Abstract

Despite the fact that Ruskin Bond is considered one of the foremost authors in Indo-Anglian literature, no serious scholarship has hitherto been devoted to his works. This is why in this thesis there is a conspicuous absence of notes referring to other commentators on Ruskin. He was born to a British father (Aubrey Alexander Bond) and an Anglo-Indian (?) mother (Edith Dorothy) at Kasauli Military Hospital, in Himachal Pradesh, India, on May 19, 1934. He is unquestionably aware of his father being British but his dubious notion of Edith’s descent is the reason why I have assigned a question mark to his mother’s genealogical attribute. My reading of his works seeks to problematize his notion of parentage and impressions of the self.

Ruskin’s life (and, for that matter, his semi-autobiographical works) is an allegory of the colonial aftermath. For him India is an atmosphere where in his youthful days he overcame daunting rejection in order to work out a congenial absorption. Suitable absorption accommodates both integral and differential styles of living. It caters to “identity” formation in so far as the term refers to both similarities with and differences from (the) other(s). His is an odd but exemplary attempt at absorption of a member of a minority ethnic community whose role in the shaping of the postcolonial Indian psyche is not seriously addressed. This is an attempt to explore the dialogue between the biographical and authorial selves of the man whose subjectivity is informed by the fantasies of space and time. I will be reading texts of Ruskin Bond, selected from across his writing career (he is still writing), in an attempt to diagnose the Anglo-Indian author’s
psychic tensions in postcolonial India. I have used the term “postcolonial” to mark time right from British colonization of the country.

The memories of socio-political discrimination that Ruskin suffered in India for being an Anglo-Indian underwrite his repressed concerns. He wishes to allay his anxieties by trying to signify defiance of the functional agencies of those parameters which become ironically active the more he attempts a symptomatic mastery of their inductive energies. For a nostalgic writer, nevertheless, the unconscious, which is shaped by the impressions of the experiences of negotiation between double inheritances, exerts a problematic but more discerning influence on Ruskin’s literary self. My analyses of his works seek to bring out the constant presence of this repressed anxiety and a psychological compulsion to dramatize the Self-Other dynamics as a symptomatic method to acquire a deferred conviction of identity. I would take liberty to call this the “historicity of the unconscious” insofar as the continuity of the dilemma can be traced in works as old as *The Room on the Roof* (1956) to *A Flight of Pigeons* (1975) to “Wilson’s Bridge” (1999).

According to Jacques Lacan, Freud’s twentieth century French disciple, in psychic development the infant’s mirror stage is a time when “the subject anticipates in a mirage the maturation of his power” (*Ecrits*, 2). In conformity with Lacan, whose psychoanalytic theory will be the tool of my interpretation, the later Ruskin is to be found already there in his early writings. He anticipates his maturity in childhood tensions. And since the past itself is based upon anticipation of the future, all present moments of his life are characterized by a temporal dialectic which I refer to as the historicity of the unconscious.
The notions of alterity in the post-1857 imperial period in India were so informed by an ontological sameness that the British government became excessively disposed to mapping their overseas dominion in terms of their domestic features. The consequence of which was the birth of an Anglicized Indian elite who were conveniently chosen for passing over the responsibility of governance of the country after Independence. The consideration of the other in the likeness of the self had its inherent psychological weaknesses. Here Emmanuel Levinas’s idea of alterity appears not to contradict Lacan’s notion of the self’s desire for and fear of the other. When the relationship with the other moves from the infinite responsibility arising from the shock of absolute alterity, to the responsibility limited by the third, and finally to the fear of justice in which I take myself into account as well as the other, we are left with what Brian Treanor calls creative fidelity. The restriction of the responsibility to the absolute other becomes explicit when the interest of the self is endangered by the other others’ demand on the self. The 1857 Mutiny (the setting for the author’s novella, *A Flight of Pigeons*, discussed in detail in chapter five) brought such a politically charged restrictive ethics to the fore. In Lacanian terms, the desire for the other is endangered by the fear of the others’ demand on the inflexible accounts of the self. If the birth of the Eurasians (the racially mixed Anglo-Indians) is ascribed to the initial British behaviour informed by the Levinasian attitude of transcendental responsibility to the essential other, their very existence in the post-1857 imperial era in India held a symbolic threat to that part of the self which had been dangerously compromised to the ethical demands of alterity. The British attitude having veered from a quasi-transcendental notion of judicial alterity to a convenient idea of ontological sameness, the Eurasians (who reminded the colonists of the ominous
compromises they have made and constituted a low middle-class community that reflected the downside of the self) were replaced by the Oxbridge educated Anglicised Indians in British favour. The psychological anxiety that engendered the Anglo-Indian mind due to the socio-political consequences of this attitudinal change is least represented in contemporary fiction. And if represented at all – by John Masters and Manohar Malgonkar – they have assumed binary types. Only in Ruskin Bond we identify the problematics of the dialogic nature of the anxiety. The quest to know the other both from the self and other’s point of view has been pursued by our author to an everlastingly deferred conclusion.

In the binary archetypes of identity seeking quests, we scarcely encounter the Anglo-Indian’s dilemma as suffering from an inconclusive dialogue between the constitutive essences of the other and self. A partisan notion of sameness weighs on either sides of the interface in both the cases. Nor do the characters consider the essential dimensions of identity that characterize selfhood and identity beyond the elitist forms of political power. That the psychoanalytic nature of the dialogue can change in a less politically charged, less class conscious, social stratum which was available in small towns of India (in one of which Ruskin deghettoized himself), was not envisaged by other writers. Coming only to Ruskin Bond’s semi-autobiographical writings that we find the dialogue taking a more problematic and exhaustive turn.