CHAPTER 2
MIDDLE PHASE NOVEL:
THE BIRDS OF PARADISE
THE BIRDS OF PARADISE

Paul Scott’s *The Birds of Paradise* was published in the year 1962. It is considered as his finest achievement prior to the *Quartet*. The novel is unforced and simple with the birds as the central symbol metaphorically representing the princely states in the pre-Independence era. This symbol has been beautifully and intricately woven into the lives of its various characters. The story covers a period of forty two years from 1919 to 1962. It is supported with flashbacks which are well integrated into the present time narrative structure. The novel deals with the life of its protagonist William Conway and his stay at the fictitious island of Manoba. It also features the description of his stay with Dr. Daintree and the Griffins. The novel has been narrated from the point of view of its narrator hero William Conway. It captures in detail the different stages of his life: Indian boyhood, English boyhood, his life as an army officer, his second visit to India after the war, conjugal life in England and sabbatical year in India:

Scott makes William use the predominant technique of unfolding the vivid images of memory as they come to him . . . The life-time of William is cut into four main segments and the images are arranged in such a way the novel is neatly rounded off in a circular pattern. It ends where it begins - *i.e.* William’s present stay on the island of Manoba which is symbolic of mankind itself. (Badiger 30)

Conway recreates the vivid images of his life and tries to discover and analyze the differences in the politico-social set up since the time he spent in India as a child, his friendship with Dora and Krishi, the time he passed in
Musharraf

England, the horror and trauma of his experiences as a prisoner in the Japanese
prison camp during the Second World War. The narrative structure of The
Birds of Paradise takes into account the major historical events that occurred
during India’s struggle for freedom. It captures the significant moments and
developments of Indian history during its colonial and post-colonial era. The
characters play an intrinsic role in the major happenings and events of the plot
and contribute to the organic unity of the novel.

The Birds of Paradise is divided into four books: The Wheeling
Horsemen, On the Banks of the Water, The View from the Terrace and Against
the Wind; each book epitomizes William Conway’s growth as a man. The
novel has a non-linear narrative progression as Conway reminisces about his
past life. Each section of the novel takes into cognizance significant historical
events and issues like Privy Purse, Second World War, references to INA, all
neatly merged into the narrative structure. Paul Scott collates the lives of the
individual characters with historical events as an artistic necessity to give
expression to his creative genius. His creative process found stimulant in
history (events, facts) that helped him to formulate his ideas and articulate his
artistic vision through his fiction. Thus, both the characters and the events in
the novel are artistically and intellectually connected with each other because
each important event of their lives is associated with the chronicles of the past.

The central symbol in the novel is of the caged birds which conveys the
theme of imprisonment, obsession and the need for freedom. The birds (caged)
delineate the condition of the princely states in the pre-Independence period (under the British Empire), trying hard to wrest dignity and respect for themselves in an otherwise ignominious existence:

A collection of few birds of paradise in a huge cage is the main symbol for the princes of India in this novel. Magnificent in their rich and luxuriant plumage, amidst the exotic flora of an island, these birds, for all their apparent mobility and postures of flight, are only dead, stuffed birds, carefully preserved and maintained to give an impression of life. (Narayanan 72)

The narrative interest centred on the princely states is to highlight their historical significance at the time of India’s independence and after it. The British had arrived in an India which mainly consisted of small states. The kings and princes offered them hospitality as well as space for trading and staying in India. Gradually, with the help of their policies and army they subjugated the whole country and brought it under their control. During the colonial rule, the territory which came directly under the control and administration of the Governor General of India was known as British India while the ‘princely states’ though governed by their respective rulers were under the vigilance of the British Crown – of its residents and agents. Such a political arrangement gave the British an edge to rule/control them indirectly.

While recounting about India, Conway recreates the geographical map of India and its prevailing political situations. The supreme power was in the hands of the British Crown which ruled (colony) according to a set of rules. With the help of its policies of exclusion and discrimination the Raj was able to
maintain a strict/rigid distinction between the Indians and the British in every possible realm:

We lived in Indian India which was as different from British India as chalk from cheese. Indian India was made up of the princely states which one way and another accounted between them for something like a third or more of the whole land mass, which I have found surprises people who always thought of India as just India with the British ruling the lot from Whitehall and putting a Viceroy in to make it look good. The states had treaties with the British Crown and were left to govern themselves for good or ill, except in matters of external affairs, defense and communications; but the British Crown represented the paramount power and so they had to govern themselves under the eyes of British residents and agents. (Scott 15-16)

In the words of Suhash Chakravarty, the ideology of the Raj was:

... stern, arbitrary, amoral, based on expediency and designed to create a permanent gulf of contempt and fear between the ruler and the ruled. In order to make the physical separation between the master and the bonded men conspicuous and visible, the imperial governing class was not expected to socialise with the common folk. The code of behaviour was fashioned to draw respect and not affection. (63)

This also accredits the already discussed fact that during the British rule, India consisted of two distinctive bodies namely the British Provinces and Indian princely states. British India was “cheese” and Indian India was “chalk”, which clearly demarcated Indians as inferior or ‘other’ to the British who believed themselves to be intellectually, culturally, socially and morally their superiors. This feature posits the postcolonial perspective - of “... the western [white]
assumptions about the inherent superiority of the European civilisation and values" (Padley 123). Thus, the role of the usurper was justified by degrading the natives. In the very emphatic words of Albert Memmi:

The colonised is associated with contradictory features. . . . The colonised is projected as lazy, one with no sense of economy, jealous, fanatical, a weakling who requires protection. He is always considered in a negative light. He is depersonalised. The living conditions imposed upon the colonised do not grant them liberty. (Nayar 179)

*The Birds of Paradise* as a novel makes a political comment on the plight of the princely states by signifying their condition during the Raj period. The Indian princely states though governed by the native rulers, had signed treaties with the British. They were nominal sovereign entities of their kingdom; though they had the right to rule but no right to take crucial decisions. In reality the British played with the psyche of the rulers. By allowing them the right to rule their states made the princely rulers believe that they had power in their hands but actually they were pawns in the hands of the British Crown. They were always under the surveillance of the British who had the ultimate power of annexing any state, whenever, they wanted to. The Raj had suzerainty and controlled the state's internal affairs and also exercised indirect rule over India's national affairs.

Thus, the Indian princes faced extreme trying situations during the British rule; yet ironically they remained faithful and loyal to the Crown. When Conway returned to India, the son of Dingy Row visited him, a gesture
indicative of his loyalty and devotion towards the English. Conway narrates: "He had a high opinion of the then Viceroy, Wavell, who, he knew, would "sort out these chaps Nehru and Jinnah," and wouldn't "sell the states down the river"." (Scott 156). Viceroy Wavell was the twenty third Viceroy and Governor-General of British India whose repressive and manipulative policies towards India were no different from the other Viceroy's who had ruled the colony. Confident of imperial patronage, Dingy Row's son remarked, "'We've stood by the Crown," . . . "and the Crown'll stand by us. The jackals aren't going to feed on us. Wavell will see to it. So shall we. So will men like your father'" (156-157). This conversation is of contextual importance as it focusses upon the role played by the princely states in India's struggle for freedom and their own subservience to the White masters. He (Dingy Row's son) strongly believed that the Indian nationalists were creating problems by questioning the policies of the Raj because the princely states had bestowed their continuous support and adherence to the British Crown. As Conway explains:

By jackals he [Dingy Row's son] meant the Indian politicians of British India whom he described as, "at each other's bloody throats, carving up the country and getting rid of the princes if they get the chance." (157)

The Indian politicians who were struggling hard to gain freedom for their country instead of getting support from the princes, saw them as mere vassals of the British; relying on a belief that they would help them. Despite the passing of the Privy Purse Act in 1947, which was to take away all the
privileges from the rulers of the princely states; that they were treated with
contempt and subjugated to much disrespect, yet they, like the son of Dingy
Row had faith in the English. He still believed that Gopalakand would be
protected at all times by them. Though the Partition of India and Pakistan
seemed to be a political inevitability, yet the dream of every Indian, Hindus and
Muslims, alike, was to see India free. Against this patriotic scenario and strong
nationalistic feelings, the Indian princes tendered their loyalty to the colonial
master. This made them appear hateful and traitorous to the freedom fighters
and other fellow countrymen. Hence, at the time when the entire country was
struggling for independence, to put an end to the colonial rule, these princes
were "impervious to the winds of change" (Narayanan 67) and instead of
standing for their country and countrymen in their demand for freedom
supported the British in their cause:

Following the Indian Mutiny of 1857, the British decided to make no
more inroads into the Kingdoms, big and small; ruled by the native
princes of India, and in Queen Victoria's proclamation of 1858, these
kingdoms were granted to their rulers "in perpetuity." By preserving
the status quo in the princely states, Britain had created a special
breed of rulers, invested with much power and little responsibility,
apparently independent but in reality subject to Britain.

The present situation was much different from the earlier plans that the
British had for the princely states:

... in attempting to form a constitution for a free and self-governing
India within the British Commonwealth no changes in the princes'
relationships or treaty rights with the British Crown could be made or even initiated without their consent. (Scott 158-159)

But later as Conway explained that probably independence appeared to the princes as a kind of attraction which was to their advantage. However, a few months later:

... the British cabinet mission had to explain that independence for British India would mean the end of paramountcy, the end of treaties the British no longer had the means to adhere to. The states would be free to make their own arrangements, which of course meant cut adrift to fend for themselves. (159)

Thus, in a matter of a few months amidst the changing political landscape of the country, the British asked the states to make arrangements for themselves. "What the British Crown had taken from these princes – supreme authority in the three matters of external affairs, defence and communication – they were now asked to give to one of the new self-governing dominions" (206).

The princes were unable to perceive what was in store for them; they failed to see the real meaning of the end of British paramountcy. Even before independence became a reality, princes and kings began fighting over the question of power and authority. It resulted in riots – rampages and violent outbursts all around. Conway explains thus:

Now the writing was on the wall, but it seemed that so many princes had failed to see it... The winds of crisis changed quarter and blew from colder regions. The maharajahs ate crow. With nearly six hundred of them, they ate it in different ways, a few eagerly, most
reluctantly, some by forcible feeding. Some threatened to accede to Pakistan even if geographically such an accession would have been nonsensical; others were as much coerced into accession by their own people as diplomatically persuaded by the politicians of the new India. They had riots in their own capitals, riots they described as raised by Congress-inspired rabble but which Congress described as the struggle of their enslaved subjects for democratic freedom. (Scott 206-207)

Thus, provinces were formed out of the states, of what earlier was called British India. There were payments to be made as well – an annual privy purse for the upkeep of palace, family, servants and pensioners. Conway comments: "In this way the work of men like my father was taken out of their hands to be brought to its logical end" (207).

The game of chess played between Conway and his father after his (William Conway's) return from Pig Eye made him realize its symbolic ramifications. The details of the game by implication are forged with the political history of India and are commented upon by him. He had taken the black ones and asked his father to play with the white ones. The symbolism hints at the upcoming dissolution of the imperial rule in India, its ultimate failure. It covers the entire history of British rule till the time of independence. The game manifests, how, the British Empire committed error after error which eventually resulted in the end of the imperial rule in India. It also alludes to the rule of the princely states. His father's defeat symbolizes the demise of the Raj:

The symbolism of the game was striking. My black pieces were what Dingy Row's son had called the jackals – the Indian politicians of
British India: and the white court these some jackals opposed and brought to disintegration was one of the feudal courts which men like Father had lived for. . . .

My queen got in the back and mopped up the remaining pawns, one by one, until only the king’s knight, my father was left to defend his monarch.

. . .

But Wavell wouldn’t be able to see it. Neither would men like Father. They were pawns dressed up as knights. Logic demanded that one day we should say to a land we had loved and hated, bled and bled for, felt in our cold northern bones as a source of warmth and in our God-rotten souls as a burden too hot to handle: Yes, we will go, we will go on such and such a day. . . . And on that day we are finished, the princes are on their own, it is up to them to whom, if anyone, they pay tribute. (Scott 187)

Later in the novel, Conway narrates that two years after that “game of chess”, his father’s career which he had followed for forty years came to a sudden end, when Gopalakand like the other princely states “. . . was forced to surrender her autonomy to the province of the new self-governing dominion that bounded her frontiers . . . For the dominion had no romantic notions about princes” (189).

This is with reference to the British withdrawal and the division of the country into India and Pakistan and its effects on different people. It ruined the careers of many British officers but most of all it created boundaries upon a “boundless” land. Princely states were compelled for cessation, and submission to the new policies of the new government. These small states which earlier
Musharraf had operated well under the "preservation and protection" of the British, consequently, found themselves floundering in the new set up "once the illusion of stately togetherness was destroyed" (Scott 209):

The illusion vanished with the Crown, and it was too late to create the similar illusion that might have taken its place if the old 'thirties plan of a federation of all the states had ever come to anything. It had come to nothing because the princes had distrusted each other, and British India had distrusted Whitehall. (209-210)

William Conway had met Krishi (the son of Jundapur's king) for the first time during his childhood. He had been, "... weakling as a boy, with thin arms and thin, knobby-kneed legs..." (60) and succeeded to the throne of Jundapur in 1946, "... just in time to relinquish its powers to the new Indian government and retire to live on a pension and brood through his periods of impotence in the decaying palace..." These narrative details dwell upon the abject hollowness and impotency of the political existence of these rajahs and princes. They had lost all that was theirs — their real authority, power, in fact their very identity. Krishi, who took charge of his state, had no rights and powers to wield. All that he truly possessed was the title and the memories of the past glory as signified by the decaying palace and the stuffed birds of paradise — carefully preserved and maintained to give the impression of majesty/royalty:

The birds had been collected by Krishi's grandfather in the last years of his life and in his day their plumage had been worth a fortune. Their wings and bodies were cunningly supported on wire cradles and
braces and only the rods connecting them to the domed roof were
dimly visible from below... . . . Being under glass, the drawings were
well preserved and the colours, like those on packets of seed, more
magnificent even than the reds, green, blues and buffs and violets of
the stuffed specimens which had hung in the upper air for something
like twenty years. (Scott 82)

Scott has very artistically and interestingly intertwined a religious aspect
with that of history:

There was a legend about the island. Once, long ago, in the days of the
old palace, before the Palladian mansion was built on its site
(something that was supposed to have happened while the rajah and
his family were in exile or in prison and their estates taken from them
temporarily by the East India Company) the king’s daughter fell in
love with the young boatman whose job it was to row the courtiers to
and fro across the lake. She did not know that this handsome peasant
was really the god Krishna in one of his many amatory disguises. (84)

The temporal aspect of the legend is related to the colonial history of India,
which significantly highlights the historical reality of political usurpations and
annexations that underpinned the British colonial tactics. The incident is
narrated only as a belief of a few people but tells that it all happened when the
King and his family were “in prison” and their property was taken away by the
“East India Company.” The fact highlights very many such cases where titles
and states had been seized and captured by the British during the imperial rule.

Bates, Conway’s history teacher once while giving a lecture had quoted
Mountstuart Elphinstone to refer to the princely states of India as “sinks, cess
pits” (121). He said, “We must have some sink to receive all the corrupt
matter that abounds in India, unless we are willing to taint our own system by stopping the discharge of it”” (Scott 121). India was nothing more than a garbage bin for them (British) which they had used shamelessly so as to protect their own country and system from being vitiated and impaired. Such were the notions and beliefs of the people who had ruled over India for around two hundred years and wanted to forward them to the later generations of English, even though the time had come for the English to bid farewell to “Britain’s role as a great imperial power” (Darby 112). The sentiment is a marker of the moral, cultural and political supremacy that the English affected against the natives.

While talking on the subject of loyalty of the Indian kings and princes towards the British Crown, Conway recalls what Mrs. Canterbury, his governess had once told him:

Indeed, it was she who first explained that the Indian princes had been on the side of the British “to a man,” that they had always been the loyalest element in British Indian life, as had been proved in the Great War when they gave money and men to the allied cause. (Scott 24)

Paradoxically, the virtue of loyalty towards their colonial masters proved to be the greatest undoing for the Indian princes as the later facts of history unfold. The reference to the Great War is about the First World War. What Scott posits through this historical detail is the exploitation of the Indians and Indian resources by the English.
By incorporating small historical details into the narrative structure of the novel, Paul Scott brings his readers face to face with many stark realities of Indian history. He has presented these facts from the perspective of an English boy, who recalls many things told to him, when he was young, yet, as a writer he significantly allows the readers to gauge the Indo-British politics during the Raj as well as get a measure of the "culture of imperialism in the lives of his characters" (Darby 113). Every possible historical detail and fact has been judiciously interpolated by Scott into his fiction so as to give his narrative the strength of reliability and accountability. Conway recollects:

My father was the man on the spot, alone, unarmed but ready like Gordon at Khartoum to quell an angry mob with a look. At any moment the good fellows in the guardroom at our gate might turn against us as the sepoys of British India had turned against their British officers in the mutiny of 1857. (Scott 23)

The narrative takes into account the Great Indian Uprising, i.e. The Revolt of 1857 – the turning point in British-Indian (colonial) history. It becomes the first official record of the beginning of the resistance by the natives against their colonizers. The Sepoys of British India, turned against their foreign ruler due to a sense of outrage at the religious, social, economic and political level. It was considered a mutiny by the British. They believed that it was a wrong act, an act of betrayal by the sepoys against their master. The British tried to dismiss it by calling it a "Sepoy Mutiny", to make the Indians guilty of acting dishonourably against their masters, for the revolt significantly brought out the anger and deep rooted hatred the Indians had for the Raj. The natives of India
had suffered greatly under the oppressive colonial rule for about a century and the growing discontentment among them had led to the rising. For Indians it was the First War of Independence; it was the first attempt on the part of the Indians that showed signs of resistance and repulsion against the outsiders – British. This was to be the beginning for their fight for liberation and independence.

Paul Scott makes Conway a medium to reflect upon the details of the rising, the first war of independence and the effect of it on his psyche. Conway builds up a gruesome and inhuman picture of the violence and bloodshed as described to him by Mrs. Canterbury:

> From the stories she told me I built up a childhood picture of it [well] crammed with bodies, so crammed that the limbs of those on the top layer stuck up stiffly at odd angles over the edges. She spoke of a pink satin slipper, a relic of bodies in the well, that could be seen in a museum in London. . . . I had nightmares about the well and would wake in the dark, bite my hand to stop myself crying out; but in the daytime I dug deep narrow holes in the garden and stuffed them full of lead soldiers with relish. (Scott 23-24)

Here, Scott brings out the gory details of the atrocities and repressive measures taken by the British against the Indians which consequently took the Indian resistance to the next level of rebellion. The scene that he has described is one of the myriad of such events that took place during the Revolt of 1857. The uprising was crushed with an iron hand, thousands of people were killed and hundreds imprisoned. Such incidents which left a deep impression on little
Conway’s mind, indeed, scarred the memories of the Indians for times to come as revealed by pages of history.

William Conway, the protagonist had many differences with his father. He had no one to understand him, love him or listen to him. His relationship with his father has been used by the novelist to comment upon the colonial ideology and the imperial perspective of the British. Mrs. Canterbury idealized the senior Conway as a true representative of the Crown:

"Men like your father have given them standards." "By leaving them with the crowns and palaces they had when we first conquered India, men like your father have shown them that the English understand true values." (Scott 25)

She presented the father as a hero to William, but he seriously doubted it to be true. He knew that it was all a deception. She praised his father by saying that he had put an end to all the injustices, however, the irony was that that by giving few rights to the kings and princes after annexing their states, Robert Conway was merely implementing the Raj myth (ideology) of being beneficent and merciful towards the rulers of these states. A man who did not try to understand his son, how could he be sensitive to the needs and wants of his subjects – the natives. The British never tried to relate or empathize with the Indians; to identify with their needs and understand their problems. Major historical events like the Revolt of 1857, Jallianwalah Bagh Massacre, and Satyagraha indubitably demonstrate the tyranny and brutality of the colonizers towards the inhabitants (natives) of the colonized territory.
The narrative perspective focusses upon the widening gap between the father and son when the uncertainty of British presence in India (future time) made Robert Conway apprehensive for his son’s Indian career. That the Raj was slowly and steadily losing control on India made him realize the imminence of India’s freedom and of British withdrawal. In reality, it was a time (1930s-1940s) when British were preparing for their final departure. Thus, the father’s insistence upon his son not to make a career in India brought a “premature end” (Scott 129) to all his (Conway) future plans and dreams; it worsened the relationship between the two. This fictional detail indirectly brings to light that the British presence in India during the early decades of the twentieth century had become marked by untenability and indeterminacy. Though they tried to manipulate the political situation to their advantage, yet they realized that the Indian resistance had become a movement for freedom and it was a matter of time when they would have to give up – their jewel in the crown.

The narrative sequencing of the episode of Conway’s imprisonment by the Japanese as prisoner of war for three and a half years at Pig Eye camp in Malaya during the Second World War, relates to an aspect of history which contributes to the fictional development of the plot. Pig Eye was, “the place of all misfortunes, damnation and munificence” (Badiger 34). He had joined the West Country territorial regiment in England in 1939 which was later sent to Malaya to counter the Japanese attack on the East front. The horror of prison
life in the prison camp of Pig’s Eye to which Conway and his men were subjected is recorded thus:

My men were roped together by their wrists and ankles. They were being made to hobble around in a circle. The Japanese were prickling them with bayonets. I got the impression that they had been going around in a circle for a long time. My arrival was the signal for something else to begin. The youngest, a fair, good-looking man called Bracegirdle, was cut away from his companions, stripped, held by the shoulders and ankles and sexually assaulted three times. (Scott 161)

The image depicts the torture, brutality and barbaric behaviour meted out to the prisoners of war. Second World War is a perfect example of man’s barbarity and inhumanity towards another man irrespective of the consideration of nationality, race, caste, creed or colour. The Great War qualifies as the biggest example in history of perpetuating war crimes against human race. The inhumanity of the Japanese army is often compared with that of the Nazi’s against the prisoners of war. The rate of death of prisoners was very high under the Japanese. “They used the prisoners to build an aerodrome and a system of roads” (164) and coerced millions of soldiers (prisoners of war) and exploited them as bonded labourers. Badiger writes: “The blood curdling experiences of the prison camp during the war are epitomized in the novel in clear cut visual images” (34).

More than 140,000 English soldiers were taken as prisoners of war by the Japanese. Out of these most of the soldiers died from hunger, fatigue,
barbaric punishments and diseases which were not treated. They were sent to build the 260 mile long Burma – Thailand railroad manually. These prisoners used to work from dawn to dusk, laying the tracks, building bridges and moving heavy pieces of earth. All of them were forced to learn Japanese and if they failed, were beaten badly.

While talking about the life and environment at the Pig Eye, Conway details the following:

The Japanese were turning it into a base depot. They used the prisoners to build an aerodrome and a system of roads. The Indians were kept separate from the British. The camp was divided into three, Indians, British, sick-bay compound. After a while a lot of the Indians were suborned and formed themselves into a unit of what was called the Indian National Army which was inspired by Subhas Chandra Bose. (Scott 164)

In course of this description, Scott has subtly mentioned the formation of the Indian National Army by Subhas Chandra Bose which was to become an important factor to spearhead India’s struggle for freedom. He once again makes William, his spokesperson, to acknowledge the failure of the British protecting India from other foreign powers. He further writes that: “Those Indians who refused to join the unit [INA] were sent away, but some of them came to sickbay to be treated for injuries; mostly for burns from being held over a fire, or ruptures, or internal lacerations caused by sharpened bamboo stakes.” Thus, Conway acknowledges that the emergence of INA was the result of British negligence and antipathy towards the Indians. Even during the war,
the British practised discrimination against the native soldiers. He comments: "I never really found it in my heart to blame them. We had done a poor job of protecting them from their enemies" (Scott 164). This reminds us of Tom Gower’s view in *The Alien Sky*, who believed that the British had failed as rulers of India because they never tried to understand the country. He too accepted that the Raj in its imperial arrogance had never tried to comprehend India and its people. It was apparent that British had failed as a governing system. Due to their deep seated colour bias and racial prejudice they failed to amend their discriminatory, manipulative and repressive policies towards the natives.

In course of the narrative, Scott has skilfully interpolated his views on the movement of Satyagraha and non-violence which helped India to gain freedom. The dialogue between Conway and Grayson-Hume is a point of reference:

He [Grayson-Hume] talked about Indian leaders like Gandhi who would rather starve than fight. . . . I asked what starving proved. I think he said it didn’t prove anything either but drew attention, like civil disobedience and non-violence, to social and political injustice in a way that fighting couldn’t because in the heat of battles there wasn’t room for anything but anger. Sometimes, though, civil disobedience got out of hand and then you had to treat the leaders like rebels, you had to put them in prison, they had to pay for the hot-headedness of their followers. On one of these walks I said, “What does Gandhi want, what’s swaraj?” He said, “Independence for British India. Freedom. What we all want, old man.” “Will he get it?” I asked.
Grayson-Hume said perhaps, but there was a long way to go. There was so much we had to teach the Indians before they could rule themselves. That was what Father's job was about, although the princes were a different problem. We had two jobs in India. The princes knew how to rule but we had to teach them democracy. The Indians of British India knew about democracy but had to be taught how to rule. (Scott 28)

This conversation/dialogue is an explicit manifestation of the colonial assumption of the inherent superiority of European culture and civilization. Thus, conscious of their ascendancy over the natives, the English accorded themselves the privilege of being the moral protector – the dispenser of “divine justice” over the Indians:

Kipling gave the Raj a wide ideological umbrella which sheltered a whole range of self-righteous exaltations, romantic images and contorted visions wrapped up in a seductive phrase: ‘white man’s burden.’ (Chakravarty 60)

Furthermore, the readers are informed about the Satyagraha initiated by Mahatma Gandhi between the years 1918 and 1919. The movement started at Champaran but the term was used for the first time in the Anti Rowlatt agitation (1919). It ushered in an era of peaceful and non-violent resistance. It was one of the major political tools in the hands of the ‘Moderates’ who believed that the removal of the grievances of Indians was only possible through peaceful means – Ahimsa/non-violence. The concept created feelings of love, labour, dignity, self-respect, mutual respect and civility.
This simple dialogue between Conway and his teacher carries the weight and information of a whole book on this subject. It also takes note of the civil disobedience and of the imprisonment of the nationalist leaders fighting in the cause of independence. They were jailed and tortured so as to dampen their political enthusiasm and to deter their patriotic zeal which was steadily increasing in intensity and influence. On the other hand, the British saw themselves and their actions as fulfilment of duty; of teaching the Indians and Indian princes lessons in democracy, equality, order and justice, so as to vindicate their stay and rule in India. In order to control the growing multitude of politically conscious Indians justified in their acts and cognizant of their rights, the British introduced multifarious laws which strengthened the colonial authority and granted them privilege to rule over the Indians and subjugate them easily.

When William Conway visits India and Burma in 1960 on sabbatical leave, he goes to Jundapur to meet Cranston, Krishi and Dora – to relive his past. He informs Cranston about his intended visit and when he (Conway) learns of his being back in India again, he affirms his feelings thus:

This seemed like an omen—I wasn’t sure of what. Muzzafirabad was a new name to me. It sounded old and yellow, dominated by mosques, full of flies and men kneeling on prayer mats, a predominantly Muslim town, but in India and not Pakistan; not my childhood India, but even older, the India of the great Moghuls. (Scott 205)
The Partition had changed the map of India. New towns and cities had come into existence and people were not even familiar with their names.

The act of India gaining independence, British withdrawal, Partition had altogether transformed the face of the subcontinent. Nothing seemed familiar; everything had changed even for the English. Dora’s husband, Harry Paynter, is an example of this fact. He was, “... in the old Indian army, which meant he lost his job in 1947...” (Scott 224). Dora explained:

... there was independence and partition and the break-up of the old Indian Army, Harry losing his job he’d set heart on from as far back as he could remember. He joined the Pakistan Army because he thought Muslims manlier than Hindus and stuck it for two years he’d contracted for, but he was never convinced that one day India and Pakistan wouldn’t get to grips over the Kashmir problem and he’d find himself fighting old comrades... During the massacres that accompanied partition they’d seen the trains coming into Lahore piled with bodies of people who’d been killed between there and Delhi, either Muslims killed by Hindus or Hindus killed by Muslims, never British, the British were treated with great courtesy; and for a time Dora thought she couldn’t go on living in a country that showed itself so savage just under the skin. (247)

On the subject of Partition, Scott presents a horrific picture of this momentous happening in Indian history. It exposed a very ugly face of the people living in India and Pakistan. They were barbaric and murderous, callous and insensitive towards their fellow human beings. Brimming with hatred they massacred those people with whom earlier they had shared their lives and spaces for hundreds of years. Formation of India and Pakistan took away lives of
uncountable people and left a large number of people homeless. But the English (responsible for Partition), whose policy of divide and rule had fanned the communal feelings between the two communities, were contrarily, treated with love and respect. This reflects the chicanery and duplicity of the new formed nations. The religious differences between the Hindus and the Muslims were exploited and nurtured by the British who never allowed them to resolve their differences. Thus the seed of hatred, distrust and envy continued to haunt them (in future too).

Conway during his visit to India in 1963, witnesses post-colonial/post-Independence changes in light of the demise of the Raj and the Partition of the country. India’s disintegration into two nations, destroyed its very political and cultural identity. This becomes apparent as the hero-narrator muses upon old times:

By now everything was gone, the Rani, the state, Dora’s looks, Harry Paynter’s military career, Krishi’s waistline and most of his natural virility. And the only one of these he [Krishi] didn’t regret was the state. “Thank God for integration,” he said, “I signed everything like a shot.” The other states in the old agency had signed like shots too: Tradura, Trassura, Premkar, Skakura and Durhat; although Tradura only signed like a shot because the political situation there had become very difficult . . . There would have been riots if the Maharajah had shown the slightest sign of wavering, of standing out against Congress when Congress took over from the British Crown. (Scott 240)
All the wealth, pomp and glory of India had faded away. Princes and kings fed up with the political uncertainties had signed away their states. Gomathi Narayanan writes about Krishi, who like other princes had become “... a victim of history, but he is quite relieved at the chance to rid himself of his microscopic bankrupt kingdom” (73). Thus, whatever happened to the princely states, Conway realizes, was the result of British machinations:

... history had shown that it was the princes of India who were dead, in spite of all their finery and high-flown postures. The British had stuffed them and burnished their fine feathers, but as princes they were dead even if they weren’t dead as men, and if not actually dead then anyway buried alive in a cage the British had never attempted really to open. (Scott 257)

At the beginning of the novel as Conway retrospect about his childhood, he informs the readers:

I was born in India at the Residency in Gopalakand in 1919, when my father was acting as assistant to the Resident. The fireworks were ordered by the ruler of Gopalakand, The Maharajah, Sir Pandirakkar Dingit Rao. He was known to the English as Dingy Row. It never occurred to me to ask why there should have been fireworks to mark the birth of a son to a then junior civil servant, but I suppose Sir Pandirakkar was in a pro-English mood and thought the fireworks as much a proof of his own good nature as a compliment to my arrival. (14)

According to Conway, Maharajah Pandirakkar Dingit Rao wanted to express his affection for a subordinate/British resident (Conway’s father) so as to affect a front of good will and concern to the people of his state. In British India, the
kings were bound to portray their approbation of the colonizers in order to get their vested interests served. However, this resulted in their reckless spending of their inherited wealth in an effort to please and appease the British.

As a child Conway, on his birthdays had the pleasure of meeting and dining with the Maharajah and he thoroughly enjoyed the occasion and the privileges granted: "To begin with I liked the feeling that I was my own master and the way the well-sprung carriage dipped when I put my weight on the footplate" (Scott 31). It made him feel superior and elevated in comparison to the Indians, over whom his countrymen were in authority and control.

In a situation of such "structured inequality" (Darby 113), even the children of the English believed it their right to be treated especially. They believed India to be their possession – property. This was something which had been embedded into their minds since childhood. Though Ranjit Singh, Maharajah of Tradura (with whom Conway used to have tea on each of his birthdays) was called by different titles like "Lord of the Sun, Giver of Grain" (Scott 31), in reality had no power and authority over his small piece of land. He was supposed to seek permission from the British, even for the smallest of decisions. It was his duty to keep them happy and their children as well, as the incident recalled and recounted by Conway conveys. Inside the palace, he remembered the walls of the palace to be adorned with the pictures of British Queen and King instead of the pictures of national leaders like Mahatma Gandhi, Subhas Chandra Bose who were struggling to gain independence for
their country. None of the Indian rulers (under British patronage) would dare to be supportive of the freedom fighters. They would be deigned disloyal and traitors by the British Crown. Scott, thus questions the loyalty and integrity of the Rajas who were ready to betray their own motherland in lieu of British patronage. The British along with the trade and wealth of India manipulated even the hearts of these Indian kings and princes; they (English) took keen interest in the education of the young heirs of the Indian states:

The education of young heirs was something of very special concern to the Political Department. Father’s predecessor had advised English tutorage followed by a few years at an English public school. Ranjit Rao had sent his son to Switzerland in the face of stiff opposition and was credited with the remark, “My grandson must learn the value of time,” a reference to the Swiss national industry which the then political agent was said to have taken a year to understand. (Scott 39)

In *The Birds of Paradise*, Paul Scott has woven many historical events associated with the princely states. The narrative helps to foreground the attitudes and beliefs of these Indian rulers, to deliberate upon the affiliation/bondage that they had with the British Crown. Thus, the relationship of these princely states with the Raj is explored and commented upon in detail so as to emerge as a significant factor that contributed to India’s subjugation and colonization. The princely states had become a powerful tool in the hands of the British Empire with which it safeguarded its own political interests in India.
Paul Scott’s *The Birds of Paradise* belonging to his middle phase of writing is a fine blend of fictional details with the history of British India. Set against the principal background of princely (states of) India, the novel oscillates between the other settings of the island of Manoba, Pig Eye, Palaces of Tradura and Gopalakand. The time period covered is from 1919 to 1961 as the narrator tries to recreate his past from the images of memory as they come to him since the moment of his birth in India in 1919 to the time he revisits it on a sabbatical leave in 1961 and settles down at the island of Manoba – a lonely man. In retrospect, William Conway reminisces about the course of his own life where the major portion of it is related to that of the history of colonial India. A broad spectrum of historical details inform the narrative, thereby highlighting the history attendant to the colonial rule, especially that of the princely states, the policies of the Raj and the ultimate fragmentation of India into the dominion of India and Pakistan. The inherent symbolism of the title *The Birds of Paradise* lends an artistic beauty to a well documented historical narrative.
Works Cited


