

# RUSKIN BOND'S THE ROOM ON THE ROOF AS AN ALLEGORY OF LIFE

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*The Room on the Roof* recreates the aura of post-independence Dehra Dun with seemingly just a few deft, vivid strokes of a brush. Life and Dehra had seen through the eyes of Rusty and his experiences. It does not matter much that other characters, barring perhaps Meena and her son Kishen, do not get enough elbowroom develop. The main object of the book is to convey the truth that life continues regardless of death, change and individual emotional trauma, and to invoke the magical charm of a hill station like Dehra. Life is really the quintessence of *The Room on the Roof*. Rusty, who was brought up by his Anglo-Indian guardian in the posh westernized area of Dehra, finds the antiseptic confines of his house and neighborhood quite dull and too constricting. He harbors secret desires to explore the seedier parts of the town, which have been declared out of bounds for him by his guardian Mr. Harrison. Eventually he does venture into the forbidden bazaar and strikes up acquaintances with some of the local boys. When Harrison comes to know of this Rusty has given second caning, which is Harrison's standard method of punishment. On the second such occasion, Rusty rebels and runs away. The Dehra bazaar gains satellite as the cloistered Anglo-Indian Rusty discovers the sights, smells, sound and even tastes of the real Indian to be irresistible.

Primary among these lures is, for Rusty, the *chaat* shop in the bazaar. Taken there by his newly found friends, he becomes a *gol-guppa* addict in a matter of minutes. Early in the novel, Rusty has introduced to Holi, the Hindu festival that celebrates *joie de vivre*, and he is overwhelmed. Not been accustomed to such sheer warmth and exuberance in his own circle, Rusty immediately becomes a convert to the daily cycle of life in the bazaar, bathing at the same street taps as his friends, eating the same *chaat* shop, and watching the same world go by. His first night in the Dehra bazaar is also a novel experience. The empty lifeless street was very deceptive; if the roofs could have been removed from but a handful of buildings, it would be seen that life had not really stopped but, beautiful and ugly, persisted through the night.

The night is cold and wet, yet full of its own distinctive life, including strange women beckoning at dark windows. Everything that Rusty encounters is new to him. It is as if Dehra was giving him daily lessons on how to live. His friends, particularly the Sikh Somi and the Hindu Ranbir, embody this zest for life, and the instinctive warmth in Somi's offer of hospitality has something novel. Somi even goes out his way to find Rusty a job as private tutor for the Kapoors' son Kishen, and Rusty comes to stay in the roof of the Kapoors' house. He develops a crush for Meena Kapoor, the young wife of the alcoholic Kapoor, and the peak of idyllic bliss and joy in living comes during the family picnic, when he expresses his love to her and she, needing someone to love her, reciprocates. However, life has its dark nights of the soul, and Rusty gets his fair share of tragedy soon enough. Meena dies in a car accident; Rusty has forced to learn the grim aspects of life:

Rusty had overcome by a feeling of impotence and futility, and of the unimportance of life. Every moment, he told himself, every moment someone is born and someone dies, you can count them one, two, three, a birth and death for

every moment...what is this one life in the whole pattern of life, what is this one death but a passing of time.... In addition, if I were to die now, suddenly and without cause, what would happen, would it matter...we live without knowing why or to what purpose. (P.88)

Kishen has to leave Dehra as soon as possible, to stay with his aunt. Meanwhile Rusty's other friends have also departed-Ranbir and Suri to Musoorie and Somi is preparing to go to Amrister. Rusty finds himself all alone once more, virtually as he was at the beginning of the novel. Ultimately, he too decides to abandon Dehra, perhaps India as well, to get ssfar away from all memories of Meena and her death. At Hardwar, he meets with another set of very new occurrences, which confirm the unpredictable flux of life for the last time, confounding all his elaborate plans. Kapoor has married again and is healthier than he ever was; the shock of the second marriage has made Kishen disown his father and resort to the career of a notorious thief for a living. Rusty traces Kishen and they decide to return to Dehra because:

They were both refugees-refugees from the world... They were each other's shelter, each other's refuge, and each other's help. Kishen was a *jungle*, divorced from the rest of humankind, and Rusty was the only one who understood him-because Rusty too was divorced from humankind. In addition, theirs was a tie that would hold, because they were the only people who know each other and loved each other. (P.117)

Yet there is hope at the end of novel, the hope that was stated Somi's letter to Rusty,

I shall be coming back to Dehra in the spring, in time to watch you play *Holi* with Ranbir...wait a little, be patient, and the bad days will pass. We do not know why we live. It is no use trying to know. However, we have to live, Rusty, because we really want to. In addition, as long as we want to, we have to find something to live for, and even die for it. (P.102)

Moreover, the hope that is present in life itself:

"One day you'll be great, Rusty. A writer, an actor, a prime minister, or something. May be a poet! Why not a poet, Rusty?"

Rusty smiled. He knew he was smiling, because he was smiling at himself.  
 “Yes,” he said, “why not a poet?”  
 Therefore, they began to walk.  
 Ahead of them lay forest and silence...and what was left of time. (P.118)

*The Room on the Roof* is therefore a general allegory of life, but also a specific homage to Dehra Dun. Apart from the last three chapters, the entire story unfolds in Dehra, and this imparts a certain unity to the structure. The novel has been written in an almost dramatic framework, it being possible to sub-divide it into four ‘Acts’. The expository first seven chapters introduce all characters (except the Kapoor) and shift between Harrison’s house and the Dehra bazaar. With Rusty’s happy advent into the Kapoor household, the next seven chapters describe the extroverted gaiety of the bazaar and the Kapoor house, only the climactic picnic of chapter 12 being appropriately set in the Dehra forest. There follows the gloomy introspective period after Meena’s death, and the sequence of five chapters emphasizes the motif of *The Room on the Roof* where Rusty is engrossed in his own thoughts. The rooftop room gains in importance until it symbolizes the entire world of Dehra, as Rusty knows it. In the form of wages he is given a room on the roof.

The story develops in the form of an allegory, the allegory of room. Rusty enjoys this newfound freedom in the company of Somi, Kishen and Suri. Mr. Kapoor in spite of his alcoholic traits and occasional disgusting bouts is always ready to join their funs. The novel rounds up one phase of life and thereafter begins the second one. The story that is produced personal and general, that in the vast world, each individual struggles to find out his room, his niche. As literature is a mirror of life. Ruskin Bond holds a true mirror to life. He presents a true picture of life and does not transcend the readers to an imaginary world. In this respect, Bond can be termed as a realist.

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