CHAPTER-II

RUSKIN BOND :

WRITING FOR THE

ADOLESCENT READER IN INDIA
2.1. THE LAMP IS LIT: LEAVES FROM A JOURNAL.

Ruskin Bond is one of the most prolific writers of India writing in English for children. He may be termed as the first writer who is writing consciously and meticulously for the adolescents in the Indian subcontinent.

With the writing career of over 50 years, his writings for young reader in India have paved the way for new writers. He has inspired many young writers to take up a career in writing for the adolescent children. Son of a British father who served in the Royal Indian air force during the British rule in India, Bond takes pride in his dual heritage. He is a novelist, diarist, essayist, poet and a scriptwriter. He even wrote a play.

Ruskin Bond is mainly a writer of fiction who writes consciously and meticulously for a teenager. His stories prescribed in school textbooks, throughout India, are of adventure, exploring train tunnels, mountain tops, hills and valleys, which are the themes close to the heart of a teenagers all over the world.

"In some ways the lives of Indian children aren't very different from anywhere else." says Ruskin Bond, in one of his interviews. Their aspirations, what gives pleasure or sorrow are universal. Jumping in a pool of water, playing games making friends, losing friends, making friends again are common to children everywhere. The differences are mainly in geography, custom and the economy that the rural children
The Lamp is Lit: Leaves from a Journal, contains autobiographical sketches and essays published in journals. The best loved author of children’s books in English, Ruskin Bond, declares, “This work is a celebration of my survival as a freelancer.”

The first part of the work contains an account of his struggle to be a published author. He aptly assigns his success to his “stubbornness and persistence as much as his talent.” His early forays into literary magazine along with some examples of his work published during that period throw light on his life away from the hills. Four years in London and five years in Delhi provided a preamble to the budding writer who ‘blossomed’ into children’s writer. In his writings he brought the child and Nature together. As he grew up he learnt to laugh at himself. It is this sense of humor that makes him laugh at the eccentricities of life. This is the secret of his survival against all odds.

For Ruskin Bond, there is no difference between his life and his works. His work is his life and his life is depicted in his works. He says, “In my case they are one and the same thing. I live through my writing and my writing lives through me.”

But at the time he confesses that the truth is disguised in the form of fiction in the stories that depict painful experiences like bereavement. For example, the story “The Funeral” contains a true description of the trauma he experienced as a child on getting the
painful news about his father’s death. He was a little boy studying in a
boarding school. His father died in Calcutta. The story describes the
imaginary funeral of his father.

He claims to be a writer concerned about social issues. For him
Nature’s issue is a social issue. Man’s relationship with nature is one
of the basic issues of survival. Secondly, when an individual is the
basic unit of society, the simple and honest depiction of that
individual, becomes a part of social issue.

His faith in God is something that can provide a solution to the most
basic problems of society and human civilization that arise out of
castes and religious bigotry. He believes in the religion of ‘Nature’ and
sees God in a “raindrop”

“I find it easier to see God in a rain drop than in a place of
worship.” His transparent honesty and endearing simplicity is
depicted in his writings. He admits – “Among writers I am not one of
the big guns. I am not even a little gun. I am just a pebble lying on the
beach. But I like to think that I am a smooth, round, colorful pebble
and that some one will pick me up, derive a little pleasure from
holding me, and possibly even put me in his or her pocket. Could you
be that wanderer by the sea? I shall nestle there close to you. I shall
make you feel better. And if you tire of me, you can always throw me
back into the sea. Perhaps a kindly wave will wash me ashore again
and some one else will pick me up.”
There is a general impression that he is a small town or hill station person. But the four years of his life in London and five years in Delhi also played a significant role in his writing career. He blossomed as a children’s writer only after he decided to live in the hills. This aspect is described in his largely autobiographical “Rain in the Mountains”.

He started writing for money. On his return from England he decided to stay in Dehra Dun even after his family shifted to Delhi. His stepfather’s first wife, Bibiji gave him a room to stay and also provided breakfast. He wrote in the light of a kerosene lamp as Bibiji could not afford electricity. By then he had chosen his career as a writer and it was not an easy one. Since then a framed photograph of his father and his type-writer have been his constant companions. His career has progressed slowly yet steadily.

He wrote in longhand and typed his manuscript. Thus he could edit it as he typed it. In 1956 The Illustrated Weekly of India serialized “The Room on the Roof”. A year later its sequel “Vagrants in the Valley” was published in the same magazine. According to Ruskin Bond, the first one is full of youthful optimism and the latter has his sensuality. He wrote thousand-words everyday. It took a couple of hours. Rest of the time he spent in gathering material for the next day’s writing and jotted down stray thoughts and ideas. He also submitted his stories to B.B.C. in London. They were broadcasted in their Home Service short-story slot.
He also wrote articles on various subjects. These were published in ‘The Sunday Statesman’ ‘The Hindu’ and ‘The Tribune’. His novel “The Room on the Roof” was translated into German and that fetched a tidy sum for the author who was able to write another novel and a few “carefully crafted stories”.

The works that influenced his writings are – Rabindranath Tagore’s Crescent Moon, Conrad’s ‘Heart of Darkness’ and ‘Youth’, Emile Bronte’s ‘Wuthering Heights’ T.E. Lawrence’s ‘The Seven Pillars of Wisdom’. along with the wonderful abandon of Sterne, precision of Oscar Wilde, and the humour in Dickens and Wells.

Apart from the great authors, he drew inspiration from the people around him. His neighbour Mrs. Singh, wife of a Sub-Inspector, provided him with stories of ghosts and spirits, churels and munjias.

There were his ‘noble young friends’ about whom he wrote in his semi-autobiographical novels. He peopled his fiction with his friends, neighbours and the down to earth common men and women. They were the ones who inspired him, interested him and made him a writer.

He always kept a notebook and a pen with him. Every little creature interested him. He could write about the smallest creatures like ants and butterflies as well as about the ones like leopards and tigers, with equal ease, care and understanding. He meticulously
noted down the minute details about them in his notebook.

He made his home at Mussoori in 1963. He is fond of long walks whether he in Massoori or in Delhi. He observes the surroundings and notes down the contents immediately in his diary. His keen observations of even the most common things make an interesting reading. This is due to his delightful sense of humour. He laughs not only at the frivolities and frailties of life but also at himself. This delightful tongue-in-check humor in Bond's writing makes it all the more lively and endearing.

**Theme of Loneliness:**

According to Ruskin Bond "Every man is an island no matter how hard he tries to paddle away. A woman may have the comfort of an infant feeding at her breast. But men grow up insecure." But at the same time he says that loneliness is a vital part of an artist's creativity. Great writers like Gorky, Stevenson, and Conrad were basically lonely men who did a lot of tramping. Like these great writers he is a wanderer all his life. Even at the age of seventy he remain a wanderer at heart.' His heroes are Kim, Huckleberry Finn and Captain Marlow.

It is this sense of loneliness which is responsible for making him choose writing as a career. He thinks that even in a crowd one may feel lonely. He calls himself a 'lonely wanderer'. At heart he remains a wanderer. The loneliest part of his life, he says, is the two years he spent in New Jersey. He was only seventeen. His
loneliness and yearning for India made him write his first novel, *The Room on the Roof* which won the John Lewellyn literary prize for the published writer below the age of 30 years. His writing at that time, though raw, naive and imperfect, was brimming with life and joy. It was a true account of himself at seventeen and for Ruskin Bond, "to be true to oneself is to be true to others."

**Writer by Profession:**

The early years of his life were not easy ones. He had set his mind on being a writer by profession. He decided to take up the most pleasant job, his hobby turned into profession. It was not easy. He admits that he wrote for his life. It may also mean, writing was his life, apart from providing sustenance.

The compulsion to earn a decent living also motivated him to write regularly. Had he taken it as a part-time hobby or leisure writing, he would not have come up with so many impressive titles. He knew he had a talent for telling stories and wanted to en cash it.

He started his writer's life in a small rented room above his stepfather's first wife's 'provision store' in Dehra Dun. His refusal to accompany his 'mother and stepfather to Delhi was due to his love for freedom and the desire to be in the vicinity of the hills and rivers.

As his landlady could not afford to pay for the electricity, Ruskin Bond had to manage with a kerosene lamp. He had to wear glasses due to the strain on his eyesight. With characteristic Bondsian humor,
he states that these glasses helped him in a way to gaze at the college girls walking or cycling past Ashley Hill.

He could manage to write a thousand words in a day. It took him only a couple of hours. Rest of the day he spent in the company of his friends, sipping coffee at the Indiana Café. He could jot down stray thoughts and ideas or write a letter.

He wrote a number of articles which were published in The Sunday Statesman, The Hindu and The Tribune. “To be a writer, all you need is a paper” he says.

References:

2.2 **SCENES FROM A WRITER'S LIFE : A MEMOIR.**

First published by Penguin Books India, in 1997, it is his first autobiography. Bond admits “The autobiographical element is present in much of my work but there is really more fiction in my fiction than the reader may realize”\(^1\)

He begins the autobiography with a preamble wherein he gives a true picture of himself. The first 20 years of his life form the period covered by this memoir. These were the formative years of his life. As far as Ruskin Bond’s writings are concerned it is these ‘most emotional, impressionable and vulnerable’ years that have influenced a major part of his writings.

He was just a ‘pimply adolescent’ when he decided to choose writing as a profession. Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield* and Hugh Walpole’s *Fortitude* made a great impact on his young mind and he decided to be like the writer hero of these books. His father fed him with classics for children at a tender age of ten. The separation due to death of his father had a disastrous effect on the little boy. Life with stepfather and mother brought him closer to the books which became his true companions throughout his life. They provided him with a great escape.

As he grew older, he became more attached to his surroundings. His short stay in England made him yearn for India. He felt homesick.

He describes himself as ‘a child of changing times.’ The British Raj in India had come to an end. The Englishmen were going home to
England. He faced an identity crisis being son of an English father but he claims that it is this 'double inheritance' which is a blessing in disguise for him. His British lineage and Indian heritage have given him a double advantage of understanding Indian sensibility which he expresses with utmost ease in English language.

He records the impressions of his 'lonely childhood years' when he felt distanced from family and could find happiness in the homes of friends or 'between the covers of books'. It is this painful but pleasurable process of growing up which is the main theme that runs through all his fiction.

The broken marriage of his parents had a deep impact on the psyche of the writer who was a young boy of ten. He suffered from insecurity, helplessness and was deeply disturbed. He confesses that, it is this suffering that has made him sensitive and has helped him to understand the needs of young boys and girls. Had his childhood been peaceful and happy, he would not have been the writer that he is today. “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 had contented normal childhood seldom remember much about them; nor do they have much insight into the world of children. Some of us are born sensitive. And if on top of that, we are pulled about in different directions (both emotionally and physically) we might just end up becoming writers”
His early childhood spent with his father, had a very distinct and clear influence on his writings. His life with father who was a teacher for the princesses in Jamnagar was the happiest. He fondly remembers the young princess who was his father's students.

He had to go to the Convent School in Mussoorie which he hated from the beginning. His father had joined Royal Air force and mother had left them to marry a businessman, Mr. Hari. He fondly preserved the post-cards he received from his father. As his parents were separated, he was withdrawn from the boarding school. He joined his father in Delhi. The two years he spent with his father were the happiest moments of his life.

The chapter 'Life with Father', depicting the happy memories of his childhood, reads like one of his stories. It is nostalgic and full of his love for his father. As a child of 8 – 9 years was emotionally attached to his parents. It is the parents who provide the child with a sense of security, which acts as a protective cover throughout his life. But unfortunately for Ruskin Bond the quarrels between his parents resulting in their separation caused a deep dent in his psyche making him feel insecure. It can be seen in many of his writings.

His life in the boarding school of Simla is depicted with Bondsian humour. His description of Delhi in 1943 is delightful. “Change and prosperity have come to Delhi but its citizens are paying a high price for the privilege of living in the capital” – he comments on
the growing Delhi. “Spread on, great octopus – your tentacles have yet to be fully extended”³ – he exclaims.

He analyses his feelings for his parents. His love for his father was just as natural as his resentment for his mother. He reconciles himself saying “they were obviously incompatible. They should not have been married”⁴. He reproduces the last letter of his father as an example of his writing. One can very well notice the influence of his father on his writing style which is simple and lucid. His father’s death and the deep impact it had on the mind of a ten year old boy is touchingly described as he says “If God was love, why did he have to break up the only loving relationship I’d known so far?”⁵ The incident of losing his father’s letters and the cruelty of it all is touchingly narrated.

He describes his life with his mother and stepfather. About his grandparents, he did not get any pampering from them. They were a matter of fact elders. The little boy was obviously hungry for love and affection. In the forest Rest House where his mother and stepfather used to stay during their hunting expeditions was a treasure house for this little boy. He discovered a shelf-full of books which he read voraciously. He got hooked to reading. Later he found a number of books in his grandmother’s house ‘tucked away in a chest of drawers’. They belonged to his great aunt who was no more.

In the winter of 1945 he was a young teenager living with his mother and stepfather. He was 12 years old. He could not reconcile to
the death of his father. He returned to Simla. He had very few friends in school. His first writing adventure was a satire on his schoolmates and teachers which met with a disastrous end. The partition of India made his only friend leave for Pakistan. The politics which he did not understand as a child. It had its impact on his life by separating his good friend Omar. "The land though divided, was still a big one, and he was very small". He gives a touching account of the tragic end of his friend Omar whose Pakistani plane was shot down near Simla, when he might have diverted it to get a glimpse of the playing fields of his childhood days.

At the age of thirteen he was completely occupied with his reading. The books like *David Copperfield* and *Fortitude* that had stirred him deeply continue to do so till date. He got the same feeling when he opened it recently and "found it was still stirring stuff".

At the age of fifteen he was a football goal keeper, hockey player, athlete. Except singing or playing musical instruments, he did everything a boy of his age was supposed to do.

In Chapter V, 'Dehra Dun – Winter of 45,' he describes 'the snowfall in Dehra Dun. The thrill and joy of a little boy on seeing the snow, is remembered with every little detail. The vivid description reminds the reader of Wordsworth's 'Daffodils' that flash upon the inward eye. Bond also has that bliss of solitude. This makes his writing a thing of joy forever. His keen observation and fine memories depicted in light hearted and lucid style make his prose almost poetic.
“Spring came to the foothills in February and Dehra’s gardens were at their best then. Masses of sweet peas filled the air with their delicious scent, bright yellow California poppies formed a carpet of their own; scarlet poinsettias greeted each other over hedges and garden walls; snapdragons of many hues gave off their own elusive scent; bright red poppies danced in the slightest breeze.”

His love of nature and his sensitivity is revealed in the passage where he defends his inability to learn music.

“Insensitive though I may have been to high notes and low notes, diminuendos and crescendos, I was nevertheless sensitive to sound – birdsong, the hum of the breeze playing in tall trees, the rustle of autumn leaves, crickets chirping, water splashing and murmuring in brooks, the sea sighing on the sand—all natural sounds, indicating a certain harmony in the natural world”.

Ruskin Bond does not think that the modern day distractions like Television can drive the children away from books. He says,

“There were just one or two boys who actually read for pleasure. We tend to think of that era as one when there were no distractions such as television, computer games and the like. But reading has always been a minority past-time. People say children don’t read anymore. This may be true of the vast majority, but I know many boys and girls who enjoy reading far more than I encountered when I was a school boy. Book readers are special people and they will always turn
to books as the ultimate pleasure. Those who do not read are the unfortunate ones.10

About himself he writes “And for me it (his extended family) makes up for the lonely childhood years when I felt distanced from family and could find happiness only in the homes of friends or between the covers of books”. Books were his childhood companions and continue to be his friends till date. He found an ‘escape’ from the routine and mundane experiences of real life in the leaves of books and in the cinema theatres.

A young rebel at sixteen, he decided to end his formal education after his final year at school in 1950. He was “an angry young man in revolt against rules, traditions, conventions, examinations, authority of any kind”.

He had decided about his future career as a writer. Not many of the famous authors like Dickens, Jack London, Joseph Conrad or the Bronte Sisters had any higher education or degree to their credit. These were his favorite authors whom he wanted to emulate. So he had a point there, in his favour!

When he was given charge of school library, he utilized the opportunity to the maximum benefit. He read the complete play of George Bernard Shaw and J.M. Barrie, and devoured the novels of H.G. Wells, J.B. Priestly and the short stories of William Saroyan and A.E. Coppard. He says that the last three influenced him most in selecting the short story or novella as a genre for his creative writing.
It best suited his temperament—"snatching at life and recording its impressions and sensations rather than trying to digest it whole".\(^{11}\)

Eight years of his life in school at Mussoori was far removed from this reality of the rest of India with its towns and villages. Not a single story of any significance came out during his school days. Year 1951 was a watershed in his life. A genesis of his first novel as well as his future career of his life was taking shape. As an adolescent, he describes himself as follows,

"Of personality I had none, not then, not ever! But I was very much my own person – strong in my likes and dislikes, very stubborn, wanting and getting my own way, my own room, my own privacy; old fashioned enough to believe in loyalty to friends; scorning money for money’s sake; ready to discover things about myself and came to terms with wayward, sensual nature; above all eager to express myself in the language I had learnt to love; ambitious enough to want to see my name in print (if not in lights). To love and be loved; to be free. Free to wander wherever I pleased; read what I liked; be friends with those who attracted me".\(^{12}\)

He describes his first room on the roof which his mother provided him, after he actually left home for a few days and returned. This room provided a natural setting for his novella. *The Room on the Roof*, which he wrote in England and won a major British literary prize. It was the beginning of a writing career which has spanned over
five decades, and earned him a place in the pantheon of great Indian writers for children.

He describes his first love Raj, sister of his friend Ranbir. It would have been another of his stories but as he puts it, it was not fiction. So he remained a good friend and couldn’t proceed beyond that!

He further records indirectly the changing scene of the Indian sub-continent with its population of the Anglo-Indian community gradually diminishing. He found his friends leaving one by one, but he decided to continue to stay in Dehra. He began his writing career with his essays and sketches. The major hurdle was getting them published. He was only seventeen years and publishers were looking for an older person as an author. "So the age had to be concealed. I took on the role of an old man catching the loves of his youth, and this seemed to work. ‘When I was a young man’ ... was the opening phrase of many an early tale of romance, and by the time I had finished writing it I would be feeling quite ancient. I must have convinced some of my early editors and readers that I was an elderly writer because when I met one of them a few years later, he exclaimed, ‘But I thought you were dead!’"¹³

Throughout his life he enjoyed the company of older people as they had interesting stories and experiences to relate. As he himself became old and began to run-out of old people, he turned to children, ‘with all their freshness of new life, a new day’¹⁴ He admits that
because of this habit, sometimes he wrote like an older person and sometimes like a child.

A sense of insecurity that haunted him throughout his childhood, was due to the incompatibility of his parents. He seems to have never forgiven his mother for this. He was deeply attached to his father who took custody of the son.

“I witnessed my parents’ quarrels from an early age and later when they resulted in my mother taking-off for unknown destination (unknown to me). I would feel helpless and insecure. My father’s hand was always there and I held it firmly until it was wrenched away by the angel of death. That early feeling of insecurity was never to leave me, and in adult life when I witnessed quarrels between people who were close to me, I was always deeply disturbed, more for the children whose lives were bound to be affected by such emotional discord. The body chemistry may be right but the harmony of two minds is what makes relationships endure”.15

He explores this factor in his short stories and novellas. The human relationships that endure in his stories are time and again the relationship he has with his friends and not the ones he has with his beloved. These relationships are either purely physical or emotional. May be due to this feeling his heroes do not usually have a lasting relationship with the girls. Being a sensitive child he was intrigued by the relationship of his parents. Later in life he settled on an answer like, ‘they were not compatible.’ By making this aspect of life look
comic and at times ridiculous he might be making fun of his parents and marriage as such.

“No, we don’t become writers in schools of creative writing. We become writers before we learn to write. The rest is simply learning how to put it all together”.

That’s why it is not possible to understand his fiction without understanding his life. There is a very thin line between his life and his fiction. He wrote about himself in his fiction. The people he met came alive in his stories.

References:
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3. Ruskin Bond. Simla, Delhi 1943 Scenes from a Writer’s Life PP.20
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5. Ruskin Bond My Father’s Last Letters Scenes from a Writer’s Life pp30
6. --------------- The Playing Fields of Simla pp S.W.L pp58
7. ---------------Reading Was My Religion S.W.L p.p. 64
8. Ibid p.p. 43
9. Ibid pp. 66
10.Ibid pp. 66
11-Ruskin Bond. The Young Rebel S.W.L pp.75
12.Ibid pp. 79
13-Ruskin Bond. Hold on to Your Dreams S.W.L pp 89
14.Ibid pp. 90
15-Ruskin Bond. Life with Father S.W.L pp 3
16-Ibid pp 4

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First published by Penguin Books India in 1993, contains the extracts from journals, his personal diary, a play, some essays and poems which were not published so far. They are linked with his personal and nature essays and poems. The first section has the extracts from journals written in the seventies and a play written about the same time. Second section contains some of the essays written in the sixties, seventies and eighties. Third section has diary extracts. Fourth section has essay written in the Nineties. The book ends with the Epilogue titled 'Time to Close the Window: The Mountain Remains!'

This work may be called as a sequel to *Scenes from a Writer's Life. A Memoir*. The latter a full-fledged autobiography which covers his 'formative years' till the age of twenty and the former one deals with the remaining years of his life as a writer. In *Rain in the Mountains* we can trace his development as a writer from a 'pimply adolescent' to a writer of substance..

Concluding the book, he writes in the Epilogue "Growing up was always a difficult process for me and I gave up trying many years ago. I decided that there was little point in becoming an adult, if I could remain a child and still make a living. I have the temper of a child and a tendency to be mischievous. And still I retain a childlike trust in grown-ups -- *Adolescence is a fascinating period and I keep going back to it in my fiction*"
Bond with Nature: Ruskin Bond shares a special relationship with the trees. He turns to them for support and inspiration. They have a great influence on him. He says that they are noble and help him avoid the trivial and the banal.

"The trees stand watch over my day to day life. They are the guardians of my conscience. I have no one else to answer to. So I live and work under the generous but highly principled supervision of the trees – especially the deodars, who stand on guard, unbending on the slope above the cottage. The Oak and Maples are a little more tolerant. They have had to put up with a great deal, their branches continually chopped for fuel and fodder. What would they think? I ask myself on many occasions. What would they like me to do? And I do what I think they would approve of most!" 2

He paints a delightful pen picture of the people around him and his extended family. The changing seasons, the whistling birds, the rain and glistening leaves of the trees come alive in short notes about them. It is the sheer charm of his prose which turns poetic, that makes these notes interesting to read.

References:
