

Negotiating Identity": A Journey of Being Indian to Becoming an Indian. (Ruskin Bond)

¹Pooja Verma ,²Dr. Saurabh Bhardwaj

¹Research Scholar)

²Supervisor (Assistant Professor) Department of English Guru Kashi University, Talwandi Sabo.

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Abstract: This paper explores the themes of identity, belonging, and cultural assimilation in the works of Ruskin Bond, with a particular focus on the concepts of "being Indian" and "becoming Indian." As an Anglo-Indian author who has spent most of his life in India, Bond offers a unique perspective on the fluidity of identity within the context of postcolonial India. This study examines how Bond's personal experiences and literary characters navigate the complexities of cultural identity, and how these narratives contribute to a broader understanding of what it means to be Indian.

Keywords: Indianness, Identity crisis, Identity formation, Cultural heritage, Indigenous identity.

Introduction: Ruskin Bond, an iconic figure in Indian English literature, has often been described as a writer of the hills, small towns, and the common man. Born in 1934 in Kasauli, Bond has spent the majority of his life in India, predominantly in the hill stations of Uttarakhand. His works, spanning over five decades, offer a rich exploration of the Anglo-Indian experience and the broader theme of identity in postcolonial India. This paper aims to analyze how Bond's literature reflects the process of being Indian and becoming Indian, exploring the intersections of race, culture, and identity. His writings give an interesting focal point through which the most common way of "being Indian" and "becoming Indian" is investigated. Bond, a Somewhat English Indian essayist who experienced childhood in India, possesses a double social personality that profoundly impacts his stories. His works frequently mirror an agreeable mix of the Indian ethos and his Somewhat English Indian legacy, giving experiences into the developing suggestion of Indian character. His vivid descriptions of the foothills of the Himalayas, the bustling streets of small Indian towns, and the monsoon-drenched forests capture a sense of belonging to the land. This connection underscores the idea that "being Indian" is tied to the physical and emotional landscapes of the country. His accounts depict the conjunction of various networks, customs, and dialects, mirroring India's pluralism.

Literature Review: Several scholars have examined the works of Ruskin Bond through various lenses, including postcolonial studies, nature writing, and childhood studies. However, the exploration of identity—specifically in terms of being and becoming Indian—remains a relatively underexplored aspect of his work.

Studies such as "*Ruskin Bond's India: A Blend of British and Indian Cultures*" by Smitha Menon and "*The Theme of Belonging in Ruskin Bond's Fiction*" by Anjana Kumar provide useful frameworks for understanding Bond's negotiation of cultural identity.

Dr. Sunita Bhola in 'Quest for Cultural Identification of Characters in Ruskin Bond's *stories*' states his experiences of feeling alienation in England and his intense desire of coming back to India realizing the deep differences of culture.

Kavita Navlani in her essay, "The Fictional World of Ruskin Bond" states that the writers who deals with social or political or any other burning issues, projects a rather negative sort of image of India though unintentionally (161).

Methodology: This study adopts a qualitative approach, utilizing close textual analysis of Bond's short stories, novellas, and autobiographical works. These texts are examined for recurring motifs, character development, and narrative strategies

that reflect the themes of being and becoming Indian. This research paper analyses the psychological study of the character and their issues related to the identity by using the theories like Psychoanalytic theory and Existential theory.

1. The Anglo-Indian Identity: The Anglo-Indian identity is marked by a blend of British and Indian cultural influences, shaped by colonial history. Bond's own identity as an Anglo-Indian significantly informs his literary perspective. His characters often navigate a space between two cultures, embodying the dualities and tensions inherent in such a position. In "The Room on the Roof", Rusty, the protagonist, represents the quintessential Anglo-Indian experience. Rusty's journey forms the confines of an English household to the vibrancy of Indian streets symbolizes a shift in identity—from being a detached observer to becoming an active participant in Indian life. The novel explores the complexities of Rusty's identity as a young Anglo-Indian caught between two cultures: the British colonial world and the Indian society in which he lives. Here's a detailed exploration of how this identity is portrayed in the novel.

Cultural Displacement and Isolation Rusty, a 16-year-old Anglo-Indian boy, lives under the strict guardianship of Mr. Harrison, an Englishman in a small Indian town. This setting symbolizes Rusty's cultural displacement. It is a central theme that hones his identity and personal journey. He is physically in India but emotionally and culturally disconnected from it. Rusty experiences a clash of cultures that leaves him feeling alienated and rootless. His guardian enforces strict British customs, keeping Rusty isolated from the vibrant Indian world outside. He is raised with British customs and values, which often contrast with the Indian environment around him. This isolates him from fully belonging to either culture. This isolation reflects the broader experience of many Anglo-Indians during the colonial period, who often found themselves alienated from both British and Indian societies.

Straddling Two Worlds: Rusty's identity crisis is central to the novel. He is neither fully British nor fully Indian, and this duality creates a sense of confusion and dislocation. He is curious about the Indian world outside his home, yet he is also bound by the expectations and restrictions imposed by his guardian. This tension between two worlds is a defining aspect of Anglo-Indian identity, where individuals often struggle to reconcile their mixed heritage and find a place where they truly belong.

The Journey of Self-Discovery: The novel is essentially Rusty's journey of self-discovery, where he gradually moves from being an outsider to becoming part of the local Indian community. His decision to run away from his guardian's home and live with Indian friends marks a significant turning point in his identity. Through his interactions with Somi, Ranbir, and Suri, Rusty begins to embrace Indian culture, finding joy in the simple pleasures of Indian life—such as sharing meals, playing Holi, and exploring the bazaars.

- This journey represents the process of "becoming Indian," where Rusty starts to shed his rigid British upbringing and assimilates into the more fluid, inclusive, and communal Indian way of life. This transformation is a key aspect of his Anglo-Indian identity, reflecting the broader experience of many Anglo-Indians who navigated the complexities of cultural assimilation.

The Role of Language: Language plays a significant role in Rusty's identity. Initially, Rusty speaks only English, which isolates him from the local community. However, as he spends more time with his Indian friends, he begins to pick up Hindi, symbolizing his gradual integration into Indian society. This linguistic shift is symbolic of Rusty's growing connection with India, and it reflects the broader struggle of Anglo-Indians to find a linguistic and cultural identity that bridges their dual heritage.

Conflict and Resolution: Rusty's relationship with his guardian represents the larger conflict between British colonial authority and the emerging Indian identity. Mr. Harrison embodies the colonial mindset, seeking to maintain control over Rusty and prevent him from engaging with Indian culture. Rusty's rebellion against this authority and his eventual departure symbolize the rejection of imposed identities and the embrace of a more self-determined, hybrid identity.

- A mental state where a person feels dubious, clashed, or confounded about identity, reason, or job throughout everyday life. It frequently happens during significant life advances or difficulties, Though Rusty has not fully resolved his identity crisis, yet he has taken significant steps towards forging a new sense of self that is more connected to his Indian surroundings. His move to the room on the roof, a physical and metaphorical space of freedom and independence, represents his break from the restrictive Anglo-Indian identity imposed by his guardian and his tentative embrace of a new, more inclusive identity.

2. Cultural Assimilation and Belonging:

- Cultural assimilation is the cycle through which people or gatherings from one culture embrace the practices, values, and standards of another culture, frequently mixing into the predominant culture of a general public. This can happen intentionally or because of outside pressures and is impacted by variables like movement, colonization, or social reconciliation. Bond's works frequently explore the idea of cultural assimilation. His characters, often outsiders in some

way, gradually become integrated into Indian society. In Ruskin Bond's novella "The Blue Umbrella," cultural assimilation and the theme of belonging are intricately woven into the narrative. The story, set in a small village in the Indian Himalayas, revolves around a young girl named Binya and her prized possession—a beautiful blue umbrella. Binya's procurement of the blue umbrella, a thing foreign to the town's conventional setting, shows how outer impacts are slowly acknowledged and respected, turning out to be essential for the neighborhood character. Through this seemingly simple tale, Bond explores the complex dynamics of cultural assimilation and the deep human need for belonging.

Binya's Connection to the Local Culture:

Village Life and Identity: Binya is a quintessential village girl who is deeply rooted in the culture and traditions of her small community. Her life is shaped by the rhythms of village life—herding cattle, interacting with neighbors, and participating in local customs. This strong connection to her surroundings and the people within it forms the basis of her identity and sense of belonging. She is though a simple village girl, undergoes a subtle transformation that reflects her growing connection to her community and surroundings. This narrative can be read as an allegory for the broader theme of becoming Indian—where identity is shaped by one's environment and relationships.

Acquisition of the Blue Umbrella: The blue umbrella, a foreign and exotic item in the context of the village, becomes a symbol of Binya's unique identity within her community. Although the umbrella is not a traditional item in her culture, Binya assimilates it into her life, carrying it with pride and care. This act of integrating something foreign into her daily routine reflects a broader theme of cultural assimilation, where new elements are absorbed and made part of the local culture.

The Impact of the Umbrella on Village Dynamics:

Envy and Desire: The blue umbrella's introduction into the village disrupts the existing social order, as it evokes envy and desire among the villagers, particularly in Ram Bharosa, the village shopkeeper. This reaction highlights the tension between old and new, traditional and modern, local and foreign. The umbrella, while admired, also creates a subtle divide within the community, as it represents something beyond the villagers' usual experiences.

Ram Bharosa's Aspirations: Ram Bharosa, who initially disdains the umbrella, eventually becomes obsessed with owning it, seeing it as a means to elevate his status within the village. His desire for the umbrella symbolizes his longing to assimilate something new and exotic into his life, hoping it will bring him closer to the villagers who admire Binya for her possession. This reflects the complex nature of cultural assimilation, where the adoption of new symbols and practices is often driven by a desire for acceptance and belonging.

3• Transformation Through Assimilation:

• **Binya's Growth:** Throughout the story, Binya's relationship with the umbrella evolves, symbolizing her own growth and deeper integration into the village community. Initially, the umbrella is a source of pride and individuality for Binya, setting her apart from others. However, as the story progresses, she realizes the impact it has on those around her, leading her to eventually give it away. This act of generosity not only strengthens her bonds with the villagers but also signifies her maturity and understanding of the values of her community. Binya's willingness to part with the umbrella reflects her assimilation of the communal values of her village, where belonging and harmony are more important than individual possessions.

• **Ram Bharosa's Redemption:** Ram Bharosa's journey from envy to redemption also illustrates the theme of cultural assimilation. After receiving the umbrella from Binya, he undergoes a transformation, becoming more generous and kind-hearted. This change signifies his assimilation of the values represented by the umbrella—kindness, humility, and community spirit. Through this transformation, Ram Bharosa finally finds a sense of belonging in the village, not through possession but through a change in character.

4 Belonging and the Social Fabric:

Community Dynamics: The novella underscores the importance of belonging to a community and how individual actions and attitudes can affect the social fabric. Binya's initial pride in her umbrella sets her apart, but it also isolates her to some extent, as the villagers begin to envy her. However, by relinquishing the umbrella, she restores harmony and reaffirms her place within the community. This act underscores the idea that true belonging comes from contributing to the well-being of others, rather than from possessing material objects.

• **Integration vs. Isolation:** Throughout the novella, Bond highlights the themes of integration and isolation often serve as contrasting forces that shape his characters' journeys and their connection with the world around them. In 'The Room on the Roof', Rusty moves from the isolation of his British upbringing to the vibrant Indian lifestyle, forming friendships and finding a sense of belonging. His integration into Indian culture represents his emotional and social growth. Characters who are willing to embrace change and think beyond their immediate desires—like Binya—are rewarded with a deeper

sense of belonging. In contrast, those who isolate themselves through greed or envy—like Ram Bharosa initially—find themselves alienated from the community. The narrative suggests that assimilation into the broader cultural and moral values of the community is essential for true belonging.

The Role of Landscape in Identity Formation: The Indian landscape is more than just a backdrop in Bond's stories; it is integral to the characters' sense of identity. Bond's detailed descriptions of nature and small-town life in India are not just settings but are central to the process of identity formation. The mountains, forests, and rivers often mirror the inner lives of his characters, symbolizing their emotional and psychological states. In works like "Time Stops at Shamli", the landscape becomes a metaphor for the characters' evolving sense of belonging.

Nostalgia, Memory, and the Idea of Home: Nostalgia is a recurring theme in Bond's work, often reflecting his own complex relationship with India. His stories frequently evoke a sense of longing for a simpler, more harmonious past, which contrasts with the changes in post-independence India. This nostalgia is intricately linked with the idea of home and identity. In "A Flight of Pigeons", for instance, the notion of home is fluid, reflecting the characters' shifting identities in the face of historical and cultural upheavals.

Resistance to Fixed Identities: Bond's characters often resist easy categorization, reflecting the fluid and dynamic nature of identity. This resistance is particularly evident in his portrayal of children and young adults, who are still in the process of forming their identities. In stories like "The Night Train at Deoli", the protagonists' encounters with the unfamiliar lead them to question their own identities, suggesting that being Indian is as much about personal choice and experience as it is about heritage.

Conclusion:

Ruskin Bond's works offer a nuanced exploration of identity in postcolonial India. Through his characters, narratives, and the Indian landscape, Bond delves into the complexities of being Indian and becoming Indian. His literature challenges fixed notions of identity, instead presenting it as a fluid, evolving process that is deeply intertwined with one's environment, relationships, and personal experiences. Bond's portrayal of identity is thus a testament to the diversity and richness of the Indian experience, making his work a valuable contribution to both Indian and global literature.

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