

Of Identity And Self: An Explication Of Portrayal Of Children Protagonists In Ruskin Bond's "Chachi's Funeral" And "Panther's Moon"

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Citation: Kajori Rajkhowa, et.al (2024). Of Identity And Self: An Explication Of Portrayal Of Children Protagonists In Ruskin Bond's "Chachi's Funeral" And "Panther's Moon", *Educational Administration: Theory and Practice*, 30(11) 1920-1925

Doi: 10.53555/kuev.v30i11.10116

ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

When it comes to comprehending attributes of intricacies pertaining to one's identity and associated selfhood, existential conditions become of paramount importance. Contemporary world of manifold theoretical paradigmatic philosophical foundations has reiterated a rapid rise in diversified philosophical ideas- at times, almost in layered presentations. Of different rising concerns, a concretized position of an individual in a society while encountering different entanglements of culture, and spatiality of physical conditions, remains foremost. Literary writings, wrapped up in ramifications of various theoretical pronouncements, vividly showcase how young children tend to echo larger societal tendencies through their caricatures. Considering writers who have made attempts to delve deep into psychic reiterations of children, the notable stalwart in the field of short-story writing, Ruskin Bond, needs no second mention. An erudite scholar in his own right, Bond, in his numerous short stories have tried to encapsulate even minutest of details related to children, making their characterization one of his strongest suite. Hinging on the critical idea of "social subject" put forward by notable cultural theorist, Stuart Hall, this research critically attempts to understand how portrayal of children characters in, "Chachi's Funeral" and "Panther's Moon," Bond, in turn, leads to presentation of their identity- one that is so deeply rooted in their societal characteristic traits. Doing so, this research also attempts at comprehending different intricately intertwined nuances related to identity as a critical concept, explicating its inherent tendencies in light of post-modernist ideas. The research employs a qualitative methodology, in that, it makes a critical evaluation of the stories using different literary and theoretical terminologies of research related to humanities.

Keywords: children, identity, theoretical, post-modern, qualitative

Identity has been one of the significant features which reiterates how a particular individual is placed in different structural categorizations of a society. A Sneak-peak at the evolvment of various otherwise concealed tendencies of identity as an entity since period of great Humanist thinkers like that of Descartes and Locke unmasks a visibly evident feature- that is was very much essentialist. Earlier periods showcased identity to be a very confined entity with its own intricate structures. However, with rise in different literary periods and critical concepts, particular in the contemporary period of post-modernism, one can sense that it has moved away from its earlier understanding of being essential and concretized in its outlook. The current-day scenario has denoted a drastically alternating feature of it being influenced by multiple external conditions and societal tendencies. While core features pertaining to identity and ontological existence of an individual always remain almost same in their outlook, modern-day influence of society and various other existential tendencies become equally vital in constructing an altogether different identity- one that wears an alternate outlook to what a specific individual comprehends in mind. A prominent feature in line with postulation of individual children identity as a result of caricaturing them in his different literary writings, Ruskin Bond has significantly carved out his own trajectory of artistic creation. Of all, his short stories act as a testimony to his greatness as a writer; a writer whose estimate cannot easily made in broader corpus of canons.

As this research attempts at understanding his portrayal of children in his two short stories, namely, "Chachi's Funeral" and "Panther's Moon," it also, thus, showcases subtleties of Bond's writings- those seeped in his deeper probe in delicate threads of fictional presentation. At a surface level, both the stories appear to be mere explication of how two children protagonists march their way forward, accomplishing important yet mundane tasks. With that being out in context, a deeper probe into their essentialities reveal a very interesting feature- a psychic introspection of these children by Bond, making readers realize his inherent concerns and goals pertaining to larger grounds of human existentiality. This gets beautifully summed up by Aggarwal as she comments on his creations

Bond fabricates a simple unambitious, innocent world where man does not cut each other's throat for his advancement. His characters struggle hard for their survival but the 'weariness, fever and fret have not disillusioned them. The plots of his novels and stories emerge from the silent sympathies of human soul which he has stored up in his consciousness. (18)

"Chachi's Funeral" is one of the most poignant stories penned down by Bond which focusses on intricate connection between construction of identity of the central protagonist and the external societal surrounding he was placed in. Bond makes a very striking revelation at the initial lines of the story when it was stated, "Chachi died at 6 PM on Wednesday 5 April and came to life again exactly twenty minutes later. That is how it happened" (*Collected Short Stories 2*). This sets the keynote for different events to follow- most of which get presented in an overlapping stance to reveal manifold psychic intricacies of the young ten-year-old protagonist, Sunil. The tale, at a rudimentary level, can be argued to be a delicate bond between Sunil and his aunt which, across different spatiality and temporal boundaries, cuts across diverse thematic concerns with its presentation. As a general phenomenon, it can well be stated that a healthy relationship between children and elders call for cordial bonds between them, often at junctures which can lead to conducive mental and physical growth. However, Bond showcases that chachi, although had a strong liking for young children, depicted a cold behaviour towards Sunil, the reason being he was intellectually superior and attractive when it comes to appearance than Chachi's native kids. As it was stated, so much was her aversion towards Sunil that "...she resented having to cook for the boy while both his parents went out to office jobs" (*Collected Short Stories 128*).

As a comforting space, presentation of Sunil's cousin, Madhu, becomes remarkably significant in comprehending Sunil's identity in the narrative as the space which has been given to him was one of loneliness. The story does not find any frequent mention of his parents, indicating a slow process of showcasing Sunil's dangling identity that tends to find a secluded space in the narrative. It has to be comprehended that lack of depiction of Sunil's parents in the narrative attains a very critical outlook in relation to his identity, in that, bond between children and parents always remains indispensable in development of an amiable space of living. Life of Sunil to have not liked by his aunt, to have not received warmth and love of his parents, in this specific context, becomes one echoing "insecure childhood," "loneliness" that espouses "utter alienation" (Jyothi et al. 36-37). In comprehending Sunil's loneliness, Bond's delves deep into his efforts to maintain human relations with his other family members like that of cousins and friends, indicating an effort to remain interconnected despite being lonely in actuality which glaringly leads to a construction of his secondary identity- one that is wrapped in his existential dilemma.

Role played by physical/lived spaces and other related spatial dimensions in an individual's life always becomes paramount as to how that specific person gets placed within larger rubric of a societal structure. In relation to Sunil's efforts to be in contact with his cousin, his aunt, and other friends, it can well be argued that his identity, becomes a created result of his interactions with them, becoming a "sociological subject" (Hall 3). Bond deliberately presents a dual relationship of Sunil with his cousin and Sunil with his aunt so that it creates a specific division between the two relationships, one which was founded on attachment and the other, on aversion. It was also presented by Bond that Sunil extremely hated "a scolding or a cuff across the head" (*Collected Short Stories 128*). This specific delineation of what he hated can be attributed to Bond's deeper probe into psychological nuances of the character. Instances of playfulness can also be observed in the story when Sunil was seen to be deliberately creating acts of nuisance with the intention of irritating chachi despite knowing her aversion towards him. So much was she annoyed with him that he was beaten up badly one day leading to him even contemplating her death- a sign indicative of his inner frustration towards her. This instance occurred as Sunil broke a jar containing honey in his attempt to grab it from the top shelf.

That stated, Bond artistically presents a scene of confession of love and care towards one another after that- one that brings in a kind of reconciliation between them. Also, Bond's presentation of Madhu, his cousin's entrance in his room, during Sunil's effort to get a knife for killing chachi leads to a completely different dimension- an entrance which drastically changes the entire scenario. Bond's presents a very remarkable conversation between the two which vividly reiterates tussle between them

"She hates me, I know. Well, I hate her too. This time I'll kill her."
How are you going to do it?"

"I'll stab with this,' He showed her the knife."

"Three times, in the heart."

"But you'll be caught. The CID are very clever. Do you want to go to jail?"

"Won't they hang me?"

"They don't hang small boys. They send them to boarding-schools"

"I don't want to go to a boarding-school."

"Then better not kill your 'Chachi.' At least not this way. I'll show you how" (*Collected Short Stories* 29)

Sunil's identity, in relation to his position in the society, becomes a result of his interaction of various constituent parts of his external living conditions. Another primary inference in this regard is a comprehension of how identity, since its fixed nature during earlier literary periods, has deviated itself from a very concretized position to something which hinges on interactions, societal connections, and also modern-day spatial positioning of an individual. Bond's presentation of multiple versions of Sunil- of creating mischiefs, of developing mutual bond of compassion with his cousin, of hatred when being hit by others, go onto indicate different dimensions of a young child which relate to establishment of his personality in larger framework of the narrative. Psychic revelation of Sunil also very artistically gets portrayed by bond when he made him feel guilty for his thoughts to kill his chachi, leading readers to realize that human emotions can flare up during fits of anger which can even lead to catastrophic results, often detrimental in nature. Stuart Hall, explicating this idea, makes a critical pronouncement as to what basic understanding of identity implies

I use 'identity' to refer to the meeting point, the point of suture, between on the one hand the discourses and practices which attempt to 'interpellate,' speak to us or hail us into place as the social subjects of particular discourses, and on the other hand, the processes which produce subjectivities, which construct us as subjects which can be 'spoken.' Identities are thus points of temporary attachment to the subject positions which discursive practices construct for us. (5-6)

It was also very artistically portrayed that an inner sense of guilt tormented Sunil in Bon's depiction of tears rolling down Sunil's cheeks, leading readers towards the end when he was seen rushing towards his chachi and making the following remark, "oh Chachi! Shouted Sunil. He rushed to her and tried to get his arms around her ample waist" (*Collected Short Stories* 4). As readers were made to learn, there was a mild stare of reassurance from his chachi which is indicative of inherent love that she has for him, a bond which immensely helps in structuring Sunil's identity in larger realm of societal interactions with others. This story is one of the very simplistic portrayals of a child's innocent personality which seems to get affected by stern disciplinary behaviour by his elders- a display which appears very common among little children. That Bond's children protagonists always are shown in good light, revealing their innocent personality, again finds a notable manifestation in Sunil's character when he was shown to be repenting at the end which is also a reflection of his innate genuine self- one that leads to development of his identity.

"Panther's Moon," another mesmerizing short story by Bond, gets set in one of his most recurrent and famous physical locations- the foot hills of lush green Himalayas. Although the tale has been divided into nine different episodes, it entirely revolves around different happenings and experiences of the young protagonist, Bisnu, the twelve-year-old boy in his village. Bond, apart from his concerns related to depiction of various details concerning life of Bisnu, also makes a heart-wrenching revelation of different hardships and struggles associated with lives of individuals who resided in the small village of Manjari. It was stated that these people heavily relied on rainfall for growth of their crops which is also indicative of their village life. Bisnu's portrayal attains an important dimension in the story as he has been shown to regulate different activities of his family from early in the morning, extending his help towards his sister, Pooja, and his mother after demise of his father. Thus, he becomes an emblematic representation of a very caring young child who has been shown to nurture his duties with extreme ease despite his tender age. Bisnu's existential position can well be argued to be arduous as it has been shown that his village was devoid of any institution of learning, making him travel a staggering distance of five miles on a daily basis.

Bond also portrays the character of Sheroo, his dog, depicting a cordial bond between them. Their bond acts as a reiterating agent of Bisnu's identity being influenced by external condition which suffers a serious jolt when Sheroo was attacked by a panther. Also, it becomes a reflection of very raw emotional state of affection which can generally be visualized in young children. Bond makes a very captivating revelation in portrayal of Bisnu's character- he was much more matured and understanding compared to his age. Readers find a glimpse of Bisnu's maturity when it was seen that Bisnu, although sad at the attack to his dog, was not seen to be excessively sentimental, showcasing his deeper probe into uncertainty of lives. There are also instances of Bisnu accomplishing his daily tasks and also occasionally engaging in instances of fight as well with other boys, a depiction of daily lives which villagers engage themselves in. Bond also portrays a very compassionate side to Bisnu's personality when it was portrayed that he once kept a goat on his way home from school which, as it appeared, was lost from its herd. Bond makes a very enticing narration, sketching the arduous life that Bisnu was leading- a reflection of troubles faced by young deprived village children during the period when the country was struggling for its freedom

Five miles to school. Every day, except Sunday, he walked five miles to school; and in the evening, he walked home again. There was no school in his own small village of Manjari, for the village consisted of only five families. The nearest school was at Kemptee, a small township on the bus – route through the district of Garhwal. A number of boys walked to school, from distances of two or three miles; their villages were not quite as remote as Manjari. But Bisnu's village lay right at the bottom of mountain, a drop of over two thousand feet Kemptee. There was no proper road between the village and the town. (*Collected Short Stories* 12)

Bisnu's zeal to visit school regularly adorns his personality to a notable extent as it is a revelation of his inclination to be a part of an environment of education which almost is a strenuous effort for children of his village. Also, with depiction of uncertain attacks of panther, it was seen to be doubly-difficult for numerous village children like Bisnu to go to school as it meant a huge risk for their lives. There have been messages as well from Bisnu pertaining to children who have been privileged enough with facilities available for them as numerous like him were devoid of greater access to eye-catching facilities in the village. Bond makes a very painstaking disclosure in his portrayal of hardships for school children

Bisnu was fretting because he could not go to school. Most boys would be only too happy to miss school but when you are living in a remote village in the mountains and having an education is the only way of seeing the world, you look forward to going to school, even if it is five miles from home. Bisnu's exams were two weeks off and he didn't want to remain in the same class while the others were promoted. Besides, he knew he could pass even though he had missed a number of lessons. But he had to sit for the exams. He couldn't miss them. (*Collected Short Stories* 140)

As Hall argues in his explication of ideas related to development of an individual identity in today's period to be a result of different social encounters, it becomes vividly evident that alongside different characteristics which regulate a society, its underlying practices and customs also act as prominent regulatory factors. In this context, notion of identity becomes very feeble in nature with fluidity reigning supreme, indicating a bifurcation from a conformist position to a position of non-conformism. It also has to be comprehended that a discursive practice is always in place which regulates different paradigmatic formulations and regulatory guidelines of an individual self, leading to a significant construction of one's identity within that framework of discourse. As Hall opines, positioning of an individual within different physical spaces gets largely "constructed within, not outside, discourse" (4). Bisnu's slyness also gets depicted on the story when Bond portrays his bravery to attack the panther one day on its paws using a sharp spear when it tried to enter his house while they were sleeping at night, indicating his awareness as an individual to any impending danger for people residing in villages. Bond also indicates the amount of risk which gets involved in this act; it is this courage in Bisnu which goes a long way in forming his identity- one which is wrapped up in childhood innocence and playfulness.

Description of the panther by Bond is another indication of terrified nature of villagers who were constantly under threat as "it looked enormous from the angle at which he saw it and for a moment he thought it was a tiger. But Bisnu knew instinctively that it was the man-eater" (*Collected Short Stories* 142). One of the significant factors involved in portrayal of Bisnu's character is his innocent side- almost an instinctive side to his character which was based on reacting to any adverse situation that appears in front of him. This is a very important attribute of Bond's dealing with children characters- a theme so recurring in his works. As he himself revels in relation to his constant engagement with children

Many people ask me why I write so much about children which I started doing in my 40s. Before that I was writing more or less about adults. I had a pretty lonely childhood and it helps me to understand a child better. (*Scenes from a Writer's Life* 22)

Issue of Bisnu's identity in the story finds an amalgamation with portrayal as a heroic child who has the zeal to involve himself in different activities in the village. However, it was a totalizing amalgamation between an emotionally high character and a duty-bound boy which makes his character one of primary importance in the story. To indicate his hardships, Bond remarks, "in the entire village, he was the first to get up" (*Collected Short Stories* 1). The entire story, as readers learn, revolves basically between Bisnu's duty as an individual and head of the family and his constant fear of getting attacked by panther whenever he was out in the village- a situation of contradictions which every individual in life faces while negotiating various spaces where identity gets constructed and, resultantly, get validated on grounds of self-positioning of an individual. One can anticipate a sense of fear and impending danger from the presence of "panther" in the story's title which can also be understood to be having a direct connection with thrill in lives of young children, at times regulating their existential positions, much like Bisnu's in the society. A prominent feature which was seen in Bisnu's character in the story was that he was shown to be very keen observer of different situations and also a close observer of human emotions. As a notable example, it was seen that Bisnu tried to contemplate the gloomy face of his teacher, Mr. Nautiyal, in class one day saying that he was a good teacher and his sadness might be the result of his meagre salary. This deep psychic probe into Bisnu's personality becomes a very important feature in ascertaining his personality because it unmasks Bond's fascination for depicting different psychic workings of young children, a prominent feature that stamps his authority as a short-story writer.

Placement of an individual body in different existential and societal conditions is of pivotal importance in ascertaining associated selfhood. Hall argues that identity concerning individuals in contemporary societies can be argued to be “not essentialist but strategic and positional” (3). When an individual gets placed in broader rubric of a society, there are tendencies and traits of a society which play major roles in answering different questions which find themselves inextricably tied to what is understood as ontology of a person. Different negotiations and contemplations which can be argued concerning Bisnu’s life and position in the novel lead to comprehension of a key notion of understanding identity as “an idea which cannot be thought in the old way, but without which certain key questions cannot be thought at all” (2). It also has to be argued that post-modern traits and features of literary writings critically celebrate fluidity of various arguments and postulations, opening up numerous spaces where seminal ideas can creep in. Bisnu becomes a very symbol of Bond’s innocence which he connects with portrayal of children in his short-stories. Not only his different emotional states play pivotal roles in creating his identity but also his presentation as a young boy who gets on actively with different mundane activities in life is a testimony to the captivating mix of personality which Bond depicts. At times, it also has to be argued that, there can be creation of a very strange and different from of social environment that can restructure an individual positioning- an idea explicated below

Strangeness is encountered when there exists the realization that the social world is unrecognizable in many ways, and where familiar reference points no longer exist (or are far from reliable). In more everyday terms we can say that strangeness occurs when we recognize that we have lost our collective bearings and our social compass is giving strange readings. In other words, strangeness is a type of social disorientation (resulting from an experience of globalization) as a result of which we are no longer sure who ‘we’ are, and we find it difficult to say who belongs to ‘our’ group and who comes from outside. (11-12)

Bisnu’s portrayal reaches its zenith towards the end of the story when he visualized the panther making attempts to attack his sister, Puja, when they were seen accomplishing daily tasks in the field. His identity attains a significant elevation when readers learn that the young boy has orchestrated the demise of a deadly panther which was devouring human beings almost for fun, indicating how Bond presents his children characters- filled with vitality, innocence, and also indomitable courage. There was a notable conversation between Bisnu and Surru which readers find after the death of panther that provides a very critical dimension to Bisnu’s personality. There were thoughts in his mind which pertain to different atrocities which human beings have meted out to the external environment, making animals come out of their natural habitat and perturb human existence. The different introspective statements from Bisnu become well representative of perspectives which are connected to psychological developments of a child. The narrative also becomes a true reflection of multiple dimensions of Bisnu’s personality which gets adorned with his innate playfulness, duty-bound self, commitment towards others- values which Bond so endearingly showcases in his protagonists and which appear significant in making his children protagonists stand out amidst all odds to be authenticating their own selves. By presenting different dimensions of Bisnu’s character, Bond has also developed a very subtle gateway through which readers can visualize his mind and its entanglements. As Aggarwal sums up

In *Panther’s Moon*, the presence of a man-eater in the forest becomes a battle for survival for twelve-year-old Bisnu. The panther emerges as his personal adversary because he is unable to attend the school and is confronted with the possibility of failing in the final exam. (Aggarwal 88)

Both the stories can well and truly be argued to be absolute literary delights, keeping readers engaged with their presentation and portrayal of various dynamics layered within the narrative. Readers can also come across an important dynamic of intermingling stance related to both Sunil and Bisnu in terms of characteristic display. If it was anger towards his chachi which was suppressed by Sunil in most parts of the story, it was fear of the panther which loomed large in Bisnu’s mind. Both protagonists showcase multiple emotional states throughout their different societal encounters with different aspects of a society, a reflective state of Bond’s inherent desire to present his children protagonists in diverse situations so that they can carve out their own existential position with a stabilized identity. In different contemporary writings, it can notably be observed that there are numerous scenes of diverse ideas which come together to create a random mix of overlapping thoughts, depicting foundations and postulations. Furthermore, essential intricacies related to self in the two stories appear to be attaining an interesting dimension as these reiterate their identity in larger context of societal tendencies. Cultural ramifications, as can be seen in the stories, tend to be influencing factors in not only denoting how the characters place themselves in different existential conditions, but also restructure their ontological traits within the larger rubric of notions related to current-day ethos.

Another notable feature which can be observed in the stories is presentation of a twin image which can be visualized in caricaturing of the two children protagonists. It is the creation of a dual image in relation to inherent self of a person and how a person gets dictated by others, making the individual fall prey to assumptions and validations. Thus, a resultant formation of double identity informs individuals in this regard which was espoused by the notable psychological stalwart, Erik Erikson

A subjective sense as well as an observable quality of personal sameness and continuity, paired with some belief in the sameness and continuity of some shared world image. As a quality of unselfconscious living, this can be gloriously obvious in a young person who has found himself as he has found his communality. In him we see emerge a unique unification of what is irreversibly given--that is, body type and temperament, giftedness and vulnerability, infantile models and acquired ideals--with the open choices provided in available roles, occupational possibilities, values offered, mentors met, friendships made, and first sexual encounters. (22-23)

Sunil and Bisnu, as Bond portrays, epitomize what can be argued to be development of a mutual inter-personal development with others. Bond's children protagonists do not attain a passive outlook; rather they represent the desire to be with others which, in turn, leads to the creation of their identity. The two characters are indicative of their inner nurturing power depending on various social interactions, evidencing that Bond's characters are capable enough of voicing out their myriad perspectives on both life and their different experiences on lived situations. Identity, in this context, becomes significantly critical in the two stories as, at the surface, the stories appear to be mundane tales of innocence associated with childhood of an individual. However, a serious introspection of those makes a critical revelation of these being layered with psychological reiterations, interplay involving human relations based on attributes of love, fear, and hate which further lead to a proper structuring of identity of the two protagonists- one that was nuanced and layered to its core. The two stories, as can be inferred, also act as reiterations of how connections and social interactions between individuals lead to a healthy growth of attachment towards one another coupled with love for each other. As innocence becomes critical in comprehending different dimensions associated with personality of the two children, it gets validated by forms of engagement with them, leading to their positions of comfort in their social lives. To reiterate, identity of the two children protagonists, in the larger rubric, becomes subject to various dynamic factors which is well in line with the physical space that these become a part of- echoing that societies, too, find themselves in changing spaces with passage of time. The two children, in this regard, epitomise how their identity becomes a totalizing subject to their inherent playfulness- one that is wrapped in the dictates of ideological foundations and constructions of values that regulate essentialities concerning existence of human beings.

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