

## MONEY MATTERS: ECONOMIC CONCERNS IN RUSKIN BOND'S DELHI IS NOT FAR

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### **Abstract**

*Ruskin Bond is one of the most popular literary figures in Indo-Anglian literature. His novella Delhi Is Not Far is a skillful weaving of myriad lives together and is settled in town of Pipalnar. The story revolves around Arun, an aspiring writer who dreams to find better prospects in Delhi. The story also narrates how Arun, who is adrift as a logwood without family, establishes an unusual bond of love with Suraj and Kamla. The unemployment of educated youth that is engulfing India has been evoked as a key issue in the novella. The transactions, circulations and scarcity of money play a significant role in the narrative. The text can therefore be reinterpreted on the basis of economical lines. The paper tries to analyse the role of money in the fiction.*

**Keywords:** *Commodity, Economy, Money, Power, Town, Unemployment.*

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Ruskin Bond's fictions are master strokes of a literary genius, whose pen had deftly portrayed India in enchanting hues. His fictions are remarkable for their vibrant hues of nostalgia, lucid vocabulary and narrative style. His novella *Delhi Is Not Far* first appeared in 1994, captures a slice of the life of Arun, an aspiring writer who wishes to escape to Delhi in search of better prospects. Living in the dusty underdeveloped corners of the fictional town, Pipalnar, only few like Arun dreamt of moving to Delhi, others seemed sluggish even to dream bigger. "In Pipalnar there is no exactly despair, but resignation, an indifference to both living and dying" (17). But, Arun was different; he fervently desired to move out of Pipalnar which was accentuated by his need to find better treatment for Suraj's epilepsy.

The novella tries to highlight the unusual bond that connects him with Suraj and Kamala. The 'plot less' novella doesn't affects the readers with extra ordinary events, emotional outburst or thrilling climaxes. Rather it maintains the subtler momentum of everyday life in a small town and narrates the ordinary life of its denizens. A re-reading of the novella may also provide certain glimpses about the significance of money in shaping lives at Pipalnar. The paper tries to reinterpret the novel on economic lines.

The novella begins by detailing about the nuances of the infrastructure where Arun lives. The description of the rented cramped and dingy cellar of Arun, which doesn't even have the luxury of wide open windows, conveys the poor economic condition of Arun. His preferring of balcony rather than the small grilled windows in his room suggests Arun's penchant to look beyond the present stagnant conditions. This metaphorically indicates Arun's existence as a writer and his ability to dream- far beyond the boundaries of the small town. The author also details about the rising unemployment among the educated folk in India. In his 'Introduction' to the novella, Ruskin Bond comments: "The opportunities are limited, even in high-tech India. We hear a lot about the information technology boom, but this has yet to filter down to small-town India, where thousands of youngsters pour out of schools and colleges nowhere to go and nothing to do" (x). The author may have been propelled by the social context of India, where youths are crowned with many degrees but remains jobless. Ruskin Bond, in his 'Introduction' to the novel, reminds the readers about the dismal plight of the unemployed youth in India.

Arun's use of writing skills as a means of livelihood rather than an emotional need also underscores how creativity turns into a fetish in a world, where money is a much needed factor even to spent half a day. "... articles of utility become commodities, only because they are products of the labor of private individuals or groups of individuals who carry on their work

independently of each other” (Marx 668). Arun who is a struggling writer of detective novels in Urdu, details the condition in which he had to market his creativity for livelihood: My publisher, who operates from a Meerut by-lane, paid me two hundred rupees for each book; a flat and final payment, no royalties. I could not get better terms from any other publisher. It is a good country for publishers but not for writers... ‘If you want to make money, Arun,’ he confided in me when he handed me my last cheque, ‘publish your own books. Not detective stories. They have a limited market. (Bond 3)

The publisher advises him to write academic books that will help students to crack tough competitive examinations. This highlights another issue of ‘academic fever’ where lakhs of students are in a mad rat race to seize prestigious seats for various courses. Even when many get defeated in the process, the mission continues. Surplus of courses are available and such degrees are luring the students with the prospects of a prestigious career and hence more money. But even in the presence of such huge variety of degrees, unemployment among the youth remains as a major issue in India. Arun can also be considered as such a victim. His imagination and writing skills could neither fetch him money nor fame. The publisher asks him to cease his creative pursuits in fiction writing and to concentrate on the academic books demanded by the market, which according to the publisher will “sell like hot cakes” (Bond 3) and Arun couldn’t accept this idea of money-making.

But he has tried his hand in many other jobs for livelihood from starting a vegetable shop to even pick pocketing. “My efforts at making fortune were many and varied. I had, for three days, kept a vegetable stall; invested in an imaginary tea-shop; and even tried my hand as a palmist” (Bond 12)195 But all these ventures failed miserably. He struggled to meet both ends and even for paying the room rents. His much desired journey to Delhi also needed money which he and Suraj struggled to accrue. “We decided to save a little money, from his small earnings and from my occasional erratic payments which came by money order. I would need money for my trip to Delhi; sometimes there are medicines...We managed to put away twenty rupees one week, but withdraw it the next...” (Bond 45).

Even in such conditions, small amounts were lent to acquaintances who are in need. This indicates the intimate bonds that exist between people of small towns or villages. Such small borrowings save them from paying interest to money lenders and from falling into the trap of huge debts. Even beggars find Arun as a friendly person who will provide them with one Anna or two in case of need. It is clear from the narration that Arun is not that much focused about repayment but most of them who borrows as money as debt used to repay him when they have enough money in their pockets. Here, who lends money is not a power wielding figure and money doesn’t exist as a means to profit the lender and to burden the borrower. But it exists as a medium of transaction to help those who are in need. May be it is this serenity and tranquility of Piplanagar that have inspired Arun as depicted in the last episodes of the novel. The salary offered to him at Delhi and his letter to Suraj shows his optimism of a better future. But Ruskin Bond in his ‘Introduction’ of the novel writes: “I wrote this novella back in the 1960s, when I left Dehra Dun for New Delhi. I thought I would find fame and fortune in the capital; I found nothing of the sorts” (ix). This made him return back to the hills in the 1960s. Arun, the narrator and a writer can possibly be a reflection of the author himself and Delhi may not adorn him with fame or fortune. But still there is a glimmer of hope, that he will also be adorned with laurels in the future and will become an acclaimed writer like Ruskin Bond.

The stationary economic condition of Piplanagar is deftly sketched in the novel. The beggars roaming in the streets and petty thieves who try to plunder the little riches also provide evidence for this. All these have been continuing at Piplanagar for years. The episode of beggars’ strike to withdraw the tax imposed on begging can be considered as a figment of Bond’s exaggerated imagination, but it is almost impossible to consider the event as completely fictitious also. The

tax was a sort of power exerted by the Government to increase their income. It was a sort of power strategy implemented by the government to extract what is left in the begging vessels of these beggars. But their massive protest even in the absence of a systematic leadership extirpated the law.

He paints the diverse faces of begging. For boys, it was a hobby. But there are professionals whose life is centered on this vocation. "The professionals are usually crippled and maimed in one way or another-many of them have maimed themselves...A few cases are genuine, and those are not so loud in their demands of charity, with the result that they don't make much" (Bond 42). He pen pictures the beggars who tries to earn for a living and the lepers who comes to the town once in a week to beg. He also hints that begging is becoming a flourishing business at Pipalnagar. "It was rumoured that one beggar, after spending the day on the pavement calling for alms would have a taxi drawn up beside him in the evening , and would have a taxi drawn up beside him in the evening, and would be driven off to his residence outside town" (Bond 42). The beggar's episode narrates about how charity in the shape of money is elicited by the employment of sympathy or fear and many a times these take up the form of a power structure by which the pedestrians or householders are indirectly cajoled in such a way that they couldn't resist themselves from becoming charitable. Money provided in the form of charity is therefore no more a benevolent deed. It is part of a much larger project of extracting money by certain manipulations. Those beggars who don't resort to such methods end up as poor. May be some of these instances are exaggerated but the realistic elements added in it far more outgrows the fictitious parts. Arun says about his personal affiliations with some of his beggar friends: But my own personal beggars, old Ganpat Ram and the boys, don't take advantage of their growing power; they treat me with due respect and affection; they do not consider me just another member of the public, who has to be blackmailed into charity, but look upon me as a friend who can be counted upon to make them a small loan from time to time, without expecting any immediate return. (Bond 43)

Pipalnagar also was a home of many abandoned people and orphans. Suraj who is epileptic but studious is an orphan who had no money to pay for treating his illness. He sold miscellaneous items to earn money for his livelihood. Kamla, another major character of the novel is a mistress of a feudal lord. She is young but bold enough to scrape the ego of the customers who are visiting her. Kamala was being forced into sex work by her husband, for more income. According to Irigaray, "*As commodities, women are thus two things at once: utilitarian objects and bearers of value*" (802). Kamala's marriage with a much older man, her husband was also a monetary affair. After marriage he tried to convert her into a commodity by initiating her into prostitution. His husband had made her a deal, where he purchased Kamala from her father for some acres of land and was reselling her to other men to fill his pocket. "...the exchange takes place between masculine subjects, and it requires a *plus-value* added to the body of the commodity, a supplement which gives it a valuable form. That supplement will be found, Marx writes, in another commodity, whose use value becomes, from that point on, a standard of value..." (Irigaray 803). Arun on her introduction about Kamla says that she is young but is skilled in love making than any other women in the town, which indirectly implies her use value to her husband. Irigaray also points out that in the case of a prostitute, "the qualities of woman's body are "useful." However, these qualities have "value" only because they have already been appropriated by a man, and because they serve as the locus of relations - hidden ones -between men" (808). Thus she like many other women is a product of a patriarchal society, that craves to assert their power over land and women. But even if Kamala is trapped in this vicious circle of society and her husband; she with her acrid tongue and sarcasm lashes vehemently and boldly at the male ego.

Some of the denizens of Pipalnagar, other than Arun dreams about gaining better prospects at Delhi. "Pitamber and Deep Chand and Ramu and Aziz all had plans for visiting Delhi. Only Kamla

could not foresee such a move for herself” (Bond 45). Arun instills such a hope in the mind of Suraj also. Even though Arun and Suraj could make it to Delhi; most of them are tied down in Pipalnaragar.

Thus, the novella paints a stark picture of the economic conditions in the remote hamlets or towns of India. Everything from creativity to goods to body is being sold for livelihood. There are no big desires to amass a lot of wealth. In fact people in Pipalnaragar even dare to dream big. Except for the feudal lords, majority of the people are engaged in small activities to eke out money for sustenance. Arun’s dream also gives hints about the rising urbanization prevailing in India, where people from towns and villages migrate to big cities in the hope of a better future. Whether these people fulfill their prospects or whether it gets punstured is uncertain. Many who had moved out of such towns may have returned back dejected and defeated; some may have found little dingy spaces to work hard without earning much and there will be a small fortunate proportion of people who have got all their dreams blossomed into inflorescence. There are no suggestions to which of these slots, Arun and Suraj fit in.

Thus, the economic conditions prevailing in Pipalnaragar can be easily traced from the novella. He also adeptly frames the changing countenance of Delhi with an economy of words. He also gives a glimpse of the nook and corners of Delhi, its markets, cultural interactions and his detached tone vaguely conveys the message that Delhi is still far for people from small villages or towns eventhough the title suggests otherwise. May be the title displays the glimmering hope or enthusiasm to fulfill the dreams. More than conveying an emotionally filled plot, the author frames an exquisite story out of ordinary people and ordinary circumstances, whose prototypes can be still traced in India’s towns or hamlets. When economical changes make massive shifts and drifts in the world market and in the Indian nation, where large sums of money always associate with debts, corruption or the income of celebrated personalities, there are still people in such places, who unaware of any of these changes, desire to have a little bit of it just to sustain their daily life. They don’t dream of being a billionaire, but hopes to save a little money for livelihood. Money is thus depicted in all variegated forms; it is the helping hand, the means of transactions, the way to fulfill dreams, hope of change, sign of benevolence or charity (whether forced or not) and a significant weapon to wield power.

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