Chapter 2

Sense of Exile: An Anglo-Indian Context

The Sahib in India during the hey-day of the East India Company behaved, when not rapaciously concerned in improving his financial status, in an affable manner, often intermarrying and adopting the local inhabitants' art of living. The growth of the Company's dominions and later the involvement of the Crown's servants in Indian affairs changed the friendly intercourse between the Sahib and the Indian to a more reserved approach. In *The Plain Tales from the Hills*, Kipling points out that the Sahib sought a self-contained English life in India. The reason for this retreat is the Sahib's inability to leave a permanent mark on the country he has decided to rule. Thus the Club and the Hill Station become not only an area of retrenchment, but also form the sanctuary of the Empire. It represents symbolically the Anglo-Indian novelist's acceptance of the recessional period of British imperialism in India. Kipling's Sahibs withdrew from India and sought refuge in ghettos, from the alien world around them. In *A Passage to India*, the English community at the ghetto of Chandrapore have expressed in their attitude a form of petrifaction in their relations to Indians, which Forster maintains, in *Abinger Harvest*, to be the product of an undeveloped heart. Ruskin's desire to deghettoize himself is a critique of the imperial practice and symbol of the developmental process of the heart, negotiating with anxieties of identity.

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 something like "disponibilite" (Treanor 202) and 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 John Masters’ *Bhowani Junction*, we are presented a Eurasian family at the railway town of Bhowani in 1946. Two Eurasians in the novel, Patrick Taylor, officer in the Traffic Department of the Delhi Deccan Railway and Victoria Jones, subaltern in the WAC (I) express their diverging points of view of the social and political conflicts which beset their lives during the turbulent year. Patrick, who was initially Victoria’s fiancé, subscribed to the thesis of the ontological sameness of the colonial perspective. Being born out of a compromise of the purity myth of the superior racial ego of the colonists, the self/other dichotomy in him was more weighed towards factors that placed the social, cultural and economic bearings of the white drop in his veins in apparent convenience. The upper caste, Anglicised Hindu elite became conscious of the increasing superiority of their otherness since their emulation of the colonist self’s persuasions of sameness had begun to produce tangible results in terms of political and economic power. They started using caste prejudices to secure their privileges which were actually gained through the same means that privileged the upper middle class in Britain. Lest the Eurasians of lighter shade exploit the archetypal racial prejudices of the consensual other’s psyche, the Hindu elite used the bogey of caste against the Eurasians in the same manner as they had learnt
to wield it against other Indians during the confused administration of the imperial rule. Such odds against the white Eurasian were problematized further by the Nationalist effusions against the Raj during the pre-Independence days. In such a maelstrom, Patrick thought it convenient to identify with the British half of his lineage, unable to read the colonial anxieties of racial compromises that had set the Anglo-Saxon purity myth once again against him. Victoria on the other hand judged that her destiny is to side with the Indians. She wished her colour to burn under the tropical sun and finally replaced Patrick with Ranjit Kasel, a railway officer subordinate to Patrick at Bhowani, to bestow her favours on. In these 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 these writers. The disgruntled Eurasian girl Ruby Miranda in Malgonkar's *Combat of Shadows* tries to accept her Indianness out of frustration of her failed desire to marry the Englishman, Henry Winton. Coming only to Ruskin Bond's semi-autobiographical writings that we find the dialogue taking a more problematic and exhaustive turn.

Paul Scott's novel *The Day of the Scorpion* embodies the novelist's intentions which range from a criticism of the lives of the English in India to the problem of class distinction among the English in England. The frame of the novel is British India in the
years 1941 to 1945; the war years when the losses in Asia had sunk British prestige to its lowest and had made the presence of the British as an imperial power insignificant.

Indian nationalism had risen to a commanding force which eventually forced the British Government to concede independence. The sahibs fought desperately against concessions from home, but to no avail. Opinion in Britain was against Empire and many intellectuals pressed this point home effectively so that among many Members of Parliament Empire became more of an embarrassment than a matter of pride. In such a context, Aubrey told young Ruskin upon the beach at Balachadi in Gujarat that they would be leaving for England after the war. He intended to sell his stamp collection to finance their way back to a place that the young boy had hardly any idea of belonging. That Ruskin could not equate with the notions of spatial identity that characterized the sensibilities of a British father who delivered the interests of the Raj became clear when he made the protagonist of the short story, “Escape from Java”, end up his postcolonial flight from Indonesia to England in India. He dramatizes the conflict between his sense of Indianness and the paternal sense of “home” through the artifice of imagined eventualities; anxieties are sought to be allayed in circumstances of fictional detachment.

The second plot of Scott’s novel revolves around the alleged rape of Daphne Manners, the niece of the former lieutenant-general of an Indian province. She was allegedly dishonoured by an Anglicised Indian called Hari Kumar. Hari came from a good family. His father had settled in England after becoming a widower and had sent him to a good public school – Chillingborough. At this established school for the gentry, Hari was groomed to behave as an English gentleman. After his father died, he returned to India. At Ranpur, where he lived with his aunt, he came to be acquainted with Daphne.
They fell in love, but this meant the rejection by Daphne of Police Superintendent Merrick who was also in love with the young Englishwoman. One evening at Bibighar Park, Daphne and Hari make love. A gang of hooligans scuffle with Hari and rape Daphne. Merrick gets the wind of the whole affair and arrests Hari, satisfying his wounded pride.

Hari being groomed in an English public school belonged to an upper class, entry to which was barred to board-school educated Merrick. By mishandling Hari on the basis of race Merrick is really attacking the upper middle-class society at home. Here then is the fulcrum of the novel. Merrick's indignation at Hari suggested the failure of the English society in England. The disgruntled Jimmy Porter in John Osborne's critique of the post second world war English society, *Look Back in Anger*, diagnoses the English social malaise which brought about the decline of her Empire. The implementation of E. M. Forster's "undeveloped heart" is distinctly noticeable in Scott's criticism of English society in India; the root of which being predominantly a problem of the structure of the English middle-classes and their upbringing in England. Scott's ultimate message is that the Empire in India be dismantled so that English men and women can regenerate their society in Britain. Such a postcolonial context in India and Britain throws into significant relief the direction Ruskin Bond's identity-seeking quest takes when he moves out of the English ghetto and declasses himself among newly made Dehra Dun friends. But the experiences of Indian Nationalist persecution (which I have referred to in detail in chapter five) and aspirations of being a writer in English (for which 1940s India was a dead end) led Ruskin to toy with the idea of going to England.
Ruskin remembered his father’s words that he belonged to England. Like the protagonist of Janet Frame’s *The Edge of the Alphabet*, he acceded to the suggestion of going there on the expectations that he could detach himself from the insidious anxieties of the self and become able to fulfill his desires of being a published author in English. But it was not an easy thing to leave a place he had grown a familial attachment with. On the verge of setting out for the new land in 1951, he represents his psychological dilemma in the story, “The Coral Tree.” The authorial narrator holds a dialogue with his Other, who appears in the form of a dark, little girl. The dialogue eventually becomes the site of representation in the Symbolic order and restores a required sense of detachment to the fictionalizing process of the autobiographical imagoes. The tree as a metaphorical replacement for the sense of rootedness is one of the major prototypes of being to Ruskin, the Armenian-American writer, William Saroyan, who had a substantial influence on our author, and another writer, A E Coppard, whose influence Ruskin acknowledged himself. Saroyan in one of his aesthetic musings maintains:

> How do you write? My answer is that I start with the trees and keep right on straight ahead. I start with these companions of this place each fixed into the soil of where it is, and sometime the rock or rocks, and very little else, and after that, the going is not only easy, it is very nearly rollicking, for the tree is a thing of great attachments, and it puts forth all manner of leaves, abundantly, and each leaf is the same, but not precisely so, so that noticing this repetitious imprecision leads to everything else, especially life, especially speculation […] (Where the Bones Go 34).

To Ruskin, the coral tree in his maternal grandfather’s house in Dehra Dun is the anchor around which his emotional concerns of departure rally in the story. The narrator would be going to England to find a job. Not that he wanted to go, but he had to. “I was in my twenties and I had begun to earn a living and felt I had certain responsibilities,” says the
author. Perhaps he should follow the footsteps of those of his community who have left the country after Independence. Besides, he has his father’s words in mind. He tries to reassure himself, not once, but twice, that “I was the only one left” and “I am the last to go”. At twenty, the authorial self engages in a debate between his communal commitments and private desires. Whether they are mutually exclusive or subsumable ideas like the Symbolic and the Imaginary constituents of the authorial self he appears to be undecided about. The brand of self-reflexive irony that engenders the narration can be called, to borrow Franco Moretti’s words, “spell of indecision” (Ch 9).

The night before his departure is hot and rainy. The author sleeps in his verandah and awakes in the morning to be greeted by a girl in his compound: “a small, dark girl, her eyes big and black, her pigtails tied up in a bright red ribbon; and she was fresh and clean like the rain and the red earth.” The conversation the author has with her is what I call the “dialogue”, revelatory of the anxious identity-seeking concerns of the self and the other.

“Can I do anything for you?” I asked, stretching my limbs.

“Do you stay near here?”

She nodded.

“With your parents?”

With great assurance she said, “Yes. But I can stay on my own.”

“You’re like me,” I said, and for a while I forgot about being an old man of twenty. “I like to do things on my own. I’m going away today.”

“Oh,” she said, a little breathlessly.

“Would you care to go to England?”

“I want to go everywhere,” she said, “to America and Africa and Japan and Honolulu.”
The author eventually finds out what has driven the girl to his place on that rain-soaked morning: she wants some flowers of the coral tree that stands in his garden, but the blooming branches being higher up and beyond her reach, she appears to be beseeching help. He climbs up to one of the lower branches and snaps a flowering twig for the girl. He suffers moral qualms about breaking it because “the wood was young and green, and I had to twist it several times before it snapped.” He does it, anyway, for the little girl and seeks her approval for it in order to allay his scruples. He is instantly seized by an overwhelming emotion: “I felt a sudden nostalgic longing for childhood and an urge to remain behind in my grandfather’s house with its tangled memories and ghosts of yesteryear.” When he is about to set off to the station in a hired tonga, he expresses his desire to meet the girl again:

“I’ll see you in London,” she said. “Or America or Japan. I want to go everywhere.”

“I’m sure you will,” I said. “And perhaps I’ll come back and we’ll meet again in this garden. That would be nice, wouldn’t it?” (10).

The girl stands on the damp, red earth beside the gravel path as he rides away. She waves the coral twig at him. The scarlet blossoms fall down along with the red ribbon of her pigtail on the red earth where she stands.

The significant last image underscores the inseparability of the girl and the tree. She becomes the coral tree with the blossoms at her feet. The red ribbon, symbolic of the author’s desired sense of binding to the place, fuses with the red earth and scarlet blossoms like the security girdle Rakhi (in the author’s story, “Cherry Tree”) makes with pebbles to secure the cherry sapling in her garden. Incidentally, Ruskin’s “Cherry Tree”
written originally for the children in the 1970s and published by Caroline House of Pennsylvania, USA in the gracefully rendered illustrations of Allan Eitzen shares some sentiments with A E Coppard’s story, "The Cherry Tree" (Coppard 31-35).

In Ruskin’s story, Rakhi, with her grandfather, plants a cherry seed in her rocky Mussoorie garden at the age of six, grows up with the seedling and at the age of ten cherishes to tell her future children “how Dada and I planted this cherry tree many years ago when I was six.” The ending of the story is conceived in the same vein in which Ruskin cares for the nostalgic trip to where his “Father’s trees still grow in Dehra”. In Coppard’s story, Johnny Flynn and Pomona’s mother used to tell the children her nostalgic yearning for the cherry tree in her father’s garden. Of course, she decorated her images with romantic inventions of her own, but the cherry tree in the minds of her children “became a heavenly symbol of her old lost home.” The trees for each of these authors have a specific quality that invokes connotations of the particularity of geographical space and memories of personal relations that have constituted the anthropological layers of the unconscious. Like the mother in Coppard’s tale, Ruskin’s Rakhi and the authorial narrator in “My Father’s Trees” express wishes for perpetuating the sensibilities inherent in their arboreal experiences among their progeny or, for that matter, among the future readers. Given the implied reference to specificity of geographical space in these images, it appears that the authorial intention is to combine ancestry with location in a search for the ontological roots of belonging. In their attempt to restore a sense of total reality, however, their sensibilities get fractured by the insistent demands of the Imaginary to plug the slips of consciousness that undermined any sense of belonging.
In Coppard’s story, Johnny and Pomona’s mother used to embellish the cherry-tree myth with imaginary frills of grandeur. Self-reflexive irony is directed at her romantic sense of identity when her children contrive an ingenious birthday gift for their mother; they defoliate the evergreen “bush” in their garden and create a replica of plenitude by hanging on its branches cartloads of ripe cherries bought from the market. The contrast between the imaginary cherry tree in her father’s garden and the evergreen bush in the “dull” garden of her new family serves to critique a comfortable sense of belonging she appeared to nurture in her mind. In Ruskin’s “Cherry Tree”, Rakhi’s desire to narrate her childhood memories associated with the cherry tree to her future children stems from apprehensions of change in scene and sense of belonging. She feels it necessary to record her past carefully lest it betrays her memory. In “My Father’s Trees”, however, the authorial narrator delves into his past and finds identifiable links with the place, Dehra Dun, where he and his father planted the trees once; the same father who tried to instill in the child a sense of belonging to England. Perhaps, this is the inherited paternal obligation that he refers to as “responsibilities” at the beginning of “The Coral Tree”. The material prospects associated with living in England in the 1950s vis-à-vis Dehra Dun reflected the manly concerns of independence in the author in his twenties. He continues to persuade his mind against the emotional attachments of the place he grew up in:

There would be work, interviews, a job, a different kind of life; so many things, that this small bungalow of my grandfather’s would be remembered fitfully, in rare moments of reflection

(*Collected Fiction 8*).

I use the phrase “manly concerns” as a substitute for “masculine” because I presume the latter to be a more gendered word than is applicable here. This is not to obviate the
psychoanalytical claims of independence ushered into a child through the prohibitive father and the instrumental mother’s purported initiation of her child into language. One needs remember at this point that if Ruskin is nurtured on the image of England as his father’s land in spite of sensibilities like “My Father’s Trees”, he had chosen to return to India after three years of lonely sojourn there upon the seeming rationale that India, nevertheless, was his mother’s land. This sort of sensibility is not unique to Ruskin Bond, but is commonly shared by the domiciled Anglo-Indian community whenever they tried to come to terms with the ambivalent nature of their identity. Reflecting on this dilemma, the Anglo-Indian author Herbert Stark in his much quoted book *Hostages to India* acknowledges:

> If England is the land of our fathers, India is the land of our mothers. If to us England is a hallowed memory, India is a living verity. If England is the land of our pilgrimage India is the land of our homes (140-141).

The linguistic endorsement for independence referred to by Ruskin as a desire to be a writer in his memoir has, perhaps, an oblique and veiled allusion in the italicized phrase: “There would be work […] so many things” (italics mine). The image of the West as a centre of production for the author in the 1950s led him to choose self-exile that he prefers to identify as independence. When the pigtailed girl in “The Coral Tree” is asked whether she lives with her parents, she says, “Yes. But I can stay on my own.” The narrator identifies himself with the girl, despite difference in age, and says: “I like to do things on my own. I’m going away today”. The consequences of his self-exile are the birth of a sense of alienation, a sensitive realization of the emotional value of living in one’s own home (i.e. India and especially Dehra Dun) and a coterminous act of linguistic
representation of such feelings in a book (The Room on the Roof) that brings partial
fruition to the desire of independence.

Self-exile festers into an experience of exile when, according to Raymond
Williams (Culture and Society), the sense of pain cannot be obviated. Principles begin to
shape in such an unromantic manner that Ruskin’s urges for communal affiliation that he
could have mistaken for politics of space undergo a reorientation towards personal
experiences broader than any sectarian illusions. “Home” is a concept, a contested site of
symbolic representation that is shaped by multiple influences over a range of scales. On a
household scale Anglo-Indian domesticity has been influenced by both European and
Indian ideas of home. On a national scale Anglo-Indians identified with Britain and/or
India as home both before and after Independence. The politicization of the homeland
concept attuned the Anglo-Indian imagination to consider Britain as fatherland and India
as motherland. On a diasporic scale the Anglo-Indians have become more diffused as a
community. Ruskin’s public feelings on this scale tend to verge on a sense of
global/universal belonging. His conception of space purportedly tends to conflate the
“global” with the ‘universal” as a way of emphasizing the primacy of human intimacy
among themselves and with nature irrespective of ideological formulations like Nation,
Ethnicity and Race. In the way of identifying such tendencies in the author one cannot
overlook the importance of the dialectics and psychological debates that lie behind such
attitudinal developments. These debates travel across different scales and posit Ruskin’s
textually embedded concerns of identity into what Homi Bhabha calls the “third space”
(Location of Culture, 38), the “in-between space” between the Self and the Other. What
the author’s Other, subjectivized in the small girl in “The Coral Tree”, claims as her
ability ("I can stay on my own") does not necessarily entail a physical sense of geographical dislocation as an imagined desire to participate in the process of what Aijaz Ahmad calls the "excess of belonging" (In Theory, 130). When asked, if she would "care to go to England," she wished to go everywhere, "to America and Africa and Japan and Honolulu." That is the authorial Other speaking in a dialogue with himself, trying to live up to his moral conscience of commitment to his "responsibilities" of independence in a communal manner. I have already referred to the post-Independence dispersal of the Anglo-Indian community into a global diaspora, a phenomenon that makes the author's state of indecision between belonging and unbelonging or an "excess of belonging" so relevant. There is a slight indication, however, of an incipient hope of resolution of the ambivalence. At the final hour of leave-taking, the authorial narrator in "The Coral Tree" expresses his desire to come back and meet the girl again in "this garden" of the coral tree: "That would be nice, wouldn't it?" The tone of self-assurance inherent in the rhetorical question undoubtedly marks the author's preference to come back to where his childhood or the coral tree is. If one chooses to call this a sense of rootedness that ensures a feeling of security to all imaginary perambulations, then Saroyan's aesthetic reflection on identity distinguishes Ruskin's authorial sense of belonging: "I start with the trees and keep right on straight ahead."

In England, Ruskin realized how pressing are the urges of past memories and longings to visit them are to a writer. Scraping together time from the mundane routine of odd jobs he had to do for a living, Ruskin translated his childhood memories of growing up in Dehra Dun into a bestseller, The Room on the Roof. A sense of spatial rootedness intensified by physical exile was central to Ruskin's muse in England. It is convenient to
fondle the memory of place from a distance than to go back to it to be disappointed by its veritable absence. Discriminations, hostility, and political tensions associated with geographical space fracture signifiers of place into non-meaning. The signified of spatial belonging of the subject is barred from its signifier place so that spatial existence becomes a nullity. The hill station graveyards in India speak of that metonymic void. The absence of such objective existence of place is complemented by the subject’s desire for it in fantasy. Exile is one of the metaphorical ways to revive the topographies of the historical past. In many stories, Ruskin inscribes historical places of insubstantial content with phantom houses, spooky furniture and ghostly inmates. I have discussed one such story, “Whispering in the Dark”, in chapter four. The vivid conjuration of place in The Room on the Roof, which is written in exile, becomes a crisis for Ruskin in Vagrants in the Valley when the familiar dimensions of the place undergo mutation, and inscriptions of the real past seem to slip away. In the next chapter, I will demonstrate the birth of the crisis and the authorial means of negotiating with it.