Spatial Catastrophe and Urban Belonging: Anglo–Indian Identity in Ruskin Bond and Bapsi Sidhwa

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ABSTRACT:

This paper examines Anglo–Indian identity through comparative analysis of Ruskin Bond's The Room on the Roof (1956) and Bapsi Sidhwa's Ice–Candy–Man (1988). Drawing on Homi Bhabha's theorization of cultural hybridity and Elleke Boehmer's work on postcolonial minority writing, the study argues that Anglo–Indian identity emerges through urban spatial practice rather than fixed cultural essence. While Bond depicts postcolonial urban space as enabling hybrid experimentation, Sidhwa reveals how Partition violence catastrophically destroyed cosmopolitan urban fabric. The analysis demonstrates how gender, class, and historical trauma fundamentally shape experiences of cultural hybridity and spatial belonging.

KEYWORDS:

Anglo–Indian literature, spatial practice, Partition literature, cultural hybridity, urban space.

Introduction

The Anglo–Indian community occupied an excruciating social position between British colonizers and colonized Indians, inhabiting what Bhabha theorizes as the "interstitial passage" enabling cultural hybridity. Yet this theoretical celebration often obscures material constraints, social exclusions, and violent disruptions accompanying Anglo–Indian liminality. Indian English literature has engaged persistently with Anglo–Indian identity in post–independence decades, yet insufficient attention has been paid to how urban spatial practices specifically constitute—rather than merely reflect—cultural belonging.

This paper addresses that gap through comparative analysis of two novels presenting radically contrasting urban imaginaries. Bond's The Room on the Roof, published nine years after independence, depicts an adolescent protagonist discovering freedom through urban exploration in postcolonial Dehra Dun. Sidhwa's Ice–Candy–Man, set

during 1947's Partition violence, shows how Lahore's cosmopolitan urban fabric disintegrated into communalized territory. Together, these texts demonstrate that Anglo–Indian identity emerges through situated spatial practices profoundly shaped by gender, class, and historical circumstance.

Urban Liberation and Material Constraints: Ruskin Bond's The Room on the Roof

Bond's novel centres on Rusty, a sixteen–year–old Anglo–Indian orphan escaping his guardian Mr. Harrison's oppressive bungalow in the civil lines—representing colonial order and racial segregation—for Dehra Dun's bazaars and rooftops symbolizing possibility and friendship. Harrison's domestic space embodies colonial spatial logics through high walls and surveillance, materializing what Boehmer identifies as colonial domesticity's function: reproducing racial boundaries through spatial segregation. The bungalow operates as technology of racial discipline, attempting to preserve British cultural purity in postcolonial context.

When Rusty escapes into the city, the transformation is fundamentally spatial. The bazaar neighbourhoods operate through radically different logics: fluid boundaries, spontaneous sociability, and egalitarian encounter. His developing friendships occur through shared navigation of urban spaces—attending festivals, swimming, gathering on rooftops. These urban encounters constitute Bhabha's "third space of enunciation" where cultural meanings possess no fixed unity and signs can be reappropriated and read anew. Festival spaces merit particular attention for enabling temporary transgression of social boundaries. During Holi, hierarchies momentarily dissolve as people mix in street celebrations. However, Bond acknowledges that festival transgression remains temporally bounded—afterward, normal spatial order resumes, revealing both possibilities and limitations of hybrid urban space.

The titular room on the roof functions as symbolically dense heterotopia—architecturally liminal, neither properly interior nor exterior. This marginal space materializes Rusty's social positioning: neither fully British nor fully Indian, neither securely housed nor homeless. Gender fundamentally enables Rusty's spatial mobility while constraining female characters. His freedom to wander, swim, and sleep on rooftops depends on male gender, whereas female characters experience circumscribed movement governed by propriety. However, Somi's role as cultural

mediator demonstrates how women's spatial practices, though constrained by patriarchy, nonetheless shape intercultural encounter.

Class stratification profoundly structures spatial access. Rusty's descent into economic precarity after escaping—periods of hunger and homelessness—reveals that cultural mixing carries material costs. The bazaar friendships, while genuine, cannot fully compensate for lost economic security. Bond's linguistic practice mirrors spatial hybridity through casual code-switching between English and Hindi/Urdu without italicization or glossaries, embedding them within English syntax and assuming bilingual competence. This normalization of multilingualism reflects urban linguistic reality while performing the cultural mixing the plot depicts.

The novel's sensory richness grounds abstract hybridity in embodied experience. Descriptions of monsoon humidity, street food aromas, festival colours create phenomenological thickness making cultural mixing tangible. Rusty's growing comfort with physical intimacy marks cultural learning as somatic and affective. Significantly, the novel concludes with Rusty's future uncertain and his economic situation precarious. This refusal of resolution suggests that hybrid identity requires ongoing negotiation rather than achieving stable synthesis, carrying real costs alongside possibilities.

Partition's Spatial Catastrophe: Bapsi Sidhwa's Ice-Candy-Man

Where Bond depicts urban space enabling hybrid possibility, Sidhwa presents its catastrophic collapse. Set in Lahore during 1947's Partition, the novel traces how cosmopolitan urban fabric disintegrated into communalized territory where neighborhoods became battlegrounds. The narrator Lenny, a young Parsi girl with polio, occupies multiple marginal positions—female, disabled, child, member of minority community—shaping her perspective. Her physical disability serves as complex metaphor for urban fragility: just as her body marks her as different while limiting mobility, Partition reveals how hybrid urban space was more fragile than inhabitants realized.

Before violence erupts, Sidhwa establishes Lahore as vibrantly cosmopolitan. The park where various suitors meet becomes microcosm of pre-Partition urban sociality, suggesting individual desire might transcend communal boundaries. Neighborhoods mix families from multiple

religions living in amicable relationships built through shared space. Markets, streets, and public spaces facilitate intercommunal encounter through established social protocols and personal relationships.

Communal violence escalates, familiar spaces become threatening. Streets Lenny once walked freely now feel dangerous. Neighbours' homes change from welcoming visiting places into locked fortresses or empty ruins. Bhabha calls this the "unhomely"—the moment when the boundary between home and outside world disappears, and private life becomes tangled with public danger. The safe and familiar (heimlich) transforms into something strange and frightening (unheimlich) when violence destroys the security of home.

Ayah's fate embodies the novel's most harrowing exploration of gendered communalized violence. Before violence, Ayah moves confidently through Lahore's public spaces, representing possibilities for individual identity transcending communal categories. However, as violence intensifies, her visibility and cross-communal relationships become vulnerabilities. Her eventual abduction represents not just personal tragedy but systemic gendered violence where violating women symbolized territorial conquest. Sidhwa refuses sensationalizing this violence, representing it through Lenny's traumatized perspective using gaps, silences, and fragmentation that enact trauma's belated temporality.

Language functions as both medium of cosmopolitanism and weapon of division. Characters naturally code-switch between English, Urdu, Punjabi, Gujarati, and Hindi before Partition, their multilingualism embodying urban cosmopolitanism. However, violence transforms language into communal marker—religious greetings and accent become tests of belonging determining survival. Class operates as crucial determinant of vulnerability: Lenny's wealthy Parsi family possesses resources largely unavailable to working-class characters like Ayah. The novel refuses redemptive narratives, instead demanding readers confront how communal violence destroys cosmopolitan possibility and leaves lasting trauma.

Comparative Analysis: Contrasting Urban Imaginaries

Reading Bond and Sidhwa comparatively illuminates both possibilities and vulnerabilities of hybrid identity formation in postcolonial South Asian contexts. Both foreground urban spatial practice as constitutive of identity but present radically contrasting accounts of what spaces enable

and what threatens them.

Bond's Dehra Dun represents postcolonial urban space as relatively open to hybrid experimentation and cross-community friendship. While gender and class constrain possibilities, the novel suggests urban mobility and voluntary association generate new belonging outside colonial racial categories. This optimistic imaginary reflects the 1950s when postcolonial futures seemed more open. Sidhwa's Lahore presents catastrophic collapse of cosmopolitan space into communalized territory. Her spatial poetics emphasize fragility and contingency—stable multiculturalism disintegrates with shocking rapidity once political mobilization weaponizes communal identities. The novel insists hybrid space requires active maintenance through daily coexistence practices, remaining profoundly vulnerable to historical rupture.

This contrast illuminates how historical circumstance fundamentally shapes spatial possibilities. Bond's benign postcolonial context enables gradual experimentation and relationship-building. Sidhwa's Partition context reveals how quickly relationships collapse when political crisis mobilizes communal identities. The comparison suggests hybrid urban space represents not stable achievement but contingent possibility requiring specific conditions to maintain.

Both texts demonstrate how gender fundamentally shapes spatial practice. Rusty's male gender enables extensive urban mobility—wandering, swimming, traveling—impossible for female characters constrained by propriety. Ayah's pre-Partition confidence contrasts with vulnerability once communal violence targets women's bodies as territorial symbols. Celebrations of hybrid urban possibility often implicitly assume male mobility while obscuring how patriarchy constrains women's spatial practices even in open contexts.

Class operates as equally fundamental determinant. Rusty's descent into precarity reveals material costs of hybrid experimentation for those without independent resources. Lenny's family wealth provides partial protection during Partition lacking for working-class characters despite greater personal agency. Both texts demonstrate hybrid possibilities depend significantly on class position—who can experiment with identity, who possesses protection resources, whose mobility is enabled versus constrained by economics.

The ethical dimensions differ markedly. Bond explores ethics through friendship and quotidian hospitality in urban encounters, emphasizing possibilities for egalitarian relationality. Sidhwa examines ethics under extreme duress where ordinary moral frameworks prove inadequate. Her refusal of easy blame or absolution insists on complexity when structural violence overwhelms individual choice. This comparison suggests ethical possibilities vary dramatically according to whether contexts enable gradual relationship–building or impose catastrophic crisis.

Conclusion

This comparative analysis demonstrates that Anglo–Indian identity emerges not as stable cultural essence but as ongoing spatial practices shaped by historical contingency, material constraint, gender hierarchies, and vulnerability to catastrophic violence. Bond's urban bildungsroman and Sidhwa's Partition trauma narrative present contrasting yet complementary accounts of hybrid spatial possibility. Together, they argue against both nostalgic hybridity celebrations and exclusionary nationalisms, presenting hybrid identity as precarious achievement requiring specific conditions.

Several insights emerge from this spatial approach. First, gender and class operate as constitutive rather than supplementary dimensions of hybrid identity—one cannot understand spatial practice without analysing how patriarchy and economics fundamentally shape mobility and possibilities. Second, ethical responsibility emerges through relational encounter and spatial copresence rather than abstract principle. Third, hybrid urban community remains profoundly vulnerable to historical rupture.

What remains striking is both texts' refusal of simple resolutions. Bond's narrative ends with Rusty's future uncertain and his situation unstable. Sidhwa offers no redemption from Partition trauma, only necessity of bearing witness. These endings resist both tragic narratives and progressive teleologies, presenting hybrid experience as ongoing negotiation without guaranteed outcome. Through particularized characters in specific urban spaces, these novels reveal identity as lived process rather than achieved state, relationally constituted rather than individually possessed, spatially embedded rather than abstractly cultural. Ultimately, they argue that urban belonging for minorities is neither inherited essence

nor chosen affiliation but precarious achievement requiring continuous spatial, relational, and ethical work—remaining profoundly vulnerable to historical crisis yet essential to imagining how diverse communities might share space without forced homogenization or violent exclusion.

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