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Representing the Ethnic Life: A Study of Vishal Bhardwaj's Adaption of *The Blue Umbrella*

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Ruskin Bond, the veteran Indian writer of British decent has enriched the oeuvre of Indian writing in English by his innumerable short stories and novellas. As a writer Bond claims that he was so haunted by the hills of Himalayas that he gave up his life and promising career in England for it. He himself admitted in his interview with Atula Ahuja that, "My attachment were so deeply rooted in India that I could not find comfort in England.....I knew my story was going to be published anytime, but the need to get back to the warmth here was so strong that nothing mattered." His pioneering role in the growth of children's literature was recognized when he was awarded the Sahitya Akademi award in 1992 for *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*. A reclusive writer who lives in Landour, Mussoorie's Ivy Cottage since 1964 was brought in the limelight in 1999 when he was conferred with the prestigious Padma Shri award.

The uniqueness of the body of writing of Ruskin Bond is in the way he has drawn inspiration from the mundane things in life and has skillfully created beautiful yet inspiring moments to celebrate childhood and nature. The image created in following words, "The grass was always wet and the pine-needles were slippery underfoot. The tall trees shut out the light, and poisonous- looking mushrooms, orange and purple, sprang up everywhere. But it was a good place for porcupines, who seemed to like the mushrooms." (Bond 57)The thoughtful and sensitive expressions in his writings have placed him among the stalwarts of Indian writings. What is common in most of his writing is the setting, which is the Garhwal region of Utrakhnad. The tranquility and serenity of the Himalayas form an intrinsic part of Bond's writing. He has beautifully woven the simple life with incidents that occupy the people of this region. We find Garhwali life skillfully integrated in his stories.

Apart from being included in the school curriculum Ruskin Bond's works have also inspired films. *The Room on the Roof* which was his maiden work was adapted into a BBC – produced TV Series. His historical novella, *A Flight of Pigeons* was adapted into a hindi film called *Junoon* produced by Shashi Kapoor and directed by Shyam Benegal. His short story, *Susanna's Seven Husbands* was adapted into a movie called *Saat Khoon Maaf*, by Vishal Bhardwaj which had Priyanka Chopra in the lead. But it was his novella, *The Blue Umbrella* when adapted into a movie by Vishal Bhardwaj that won the National Award for the best children's film along with public appreciation.

Vishal Bhardwaj a film director, writer, screenwriter, producer, music composer and playback singer went to Mumbai to become a music composer and took to directing films only to create opportunity to compose music. His directorial debut was children's film *Makdee* which received critical acclaim. He then made the first of his Shakespearean adaptation, *Maqbool* based on Macbeth, which was followed by *Omkaara* based on *Othello*. Vishal Bhardwaj's association with Ruskin Bond culminated into two, adaptations *Saat Khoon Maaf* and *The Blue Umbrella*.

Bhardwaj has mastered the challenging art of adaptation by adapting the famous Shakespearean tragedies in the present Indian life. *Saat Khoon Maaf* and *The Blue Umbrella* are two adaptations which retain the setting with very little variation in the plot. The film was released in 2007 and was well received by the critics and the audience.

The storyline of the film is simple yet deep, metaphorically. Biniya is the livewire of a small hamlet, somewhere in the Garhwal region, and the people of the village adore her. Nandkishore Khatri is a local tea-stall owner, who is known to be a miser and a very self-centered person. As in a small village a small shop becomes the source of supplies, Nanad Kishore Khatri's Tea Stall also is the centre of action for tourists and the inhabitants of that village. One day, Biniya sees a beautiful Japanese umbrella and exchanges her necklet for it. As she flaunts her umbrella around the village, it becomes the envy of many, including Nandkishore Khatri and he desires it intensely. To put it in Bond's words,

Most of the people in the village were a little envious of Biniya's blue umbrella. No one else had ever possessed one like it. The schoolmaster's wife thought it was quite wrong for a poor cultivator's daughter to have such a fine umbrella while she, a second-class B.A., had to make do with an ordinary black one. Her husband offered to have their old umbrella dyed blue; she gave him a scornful look, and loved him a little less than before. The Pujari, who looked after the temple, announced that he would buy a multicoloured umbrella the next time he was in the town. A few days later he returned, looking annoyed and grumbling that they weren't available except in Delhi. Most people consoled themselves by saying that Biniya's pretty umbrella wouldn't keep out the rain, if it rained heavily; that it would shrivel in the sun, if the sun was fierce; that it would collapse in a wind, if the wind was strong; that it would attract lightning, if lightning fell near it; and that it would prove unlucky, if there was any ill-luck going about. Secretly, everyone admired it. (Bond 39-41)

Khatri adopts innumerable means to convince Biniya to give her umbrella to him. He tries to coax Biniya to give her umbrella by offering money, sweets, free sweets and biscuits for the whole year and colourful balloons, especially brought from the city. But his temptations fail to cajole Biniya in parting from her prized possession. Then one fine day, the umbrella is stolen, and Biniya suspects Nandkishore of stealing it, though she has no proof. How Biniya finds her missing umbrella and what happens to Nandkishore Khatri after that forms the rest of the story. Although transported to the Garhwali speaking area of Himachal Pradesh the film represents the ethnicity of this region.

Ethnicity is a form of cultural identity. The term, ethnicity is derived from the Greek word, *ethnikos* which means 'heathen' or 'cultural strangers'. In the words of Chris Baker, "Ethnicity is a cultural concept centered on sharing of norms, values, beliefs, cultural symbols and practices. The formation of 'ethnic groups' relies on shared cultural signifiers that have developed under specific historical, social, and political contexts." (Barker 249)

Ethnicity is an ethnic quality or affiliation resulting from racial or cultural ties, or more exactly, what country or countries one and one's ancestors originate from. An ethnic group is based on presumed shared socio-cultural experiences and similar physical characteristics. The bond that holds people together is not the shared political rights, but pre-existing ethnic characteristics. Members of an ethnic group are conscious of belonging to an ethnic group, moreover ethnic identity is further marked by the recognition from other's of a group

distinctiveness. Ethnicity is a sense of brotherhood where the members feel themselves set apart from other groups by a sense of belonging together. Membership in an Ethnic group is passed on from generation to generation.

According to Anthony D. Smith in his book *National Identity*, an ethnic community can be identified by six attributes:-

1. A collective proper name.
2. A myth of common ancestry
3. Shared historical memories
4. One or more differentiating elements of common culture
5. An association with a specific 'homeland'
6. A sense of solidarity for significant sectors of population. When these attributes become salient and intense, ethnic identity is formed which gradually leads to the formation of ethnic community.

India is a colourful canvas portraying a unique assimilation of ethnic groups displaying various cultures and religions. The variety in race, culture and religion etc accounts for the existence of different ethnic groups who, although, live within the sanctums of one single nation, profess different social habits and characteristics. One such ethnic group is that of Garhwali people who are from the north-western Garhwal division of the northern Indian state of Uttarakhand and some parts of Himachal Pradesh.

The Garhwal Kingdom was a princely state in north-western Uttarakhand (of present India), ruled by the Rajput (Panwar) dynasty. It was founded in 888 AD and existed until it was annexed by the Nepalese in 1803. Thereafter post Anglo-Nepalese War and the Sugauli Treaty of 1815, the Kingdom was restored, with the formation of a smaller Tehri Garhwal state. Later, as a part of the Punjab Hill States Agency of British India, Garhwal Kingdom consisted of the present day Tehri Garhwal district and most of the Uttarkashi district. Garhwal state acceded to the Union of India in August 1949. During the Quit India Movement people from this region actively worked for the independence of India. Ultimately, when the country was declared independent in 1947, the inhabitants of Tehri Riyasat (Garhwal State) started their movement to free themselves from the reign of the Maharaja Manvendra Shah, the 60th king of Panwar dynasty. Due to this movement, the situation became out of the control of the Maharaja, the last ruling Maharaja of the Garhwal Kingdom. Consequently in 1949 he accepted the sovereignty of the Union of India. Hence Tehri Riyasat was merged into the Garhwal District of United Provinces (later renamed to Uttar Pradesh) and was given the status of a new district, the Tehri Garhwal district. Subsequently, on 24 February 1960, the state government separated one of its tehsils which was given the status of a separate district named Uttarkashi. It is currently part of the Garhwal Division of the Uttarakhand state of India which was carved out of Uttar Pradesh in 2000.

Garhwali people are an Indo-Aryan ethno-linguistic group who primarily live in the Garhwal Himalayas of the northern Indian state of Uttarakhand. Any person who has ancestral Garhwali roots or lives in Garhwal and has a Garhwali heritage is called a Garhwali.

They include all those who speak the Garhwali language or any of its numerous dialects, living in Dehradun, Haridwar, Tehri Garhwal, Pauri Garhwal, Uttarkashi, Chamoli and Rudraprayag districts of Uttarakhand, India.

There is documented evidence that the Garhwal region has been inhabited by the mankind at least since the Vedic period, and the people of Garhwal today are the descendants of different waves of migration of Indo-Aryan and Indo-Iranian people to these hills which took place over several centuries.

Significant communities of Garhwalis are present in the surrounding Indian states of Uttar Pradesh, Himachal Pradesh, Haryana, Delhi, Punjab, Madhya Pradesh and Maharashtra along with a sizeable population overseas. According to various estimates, there are at least 25 lakh Garhwali migrants living in Delhi. Many Garhwalis also share links with the neighbouring Nepal because of many similarities in traditions and culture.

The culture of the present Garhwal is an amalgamation of influences from the indigenous population coupled with traditions superimposed by various immigrants who settled in the region from time to time. Majority of the people are involved in the agriculture, tourism and the defense industry.

The Garhwali language is a Central Pahari language belonging to the Northern Zone of Indo-Aryan and is native to Garhwal.

Garhwali is one of the 325 recognised languages of India spoken by over 22 lakh people in Tehri Garhwal, Pauri Garhwal, Uttarkashi, Chamoli, Dehradun, Haridwar and Rudraprayag districts of Uttarakhand. Garhwali is also spoken by people in other parts of India including Himachal Pradesh, Delhi, Haryana, Punjab, Uttar Pradesh and Bihar.

UNESCO's Atlas of the World's Languages in Danger designates Garhwali as a language which is in the *unsafe* category and requires consistent conservation efforts.(Wikipedia)

The film *The Blue Umbrella* is set in a small hamlet in Himachal Pradesh where the local language is Garwali and the people are Garhwals. The movie in its myriad ways depicts the life and culture of this ethnic group. If we analyse the six attributes of an ethnic community identified by Anthony D. Smith in the movie we find the following:-

1. We can conclude that the movie depicts the life of the people who have a collective proper name of Garhwalis or Garhwals.
2. Secondly they believe in common ancestry i.e., they are the inhabitants of the hills and their fathers and forefathers belonged to the Garhwal Kingdom whose history can be traced to second century B.C.
3. They possess shared historical memories as "There is documented evidence that the Garhwal region has been inhabited by the mankind at least since the Vedic period, and the people of Garhwal today are the descendants of different waves of migration of Indo-Aryan and Indo-Iranian people to these hills which took place over several centuries."
4. The movie represents the lifestyle, music, culture festivals and local deities of the common culture shared by the inhabitants of this region.
5. The garhwalis represented in the movie have an association with the specific homeland situated in the the Garhwal Himalayas of the northern Indian state of Uttarakhand. Any person who has ancestral Garhwali roots or lives in Garhwal and has a Garhwali heritage is called a Garhwali.They include all those who speak the Garhwali language or any of its numerous dialects, living in Dehradun, Haridwar, Tehri Garhwal, Pauri Garhwal, Uttarkashi, Chamoli and Rudraprayag districts of Uttarakhand.

6. They also emerge as an ethnic group as their sense of solidarity for their community present in the various parts of the country is reflected.

In the movie the cinematographer, Sachin K. Krishn and the Art Director, Samir Chanda have beautifully captured the picturesque quality of a Garhwal village which Ruskin Bond has described in following words, “The rains set in, and the sun only made brief appearances. The hills turned a lush green. Ferns sprang up on walls and tree-trunks. Giant lilies reared up like leopards from the tall grass. A white mist coiled and uncoiled as it floated u from the valley. It was a beautiful season, except for the leeches.”(Bond 46)

The lyrics by Gulzar and music by Vishal Bhardwaj show inspiration of the Garhwali folk especially the song “*Arre he.*” Another significant representation of these people is through their attire, especially woolen caps worn by men. Besides the wooden houses, the people grazing the cows, fetching water from the spring, the pine trees, terraced fields on the mountain cliffs and the green pastures extending across the foothills of mountains, represents the homeland and the lifestyle of a specific group of people unfamiliar to millions of Indians living in the plains.

An important reference to the ethnic culture is made in the film by the significance of the bear nail which Biniya wears around her neck as a pendant. It is referred as a charm or *jantar* which brings good luck to people. Therefore, Biniya’s decision to exchange it for the blue umbrella angers her mother who scolds Biniya for it and expresses her fear that some misfortune may descend on them. In the end also Nand Kishore Khatri as a token of friendship and gratitude gifts Biniya a necklet with the bear nail to be worn as a charm and hence bring luck back in her life.

Hence, to conclude we can say that a simple story about a small trivial umbrella needed a humble setting and would not fit into the ostentatious metropolitan or urban life. Therefore locating it in a more naturalistic setting and unpretentious lifestyle maintained by the inhabitants of Garhwal region has helped the director in making the narrative effective. The simplicity of the Garhwali group adds meaning to the story by being the matchless setting which remains incontestable in the novella and as well as in the adaptation. It also brings the existence of this ethnic group to the attention of the audiences across the world.

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