

Role of Cognitive Abilities and Empirical Experiences for Survival during Calamities: A Study of *Angry River*

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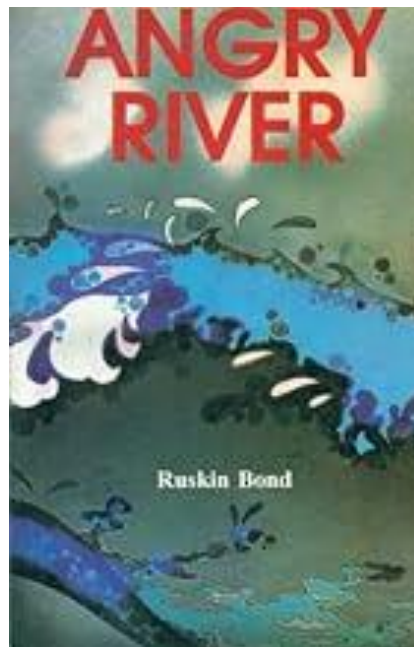
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Abstract:

This paper explores the struggle of Individuals for survival during natural calamities i.e. floods and showcases how their cognitive abilities help them maintain their existence in disaster-like situations. While presenting the helplessness of the old man that forces him to settle down on an island despite the knowledge of the danger of the river during the rainy season, and the empathetic nature of the villagers, it **showcases the children learning life lessons from their elders using their cognitive abilities and their own empirical experiences.** This paper also

reveals how the children suffer from alienation, pine for company and find respite with toys, flora and fauna.

Keywords: *Angry River*, Ruskin Bond, cognitive abilities, survival, natural calamities, helplessness, island, empirical experiences, flora and fauna.

Ruskin Bond (b. 1934) projects a child named Sita as the protagonist of his novella *Angry River* (1972). Sita lives on an Island amidst a big river with his grandparents. She has lost her mother in her childhood and her father lives in the town as he has a job there. Her grandparents have built a hut beside a huge rock beneath an old peepul tree. The rock serves as a wall of the hut having three mud walls. Her grandfather has a small boat which is used to catch fish and is a medium of family transportation. Her grandparents have three goats, two hens and a cock. Besides, they grow vegetables in a small patch of land. All these contribute to their economy on that isolated island. Once Sita's grandmother falls ill due to a heavy fever and her Grandfather takes her to a hospital in a town, Shahganj with three goats in his boat instructing Sita what to do if the water level rises to the hut in his absence. Sita remains alone and has a terrible experience realizing the need of society for survival. When ultimately she meets with her grandfather, she finds her grandmother is no more and they return to the Island with two goats to settle there even after that horrible calamity.

Scholars like Priyank Jain and Anita Harris Satkunanathan have explored pedagogical aspects of the novella whereas A. R. Jemi and Selva Mary Gokila S. George have contemplated the use of symbols in this novella. Ms E. Priscilla and J. P. Vandhana have analysed the use of emotional intelligence in *Angry River* and S. Revathy has dealt with the realism of the novella. Besides these, Bansi Singh has traced out the anthropocentrism in the novella.

Angry River has a setting of an Island where Sita lives with her grandparents. The island is situated in the middle of the big river that begins in the mountains and ends in the sea. The river swept around the Island, sometimes touching its banks, but never went over it. The novelist writes, "It was over twenty years since the river had flooded the island, and at that time no one had lived there. But for the last ten years, a small hut had stood there, a mud-walled hut with a sloping thatched roof. The hut had been built into a huge rock, so only three of the walls were

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mud, and the fourth was rock” (1). The goats used to graze the short grass and prickly leaves of thorny bushes that grew on the island. The hens used to follow them. A melon and a vegetable patch are also there. There was an old peepul tree in the middle of the island. It was the only tree there. It stood firm even during the great flood when the island was underwater. The novel is set in the month of July which is the peak of the rainy season. (1-3)

The novelist highlights the **self-reliant aspect of life on an isolated terrain** through Sita’s family in the novel. The grandparents of Sita have trained her in the household chores. She cooks food for her grandparents (13), fetches water, grazes goats, milks them (19), brings fodders for them, feeds hens (30), and takes care of the needs of her grandparents on the island whereas her grandfather manages the necessities from the town beyond the river.

Keeping in view the **cognitive abilities of Sita**, based on his empirical experiences of the island and partially because of the helplessness, Sita’s grandfather decides to leave her alone at home on the isolated island when her grandmother falls seriously ill due to fever and moves to the Shahganj, a town for hospital for the treatment of the ailed old woman. The grandfather invests **complete faith in Sita’s capabilities** and gives particular instructions to her imagining the worst scenario, but he could not envision the uprooting of the peepul tree due to the history of the island. After her grandparents’ departure to the hospital, Sita does everything as per the instructions while using her cognitive abilities from climbing onto the peepul tree to finding her grandfather in Shahganj with the help of the cartman.

The novelist **highlights the role of society through Sita being alone on the island during the time of catastrophe as she feels the dire need for company, and she finds solace in the company of toys, flora and fauna**. Earlier Sita used to share her secrets with a rag doll, ‘Mumta’ (16) occasionally as there were no children on the Island, but after her grandparent's departure, **she completely depends on her, the rag doll Mumta**. The novelist writes:

Mumta always answered Sita’s questions, even though the answers could only be heard by Sita. ‘Do you think the river will reach the hut?’ asked Sita.

‘If it keeps raining like this and the river keeps rising, it will reach the hut.’

'I am a little afraid of the river, Mumta. Aren't you afraid?'

'Don't be afraid. The river has always been good to us.'

'What will we do if it comes to the hut?'

'We will climb onto the roof.'

'And if it reaches the roof?'

'We will climb the peepul tree. The river has never gone higher than the peepul tree.' (17)

It is evident from the **conversation that Sita had always wished to keep Mumta, the rag doll in her company even in a disaster situation**, but when the water level rises to the level of the hut that compels her to climb onto the peepul tree **forgetting the rag doll in a hurry** and as she sees the hut floating, she gets reminded of the doll, soon finds the doll floating too. Sita repents and is saddened too much for separating from her companion. As Sita climbs a little higher onto the tree she finds a jet-black jungle crow, settled in the upper branches of the nest protecting the eggs (41). **Though the crow was in miserable condition**, Sita heaves a sigh of relief having someone as her companion at least. When finally, the tree gets uprooted and starts floating in the river **she feels safer in the branches of the tree**. When Krishan rescues her she sees a stag in search of the dry patch of land (61). In the absence of her grandparents, Sita feels secure in the presence of the crow, tree and the stag in that horrible circumstance.

Further, the novelist presents **a significant feature of Indian rustic society through villagers' volunteer readiness to help and co-operate in times of adversity** selflessly which is a rare thing in an urban society. When a village boy Krishan sees Sita caught in the flood, he immediately brings the boat with great difficulty through the force of the main current and rescues her to a village (58). When the cart man comes to know about Sita that she is homeless and in search of her caretakers, **he helps her in arriving Shahganj where she can have a reunion with her grandfather (71). Thus one can see an innate selfless helping attitude of the villagers.**

Despite her age, **Sita approves of Charles Darwin's dictum 'survival of the fittest' (Darwin 71) through her character in the novel.** Though she is a child, she displays the wisdom like that of the grown-up individuals. She never thinks when her grandfather bestows faith in her and announces that she will have to stay alone on the island as he needs to take her grandmother to the hospital. She is adept at household chores and takes responsibility without any burden rather lessens her grandfather's burden by consenting to her grandfather's decision in a state of utmost helplessness. She remains consistently worried about her grandmother's health and she converses regarding this with Mumta, her rag doll (16). She shows a good sense of responsibility while using her commonsense throughout the novella but most importantly when she packs her mother's big tin trunk with everything valuable in the hut like spices, Grandmother's sari, grandfather's *hookah* [hubble-bubble], cotton quilt etc, and locks the trunk and keeps the key high on the rock wall. (35) She thinks that the weight in the trunk would prevent it from flowing in the current if the water level rises. **Once the river floods she does not cry but accepts the situation and even derives comic pleasure in the company of Krishan as he plays flute.** She adjusts in the company of the hens, crow, tree, and the cart man during the flood.

Empirical experiences, deprivation, and economic helplessness join together to bring Sita's grandfather back to the island even after that great calamity. He returns with Sita from Shahganj after his wife's death with two goats as one goat covers up the expenses of treatment to the island and it is unbelievable for him that the peepul tree has been uprooted. He ponders over how Sita could have survived. The novelist says that after reaching the island:

For three nights they slept under a crude shelter made out of jute bags. During the days she helped her grandfather rebuild the mud hut. Once again, they used the big rock as a support.

The trunk which Sita had packed so carefully had not been swept off the island, but the water had got into it, and the food and clothing had been spoilt. But grandfather's *hookah* had been saved, and, in the evenings after their work was done they had eaten the light

meal which Sita prepared, he would smoke with a little of his old contentment, and tell Sita about other floods and storms which he had experienced as a boy. (77)

Nostalgia plays a significant role in the novella especially after Sita and her grandfather return to the island and attempt to rehabilitate them there. They become nostalgic about their hut and feel the absence of Sita's grandmother. There is no sign of their hens. This tragedy brings a series of similar events of his lifetime of Sita's grandfather and he narrates them to Sita. Sita too misses her rag doll Mumta, and the flute of Krishan. In memory of the peepul tree, she plants the mango seed at the same place where the peepul tree was, in an attempt to establish the same connection with the place.

The above analysis shows that **human beings learn either from their own empirical experiences or what their elders/companions teach or instruct them over the period and all the learning gets programmed and stored in the minds of the individuals while becoming a storehouse of cognitive abilities as per cultural differences. Therefore, learning is culture-specific. The circumstances** Sita undergoes without uttering a single word in resistance are unimaginable for the children of the ordinary world or culture who might have lost the barriers of their patience by crying, complaining or by inapt decision-making and finding comic pleasure in times of calamity like Sita becomes a dream of the distant world for them. Sita's grandfather's decision to leave her alone on the island results from his empirical experiences and his belief in her cognitive skills. Krishan's rescuing Sita from the flood and cartman's helping hand to arrive her Shahganj in an attempt to unite her with her grandfather showcase their soft skills resulting from that particular culture. **To conclude, cognitive abilities or commonsense resulting from the rustic culture heighten the sense of empathy amongst individuals which further attempt to save society from disasters or calamities irrespective of identities.**

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