



**THE INTERSECTING WORLDS OF CHILDREN AND ADULTS: A STUDY OF
RUSKIN BOND'S RUSTY SERIES**

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The five novels of the Rusty series thrive on and underline the didactic aspect. In the course of writing these novels, Bond, directly or in a nuanced way, highlights issues of high seriousness of the adult world. It is a world which exists beyond the realm of children. In his role as an author, Bond does not subscribe to adult perspectives on issues such as race, caste, class, gender and religion. He portrays the adult world as distorted and hypocritical in its conduct towards the other human beings. Bond has claimed that he writes children's stories for pleasure, but an adult reader cannot ignore the ideological constituents of the adult world. These constituents are actively at work in order to transform perceptions of innocent children into the distorted, warped outlook of adult life. The adult world in the Rusty series is able to affirm its perspectives through the ideological practices it subscribes to. The writer demonstrates how these issues establish the manipulative power that guides the rich and poor, men and women, rural and urban folk of the adult world. But the manipulative power of ideological preaching and practice does not completely sway children of all age groups. As children grow older, they gain the ability to distinguish between what is right or wrong, fair or unfair, honest or dishonest. They learn to apply their own subjective perceptions/perspectives on serious issues.

One notices that the adults within the Rusty series are themselves a part of the ideological matrix of the society and are unable to look beyond it. There exists a strong inability in the adults in the series to look beyond what they perceive to be true and correct. This is explained by

Althusser, in *Ideology and Ideological State Apparatuses*¹, when he says that people's values, desires and preferences are inculcated by ideological practice which works through interpolation. Ideology constitutes family, religious organizations and the education system. It does so through the propagation of ideas, and creates belief systems. 'It is essential to say that for their part the ideological state apparatus functions massively and predominantly by ideology, but they also function secondarily by repression, even if ultimately, but only ultimately, this is very attuned and concealed, even symbolic. There is no such thing as purely ideological apparatus, thus, schools and churches use suitable methods of punishment, expulsion and selection, etc to discipline not only their shepherds but also their flocks' (IISA 337). He states that every idea exists in action, action in *practices* and practices in *rituals*. These rituals have a material basis, so the subject begins to be governed by these ritual practices. The subject is free, ethical, and has an idea, but once the ritual practices begins to govern the subject, it is in danger of transforming into an object. In the Rusty series the readers observe how young Rusty gets different perceptions from adults; Rusty's father provides matter-of-fact answers to his questions whereas the ayah resorts to supernatural tales and explanations. And on the other hand, school faculty shows complete indifference in attending to the questions raised by students.

Ideology is an untameable, inevitable and uncontrollable factor in the transaction between books and children, and it is so because of the multiplicity and diversity of both books and children, and the social world in which each take an individual form. According to Peter Hunt in *Criticism, Theory and Children's Literature*², 'with children's books we cannot escape the fact that they are written by adults, that there is going to be control, and that it is going to involve moral decisions. The book is going to be used not to entertain or modify our views but to form the views of the child'. Children's books do not merely reflect the contemporary social scene and the problems of adult life. The simplified manner in which they treat their subjects also makes them something of magnifying glasses.

This paper focuses on the many levels at which the Rusty series transcend the confines of children's literature/adventure tales and suggest complex ideological components that lie much beyond the world of children. This implies that this chapter analyzes the ideology that have to do with education, rural and urban habitats, race, caste, class, religion and gender.

It has already been stated in the previous chapter that Ruskin Bond does not consciously promote any radical reform in society but does it unconsciously. In the process he highlights

several ideological practices that actively surround a child's growing phase and it make efforts to impact a child. Ruskin Bond is not the repertoire of the ideologies surfacing in the novels; he is highlighting the corrupted world which tries to include Rusty in its active participation of the ideological practices. Ruskin Bond on his part makes educative adjustments within the Rusty series unlike Mark Twain who, in *Huckleberry Finn*, acts as the preacher and apparently confirms the racist stereotype of the black man in the novel. Ruskin Bond, on the other hand, rises above the stereotypes created by the adult world and challenges them at some level in the Rusty series.

Bond's personal experiences make him challenge adult ideologies in the Rusty series. One of the levels on which Bond conveys his ideology has to do with education. Ruskin Bond and Rusty's educational experience run parallel in the novel as the author himself faced problems during his schooling. Ruskin Bond in his autobiography, *Scenes from a Writer's Life*, says that he went to Bishop Cotton School of Shimla. In the autobiography, he names a chapter 'The Young Rebel' in which he describes how he perpetually revolted against the authority of the school which tried to undermine and discourage the students. He mentions that the teachers were antagonist to the students and he was subjected to several punishments for uncommitted sins.

The protagonist Rusty is depicted as an avid reader, and he attributes this habit to his father who brought him books to read and took interest in all his curious questions regarding them. It can be stated that a child's state of mind can be judged by the book he enjoys reading the most. He mostly read *Alice in Wonderland* and always preserved the copy handed over to him by his father. His particular fondness for *Alice in Wonderland* displays his wish to experience adventures and establish himself independently. Rusty is also depicted as interested in books related to nature, and this helps in developing his avid interest in the flora and fauna around him.

In the novel *Rusty Runs Away*, written after his father's death, Rusty is sent to a boarding school Arundel by his guardian, Mr. John Harrison. He says that school was run like a business enterprise—'give a little, take a lot' (RRA 45) was its motive. Just like Ruskin Bond, Rusty never enjoyed his stay in boarding school as he found it to be authoritative and arbitrary in its conduct towards students.

It is imperative to scrutinize here that Rusty had difficulty with school and not with the books. He read extensively and in fact found solace in the books when he was lonely and had no companion. It is the structure of school that imposed undue expectations from children and in

turn made them detached from the traditional method of classroom teaching. Bond's own experience is reminiscent in Rusty's response to school education, wherein in one episode it results in his running away from school with his friend, Daljeet.

In schools, teacher-student relationship works on a different level altogether as teachers do not encourage students' creativity; in fact, all subversive ideas are systematically demolished by the dominant mode of thinking created by the system. It works in direct opposition to any development of individuality, and focuses on mechanical aspects of education where all students are directed to retain the concepts delivered by teachers and if there are questions that are provoked they are largely naïve in nature. In such a situation, students are mostly considered to be ignorant, indifferent or indolent and are therefore made to internalize their passive attitude and belief in their sluggishness, whether mental or physical.

Schooling has an important role in the socialization process, but students are taught to gain material success as that becomes the parameter on which society evaluates man's accomplishments in life. This is evident when Rusty's relatives in Jersey are critical of his ambition to become a writer and advise him to focus more on a well paying profession. Similarly, his stepfather Major Summerskill, disapproves of his reading habit and refers to him as a good-for-nothing fellow. This highlights how the system of education and family does not identify the ambition and aptitude of the protagonist, and tenders to him no word of encouragement.

Another level of ideological representation is that of the rural-urban divide in terms of values and way of life. Another significant issue in the novel is Ruskin Bond's pro-rural and anti-urban stance. Ruskin Bond represents the urban centres of Delhi and Bombay in highly negative light and his approach is very prejudiced. The author's deep love for nature has been mentioned in the previous chapter, as he provides the reader with mesmerizing descriptions of the flora and fauna of Himalayas in his stories. Having previously lived in Jamnanagar, Dehradun, Shimla and London, he decided to finally settle in Landour in Mussoorie. To the author, mountains provide the sheltered life and the spiritual affinity which is lacking in the urban life of cities like London, Delhi and Bombay. Ruskin Bond believes nothing is perfect in the world, whether relationships or places, but this holds true for large cities like Delhi, London and industrial centres. According to Bond, the real India is to be found in its villages and small towns. The author, in displaying his preference for the village life, propagates the idea that the

city life is very busy, complicated and dangerous, whereas the village life is simple and cosy. Such an argument as presented by the author is distorted as he directly condemns the city life without providing the readers with a counter argument. Ruskin Bond has lived both in the cities and villages as well, and he shows his preference for the village life as he found it more attractive. But the drawback in Ruskin Bond's position arises with his undue emphasis on the problems of city life. The premise of his position is unpragmatic as everyone cannot shift to the villages. In his efforts to glorify the village life he is subjectively indifferent towards urban life. Ruskin Bond creates the comparison of rural and urban life on the basis of (1) occupation, (2) values, (3) density of population, and, (4) the level of interaction among the communities. He admits that Dehra does not provide sufficient opportunity in profession growth but the values of villagers are far more pure and superior than that of urban people. In his brief stay in Delhi, he found the growth of nuclear families, the decreased level of social interaction among its citizens, and its people jostling for space on roads. This turmoil was absent in the rural areas where people still participated jointly on all occasions.

In the novel *Rusty Runs Away*, Rusty and his friend Daljeet run away from the school and take lift from a cart. On jumping off the cart, Rusty asked Daljeet if they had to offer any money. Daljeet says 'He will be offended. He is not a taxi driver' (RRA 64). So, they just thank the driver and move on. This small incident portrays the generosity that marks village behaviour as people inculcate on the value of selflessly serving those in need.

The two friends discard the thought of spending a night on the railway station because they do not find it safe. In Dehra, they roamed around freely, but in a city amongst the crowd they find themselves unsafe. In the final novel of the Rusty series, Rusty spends a considerable time in New Delhi because of the limited scope for writers in Dehra. He finds the environment of city oppressing and wishes a retreat into the peaceful environment of Himalayan towns.

The premise of the issue is based on the size of population in rural and urban areas. Ruskin Bond is unable to reconcile with the heterogeneous population of the urban centres whereas he finds solace in the homogenous environment of the rural environment. These strong positions may perhaps not quite be acceptable today as all spaces/places have their own advantages or disadvantages.

Bond's ideology that emanates from colour, race and religion also finds its way into the Rusty series. In an author's role, Bond highlights the issues of race, caste, class, religion and gender. The ideological practice of these issues functions most actively in the novel. Throughout the five novels Rusty is instructed by the people of European community to not mix with the Indians because of the difference in race. The protagonist Rusty does not give much weight to these instructions and befriends Indians of different race, caste, class, religion and gender. Initially, when he is a young child, Rusty befriends Indian children primarily out of a child's naïve requirement of friends. It is only when he grows a little older and commences to perceive the strong manipulative power of the adult ideological structures that he decides to trust his own reason and capacity of subjective judgment. In the novel, *Rusty Runs Away*, Rusty's guardian Mr. Harrison gets furious on learning he had played Holi with Indians and says, 'You are just a wild, ragged, ungrateful wretch who does not know the difference between what is proper and what is improper, what is civilized and what is barbaric, what is decent and what is shameful !' (RRA 153). The use of words like 'ragged' and 'barbaric' highlight the stereotypes created by the White Western for their perception of Asian and African people as 'uncivilized'. The chief purpose of Rusty's guardian is to restrict the social mobility of Rusty to only the European community settled in Dehra. In doing so, he is dictating and inculcating in Rusty feelings of difference and superiority towards Indians.

Ruskin Bond is challenging this notion of the Western world by depicting several humane characters that rise above the petty issues of race, caste and class. The ayah is depicted as selfless in her love for the child and is ready to move to a different location with the family not for material reasons but purely out of love. Rusty is able to see through the selfless and unconditional love of people and thus offers a true hand of friendship. He witnesses an unconditional care and concern in his Indian friends and neighbours which prompts him to reciprocate their love for him. To Rusty, the value of spirited vigour to live life is far more significant than the distorted and twisted ideas of the adults harping on creating divisions. Rusty, during his stay in London, celebrates Christmas with his African friends and remembers it as his best Christmas with people who were 'lovable and sincere' (RGL 36). During his stay in Jersey, he witnesses the racial bias against the Asian and the African communities. He says 'colour conscious Jersey did not encourage dark skinned tourists from the Asian, African or American

continents' (RGL 12). This is apparent in the hotels not encouraging dark skinned people from around the world. Rusty takes up the job of booking people in a hotel and on one occasion, books a group of Brazilian samba dancers into a hotel meant for 'whites'. The authorities immediately fire him from the job. The author, in the course of recommending an improved world, is bound by the constraint of depicting a corrupted world against which he tries to warn the children. According to Peter Hollindale, in *Children's Literature*, writers for children are transmitters not of themselves uniquely but of the worlds they share³. This also bestows on the reader the task of distinguishing between the variations of ideological positions in the child and adult world portrayed in the Rusty series.

Ruskin Bond, brought up in the complex cultural milieu of India, witnesses the diversity of religion and its influence on children. These ideological sensitivities embody Ruskin Bond's understanding of religions in India. It is commendable that he candidly describes the effect of religious practices on the relationships of people with each other. He displays his familiarity with miniscule aspects of the everyday life as influenced by religion. As a small child, he learns from his gardener, Govind that the peepal tree is sacred to Hindus so it must not be cut down. As a boy, he removes his shoes and socks when he goes near a banyan tree just as people do when they go near a holy place. Religion is depicted as dictating food preparations, social hierarchies, family behaviour, and many other things of everyday life. But sometimes religious ideology dictates views, attitudes or sets of beliefs in a highly restrictive manner, and demarcates the behaviour of people. On the one hand, it delineates festivals within religions and allows people the space to merge with others; on the other hand, in the name of the same religion, it creates restrictions. During the Hindu festival of Holi, Somi is unwilling to participate because it is not a festival of Sikhs. He remains untouched by the heated excitement and fervour of the festival. The tragedy is the way religion has been manipulated—as is also apparent in the Partition of India—and it shows in Somi's unwillingness in participating Holi, and Rusty's landlord's aghast expression on witnessing Rusty celebrating Christmas with Africans.

Religion alone, Bond suggests, is not dangerous as it serves man's need of secularism, peace, order and spiritual comfort; it is when ideology which influences religious beliefs that religion become dangerous. Rusty witnesses its gruesome aspect when, during the Hindu-Muslim clashes, the school cook is set afire by the mob. Readers notice the poignant scene at the time of Partition, when Muslim boys are forced to leave India for Pakistan, it is the Hindu,

Christian and Parsi boys of the school who help them load their luggage. The adult world is always governed by the differences that religion creates; it is the children who practice, without prodding, true secularism by developing relations with children and adults alike, based purely on sincerity and purity of heart.

In the five novels, which span his childhood to adulthood, Rusty has myriad experiences with women. Bond's representation of women characters is significant in these novels as they provide pointers to children for understanding the sensitivities of gender in society. Though women characters in the series do not have pivotal roles, they make a significant contribution to Rusty's growth and development in emotional and psychological terms. These women, thus, underline the series as texts reflective of the bildungsroman tradition. Aijaz Haider says that 'Bond presents a picture of woman which has a beautiful blending of the traditional Indian concept and wish for modern traits' (CCRB 131). Women characters in the five novels of the Rusty series are not stereotypical. Each woman character has been distinctly defined and it is unfair to see resemblances in their personalities. Rusty as a child is acutely aware of the absence of his mother who, it turned out, had divorced his father. Throughout his early childhood he holds in his heart an accusation against his mother for abandoning him and his father. In his early teens, however, he begins to understand how human beings are different from one another and a marital relationship can go awry. He reaches this understanding after witnessing crucial incidents in his life as a child. He learns his Grandfather's first wife, Rose, was unstable and unbalanced. She wandered off on her own and did not bother about the family. People around her, including Rusty's Grandfather were unable to understand her personality and on one occasion, she took the extreme step of taking her life. This incident makes Rusty realize how disturbed adult lives can be. Women in Bond are devoid of any fullness of character and personality, yet they reflect a sad pathetic angle of existence. Bond conforms to the traditional depiction of women as passive, naïve and dependent. Even though he depicts the Vietnamese girl, Vu Phong, in *Rusty Goes to London* as independent and adventurous, she passively disappears at the end. There are no exceptional women in the novels. The weak depiction of women is constraining when they are depicted as incapable and devoid of any emotional bonding. Rusty, as a teenager, falls in love with Meena Kapoor. Meena is unhappy in her marriage but conveys the impression of a contented wife and dies in an accident.

There are innumerable incidents in the five novels where the women characters are lost in oblivion and the threads of their lives do not surface again. In this category are Madhu, the girl at Deoli station, and Binya, the widow, both of whom fade away eventually. There is also the story of a British man, Robert, who fell in love with a girl from hills. Due to opposition from their families, both decide to run away and start a new life. On the night of escape, they take refuge in a empty old building, but the lightning strikes and both are burnt to ashes. In his friend, Kamal's house no woman is content with her life, and there is turmoil is exacerbated by the fact that the head of the family is a lady.

A common fate binds all these ladies—they either die or disappear. There is no everlasting companionship or interaction with women characters as far as the protagonist of these novels is concerned. They are depicted as simple, different and mysterious but there is lack of cheerfulness about them. A sense of incompleteness is manifested in all of them. This could perhaps be attributed to the fact that the author himself never experienced a wholesome relationship with any woman.

In the Rusty series, Bond's perceptions and sensitivities get transmuted into ideological perspectives. Looked at from an ideological plane, the Rusty series can be said to reflect three distinct perceptions—that of the author, that of a child, and that of an adult. Bond is able to convey the distinct way in which the stances of these differ and yet influence each other. Their ideology influences and intersects within their spheres of existence. None of these three can remain unaffected and independent of the other. Thus, when the author wishes to depict an egalitarian world to the child, he ends up depicting a corrupt world against which that very child has to protect himself. In this depiction, the author gets subsumed into the very ideological stance against which he tries to warn the child. The response of a sensitive, malleable young reader becomes fraught with the danger of getting influenced by what he/she reads. There is no denying that the purpose of children's literature is to aid the educative and socialization process but Bond's Rusty series calls upon young readers to judge the world through their own special experiences of the adult world. The child is compelled to take a deeper look at the nuances and suggestivity that lie behind the protagonist's experiences. It is pertinent to mention that pre-teen readers will only perceive the stories as a mixture of fantasy and adventure. Teenage readers, however, will clearly be able to perceive in the fantastic and the unreal, angles of reality in the adult world in which they slowly make their place. With time, they shall be able to read in the

adventures of Rusty the many ideological nuances that are played out in the world of adults. The Rusty series showcases the sensitivity that children inculcate in their perception of issues and their understanding of ethical and social issues. The novels represent a world of race, class, caste, religion and gender into which they will one day intrude and then have to deal with. In the events that Rusty is made to go through, both children and adult readers will not only find realities that mark their actual existence but will also have to evolve their own responses to them. In this way, Bond's Rusty series is writing that ostensibly depicts a child's world but in reality, calls for introspection and inculcation of values and perceptions of both the young and the adult reader. Ideology is a basic factor in the transaction between books and readers, and multiplicity and diversity of subtle ideologies in the novels make the Rusty series suitable for both adults and children.

¹ **FOLLOW MLA STYLESHEET FOR ENDNOTES** All subsequent references to this book will appear within the text as IISA with page numbers.

² **Hunt, Peter. *Criticism, Theory and Children's Literature*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1991. p 51.** All subsequent references to this book will appear within the text as CTC with page number.