

Adolescence in Ruskin Bond's *The Room on the Roof*

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Ruskin Bond's major novels are about the adolescent. The first novel *The Room of the Roof* is a novel by an adolescent about the adolescent. In order to better analyse his novel, it is pertinent to understand the nature and mind of the adolescent in the light of the findings of modern psychologists. The term "adolescent" has a specific meaning in psychology. It should not be confused with the word "teenager", although the periods of adolescence and teenage are almost the same. Teenage is the period between thirteen and nineteen. When a boy or girl enters the age of thirteen he or she is called a teenager and continues to be called so till the age of nineteen. The period of adolescence covers the years from thirteen to twenty and according to some psychologists up to twenty-one. However the following chart made by Luella Cole and Irma Nelson Hall is accepted by leading psychologists.¹

Pre adolescence or late childhood	11-12 years (girls) 13-14 years (boys)
Early adolescence	12-14 years (girls) 15-16 years (boys)
Middle adolescence	15-17 years (girls) 17-18 years (boys)
Late adolescence	18-20 years (girls) 19-20 years (boys)

Since adolescence is primarily the stage of development, psychologists have specified the following areas:

1. Physical development

It consists of growth of tissue, muscle, bone and skeleton in totality. Besides there is growth in strength and various skills and physical development.

2. Intellectual development

With the enlargement of the brain there is mental growth. The adolescents begin to show their intellectual abilities and intellectual-cultural interests.

3. Emotional development

Emotion is a response to some kind of stimulus. It is an experience that affects an individual's vital processes, stimulating him to greater activity than is normal. Emotional growth of an adolescent leads him to act with greater drive. His self emerges and he begins to assert his independence and thus there is the development of a personality.

4. Social development

The seeds of social development are sown in the family and the primary school. But at a later stage, extracurricular activities lead the adolescent to have contact with people of all age groups. It is at this stage that boys and girls develop friendship and choose their future career.

5. Moral development

Children do not take religion seriously nor are they sufficiently conscious of the feelings of others. In adolescence, young boys and girls begin to think about religion seriously, the do's and don'ts of society and ethical principles. They accept community influences, sometimes without question and sometimes with a grain of salt.

It is at this stage that adolescents think about their goals in life. According to Cole and Hall the main goals of adolescents are:

- (a) Control of emotion by reason
- (b) Social adjustment
- (c) Independent adulthood
- (d) Financial independence
- (e) Choosing a career

While pursuing his/her goals, the adolescent faces a number of problems. It is the responsibility of society to help the adolescent achieve his/her goals and be a responsible citizen of his/her country.

We shall study Bond's novel in the light of the findings of eminent psychologists and examine how far he has been able to depict the emotional, moral and social development of his main characters.

If we look at the characters of Ruskin Bond, all the important characters such as Rusty, Somi, Ranbir, Kishan, and Suri are in their

early adolescence. Bond has chosen the young boys as the main characters in the novel. The reason is obvious. A boy of seventeen could not but write about him and his comrades. The novel is autobiographical, hence true and sincere. While writing it Bond had no need to read a book on adolescent psychology. All that he wrote is largely a part of his own experience. Some of the characters have the same name they had in actual life. Rusty is Ruskin and Somi is Somi. Some critics may comment that it is not fiction; it is a life history. But we have to remember that it is a novel by a seventeen year old boy, still an apprentice.

Coming to the novel, Bond has put so much in it that we are surprised by its wealth. Let us look at the characters. They are Rusty, Ranbir, Somi, Kishen and his mother. Bond writes in his memoirs:

After Miss Kellner died there weren't many old people to talk to (not for some time anyway), because I suddenly acquired a number of young friends. There was Ranbir and his super sister Raj; there was Bhim, already making little business deals; and there were other families in the *mohalla*, such as the Lals (who became the Kapoors in *The Room on the Roof*) and the Sikh boys Haripal, Dipi, Somi and Chotu....²

The room is an actual room. Bond gives a detailed description in his journals of the room and how he lived there. He says, 'I feel like a monarch.' (p. 583)

The novel is autobiographical, not a biography. Rusty is Ruskin to a large extent but not his complete self. The imagined world of *The Room on the Roof* is built on the world of Ruskin, the adolescent and therefore we should analyse it as a novel, not a life-story. Ruskin Bond has mixed facts and fiction, as his main aim is to present the emotional life of the adolescent.³

It is the story of Rusty, a parentless Anglo-Indian boy in his teenage. His guardian, Mr. John Harrison, is a strict Victorian guardian. Typically imperialist in nature and having the pride of the white race superiority over the Indians, he does not want Rusty to mix with them. But Rusty, an adolescent that he is, wants to widen his horizon. An adolescent can never remain confined to the precincts of a bungalow; he must go beyond it and encounter the world outside. This also happens with Rusty. He goes out and meets the Indian people. Being still innocent, not coloured by the white man's prejudices, he makes other adolescents his friends. Though the first encounter is unpleasant (Somi on his bicycle collides with him while eschewing Maharani the ferocious cow) but soon develops into friendship and he is invited to take *chaat* in the bazaar. He takes it and returns home late. Later on he becomes a regular visitor.

The festival of Holi comes. Rusty's friend Ranbir invites him to play Holi when he is relishing *chaat* in the shop.

'Rusty was enjoying the *chaat*. He ate *gol-guppa* after *gol-guppa*, until his throat was almost aflame and his stomach burning itself out. He was not very concerned about Holi. He was content with the present, content to enjoy the new-found pleasures of the *chaat* shop, and said: "well, I'll seeif my guardian doesn't come back tomorrow, I'll play Holi with you, all right?"' (p. 561)

Rusty goes to play holi with his friends. Had he known the UP style of holi, he would not have gone. The treatment he receives there is almost like ragging in a college in a civilized way. He is thoroughly soaked with coloured water and his whole body is smeared with different colours.

Gently, they rubbed dust on the boy's cheeks, and embraced him; they were like many flaming demons that Rusty could not distinguish between this gentle greeting coming so soon after the stormy bicycle pump attack, bewildered Rusty even more.

Ranbir said: Now you are one of us, come; and Rusty went with him and the others. (p. 568)

This experience of unlimited joy of playing holi changes the whole course of Rusty's life. He feels for the first time, the pleasure of independence. Up till now he had been shackled by the discipline of his guardian, Mr. Harrison.

'He was exhausted now, but he was happy. He wanted this to go for ever, this day of feverish emotion, this life in another world. ...He did not want to go home.' (p. 569)

This mingling of Rusty with the Indian boys can be interpreted in many ways. We all agree with Meena Khurana's interpretation.

'Set in 1950, *The Room on the Roof* is a coming of age novel that explores the typically adolescent concern of identity formation, alienation, rebellion against adult restrictions, personal autonomy, emerging sexuality, choosing a career and financial independence.'⁴

Khurana is right in saying that Rusty is in search of an identity. In support of her argument she quotes the famous psychologists Judith R. Harris and Robert M. Lie Bert:

'Adolescence is the transitional period from the dependency of childhood to the independence and responsibility of being an adult. At this point in their lives, young people struggle with two fundamental problems: to redefine their relationship with parents and other adults and to establish themselves as individuals.'⁵

But Harris and Lie Bert are American psychologists and their observation may not be true in the Indian context. Why does the author

choose Holi? The answer is that Holi is a festival when all barriers are broken—caste, religion, region and class. People mix freely. They all become alike when smeared with colour. There are neither white people nor black people. They are all coloured. Right from the beginning of his life Ruskin Bond loved India—her mountains, rivers, forests and the sunny climate.

Harrison's racist attitude was a great barrier for the growing boy. There are two worlds: the Civil Lines and the bazaar, the first is inhabited by the former rulers and the second by the native Indians. The bazaar is a prohibited place for the Anglo-Indians. Rusty is warned by his guardian of the consequences of mixing with the Indians, especially the people in the bazaar. But adolescents always want to break barriers. They have keen curiosity to see the unknown, experience things that are novel. Rusty, in his teens, is free from racial prejudices. He does not know why he should remain cut off from the people who inhabit the same land he himself is a part of. Holi is a festival when people forget their caste and class. Colour is thrown on everybody. Everybody is equal on this day. Rusty's playing Holi is symbolical. It breaks the racial barrier. Now he is an Indian.

This mixing with the people of the bazaar leads him to love India and Indian people. Somi, Ranbir, Kishen, Chotu, Harpal and other youngsters carve a permanent niche in his mind and heart. This Holi festival releases him from the bondage of Mr. Harrison. Rusty finds his own self. On his return he finds his guardian terribly angry. He is badly beaten for his escapade.

'Rusty stared fascinated at the deep yellow nicotine stains on the fingers of his guardian's hand. Then the wrist moved suddenly and the cane cut across the boy's face like a knife, stabbing and burning into his cheek.

Rusty cried and cowered against the wall; Rusty's guardian could feel the blood trickling across his mouth. He looked around desperately for a means of escape, but the man was in front of him, over him, and the wall was behind him.' (p. 571)

Not satisfied with inflicting physical pain, he begins to insult him by means of words. The boy listens to him silently in the beginning but soon bursts into anger. He pulls Harrison's legs. Harrison falls down. Then he strikes him in the face with a vase. The target is missed but the water and flower cover his face and he is hit. Not content with this, Rusty holds his collar and slaps his face on both sides. Harrison is injured badly.

This incident, which follows the Holi festival, is a sequel of the former. Rusty mixes with the Indian people and with their help can

break away from the dying Anglo-Indian society and live independently. The beating of Harrison gives him the confidence that he can act independently.

‘Mad with the pain in his own face, Rusty hit the man again and again, wildly and awkwardly, but with the giddy thrill of knowing he could do it; 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!’ (p. 572)

Thus Rusty’s departure from Harrison’s house can be interpreted on two levels; the leaving of the emaciated Anglo- Indian society for the healthier Indian society and the departure from the stage of helplessness of a small boy to the stage of strong and energetic manhood.

Rusty’s new world is free from the oppression of the colonial world; it is a world of freedom, of untrammelled joy and trustful camaraderie. This is where adolescents can develop their faculties in the desired way. The people he meets are all simple and sympathetic. Rusty, as said earlier, is partly Bond himself. It was the love of Dehradun’s people that brought him back from England and he decided to live in India for ever and write about the people here. The sunny atmosphere gives vigour and energy to Rusty. He revives his true spirit.

Leaving his guardian’s house, Rusty moves in the street of the bazaar for a shelter. He sees a house with light. He goes upstairs where he is received well. The woman in the room considers him to be a customer. Her amorous advances trouble him and he leaves the place and sleeps in the open uncomfortably. Next day, it is Somi who takes him home. There he meets his family. After bath and meal, he discusses the future plans. Somi has a mother and two sisters. Though a Sikh by religion, he considers Rusty to be a member of his family and no one looks at him as a stranger. The plan is chalked out. Rusty will teach Kishen, the son of Mr. Kapoor, a well-off person in the area. Rusty is diffident about his ability as a teacher of English.

‘Rusty felt very sceptical about the proposal; he was not sure he could teach English or anything else to the wilful son of a rich man. But he was not in a position to pick and choose. Somi mounted his bicycle and rode off to see Mr. Kapoor to secure for Rusty the post of Professor of English. When he returned, he seemed pleased with himself, and Rusty’s heart sank with the knowledge that he had to go.’ (p. 582)

Rusty goes to Kapoor’s house. Mr. Kapoor, in his own words, “..... was a nice Big Man himself, and every one knew this; but he had

fallen from the heights; and until he gave up the bottle, was not likely to reach them again. Everyone felt sorry for his wife, including herself.”(p. 583)

He is introduced to Meena, Kapoor's wife and his pupil's mother, Rusty describes her: ‘Meena, Kapoor's wife was a capable person, still young, charming hostess; and in her red sari and white silk jacket, her hair plaited and scented with Jasmine, she looked beautiful.’ (p. 584)

The first meeting is rather dry, mechanical and business like. Meena Kapoor introduces her son Kishen, tells him the terms and conditions of tuition and shows the room on the roof where he was to live. The room is not at all attractive. The author describes it: ‘It was a small room, but this did not matter much as there was very little in it: only a string bed, a table, a shelf and a few nails in the wall. In comparison to Rusty's room in his guardian's house, it wasn't even a room: it was four walls, a door and a window.’ (p. 596) But the room makes Rusty happy. When Meena says that she will change the room if he did not like it, he replies: ‘But I like it. This is the room I want to live in. And do you know why, Meena? Because it isn't a real room, that's why!’ (p. 596)

The room, though very ordinary, is Rusty's citadel. The first reason for liking it is Meena Kapoor. An adolescent, he, has fallen in love with her. It is very difficult for us to explain why he falls in love with an elderly lady. As a rule, he should have been in love with a girl of his own age or slightly elder. It is equally enigmatic that Meena responds to his love. Strange are the ways of love. But the second reason for his liking the room is that he has got freedom from his guardian. The room is his own and like Shelley, he survey's everything with the pride of a monarch. The room is a symbol of the adolescent's ideal world—good company of friends and love of a beautiful woman. Its symbolic meaning is revealed slowly and convincingly.

Rusty begins a new life in Kapoor's house; it is a life of fun and frolic and, later on of growing up. His task is to teach Kishen, who is full of mischief and who does not consider Rusty to be his teacher or, at least, does not have the image that most children have in their mind of a teacher. For him, Rusty is a friend.

Although Rusty is still a boy in the eyes of Somi, Kishen, Chotu and Haripal, he, in fact, has grown up physically and mentally. This growth of an adolescent can be easily seen in the relationship between Meena and Rusty. Married in her early teens, Meena's husband was twenty years older than her. In other words, when she was thirteen, her husband was thirty three, the age of her uncle, if not her father. The

future events mingled with her husband's indifference and indolence, induce her to lean towards the young English boy of sixteen or seventeen. An adolescent is hungry for everything—food, company, love, sex, adventure, play and reading. Meena's beauty attracts him strongly.

Mr. Kapoor decides to have a picnic. The summer season was approaching. The litchis were almost ready to eat and the mangoes had ripened. Kishen liked mangoes very much. In the afternoons, the rays of the sun stole through the branches and leaves of the big Banyan trees and made a pattern of light and shade on the ground and Kapoor's house walls. The birds knew and so they twittered and chirped in the morning and a lot of noise in the evening when they came home to the tree. In this lusty season, the picnic was arranged.

During the picnic, Rusty and Meena walked into the thicket. Rusty expressed his love to Meena by holding her hand tightly and kissing her as well. It was a clumsy and awkward kiss but fiercely passionate and Meena responded, tightening the embrace, returning the fervour of the kiss. They stood together in the shadows. Rusty intoxicated with beauty and sweetness, Meena with freedom and the comfort of being loved.

This puppy love does not continue for a long time. Meena is killed in a car accident. Kapoor gets an appointment at Delhi. He takes his old car. Meena accompanies him and leaves Kishen in Rusty's custody. But she never reaches Delhi. She is killed in the car accident. Meena's premature death in the car accident is a turning point in the life of Rusty and Kishen. It creates a wide chasm between the lovely past and the ugly present. The stern reality of Meena Kapoor's death changes Rusty in a moment; he becomes an adult at once, a guardian to advise Kishan, a child. The situation is aggravated by the indifferent attitude of Kishen's father; he shirks his responsibility. The first three pages of chapter sixteen aptly describe the mental condition of the adolescent and the child. Kishen wanders here and there the whole day and Rusty waits anxiously for him till the evening sets in and stars begin to shine in the sky. He sees the silhouette of Kishen and asks him where he was. Kishen tells him the truth. Rusty is more grieved.

Kishen slept. He was exhausted—he had been walking all evening, crying his heart out. Rusty laid awake his eyes wide open, brimming with tears. He did not know if the tears were for himself or for Meena or for Kishen, but they were for some one.

Next morning a tonga comes to take Kishen to his aunt as instructed by his father. As Rusty himself is without support, he cannot retain him. The tonga takes Kishen away. The separation is the cutting of the

bond between Rusty and Kishen. For adults, it is the routine of the world but for the nascent and sensitive mind of the adolescent it is the parting of the body into two. Even the presence of Kishen's aunt fails to give him any kind of solace that Kishen is now in protective hands.

Rusty decides to leave Dehradun to go to Delhi and then to London. On his way to Delhi, he stops at Hardwar to meet Kishen. He meets Mr. Kapoor who is a changed man and has married again. Through Mr. Kapoor, he comes to know that Kishen has run away and become a thief. He takes great pains to find Kishen and in the process, loses his clothes while taking bath in the Ganga. He persuades Kishen to leave this profession and takes him back to Dehradun.

The mention of Dehradun indicates that Kishen wants to leave Hardwar and give up the profession of stealing and robbing. Further, it also indicates that he wants to be in the company of Rusty. Rusty asks him what they will do at Dehra.

'Oh, we will find someone for you to give English lessons. Not one, but many. And I will start a *chaat* shop.' (p. 656)

Hearing these words of Kishen, Rusty forgets everything- England, fame and riches and asks, 'When do we go?' Kishen's reply is quicker. He says that they will leave Hardwar the next day.

The story of the novel practically ends here. The next chapter narrates their journey in the boat that takes them to the other side of the river.

The novel as we see it is simple in narration and very much oral in technique. The development of the story is in chronological order. There is little flashback and most of the characters excepting Meena Kapoor and Kishen are typecast; They remain the same throughout whether Mr. Harrison or Somi or Ranbir or Suri or Mr. Kapoor.

But behind this simplicity of plot and narration there is the complex world of the adolescent, symbolized by *The Room on the Roof*. The period of adolescence as discussed earlier is the most crucial in man's life. Ruskin Bond writes in *Scenes from a Writer's Life*:

..... these [years] are not years of great achievement, they are the formative years, and the most emotional, impressionable, vulnerable years. There are struggles, setbacks, failures, but hope and optimism have not been blighted, and the cynicism of middle age is yet far distant.⁶

The plot of the novel is concerned with Rusty and his friends, all between ten and sixteen. They are carefree adolescents, free from the restraints of the adult world and are on the verge of the world of experience. Rusty is a complex character. Born in India of a middle class Britisher, he loses his parents during early childhood. He is under

the guardianship of Mr. Harrison who has inherited all the colonial ideas. The author makes a contrast between Civil Lines, inhabited by the whites and the bazaar owned by the common people. The adolescent Rusty does not know the reason why he is prohibited by his guardian from going to the bazaar. For Harrison, it is not proper for a British to mix with the common Indian people. But for Rusty, the world of the Civil Lines is a kind of jail where Harrison is the jailor and he must obtain freedom from him and this he does by going to the bazaar and eating *samosa* and *golguppa* at the *chaat* shop with Harpal, Somi and Ranbir. Unable to bear the tyranny of Harrison, he leaves his house and goes to Somi for shelter and enters a new free world. This new world is symbolized by the room on the roof, an ordinary place, not comfortable, but built by Meena Kapoor, and renovated by Somi, Chotu and Kishen, a world where he is independent of his guardian's sickening influence and where he can dream of his future of becoming a writer of eminence.

His friends encourage him, without knowing the hard path of a successful writer. But this happy room cannot remain happy if its people leave it. It happens. Ranbir and Suri go away from Dehra. Meena Kapoor dies, Somi and Chotu go to Amritsar for a long period and Kishen is sent to his aunt. The room is inhabited by lonely Rusty. He decides to go to London.

But when he meets Kishen again and Kishen asks him to return to Dehradun, he forgets his previous decision of going to England. Once his people are with him, he goes back to his world of freedom—the room. Towards the end of the novel, when Rusty and Kishen have crossed the river and entered the forest, Rusty remembers the forest of the day of the picnic, when he had kissed Meena and held her hand and felt the magic of the forest and the magic of Meena. He unconsciously says, 'One day we must live in the jungle', (p. 660) to which Kishen replies with a happy laugh, 'One day. But now we walk back. We walk back to the room on the roof! It is our room, we have to go back.' (p. 660)

This is the world of the adolescent, a world of untrammelled freedom when they dream of the future and make preparations for adult life.

NOTES

1. Luella Cole and Irma Helen Hall (1966), *Psychology of Adolescence*, New York: Holt Dinechart & Winston Inc.
2. Ruskin Bond (1997), *Scenes from a Writer's Life*, Delhi: Penguin Books, p. 4

3. Ruskin Bond (1987), *Collected Fiction, The Room on the Roof*, New York: Penguin Books, p. 583
4. Meena G. Khurana (1975), "The Search for an Identity: Journey as Metaphor" in *The Room on The Roof in The Creative Contours of Ruskin Bond*, P.K. Singh (ed.), Delhi: Pencraft Publications. p.72.
5. *Ibid.*, p. 73.
6. Ruskin Bond (1997), *Scenes from a Writer's Life*, Delhi: Penguin Books, p. 90.