



‘Socio-Psychological trauma of the people during the anti-colonial struggles in India: A Study of the major characters in Ruskin Bond’s *A Flight of Pigeons*’

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Abstract

Ruskin Bond’s Novella ‘A Flight of Pigeons’ (1975) is a historical fiction set in British-India Shahjahanpur, against the backdrop of the chaos of 1857 rebellion. The author reconstructs the historical tale of Ruth Labadoor and her family’s escapades during the massacre that took place during the first war of Indian Independence in 1857.. The narrative reflects the chaotic socio-political conditions of the day originated due to colonial exploitative hegemony over Indians. The novella focuses on the turbulent times prevailing during the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny in India and depicts the traumatic and painful experiences of people –both the natives and foreign origin people with their families. The historical reconstruction of the turbulent era was done in the novella through the characterization of Ruth and Mariam Labadoor. In his *The Flight of Pigeons*, Ruskin Bond depicts the socio-psychological trauma of the people and political turmoil during the phase of anti-colonial struggles in India in the mid-decades of the 19th century.

This research explores how the-then socio-political turmoil was reflected in the novella through the characterization of Ruth and Mariam Labadoor, how colonial oppressive hegemony over the native Indian people by the British boomeranged, causing miserable plight in the lives of their people settled in and around Shahjahanpur. This paper aims to explore the impact of anti-colonial struggles on the psyche of the colonised.

Key Words: Political hegemony – economic exploitation – conflict of cultures – historical authenticity – anti-colonial struggles – social unrest – socio-psychological trauma.

Introduction

The story focuses on the turbulent times of northern and central India during the 1857 rebellion against the British and has its sources in the annals of history. The small town Shahjahanpur serves as a microcosm of the events that occurred through north-central India in 1857. The novel begins when Ruth, accompanied by her father, attends the usual Sunday prayer at St. Mary's Church disregarding the suppressed upheaval outside. Ruth's father is killed by the rebellions and the story progresses with the way the family struggles to free themselves from the dreadful state of affairs. The author gives a detailed account of the happenings through this erratic journey of Labadoors till they reach their destination. The author analyses the novel to understand the psychological trauma caused by the then-existing socio-political turmoil due to colonialism.

The main characters in the novel are Ruth Labadoor, who is the narrator of the novel and the eye witness of the death of her father and Mariam Labadoor, Ruth's mother, a helpless woman who saves her family from every harm though entangled in a myriad of circumstances. Mariam Labadoor's father had been a French adventurer who had served in the Maratha army; her mother came from a well-known Muslim family of Rampur. She and her brothers had been brought up as Christians. At eighteen, she married Labadoor, a quiet, unassuming man, who was a clerk in the Magistrate's office. He was the grandson of a merchant from Jersey (in the Channel Islands), and his original Jersey name was Labadu.

After the brutal attack, Ruth escapes and joins her mother in their hiding place at the house of Lala Ramjimal for a month, where eight of them live in a little room, served one meal a day and shut up in the house all day for the fear of being discovered and killed. But on a fateful day, the Labadoor family was caught by twenty to thirty men armed with swords and pistols along with their leader Javed Khan a Rohilla Pathan, who is suspected of having set on fire at night the bungalow of the Redmans. Javed Khan forcefully abducts them to his haveli and proposes to marry Ruth as he is infatuated by her beauty. He haunts Mariam with a proposal to marry her young daughter Ruth, but Maryam persuades him to wait until the victory of Delhi, on a condition that if rebels win Delhi, Maryam would give her daughter in marriage to Javed Khan.

Historical socio-political context

Shahjahanpur is situated southeast of Rohilkhand region and it is also known as the City of Martyrs (shaheedon ki nagri). It was made a district in 1813-14 by the East India Company and was a part of Bareilly district before. According to tradition, its earlier name was Gangadurga. During the medieval period, it was included in Katehar which was the name of Rohilkhand during the Sultanate period. The revolt of 1857 in Shahjahanpur began at the same time as in the other districts of Northern India. The news of Meerut-outbreak on 10 May, 1857 reached the sepoys in military cantonment on 15 May, 1857. In the morning of 31 May, a Sunday, the Europeans were assembled in the local St. Mary's Church situated near the famous 'Gandhi Faiz-i-Aam (P.G.) College, Shahjahanpur' for their usual prayers. That was the moment, when native infantry regiment turned violent and rebellion broke out in Shahjahanpur and a murderous attack was made by a number of rebel sepoys, under the leadership of Jawahar Rae at 7.30 a.m., who rushed into the building, armed with swords and clubs and thus the massacre began.

It was so sudden that nobody could understand what exactly happened outside. The District Magistrate Marwant Ricketts was wounded and dashed out a few yards from the Church door. The other officers somehow managed to drive out their assailants and close the Church door placing the women and children for safety in the turret. Some villagers about a mile from the station murdered Reverend J. L. Malam, who was escaping from the Church. Lamaistre, a clerk in the collector's office, was killed in the Church. Smith, another clerk, was cut down near the collector's court. By that time, the rebellion was spread towards military cantonment and the mutineers started looting and burning the houses in the cantonment area. In the introduction to *The Penguin 1857 Reader* Pramod K. Nayar gives insights into factual evidence: The telegraph wires were cut and there was no way the Meerut officers could contact other regiments for help. Looting and plunder proceeded briskly. Englishmen's bungalows were burnt and many killed with their families. Some sepoys and native servants, however, helped their English officers and their families to escape at great risk to themselves. (10)

Colonial violence

The British colonial rule had a tremendous impact on all sections of Indian society. Violence and plunder were the two most popular tools used by the rebels to express their resistance against their oppressors. These violent incidents were a common phenomenon during those turbulent times of revolt. Ruth describes the incident at the

church where, six or seven men on the porch whose faces were covered up to their noses; wore tight loin cloths as though they had prepared for a wrestling bout; but they held naked swords in their hands. “The armed men had made only one rush through the church, and then gone off through the vestry door. After wounding my father, they had run up the center of the aisle, slashing right and left” (P 8)

The character exemplifies how an Anglo-Indian teenager becomes an object of desire to people in power and simultaneously it is clear from the very first chapter of the novel when Ruth observes soon after her father's demise: Leaving him against the stone wall of the church, I ran round to the vestry side and almost fell over Mr. Ricketts, who was lying about twelve feet from the vestry door. . . . Sick with horror, I turned from the spot and began running home through Buller's compound. Nobody met me on the way. No one challenged me or tried to intercept or molest me. The cantonment seemed empty and deserted; but just as I reached the end of Buller's compound, I saw our house in flames. I stopped at the gate, looking about for my mother, but could not see her anywhere. Granny, too, was missing, and the servants. Then I saw Lala Ramjimal walking down the road towards me. (Bond, *A Flight of Pigeons* 10) Through these ghastly incidents in the novel, the author brings to light the atrocities inflicted on humanity during Mutiny. It was not just killing but plundering and destruction of property was a common phenomenon during the uprising. The sepoys chose to destroy property as conscious agents and property owned, used or lived in by the British was always attacked first. ‘The buildings identified with the British, their institutions, missions, churches and other symbols of power were invariably destroyed everywhere during the revolt’. (R. Mukherjee, 'The Sepoy Mutinies Revisited' in Kaushik Roy (ed.) *War and Society in Colonial India*, 2006,Oxford University Press, New Delhi, p. 115.)

Adverse impact of socio-psychological trauma on the characters

The characters Ruth and Mariam Labadoor are the victims of the socio-political turmoil caused by the conflict between the colonized and the colonizer. They are subjected to socio- psychological trauma in the backdrop of the sepoy mutiny and the consequent anti- colonial struggles. Ruth, accompanied by her father, attends the usual Sunday prayer at St. Mary's disregarding the suppressed upheaval outside. ‘Father and I had just left the house when we saw several sepoys crossing the road, on their way to the river for their morning bath. They stared so fiercely at us that I pressed close to my father and whispered, Papa, how strange they look! (6) Ruth was terrified of the ghastly attack and blood shed at the church and starts running home. ‘Sick with horror, I turned from the spot and began running home through Buller's compound. Nobody met me on the way. No one challenged me or

tried to intercept or molest me'(10) 'Violence had and would continue to play a prominent role in British colonial control' – Jill C. Bender. *The 1857 Indian Uprising and the British Empire* (Chapter 6)

The most significant character in the novel is Mariam is portrayed as an intrepid woman who defies all odds to protect her family, she suffers from fear of insecurity when people try to harm her family. Her daughter Ruth expresses her feelings at her mother's sufferings, "Everyone slept well, except Mother, who, though she rested during the day, stayed awake all night, watching over us. It was distressing to see her sit up night, determined not to fall asleep" (30). Mariam's forebodings of danger were so strong that she hid a knife under her pillow to pierce the heart of men who attempted to lay hands on them. Mariam, Labadoor' gets emotionally disturbed when she receives information regarding her husband's death and tries to commit suicide thinking that her daughter is also killed. Her emotions lack stability and she attempts to commit suicide by throwing herself into the well. It is pointed out, "Hearing that we had both been killed, Mother's first impulse was to throw herself into the nearest well; but Granny caught hold of her, and begged her not to be rash . . ." (14).

Even after the British restores power in Delhi and the Labadoor family safely joins their relatives, Ruth continues to suffer from psychological disturbance in the form of nightmares. She pathetically opens her mind, "But the trials of the past year had made such an impression on my mind, that I was often to wake up terrified from nightmares in which I saw again those fierce swordsmen running through the little church, slashing at anyone who come in their way". (132) "Stress in Man is a diffuse emotional state, characterised by continuing state of uncertainty, in which the individual constantly feels threatened. It occurs when an individual is subjected to conditions which disturb, or threaten to disturb, crucial psychological variables from within their normal limits"(Trivedi C. R. 6) Mariam and her family's constant shift of abodes under compulsion and their negotiations affect them both psychologically and physically. The most crucial attack during a church service in Shahjahanpur where Mr. Labadoor gets killed and Ruth narrowly escapes from death is a demonstration of the horrific impact of the colonial outrage

Anticolonial struggles of the characters

A Flight of Pigeons realistically explores several issues surrounding the life of British colonizers in India and the characteristic attitude of the colonized Indians. The sepoys chose to destroy property as conscious agents and property owned, used or lived in by the British was always attacked first. 'But as the residents and the troops

marched to the scared edifice it became evident that some great event was pending. They saw bodies of armed men hurrying on their way as if to a rendezvous. Then there succeeded columns of smoke, as if many bungalows had been set on fire'. (G. B. Malleson, *The Indian Mutiny of 1857*, 1988, Rupa Publications, New Delhi, p. 45)

The Labadoor house is set to flames after the massacre and they hide themselves in a nearby mud house until Lala Ramjimal, rescues them to his house where they were served food once a day in platters made of stitched leaves and front door chained at all times. "We soon fell into the habits of Lala's household, and it would have been very difficult for anyone, who had known us before, to recognize us as the Labadoors". (28)

Ruth and Mariam assume Muslim identities, when Javed Khan takes the women away as guests to his Muslim household, as they knew that their only chance of survival was by gradually shedding their European identity. Homi Bhabha theorises in his essay, 'Of Mimicry and Man' – 'Mimicry' is that ambivalent position and trained imitation by which the colonized expresses his subservience to and follow the White/colonizer.

They wistfully welcome the change to camouflage their identity and take Indian names. 'I was given the name of Khurshid, which is Persian for sun', and my cousin Anet', being short of stature, was called Nanni. Pilloo was named Ghulam Hussain, and his mother automatically became known as Ghulam Hussain's mother. Granny was, of course, Baribi. It was easier for us to take Mohammedan names, because we were fluent in Urdu, and because Granny did in fact come from a Muslim family of Rampur'(28). The aftermath of the murder was so enormous on the Labadoor family that they had no time to indulge in their private sorrow but to live a life of constant danger. 'It is through the human stories of the successes, struggles, grief, anguish and despair of these individuals that we can best bridge the gap of time and understanding separating us from the remarkable different world of mid-nineteenth century India' (The Last Mughal 13). The Uprising or Mutiny is not just viewed as nationalism, imperialism, orientalism or other such concepts, but as a human event of extraordinarily complex and tragic outcomes. It allows us to look into the lives of the individuals caught up in one of the greatest upheavals of history.

Chaotic social and political conditions

The Labadoor family was in constant fear of their future if the British rule is not restored., Twenty-five days after the massacre in the Church, there was a great beating of drums, sound of fife, shouting on the road and the trample of the horses on the 24th of June as there was a change of Nawab. It was a moment of uncertainty; the Lala later

informs Mariam that the dissolute Nawab Quadir Ali has been ousted, however Ghulam Qadar Khan, the new Nawab who is said to be pious was determined to rid the land of all *firangis*. The only uncertain consolation for Mariam is that he has some regard for the Labadoors and was also against the senseless slaughter of women and children. ‘I will have nothing to do with the murder of the innocent,’ he said (113). **Historian Brantlinger** describes the event as: On 10 May the sepoy mutinied at Meerut, burning the cantonments and killing their British officers and other Europeans. Then they marched to Delhi where they massacred many European residents and installed Bahadur Shah II, hypothetical ruler of the Moghul Empire, as their reluctant leader. (201).

Mariam desperately looks forward to the reoccupation of Shahjahanpur by the British which would ultimately end their captivity. “Our motives in hoping for the restoration of British authority were, therefore, entirely personal. We had during the past months, come to understand much of the resentment against a foreign authority, and we saw that the continuation of that authority could only be an unhappy state of affairs for both sides; but for the time being our interests to see it restored. Our lives depended on it” (111). Colonialism proved to be very cruel towards the indigenous peoples, bringing about slavery, brutality, and death” An introduction to global studies (Campbell, MacKinnon, & Stevens, 2010, p. 36)

Essence of humanity

A Flight of Pigeons is more profound due to the juxtaposition of cruelty and compassion—if violence anguishes the innocent Anglo-Indians, kindness replaces the wound. We have seen that Ramjimal’s earnest assuage Mariam and her family in utmost necessity. He may be a —lean man with —a long moustache, but his surefooted presence and dignified speech bring forth —an air of determination (Bond, A Flight 300) of rarest kind, which earns admiration from the women in distress. This Hindu businessman is one who, on being questioned about his decision to protect the ‘angrezans’ in his house, clarifies his moral responsibility unhesitatingly: —I have done what is right. . . . I have not given shelter to Angrezans. I have given shelter to friends. Let people say or think as they please (300)

Historical authenticity of the characters

In order to provide historical authenticity to his story Ruskin Bond studied the gazetteers of that period and other available accounts, and visited the site of action in Shahjahanpur. ‘Mr. Lemaistre, a clerk in the Collector’s office was killed in the Church, and the fate of his daughter is unknown.’

“My father was born in Shahjahanpur and had probably heard the tale from his soldier father who had been stationed there afterwards. Whether the girl in question as **Ruth Labadoor (or possibly Lemaistre)** or someone else, one cannot say at this point in time. But Ruth’s story is true. She survived the killings and her subsequent

ordeal, and lived to tell her story to more than one person; mention of it crops up time and again in old records and accounts of the ‘Mutiny’ of 1857”.

The author throws light on the **Pathan** community through the character of Javed Khan. Pathans formed thirty percent of the Muslim population of Shahjahanpur (Muslims forming twenty - three percent of the entire population) according to 1901 census. Most were cultivators, although many were landed proprietors of the district. (True Pathans are descendants of Afghan immigrants). ‘Their attitude during the mutiny cost them dear, as many estates were forfeited for rebellion’ (*Gazetteer*) **Rajendra Mohan Bhatnagar in his work The Stories of Freedom Movement**, describes the scene as following: On 31st May, 1857. In Shahjahanpur, the British were gathering in the church when the Indian soldiers suddenly attacked them. Fighting broke out. Many Britishers were killed. Some of them fled to save their lives, and by the time it was evening, Shahjahanpur had fallen into the hands of revolutionaries. (Bhatnagar 54).

Socio-cultural Milieu of the 19th Century

The humane elements that remain unspoken in the traditionally evasive accounts of the Indian Uprising are beautifully presented in this novella. Ruskin Bond gives an exceptional version of human relationships in all their complexities and diversities through this fiction. Amidst the dreadful experiences, people like Lala Ramjimal extend support towards Ruth and her family. While the British historians have time and again held the Rising of 1857 to have been an act of aggression by the Muslims, Bond introduces a counter-discourse to this homogenized understanding of human individuals through the religious aspect of their identity in revealing through Lala Ramjimal how the dead Christians at the church were buried by two Muslim people who said that “something had impelled them to undertake this task” and that they “were willing to face the consequences” (23).

The author gives a detailed and artistic description of the camaraderie and internal politics of Indian Muslim women. Though the women of Pathan household resent the idea of giving shelter to the *firangi*, the women later realise the helpless condition of these people and accept them earnestly by showing affection and integrating the firangis into their lives. The character of ‘Kothiwali’ an elderly woman in the Pathan household describes the human ethos that surpasses enmity and hatred. She is compassionate towards the Labadoor women and assures them with her promise, ‘No, you are safe while I am here’, said Kothiwali (43). She was enamoured by Mariam’s perfect Urdu, fine manners and high moral values and develops a great affinity with the Labadoors. While describing the predicament of the characters caught in the flux of events, Bond brings out their essential humanity.

Loss of identity and Alienation

The Labadoors live a life of refugees, transported from one house to another in the constant fear of being killed. ‘A valid identity of the self is eroded by displacement or dislocation, thus producing a fissure between self and place’ (Ashcroft, Griffiths and Tiffin 9). Mariam sadly expresses: “It was in our interests to forget that we had European blood in our veins, and that there was any advantage in the return of the British to power. It was also necessary for us to *seem* to forget that the Christian God was our God, and we allowed it to be believed that we were Muslims”. Mariam discreetly tells Kothiwali, ‘For the present we are identified with you all, and we must go where you go’ (155). Loss of cultural identity often leads people to lose their self- esteem, confidence and emotional security. In the words of Hall, “Culture includes both the meanings and values which arise amongst distinctive social groups and class, on the basis of their given historical conditions, and relationship, through which they handle and respond to the conditions of existence; and the lived traditions and practices through which they are embodied” (26).

Conclusion:

The various representations of the Uprising of 1857 have been manifested in several historical, social and literary accounts. Ruskin Bond’s 'A Flight of Pigeons' is a sensitive and insightful portrayal of bringing out ‘the twists of fate, history and the human heart’. Although the characters are fictional, the characterization has historical authenticity affirmed by imperative evidence from old records and accounts of the ‘Mutiny’ of 1857. The violent activities of the Revolt and the anti colonial struggles are objectively and creatively reflected in this novel. Through the characterization of Ruth and Maryam Labadoor, the author reflects the gamut of acute emotional trauma and endless ordeals the common people underwent during the most significant period of history. The author portrays the saga of survival of the perseverant women to reach their destination through the shadows of horror and strife and thus giving life to traumatic and painful experiences of colonialism

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