

Short Fiction in Indian Literature
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Lecture - 10C
Hidden Fractures in Ruskin Bond: The Blue Umbrella Overview

Hello and welcome to this conversation between me and Gayathri who is an MA student at IIT Madras. We are going to talk about Ruskin Bond's *The Blue Umbrella*. The textbook that I am using is the one which has been illustrated by Archana Sreenivasan. It is a wonderful book and illustrations are lovely to look at. So I would recommend this edition for this particular course.

Hi Gayathri how do you find the book? **“Professor - student conversation starts”** The book it is a children book as they had said, but I think it is very relevant for any age group. I am a teenager and I have read it and I can take as much as I can out of this so can the children. I think the children too will understand there is a variety of spectrum of emotions being displayed from jealousy, to generosity, to greed, to forgiveness.

And I think people of any age group will have something to take away from this book definitely. **“Professor - student conversation ends”** Absolutely that is quite right I mean even a 2-year-old who is beginning to trying to understand stories even that kid can understand some of the emotions that running through the book and especially the blue umbrella which is very, very attractive object.

The color blue is also very interesting choice to adopt in this particular story. So it is quite appealing both to the adults and to the children because morals are the same regardless of the age, the morals do not change. So that is why I think it is (()) (01:59) appealing across the ages. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** I think that is one of Ruskin Bond's genius. So moving on to the story the characteristics that is extremely striking from the book is the personification of nature.

How close we feel with the nature. The reader feels as if that person is in that forest, that person is running through the hills and it is beautiful so what do you think? **“Professor - student conversation ends”** The descriptions of nature have been very skillfully done. It is a

masterly rendering of the minute aspect of nature and as you say we do feel as if we are there with Binya running down the hill slopes.

You know trying to be careful where we place our footsteps so that we do not get struck by these (()) (02:50). So all these aspects are there and we also almost imagine as if Bijju has been stung by all these bees. So that is because of the power of Ruskin Bond's pen and he has experience all these hilly regions first hand and he communicates it very, very easily and simply and it is almost as if it is effortlessly done and sentence structures are very simple.

And the choice of words is not too complicated and that makes a charming once again across the ages to everyone, but as I mentioned in some of my lectures nature is not as simple or as charming as we think it to be in Ruskin Bond. There are dangerous aspects of nature right from heavy rain to winter storms when Binya was born and 2 leopard sprawling in the hills. In fact, if you look closely at the concluding stages of the novel.

She is careful not to come into contact with the leopard. She is hurriedly going home that is there, but somehow we tend not to notice all those things because we are kind of charmed by the delightful language, the happy aspects of life that is simple aspects of life, but nature can be really terrible the bear which visits Ram Bharosa and leaves behind a claw. It can be threatening, but it also is kind of slightly generous which makes Ram Bharosa kind of give a claw pendant to Binya and then we have the leeches.

And he says that it is a beautiful season except for the leeches. So they do live in close communion with nature. They do enjoy the aspects of nature and especially we are supposed to look through the eyes of Binya, we kind of follow her. So her (()) (04:45) nature is passed on to us in some respect. So she is the kind of the ideal girl the (()) (04:52) but the funny thing is that we do not get to know quite a bit about her thought process.

So that is very interesting too. So the very simplistic attitude to nature is retained on the part of the readers. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Again the tourists they come only when the grass is all green and again when it starts raining there are no tourists and the natives are left all alone. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**. They come when it is ideal for them to visit right the summer season when the nature is at its prime.

That is when they come for a picnic and of course they do not see the harsher side of nature during the winter or during the monsoon season and the monsoon season brings out the snakes as well which is at one time Binya has an encounter with a poisonous snake. It is a very close shave for her and she is really terrified. So we do have these disturbing elements of nature, the really scary elements are there but it is slightly hidden.

“Professor - student conversation starts” What do you think is the narrative conflict in the story? **“Professor - student conversation ends”**. There are a couple of conflicts and we have the big conflicts where Rajaram is employed by Ram Bharosa to steal the umbrella, but that conflict is the most important and it is a high point of the story, but there are like mini conflicts which are kind of run up to the big one.

So we have the mini conflicts where the winds play the wicked role it steals the umbrella and throws it down along the cliff side and Binya has to scabble down a cliff phase and it is a precarious descent again. If she slips and falls it is a 80 meters down by the side of a stream which is thrown with big boulders. So if she falls it would mean death for her. So that is one conflict and again the source of the conflict is nature.

And the other conflict as I mentioned in my lecture videos is the conflict with the snake and here the umbrella becomes a shield. It is like a weapon which protects her so there the umbrella is almost like a lucky charm just a leopard claw it is supposed to function and then finally we have the big conflict with Ram Bharosa and Rajaram there is even a fight sequence Bollywood fashion.

A big sequence where these 2 boys fight really hardly and Bijju is the winner and he rescues the umbrella and gives it back to his sister. So that is a major conflict there. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** We talk about the internal conflict within Ram Bharosa. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**. Yes, that is the symbolic, the metaphorical the figurative conflicts that is running through.

It is very interesting that when he wants to get the umbrella there is no conflict that he wants to get it. He is rich, he can afford it he is the richest man in the region he says right. So it seems almost as if it is right to own the umbrella it is his prerogative, but then the conflict that you are talking about that is psychological conflict. It is a very interesting point that

happens later during the resolution of the narrator interestingly when Binya deliberately leaves the umbrella behind.

And he kind of sees the umbrella open it inside his tea shop and then he enjoys that moment it is a bizarre moment, it is a surreal moment and suddenly he realizes that is a Eureka moment for him. What I am going to do with this umbrella I am hardly outside. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Rajaram point this out when we asked Ram Bharosa why does he need the umbrella, but he says it is just the thing of beauty and I needed for myself. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”**

And he is a very, very clever man this Ram Bharosa. He says that it is the thing itself and he says almost in Shylock style I have a human soul and therefore I should own this thing of beauty that rhetoric reminded me of Shylock Merchant of Venice. So he adjusts really very cleverly in order to somehow very cleverly push Rajaram to think about getting the umbrella for a prize.

So he was very manipulative as well. It is very subtly done so you cannot put it past him. So he almost very cleverly places the idea in Rajaram mind and Rajaram being an employee is somehow duty-bound, but then he exploits the situation for his benefit too. So the psychological conflict is a very good point something we need to think about and that is clear when he touches the umbrella, own the employee.

It is almost as if the umbrella kind of changes his mind and he goes back to (()) (09:23) give it back to her. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** There is one more thing which is very interesting age, death relationships these are all very heavy topic I feel and these are just dealt with very off handedly by Ruskin Bond. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**. True. It is kind of marginalize somehow.

“Professor - student conversation starts” It is just the paragraph in the beginning and then the description of nature is so big, is so huge. Again you just talk about this father death and he says it did not make any difference too. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**. Absolutely and that is why the narrator is little bit interesting that way the third person narrator who does the story telling. We need to kind of think about his motivation in the way he narrates the story.

Why has he suppressed all these heavy topics, all these big issues and I am sure the absence of a father would have been felt by this young small family, but that is kind of suppressed and the ideal father is very interesting because Ram Bharosa at one point says that I am glad that Rajaram is not my son. I do not have to play the father to him. I do not have to discipline him because only if your father you are supposed to worry about the moral compass of your kid.

So that ideal father and sons and the death of father is very, very interesting and the dysfunctionality of a home, the full home which is not complete in the sense that one parent is missing. We do not get to know about Rajaram family, we do not get to know about Ram Bharosa family, we do not get to hear a lot about Binya mother she is kind of absent figure too.

So families we just get glimpses of them and we do not know what is going on at home. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Again the motive behind him writing about the father death. I do not know if I am extrapolating it but still. His father his own father he died when he was 8 years or 10 years old of Malaria or something. Do you think there is an autobiographical element to this, the motive is autobiographical? **“Professor - student conversation ends”**.

Yeah possibly the missing father is a kind of a presence. So even the mother is hardly present in this particular narrative. So the absent parental figure in Ruskin Bonds own life could have played a part somehow or the other in the way he structures the characters of these young children who are almost always on their own. They are kind of lonely figures who kind of navigate the problems of life on their own in some ways like Binya and Bijju.

So they kind of take on a lot on the young shoulders in some respect so that could be there. It could be one of the factors. **“Professor - student conversation starts”**. There are different kinds of categories described by Bond in this story, there is a native then there are the tourists, there are the adults, there are the children. So how would you look at these categories, do you find any similarities or differences among these?

Let us first talk about adults and children in the story. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**. Let us look at tourist in this regard we have the picnicker right from the plains and

Binya at one point she hides behind the curtain of the trees and look at all the stuff that displayed. She admires their cloth, listening to their unfamiliar accents and gazing rather hungrily at the sight of all their food and then her gaze came to rest on a bright blue umbrella.

A freely thing for women which lay open on the grass besides its owner and then she kind of quietly comes out and then they notice the older of the 2 women notices Binya a little village girl is not she pretty remark the other, but how torn and dirty her clothes are. It do not seem to bother them that Binya could hear and understand everything they said about her, they are very poor in the hills said one of them.

Then let us give her something to eat and the older women (()) (13:41) Binya to come closer hesitantly, nervously Binya approach the girl. Normally she would have turned and fled, but attraction was the pretty blue umbrella. It has cost to spell over her drawing her forward almost against her will. The attitude of the picnickers from the plain is very clear. They see the village girl as pretty attractive, but then the poverty becomes very apparent to them.

They notice all the clothes and they talk as if Binya is not present there. So that self centered, egoistic attitude of the picnickers is contrasted with Binya own attitude, but she can be persistent, she can be stubborn in her own way, but then towards the end of the story we can see her change in attitude too. So there are parallels in terms of the construction of the ego between the adults and the children that is there.

We cannot see the children as purely pure, innocent the word of any kind of discrimination in terms of the attitude towards the other. The children are mini adults that is why I read this particular text and they carry the same kind of gender, stereotypes or class stereotypes or race stereotypes to a certain extent and these can be apparent in children narratives too, but in the case of adults it becomes really very noticeable.

In the children it becomes a less noticeable perhaps that could be the reason why we tend to see children as more. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Continuation of that extract here the older women call her to give a food, but then that food is again she never gets the food. She sees the umbrella and then she gets the (()) (15:34) the poverty just disappears there **“Professor - student conversation ends”**.

She gazes hungrily that is a very interesting thing too. So we also need to think about the economic status of this particular family which has a small patch of land on the hill side and they kind of sell milk to the temple pujari, to the school master they make end meet and through hard work and if you notice towards the end of the story Binya is picking up porcupine quills from the grass floor of the hills.

So it is hard labor and she gets paid very, very little and that payment is done by Ram Bharosa which is again very interesting when the theft of the umbrella happens this poor kid is picking up stuff so that she can give it to this old man the skinflint. So we need to put everything in context it is like a puzzle that we need to bring together. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** And the attitudes of the adults and children. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**.

The one thing that is very interesting is that the only adult we get to see quite a bit is Ram Bharosa and he is a not a very admirable representation of an adult figure. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Yes but there is an extract by Bond which says how adults and children react to the blue umbrella, how they say can we re-determine. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**. I have this here page 29 in my edition.

Most people console themselves by saying that Binya is pretty umbrella would not keep up the rain if it rains heavily that it would (()) (17:10) the sun if the sun was fierce that it collapses in a wind if the wind was strong that will attract lightening if lightening fell near wretch and that it would prove unlucky if there is any ill luck going about secretly everyone admired it. So (()) (17:31) great philosophy when I read these a very rhetorical set of ideas.

If anything bad was going to happen the umbrella would kind of attract that evil thing that is around it. So that is the attitude of the adult because they cannot get hold of it and if you remember the school master wife wants to have this umbrella because she has studied up to BA degree and the temple pujari he wants a multi color umbrella so that he can have a superior one than Binya.

So he goes to town to get a multi color umbrella, but he is disappointed that he cannot get it. So they kind of have this idea that since they are superior they should have this thing and the same philosophy is applied by Ram Bharosa too because he has wealth as his (()) (18:20). So

he has that quite a bit so which means this beautiful thing must be his property. That kind of philosophy does not apply to the children.

So that way we have a subtle difference between the adults and the children and the children what do they do. They are full of price for umbrella. It was so light, so pretty so bright a blue. It is almost as if the narrator is channeling the thoughts of the little kid. So admiring the blue umbrella and it was just the right size for Binya. They knew that it is said nice things about the umbrella. Binya would smile and give it to them to hold umbrella just a very little while.

So even that slight bit of manipulation is at work and the minds of the children too, but it is for a positive reason so that they can get what they want from Binya. So you are quite right I mean there is a difference between adults and children in certain areas, but in some areas they mimic the adults to get what they want. So that (()) (19:21) by the adults and that is tragedy somehow.

“Professor - student conversation starts” Again the choice of the name Ram Bharosa. Bhasora meaning trustworthy in Hindi. It is very interesting so could you talk about his character and the relationships he shares with other people in the story and especially with Rajaram his employee. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**. It is a very ironic name my question back to you would be was he ever trustworthy in the first place.

Because if we see these children and how they are trapped by Ram Bharosa into getting all these sweets and toffee for credit and ultimately they are not able to pay him back and look at what he does. He gets back all their price possessions, there could be a pair of ear rings, a very intricate knife and also some stuff from the little kid some of which he kinds of hangs on to and some of which he sells them on.

So he likes to make a profit out of these really innocent young children and at the same time he wants to kind of match by like collect all the beautiful stuff and hang on to it. So it is a very, very less admirable quality that he has and his nature is put spelled it out who does it Rajaram does it at the end of the story. He says he is a skinflint first time that we kind of get a description for his character even though everybody understands that is what he does.

So Ram Bharosa was very never trustworthy in my reading of the book and a people mock

him very directly at the end of the tail because they get the chance to do it, the opportunity to do it through Binya umbrella. So he is kind of exposed that way and the umbrella becomes a kind of a charm to expose the false and follies and foibles of these man on the hilly village. So did I answer your question. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** Relationship between Rajaram and Ram Bharosa. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”**

Yeah Raja Ram and Ram Bharosa and again as I mentioned in my lecture videos these 2 character seems to be mirror images of one another even the names are almost similar. And I sometimes mix up between Ram Bharosa and Rajaram because as I said they sound the same and Rajaram understands the working of Ram Bharosa he kind of knows what Ram Bharosa wants and he kind of provides the solution.

And that is also very interesting to see how Ram Bharosa depends on Rajaram if you steal the umbrella and give it to me everybody will know what am I supposed to do then. I mean it is very funny to see this old guy kind of try to get all the solutions from this poor child this little school going boy and he said I do not care what you do I mean you can go to the town and get it dye and do whatever you want, but then I just get it for a particular amount of money.

There is a lot of dependency on these two and once he sacks Rajaram he has become very, very lonely because he has no company and everybody ostracizes him. So I would see them as kind of parallel in some way in terms of the moral attitude. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** As he was a children mimic ideals and Rajaram is in a transient stage of he is an adolescent as far as. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**.

He goes to school like Bijju he is a classmate of Bijju, but they are never friends and he tries to get hold of Bijju to work for him and he refuses. And it is very interesting to see how Binya and Bijju stay away from this old man. They never get things on credit unlike the other innocent children. So these two kids are smarter than the rest in the way they relate to this particular old guy.

“Professor - student conversation starts” Let us talk about how Binya gives the umbrella to Rajaram, how she feels sad and how she feels responsible for Ram Bharosa flight. So do you think she is playing a stereotype by doing this to you, do you think because she is a girl she had to feel this way, she felt responsible, she felt how and all that I think she is playing a

stereotype. **“Professor - student conversation ends.”**

It is a very, very good question let us look at the particular extract because that guilt factor needs to be highlighted and we can see the difference in attitude between Bijju and Binya in terms of Ram Bharosa fault. It is in page 49 in my book the narrator says she kept reasoning with herself, telling herself that the umbrella was her very own and that she could not help with this if others were jealous of it.

But had she love the umbrella too much, had it mattered more to her than people mattered. She could not help feeling that in a small way she was the cause of the sad look on Ram Bharosa face and he ruins his condition of his shop. Bijju says it face is a yard long that is his comment. It was all due to his own greed no doubt, but she did not want him to feel too bad about what he had done because it may her feel bad about herself.

And she closes the umbrella whenever she came near the shop opening it again only when she is out of that side. So she does feel responsible for this change in situation for Ram Bharosa and if you look at Ram Bharosa thought about it he says he wish he has never set eyes on it because of the umbrella he had suffered the tortures of greed, the despair of loneliness. It is a bit exaggerated in terms of his choice of work there because of the umbrella people had stopped coming to him.

So he is trying to shift the blend on to the umbrella, but then the reality is that the umbrella does cause a lot of issues in the village and this material commodity which has come from the plains, from the town does play havoc in the mind of all these people. The fact thing here is that as you mentioned just because she is a girl, she somehow feels as if she is responsible and she has to do something to sort the issue.

And that burden is put on her shoulders and so what does it she does tries to give the old man the umbrella in a very, very subtle manner, but at the end of the day just as the other people had wanted this umbrella is no longer the property of the little girl. This poor cultivator's daughters cannot have this umbrella that is what they thought from the school master's wife to Ram Bharosa to the temple pujari none of them wanted Binya to have this beautiful thing.

Because it does not fit her station in life, a poor cultivator daughter cannot have this beautiful

fully thing which is meant for ladies to play with. It is not a very productive thing. So what is a non productive aesthetic object doing in the hands of this girl from the village. So the ending is a bit complex it is problematic, but we have this idealized, moralistic formula of this girl is very forgiving. She gives back the umbrella and the umbrella ultimately becomes the property of the entire village that is a very, very slight of hand I would say of Ruskin Bond because he does not lead the umbrella be with the old man.

He makes the entire village share in its beauty somehow and somehow that makes it all right to take this thing away from the little girl. So I do not want to talk more because I will break the hearts of all these people who adore this novella so to speak. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** I find the choice of the umbrella the protagonist of the story very interesting.

It is an object which everybody takes for granted nobody gives second thought about it. So why do you think why this choice of the object. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**. It is interesting choice and it is very handy as well. It is very (()) (27:46) and the thing is it is not that as if the villages do not know what exactly an umbrella is because if you read the early part of the story everybody has an umbrella.

The Binya mother has an umbrella, but it is old and worn out and it is no longer used and the school master wife has an umbrella and then if you remember the husband says I will dye it blue for you. So everybody has it the only difference here with this blue umbrella is it is not very functional in the sense that it does not keep out the rain every effectively, does not keep up the rate very effectively.

You will still get a wrench if it is a heavy rain. It is the aesthetic aspect it is like a blue flower. It resembles a flower; it resembles a natural aspect of beauty. It is like a big blue flower on the brown hill side so it is an imitation of a natural object like a very pretty flower, but it is not. So it comes close to being organic material, but in the sense it is a manmade stuff. So that close connection makes it very interesting for this set of people from the villages to admire it.

It is like a rainbow, it is like a poppy, but it is not. So we need to know of the difference there and if you read the final sections of the story there is one line in page 51, 52, 53 in my edition

Binyas says umbrella is not everything and she left the old man holding the umbrella and went tripping down the road and there was nothing between her and the bright blue sky. So the umbrella was a stuff that had come between her and nature and her real nature.

The human nature, now that is taken off she becomes more in direct contact with the elements of nature, there is nothing manmade nothing co-modified to come between these two features. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** And the bright blue sky again it was a blue umbrella and it was blue sky. **“Professor - student conversation ends”** And this blue umbrella seems to have kind of become a block, kind of a burden or a hurdle and so that has been taken away.

“Professor - student conversation starts” The blue umbrella this book has been classified as a children’s books the genre given as it is a children book. So do not think we discussed this earlier too, but do not you it is as relevant for an adult as it is for children and since it is a children book what do you think is the morale of the story. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**.

It is classified as a children book even Ruskin Bond says that it is my second children’s book. The harsher aspects of life have been tone down which is perhaps why bond did not want to deal deeper into the family life of Binya, how the mother suffer without a partner to run the family or how Ram Bharosa has become crab without a big family or a wonderful family to look after him or how Rajaram has become walked distorted in the absence of a family.

So that kind of background has been suppressed so that children do not come into contact with all these difficult situations in circumstances so it makes the book lighter. We just get to see really black and white kind of morality and moral figures. **“Professor - student conversation starts”** It is not preachy either. **“Professor - student conversation ends”**. It is not very preachy.

And even Binya has for failings if he wants to look closely at it but we do not that is because the other elements of nature have been highlighted and that perhaps why, but then I want to bring this to the attention of the readers when there is a big fight going on between Biju and Rajaram it is a big fight and the birds have been disturbed, the bulbuls and the magpie in a fly away in fear.

And this fight is happening by the side of the stream sometimes they are in the stream they are out of it and then Bijju pins the boy down. Binya does not support them not one minute she just goes there. She hurriedly goes after the umbrella which is kind of floating away in the current. So even his little girl has for failing, but we tend not to look closely. So if we look closely into the motivation, into the attitudes of the people here we will know that this might be taken off from the genre of children literature and put in the other section.

But we do not and even if you look at Ram Bharosa language the abusive language that he implies to talk to Rajaram it is very disturbing the word wretch. It keeps coming up time and again. So it is very harsh language, but then we are led down a particular pathway down the hills that we do not notice all the (()) (32:37) and the leeches that are there thrown on this narrator. Thank you Gayatri. Thank you for watching we will continue in the next session.