

Ruskin Bond's optimistic approach to life: A study of his child characters in select short stories

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Abstract:

This paper intends to highlight the element of positivity that is present in all the child characters featuring in Ruskin Bond's stories. The characters are the mouth piece of Ruskin Bond's optimistic approach towards life.

As Amita Aggarwal in her book, 'the fictional world of Ruskin Bond states,

'The essence of Bond's vision lies in the positive approach towards life'¹.The researcher intends to explore the never ending hope that seems to be the motto of these characters as they struggle through the adverse circumstances in the harsh environs of the hills.

The Author through his characters presents the real pictures of the hill life which appears like a paradise through the lens of the tourist cameras.

Keyword: Optimism, Paradise, Utopia, deprivation, unprivileged.

Introduction

Ruskin Bond's stories and characters are people he had met in the path of his life. His experience in life made him believe in the divine intervention

' I had bouts of ill health and there was time when money ran out, editorial doors closed, just as one door closed ,another one has for me miraculously opened'²

Ruskin Bond's characters also go through the ups and downs as they struggle to survive and succeed in the world. The optimism observed by the readers is often mistook to be idyllic and unrealistic, but that is not the case.Bond's characters are ordinary people who dream of ordinary life. They do not oftensucceed in making their lives better but what is noteworthy is the acceptance of their failures and the optimism with which they renew their efforts to reach their goals. Optimism is not a utopian state of mind rather it is a positive attitude that makes one believe that good things will happen.

Lionel Tiger in her book, 'optimism: The Biology of Hope', states that optimism is biologically induced. Citing the example of our ancestors during the time when they were hunter gatherers and lived in caves ,Tiger reasons that humans tend to abandon tasks that are associated with negative consequences hence it was biologically adaptive of human beings to develop a sense of optimism. Elaborating further he says that when we get injured our bodies release endorphin which has two properties it is analgesic and it produces euphoria which made our ancestorsadapta positive approach to injury so that it would not hinder their need to hunt in the future.

Many personality theorists consider optimism a personality trait and not an emotion. They believe that optimism is an inborn temperament. Ruskin Bond's characters run true to type. His characters like Bijju,Binya,Suraj,Pooja,Pitambar,Sita, Kusum and Sanjay all have an adrenalin of optimism rushing in their veins.Bisnu, a twelve year old boy, shoulders the responsibility of the entire house. He relentlessly ploughs the

hard ground with his weak oxen, hardly making an impression on the hard ground, yet he keeps the seeds ready to sow as soon as it would rain. When the fire starts on the mountains he is not disturbed instead he says,

‘If the monsoon arrives tomorrow the fire will go out.’³

Bisnu is forever the optimist. His struggle to provide food for his family (the monsoon having failed) takes him to Mussoorie to earn money. He starts working at a tea stall for fifty rupees a month. The people coming to watch cinema frequently ill-treat him. Having no place to stay he sleeps in the foyer of the cinema hall, braving the icy Himalayan winds with nothing but a thin blanket and a poster as a buffer. Despite such adversities Bisnu does not give up and continues to be optimistic about his future. His destiny takes him to work with Pritam Singh, a truck driver at the mine quarry. Pritam Singh proves to be a benevolent and generous master and treats Bisnu as his equal. Bisnu manages to save most of the money and send it home. However a near fatal accident puts an end to this job and Bisnu decides to return home not with a heavy heart but full of spirit and optimism. As he walks through his snow covered fields he is already thinking of his future with hope.

‘When the snow melts, he would clear the fields and nourish them and make them rich’⁴

Dr. Walid A. Fitahi in his study, ‘Optimism is the seed of hope’, states that optimism is a natural concept which provides one the motive to work hard. The same energy and proactive mind set is seen in the child characters of Ruskin Bond. This feeling of optimism does not dwindle in the face of death. The story ‘The Funeral’, proves it. The boy who has lost his father, his only companion and friend, suffers immense pain, loss and deprivation, but is still full of optimism as he bids farewell to his father.

‘He clenched his fists and pushed them deep into his pockets. “He will find a way out”, the boy said fiercely to himself. “He’ll get out somehow”.’⁵

Bond celebrates innocence and optimism. He believes in the indefatigable human spirit thus his criminal characters also possess a sense of honesty giving hope for a positive change.

OPTIMISM OR REALISM

Does this mean that an optimist is an unrealistic? In his book, ‘The Optimism Advantage’, Terry Paulson sets about clearing this misconception. According to him an optimist is not unrealistic. He does not shy away from hard work. He is neither a day dreamer nor naïve. Optimism does not mean being naïve about the reality of the situation. An optimist on the other hand takes challenges and tries to change the situation for better. He may not succeed in the first, second or even third attempt what matters is that every time he renews his effort and this energy to persevere is the outcome of his optimistic attitude. Suraj, an orphan in the story ‘Bus Stop, Pipal Nagar’, sells odd assortments of buttons, laces, combs, perfumes etc. He roams about selling his wares on a tray and earns two rupees a day and saves ten rupees a month for his school fee. Being an orphan and a refugee is not the only setbacks in his life, he suffers from epilepsy due to which he loses his job at a shop and is forced to roam the streets with his merchandise. The disease does not dampen his spirit or his hope for a better future and he saves money to finish his high school, studies under a street lamp, skips his meals and sleeps wherever he finds a place. He takes his disease lightly saying that when he has a fit he hardly knows anything and once fit is over he cannot remember anything hence he doesn’t worry about it. He wears a smile on his face regardless of whether he is sad or happy. He dreams of passing his exams and getting a scholarship to a good college. However, his hard work does not pay off and he fails the exam. He is sad but not disheartened. After a few minutes silence he starts smiling.

‘Never mind, I’ll pass next year’

‘I have plenty of time now’.⁶

Ruskin Bond’s stories are no fairy tales, there is no escaping the harsh realities of life. He does not offer any miracles to end the misery of his characters, thereby relieving the mind of the reader by serving ‘a happy ending’ rather he makes sure that the reader goes through the turbulent journey of these characters and imbibe their optimism. Bond’s characters are far from fictional. He says,

'I prefer to write about people and places I have known and the lives of those whose paths I have crossed. The crossing of paths makes for stories'.⁷

Another character, Pitambar, a poor rickshaw puller in the story 'Bus Stop, PipalNagar', is dancing in the rain. On being asked why he is dancing, he says that he is happy so he is dancing and on being asked why he is happy, he says because he is dancing. He proves the theory correct that optimism is inherent and it needs no external stimulant.

Bisnu, another character in the story 'The Panther's Moon', lives in a remote village, Manjari and travels ten miles daily to attend school. Even the fear of a prowling man eater in the jungle that he crosses daily, fails to shake his determination to gain knowledge so he could be a part of the big world. Bond's optimism is not an idle daydreaming. It is absolutely pragmatic. His characters are simple, ordinary people dreaming of ordinary things. They make no fabulous promises or extraordinary vows rather they desire little joys and support.

OPTIMISM IS INBORN

A survey was conducted on 250 students aged 13 to 15 years from a different socioeconomic background to prove the hypothesis that optimism comes naturally to young children. The survey which comprised a questionnaire revealed that 75% of students reflected inherited optimistic traits. Though the students were from a different socioeconomic background the results showed that their socioeconomic status did not affect their optimism.

The survey proves why Bond's characters despite being poor and underprivileged remain full of optimism.

RELEVANCE OF OPTIMISM IN CONTEMPORARY WORLD

Research conducted by the University of Sydney suggests that people who think optimistically will recover faster from their illness. The study indicates that optimistic thinking has the power to speed up the recovery of sick people, including cancer patients. A positive mind set improves one's chances of overcoming the difficulties of life. It even enhances one's chances of recovering faster from illness.

RUSKIN BOND'S PHILOSOPHY OF LIFE

Bond's philosophy of life is reflected in his characters as his experience with the hill people strengthened his belief in the design of God. He states,

'Hill people have imbibed the steadfastness of oak in their life. They are not glamorous, facility ridden and self-centred rather like oak they have great tolerance and resistance and like its seed they renew themselves faster amid constant threats and wants. Neverlose hope is the motto of their life, which keeps them warm even in the chilliest of winds'.⁸

Bond says that while writing stories for children he tries to strike a positive note. He says that for adults one can strike a negative chord because by the time they grow up they lose their innocence. Lamenting the lack of enough writing for children, he states that nothing could be more important than enrichment of young minds with great literature. According to him we discover our potential and more after reading and we do things through what we have read about. Bond's characters instil in the minds of the readers a sense of association. Young readers identify themselves with characters like Bisnu, Binya, Suraj and Sita even though these characters like most of Bond's other characters, belong to the hills and live a deprived life in terms of material goods. They strike a chord in the hearts of urban readers as well. Bond's undiminished popularity amongst young readers and the fact that the author is always in demand to write more stories and is still busy at his typewriter spinning out tails for generation after generation, proves that his characters are not only accepted but dearly loved. Added to that Bond does not offer an escape to the world of fairies and magic but gives an insight into the lives of real

prince and princess, disguised in rags. Take the example of Binyain the story, 'The Blue Umbrella' is one such ordinary village girl with character and heart befitting that of a royalty. Having never possessed anything beautiful in her life when Binya acquires a dainty umbrella from a group of picnickers in exchange for a leopard claw pendent, she is on top of the world She carries the umbrella like a piece of her own sky, but is not selfish and shares it with all her friends. The shopkeeper RamBharosa feels that a poor girl like her should not possess anything as dainty as the umbrella and tries to persuade her to sell it him for tenrupees, a huge amount for a poor girl like Binya. It could provide her family food, but when Binya refuses to be tempted RamBharosa tries to get it stolen, but Binya and her brother Bijju manage to thwart his plan and Ram Bharosa is exposed as a result of which people of the village ostracize him and stop buying goods from him. Binya feels sad at his plight and decides to leave the umbrella in his shop. When RamBharosa discovers the umbrella he runs after her to return it but she says,

'You keep I don't need it anymore'

'But it is the best umbrella in the village'

'I know, but an umbrella isn't everything'⁹

When readers come across such characters the impact on their psyche is a long lasting one. Unconsciously they try to imbibe these traits and behave in the same manner as these characters.

Giving away her prized possession, the only item of luxury Binya had possessed, does not make her sad rather she feels glad because she has put RamBharosa out of his misery. Thus she goes tripping along the road singing happily. Her positive attitude makes her an extraordinary girl. Bisnu a young boy of twelve, takes a two day journey to Mussoorie to provide for his family. After having earned enough keep his mother and sister and the dog safe for another year, he decides to return home to his village with all the optimism of youth, full of plans to nourish, and make the fields rich.

Sita, a young girl of ten, in the story, 'The Angry River' too survives the ordeal of loneliness and homelessness because of her optimism. Living in a small hut on an island with her sick grandmother and aged grandfather Sita has no one for company. She does not go to school as such she has no friends of her age to talk to or confide. Her only company is a ragdoll whom she calls Mumta. Mumta answers all her queries. In other words, the doll's answers are a manifestation of Sita's own thoughts. It represents Sita's positive attitude even in the face of adversity.

'I am a little afraid of the river'

'Don't be afraid .The River has always been good to us'¹⁰

When the island gets flooded completely and her hut disappears, she climbs up a tree to save herself and is finally rescued by a boy on his boat. Rather than be disheartened Sita builds the hut on the island again and starts living her life with her grandfather. She feels sad on the coming to know of her grandmother's death, but her sadness lasts a short time as her positive mind tells her that now her grandmother is free from all suffering and pain. She realises that it is her responsibility now to take care of her aging grandfather.

Madhavi Solankurkar and Dr. G.S. Mhangore in their research paper on 'Child Psychology in Ruskin Bond's stories', states that reading Bond's stories will enhance the children's understanding and they shall be able to solve their day to day problems on their own. Bond creates positivity in a negative situation. Citing the example of Arun in the story, 'Woman on Platform 8', she says that Bond gives hope to all those single parented and orphan children that love will find them. Just like Arun's heart is filled with motherly love by a stranger, a woman who takes care of him as a mother would, feeds him, listens to him patiently alleviating his loneliness. He knows it is a temporary situation nonetheless he stores these affectionate moments to remember later on. He calls out Goodbye Mother 'with genuine emotion because she has filled the vacuum in his heart

CONCLUSION

Ruskin Bond's stories and his characters teach readers the concept of honesty, hard work, contentment and above all optimism. Their cheerful smiles and determination in the face of adversity motivates readers to face their problems with similar attitude. These characters are the beacon of life for the young and old alike. They

don't offer any moral lessons ostensibly, but the impact of their journey makes the readers remember them and their character traits. Thus these characters teach without being didactic.

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