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NATIVE SPACE, COLONIAL PRESENCE— EAST-WEST ENCOUNTER IN *A FLIGHT OF PIGEONS*

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ABSTRACT

Ruskin Bond writes mainly from his experiences, however in the novella *A Flight of Pigeons*, his critical as well as creative circumferences of mind move away to the pre partition era of India. With the melange of creative and critical, this work becomes a brilliant example of the way in which binaries can be converted to harmonious symbiotic entities. Various emotional, political and social dichotomies have become the hallmark of conventional colonizer-colonized relationship and have been theorized and represented as such. In fact, it has become the common conventional wisdom. Ruskin Bond's novella *A Flight of Pigeons* not only challenges this stereotypical and dichotomous understanding of the East and the West, but it also reorients ones understanding of this dynamic through a nuanced portrayal of native-foreign overlap. On the face of it, it begins by constructing the conventional stereotypes but the way these stereotypes are detailed, soon lead to their pounding. *A Flight of Pigeons* lays before the readers an interaction between ethos; ethos that are considered as binaries. East and West are considered conventionally as two opposites, but here this opposition becomes complex. These binaries are placed in such a way that they later become interlocked. This paper is aimed at highlighting these complexities of binaries in *A Flight of Pigeons*. Instead of creating native and the foreign as distinct insular spaces Ruskin Bond creates (by the presence of foreign in the native spaces) an overlap that connects them. This work also stays relevant in today's scenario as it is by crossing these kinds of man-made binaries that the world becomes a socially unified place to live in.

Keywords: Binary; Convention; Stereotypes; Overlap

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INTRODUCTION

Ruskin Bond is a renowned writer of India. Having written plenty of works, he remains one of the unique writers of the world. This uniqueness is depicted by the way in which the domain of his works

varies. He was awarded Sahitya Academy Award in 1992. His works are inspired by his experiences as well as his imagination.

In 1857 Bahadur Shah Zafar was captured by Hudson. After capturing Bahadur Shah, Hudson said:

Damdame me Dam nahin, ab khair mango jaan ki.

Ae Zafar bas ho chuki, shamshir Hindustan ki.
(Your fort is crumbling down, pray for your life.

The Indian sword, O Zafar, has lost its sheen and might)

On hearing this Bahadur Shah Zafar replied:

Hinduon me boo rahegi, jab talag iman ki.

Takhte London tak chalegi, teg Hindustan ki.

(So long as the soldiers retain their faith and pride The Indian sword will not relent till it humbles (London's might)) (<http://www.boloji.com/>)

This interaction between Bahadur Shah and Hudson metaphorically captures the essence of East-West encounter. It carries the burden of hatred, enmity and jealousy that the two entertained and exhibited for each other. This emotional, political and social dichotomy has become the hallmark of conventional colonial-colonized relationship and has been theorized and represented as such. In fact, it has become the common conventional wisdom. Ruskin Bond's novella *A Flight of Pigeons* not only challenges this stereotypical and dichotomous understanding of the East and the West, but it also reorients ones understanding of this dynamic through a nuanced portrayal of native foreign overlap. On the face of it, it begins by constructing the conventional stereotypes but the way these stereotypes are detailed, soon lead to their pounding. *A Flight of Pigeons* lays before the readers an interaction between ethos; ethos that are considered as binaries. East and West are considered conventionally as two opposites, but here this opposition becomes complex. These binaries are placed in such a way that they later become interlocked. This paper is aimed at highlighting these complexities of binaries in *A Flight of Pigeons*.

Instead of creating native and the foreign as distinct insular spaces Ruskin Bond creates (by the presence of foreign in the native spaces) an overlap that connects them. The first instance of colonial presence in native space is shown at Lala Ramjimal's house after Ruth and her family reach there. On the

second day of their arrival, Lala Ramjimal's mother says:

...You have made a great mistake in bringing these *Angrezans* into our house. What will people say?(18)

On hearing this Lala Ramjimal replies:

I have not given shelter to *Angrezans*. I have given shelter to friends.(18)

This kind of East-West encounter goes beyond the mundane thinking of the native and colonial spaces. Similarly, once when Ruth asks Lala Ramjimal about the whereabouts of her father's body, he replies that the Christian mortals were buried by two Muslims and Lala himself. He further says that the two Muslims were "aware of the risks but that something had impelled them to undertake this task and that they were willing to face the consequence." (23)The use of the word 'something' implies the generation of an impulse of humanism where humanity wins over colonial individuality. In other words, genedentic space which is a self-conscious and self-critical space wins over the Euclidian space or what we call as geometric space (presented by materialistic boundaries like maps).

After Ruth and her mother are taken by Javed Khan to his house which is a native space, the complexities of the binaries strengthen again. Javed Khan is infatuated with Ruth and he shows respect to her mother Mariam. Ruth describes her own encounter with Javed Khan as:

He gave me a scorching look, and I could not take my eyes from his face; I was like a doomed bird, fascinated by the gaze of a rattlesnake." (46) and, "I opened my eyes once, and saw Javed Khan standing in the doorway...He stood there a long while, staring at me, and I was too afraid to move and call out...Then he turned and walked quietly away.(71)

These two examples show the fear that Ruth has for Javed Khan. On the other hand, Javed Khan's view towards Ruth seems to be that of infatuation but yet complex. Javed Khan as he says is 'intended to marry Ruth honourably.' (45) However, his native space, that

is, the feudal space acts as a hindrance because he is bound by some responsibilities and finds himself trapped in the labyrinth of feudal relationships. The vague relationship between Javed Khan and Ruth acts as a metaphor for the unidentified peculiar love shown between the colonizer and the colonized in *Flight of Pigeons*. Edward Said once called East as seductress:

Rather than listing all the figures of speech associated with the Orient—its strangeness, its difference, its exotic sensuousness, and so forth—we can generalize about them as they were handed down through the Renaissance.(Said 72)

However, in this novella the west, symbolized by Ruth plays the role of the seductress and shakes the foundation of the idealistic colonial encounter.

Kothiwali is the first person who meets Ruth and her family in Javed Khan's house. She shows compassion to them and tells Javed Khan to 'Be kind to them'. Gradually Kothiwali becomes a good friend to Ruth and her family crossing the man-made boundaries of East and West. The love and affection that is being showered by Qamran, Javed Khan's sister on Ruth and her mother is worth mentioning here. When Ruth and her family along with Khan Begum reach there, people come to see the *firangans* but, gradually majority of them become fond of Mariam and her family. This bond of love, of friendship and of humanity goes beyond the geometrical space and the stereotypical virtual space (space created by our thinking) of colonizer and colonized. Once Qamran tells Mariam:

You are like one of us...I would not exchange you for half a dozen women of my own race."
(76)

Here, we see the public space (that treats East and West as antagonists) and domestic space getting overlapped.

The third place where Ruth and her family visit is Kothiwali's home. During one instance Kothiwali says:

...all men are alike when the time comes to die...When you are dead would you like

somebody to disturb your body in search of treasure?...A child, when it is born, comes into the world with a closed fist, and the same hand lies open and flat at the time of death. We bring nothing into the world and we take nothing out! (105)

This utterance of Kothiwali carries several connotations; the use of the word 'treasure' seems to be alluding to the perception of the British for India as 'the golden bird' which led them to colonize it. Moreover it is an occasion where Kothiwali is shown to be reciprocating and is trying to teach the lesson of humanity and oneness to both East as well as West. Mariam tells Kothiwali's son's friend Kaddu Khan some remedies to treat consumption. The readers feel that west also has the potential to reciprocate and this reciprocation is not only shown at Kothiwali's place but also in Qamran's house where the west equally responds to the 'favour' of East.

The final reciprocation by west side takes place when Javed Khan comes to see Ruth, after Ruth and her family temporarily shift to Indarkha. Ruth's mother Mariam is not willing to bring Ruth in front of Javed Khan, but 'impelled by some odd impulse' (124) Ruth steps 'forward into the light' (124) and stands before him. She describes this instance as:

He gazed at me in silence for about a minute, and for the first time I did not take my eyes away from his; then without a smile or a word, he turned away and mounted his horse and rode away into the night." (124)

This description is completely opposite from the descriptions that Ruth gives earlier (that of a 'doomed bird' and 'a rattlesnake') which was full of hatred and fear. The last encounter evokes the atmosphere that Rudyard Kipling presents in 'The Ballad of East and West':

Oh, East is East and West is West, and never
the twain shall meet,
Till Earth and Sky stand presently at God's
great Judgement seat;
But there is neither East nor West, Border,
nor breed, nor birth,

When two strong men stand face to face, tho'
they come from the ends of the earth! (
Kipling, line 1-4)

This stanza very well stands for Ruth and Javed Khan. During this moment of encounter readers see the genuine feeling of Ruth for Javed Khan. At the end of the novella Ruth says:

Looking back on those months when we were his prisoners, I cannot help feeling a sneaking admiration for him. He was very wild and muddle-headed, and often cruel, but he was also very handsome and gallant, and there was in him a streak of nobility which he did his best to conceal. (133)

Here, we see the love of Ruth for Javed Khan becoming eternal. In other words, Ruth and Javed Khan, who are binaries- East and West, not only attract each other but their strange feeling towards each other changes into true love, leading to the dissipation of materialistic spaces. Hence, *A Flight of Pigeons* gives us a story showing East and West encounter getting affected by spaces which leads to their conversion as interlocked binaries.

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