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Narrative Design of Ruskin Bond's *The Blue Umbrella*: A Todorovian Model

Surajit Sen

Assistant Professor & Head
Department of English
Government Degree College, Kamalpur, Tripura

Of all the writers living in India and writing in English, Ruskin Bond, the septuagenarian, Mussoorie-resident author dictates the term when it comes to the art of conveying the drama and pathos of ordinary lives. Through his short stories, long stories, novellas and novels, this self-confessed Indian writer (though born to British parents) has been charming the adult and the children alike in a literary career spanning five decades. His simple style of story-telling marked with depth and sensitivity is a favourite to the readers, especially to the children. He has this wonderful ability to assemble myriad feelings and perspectives even in a limited span of a short or long story. And in most of his writings, Ruskin Bond employs an uncomplicated style of narration. *The Blue Umbrella* (TBU 1992) is a fine specimen of this. Published in 1992, this novella has also been filmed in 2007. This paper endeavours to bring out the narrative design of this beautiful story and to show that it is essentially a model advocated by the famous Bulgarian narratologist Tzvetan Todorov.

The Blue Umbrella is set in a small village of Garhwal where a little highland girl, Binya, trades her lucky leopard's claw pendant with a picnicker lady for a pretty blue umbrella. None in the village had such a fine umbrella and everywhere Binya went, the umbrella went too. Gradually it faded to pale blue, and was patched in several places, but there were still many who envied Binya her treasured possession. And the most envious of them all was old Ram Bharosa, the shopkeeper, who decided that by some means he must own the blue umbrella. He tries to bribe Binya but of no avail. Undeterred, he employs a boy Rajaram to steal it. Rajaram steals it but only to be caught and assaulted by Binya's strong brother Bijju. When he is pressurized, Rajaram discloses that he has been sent by Ram Bharosa. As a result, the shopkeeper's name is tarnished in the village. His business drops drastically. His drooping and glum face makes Binya sad and think differently. The story concludes with the little girl giving the umbrella to the shop-keeper and dancing down the road, happy, having been gifted a bear's claw pendant by the shop-keeper.

If the story-line is examined, we can find a definite narrative pattern in it. In the beginning, everything is at peace in the sleepy village of Garhwal. Binya is seen scrambling barefoot over the rocks, running over the short summer grass and calling for Neelu, a blue-grey cow in the afternoon. Her brother is busy preparing for his exams, the villagers of this mountainous place are occupied in their respective works. This calmness is disturbed when the little girl Binya comes across a party of holiday-makers in the serene woods and her gaze comes to rest on a bright, blue umbrella. In normal circumstances, she would have fled. But she does not run away. The umbrella, 'had cast a spell over her, drawing her forward almost against her will'. (TBU 13) Seeing Binya's tiger claw pendant on her neck, one of the picnicker-ladies wants to own it. The lady's husband offers Binya five rupees but she refuses to give her lucky charm. When asked about her demand, she points to the blue umbrella. After a while,

her wish is accorded as the whimsical lady gives her the umbrella in exchange of the tiger-claw pendant. Binya becomes the proud owner of the lovely-looking umbrella.

With the light blue thing overhead, Binya draws everyone's notice. Wherever she goes, she carries it. She develops pride having possessed the frilly umbrella. Her showing off the luxurious item makes a number of the villagers like the schoolmaster's wife, the Pujari etc envious. They can not tolerate the fact that a poor cultivator's daughter should possess the most beautiful umbrella in the village. Ram Bharosa, the rich shop-keeper falls to the lure of the umbrella. He tries to bribe Binya and her brother Bijju and offers her big sum. When his ploys nosedive, he turns evil. He engages his servant Rajaram to steal the umbrella. By doing so, he puts his reputation of a trustworthy shop-keeper (his name 'Ram Bharosa' suggests 'trust') under the sword of suspicion, mistrust and taint. He loses his clean image; people desert his erstwhile thriving shop. The umbrella causes total havoc in his life.

For two weeks Ram Bharosa did not find a single customer coming to his shop. People ostracized him for selling his soul for an umbrella. The old man's distressed state moves Binya into pity. She feels that in some way she has been responsible for his misery. From then on, whenever she passes his shop, she does not open her umbrella thinking that the sight of the umbrella will hurt him further. Later on, she hands him the apple of discord, the umbrella. While giving him the umbrella, she utters- 'An umbrella isn't everything'. (TBU 79) Her sentence sums up the futility of material possession. An umbrella, however beautiful and precious it may be, can not ensure peace and amity. Such realization and maturity is beyond her age. Binya's sacrifice brings back happiness and calmness. Her broadness of mind touches the old shop-keeper. He gifts Binya a silver pendant with bear's claw. He is back to his former self- loveable and trustworthy. So in the end, amity prevails again.

When we apply the linguistic model to literature, we appear to be in a methodological loop. After all, if literature is already linguistic, what is the point of examining it in the light of a linguistic model? Well, for one thing, it would be a mistake to identify 'literature' and 'language'. It is true that literature *uses* language as its medium, but this does not mean that the structure of literature is identical with the structure of language. The units of literary structure do not coincide with those of language. This means that when the Bulgarian narratologist Tzvetan Todorov advocates a new poetics which will establish a general 'grammar' of literature, he is talking about the underlying rules governing literary practice.

Structuralist narrative theory develops from certain elementary linguistic analogies. Syntax (the rules of sentence construction) is the basic model of narrative rules. Todorov and others talk of 'narrative syntax'. The most elementary syntactic division of the sentence unit is between subject and predicate: 'The knight (subject) slew the dragon with his sword (predicate)'. Evidently this sentence could be the core of an episode or even an entire tale. If we substitute a name for 'the knight', or 'axe' for 'sword', we retain the same essential structure. By pursuing this analogy between sentence structure and narrative, Vladimir Propp developed his theory of Russian fairy stories.

Propp's approach can be understood if we compare the 'subject' of a sentence with the typical characters (hero, villain, etc.) and the 'predicate' with the typical actions in such stories. While there is an enormous profusion of details, the whole corpus of tales is constructed upon the same basic set of thirty-one 'functions'. A function is the basic unit of the narrative 'language' and refers to the significant actions which form the narrative. These follow a logical sequence, and although no tale includes them all, in every tale the functions always remain in sequence. These functions are present not

just in Russian fairy tales or even non-Russian tales, but also in comedies, myths, epics, romances and indeed stories in general. Propp had added seven 'spheres of action' or roles to the thirty-one functions.

A.J.Greimas, in his *Semantique Structurale* (1966), offers an elegant streamlining of Propp's theory. While Propp focused on a single genre, Greimas aims to arrive at the universal 'grammar' of narrative by applying to it a semantic analysis of sentence structure. In place of Propp's seven 'spheres of action' he proposes three pairs of binary oppositions which include all six roles (actants) he requires: subject/object, sender/receiver, helper/opponent. The pairs describe three basic patterns which perhaps recur in all narrative: 1. Desire, search, or aim (subject/object). 2. Communication (sender/receiver). 3. Auxiliary support or hindrance (helper/opponent). In order to account for the various narrative sequences which are possible he reduces Propp's thirty-one functions to twenty, and groups them into three structures (syntagms): 'contractual', 'performative' and 'disjunctive'. The first is concerned with the establishing or breaking of contracts or rules. Narratives may employ either of the following structures: 1. contract (or prohibition) > violation > punishment. 2. lack of contract (disorder) > establishment of contract (order).

The work of Tzvetan Todorov is a summation of Propp, Greimas and others. All the syntactic rules of language are restated in their narrative guise- rules of agency, predication, adjectival and verbal functions, mood and aspect, and so on. The minimal unit of narrative is the 'proposition', which can be either an 'agent' (e.g. a person) or a 'predicate' (e.g. an action). The propositional structure of a narrative can be described in the most abstract and universal fashion.

Having established the smallest unit (proposition), Todorov describes two higher levels of organization: the *sequence* and the *text*. A group of propositions forms a sequence. The basic sequence is made up of five propositions which describe a certain state which is disturbed and then re-established albeit in altered form. The five propositions may be designated thus:

Equilibrium¹ (e.g. Peace)

Force¹ (Enemy invades)

Disequilibrium (War)

Force² (Enemy is defeated)

Equilibrium² (Peace on new terms)

Finally a succession of sequences forms a text. The sequences may be organized in a variety of ways, by embedding (story within a story, digression, etc.), by linking (a string of sequences), or by alternation (interlacing of sequences), or by a mixture of these. His attempt to establish the universal syntax of narrative has all the air of a scientific theory.

The propositions stated above fit in the narrative pattern of the novella *The Blue Umbrella*. Equilibrium¹ refers to the onset of the story when everything is at peace in the village of Garhwal. Force¹ proposition takes place when Binya gets hooked by the sight of the blue umbrella. She gets the luxury item but it gives rise to jealousy, machination among other villagers. Disequilibrium takes place in the mind of the old shop-keeper who wants to possess the umbrella by hook or by crook. His evil attempts are exposed and his image gets tarnished. Force² proposition is seen

when the little girl Binya tides over her obsession for the umbrella, feels bad for Ram Bharosa, and decides to give the umbrella to him. In return, the shop-keeper gifts her silver pendant with bear's claw and Equilibrium² is established. Thus the elixir of the novella's narrative follows the model stated by the Bulgarian narratologist Tzvetan Todorov.

Besides being essentially a Todorovian model, there are some other striking features of the book's narrative pattern worth mentioning. The opening paragraph of each chapter prepares the readers about what lies ahead. For instance, let us have a look at the opening paragraph of chapter four-

"The rains set in, and the sun only made brief appearances. The hills turned a lush green. Ferns sprang up on walls and tree-trunks. Giant lilies reared up like leopards from the tall grass. A white mist coiled and uncoiled as it floated up from the valley. It was a beautiful season, except for the leeches."(TBU 50)

Everything seems fine save the mention of the leeches in the last line. The chapter also tells us happy things like Binya's joyous loiterings with the beautiful umbrella overhead. Leeches appear in the last in this beautiful season. Later in this chapter, we find the greedy shop-keeper Ram Bharosa masterminding the stealing of the blue umbrella. This sort of intimating the readers through the description of Nature is a favourite ploy of Ruskin Bond. He uses Nature to prepare the readers for the things to come, at least for the twist of events to follow in the book. His first novel *The Room on the Roof* (1957) is a fine specimen of this narrative technique.

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