

The Young Vagrants: A Journey of Friendship and Adventure

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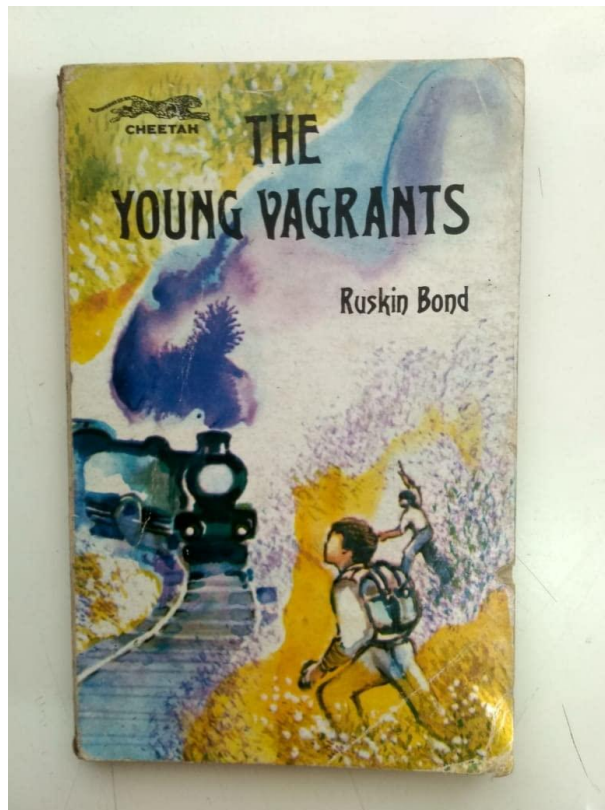
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This paper aims to analyse Ruskin Bond's *The Young Vagrants* as a piece of children's literature. The path for children's books' future was established when the requirements were recognized as one of the most important components of child development. Even though children's literature has been around since antiquity, it was included in mainstream literature. Only in the 19th century did it attain its own significance. Prior until that moment, parents forced children to read the books

they believed were suitable to them. The majority of this material was moralistic. Children were deprived of the things that would make them happy. The middle class began to gradually shift its perspective as a result of political and social shifts, starting to comprehend the intrinsic value of "children" and "childhood." This further contributed to the creation of children's literature that was written with their interests and relevance in mind.

Since Ruskin Bond is one of the best children's authors and his books have been cherished by young readers, his writings are more relevant while talking about children's literature in India. Several images, occurrences, and characters from his life contribute as vital avenues for inspiration for his writing, giving it an autobiographical tone. Bond paints a clear picture of his young figures by peering directly into their transparent hearts. His portrayal of the characters shows how well he understands the children's unassuming nature. The first-hand experiences of children who appear in his books serve as the foundation for his realism.

The novel *The Young Vagrants* was first published in 1981 by Indian book house. It is the sequel to the novel *The Room on the Roof* and has Rusty as the main character. It is autobiographical in tone and is pleasurable to read and is exciting with the alterations of the journey of Rusty and his companions. It is a suitable novel for older children. It deals with the pre-pubescent years of Rusty and his companions. It is a phase of identity crisis. The person is too old to be a child and too young to be an adult. At this transitional stage Rusty and his friends have to make several major decisions regarding their future. The friend's runaway from their houses under various circumstances and wander to different places in search of livelihood and stability. Finally Krishan finds a guardian in a well to do distant relative Mr. Bhusan and Rusty stumbles upon good fortune which changes his life and the novel ends with a traditional ray of hope.

Rusty's parents die when he is very young. His guardian, an Englishman, is very strict and restricts the boy's movement to his own community. Rusty's friend Somi once takes him to bazaar and shows him India and the world and life itself. Rusty's guardian beats him up on his return. Rusty returns the beatings and runs away from home. Somi introduces Rusty to Krishan who later on

becomes Rusty's close friend. They both run away to Hardwar a wrong place to live. As they are at penury they have to walk much of the distance back to Dehra Dun. Their journey is filled with a lot of adventure. Back in Dehra Dun Krishan is found and taken home by his distant and well-to-do relative Mr. Bhusan. Rusty makes friends with Davinder and Sudhir the lafunga (loafer). He meets his father's friend Mr. Pettigrew who helps Rusty find his aunt who in turn hands over his father's belongings which proves to be Rusty's fortune. He then decides to go to England in search of a better future. The novel ends with the parting of the friends with a promise to meet again and Rusty's journey to England. The story ends on an optimistic note.

Rusty is the protagonist of the novel. He is a strong character. He is restless to know more about children of his age group. He is convent educated and has good knowledge of books and literature. He is very confident in himself and moves forward in search of a place to live. He makes good decisions hence his friends always rely upon him. He is a bookworm as mentioned by his friends and does not like to be disturbed while reading or writing. He is very focused from a very young age. Once his guardian takes him to Tarai jungle. Rusty finds a collection of books in the forest rest house. He reads all of them while the hunters are feasting. As Bond narrates: "Anyway, there they were – a shelf of some thirty volumes. The habit of reading books had brought in him the interest to be a writer. The shelf was catholic in its contents-as Rusty had soaked up Dickens, Woodhouse, M.R. James, George Eliot, Maugham and Barrie" (55). His keenness in books is seen by his extensive reading habits. Rusty has a very clear perception of life even at a very tender age.

Though the maturity level varies from one person to another in pre-pubescent age the peer group influence is more. Rusty's friends learn a lot of things from him .Even Rusty learns from his friends the Indian way of living. He is now familiar with the language, local habits, society and culture of the place. But he is careful and has not accepted the wrong in his friends.

Peer groups have both positive and negative influence on adolescent. They learn traits like smoking, delinquency, careless driving; drug intake etc. sudhir has these negative traits. He offers Rusty to join him to earn money by duping people in the disguise of Sadhu. But Rusty refuses his

offer.’ I want to give some direction to my life. I want to work, I want to be free, I want to be able to write. I can’t wander about the hills and plains with you forever (155) ‘. These words of Rusty are strong but humble. He is very focused about his goal and leaves no stone unturned in his path. He faces all odds to reach his aunt’s abode in the hills. Rusty’s determination to meet his aunt is so strong that he faces all odds of meeting her.

The hardships faced by Rusty shows his determination to achieve what he aims at. His love for his father is the sole cause for his eagerness to obtain the things left back by his father for him. Though the journey to the hills is tough he moves forward along with his friend Sudheer. He accepts Mr. Pettigrew’s suggestion to go to England in search of a better life. He reaches this decision only after reasoning it out with Mr. Pettigrew which shows his maturity.

Rusty and his companions just act upon their instinct and run away from home. Though they have very little money and vague idea about their future cause of action, they seemed to be unshaken and confident and unregretful about their decision. The boys with their wit and wisdom could finally find their path in life.

The American’s character in the novel is symbolic. He and Rusty meet twice only in the train and railway platform. First when they meet, they both are on a journey one in search of life and the other on a mission. The second time they meet both not very successful but undeterred they keep trying. The role of the American is significant. He is a dedicated white man who tries to bring about modernism in people for their better living. The American tries his best to convince the farmers about the benefits of the steel plough. But, even after several visits he manages to make very little progress. He says:

“Oh! They are quite prepared to be convinced. The trouble is, they Find it cheaper and easier to repair a wooden plough. You see How complicated everything is ?it is a question of parts. For Want of a bolt, the plough was lost, for want of a plough the

Crop was lost, for want of crop...”.

The despair is quite clear in American’s tone. The backwardness and superstitions of the farmers fail to make them understand the importance of the steel plough. But the American seems never to give up until he succeeds. His character is significant in depicting the state of progress in Indian villages which are plagued by superstitions and distrust towards whiteman.

Apart from the protagonist Rusty the other important characters are rusty’s friends. Krishan joins Rusty on his journey to Hardwar. He becomes homeless after losing his mother. Rusty changes his plan to go to England only due to Krishan. His feelings of responsibility towards Krishan as an elder brother holds him back. Krishan on the other hand is a carefree boy who do not take things seriously. His distinct relative Mr. Bhusan takes him away. He is happy in the company of Mrs. Bhusan’s daughter Aruna. Rusty is happy for Krishan for he is secure in his rich aunt’s house. He is one happy go lucky types who has everything but lose only to be found later.

Goonga on the other hand is a dumb youth, a thick person with shaved head at the tea stall. Everybody makes fun of him. He is used to these everyday torments. He likes Rusty because he buys him tea. He follows Rusty to the playground but is sent back by the latter. The plight of the disabled youth is depicted through this character. How Goonga accepts his faith and circumstance and just leaves on brings a feeling of compassion to the child reader. Devinder is another friend of Rusty. He is a partition refugee who is confident that he is quite older to make earnings to live as well as save for his studies. The boy on his own wits comes a long way in doing his intermediate course.

The other important character is Sudheer who is an orphan. He is originally from the frontier. He wanders as a homeless refugee over the border into India. He is adopted by a smuggler who teaches him the profession. When the smuggler is shot by the police, he once again becomes free. He is quite a criminal with principles who rob the rich and the greedy. His best friends are two dancing girls-Mrinalini and Hasthini. He often borrows money from them. Sudheer is a carefree and

cheerful boy. He spends money as he earns and saves nothing. He is nicknamed ‘lafunga’ a loafer. He likes Divender and later on becomes a good friend of Rusty. He accompanies Rusty to the hills in search of Rusty’s aunt. Sudheer though he chose robbery as his profession, he is a good boy in many ways. He is friendly; he lends money for Rusty’s journey to the hills.

The novel is set in the backdrop of Himalayas. The long range of Shivalic hills spread with a magnificent carpet of greenery provide a good backdrop to the story. The protagonist rusty lives in picturesque Dehra Dun from where he and his friends wander to Hardwar (a pilgrim place of the Hindus), Raiwala, Doiwala. Dehra Dun is an old town but it is not the reign of Rajput prince or Maughal King under which it grew and flourished. It acquired a certain size and importance with the coming of British Anglo-Indian settlers. They have a sense of nostalgia since it reflects a little bit of England’s green and pleasant atmosphere.

Bond states in the preface to the novel *Time Stops at Shamli and Other Stories* India is not found either in villages or metro cities but the “true India is found in the small towns” (9). His description of the social settings in the novel gives a true and varied picture of society during the early pre-independence period. The people are humble and have strong belief in god. They equally believe in supernatural elements like ghosts. The tea stall owner in the bazaar tells a few Jinn stories. Society is all powerful and everybody abides by the rules, customs and taboos set by society. Since Hardwar is a pilgrim centre people come in from all parts of India for religious fairs. Many wandering Sadhus are found here. Sudheer also puts on Sadhu disguise to cheat on the beliefs of rich men. “A Sadhu such as I, must have disciples, and they should be rich disciples. There must be many fat, rich men in the world, who are unhappy, about their consciences. Come, we will be their consciences!” Sudheer takes advantage of the beliefs and superstitions of the people to dupe them.

The bazaars are crowded and noisy. All the nearby village people come with their agricultural produce and have transactions. Business is very active in these towns though chaotic in state. The transport system is caravans, tongas, horses and bullock carts and occasionally crowded buses

which also find most of the dust on the roads on its body. The roads are dusty and bumpy. The tea stall is a busy place. People sit for a small chat over tea and relax. The stall owner even tells stories to his customers. There is a railway line, which runs along Dehra Dun, Hardwar, Rishikesh and Delhi. The otherwise calm platforms become crowded on the arrival of trains. Men, women and children push and struggle to enter and get out of the train. Bundles of belongings are passed through windows to reserve seats. Several young men enter through windows. This kind of rush is usually during religious fairs.

There was a jam on the platform, while men, women and children pushed and struggled, and it was several minutes before anyone could get in or out of the carriage doors. The American had been swallowed up by the crowd. Bundles of belongings were passed through windows, over the head of bystanders. Several young men climbed in at the windows, heads first, assisted by pushes from behind. Rusty assumed that there was another fair at Hardwar, For the rush was even greater than usual.

Bond's description of the platform on arrival of the train is very realistic. His fineness in bringing out a live picture of the situation in a humorous way is laudable and also is pleasurable for the child reader.

The style used is simple with good use of appropriate words and sentences. The tone of the narrator is mixed and changes from casual to serious and sometimes humorous according to the situation. The sentences used are sharp and witty and convey a lot of meaning. For example: "A year ago when I ran away I slept on the maidan, and again I am going to sleep on the maidan. That's called progress."

Ruskin Bond's use of words is simple yet grips the child reader's attention. This novel is autobiographical in tone. Many incidents which bond went through in his childhood are

fictionalized. The young reader finds the subject of the story realistic and identifies with the characters in the novel. This makes interesting and pleasurable reading for the teenagers.

The Young Vagrants is autobiographical in tone on the lines of Wordsworth epic poem *The Prelude* celebrating adolescence which is a brief and passing phase. It is a transition period from childhood to adulthood. This formative stage is full of ideas and conflicts which every teenager faces, and their families and society have a great influence on them. Rusty and his friend also go through similar experiences. Though they have no roof over their head and are wandering they are still optimistic.

Rusty's friends help him in many ways. Though they are at penury they are undeterred with principles and always true to guide each other in correct ways. Throughout their wandering period they display courage to face all odds in life and come out winners. Rusty's words of wisdom to Krishan speak about his foresight and realities of life when he says: "You can't run away from it (life) and service. You can't be a vagrant forever. You're getting nowhere, so you've got to stop somewhere"(124).Bond's *The Young Vagrants* is a novel about adolescent children who enjoy vagrancy with good friendship, exciting adventure, uncontrollable humour,dreams and reality and finally attain wisdom which enthralls the young audience.

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