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HYBRID IDENTITY AS A STRATEGY FOR SURVIVAL: THE ANGLO-INDIAN EXPERIENCE IN RUSKIN BOND'S *A FLIGHT OF PIGEONS*

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ABSTRACT

The novella, A Flight of Pigeons (1978) by Ruskin Bond tries to explore the survival and in-betweenness of an Anglo-Indian family, the Labadoors, during the Uprising of 1857. This paper tries to discuss how the mixed-race identity of the Labadoors becomes both a survival mechanism and an agent of constant dislocation and relocation, pushing them into what Homi Bhabha theorises as "third space". This paper also tries to tell how this novella does not fall into the oeuvre of the traditional Mutiny Novel. A close reading of the text suggests how this novella differs from the initial novels on the Uprising of 1857. Moreover, the novella presents before the readers a nuanced and layered portrayal of colonial India, where survival depended on siding with those who wielded power.

Keywords: hybridity, third space, Anglo-Indians, mutiny novel

INTRODUCTION

The novella is set in the town of Shahjahanpur and the violence during the Uprising of 1857 forms its backdrop. The novella tries to trace the survival of the Labadoor family. Ruth Labadoor's father is killed in the attack by mutineers and post his death, Ruth and her family take shelter with their trusted aide, Lala Ramjimal, hoping to escape to their relatives living in Bareilly. Their plans are disrupted when Javed Khan, leader of the mutineers who attacked the congregation in the church, tracks them down and abducts Ruth and her mother and brings them to his haveli. Contrary to their fears,

Javed is not driven by hate and frenzy, but by an intense attraction for Ruth and wants her to be his wife. Towards the end of the novel Javed fails to marry Ruth as the British forces take over Delhi and eventually move to Shahjahanpur and rescue the European and Anglo-Indian survivors.

In the novella, we see the Uprising of 1857 fractured not only the colonial authority but also exposed the terrifying precarity of the Anglo-Indian community, which was caught in between those who governed and those who were governed, owing to their mixed heritage. While academic history talks in the binaries of British and Indian, or coloniser and colonised, there exists a silence on the part of the Anglo-Indian community. They are often caught in the in-betweenness of the situation, and their voices remain marginalised. Mostly post-colonial issues are seen in terms of the British rulers and the Indians ruled and the Anglo-Indian community was and remains a minuscule community.

The novels written on the Uprising were called 'Mutiny Novels'. The term refers to "historical novels in whose plot the rebellion plays a more or less substantial role" (Nicora, 2013, p. 11). "It was a famous sub-genre of British literature in the second half of the nineteenth century belonging to the genre of 'historical fiction'" (Chemmachery, 2019, p. 1). The common features of these novels include chivalric depictions of British characters and portraying Indian male characters as embodiment of savagery and Englishwomen as women in distress, sometimes showcasing acts of heroism. These tropes, which are a characteristic of colonialist stereotyping have existed since the inception of this genre (mutiny novel) (Chemmachery, 2019, p. 2).

A Flight of Pigeons offers a different perspective on this historical event as it focuses on the strategies used by the fiction Labadoor family, whose mixed heritage becomes both a boon and a bane. The novella does not subscribe to the ideas of the initial novels on the uprising, like Rujub the Juggler (1893) or The Great White Hand (1896). Despite its shortcomings it offers an alternate representation. The novella remains limited for various reasons. The novella focuses on a small mofussil town of northern India, Shahjahanpur and limits its characters to a handful of Indian and Anglo-Indian. It does not talk about the larger context of the Uprising of 1857, the famous sieges, the Siege of Cawnpore or the Siege of Lucknow or any historical character like Nana

Saheb or Bahadur Shah Zafar, the economic, social and immediate causes; rather, the Uprising is seen in the effects it had on the lives of women victims of the violence. Considering the modes of survival of the Labadoors like linguistic adaptability, flexibility of religion, cultural play, this novella brings forth to the readers the crises of identity, belonging and survival in colonial India.

HISTORY OF THE ANGLO-INDIAN COMMUNITY

With the discovery of the sea route to the Cape of Good Hope, the attention of the European world turned towards India. During the reign of the Mughal emperors, trading companies from Portugal, the Netherlands, France and Britain settled in the major port towns of India. The cultural transaction and the relations between the male officers, soldiers and merchants and Indian women led to the inception and evolution of a mixed race. Out of all these European companies, the English East India Company had the greatest impact on the mind and milieu of the Indian populace.

The British made a notable contribution in the evolution of the Anglo Indians. Britishers initially arrived in India as traders and slowly they established themselves as masters. They were already familiar with the people of mixed Asian and European ancestry and before arrival of the British, Indians already had a significant Indo-Portuguese population. Children from these partnerships were highly valued servants, especially as interpreters in dealings with Indian traders and monarchy. Marriage between British men and Indian women were customary which was sometimes recognised by church through a secular contract. The women came from a wide range of social groups the monarchy, the wealthy, the upper castes, lower caste and the ostracised. At one point in time the East India Company provided financial assistance to British soldiers to marry Indian women. The treatment of children born from these communions varied, sometimes they were prioritised and rewarded and at times they were neglected (Ali, 2023, p. 4).

The Labadoors exemplify this complicated genealogy. Ruth's father was a French adventurer who worked in the Maratha army and her mother belonged to well-known Muslim family of Rampur. “Her name was Mariam. 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" (Bond, 2007, p. 5).

THIRD SPACE AND CULTURAL HYBRIDITY

Homi Bhabha's concept of "third space" helps the readers to understand the positioning of the Labadoors during the uprising. Bhabha writes:

> …the intervention of the Third Space of enunciation [...] challenges our sense of historical identity of culture as a homogenizing, unifying force, authenticated by the originary Past, kept alive in the national tradition of the People [...] It is that Third Space, though unrepresentable in itself, which constitutes the discursive conditions of enunciation that ensure that the meaning and symbols of culture have no primordial unity or fixity; that even the same signs can be appropriated, translated, rehistoricised and read anew. (Bhabha, 1994, p. 37)

The ideas of racial purity and miscegenation were important ideological props during the colonial period, especially in the early 20th century. Ideas of racial superiority always posit a homogenous and glorious past. This past may be challenged and questioned by contemporary realizations which are found inconvenient and are largely made invisible.

The third space is characterised by the amalgamation of two cultures, what Bhabha terms as "hybridity." Claire E. Hanlon writes, "Bhabha appropriates the concept of hybridity as an in-between third space, synthesising cultural differences within the postcolonial condition" (Hanlon, 1994).

It is to be noted that the hybrid identity places Labadoor family in a liminal space. Arup Ratan Chakraborty writes, "Homi K. Bhabha refers to liminality as a transitory, in-between state or space, which is characterized by indeterminacy, ambiguity, hybridity, potential for subversion and change" (Chakraborty, 2016, p. 146). The liminality does provide resistance and survival, but at the same time creates dislocation and belongingness. In the novella, the Eurasian subjects feel dislocated from both their 'parental' identities, that of the British and the Indian heritage.

VIOLENCE AND DISLOCATION

Shajahanpur, a small town in the northern part of India, experiences the violence of the uprising. The Labadoors, an Anglo-Indian family survives the violence of the

uprising. The first chapter of the novella creates an atmosphere of imminent dangers for European city dwellers. The novella is set in 1857, a watershed year for the British and the Indians, as Indians revolted against the British colonial rule on a large scale. As discussed earlier, the revolt was marked by violence and bloodshed and the end of company's rule in India. The mutineers in the novella attack St. Mary's Church. Whilst the attack was against the unjust rule and policies of the East India Company and its officers, the common European men, women, and children became the fodder for this violence. In the St. Mary's church women and men were mercilessly slaughtered, and Ruth's father was killed by the mutineers in the premises of the church. It is well known fact that the European establishments were under threat during that phase. Here, the church, another European establishment became the centre of the wrath of the mutineers. This phenomenon was common in town where the fire of Uprising spread. The following reference provide testimony to the arguments above:

> The time came when the Indian Church was to be tried. Suddenly and unexpectedly the fiery ordeal of persecution and martyrdom was presented to it. No time was left for reflection. The danger came like a thief in the night. It fell upon the pastors and their flock. It might perhaps have been predicted that the pastors would remain faithful — would prefer death to the denial of their Lord. (Sherring,1859, p. 8)

> It must be remembered that the sin of apostasy was committed by Europeans and East Indians also, and the proportion in which the latter were guilty of it, so far as I have been able to ascertain, greatly exceeded the proportion among native Christians. (Sherring,1859, p. 11)

The carnage forced the Labadoors to leave their place. Many Indian characters risked their lives to help the Labadoors in the face of carnage, and one of them was Lala Ramjimal, who offered them asylum in his house when things went out of control.

> "I have done what is right," replied Lala very quietly. "I have not given shelter to Angrezans. I have given shelter to friends. Let people say or think as they please" (Bond, 2007, p. 18). Ramjimal's favours did not occur in a vacuum or all of a sudden, as the narrator puts it, "he had known us for many years, and had grown fond of my mother, who had always treated him as a friend and equal". (Bond, 2007, p. 13)

In Bond's writings, the humanitarian elements, human coexistence, interpersonal relationships above caste, creed and especially race have always found a centre

stage. This too, forms the spirit of this novella. At a time when the Anglo-Indian community was closely identified with the ruling British government, the help rendered to the Anglo-Indian character could only be ascribed to interpersonal and humanitarian impulses, which transcend race. "Bond's representation of the socio-cultural nature of the insurgency is unique in its choice of focus. He chooses to highlight the humane elements that remain unrecorded in the traditionally evasive accounts of the Indian Uprising" (Bandyopadhyay, 2020, p. 96).

THE LABADOORS IN THE THIRD SPACE

Language

It is essential to note that language proficiency becomes a key asset for the survival of the Labadoors. The writer has mentioned that Mariam was liked by most of the local Indians, Triloki, Ramjimal, the woman fish seller, and participated in their daily gossips. It can be assumed that she still spoke the local language of the area. Perhaps Hindi, Urdu or Hindustani. There are other incidents in the novel that make these claims stronger, for example: "Mother was engrossed in a conversation with Kothiwali. Her perfect Urdu, her fine manners, and her high moral values all took Kothiwali by storm. She was in raptures over Mother, and expressed every sympathy for us" (Bond, 2007, p. 51)**.** Language functions here not merely as communication but as a tool for cultural performance. It is evident that the Anglo-Indians, being partly brown, can pass for Indian. Their hybridity that allows the Anglo-Indian characters in the novella to save themselves at a moment in time when there was an upsurge of anger against the white imperialist regime. The European settlers were objects of ressentiment because they were not hybrid and were deemed as outsiders. It is to be noted that the St. Mary's Church was attacked for it was largely attended by white establishment.

Mariam's "perfect Urdu" show how deeply she has imbibed the cultural codes that made her as an insider despite her mixed heritage. This suggests that Bond sees identity as something created through performance rather than natural, fixed or rigid. a view that anticipates later postcolonial interpretations of cultural identity. This is what Bhabha says**,** "Terms of cultural engagement, whether antagonistic or affiliative, are produced performatively" (Bhabha,1994, p. 2), and that inversely, a "contingent 'in-between' space…innovates and interrupts the performance of the present" (Bhabha,1994, p. 7).

Religious and Cultural Identity

Mariam had full knowledge about the Islamic practices since her mother was a Muslim. This ability of hers makes everyone's favourite and increases the chance of survival in Pathan quarters. During the raid at Lala's house, Mariam invokes the name of Ali (Bond, 2007, p. 40) to save the life of her daughter, Ruth. Ali ibn Abi Talib was the fourth Rashidun caliph and the first Shia Imam. Mariam's instincts were quick: when she reached the house of Ramjimal, she quickly changed her daughter's name from Ruth to Khurshid. Besides this, when the Kothiwali questions her, she uses her Muslim lineage to blend well with all the female folk of the Pathan household: "Which Rampur?" asked Khan-Begum, Javed's wife. "Rohelon-ka-Rampur," replied Mother. "Oh, that Rampur!" said Khan-Begum, evidently impressed by Mother's antecedents (Bond, 2007, p. 44). Rampur was a famous 15 gun salute princely state of British India established after the defeat of the Rohillas, a community of Pashtun heritage in the First Rohilla War (1773-1774).

CULTURAL PRACTICES OF MUSLIMS

Mariam knew the *qalma* by heart, the Muslim folklore, the stories of *jinn*. Even the Pathanic codes of honour helped her to protect her daughter. Bond tries to show how the hybridity of these Anglo-Indian characters is a source of agency. It helps Mariam and her family to survive the entire violence of uprising, unhurt, in the house of Javed Khan. Interestingly, Javed Khan's interest in Ruth highlights another hybrid relationship which transcends both religious animosity and violence. From this desire of Javed Khan, it can be noted that cultural adaptation can exist without proper assimilation. Thus, Mariam's strategy facilitates survival while preserving their distinct identity.

DOUBLE EDGE OF LIMINALITY

Bhabha employed liminality to denote an in-between space or territory where cultures intersect and blend and give out new hybrid forms. This was the fate of the Anglo-Indian community during the 1857 Uprising. Though some authors like Kipling have brought out the propensity of Anglo Indians attempting to pass as British, Ruskin Bond's novella stands out as it depicts the Anglo Indian women, Mariam and Ruth, succeeding in passing as Indians, as becomes clear toward the end of the novella

when they leave Shajahanpur for Gujarat and arrive at their destination unhurt and safe. It is interesting to see that although liminality becomes a strategy for survival, it creates permanent dislocation and invites threat. This condition of the Labadoors is quite evident as the novella progresses. The reason why Javed Khan had not slaughtered the Labadoors is his attraction for Ruth.

Whenever Javed brings up the matter of marriage, Mariam never denies the offer. Instead, she negotiates. After becoming a widow, she takes responsibility for the family in times of crisis, does not flinch from duty, and takes the best possible steps in the family's interest while maintaining its honour.

> True, if the English retook Shahjahanpur, they would show little mercy to the leaders of the revolt. They would hang me from the nearest tree. And no doubt you are hoping for their return, or you would not talk of such a possibility. But how many of them are left? Only a few thousand struggling to hold their own before the walls of Delhi, and they too will soon be disposed of, please God! (Bond, 2007, p. 68)

> "Then let Delhi decide our future," said Mother, seizing at a straw. (Bond, 2007, p. 92)

In the second to last chapter, Mariam's in-betweenness/liminality is highly visible, as she felt that, owing to their mixed-race features, such as their brown complexion and Indian apparel. She feared that from a distance, they would be assumed to be Indian Muslims, rather than Anglo-Indians, and they would be slaughtered by the British. This shows that how, in the times of conflict, hybrid identity becomes a double-edged sword, as demonstrated in this quote:

> "Yes," said Mother, "for how will they know us for what we are? We have no one among them who would receive and protect us. From our complexions and our clothes, they would take us for Mohammedan women, and we will receive the same treatment as your women. No, for the present we are identified with you all, and we must go where you go". (Bond, 2007, p. 120)

In the same chapter, Javed Khan tells Mariam about the fall of the Mughal Empire in Delhi and the reclaiming of Shahjahanpur by the British authority. Marriage to Ruth is now out of question as the British would now rescue the Anglo-Indians and kill the mutineers. This turn of events prompts Javed to express his desire to see her for the last time, to which Mariam outrightly objects. Surprisingly, the silent narrator in the

novel, Mariam, to whom no dialogues are assigned, comes forward and shows her face to Javed Khan:

> "I know that the time has passed when I could speak of marrying your daughter," he said. "It is too late now to do anything about that. But will you permit me to see her once more, before I leave?" "What good will that do?" began Mother; but impelled by some odd impulse, I stepped forward into the light and stood before Javed Khan". (Bond, 2007, p. 124)

There is an in-betweenness or ambiguity on the part of Ruth, for she is attracted to Javed and repelled by him, too. Ruth reflects that, despite being his captive, she secretly hoped that he escaped unhurt. She was his prisoner, still grew fond of him and started admiring him. Ruth assesses Javed's character very minutely: "he was very wild and muddle headed, and often cruel, but he was also very handsome and gallant; there was in him a streak of nobility which he did his best to conceal" (Bond, 2007, p. 133).

Ruskin Bond himself is an Anglo-Indian, and he tries to indicate how in the tug-of-war between the Empire and the Indians, the Anglo-Indians became scapegoats. This dilemma is well explored and finds a mention in this work. According to Bandyopadhyay, contemporary Indian English fiction has been spare in representing the psychological anxieties experienced by endangered Anglo-Indians due to socio-political change. The identity crises have only ever been explained in polarities by John Masters and Manohar Malgaonkar. It is only through the works of Ruskin Bond, that one could recognise the identity dilemmas of belonging to both sides simultaneously, which is visible as such in the dialogic nature which sheds light on the double bind situation experienced by them (Bandyopadhyay, 2020, p. 18).

The above-mentioned incidents from the novella suggest how the hybrid identity was both a boon and a bane. By showing the harmonious relations between the Labadoors and Indian characters like Kothiwali, Mangal Khan and Ramjimal, Bond has highlighted the humane side of the Indians and how they honour their word, as in the case of Javed Khan. However, at the same time, he has not shown the Indian mutineers as unblemished, for Ruth loses her father, fellow Europeans and Anglo-Indians by the swords of the mutineers. The novella, in its scope, is extremely narrow and does not cover the major events that led to the buildup to the Uprising. It is to be

noted that it primarily focuses on the survival and anxieties of Anglo-Indian women. As discussed earlier, they were open to threat from both parties involved in the Uprising and, therefore, were in a liminal space. Even after leaving Javed Khan's captivity, "it is worth noting that the possibility of Ruth and her mother being rescued by the British is left suspended" (Bandyopadhyay, 2020, p. 99). Another observation is that the *zenana* provided the Labadoor women a safe haven, and from there they could keep an eye on the political tumult in North India and then decide their future moves. Essentially, the novella focuses on the mother and daughter and their resilience and liminality in the face of turmoil and threat.

REVISIONIST APPROACH

Bond's tryst with history (here, the Uprising) doesn't make him a contributor to the ideas of the initial mutiny novels. It should be noted that the Indian characters in Ruskin Bond's novella break away from the stereotypical representations of the mutiny novels. The focus is more on the characters and their relations with other characters, and not on the plot. The Indian character Javed Khan, initially presented as a threatening and blood-baying monster, shows complexity and honour as the novella moves ahead. His protection of the Labadoors, despite their refusal of a marriage alliance, demonstrates moral codes that transcend immediate self-interest. In one such incident, he promises a *pir* that he shall not do any harm to the women and he keeps this promise intact until the end: "Take care for your soul, Javed," said the pir. "You have taken an oath which no Pathan would break and still expect to survive. Let no harm come to these two, or you may expect a short lease of life!" (Bond, 2007, p. 42).

Similarly, characters like Lala, Kothiwali and Mangal Khan display loyalty, kindness, and moral courage that challenge colonial stereotypes of Indian character. Moreover, Mariam emerges as a figure of remarkable agency and intelligence. She engages in strategic negotiations with various protectors and demonstrates cultural adaptability. The protection of her family's dignity while ensuring their survival demonstrates complex decision-making that transcends the "damsel in distress" stereotype. She never thought of ending her life after her husband's death, as against the rumour that she jumped into the Khannaut river; her approach towards life changed, and she took up the job of the protector: "He gave her a rusty old knife, and she took great pains to

clean it and sharpen its edges. A day came when Mother threatened to use it" (Bond, 2007, p. 30).

CONCLUSION

While Bond recounts the experiences of the Labadoors during the 1857 Uprising, readers come to understand that identity in social contexts is not fixed; rather it is a strategic performance. Survival of the Anglo Indians especially in colonial India required them to take up different cultural positions. The novella breaks away from the binaries set by the preceding authors on this subject. The experiences of the Labadoors show the inadequacy of the simple binary narratives of coloniser and colonised. Bond has tried to paint a practical picture of India where relationships bridge racial boundaries amidst sudden and brutal violence, but he points out the dangers of the liminal existence of the Anglo-Indians. In order to survive they have to negotiate within the ever-changing power structure. Throughout the novel their survival, marked by constant relocation, is full of risks that turned out to be fruitful. The Labadoors embody the tragedy of communities which, in times of political conflict, get caught between nationalisms and complicated racial categories.

In conclusion, this text touches upon aspects of postcolonial theory, such as hybridity and liminality. Hybrid identity can help in survival and act as tool for resistance. Still they need constant self-checking and strategically planned performance, which finally leave the issue of belonging unresolved and unanswered. It is important to look closely at the title of the novella. The Labadoors are forever in a "flight", a constant relocation which does not end. Also Bond names the penultimate chapter of the novella as "In Flight Again" (p. 120). The word 'Again' makes the reader aware that their refuge(s) is(are) of a temporary kind, driving them into permanent dislocation and relocation.

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