

## Reinforcing Young Minds: A Study on the Infusion of Indian Cultural Ethos in Selected Children's Fiction of Ruskin Bond

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**Abstract:** Children's literature holds great importance in terms of fostering intellectual, moral, emotional, and cultural development of young readers. Within the Indian setting, children's fiction is a critical tool for the transmission of culture, values, traditions, beliefs, and ethics across generations. The present study aims to analyze the portrayal of Indian cultural ethos within two texts of Ruskin Bond, *The Blue Umbrella* and *The Cherry Tree*, and understand their contribution to the process of formation of children's identity and value system. The study makes use of the qualitative textual analysis approach, incorporating insights from children's literature, cultural studies, and ecocriticism, and will investigate such aspects as family values, reverence of elders, compassion, honesty, environmental consciousness, folk beliefs, ritual, and cultural diversity. It will be argued that in his fiction, Bond portrays the cultural ethos not through exhortation but through the ethic of attention, which means that values emerge in the result of a child's loving and attentive attitude towards people, animals, trees, and landscape. This study has shown that these texts combine entertainment with cultural and moral education, handle conflict in a restorative manner and not in a retributive manner, look at difference as a process of negotiation and tradition as a capability to assimilate change. It is clear from this article that the children's fiction in question remains a potent tool for developing culturally aware and ethically sound citizens in today's dynamic world.

**Keywords:** Ruskin Bond, fiction for children, cultural ethos of India, moral education, ecocriticism, identity formation, pluralism.

### 1. Introduction

Children's tales of any society serve to be the most revealing writings of a society. This is because they reveal the kind of adults that adults want the children to grow up to be like, the kind of loss that adults fear from children, and the aspects which are of vital importance to adults that they cannot afford to risk leaving to chance. According to Peter Hunt (1991), children's literature cannot escape ideology because it is the work of adults who always have certain ideas about childhood.

The literary heritage of India to which children have access has deep roots and many layers to it. Be it the Panchatantra, Jatakas, or bedtime narratives drawn from epics, all of them regard narration as a process of upbringing. The modern children's literature in India and in English, in particular, continues that legacy under entirely new conditions of colonial education system, nation-building after the independence period, and now urbanization and digitalization. Ruskin Bond has a special place in the history of Indian literature for children. Having been born in Kasauli in 1934, educated in Jamnagar, Dehradun and Shimla and residing in Landour, Mussoorie, he is an Anglo-Indian writer in English who gained popularity in the genre of children's literature.

What this essay attempts to find out is how a writer of this kind – one whose identity occupies a marginalized position in any classification system – is seen as the guardian of values of Indian culture. The thesis of this essay is that Bond does not pass on cultural ethos through a list of virtues. He does so through an ethic of observation. His children observe closely – the bright umbrella, the tiny sapling, the steep mountainside, and they are morally shaped by this act of observation. This ethic of observation is captured concisely in three words midway through the novel *The Cherry Tree*, when the grandfather of Rakesh reproaches a woman who has just chopped down the sapling, “You were not observing.” (CT, p.21) The values of this essay (family loyalty, respect for elders, compassion, truthfulness, love for nature, belief in folk wisdom and acceptance of difference) are seen here as outcomes of this ethic of observation, and not apart from it.

*Cultural ethos*, as it is employed here, is in the spirit of Geertz's (1973): it involves the mood and moral tone of a culture, as conveyed through its symbolic expression of its attitudes towards life. Consequently, an ethos emerges both in terms of what the narrative means as well as in the way that it “feels,” and is thus part of reading for theme.

The purpose of this study is to look into how the chosen literature portrays family values, respect towards elders, compassion, integrity, environment, folklore, ritual and festivals, and at the same time analyze how the chosen literature portrays cultural and social diversity. The study will also try to find out how the literature tries to balance culture with modern childhood views and experiences.

## ***1.2 Research Questions***

How do the texts integrate Indian values through entertainment while constructing child readers as future moral and social agents, and to what extent do they accommodate flexibility, diversity, and critical engagement alongside traditional values?

## **2. Theoretical Framework**

### ***2.1 Children's literature studies***

The communicative structures of children's literature are unique. Children's writers are adults and their readers are not, and so every piece of writing includes what Perry Nodelman (2008) has called a "hidden adult," an implied adult voice which determines what the book thinks children will need to know, what they do know, and what they are meant to be. As Jack Zipes (2002) has emphasized, children's stories are always involved in socialization, actively endorsing or, from time to time, silently opposing dominant values; as John Stephens (1992) has shown, ideology operates just as much through point of view and closure as it does through statement; and as Maria Nikolajeva (2005) has demonstrated, a text educates through its structure.

### ***2.2 Cultural studies and representation***

The concept of representation from cultural studies comes from the work of Stuart Hall (1997), who states that "representation constructs both the identity and the meanings that appear to be merely represented." A book about a Garhwal village does not copy the village. It selects, arranges, and interprets, and thereby offers readers a version of Indian life to inhabit imaginatively.

### ***2.3 Ecocriticism***

Because environmental awareness is one of the study's concerns and Bond's fiction is saturated with landscape, the framework also draws on ecocriticism. Lawrence Buell (1995) describes environmentally oriented texts as those in which the non-human environment is more than a framing device, in which human interest is not the only legitimate interest, and in which the text implies human accountability to the environment. Greg Garrard (2004) extends this to the study of dwelling, the lived and habitual relationship to a place. Both ideas help in reading Bond, whose child characters inhabit their landscapes and do not merely visit them.

### ***2.4 Mirrors, windows, and narrative imagination***

Rudine Sims Bishop's (1990) image of books as mirrors, windows, and sliding glass doors helps explain how a child in Chennai or Kolkata can find Garhwal both strange and recognisable. Martha Nussbaum (1995) argues that narrative imagination, the capacity to enter another's situation in thought, underlies moral and civic life. It is these ideas combined that relate the aesthetics of reading to the overall theme of the paper in relation to the role of children's literature in ethics.

### 3. Bond in Indian Children's Literature and the Selected Texts

However, the Indian tradition of writing for children has always remained a part of the process of teaching. The *Panchatantra* itself has been written as a guide for young princes and it involves allowing advice to unfold through stories (Olivelle, 1997). The introduction of English readers by means of colonial education meant that European childhood became the ideal one. As has been pointed out by Krishna Kumar (1991), the colonial school along with its books created the image of a child as a receiver of certain knowledge, whereas Nandy (1983) has highlighted the internal conflict that colonial modernity imposed on the colonized self.

This is how the career of Bond started. The very first novel that he wrote was *The Room on the Roof*, published in 1956. Over the coming years, many more novels, short stories, and autobiographies were written by him.

Criticism tends to emphasise his nostalgia and simplicity of style, but this study proposes that the apparent simplicity of his prose is itself a moral strategy, a way of directing the child's attention to small things and teaching, through that attention, a way of being in the world.

The two selected texts complement each other. *The Blue Umbrella* is a novella in seven chapters set in a Garhwal village. Its protagonist, Binya, is a girl of about ten who exchanges her leopard-claw pendant for a bright blue umbrella belonging to picnickers from the plains, and the novella follows the envy, theft, and reconciliation that the umbrella provokes, chiefly through the tea-shop keeper Ram Bharosa. *The Cherry Tree*, in the illustrated Puffin edition by Manoj A. Menon, follows Rakesh, a boy who lives with his grandfather in Mussoorie, from the day he plants a cherry seed at the age of six through the tree's survival of goat, scythe, and snow. One is driven by social conflict, the other by growth over time.

### 4. Methodology

The study uses qualitative textual analysis within an interpretive paradigm. The texts were chosen by purposive sampling according to four criteria: they are addressed to, or widely read by, children; they are set in recognisably Indian social and natural environments; they are by a single author, which permits a sustained account of one writer's ethos; and they differ in form and emphasis, so that the argument does not depend on a single narrative mode. References to the primary texts use the abbreviations BU for *The Blue Umbrella* (Rupa edition) and CT for *The Cherry Tree* (Puffin edition), followed by page numbers.

The textual analysis was conducted using the thematic approach suggested by Braun and Clarke (2006). The texts were read several times, passages were coded based on the themes identified

in the study (family, elders, compassion, honesty, environment, folklore, ritual, diversity), and codes were further grouped into larger themes and interpreted within the framework presented in Section 2. Since ethos lies both in matter and manner, the coding included attention to voice, naming, syntax, and, in the case of the illustrated *Cherry Tree*, the relationship between the picture and the text.

The study makes no claims as to the actual responses of the readers; it only identifies what is contained in the books without addressing how children interpret these books. The scope of the study is too small to draw conclusions that would apply to the entire area of Indian children's fiction.

## 5. Analysis and Discussion

### 5.1 Naming, belonging, and the grammar of place

*The Blue Umbrella* begins with a cry down the slope, “Neelu! Neelu!” shouted Binya’ (BU, p. 3). What the reader discovers right away is a name, and then a way of naming things in this world. The story immediately translates for the Hindi used in the sentence, such that the name of the blue-grey cow Neelu means “blue,” and the name of her partner, Gori, means “fair one” (BU, p. 3). This translation serves as a commentary on a reader who may not have been part of the hills’ language, but it does it in a way which shows affection for the local custom without exoticizing it. Time also flows in this way, as in no family in the village observed birthdays, Binya is ‘probably ten years old,’ and all her mother can tell her about when she was born is that it was a winter with snow reaching up to the window sills (BU, p. 4).

The beginning is also a lesson on how the child moves around. She “scrambled barefoot over the rocks, ran over the short summer grass,” and over the brow of the hill (BU, p. 3). The string of verbs in the one sentence follows the movement in a manner similar to that of the syntax of the sentence. The narrator then provides the first claim to identity in the story: “Binya belonged to the mountains” (BU, p. 3). The belonging here is predicated not upon ancestry but rather on competence. Dark forests and the lonely heights are not scary places for her, whereas the market town and its crowds make her “nervous and lost” (BU, pp. 3–4).

*The Cherry Tree* starts with taste rather than with terrain. At six years old, Rakesh goes back home from the Mussoorie bazaar munching cherries that “are a little sweet, a little sour” and have been brought “all the way from the Kashmir Valley” (CT, p. 1). After two pages, the focus gets narrower. In the first range of the Himalayas in which he lives, the soil is rocky, the harsh winds hinder the growth of most vegetation, and the fruit trees are few (CT, pp. 2–3). Even

before the seed is sown, however, the narrative has shown that for cultivating a cherry tree in this environment means to go against the very grain of the place. The cultivation to follow is thus an attempt at acclimatization, and the narrative will focus on its demands.

In both stories, it is the place that carries out the work of ethics before the character does. It provides the criteria of competence, scarcity, and luck. The household, to which the discussion now turns, is where competence comes into play first.

### ***5.2 The household: kinship as mutual provisioning***

These are families that are very small, economically hard-pressed, and united through reciprocal services. In the case of Binya's family, the father is dead, yet "the death of him meant nothing to their mode of living" (BU, p. 4). This sentence captures the fact of bereavement as continuity, and it is an indication of what the family is – "three small terraces, two cows, a widow, two children, and enough for living" (BU, p. 4). Survival is a matter of work divided by season and need. Bijju is preparing for examinations and cannot herd the cows (BU, p. 3); during the monsoon holidays he delivers milk each morning and helps their mother with the ploughing and transplanting of rice seedlings; and the mother sells a measure of milk daily to the schoolmaster and, at a reduced rate, to the temple pujari (BU, p. 50). The reduced rate is a small piece of moral economy: a family with little still discounts its goods to the temple.

What binds the household is less duty than a continuous exchange of small kindnesses. Bijju brings Binya wild berries, and she rewards him by letting him carry the umbrella home (BU, p. 37). In the downpour the taller Bijju holds the umbrella over his sister while she holds his schoolbooks (BU, p. 45). When the umbrella is torn, it is their mother who stitches the rents (BU, p. 37). When Rajaram runs off with it, Bijju drops his bundle of sticks and sprints after the thief, calling "I'll soon catch him!" (BU, p. 63). The family's solidarity is audible as well as visible. At the end of the novella Binya, coming home through the darkening glade, hears her mother and Bijju calling for her and begins to sing, and "they heard her singing, and knew she was safe and near" (BU, p. 82). A song across a mountainside becomes the family's signal system, and the child learns that kinship is a field of mutual listening. Binya "enjoyed being alone" (BU, p. 3), and her independence develops within the family rather than outside it.

*Cherry Tree* takes its path to the family through separation. Rakesh stays with his grandfather in Mussoorie since there was no school in his parents' village, fifty miles away from them (CT, pp. 4-5). Education comes at the cost of division of the family, but the story embraces the situation without regrets by providing the second home to Rakesh. Grandfather, who used to be the forest ranger (CT, p. 6), educates the boy by provocation. When the boy asks his

grandfather if cherry seeds bring luck, the grandfather replies, “Of course,” and then says, “Nothing brings luck if you keep it to yourself” (CT, pp. 7-8). And the lesson continues in just two words: “Plant it” (CT, p. 8).

The generation-to-generation relationship works in both directions. At night, Grandfather entertains with tales, while in return, Rakesh reads to him the newspaper (CT, p. 11). However, when the snow blocks the newspaper supply and the elderly gets grumpy, the tales turn sour and he decides to cheer himself up: “Nobody loves a sad man” (CT, p. 28). And he sings happy tunes until the weather improves. The respect towards the elderly in such a case does not have anything to do with deference to the higher rank, but rather reflects the understanding of the child about the gifts from the elderly and vice versa. Seasonally returning to his parent’s village to assist in the field work, after which he returns “thinner but stronger” (CT, p. 23), proves that Rakesh owes work to two houses.

If trust becomes the foundation of the family, then *The Blue Umbrella* puts that trust to the test, and in doing so, uses desire.

### **5.3 Desire, status, and the ethics of honesty**

Inciting incident in the novella occurs in the forest glade when Binya, following her cows, meets picnickers “from the plains” (BU, p. 8). It is a blue umbrella which “lay open on the grass like a flower” (BU, p. 8) which lures her. And the language used here is precise enough for the narrator to say that umbrella “cast its spell” on her, pulling her almost against her will (BU, p. 9). But usually, she would be scared to death from strange people. Picnickers’ behavior is the first test of honesty in the book, and they fail it. They make remarks about her tattered and dirty clothes, while narrator dryly notes that it did not bother them at all that Binya understood every word (BU, p. 9). They were sure that hill people needed money: “she’s sure to need the money” (BU, p. 11). Explanation of her pendant as a talisman against the evil spirits which was made by a man is immediately undermined with a parenthesis: “(He had never seen a tiger’s claw.)” (BU, p. 11). He asks Binya for a confirmation, but there is none because she declines both to correct him and to play to him. She waves away his offer of two rupees and five, and, “without any hesitation,” she points to the umbrella (BU, p. 12). It would be an incorrect premise to assume that poverty equals hunger for money.

What follows is the book’s most exact study of desire. Ram Bharosa, the tea-shop keeper, is introduced with a gloss on his name, “Ram the Trustworthy” (BU, p. 19), and the novella will exploit the irony. His offers for the umbrella rise from five to ten to twelve rupees, each declined with a laugh (BU, pp. 20–21), until he confesses to the boy Rajaram that profit is not what he is after: “It’s the thing itself. It’s the beauty of it!” (BU, p. 53). He is no simple miser.

“I, too, have a soul,” he insists, and he wants “its beauty to be mine” (BU, p. 54). That phrase locates the exact point of moral divergence. Binya and Ram Bharosa desire the same thing, and the narrative honours it in both. But Binya wants to look at the umbrella, carry it, twirl it, and lend it to anyone who is feeling unhappy (BU, p. 20), whereas Ram Bharosa wants to possess its beauty and withdraw it from view. The ethical distinction is not between desire and the absence of desire but rather between a desire that flows and one that stockpiles.

There is honesty being challenged outside of school as well. The wife of the schoolmaster, a “second class BA” with just her black umbrella, considers it unacceptable for a poor cultivator’s daughter to have such an excellent umbrella and the pujari comes back frustrated from town to tell her that those kinds of umbrellas are only found in Delhi (BU, pp. 39–41). It is the narrator who provides the sentence that ties it all together: “Secretly, everyone admired it” (BU, p. 41). There is a whole group of people who oppose these grown-ups – children who did not have to pretend anything, but expressed their admiration openly (BU, p. 41).

Dishonesty assumes a sinister dimension in the economy of credit. Ram Bharosa extends credit for selling sweets, and children who have gone beyond their limits hand over their prized possessions, including a curved knife, a little hatchet, and earrings, which he keeps or sells (BU, pp. 36–37). As he is keen on acquiring the umbrella he is ready to extend credit to Binya and Bijju, “but neither had fallen into the trap” (BU, p. 37).

But when desire results in theft, the novella clearly defines the culpability of the adult. Ram Bharosa negotiates for the cost of stealing the umbrella “without being seen” (BU, p. 55) from his shop-boy Rajaram, comes to an agreement at three rupees, and says that the boy is sharp but “will come to a bad end” (BU, p. 55). As Bijju beats up Rajaram by the stream and tries to learn the reason for stealing the umbrella, it becomes clear that Rajaram has been instructed to do so by Ram Bharosa under threat of dismissal (BU, p. 66). The thief is a child who has to earn money and the blame for the theft is on his employer. The thief is captured and the villain disclosed – but not for the children’s story.

#### ***5.4 Compassion as restoration***

In lieu of any punishment from on high, there is judgment by society. Once the theft attempt is exposed, Ram Bharosa finds himself hated by all in the village; customers go out of their way to the stores located by the Tehri bus stop, children ridicule him, and “Ram the Trustworthy” is transformed into “Trusty Umbrella Thief” (BU, p. 70). The price is exacted in a precise form; he is left to sit alone in his deserted shop, without any appetite and having to resort to spending

some of his savings (BU, pp. 70–71); he has experienced “the torments of greed, the despair of loneliness” (BU, p. 68).

The distinction about the novella lies in the reaction of the victim. Binya tiptoes around the shop while averting her eyes, “as if she was somehow to blame for his troubles” (BU, p. 71). She reasons that the umbrella is her own and that she cannot help others’ jealousy, then asks the harder question of whether she loved it too much and is, “in a small way,” the cause of that sad face (BU, p. 71). It was all due to his greed, “no doubt,” but she does not want him to feel too bad, “because it made her feel bad about herself” (BU, p. 72). Her compassion is self-implicating. She does not forgive from a height; she recognises her own entanglement.

Her next gestures are acts of tact. She closes the umbrella whenever she comes near the shop and opens it only when she is out of sight (BU, p. 72). Near the end of October she buys a toffee, becoming his first customer in almost two weeks, and he bites her coin and rings it on the ground before pronouncing it good (BU, pp. 72–74); the man who betrayed trust can no longer extend it. There is then the scene that is laden with ethical implications in the novella. Ram Bharosa discovers that the closed umbrella has been left behind in his store after Binya has already departed (BU, p. 74). The narrator is vague about whether this happened accidentally or not, which is a fruitful ambiguity, because it makes the reader judge whether the gift was a deliberate act or not. One thing is definite: it is an opportunity for temptation. The old man can easily hide the umbrella behind the store without anyone finding out, but when he unfolds the umbrella and stands under it in the dark shadows of his shop “where no sun or rain could ever touch it” (BU, p. 74), it becomes too absurd for him. “What is the use of an umbrella to me?” he asks himself, and rushes after her, although he had never run before (BU, pp. 74–75).

However, Binya refuses to give it back, saying, “Keep it. I don’t need it anymore” (BU, p. 75). With her statement, “It was theirs in that instant,” the author transforms the item which is a point of contention into a possession belonging to two people at once, and with her comment that “an umbrella isn’t everything,” she goes walking down the road, “nothing between her and the bright blue sky” (BU, p. 75). The final chapter converts this restoration into a social practice. The faded and patchy umbrella has become, in the narrator’s phrase, “everyone’s umbrella,” left open outside the shop for whoever wishes to borrow it (BU, p. 77). People visit Ram Bharosa again, and he looks much healthier for being coaxed out into the sun and rain (BU, p. 77).

The exchange with which the novella began, the leopard-claw pendant for the umbrella, is answered by a second exchange. A bear, driven lower by snow on the higher ranges, loses a claw on the roof of Ram Bharosa's shop (BU, p. 77). He has it set in a silver locket by a craftsman in the market town (BU, p. 78) and gives it to Binya: "You gave me the umbrella, I give you the claw!" (BU, p. 81). The first transaction was a swap between strangers; the second is a gift between neighbours. This is an observation anthropologists have noted for some time: gift-giving helps establish and maintain connections among people that commodity exchange fails to achieve (Mauss, 1990). In addition, there is a clear relationship between this story's transformation from commodity exchange to gift-giving and an ethical tradition in India that emphasizes forgiveness (kshama) and restoration of the community, even if the term itself is not mentioned.

### ***5.5 Dwelling and tending: the ecology of belonging***

In both the stories, nature is presented as an arena of relationships and not a mere background. Nature in *The Blue Umbrella* is at first represented as a naughty factor. In one such windy day, when Binya is napping, the author anthropomorphizes nature with obvious joy in his/her narration. "It lifted up the umbrella, dropped it, and then carried it away again 'in a wicked, playful mood'" (BU, p. 26). This is followed by a pursuit through a hillside till she comes across a precipice.

This knowledge is evident in the specifics of her descent. She faces the hillside and uses her feet to feel her way, and changes the handhold when the feet are safe (BU, p. 29). She trusts the prickly bilberry bushes but not those which can be pulled up and takes care not to trigger a landslide with loose stones (BU, p. 29). Her expertise is ecological literacy: she knows what holds, how stones roll, and what a slope does. Her fear too is controlled by awareness. She experiences no fear in tree climbing and gets scared only when looking down into the abyss. The cure lies in focusing "on the patch of blue" a few feet ahead and looking neither up nor down (BU, pp. 31-32). This passage shows a method both practical and ethical: concentration on what is in front dispels fear of what is behind. The landscape gives back, for the umbrella sails "serenely" down into a patch of nettles (BU, p. 32), and Binya, no less immune to nettles than Bijju to bees, does not even notice the stings (BU, p. 33). The body of the hill child has been crafted from the hill itself.

Seasonal cycles give us the moral climate of the novel. Monsoon comes through with abundant fecundity with lilies as "big as leopards emerging from tall grass" (BU, p. 47). When she is

attacked by a snake, Binya raises an open umbrella against the “snout” of the snake, which strikes twice and then “turned and slithered away” (BU, pp. 48–49); it doesn’t get killed. October is referred to as “a kind month” (BU, p. 68) and its warm breeze full of smell of pine makes the right climate of forgiveness possible. The final image of the novel puts the final say into the landscape. “And the mountains were glad” of her singing about the stars (BU, p. 82).

*The Cherry Tree* makes that same attention into cultivation. While Binya studies a landscape she knows, Rakesh begins to learn how to nurture something he does not own. The act of planting is quite simple. It consists of pushing the seed into the ground and then eating his lunch, playing cricket and forgetting about the tree (CT, p. 8). Time in this narration is passed through monsoon and bare winter in just a few lines (CT, pp. 9–10), so it seems that the tree grows unnoticed during the pauses. This impatience of the child is funny because once the young tree seems to grow slowly, he “stopped looking at it – except quickly, out of the corner of his eye” (CT, p. 14), and a couple of weeks later, he saw that it had grown one inch.

The attention is only ethical when it is put to test. A goat eats up the leaves of the tree (CT, p. 19). A woman who is out chopping grass with her scythe slices the tree into two pieces (CT, p. 21). “I did not see it,” she says in her defense, to which Grandfather responds, “You were not looking” (CT, p. 21). The dialogue acts as the moral center of the story and deals with the issue of perception and not with malice. It is significant that the story maintains its objectivity. The woman chops grass because she needs it for her cows while Grandfather’s counter claim, that the grass belongs to him and he likes watching it and sitting on it, is fair and also slightly possessive.

The tree lives, “for it had no intention of dying” (CT, p. 22), and in growing it establishes itself as a habitat. Its first visitor is a praying mantis which commences eating leaf-cutting insects (CT, p. 24). The caterpillar, however, is not such an easy visitor. Having learned from school that ugly caterpillars turn into beautiful butterflies, Rakesh takes it and throws it across the wall while saying “Come back when you’re a butterfly” (CT, pp. 26–27). Negotiation, rather than destruction or capitulation, and school science are combined with the principles of benevolence here. The cherries, when they appear, are too sour for Rakesh, and he spits one away; bulbuls and minivets feed on them (CT, pp. 31–32). Fruit that the boy refuses to eat appeals to other creatures, thus satisfying the ecocritical requirement “that interests other than those of humans be recognized as valid ones” (Buell, 1995).

The concluding scenes bring together all of the motifs. In the final scene, the grandfather lying under the tree “has just the right amount of shade” (CT, p. 32); the tree that the boy protected

is now protecting the grandfather. As night falls, the two wait silently till “the stars came out” and “the insects, like an orchestra tuning up, began their song” (CT, p. 35). Rakesh wonders why he likes this tree so much, and his grandfather tells him: “You planted it yourself. That’s why it’s special” (CT, p. 36). The boy climbs to the top branch and proudly announces, “Tall, strong cherry tree, all grown by me!” (CT, p. 37). This line is tinged with irony as the tree grows through rain and stubbornness, but it reflects the main point of the story – how care makes an object into a relation.

*The Cherry Tree* is not a lesson in conservation but an account of how affection for a living thing comes to be, and it suggests that environmental concern begins in the investment of one’s own time.

### ***5.6 Folk belief, luck, and the rituals of the ordinary***

Folk belief enters both texts as part of a living environment, and both handle it with a tolerant tact that avoids mockery and endorsement alike. In *The Blue Umbrella* it is first embodied in an object, the leopard’s claw that hangs from Binya’s necklace as a lucky charm and that her brother wears on a string (BU, p. 4). The explanation of the charm comes from an outsider who thinks it a tiger’s claw, and the narrator undermines his authority with the parenthesis noted earlier. The villagers’ own repertoire is more particular. They predict that the umbrella will attract lightning or prove unlucky (BU, p. 41), and older villagers hold that being bled by leeches is a remedy, so that Ram Bharosa applies a leech to his temple when he has a headache (BU, p. 47). The porcupine quills Binya searches for are thought little of in the hills but valued as charms in southern India (BU, p. 58). All these things constitute a map of faith which is specific, pragmatic, and rather amusing. Finally, luck comes back in a new guise. The claw of the bear turns out to be, according to Ram Bharosa, “luckier than a leopard’s claw” (BU, p. 81), and the amulet which was a commodity in the clearing becomes a gift once more.

In *The Cherry Tree*, the question is taken up again, now from the perspective of the elder, but it is done in a very direct way. When asked if the cherry tree seed is lucky, Grandfather not only confirms this belief, but qualifies it: “If you want luck, you have to make the seed work” (CT, p. 8). This passage neither dismisses nor ridicules the belief, which would distance the child and disrespect the elder; rather, it interprets it, and in this way, luck becomes the term for what emerges through work and time.

The second is the art of storytelling. Grandfather’s fireside stories deal with men becoming animals, spirits residing in trees, jumping beans, and crying rocks (CT, p. 11); and in the facing illustration, they become part of the landscape, represented in ghostly form by the pale figure

of the ghost and the bounding spirit of a tiger in the clouds (CT, pp. 10-11). It is an animistic inventory, a world where trees and rocks have an interior life, and the backdrop of a story where a tree becomes magical.

Neither text offers a festival in the ceremonial sense, and the absence is itself informative. The ritual life depicted is that of the ordinary: the daily bus that stops for tea and curd (BU, p. 19), the milk that goes to the temple (BU, p. 50), the shelter people take together when the cloudburst comes (BU, p. 45). Even the weather is ritualised. Binya sits on the hillside all afternoon waiting for the first drop of the monsoon and is the only person who does not run for cover when it arrives, because this is “what she’d been waiting for” (BU, pp. 43–45). The nearest approach to celebration is Rakesh’s birthday in *The Cherry Tree*, marked by a tea party in the garden at which his friends eat everything, sing, dance around the tree, and play hide-and-seek until dark (CT, p. 29). The contrast with Binya’s village, where no one kept birthdays (BU, p. 4), is telling. The same hills contain a town child whose birthday is a party and a village child who does not know her own age, and Bond’s ethos registers, quietly, the difference that schooling and town life make.

### **5.7 Difference, class, and connection**

India’s plurality is represented in these texts as encounter, hierarchy, and connection. Binya’s first encounter is with “holidaymakers from the plains” in bright saris and light summer shirts, whose “unfamiliar accents” she listens to with fascination (BU, pp. 8–9). Their talk is condescending, yet the narrative does not make them villains. The man is “slightly embarrassed but anxious to please his young wife” (BU, p. 11), and he observes that the pendant “may not be hers to sell” (BU, p. 12). The older woman sees, in the couple’s quarrel, that “we’re making such fools of ourselves” (BU, p. 14). The exchange is possible because each party recognises value in what the other has, the visitors in a hill charm and the hill child in a plains luxury. In Bishop’s (1990) terms, the scene is a mirror for hill children and a window for children from the plains, and the sliding door opens through recognition of shared feeling: wanting something beautiful, being resented for it, and finding a way to forgive.

The class is marked with greater depth within the village setting. “Ram Bharosa was probably the richest man in the area” (BU, p. 49-50). “The wife of the schoolmaster gauged wealth by degrees” (BU, p. 49-50). “Binya’s people were small cultivators” (BU, p. 49-50). Rajaram, summoned from another village to help wash and perform chores, stands at the bottom of the hierarchy (BU, p. 49-50). However, the moral progress of the story contradicts the order. The poorest of all is the girl who provides grace, while the richest is the lonely man.

The stories also situate the hills in wider networks of exchange. The porcupine quills travel from Binya's hillside to Ram Bharosa, to a trader from the plains, and on to southern India (BU, p. 58). The pujari's multicoloured umbrella can be had only in Delhi (BU, p. 41), the silversmith works in the market town (BU, p. 78), and the Tehri bus ties the village to the world beyond (BU, p. 19). In *The Cherry Tree* the cherries come from Kashmir (CT, p. 1) and the ducks that signal spring are flying north to Siberia (CT, p. 13). Plurality appears as connection and not as a catalogue of communities.

The limits of this plurality should be recorded. Religious life appears only through the temple and its pujari (BU, pp. 39, 50), and caste and communal difference are not named in either text. Bond's position as an Anglo-Indian writer who chose to remain in India may help explain narratives that describe from an intimate but respectful middle distance and do not claim to speak for the community.

### ***5.8 Tradition, change, and the contemporary child***

Bond is often read as a nostalgic writer, but the novella is full of the modern. Bottles of Coca-Cola stand on Ram Bharosa's shelves, though without ice they get hot in the sun (BU, p. 20). Savings are kept in a bank in Tehri (BU, p. 70), and Bijju's examinations shape the family's division of labour (BU, p. 3). The central object is a manufactured silk umbrella from the plains. The narrative does not treat its arrival as an invasion to be repelled. It treats it as an event to be lived through. The umbrella fades from bright blue to a pale milky blue and is patched in several places, yet remains "the prettiest umbrella in the village" (BU, p. 66), and it ends as shared property (BU, p. 77). A modern commodity is taken into a moral economy older than itself, and tradition emerges as the quality of a community's response to new things and not their absence.

The same thing happens in *The Cherry Tree*. Rakesh goes to school wearing his raincoat and gumboots (CT, p. 17), plays cricket (CT, p. 8), reads out the newspaper and relies on his school education in biology to kill a caterpillar (CT, p. 27). But his biggest joy is to lie under the tree he planted, and the old and the new interlink in this way: the newspaper links Grandfather with the world and the tales link Rakesh with his perception of the world.

Even the point of view is revealing in this case. As Nodelman (2008) explains the hidden adult in Bond's writing can hardly be considered to be hidden at all. He/she appears in the form of dry parenthesis and irony aimed at slightly more sophisticated audiences than children, for instance, the comment about the fact that the man had never seen the claw of the tiger whose name he gave (BU, p. 11) and Bijju's description of Ram Bharosa who "has a face a yard long"

(BU, p. 71-72). Moreover, the author believes in the moral abilities of his/her child characters. Thus, Binya makes decisions about what to do with the umbrella, and Rakesh decides on how to treat the caterpillar.

There are some limitations. The gentle voice of Bond may help resolve the conflict, and the village being too small for representing structural constraints in urban childhood. Rajaram's theft and the woman with the scythe signify the condition of poverty and precarious livelihood that is recognized but not explored by the stories. The texts can be perceived as one of the resources, useful in terms of attention they raise rather than a whole lesson in citizenship. Within their limitations, they achieve what was meant to be analyzed in the study: they locate the child within the context of the place, family, and care without constraining the child within it.

## 6. Findings

1. **Cultural ethos is conveyed through an ethic of attention.** The cultural ethos is expressed through an attentional ethic. Simple prose, glossed names, and the instances like "You weren't looking" put attention itself into the moral realm, thus creating values through an attentive approach to people, animals, and landscape rather than from stated teachings.
2. **Households are where morality is first inculcated.** The family functions as an interdependent network, and reverence for elders is a two-way street, with the elder instructing the child while taking care of his/her temperament, and vice versa.
3. **Honesty is explored through desire.** What matters is the opposition of circulating desire, as evidenced by Binya's borrowing of the umbrella, and desire that is obsessed with possession, as exemplified by Ram Bharosa's desire to possess the beauty. Accountability for moral wrong is placed on the adult who takes advantage of the dependent child.
4. **Compassion takes the form of restoration.** The effect is that of a collective sanction, and the offended individual replies with self-referential tact. The novella's progression from trade to gift exchange restores the community without eliminating the offense.
5. **Environmental awareness grows from dwelling and tending.** The ecological awareness of Binya and the cultivation of the tree by Rakesh are two examples of different kinds of attention, and what *The Cherry Tree* does is that it depersonalizes human interest by letting birds feed on the fruit the boy would not eat.

6. **Folk belief is translated, not debunked, and ritual is largely ordinary.** "Luck" is reinvented in terms of the result of labour and time; "folk tale" persists as both mode and content; and "festival" is represented solely by the miniaturization of the child's birthday party."
7. **Plurality appears as encounter and connection, and tradition as a capacity to absorb change.** The drama of class, region, and origin occurs through relations, moral power derives from surprising sources, and modern items and schooling enter a traditional moral economy. Differences in religion and caste persist below the surface.

## 7. Implications

Implications for teachers are that these books should be read for fostering observation and discussion but not for extracting moral lessons. To question kids about why Ram Bharosa chases Binya, or to discuss the story of the woman with the scythe, are more appropriate than summarizing moral lessons from these texts. Parents can be encouraged to read the book together with their children as well as to plant cherries together, in order to share the ethic of *The Cherry Tree* at home. For writers and publishers, Bond's example indicates the value of specificity of place and restraint of tone. For researchers, the study opens paths for reader-response work, comparison with regional-language authors, and study of Bond's treatment of religious and caste diversity.

## 8. Conclusion

This study set out to examine how selected children's fiction by Ruskin Bond carries the cultural ethos of the society it addresses. Reading *The Blue Umbrella* and *The Cherry Tree* closely, it has argued that Bond's method is to cultivate an ethic of attention, from which family loyalty, respect for elders, compassion, honesty, environmental care, tolerance of belief, and openness to difference follow as consequences and not as separate lessons.

In a world of accelerated attention and unstable environments, these stories offer children a way of being rooted, in place, in kin, and in practices of care, while leaving them free to engage a plural and changing world. As examples of how literature can nurture culturally grounded and ethically responsible young readers by training the quality of their attention, they remain among the most persuasive in Indian children's writing.

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