



BOND WITH *THE ARCHIES*

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ABSTRACT: Zoya Akhtar's latest directorial venture *The Archies* aired on Netflix is a fresh and frothy look at the Anglo-Indian community at a crucial juncture in its history. The period in question is 1947 to 1963, from Indian independence to the death of independent India's first prime minister, Jawaharlal Nehru. The lead characters, all and each from the popular American cultural cartoon strip 'Archie', are all seventeen- years old, ready to face life. The all-American Riverdale is transported to a 'muluk, an Anglo-Indian settlement in India in the 1960s, and the film is a period piece, evocatively resurrecting the Anglo-Indian ethos of the 60s, with darker shades tempering its bright and bubbly surface—to migrate or not to migrate, the expanding influence of the corporate and threat to the environment. These are important issues which resonate which the youth of all communities. The paper aims to juxtapose the world depicted by Akhtar's 'The Archies' with that depicted by Ruskin Bond in his autobiography *Lone Fox Dancing*. Ruskin Bond who turned 89 in 2023 is a celebrated Anglo-Indian author who has lived through the period of crisis pictured in *The Archies*, and uncertainties faced by the Anglo-Indian community. He has written about it in his autobiography *Lone Fox Dancing*. Indeed, he embodies several of the issues that Akhtar raises in 'The Archies'. The paper intends to put *The Archies* in context of a few earlier films with an Anglo-Indian focus, as well as to juxtapose it against Ruskin Bond's text.

KEY WORDS: Anglo-Indian, Bollywood, Homeland, Ruskin Bond, Mussoorie

The voice-over with which Zoya Akhtar introduces *The Archies* is important because it introduces the audience to a community about which it is largely ignorant. The story line is about the Anglo-Indian community, once the backbone of the Railways, Post and Telegraph and Customs departments, and latterly associated with education, most importantly the 'English Medium' school. Using a visual to narrate the history of the founding of Riverdale, the Anglo-Indian settlement where Archibald Andrews and his friends live, the voice-over establishes two important facts: the Anglo-Indians are the offspring of European fathers and Indian mothers, and that they made serious efforts to establish homelands for the community in an effort to integrate with the Indian nation while protecting their cultural identity. While Anglo-Indian characters have appeared in Bollywood since the 1950s, nearly no significant efforts have been made to present their history. Akhtar must be lauded for this skilful exposition to the plot. The Indian Constitution recognises the Anglo-Indian community as a distinct 'mixed race' community. Though never very large numerically and certainly neither wealthy nor powerful after 1947, the Anglo-Indian community has appeared in several Bollywood films. Films like *Jaal* (1952), *Howrah Bridge* (1958), *Phool Aur Pathar* (1966), *Julie* (1975) *Junoon* (1992) and *36 Chowringhee Lane* (1981) have Anglo-Indian characters. The last three, *Julie*, *Junoon* and *36 Chowringhee Lane* are centred around nuanced and sensitive portrayals of women. *Julie* deals with unwed motherhood, while *Junoon*, based on a real incident, is about how an Anglo-Indian mother and daughter survive the uprising of 1857. *36 Chowringhee Lane* is a story about aging in a world that has little use for the old. The cynical abuse of the hospitality offered by an aging Anglo-Indian teacher to her erstwhile student is at the centre of the plot. The gigantic strides made by these women-centred films with Anglo-Indian women in focus becomes obvious when seen in context of mainstream Hindi cinema's othering of Anglo-Indian women as represented by Helen. For filmgoers of the 70s and 80s, all that was evil

about the West came to be embodied in the person of Helen, the archetypal vamp predatory and sexually promiscuous (though sometimes with a golden heart) the polar opposite of the heroine who represented Indian values. Sometimes she paid with her life for protecting the hero. The message was loud and clear, such transgressive women do not deserve to live. Helen was a Franco-Burmese actor, who could easily fill in for an Anglo-Indian: She looked and dressed western but spoke Hindi albeit with a drawl. Most often assaying the character of gangster's moll or cabaret dancer, Helen's *raison d'etre* in the film was to try to (unsuccessfully) seduce the hero, epitomise the oomph factor by packing in sizzling dances, and act as a foil to the virtuous heroine, who, clad in a sari represented Indian values. A later bunch of westernised heroines gradually put Helen out of business in Bollywood.

Not everyone was influenced by this stereotyping, and several films like *Massey Sahab (1985)*, *Miss Beatty's Children (1992)* as also the ones mentioned above are sensitive portrayals of Anglo-Indian characters. Mention must be made of *Bhowani Junction (1956)* a Hollywood production, based on John Master's book of the same name. Victoria Jones, the Anglo-Indian protagonist is a young woman demobilised from the WAC-I circa 1947. Though she is an adult at the time Akhtar's teenage Anglo-Indian characters in *The Archies* are being born, the Anglo-Indian community is already in the throes of a crisis. The crisis in 'The Archies' however becomes apparent only gradually. The initial impact of the teenage musical is one of fun and frolic. Veronica Lodge, 'Ronnie' is back in Riverdale after a couple of years abroad, and Archie Andrews is beginning to wish he had two hearts to be divided equally between old flame Veronica and present girlfriend, Elizabeth 'Betty' Cooper. The teenage musical format, foot-tapping bilingual songs, Hinglish, the star-kid dominated cast and the evocation of a 'swinging sixties' ethos tends to lull the critical faculties. The amazing 'period piece' interiors and retro-costumes deserve full marks. The issue at the core of the film is the threat faced by Riverdale, the community where Archie and his friends live. The acquisition of a park central to Riverdale both for its location and its history by Hiram Lodge, Veronica's father to build a mall shakes up the settlement. The underhand ways in which the corporate swallows up commons in the name of development is effectively played out. How even the public spirited are ensnared, how the idealism of youth is stonewalled by 'practical' considerations and how relationships are strained to breaking point when the community gets polarised is effectively illustrated. Caught up in the narrative it is easy to lose sight of the subtle tweaks in the representation of the Anglo-Indian characters. The characters, nearly all Anglo-Indian, are tawny in complexion. Their skin-tone is below the normal complexion of Bollywood heroines as presented on screen. The colour complex was an important factor in the psyche of the community. As in most Indian communities, the paler the better. But, perhaps to minimise the exoticisation of an Indian community, all the characters in *The Archies* have a 'wheatish' complexion. The sari, worn both as party wear and work-a-day outfit in the film seems to be far more on display than is probable given the period depicted. The frock and the skirt were important markers of the Anglo-Indian community, and it seems inconceivable that Anglo-Indian women would show up at an anniversary party in an Anglo-Indian colony elegantly draped in a sari masquerading as a gown. The ambience of a Saturday night dance in an Anglo-Indian club or Railways Institute, including the brawl that follows the ball is delightfully presented. Anglo-Indians use the English language in a distinctive manner. Indeed, the English language was flagged as a marker of the community by the Anglo-Indian Association. Colloquialisms like 'an' all' and 'men' were hallmarks of the Anglo-Indian lingo, but such is not the case in the dialogues in 'The Archies'. Violet Stoneham of *36 Chowringhee Lane* brilliantly assayed by the legendary Jennifer Kendall is a far more authentic presentation. Her dress, her speech as well as the way she lives is totally authentic. The economic activities of Riverdale are well on display in *The Archies* --a travel agency, a bookstore, a local newspaper, a hair-dresser's salon and so on. Nevertheless, none of the characters appear to be in straightened financial circumstances. Veronica Lodge's family is outright wealthy, as in the original cartoon strip, a detail made well use of in the development of the plot. Historically however the reservation in government jobs that community leaders had won for the Anglo-Indian community was ending in the 60s, and economic hardship as well as loss in privilege was looming ahead. Migration to England was much was a much desired goal.

Ruskin Bond, who turned 89 in 2023 is an Anglo-Indian 'wordsmith' who has lived through the turbulent times weathered by the community has recorded some of it in his autobiography, *Lone Fox Dancing*. Bond's father, Aubrey Bond, an English teacher who joined the RAF was a domiciled Englishman, while his mother Edith Clerke was an Anglo-Indian. Aubrey Bond was tutor to the prince and princesses of Jamnagar, and as a child Bond enjoyed all the privileges of an English child. He fondly recalls his ayah, the tall tales narrating *khansama*, Osman, and the large 'Tennis Bungalow' surrounded by extensive gardens where he lived with his parents and sister in Gujarat. Later, after his parents got divorced and he started living with his father in Delhi, there were trips to Connaught Place to see the latest Hollywood films, records to buy for the gramophone, bookshops and confectionary shops to visit. In Bishop Cotton, Shimla his education closely resembled that of a British Public School. This privileged world shattered when his father died when he was just ten years old and he had to return to Dehradun. His mother, in the meantime had

married Mr Hari, a happy-go-lucky Indian businessman who was a married man with grown up children. The home he returned to was far from affluent. Mr Hari's business ventures regularly failed. The meagre resources had to be shared between Ruskin, his brother, his two half- brothers, as also with a sister who was a special child. Bond migrated to England when he was in his teens and returned to India four years later. He has lived through, indeed embodies, much of the Anglo-Indian experience with a difference. He migrated to England and returned to settle permanently in India. In fact, Bond's immersion in the Anglo-Indian ethos began when he was just 6 years old. Once his father left to join the RAF, Bond's mother Edith returned to Dehradun. Her father, who was in the railways had passed on, but her mother continued to live in the bungalow built by him on Old Survey Road, supplementing her small pension by renting out a part of her house to Miss Kellner, and selling pickles, jams and preserves. Clement Town, on the outskirts of Dehradun was a 'Rest Camp' for American and British soldiers, so laid back Dehradun had suddenly metamorphosed into a happening place bursting with bars, cafes, nightclubs and parties. Edith Bond ne Clerke, long exiled from this vibrant ethos, threw herself heart and soul into the hectic social life of Dehradun, and Ruskin was left in the care of his unsmiling and strict grandmother, a far cry from the genial affection of his father and pampering of his ayah. As the war ended and India began its march towards independence, things changed drastically. Bond reconstructs the sudden decline in the fortunes of the Anglo-Indian community through sundry characters who appear in his autobiography and in a fictionalised form in his short-stories.

Viola Melville from an affluent Anglo-Indian family of Dehradun married an English corporal and left for England soon after her marriage. Rhoda and her sister Irene regulars at the Casino, a popular nightclub are also recalled in *Lone Fox Dancing*. Irene too left Dehradun for England after marriage. It would appear that the height of social success in Dehradun of the late 1940s was marriage to a Tommy. O'Brien mentions the pioneering role Anglo-Indian women played by joining the workforce. As mentioned above, Victoria Jones is a subaltern demobilised from the WAC-I in *Bhowani Junction*. Ruskin Bond's mother herself was a training to be a nurse when she got married to Aubrey Bond. After her second marriage to Mr Hari, she had to take up several jobs to keep the home fires burning. One such job was managing the Green Hotel in Dehradun. The Green Hotel was once a posh and thriving establishment, but after independence it was facing a slump as was the entire town of Dehradun. It was mostly vacant, but occupying a room were Mrs Deeds and her son, Howard. Mrs Deeds was an alcoholic, deserted by her husband. She had some property in Nainital which she had since sold but had not been paid fully for. Her financial condition grew steadily worse as she awaited an assisted passage to England for herself and her son. Unable to clear her dues, she was thrown out of Green Hotel, and gradually moved to progressively seedy hotels. One night, while crossing the maidan on her way back to the hotel she was raped. She subsequently left Dehradun. Miss Deeds is a character who appears in Bond's 'Time Stops at Shamli'. She is a school teacher stranded in one horse Shamli. She has no relatives or friends and receives no letters, as Mr Lin another guest in the hotel where she lives, points out. The only escape route for her is marriage, and there is no one she can marry. She says she is called the Jungle Princess by her friends as she lives in backward Shamli. Actually, it was Edith Bond's friend Mrs Carberry who was called the Jungle Princess. Carberry and her little daughter Doreen lived in Herbertpur, a small town on the Paonta Sahib road. Her income came from her extensive orchards. Eventually, she sold off her land and left Herbertpur where her family had lived for several generations. In 'Tales from Fosterganj' there is a character 'Foster of Fosterganj'. The Fosters were once big landowners of Fosterganj, but the last of the Fosters is an eighty- years old man, trying to survive by running a chicken farm and selling gladioli bulbs. The fictional Fosterganj is based on Barlowganj, now part of Greater Mussoorie. Barlowganj, with its very Victorian bungalows and very Indian bazaar was home to two illustrious Anglo-Indian families: Skinners and the Harseys. The Skinners owned Sikandar Hall, a landmark in Barlowganj. Forster's sad predicament is to be understood in the context of his location, once home to landowning Anglo-Indian families, but bereft now. The fortunes of most Anglo-Indian families recalled by Bond in his memoirs are on the decline. The last of the family of 'Pahari Wilson', once extremely wealthy and influential but now impoverished, was well known to the Bonds as well.

Many such examples, both factual and fictional can be gleaned from Bond's works. Bond migrated to England and returned in time to witness the sun set on a once vibrant community. Bond came to live in Mussoorie in 1963 renting a part of Maplewood Lodge from Miss Bean, herself a caretaker appointed by her friend Marjorie Gordon. The date fits in with the period depicted in 'The Archies'. The Mussoorie he came to live in still had a number of Anglo-Indian and domiciled European families. Bond frequently uses the term 'poor white' when narrating the story of the last of the Anglo-Indian community, including himself. He mentions the Powell sisters of Wayside Lodge, and 'Sir E', (Sir Edmund) his aristocratic neighbour, once the Resident of Jamnagar State, who knew Bond's parents. It is vital to note that the only domiciled Europeans and Anglo-Indians left in Mussoorie in the 60s are older people, mostly single and impoverished but loyally clinging on their natal country. There are absolutely no young people from the Anglo-Indian community left in Mussoorie, a far cry from Akhtar's vibrant group of Anglo-Indian teenagers in *The Archies*. Some, like the hearty middle-aged Garlah sisters are busy within the community, managing a boarding house and the cemetery with equal elan, and in a position to help Arthur Fisher 'discarded by the Fisher family when

they left'. As Bond recalls, there were small get togethers arranged by the community for its dwindling members, but mostly the elderly Anglo-Indians lived alone in isolated cottages in and around Mussoorie. As the sun set on the empire, most white and near white residents of the fashionable resort town of Mussoorie scrambled to leave. They sold, gave away or abandoned their bungalows and cottages which gradually fell into ruin. The massive slump in property prices in Mussoorie after independence made keeping up these properties unviable. Junk dealers stripped these homes of everything that could be sold as scrap-- furniture, tin roof, door and window frames, wooden floors, were all dismantled and sold. Only empty shells of the once gracious homes were left. Bond describes one such house, Fox-Burn in an essay, 'Picnic at Fox Burn'. But amid all this waste some cottages stood out, still lived in and kept up after a fashion... and one of these was Maplewood, Bond's first home in Mussoorie. The beautiful colonial interiors reconstructed so authentically in *The Archies* were sadly a thing of the past for the community in the 60s, as were the bands, dances and shows. Young people had almost all migrated, and the older ones lived on until gathered to their fathers. However, though alone and defenceless and the last of an erstwhile ruling class, they were not harmed or molested in anyway, living out their days supported by local people, Sir E has his Trilok, and Miss Bean her *khansama*, who she pays a pittance. The only Anglo-Indian being actively harassed Bond writes about was the unfortunate Dean Spread. Being feeble minded he was abandoned by his family. This fair-haired, blue-eyed boy plodded along the paths of Mussoorie, a gunny bag on his shoulder, going from house to house collecting saleable rubbish to be sold to the Rajpur *kabaris*. He would be abused and pelted with stones by urchins as he went around town. No one but Bond can or would sympathetically recall and write about those members of the Anglo-Indian community, like Dean Spread or Arthur Fisher, who fell by the wayside.

A short story by Bond, 'Gracie' is about meeting a girl he had a boyish crush on in far off Dehradun, in London. A war bride, she was abandoned by her soldier husband, and finding no takers for her talents as a singer, gradually turned to prostitution. She does not want any one back home in India to know her sorry plight. Interestingly Bond has not written about the predicament of Anglo-Indian women who married Indian men and stayed on. His mother had married Mr Hari and Bond must have seen such a relationship at close quarters. Both *Bhowani Junction* and *36 Chowringhee Lane* indicate the difficulties of such an alliance. *36 Chowringhee Lane* has the parallel story of Rosemary, Violet Stoneham's niece, who is all set to marry an Indian man, but the relationship ends in a breakup. But Bond's mother stood by Mr Hari through thick and thin even though his business ventures regularly failed, the extended family was large and money always an issue. The family had to move frequently as Mr Hari could neither pay his taxes nor his rent, and eventually quit Dehradun.

Bond's memories and delineation of Anglo-Indians is tinged with a sense of loss. But as O' Brien notes the community is characterised by a 'never say die' attitude. No one exemplifies this better than Bond himself. Diana Athill, Bond's first publisher notes that though merely a teenager when she first knew him in London, Bond worked at an accounting job during the day, and wrote far into the night, determined as he was to be a writer. He was down-to-earth and dogged, and left for India after he had achieved his goal.

The Archies is not a history of the Anglo-Indian community. There are fictional as well as factual texts, like Allan Sealy's *Trotternama* and Barry O' Brien's *The Anglo-Indians: A Portrait of a Community* that address the issue imaginatively and factually. Nevertheless, *The Archies* is a timely intervention and Akhtar stands with the angels. She has put on record the presence and continuance of a community the very existence of which is now denied. The Anglo-Indian community is now denied representation in parliament under the pretext that there are almost no Anglo-Indians left in India. As Archie's father says in the film, if all of us migrate there will be no one bearing the name of Anglo-Indian. Many stayed on. They are inheritors of a five hundred year old legacy. They deserve to be seen and acknowledged.

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