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## **Art of Characterization in Ruskin Bond's Child Fiction: A Study**

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**Abstract:** Bond is an iconic children's writer and his child fiction has made an indelible impression on his readers. His unique narrative style makes him one of the most lovable authors among children. He conceives ideas for his stories from his day to day life experiences and observations. The elements of setting, theme and characters are more focused upon by him. The people he met and the places he visits provide him food for thought which later he visualizes and then put to paper using beautiful language. Bond's characters are lifelike characters. He draws them from real life experiences. There is nothing extraordinary or improbable about them yet they manifest themselves in an astounding way revealing new insights into human nature. This paper delves into the literary craftsmanship of Ruskin Bond, focusing on the study of art of characterization in his child fiction and to probe into the intricacies and development of his ostensibly simple characters.

**Key Words:** Fiction, Characterization, Culture, Common man, Real.

**Introduction:** The narrative style of Bond is remarkable and singular. In his child fiction we find both substance and depth. His approach is fresh and direct and his expression simple but vigorous. As a fictionist he is a great delineator of characters. "Characters are *who the story is about*, and the action revolves around them. Brown and Stephens (2007) believe that 'the effective development of the main character may be the single most important element of the work' (170)..." (qtd. in Anderson 32) Bond successfully depicts characters with high moral values and through them helps children to attain the wisdom to lead a meaningful and positive life.

Characterization is one of the most essential elements of the art of storytelling. It "refers to the process by which a writer reveals the personality, traits, and motivations of a character in a story. This can be accomplished through various means, including direct description, dialogue, actions and interactions with other characters." (literary-devices.com/characterization)

**Discussion:** Bond's characters are true to life characters. Common men and women; Gardener, tonga-drivers, ayahs, school boys, traders, chawkidars, vendors, farmers, labourers, basket-sellers, goat-herds, schoolteachers, truck drivers, prostitutes, sweeper boy etc populate his fiction. "The art of characterization is the art of presenting the people who populate your story" (Ray Harvey)

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He draws characters from real life experiences. There is nothing extraordinary or improbable about them. The characters created by him are relatable and fully convincing. Most of his characters are governed by their emotions and not by their intellect. Apparently simple, his major characters are complex or dynamic characters, they grow and develop along with the plot and attain maturity. They are all acted upon by the situations in which they are placed by the author. His characters are both types as well as individuals. As types they represent their particular class but as individuals they have their own strengths and weaknesses. Bond says, "Meet some of the people I can never forget... because their individuality made them stand out from the common place. It was not money or success but pride in them that set them apart. People like my granny or my father, or the old kite maker, or the wayside station's khilasi, or the epileptic boy who sold trinkets for a living" (*Friends in Small Places* vii).

Bond also created some fictional characters based on his real life friends and relatives. His grandfather, granny, father, uncle Ken, Aunt Ruby, Dukhi the gardener all make appearance in his tales. In 'Introduction' to his book *The Parrot Who Wouldn't Talk and Other Stories* he writes: "I think everyone has at least one eccentric aunt or uncle in the family. I had more than one. Strong, unforgettable characters, all of them." (viii) All the stories collated in this book are about his family, friends and relatives.

The protagonists of his children's stories are usually Indian children like Binya, Koki, Sita, Madhu, Somi, Ranbir, Kishan, Anil, Bisnu, Ranjit, Bijju, Mani etc. Most of his child characters are motivated by Indian values of love, friendship, truth, goodness, obedience, endurance, mutual trust and respect for elders. Amita Aggarwal in her book *'The Fictional World of Ruskin Bond'* remarks: "Bond fabricates a simple unambitious, innocent world, where man does not cut each other's throat for his advancement. His characters struggle hard for their survival but the 'weariness, fever and fret' have not disillusioned them" (18).

Bond's stories give insights about the values that a child needs to learn to become a better and responsible person. Bond deals with issues related to the lives of the young characters; their problems, inter-personal conflicts and moral dilemmas in such a way, that despite adversities and hardships they never deviate from the path of truth and virtue. Prafulla Kumar Sahoo also opines, "...the child characters of Ruskin Bond are much more than children having common traits. They are not ordinary but extra-ordinary. They show exceptional dexterity even during a terrible crisis. They do not break down. They are the embodiment of courage and fortitude. They can think and act like adults" (473).

Bond's characters reflect personal and socio-cultural values and cultivate divergent thinking. Stories like 'Dust on the Mountain', 'Getting Granny's Glasses', 'The Fight', 'The Blue Umbrella', 'The Angry River', 'Woman on Platform no. 8', 'The Crooked Tree', 'The Thief', 'The Guardian

Angel', 'Bhabhiji's House', 'The Photograph', 'The Tree Lover', 'The Window', 'Most Beautiful' etc. are replete with Indian values and ethics like truth, non-violence, love, kindness, perseverance, sacrifice, empathy, sharing and giving, adaptability, family bondage, courage, hope, honesty and value of education etc.

The most striking feature of Bond's art of characterization is the detailed description of the physical appearance of a character. He introduces his personae by describing their appearance. For example in 'The Window', he writes about Koki thus: "She had long black hair that fell to her waist, tied with a single red ribbon. Her eyes were black like her hair and just as shiny. She must have been ten... (Bond, *Rusty Runs Away* 2). We can visualize Binya in 'The Blue Umbrella' as "Like most mountain girls, Binya was quite sturdy, fair of skin, with pink cheeks and dark eyes and her black hair tied in a pigtail. She wore pretty glass bangles on her wrists, and a necklace of glass beads." (*Bond's Children's Omnibus* 18). Both Binya and Koki represents Indian girls in traditional set up. Bond describes Ranbir, Suri, Somi and his mother in 'It Happened One Spring'. He details the appearance of Somi that unveils his cheerful mannerism. "His legs were long and athletic, his colour was an unusually rich gold, his features were fine, his mouth easily broke into friendliness" (*Rusty Runs Away* 118). He skillfully sketches the personality of Kishen, Mr. Kapoor and Meena Kapoor in 'The Room on the Roof'. Rusty shares his impression about Meena in these words; "She was a capable person, still young, a charming hostess, and, in her red sari and white silk jacket, her hair plaited and scented with jasmine, she looked beautiful" (61).

In Bond's child fiction, dialogue is another means of character revelation. For example through the dialogue between Sunder Singh and Suraj in 'The Tunnel' Bond exhibits Sunder Singh's valour and concern for wildlife: "Yes, my friend. And if we don't drive the leopard out of the tunnel, it will be run over and killed. I can't let that happen" (163).

Another way of character portrayal is through actions. For instance Binya in the Blue Umbrella reveals her good heartedness thus: "...but she didn't want him to feel too bad about what he'd done, because it made her feel bad about herself; and so she closed the umbrella whenever she came near the shop, opening it again only when she was out of sight" (*Children's Omnibus* 39). In the same story Ram Bharosa's greed and ill will is made known to the readers through his act of stealing the umbrella. "Ever since it had become known that Ram Bharosa had tried to have the umbrella stolen, the village people had turned against him" (*Ruskin Bond's Children's Omnibus* 38).

Another method employed by Bond is psychological analysis of characters to reveal the inner recesses of their mind. For instance characters like Sita in the 'Angry River', Binya and Ram Bharosa in 'The Blue Umbrella', Miss Mackenzie in 'The Prospect of Flowers', The Rani in 'The Room of Many

Colours', Mehmood in 'The Kitemaker' and Rusty – the mirror image of Ruskin in Rusty fiction. Bond unveils the inner state of mind of various characters on different occasions.

Endowed with a great insight into the psychology of man he is motivated to write about what is uncommonly common in human nature. Therefore, his prime concern while writing a story is to highlight the extraordinary in an ordinary type of man. The story moves with the development or some revelation in the character within the folds of a given situation. Resultantly, there are a number of moving character-portraits bright and serene in varied colours and shades. (Bhatt 123).

Bond skillfully captures the mental turmoil of both Binya and Rambharosa in his favourite novella 'The Blue Umbrella', revealing Binya's thoughts he writes:

She kept reasoning with herself, telling herself that the umbrella was her very own, and that she couldn't help it if others were jealous of it. But had she loved the umbrella too much? Had it mattered more to her than people mattered? She couldn't help feeling that in a small way she was the cause of the sad look on Ram Bharosa's face and the ruinous condition of his shop. (39)

Rusty is the most complex character delineated by Bond, also he is the most important character as he appeared in several of Bond's short stories and novellas. We see him grow, struggle and achieve his desired goal of becoming a writer through series of Rusty fiction. He was described by Bond as "a pale boy, with blue grey eyes and fair hair; his face was rough and marked, and lower lip hung loose and heavy. He had his hands in his pockets and his head down, which was the way he always walked, and which gave him a deceptively tired appearance. He was a lazy but not a tired person" (*The Room on the Roof* 4).

Bond deftly captured the adolescent psychology and narrated Rusty's thoughts and feelings, when he was staying with his guardian Mr. Harrison in detail: "Rusty wanted to argue, longed to rebel, but fear of Mr. Harrison held him back. He wanted to resist the man's authority, but he was conscious of the supple Malacca cane in the glass cupboard" (*The Room on the Roof* 30).

In 'Bhabiji's House' we encounter characters of different dispositions. It is a story of a Punjabi joint family in which Bhabiji herself is a very complex character. Madhu and Manju, the two girls in the family are binary opposite characters. Madhu is a hardworking, sensible and mature girl on the other hand Manju is a self-centered and frivolous girl. Through these two Bond presents the complexities of human nature in a very expressive way. He writes about Madhu, the fourteen- year- old granddaughter of Bhabiji thus:

Madhu is made attractive by the gravity of her countenance. She is always thoughtful, reflective; seldom speaks, smiles rarely...I wonder what she thinks about as she scrubs floors, prepares meals with Bhabiji, washes dishes and even finds a few hard-pressed moments for her school work... Madhu is Bhabiji's favourite. She has made herself so useful that she is above all reproach. Apart from that, there is a certain measure of aloofness about her- she does not get involved in domestic squabbles...(Calypso Christmas, 51)

Bond very deftly sketches the character of Madhu, she is the making of her circumstances. Her father went to England and left her mother alone. Madhu is eldest child of her mother and understands the situation. Eventualities turned her into an introvert child rather a premature adult. She keeps herself busy in household chores and remains isolated from domestic arguments. Whereas Manju her cousin is of a totally different nature. Bond describes her as "a sensuous creature and, like most sensuous people, is lazy by nature. She does not like sweeping because the boy next door can see her at it, and she wants to appear before him in a more glamorous light..." (Calypso Christmas, 52).

Children of different age group both boys and girls constitute the fictional world of Bond. They represent the world of children across the world. Culturally looking, Bond's characters belong to different ethnic groups. In his texts, we can meet Hindus, Sikhs and Muslims, Christians, Anglo-Indians and middle class Europeans.

**Conclusion:** Bond's characters, to some extent unfold his vision of life. His belief that happiness is within the reach of those people who feel contended in life and who accept the challenges of life humbly is very well presented by the personae of Bisnu in 'Panther's Moon', Pritam Singh and Nathu in 'The Last Truck Ride', Sita in 'Angry River', and Sunder Singh in 'The Tunnel'. Some unforgettable characters whose individuality set them apart are Kishen Singh, the watchman at the railway station who saves the Leopard from being run over by the train (The Tunnel), unnamed woman, a stranger who takes care of a boy at the railway station (Woman on Platform No 8). Mehmood the old artisan, who stoically accepts the rejection of society (The Kite Maker). Little Binya and Ram Bharosa, who overcomes their greed and gain knowledge through self-experience that love and humanity is all that is needed to lead a happy and contended life. Most of Bond's characters are Indians both in appearance and in outlook.

Thus we see that Bond is a master creator of characters and has painted a vast canvas of characters. His apparently simple characters are not static. They grow and evolve mentally, emotionally as well as physically and leave deep impression on his readers. They are not cardboard characters but rather they are of flesh and blood.

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