

Rusty's Pursuit for Selfhood in Ruskin Bond's *The Room on the Roof*

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Abstract

The Room on the Roof is a classic coming of age novel penned by Ruskin Bond, an eminent and versatile Indian English writer of British lineage. Bond has given a detailed account of his adolescent life's experiences and challenges that he encountered during his journey to establish his own identity as an individual. Thus, the novel is autobiographical in nature. The protagonist Rusty is replica of Bond's own personality. Feelings and emotions of Rusty are Bond's own. Every facet of his adolescent life is depicted through the character Rusty. Rusty, an Anglo-Indian orphaned boy of sixteen, unable to bear his guardian's frequent ill treatment, runs away from home to discover his true self. My paper explores Rusty's journey from a meek, submissive and dependent boy to an assertive, brave and independent adult with wisdom of the world.

KEYWORDS: Coming of age novel, adolescent, identity, submissive, independent

Ruskin Bond, though, a British by lineage, carries the fragrance of Indian soil in his heart. The aroma of this soil can be felt in his opuses. He has an Indian heart full of love and sensitivity. Sahitya Academy Award, Padamshree and Padma Bhushan awardee Bond carved a niche for himself as a leading writer in the arena of Indian English Literature. His oeuvre comprises novels, short stories, essays, children's fiction, non-fiction etc. His love for children spurred him to write beautiful short stories for children. One can see myriad shades of colourful Indian culture in his novels, novellas and other works.

It is our culture which binds us to our roots and confirms our existence on this earth by giving us a sense of identity. Individual identity or selfhood is what everyone craves for. Men strive hard, face many challenges to come up to the expectations of people around him so that they can establish their own identity in a society. This identity not only separates them from others but also give them a sense of fulfillment in life. As an individual attains maturity, a sense of self awareness develops which makes him self-dependent.

Adolescence is an age when a child undergoes tremendous physical and psychological changes which results in his metamorphosis. It is a transition period between childhood and adulthood in an individual's life. It is a process through which a child turns in to an adult. Crave for selfhood is the hall mark of adolescence. *The Room on the Roof* is Rusty's journey from childhood to adulthood during which he explores his real self and ultimately transforms into an adult with new experiences. Reviewing the novel *The Room on the Roof*, Omkar Jadhav writes:

"It is the tale of a boy that has lost more before even forming a basic identity of himself which is why he keeps on searching, wandering around with a kindling flame burning within that propels him past the bound of familial chains and into the vast colourful and lively world nesting in the arms of the sub continent."

Ruskin Bond, in the introduction of the novel affirms :

“What makes it ‘different’, I think, is that it is a novel about adolescence by an adolescent, and for this reason I have never changed a word or made any revisions. It reflects the writer as he was when he wrote it- naive, trustful, eager for love and friendship” (ROR vii).

Bond wrote this novel at the age of 17 when he himself was undergoing this process of change in his life. He started this journey in ‘barsati’ an old room on the roof in Dehradun where he encountered various challenges of his adolescent life. He used to pen down his experiences in a journal which ultimately took a beautiful shape in the form of the novel *The Room on the Roof*. During his short stay in London he felt nostalgic for the little ‘barsati’ and the time he spent there. Bond words: “.....out of a longing for all that I had left behind in India, that I turned my journal into a novel and called it *The Room on the Roof*” (ROR v-vi). The novel fetched him coveted John Llewellyn Rhys Prize in 1957.

Rusty’s quest for selfhood begins when he breaks open the shackles of restrictions imposed upon him by his guardian Mr. Harrison and steps into the world of bazaar which was, so far, a forbidden place for him. He sets on a journey to discover his true self, a journey which takes him to the passionate dream world of freedom where he has his own identity, self respect and dignity which he desperately yearned for long. This journey provides him the opportunity to expand his horizon and to become a man of the world. Ranbir Somi and Suri, his friends, expose him to this new magical world which is full of people with their age old culture and traditions and where there is a lot of fun and entertainment which Rusty as an adolescent always missed. Somi and Ranbir had great contribution in transforming the personality of Rusty from a meek, submissive and dependent boy to an assertive, brave and independent adult with wisdom of the world.

Rusty was a parentless boy living under the care of his guardian Mr. Harrison who was his father’s cousin. Mr. Harrison was an authoritarian who used to impose his wishes on the helpless Rusty. He kept rusty deprived of the simple pleasures of life. He was not allowed to go to the bazaar as Mr. Harrison did not want him to mix with the Indian people. Rusty’s visit to the bazaar made Mr. Harrison furious, and he bawled at him “You belong here, to this house, this road, these people. Don’t go where you don’t belong. Don’t go where you don’t belong” (ROR 31). He wanted Rusty to grow up like a British boy, but as he was born in India, he could feel the sweet scent of Indianness all around which ultimately propelled him to come out of that restrictive environment and explore the world around him. He feels exhilarating while tasting tikkies offered by his friends for the first time.

“Rusty tasted a bit. It was hot. He waited a minute, then tasted another bit. It was still hot but in a different way; now it was lively, interesting; it had a different taste to anything he had eaten before. Suspicious but inquisitive, he finished the tikkee and waited see if anything would happen” (ROR 23).

Holi celebration with his friends Ranbir, Somi and Suri was quite a new experience for Rusty. He feels thrilled as he could breath in an unrestrictive colourful environment. He feels as if his engaged soul has finally been liberated.

“He wanted this to go on for ever, this day of feverish emotion, this life in another world. He didn’t want to leave the forest; it was safe, its earth soothed him, gathered him in, so that the pain of his body became pleasure.....” (ROR 33).

Rusty used to suffer pain quietly without objecting the tyrannical behavior of Mr. Harrison. His fractured soul used to cry for justice but after his exposure to the outside world which could be possible only because of his friends Ranbir and Somi, he became aware of his self and started objecting to his guardian's beatings. After holi celebrations, when Rusty came back home with painted face and clothes soaked in colour Mr. Harrison got enraged and started beating him with a supple malacca cane. Rusty, instead of suffering the blow, strongly objected.

"Rusty flared into a temper, showing some spirit for the first time in his life. 'I am no better than the sweeper boy but I'm as good as him! I'm as good as anyone! And, instead of cringing to take the cut from the cane, he flung himself at his guardian's legs. The cane swished through the air, grazing the boy's back. Rusty wrapped his arms round his guardian's legs & pulled on them with all his strengths" (ROR 46).

He is now courageous enough to retaliate the torture inflicted upon him by his guardian.

".....He was a child no longer, he was nearly seventeen, he was a man. He could inflict pain, that was a wonderful discovery; there was a power in his body- a devil or a God – and he gained confidence in his power, and he was a man" (ROR 47).

The exposure to the outside world developed in him a sense of self awareness. After this incident, he released himself from his imprisoned existence and stepped into a new world, free from all restrictions and tortures of his guardian. He could now feel the whiff of freedom. Though, the path ahead was not easy for him, many more challenges he had to face in times to come yet he resolved to move ahead to explore his true colour.

Rusty, after leaving his home, took shelter in Somi's house. Now his life was going to take a new turn, a turn which will put many new challenges before him. Unlike his guardian's home, he felt a little happy and safe at Somi's home as there was no one to torture him with a cane and to impose restrictions on him. He was now free to enjoy the simple pleasures of life like enjoying bath under a public tap, relishing allu chole and golgappa at chaat ki dukan, gossiping with his friends, which were once a dream for him, but now he could see his dream coming true. Though he was comfortable in Somi's home, the major challenge before him was to earn livelihood. Somi, at this critical time of his life walked along with him like his shadow and assured him to find a job for him. When Somi's mother told Rusty to give her son 'the lessons in spelling and arithmetic' an idea struck in Somi's mind that Rusty is an English boy and give lessons of English to Kishen, Mr. Kapoor's son as they were finding a tutor for Rusty. Somi introduces Rusty to Kishen in the bazaar who take them to his home and finally he is appointed as Kishen's teacher by Mr. & Mrs. Kapoor. Meena, Mrs. Kapoor words:

".....Kishan is not easy to teach. There is no fixed pay, but we will give you anything you need. You are not our servant. You will be doing us a favour by giving Kishan some knowledge & conversation & company, and in return we will be giving you our hospitality. You will have a room of your own, and your food you will have with us" (ROR 80).

This new room not only gave Rusty shelter but also a feeling of selfhood. It was a room where he could explore his true essence, where he could give wings to his dreams and desires, a room of his own from where his journey to become a writer will begin. The room is a symbol of his liberation from the prison of restrictions in which he was

imprisoned. His joy knows no bound when he gets a room of his own where he lives like 'a king'. He shares his newly attained happiness with his friends: "But I like it, Somi, I want it, really I do.....Come on to the house and see the room. It's the kind of room in which you write poetry or create music" (ROR 87).

Meena's grace, charm and quick wit attracted Rusty towards her and soon he finds himself in love with her. Rusty was at his adolescence so this attraction was natural. Meena also felt driven towards Rusty as she was fed up with her drunken husband. Rusty was very happy in his new life and enjoyed company of Meena, unaware of the misfortune he had to face in due course of time.

Meena goes to Delhi with her husband but never returns. The car in which they were travelling met with an accident and Meena died on the spot. Meena's premature death created a void in the life of Rusty. He stands all alone at the shore of the vast ocean of his life and ponders over the futility of life.

"Rusty was overcome by a feeling of impotence and futility, and unimportance of life. Every moment, he told himself, someone is born and someone dies, you can not count them one, two three, a birth and a death for every moment.... What is this one life in the whole pattern of life, what is this one death but a passing of time..... And if I were to die now, suddenly and without cause what would happen, would it matter... we live without knowing why or to what purpose." (ROR 90).

Rusty becomes philosophic and questions his existence on the earth. Meena's death made him mature enough to ponder over such subtleties of life.

Kishen is now motherless boy and seeks shelter in the lap of Rusty. Kishen has been very much attached to Rusty and wants to stay with him after losing his mother but his father Mr. Kapoor sends him to Hardwar to stay with his aunt. This separation was unbearable to Rusty. He cries: "..... Kishen has gone and part of my life has gone with him, and inside of me, I am all lonely" (ROR 139).

Somi, his dearest friend also left for Amritsar and Rusty is left all alone to bear the immense pain. But he does not give up and decides to move on. He utters:

"I can't live like the gardener, the cook and the water-carrier, doing the same task everyday of my life. I am not interested in today, I want tomorrow. I can not live in this same small room all my life with a family of lizards, living in other people's homes and never having one of my own. I have to break away. I want to be either somebody or nobody. I don't want to be anybody" (ROR 157).

The above words of Rusty shows his indomitable spirit and passion for living a life with his own identity. He decides to go to England to pursue his dream. But before saying good bye to India, he wants to meet Kishen. On his way to Delhi he stops at Hardwar and learns from Mr. Kapoor that Kishen has run away from his aunt's home as he could not tolerate his father's remarriage and become a thief. Kishen was the son of Rusty's beloved Meena and he could not leave him in such a miserable condition so he decides that he will search for Kishen. His search bore fruit and he ultimately found Kishen. Rusty and Kishen both needed the support of each other to continue this journey of life "because they were the only people who knew each other and loved each other" (ROR 183). So, they both decided to come back to Dehra and continue their life in the same room on the roof, the room which, once, gave him the identity of his own and so many beautiful moments to be cherished forever. Rusty says, "He could not escape the life he

had made, the ocean into which he had floundered the night he left his guardian's escape" (ROR 183). They are returning to the same room in a boat. Kishen says: "We walk back to the room on the roof ! It is our room. We have to go back" (ROR 184). Kishen is quite confident of Rusty's abilities and says: "One day you will be great, Rusty. A writer or an actor or a Prime minister or something. May be a poet ! Why not a poet Rusty? Rusty smiled. 'Yes,' he said, 'Why not a poet?'" (ROR 184). The novel ends with Rusty and Kishen's march towards Dehra to fulfill unachieved dreams of their lives.

Conclusion

The Room on the Roof is Rusty's journey of his transformation from childhood to adulthood, a journey full of hardships, upheavals, turbulences and traumatic experiences which ultimately developed him into an adult. His pursuit for selfhood is finally accomplished after undergoing colossal sufferings. A new Rusty emerges from the ashes of trials and tribulations like a phoenix.

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