

Human Relationships, Identity, and Emotional Growth in Ruskin Bond's *The Room on the Roof*: A Psychological and Reader-Response Perspective

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Abstract

The Room on the Roof (1956/1957) by Ruskin Bond is one of the best-loved coming-of-age stories in Indian English literature that sensitively depicts adolescence, friendship, identity and emotional belonging. Bond does not depict exoteric conflicts but rather the internal drama of Rusty, an Anglo-Indian orphan who finds himself navigating issues of cultural identity, isolation, freedom and self-discovery in the sociopolitical landscape of post-colonial India. This article looks at how Bond portrays human relationships in which the protagonist grows emotionally and acquires a sense of place. Based on the theories of Reader-Response Theory and developmental psychology, as well as children's and young adult literature, the paper suggests that friendship, surrogate family relationships, and interpersonal empathy become psychological catalysts within Rusty's development. The article also provides evidence that Bond's ability to create a realistic character and to keep his narrative style restrained and devoid

of emotion allows the reader to actively interpret the protagonist's experiences, thus making the novel relevant in different generations. Finally, *The Room on the Roof* shows that identity is not defined by social status or ethnicity, but by meaningful human relationships based on trust, compassion, and acceptance.

Keywords: Ruskin Bond; *The Room on the Roof*; Human Relationships; Reader-Response Theory; Identity; Adolescence; Coming-of-Age; Indian English Literature

1. Introduction

One of the preoccupations of the literary world of Ruskin Bond is human relationships. In his novels, short stories, essays and memoirs, Bond is often a character whose life is defined not so much by the unusual as by experiences that are commonplace: friendship, affection, loneliness, loss, and reconciliation. His stories are seldom plot-driven, but rather emotional through simple human interaction, showing depth in human experience. The unique narrative approach has given Bond a place in the unique category of Indian English literature, and especially among child and young adult readers.

The Room on the Roof stands out as one of Bond's earliest works as it is both an autobiographical narrative and a universal exploration of adolescence and identity. Set in 1957 when Bond was just seventeen, the novel, written when he was barely a teenager, tells the story of the Anglo-Indian Rusty, whom the English have taken into their care in Dehradun, where he is under the watch of a strict English guardian. While feeling somewhat cut off from the emotional world and stifled by the oppressive colonial atmosphere, Rusty gradually slips into the colourful social life of his Indian friends: Somi, Ranbir, Kishen and the Kapoor family. These relationships open a process of emotional freedom and self-exploration which leads to a new sense of belonging, family, and identity for himself. The novel has been interpreted as an expression of Bond's own life experiences of displacement and his quest for cultural and emotional home in India.

While many studies explore the autobiographical aspects, descriptions of landscapes, and nostalgic features of Bond's fiction, far fewer scholars have explored the interpersonal relationships as the mechanism at the heart of psychological development in *The Room on the Roof*. Recent reader-response scholarship suggests that Bond's stories require the reader to emotionally engage with the themes of alienation, friendship, and self-discovery of Rusty to produce multiple interpretations based on the reader's own memories and emotional histories. For Bond, the meanings are not fixed, but are created by the reader's engagement with the text, in a space or line in the narrative.

This article, therefore, examines how Bond uses friendship, surrogate family and emotional companionship to develop Rusty's changing identity. The study and analysis is based on the theory of Reader-Response Theory (Rosenblatt, 1978), theory in developmental studies on adolescence (Erikson, 1968) and contemporary children's literature criticism (Hunt, 2005; Nikolayeva, 2014), which are used to argue that the novel is not a mere by-product of the story, but the main source of psychological development and emotional strength in human relations. Through this, Bond confronts the notions of identity that are traditionally defined by social class, nationality or race, and proposes that true belonging is created through empathy, trust and shared humanity.

In addition, the article places *The Room on the Roof* in the context of the *Bildungsroman*, or coming-of-age novel. Bond foregrounds emotional education, not formal education or professional success, as the only thing that happens in everyday human interactions. Rusty's development is not set by institutional power but by friendship, love, loss, culture, and a sense of morality. This is why the novel remains relevant to today's readers grappling with the same issues of identity, belonging and emotional autonomy in a more diverse and multicultural world.

2. Resocialization as a Process of Development

In adolescent fiction, specifically the Bildungsroman, one of the major themes is identity formation—a process by which the adolescent develops some emotional maturity over time as he or she relates to society. According to Erikson (1968), adolescence is the development stage when people experience a crisis of identity and/or role confusion as they strive for coherence between their personal aspirations and social expectations. The protagonist is placed at the psychological threshold in the novel. Rusty is an orphan, has not received emotional nurturing from his English guardian, and has only a single right to personal identity, which is the rigid discipline. His change is not via formal learning or material achievement, but through significant relationships which slowly reconstruct his emotional world.

The novel's opening scene is an isolated Rusty, a world secluded from the rest of humanity. He is happy with material possessions, but his life is lacking in affection, companionship and emotional freedom. Bond's loneliness is not just loneliness of being alone; it is psychological loneliness, alienation. Rusty always craved emotional bonds, love, honour, acceptance and accommodation, whereas his guardian was insensitive to it as colonial values were the centre of any decision and judgment. His first encounter with Indian boys is a turning point in his life due to this emotional deprivation. In fact, as Hunt (2005) notes, friendship often plays a role in the way in which children's and young adult books address issues of identity, independence, and social belonging. Rusty's experiences are an example of this type of story arc with a high degree of psychological realism.

Rusty's emotional awakening starts with his friendship with Somi. Somi is not an authoritarian adult like the ones he has faced before; he meets Rusty on an equal footing and treats him as an equal. Their friendship grows out of their curiosity, sense of humour and trust, not obligation. Somi attempts to make Rusty at home with Indian flora and fauna, its surroundings, streets, buildings and people, what he was once deprived of. This relationship is

a symbolic deflation of the cultural divide between the Anglo-Indian adolescent and the Indian community he or she resides in. Rusty learns from Somi that the essence of belonging is lived in human relationships, not through race, social standing or privilege.

This friendship has an emotional significance which can be explained using the theory of reader-response. Rosenblatt (1978) believes that meaning in literature can only be created when the reader and author interact with one another, allowing the reader to conclude the character's experiences based on his/her own emotional history. For readers who have had similar experiences of loneliness, migration, cultural displacement and social exclusion, Rusty's slow integration into Somi's group of friends will resonate with them. Bond doesn't indulge in sentimentality, and ordinary talk and shared experience convey the emotional shift in a dramatic way. Thus, readers are actively engaged in Rusty's psychological journey rather than just watching it unfold.

However, as vital as Rusty's friendship with Kishen is, it grows into a quasi-brotherhood. Whereas Rusty's life and personality are staid and more controlled than Keshen's contrast, Kishen's youthful spontaneity, mischievous behaviour, and emotional openness are all stark contrasts with Rusty's life and personality. Their relationship is not based on authority, but equality, trust and vulnerability. Rusty finds familial love through Kishen, which he never knew before. Their interactions show that Bond thinks that sometimes there's emotional kinship when there's no blood kinship. Today's children's literature increasingly depicts family as an emotional and not just biological institution, an institution whose emotional support and interpersonal relationships produce significant effects on the cognitive and emotional development of children (as Nikolayeva, 2014, put it).

Bond solidifies Rusty's emotional growth in this friendship with the Kapoors (the Kapoor family). Mrs Kapoor is a notable figure as she embodies maternal warmth, love, and acceptance. The caring, generous and hospitable nature of her parents has resonated with Rusty,

who was raised in an orphanage. The relationship is very well planned, with no melodrama, and Bond stresses small gestures like caring, talking and companionship that slowly bring Rusty back into emotional normalcy. The story is told in a restrained way, typical of Bond's artistic style, which means that readers have to draw their own conclusions about the emotions involved without the author being too explicit.

In his fiction, Bond has been variously noted for the emphasis he puts on the emotional rather than the dramatic (King, 2000). It is a characteristic that is particularly apparent in Rusty's relationships with Mrs Kapoor as everyday domestic experiences are psychologically transformative. Mrs Kapoor is not just a character but more of a symbol for Rusty's emotional stability, which he has been seeking since his adolescent years. Her character adds depth to the protagonist's emotional growth and ability to empathise with others, take responsibility for their actions, and develop emotional connections.

The novel also questions the conventional notions of authority in the character of Mr Kapoor. Often seen as irresponsible, Bond is no moral stereotype of an alcoholic. Mr Kapoor, on the other hand, represents human vulnerability, and the very idea of adulthood is flawed and messy itself. The encounters with him lead to Rusty's realisation that maturity is the ability to see the human condition, not perfection. The author's subtlety in characterisation separates Bond's story from many other adolescent tales, where adults are primarily portrayed as symbols of authority or oppression.

The novel also has an intercultural function in terms of friendship. The transition of Rusty's identity from a colonial to a social position indicates a progressive melting away of colonial distinctions. Rusty's enrolment into an Indian social group indicates a progressive blurring of colonial identities. *The Room on the Roof*, written in the decade after Indian Independence, subtly suggests a questioning of stilted racial division that was inherited from the colonial society. Rusty's emotional assimilation into Indian culture is organic and through

friendship, not political ideology, and thus the transformative power of human relationships is greater than that of institutional structures. Throughout his early work, Bond's fiction always stresses a common humanity over cultural difference or ethnicity, thus focusing interpersonal relations as sites of reconciliation within postcolonial India, as Singh (2013) says.

These relationships combine to help Rusty slowly become emotionally independent. Erikson (1968) holds that the successful outcome of identity formation relies on the ability to form stable interpersonal relationships, while at the same time maintaining personal autonomy. This trajectory is similar to the one followed in Bond's story. Rusty does not reject his past completely or make his cultural roots disappear, but builds a more inclusive identity, based on feeling, empathy and choice. His psychological development then comes about in relations which promote the development of self-concept and understanding, in contrast to conforming to social norms.

In a larger literary context, Bond's depiction of friendship questions the individuality and competitiveness established in modern society. Compassion, loyalty, humour and acceptance are the building blocks of relationships in *The Room on the Roof*, not material gain or social status. These values make the novel relevant to today's readers facing issues of identity, belonging and emotional health in multicultural and fragmented societies.

Finally, Bond shows that identity is not a purely psychological accomplishment, but a process that emerges out of significant human relations. Rusty's story shows that real belonging isn't about ethnicity or nationality but about the ability to build relationships of trust, understanding and caring. In this regard, *The Room on the Roof* is more than just a product of its time; it is an eternal study of adolescence and the power of human connections.

3. Psychological Growth, Belonging, and the Bildungsroman Tradition

The Room on the Roof is definitely a Bildungsroman (coming of age) novel because it demonstrates the emotional, psychological and moral development of the main character, the

boy. The Bildungsroman typically recounts a person's coming-of-age, and their growth is normally associated with formal education, achievement of success in a profession or social integration, whereas Ruskin Bond's work focuses on emotional relationships as the key to personal development. Rusty's learning is not in the classroom, but in the classroom when he learns from friends, when he loses friends, when he finds friends, when he learns about them. Thus, in the novel, acts of identity formation are portrayed as an emotional process rather than a "process of institutionalisation."

According to Franco Moretti (1987), Bildungsroman essentially is about the subject's inner desires and dreams being confronted with the outer world. This is one of the common story lines that Rusty has. He is in a transitional place between two cultural worlds at the start of the novel. He is an Anglo-Indian teenager who is culturally isolated from Indians as well as Britishers because of the colonial regime. Who he is is not lived, but imposed, and therefore broken up. Instead, Bond presents adolescence as a period of psychological volatility and inabilities, of not being able to be born into belonging but rather find it.

The psychosocial development theory of Erikson (1968) offers us a good lens to look at Rusty's metamorphosis. Erikson suggests that an adolescent's dilemma is between identity and role confusion; this means that the person is attempting to establish a continuity between himself and his environment. The initial reliance on his guardian serves as an example of externally imposed identity for Rusty. He then makes new friendships that help him to question what he knows to be true and to develop a more authentic sense of self. Rusty, on the other hand, gradually became a synthesis of the various cultural experiences. This is a developmental process which exemplifies Erikson's claim that identity formation is not a purely introspectionist process.

Bond's take on loneliness takes it one step further and substantiates this psychological understanding. The room on the roof is not a physical room; it's a room devoid of emotional

recognition. Rusty is the most affected by the lack of relationships that are based on trust, love and equality. Social connectedness is also one of the most crucial factors of adolescents' well-being, resilience and identity formation as outlined by contemporary psychological research (Nikolayeva, 2014). He hopes that people will learn these lessons from the experience, and that emotional companionship can help them to cope with feelings of alienation and psychological instability.

Freedom and responsibility are another theme that is explored in the novel. At first, Rusty's leaving his guardian's house seems to symbolise free agency and independence for individuals. As the days pass, however, Rusty slowly comes to realise that physical freedom is not all that is needed for his independence. But Rusty's having a tough time with his money, a heartbreak, questions and decisions that make him responsible for himself. This development is a movement from dependence to autonomous adulthood that is typical of the Bildungsroman genre. Bond is, therefore, opposed to freedom as a simple or static entity and suggests that the greatest freedom is freedom from responsibility, in the sense of freedom to take on responsibility.

A part of Rusty's development is the way he views "home." Initially, home is an area of authority and discipline. But as the plot progresses, Bond reimagines home as a place of feeling at ease, friendship, and togetherness. The Kapoor family are imperfect, but they offer Rusty warmth and love that he doesn't get from his guardian's family. When Mrs Kapoor dies, Rusty endures tremendous loss and loss of love, but also learns about love and loss and the fragility of humans. Home, therefore, is a mental, rather than physical or architectural, entity.

The idea of home is a new one, with special connotations in postcolonial literature. Homi K. Bhabha (1994), however, suggests that in the "Third Space" the boundaries of culture begin to flow and hybrid identities result from a process of negotiation. Although Bond is not an overt post colonialist, Rusty's experiences are very pertinent to the postcolonial concept. He

doesn't feel completely British colonial or completely Indian. Rather, he creates an identity that is "cultural hybrid", with an emphasis on universal humanity and humans, and not on ethnicity. In the novel, culturally affiliative binary oppositions are indirectly challenged, without resorting to symbolic characters.

I like the Bond story because he doesn't break into a frenzy over it. *The Room on the Roof* does not evoke the emotional depth of a modern YA novel of drama or psychological strife; rather, it does so through the repetition of day-to-day discussion, family meals, entertainment, celebrations and the personal moments of contemplation. This is a narrative economy, and Bond assumes that readers will be able to interpret. Peter Hunt (2005) thinks that good children's books treat their readers well and that they do not over-explain; that emotional meaning should build up in the story itself. It is a common occurrence for Bond to have the reader make his/her own psychological interpretations, instead of a predetermined one.

Also supported by reader-response criticism, which argues that Rusty's story is still relevant today. For Rosenblatt (1978), reading is a transaction every time, between the text and the reader. Young people may be able to feel a sense of themselves in Rusty's pursuit of independence, while adult readers might be more sensitive to the themes of memory, memory loss, and emotional strength in the novel. The novel can be read on a personal level in terms of the reader's own emotional, life-giving experiences: migration, cultural displacement, bereavement, loneliness, etc., etc.—and so many different meanings have come about, all equally valid. The novel's literary success is in part due to Bond's sober, multiple narrative voice that intentionally allows for a variety of interpretations.

Today's widely discussed topic on social and emotional learning (SEL) is also presaged in *The Room on the Roof* from the children's and young adult literature perspective. As one of the powerful resources in developing empathy, interpersonal communication, responsible

decision-making, and emotional regulation (CASEL, 2020), literature is recognised to play a vital role in the academic lives of students. Literature is recognised as a powerful tool in developing empathy, interpersonal communication, responsible decision-making, and emotional regulation (CASEL, 2020), and this plays a vital role in the academic lives of students. The skills that Rusty demonstrates through each of his experiences. He learns emotional intelligence, beyond what he can read in books, in the process of developing friendship, conflict, grief, forgiveness, and responsibility. Bond proposes, then, that literature is a place for emotional learning, as a text from which readers extrapolate their own personal relationships and ethics.

Rusty's growth as a person is a testament to the fact that adolescence is not a time of confusion, nor is it a process that will undoubtedly lead to adulthood. Rather, it is a process, shaped by interpersonal relationships, cultural confrontations, subjective feelings, and a process of reflection on self-understanding. What made Bond so successful is his ability to depict this process so sensitively without being sentimental idealists or pessimistic psychologists. Consequently, *The Room on the Roof* continues to be one of the greatest explorations into the adolescent identity in Indian English Literature, and its insights continue to resonate with readers faced with the issue of belonging, selfhood and human relationships in a world that is becoming hyperconnected and hypermobile.

Rusty's psychological development also illustrates that identity is relational, meaning that it is also a communal identity. Although the writers' backgrounds and cultures are very different, both recognise that the human psyche is built when people are accepted into society, when they feel secure within themselves, and when they interact with other people. Bhadury et al. (2026) argue that the psychological environment in which identity is formed can significantly influence an individual's psychological self-awareness and that if it is not affirmed, a psychological fragmentation can occur rather than emotional development. For

both, it's a journey marked by racial trauma and systemic oppression for Morrison, and loneliness, friendship and the search for belonging for Bond. In both, the notion of identity is not a static personal characteristic, but a process taking place in the mind shaped by relationships with others.

4. Discussion: Human Relationships as the Heart of Bond's Literary Humanism

In the above analysis, it has been revealed that *The Room on the Roof* is in many ways more of an autobiographical account of adolescence than that. In a seemingly innocuous coming-of-age narrative, Bond reveals that human relationships can be the greatest source of identity, emotional resilience and moral consciousness in a person's life. The social conflict or ideological conflict is not the focus of the psychological development as in a typical 20th-century novel, where the focus is on the psychological development of the social conflict or the ideological conflict. The main forces: friendship, affection, compassion, grief and forgiveness are the ones that come to play as Rusty slowly adapts to society. In the novel, the emotional relationship, accordingly, does not follow racial barriers, class barriers, national and religious barriers, which represents the humanistic vision in the novel. The novel then represents the humanistic vision in which all kinds of emotional relationships are not restricted by racial, class, national and religious barriers.

He is among those who had a literary humanism more characteristic of his time than other prose writers. Humanism in this sense is a literary approach that values the worth, feeling and humanity of human beings more than the hierarchical division of society. In *The Room on the Roof*, Bond consciously does not make political ideals or cultural types the stand-in for the characters. Rusty is not just an Anglo-Indian teenager, and Somi, Kishen or the Kapor family are not depicted as a symbolic representation of post-colonial India. Instead, all characters are emotionally unique, and the reader can identify with the characters as personalities (as human beings) and not as social types. Literary humanism is about 'enlightening the universal aspects

of human life through particular lives,' as Abrams and Harpham (2015) put it, and this is always present in Bond's use of narrative.

It is also a focus on a shared humanity that is unusual in Bond's work on postcolonial identity. The issues of colonial power, hybridity, and cultural negotiation have been rightfully explored in a significant amount of postcolonial criticism (Bhabha, 1994; Ashcroft, Griffiths, & Tiffin, 2002). It is useful to take these perspectives to heart as interpretive, and Bond is not a theorist of identity as politics, but an agent of encounters with the 'otherness' of others. Rusty's integration into Indian society is gradual, as he is accepted, companionship is found, and emotional security is gained in the company of his friends - and not necessarily through a political agenda. The novel demonstrates that cultural participation is not ideological, but rather through normal human interaction. The perspective foregrounds emotion in the process of identity formation and highlights the emotional aspects of postcolonial studies.

The novel is also a major component of current knowledge and practice in the field of social and emotional learning (SEL). Empathy, relationship skills, responsible decision-making, and emotional regulation are all identified as key skills needed in the development of adolescents (CASEL, 2020). These abilities tend to be developed in literary narratives, where the reader is immersed in the emotional situations of the reading experience and can also imagine the situations in a critical way. The feelings that Rusty has – loneliness, friendship, affection, bereavement, responsibility – are the feelings that are known in the modern educational system as essential to the healthy development of adolescents. Bond thus expects educational practices that have come into prominence in recent decades.

One more strength of the novel is the portrayal of the idea of chosen family. Today's family relations are perceived as beyond blood responsibilities to include love, trust and mutual support (Nikolayeva 2014). The use of this concept is very subtle in Bond. Rusty slowly builds up an emotional family as he forges relationships with Somi, Kishen, Mrs Kapoor and the rest

of the community. These relationships are not a substitute for his own family, nor are they intended to wipe out his past, but rather intended to offer the emotional strength for his psychological development. The images resonate with their own time of today, as they are significant to people living in mobile, multicultural and socially plural societies, where the "traditional" family is increasingly interwoven with emotional networks.

Bond's narrative economy is to be equally considered from a stylistic point of view. In modern fiction, it is common to use flashbacks, character narration to explain things, or some sort of argumentation to propel the story forward. Instead, Bond takes a very different approach. Whether everyday conversations, festivals, family life, walking down Dehradun or simple moments of quiet reflection, they are emotional yet reveal the nuances of the changing nature of relationships. A realistic realism, without frills, that encourages readers to play an active role in generating emotional meaning. According to Rosenblatt (1978), literary significance is created when the reader interacts with the text and not when the author provides a clear explanation of the text. This transactional way of reading is illustrated in the very way in which Bond narrates.

This is largely because *The Room on the Roof* could also cater to the general issues of young people. Although set in a socio-historical background of post-Independence India, Rusty's journey to acceptance, autonomy and belonging is as relevant to readers today, irrespective of their cultures. The experiences of young people in the 21st century are still very much defined by globalisation, migration, multiculturalism and what is becoming more and more complex: social identities. Rusty's journey is thus not only historical but also relational, as questions of identity are not geographical or political but relational. Many readers from different cultures see some of themselves in Rusty's emotional roller coaster, thus proving the novel's ongoing international appeal.

Finally, Bond's literary achievement is a challenge to the prevailing ideas of children's and young adults' literature. This kind of literature has been disparaged as not being as refined as grown-up fiction. Other studies have demonstrated how complex philosophical, psychological and ethical themes are dealt with in children's stories; however, Hunt (2005), Reynolds (2011) and Nikolayeva (2014) are just a few that have done this. This can be seen in *The Room on the Roof*. It has a simple vocabulary, but it is a strong exploration of identity, emotional development, intercultural awareness and moral responsibility. Literary accessibility does not detract from the intellect, Bond reveals.

The novel is thus suggested to be read as an autobiographical novel of adolescence as well as an important novel in Indian English, children's and psychological fiction. In all the above respects, Bond's work has a humanistic quality, but uses a measured narrative technique to produce a narrative that still stands out for its timeless significance of empathy, friendship and emotional attachment in the process of developing personal identity.

5. Conclusion

The Room on the Roof is the subject of this study here, so that it can be discussed from the point of view of human relationships, identity formation and reader-response theory. The analysis shows that Ruskin Bond's interpersonal relationships are the main means by which he comes to terms with negotiating adolescence, surmounting emotional isolation and building a coherent identity. Psychological growth is not only triggered by the narrative elements of friendship, surrogate families, and the daily expression of compassion, but also by these elements themselves. The article also asserts that Bond redefines the concept of the Bildungsroman tradition, shifting the emphasis from institutional education and social success to educational experiences that emphasise emotion based on lived human experience. Identifying with the concept of identity formation of Erikson, Rusty's development also supports Rosenblatt's perspective that literary meaning is created by the emotional involvement

of the reader. The restrained narrative style and the characterisation and humanistic philosophy of Bond invite readers to reflect critically on their experience of belonging, friendship, loneliness and resilience.

Furthermore, the novel is not just historically relevant, but it is also relevant to the present. It has captured and investigated the concepts of cultural hybridity, emotional intelligence, selected family and inter-personal empathy, which are still very relevant in today's multicultural societies where issues of identity continue to shift. Instead of providing dogmatic answers, Bond presents a very humanistic perspective in which understanding and compassion are the basis for meaningful social relationships. Finally, *The Room on the Roof* can be considered a landmark in Indian English fiction as well as an important work of children's and young adult literature. It is a literature of enduring value because it exemplifies identity development in the context of relationships that are based on trust, empathy, and mutual respect. In his portrayal of the impact of common human relationships, Ruskin Bond delivers a universal journey through adolescence that speaks to readers from across generations and cultures.

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