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Historical Authenticity In *The Flight Of Pigeons*: A Study Of Fiction Based On History

Dr. Poonam

Assistant Professor (History)
Dept.of Art & Humanities
Phonics University Roorkee.

Dr. Anjo Rani

Associate Professor (English)
Dept.of Art & Humanities
Phonics University Roorkee.

Abstract

Ruskin Bond's 1975 novella *A Flight of Pigeons* is a work of historical fiction set in Shahjahanpur during British-ruled India, unfolding against the turbulent backdrop of the 1857 uprising. Bond revives the real-life story of Ruth Labadoor and her family, tracing their struggle for survival amid the violence that erupted during the First War of Indian Independence. Through his narrative, he captures the disorderly socio-political environment shaped by decades of colonial exploitation and domination. The novella portrays the unrest and uncertainty that marked the Sepoy Mutiny, revealing the anguish endured by both Indians and the British-origin families caught in its wake. Bond reconstructs this volatile period primarily through the experiences of Ruth and her mother, Mariam Labadoor, whose personal journeys highlight the broader cultural and psychological dislocation of the time. *A Flight of Pigeons* not only recounts political and historical upheaval but also explores the emotional and mental trauma inflicted on individuals living through the anti-colonial struggle. This paper examines how the socio-political, historical turbulence of 1857 is mirrored in the theme of this novella, and how the oppressive colonial hierarchy ultimately rebounded to create suffering for British families residing in and around Shahjahanpur. Our study also investigates the impact of the resistance movement on the psychological state of the colonised subjects.

Keywords: Political domination, Economic exploitation, Cultural conflict, Historical representation, Anti-colonial movements, Social unrest, Psychological trauma.

A disruptive yet necessary sign of new cerebral energy can be identified in the literary theory and its application domain with regards to literary problematic today. The textual practices and their inherent libidinal impulses to adopt a cognizant strategy of interpretation has altered the imagination of critical faculty by laying bare the politics of discourses and the repercussions of postmodern capitalism. Among these discourses the historical territory or the epistemes remains the most politicized and mystified one. It is, conveniently, a dangerous territory; is the account of the epistemologies garnered after a careful scrutiny of the bygone epochs rendered for a proclaimed altruistic public consumption. But on magnifying lenses it also involves masking the creation of ideologies and promotion of certain set of attitudes necessary for politicizing the credo of nationalism and establishing the cultural supremacy. Hence the history is to be treaded with a wary approach of not disrupting the power relations and structures configured to tilt in the discursive corner of the authority at the helm of the affairs. In literature too, history is accessed with prudence since the wide ranging implications of sundry misrepresentations and misinterpretations are not very complex to surmise. In the recent years the controversies-courting endowed writers like Salman Rushdie have borne the brunt of skewing the popular taste of historical access with the honest intention of realism and truth rendering. It was, however left to the literary demigods like Shakespeare and Walter Scott to bathe in the history fiction glory and emerge undiscriminated and fidelity exhibiting which the litterateurs today beg to differ from.

Foreseeing the enshrined perils therein perhaps, the new criticism of the early decades of the 20th century proposed a close reading of the text in order to liberate it from contagious externalities like the author's psychology or social existence and the socio-political matrix of the work. Here the history and its tyrannical weight were completely glossed over, either as context or as text. But since 1980s a new kind of historical criticism took shape which detached history from reality or reality representation and had a clear impact of the postmodern and poststructuralist dynamics which defer the meanings to the pit called *aporia* or undecidability. So much so that "what had hitherto been considered as definite, true and factual became arbitrary, dependent on conventions. Everything became fiction. Literature in general and poetry, story and novel in particular, were already fictitious but now philosophy and even history too were termed fictitious" (Singh 130). History then ceased to be documentation but something which is merely a strand in the net of power and resistance coming straight from the school of ideology. It was seen as impacting the narratives of the time and in turn getting impacted by them leading to the formation of ideological structures and diffidence and resistance in the postmodern world. In such a constructed world the critical policies of New Criticism are rendered 'powerless' and hence arises a scope for tampering. According to Jenkins, "History is always for someone. That history always has a purpose. That history is always about power. That history is never innocent but always ideological" (Jenkins xiii). New Historicism as a critical theory, to evaluate literature, grows on this poststructural viewpoint related to literature and philosophy whereby conventional historical methods are rejected for being pretentious of reaching at easy meaning when there are so many externalities waiting to pounce upon its individuality.

New Historicism, as is insinuated from above discussion, believes in the subjectivity of history depending upon the viewpoint of the narrator and hence rejects the prominent account of the power generation of history. Hence, an ideal New Historicist outlook would give importance to the experiences and standpoint of a layman of a society irrespective of his economic stature or standing and not just that of ruling class. It states that power is not confined to a single person or level of society and moves through the culture by the exchange of ideas between the members of society, as well as the exchange of the goods or human beings. It influences the culture and is influenced by it alike in a literary text which is formed and structured by the particular conditions of a time and place and should be analyzed in its own light. Unlike previous historical criticism, which limited itself to simply demonstrating how a work reflected its time, New Historicism evaluates how the work is influenced by the time in which the author wrote it. It also examines the social sphere in which the author moved, the psychological background of the writer, and the books and theories that may have influenced him or her. Richard Wilson and Richard Dutton on the introduction to their collection of essays *New Historicism and Renaissance Drama* comment:

“Where [earlier] criticism had mystified Shakespeare as an incarnation of spoken English, it [new historicism] found the plays embedded in other *written texts*, such as penal, medical and colonial documents. Read within this archival continuum, what they represented was not harmony but the violence of the Puritan attack on carnival, the imposition of slavery, the rise of patriarchy, the hounding of deviance, and the crashing of prison gates during what Foucault called ‘the Age of Confinement, at the dawn of carceral society’ [‘carceral’ comes from the Latin word *carcer*, meaning prison]” (Wilson and Dutton 8)

Here the hidden realities in the Shakespeare plays as uncovered by the two critics becomes the framework of New Historicism and ‘the archival continuum’ becomes the context in which the literary document could be studied as it indicates that

“New historicism is indeed a *historicism* rather than a *historical* movement. That it is interested in history as represented and recorded in written documents, in history-as-text. Historical events as such, it would argue, are irrecoverably lost. This emphasis bears the influence of the long familiar view in literary studies that the actual thoughts, or feelings, or intentions of a writer can never be recovered or reconstructed, so that the real living individual is now entirely superseded by the literary text which has come down to us.” (Barry175)

Louis Montrose, the American critic, interprets the same as a combined interest in ‘the textuality of history, the historicity of texts’. Stephen Greenblatt from America is considered its greatest proponent and initiator whose book *Renaissance Self-Fashioning: From More to Shakespeare* (1980) is a seminal work in this dimension of critiquing. The present paper shall try to fathom into the new historicist criticism with attention conferred upon Ruskin Bond’s 1970s novel *A Flight of Pigeons* which chronicles the events of 1857 Indian uprising (dubbed as first war of Indian independence) interpreted as Sepoy mutiny by the English.

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. The novel starts with the slaughter of English clerk Mr. Labadoor in a church in front of his family comprising his daughter Ruth and wife Mariam. The massacre of all the Englishmen including Mr. Labadoor is executed by the rebels of mutiny sworn to wipe away English population from the town of Shahjahanpur where the narrative is set. Mariam Labadoor shows alacrity in saving her daughter and other 5 relatives from getting killed taking a refuge at the house of their family’s trusted friend Lala Ramjimal who keeps them at his home and gives them the maximum security and shelter he can give. The Pathan leader Javed Khan comes to know that there are a few foreigners living in Lala’s home and he suddenly comes into their house and forcefully takes away Ruth and Mariam Labadoor to his home. The rest of the book is followed by the various happening in the Labadoor family, who are very warmly welcomed by different family members of Javed Khan. But, Javed Khan himself is a cunning man and he pleads to marry Ruth Labadoor. Mariam saves her daughter many times as she does not want her to marry Javed Khan. She keeps a condition that if the British are able to take on the country once again, then she would not let him marry her daughter and if they lose to the rebels, then she would give her daughter to him. The British are able to take hold of the country and Javed Khan is killed in one of the fights with the British. With lots of help and support, the Labadoor family finally reaches its relatives.

The first feature which strikes about the novel is its historical framework in which the fictionalized events are placed to give the lived experience of the events of the era. The 1857 was a blood-spattered year, first of its kind in the Indian history, when the soldiers of Indian army recruited under the East India Company revolted against their British lords for the unfair treatment meted out to them. The revolt was joined by many princely states of India, the kings and *nawabs* who refused to adopt the British policies of annexations. This revolt has been registered by the Indian historians as First War of Independence and the executed soldiers as martyrs like the legend of Mangal Pandey projected to be the precursor of Bhagat Singh, Chandershekhar Azad, Sukhdev, Rajguru, etc who had been painted as terrorists by the British government. But the British historians term it as *sepoy* or the soldiers’ mutiny leading to the deaths of many innocent English people co-existing peacefully with the Indian citizenry. This is the first salvo of the history related viewpoint since it is documented subjectively for the target readership. History, so, as apparent, becomes a series of accepted judgments rather than true blue truth. The historian evaluates and

selects the facts and thus all the historical facts are the reenactment in the historian's mind. Therefore, when we take up a work of history, our first concern should not be with the facts which it contains, but with the historian who wrote it. History is a continuous process of interaction between the historian and his facts, an unending dialogue between the present and the past (Carr 35). The violent event which proved to be a game changer for both the nations is thus at the mercy of the historian's convenience undermining the right of the reader to know about it in its crude form.

New historicism relates the literary work much more closely to the culture of the times and the background of the author considering them as indispensable in shaping the work. Ruskin Bond is an Indian writer with British lineage born in India itself. His father was a middle class clerk (like Mr. Labadoor in the novel) in the government and later on joined Royal Air Force in Jamnagar (Gujarat). His British antecedents thus make *A Flight of Pigeons* probably more vivid and convincing as there is a description of the "unfortunate" 1857 events from the stance of a British narrator.

The events in the novel take place in Shahjahanpur (Uttar Pradesh) where Bond's father was born after a few years. The author mentions this in the Introduction which, according to Stephen Greenblatt is the powerful anecdote strongly evoking the quality of lived experience and which becomes co-text rather than just context.

"I remember my father telling me the story of a girl who had a recurring dream in which she witnessed the massacre of the congregation in a small church in northern India. A couple of years later she found herself in an identical church in Shahjahanpur, where she was witness to the same horrifying scenes which had now become a reality. 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." (vii)

On another instance, in the "Notes" part appended in the end which also acts as a co-text Bond writes

"I first heard the story of Mariam and her daughter from my father. Who was born in Shahjahanpur military cantonment a few years after the mutiny. That, and my interest in the accounts of those who had survived the 1857 uprising, took me to Shahjahanpur on a brief visit in the late 1960s. It was one of those U. P. towns that had resisted change, and there were no high-rise buildings or block of flats to stifle the atmosphere. I 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[...] It couldn't have been very different in Ruth Labadoor's time. The little River Khannaut was still crossed by a bridge of boats." (135)

Clearly, the Labadoor family of the novel becomes the fictionalized version of one Lemaistre family whose patriarch was slain in front of a church in Shahjahanpur and his daughter and wife were left to fend for themselves in an intimidating turn of events. Bond has made use of this anecdote from the oral tradition of story telling passed from one generation to other as well as some scattered documents like *The Meerut Mofussilite* and *Gazetteer* (appended in the 'Notes' section of the novel) documenting the accounts of the 1857 uprising. An excerpt from the former one reads: "Mr. Lemaistre, a clerk in the Collector's office, was killed in the church, and the fate of his daughter and wife is unknown" (135) This co-text (not context) is juxtaposed with the text and thus become "the expressions of the same historical moment and interpreted accordingly" (Barry 173). The events pertaining to Mr. Lemaistre would be historical in nature but that of Labadoors are historicist, the distinction of which sums up a New Historicist reading of the text. The first couple of chapters are devoted to the same whereby the Englishmen are slain mercilessly and there is lot of looting by the hooligan pathans like Javed Khan:

'Javed Khan, as you know, is one of the biggest ruffians in the city. When the sepoy had returned to their lines after proclaiming the Nawab, Javed Khan paid a visit to their commander. On learning that the regiment was preparing to leave Shahjahanpur and join the Bareilly brigade, he persuaded the Subedar-Major, Ghansham Singh, to make a raid on the Rosa Rum Factory before leaving. [...] Javed Khan's party set fire to it, and no less than 70,000 gallons of rum, together with a large quantity of loaf sugar, were destroyed. The rest was carried away. Javed Khan's share of loaf sugar was an entire cartload!' (20-21)

The mentioning of Rosa Rum Factory in the novel is accompanied by a footnote on the page number 21 in the novel stating its present existence also obliquely directing towards the history haunting the creative text as a co-text so that both go hand in hand and could be interrogated paralleling each other. Similarly, the event of slaughtering of some British citizens in front of church (St. Mary's) as quoted above, find a fictionalization in the following excerpt from the novel:

"I cannot tell you much," said Lala. 'I only know that while the sepoy attacked Mr. Ricketts, Mr. MacCullam was able to reach the melon field and conceal himself under some creepers. But another gang found him there, and finished him off with their swords.' [...] Assistant Sahib was murdered in the city, said Lala." (24)

The citation of exact dates in the novel of various historical events also attracts the new historicist attention as it enforces the history-literature nexus central to its creed.

The novel abounds in the episodes whereby the events of 1857 are graphically rendered with dates

and documentary force and could be easily observed as tilted in favor of the English author. The loss of English lives and the destruction and arsenal of their properties exhibit an identification with their creator owing to his own English connection. Apparently, viewpoint here is that of an Englishman who considered it totally barbaric without any reference to the Indians' opinions and justification for it. Hence the text of the novels becomes a playground of the novelist's own way of reaching out to the history. The proclaimed discriminatory attitudes towards the Indian *sepoys* leading to the uprising has nowhere been given the space in the novel needling towards the new historicist approach of reading the text whereby history is processed many times owing to variegating viewpoints and the ambiguity of language itself giving rise to more than one interpretations, the deconstructive edifice. However, Bond's limning of characters like Lala Ramjilal, Khan Begum, Kothiwali, etc who warm up to Mariam and Ruth in their ordeal is appreciatory as it balances the excesses committed by the pathans and hindu kings during the uprising against the English.

The character of Javed is Bond's literarily most valued character in the novel whosechutzpah and charm, attract and repel at the same time. This contradiction of character is self-explanatory considering his attitudes towards the English in the novel. He, the pathan, is portrayed as a hooligan as well as highly refined cultured family man having links with the royal family. He is very handsome, as confessed by Ruth herself, and a slave of his passion as is visible in his pursuit of Ruth. His (ahistorical) rise and fall in the novel give Bond the opportunity to juxtapose the (historical) fall and rise of the English empire in India. His momentary glory against the backdrop of Labadoor family's sorry travails makes the British capture of India look more magnificent in British annals. Bond has carved this character from his historical knowledge of the pathan history from the *Gazetteer* which states:

“Pathans formed thirty per cent of the Muslim population of Shahjahanpur (Muslims forming twenty-three per cent of the entire population) according to the 1901 census. Most were cultivators, although many were landed proprietors of the district. (True Pathans are descendents of Afghan immigrants.) ‘Their attitude during the Mutiny cost them dear, as many estates were forfeited for rebellion.’”
(134)

This historical fact about the pathan history explains a lot about Javed Khan and his fate in the end as he too is ruined. His meteoric ascent is followed by the restoration of the Empire which in 1858 materialized after the fall of Delhi. Ruth ruminates: “We heard that Kothiwali and Qamran and their families eventually returned to Shahjahanpur, after life had returned to normal. But Javed Khan disappeared and was never seen again. Perhaps he had escaped into Nepal. It is more probable that he was caught and hanged with some other rebels.” (133) This victory over the Indians, in the text Javed, was a historic one for England and is appropriated by Bond as the restoration of order after chaos which occasioned after lots of British predicaments. Javed Khan's obsession for Ruth and his subsequent failure is the way in which probably ‘the Empire writes back’ and claims what lawfully was its possession.

New Historicism as a literary critical mode is resolutely anti-establishment owing to its deviant approach (not privileging the literary text) and view of history as something which could be remade in sync with the literary document and participate in the production of something new. It accedes to cultural historian Foucault's terminology of 'discursive practices' through which the State controls the thoughts and pervades the personal lives of its subjects and which socializes its ideology through political practices. It (the discourse) is such a complex and multiple dimensional structure that resistance to it or deviance from it or transformation becomes impossible as the personal sphere of action becomes a political one. Hence, Gramsci's 'hegemony', Althusser's 'interpellation' and Foucault's 'discursive practices' all convergent to the explanation "the way power is internalized by those whom it disempowers so that it does not have to be constantly enforced externally." (Barry 177) The failure of 1857 Indian mutiny establishes this victory of the State as all powerful and its ideology irresistible, the antagonism to which is unthinkable since it penetrates into the intimate areas of life and is quietly internalized by those on whom it is exercised. As is depicted in *A Flight of Pigeons*, the State structure in the form of East India Company face a backlash from a niche section of the Indian populace inconsistently at scattered places (like Shahjahanpur in the novel) and not as something concerted or organized because not all strata could see the possibility of a fundamental transformation in the face of its panoptic surveillance and all pervasiveness which is transmitted and maintained, as per Foucault, through institutions like State punishment, prisons, the medical professional and legislation about sexuality. The mutiny didn't start at all places at the same time and many Indian kings refrained from it either exhibiting allegiance to the British or due to their own fears of getting deposed by the perennially ruled classes. Writes prominent journalist and columnist M. J. Akbar about the loyalist Indians, "British rule was never a solely British enterprise. It could not have survived a day without an obedient Indian comprador class. Most purchased by nothing more glamorous than a salary." (Akbar, *Sunday Times of India* 14). In either case, it was the East India company's Machiavellian calculating inoculation of the truth and universality of its ideology which was a necessary external validation for the Indian states and their drivers. The East India Company's execution of the rebels before and after the uprising evinces the State's repressive structures preventing any liberal thinking and personal freedom. Though the author in the novel has eschewed from any such discussions in the novel, directly or obliquely, it is the primary historical reference which is implicit in any literary work modeled upon the event of mutiny.

The 1857 mutiny for England was a sinister chapter in its colonial nomenclature. Such a watershed event required a literary-historical representation/textualization of it from the standpoint of the Empire itself but minus any kind of misreading and subverted romanticization aiming to debunk an exacting continuum. It is thus the historical weight of the occurrence which required its encoding into the text (encapsulating the political agendas) and which could reflect the history not just as backdrop but something which shaped literature and made it indispensable for a literary construal. To boot, it ought to be from the pen of someone whose heritage had partook in the same historical moment. And Ruskin

Bond with his unique position as an insider as well as outsider could vindicate this cultural demand satisfactorily for readers of both the nationalities whose interest vis-à-vis history coincide. Born and bred in India, Ruskin Bond spent an extensive quantum of time in England as well before getting read and recognized as a writer in India during seven decades of his Indian citizenship (reminding about his English descent would however be, tautological). Such a duality of life experience perhaps modeled his sensibilities towards transcultural historical narratives. Utilizing his gift as a writer, Bond recalled a historical epoch (significant to his own pedigree) literarily and harnessing the historical traces literally which thereby made both history and literature equally significant (constantly informing and interrogating each other) in the reliving of the moment. It is thus, textualizing the history and historicizing the text which is demonstrated in practice.

The foregoing discussion illustrates how *A Flight of Pigeons* becomes an exemplary site for applying the principles of New Historicism, revealing the mutually constitutive relationship between literature and history. Ruskin Bond's novella does not merely retell the events of 1857; it reanimates a turbulent historical moment through the lens of individual memory, inherited anecdotes, and cultural positioning. Bond's dual identity—as a writer of British descent rooted in Indian soil—enables him to negotiate the complex terrain between historical record and personal narrative. In doing so, he exposes how history is never a singular, objective truth but a mosaic of perspectives shaped by power, ideology, and lived experience. The novel's fictionalized rendering of the Labadoor family's ordeal, interlaced with archival references and local histories, demonstrates how literary texts can both preserve and interrogate cultural memory. The selective illumination of English suffering, the marginal acknowledgment of colonial injustices, and the symbolic rise and fall of characters like Javed Khan underscore how narratives are inevitably shaped by the author's standpoint. This fluid interplay between documented fact and narrative imagination affirms the New Historicist premise that history itself is a discourse—constructed, contested, and continually rewritten. Through this framework, *A Flight of Pigeons* becomes more than a historical romance; it emerges as a cultural artifact reflecting the anxieties, contradictions, and power dynamics of both 1857 and the period in which Bond wrote. The novella reveals how the echoes of empire reverberate across generations, shaping identities and interpretations long after the events have passed. Ultimately, Bond's text highlights the inescapable entanglement of literature with the socio-political forces that produce it, demonstrating how storytelling remains a vital medium for understanding not only what history records but also what it chooses to forget.

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