

## COLONIAL TRAUMA IN RUSKIN BOND'S *A FLIGHT OF PIGEONS*

Badri Prasad Pokharel (Nepal)

Parash Adhikari (Nepal)

### ABSTRACT

*India, one of the largest democratic countries in the world, was once colonized by the British rulers and remained colonized for more than two hundred fifty years. The colonization impaired the socio-economic-political impasse of the country in the perilous time. The people of India fought for the independence fiercely; even some daring people happily became ready to die supposing that the future would be bright for their children. It was 1857, the whole of the Indian territory was in the grip of rebellion, and a small locality called Shahjahanpur in the area of Meentut was in a turmoil as the insurgents were in the mood to finish off all the foreigners doing any means to harm them. Ruskin Bond's *A Flight of Pigeons* shows the Labadoor family seeking their refuge at insurgents' residence and their fearful life in each step. Here, colonial or historic trauma that is dominant in the novel has been analyzed to understand their mood.*

**KEYWORDS:** Trauma, perpetrators, victims, insurgents, colonizers, colonized

### INTRODUCTION

History gets written in anyway whether one does any significant work or not. Time gets on even if we remain idle. 1857 in the history of India was an important time, which brought a great change i.e. a great awakening in the mind of commoners. Though this uprising did not cause any significant change that time except the death of many freedom fighters, it left an important discourse that change is a must. Ruskin Bond in his novel *A Flight of Pigeons* has created one such event (which his father is supposed to have told him in his childhood), which reminded many people of the horrific mneme.

Bond, an Indian author who was born in 1934 of the British parents living in Mussourie of India with his adopted family, has been known for writing children's literature, colonial India and other contemporary issues. He began his literary career at the age of sixteen in 1951 by writing *Untouchable*, a collection of short stories. *The Room on the Roof*, *The Blue Umbrella*, *Funny Side Up*, *Rains in the Mountains*, *Scenes from a Writer's Life*, *The Night Train to Deoli*, *Time Stops at Shamli*, *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra*, *Vagrants in the Valley*, *Rusty*, *The Boy from the Hills*, *Rusty Runs Away*, *Rusty* and *The Magic Mountain* are some notable literary works he has contributed to English literature in India. Mostly, the mountainous places which are located at the foothills of the Himalayan ranges, and the mnemonic past of his bygone days for

his nostalgia, play an important role in creating characters and their temperaments facing the prevailing socioeconomic craps, which every common Indian has to cope with in the contemporary Indian society.

#### **THE CONTEXTS: BOND AND HIS WRITING**

Bond's works reflect his own experiences that he witnessed the lives of Anglo-Indian people, and the changing Indian political, cultural and social assets besides witnessing closely colonial as well as postcolonial and dependence, and later part of socio-political life of India. The inscription of his biography is another significant part of his writing. *Rain in the Mountains*, *Scenes from a Writer's Life*, *The Room on the Roof* and many others are the books, which induce his own experiences of living his hardships either in India as an orphan or in London as a struggler to sustain in his own ancestral land. Recalling his past hardship he sustained, Bond inscribes, "The Room on the Roof tells a lot about my parents. It ends with the publication of my first novel and my decision to make writing my livelihood. Basically, it describes how I became a writer" (P.27). Spending more than fifty years he has experimented with different genres: fiction, non-fiction, romance, essays, travelogue etc. His cameo presence in some Bollywood clips like *7 Khoon Maph* from his book Susanna's *Seven Husbands*, induces his inclination to indict in the silver screen. The 1978 Shashi Kapoor's Shyam Benegal's directorial venture *Junoon* from his historical colonial novella *A Flight of Pigeons*, Vishal Bhardwaj's directorial attempt on his popular novel for children, *The Blue Umbrella*, which won the National Award for Best Children film, TV soap operas like *Ek Tha Rusty* inscribing an orphan struggling to live in the mountainous places in India from his works *The Night Train at Deoli*, *Time Stops at Shamli*, and *Our Trees Still Grow in Dehra* are some of the important flicks that he has been remembered and honoured.

Rusty, an autobiographical sketch, has been presented as one resembling the author himself facing different hurdles. The author got through the past life in his first book, *The Room on the Roof*, which was written when he was only 17 years old, presenting Rusty as the protagonist. This book was created describing the experiences that his friends and himself faced along with the difficult times whiling living in a small room which they had taken on rent in Deharadoon, a small hilly town. It was Bond's emotional attachment that he felt while spending his childhood in Deharadoon. The beautiful landscape and hilly region along with the scenic background have played an important role in all his stories as a source of the inspiration. Susanna, the protagonist of the novel dares to take revenge with the persons with whom she gets married one after another. Javed Khan in *A Flight of Pigeons*, being a married Pathan and rebel for the freedom of India in the first independence movement that incurred in 1857 falls in love with an English girl and dares fight with his own fellow people to save her, but ultimately is found dead for the sake of his love to her. Here, in this article, we have highlighted those parts of a historical event which brought a great change in the socio-political scenario. In the same way, it has left many more badly impaired physically and mentally for a long time from which the people who were directly or indirectly related to this event have not come out and looking for a new way to encompass it.

As a new asset of historical or colonial trauma integration, this approach has been considered to present a concrete way of comprehending those facts which

happened in history panelizing the social and cultural aspects of those communities in which local denizens were badly depressed in the name of development the British colonizers upon the colonized. In this model, i.e colonial or historical trauma, the painful memories have been allotted to signify the bitter facts which can remind each one of the horrific past as an incurable disease. The colonial trauma, an unbearable hidden collective mnemonic event, has been rendered from one generation to another for many years as a form of social disorder and maladaptive social and behavioral patterns normally found in the sufferers of trauma. In this regard Wesley-Esquimaux & Smolewski (2004) argue, “There is no ‘single’ historic or colonial trauma response; rather, there are different social disorders with respective clusters of symptoms. It disrupts adaptive social and cultural patterns and transforms them into maladaptive ones, which manifest themselves into symptoms of social disorder” (p. 32). In short, colonial trauma as a cause of deep nervous breakdowns in the functions, which are done in social practices that may last for many years, decades and even generations, has been understood as a key point.

The critics have found this approach i.e. colonial trauma as a fertile ground to analyze the ever-lasting mnemonic effects of colonization of the west upon the oriental denizens over a long span of time. Here, suppression, domination, and cultural exploitation remain rampant among them, which later became a norm to rule over the land. This norm later developed as a system to felicitate the Indian resident/boarding schools and systematic out-adoption to all who are directly or indirectly affected by this colonization. Making such policies, the colonizers tried to liberate this norm normal to all. The horrific event that happened once in history repels one back to the event and makes one suffer mentally. This would incite social, cultural and psychological aura in the sufferers as Kirmayer et. al. (2014) claim, “Historical trauma offers an explanation for continuing inequities in health and wellbeing and a focus for social, cultural, and psychological interventions. Politically, it has led to explicit recognition of past violence” (p. 301). Colonial facts that happened in history always make generations feel the suppression for a long time in future.

Clarifying privilege of colonialism in the new places is undoubtedly to exploit the economy of that place. For instance, Cote-Meek (2010) states, “The heart of the colonial relationship – and that privilege is undoubtedly economic” (p. 19). In this case, the critic is in the view that the economic privilege may help the poor that may attract the colonizers hoping that their life would be changed over time. Coveting the innocents and showing them the bright future, the colonizers did all they could to entangle them in the quicksand of racial discrimination from which they could not come out, it took them centuries to live in free air of existence. It can be noted that a unique, complex and hierarchical relationship remained locked in place between the colonizers and colonized that extends beyond classism that ultimately leads to violence.

### TRAUMA AT WORK

Set in the background of 1857 sepoy mutiny against British Empire, which founded the revolt of Indian Independence movement that continued for nearly next one hundred year, Bond’s *A Flight of Pigeons* is about a young lady called Ruth Labadoor, the narrator of the novel and her family. She along with her family

members has to take refuge to Hindus and Muslims facing many problems until they reach their relatives. The trauma she underwent was her witness of her own father's assassination by the Indian insurgents who were fighting for the liberation of their land from the British.

The book begins with the narrator of the novel, Ruth Labadoor's father's death in front of her eyes very cruelly making her helpless to save him from the insurgents in a church. This assassination is committed by the freedom fighters as rebels who were the part of the Indian Rebellion of 1857 instigated with the initiation of Mangal Panday, a sepoy in the British-India regiment. The insurgents decide to clear off all the English people of the small town of Shahjahanpur either by killing or by making them flee from there. After the death of the Petrarch, it is the duty of his wife, Mariam Labadoor (the narrator's mother) to save all family members including the narrator who is too young to decide for herself from the rebels; and Mariam Labadoor has to take her entire family members (six) to their loyal friend Lala Ramjilal who saves them with his sneak cleverness from the watchful insurgents including her neighbours. He does his best to provide them security and shelter. Here, Lala's neighbor Javed Khan, a Pathan leader sensing the freak comes to know about their whereabouts. Finally, he comes into his house without information and forcefully takes both mother and daughter to his home and keeps them safely there in spite of many hurdles and threats imposed by his friends, family members and the movement's insurgents. In the meantime, he falls in love with Ruth and does all he can to make her his wife. Her mother plays an important role to persuade him to wait until the victory over Delhi. If rebels win Delhi, he can marry her, otherwise not. She denies Javed's proposals many times as she does not want Ruth to marry Javed Khan. On the other hand, Ruth is gradually falling in love with hm. Ultimately, there begins a fierce fight between the British troop and the rebels and the British are able to take the hold of the country and Javed Khan who could have saved his life is killed in one of the fights with the British. With lot of help and support, the Labadoor family finally reaches their relatives in Bharatpur. After the mutiny, the Labadoor family is able to reach London where Ruth lives for about next fifty five years remaining unwed probably in the loving memory of Javed.

Bond is in the condition of duality (born to English parents and grew up in India as an orphan), who could observe the colonial and postcolonial trauma of displacement, of loss of country or identity, friends and parents of insecurity and of finance. There remains no tension between two cultures: the East and the West. He has lived in India in both colonial and postcolonial time. As a result of post colonialism and globalization, Bond is quite near to different cultures that developed with the passage of time. Assimilating syncretism of culture is a unique, as Fatma (2009) claims, "Assimilation is the full acceptance of the other culture while syncretism or union is a combination of the two cultures which a person chooses and prefers among the two" (p. 43). Both sides are stern in their insistence not willing to give up.

Here, Bond's novel opens up with the emphasis lying on the relations of dominance in the cross-cultural and political context. It mainly deals with the impact of the encounter on the individual living away from a specific dividing line of nationalist identities. The novel creates a dilemma of the pro-dependence rebellion as nobody was secure and both colonizer and colonized were struggling

for their existence. The colonizers, here the British, who had spent some good time living in India regarded it as their home. On the other hand, the colonized, here the Indians, were inclined to regaining their lost status in their own land which had been confiscated from all spheres. Anyway, it was a time of insecurity for both of them. Hence, it shows difficult time for both. This patriotic movement flared in Meerut on May 10, 1857 when the pro-dependence rebels in the company's forces revolted against the officers and took charge. Later, this revolt spread to other parts of India. The event dispels mutual stereotypes as Muslims and Europeans have to fetch to each others. Here, we find the situation very ironical when the British forces quench the rebellion and capture Delhi, the seat of the Mughal Empire and imprison the emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar. The commoners once terrified with the British terrify them in such a way that they have to take shelter at the colonized's homes in their mercy. Here, in front of them, the rebels go to fight with the British troop and get badly defeated in the battlefield. In their own place the colonized become refugees and flee away from there in search of shelter. Fatma further states, "It is now the Hindu and Muslim nationalists and their families who headed toward Shahjahanpur because the victorious British army who becomes dominant and the Indian flee to save their lives. takes control and the Indians are running away" (p. 29). The fight between the colonized and colonizers becomes the matter of existence and stability in their ever claimed land.

Ruth and Mariam, who are still under Javed Khan's protection and in the position of captives, cast off their Indian clothes and are happy to get back their European identities and privileges. There is a lot of suspense and tension regarding Mariam's brother's house in Bharatpur. Ruth and Mariam are helped by the British, Hindus, Muslims, and Sikhs during their difficult time. These are very unhappy experiences for the protagonists, and they think seriously about the futility of war for it burning and looting the houses, riot and rape and killing of several innocent women and children. In spite of the fact that the colonized did a lot to protect the Labadoors, Mariam, as a member of the colonizers seems unable to do in their favour. At the end, she is able to rescue her daughter from the grip of Javed Khan and safely takes her family back to the destination.

The novel has clearly portrayed the struggle that prevailed for a long time and sowed the seeds of rebellion for the freedom of India through the family of Ruth Labadoor who becomes orphan and helpless due to adverse circumstances. The colonial conflict as shown in the novel not only shows one family in such dilapidated condition, but many others were ruined during the war and many became homeless because homes were burned and humanity remained at stake. Many innocent people were killed. Not only colonizers but colonized also lost their sons in the war for independence. The fault was not of the people who were killed in the rebellions but it was also the fault of a handful people who indulge in politics of menial or petty selfishness. In such a war, basically innocent people mainly suffer the loss which can never be compensated with any monetary unit except some consolation and promises. In other words, commoners or innocent victims are the silent sufferers because their voice is never heard or recorded. The civilian victims, the women and the children are those who are losers. In the book, the characters are seen to grow beyond racial distastes. In this way, Bond is able to expose the racial stereotypes of Orientalism which sees Hindus, Muslims and Sikhs as prejudice and bigoted. He

throws light on the notions of human associations, as well as all forms of piety, and possibilities of mutually-enabling acts in the social life of India.

Normally, whenever any violence or war erupts, the people either victims or perpetrators in such activities are vulnerable to die. And the silent sufferers who are destined to become victims even if they don't take up arms and ammunition to counter fight with the perpetrators. Here, women, children or other physically impaired people would be the one who undergo with the painful condition. This book deals with some such survivors who would be able to narrate the painful mnemonic past. As a historical fiction, which, according to the writer, may be based on fact one can track on the actual events that took place during the 1857 uprising against British rule. A study of the 1857 uprising is usually from the point of view of the Indian participants. One would speak about Mangal Pandey, Rani Laxmibai of Jhansi, Nana Saheb, and the like who stepped forward a pace ahead to march to make others come ahead for freedom against the ever-dominated and oppressed colonial regime. Here, Bond (2008) writes, "And that is but natural when we speak of it as an uprising. But the British looked at it as the mutiny, being the rulers at the time" (p. 24). Anyway, it remained a rising point for the independence of the largest republican nation of the world.

Illuminating the facts related to this book, Bond (2008) delineates, "It is a very perceptive, wonderfully written book, complete with a detailed look into the mechanisms of the *zenana* or women's quarters in a segregated household. A tale of survival of the refugee women who probably did so only because of a mother playing by her wits, guts and an ability to adapt and accept her circumstances" (p. 24). After all a mother can fight with the world to protect her children from any perilous situation.

The book while bringing out some important facts of the colonial era has an introduction, in which Bond (2008) says, "There was probably some truth in accounts of an actual girl called Ruth Labadoor, whose account is to be found in old records of the 1857 uprising. He quotes these specific references in the notes at the end of the book, as also gives us a perspective on the period in which the book is set" (p. 24). Sometimes, the past event can become an integral part to let one create a fictional work.

## CONCLUSION

History gets written in anyway whether one does anything or not. Around one hundred sixty years ago, the mutiny occurred and many combatants and civilians lost their lives and some like Mangal Pandey became martyrs. The perilous path of freedom, democracy and pursuits of happiness began. *A Flight of Pigeons* written around forty years ago highlights the historical or colonial facts how the people in their own land became victims of the colonization which was imposed upon them for a long time. Still this event did not bring them any significant result. However, the event as historical and colonial rhetoric remains afresh in everyone's mind and will remain forever.

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#### ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Badri Prasad Pokharel** is a doctoral scholar to study on conflict literature in Nepal from the Buddhist perspective at Lumbini Buddhist University in Nepal. By profession, he is a Lecturer of English at Bhaktapur Campus in the Kathmandu Valley. Previously, he has also worked at Research Division of Tribhuvan University for a long time. He has published research articles in various journals nationally and internationally.

**Parash Adhikari** has graduated from Tribhuvan University, Nepal. In the past, he worked with the Resettlement Support Center (RSC) under International Organization for Migration (IOM)-UN Migration Agency South Asia for more than 9 years and also served in the RSC Middle East and North Africa (MENA), Amman, Jordan for 3 months. In 2017, he has attended a Summer Course Programme under North Western University, Chicago. His interests are in the areas of migration and refugee settlements, and has worked for Bhutanese and Syrian refugees.