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The Key Elements Of Humour In Select Autobiographical Essays Of Ruskin Bond

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Abstract : Authors use humour as a tool in their works to create amusement, laughter, and to break the monotony or boredom. To use this tool the authors either use isolated words or complete sentences. This is done to make the text more enjoyable to read. Humour is one of the most important tools that interests the readers and helps them to comprehend and connect with the text. Since the main purpose is to entertain the readers, the authors would sometimes coin new words. Ruskin Bond is a pioneer of children's literature in India. He is a versatile author because he has written in different genres. Nature has been the important theme in most of his works. The other theme that is found more often in his works is humour. He has used most of the humour elements in his autobiographical essays, written especially for children. This research expounds on Ruskin Bond's usage of different elements of humour taken from select works of his autobiographical essays, which can be compared to some of the humour elements found in the essays of G.K. Chesterton.

Key words: Ruskin Bond, Humour elements, Humour, Autobiographical Essays.

I. INTRODUCTION

Authors use humour as a tool in their works to create amusement, laughter, and to break monotony or boredom. To use this tool the authors either choose isolated words or complete sentences. This is done to make the text look more enjoyable to read. Humour is one of the most important tools that interests the readers and helps them to comprehend and connect with the text. Since the main purpose is to entertain the readers, the authors would sometimes coin new words. There are seven major elements of humour commonly found in literary texts - they are: satire, irony, incongruity, self-deprecation, hyperbole, situational, and understatement.

Satire is commonly found in texts that criticize someone or a particular issue. The best example is Chaucer's "*General Prologue to the Canterbury Tales*", which is also considered as the first satirical work written in English Literature. Irony is used when the author is trying to convey something through a hidden meaning that is a serious or a painful truth, said in an indirect way. Authors use irony as a deliberate inclusion to say a contradictory note between what the appearance and the reality is. Shakespeare's "*Othello*" can be considered as a best example of the early period. Othello does not know Iago's true nature; he calls Iago as 'honest Iago'. It was in 1725, the first modern thinker Francis Hutcheson introduced the term 'incongruity' in his work, "*Thoughts on Laughter*". When the term was introduced, incongruity meant only as a 'clash between two opposing ideas'. Today, incongruity is that which deals with something that is found silly in a given situation in a text. Self-deprecation is a humour that targets oneself to entertain people only to bring laughter. This is used against self-pity and the author amuses his or her readers stressing on his own follies than to create a situation to laugh at others. Situational humour is used in a situation especially when tension prevails in the particular setting. There

are three important elements that make the situation humour, they are events, characters and environment. It is only when all the three unite the situational humour finds its effect in the text and thereby the readers are entertained. Hyperbole is to convey ones' thoughts through an exaggerated manner only for the purpose of entertainment. This was commonly found in the plays of Marlowe and Shakespeare in the early period of literature. Understatement is a kind of humour that is contrary to hyperbole. It is used only to make a good or a bad situation turn to be nothing at all, which is something that could be less valuable or smaller in terms of nature or quality.

In this article the researcher mainly focuses on the different kinds of humour that is brought out in the select works of Ruskin Bond. He is one of the famous writers of India and is considered as the pioneer of children's literature in English. Apart from children's writing he has also contributed mainly on nature writing. He is most often called as the Indian Wordsworth because of his love for nature. Ruskin Bond is a versatile writer as he has tried his hand on different genres of literature. In his writings one would find humour as one of the most important tools used in an interesting manner, be it fiction or non-fiction. This article deals with his select autobiographical essays which bring in different types of humour in varied situations, while some of which can be compared to the humour elements found in G. K. Chesterton's essays.

II. SATIRE

Ruskin Bond in his essay, "On the loss of Solitude and my Pyjamas", states it is bliss to spend time in solitude. He shares that he would like to admire the mountains from his small room through the open window. However, he is left in a state of confusion because of a particular monkey that has been giving him trouble for over a period of time. He mentions the disadvantage of keeping the windows open because of this particular monkey that keeps giving a speculative glance at his window only to come in when unnoticed to take away his pyjamas.

First, the author is puzzled about its gender and has no clue why it showed its fondness in carrying away his bright and colourful looking pyjamas. When stating about the monkey he uses this metaphorical term "Freudian simian obsession" (p.3), a term that is used to bring humour in telling about the behaviour of the monkey. In this context the interest that the monkey shows is a kind of obsession in taking away his bright coloured pyjamas. He feels sad that his pyjamas go missing even if he had kept his windows open for about half a minute. "I have only to leave the window open for half a minute, and away goes my pyjama, over the trees and far away." (p.3).

Ruskin Bond shows the tactics that the monkey had in collecting the pyjamas without his knowledge. The author is curious to find out where the monkey carried his pyjamas to. However, the author could only make guesses saying that a whole tribe of those monkeys must be in a part of a forest, wearing the author's many coloured pyjamas and rejoicing and feeling proud of themselves to have taken those from him. This kind of humour brings in surprise for the readers for nobody would have expected such a twist like the author has mentioned about the tribe of rhesus monkeys.

"There must be a part of the forest where a whole tribe of rhesus monkeys is prancing around in my many coloured pyjamas. They are probably having their own fashion show." (p.4) Here the author tries to bring the interest that people have for fashion shows and that is what is seen in the rhesus monkey as well. It is a satire, to bring out the pleasure that people seek in the modern world which is reflected in the nature of those monkeys that tend to behave like humans. In the last line the author also brings out the mockery to say how these rhesus monkeys show some kind of human behaviour and thus says that even rhesus monkeys would show great interest in being trendy and holding a fashion show among them in that forest wearing the colourful pyjamas of the author.

Just as how Ruskin Bond comments on the fashion and trend, so does G.K. Chesterton in his essay, "On Running after One's Hat", mentions about how a new sport that could be introduced. Chesterton, states that when people run faster in games and sports, they do not show the same interest to pick up their hats when they fly off, for they only feel humiliated to run after the hat. The author is surprised at seeing the same people run after a leather ball or even a nice silk hat. This allows G.K. Chesterton to think that in the future on a windy day, the upper classes could spend time sporting on running behind a hat which would become a fashion:

In fact, I am inclined to believe that hat-hunting on windy days will be the sport of the upper classes in the future. There will be a meet of ladies and gentlemen on some high ground on a gusty morning. They will be told that the professional attendants have started a hat in such-and-such a thicket, or whatever be the technical term. (43)

Ruskin Bond's imagination of the rhesus monkeys and C.K. Chesterton's creativity on a new sport of running after one's hat are best examples of satirical humour. In both these essays, the authors have used the indirect satire, "... in which the objects of the satire are characters who make themselves and their opinions ridiculous or obnoxious by what they think, say, and do, and are sometimes made even more ridiculous by the author's comments and narrative style." (M.H. Abrams 277).

III.IRONY

In the essay "Running for Cover", Ruskin Bond shares his experience about a woman who was determined to see him regarding her book, even when he tried to avoid telling her that he was ill because of bird flu, she made it a point to meet him to discuss something important.

The reason why the lady visited the author is the irony that the author brings in here. He says that she had gone to visit him asking if he could recommend her name for Booker Prize. When Ruskin Bond replies her that people never knew him in England, then without being hesitant she asked if he could recommend her name for Noble Prize. As an author Ruskin Bond must have had the shock when someone asks such a favour, and he must have also felt sorry for the woman who had been naïve to ask him to recommend her name for one of the two prestigious literary awards. Ruskin Bond brings in this incident only to say that people are crazy to think that it is a cakewalk to get such a prestigious award. This further shows how people are ignorant and do not understand the value of such awards.

When Ruskin Bond asked the lady for the book to read, she replied, "I haven't written it yet." (p. 6). The author gives her a sarcastic comment that he would read her book when she had completed it. Further he states that writing should not be done in a hurry and it would at least take two years to complete.

The author agonizes on the ignorance of some people who think it is easy to write a book and win prestigious awards. The lady's words were only contradictory for she was so sure that she would be recommended for one of the prestigious awards for her book, when she had not even written the book. Ruskin Bond only feels sorry for people like this lady and thus conveys that it is an irony that people are still unaware of what it is to write a book or what it is even to be chosen to be awarded on writing a good book.

In the essay "On Running after One's Hat", G.K. Chesterton comments on the flooded roads of Battersea. He describes that as one of the most beautiful localities where people lived. Added to that, the flooded streets have made it look more interesting like the vision of Venice as the butcher and the greengrocer used the gondolas to sell. When a place is flooded, people find it inconvenient more than admiring such a sight, because their routine gets spoiled. But the author here says that it is a beautiful sight to see the place, only with the intention to state how they did not have the facilities to cope with heavy rains and thus the place was flooded. G.K. Chesterton only points out this situation in an ironical manner:

Battersea was already, as I need hardly say, the most beautiful of human localities. Now that it has the additional splendour of great sheets of water, there must be something quite incomparable in the landscape (or waterscape) of my romantic town. Battersea must be a vision of Venice. The boat that brought the meat from the butcher's must have shot along those lanes of rippling silver with the strange smoothness of the gondola. The greengrocer who brought cabbages to the corner of the Latchmere Road must have leant upon the oar with the unearthly grace of the gondolier. (p.41)

Ruskin Bond and G.K. Chesterton looks at the different situations in an ironically humorous manner, in their essays amusing the readers with their wit and thought provoking on such issues.

IV. INCONGRUITY

The author quotes another incident from the essay, “Running for Cover”, that brings out yet another element of humour. Ruskin Bond says how he has been mistaken for other people and how he has taken the situation is what is brought out in this piece of work. Usually an author would feel offended if he or she is mistaken to be considered as another author. The reason being, their own credibility would not be showcased or proved if they are considered to be thought of as another author.

Once, a small boy had gone to meet Ruskin Bond. He surprised asking Bond “Are you Mr. Pickwick?” (p. 11). Bond took it lightly for he was glad that the small boy was reading Charles Dickens’s work. He was happy to reply that he was a distant relative to Dickens.

Once, a ten year old child’s mother told Ruskin Bond that her son studies the author’s text in school. Ruskin Bond was not surprised for some of his books or stories were prescribed in certain schools. The lady said that her son wants his autograph. The author was startled when he heard the reply from the child when he asked what book of his he was reading.

“What’s the name of the book you are reading?” I asked. ‘Tom Sawyer’, he said promptly,” (p. 11). This incident again shows how not only the children, even their parents are unaware of the works and the names of the author. This incident might look funny but it only shows how parents do not even know which author they were going to meet. This is the most embarrassing situation for an author to have mistaken him for someone else. But Ruskin Bond was sportive and also he did not mind signing in the name that the children wanted. Ruskin Bond must have taken the situation lightly, for he was at least glad that the parent and the child knew him to be the author!

Finally, Ruskin Bond declares that he has felt proud signing the names of the other authors. “I have signed books in the names of Enid Blyton, R.K. Narayan, Ian Botham, Daniel Defoe and J.K. Rowling. No one seems to mind.” (p.11). In this account the author only shows how when children like authors they don’t mind who signs their book, and they show interest in getting the signature in any book, as long as they know that they have got an author’s signature in their book. Ruskin Bond has tried to be creative in handling the situation and this incongruity is what makes one think, as well as laugh.

In the essay, “On Pleasure – Seeking”, G.K. Chesterton shares an incident on a different complaint he had while travelling by a train. People usually complain about the dinner not being good, but he complained about the dinner being good. This definitely is strange for nobody would complain about something that is good! When people usually find it difficult to eat while travelling on a train, the author calls it a picnic and finds it adventurous. To dine happily and comfortably when the train goes at a good speed and when others find it as an inconvenience actually brings in the humour.

Ruskin Bond and G.K. Chesterton have found something funny, as in the situations quoted above which would be seen differently by an ordinary person. This is the incongruity that is found in both the situations mentioned and the authors’ perspectives are different from that of an ordinary person.

V. SELF-DEPRECATING

“The Power of Pen and Paper”, is another interesting personal essay written by Ruskin Bond. He begins the essay giving an account of the ink pens which used to be a favourite for many in the days when ball pens were not in use. He explains the problems one would face those days using a fountain pen. Though fountain pens were people’s favourite, many did not prefer it because of the ink filling process. People have often gifted him fountain pens, but he seems to be fussy with the usage of the fountain pens because he has always struggled to either empty the ink from the pen or to refill the ink into the pen.

The author calls himself as the clumsiest man for filling the ink with difficulty and in the process he spills the ink all over the place making the place look messy. “Being one of the clumsiest humans on Earth, I am unable to full or refill or empty a fountain pen of its ink without getting the said ink, black, blue or blue-black, all over my hands or on to my coat-sleeves or shirt front.” (p. 46). On one such occasion when the author was refilling the ink it spilled and he kept looking for his handkerchief. Since he could not find one he took a cloth that he could find nearby to wipe the ink. “I reached for the nearest

piece of cloth, only to realize (too late) that it was a lady's dupatta. That's one way of how to lose friends and fail to influence people." (p. 46).

Ruskin Bond feels terrible for doing something unintentional and that he felt embarrassed after that. This is the best example of self-deprecating humour, where the author has to pose a sorry state because he had mistaken a lady's dupatta to be some cloth that could be used to wipe off the ink from his hands. This is the most hilarious situation the author uses the self-deprecating humour element to laugh at his own self for being foolish. This shows why the author calls himself a clumsiest man on earth when in the process of filling the ink in a fountain pen and how terrible it is to do such a thing when people are around. At the end of it he only feels sorry because he had to lose friends because of his own folly.

G.K. Chesterton, in his essay titled, "The Hypothetical Householder", shares his experience of walking into another man's house always, thinking that it was his own house and he did that monotonously. It was only later he realized that it was his own house, but he kept thinking it was another man's house. He laughs at his own absent-mindedness. "We have read of some celebrated philosopher who was so absent-minded that he paid a call at his own house. My own absent-mindedness is extreme, and my philosophy, of course, is the marvel of men and angels." (p. 194).

VI. SITUATIONAL HUMOUR

In "Be Prepared!"- Ruskin Bond recollects the day when he celebrated Holi the previous year. He was reminded of how after celebrating Holi, when he got back home to have a bath, he could not get a drop of water. His neighbour too had to face the same problem. They had to face the difficult situation until evening waiting for the water tanker to come and supply to relieve the situation.

Ruskin Bond did not wish to go through the same situation that year again so, he thought he would be well prepared for it. Since he was in Scouts he remembered the motto "Be Prepared!" He declares, he was not enthusiastic about having a bath, but he was just worried that he cannot go into the Cambridge Book Depot after playing Holi. "I'm not a fanatic about bathing but it won't do for me to turn up at the Cambridge Book Depot looking as though I've just fallen into a paint-box." (p. 21).

The author looked colourful after playing Holi. This also reveals the enthusiasm the author showed in playing Holi, like a curious little child would show in playing this colourful festival. At the end of the day all the colours would be on him, leaving people in a confused state not allowing them to recognize him! Also there is a possibility of them passing comments on him that would embarrass him to make the situation worse.

In this essay, Ruskin Bond shares his experience from the previous year, which would help the readers understand why he was very particular to wash off the colours from his face and then go to the Book Depot. When he was signing the books for his readers in the Cambridge Book Depot, he happened to hear one of his readers' comment- "Old Bond is finally going round the bend," I can hear someone say. 'Now he's signing colouring books!'" (p. 21).

The author here uses situational humour to mention about the comment that has been said about him by a reader who assumed that the author has gone crazy signing the colouring book. Here it is to be understood that the author was signing his books, since he had played Holi and come, the colour from his hands must have had made the book change into a colouring book, thus the reader mistook and has passed that comment. The author tries to make the text look more interesting and thus brings in the situational humour. It is now understood why Ruskin Bond was very particular about having a proper bath before going to the Cambridge book depot the reason behind is he does not wish to face a similar situation as how he faced the previous year.

VII. HYPERBOLE

Ruskin Bond brings humour even in his supernatural essay “Welcome, Good Spirits!” The author is confused after hearing aimless conversations in the sitting room which adjoins his bedroom. He is anxious to know how sounds come from that room when nobody in the family uses it. The sound keeps increasing as the time goes on, and it only looks like people are all partying. The author first thinks it could be the Christmas party for there is much talking and laughter later he is clueless not knowing what is happening. This has been going on for a while leaving the author puzzled.

One night when the author felt hungry he went into that room where he heard the party going on, only to find something to eat. When he switched on the light he found no one around. And when he returned to his room, he again heard the party going on. He thought it was an exclusive party for the ghostly visitants that he was not welcomed to their place.

Finally, Ruskin Bond states, that the party goers must have felt sorry for the author. The reason is he finds a surprise waiting for him inside his room on a December morning. A large Christmas plum pudding is left on the table in his room and there is no card or note beside it and he does not know who has left it there for him. The best part of this is he is wondering how it is on his table in that room when all the doors are kept closed and there is no way for anyone to enter inside. It then strikes him that it could be from the visitants who were partying all through the night, could have left it for him. Ruskin Bond’s humour sense is revealed in the following line: “I decided to taste some of it. Just in case it was over a hundred years ago!” (p. 50).

When the author realized the plum cake could have been from the visitants in the party that was happening the previous night, he is frightened. Since he is tempted to have he decides to take a small piece of cake from it. He is glad it does not taste like a hundred year old one. He states that because he only feels that the ghosts would have lived a hundred years ago. Here the author brings in the hyperbolic expression to think that the cake that was kept by the ghosts would have also been old and could have been prepared by them a hundred years ago. This is an exaggeration bringing in laughter and amusement for the readers. The author further says, “Well, it’s a perfectly good pudding. Just the right amount of brandy in it. I think I’ll have another slice. And if my ghostly party goers are here again tonight, I won’t complain.” (p. 50)

Humour is one of the interesting tools to seek the attention of the readers and that would leave a lasting impression in them even after they finish reading a piece of work. Ruskin Bond has used different kinds of humour elements in his autobiographical essays to entertain not only the children but also the adults. The author has written interesting accounts using each of the elements of humour in different essays, giving his readers a pleasure of reading.

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