

The Evolving Self of an Alienated Youth in Ruskin Bond's "The Room on the Roof"

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Abstract- This paper examines the growth of Rusty, a teenager alienated protagonist of Ruskin Bond's novel "The Room on the Roof", whose gradual development from alienation to self-governance finally provides him with his own self-identity or subjectivity. Alienation, here, means the moment of abjection; however, as a captivating force, it also portrays the gradual process of the evolving self of the protagonist. While doing so, this paper basically focuses on the Theory of Abjection and the Kegan's Constructive Developmental View as the center of critical attention, while remarkably little attention has been paid to supporting critics as well. Thus, this paper by the end provides us an innovative perspective to perceive adolescent's identity formation process; focusing on how within abject, in the process of reification, the discarded youth Rusty has resilience and reformatory ability to develop own subjective 'self'.

Keywords- Evolving self; abjection; interpersonal balance; subject-object relationship; alienation

Ruskin Bond's *The Room on the Roof* is a tale of Rusty, an orphaned 16 years old Anglo-Indian boy living with his English guardian in the suffocating European part in Dehra Dun. The novel begins with depressed Rusty's first encounter with Indian boys who lure him to visit the bazaar. Due to the unsupportive and stringent guardianship of Mr. Harrison and his wife, an adolescent Rusty gets repressed to live up to his longings. Running away from his home to his Indian friends, desolate Rusty feels revived to eat Indian foods and celebrate Indian festival. He not only sets confident to pay back them, but also determines to live his life. The boy earns his living being independent as a teacher of Kishen, in return he gets foods and the room in the roof. As a healthy teenager when he falls in loves with Meena, he cuddles a lot of changes in his life. Her presence and absent matters a lot in shaping his personal identity. When Meena dies in accident, Rusty leaves the house in search of his future; however, when he notices the second marriage of Mr. Kapoor, Meena's husband, and Kishen turning into notorious thief, he returns to his own room on the roof with Kishen with the determination of living together being each other's shelter. Moreover, Rusty undergoes a tension in course of trying to depart from repellant European culture, and at the same time trying his best to embrace new circumstances among Indian boys with buoyancy. The story progresses so rapidly that within a year Rusty initiates into adulthood being much optimistic and accountable. Thus, despite of the notable struggles held between individuality and guardian's suppression, guidance and individual freedom, others choice and person's inclination, and alienation and support simultaneously, the protagonist Rusty amongst the loss and growth of his interpersonal balance finally takes

the track on to build up his self or subjectivity with a confrontational continuous effort.

On the surface, the novel seems depicting the life of self-indulgent teenage Rusty who tries to deteriorate his status and position in society wandering with idle Indian boys. Along with his misalliance love affair, he wholeheartedly admires the adopted Indian culture with an easy assimilation; however, covertly the novel focuses on Rusty's physical and psychological journey to establish his self-identity. Despite the melancholic tone the text carries, the lens of abjection and Constructive Developmental View can reveal the embryonic self of an alienated youth Rusty.

The term "abjection" generally refers to a depressed feeling, a desolate and heavyhearted state of mind that resulted in the state of being casted off. Further, it states to the breakdown in the distinction between self and other. Preventing the absolute realization of existence, abjection separates the person from the environment in which he or she hardly belongs to. Julia Kristeva in *Approaching Abjection* defines it, "The one by whom the abject exists is thus a deject who places (himself), separates, situates, and therefore strays instead of getting his bearing, desiring, belongings, or refusing (8). Supporting Kristeva's view, Barbara Creed in *Horror and the Monstrous Feminine: An Imaginary Abjection* states, "The place of the abject is where meaning collapses, the place where I am not. The abject threatens life, it must be radically excluded from the place of living subject, propelled away from the body and deposited on the other side of an imaginary border which separates the self from that which threatens the self" (65). Similarly, generalizing how within desolation and separation abjection leads to

form a stable identity, Karen Coats in *Abjection and Adolescent Fiction* argues, “Abjection is the process of expulsion that enable the subject to set up clear boundaries and establish a stable identity” (140).

On the other hand, Robert Kegan, who has proposed a constructive-developmental view of identity formation process, speculates progressive qualitative shifts in how people construct and understand the world around them, a process that both defines and influences identity, self-concept and interpersonal relationship. He postulates that each successive developmental stage builds upon and includes earlier developmental stages. As such, later or “higher” stages are characterized by the development of more complex and more encompassing ways of structuring experience. Later stages are not achieved until the cognitive structures of earlier stages have been fully developed since, as he states, “the child is subject to his perceptions in his organization of the physical world. He cannot separate himself from them; he cannot take them as an object of his attention. He is not individuated from them; he is embedded in them” (Kegan 29). There lies tension between human yearning to be connected, attached and included on the one hand, while, to be distinct, independent and autonomous to the other. Besides, as the process of growth always emerges from the engrained circumstances and takes the mode of differentiation, it trails the process of “creating out of the former subject a new object to be taken by the new subjectivity” (31). Consequently, the evolving self is the story of continuing negotiation of this tension, since “evolutionary truces establish a balance between subject and object” (28). Kegan maintains that when the new truce is negotiated, an individual with new subjectivity throws away something that was once a part of his/her self and makes it an object to a restructured self, moving from position of subject to object. In fact, “this new subjectivity can now construe the world propositionally, hypothetically, inferentially, abstractly”, and thus the rebalancing phase of subjectivity is “often the hallmark of adolescence, unhinges the concrete world” (38).

Young adults, who are oblivious about their subjectivity, seem inept to distance themselves from the imbedded circumstances despite of their longing to depart from it. In fact, until one emerges out of this deep-rooted situation, nothing can be assumed “for it is our embeddedness, our subjectivity that leads us to project it onto the world in our constitution of reality” (Kegan 31). Being brought up in an exclusively European line, Rusty feels petrified of his guardians’ presence because he must do as per their wishes. For Rusty, Indian bazaar which situates only a mile away from the European suburbs is a fascinating place. His guardian, Mr. Harrison, always forbids him to enter it, “I have told you never to visit the bazaar. You belong here, to this house, this road, and these people. Don’t go where you don’t belong” (23). His life gets trapped on the control of his guardians’ that he can hardly do the things of his own desire. Thus, the moment the desolate boy has to save it in his dreams, he realizes

abjection in his life for the first time. “The abject has only one quality- that of being opposed to I” (Kristeva 1). Under the guardianship of Mr. Harrison, Rusty, a young adult, is not only unmindful of his self or subjectivity but he also has to play subservient role. The frequent refutation of his preferences results border between them. Yet he becomes impotent to distance himself from the intra- psychosomatic framework in which he is entrenched to, but his Guardians willingly draw him “towards the place where meaning collapses” (Kristeva 2), so that more or less he can stay detached or autonomous from Indian tradition. The more he is forbidden, the more he desires to break the boundaries. Because of the emergence of imaginary border between the self and other, he develops the feeling of others towards his guardians.

Due to abjection, “the in-between, the ambiguous, the composite” (Kristeva 4), Rusty reluctantly sticks in liminality that he passes through the realm that has none of the attributes of the past or coming state. Victor Turner defines, liminal entities are “neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial” (89). Rusty, here, neither with his guardians’ European culture, nor he can escape to Indian heritage. He remains in-between the position exhibited by convention. He, as an alienated adolescent, often emphatically wishes to cast the disconcerting factors to attain his dreams. He becomes completely lonely, and always desires for more freedom, love and absence of his guardians. As the yearning of withdrawn teenager, he inanely passes time along the road over the hillside, worrying about the future or envisaging of sudden and perfect friendship, romances and heroics. This abjection threatens his life and lurks his self.

The more Rusty suppresses his longings, the more he is fascinated towards Indian attributes. Being subordinate to his guardians, he subdues his desire of being part of Indian culture, custom and friends. As Victor Turner claims, “Liminal entities, such as neophytes in initiation or puberty rites, may be represented as possessing, nothing...this behavior is normally passive or humble; they must obey their instructors implicitly, and accept arbitrary punishment without complain” (90), Rusty feels the deficiency of authority having no possession over own self. In fact, he could not wait more. So, in the absence of Mr. Harrison, he escapes towards the bazaar accepting the existing circumstances, refusing his guardians but following the wishes of his heart; for that he has to pay a lot. As a consequence of his stubborn action, after returning from his first visit to bazaar, he humbly accepts the stroke from his guardians. Although he wishes to argue, desires to rebel, the fear against his guardian’s held him back. He not only lacks consciousness of his prevailing individual self but the concealed terror obstructs the development of his subjectivity.

Acknowledging how his maturity is challenged, Rusty contests the existing boundaries in spite of the prevailing abjection. This comprehension of the reality and perception of his inadequacy compel Rusty to think further

about his self-development. Talking about how mental model affects judgement, nature of human perception and information processing, Richards J Heuer, Jr. states, "Partly because of the nature of human perception and information processing, beliefs of all types tend to resist change. This is especially true of the implicit assumptions and supposedly self-evident truths that play an important role in forming mental models (61)". Similarly, the moment Rusty realizes his contentment in his first visit to bazaar, he decides to give continuity to the new- found pleasure of chaat shop and his new friends' company. Captivated by the sights on roadside, he loves hovering to and fro along with Indian dishes like chaat, gol guppas, and spicy salad of potato remains. After his second visit to bazaar, his perception concerning with his guardian's nurturing and implicit assumption towards this upbringing drastically changes; he gradually becomes more resisting. He becomes so stubborn to get freedom, to develop friendship with Indian friends and to assimilate himself within Indian customs that he challenges his guardian and tries to develop own subjectivity.

In addition, discovery of the facts energizes Rusty to cross the universe and act according to it. Jack Mezirow, a professor Emeritus, Teachers College, Columbia University, overviewing transformation theory mentions, "Critical reflection and rational discourse are processes of adult learning emphasized by those cultures experiencing rapid social change in which old traditional authority structures have been weakened, and in which individuals must be prepared to make many diverse decisions on their own"(222). Similarly, to embrace the existing circumstances, Rusty rebels his guardians. Hearing the sound of many drums and voices, Rusty feels something wild and emotional, something that belong to his dream world. His determination and self-trust drags him to Ranbir in the forest to enjoy Holi, the festival of colours. The height of celebration provided him with an extreme ecstasy that the pain of exhaustion of his body becomes a source of pleasure. After his return, acknowledging his young spirit in defense to his guardians, he pulls Mr. Harrison's leg and falls flat on his back. Rejecting his identity as Englishman Rusty 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!"(34). Realization of his subjectivity leads towards defiance the authority; he not only pays back to Mr. Harrison while defending, but he also again escapes from the house with the determination of not returning again.

Rusty's initial inability to recognize and confirm his capacity makes him internally suffer a lot; however, the moment he has decided to live his life in his own way tackling with all the upcoming circumstances, his interpersonal self starts to evolve. "One result of reflecting on evolution is that one learns to take the past very seriously" (Csikszentmihalyi 4). Through his evolutionary process, his new subjectivity can internalize perceptions, judge past activities, can co-ordinate one perception with another, and can integrate the same impulses across time constructing enduring dispositions, and that is a notion of

being in his own self. Correspondingly, Rusty's confidence grew further when he discovers his manhood, his growth towards adulthood that he was a man of nearly seventeen years. "He could inflict pain that was a wonderful discovery, there was a power in his body- a devil or god- and he gained confidence in his power; and he was a man!"(35). Unhappy with the strict ways of his guardians, as an adult, he feels enchanted when he freely plunges to bazaar, lingers with Indian friends, observes Hindu festival Holi, and other aspect of Indian life. He not only crosses the boundaries set by his guardians, but also dares to hurt them physically. Self-formation is more about crossing the boundaries of "I", breaking down or breaking through and again establish boundaries. It is a continuous process.

The abject, however, is again encountered by Rusty when he leaves the house. After leaving the house, the first shivering cold night teaches him the hazards of the situation. Loneliness now with freedom is somehow similar to his previous loneliness with the presence of his guardians but violence and madness, which are new to him, makes him conscious of his unhappy state. His physical condition represents a state of misery and degradation, so does his fatigue mental state. This can be identified in his difficulty in sleeping and his suffering because of terrible starvation. It seems that his conscious mind represses these horrors they still exist beyond the imaginary border between the self and the too terrible things to consciously acknowledge. In *Adolescence, a Syndrome of Ideality*, Julia Kristeva clarifies how despite the abjection, adolescence go for transformation, "Only the analyst's capacity to see through the idealizing course of adolescent drives will allow him to provide a credible and effective transference- and thus be capable of metabolizing the need to believe not through acting out but through the pleasure that comes with thinking, questioning and analyzing" (725). Likewise, Rusty, despite of hard time, seems to be gratified when he realizes his freedom from the guardian's entrapment and enslavement to European culture. Thus, the abject no longer threatens him because he has willingly crossed the imaginative border having appalling feeling towards his own upbringing environment. Meaning- making is an ongoing procedure in which the frontiers between self and others become organized, disappeared, and again rearranged. Jane Kroger argues, "the activity of meaning-making, of organizing and making sense of the world, and then losing that coherence and sense of self to a newly emerging way of being and making sense are the foundation of constructive-developmental approach" (146). Rusty too undergoes though same processes in his growing state. Being more fortunate, at initial he effortlessly gets a loving and fun family, family of Somi and Kishen to accommodate himself in his deserted life. His independence after getting a job of teaching English to a boy named Kishen, in return for a tiny room on the roof and food, encountering his 'first love' Meena, the mother of his student, Kishen and developing friendship with amiable Indian friends Ranbir, Somi and Suri who become his hope and confidence

demonstrate his structured life. Sluggishly from a confused boy, Rusty turns into a confident and independent boy. However, despite of transitory happiness, as a teenager, he is much confused, helpless, lonely, and is in search of his complete identity. He is Sahib no longer, nor is he an Indian since he has no caste. He suffers from identity crisis, feels lost.

In addition, Rusty's hope, confidence and courage gradually vanish when he loses everything in which he gets intimately attached to. After the emergence of desolation in various places, he simply bears lost and abjection in his life again. Highlighting on how abject simultaneously beseeches and pulverizes the subject, Julia Kristeva asserts, "The abjection of self would be the culminating form of that experience of the subject to which it is revealed that all its objects are based merely on the inaugural loss that laid the foundation of its own being"(5). With the feeling of abjection, Rusty acknowledges his incomplete and suppressed selfhood. So, he resists his European identity. "I don't belong here, I don't belong anywhere. I am a half-caste" (111). Neither he can accept his identity as English man, nor he can reject it, is clearly reflected through his straightforward words. Deeply rooted on the adolescence query, an alienated youth Rusty puts forward his efforts to identify who he is. "Where do I belong; what am I doing? What is going to happen to me?"(121). The moment, the object of his want, Meena, his first love and Kishen's mother, dies in car accident, he feels immobilized and apprehends the futility of life as if he had no life at all. Further, when his friends Ranbir and Suri gradually leave him, his last source of confidence and hope disappears, and his lonely days return. Then, he too plans to gait away from India, from the remaining friend Somi, and from the chat shop and the bazaar. Making up his mind to go back to England, here, he is again propelled in the world of abject that disintegrate the imaginative boarder between self and others. To spring to a new life, he has to cut away from his roots, the structured self. Thus, he again feels lost, lonely and scattered that the abject becomes a tangible threat. In this alienated moment, he returns to the same frame of mind that he made when he was with his guardian, so void and meaningless. There remains only his agony and dream which impel him to lose grip on reality.

The more Rusty passes through abjection, the more he seems fascinating towards searching his selfhood. Stating abjection as in-between time, Karen Coat in "Abjection and Adolescent Fiction" mentions young adults, "challenge the borders of identity, trying to become adult without becoming adulterated" (142). To reader's surprise, Rusty also decides to step further in his life. "I have to break away. I want to be either somebody or nobody" (121). His present convictions tries to maintain his status quo that encourages him to reflect on his self with ultimate goal. He becomes more reflective regarding his identity, his self and his responsibilities towards Kishen. After all, he recognizes his self-interested self, his self-sacrificing and confirm the balance in which he has hung earlier. He

was trying to make sense of the world organizing the sense of self to a newly developing way of being, balancing and rebalancing a shift from subject to object side of subject-object relationship. Such balances, as a strength, give rise to the meaning that he tries to make of the world.

Conversion to a new form of independence from interpersonal self is the endorsement of adolescent, where the interpersonal self is the regulating subject-object truce of early and mid- adolescence. Taking the balance between subject and object as crucial aspect by which identity or the making of meaning evolves over the course of the life-span Jane Kroger in "Identity in Adolescence" cites Kegan, "Kegan refers to a subject-object (self-other) relationship in balance as an evolutionary truce... Truce are a time when the world 'makes sense', though that sense it differs markedly for individuals in different subject-object balances" (147). After initial separation, accepting Krishen's company, Rusty decides to stay on the 'Room on the Roof' conserving the balance between subject and object in the days to come. Kishen's wild condition, loneliness and his peculiar activities, at the same time, make him a competent and practical man. Like Rusty, his mind has developed far quickly than his body that he comes up with the suggestions on how they rescue themselves. The inverse situated is visible on their action that before separation, Kishen used to cling to Rusty for protection whereas now Rusty look Kishen for guidance. During such transformation, Rusty must once again experience the loss of an old balance; this time he has relationship with Kishen, who becomes an object to his new self. Along with the interpersonal balance and evolving self, the isolated youths, Rusty and Kishen unite together with their restructured identity.

Succinctly, the emergence of independency and growth on alienated Rusty's physical and psychological experiences, despite of disruptions and triumphs, approve his the evolving self. Rather than solely being concerned with goal accomplishment, he seems much committed to develop his inner self of being, constructing personal values and standards. The resulting independence from social and interpersonal expectations enables him to take decision over his own life in spite of the presence of complex, ambiguous and rapidly changing situations.

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