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HISTORY AND TYRANNY IN RUSKIN BOND'S A FLIGHT OF PIGEONS

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Abstract

Colonialism, a system which exerts one's power and influence over others for establishing one's control over the captives, certainly reshuffles the life and economy of the colonized. The colonizers are forced to undergo a change of identity with their arrival to the colonial lands, whereas the colonized are imposed to follow the cultural pattern.

This paper analyses the psychological and sociological existence, racial stereotypes, impact of cultural conflict and political trauma of both the colonizer and the colonized in a colonized nation. Ruskin Bond, an Anglo-Indian writer, realistically portrays the impact of 1857 Sepoy Mutiny, which is registered as the First War of Independence in Indian history, in his novella *A Flight of Pigeons*. The writer strictly follows the historical incident with some fictional touch and makes the story highly influential. The paper also focuses on the difficult times when the British officials are massacred and how the members of their family surrendered themselves blindly to the opponents for their survival. Through this novella, Ruskin Bond throws light on the colonial dilemma where

people undergo varied psychological and sociological experiences in their struggle for survival. Racial marginalization which causes mental stress leading to depression and frustration is also highlighted. The paper lays emphasis on the cross-cultural issues that pave way for loss of identity and cultural disasters. By depicting the politics of power and mixed-racial marginality, *A Flight of Pigeons* steadfastly affirms that colonialism and war often end in vanity and destruction abruptly.

Colonialism, a practice by which a powerful country seeks to wield its influence over another country for power and economic dominance, corrupts the normal life of both the colonizer and the colonized. British colonizers in India utilized varied strategies on some powerful Indian and Mughal emperors to grab the power of ruling India. To establish colonial domination in India, the colonizers used silent but powerful weapons such as divide and rule, apartheid laws, ethnocentrism,

education and language, religious suppression, depolitization, and inward violence. Aziz Rahman opines, “The British realized that India was a land of socio-cultural diversity, and to exploit and control the lands, it was imperative to incite Hindus against Muslims and the masses against the princes, as well as provoking one caste against the other to augment caste divisions and class disparity among the Hindu community”(4). However, in 1857 during the Sepoy Mutiny, the Indian soldiers and people irrespective of their caste and religion joined hands to wipe out the imperialist colonialism in India which forced even the colonizers to pass through physical and emotional disturbance of identity crisis and cross-cultural issues.

Ruskin Bond, an Anglo-Indian writer who has lived through both the colonial and postcolonial India, realistically portrays the trauma of displacement, loss of identity, racial and political marginalization of the colonizer and the colonized in India during the freedom struggle in his racy and exciting novella *A Flight of Pigeons*. This novella serves as a historical and cultural testimony to the Indian war of Independence which broke out suddenly and swept across the land like a storm which made even the colonizers tremble with fear. Additionally, the writer also reflects the endeavour of the Muslims to reinforce their political, social and economic hegemony over the British imperialists who strive hard to establish their dominion over India. Bond poignantly captures the aftereffects of struggle for power which results in communal and racial strife driving people to struggle for their psychological and social existence overcoming many social and cross-cultural issues. In addition to the struggles and sufferings, the writer brilliantly enunciates the humanistic concern shown towards the opponents. Rohit Phutela confirms the historical and humane manifestations as, “Set in Shahjahanpur during the revolt of 1857, *A Flight of Pigeons* is Ruskin Bond’s classic novella about the twists of fate, history and the human heart”(286).

It is a known fact that while colonising a country, the colonizers have to undergo the experience of migrancy and relocation. Migration from their motherland to a different country certainly creates the pain of transplantation, rupture and disjunctive crisis. In such circumstances, the colonizers are reinforced to adopt in the alien land for their survival. Survival in a foreign land becomes crucial as it involves physical, social, cultural, psychological and spiritual adjustments with the newly inherited society. In the words of Vijayasree, “Survival in this case, is primarily the need to survive the cataplexy of uprooting and the shock of arrival. This is followed by an incessant struggle to surmount the obstacles to one’s assimilation into or comfortable adaptation to the new environment” (131). Moreover, survival becomes critical when there is a threat for life.

Ruskin Bond lucidly presents the mindset of the people who strenuously attempt to protect their life from the butchers in the name of mutiny in his novella *A Flight of Pigeons*. The psychological turmoil of

the English people due to the massacre of their congregation in a church and its premises by the sepoys at Shahjahanpur during the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857 is realistically portrayed. Through the depressed life of Ruth Labadoor and her family, Bond manifests the impact of psychological anxiety and distress caused by displacement and relocation. Mr. Labadoor, an English man working as a clerk in the British magistrate's office, gets killed in the attack by the sepoys in front of his daughter Ruth. Mariam, Labadoor's wife 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).

Psychological disturbance often results in mental stress which means double minded stage of life resulting in irrational beliefs and prejudices. A stressed person generally lacks stability and leads a hellish life with tension, worry, anxiety, fear and conflict. Ruskin Bond throws light on the instable mentality of Mariam who is psychologically agitated after her husband's murder. Out of fear she becomes restless and never sleeps at night to protect the members of her family from the evil hands of the revolutionaries. 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 sleep" (30). In addition to this, fear and frustration makes people lose even their self-esteem. Though a member of a respected family, Mariam goes to the extent of begging people to save her family from destruction. When the revolutionaries attempt to abduct Ruth, her mother falls at their feet and begs for her daughter's life. It is said, "'No' cried mother in a tone of anguish, throwing herself in front of me. 'If you would take my daughter's life, take mine before hers, I beg of you by the sword of Ali'" (40). Her stress becomes worse when Javed Khan who saves them from the revolutionaries comes out with a proposal to marry her thirteen years old daughter Ruth. She bends down with shame when Javed Khan's relatives blame her for Javed Khan's insensible behaviour.

Sarfaraz Khan, Javed's uncle scolds Mariam, "And yet everyone is saying that you have come into this house to find a husband for your daughter, and that Javed Khan is going to marry her! Why have you brought trouble to this good woman?" (62). C.R. Trivedi states the characteristics of stress, "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" (6).

Above all, Ruskin Bond brilliantly picturizes the impact of depression even after the problematic issue is settled. Ruth undergoes

severe mental depression due to her father's death and their life as refugees in Javed Khan's house and its consequences during the mutiny. Unfortunately, even after the English people defeat the revolutionaries and become powerful 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).

It is understood that one of the most complex mysteries of life is trying to understand other people in the society and to lead a peaceful life in acceptance with them which seems to be the central aspect of one's existence as social being. Ruskin Bond throws light on the importance of sociological existence by the realistic portrayal of Labadoor family and other English captives who change even their identity for their survival. Social and cultural identity in general, is a relationship between people who bear various kinds of commonalities and resemblances. Such an identity shares the fixity of a person to a particular race and provides a fixed and unchanging entity. Hence, dispossession of social and cultural identity detracts the existence of one from his or her society resulting in mental rupture and uprootedness.

Unfortunately, helpless people under the domination of power and capitalist cultures change even their ethnic identity for survival. In *A Flight of Pigeon*, Bond projects the plight of the English people who lose even their identity to survive in an alien land amidst revolutionary sepoys. After escaping from the English cantonment area in Shahjahanpur, Mariam hides her original Christian identity and mentions her family as Muslim family to save themselves from the enemies. Ruth pathetically points out, "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" (58). The pathology is that they even change their names into Muslim names for their survival. Loss of identity certainly pains the entire family as it changes their rich life into a local one. With feelings of unhappiness Ruth states, "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). Gillian Cowlshaw and Barry Morris point out, "Dispossession creates ruptures and discontinuities which themselves construct unique forms of social experience and cultural responses which cannot be traced or recognised purely within legal processes" (8).

Race, a historically grounded social construction, divides people into different groups on the basis of their colour, culture and ethnicity. Race is considered as an erroneous concept because racial consciousness and expression among people pave way for tension and conflict. On the other hand, sometimes it acts as a major organising principle, a source of imaginative energy and as a secret focus of social identity.

However, racial discrimination becomes immoral when it becomes destructive outcome. *A Flight Pigeons* is used as a tool to highlight the destructive effect of racial and religious discrimination. This novella brings into light how the Pathans massacre the English Christians. Pathans, a group of Muslims manifest their animalistic racial consciousness during the Sepoy Mutiny in 1857 by ruthlessly murdering and destroying the goods of the English people residing in Shahjahanpur. The writer strongly exposes the aftereffects of racial discrimination which becomes a threat not only to human lives but also to their belongingness. In the name of revolution, the Pathans attack the English Christians and loot their goods vehemently, "A bungalow in the cantonment, owned by the Redmans, an Anglo-Indian family, had been set on fire during the night. The Redmans had been able to escape, but most of their property was destroyed" (1-2). The most crucial attack takes place during a church service in Shahjahanpur where Mr. Labodoor gets killed and Ruth narrowly escapes from death. The sight of Captain James' murder stuns Ruth and makes her motionless. With a painful heart she narrates, "We saw Captain James riding up to the church, quite unaware of what was happening. We shouted him a warning, but as he

looked up at us, one of the sepoys, who were scattered about on the parade group, fired at him, and he fell from his horse" (8). Subsequently, murders and material destruction proclaim the horrors of racial and religious destruction. In addition to the murders by racists, the affected people attempt to commit suicide as they lose their hope and end up with mental depression and frustration. Through this realistic presentation of inhuman murders and destruction, Ruskin Bond evinces the terrific outcomes of blind racial and religious fanaticism. Regarding race Gillian Cowlishaw and Barry Morris opine, "Racial consciousness, and identification by race, are named as problems rather than as the racialised *effects* of social and economic inequality. The abandonment of race as a social category is considered a victory for reason, a testament to the progress of the scientific truth that race is a lie" (3).

Migration for any reason involves a change, the transplantation of old roots and a search to find new roots. Even the colonisers when they occupy a new nation confront with the change in physical environment such as changes in language, culture, socio- economic system as well as in their personal situations, family lives and working lives. Above all, the social and cultural background of immigrants constitutes a significant influence on the settlement process. Culture, which encompasses not only practices such as art, music, or dance, but also concerned with the experiences of everyday life and employment, as well as economic and political system which provides the identity of any society, class or region. It provides not only meaning but identity for everyone in a particular society or group, class or regional background. In the case of migrants, they confront with the painful experience of immigration and resettlement which involves both personal and cultural loss. 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).

The paper realistically portrays the impact of cultural clash between the European colonizers and the colonised Indians. British colonizers follow differing cultural practices in their everyday living which clashes with the existing social practices. He also highlights the cultural marginalisation of the helpless British immigrants in India by the powerful mohemmadians during the Mutiny in 1857. In particular, after the murder of Mr. Labadoor, Javed Khan, a Pathan haunts Mariam with a marriage proposal to marry her young daughter Ruth. Mariam gets upset over this proposal because he is already married with Khan Begum and so, she refuses the proposal saying that their culture does not allow marriage with a married man. Contrarily, Javed Khan says that he can divorce his wife with a handsome dowry as the Pathan culture allows it. Men can part away from their betterhalves easily by giving them money. Moreover, Pathan culture accepts widow remarriage also. Hence when Mariam poses her culture as a hindrance for his marriage proposal, Javed Khan coolly says, “It is fortunate for you that I am a man. No one shall take her away from Javed, and Javed’s wife she shall be, and I will give her handsome dowry. And if you were to take my advice, Mariam, you ought to take a husband as well and settle down again in life. You are still young” (69). In addition to this, in Pathan culture men are allowed to have more than one wife. Javed Khan proclaims, “Well, what is there to prevent me having more wives than one? Our law allows it”(50). However, Mariam is not convinced and so replies, “But how can you, a Muslim, marry a Christian girl?”(50). Ruskin Bond, thus, lucidly reflects the sorrowful outcome of cultural conflict between the Pathan and Christian culture.

British colonizers in India set apart themselves from others by their peculiar dress code and behaviour. Social gatherings in the name of party are frequently done to enhance their unity and solidarity in the alien land. Their get-togethers with special drink, food and dance are considered eccentric behaviour and their free mingling with the opposite sex is often criticised by the narrow minded Indians. Umda, Khan Begum’s relative underestimates British culture and teases Labadoor family in the midst of many Muslim women saying, “You cannot deny that they enjoy laughing and joking with strange men, that they dance and sing, sometimes half-nude, with the arms of strange men round their waists. Then they retire into dark corners where they kiss and are kissed by men other than their husbands!”(78).

Likewise, the Muslims are not pleased with short skirts and tops used by English women and so Javed Khan asks Labadoor family to change their dress code. He tells Mariam, “It won’t do to wear such cloths in my house. You must get into a pyjama” (58). Alison Blunt affirms the Anglo-Indian behaviour, “This

modernity spanned their dress, their paid employment beyond the home, and their ability to mix socially with men, to choose whom to marry, and to live in a nuclear rather than a joint family after marriage” (204-5).

On the other hand, Ruskin Bond takes an effort to give life to Pathan culture by highlighting the importance of their festivals and traditional beliefs. Pathans are descendants of Afghan immigrants and hence, their religious and cultural celebrations seemed to be entirely different. Monsoon festival is a special festival celebrated by the Pathan women during rainy season to relieve them from physical and mental pressures. On that day, the Pathan women dress themselves in beautiful costumes and engage themselves in many games to forget all their worldly difficulties and enjoy life to the least. Regarding the monsoon festival it is said, “It was the day of the monsoon festival observed throughout northern India by the womenfolk, who put on their most colourful costumes, and relax on innumerable swings, giving release to feelings of joy and abandon”(82).

Moreover, Pathan faith on myths and superstitious beliefs are also brought out which help them to preserve their cultural identity amidst the pressures of dominant cultures through colonialism. They strongly believe that women with long and beautiful hair will be possessed and taken away from the world by aerial beings called jinns. Therefore, elderly women in the community never allow young girls to spread their long hair openly to protect them from the jinns. When Badran, Kothiwali's daughter, dries her wet hair after a bath, her mother says a story, “A young jinn would appear to her, and tell her that he had fallen in love with her beautiful hair one evening as she was drying it after a bath, and that he intended to take her away” (84). Though the girl suffers from great pain, the invisible tormentor continues to visit her and makes her body weak and pale. The jinn exploits her to death, however, her beautiful hair remains as gorgeous as ever.

In addition to this, Pathan culture finds a strong connection between white pigeons and the dead people. It is believed that the souls of dead people come out of their grave on Thursdays to get fresh air in the form of white pigeons. Abdul Rauf, the Pathan leader shouts at Javed Khan not to hunt white pigeons. Javed narrates Abdul Rauf's words, “‘Pigeons,’ he said, ‘are people who come out their graves on Thursdays for a little fresh air’” (95).

Moral codes and values are strictly followed in the Pathan society to keep the people spiritually strong. They vehemently abhor any kind of passion provoking activity in the public to protect people from emotional crimes. Even music is believed to instigate human emotion which may end up with abnormal behaviour and so, it is prohibited in public places. Ruth Labadoor explains, “But in a Pathan settlement, no one is allowed to sing or play any instrument in the streets. Music is supposed to excite all sorts of

passions, and so it is discouraged” (96). Premarital sex and pregnancy is also not accepted in the Pathan culture. Children born without wedlock and certainly with illicit affair brings shame to mothers and their family. Hence, Javed Khan feels irritated even at the sight of his half brother Saifulla who is his father’s illegal son. Javed goes to the extent of beating the boy thoroughly with his horsewhip that tears the boy’s skin. It is pointed out, “Javed hated the boy for being the offspring of an illicit affair of his father’s” (93). On the whole, the cultural conflict between British culture and Pathan culture makes the British descendant Labadoor family to undergo shame and criticism in Javed Khan’s house.

Political condition prevailing during the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny in India focuses on the political game between the powerful and powerless parties which strive hard to establish their power. In 1857, when the Muslims exercise their power in Delhi over the East India company, they murder the English officials and abduct their family and disturb them with varied issues. For instance, powerful Pathan Javed Khan captures Mariam Labadoor and Ruth Labadoor and punish them to walk barefooted without food and water. Ruth painfully points out, “Barefooted and bareheaded, we followed our captor without a murmur, like lambs going to slaughter”(41). Moreover, the captives are depressed with fear of death and so, they hide themselves from the powerful soldiers.

Javed Khan also haunts Mariam and Ruth with his marriage proposal which is much against their culture.

Likewise, when the British army proclaims its control over Delhi, the rebellious soldiers and their supporters run away from their places to save their life. In Shahjahanpur, the Pathan people feel worried when they hear about the British victory over Delhi and they discuss how to escape from the British attack. “The next day the menfolk held a long discussion. Some spoke of fleeing the city, others suggested that it could be better to wait and watch the course of events” (107). On the whole, it becomes clear that efforts taken to gain power through war and other means often end in vain as Ruth opines, “It did not make any sense at all; but I suppose war never has made sense to ordinary individuals”(121).

Ruskin Bond, hence, blends historical incidents with fictionalized events to give life to the lived experience of the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny in his novella *A Flight of Pigeons*. The writer realistically portrays the first Indian War of Independence where the soldiers of Indian army recruited under the East India company revolted against their British lords for the unfair treatment meted out to them. Ruskin Bond himself points out that *A Flight of Pigeons* is based on a historical story heard from his father. It is written in the notes of the novel, “I first heard the story of Mariam and her daughter from my father, who was born in the Shahjahanpur military cantonment a few year after the MutinyI found the old church of St. Mary’s without any difficulty, and beside it a memorial to those who were killed there on that fateful day”(135). Moreover, Ruskin Bond with his unique position as an Indian and an English man satisfactorily presents the transcultural historical incidents realistically for

readers of both the nationalities. Dr. Rohit Phutela asserts, “The novel abounds in the episodes whereby the events of 1857 are graphically rendered with

dates and documentary force and could be easily tilted in favor of the English author” (288).

A Flight of Pigeons not only tells a historical narrative but it is a tale of endurance both by the colonizers and the colonized. The massacre of the British officials by the Indian rebellious sepoys and their supporters disturb the life of their family who are being trapped by the Pathans in the name of protection. Mariam, Mrs Labadoor and her family undergo severe depression and frustration in the hands of Javed Khan and others without proper food, clothing and other facilities. Likewise, when the British gets control over Delhi, the Pathans run to unknown places to save their life. The writer, thus, lucidly depicts the psychological and sociological existence of both the communities.

Above all, the portrayal of cultural and racial marginalization of the colonizers by the revolutionaries bring out their tyrannical experiences in an alien land. Loss of identity for the sake of survival and the impact of cultural conflict reflect the mental trauma of the poor souls. The Labadoor family who represents Christian faith changes their names to Mohemmedian names and follow Muslim culture to avoid gossip and to escape from the sepoys. The writer also points out the vanity of politics in his novella *A Flight of Pigeons*.

Hence, it becomes clear that colonialism, though it makes the colonizers so powerful over the captives, paves way for the traumatic psychological and sociological experiences. While migrating to the colonized nation, the colonizers have to face changes in many aspects of their life such as language, culture and socio-economic system. Ruskin Bond's *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 revolt of the Indian sepoys against the East India Company in 1857 causes psychic trauma

among the Anglo-Indians who are ruthlessly massacred in their cantonment area. Ruskin Bond portrays the panic situation through the Labadoor family who are left to endure depression and frustration after the murder of Mr. Labadoor. The psychic pressure reaches the peak with their abductor Javed Khan's proposal to marry Ruth Labadoor.

Sociological repercussion pierces them in the form of criticism against the morality of English women, in particular the Labadoor women. With pain and grief, they endure such heart breaking incidents and get adapted to the situation for their existence. The writer also highlights the racial conflicts through the massacre of Christians in the church premises by the Hindu and Muslim people. Consequently, the Labadoor family and other Anglo-Indians change their names and racial identity to escape from the revolutionaries. Culture, that identifies a person's nationality, class and regional background, are used as tool to tease the

British colonizers in India. Umda, Khan Begum's relative, talks ill of the British culture of mingling jovially with the opposite sex. Moreover, Mariam and the members of her family painfully change their dress code and Christian faith and adapt to the Pathan culture for their survival. Political suppression for power ensures the vanity of war. It is emphasised that while the Muslims dominate, the Anglo-Indians hide themselves to protect their life. When the British gets power, the Muslims run for their life. Therefore, it distinctly evinces that colonialism is certainly painful and highly traumatic.

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