

The Construction of Masculinities in Ruskin Bond

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Abstract—Ruskin Bond's child characters are the unforgettable images of innocence and the refined masculinities. He celebrates the true spirit of childhood, boyhood and brings about the ideal of masculinity much required in the modern world. The child in his stories, become the votary of ideal masculinity, thus, breaking the very edifice of stereotyped masculinity. The child in his stories develops as a male with multiple masculinities. Bond's boy child characters are portrayed in such a way that shows the harmonious development of manhood. Most of his boys and Bond himself, as Rusty, display rugged strength ideally blended with gentle simplicity. There is a strong influence of life in hills in his works, where he spent the cherished years of his childhood and indeed, most of his life. He has boundless love for the mountains and their folk. His writings are imbued with the timeless rhythm of life, warmth and a gentle disarming humour. He has created some unforgettable, delightful and evergreen child characters, such as Binya, the village girl, the Dehra boys and, most importantly, young Rusty, who is the alter-ego of Ruskin Bond. His main locale of study is the child as he represents the everyday children of India, he also depicts them as the universal children. Bond delves into the deep recesses of a child's psyche and captures the essence and spirit of childhood. The present paper showcases the construction of masculinities in the child characters of Ruskin Bond and is viewed through archetypal approach.

Keywords: childhood, adolescence, masculinity, identity, archetypes.

Masculinity, basically, is associated with the traditional qualities of men. Different connotations have been assigned to the term masculinity by the theorists. It is extended in the form of boyhood, manliness or manhood as it deals with the basic attributes, roles and qualities of a male or a man. Ruskin Bond conjures up images of engaging boy child characters, the ideals of masculinities from the pre-colonial to the contemporary India. He celebrates childhood, boyhood and in his writings the child becomes the glass through which the reality of the world is visualized, the cynicism is avoided and an apt place is found for the child in the geo-political world. Bond is at his best when he writes about children and readers are compelled to connect with his stories through their childhood. His main locale of study is the child. Representing real children of India, he depicts the universal child. Bond delves into deep recesses of child's psyche and captures the essence and spirit of childhood. He celebrates the true spirit of childhood, boyhood and brings about the ideal of masculinity much required in the modern world. The child in his stories, become the votary of ideal masculinity, thus, breaking the

very edifice of stereotyped masculinity. The child in his stories develops as a male with multiple masculinities.

The present paper seeks to make a detailed analysis of the construction of masculinities in the child characters of Ruskin Bond and draws upon the masculinities through the archetypal perspectives as to how he crafts his own identity. Bond's child is full of innocence and positivism, oozing warmth and camaraderie, spreading love and compassion, celebrating the true spirit of childhood and acts as a messenger of love and peace. Masculine qualities are considered synonymous with courage, independence and assertiveness. Further, social and cultural factors mould these traits depending upon the location and the cultural and social milieu. As the general perception goes, masculinity is often equated with power, carefree attitude and disrespect for consequences and responsibility. Irrespective of the biological sex, both male and female can have feminine and masculine traits and can exhibit them. Marianne Van Den Wijngaard in *Reinventing the Sexes: The Biomedical Construction of Femininity and Masculinity, Race, Gender and Science* defines it as: "Masculinity is a set of attributes, behaviours and roles generally associated with boys and men. Masculinity is socially constructed, but made up of both socially-defined and biologically-created factors" (171). The Australian social scientist R.W. Connell's concept of the "Hierarchy of Masculinities" is a path-breaking work as far as masculinities is concerned. Connell categorises the masculinities, broadly, in parts— hegemonic, marginalized, subordinate and complicit. The construction of masculinities in Bond is better studied in view of child archetypes. The archetypal approach is relevant to the study of boy child characters in Ruskin Bond.

The child archetype is that part of our nature which contributes greatly to our ability to sense playfulness in our lives, balancing the seriousness of adult responsibilities. Masculine traits represent courage, free independent spirit, responsibility and assertiveness. There are manifold male archetypes through which Bond's wide corpus of children literature can be viewed. In psychology, an archetype is a model of a person, personality or behaviour. The archetypes are inherited pre-dispositions to respond to the world in certain ways. A child's psychological growth occurs in different stages from birth onward. He develops an increasingly sophisticated repertoire of emotions and a progressive mastery

of fundamental intellectual concepts. Thus, a growing child is able to create changes in its environment in order to fulfill its own needs and explore its own individuality. Carl Gustav Jung defines the archetype as: "...essentially an unconscious content that is altered by becoming conscious and by being perceived, and it takes its colour from the individual consciousness in which it happens to appear" (5). The child archetype further manifests itself in various types, some of which are: "Its many aspects include the Universal Child, Wounded Child, Orphan, Dependent, Eternal Child, Innocent Child, Nature Child and Divine Child. The core issue of all the child archetypes is dependency and responsibility: when to take responsibility, when to have a healthy dependency, when to stand up to the group and when to embrace communal life" (Myss 145). Thus, the archetypes are the energy guides to the highest potential and the child archetypes are established with the perceptions of life, safety, nurturing, loyalty and family.

Bond's boy child characters exhibit all these attributes. Bond's representation of the child archetype not only energises the reader but makes the world seem a happy place to live in. His child characters are universal in nature. He says in *Fictional World of Ruskin Bond*: "In some ways the lives of Indian children aren't very different from anywhere else... their aspirations what gives pleasure, or sorrow is universal. Jumping in a pool of water, playing games, making friends, losing friends, making friends again are common to children anywhere" (Aggarwal 93). He makes us see happiness in small things which, at times, we pass by unnoticed. Bond writes in his works about the society which is in dire need of human love.

The Universal Child is an archetype that Bond represents in his stories who is same everywhere filled with vivacity, high thoughts, liberty and fraternity. In *The Creative Contours of Ruskin Bond*, S.C. Dwivedi writes about the universality of his characters: "As a writer Bond rises beyond the locale and the localness and becomes a story teller of an everlasting humanity. In brief, Ruskin Bond's fiction is a clarion call for the establishment of a humane society" (161).

Bond's boy child characters are portrayed in such a way that shows the harmonious development of manhood. Most of his boys and Bond himself, as Rusty, display rugged strength ideally blended with gentle simplicity. The writer himself gives a peep into his life through bildungsroman autobiography where one notices the growth of a character. Rusty, the alter ego, of Ruskin Bond, and his growth is clearly perceptible in the Rusty series and the two autobiographical works. Rusty does not show any characteristic qualities of hegemonic masculinity. Though he is strong, athletic but possesses certain traits that are not indicative of hegemonic masculinity. Bond posits about the growth in true account in *The Lamp is Lit* as: "This collection may give the reader a picture of my life both as writer and person. In my case they are one and the same thing. I live through my writing and my writing lives through me" (x). He amplifies, further, by

adding: "There is an equal amount of autobiography to be found in my fiction" (x). Ruskin Bond has inherited the double inheritance that helps in moulding his character in the making of a writer. It had a tremendous impact on his creativity. The universal child character or archetype, searching and making an earnest endeavour to find himself, carving a niche and placing his identity, is seen in his autobiographical writings and other works. Though, it becomes very difficult to draw a line between the autobiographical and the fictional details. He inherits, observes, develops, adapts, assimilates and then produces the universal characters through his writings.

Though Rusty, the boy child is physically strong but he shows more strength as being emotional, caring, and compassionate and associates with people with quite an ease. Rusty searches his true self and through Rusty is seen the evolution of a writer and his great contribution as the writer who writes for the children. Emphasizing about Bond's stories for children, Meena Khorana in her work *The Life and Works of Ruskin Bond*, writes: "His stories for children brought freshness, imagination, and, because of his Anglo-Indian background a multicultural identity to Indian Children's Literature" (94). Bond's work can be seen as a study of bildungsroman where the growth of writer occurs with the self-actualisation. He makes an earnest effort to self-actualize himself and finally establishes as a writer who writes for children. He takes the relationship into a new affirmation of the self as the growth of a writer. For Ruskin Bond, writing for children is because he started writing at an early age of seventeen and the main protagonist of his writings was Rusty, himself, that resembles every boy. Thus, attaining and rendering universality to the child character Rusty and alike. Bond is a true humanist and his consciousness acts as universal consciousness in his works. Bond sees good everywhere. There is a recurrent positive creative energy flowing in his works. He sees a constant striving for life; for eros in his world. There is a great tendency in most of his characters to lead a life, to live it.

Bond draws from the innocent child too. Like a psychologist, he sees the growth of a child and how his innocence is exposed to certain revelations of life. He is firm believer that a child full of innocence is the real harbinger of peace. Bond delves deep down in the recesses of child's mind and he believes himself to be a child of sixty year old. He is passionate about the children. And he says in *The Night Train at Deoli and Other Stories* why he likes writing about them: "...because I have strong an empathy with children I can enter into their minds. As children we are individuals; it is only as we grow older that we acquire a certain grey similarity" (11).

"The Wounded Child archetype holds the image of abuse, neglect, and other traumas that have been endured during childhood" (Myss 443). However, in the positive manifestation of this archetype, the painful experiences awaken a deep sense of compassion and a desire to help other wounded children. Further, on the spiritual plane, a wounded

childhood opens the path of learning to forgive. There is a slight touch of the wounded child in Ruskin Bond, but it tilts to the positive side. Rusty does not harbour any ill-feeling towards any creature. He is traumatised by the fact that his parents were not compatible partners and their life was a series of perpetual quarrels. After the death of his father, he could not relate to his mother emotionally. He is so attached to his father that he thinks of his passing away as more of a 'vanishing' than death. And later in his life, it is this very aspect that allows him to forgive his mother.

Besides, the multiple masculinities are inherent in Rusty, the boy child character. Androgynous masculinity is also perceptible in Rusty. Androgyny is the combination of masculine and feminine characteristics. Generally, there are stereotyped roles for the average man or woman. Men express competence and independence, while the women focus on warmth and expressiveness. Men are seen as having the competence traits, while women are seen as more expressive. Gender identity is not only determined by our biological trait but depends upon our behaviour also. It refers to our roles in a society. Feminine traits are usually associated with being a girl or a woman. It is the society that has categorized male and female and defined their roles. Androgynous people are more adaptable. They behave in ways appropriate to the given situation — regardless of whether the behaviour is masculine or feminine. Bond also possesses feminine traits being emotional, sensitive, innocent, nurturing, soft and accepting. Rusty is androgynous and presents composite masculinity representing a perfect blend of both masculine and feminine. Rusty also shows the informed masculinity as he is caring, kind-hearted and has the feeling of compassion inherent to his character. He not only sympathises but carries empathy towards fellow beings and flora and fauna.

Bond also showcases the Orphan child archetype. There came certain instances in Rusty's life, when he considered himself as an outsider within his family. He felt ignored, thwarted and a burden on his mother after his father died. In *Scenes from a Writer's Life*, he tells the sad tale of his experience of feeling alienated from his family. In the words of Caroline Myss: "The absence of family influences, attitudes and traditions inspires or compels the orphan child to construct an inner reality based on personal judgment and experience... . The shadow aspect manifests when orphans never recover from feelings of abandonment and the scar tissue from family rejection stifles their maturation, often causing them to seek surrogate family structures to experience tribal union" (Myss 442). Similarly, Bond feels orphaned after the death of his father but he relates to the surrogate families and lives with his adopted family in Mussoorie.

Yet another kind of psychological archetype, Puer Eternis is found in the works of Ruskin Bond. This archetype, the Eternal Child, manifests as a determination to remain eternally young in body, mind and spirit and to live life with relish and great engagement: "The eternal child in man is an

indescribable experience...a divine prerogative; an imponderable that determines the ultimate worth or worthlessness of a personality" (Jung 179). This archetype is predominant in Bond and makes him enjoy even the small incidents and moments of his life. He relates easily to the children and he calls himself 'the child'. His works about children give a view of life from a child's perspective. In reading Rusty's adventurous escapades one takes a roller-coaster ride back into one's childhood. However, they do not merely provide excitement, the incidents are also thought-provoking.

Most of all, the Nature Child archetype rules Ruskin Bond and this is the reason he is known as 'Our Own Resident Wordsworth in Prose'. The nature child inspires deep, intimate bonding with the natural world and has a particular affinity for the animal world. It possesses an inner toughness and the ability and strength to survive the rigours and challenges of nature. The nature child unleashes the free spirit and aspires to break free of restrictive boundaries to explore new horizons. Sometimes the nature child develops the advanced skills of communicating with animals and we find in Bond's stories his favourite animals coming to the rescue of the child characters when they are beset with problems. There is a close kinship between him and the natural world. He communes with the flora and fauna quite naturally. Bond relates with nature since his early childhood and the nature child in him defines all his writings.

Bond not only derives the love for animals from this archetype but he is also in communion with the natural spirits and works in harmony with the mountains. He relates to every speck of nature spontaneously. There is a close association with the world of birds and Bond. He believes that the presence of the birds can be learnt from their calls or songs against the dark trees and the varying shades of the hillside: "Bird song is with you wherever you go in the Himalayas..." (*Book of Nature* 191). Thus, it is evident that Bond is predominantly influenced by the nature child archetype. His racy narratives about nature are exquisitely beautiful, wherein Mother Nature comes alive in all her splendour.

There is an inborn, eternal child character, the puer archetype, in Ruskin Bond. Thus, in his seventies, he continues to produce marvellous literature with the boy child centered in it. He keeps the innocent, creative child intact within him all the time and most of his stories are addressed to the child in the adult. The construction of masculinities in the child characters of Ruskin Bond is central to his creativity and the significance of the boy child characters is essential to his fiction. When the world is beset with glaring problems of terrorism, insensitivity and merciless killings, where violence looms large and disrupts the normal tenor of life, where organized crime poses a grim threat to the humanity at large; Bond's male child characters give an alternative for a better world. He presents the images of masculinities entirely different from the perceived notions of stereotyped

masculinities of being macho, strong physically, violent, aggressive and domineering. But Bond presents different aspects of child characters with different masculinities much required in today's world. As goes the saying, "Child is the father of Man" and it is the child if groomed properly during the childhood, prospers to be good, matured male who is lovable and productive to the society.

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