

ISOLATION TO SOLITUDE: RUSKIN BOND'S *LONE FOX DANCING*

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**Abstract:**

*Isolation is a state of being separated from the outer world both socially and internally. Solitude is the choice of a person to be alone. Isolation leads to the feelings of loneliness, fear of others and negative self-esteem. Isolation may result from many causes like discriminations based on gender, caste, race, color, broken families, relationship trauma, politics, social unrest and many other psychological reasons. Isolation and solitude had been the two prominent themes in literature. Isolation is mostly seen in autobiographical works as most of the writers find refuge in their writing to escape from the unpleasant realities of life. Writing out their life and situations helped them to overcome the severity of loneliness. Isolation is undoubtedly, a dominant theme in his works because he had admitted it himself several times when commenting on his own works that he was always alone. This paper discusses about the harsh realities and the episodes of isolation surrounding Ruskin Bond throughout his life which he had written in his autobiography *Lone Fox Dancing*.*

**Key Words:** *Isolation, Loneliness, Solitude, Suffering.*

Ruskin Bond portrays his life and experiences through various genres of literature like novels, short stories, novellas, poems and essays. Subjectivity and dreams play a significant role in Bond's writings; he says "Dreams are an important part of my writing". He started writing even from his school days and his first fictional work *Nine Months* was written in the dreary environs of boarding at Shimla. His children's' stories are his own experiences of childhood and it can be noted that there is always a melancholic mood overflowing the writings of Bond. The book he preferred the most was Charles Dickens' *David Copperfield*. He felt that David's loss of parents, sense of insecurity and struggle for a meaningful life was similar to his own. His autobiography *Lone Fox Dancing*, centers around the writer's life in India and the experiences that shaped him into what he is today.

*Lone Fox Dancing* is a sincere and truthful autobiography of a man who had to face huge isolation in his life and later turning it into solitude. Ruskin Bond starts his latest and complete autobiography *Lone Fox Dancing* with the words "Even a fox needs a family" foreshadowing how he came to accept his need to belong. "I used to consider myself a loner" says Ruskin Bond about his autobiography *Lone Fox Dancing*. Social isolation is a state of complete or near- complete lack of contact between an individual and society. Social isolation can lead to feelings of loneliness, fear of others or negative self-esteem. Ruskin Bond comments about the title of his autobiography *Lone Fox Dancing* in his interview:

It sort of indicated certain individuality or a longing when I was younger to be out on my own, to be in the wilderness or sometimes in lonely places and that isolation gave me very often the inspiration for stories and things I wrote. But I am no longer a lone fox, I have a large adopted family.

In the prologue of *Lone Fox Dancing*, Ruskin Bond gives us an outline of his life. He mentions about his isolated childhood, nature becoming his dearest companion and finally to a writer on the hills. He clearly explicates in the beginning of the book “I had a lonely childhood growing up in a broken home and a boarding school in the hills(1)”. There is much of innocence in his book as Bond says that the book says almost everything about his life. He begins with his earliest memories; “of a little boy who ate a lot of kofta curry and was used to having this way (7)”. He mentions about his 'beautiful gramophone' which he calls his first love apart from his ayah. Here Bond's isolation from his family is clearly seen when he loves his ayah more than his father, mother or his whole family. In his lonely childhood Osman was his friend and most interestingly his story teller. Unlike his mother, his father cared for the silly moments of enjoyments like going for cricket matches and singing together in the bath tub. His innocent mind started defining his father and mother distinctively like:

He was usually a serious, quiet sort of person, but on those occasions, he would be quite boyish and noisy-and because he was parent and playmate, he was daddy to me. That was what I always called him. Not 'father' or 'Dad' or 'Papa'. My mother was 'Mum' or 'Mummy', but my father was always 'Daddy'. (16)

Bond was always attracted to the lonely places instead of being crowded with friends like all other children of his age. Bond honestly expresses the love for his ayah whom he calls his “guardian angel, surrogate mother, friend and beloved all rolled into one and wrapped up in a white sari (22)”. Ayah had a significant role in the life of little Ruskin as she filled the space left behind by his father and mother in his life. His mother was busy in get-togethers, picnics and excursions and his father being engaged in his work; little Ruskin was left with his ayah. He received the love and affection from his ayah rather than from his mother who “was not a physically demonstrative person”. He was totally absorbed in the world of his ayah that it made him forget the isolation he felt from his all-time busy parents:

I was in love with ayah-it was a child's love for a mother, but it was also a sensual, physical love. I loved the smell of her skin and her paan-scented breath and her dazzling smile. She was in love with my soft white skin and bathed and dressed me with infinite tenderness. (23)

Ruskin's father and mother quarrelled often that they were totally ignorant of each other's presence. Poor little Ruskin being alone got more and more attached to ayah he even wrote a poem on her. Ruskin also mentions about his skill in reading things in reverse which he says is really useful especially when life begins to get difficult and boring. Ruskin had no friends to play with except his ayah to fuss over and Osman to tell improbable stories. He was desperate about his only sister Ellen who had to remain in a kind of limbo all her life which he calls “God's casual cruelty”. He did not want to play with her, instead climbs the room of colored windows or wander alone in the garden. His parent's quarrels became more frequent and serious that gradually the feeling of helplessness and insecurity in his mind got thickened. He says “this feeling of insecurity was to become a part of my mental baggage for the rest of my life (29)”. Little Bond used to run out to the garden or remain in the verandas at night when his parents started their routine of fights. Soon when his father joined the royal air force and left Jamnagar, he had to part with his most soothing refuge, his Ayah. He was put into more disappointment that he could not see his ayah any more.

The sadness and loneliness followed him to his grandmother's house also. He was almost abandoned by his grandmother that he was not allowed to speak in a group and was discouraged from taking second helpings of any dish. His grandmother was also partial towards him in front of his cousins whom she praised at most. Bond finds out a reason as to why this was done to him that it was because his grandmother was not sure of the fact that he was legitimate or not. He became bewildered and resentful that he had many questions before him for which he did not even have his parents near him to answer them. He

could not even have his mother for comfort who lived in the same house but had no time to worry about her family. She was always busy in her own world. Poor little Ruskin was made the centre of bullying and was tormented much that he wished to be invisible. It is really pitiable of a child being isolated from his own family and was looked upon as an alien.

He missed his father all this while who was busy travelling from one place to the other for his job. In this phase of his life, Bond was an orphan with parents alive. Ruskin missed his ayah during those times as he states “Gone were the soft hands of the Jamnagar ayah; gone were the days of playing 'ructions' in the bathtub with my father (37)”. When he was six, his grandmother again turned out to be his villain as she wanted him to be sent to a school which he calls an incarceration. He hated the school until he left there. He did not like the children or the nuns who were strait-laced, remote and unsympathetic. There was nothing that he could learn or develop from there other than academics. Spiritually also he experienced isolation that he could not find any solace in his religion. Thus, he found comfort in nature. His mind was wandering for some refuge one after the other. All the doors to his happiness were getting shut down one by one. Bond expresses his grief for all the children who are left behind by their parents after separation. His experiences made him empathize for the whole kind of suffering children:

The life of a small child is dependent on the lives of his or her parents. When a marriage breaks up, the children are often pulled in different directions and there is very little they can do about it. I had no quarrel with my mother; but I was drawn to my father instinctively. No one stood before us. (43)

Ruskin joined his father after the parents' separation. Finally, he became alone and had no one for help when he needed. His father, despite his tight schedules found time to spend with his kid. Now, after a short span of happiness, the first moments of anxiety came into the child's mind when his father got hospitalized due to malaria. He started having a fear about the loss of his father and somehow his father recovered. When his father got admitted in hospital, he was alone with some books. He was now used to the idea of being alone and having one's own room. Being isolated frequently, his mind got used to being in love with darkness and isolation. His only happiness was his father but suddenly one day his father was no more. It came to him as a shock when he was anticipating the fun-filled vacation with his father. His father's death left a huge void in his mind that the only person who loved him was gone. He says mournfully “If everything begins and ends with love-and I believe it does-my world had ended (69)”. He understood that he was alone, and while walking towards the hills, he felt like his father was beside him but later he realizes that it was just an illusion. He did not want to show his tears in front of others. While going to the grave yard, the boy remembered how he spent days with his father and he had to accept the truth that he became an orphan. He boldly decided that one day he would come out of the shadow; the shadow of loneliness, the shadow of dependency, shadow of fear, and shadow of attachment

It was really difficult for him to come to terms with the loss because he could not witness the death or burial of his father, though he did it purposefully to retain his father always alive in his heart. He felt the isolation and abandonment greatly by his mother when he came for winter holidays, ignorant of his mother's new family. He could not adjust with them. His loneliness grew to an extent that he had no friends and was wanting for some. It was really pitiable that he even went to railway stations waving to some children in the train wishing they could give him company. Ruskin had no entry to his mother's and step father's life. His happiness was always short lived that his dear ones left him alone very soon. Again, he was a loner in Dehra like most of the times. He loved loneliness and enjoyed the escapism into the darkened cinema halls alone with no company. Ruskin experienced great depression in his school because of his dispiriting illness and separation from his most loved Azhar. Azhar was so close to Ruskin's heart as he was both a guardian and friend for him after the death of Ruskin's father. After losing both of them Ruskin was searching for someone for him to love.

The usual feeling of loneliness returned to him when he was about to leave for England. Leaving his family was not a great deal but the thought of leaving his friends disturbed him. When Mr. H and his mother came to the station to send him off, he remembers an incident six years ago when he was left alone in the station arriving in Dehra after his father's passing, but he is no stranger to those situations of his life. In England again he is haunted by a sense of belonging between the east and west. He wanted to become a writer which was his dream and also, to return to India. He was absolutely alone with his dreams that he declares "I discovered that the world could be a lonely place for someone like me (140)". Apart from his father, the ever greatest missing in his life, he missed India and his friends in Dehra. He finds some relief from nature but still he is deeply wounded by loneliness since his father's death. Later he becomes stronger with the loneliness that reached the extreme level, going through all its harsh phases. He gained confidence in his life and future, being alone in the whole wide universe:

I suddenly realized that for the first time in my life I was really and truly on my own. No parents to back me, no relatives to fall back on. Alone. All by myself in a wilderness of wind and water. The way I wanted it. Eighteen and in control of my own destiny. For that man is strongest who stands alone. (151)

Happiness and comfort came to Ruskin's life as a guest who abandoned him sooner or later. Certain people and episodes gave Ruskin a hope for happiness for a very short time but finally left him alone. Such was Vu, a pretty girl who made Ruskin's life glowing for some days but left him with a deep wound. As he was used with these kinds of missing and loss, he could cope with it by taking in some good lessons from the episode. Even though it was difficult for him to bring those practically into his life, gradually he learnt not to expect anything from anyone. Both his career and personal life began to fail. He got totally broken down in a foreign country with none to hold his hands or share his tears with. His sense of belonging to India became worse. He considered India as the land of acceptances where he could feel free to be a failure. He just wanted to be in his small room that he called his own. He does not have a hope in anyone or anything but he wanted was to be back in his refuge, his homeland. "Home-that was the magnet. Not the home of my mother and stepfather, but the larger home that was India, where I could even feel free to be a failure (171)".

Ruskin, apart from the nature and life circumstances the most important thing he missed in England was the 'intimacy of human contact'. He lists out certain facts that he missed in England and found only in India. Those were the freedom to express desire and affection towards a person 'without reserve and find fulfilment', being strangers without feeling like an outsider. India gave much for the soul but England looked upon 'the orderly life, the good sense and civility' says bond "I missed everything that made it all right to be sentimental and emotional (173)".

The significant title of bond's autobiography has its origin in a small poem which he wrote while he was walking alone in the dark and seeing a fox. He says more clearly in one of his interviews about the title and its connection with his real life. "I saw a fox quite happy dancing around its own in the moonlight and I sort of in a way identified with it. The fox was a loner, I was a loner; loner at that time. It sort of gave me a feeling that it was doing its own thing and so would I and wrote this little poem (229)". Bond, in his poem says:

As I walked home last night  
I saw a lone fox dancing.....  
Sometimes when words ring true,  
I'm like a lone fox dancing  
In the morning dew (1-2, 7-9)

In the entire corpus of Bond's fiction, parent- child relationship emerges as a persistent theme. Bond's personal trauma owes to the depiction of this relationship. The emotional vacuum still persists in consciousness. His own sense of loneliness and insecurity in the early childhood haunted his consciousness and he became a premature introvert. Bond can associate himself with children because the child in him remained transfixed to that very stage. Fortunately, the realization that children are hardly taken seriously by their parents made him more and more sensitive towards them and resulted in his outspoken and beautifully framed books which made him the great writer on the hills.

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