
**From a Prodigy to a Poet: *Kunstlerroman* in Ruskin Bond's
*Lone Fox Dancing: My Autobiography***

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Abstract:

Authoring over five hundred short stories, poems, essays, and novellas, Ruskin Bond, the witty wordsmith, bookmarks his legacy in the field of Indian English literature. From spending his sports hours in school libraries to weaving words with his wrinkled fingers as a golden ager, he has ever been engrossed with writing. From a boy with broken poems, he grew as a teen of testing novellas, sprouting as an enthusiastic man of essays, and now, as a nonagenarian of novels, his age outsmarts with the number of his oeuvres. Throughout his writing job, he has neither retired nor applied for a Volunteer Retirement Scheme (VRS). The only move he opted for was a transfer from his typewriter to pen-paper.

Keeping pen as his oar, Ruskin Bond swims in the ocean of ink through his paper boat to attain his artistic destiny. The map he has is that of a *Kunstlerroman* that draws his voyage to the shore of his artistic destiny. His writing journey has not been a bon voyage, but rather a 'Do or Die' reality show. Throughout his voyage, hurricanes blocked him through rejection slips from magazines and publishers. Besides, rough tides barricaded him through the discouraging words of his kith and kin. Despite all those hurdles, he swam through his literary fins, reaching his artistic shore.

The purpose of this research article is to throw light upon how the scribbling he did as a boy turned into a broken verse, and how the scribbling took shape, got sharpened, and became a masterpiece, reincarnating Ruskin Bond from a prodigy to a poet. Nevertheless, the paper attempts to map the moves of his life to fit in the shoes of *Kunstlerroman* by excluding not his impulsiveness of not quitting, rather quenching his artistic taste, mastering his self-hood, absconding the societal expectations and staying stubborn to stand out of common flocks.

Keywords: *Kunstlerroman*, Ruskin Bond, Autobiography, *Lone Fox Dancing*.

Introduction

The word *Kunstlerroman* has its roots in Germany, getting defined as ‘artist novel’ (*Kunstler* – artist; *Roman* – novel). This German term metamorphoses into a novel that showcases the development of a novelist or an artist of any other sort. A *Glossary of Literary Terms* defines *Kunstlerroman* as “...the development of the novelist or other artist from childhood into the stage of maturity that signalizes the recognition of the protagonist’s artistic destiny and mastery of an artistic craft” (255). It further records both the physical and psychological growth of the character. Keeping their quest for passion, it unfurls the transition in the character’s temperament, leading to the roller coaster of emotional outlet, zig-zag ups and downs in pursuit, absconding the societal expectations, their perseverance for passion, and quench for identity.

Such a kind of novel that was particularly popularized in Germany dates back to the late eighteenth century and the early nineteenth century. Popular German playwright and novelist Goethe was one of the pioneers to develop this form. Coming under the umbrella term *Bildungsroman* (the novel of formation/education), *Kunstlerroman* keeps its semblance and disparity. While *Bildungsroman* often tunes the protagonists to often dream of becoming their best possible versions but settles for mere family lives (like Charlotte Bronte’s *Jane Eyre* (1847), Charles Dicken’s *David Copperfield* (1850)), *Kunstlerroman* usually ends on a note of arrogant rejections of a common life.

In James Joyce’s *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* (1916), the plot captures the life of a young Irish man who gets stuck in a dilemma, later experiences epiphanies, and finally decides to pursue his path as an artist. Similarly, Louisa May Alcott, the predominant American novelist, in her novel *Little Woman* (1868), carves her alter-ego through the central character Josephine March whose pursuit of her best version as a writer is drawn right from her childhood to adulthood. Further examples of the prototype include Marcel Proust’s *Remembrance of Things Past* (1913-27), Thomas Mann’s *Dr. Faustus* (1947), and Andre Gide’s *The Counterfeit* (1926).

Being a Whiteman in looks but proud brown Indian in spirits, Ruskin Bond believes that being as well as feeling Indian has nothing to do with one’s religion or place. If honouring him as ‘Indian William Wordsworth’ sounds applicable, praising him as the ‘Male version of Josephine March’ (protagonist of Louisa May Alcott’s *Little Women*) too echoes stronger. “...I found myself writing regularly again, and stories, essays, poems, and novellas rained down upon my desk” (271), spells Bond.

From being a boy chick to a nonagenarian, even in this day and age, Bond gets addicted to Bibliosmia (the smell of books). With his papery wings and pen feathers, Bond flies throughout his fictional world, shadowing art in every part and parcel of his literary life. Once stepping into his artistic destiny, he gets greeted by prestigious literary awards, not excluding the Padma Shri (in 1999), the Padma

Bhushan (in 2014), the Sahitya Akademi in 1992 (for his book *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*), the Sahitya Akademi Fellowship (in 2021) and fingers to count, carving his life, a sculpture of *Kunstlerroman*. Such an iconic journey of a writer gets decoded in the following main text.

Research questions

The hypothesis of this research paper aims to provide answers to the probable questions: 1. What made Ruskin Bond a prodigy? 2. What tuned him to be a prolific poet? 3. Did his choice of career as a writer go in a flow? 3. If not how did he tackle those impediments to overcome the societal norms? 4. What are the factors that exemplify his life as a *Kunstlerroman*?

Review of Literature

A review of the literature analyses the existing research papers on specific topics that share frequent levels of observation. Further, it helps in comprehending the existing knowledge on the topic and circles the gap in research. The following research articles get picked for the review of literature for comprehending the gaps, helping to decode this research paper.

Dr. B.K.Sharma in his research article titled “Rusty Series as Bildungsroman: A Perspective View” decodes how the central character Rusty (who is an alter-ego of Ruskin Bond) explores his life as a child and gets into adulthood, wholly to create his identity. While it evaluates the fictionalized version of the author, this research article attempts to shoot the author’s unmasked version, peeps into his off-screen episodic tales, and traces his zig-zag footprints that imprint his totem as an artist, a writer in particular.

On the other hand, the research paper by Uma Maheswari Subramanian titled “Communicating Values through Autobiography and Bildungsroman: A Study of Ruskin Bond’s Rusty Series” dives deep to discover how Bond nurtures the socio-political values as sugar-coated pills to the young readers. It unveils how his personal life experiences help in healing himself too. In contrast to these research findings, this research paper proposes to capture how a prodigy blooms into a poet rather than viewing the central character as a preacher.

Main text

While fictitious artists often get favoured to fit into this prototype, litterateurs like Ruskin Bond unlock the doors of *Kunstlerroman* through their key of the oeuvre. Being a little boy, Ruskin Bond once swallowed an orange seed and became vigilant of its growth in his tummy. Though it did not sprout as he expected, the seeds of art that settled in his brain started sprouting, yielding an unripe verse. Manured by nursery rhymes named ‘Dandy Comics’, he yielded his own verse that runs as follows:

Gobble-gobble said the turkey,
Honk-honk said the goose.

Clunk-clunk said the little hen,
.....
.....

Sleep tight, says Ayah-papaya,
And God protect my little baba. (25-26).

The rhyming in the verse occurred at the beginning rather than the end of each line, making him a diamond in the rough. Upon putting in his first literary effort, he reincarnated from a mere boy to a prodigy. As per the saying of Shiv Khera, a predominant businessman, “Winners don’t do different things, they do things differently”, what makes him stand odd one out is his crazy skills. Reading books upside down used to be one of those esoteric stuff to tackle times when boredom hit.

Vladimir Nabokov, a Russian–American writer, in his essay *Good Readers and Good Writers*, states that to be a good writer, one must first be a good reader. Bond bounds to remain a live example by throwing his symmetrical spirits – both as a reader and writer. During his stay in Delhi with his father, when the latter was hospitalized, all that accompanied him were some comics and a collection of postcards. At night, he was accompanied by the son of a water-bearer. Those gawky moments not only left Bond solitary but even boosted the writer within him to embrace his longing bosom. His hands got triggered to ink and sprayed colour to his heart, swiping the solitude. “Two little boys, an outcaste and a half-orphan, giving each other company and support...It must have left an impression on me because out of that experience grew my first story, ‘The Untouchable’, published some ten years later in *The Illustrated Weekly*” (48). The published story honoured him with a cheque of fifty rupees. The cheque that checked and raided his ink, paid the legacy he deserved.

Further, when he himself was hospitalized during his school days due to dysentery followed by jaundice, a matron gave him a cache of old books and magazines. The piles he ate were authored by A.A. Milne, Bary Pain, Stacy Aumonier, and W.W. Jacobs. Back to school, the library became his harbour to the tides of his wavering mind. For a couple of years, Bond tied his bond with books by taking charge of the library and reading books crafted by Dickens, Stevenson, Jack London, and so on. If Bond had born earlier, he would have appeared in William Blake’s *Songs of Innocence*. The little boy who got engrossed in reading never knew that his books too would rule the sacks of library bookshelves in the future. For some of the essays he attempted, he was crowned with books and some medals too...That was how he split his personality both as a reader and writer, merely like R.L.Stevenson’s characters Dr.Jekyll and Mr. Hyde.

Once finished schooling, his heart drummed, wanting to be a writer. Yet to his mother, aunt and some of his companions, his desire to become a writer was nothing but a passing cloud. To pay his credential for being a live example for

Kunstlerroman, he took charge, proving to them all that his desire was not a passing cloud, but an everlasting sky. When his mother wanted him to join the Britain army, he too thought of moving to Britain, only to be hoped as a writer:

I was sixteen, stubborn, hoping for adventure, and ambitious to see my name on print- on the cover of the book, most of all, I was young enough to be scornful of money, and while fame would have been nice, it wasn't my primary concern. The romance of being a writer was what attracted me (126).

Once getting a separate room on the roof, as a result of quarrelling with his mother, he bought a second-hand typewriter and joined a 'Typing and Shorthand Institute' and began his writing life. Similar to a creeper needing support from an existing branch to grow, his juvenile hands too took support from the mystery movies he had watched. As for he was fortunate for those missing write-ups.

As per the belief of Bond, unlike other professionals who have a scheduled time to work, a writer is always a writer 24/7. Because a writer does not simply make words but rather observes the surroundings to rejuvenate their fictional world. So does he. "All the time I was keeping a diary, or journal, in school exercise books, recording some of the events of my daily life..." (130).

In his book published in 2020 titled *How to be a Writer*, Ruskin Bond states, "Be ready for disappointments, rejections. But if you are any good, you will meet with success sooner or later. I had my disappointments over the years. But, I never stopped writing" (116). Equalizing the major factor of *Kunstlerroman* where an artist stays stubborn to quit, Bond's journey too has its barricades and has never been a bed of roses. Shining as a writer during his days sounded possible only in countries like England or America, not in India. Such a moment of epiphany made him step into England. "You are going to be a great writer", pronounced Krishan. "Best in the world!" And I was naïve enough to believe him." (138). Like Stephen Dedalus from *A Portrait of the Artist as a Young Man* Bond's epiphanies too misled him, later turning into experience:

I had come to England with a dream of sorts,....the struggle to write my first book and find a publisher for it. I discovered that the world could be a lonely place for someone like me. And I found that becoming a writer wasn't just a matter of putting pen to paper- although that was certainly the first step! (145).

Despite doing all odd jobs – at a travel agency, a photographic agency, and Public Health Department his burning duties never melted his desire as a writer. "...it wasn't easy to find the time to write. I tried to put down at least a few hundred words a day, but few of them rang true" (204). With the salary he received, he spent some on books. When days got drunk by his profession, his nights got lightened with

stories, and readying to appear in magazines. Nevertheless, they returned with polite rejection slips. Yet it did not stop him from stepping further.

Learning of his writing passion, he was called 'Pushkin', rhyming with the Russian writer Alexander Pushkin, often by Mr. Bromley, his colleague. When his work gave him only professions, he strived for passion. "But I wasn't looking for permanency or the unexciting life of a government servant. I didn't refuse the permanent job, but in my heart, I knew I wasn't going to stay" (151).

To his needy eyes, nothing could give him the joy than a little, portable typewriter. Though circumstances stood against him, he did stand stern. Out of nineteen pounds he had only six and could not deny the offer by Mr. Bromley to whom he had to be indebted, but soon paying it off.

His boot sounds, as he stepped in the staircase of passion echoed the ears of an editor named Diana Athill who was working in a London publication. His debut novel *The Room on the Roof*, though reviewed by her, did not reach the stage of publishing. He had to step out and get back to India. "Suitcase in one hand and portable typewriter on the other...But I felt quite confident in myself and in the future" (153). Even on his voyage to return, he bought newspapers, checking for opportunities to send his essays and stories, but in vain.

Wherever he lodged, either in Dehra or in Jersey, he always had the companionship of books. At times he had no bookshelves – but ever had books. Upon his experience, writing, at the end of the day remained a lonely job, yet books gave him solace.

What makes an artist stand out from the flock of fellow beings is their ability to carve their artistic spectacles and view the world through it. Bond too paid no exception to it. Whatever the circumstance was – be it a rejection from a publisher, or a rejection from women whom he infatuated, he gave birth to those emotions through verses. The following poem which was rejected by magazines ran as follows:

Who will buy my poems?

I sang out to the silent stones.

.....
.....

But please don't send us any poems,
We will not buy your rotten poems! (160).

He was no longer a prodigy but turned into a poet, mature enough to emote out through poems.

Everything – might it be a chirping bird, a blooming bud, or a park – nothing absconded his artistic specs. An expert, he could handcuff words with a pen, prison them forever in paper, allowing readers to visit them often. With his stories some published, some rejected and some lost, his path went zig-zag, hoping to reach his

destiny. Alike fireflies lightening on nights, his path got lightened when BBC invited him to read one of his stories 'The Rainbow' in a live show.

An artist is one who not just lives so, even breathes, smells, and sleeps with potent and passion. "In the evenings I lit a kerosene lamp if I wanted to read or write, as there was no electricity... My desk was a large dining table on which I spread out my notebooks, papers and typewriter" (180).

Even after returning to India, he still persevered to contact his first editor Diana Athill, wanting to publish. The ability to not quit is what makes an artist born and shape destiny. Bond suited the deal well. "And ever the optimist, I was convinced that I could make a living from my writing, even though I could not see anyone else doing so" (177). To the stories that got accepted, he was not paid much – an average sum of twenty-five rupees per story. But still, he did write.

When tables turned toward him, after a toil for a couple of years, his debut novel *The Room on the Roof* was serialized in the *Weekly*. "My novel! I told him. In this and the next five issues" (184). As per the saying, the best view comes after the hardest climb, all his toil was about to gift him the moment he had been longing for, yet an impediment crossed in the form of a cow that snatched the magazine he had brought to see his printed words wholeheartedly. Yet still he never let pessimism engulf him.

As a writer, he was bound to its customs by mirroring life through his literary works. He created what he consumed. His other novel *A Flight of Pigeons* (1978) got its source from a girl who was refuted by both Hindus and Muslims whom he met while working in CARE – Cooperative for American Relief Everywhere. "I write in leisure; there is no hurry" (219), says Bond. As per the saying, "Where there is a will, there is a way", his willingness gave him the plots to write. Settling in the Maplewood lodge in Mussoorie, all those he wrote were tuned by his environment. A lovely girl on the hillside, twirling a blue umbrella became Binya in his *The Blue Umbrella* (1974). His nomad life itself mirrored the plot for his picturesque, first book of children *The Hidden Pool* (1966). Later, after getting adopted by his Indian family, his time that got usurped by the young ones made him write for children more. "- I began writing stories for children. And became a child myself!" (234):

All these good friends and neighbours went into my journals, although at the time I had no idea that some of them would later be fictionalized and turn up in my first book, *The Room on the Roof*. The 'room' in my novel was certainly the real one, the room I shared with the wall lizards and the mynah birds. And Somi and Krishan and Ranbir went into the book unchanged. But the plot (if you can call it that), the incidents, the sequence of events, the running away, the relationship with Meena, the going away and the return, were all part of the 'novelization' of my journal (136).

In his voyage to reach his artistic destiny, his passionate ship, at times, collided with rocks, teaching him how to sail better. William Matheson, a journalist cum literary critic tore Bond's stories to bits, accusing him of over-writing. "A writer should not make money from his writing. He should do it simply because he loves writing" (211), once said the wife of the indispensable Indian writer Khushwant Singh to him. In his book *How to be a Writer*, Ruskin Bond states, "Every writer must be prepared for criticism. The greatest of writers haven't escaped it" (99). Sometimes, his writing journey got hurdled by rocks of writing block too.

Throughout his writing voyage, Bond had discovered some pearls of appreciation that boosted him to sail further. "Dr. Karan Singh, a scholar and son of the former Maharaja of Jammu and Kashmir, wrote me a nice letter after reading one of my essays" (211). Some of his works including *The Blue Umbrella*, *A Flight of Pigeons*, and *Susanna's Seven Husbands* were made into films, but did not let him take a different turn from his destiny. In his fifties, International publishers landed in India, giving him a compass to sail toward his destiny.

"For writers, the nice thing about growing old is that it gives us more to write about -", says Bond in his book *The Golden Years* (2023). In Dehra, Bond had to supplement his income by taking tuition for children at Cambrian Hall. Today, in his golden age, his adopted grandson initiates a school under his name – 'Ruskin Bond International School' (RIBS). What else could make him opt better than this to be the male version of Josephine March from *Little Women* (authored by Louisa May Alcott) who dares to become a writer, succeeds, and starts a school at the end of the novel? The futuristic scope for the research can be applied by comparing the literary journeys of two fictional characters namely Rusty and Josephine March who remain as alter-egos of the predominant writers Ruskin Bond and Louisa May Alcott respectively.

An artist who, amidst all those hustle-bustles, climbs forward with a stubbornness to quit is the one who picks a golden leaf. Bond, being one did pick his leaf. His ship reached the shore, gifting him bouquets of victory. "I became old and found myself in demand. People started recognizing me and asking for my autograph..." (274). Upon his endurance in writing, he thrived, placing himself in the lively demo for *Kunstlerroman*. "Perseverance does pay" (274), he says:

A 'real' writer should be able to write anywhere – onboard a ship, in a moving train, in a prison cell, in a hospital bed, in a five-star hotel room, or in a dingy attic – and I have written a few things in several of these places; but over a period of time, it helps to have a permanent abode, a familiar room, and above all, a window from which to look out upon the world (271).

Rejection of humdrum lives, overcoming hurdles, mastering one's self-hood, attaining the artistic destiny – all these make him fit in the shoes of *Kunstlerroman*. The scribbling he did as a boy turned into a broken verse, later all those scribbles

took shape, got sharpened, and now became masterpieces, reincarnating Ruskin Bond from a prodigy to a poet!

Summation

Carving a niche for himself in the field of Indian English literature, Ruskin Bond has ever been engrossed with writing ever since he was a boy chick. As a boy, he attempted to beget a verse of his own, mimicking a nursery rhyme. The moment of creation reincarnated him from a mere boy to a prodigy. All these years, his hands have been dancing to the tunes of ink, framing him as a poet. Such a life of literariness has its own passion and predicament – both as see-saw, with one rising and the other falling, and vice versa. Despite all those hurdles, he stood immune, fitting in the shoes of *Kunstlerroman*.

Unlike *Bildungsroman* which captures the growth of a central character from childhood to matured adulthood, *Kunstlerroman* screens how art, as a parasite, grows along with the character, right from the budding stage until the protagonist reaches the artistic destiny.

Bond's journey to pin a badge as a succeeding writer did not go smoother. In spite of having subsidiary options to take diversions from his artistic route and settle down with financial stabilities, he still chose to walk straight ahead. Such an errant rejection of common life is what makes his life to be exemplified for *Kunstlerroman*. Sticking to all odd jobs ranging from working in a photographic agency to a travel agency, he still quenched his appetizing hands with ink.

Proving the words of Vladimir Nabokov which he carved in his work *Good Readers and Good Writers* he read on one hand and wrote on the other. His love for books infatuated him to write more. Enlivening the saying of Tony Morrison, "If there is a book you want to read, but it hasn't been written yet, then you must write it", Bond wanted to relive his life through words when he was ending his teens and started writing it under the title *Room on the Roof*. Yet it did not turn easier as much as it sounded.

For a passion to have proceeded, he left India for England, knocked on publishing doors, and returned with rejections, yet never let pessimism swallow his spirits. With his kith and kin showing no interest by putting discouraging thorns in his path, he still jumped over those hurdles, marching toward his artistic destiny. After a long toil for a couple of years when his debut novel got published in a serialized version, a cow snatched his magazine to munch. Whatever the circumstance was, no water could put off the fire burning within him.

As a writer, he wore spectacles of literature, through which he accessed the world. All those events that occurred in and around his environment were revived into words. His popular works *The Blue Umbrella* and *A Flight of Pigeons* were inspired by real-life circumstances. As a poet of human pathos, he emoted through

verses, proving how art and his life go hand in hand with each other beyond time and place.

From sending his literary pieces to magazines to becoming indebted by buying a typewriter, his journey went zig-zag, only to make him realize that the struggles were all worth it at the end of the day. As an impact of his endurance, Ruskin Bond, in this day and age has become an author of infinite awards. His literary life which was initiated by doodling, turned him into a prodigy. Further, when he kick-started, he metamorphosed into a poet. Such a story of his artistic life not excluding his headstrong impulsiveness, sabotaging impediments, societal expectations, artistic epiphanies, and disapproval of common life not only marks his mastered self-hood but even gets his life insured in all possible means to become a *Kunstlerroman*.

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