

ISSN: 0976-8165

IMPACT FACTOR 7.86

THE CRITERION

AN INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL IN
ENGLISH

Bi-Monthly Peer-Reviewed eJournal

VOL.14 ISSUE 5 OCTOBER 2023

14 Years of Open Access

Editor-in-Chief
Dr. Vishwanath Bite

Managing Editor
Dr. Madhuri Bite

www.the-criterion.com

AboutUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/about/>

Archive: <http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/>

ContactUs: <http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/>

EditorialBoard: <http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/>

Submission: <http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/>

FAQ: <http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/>



ISSN 2278-9529

Galaxy: International Multidisciplinary Research Journal
www.galaxyimrj.com

Delineation of Mountain Children's Dutifulness, Nature and Human Nature (Jealousy) in Ruskin Bond's *The Blue Umbrella*

Suresh Kumar

Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Govt. College Indora, 176401,
Kangra, Himachal Pradesh, India.

Article History: Submitted-26/09/2023, Revised-13/10/2023, Accepted-14/10/2023, Published-31/10/2023.

Abstract:

Ruskin Bond (1934 -) is considered one of the most significant Indian writers in English in the contemporary world. The novel, *The Blue Umbrella*, was originally published in 1974. This paper aims to explore how the lifestyle of hill children is different from the children of plains i.e. how their routines are scheduled with hard work, discipline, and exploits. It also showcases how the hill people live in close harmony with nature despite everyday adventures while providing vivid descriptions of flora and fauna. Besides these, it also throws light on how jealousy is possessed and nurtured even by the mature and elderly people of the hills, who are isolated from the rest of the world.

Keywords: Mountain, dutifulness, adventure, nature, flora and fauna, harmony, jealousy.

The novelist represents a deep sense of responsibility and dutifulness through the characters of the children i.e. Binya, Bijju and Rajaram. All of them do their assigned tasks with love, honesty and devotion. Bond introduces Binya to the readers as a child of ten years old, performing her duty of grazing the cow in the opening line of the novel. He writes:

Neelu! Neelu! Cried Binya. She scrambled barefoot over the rocks, ran over the short summer grass, up and over the brow of the hill, all the time calling 'Neelu! Neelu!' Blue was the name of the blue-grey cow. The other cow, which was white, was called Gori, meaning 'fair one.' They were fond of wandering off on their own, down to the stream or into the pine forest, and sometimes they came back by themselves and sometimes they stayed away – almost deliberately, it seemed to Binya (1).

Ruskin Bond acquaints the readers with how animals are named by the peasants living in the mountains based on their colours and as these animals grow along with the children of the home, they mix up well with each other and, therefore, become more familiar, friendly, fearless and harmless. This bonding between the children and the animals of the home gives the elders or the parents of the home a sense of confidence resulting from trust to train the children in responsibility by handing over the charge of cows throughout the day for the hills. Therefore, grazing the animals is considered the easiest task for the children of the home based on their mutual relationship with each other and in this way, the children make their most significant contribution to their parents' economy too. The children do not take this assignment as a burden rather they do willingly and enjoy the company of animals amidst nature. The dense forests, fighting animals, deep steep chasms, serpents, wild animals, and streams remain some challenges for the parents and as a result, the parents get worried about how their children will react if they face such circumstances. Although they give special instructions on do's and don'ts, an element of uncertainty remains there. In these circumstances, the mountain children give their contribution to their parents, and family and emerge as parents' time savers and bread runners, thus, universalising this feature. Binya allows freedom to the cows to wander about in hill forests that is why the cows used to like her as their companion or caretaker whereas Bijju her brother, who is two years older than her, is commanding and never lets the cows wander at their will. Generally, managing cows is a duty of Bijju, but during exams, he remains free from this task as he prepares for the exams. Now, it becomes Binya's key responsibility to keep an eye on the cows. The cows usually return home after grazing at the right time in the evening. If they do not return, Binya calls them by their names i. e. Neelu and Gori as she moves to search them towards the pastures in the hills of Garhwal of the Himalayas. "Dark forests and lonely hilltops held no terrors for her [Binya]" (3). As she listens to the cowbells tinkling, she stops calling for them as she locates them with this signal.

By providing the family background of the central character of the novel, Binya, the novelist introduces the readers to the hardships, deprivations, sufferings, and struggle of the family for its survival. Like other mountain girls, Binya was quiet, sturdy, fair fair-skinned with pink cheeks, dark eyes and black hair in a pigtail. She used to feel uncomfortable in the crowds of bazaars but she was very comfortable in the forests and on the peaks of the mountain. Binya's father died when she was twelve, but his passing did not make much difference in their lifestyle

as her father was not a salaried person or a successful businessman rather he used to manage his livelihood by toiling in the fields, with cows. Although he could not manage comforts, but used to fulfil the basic needs of his family. The writer writes, “They had three tiny terraced fields on the side of the mountain, and they grew potatoes, onions, ginger, beans, mustered and maize: not enough to sell in the town, but enough to live on” (4). After the death of Binya's father, the survival of the family depends on the efforts of her mother and her mother could have toiled in the fields and forest only due to the cooperation of Binya and Bijju. Binya's mother was able to sell one kilogram of milk every day: half a kilo to the school teacher and half a kilo to the temple pujari [priest] at a reduced price. Bijju delivers the milk every morning. Besides he helps his mother with ploughing the fields and transplanting the rice seedlings (50).

Thereafter, the novelist reveals the beliefs and practices of the hill people through some references to birthdays, superstitions, and barter system in the novel. The most common practice of giving nicknames to the children has been emphasized by the writer as the real names of Binya and Bijju are Binyadevi and Vijay respectively, but they are not called with their real names. Secondly, the writer shows that during the 1970s there was no craze for celebrating birthdays for the exact birthdates were not remembered or recorded by anyone most probably due to their struggle for livelihood. Bond writes, “Binya was probably ten. She may have been nine or eleven even, she couldn't be sure because no one in the village kept birthdays; but her mother told her she'd been born during a winter when the snow had come to the windows, and that was just over ten years ago, wasn't it?” (4). So, Binya's mother could not recollect exactly the birth date. Another belief of hill people is their faith in superstitions as Binya wears a “leopard claw” (5) in her necklace. Besides the tourist woman's longing for the leopard claw (12), Ram Bharosa, the shopkeeper also owns a “bear claw” (77). These possessions are considered auspicious by the people in society generally. They are supposed to bring good luck. One more practice the hill dwellers believe in is the exchange of things or articles of use. When a female tourist from the plains becomes obsessed with the mania of owning the leopard claw as soon as she sees it, she tries to finalize the deal by offering a five-rupee note to Binya but Binya shakes her head in negation. When Binya is given the option to choose amongst the picnic things scattered on the grass, she points out towards the blue umbrella. Ultimately, the deal gets finalized based on priorities.

The vivid description of the flora and fauna of nature and the realistic setting of the novel showcase the novelist's fascination towards the mountains and the lifestyle of people dwelling there. Bond believes in the benevolence of nature as it offers its resources in sufficient amounts to survive in this universe. *A Glossary of Literary Terms* defines nature writing as the intimate, realistic, and detailed description of the natural environment in prose, rendered as it appears to the distinctive sensibility of the author (Abrams and Harpham, 98). Bijju had attempted to cut a hive for honey from an oak tree about four years ago, but he was stung badly by the honeybees. If he gets stung by any bee, he feels no pain as his body has been immunized for life. Bijju's eating wild fruits like bilberries while returning from school, his lips getting "stained purple with the juice of the wild, sour fruit" (36) at a time when his friends take sweets on credit at Ram Bharosa's shop, he takes nothing in the absence of money with him. He prefers wild fruits and also shares these with his sister Binya. The writer beautifully visualizes the monsoon, "Big black clouds kept piling up, and thunder rolled over the hills" (42) and Binya kept waiting for the rain as she had wished to feel the rain under her blue umbrella. Bond writes, "The rains set in, and the Sun only made brief appearances. The hill turned a lush green. Ferns sprang up on walls and tree trunks. Giant lilies reared up like leopards from the tall grass. A white mist coiled and uncoiled as it floated up from the valley. It was a beautiful season except for leeches" (46). As the rain stops numerous small creatures and animals come to the surface from the holes like rats, scorpions and snakes. "Bijju liked lifting large rocks to disturb the scorpions who were sleeping beneath and snakes came out to bask in the sun" (47). The writer states that October is a pleasant month in the hills; it seems longer than other months because it is kind. The grass seems good and the breeze is warm, gentle and palm-scented. Everything in nature seems contented (68). Besides these, the novelist's love for the beauties of nature has beautifully been manifested in his essay "Simply Living" where he describes the features and socio-economic significance of flowers like marigold, rose and jasmine:

The rose may still be the queen of flowers, and jasmine the princess of fragrance, but the marigold holds its own through sheer sturdiness, colour and cheerfulness. It is a cheerful flower, no doubt about that - brightening up winter days, often when there is little else in bloom. It doesn't have a fragrance—simply an acid odour, not to everyone's liking—but it has a wonderful range of colours, from lower yellow to deep orange to golden bronze, especially among the giant varieties in the hills (Simply Living 113).

Experiences of the protagonist with the leech, porcupine, snake and her attempts to rescue the umbrella reveal the hardships of the life of mountain dwellers, especially the children. While mentioning the rainy season, Bond writes, "Every day, Binya came home with a couple of leeches fastened to the flesh of her bare legs. They fell off by themselves just as soon as they'd had their thimbleful of blood, but you didn't know they were on you until they fell off, and then, later, the skin became very sore and itchy" (47). Generally, the very presence of a leech even on some distant object is frightful for most people. Binya's encounter with a snake becomes a lifetime horrible memory for her. Once as she just crossed the small stream at the bottom of the hill, she saw a long dark black snake gliding towards her. The clattering of the falling stones alerted it, and it rose to hiss and prepared to attack. "The forked tongue darted out; the venomous head lunged at Binya. Binya's umbrella was open as usual. She thrust it forward, between herself and the snake. The snake's hard snout thudded twice against the strong silk of the umbrella. The reptile then turned and slithered away over the wet rocks, disappearing into a clump of ferns" (48-49). Forgetting about the cows, Binya runs home to share this incident with her mother immediately after its disappearance. Bijju is sent to fetch the cows with a solid stick in his hands if he too finds any snake in the way. Thereafter, Bond reveals Binya's skill of searching porcupines according to the types of vegetation. She collects porcupine quills without much effort with the help of her knowledge. Moreover, her efforts to safeguard the blue umbrella from flying into the ditch or unapproachable steep terrain and bringing it back from the rattling cliff (29) win the hearts of the readers.

Further, the novelist highlights that jealousy is an integral part of human nature. Although people dwelling in the lap of nature and isolated from the crowds of the city life and materialistic world are considered peaceful, jealousy can never be erased from the hearts of human beings irrespective of place, as it is a universal trait or emotion. When Binya had stopped calling for the cows after listening to the cowbells tinkling, singing to herself she walked over fallen pine branches into the forest glade on the spur of the hill. She hears talks and laughs along with the clattering of plates and cups and to find an answer to her curiosity as she steps through the trees, she finds herself in front of picnickers from the plains. The group of men and women was enjoying the outing there. When they notice Binya, they call her. Usually, she would have run away from their very sight, but it was the existence of the colourful blue umbrella that compelled her to stay on. A man from the tourists noticed the tiger's claw hanging from Binya's pedant. His

wife immediately expresses her will to possess it as it is a rare thing in the plains and is supposed to keep the spirits away. Binya's only choice of the blue umbrella sends a shock to the owner of that umbrella who exclaims. "My umbrella! She wants my umbrella. What Cheek!" (12) But somehow the lady's spouse could pacify her, and thus Binya's wish gets fulfilled in exchange for the leopard claw. Therefore, we see the emotion that expresses jealousy for losing the umbrella for the claw as she considers her umbrella superior to its counterpart. After possessing:

Binya seldom closed the blue umbrella. Even though she had it in the house; she left it lying open in a corner of the room. Sometimes Bijju snapped it shut, complaining that it got in the way. She would open it again a little later. It wasn't beautiful when it was closed. Whenever Binya went out-whether it was to graze the cows, fetch water from the spring, or carry milk to the little tea shop on Tehri road-she took the umbrella with her. That patch of sky-blue silk could always be seen on the hillside (18-19).

Ram Bharosa, the tea shopkeeper on the Tehri road is astonished at the first sight of Binya's blue umbrella. He desires to possess the same by hook and crook. His shop was only a mile from the village. Bijju and Binya used to visit his shop for sweets and toffees whenever they had money. During one such visit, Ram Bharosa enquires Binya about the umbrella and persuades her to sell it to him. He offers her twelve rupees, but Binya does not pay any heed to his persuasion. At this, he turns more envious and asks Bijju to work in his shop but the latter denies it. Thereafter, he employs Rajaram, a boy of Bijju's age from the next village who tries to steal the umbrella from Binya by chasing her in the hills while obeying his master's orders. In addition to this, Most of the people in the village were a little envious of Binya's blue umbrella. No one else had ever possessed one like that. The schoolmaster's wife thought it wrong to have such a fine umbrella in the possession of a poor cultivator's daughter whereas she has to manage with her ordinary umbrella, the black one, and her dislike increases for the same. The pujari [priest] announces that he will buy a multicoloured umbrella during his visit to the town (40). Most people express their envy advertently or inadvertently. Only the children praise the umbrella on a positive note.

The above description and analysis show that the mountain children never give in due to hardships and deprivations rather they turn out to be more committed and dutiful in such circumstances. They contribute to the economy of their parents happily. They live in close

harmony with nature. Empirical experiences play a crucial role in developing their personality harmoniously. The novelist believes in the benevolence of nature. Nature never lets the world turn dull, rather through varied seasons keeps the flora and fauna lively and colourful if human beings do not deteriorate it. Besides, the element of jealousy is universal irrespective of the place in the case of adults. Moreover, the novelist appreciates the exemplary sincerity and sense of commitment of the mountain children and encourages the hill dwellers to harmonious co-existence with the natural environment. However, Ruskin Bond has exposed a human frailty i.e. completely irrational jealousy or the root cause of all sufferings. Hence, an appeal has been made to become critical thinkers rather than being impulsive in certain cases.

Works Cited:

Abrams M.H. and Geoffrey Galt Harpham. *A Glossary of Literary Terms*. Cengage Learning India Private Limited, 2018.

Bond, Ruskin. "Simply living", *Reflections from the East and the West*, edited by Pankaj K Singh and Girija Sharma. Orient Black Swan Pvt. Ltd, 2012.

Bond, Ruskin. *The Blue Umbrella*. Rupa Publication Pvt. Ltd, 1992.