

RELEVANCE OF RUSKIN BOND'S STORIES IN THE CONTEMPORARY WORLD: A STUDY

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***Abstract-**Ruskin Bond has been hailed as the 'Pioneer of English literature for children. Ruskin Bond has been contributing to the enrichment of English literature through his poems, essay, short stories and novels for nearly six decades. The author today has more than five hundred compilations to his credit. Despite its humble background and ordinary child characters of the hills Bond's stories and characters have great relevance in today's times as the world races towards materialistic and technological innovations? A world where new borns are exposed to the gadgets long before they know what it is. The little ones are experts at handling mobiles and impeccably play on the video games but lack completely in moral conduct and social skills. Ruskin Bond's stories and characters act as a moral guide to these urban locales especially the adolescents.*

***Keywords:** Ruskin Bond's, Stories, World, Contemporary.*

I INTRODUCTION

They introduce the young readers to characters that live an ordinary life but are extra ordinary in their approach towards life. This paper analyses the relevance of Ruskin Bond's child characters as beacon for the young adults. The following stories have been chosen to analyse the relevance of Ruskin Bond's characters in the contemporary world:

The Blue Umbrella

Dust on the Mountains

The Visitor

The Bus stop at Pipal Nagar

Ruskin Bond is a keen observer of children and their behaviour. His love for the hills and mountains has made him create characters who are the true sons and daughters of the soil. In introduction to his story book 'The Night Train at Deoli', Bond says,

'I prefer to write about the people and places I have known and the lives of those whose paths I have crossed'. ¹ This safely proves that Bond's characters are not fictitious. Girls like 'Binya' and boys like 'Bijju' are still struggling to make ends meet yet their high moral values and strong sense of integrity are a source of inspiration for all the readers. Binya, a ten year old girl, while looking for her cows comes upon a bunch of picnickers. As she gazes admiringly at their clothes and food her eyes fall on a bright blue umbrella which lay open on the grass. To Binya's imagination the umbrella appears as a great blue flower that has sprung on the hillside. Binya's love for the little patch of blue sky makes her exchange, her lucky charm 'tiger's claw pendant' for the dainty umbrella. On acquiring the pretty umbrella Binya seldom closes it. She takes the umbrella every

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where she goes. Binya, a cheerful girl by nature, is always ready with a smile and would willingly have lent it to anyone feeling unhappy. Binya's instant love for the umbrella has deep psychological intonation. For the first time she is in possession of a thing not because of its utility but because of its beauty. She agrees with Ram Bharosa that, 'It's a pretty thing for ladies to play with' ² and that is the reason she loves the umbrella. Bijju and Binya do not buy any sweets from Ram Bharosa's shop if they do not have money to pay for it. Even though Bijju feels hungry having eaten nothing since six in the morning he calms his hunger pangs by feasting on bilberries rather than buying toffees on credit from Ram Bharosa. Such will power is seldom seen in the adults yet Bijju and Binya display this extra ordinary trait in such an ordinary manner. Binya's love for the umbrella does not make her selfish and she willingly lets her friends carry it. When Ram Bharosa's offer to buy Binya's umbrella for an amount of twelve rupees does not fruitify, (to his surprise) for he knows Binya's family is economically constrained and the money offered by him would have helped them, he resorts to unethical means of procuring the umbrella. He assigns his assistant Rajaram to steal the umbrella. When the villagers come to know of this they ostracize Ram Bharosa and do not visit his shop anymore. Binya knows that it is Ram Bharosa's fault yet she cannot prevent herself from feeling sorry for the old man. She keeps reasoning with herself that the umbrella is her property and she cannot help it if people are jealous of it still she couldn't help feeling that she is the cause of the sad look on Ram Bharosa's face and the ruinous condition of his shop. Hence whenever she would come near Ram Bharosa's shop she would close her umbrella and open it only when she would be out of sight. Such sensitivity and pure heartedness is a source of inspiration to all the adolescents who are following the maxim 'I, me, myself'. Binya despite being from a poverty stricken background with no luxury to speak of except for the frilly blue umbrella decides to give it to Ram Bharosa when she sees that his obsession for it is making him sick. She does not make a big show of her philanthropy but quietly leaves the umbrella at the counter so as to save the shopkeeper any embarrassment. Her magnanimous gesture brings about a change in the shopkeeper as he too learns the joy of giving. Binya's gesture is nothing short of extraordinary as she lets go of the only pretty thing she had owned in her entire life. The blue umbrella is not just an umbrella for her but also a small part of the world she can only dream of. Hence when she holds this exquisite thing in her hand for her it is like holding on to a dream world. Binya is a source of inspiration to the young of the contemporary world who do not believe in giving or sharing even though materialistically they are far better off than Binya yet the more they have the more they want to possess whereas Binya gives away the only beautiful thing she had ever acquired. She even starts questioning her love for the umbrella and whether it is greater than a human being's happiness. What makes a poor village girl give up on her possession is the question that gives food for thought to the young readers in the urban locale.

'Dust on the Mountains' is yet another story that explores the extraordinary character of these ordinary village people. Bisnu, a twelve year old boy takes on the responsibility of being the man of the house. His father having passed away the responsibility of providing for his sister, Puja and his mother, falls on his shoulder. Despite the hardships Bisnu does not lose hope.

II DISCUSSION

‘If the monsoon arrives tomorrow, the fire will go out’. Bisnu was only twelve, but he was the man in the house, he had to see that there was enough food for the family and for the oxen, for the big black dog and the ‘hens’ 3

When the monsoons fail Bisnu decides to go to Mussoorie to earn money in order to provide for his family. Bisnu’s plight is not a solitary incident. Life in the hills is never easy given the harsh climate, rough terrains and inaccessibility in the remotest villages.

Bond says about the hill people ‘They imbibe the steadfastness of oak in their life. They are not glamorous, facility ridden and self centered. Like oak they have great tolerance and resistance and like its seed ‘renew themselves’ faster amid constant threats and wants. ‘Never lose hope’ is the motto of their life, which keeps them warm even in the chilliest winds’. 4

Bisnu, a man of the hills proceeds towards the glittering town of Mussoorie with the hope of earning some money for his family. He has enough money to reach Mussoorie and he knows that he has to find a job before the night fall for he cannot afford to spend money on a night lodging. As luck would have it he finds a job at a tea kiosk on a monthly salary of fifty rupees. His job is to supply tea and ‘Samosa’ during the interval at the cinema hall. However, he has to make his own arrangement for boarding and lodging. Bisnu braves the icy Himalayan winds with just a thin blanket to shield him as he sleeps in the foyer of the cinema hall. Despite his hard work Bisnu is often ill treated by the cinema goers. He gets abused or kicked in the shin by someone who is not happy with his services. At the age when most of his counterparts in urban locales are being sent to expensive schools and provided with all the luxury Bisnu is working in a tea kiosk facing all the hardships trying to earn enough money so his family can survive another winter in case it does not rain. Bisnu is a source of inspiration for all the adolescent readers. Unlike the character of ‘Tom Sawyer’ who despite being an orphan enjoys his life in the sunshine of childhood, Bond’s child characters are born of reality. Almost all his characters are people he has met and interacted with. Amita Aggarwal in her book ‘The Fictional World of Ruskin Bond’ writes about Bond’s characters being primitive and elemental. Most of his men are hill folks who are motivated by universal values of truth, goodness and trust. Bond’s world is not infected by the virus of social disintegration, neck to neck competition attributed to the modern mercenary life. On the contrary, they try to remain content and happy in all situations. Just like Bisnu who has need, not greed for money. Hence, once the tea kiosk closes down for the winter he finds a job as a cleaner on a truck. The driver of the truck, Pritam Singh, treats him affectionately and respectfully. However, a near fatal accident renders Pritam Singh incapacitated and Bisnu jobless. His friend Chitru tries to persuade him to go to Delhi in order to earn more money but Bisnu refuses as he has decided to return to his village. He has earned enough to tide his family over till the next winter. His experience at the mine quarry has taught him that it is better to grow things than to destroy them.

‘The Visitor’ is yet another story of hardship, survival optimism and high moral values. Mohan an orphan sells odd assortments of goods on a tray. He goes door to door to sell his goods and studies for his high school examination at night under the street lamp. He has no home to speak of and sleeps on a bench in a park or outside some one’s house or the Verandah of a temple. He is not much affected by his present situation and is hopeful of passing the exams for a better future. He saves money to pay the examination fee for which he is appearing

privately as he cannot afford to pay the school fee. Mohan's association with Amir blossoms into true friendship as Amir offers to share his room with Mohan so he could sleep under a roof. Mohan accepts the generous offer but is very particular about leaving the room early in the morning so he would not have to burden Amir further. Mohan is a classic example of the people of the hills who are sturdy as an oak and believe in survival. The story is a true inspiration to the adolescent readers who can identify themselves with a character of their age but world apart in life and experience. Not only do these characters of Ruskin Bond give an insight into the life struggles and of the people living in the hills but they also introduce the readers to the harsh reality. Bond's stories are not fairy tales with happy endings but a reality check probably because he derives his stories and characters from real life incidents of the people he meets and observes. Mohan, too, is not able to clear his exams. He feels sad for a while but soon afterwards optimistically declares that he would pass the coming year because he now has the whole year to study. It would have been predictable and ideal had Bond given this story a happy ending with Mohan passing his exams with excellent grades and getting scholarship to study further. While this would have satisfied the readers they would have soon forgotten him but the fact that the story ends at a point where the readers keep wondering about Mohan's plight, makes sure that they do not forget this character and his struggles.

Amita Aggarwal in the preface to her book 'The Fictional World of Ruskin Bond' says,

'As an intelligent observer of human life Bond displays the maturity, sophistication and remarkable ease of a storyteller. The characters and incidents spring out of his experiences of daily life. Boy and girl, man and woman, bazaar and shop, hill and plain, the tree and forest- all are close to his observation so as to be transformed into some memorable tale'. 5

'The Bus Stop, Pipal Nagar' another fiction created from reality touches upon the struggle of four friends to survive in the present society. The protagonist, a writer struggles to become an accomplished writer while living in an eight by fifteen feet room and earning hundred rupees a month. Despite the lack of cash he refuses to accept his journalist friend's advice to write model answer papers for university students so they would not have to study hard and pass their exams the easy way. His conscience does not allow him to misguide students in this way. Deep Chand, a barber by profession, dreams of opening a saloon in Delhi but does not have enough capital. Pitambar, a cycle rickshaw driver, dreams of owning a scooter-rickshaw and driving it on the Delhi roads. Suraj, an epileptic and orphan, dreams of passing his high school exams and getting a well paid job. He goes about selling an assortment of goods on a tray and studies by night. Despite the difficulties faced by these youngsters they do not give in to wrong practices nor do they lose hope. A glass of hot, sweet, milky tea is all they need to raise their spirits. They are not afraid of problems they do not mind problems as long as they are new ones. Their optimism is the reason for their survival as Pitambar says on being asked,

'What are you dancing for'

'I am happy, so I'm dancing'

'And why are you happy?'

'Because I'm dancing'6

In other words one does not need any reason to be happy because happiness is not an accident but a state of mind. It has nothing to do with material possessions. It emerges from a heart full of contentment just like these characters who do not have two pennies to rub together yet are happy and content. When the protagonist get a job in Delhi he invites Suraj to join him but Suraj with his medical and economical condition does not want to be

a burden on his friends and promises to join him only after passing his exams. Suraj's perception of life is an eye opener for any reader.

'Yesterday I was sad, and tomorrow I might be sad again, but today I know that I am happy. I want to live on and on. One lifetime cannot satisfy my heart'⁷

These characters who are struggling to survive do not blame, curse or feel miserable about their plight. They take these adversities in stride and find reasons to be happy and enjoy the celebration called life. This attitude towards life is a source of guidance and inspiration for the adolescents living in urban localities whether hills or plains. Amita Aggarwal says in her book, 'The Fictional World of Ruskin Bond'

"A writer is not a trifler, playing with the emotions of people for earning wealth and celebrity. Bond believes that a writer should be responsible to society and man. Bond is neither a propagandist nor a philosopher. His fiction is replete with human values and universal appeal A.C. Ward's opinion about true fiction can be applied to Bond's fictional world: It is not a fairy tale, a harmless opiate for vacant hours and vacant minds".

A research study conducted on 250 students of 14 to 16 years of age to analyze individualism revealed that 79.5% showed higher individuality traits. Each student was given a set of questionnaire ranging on the scale of one to five. The results proved that these students possess individualistic attitude and are not afraid to express and show case their different-from-others, unique self. 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 or stereotypes. Living examples of such children abounds in Ruskin Bond's stories lending them credibility and authenticity.

Another research study to judge the level of morality in children was carried out on 250 students between the age of 14 to 16 years. The study revealed that 88% displayed strong moral reasoning. These students were found to be inclined towards making the right choices and expected to make the right decisions. They are more confident, have greater self esteem, sense of judgment and work on the principles. Just like Bisnu and other such characters of Ruskin Bond's stories which further proves that Bond wrote about all that he observed around him. Another research study on optimism as integral to humans particularly to children was conducted on 250 children between 14 to 16 years to assess that optimism in children is inborn. The results showed that 75% students reflect inherited optimistic traits. These students were found to be more confident and self motivated, better able to cope with adversities and can recognize and seize a good opportunity when it comes. They have the drive to work harder and for longer, tackle challenges and change the situation for better.

III CONCLUSION

This proves that Bond's characters are not wholly fictional. They are realistic and their life and experiences too are full of reality. The other aspect is that Bond's stories are not fairy tales because no matter how entertaining the fairy tales are, they provide the readers with an escape route from the harsh realities. Bond's characters are real, ordinary people trying to survive in this world. Just because they are struggling does not mean that success will be theirs. They struggle yet they fail but the hope to succeed keeps them motivated to work harder and ultimately they will succeed but Bond's focus is on the 'struggle' and 'hope'. These are the key factors that will ultimately lead them to success. He wants his readers to walk with these characters on their

journey of struggle, failure and resilience because the true meaning of courage is not to reach the goal but to get back on your feet no matter how many times you fail. 'I know for sure that having the courage to stand up and pursue your wildest dreams will give you life's richest reward and life's greatest adventure'.⁸

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