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'Becoming' an Indian Cultural Nuances in Ruskin Bond's Marginal Entities

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"We are translated men", said Rushdie. (Rushdie, 20) As his words were true for the Indian writers writing in English, and thereby, attempting to translate their own culture in a different language, they are equally true for someone who in European by birth, and has chosen to be an Indian, though not in the language he writes, but in culture.

Ruskin Bond's position in the Indian literary scenario is, to say the least, problematic. In the postcolonial condition where the Subaltern studies are achieving new feats, Bond has often been categorized only as an author belonging to the 'young adult' genre. But a minute reading of his fictions and non-fictions suggests otherwise. His British origin, troubled childhood, constant attempts to establish a kinship with India- all speaks for the unique problem of an otherized individual.

Presuming itself fundamentally different from the Self, both culturally and socially, the Other, in a continuous attempt to attain the position of the Self, either translates itself to one belonging to the culture of the Self, or the other way round: translating or appropriating that culture to his own. Bond's fictions and non-fictions precisely capture these attempts to study the Other on the author's part, and thus, themselves become embedded with subtle nuances of cultural translations.

Bond's treatment of the Other, may be divided into two prominent phases: one that consists of his early works with the Anglo-Indian protagonist's Rusty's adventures and coming to terms with India; the second phase is much more 'Indian' in spirit from the very beginning, in Bond's own words.

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Bond's treatment of the Other can be seen emerging from his very first novella: The Room on the Roof. Published when the author was only seventeen years old, it marks the birth of Bond's India in print. This semi-autobiographical piece of work foregrounds the protagonist Rusty, an Anglo-Indian teenager, as the Other in an Indian context. His narrative is never really bent on showing the boy as an entity in exile; rather, the narrative becomes a cult of alternative postcolonial writing in English. Rusty's outlook is not that of a postcolonial subject, but of a European 'stayer-on', a threatened individual, who, as the novel progresses, translates himself to one who is intricately involved in Indian culture and practices. Rusty's guardian Mr. Harrison and others of his clan think the country district of Dehra, full of blossoming cherry trees to be the 'beautiful' India, close to their own Britain. The 'real' India, full of filth and dirt, thieves and germs, started from the bazaar and was forbidden to them. Rusty, growing up in such conditions, is rusticated by his Anglo guardian when he goes to the bazaar and plays Holi with his Indian friends. The bazaar is significant in the context of the novel: its entity oscillates between the Self and the Other- it brings in the throbbing essence of Indian lifestyle which the Anglo psyche of Mr. Harrison strictly abhors.

Rusty's love for with this 'real' India has been masterly portrayed by Bond in the third chapter of the novella where the narrator says: "And all three-the bazaar and India and life itself - were forbidden." (Bond, 13) The word "forbidden" suggests the conflicting curiosities within Rusty, and as he feels that life itself is facing a threat of getting abandoned, he gets inclined towards life. Rusty's vulnerable identity is again highlighted when throughout this book Somi, Suri, Ranbir and Kishen address each other by name, but add a respectable 'Mister' in case of Rusty. However, Rusty's Indian chord is snapped when later his friends leave Dehra. The fact dawns upon him that 'India' had meant to him only his friends. Now, as he again feels alienated, he is overpowered by the otherizing tag of half-cast and is determined to become either 'somebody' or 'nobody' but not 'anybody'. This angst of being a mismatch finally finds a way toward existence in the sequel, Vagrants in the Valley.

These novellas acquire almost a stature of life-writing. From his own experience of a troubled childhood and the untimely death of his father, his sole companion during that time, came Bond's urge to locate his roots in the scheme of things. These early works show the author, and his fictional counterpart Rusty, trying to find their way into the natural order of things, where there is no need to draw a margin, and thus, discovering the elusive identity of the Other.

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The beginning of the second or the later phase of Bond's career (as far as the treatment of the Other is concerned) is perhaps marked by his words on his twenty-first year of life, published in his autobiography Scenes from a Writer's Life: "I had resolved most of my inner conflicts and could confidently say, "I am an Indian" - in the broadest, all embracing, all-Indian sense of the word. … I was blessed with a double inheritance." (Bond, xv-xvi) The phrase "double inheritance" itself brings into question Bond's claim of being 'purely' Indian, for it implicitly states that India has never been able to overthrow Bond's English past. From this point onwards, the author restricts himself and his narratives largely to the small hilly towns and valleys, which again are Indian, yet nourish some topographical and historical 'English' dreams within them, perhaps to justify Bond's "double inheritance".

A large group of Bond's characters become now the small-town nobodies. Most of Bond's characters are poor villagers, vendors, stray peanut sellers, or at most, a writer striving for recognition. Their position in the society, beyond any doubt, is marginal. But in sharp contrast to the prevalent postcolonial discourse about the suffering and the struggle of the subalterns, Bond's narratives are often about the jubilant yet simple, subdued yet strong celebration of the life-force that he finds in every individual, even if they are the 'marginal'. The characters of his novella Delhi is Not Far are Deepchand - a barber who dreams of opening a more up-to-date salon to give the Prime Minister a haircut, Pitamber - a cycle rickshaw driver, Arun - a struggling writer, Kamla - a young prostitute, Suraj - an orphan, homeless and epileptic. All of them live in the small town of Pipalnagar and want to go to Delhi to pursue their dreams. Delhi here is the elusive Self/ Centre, which, they think, would bring an end to all their troubles. All these characters must be read and understood from the perspective of a person who finds himself in these people, and therefore has chosen a setting for their stories where he personally is comfortable at.

Also, in many of his non-fictional writings including Rain in the Mountains, Bond writes about people who are never in the limelight otherwise. Mrs. Bun - the one who sells bread, the postman or paper-seller, they all embody for bond the celebration of life. Short stories, such as Love is a Sad Song, panther's Moon, Woman at Platform No. 8, The Night Train at Deoli - consist of people sharing the margin in a society: the nobodies. Yet they are content in their unrecognized lifestyle.

Finally, a Taoist reading of Ruskin Bond's works also throws light on his treatment of the 'Other'. Bond's affirmed his attachment to Taoist philosophy time and again. In an interview given to Swapan K. Banerjee, published in Rusty and I: Up-close with Ruskin Bond, Bond reflects: "I had been strongly influenced by Taoism, by Lao Tzu, the ancient Chinese philosopher. I think I had been reading his works, and … was partly Taoist." (Banerjee, 35) Taoism accepts the notions of disgrace and lowliness as virtues, affirmed by Lao-tzu - which readily distances the notion of subaltern from an imposed marginality. The notion of lowliness that we find in Chapter thirteen of Tao Te Ching:

"Accept disgrace willingly.

… … …

Accept being unimportant.

Do not be concerned with loss or gain."

(Tao Te Ching, I,xiii)

is similar to the tone of Bond's essay Lonely or Alone?, published in the book Notes from a Small Room where he talks about a peanut vendor: "He was not a joyful person; but then, neither he was miserable. …he was a genuine stoic, one of those who do not attach overmuch importance to themselves, who are emotionally uninvolved, content with their limitations."

Debating Bond's constant indulgence with the marginal, the much ambiguous aspect of "double inheritance" may well be taken into consideration. Despite having an imperial blood, there's an attempt made by the author in almost all of his writings to 'become' an Indian. He is still becoming one perhaps, and his works, thus, constantly engage themselves in the act of locating and re-locating a cultural identity which has always been, by force or by choice, the 'Other'.

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