

Highlighting Symbolism in Ruskin Bond's novel *The Blue Umbrella*

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ARTICLE DETAILS

Article History

Published Online: 02 June 2018

Keywords

Civilization, Greed, Materialism, Nature and Symbols

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ABSTRACT

This paper aims at studying various symbols used by Ruskin Bond in his novella *The Blue Umbrella*. The writer has beautifully embellished his novel with symbols; thus conveying his thoughts. In literature, symbols are manifestations of ideas and attributes that give meaning to writer's imagination. To comprehend the meaning of symbols in a given text, one has to delve deep into their meaning. *The Blue Umbrella*, primarily a novel for children, is loaded with rich symbols and imagery and the paper discusses the symbols used by Ruskin Bond in this novella.

Ruskin Bond, an Indian author of British origin, was awarded Sahitya Akademy Award in 1993 for *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*, a collection of short stories and was also awarded Padma Shri in 1999 and Padma Bhushan in 2014. His first novel, *The Room on the Roof* was written when he was only seventeen years of age, and it won him the John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize in 1957. After this he wrote several novels, poems, over 500 short stories and children's books. His fascination for nature developed during his childhood which he spent in the foothills of Himalayas. The beautiful nature left a deep impact on his life. Ruskin's novel *The Blue Umbrella* narrates the story of a ten year old girl Binya and her beautiful umbrella that envies the people of her village. Binya, an innocent girl living in the serenity of nature enjoys grazing her cows. The novel begins with the quote:

"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!" (1)

The above lines symbolize Binya's adaptation to the unharmed nature and the way the villagers grow up in the lap of nature without any worries. Instead Binya feels uncomfortable in the town or civilization as given in the lines here: "Dark forest and lonely hilltops held no terror for her. It was only when she was in market-town jostled by the crowd in the bazaar, that she felt rather nervous and lost." (3)

Man is a symbol-making and –using animal. Language itself is a symbolic form of communication. The great writers all use symbols as a means of controlling the form of their fiction. Some place it there subconsciously, discovered it and then developed it. Others started out consciously aware and in some instances shaped the fiction to the symbols (*Invisible Man* 34).

Binya belonged to Garhwal, a part of Himalayas. Binya was assigned the duty to graze cows in the green hills and fetch them back in the evening. One day while grazing her cows in the hills, she encountered a party of picnicker who carried along with them a beautiful umbrella. "The umbrella was like a flower

that had sprung upon the day brown hillside." (8) She moved forward a few paces so that she could see the umbrella better. The umbrella here represents civilization, and a nature loving village girl Binya was left spellbound on the sight of the bright blue umbrella; mere a plaything for civilized people. Binya had to exchange her leopard claw necklace to get the umbrella. The leopard claw necklace was her lucky charm which represents the superstitions dwelling in Indian villages. They believe that wearing a leopard claw keeps the evil away. But the woman from the town only wanted to have it because she had not seen any such necklace before or she could not get it on shops.

The town woman desired to get Binya's necklace but in return she did not intend to exchange her beautiful umbrella. When Binya pointed towards umbrella for her lucky charm the woman exclaimed: "My umbrella! She wants my umbrella, what cheek!" (12) It shows the shallowness and greed of civilized woman. The civilized townspeople are also emotionless and can hurt innocent children without caring for their sentiments. The woman remarked about Binya's clothes. "But how torn and dirty her clothes are." (9) The materialistic people measure the standard through clothes and wealth but a child's innocence and pure heart doesn't seem to be in their consideration

Symbolism arises out of action... once a writer is conscious of the implicit symbolism which arises in the course of a narrative, he may take advantage of them and manipulate them consciously as a further resource of his art. Symbols which are imposed upon fiction from the outside tend to leave the reader dissatisfied by making him aware that something extraneous is added (*Invisible Man* 31).

Some of the Ruskin's characters in this story behave contrary to the meaning of their names like Rajaram, Ram Bharosa and religious Pujari. Ram Bharosa, the greedy shopkeeper was astonished to see Binya's blue umbrella. His character is opposite to his name Ram Bharosa, which means the trust worthy, but he wanted to grab Binya's umbrella by hook or by crook. When Binya refused to sell her umbrella, he adopted illegal means to take the umbrella. He represented the greed of human nature. He would hurt innocent children but

wouldn't control his greed for worldly possessions. He said to Rajaram: "Wretch! Evil one! Darkness of my door step! Fetch me the umbrella and I'll give you three rupees". (56) The evil Raja ram tried to steal Binya's umbrella only to please his master and get some money. The religious temple Pujari also got corrupted after watching Binya's umbrella turned materialistic and wanted to have the umbrella. He also fell in love with worldly charm of the bright blue umbrella. He announced that he would "Buy a multicolored umbrella the next time he was in town." (39) In the story Bond gives a contrary representation of the innocent and kind nature of children with corrupted and fake approach of adults as they feel jealous for Binya's umbrella whereas children praise the beautiful blue umbrella; "the schoolmaster's wife thought it was quite wrong for a poor cultivators daughter to have such a fine umbrella while she, a second class B.A., had to do with the ordinary black one." (39)

The rain in the story symbolizes the regeneration in the human life; where as the umbrella represents the civilization. The fading color of umbrella represents that civilization cannot stand against the nature's powers and it also convey that the man made things cannot be long lasting. After Rajaram's unsuccessful attempt to steal umbrella Ram Bharosa's business got affected. Ram Bharosa was ostracized by the villagers for his misdeeds and suffered in his business and realizing his mistake he repented but it was all in vain. The changed attitude of Ram Bharosa was realized by Binya. She held herself responsible for his misery. She intentionally held the umbrella on the counter in his shop and walked away to restore happiness in his life. She didn't want to be the cause of anyone's grief and suffering. Infact, she always wanted to spread happiness. Being a kind hearted and innocent she resolved to restore Rajaram's lost dignity and decides to give her dearest possession to Ram Bharosa to make him happy.

"Binya, Binya! Binya, you've left your umbrella behind! You forgot it-the umbrella!" shouted Ram Bharosa

"You keep it. I don't need it anymore." said Binya.

"But it's such a pretty umbrella! It's the best umbrella in the village." Protested Ram Bharosa

"I know, but the umbrella isn't everything." said Binya. (75)

The novella symbolizes that vices can only be conquered by virtues as the story greedy and the materialistic Ram Bharosa reforms and gives up his greed and becomes a good person. He finds a bear's claw and makes it a pendant and gives it to Binya in place of her umbrella.

"What do you think of it?" asked Ram Bharosa

"It's so beautiful" said Binya

"It's a bear's claw that's even luckier than a leopard's claw. Would you like to have it?" asked Ram Bharosa.

"I have no money." said Binya.

"That doesn't matter. You gave me the umbrella-I give you the claw! Come let's see what it looks like on you." said Ram Bharosa. (81)

Ruskin Bond, through this novella has presented the true nature of children who are loving, caring and humane. The vices present in his wicked people are rectified with love and kindness. The awesome transformation of Ram Bharosa's nature from vicious to virtuous person proves his point. Hence it symbolizes that evil can be won by good.

References

1. Bond, Ruskin. *The Blue Umbrella*. Rupa Publications: Mumbai, 2015.
2. Ellison, Ralph. *Invisible Man*. New York: Penguin, 1952.