use of diegetic mode becomes essential. As the story begins in a diegetic mode: “The person I encounter most often on the road is old Ganpat, the bent-double beggar”. (Bond 17), we are being told about the subject of the story by the narrator and this sets the stage for further incidents.

Then the story takes a mimetic mode which deal with the events which take place in the present scenario of the story.

“Look, Ganpat,” I said one day, “I’ve heard a lot of stories about you, and I don’t know which is true. How did you become a beggar? How did you get your crooked back?” (Bond 17).

A story usually requires a blending of both the mimetic and diegetic as there are events which require distance between the narrator and the story. Bond uses this distance very carefully as the story starts on the diegetic mode when the narrator summarizes his views, and then the mimetic mode becomes operational where the present action of the story begins and goes on. This diegetic opening of the story determines the precision in the narrative and the accuracy of the information conveyed.

This precision fixes the scope of the story in terms of motive and character description. It gives an orientation to the readers and arouses their curiosity in the story. Therefore, it acts as a radar which establishes the boundary and also the connection with the readers.

The ‘Focalisation’, changes twice in the process. In the beginning CN (Character bound narrator) is the focaliser who puts forward his views about the beggar. This narrator provides motivation for the act of looking and arousing curiosity among the readers. The motivation is through descriptions which appeal to the senses required in the perception of

the object/objects. This insertion of the descriptive narration leading to motivation is an important function of focalization. The preparation of the readers' heightened sense of suspense as well as interest, the anticipation of what is going to come next, depends very much upon the intensity of the focalizer's perception of the object and the surroundings, and the way he can convey it or narrate it effectively. The character bound narrator does this in a very effective way by focalizing upon certain facts about the bent-double beggar in a digetic mode, and at once motivates the readers to move with him further. He prepares the readers by describing some very unusual characteristics about the beggar. He writes: "It is difficult to resist Ganpat because, though bent double, he is very dignified. He has a long beard, white beard and a commanding eye. His voice is powerful and carries well; which is probably why people say he was once an actor" (17).

He further arouses the curiosity of the readers by creating suspicion about the object he is focusing upon. The readers are compelled to go along with the narrator till last to clear their doubts and quench their curiosity. He comments about the bent-double beggar's life: "People say many things about him. One rumour has it that he was once a well-to-do lawyer with a European wife: a paralytic stroke put an end to his career, and his wife finally left him. I have also been told that he is CID man in disguise—a rumour that might well have been started by Ganpat himself" (17).

The narrator himself is very curious to know about the true story and instills the same in the readers. He knew that the beggar was not so by his own choice, that something led to this condition, for he was a very strange kind of a beggar: "...he had little in common with the other members of his profession. His English was good, and he could recite passages from Shakespeare; his Hindi was excellent. He never made a direct request for money, but would enter into conversation with you, and remark on the weather or the innate meanness of the human race, until you slipped him a coin" (17).

And then, there is a change in focalization suggesting that now the point of view has been that of Ganpat. The beggar says "In those days I was a healthy young man, with a wife and baby daughter" (18).

Here, Ganpat begins with his tale of how he got his bent- back and with that the point of view in the story also shifts from the narrator to the beggar. The completion of Ganpat's tale brings about a change for the second time, in the focalization. As he concludes his story "I left my village and wandered from one city to another, begging for a living. That is how I came here. People in this town seems to be more generous than elsewhere" (20).

And with that note by the beggar, the narrator who was the one to begin the story, becomes the focaliser of the tale once again. Narrator states "He looked at me with his most appealing style, waiting for the promised rupee. You can't expect me to believe that story" I said, "But for your powers of invention you deserve a rupee" (20).

The narrator subtly performs the dual role. At first he is the narrator and the actor and then skillfully drifts into oblivion just as a normal reader. He becomes an impartial observer acting as an instrument to move the story and intentionally comes back again in the scene to create an uncertain probity of the whole story in the minds of the readers.

The shift in the point of view in the story is extremely flexible and covers a broad change from truth to lies. Bond has left the readers with their own views about the beggar's story. Thus, there is an ambiguity created by the CN to enhance the participation of the readers in the story. It is the readers who judge the veracity of the narration according to what they experience of it.

A focaliser prepares the reader for a situation involving both logical and psychological aspects. Motivation thus, becomes a key function of the focalizing agent. The agent is the narrator himself but the point of focus in the story always remains with the object i.e. the beggar evoking the reaction of the readers about the encounter of the CN with the object (beggar). "The intensification of the focaliser's perception together with the narrative expression of the moment prepares the reader for a heightened sense of suspense, giving anticipatory importance to what will come" (Bal 39).

A first- person participatory narration is observed throughout the story. The only thing that changes in the process is the person himself. It starts with the first- person singular

pronoun 'I' by the narrator, in the middle by the beggar telling his tale, and ends with the narrator himself using the same. A first-person narration draws the reader's attention to the narrator. The reader has the sensation of being spoken to by a person who is telling of his own experiences. And on top of that the authenticity of the events become even more credible.

As far as the handling of time is concerned, it has two aspects, i.e, Analeptic and Proleptic, resembling the *flashback* and *flash-forward* of the events in the tale respectively. The story has only an analeptic turn which is going back to the past, as we come across the events of Ganpat's life. Ganpat recalls that, one night when he passed a Peepul tree, he met Bippin, the ghost. Bippin leapt out of the tree and stood in the middle of the road, bringing Ganpat's bullocks to a halt. Ganpat now in fear said that he was a poor man, with a wife and child to support. Bippin replied by saying that, he could make him rich, but he would have to promise him something. The deal they both entered into was that, now Bippin would stay at his home, without letting anyone know except Ganpat. As they had the conversation "then drive on" cried Bippin. "I am coming home with you". "And I drove back to the village with Bippin sitting beside me" (19).

The chronological sequence of events in the story has been deliberately shuffled to make it more engaging. The story is artistically plotted to first involve the reader in the present time and then move back and forth according to the narration.

When we come to the 'thoughts and speech' employed in the process of telling, the first is the *direct and selectively tagged speech*. "I am a poor man, with a wife and child to support. You have no business being poor", *said Bippin angrily.*" (18). The narrator is intellectually precise in the mode of telling, allowing the involvement of the readers to get familiar with the events of the story.

And the second kind of speech traced in the tale, is the *direct and tagged form of representation*, used as follow "That's a very long story," *he said*, flattered by my interest on him. He had served his purpose in whetting my appetite. *I said,* "it will be worth a rupee if

you tell your story”(18). Bond takes the readers into confidence developing trust and understanding, so that they can move along with the narrator.

Referring to the packaging of the story, we see two stories, one that of narrator’s conversation with the beggar and the other that of the beggar’s own life. This is called the story within story, embedded work of narrative. Embedded narrative act as a link that connects to the main story and also to many other stories at times. It completes the story with an elaborate fabula making the readers forget the primary narrative. An embedded fabula performs the functions of exposition, description and answering of the primary text. Bond presents this by leading his first story to the second one and also establishes a connection between the two tales. In the embedded text we get the answers to the questions that were raised in the primary narrative like who is the beggar? What had happened to him? And the most important of all, why and how did he get his bent back? The resulting effect is that this creative skill allows the reader to interpret the narrative in his own way, not as intended by Bond. Furthermore, there is also a double-ended narration, which means the story should end on its primary narrative, which is the first narrative that occurs in the tale. And this very process of ending is justified at the end, as the story ends with the narrator’s voice from where it had started.

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