An Anglo-Indian Perspective of India: A Critical Study of *The Room on the Roof* and *The Great Train Journey* by Ruskin Bond

Dr Neelam

Assistant Professor

Dept. of English

Smt. B.D. Jain Girls P.G. College

Agra, Uttar Pradesh, India

nneelam05@gmail.com

Abstract

Indian English writing traces its history back to the nineteenth century. The beginning phase includes the writings of reformers like Rajaram Mohan Roy and others. Later, it was the trio - R.K. Narayan, Mulk Raj Anand and Raja Rao- who made Indian novels internationally recognizable. Indian English Writing consists of not only the writers of Indian descent but those European, born and brought up in India. Some of them, after Indian Independence, instead of moving to England, decided to be Indian citizens for the rest of their lives. One of such is Ruskin Bond. His writings are enriched with the Indian ethos. His heart and soul thrive for India. In him, one can find a beautiful blend of the East and the West. He chooses to write in English, not about the English, but about India and Indians. The content of his stories and novels is deeply rooted in the Indian scenario and sensibility. He is not interested in the big historical events, but like R.K. Narayan, in the mundane events in which he finds magic. He writes about that world which one sees through the window. His writings explore the sentiments and emotions of daily happenings. He himself says: "I go by heart in my writings". His career as a writer span over 70 years. He has written more than 500 stories and several novels. But the current paper aims to critically analyze his novel *The Room on the Roof* and his collection of stories *The Great Train Journey* from an Anglo-Indian perspective.

Keywords: Loneliness, Roots, Cultural Identity Crisis, Alienation, Nostalgia

Indian English writing is not generally divided on the basis of race or descent. The term Anglo-Indian originated during the British Empire to describe people of European ancestry living in India; later, it came to refer to those of mixed British and Indian descent. In India, the number of Anglo-Indian writers is small. Henry Louis Vivian Derozio is considered the first Anglo-Indian poet. He is revered as India's first 'nationalist poet.' His poems reflect Indian sensibility and ethos. Though born to European parents, his heart belonged solely to India. Poems such as "The Harp of India" and "To India—My Native Land" are true expressions of his "burning nationalistic zeal… at a time when the average representative of his class was prone to repudiate his Indian blood and identify himself with the white man, for eminently practical reasons" (G.J.V. Prasad 48). Rudyard Kipling, another Anglo-Indian writer, is known for his famous works like *The Jungle Book* and *Kim*. Unlike Derozio, he was a staunch advocate of the British Raj. His portrayal of India is that of an outsider looking in. He justifies colonial rule in India and depicts the country through a colonialist lens. Kipling presents India as uncivilized and superstitious, championing colonial superiority and the justification of the 'White man's burden.' The image of India that he produces is stereotypical, racial, and prejudiced. By contrast, Ruskin Bond shows India in a realistic and subjective manner. His view of India is that of an insider. Rehman and Sharma note that "his ability to blend the autobiographical with the fictional is what makes his works stand out" (85). Bond's stories and novels portray India in all its dimensions. His relationship with India is not ancestral, but emotional. After India was partitioned, he was sent to England, but after spending four years there, he longed to return to India. He says, "I decided to return to India because of personal relationships, friends, and the town in which I had grown up. I was deeply rooted by the age of 17" (*The New Indian Express*).

As a writer Bond is generally associated with children literature. But his stories are read and appreciated by people of all age-groups. His stories explore the themes of childhood innocence, adolescence adventures, human relationships, alienation, loneliness, identity crisis and nostalgia. He says: "I am projecting different parts of myself in my stories." (*AzimpremjiUniversity*) He finds beauty in the daily monotonous things and scenes. Like William Wordsworth, he is a lover of nature. He sees nature as an inspiration and a good companion. It is his love for nature that he chose Mussoorie (the queen of hills) as his home. He says, "Living in hills affected my writings. I am a Hill person." (*Udbodhan*) For him nature is like human beings with its own soul and essence. That'why nature is never a setting or background in his stories but a character, a living entity and an observer. Dr Ranjana Srivastav writes: "the beauty of nature at Mussoorie attracted him so much that he finds a kind of brotherhood with the trees". (18) M.K. Naik believes that the "special feature of Bond's stories is his acute responsiveness to nature …it is not simply a matter of nature description as a narrative technique, but a genuine feeling for the natural world which has somewhat of a Wordsworthian quality about it" (250). Bond is a minimalist. He doesn't crave for luxurious life but a room of his own. As Virginia Woolf believed that for a writer, a space of his own is a mandatory to have the freedom to think and write. The novel *The Room on the Roof* is an expression of his desire for a space and freedom.

Unlike Mahasweta Devi, Bond believes in subjective realism than social realism. He says: "My writing in general is realistic". (*Youtube*) His characters are very simple and ordinary people whom we meet in our daily lives. They are not social revolutionaries who wish to change society. They are simple-minded. Like R.K. Narayana, he deals with the ordinary events of life. He does not take an interest in exploring the intricacies of urban realism. His stories and novels are rooted in the Indian countryside and hilly ethos. The *Tarai* region of India is for him what was 'Wessex' for Thomas Hardy and 'Malgudi' for Narayana. Indian

sensibility is widespread throughout his works. His writing style vividly depicts his minute observation of Indian life. His stories are voices of local people and "are windows into the heart of India and the human experience, capturing both the magic and the everyday with equal grace" (Rahman and Sharma 92). The novel *The Room on the Roof* and his stories collection *The Great Train Journey* are vivid pictures of "when there were still considerable greenery and abundant wildlife in the Himalayas" (Srivastava 18). Reflecting on the themes of Ruskin Bond's works, Rahman and Sharma writes that he-

> Often focus on themes that are close to the human experience and are relatable to a wide range of readers. Some of the recurring thematic concerns in his short stories include nostalgia and longing for simpler times, childhood memories and experiences…Bond explores social issues such as poverty and class differences and highlights the beauty and imperfections of life in small towns and villages in India (94).

Though he deals with social issues, he treats them with a touch of lightness and humour. He is never grievous and grim in his tone. On Bond's characterization, Naik says: "His favourite subjects are pets, animals and a variety of have-nots, including waifs, orphans, abnormal children, restless adolescents and frustrated old men, whom he portrays with genuine compassion." (250) So, it shows his sympathetic, sensitive and warm-hearted attitude towards his characters.

The novel *The Room on the Roof* is full of autobiographical elements. It belongs to the early years of his writing career. It is a product of the author's nostalgia and loneliness when he was living in England, remembering his days spent in India. Though surrounded by his own race, he always felt isolation and alienation. He was not able to recognize himself with them. His heart and mind kept on desiring India - its landscape, surroundings and the people with whom he was in acquaintance. He felt like a stranger in England, so he came back and made Mussoorie his permanent residence. Like Rusty, Ruskin Bonds also fled from his home. In an

interview, Bond says, “It is a novel about an adolescent by an adolescent. It reflects as I was”. (*Youtube*) The novel paints the teenage experiences and adventures. It gives a glance into adolescent psychology. It throws light on the identity crisis of an Anglo-Indian adolescent. After independence, most of the Anglo-Indians left India, but a few were in a dilemma to make a decision, hovering between two spaces-the land of ancestors and the land of birth. Bond vividly describes this dilemma through the character of Rusty-

> He has cut away from his roots: he had been replanted, had sprung to life, new life. But it was too quick a growth, rootless, and he had withered. And now he had run away again…the pulsating throb and tremor of the train rushing him away; away from India, from Somi, from the chaat shop and the bazaar; and he did not know why, except that he was lost and lonely…nearly seventeen” (RR 166).

The novel beautifully depicts an Indian adolescent's attitude towards an Anglo-Indian adolescent struggling with identity crisis. When Rusty decides to leave India because he thinks- “I don’t belong here…I don’t belong anywhere. Even if I have papers, I don’t belong. I am half caste, I know it, and that is as good as not belonging anywhere”. (RR 145) Somi, his friend says, “You belong here’, trying to reconcile Rusty with circumstances. ‘You will get lost in big cities. Rusty, you will break your heart” (RR 145). Rusty does know that his heart and soul belong to India, as he says, “when I came home after playing Holi, I was happy then” (RR 146), when the guardian “told me, I was not ashamed, I was proud” (RR 146). Even when Somi says,” you are running away from India” (RR 146). He replies, “No, not from India” (RR 146). The above conversation proves that Rusty is unable to cut off his ties with India. He is struggling with the circumstances, and a queer atmosphere erupted after the partition. So, the novel is an attempt by Bond to map the emotional geography of Anglo-Indians like him.

The novel also unfolds the racial prejudices of Anglo-Indians. Bond writes: ‘For Harrison, the missionaries, and their neighbours, this country district of blossoming cherry tree

was India. They knew there was a bazaar and a real India not far away, but they did not speak of such places; they chose not to think about them" (RR 12). Initially, even Rusty was hesitant. Bond writes: "Every day he walked aimlessly along the road, over the hillside; brooding on the future, or dreaming of sudden and perfect companionship…when an opportunity for friendship did present itself, as it had the previous day, he shied away, preferring his own company" (RR 13). It was due to the impact of racial indoctrination that Rusty had gone throughout his childhood. Bond says that though to Rusty "the bazaar sounded a fascinating place, and what he had seen of it from the window of his guardian's car had been enough to make his heart pounded excitedly and his imagination soar; but it was a forbidden place-full of thieves and germs, said the missionary's wife" (RR 12) But soon he overcomes his fear, and "defy the law of his guardian and of his community" (RR 18) by visiting the prohibited places and mixing with forbidden peoples. Though "he was afraid of discovery and punishment, but hungering curiosity impelled him forward. The bazaar and India and life itself all began with a rush of noise and confusion. The boy plunged into the throng of bustling people." (RR 18).

Simultaneously, Bond reveals not only the casteism and untouchability prevailing in India but also the missionaries' incorporation of such a system to keep intact their supremacy and authority, and the system of social exclusion and injustice. Missionary's wife says to Rusty: "Even if you were an Indian, my child, you would not be allowed to play with the sweeper boy. So that Rusty often wondered: with whom, then, could the sweeper boy play? The untouchable passed by the windows, smiled, but Rusty looked away" (RR 11). The author seems to be sarcastic about the missionaries' ideals of Christianity. Instead of preaching equality, humanity and brotherhood, they are propagating untouchability and inhumanity. It explores the hypocrisy of their mission.

The novel is also a pen-portrait of pre-independent India, divided into Europeanized and Virgin rural India. For Rusty it is the virgin rural India which is more exciting and

fascinating as it is full "…the throng of bustling people…alive with the cries of vendors and the smell of cattle and ripening dung…the sight of beggars lying on the roadside: naked and emaciated half-humans, some skeletons, some covered with sores; old men dying, children dying, mothers with sucking babies, living and dying like the cows and loud speakers" (RR 20). On the other side, the Europeanized India was full of "the rows of neat cottages, arriving at a commercial area-Dhera's westernized shopping centre-where European, rich Indians, and Americans tourists…could eat at smart restaurants and drink prohibited alcohol" (RR 19).Here, the writer draws not only a contrast between rich and poor but also indirectly critiques the government policies and neglect of the poor as he says, "the beggars were a natural growth in the bazaar" (RR 20).

Bond aptly expresses the Indian cultural ethos. Indians' sentiments towards cows are explicit when, "Somi, in order to escape to hurt the Maharani, while riding a bicycle, unintentionally hits Rusty as he says, "if I had missed you. I would have hit the cow!" (RR 22) Even his description of the Indian bazaar is very scenic. He says:

> Every little shop was different from the one next to it. After the vegetable stand, green and wet, came the fruit stall; and after the fruit stall, the tea and betel leaf shop; then the astrologer's platform, and after the astrologer's, the toy shop, selling trinkets of gay colours. And then. After the toy shop. Another from whose doors poured clouds of smoke." (RR 20)

This description of the Indian market draws parallel with R.K Narayan's description of Market Street in the story 'An Astrologer's Day". Thus, Bond skillfully records the oddities and peculiarities of Indian life not as an observer but as a part of it.

In the novel, the author explores the complexities of a teenager's psyche- his hunger for roots, identity and belongingness. The author uses 'Kishen' and "a room on the roof" as a metaphor for bond, quest and destination. As Bond says:

> Rusty…was asking himself…what was Kishen to him? He was sure of one thing. They were both refugees-refugees from the world…they were each other's shelter, each other's refuge, each other's help…because of this tie, Rusty had to go back. And it was with relief that he went back. His return was justified…he could not run away. He could not escape the life he had made, the ocean into which he had floundered the night he left his guardian's house. He had to return to the room, *his* room; he had to go back" (RR 183).

This return, and a room on the roof, is symbolic of not only his intense bond with India but with himself too.

The Great Train Journey, a collection of journey stories, showcases varied experiences of the author's life. The collection is a picture of his childhood and boyhood days. The abundant use of animal and nature imagery to communicate the persona's experiences and moods illustrates not only author's love for the natural world but his intimate bond with them. The trains are integral part of India's social and economic life. The collection, concurrently delineates the author's enchantment and passion towards the small-town life. He writes:

> There is something about passing trains that fills me with awe and excitement. All those passengers, with mysterious lives and mysterious destinations, are people I want to know, people whose mysteries I want to unfold. There is no joy like sitting in a train as it comes out of tunnels and jungles and passes through fields and villages, when small children shout and wave at you, and you simply wave back to them" (GTJ VIII).

The stories in the collection revolve around teenage experiences of the trains and train journeys. As the writer admits: "I have put together fourteen of my short stories that in some way or the other revolve around the trains and railway stations of small-town India…with the promise that they will take you back to a time when life was not so full of care, and there was time to stand and stare." (GTJ viii) The stories present a microcosm of India, bringing together

the cultural diversity and shared humanity with the tinge of humour. The personas are mouthpiece of author. Suraj, in the story "The Great Train Journey", is representative of the author's awe with trains. He writes: "Suraj waved to a passing train, and kept waving until only the spiraling smoke remained. He liked waving to trains. He wondered about the people in them, and about where they were going and what it would be like there" (GTJ i). Bond shares his own experience-

> The first time I saw a train, I was standing on a wooded slope outside a tunnel, not far from Kalka. Suddenly, with a shrill whistle and a great burst of steam, a green and black engine came snorting out of blackness. I had turned and run towards my father. A 'dragon', I had shouted. There's a dragon coming out of its cave!" (GTJ vii)

The collection takes the reader back to the bygone era of the slower small-town life and railway system of India. The era when rail was a magical machine or a kind of mystery, especially for young boys. Recalling the bygone days, the author says, "small wayside stations have always fascinated me. Manned sometimes by just one or two railway employees, and often situated in the middle of a damp subtropical forest, or clinging to the mountainside on the way to Simla or Darjeeling, these little stations are, for me, outposts of romance, lonely symbols of the pioneering spirit that led men to lay tracks into the remote corners of the earth" (GTJ 13). The author sheds light on the commencement and spread of railways in India. He says, "In 1855, the East India Railway was opened between Calcutta and Raniganj, a distance of 122 miles. By the turn of the century, India had one of the most extensive railway systems in the world." (GTJ 12) Though railways were brought by the British Empire but like other Anglo-Indians he never eulogized the empire for bringing it in India, as it is a well -known fact that the empire started rails to achieve its own financial profits and administrative goals. His outlook on it is that of a common Indian boy.

The story "The Night Train at Deoli" is a vivid picture of the authors' youth days. The story is a fascinating portrayal of the ambience of a small town or village station. Describing the station of Deoli, he writes:

> The train would reach Deoli at about five in the morning when the Station would be dimly lit with electric bulbs and oil lamps, and the jungle across the railway had only one platform, an office for the stationmaster and a waiting room. The platform boasted a tea stall, a fruit vendor and a few stray dogs; not much else because the train stopped there for only ten minutes before rushing on into the forests" (GTJ 58).

The collection portrays the life of villagers who live near the station, surrounded by forest. They are vulnerable to all sorts of dangers but preserve and protect the forests and wildlife because their faith rests on co-existence. In the story "The Tunnel", the writer enunciates the attitude of villagers towards wild animals. Sunder Singh says, "If we don't drive the leopard out of the tunnel, it will be run over and killed. I can't let that happen" (GTJ 110).

The author finds captivation in a train journey. He says: "for me, all are significant: the lighted compartment, with its farmers, shopkeepers, Artisans, clerks and occasional pick-pockets; and the lonely wayside stop, with its uncorrupted lamplighter." (GTJ 119) It's not only the train that allures the author but the strangers who turn into angels. The story "The Woman on Platform no 8" is an encounter with a stranger woman who gives both motherly affection and protection to the narrator, travelling alone. The story shows that the "parents do not worry about the protection of their children, who travel freely without fear of harsh or criminal acts, because the people from the hills are welcoming, trustworthy and kind". (Rahman and Sharma 83) The collection exhibits that for Bond, India and Indians are "if say anything better than western society's civilized people "(Rahman and Sharma 93). He says, "Race did not make me an Indian, but history, because race indeed had nothing to do with

making me an Indian. History did, in the end. On the other hand, in the long term, it is history that matters" (Rahman and Sharma 91).

In a nutshell, Bond's portrayal of India is very authentic and beyond question mark. The English he uses is not British but Indian. He incorporates Hindi words into his prose. The dominating themes of his stories are the Himalayan landscape, nature and human connection and relations as he observes and notices in India. His protagonists are Indian. He seeks charm and magic in the small things and otherwise insignificant incidents. As R. K. Narayana is called the writer of the south, Bond can be considered the writer of the Himalayas. So, it is not incorrect to refer to Ruskin Bond as a region- specific writer like R.K Narayan and Mulk Raj Aanand. He loves India's multiculturalism, which is a source of charm, attraction and inspiration. He is in love with India, with all its oddities and imperfections. His love for nature, ordinary people and simple life makes him extraordinary. He is different from his contemporary writers not only in the subject matter or themes but in tone and emotion, too. Unlike his contemporaries, he finds contentment and peace in his surroundings, which is always in flux because he knows nothing is stable and permanent. It is the law of nature. He not only admires nature but also respects and seeks inspiration from it. He finds no grudges in his surroundings because for him, life is the name of adjustment and adaptability.

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