

COLONIAL DILEMMA IN THE RUSKIN BOND'S ROOM ON THE ROOF

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Ruskin Bond has a dual heritage. He was born as an Englishman during the British regime in India. As he grew up India became free. Though most of English and Anglo-Indian families returned to U.K. and many others stayed in India. Ruskin Bond's family also settled in India. When others were passing through post-colonial trauma of displacement, of loss of country, friends and parents, of insecurity and of finance, Ruskin Bond experienced the trauma of a loss of identity. He explored his roots in India; because the question of filial relationship was made him restless. But there was nothing common with other English people except pigmentation. When he grew up, he was really fascinated by India. Some of his stories portray the colonial and postcolonial India. Ruskin Bond himself saw both Pre and post-independent India. He also observed the transition period both in India and Britain.

Room on the Roof (1993) has an element of autobiography where Bond narrates from the perspective of a child regarding his feeling of loneliness in his guardian's house, through a character called Rusty, who lost his parents, and had been kept, fed and paid for, and sent to an expensive school in the hills that was run on 'exclusively European lines'. Rusty is under the total care of Mr. Harrison, a cousin of his father a guardian. Harrison seldom speaks of Rusty's childhood, or his parents, and this secrecy lent mystery to the vague, undefined memories that hovered in the boy's mind like hesitant ghosts. Rusty is willing to do as his guardians wish; he always obeys him. But he is afraid of the man, afraid of his silence, ginger moustache and of the supple Malacca cane that lay in the glass cupboard in the drawing-room. Rusty spends much of his time studying himself in the dressing-table mirror, he is able to ignore his pimples and sees a grown man, wordly and attractive. Though only sixteen, he feels much older. He is white. His guardian is pink, and the missionary's wife a bright red with his thick lower lip and prominent cheekbones, he looks slightly Mongolian, especially in a half-light. He often wonders why no one else in the community has the same features.

Mr. Harrison's house, and the other houses, are all built in an English style, with neat front gardens and nameplates on the gates. Harrison, the missionaries, and their neighbours, know there was a bazaar and a real India not far away, but they did not speak of such places and even think about them.

The identity issue is mostly handled within the sphere of the colonized. However, the colonial identity goes beyond the colonized. It is, as Homi Bhabha puts, between colonized and colonizer. To Rusty, the bazaar sounds a fascinating place. Rusty's intention to enjoy, explore, wander afar in the bazaar has come true when Mr. Harrison planned to go to Delhi. Rusty took permission from his guardian's wife to go for a walk, he walked down the road to bazaar passed rows of neat cottages, arrived at a commercial area- Dehra's westernized shopping center – where Europeans, rich Indians, and American tourists for Mussorie, could eat at smart restaurants and drink the prohibited alcohol. But Rusty is afraid and distrustful of anything smart and sophisticated, and he horridly crosses the shopping center. He comes to the Clock Tower, which had been lifeless for five years but served as a good landmark. Rusty's heartbeats fast as he reaches the Clock Tower. He is about to defy the law of his guardian and of his community. He stands at the Clock Tower, nervous, hesitant, biting his nails. He is afraid of discovery and punishment, but hungering curiosity impels him forward. The bazaar and India and life itself all began with a rush of noise and confusion.

“Clock Tower lay the bazaar and in the bazaar lay India. On the other side of the Clock Tower began life itself. And all three-the bazaar, and India and life itself-were forbidden”.

Rusty moves along with the crowd, fascinates by the sight of beggars lying on the roadside naked and emaciating half-humans, some skeletons, some covering with sores, old man dying, children dying, mothers with sucking babies, living and dying. But strangely enough, he could feel nothing for these people, perhaps it is because they are no longer recognizable as humans or because he could see himself in the same circumstances. Every little shop is 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 beetle-leaf shop, then the astrologer's platform and after the astrologer's the toy shop, another form whose doors poured clouds of smoke. Put of curiosity Rusty turns to the shop from which the smoke is coming. But he is the only person making for it. Approaching from the opposite direction was Somi, who gave lift to Rusty once on his bicycle on his way to home where he met Somi's friends. Ranbir- a singh, Sury – pale, bony, sickly boy. Somi invites Rusty for a chaat, Rusty has no idea what is meant by the word chaat. The shop is crowded, but so thick is the screen of smoke and steam, that it is only the murmur of conversation which makes him to know the presence of many people. A plate made of banana leaves with two fried cakes is thrust into Rusty's hands. They are tikkies, explains Somi. Rusty tastes a bit. It is hot, he waits a minute, then tastes another bit. He finds lively, interesting, it had a different taste to anything he has eaten before. He has even tasted chaat and golguppas. Rusty is content with the present, content to enjoy new found pleasures of the chaat shop. He has eaten a spicy salad of potato, guava and orange, baked flour-cups filled with burning syrups. Rusty feels at ease and begins to talk, telling his companions about his school in the hills, the house of his guardian, Mr Harrison himself, and the supple Malacca cane. Somi and Ranbir pity at Rusty that his life has been very dull to date. To make Rusty exhilarate his new friends reminds that the next day is Holi. Rusty who is unaware of this asks ‘What is Holi?’. Ranbir looks at him in amazement and replies, it is the Hindu festival of colour. It is the day on which we celebrate the coming of spring, when we throw colour on each other and shout and sing and forget our misery, for the colours mean the rebirth of spring and a new life in our hearts. So you must play with me. Rusty is bewildered by Ranbir's sudden eloquence. He says, ‘I might get into trouble’, I'm not supposed to come here as my guardian might return any day. Ranbir with disappointment and somewhat disgust expression on his face says ‘You are afraid to spoil your clothes, mister. You

are just a snob, even Somi agrees to this. Rusty replies, if my guardian doesn't come back tomorrow, 'I will play Holi with you'. Ranbir feels content with Rusty's reply. Rusty leaves to his guardian's house and finds no sign of the missionary's wife or the sweeper boy, but find Mr. Harrison's car in the driveway of the house. He feels a little weak and frightened, who does not expect guardian to return so soon and has, in fact almost forgotten his existence. But at the sight of his guardian he forgot all about the chaat shop, Somi and Ranbir. When Mr. Harrison questioned him about his delay, Rusty lies that he has been for a walk, but his guardian suspects that he has gone to bazaar and warns him about the place that it is not right place for people like they. The younger generation of the colonizers, born into the colonial state, identified as a colonizer and destined to be superior, Just as the colonized is identified as inferior, timid, and others at their own land.

The gentlefriendship of Somi and his friends not only encourages him to break the barriers between Indian and European section but also the illogical statement of colonials of not to mix with natives. As his guardian, Mr. Harrison always told teach him: "You belong here, to this house, this road, and these people. Don't go where you don't belong"

Rusty who wants to argue but fear of Harrison holds him back. But his cowardice does him no good, his guardian takes supple Malacca cane and beats Rusty badly which has burned up the flesh. He lays groaning on his bed until the pain has eased. He has pitied himself and thought to cry, but he knows futility of tears. But the pain and the sense of injustice he feels are both real. Angry with his guardian and with the servant and most of all with himself. Rusty has buried his head in his pillow and is trying to shut out reality, he has forced a dream, in which he is thrashing Mr Harrison until he begs for mercy.

Rusty has remembered his promise, that he will play Holi with Ranbir, meets him in the jungle when he beats the drum. From the distant bazaar comes a new music, many drums and voices, faint but steady, growing in rhythm and excitement. The sound conveys something to Rusty, something wild and emotional, something that belongs to his dream-world, and on a sudden impulse he sprung out of bed. For one day, Rusty has forgotten his guardian and the missionary's wife and supple Malacca cane, he climbs out of the window and runs over the dew-wet grass, down the path behind the house, over the hill and into the jungle.

Ranbir and Rusty moves round the hill, keeping in the fringe of the jungle until they have skirted not only the European community but also the smart shopping centre. They have come down dirty little side-streets where the walls of houses, stained with the wear and tear of many years of meagre habitation, were now have been stained again with the vivid colours of Holi, and reaches Clock Tower. Children have formed groups. Ranbir meets some friends and greets with great hilarity. Rusty is subjected to pumping from all sides by a horde of children, his shirt and pyjamas, have drenched through, stuck to his skin, his shirt has torn and came away when someone has gripped and tugged it. Someone has thrown dust on his face and body with full force, his tender, unexposed skin has smarted beneath the onslaught. His body is full of sooty black, streaked with red and even his mouth is full of dust and colours. These incidents bewildered Rusty more. Rusty enquires Somi about his involvement. But, Somi is different to that of Ranbir, he wears turban but Ranbir won't. Somi has a bangle to his wrist which projects him as a Sikh and they won't play Holi.

Rusty is tired. He is hungry, he has lost his shirt and shoes, his feet are bruised, and he notices these things, for he has been caught up in the excitement of the colour game, overcome by an exhilaration he has never known. His fair hair is tousled and streaked with colour, and his eyes are wide with wonder. He is exhausted now, but he is happy. He wants this to go on forever,

this day of feverish emotion, this life in another world. He does not want to leave the forest, it is safe, its earth has soothed him, gathered him in so that the pain of his body has become a pleasure. He does not want to go home.

Rusty's guardian Harrison recognizes the boy spending the day in bazaar got angry and questioned – “the years of training come to nothing”. I've tried to bring you up as an Englishman, as your father would have wished. You are no better than the sweeper boy. Rusty flares into a temper, showing some spirit for the first in his life says: “I'm no better than the sweeper boy, but I'm as good as him! I'm as good as you! I'm as good as anyone!”. Rusty leaves his guardian's house and walks towards the road to the bazaar.

The Room on the Roof provides an intimate study of an adolescent caught in the crossfire of two distinct cultures. And the fact that this adolescent, Rusty is Ruskin himself becomes rather irrelevant. He is simply a lonely, melancholic adolescent, who had been deprived of his mother's love as she is with her love for fun and frolic, had deserted his noble father, his idol having –

Hyperion's curls; the front of Jove himself:
A combination and a form indeed
Where every God did seem to set his seal
To give the world assurance of a man

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