



Pluralism & Diverse Spirits in South Asian Children's Literature: Characterization of

Children by Ruskin Bond in his Writings

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Abstract: Love for Literature existed since time immemorial. Literature is imaginative works specific to the writers with their unique ways of portraying nature, the people, and the ways of life. South Asian Literature varying in poetry, drama, non-fiction, prose, and fiction exists with the themes of love, religion, redemption, revenge, etc. engulfing huge space both geographically and culturally and has been able to establish itself as one of the most incredibly rich literature to offer. In spite of the diversity of this region, children's literature, through the concept of storytelling, finds an important aspect in the form of fables, tales, picture books, lullabies, and songs. Ample number of children's tales from South Asia is remarkable. And when it comes to children's literature it is Ruskin Bond, the Indian author, who has been penning down since his first novel in 1956. He has a unique way of highlighting the children in the flesh and blood of the locality encompassing nature.

Keywords: children's literature, diversity, Ruskin Bond, short stories, storytelling

Every area has its unique ways and this finds expression through portrayal in the literature of that part of globe, encompassing description of nature, people, and ways of life which provides an idea of that area at that point of time and references in days to come. Literature is the medium of such works and styles that are specific to writers. It may also be said as the way of recording and transmitting knowledge and scenes that writers saw during that point of time and preserving those in the form of writing. These throw a meaningful insight into contemporary society where cultures contribute greatly to knowing evolution, history, and culture. South Asian region also paced with the world in field of literature as an art form including works in various fiction, and non-fiction categories in the region as well as in English. Literature here, too, developed to provide entertainment, enlightenment, or instruction to reader, listeners, and those who learn by seeing. Ample literature displays almost like pictures and images of that specific time, place, and age. In

fact, South Asian literature diverges in rich and is spreading through as many as eight to nine countries making it a variety into a single term. It is believed that some of these even belong to the bronze age. The Sanskrit, the Pali, and the Chinese are considered to be major contributors to South Asian literature with themes varying from love, religion, story of its time, redemption, revenge, etc. This genre of literature combines all types of poetry, drama, non-fiction, prose, and fiction which were able to attract readers to date.

One of the assets of these South Asia Literature is that they were to be found in multiple languages including English, as it is spread over almost eight to nine countries of this region. Virtually spreading over the tropics i.e. a huge space both geographically and culturally and has been able to establish itself as one of the most incredibly rich literature to offer. And diversity is, thus, quite obvious. Talking alone of our own country, India, which too falls within this ambit having such diversified literature linguistically. Although the themes are based on the region of a particular country, its variants have much in common with each other and in fact, many of these cut across South Asian literature and bind it together into something specific to the region. With the change of time, however, the focus of South Asian literature has been independence from Britain, too, which finds a place through writings especially evident in prose. Having their base in history, these genres are stated to be having oldest recorded pieces in literature since their traces in the Rig Veda. Tenali Ramakrishnan, Muhammad Quli Qutb Shah, Sahab Kaul, Pir Roshan, Saadat Hasan Manto, and Ismat Chughtai were a few names associated with this period and region in the field of literature of South Asia.

South Asian literature reflects culture not only in folktales and historical stories but also in modern-day and fantasy worlds as well. In spite of vast and diverse region, the variety of array of languages and religions remains connected through art, dance, food, history, traditions, and literature. “Room in Your Heart” by Kunzang Choden and Pema Tshering; “Dear Mrs Naidu” by Mathangi Subramaniam; ‘American as Paneer Pie’ by Supriya Kelkar is a story of newly arrived

immigrant Avantika having duality of countries of America and India; ‘Finding Om’ by Rashmi Bismark. It is to be found that as much as 7% of children’s literature was written by authors from South Asian region in the year 2018 as per a review at cmllibrary.bibliocommcommons.com/list/share/117684117/1871942239. One of the genres of literature is children’s literature which has been developing along with other types. This has been done by authors through the concept of story-telling which also finds an important feature in this South Asian part of the world and is well reflected in the literature. An ample number of children’s tales is from the likes of Japan, Korea, Indonesia, China, Bangladesh, Pakistan and not to say India. These come as fables, tales, picture books, lullabies, songs bring in the increase in languages and also emotional and cognitive skills.

Children’s literature and the material culture of childhood have always had a special place in minds of readers. The aesthetic, pedagogic culture and materials of the region are an important element of South Asian children’s literature. The development of children’s literature in leading languages lies in heavy reliance on rich oral and folk traditions of the country. Panchatantra and Hitopadesha of our country are worth mentioning. Many translations were also found during the colonial rule that brought in the increase in the volume of literature and children’s literature was not left out though. This literature has expanded so much that there have been books and stories about characters of South Asian ethnicity. “Bindiya in India” by Monique Chheda and Debasmita Dasgupta, “Bracelets for Bina’s Brothers” by Rajani LaRocca and Chaaya Prabhat, “Hannah and the Ramadan Gift” by Qasim Rashid and Aaliya Jaleel are a few of this category. Chapter books by South Asian Authors for Children *are Book Uncle and Me, Midsummer’s Mayhem*, etc.

Literature for children is books for children or young people are categorized into primarily concept, predictable, narrative, and informational and these may come in the form of a board book, fairy tales, or real-life stories of famous persons so that young minds may be inspired and follow at times to achieve success in their own life. Sardindu Bandhyopadhyay, Upendrakishore Ray

Choudhary from Bengal, Kuzhanthai Kavignar as popularly known is one of the famous poets of the children, catering to various groups belonging to Tamil Nadu, Buri Aair Sadhu, Tejimola and *Lora Bandhu* magazine in Assamese literature edited by Karunabhiram Barua is a children's work as early as 1888. Masood Ahmed Barkati, Mahnaz Malik from Pakistan, Rituraj Bhowmik, Sufia Khatun from Bangladesh, Andrea Hirata, Nh. Dini from Indonesia Dedie King Theikpan soe Myint Naing belonging to Mynmaar, Murasaki Shikibu from Japan, a novelist and poet belonging to the imperial court in the Heian period. Best known for the *Tale of Genji*, one of the pioneer novels from Japan. This novel, said to be the full novel of that time, played a substantial role in formation of culture of the country which is still intact. This novel gives a clear image of culture and literary understanding of Japan too. This also throws light on the works at the court.

On the home front, R. K. Narayan, Swami and *Malgudi Days* are a combination that one can never forget while Anant Pai, creator of many famous characters like Supandi, the duo in Tantri the Mantri, Shikari Sambhu, Prolific writer, Sudha Murty, all write for children who belong from India again are also noteworthy. On the other hand, writers like Jhumpa Lahiri, an American Indian with her lyrical, elegant yet simple, and warmly descriptive, expertly written novels and poems are a charm to read. Mohsin Hamid's literary fiction includes *Moth Smoke*, *The Reluctant Fundamentalist* who originates from this region but is now staying elsewhere in the world. Donna and Vikesh Amey Bhatt also have written a fascinating, engaging history of India, Pakistan, Bangladesh, and Britain: *Lands of Belonging* are a few famous writers named here as an example who have greatly contributed to writing for children from the South Asian region. One cannot but mention many children writers themselves evolving to be great authors writing for their fellow children, Ayaan Kapadia, a fourth standard boy has been officially declared as the youngest author in India by the *Indian Book of Records* which has come as a welcoming news. A four-year-old boy, Ayan Gogoi Gohain, hailing from my state, Assam has been able to achieve the title of a wonder kid who has managed to pen a book named *Honeycomb*.

But, when it comes to children's literature, a name that promptly sprouts into my mind is the Indian author of Hearts but adults alike is Ruskin Bond, who has been penning down since his first novel that won him the John Llewellyn Rhys Prose for his first novel *The room on the Roof* in 1957 when he was still at school. He is best known for his short stories which are more than five hundred in number and these include essays, and novellas spreading over forty books for children. He has a unique way of telling the stories, the highlight of the stories are mainly children of a locality encompassing nature. He is also famous for authorizing very prolific literature books for children that are marked with simplicity, directness of style, and authenticity of persons and experiences that these children depict. His "Our Trees Still Grows in Dehra" fetched him one of India's prestigious Sahitya Academy Awards in 1992. His writings greatly contribute to the South Asian literature that is influenced by the life in the hill stations, and nature, depicting the changes taking place around development. He is one of the finest writers for Children who is blessed with simplicity and powered with the skill to provide pictorial illustration making it easy for young minds to understand and visualize the content. He has conjured up magical literary landscapes especially of the hills where he has been living and where his heroes, the energetic children, play pivotal roles. He is considered as an icon of children's literature.

Bond's writings also produce some influence of post-independence era as found in South Asian literature. The best example is his first story, "The Room on the Roof", which explores a British child who desires to mix up with the commoners. Again, the story "The Thief" expresses the way he wishes to reform the criminal through love and understanding instead of punishment or admonitions. His works also project the Anglo- Indian Community when he refers to construction of nation that is a mixture of many diverse communities. Ruskin Bond, through his characters, tries to develop his vision of childhood who are as simple and honest, usually pondering over simple thoughts of fireflies, trees growing in the neighbourhood, happy over petty things, fears of being alone on a night full of lightening, not judging by anyone's looks, adventurous, etc. Children find a special place in his short stories. It is through characters that he can remain and retain a special place

in the hearts and minds of his readers. This prolific writer with his brilliant capacity can fill the ordinary-looking children's character with life, sights & and feelings of plains and hills that are usually drawn at the backdrop in the small town of the mighty Himalayas.

These features, retain and absorb the worldliness of a child's imagination, and emotions into the readers, who find it difficult to keep aside the book until it is finished. The soft, pure nature of children finds high regard in mind of the writer which is quite clear in most of his short stories. The Beauty of children characters of Ruskin Bond lies in their portrayal to be very hard working, adventurous, and sensitive in dealing with situations. In *The Fictional World of Ruskin Bond* (2005), Amita Aggarwal has superbly pointed out that Bond is a keen observer of children in rural while drawing them in the backdrop of rustic hills and, thus, their capacity for hard work and spirits of adventure is inbuilt. The children's characters are usually introduced without much role to play except for a few, they remain undeveloped and are often side-lined but in stories of Ruskin Bond they grow and develop throughout the story to be able to release facts of life and also face the reality. "The Room on the Roof," "The Blue Umbrella," "Untouchable," "The Angry River," "Rain in the Mountains," "Dust on the Mountains," "The Thief," "The Guardian Angel," "At School with Ruskin Bond," "The Cherry Tree," "The Tiger" in "The Tunnel" are a few to name from the huge assembly of his creations having his young & attractive protagonists that remain in the reader's heart forever.

The children characters, thus, in Ruskin Bond's stories are not heroic figures, damsels waiting for a prince to rescue them, or super cops but from the common masses, those are found in our neighbourhood who are of course extraordinary out-of-ordinary children of flesh and blood. His characters somehow look familiar and as they are so relatable seem to stay with us for a long time. One must say each story has an underlying moral that is expressed in an easy-flowing way. Through the children's character, Ruskin Bond wishes to project his own vision of childhood. A few of his characters are drawn from personal experiences, from places that were close to his heart, his unfulfilled passions, love for animals and nature it is vivid, and charming and reflects rich

imagination a child may possess within. Rusty is one of the well-known fictional characters of Ruskin Bond. Bisnu, from his “Dust on the Mountain,” is an honest, hard-working, and optimistic boy who, due to hardship at home, moves to the city to work to meet the two ends. But he finds himself in a situation in which he is frustrated and speaks out that it is better to grow things on land than to blast things out of it; this is how Bond expresses the ills of deforestation leading to changes in the environment and its effect on climate. Rakesh plants a cherry tree and is amazed to find the cherry tree growing due to his little care.

Nakoo, the crocodile, is funny, gentle, and kind yet an attraction for children to read his stories. The attractions of the “An Island of Trees” are the goat, the hornbill, the monkey, and the chameleon. While Sita, the protagonist of the short story “Angry River” is a simple young girl who lives with her grandparents in a very rustic mud house. She is simple, generous leading a simple life. She is, however, equally strong and determined which we come to know when she finds herself amidst flood, but, does not forget to pick up her selected belongings. During this, she had witnessed the fury of nature but her composure is intact till she is rescued by a boy. Further, the focus is also on emotional intelligence of characters of this short story where emphasis for the need to control emotions as has been found in the simple girl child. Here the attributes of self-awareness and self-regulation find a place in Sita, the main protagonist. These are examples of how the children heroes, the protagonists grow and develop in Bond’s writings.

Bond also has a few of the poems in his kitty which are equally engrossing and appealing. The underlying lesson is providing knowledge, values, and education to children and adult readers alike. He wanted to spread the thought that moral values and right ways of life are to be taught to children in their early life expecting them to be better human beings in the later stage of their life. “What Can We Give Our Children” is one of the must-reads having this idea capsuled into merely ten odd poetic lines. “Don’t be Afraid of the Dark” is a poem found in the grade four standard written by him which provides strength to children and explains why night falls after a day and one

need not be afraid as it is necessary for the sun to set so that after the hard day's work, the mother earth may take rest. He urges kids to enjoy the moon and stars as they appear in the night sky and instead of fear grow within them the willpower to make the darkness of the night a friend of theirs. Although it appears to be a simple thing yes, many kids are often afraid of this darkness and Bond here tries addressing this natural phenomenon for kids so that they may come out of shell of fear and bloom instead. Like his other compositions in fact his poem for children was as simple, rhythmic full of mirth as his short stories. Morals that are to be found in Bond's writings be it the short stories or the poems bear a strong message to its readers, children and adults alike and one of such came when he laments on the current scenario of environmental degradation through his poem "Dirge of Dehradun" which is stated to be happening due to man-made issues of the rise in population, rapid infrastructure development that is directly effecting ecology, decrease in the water bodies and the menace of ever-increasing wastes having no scientific ways or method of disposal.

The message that Ruskin Bond wishes to put forward to young readers through his children's literature is that enjoying nature, enjoying life, reading, and living under the sun helps one to grow which will bring out the best within one, learning from the experiences, help overcome hard situations, hardships of life, etc. The Indian Council for Child Education has recognized his pioneering role in promoting and in the growth of children's literature and has awarded him with the country's highest literary award, the Sahitya Academy in the year 1992. He secured a remarkable and unique place among readers, he is one of the most loved and longest-read authors representing South Asian literature, who is crowned as the pioneer of modern children's literature of India from the South Asian region. Literature from the South Asian region is contributing immensely and has been able to provide an indelible mark and create space of its own. It is helping to give insight to the rich, pluralistic cultural exchange, and diversified knowledge making it worth globally.

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