

Quest for Cultural Identification of Characters in Ruskin Bond's Stories

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Abstract: *This paper focuses on the impact of confused cultural identity and then the gradual cultural assimilation of characters in the writings of Ruskin Bond, who himself bears the dual heritage, that of an Englishman and of an Indian. During his formative years, he saw India as a free nation and subsequently the immigration of Anglo-Indian and English families to U.K. Some stayed back and settled in India and Ruskin's family was one among them. He suffered the ordeal of losing a cultural identity. He began to explore his ancestry in India and was restless on the issue of filial relationship. He had also observed the transition period both in India and Britain. His confused cultural identity was gradually transformed into cultural assimilation of the east and the west. The paper reflects some of the ways how the cultural assimilation is possible and how the quest of identity can be streamlined in a positive way. This paper is a study of how the unusual background of Ruskin Bond is evident in his fictional and non-fictional works and how he was able to bridge the gap between different cultures.*

Key Words: *Colonial, Post Colonial, heritage, assimilation, cultural identity, Anglo- Indian.*

1. INTRODUCTION:

Anglo-Indian Community came into existence as a result of British rule in India, and mainly consist racially mixed people and purely British descents who settled in India after the end of the colonial rule. As the British Rule came to an end both colonial and colonized struggled for their future and identity. Ruskin depicts the pathos of both very well in his book "A Town Called Dehra":

"The exodus of British and Anglo Indian families was beginning even as the war ended. For some the choice was a hard one. They had no prospects in England, no relatives there. And they had no prospects in India unless they were very well qualified".¹

Though Ruskin Bond, is one such writer of Anglo-Indian lineage, his work and attitude are all together free from the widespread colonial biases and stereotypes. In fact, after decolonization he had the daring to reject his British nationality by embracing India, the land of his birth. He elucidates in his autobiographical write-up which was titled "On Being an Indian," that his identity as an Indian is uncompromising:

"Race did not make me one. Religion did not make me one. But history did. And in the long run, it's history that counts."²

2. Quest for Cultural Identification:

Bond's writings are mainly semi-autobiographical. He jotted down the experiences that he went through during the pre and post Independence era. Many characters in Ruskin's Stories and novellas long for a pursuit of identities. His own personal quest for identity was realized by him when he stayed in England for four years. The feeling of alienation gripped him. He longed to be back to India, to its cultural and ecological space of small towns. During this trip, Ruskin for the first time, realized how intensely he loves India and therefore he confessed:

". . . no sooner had I set foot in the West, than I wanted to return to India and to all that I had known and loved.

It was only by going away that I came to the realization that I would never go away again, no matter what happened. This was where I belonged and this was where I would stay, come flood or fury."³

However, this brief sojourn proved to be futile in the manner that this nostalgia for Indian life fulfilled his dream of becoming an author and this he achieved by scripting, "The Room on the Roof", his first novella that fetched him prestigious John Llewellyn Rhys Memorial Prize. He had become the published author at the age of Seventeen.

"I was only seventeen. But out of loneliness I produced a novel, raw, naïve and imperfect, but brimming with life and joy and truth, for to be true to oneself is to be true to others."⁴

With the arrival of Bond in the literary scene, Indian writing in English became more youthful and fresh. His works portray the influence of his Anglo Indian experiences as well as the impact of the changing political, social and cultural conditions in India. Even though his stories are universal, he brings a unique insider's viewpoint as he describes the lives of simple rural or small town people. Having travelled extensively all over India and passing through the

colonial, post colonial and post independence phases of Indian life, he writes with ease about East and west, North and South India, maharajas and beggars, students and tongawallas. Describing India he writes in the novella, “Delhi is Not Far”:

“Ours is a land of many people, many races; their diversity gives it colour and character. For all India to be alike would be as dull as for all sexes to be same, for all human beings to be normal”⁵

As Bond’s writings are mainly autobiographical so he explores with imagination and sensitivity the experiences of his characters as they discuss personal, national and cultural boundaries. While working on his novels, Bond vicariously took to the places he missed, and this helped him to resolve his inner conflicts, cultural confusion and ambiguity. He could confidently says:

“I am an Indian’ - in the broadest, all-embracing, all-Indian sense of the word.”⁶

3. Cultural Assimilation of Characters in Ruskin Bond’s stories:

3.1. The Room on the Roof: A Vicarious Search for “Home”

Bond’s “The Room on the Roof” explores the fundamental concerns of the teenagers; identity formation, alienation, rebellion against adult restrictions, personal autonomy, emerging sexuality, and financial independence. While writing the novel, Ruskin himself a teenager at the time, was undergoing these experiences and presented deeply the feelings through the character Rusty, an Anglo-Indian youth.

Set soon after Indian Independence, the novel, through the existential anguish of seventeen-year-old Rusty attacks the prevailing racial and colonial attitudes of the British and his search for identity and “place” in the new independent India. Orphaned as a young child, Rusty is brought up as a “Proper” British sahib by his guardian, Mr. Harrison. The novel challenges the conventions of the colonial novel by satirizing the two British characters in the novel, and presented a variety of complex and interesting Indian characters. The Anglo-Indian protagonist of the novel retorts to the clash of cultures and moves out of his confined British space and connects with the land of his birth- with the people, places and culture of India. He does all this to identify the Indian experience and not to show racial superiority; the outsider has become an insider. Rusty has accepted the hybrid nature of his identity, which is due to his entangled and overlapping histories.

The Room on the Roof also undermines the derogatory myths associated with Indian culture. Still Rusty is drawn towards the magic of Hindu rituals. As he plays Holi or baths in the Ganges, he feels a mystical communion with everything Indian. He has the instant feeling of oneness with the creator.

In writing “The Room on the Roof,” Bond vicariously resolved his own cultural ambiguity by defining himself as an Indian of double heritage.

3.2. Exploring a dual heritage

After returning to India and settling for sometime in Delhi, he began to explore and research the history and distinctive features of the nearby towns with the intention to explore his Indian heritage and the past history of the British and Europeans in India. He writes:

“Being a child of changing times, I had grown up with divided loyalties; but at the end of the journey I had come to realize that I was blessed with a double inheritance. And I was determined to make the most of it.”⁷

Description of his visits to Agra, Jaipur, Aligarh, Mathura, Rishikesh are recollected in his memoir “The lamp is Lit.” Bond writes,

“the byways of history have always fascinated me. The history books tell us about Delhi, Calcutta, Madras and Bombay, but they have little to say about the drama that takes place in the lives of those living in villages or small towns. There are stories to be told about all these places.”⁸

Each story provides the description and historical or legendary background of the place. It also highlights the lived experience of the people in modern times and Bond’s personal visit. Bond’s visit to Rishikesh, Mathura and other pilgrimage sites gave him a clear knowledge of Hindu mythology, its Gods, its rituals, Hindu beliefs and practices. Furthermore his trips to towns like Shahjahanpur, Meerut, Bharatpur and Sardhana enabled him to discover his Anglo-Indian Heritage. He also tried to research the activities and lives of Europeans in India before the establishment of the British Colonial government. Later on, these nonfiction articles were published in English-language magazines and newspaper in India. In 1960, a collection of twenty articles were compiled and published in *Strange Men, Strange Places*, and in 1992 they were republished again after additional improvement. In the preface, Bond states that these biographical accounts, all derived from historical sources, are about “those odd, colourful soldiers of fortune – mostly European-who strutted across the Indian subcontinent during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries.”⁹

It is interesting to note that the subjects of these biographies are mainly “unusual” historical personages, especially Europeans who had in some way helped in bridging the East-West cultural divide and had made firm efforts to do so. The core theme of *Strange Men, Strange Places* is that though many heroes may be little known in history books, they played a pivotal role during the turbulent times when the Mughal Empire began to weaken and the independent kingdoms of the Marathas, Rajputs, Jats, Rohillas, Sikhs and others were struggling to gain power. They

began to either engage European mercenaries in their armies or commissioned them to raise a battalion in order to help them gain greater power or to oppose British expansion.

Bond affirms in his write-up “A Great Soldier: Benoit de Boigne,” that if de Boigne, a French soldier of fortune in the employ of Madhavrao Sindhia, had not returned to Europe and if Sindhia had not died, the British may not have been able to establish themselves in India.

Going through these stories, readers can devise an integrated narrative of the social, economic, military, and political activities of the Europeans in India. Because of differences in national and religious affiliations European mercenaries joined the company’s army that led to conflicts. For example, in the essay “Pistols at twenty Paces: A Duel at Poona” Bond recounts the harassment the Catholic Irishmen J.S. Sarsfield had to bear when he joined a Protestant Irish regiment.

As the influence of the company expanded, Christian churches and religious services also began to establish, although churchgoing had not become a priority. “The Story of Bombay Church” informs us that at St. Thomas’s Cathedral in Bombay, the sermons were often used for political defamation rather than for moral edification.

“The Story of a Hill Station,” traces the development of Mussoorie from a recuperative site for soldiers to a stylish Himalayan Summer resort. It provides a background for understanding Victorian author Mary Martha Sherwood’s disappointment at the spiritual and moral neglect of the British soldiers and children when she came to India with her husband’s regiment in 1805.

These biographies emphasizes on the cultural hybridity of these characters and their acceptance of Indian culture. In “Glories of the Hookah,” Bond informs that:

“This was a period when Englishmen readily took to Indian customs and pastimes, a happy attitude that was to disappear with the advent, in the following century, of Victorian prudery and Christian evangelism”.¹⁰

While maintaining their European ways, they adapted to Indian customs and studied Persian and Urdu; smoked hookah that had become fashionable among men and women in Bengal ; and there remained no social taboos against marrying a Hindu or Muslim.

Intrigues and adventures of Colonel William Linnaeus Gardner were narrated in the story “Colonel Gardner and the Princess of Cambay.” He had served in the armies of the Marathas and married a Muslim princess. “The Lady of Sardhana” describes the endeavour of Begum Samru, who married Walter Reinhardt and after his death had affairs with other Europeans and led troops into battle, and converted to Catholicism. Bonds another writing “Skinner and His Yellow Boys” focuses on the “restless and high-spirited” Eurasian James Skinner, whose English habits remained intact. He has a harem of Muslim wives, has literary creations in Persian and built a church, mosque, and temple.

Bond got all this information from the short biographies based on the diaries, histories, and other rare and out-of-print books that he found in secondhand book shops or in private collections in India. He also travelled extensively to the churches, cantonments and Christian cemeteries of the cities where the action had taken place and to confirm what he had read, and most of the time to find new information. He writes in the preface:

“History is best enjoyed.... by visiting the scene of actual events, and allowing one’s imagination to roam backwards and forwards in time”¹¹

3.3. A Flight of Pigeons: The European Diaspora

While staying in Delhi, Bond continued investigating his British heritage and its culmination was “A Flight of Pigeons.” It was based upon the revolutionary upsurge against British rule in India. In the year 1857 in Meerut, a spark of the collaborative freedom movement began and subsequently extends to other provinces and cantonment areas. The novel provides interpretation of these events from the point of view of British and Indian perspective. One aspect interprets the condition of innocent people from Europe, whereas the other aspect indicated that it was a grass root struggle for independence that was coordinated by influential group from all sections of the society, i.e. hindu, muslim, sikh and others. Shahjahanpur, a small town about 250 miles from Delhi, serves as a microcosm of the events that had happened throughout north-central India. Bond visited Shahjahanpur many times and recreated the setting and the events that had taken place, giving details of the parade ground, church and cantonment as they must have been nearly 150 years ago.

The story of the novella is based on the actual experiences of Ruth Labadoor, the protagonist, whose diary was published privately as *Mariam* by J.F. Fanthome, whom Ruth had narrated her experiences. Being an avid reader, Bond read Fanthome’s book on the Mutiny, in which portions of Ruth’s diary were quoted. He also referred to *Shahanjahanpur Gazetteer* of that year, and other accounts of the Mutiny that had made references to Ruth Labadoor. The novella is a fusion of fiction and nonfiction. The novel starts with homeless and helpless Ruth Labadoor, whose father was killed by Indian rebels. Lala Ramjimal, a friend of Labadoor family, with a true Indian spirit, comes to their rescue and gives them security and shelter. Bond has beautifully woven another prominent character of the novel, Javed Khan, who abducts the Labadoor women because he wanted to marry Ruth, but he did not do anything forcefully, rather he asked *Mariam* (Ruth’s mother) to allow him to marry Ruth.

Finally, the novella depicts that in spite of the revolt against the British, Indians were aware of their responsibility towards their friends irrespective of their being British. The characters portrayed by Bond has grown beyond racism and had exposed Orientalism that disregard Islam, Hinduism, and Sikhism as being biased and dogmatic. While keeping intact the facts, Bond interpreted the historical events by putting together the experiences of the protagonists in the European, Hindu and Muslim worlds.

Envisaging his ironic vision, Bond reveals that the mixed racial heritage of the Labadoor women affects their socio-political status. They were the well accepted members of the European community of Shahjahanpur yet this very fact endangered their lives. At the same time, it is their Indian background that saved their lives and prompted them to seek shelter in the homes of their Hindu friends.

As far as the title of the novel is concerned, it has a double significance; the imagery of a flock of white pigeons who hover over the city, circle in the air when disturbed, and come down to rest again is a metaphor for the British presence in India and his temporary disturbance.

4. CONCLUSION:

To conclude it can be said that Ruskin Bond was fully able to resolve his personal quest for confused cultural identity and the characters depicted by him are also able to resolve their cultural identification quest and successfully got assimilated in the other culture. The paper reflects the cultural assimilation of Ruskin Bond as well as of his characters. The term Cultural Assimilation means to fully accept other culture so in the same manner Bond, fully assimilated everything Indian by making it his own. Rather than calling himself Anglo-Indian, he prefers to call himself Indian like all of us. Recently in an interview on being asked about his attachment to his country, India, he replied:

It has more to do with history and a sense of belonging to the past, present and future all combined. It has I have always associated myself and still do so to the land, soil and earth because it is where I was born and grew up. I do not know if that qualifies as nationalism or patriotism but it is certainly love. Love of one's country and land and all that grows on it, from plants to trees; all that lives on it, from human beings to birds and beasts.

I do not know what happens when one dies. I want to be reborn in India and nowhere else and be a writer.¹³

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