

Depiction of Children in Ruskin Bond's Short Stories

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Abstract

Ruskin bond, an iconic children's author in Indian literature; for his diverse work in literature, he was conferred with Padma Shri Award in 1999. When a little boy was going through a series of events like loneliness and failure of family bonding, writing became his only way of catharsis. Even though life has given him thousands of bitterness, he somehow was able to see the light at the end of a dark tunnel. His optimism towards life has given him the strength amidst his loneliness and isolation. Having been born to Anglo-Indian parents, Bond found a home in the lap of Himalayas, and he also said that his love for India comes from the deep core of his heart. It is the atmosphere of the Himalayas that fulfils his soul and makes him able to give an imaginary vision. The remarkable blending of the literary traditions of Indian and English literature is noticeable feature of Bond's creativity. He is living in Mussoorie for last 5 decades. Since then he has been ceaselessly jotting down with his pen the inexhaustible mysteries of life in a sizeable canon of his creative literature. In his writings, he focuses the individuality of children, their dreams and their adventures like English children's writing. He captures the innocence of children in his fiction like Indian authors.

Key words: Iconic, catharsis, optimism, imaginary, blending, decades

Introduction:

Ruskin Bond, the name is an amalgamation of mountains, nature, rain, people, emotion, Indian customs and rituals, God, and Indian festivals. He paid a visit to every alley to make his work rich for his readers and found hope and life everywhere. We get numerous works where he mentioned about Indian customs and rituals of North India. He has profound knowledge when it comes to Indian culture and community, and he also said the dark side of it as well. We find all the details from the dressing style of Indian women from the pre-independent era to post-independence. His literary work is not devoid of Indian festivals like Holi. In his first novel, 'The Room on the Roof,' he mentioned the north Indian festival Holi. Besides that, he also mentioned festivals like Janmashtami. He even did not step back to saying the Indian Gods while writing. He portrays Indian Gods by mentioning their importance in human lives.

He depicted God with metaphor in many of his writings. While describing the colonial period, he mentioned the presence of Sadhus and snake charmers. Due to his love and knowledge for the country made him no less than any Indian writer. On his journey to literary works, he found simplicity from daily life, his power to see through life enables him to create some magnificent literary works.

Ruskin Bond is considered a pioneer of children literature in India. Ruskin Bond came close to children's literature. Since Ruskin Bond liked his boyhood very much therefore all his children stories whether autobiographical or semi- autobiographical expressed his longing for a happy childhood. Ruskin Bond likes children because they are more frank, open minded and emotional. According to Ruskin Bond two children can become good friends merely by exchanging a piece of marble, a coin, a doll and bangles. Children do not like the restraints put on them by their elders. Ruskin Bond loves children because they are not deceptive. All children love freedom, jumping in pools, climbing on trees, and are always curios to know about their surroundings so Ruskin Bond is

more close to children of the world.

Ruskin Bond portrays children as frank, open minded and emotional. In his stories children are innocent, love freedom and environment and are always curious to know about their surroundings. Ruskin Bond's portrayal of children may seem naïve by today's literature.

The stories like '*The Angry River*' and '*The Blue Umbrella*' brilliantly amalgamate the traditions of Indian and English Children's literature. **Sita**, the young heroine of '*The Angry River*' bravely fights the destructive forces of nature. Binya, the vivacious girl of "*The Blue Umbrella*" successfully overcomes the self-seeking attitude towards life. The readers are motivated in witnessing the indomitable spirit of both the heroines, Sita and Binya, as they fight the external and internal forces of life.

Bond's acumen could well be observed in his projection of life-like children. His child protagonists appeal enormously for their love, adventures and inquisitiveness to know the things around them. They pester the adults, at time their friends, with unending and mind boggling questions. They frequently tell lies which are invented truths of their imagination, tease each other, befriend again forgetting the scuffle of one minute before and show concern for peer interests.

The child characters of Bond act and behave as the children do in any part of the world. In their appearance and attire, Bond's children could differ from the children of the world but not in their attitude and temperament. If Tom Sawyer of Mark Twain steals jam from a pot in the *Adventures of Tom Sawyer*, Ranji, Koki and Teju of Bond steal guavas in the story "When Guavas are Ripe." Tom befools Aunt Polly and so do these three children play tricks on Gopal, the watchman of the guava orchard. Aunt Polly punishes Tom by asking him to whitewash the fence. Tom shows excessive interest and indulgence in whitewashing with the intention to allure his friends to complete his work. His trick works. The gullible friends of Tom not only whitewashed the fence but also enriched Tom by gifts for allowing them whitewashing. Teju, Koki and Ranji flatter Gopal, an ex-wrestler and the keeper of an orchard. They praise his prowess and physique and listen to dull stores of his bravery with the sole interest of procuring guavas in return. The old and lonely Gopal was immensely impressed by children's flattery. He treated them with the grand feast of guavas from his orchard. Tom and Huck love adventures. They enjoy hunting and fishing and go for expedition to Jackson's Island. Laurie, Anil and Kamal of *The Hidden Pool* enjoy themselves the secrete pool on the mountain site. At the pool they fish, build dams, take midnight dips, wrestle and ride buffaloes. They go for trekking up to Pindari Glacier at 12,000 feet above sea level, where no one from their town has gone before. Rusty in *The Room on the Roof* runs away from his apathetic and strict guardian, Kishen in *Vagrants in the Valley* from his drunken father, Daljit and Rusty from school. Thus Bond children follow the trend of running away from home or work like *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield*, *Kim* and *Huckleberry Finn*.

In *The Last Tonga Ride* the child narrator enjoys the company of a tonga-driver, Bansi Lal. He feels rejuvenated and much more important on being called dost (friend) and enjoys his raised status: "He did not call me 'chota sahib', or 'baba,' 'but dost' and this made me feel much more important. Not every small boy could boast of a tonga driver for his friend!"²². The boy loves the thrill of free tonga ride with Bansi. He accompanies him even though being scolded by his granny and ayah.

Bond presents two kinds of adult characters: one who acts as possible catalyst and the other who creates hindrance. In general, the adults in Bond's stories are considerate and contact with them exposes children to new vista and a better perspective. They love and rescue innocent and naïve kids from troubles like the fairy Godmother of *Cinderella*. The good natured strange woman who gives treat to a lonely child in *The Woman on Platform No. 8*, caring Aunt Mariam who takes care of an orphan nephew, in *The Thief* are thoughtful adults who by their positive attitude and loving approach take care of the children and guide them during trouble. They receive deep reverence of children. They pass on their wisdom to children and enable them to gain confidence and assume responsibilities. The invigorating relationship of children with adults paves the way toward happy selfhood.

The story *A Guardian Angel* invokes the loving bond between an aunt and her six-year-old orphan nephew. Aunt Mariam assures the child by her warmth, worldliness and carefree chatter when his mother passes away. The child enjoys on being called ladla (dear) by her. Mariam is an

outcaste for her family because of bringing disgrace to it by becoming a mistress but for the child, she is an angel. The child is unable to understand why his mother was cold and indifferent towards such a friendly and cheerful person, Aunt Mariam. It is only Mariam who comes to rescue the child with great readiness when his mother dies. Her tenderness and selfless approach fills the void in the life of the child. The boy characteristically recalls her personality. For him, she was a “joyous, bubbling creature – a force of nature rather than a woman – and every time I think of her I am tempted to put down on paper some aspect of her conversation, or gestures, or her magnificent physique”

The story *Getting Granny's Glasses* focuses on the attachment between a grandmother and his grandson Mani. Mani offers to accompany his grandmother on a two-day journey to Mussoorie where the nearest eye hospital is located, so that she can get a new pair of glasses. The atmosphere of this Himalayan region during monsoon is charmingly described as the two set off on their adventure. They walk through field and forests, up and down mountains, see a river rushing swiftly, pass a mule-driver singing a romantic song and admire a flock of parrots and the hills. The glasses renew Granny's zest for life. She buys gifts for the whole family, including a bell for the cow. With her improved vision, Granny excitedly rediscovers the beauty of her surrounding but her greatest joy is seeing what a fine boy Mani has grown up to be.

Majority of adult characters of Bond are portrayed in positive vein. But still there are some characters like Mr. Harrison, the strict guardian of Rusty, drunkard Mr. Kapoor, indifferent towards the need of his son and caring wife, in *The Room on the Roof*; Mrs. Bhushan a nosey and overbearing lady in *Vagrants in the Valley*; Satish mother a domineering and imposing lady in *The Woman on the Platform no. 8*. The adolescent characters are shown in clashes with adults. They defy the authority and break the conventional rules. Adolescence is a period in one's life when one becomes very sensitive and opposes protracted, rules and codes of conduct which one cannot absorb. Rusty in *Room on the Roof* rebels against the restriction of his guardian Mr. Harrison. He defied the rigid social codes of the English which do not allow him to mix with the natives. Harrison beats him for playing Holi (an Indian festival) with his friends. Rusty repulses the attack of his guardian, beats him on the rebound and runs away.

Ruskin Bond had published many casual short stories for children in magazines and newspapers in India and abroad, but he started to write regularly for children when he uprooted himself from Delhi to Mussoorie. After moving to Ivy Cottage, as a grandfather to Prem Singh's children he is constantly writing children stories, to amuse his adopted grandchildren, Rakesh, Mukesh, and Savitri. Through writing children's stories he also fulfilled his own unfulfilled wishes and longings as a child. He writes in *Scenes from a Writer's Life* that *"I don't suppose I would have written so much about childhood or even about other children if my own childhood had been all happiness and light"*.

Ruskin Bond got success as a writer for adults, and then he became interested in writing stories about children. In his introduction to *The Night Train at Deoli and other Stories* he writes that in the 1970s, when he was facing all kind of problems, his stories relating to children coped with the difficult situation. Earlier he had written a few stories for children and published in magazines and newspapers in India and abroad, but while in Mussoorie, after shifting to his new home, Ivy Cottage he started writing more frequently for children as he played the role of grandfather to Prem Singh's children. He was always thinking of new stories to tell Rakesh, Mukesh and Savitri. His innovation was to make children protagonist in his stories. Also these stories satisfied his own urge and desire to write about his lost childhood. He writes in 'Scenes from a Writer's Life' to the following effect:

"I don't suppose I have written so much about children if my own childhood had been all happiness and light. I do not find that those who have contended, normal childhood, seldom remember much about them; nor do they have much insight into the world of childhood".

CONCLUSION:

Fortunately, his trauma was channelized toward children's classics, which gave an outlet to his own agonies. Ruskin Bond found a resemblance with David Copperfield who sustained himself in an unfriendly world. The thought that children are rarely given attention by their elders, made him more sympathetic towards them. The children he came across in villages, their everyday experiences suggested themes for his stories. Ruskin Bond always enjoyed their company. Ruskin Bond's children stories can be put into two categories: “personal and impersonal ones”. Personal stories are

autobiographical or semi- autobiographical in tone, where he records his own reflections, unfulfilled passions and small adventures. These are stories like “My Father’s Trees in Dehra”, The Funeral, When I can’t Climb Anymore, The Tiger in the House, The Playing Fields of Shimla, Life with Uncle Ken, the Cherry Tree, The Last Tonga Ride, Coming Home to Dehra, All Creatures Great And Small, The Tree Lover. These stories show young Ruskin Bond’s affinity with trees and pets and his love for the town, Dehra. He was deeply attached to the places where he spent his childhood; hence his stories are nostalgic and vivid bringing to life and charming little places, colonial bungalows and fruit laden orchards where he wandered about as a boy. His stories for children reflect his rich imagination.

Bond’s love for children and his dual British and Indian heritage lend depth to his writing. He selects his style and subjects with the child reader in mind. His first person narrative helps the young audience to identify easily with the narrator child. He displays a fresh outlook while projecting his world of children, their dreams and high spiritedness. He has consolidated the notion of the child as cherished and valued members of the society who has his own aspirations to follow and dreams to pursue. Bond has the uncanny capacity of going straight into the heart of reader and unveiling the layers of childhood – universal in its romanticism. His stories have marked the trail for the future writers.

The cultural code and family matrix of Indian and western society differ entirely. Hence literature, a replica of the milieu in which it is created, is bound to differ. Commenting on the difference between the attitudes of an Indian writer in relation to a western one, VrindaNabar points out:

The importance of individualism in distinguishing between the two world outlooks, the Western and the Indian, cannot be undermined. In spite of a marginal literary move in the Indian languages toward the western mood canon in this respect, both Indian literature and culture have remained largely impervious to its message.

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