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LOVE, LOSS, AND LONGING: THE ESSENCE OF 'VIRAHA' IN RUSKIN BOND'S *THE NIGHT TRAIN AT DEOLI*

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Abstract

*Viraha, a Sanskrit term embodying the pain of separation in love, is a deeply ingrained theme in Indian literature, spanning classical poetry, Bhakti traditions, and modern narratives. Ruskin Bond's short story *The Night Train at Deoli* (1988) beautifully encapsulates this emotional depth through the protagonist's ephemeral yet profound connection with a mysterious girl at a railway station. This paper explores the themes of longing, impermanence, and the bittersweet nature of love in Bond's story, situating it within the broader framework of viraha rasa - the aesthetic experience of separation. The study delves into Bond's evocative storytelling, his use of nostalgia, and his portrayal of a fleeting romance that lingers in the protagonist's memory, much like the melancholic strains of unfulfilled love in classical Indian poetry. By analyzing Bond's treatment of memory, desire, and loss, the paper aims to highlight how *The Night Train at Deoli* aligns with the literary tradition of viraha, offering a uniquely modern yet timeless representation of unconsummated love.*

Keywords

Viraha, The Night Train at Deoli, Indian Aesthetics, Ruskin Bond, Longing, Love, Loss, Memory

Full Article

Introduction:

Ruskin Bond's oeuvre frequently delves into themes of memory, nostalgia, and longing, reflecting the transient nature of human experiences. In his novella *Time Stops at Shamli* (1989), the protagonist's unexpected sojourn in the quaint town of Shamli leads to a poignant reunion with a past love, evoking reflections on bygone days and unfulfilled aspirations. Similarly, in *The Woman on Platform 8* (1955–1958), a young boy's encounter with a compassionate stranger at a train station underscores the ephemeral yet impactful connections that linger in memory. *The Last Truck Ride* portrays the bond between a driver and his vehicle, symbolizing the end of an era and the melancholy of parting. In *The Tunnel* (2021), the narrative captures the solitary life of a watchman, whose brief interaction with a train passenger illuminates the beauty in fleeting human connections. Through these narratives, Bond masterfully encapsulates the essence of ephemeral relationships and the enduring impact of cherished memories.

Ruskin Bond's short story *The Night Train at Deoli* (1988) captures the ineffable emotions of love, separation, and nostalgia through the brief yet poignant encounter between the protagonist and a mysterious girl at a railway station. Written in Bond's characteristic simple yet evocative prose, the story is deeply rooted in the Indian aesthetic tradition of *viraha rasa* - the emotion of love in separation, which has been a central theme in classical Indian literature, particularly in Bhakti poetry and Sanskrit dramaturgy (Gupta, 45).



Bond's narrative is not a conventional love story that seeks closure or resolution; instead, it thrives on the lingering pain of absence and longing, making it a modern embodiment of *viraha* as conceptualized in ancient Indian literature. The protagonist, who meets the girl at Deoli station during his journey, experiences a fleeting yet profound connection with her. However, he never meets her again, and his decision not to search for her reinforces the notion that some emotions are best preserved in their incompleteness (Sharma, 102).

This paper explores the thematic depth of *The Night Train at Deoli* through the lens of *viraha rasa*, examining how Bond employs nostalgia, memory, and the transience of human connections to craft a narrative that transcends personal experience and resonates with universal human emotions. Additionally, the paper draws comparisons between Bond's storytelling and classical Indian as well as global literary traditions, highlighting the universality of longing and unfulfilled love.

Understanding Viraha Rasa: Love in Separation:

The term *viraha* (विरह) originates from Sanskrit word *vi-* denoting separation or distinction, and *rah* meaning to leave or abandon, collectively signifying a state of separation or longing (Monier-Williams, 1899). The concept of *viraha* has been a central theme in Indian literary and philosophical traditions, particularly in Bhakti poetry and Sanskrit aesthetics. Classical Indian theorists such as Bharata in the *Natyashastra* and Abhinavagupta in his commentaries have discussed *viraha rasa* as one of the key emotional states that evoke deep pathos and aesthetic pleasure (Tripathi, 67). Unlike Western notions of love, which often prioritize union and fulfillment, *viraha rasa* finds beauty in separation, where longing itself becomes a source of transcendence.

In the Bhakti traditions, *viraha rasa* (the aesthetic of separation) is central to devotional poetry, where the devotee experiences intense longing for the divine, as seen in the works of Mirabai and Surdas, whose verses express an emotional and spiritual yearning for union with Krishna (Iyer, 112). This separation is not merely sorrowful but transformative, as it intensifies devotion and deepens the devotee's spiritual connection, reinforcing the idea that distance from the beloved (God) heightens love rather than diminishing it (Mukherjee 76). In contrast, Advaita Vedanta interprets *viraha rasa* through the lens of non-duality (*advaita*), viewing separation as an illusion (*maya*) arising from ignorance of the self's true nature (Krishna 189). Here, longing is a manifestation of an incomplete realization of *Brahman*, and once enlightenment is attained, the apparent separation dissolves, revealing that the seeker and the sought have always been one (Tripathi, 214).

Despite their differing ontological foundations, both Bhakti traditions and Advaita Vedanta ultimately view *viraha rasa* as a path to transcendence, whether through deepening devotional love or dissolving the illusion of separation; highlighting the human longing for an ultimate, unifying truth beyond the ephemeral world.

In *The Night Train at Deoli*, the narrator's ephemeral yet piercing yearning for the enigmatic girl at the station embodies *viraha rasa*, as his estrangement from her amplifies his emotional entanglement rather than extinguishing it; an ethos akin to Bhakti traditions, where remoteness augments devotional fervor. Concurrently, his ultimate acquiescence to their unattainable confluence echoes the Advaita Vedantic discernment that longing is but a mirage woven by illusion, intimating that genuine fulfillment resides beyond the fleeting enticements of the material realm. Thus, the narrator's journey from yearning to quiet resignation mirrors a transcendental awakening, where longing, whether in love or spirituality, serves as a passage to a deeper truth—one that ultimately dissolves the boundaries between self and the infinite.



The protagonist of *The Night Train at Deoli* embodies this aesthetic principle. His love for the girl at Deoli remains incomplete, yet it continues to define his emotional world. Much like the poets of the Bhakti movement - such as Mirabai and Vidyapati - who wrote of their yearning for an absent divine beloved, Bond's protagonist sustains his love through memory rather than reality (Mukherjee, 89). His decision not to return to Deoli in search of the girl is not an act of indifference but an acknowledgment that love is sometimes best preserved in its longing rather than in fulfillment.

Nostalgia and Memory: The Foundations of Longing:

Nostalgia plays a crucial role in Bond's storytelling. His narratives often revolve around personal memories and lost moments, allowing readers to experience emotions that transcend time and place (Chakraborty, 132). In *The Night Train at Deoli*, nostalgia is not just a recollection of the past but an emotional state that keeps the protagonist connected to an unattainable love.

Memory in Bond's work functions similarly to its role in *viraha rasa*, not as a mere recollection but as an active force that keeps the longing alive (Singh, 55). The protagonist's repeated reminiscence of his brief encounter with the girl transforms her from a real person into a symbol of desire. This idealization aligns with the tradition of *viraha* found in classical Indian poetry, where the beloved is often depicted as an unattainable figure whose absence intensifies the lover's passion (Iyer, 78).

The railway station itself serves as a metaphor for impermanence - just as trains arrive and depart, so do people in our lives. The protagonist's realization that he may never see the girl again underscores the transient nature of human connections. This aligns with the Buddhist and Vedantic notions of *maya* (illusion) and *anitya* (impermanence), where attachment to the material world inevitably leads to suffering (Krishna, 91).

Comparing Viraha with Western Literary Traditions:

Although *viraha rasa* is deeply rooted in Indian aesthetics, its essence can be found across cultures. In Western literature, the theme of unfulfilled love and nostalgic longing has been explored by poets such as John Keats and Alfred Lord Tennyson. Keats's *Ode to a Nightingale* (1819) reflects a yearning for an unattainable ideal, much like Bond's protagonist's longing for the girl at Deoli (James, 47). Similarly, Tennyson's *In Memoriam* captures the melancholic beauty of love that is forever lost, reinforcing the idea that absence often enhances emotional depth (Walker 66).

Bond's story also resonates with the Japanese aesthetic concept of 'mono-no-aware' (the pathos of things), which acknowledges the beauty of fleeting moments and the inevitable passage of time (Tanaka, 103). Like *viraha rasa*, *mono-no-aware* finds profound meaning in impermanence, making Bond's storytelling universally relatable.

Ruskin Bond's *The Night Train at Deoli* is a masterful exploration of *viraha rasa*, portraying love not as an experience of possession but as an emotion that thrives in separation. The protagonist's longing for the girl at Deoli echoes the sentiments found in classical Indian poetry, where the pain of absence is transformed into a source of aesthetic beauty and emotional depth.

By drawing parallels between Bond's narrative and *viraha rasa*, as well as examining its connections with global literary traditions, this paper illustrates how Bond captures the universal human experience of love and loss. The story's unresolved ending is not a weakness but a deliberate artistic choice that reinforces the timeless truth that some love stories are meant to remain incomplete, for in their incompleteness, they achieve a kind of immortality (Desai, 112). Beyond the protagonist's personal emotions, Bond's storytelling relies heavily on nostalgia and



memory to enhance the experience of longing. This brings us to the larger role of memory in *The Night Train at Deoli* and its connection to the tradition of *viraha rasa*.

The Role of Nostalgia and Memory in Bond's Storytelling:

Ruskin Bond's works are often imbued with a deep sense of nostalgia, where the past is not just remembered but relived through the emotions of his characters. His *The Blue Umbrella* (1980) and *Time Stops at Shamli* (1989) beautifully reflect themes of memory and nostalgia, portraying fleeting childhood joys, lost love, and the enduring ache of the past. Through his evocative storytelling, Bond highlights how nostalgia shapes human emotions, making the past feel more vivid and meaningful than the present. In *The Night Train at Deoli*, nostalgia functions as both a narrative device and an emotional undertone that sustains the protagonist's longing (Bond, 92). Unlike conventional love stories where closure is sought, Bond's protagonist does not return to search for the girl, reinforcing the idea that some emotions are best preserved in their incompleteness.

Memory in Bond's work acts as an extension of reality, much like in classical *viraha* literature, where lovers sustain their passion through recollection rather than reunion (Singh, 134). The protagonist's repeated reminiscence of his brief encounter at Deoli transforms the girl from a real person into a symbol of longing itself. This idealization is a characteristic feature of *viraha rasa*, where the beloved remains forever unattainable, making the pain of separation a source of poetic beauty rather than despair (Chakrabarti, 212).

Psychological Dimensions of Unfulfilled Love:

From a psychological perspective, *viraha* in *The Night Train at Deoli* corresponds to the concept of 'limerence', a state of infatuation where love is intensified by unfulfilled longing (Tennov, 98). The protagonist's attraction to the girl is neither deeply explored nor fully realized, yet it continues to hold immense emotional power over him. This suggests that love in memory is often more potent than love in reality, as the mind embellishes the experience with imagined depth and meaning (Freud, 51).

The protagonist's decision to refrain from returning to Deoli indicates a subconscious recognition that seeking the girl may shatter the idealized version he has preserved in memory. This aligns with Freud's concept of the 'pleasure principle', where individuals often choose to retain illusions that bring them comfort rather than face a reality that may not live up to their expectations (Freud, 63).

The Liminality of Bond's Characters: Between Reality and Dream:

a) The Girl as an Archetype of Longing:

The girl at Deoli functions as more than just a love interest; she represents the archetype of longing itself. Unlike conventional heroines, she is nameless and almost spectral in presence, reinforcing the idea that she is more of a memory than a real person (Ghosh, 174). Her transitory presence, limited dialogue, and the protagonist's inability to reach her again elevate her to a near-mythical status.

Much like the celestial lovers of Indian folklore, such as Radha and Krishna, whose union is more celebrated in longing than in togetherness, the girl exists in the protagonist's life only as a moment of intense emotional experience (Bhattacharya, 209). She is not given an extensive backstory or motivations, which further amplifies her role as an object of idealized love rather than a fully realized character.

b) The Railway Station as a Metaphor for Impermanence:



The setting of Deoli railway station plays a symbolic role in reinforcing *viraha rasa*. Railways represent movement, transition, and the ephemeral nature of human connections (Sen, 45). The protagonist's repeated but brief encounters at the station mirror the transient relationships people experience in life; moments that remain suspended in time, never fully realized but never truly forgotten (Mukherjee, 115).

Bond uses the railway station as a metaphor for the impermanence of love, highlighting how relationships, like passing trains, sometimes come into our lives only to leave again (Bond, 93). This is similar to the traditional concept of *maya* in Indian philosophy, where the world is seen as transient, and attachment leads to suffering (Radhakrishnan, 128).

Comparative Analysis: Viraha Across Cultures:

While *viraha* is a central motif in Indian aesthetics, its essence can also be found in Western literary traditions. Bond's story, though deeply rooted in an Indian setting, resonates with universal themes of love and loss (Mehrotra, 241).

a) Viraha in Japanese and Persian Literature:

In Japanese literature, the theme of *mono no aware* (the pathos of things) closely resembles *viraha rasa* (Keene, 72). Works such as *The Tale of Genji* (before 1021) by Murasaki Shikibu, depict love as fleeting and bittersweet, much like Bond's protagonist's brief encounter with the girl (Shirane, 156). Similarly, Persian poets like Rumi and Hafiz have explored the agony of separation, often equating it with spiritual transcendence (Iqbal, 189).

b) Western Literature and the Melancholy of Unfulfilled Love:

In Western literature, the concept of *viraha* echoes in the works of Romantic poets such as John Keats, whose *Ode to a Nightingale* laments the ephemeral nature of beauty and love (Keats, 41). Similarly, Tennyson's *In Memoriam* explores the theme of longing for someone who is irretrievably lost (Tennyson, 76).

Bond's *The Night Train at Deoli* aligns with this literary tradition, offering a melancholic reflection on love's incompleteness and the way memory transforms absence into something more profound than presence (Chatterjee, 198).

The Universality of Viraha: Why We Relate to Bond's Story:

One of the reasons why *The Night Train at Deoli* continues to resonate with readers is its universal appeal. Almost everyone has experienced a moment of longing, whether for a person, a place, or a time that can never return (Mehta, 134). The story taps into this shared human experience, making it timeless and deeply relatable.

Unlike conventional love stories that resolve in union or tragic separation, Bond's narrative remains suspended in an unresolved state. This lack of closure is precisely what makes the story powerful (Sen, 49). Just as in *viraha rasa*, the beauty of the experience lies in its incompleteness, making the reader feel the protagonist's longing long after the story ends (Mukherjee, 117).

Conclusion: Love That Stays Beyond Time:

To conclude, Ruskin Bond's *The Night Train at Deoli* aptly captures the essence of *viraha*, offering a modern yet timeless portrayal of love that is defined by its absence rather than its fulfillment. The protagonist's inability to reunite with the girl reflects a deeper truth about love, that sometimes, it is the longing itself that makes love eternal (Bond, 95).

By drawing parallels between Bond's storytelling and the classical Indian tradition of *viraha rasa*, this paper has illustrated how the story resonates with both Indian and global literary traditions (Chakrabarti, 214). Bond's use of nostalgia, fleeting encounters, and the metaphor of the



railway station creates a narrative that lingers in the reader's heart, much like the memory of the girl lingers in the protagonist's mind (Ghosh, 176).

In the end, *The Night Train at Deoli* is not merely a love story; it is an ode to longing itself, reminding us that some loves are meant to remain incomplete; because in incompleteness, they achieve immortality (Mehrotra, 243).

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