

Ruskin Bond's Rusty Series: Textualization of Self

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Abstract: Ruskin Bond holds a unique position among the Indian English writers for children and is one of the most beloved story tellers. His child fiction is subjective in nature and there is a great deal of self-portrayal in Bond's writings. This paper is an attempt to study and analyze the 'Rusty Series' of Bond and to establish the fact that the character of Rusty is the self-image of the writer himself, which reflects his personality and philosophy of life.

Key Words: Text, Self, Life, Autobiography, Self-revelation.

I suppose most writers, to a greater or lesser extent, base their fictional characters upon real people. Mine come very close to the reality. It is my own response to them that varies. The most fictional of all my characters is myself" (Bond *Lone Fox Dancing* 136).

There is a great deal of self-portrayal in Bond's writings which reflects the writer as a person- a human being in making; his mental frame as a child and later life and the psychological aspects of his life which influenced his writings, both consciously and unconsciously. The Rusty series of Bond is an expression of his own life from childhood to adult age, portraying his journey from the world of innocence to the larger world. Rusty is Ruskin behind the pen.

He prefers to explore himself through his writings and always writes in subjective mode. He admits sincerely, 'I like writing for children, and get along well with them. Basically it depends on your

nature. In my case I've always wanted to rediscover childhood. Mine wasn't a happy one. And maybe I try to recreate it through other people's childhood. That way I find a certain lost happiness. (Kumar)

If a writer's life incidents correspond with that of the protagonist of his writings, critics identify that work as autobiographical. Different definitions pertaining to the word 'autobiography' can be applicable to Bond's fiction too. Most of his tales are tinged by his first-hand experiences, encounters and impressions. Bijay Kumar Das remarks: "The incidents and situation depicted in his stories are not wholly fictional. He projects a part of his personality into his stories to make them authentic and interesting" (113). The major concern here is to establish the point that Rusty series of Bond is primarily an autobiographical narrative. Rusty is the protagonist and the story revolves around him dealing with his life from the age of seven to the age of fifty. The notable incidents and turn of events in Rusty's life resembles and correlate with Bond's life. 'The Window' is a beautiful tale in which he textualize himself thus:

My name was Rusty, I was of British parentage, and I was twelve years old. I had been born right there-in Dehra- but had no family to speak of. My parents had separated when I was just four, and my mother had remarried. I had spent most of my childhood with my father,...But my father had passed away suddenly because of malaria and my mother, though, she tried to include me in her life again, couldn't really pay much attention to me. (*Rusty Runs Away* 4)

Childhood memories are very impressionable and deep rooted. They hold a special place in one's life and shape their frame of mind and build their attitude and personality. Bond's father and grandfather introduced him to the world of nature and its various aspects; beauty, bounty, balance, freshness, cycles, sustainability, human interrelationship etc. They instill green values in the heart and mind of child Ruskin that get manifested in several of his stories like 'Grandfather's Private Zoo', 'The Conceited Python', 'Henry: A Chameleon', 'A Hornbill Called Harold', 'A Crow in the House', 'The Adventures of Toto' etc. Accentuating this fact Bond in his book *Scenes from a Writer's Life* writes: "According to my mother, my

grandfather did keep a number of interesting pets and I have described them and their activities in some of my tales” (xiv).

Bond’s unhappy and insecure childhood makes him more solicitous towards children and develops in him a deep understanding of child psychology. His own problematic and lonely childhood inclined him to share his early traumatic experiences in the form of children’s stories. Bond mentions in *Scenes from a writer’s life*: “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. I find that those who have contented, normal childhood, seldom remember much about them; nor do they have much insight into the world of children” (3).

In 1970’s owing to some personal and professional problems Bond turned to writing exclusively for children. He has a strong empathy with children and also understands their psyche in a better way and this endows him with a power to delineate the innocent world of children and their encounter with the larger world with conviction and veridicality. S. C. Dwivedi in his article remarks:

When we read Ruskin Bond we feel that his books have been written by a child. That shows his strength. He has the capacity to peep into the heart of his characters drawn against the background of nature. He is superb while dealing with the psychology of children. It appears he lives permanently in their inner and outer weather dearly....The world of children is the world of innocence, simplicity and grandeur. (156-157)

Bond’s short stories for children are an intimate expression of his own life, his mind, his feelings and all that makes his individuality. His own childhood and adulthood find beautiful expression in his works. His stories are his best biography and give us his complete view of the world. Never was there a man to whom the past was more a vital part of his life in the present.

Bond's earnestness for truthful communication insinuates his concern to actively engage his readers with what he has to offer in his writerly journey of self-discovery. Bond's refusal (or failure) to limit himself while ideating his protagonist emerges from this promise of loyalty in the 'act of communication' with the readers. It is not unlikely to think that when he tells a story, he appears to be a part of it. Sometimes, the fine line between the fictional self and the author-persona trespass unhesitatingly. (Pal 11)

Ruskin Bond is a visualizer of memories. His writings are replete with his memories of the past. His past experiences have a curious fascination for him, with the result that, no matter what the subject he is dealing with he tends to look backward. This 'retroversion' to the past may be illustrated with reference to several of his stories.

'The Room of Many Colours', 'Coming Home to Dehra' and 'The Funeral' are highly relatable to Ruskin's personal life, although he fictionalizes them by adding fancy and imagination. 'The Room of Many Colours' throws light on Ruskin's childhood days when he lives with his father in Jamnagar, here in the old palace he discovered a room with glass windows of different colours. Bond spent much time in that empty room which appeared magical to him. Later he wrote the above mentioned story around that room. His grandmother's gardener Dukhi also emerges in this story. Thus, real life events and characters flashed and came into sight in many of his stories

'Coming Home to Dehra' is yet another autobiographical story that reveals the pain and suffering of a little boy which he felt after his father's sudden death. His loneliness and anxiety is very poignantly detailed by Bond. The young boy was going to meet his mother after a long time but was not feeling happy. "As the train drew into Dehra, I looked out of the window to see if there was anyone on the platform waiting to

receive me...I waited another ten minutes, but no representative of my mother or stepfather appeared” (Bond, *Rusty the Boy from the Hills* 196).

The above snippet from the story is a glimpse from Bond’s real life. He mentioned in his *Autobiography: Lone Fox Dancing*: “I expected to see my mother on the platform, but she wasn’t there. Not a familiar face anywhere; not even an aunt” (*Lone Fox Dancing* 75). This story details many true life incidents of Ruskin Bond which ensued after his father’s death. He also mentions about the happy times that he had spent with his father when he was alive and how his life changes afterwards. The agony and pain of a ten year old boy is impact fully described by him. This tale also highlights the psychological need of a child for parental security.

Another story that Bond pens down reminiscing his childhood is ‘The Last Tonga Ride’ in this tale he introduces two real life characters Bansi Lal, the tonga driver and Ayah. Bond enjoyed Bansi lal’s company who gives him free tonga rides. *The Room on the Roof* and *The Vagrants in the Valley*, its sequel, depicts the struggles of Rusty to stood firmly on his own foot and to gain ground in the literary arena, working hard to fulfill his epoch dream of becoming a writer, with confidence and courage, optimism and positivity. ‘Alone in the World’ and ‘The Hills and Beyond’ describes Rusty’s self-quest for identity, his loneliness and struggle, his friendships and adventures with Somi, Kishen and Dilip, throwing light on the feelings of loneliness and insecurity and adolescent infatuation. He mentions in his autobiography: “All these good friends and neighbours went into my journals, although at the time I had no idea that some of them would later be fictionalized and turn up in my first book, *The Room on the Roof*. The ‘room’ in my novel was certainly the real one,...And Somi and krishan and Ranbir went into the book unchanged” (*Lone Fox Dancing* 136).

His real life friends Daljeet, Haripal, Ranbir and Somi all supported him and motivated him to effectuate and turn his aspiration into reality. His extra ordinary dexterity in portraying the theme of childhood and growing up has been best illustrated through his autobiographical and semi-autobiographical novellas like *The Room on the Roof*, *Vagrants in the Valley*, *Rusty*, *the Boy from the Hills*, *Rusty Runs Away* and stories like 'My Father's Trees in Dehra', 'The Last Tonga Ride', 'Coming Home to Dehra', 'A Job Well Done', 'The woman on Platform No. 8', 'The Playing Fields of Shimla', 'When you Can't Climb Trees any more' etc.

Ruskin recounts his early feelings of insecurity and isolation and fictionalizes them in his short stories. Personal agonies, childhood dilemmas and adolescent problems are communicated through child characters; filled with curiosity, dreams, desires, energy, sensation and pure unconditional love. The major corpus of his writings manifests the theme of childhood and growing up. Like Charles Dickens, his favourite author, he portrays the child characters with great authenticity. "I think it would be true to say that Copperfield set me off on the road to literature. I identified with young David and wanted to grow up to be a writer like him" (*Room of Many Colours: A Treasury of Stories for Children* xi).

Dehra, Shimla, Mussoorie, the mighty Himalayas, maple and Deodar forests and scores of beautiful places in small town India touched with old memories were like living characters in Bond's vision. He cherished with the same fondness the places in Jamnagar linked with the early recollections of his childhood, of his father, mother, aunt and ayah and gardener and many other acquaintances. He was loved by a circle of the choicest friends, and his friendships in no small way contribute to the genesis of his stories.

Bond struggled hard for full forty-five years of his life and his literary oeuvre is an expression of his loneliness, struggle and emotional complexes along with adventure and friendships. In a way his writings are in the nature of self-revelation manifesting his feelings, thoughts and vision of life, autobiographical note

runs dominantly through all of his works. In fact, the elements of autobiography recurrently infuse itself in Bond's child fiction. The autobiographical factuality of his Rusty series is indisputable. Actually while writing the Rusty series Bond implicitly is making a cathartic effort. The life journey of Rusty bears an unmistakable identity to the journey of his creator in quite similar circumstances. Rusty in Rusty series is the projection of Ruskin himself. .

Bond pens down the churnings of his heart. He pours down his experiences filled with fun and adventure, love and agony. The joys and woes of growing up, challenges of childhood, family, friendship all find place in his child fiction. Whatever his eyes met, whatever he discern he make a mental note of that and later put it into words. His stories unravel the hidden or concealed part of his mind before the child readers and help them in understanding both the author and his writings.

Hence, it is clear that recollections and reminiscences of the past are very significant and vital ingredient in the stories of Bond. To realize the place which Bond's recollections and reminiscences of the past occupy in his works, we have only to imagine these stories without them.

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