

A Child's Individuality of Mind as Depicted in Select-Short Stories of Ruskin Bond following the American Psychological Association's Guidelines

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Abstract--This paper intends to explore the individuality of mind as visible in the child characters in the select short stories of Ruskin Bond. These seemingly ordinary characters possess extra-ordinary traits as they no longer view the world and situations as dictated by their elders rather they react to circumstances after logically judging it on their own. The ideology of these characters despite their humble background and nonexistent contact with the fast moving world, possess a sense of maturity that puts them head and shoulder above their counterparts living in the luxurious environs. This paper is divided into three sections.

Keywords--Individuality, Experience, Human nature, Realization, Prejudices, Perception, Societal norms.

I. INTRODUCTION

Hailed as the pioneer in the field of literature and popularly known as a writer of children's stories, Ruskin Bond has an equally huge fan following amongst the grown-ups. He is perhaps the only author to have been read by all age groups with equal delight. Born as Owen Ruskin Bond to Aubrey Alexander Bond and Agnet Clark on May 19th, 1934 at Kasauli, Himanchal Pradesh, Ruskin Bond was destined to lead an isolated life due to his parents separation. When he was barely eight, his mother left him under the guardianship of his father. His caring and affectionate father also left him an orphan when he was ten. His untimely death made the young boy helpless and lonely. The state of emotional vacuum would have been disastrous had he not escaped to the world of books.

Bond says that; he began to read whatever came his way in order to escape from reality. His passion for reading and writing led Ruskin Bond to publish his first novella 'The Room on the Roof' for which he won 'John Lewellyn Rhys Award' (a prestigious citation bestowed to a 'common wealth' writer below thirty years of age). The author is also a recipient of the 'Sahitya Academy Award (1993), Padma Shree (1999) (the second highest literary award in India) and Padma Bhushan (2014). The writer is continuously doing what he does best i.e spinning out tales on his old typewriter in the serene environs of the 'The Queen of Hills'.

The following short stories have been chosen to analyse the theme of individuality in Ruskin Bond's child characters.

Woman on Platform no.8, Dust on the Mountains, When you can't climb the trees, The Guardian Angel, Panther's Moon, The Funeral, The Visitor, The Blue Umbrella.

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II. ANALYSIS

As stated by Ruskin Bond:

‘In writing about children one has to adopt a less subjective approach, things must happen, for children have no time for mood pieces. I have so strong an empathy with children I can enter into their minds. As children we are individual; it is only as we grow older that we acquire a certain grey similarity’

Similar trait can be seen in his child characters as they refuse to follow the paradigms laid down by the society. They have their own parameters to derive their own conclusion from a given situation and often it is absolutely different from their elders. The protagonist Arun in the story ‘The Woman on Platform 8’ is a fine example of the children’s individuality of mind. He challenges the so called societal guidelines handed down by our elders. Not taking any eatable from a stranger and not talking to a stranger being some such rules stated by the society. Arun, a boy of twelve is left alone to catch a midnight train from platform no.8 of Ambala Station. His parents considered him old enough to do so. His meeting with a stranger, a woman who offers him food, company and most importantly a mother’s genuine affection for a brief interlude. Arun is imperceptibly drawn to her because she treats him as an individual with a mind of his own. Her mannerism towards him is neither condescending nor overly affectionate. Her genuineness of emotion strikes a chord in the lonely boy’s heart and he allows her to lead him by the hand towards the railway canteen. Her calm acceptance of Arun as an individual and her unconditional affection for him makes Arun overcome his shyness and suspicion towards the stranger. She does not judge his parents for leaving a young boy to catch a midnight train all by himself.

The stranger woman does not pump him for details about his life. She prefers to watch him eat, questioning him quietly about his friends, his likes and dislikes as if she is aware of the boy’s need to share his thoughts and loneliness with someone.

Both accept each other as individuals without digging into each other’s past. Both of them have unhappiness in their life. For, which loving parents would leave their child alone on a railway platform and why would a strange woman who is not travelling anywhere walk on the platform and offers company food and motherly affection to a lonely boy. Despite these question marks both the woman and the boy find solace and happiness in each others company. Neither tries to probe into the other’s life nor do they look beyond what they see. Arun sees a kind, gentle woman who gives him food and company and wards away his loneliness for sometime. The woman sees Arun as a boy in need of love. Perhaps she has lost her own son and is looking for a substitute no matter how temporary it is. She needs someone to shower her affection and motherly love on. Thus both the individuals find fulfillment in each other’s company. Arun does not follow the age old diktat of the elders who always caution children not to talk to strangers and not to accept anything to eat from them. His instincts guide him to trust and like the stranger woman. When Arun’s friend Satish’s mother starts instructing Arun in her overbearing manner the stranger woman does not let her brow beat Arun.

Unlike Satish’s mother who treats her son like a prized possession to be taken care of or a puppet to be moved on strings, the stranger woman respects Arun’s individuality by telling Satish’s mother that Arun could travel

alone. She un embarrassingly accepts Satish's mother's assumption that she is Arun's mother. On being warned by Satish's mother about strangers Arun too replies cheekily that he likes strangers.

Arun, like many other children of his age, does not follow the instructions handed down by the experienced adults. He wants to test their theory on his own experience. In this case his experience with the stranger is in complete contrast to what he has been informed. This stranger is no crook, criminal or a kidnapper neither is she a thief. Her selfless affection for the lonely boy makes her approach him. The brief interlude helps fill the void in both the hearts. The boy starved for maternal love finds it in the stranger woman and the woman who perhaps has lost her own son finds solace in feeding and taking care of the lonely boy even if it is for a brief duration and no hope of them meeting again.

Bisnu, In 'Dust on the Mountains' a young boy of barely twelve years of age is already the man of the house. His father having passed away, the responsibility of taking care of his mother and sister lies on his shoulders. When the monsoons fail and Bisnu is unable to plough his three small terraced fields he takes a decision to go to Mussoorie, a two day journey from his village, to earn some money. Despite his young age Bisnu is an individual with an independent mind. He decides on a course and then relentlessly follows it. No matter how difficult it may prove. Though his mother and sister try to dissuade him, he does not get deterred from his decision.

Psychologists having conducted various experiments have reached the conclusion that 'individuality of mind' is inherited by the human beings even before they are born. Citing the example of identical twins who look alike and share the same liking in terms of toys, pets, music, still show distinct individuality in their behaviour right from the beginning. Thus individuality of mind is present in all human beings and adolescents tend to show their individuality more expressively. Bisnu too, in the story 'Dust on the Mountains' shows the same individuality of mind and spirit. Even though circumstances force him to go to work in a far away place he is of a firm mind that once he has earned enough money to last his family another winter (in case it does not rain) he will go back to his village. He has no desire to be greedy and move to metro cities like Delhi or Mumbai. After working at a tea shop for a few months Bisnu again finds himself out of work when the cinema shuts down for the winter. However, fate brings him in contact with a truck driver Pritam Singh who carries limestones from the quarries. The kind truck driver offers Bisnu decent salary of fifty rupees a day with bed and boarding.

Despite the difference in their age Pritam Singh does not treat Bisnu as a boy or a servant. He speaks to Bisnu like an equal because he respects the individuality of the young boy. Once, at the quarry, when Bisnu meets his friend Chitru from the tea shop, he starts loading the truck with lime stones to help his friend. The contractor on seeing this warns him that he will not be paid for it but Bisnu quickly replies that he works only for friends. Pritam Singh understand Bisnu's independent streak.

Despite being poor Bisnu does not cower or fear anybody. Even when he is working at the tea kiosk he does not accept the bad behaviour of the customers and complains to the manager about it. Bisnu's life again hits a road block when the truck meets with an accident nearly killing him and Pritam Singh. A tree manages to save Pritam Singh's life but the truck falls apart. Pritam offers to get Bisnu a job on his friends's truck but Bisnu has already made up his mind.

Bisnu, though young does not hesitate when it comes to following his mind once he has made it up. He does not follow the dictates of others even it his friend. Bali, who wants him to go to Delhi where there is more money nor does he stay with Chitru who continues to work at the quarries because he loves to be in Mussoorie and has relatives there. He does not accept Pritam Singh's offer to find him a job at another truck even though the money is good and he needs it. The much awaited snow makes him realize that it is better to grow things than destroy them and he returns to his village.

'When you can't climb Trees Any More' also illustrates the innate individuality of children. They do not follow the norms or instructions given to them till they have judged it for themselves. Their innate sense of exploring and keenness of adventure makes them mavericks when it comes to social conduct. In this story too, a girl of twelve helps the protagonist to rediscover his childhood. Her blunt questions and her individuality of mind makes her judge the protagonist to be harmless.

'Despite the instructions to the contrary she invites the stranger to look at the house he had stayed in twenty-five years ago.'

Unlike the grownups children do not follow a pre carved path. They love to make their own way. They want to explore their own horizons. The girl too does not hesitate in inviting the man to the house. Being a child she understands his desperation to look for the hidden treasure in the hollow of the jack fruit tree. She alone understands the young man's desire to climb the tree yet his inability to do go.

She mentions her parents more to assure him than herself. She finally climbs up the tree because she understands with the wisdom of her childhood how important it is for the young man to discover the hidden treasure. Once the hidden treasure, a rusty old cross, is retrieved by the girl, the man gifts it to her.

The protagonist too realizes that had this meeting been with some one else, perhaps the girl's parent, then the outcome would not have been the same because grown ups behave in a similar manner. They are pre conditioned already to react in a particular way. Their reaction would have been to suspect the young man and then turn him away. Unlike them the child has her own individuality of mind and does not behave in the predictable manner of the adults. For her the protagonist is not just another human being but an individual thus she understands his craving for his lost youth. She realizes the young man's desperate search for his youth and helps him.

The protagonist in the story 'A Guardian Angel' too refuses to accept the prejudices fed to him by his elders about a particular relative whom he later refers to as his guardian angel. The protagonist finds himself an orphan at the age of six when his mother who had long been battling against tuberculosis succumbed to the ill fated disease in the middle of the night without the author being aware of it. The very same day Aunt Mariam arrives and saves him from utter loneliness. After the funeral she takes him to her home in the bazaar.

'I woke up to experience, for a day, all the terrors of abandonment. But the same evening Aunt Mariam arrived. Her warmth, worldliness and carefree chatter gave me the reassurance. I needed so badly. She slept beside me that night and next morning, after the funeral, took with her to her rooms in the bazaar'.

Aunt Mariam, the sister of author's mother was given a cold treatment whenever she would pay a visit to the protagonist's house. Her visits were very few for reasons unknown to the author.

'Before the death of the protagonist's mother he notices that his Aunt is not welcomed to the house. He is unable to understand the reason for such cold behaviour because he finds the Aunt very loving, friendly and cheerful. Thus he does not extend the same behaviour towards the Aunt as his mother rather he prefers to call her his 'Guardian Angel'

Ironically, the very Aunt who is not welcomed by the author's mother comes to the young boy's rescue with such readiness. Though there were other relatives none came forward to help the boy. Aunt Mariam's complete devotion to the boy makes him forget his loss.

The young boy who had always starved for love even when his mother was alive finds solace and motherly affection in Aunt Mariam. The boy becomes a source of gossip for the bazaar people because of his fair complexion and his Aunt's dark features.

'Is it true that his father was an English man?'

'Mariam-bi says so. She never lies'

'True. Whatever her faults- and they are many- she has never been known to lie'

When the author realizes later that the 'faults' that the neighbourhood talks about is Aunt Mariam's nocturnal visitors he does not let the prejudices and judgment of people crowd his perception of Aunt Mariam. Though he resents these visitors initially, for their arrival meant that he would have to sleep in the spare room, he later on does not mind their presence as he knows that their status in Aunt Mariam's life is impermanent.

The boy unlike the adults realizes that Aunt Mariam's methods of earning a living might not be honourable from the society's point of view but Aunt Mariam has no other means to survive as she can barely write her name. She earns her livelihood in the only way she can thus the author does not judge her as per the censors of the society; he does not endorse the behaviour meted out to Aunt Mariam either by his mother or by the allegedly respectable people living in the society. He follows his own mind and regards his Aunt as an honest individual who takes in an orphan boy. Aunt Mariam however realizes the effect that this nocturnal visitations are having on the young boy. She decides to send the boy to a boarding school. After much argument he accepts. However on returning to the place during the winter vacation he comes to know he shall not be able to see his Aunt ever again. During his absence his father's relatives succeed in proving to the court that Aunt Mariam is not fit to be given the custody of a young boy due to her dubious methods of earning money and the boy is sent to one of his respectable relatives.

The boy however refuses to accept this of his Aunt-No matter how people spoke or thought of his Aunt Mariam he always thinks of her as an angel. Long after when he grows up he visits the bazaar and discovers that Aunt Mariam is dead due to a weak heart. He finds her grave on the outskirts of the town. An angel with a broken wing forms the tomb stone.

For the boy Aunt Mariam will always be an angel. His guardian angel regardless of what the people say or think about her.

Bisnu, another child character of Ruskin Bond's short story 'Panther's Moon' has his mind set on achieving education for which he travels five miles up the mountain to a school at Kemptee and then walked five miles back as there is no school in his own village of Manjari. The village consists of only five families. The nearest school being

at Kemptee. Though a number of boys walk to school. Bisnu's village is at the bottom of the mountain, a drop of over two thousand feet from kemptee

Despite the distance Bisnu's desire to gain knowledge makes him walk ten miles a day. Though there are other boys in the village he is the only one to go to school. He could have easily stayed at home. His mother would not have fussed but Bisnu goes to school because he wants to. He goes to school not because of compulsion but desire. His desire to get a good schooling, to read and write well makes him walk through the jungle.

Bisnu does not follow the pattern set by the others. Despite being secluded from the rest of the world his individuality of mind cannot be doubted. He does not follow the accepted norms of the village and wants to continue with his education even though he is the only boy from his village to do so. He does not hesitate in arguing about what he believes is right and speaks his mind freely. He tests all that he is being told on the knowledge he gains in school. Thus he informs his mother that monsoon has nothing to do with Gods.

When the village is threatened with the presence of a panther, who kills Bisnu's dog in the broad day light while he was crossing the oak forest towards his home, people of the village start refraining from going into the forest but Bisnu has to cross the oak forest twice every day which he continues doing.

Even after losing his companion, Sheero, Bisnu does not give up on going to school. He still crosses the dreaded oak forest twice a day. However the panther, who is a man-eater strikes Bisnu's village and injures, young Sanjay, Kalam Singh's son. He even tries to attack Bisnu who saves his life by climbing a tree. A series of attack by the man eater forces everyone in the Manjari village to keep to their homes. The village people request for a 'shikari' to hunt the man eater but it would take a fort night for him to arrive. For Bisnu it is a sad situation for he cannot attend school till the panther is captured.

Unlike the other village boys Bisnu does not want his life to end in the village. He wants to read and write as anyone else in the world and the world he dreams of begins only where the mountains end. Ruskin Bond has himself stated that most of his characters are children and people he has met in the hills. His child characters and incidents surrounding their life are practically true. Thus his analysis of children with their individuality of mind as portrayed in his stories can be regarded as true due to their close connection with people he has met while living in the hills.

'I have never been any good at the more lurid sort of writing psychopathic killers, important war-heroes self-tortured film stars, and seedy espionage agents must exist in this world, but strangely enough, I do not come across them and I prefer to write about the people and places I have known and the lives of those whose paths I have crossed. This crossing of paths makes for stories.'

'The Funeral' a sad tale of a nine year old boy who bids his father a tearful farewell but refuses to accept that he has gone forever. Though very young, the questions racing in his head regarding death, grave and God reflect his individuality of mind. He does not accept the verdict of the adults who crowd the house to be part of the funeral. Despite being denied from accompanying his father's coffin to the graveyard because the so called adults feel that he is too small to be present at the funeral, the boy silently follows the procession at a distance. He wonders why the graves are laid in such a manner that the dead could admire the snow capped mountains. To the boy it seems that no one could thrust these massive tombstones aside to rise and appreciate the view. It seems to him that

no one actually wants them to come out. The well meaning missionary's words do not ring true to him. His mind does not accept the theory and philosophy doled out by the so called enlightened persons.

'God has need of your father and had God in the same way, laid claim to the thousands of men, women and children who had been put to rest here in these neat and serried rows? What could he have wanted them for? Of what use are we to God when we are dead'

His logical thinking challenges the age old dogmatic thought process of the adults around him. To him nothing is acceptable till it has been judged on the basis of his own experience. In this case his mind states that he has greater need of his father than God. When the coffin is lowered deep into the ground he is surprised at the depth of the grave and wonders whether the world down below is better than the one on the ground. Only a Superman could come out of the depth of this grave.

As he moves away from the cemetery he resolves that if he is ever put away in the similar manner he would not stay in the depths of the earth but would find a way to be out of the grave by getting into the root of a plant, becoming a flower and letting the birds carry his seeds away.

Even as he walks away from his father's grave he refuses to accept that his father has been buried and gone forever. Rather he fiercely clings to his own thoughts and reassures himself that somehow his father would find a way to come out of the grave.

'The visitor' is the story of Mohan, a homeless boy who earns his living going door to door selling an assortment of goods on a tray. His family lives in the village. His father having passed away the responsibility of earning had fallen on Mohan's shoulders. However, this does not deter him from pursuing his studies. He focuses his mind on continuing his education. Something that many people in his situation would not think of doing.

Despite his poverty stricken state he does not give up on his dream. Throughout the day he walks long distance to sell his goods and studies under a street lamp at night. His friendship with Amir provides him with a shelter at night and also the moral support to continue with his studies. Even though he fails in his first attempt he does not lose hope and makes up his mind to continue with the effort for the next year. 'I have plenty of time now. Another year'

'The Blue Umbrella' a story of a ten year old who lives a humble life with limited means but is happy nonetheless. Despite belonging to the remote hills of Garhwal region Binya is not a timid girl. She possesses her own mind and is an individual in her own right. Her chance encounters with a party of picnickers in the forest proves that she has an individuality of mind and is not ready to bow down to the people. When the town lady expresses her desire to buy the claw pendant Binya too expresses her desire to own the lady's dainty blue umbrella. Even when Ram Bharosa, the shopkeeper tries to persuade Binya to part with the prized possession by listing the uselessness of the umbrella for Binya, she does not pay heed to it. She acknowledges the truth in Ram Bharosa's words but does not accept it.

As an individual Binya's mind does not accept the usual norm of the adults i.e. the poor have no right to indulge their desire. She likes the umbrella hence she has a right to be happy about owning something that is so exclusive as far as the village is concerned. Bijju and Binya are both individuals with a strong mind. No matter how

hard Ram Bharosa tries to sell them, they do not buy any sweets from shop if they do not have any money to pay. Ram Bharosa has the sly habit of giving sweets to children on credit and later confiscating their valuable possessions to sell in his shop. When persuasion fails he tries to get Rajaram, his servant to steal it. When the truth comes out everybody in the village ostracizes him and his business grinds to a halt. Though the fault is entirely Ram Bharosa's Binya cannot help feeling bad for him even though Bijju says that Ram Bharosa is responsible for his own plight and deserves the treatment meted out to him. Binya cannot help but feel bad about him and decides to give the umbrella to him. Her mind does not allow her to continue with his ostracization and misery. She realizes his obsession for the umbrella and decides to give it to him without making him feel ashamed about his deed. She does not make a big issue of giving away the umbrella but quietly leaves it in his shop.

Binya's individuality of mind is clearly seen in this incident. She does not listen to other people telling her that Ram Bharosa's plight is his own doing and he should be punished for his bad deeds. She understands his obsession for the pretty umbrella for she too had been obsessed with the pretty thing but on thinking deeply about Ram Bharosa's suffering she weighs both the options, Her love to possess a thing or a person's happiness and her peace of mind for she too in a way feels responsible for the shopkeeper's suffering. She realizes that Ram Bharosa's happiness and her peace of mind are more important than possessing an umbrella. Thus she gives away the umbrella and in turn manages to bring about a change in Ram Bharosa for he too learns the art of giving.

III. CONCLUSION

Jacquelyn. S. Eccles, Ph.D, a Professor of Psychology, Education and Women's Studies at the University of Michigan in Ann Arbor states that the years between 6 and 14, middle childhood and early adolescence, are a time of important developmental advances that establish children's sense of identity. During these years, children make strides toward adulthood by becoming competent, independent, involved and self-aware in the world beyond their families. During middle childhood children, develop a sense of self-esteem and individuality, comparing themselves with their peers. A crucial shift in children's cognitive occurs at around age six. Although cognitive changes that occur during infancy and preschool years are dramatic, almost all theories of development point to age six as the time when children begin to actually 'reason.'

During childhood (up to about 8 years), the girl or boy often imitate parents in order to feel closely attached to them. At this time, the girl or boy defines a lot of her or his individuality based on similarity with parents.

During adolescence (starting age 9), the young persons want to redefine who they are by detaching from how they were as a child, from how their parents are, and from how their parents want them to be. At this time, the young person defines a lot of his/her individuality based on belonging with peers, and experimenting with more diversity.

Development theories and recent examinations of adult self descriptions across the life span (eg: L.M. Chiodo, G. Labouvie- Vief, L.A Goguen, M.Dieht & L.Orwoll, 1995 a,b) indicate that the self becomes more unique individualistic and complex with age.

A study conducted on 150 students of 14 to 16 years of age to analyze individualism in the children proved that even individuals that share the same mother, the same environment, or/and the same genes are never exactly the

same. Nor is a child the same person he was yesterday, a year ago, neither at birth or conception. His individualism grows and changes every day, and shapes the circumstances that'll keep making him more unique.

The study showed that 123 of those 150 14-16 year old children i.e 82% possess individualistic traits that reflect in their personality, thoughts, and behavior. These students possess individualistic attitudes and are not afraid to express and showcase their different -from-other, unique selves. They are confident, unafraid and bold. They are also characterized by self -acceptance and high self esteem. They have the desire to show and be who they are and do not comply to societal norms/stereotypes. Out of 150 students, 82% students showed high individuality.

Ruskin Bond himself has been a strong supporter of individuality of mind in children which makes them unique. It is this individuality that makes children react in a different manner when faced with the same situation. However, the adults tend to react in a similar manner in a given situation. One can take the example of Arun and Satish in the story 'Woman on platform No. 8'. Arun's reaction to Satish's mother's repressive, and autocratic behaviour is rebellious whereas Satish's reaction is more mild and hesitant. He is secretly happy that Arun could stand up to his over bearing mother but is afraid to express it openly. Similarly Binya and Bijju too react in a different manner while crossing Ram Bharosa's shop. Binya would close her umbrella and quietly walk past the shop so as not attract Ram Bharosa's attention whereas as Bijju would loudly whistle his way past the shop. Similarly the protagonist in the story 'The Guardian Angel' refuses to think of Aunt Mariam as anything other than an affectionate loving motherly person who takes an orphan under her wing and tries to provide the best for him. As soon as children begin to reason they start to analyze things on their own. They do not follow the accepted norms of the environment in which they are growing up. One such example is Bisnu in the story 'The Panther's Moon'. He is the only boy in his village Manjari, to attend a school which is five kilometers away from his home. He could have easily given up on gaining knowledge like the other boys in his village but his power of reasoning told him that if he has to go beyond the hill where his village is education is the only way he will be able to do so. Ruskin Bond's child characters are highly individualistic in their approach towards life. They are not afraid to think and act beyond the dictates of the society. They assert their individuality whenever they are faced with any situation.

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