Chapter 5

Invoking History in Self Defense: Tension Revisited in *A Flight of Pigeons*.

During the 1970s and early 80s, Ruskin’s economic crisis as an author – one of the causes of his loneliness and self-pity – shows signs of alleviation as some publishers come forward to print his works in book form. Ruskin becomes more sensitive towards his past, the enterprises of which bear fruits now. A dynamic correspondence between his present feelings and his memory of the past equips him for a more mature negotiation with the anxieties of identity.

One of the attendant sentiments that engage his thoughts is the memory of his father whose iconic influence on his authorial bearings finds occasion for cultural celebration with redemption of hope in the commercial viability of his vocation. He begins ruminating on the memories of those places which are redolent with the impress of his father: writes “My Father’s Trees Still Grow in Dehra”; dedicates *Strange Men Strange Places* (1969) to his memory “who when I was a small boy, led me by the hand up the steps of old forts and palaces, these memorials of forgotten men and places” (*Strange Men 3*); and visits his father’s birthplace Shajahanpur where the incidents of *A Flight of Pigeons* take place. Nevertheless, Ruskin’s sensibilities of inheritance are so problematic that the unconscious concerns of belonging begin to revive from the anthropological recesses of his mind. A sense of inclusive humanism subsumes in itself memories of incidental rifts and differences that used to torment his sensibilities of space
and time during his adolescent days. One of the most important works that characterize his career of this period is *A Flight of Pigeons*. Serialized in *The Illustrated Weekly of India* in 1975, it is a novella based on the historical findings of the persecution of an Anglo-Indian girl (Ruth) and her mother (Mariam) by the mutinous Indian sepoys and their accomplices during the Uprising that took place in 1857. For references to the main text of the novella I will follow the version that Penguin incorporates in the 1996 anthology of the author's *Collected Fictions*.

Mariam had a French man who served in the Maratha army for her father and an aristocratic Muslim woman from Rampur in northern India for her mother. She and her brothers had been brought up as Christians. At eighteen, she married Labadoor, a quiet unassuming man from Jersey (in the Channel Islands), who served as a clerk in the magistrate’s office in Shahjahanpur. Their daughter was Ruth whose memory of the traumatic experience of the massacre is used by Ruskin to spin this yarn. The interesting thing about it is that after a brief authorial prologue Ruskin makes Ruth assume the role of the storyteller. For plausible reasons I base my reading of the story on a premise that suitably obscures the gap between the narrator and the authorial intentions underpinning the narration. Ruskin underlines the similarity between his position and that of the “14-year old girl [Ruth Labadoor] of mixed blood, who was caught up in the holocaust [...]”

Speaking about what had inspired him to write the book, he says:

The events described here took place in Shahjahanpur, a small district town in Uttar Pradesh. I felt drawn to Shahjahanpur because it was my father’s birth-place, and because my own family background was similar to that of Ruth Labadoor (Bond, “Introduction” *A Flight 4*).

Ruth’s father was killed by the marauding sepoys, and she and her mother were threatened by persecution. Her father’s life was sacrificed for the Raj, a symbol loaded
with significance for Ruskin, whose father died for the Raj in the oppressive conditions of his work. Ruskin's imagined identification with Ruth's position is supplemented by a sense of alienation he suffered on a couple of occasions during his childhood when he had to confront native ire in forms of scornful invectives and physical assault. In the "Introduction" to Penguin India's 1994 anthology of his essays titled, *Delhi is not Far: The Best of Ruskin Bond*, the author writes:

'Great, grey, formless India,' as Kipling had called it, was, until I was eight or nine, unknown territory for me, and I had heard only vaguely of the freedom movement and Nehru and Gandhi; but then, a child of today's India is just as vague about them. Most domiciled Europeans and Anglo-Indians were apolitical. That the rule of the sahib was not exactly popular in the land was made plain to me on the few occasions I ventured far from the house. Shouts of 'Red Monkey!' or 'White Pig!' were hurled at me with some enthusiasm but without any physical follow-up. I had the sense, even then, to follow the old adage, 'Sticks and stones may break my bones, but words can never hurt me'.

It was a couple of years later, when I was eleven, just a year or two before independence, that two passing cyclists, younger to me, swept past and struck me over the head. I was stunned but not hurt. They rode away with cries of triumph – I suppose it was a rare achievement to have successfully assaulted someone whom they associated with the ruling class – but although I could hardly (at that age) be expected to view them with Gandhian love and tolerance, I did not allow the resentment to rankle [...] perhaps I had already learnt to accept the paradox that India could be as cruel as it could be kind (4).

In trying to summarize the history of development of his sense of belonging as a form of introduction to a selection of his sketches and vignettes spanning 50 years of his life, Ruskin composes these lines on September 7, 1994 and appends his sign to it. It is quite obvious from the narration that he had to overcome an overwhelming sense of alienation.
With an attitude of diehard positivism he cultivated the goodness in things that appeared all the more inimical to him. He could not have possibly gained some success in resolving the dilemma between hatred and longing had his perspective of history not facilitated him in choosing to focus on those redeeming features of Indianness that made him love the country and the country, despite all its antagonisms, love him.

Ruskin came across Ruth’s memory of the Mutiny in J F Fanthome’s narrative version called *Mariam; A Story of the Indian Mutiny of 1857*, which was published from Benares by the Chandraprabha Press in 1896. He was immediately taken in by the impressive account of her and her mother’s encounters with forces that implicitly tested the mettle of their Indianness. When Ruskin builds his story based upon the historical anecdote of Fanthome’s text, he looks upon the past with a temperament engendered by his present concerns. It appears that like nineteenth century British historical fictions on India, he is combining history with the tradition of adventure and the problems of Empire. But unlike the ideologically inflected colonial bias of such works, Ruskin’s notion of the adventures of Mrs. Labadoor and her daughter is influenced by his self-reflexive trauma of the imperial situation as it should affect a subject bearing the psychological double bind that the situation had created in its aftermath. He studies the past not as an antiquarian but uses it as a metaphorical representation of his eternal concerns of being a product of the Empire. He looks back on historical past with his living concerns in the same way as Hayden White suggests historical fiction should portray the past:

Anyone who studies the past as an end in itself must appear to be either an antiquarian, fleeing from the problems of the present into a purely personal past, or a kind of cultural necrophile, that is, one who finds in the dead and dying a value he can never find in the living (White 41).
The authorial concern for Ruskin in the novel involves primarily a repressed state of Oedipality indirectly shaped by the fears of colonialism. I have referred to it in chapter one and will explain further in the course of the present analysis. The bloodshed and massacre in Fanthome’s narrative do not merit attention in the story as much as the theme of love and acceptance that the two Anglo-Indian women wrest from the hearts of those who had apparently proclaimed war on the firangis. Lala Ramjimal goes out of his way to risk life in protecting the Labadoor family from massacre after Mr Labadoor is killed and their house is set on fire. To his mother’s fear about the hazards of offering asylum to “Angrezans” in the house, Lala offers a determined and bold reply: “I have not given shelter to Angrezans. I have given shelter to friends. Let people say or think as they please” (Collected Fiction 834). Ruskin’s representation of the socio-cultural nature of the insurgency is unique in its choice of focus. He chooses to highlight the humane elements that remain unrecorded in the traditionally evasive accounts of the Uprising. The intrepid gesture of the two Muslim men who risk their lives in burying the massacred bodies of the Christians are modeled on the edifying exploits of Nasir Khan and Amir Ali as documented in the Gazeteer of 1900 (p.150). In fact, instances of such heroic signs of solidarity were not uncommon, but were either not registered or desperately distorted by imperial treatises on Mutiny.

Bahadur Shah Zafar (known as Zafar, in short), the Mughal emperor, himself tried to save the lives of innocent Christians by ordering Main ud-Din Husain Khan, the head police officer at Pahargunj Police Station, Delhi, to secure the lives of the Christians still alive by stowing them in what he believed the fortified precincts of his palace. At the cost of attracting the ill will of the sepoys, Zafar arranged proper funeral rites for those
Englishmen and their families who were killed within the palace walls during the first wave of the sepoys' charge. For all these ennobling acts of kindness, alas, Major Harriott, the British prosecutor in the emperor's trial, accused Zafar of fomenting "international Muslim conspiracy stretching from Constantinople, Mecca and Iran to the walls of the Red Fort" (Dalrymple 406). Ruskin highlights these acts of tolerance, and far from committing any travesty of truth, he underlines the essence of humanity that would account for restoring sangfroid to his own disturbed sense of identity. The retelling of the tale for him is a therapeutic act. He certainly finds assuagement for his concerns of belonging – repressed in the unsavoury memory of racial snipe and battering – by vicariously enacting the drama of self-definition in Mariam and her daughter.

Squarely inflected as his ennui was to the outsider/insider syndrome, Ruskin can not but rightly search for its resolution in the historical testaments of naturalization. His avowed tryst with history is both personal and objective. The way he attitudinizes himself to the question of belonging is very much influenced by his view of the Anglo-Indian history as it shaped itself in the modern period – from the advent of the European merchants to the court of Akbar to the birth of the racially mixed progeny to the post-Independence phenomenon of staying on or global dispersion of the hybrid community. The aesthetics of historical approach is finely embedded in his 1975 poem, "At the Grave of John Mildenhall in Agra".

In the year 1594,
Visiting first Lahore
And then the garden city of Ajmer,
Came a merchant adventurer,
John Mildenhall by name,
From Lindon by the River Thame.
To Agra's mart he brought
His goods and baggage; then sought
Audience with the great
Moghul, who sat in state
In vast red sandstone audience-hall.
"We are pleased, Mr. Mildenhall,
To have you at our court," great Akbar said:
"Your Queen is known to have an astute head,
Your country many ships, and I hear
Of a poet called Shakespeare —
Who, though not as good as Fazl or Faiz,
Writes a pretty line and does plays on the side.
But tell us — when will you be on your way?"

"Most gracious king, I'd like to stay —
With your permission — for a while,"
Said the traveler with the Elizabethan smile.

To this request the Emperor complied.
John stayed, and settled down, and died.
Over three hundred years had past
When those who followed, left at last (Lone Fox Dancing 14).

The poem is conceived in the form of a dirge, fit to adorn the headstone of a man who in his death and burial affirmed his belonging to the place. The sepulchers in the Indian hill stations testify to the history of Ruskin's heritage and the nature of his descent. The
historical testimonial of Mildenhall’s pioneering venture is refurbished by subsequent accounts of racial miscegenation and nativization of the Europeans in India. Among the East India Company officials who settled in Delhi at the end of the 18th century were a passel of notable figures who felt deeply attracted by the high courtly culture of the city. When Lady Maria Nugent, wife of the British Commander-in-Chief in India, visited Delhi between 1811 and 1815, she discovered to her surprise that the British Resident and his assistants had all “gone native”:

I shall now say a few words of Messrs. Gardner and Fraser who are still of our party. They both wear immense whiskers, and neither will eat beef or pork, being as much Hindoos as Christians, if not more; they are both of them clever and intelligent, but eccentric; and having come to this country early, they have formed opinions and prejudices that make them almost natives” (Nugent 9).

The British Resident in Delhi, Sir David Ochterlony, had a harem of thirteen Indian wives, of whom a Brahmin dancing girl turned Muslim was his favourite. Ochterlony’s assistant, William Fraser, a linguist and scholar from Inverness, who “had six or seven legitimate [Indian] wives” (Dalrymple 63), fused so well with the Mughal culture that the claims of Sir Richard Burton’s expert emulation of Eastern customs pale into insignificance. Bernard S. Cohn refers to the cultural relaxation allowed to these “semi-Mughalized Emperors” who “affected Muslim dress in the privacy of their homes” (Cohn, Colonialism 111-112), living in the company of their Indian mistresses and children. Besides the mixed household of the British Residency, there were many landed Britons living in Delhi who tried

with varying success to bridge the gap between Islam and Christianity, between Mughal culture and that of the British. The Skinners of Hansi, the Gardners of Khasgunge and the circle around the Begum Samru of Sardhana were all descended from eighteenth century European mercenaries
who had married into the Mughal elite of Delhi and developed a hybrid lifestyle, so forming a sort of Anglo-Mughal Islamo-Christian buffer zone between the Mughal world of the court and the world of the [East India] Company’s Residency. All three dynasties nominally professed Christianity, while speaking mainly Persian and Hindustani, and living in an almost entirely Islamicized Mughal style (Dalrymple 64-65).

Such in brief is the history of Anglo-Indian cohabitation that Ruskin alludes to bolster his claims of Indianness as represented in the Labadoor family. The British attitude performed a volte face when their imperial arrogance caught fire. Two successive conquests – over the French and the Indian rivals – and the rise of Evangelical Christianity strengthened hegemonic desires in them. Native familial connections of British officials were repudiated and their Anglo-Indian children were either disowned or offered cold shoulder. A close reading of Ruskin’s *A Flight of Pigeons* will help the reader catch sight of a curious defile left open in Mrs Labadoor’s corpus of anxieties: not only she does not evince much interest in a possible British salvation of their lives, but suffers from fear of insecurity characteristic of an Anglo-Indian wife of a deceased British husband and of a mother who has an Anglo-Indian child to protect. In her predicament – which is like a two-edged blade made to cut both ways – she resembles the angst-ridden condition of James Skinner, one of the landed gentries of 1850s Delhi who suffered for his mixed blood of a Scotch father and a Rajput mother. Skinner fought bravely in the Maratha army only to be ejected from their ranks because his father was British; later, in the British army, he was increasingly discriminated against for his Indian blood. It is worth noting that the possibility of Ruth and her mother being rescued by the British is left suspended. They end their flight at Bharatpur in the shelter of Mariam’s
Anglo-Indian brother; and in their final escape they are aided by Nasim Khan and a Sikh soldier. Pilloo, the other Anglo-Indian orphan in the story, is adopted by a Pathan.

Ruskin begins his story with reference to when and where it is set and keeps track of the course of the trouble as it affects the lives of the members of the Labadoor family. It appears that he has taken for granted that his readers would be familiar with the origin and nature of the Uprising, without the background knowledge of which, however, the historicity of the narrative remains somewhat vague and unimpressive to a reader. I think it is incumbent on a commentator to supply the extra-textual clues to enable appreciation of a historical fiction, which is set against the backdrop of an incident which is distant in time and exotic in nature.

William Dalrymple attributes the Uprising primarily to the proselytizing activities of the Evangelical Christian Missionaries. Ever since the Reverend Midgely John Jennings arrived in Delhi in January, 1852, his avowed mission was to convert the people of the city to Christianity, by force if necessary. In the second chapter of *The Last Mughal*, Dalrymple makes a tongue in cheek dig at Jennings’ attitude; as though, he was compelled by his compunction to repay the debt of the British possession of the Koh-i-noor diamond by rescuing the heathens from the thrall of false religions. Because of the new British attitude to religious conversions, each move made by the East India Company, even if its religious implications were inadvertent, created serious repercussions in the Indian society. It was usual for the Indians to smack of ulterior motive behind the Company’s actions. At such a critical moment the controversial Enfield Rifle was introduced into the British Indian army. The cartridge needed for the new gun was greased with cow and pig fats which required biting off before loading.
Cow being a revered animal to upper-caste vegetarian Hindus (who constituted the majority of the sepoys), and pig, an unclean animal to both Hindus and Muslims, the new gun and its ammunition, which was introduced only to improve the army’s strategic efficiency, instilled anxious suspicion among the sepoys that the Company was intent on breaking their castes before “embarking on a project of mass conversion” (Dalrymple 126). The implementation of the General Enlistment Act (1855) that enjoined stipulation on all sepoys that they should be prepared to serve abroad further intensified religious tension in them. To the orthodox, high caste, Hindu sepoys, “crossing the black water” was a forbidden act. When the commanders of British regiments ordered the reluctant sepoys to use the Enfield cartridge, they revolted. On March 29, 1857, Mangal Pandey in Barrackpore called his fellow sepoys to retaliate, shot at two British officers and was promptly tried and hanged. By the end of April, the trouble had escalated. When the sepoys of the 3rd Light Infantry of the Meerut Regiment refused to fire the cartridge, they were courtmartialed to ten years’ penal servitude. That evening, placards came up in Meerut bazaar, calling all true Musalmans to avenge the humiliation by slaughtering the Christians. This stoked the retaliatory fire in the Meerut sepoys, who on May 10 rose in rebellion en masse.

Ruskin chooses this moment to mark the beginning of the frame of orientation required for his story. The standoff in Shahjahanpur a little later, on 30-31 May, is seemingly informed by the same proclamation of faith that the sepoys communicated to Zafar in Delhi on May 11, 1857: “we have joined hands to protect our religion and our faith” (Dalrymple 24). No wonder, therefore, Ruskin’s plot is flagged off with the incident of massacre at the Sunday morning service in St Mary’s Church. The aggrieved
sepoys cannot think of a more suitable place to strike. But before Shahjahanpur actually feels the steam of the sepoys’ wrath, the author reports of a signal incident of dubious intrigue that takes place when the Redman’s house is looted and gutted by a local ruffian named Javed Khan. In fact, the worth of the Mutiny was disparaged by licentious miscreants who did not lose the chance of cashing in on the anarchic situation that emerged with the insurgency. Subsequently the sepoys themselves allowed their passions to run amok. The religious passion of the retaliation was diffused into psychopathic vandalism and mayhem. Dalrymple refers to the exploits of a capable sepoy leader, Bakht Khan, who put up a brave fight with the English contingent at the Delhi Ridge and tried to bring back a semblance of law and order in the doldrums of the pillaged city. But such an exclusive effort was expended in the Mughal capital and did not generate its copies elsewhere. Away from Delhi, the nature of the Uprising was much less informed by any focal rallying point and turned out to be excesses committed by human lust and rapacity. The way Arthur Smith, "the Assistant Sahib" is murdered in the city in Ruskin’s story establishes the deplorable fallout on the civil society of the passion of the rebellion that is supposed to be militarist. Presuming that only the sepoys have revolted against military atrocity, Smith chooses to avoid the cantonment area and instead moves downtown. He is immediately mobbed, jostled and provoked to open fire. His shots being abortive, he is slashed by a sword and set upon by the sado-masochistic crowd. Javed Khan’s interest in Ruth and his cunning in exploiting the Mutiny fever to his own interest – looting Jhunna Lal and Rosa Rum factory, for example – have nothing to do with religious discontent. Even in Delhi, the rebellion did not take as simple a course as traditional narratives would have us believe. When the Meerut sepoys stormed the capital city, they not only took the
British unawares, but surprised Zafar as well, who had hardly any inkling of what was happening. The sepoys forced the peace loving Sufi king to assume their leadership, the motive of which was more or less to use his name to consecrate what they claimed to be a battle for power. The emperor became a stooge at the hands of a disaffected junta. Dissipations in the sepoys took such a heinous turn that conscientious Muslims who supported the insurrection at first condemned its decadent outcome and began favouring the restoration of British power. Maulvi Muhammad Baqar, the editor of The Delhi Urdu Akhbar, who sympathized with the Uprising in its initial phase, was soon disillusioned with it, reneged on his stand and became a British informer. In the August 23, 1857 issue of his paper, he described the depraved ranks of the mutineers who lay siege on Delhi:

The moment they drink the water of the city and do a round of Chandni Chowk and […] go around Jama Masjid and enjoy the sweetmets of Ghantawala [the most famous Delhi sweetshop], they lose all urge and determination to fight and kill the enemy, and they become shorn of all strength and resolution […] A lot of people maintain that many sepoys go for battle without bathing after spending nights at the courtesan’s quarters [Muslims are supposed to wash after having sex]. The setbacks they have suffered and the general mayhem we endure is partly the result of this unseemly practice.”

In such a volatile context, Mariam and her daughter play out their ordeals. Perhaps Ruskin chooses to recast in Mrs Labadoor the spirit of uprightness, grit, fortitude and self-discipline that he subconsciously desired to see in his own mother, whose prevarications brought untold misery to him and his father. His fears were compounded by the notion that his mother’s depravity is one of the evil fallouts of Empire. While speaking about the femininity that Mahatma Gandhi invoked in himself, Parama Roy in her book, Indian Traffic, essentializes the traits of Indian femininity that is represented as Mother India: “self-sacrifice, nurturance, non-violence and a commitment to everyday
heroism” (Roy 150). All these qualities converge in Mariam. In her interpretation of Kipling’s *Kim* as a tour-de-force of Anglo-Indian nationalism, Roy maintains that the concept of nationhood on the eve of the foundation of the Indian National Congress in 1885 is better illustrated by the superb rendition of Kim’s liminality. A Briton born in India and brought up partly in a native way, Kim reproduces the ideal native, better than the Indians, in his mimicry of their customs and manners of everyday life. At the same time Roy does not fail to mention that Kipling speaks disdainfully of the “half-caste”, racially hybrid Anglo-Indians and lays emphasis on the masculinity of the novel’s construction. To read of Kim’s expertise at the cost of demeaning the Anglo-Indian position is equivalent to taking a political stance in evading recognition of the latter’s existence.

It is because of their liminal position as Anglo-Indians that the Labadoor women can show much flexibility in emulating Hindu and Muslim bearings at the houses of Lala Ramjimal and Javed Khan. They take Indian names; when it is time for them to enact their Indianness, they do it so well that it is difficult for anyone who knew them before to recognize them as Labadoors. Apart from Mariam’s heroic exploits that deflate Javed’s male chauvinistic flamboyance, her perfect Urdu, fine manners and high moral values impress the women in the Pathan’s harem. She knows the *kalma*, wields considerable knowledge of Indian folklore and herbal antidotes and evinces excellent skill as a seamstress. Javed becomes sympathetic to buy her black chintz from the bazaar, which she with the help of Ruth and her cousin, Anet, makes into pyjamas and kurta-dupattas. They ensconce themselves in Muslim dresses and blend easily into the household. Ruth and Anet enjoy the monsoon festival of northern India by swinging on the ropes with the
Muslim girls, Badran and Hashmat, just as Rusty celebrates Holi with his Dehra friends in Ruskin’s *The Room on the Roof*. Mariam plays the role of Mother to those inmates of Javed’s palace who require affectionate care: when Saifullah and Rupia are unreasonably bludgeoned by Javed, she nurses their wounds with turmeric paste; in Kothiwali’s house, she offers remedies for Kaddu Khan’s ailment. In Javed’s sister, Qamran’s house, Mariam, Ruth and Anet become hot favourites; the members of the household vie with each other in showing them kindness. Through hard work, befitting the women of a Muslim family, they dispel all doubts that the Indians have about the character of Anglo-Indian women. The average Indian in the 1850s did not have high opinion about the Anglo-Indian culture. In his historical investigations, Ruskin came across the works of John Lang, the Australian-born novelist, who spent the last years of his life in Mussoorie.

In *Mussoorie and Landour: Days of Wine and Roses*, Ruskin reproduces Lang’s article “The Himalayan Club”, which originally appeared in the March 21, 1857 issue of Charles Dickens’ *Household Words*. Lang held a critical “insiders” view of the Anglo-Indian community. “We are all idlers at Mussoorie,” says Lang. “We are all sick, or supposed to be so; or we have leave on private affairs” (*Mussoorie and Landour* 266). Ruth’s appraisal of their situation in *A Flight* is, contrary to the popular notion about them, a conscious vindication of the fact that they log victory by establishing their credentials of Indian femininity and softening up their enemy’s heart:

Whereas they had formerly believed that, as *Firangi* women, we would be peeping out of doors and windows in order to be seen by men, without whose society European women were supposed to be unable to live, they were agreeably surprised to find that we delighted in hard work, that we loved needles and thread, and that, far from seeking company of men, we did our best to avoid them (Bond, *Collected Fiction* 865).
They play their part to such perfection, better than an average Indian woman, that Qamran is reluctant to lose company of Mother: “I would not exchange you for half a dozen women of my own race. Who could possibly ever tire of you?” (865)

Ashis Nandy looks upon the masculine-feminine binary as an imperial construct where the East is considered effete against the plausible masculine domination of the West. Held under Nandy’s lens, therefore, Roy’s thesis of *Kim* as an allegory of nationhood appears to miss out on the factor of resistance to imperial domination involved in Indian Nationalism. Unlike the Western idea of feminine effeteness, the feminine in the Nationalist Indian psyche is symbolized in the persona of the powerful and protective Mother. The presentation of Mrs. Labadoor in Ruskin’s story serves to explode the politically and racially biased imperial myths of the degenerate, and therefore hateful, “half-caste” Eurasian and femininity as inferior to masculinity.

When the British community in Shajahanpur fails to read the omens implicit in the vandalism and arson committed to the Redman’s property, Mariam appears to be a woman of considerable sense and foresight. The class and racial consciousness of the British wives do not prejudice her: Lala Ramjimal “had grown fond of” her because she “had always treated him as a friend and equal” (831); she does not feel it undignified to gossip with her servants who keep her informed with the latest happenings about town. Unlike the other women of the community, she embraces an insider’s notion of the value of a popular Eastern secret service that George Orwell refers to as “bush telegraph” in “Shooting an Elephant”. Mariam gathers enough hints about the outbreak and the looming danger not to go to Dr Bowling’s party on the eve of the massacre. She possesses such strong intuitions unavailable to others that her husband and daughter find
it quite surprising that a “regular church-goer” like Mrs Labadoor should request them not to go to the cantonment church for the Sunday Morning Service. In her apprehensions of what can be the best place for the aggrieved sepoys to strike she combines socio-cultural and historical prudence with affectionate maternal concerns, befitting the mettle of a legendary Indian woman. Her senses of equality and Indianness elicit kind and friendly behaviour from Ramjimal and Tirloki, the latter having offered his mud house in advance should the Labadoors needed a hideout when violence erupted in the city. Mariam is wise to accept the offer and collect the key to his hut. No wonder, her indiscriminate amiability and cautious preparations save the lives of the Labadoor household save that of her husband who succumbs to bloodshed at the hands of the marauders in the church. Like an ideal Hindu widow, with psycho-religious investment in the sanctimonious rituals of Sati, Mariam’s first reaction on hearing from the gardener’s sons that her husband and daughter are killed is to sacrifice herself by drowning into the well that used to serve Lala’s mother and aunt with holy water for the shrine. However, a sensible woman like she will not shirk responsibility when an entire brood of inmates look upon her for courage and protection. Had she committed herself to rash impulses upon a report that is only partly true, because Ruth is not actually killed, she would have deserted her daughter a helpless orphan in the midst of a squalid mess. She lives up to her responsibility leading her dependents through the travails of the story.

We come across her heroic exploit as early as in Ramjimal’s shelter when she thwarts an attack by three lewd rakes one night when the entire family is sleeping out in the open due to hot weather. When the others sleep peacefully, Mariam like a saviour keeps sleepless vigil over the nights lest any evil, which her premonitions are strong
enough to apprehend, befall the family. She becomes alert to the danger stalking them from the top of the wall. Three beady-eyed ruffians are rearing to plunge on the women when Ruth finds her mother swing into action:

Mother drew her knife from beneath her pillow, and called out that she would pierce the heart of the first man who attempted to lay his hands on us. Impressed by her ferocity, which was like that of a tigress guarding her young, the intruders quietly disappeared into the night (831).

Mariam’s furious eyes and daunting posture with a knife in hand call to mind the visual imagery of Hindu goddesses like Durga and Kali. The incident of peering eyes glued to the animated picture frame of the combative Mother (throughout the story Ruth uses capital M for mother, as though the figurative import of maternity is more loaded than her nominal persona) becomes the prototype of what Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak calls a humble “darshan” by Hindu devotees: “In Hindu polytheism the god or goddess, as indeed mutatis mutandis the revered person, is [...] an object of the gaze [...]” (Spivak 264).

Ruth and her mother initially become objects of public gaze in Javed Khan’s custody. The voyeurism involved in such a spectacle is induced by at least three associated urges within the Indian male: first, the women being considered firangaans make them invaluable trophies in captivity, inciting a sense of masculine self-gratification in that the Indian male have proved their virility by subjecting white women to domination; second, there is the feeling of erotic pleasure connected with the spectacle: and third, the Victorian idea of the “eternal feminine” – illustrated by the spells of Ayesha in Rider Haggard (in She and Ayesha: the Return of She) coextensively reaches out to engender the ethnosociology of the Indian self. The ways in which Mrs labadoor and Ruth assimilate themselves in Javed Khan’s zenana and the former resists the
advances of Javed to her daughter not only show them behaving like ideal Muslim
cwomen, perhaps more Muslim than the original members of Javed Khan’s harem, but
also revoke the three terms of inducement on which the male Indian fervour works at the
beginning. The sense of erotic pleasure and masculine satisfaction connected with the
spectacle turn out to be expressions of awe when looked at proleptically from the
perspective of the mother and daughter’s bearings.

When Javed and his henchmen, all armed with swords and pistols, zero in on Mrs
Labadoor and her daughter in Lala Ramjimal’s house, and Javed forces Ruth out into the
courtyard at the point of his sword, Mrs. Labadoor springs upon her daughter’s
persecutor to intercept the attack. Ruth recounts the brave front her Mother puts up:

‘No!’ cried Mother in a tone of anguish, throwing herself in front of me. ‘If you would take my
daughter’s life, take mine before hers, I beg of you by the sword of Ali!’

Her eyes were bloodshot, starting out of their sockets, and she presented a magnificent and quite
terrifying sight. I think she frightened me even more than the man with the raised sword; but I
clung to her instinctively, and tried to wrest my arm from the man’s grasp. But so impressed was
he by Mother’s display that he dropped the point of his sword and in a gruff voice commanded us
both to follow him quietly if we valued our lives (Bond, Collected Fiction 846).

Javed’s impression of the event as he relates it to his aunt the Kothiwal later in the story
is significant:

‘When I seized the girl by her arm at the Lala’s house, she was ready to faint. But oh, how can I
describe the terror which seized me at the sight of her mother! Like an enraged tigress, whose side
has been pierced by a barbed arrow, she hurled herself at me and presented her breast to my
sword. I shall never forget the look she gave me as she thrust me away from the girl! I was awed. I
was subdued. I was unmanned. The sword was ready to fall from my hand. Surely the blood of a
hero runs in her veins! This is no ordinary female!’ (850)
Instead of connoting a sense of humiliation and sufferance the seemingly voyeuristic import of the scene turns out to gain tropical significance of public heroism that Muslim women did perform time and again in the annals of history. Aisha, Prophet Muhammad’s widow, led a battalion to fight against Ali ibu Abu Talib in the Islamic civil war known as the First Fitna (656-661 CE). Bat Zabbai, the heroic Muslim woman of third century Syria, led a group of aggressive vagabonds on horseback. Sultan Iltutmish who founded the Muslim state of India in 1229 was blessed in having a warrior daughter in Sultana Raziya. According to Ibn Battuta, Raziya’s first act once in power was to unveil: “She ruled as an absolute monarch for four years. She mounted horse like men armed with bow and quiver; and she would not cover her face” (Battuta, The Rehla 34). She attracted public attention while alive and in death she is held in veneration by Muslims who visit her grave beside the river Jamuna as Hindu devotees adore their goddesses in temples. Sultana Shajarat al-Durr of Egypt spurred against the French soldiers during the 13th century Crusades, routing them in a decisive battle and capturing the French king Louis IX. Fatima Mernissi in her book The Forgotten Queens of Islam refers to the titles of “Sultana”, “Malika” and “ul-hurra” that befittingly adorn women of power in Islamic culture. Muslim women bearing the title of “Khatun” dabbled in political affairs as public figures beside their husbands in Turkish and Mongol courts. Nothing testifies better to the political prerogative and public life that these women enjoyed than Ibn Battuta’s reference to them in his travelogue: ‘Among the Turks and Tatars their wives enjoy a very high position; indeed when they issue an order, they say in it, “By command of the Sultan and the Khatuns”’ (Battuta, The Travels 340). Particularly interesting is the signifier “ul-hurra”. “Hurr” in Arabic implies a woman’s agency in the act of deflating a
man’s flamboyant virility. If a Muslim bridegroom fails to penetrate his wife on the first night, the latter is called “hurra” (Mernissi, *The Forgotten Queens* 16) for her power in emasculating the man. Javed Khan’s desire for Ruth is resisted by Mrs. Labadoor when she fights against him in Lala’s house and “unmanned” him, and later employs a clever ruse in deflecting his persistent desire for her. She defers the prospect of the consummation by wielding to her purpose the logic that the male guardians in her family need to be consulted about Ruth’s future husband. The merit of the argument lies apparently in Mrs. Labadoor’s use of the patriarchal myth in defeating the claims of a man whose own ideological parameters are staunchly formulated by it. It seems that as a Muslim male Javed cannot but abide by the code of patriarchal law that necessitates the permission of a male parent of the girl he wishes to marry. The mother psychologically threatens the son with the father’s laws and frustrates the latter so much so that he has to seek “jouissance” elsewhere, in the hysterical flogging of his half-brother, Saifullah, and the servant woman, Rupia. Here female intelligence appears to be symbolically more potent in emasculating a man by means of the same lever that is supposedly discovered as a chauvinistic device to empower him in the gendered hierarchy of the social order.

The psychoanalytically symptomatic content of the episode would appear curiously more manifest and ironical if scrutinized through the optic of the mother-son relation in Muslim society. The Islamic law enshrined in the *Shari'a* does not in any way prejudice the Muslim captor against exercising despotic authority upon his infidel slaves. He is provided with carte blanche to use infidel women in captivity as his concubines if he so desires. Armed with religious sanction, then, why does Javed contemplate marriage with Ruth and that, too, only by permission of her mother? Of course, Mrs. Labadoor’s
heroic personality acts as deterrence; Javed cowers in psychological fear to exercise his authority upon the fate of somebody he possesses. And a woman who can wield such power on a Muslim male from his “umma” (the harem) is his mother, for “umm” in Arabic stands for the mother who is responsible for conferring nominality on a domain that is held sacred and powerful under the leadership of the mother. Fatima Mernissi in her book Beyond the Veil (69-79) expatiates upon the primary role that the mother plays upon a Muslim – from choosing her son or daughter’s conjugal partner to influencing decisions pertaining to state-craft. It is not unknown that Harun al-Rashid was so influenced by his mother, Khayzuran, that he made public his desire to share power with a woman who had the talents of his mother. Feminist cultural studies identify the structuralist vantage committed to the role of mothers in Islamic folktales. Among the ten stories representing Islamic culture in the “North Africa and Middle East” section of her Norton compendium, Fearless Girls, Wise Women, and Beloved Sisters (New York, London: Norton & Co., 1998), Kathleen Ragan chooses as many as four that deal with the importance of Muslim princes’ dependence on their mother’s wisdom in their encounters with the quotidian world. In terms of sexual economy, Mrs Labadoor conflates the roles of a symbolic “hurra” and “umm” or mother, both of which coexist, according to the Lacanian paradigm, in the maternal figure when it comes to the question of attitudinizing the child’s psycho-sexual demeanour to social norms. The repression of the Oedipal in an adult male becomes manifest in his finding a female partner as replacement for the incestuous object of his desire. Perhaps one of the most symptomatic metaphor for such libidinal transference and superegoic economy in the dynamics of man-woman relationship can be located in the literary biography of W B Yeats. The
poet’s desire for Maud Gonne was thwarted by her marriage to McGregor Mathers, only to be revived in Yeats later in life when he coveted Maud’s daughter Isuelt as a realizable replacement for the mother.

According to Lacan, the mother ushers the child to its father’s laws; weaning is accompanied by the mother’s resistance to the child’s desire for her in the form of the former treating the latter with a body of signifiers to help it master the frustration of detachment from its mother. Mrs. Labadoor acts not only as a protector and defendant Mother of her own daughter, Ruth, but also as a mother to Qabil, Javed’s wife, and psychologically as a maternal deflector of the “death drive” of her metaphoric son, Javed. Qualities like intelligence, prowess, fortitude and discipline that enabled Muslim heroines to negotiate the odds highly inflected against them in Islamic patriarchy and emerge as powerful arbiters in forbidden public space are also the hallmarks of Mrs. Labadoor’s character by means of which she mimes the role of the maternal heroine in Javed Khan’s court. In Javed’s desire for Ruth, he is expressing his erotic attraction – a “trace” - for an younger and more charming prototype of her mother, just as Yeats desired Maud in her daughter, Isuelt, or the fictional Tracy in William Saroyan’s story, “Tracy’s Tiger”, feels aroused by his girlfriend Laura Luthry’s mother when the latter plies him with chocolates.

The maternal image of Mrs Labadoor does not only stand as a symbolic deflector of the Oedipal desire in Javed but also ascribes an aura of futility and vainglory to the masculine desire for the “eternal feminine”. Javed’s aunt, the Kothiwal, tries to dissuade Javed from coveting Ruth (disguised as Khurshid) by upholding the beauty and worth of his existing wife: “Is not your Khan Begum as good a wife as any? Mark her fine nose!”
(Bond, *Collected Fiction* 849). But Javed’s fascination for Ruth is so overwhelming and outrageous that he does not hesitate to mollify himself by riding roughshod over the tormented girl’s self-respect in seemingly emollient but circumstantially scabrous rhetoric of a lecher:

“[...] But, oh Chachi! [...] How can I make you understand the fascination this girl exerted over me when she was in her father’s house! The very first time I saw her, I was struck by her beauty. She shone like Zohra, the morning star. Looking at her now, I realize the truth of the saying that a flower never looks so beautiful as when it is on its parent stem. Break it, and it withers in the hand [...]” (849)

Ruth feels terribly dishonoured at this brazenly sensual objectification of herself in front of Javed’s indignant wife. The subsequent dialogue between Qabil and Javed is significant:

“The greater fool you, Javed, for depriving the child of her father, and breaking the flower from its stem before it had bloomed!” said Khan-Begum.

“What did you say, Qabil?” he asked sharply. “No, don’t repeat it again. The demon is only slumbering in my breast, and it will take little to rouse it” (849).

The exchange does not only convey the helplessness of Muslim women at the face of their men’s legal debauchery, but also throws Javed’s grouchy pertinacity into sharper relief. There is also an implicit reference to his involvement in Mr. Labadoor’s murder. His searing leer makes Ruth feel “like a doomed bird, fascinated by the gaze of a rattlesnake” (849). But Mariam’s fiery look at him is far more intimidating; “he quailed under her stern gaze” (849). The murderer of a father and a husband and the purveyor of licentious orgies, he now stands awe-struck under the sobering spell of the woman, whose signs of proscription appear more hard-wired than the Oedipal prohibitions of the father.
But Javed will not desist from pursuing Ruth, validating the idea of the ideal woman whom men constantly seek but never attain because all women, once obtained, fall short of the paragon. The idea finds its greatest exponent, perhaps by default, in the allegory of Rider Haggard's Victorian, ethno-sexual femme fatale, Ayesha, in *She* (1887) and its sequel, *Ayesha: The Return of She* (1905). Before dredging up Javed's unconscious "id" through the temporally and spatially coextensive Victorian sexual iconography of *She*, I would take a short break in citing Fatima Mernissi's own encounter with subjectivity in the ubiquitous male domain of sexual preferences. She refers to man's eternal desire for the timeless female, a woman who never grows old but retains her charms of youth, a concupiscent male frenzy that subjects women to what she carpingly calls the "size 6 harem" (Mernissi, *Scheherazade* 219).

As a Moroccan sociologist travelling in America at the age of 50, she was taken aback to discover with what insidious nimbleness the architectonic of the normative construct of female subjugation works in Western cultural space. In *Sheherazade Goes West*, a first person narrative account of her Western travels, she embodies her incisive perception of a rather humiliating incident that happened to her in a New York department store. She was in search of a cotton skirt of her size when the elegant saleslady, probably in her late 50s but looking half her age in lithe torso, knee length school girl dress cinched at the slim waist with a pearl studded belt, "meticulously styled short hair and sophisticated makeup" (212), told her that her "hips were too large to fit into a size six." That was the largest size that the American norm for female beauty would allow a big department store to keep. If they were to sell size 14 or 16, which Mernissi probably needed, they would have gone bankrupt. Trying desperately to salvage
her self-respect, Mernissi asked the saleslady, “And who decides the norm?” Rather surprised, the woman replied: “It’s all over, in the magazines, on television, in the ads. You can’t escape it. There is Calvin Klein, Ralph Lauren, Gianni Versace, Georgio Armani, Mario Valentino, Salvatore Ferragamo, Christian Dior, Yves Saint-Laurent, Christian Lacroix, and Jean-Paul Gaultier” (211-212). Hailing from a country where there is no size for women’s clothes, which the seamstresses make by cutting and sewing cloth according to the size of the wearer, Mernissi suddenly felt rejected by the prescriptions of Western femininity. As she walked away from the store cogitating on the “enigma of passive beauty in Western harem fantasies”, the following explanation dawned on her:

Unlike the Muslim man, who uses space to establish male domination by excluding women from the public arena, the Western man manipulates time and light. He declares that in order to be beautiful, a woman must look fourteen years old [Ruth’s age in Bond’s story]. If she dares to look fifty, or worse, sixty. She is beyond the pale. By putting the spotlight on the female child and framing her as the ideal of beauty, he condemns the mature woman to invisibility. In fact, the modern Western man enforces Immanuel Kant’s nineteenth century theories: To be beautiful, women have to appear childish and brainless. When a woman looks mature and self-assertive, or allows her hips to expand, she is condemned as ugly. Thus, the walls of the European harem separate youthful beauty from ugly maturity” (213-214).

When Javed Khan’s erotic choice veers from his wife, Qabil, to a 14-year-old beauty, Ruth (“Khurshid” in disguise), we find male sexual fantasy working on the principle of time even in an Eastern harem. This is not a one off case, anyway. The point of similarity between the Western male’s concept of female beauty and that of a Muslim male in the East is supposedly missed by Mernissi because in Eastern harems women are kept under veil and were not allowed to flaunt their curves and looks for the sake of patriarchal libido-cultural propriety. The jealous fear involved in this kind of sexual ethnography
testifies to the polygynic substance of the Muslim male’s psycho-sexual fantasies. In *The Forgotten Queens of Islam*, Mernissi herself cites countless historical instances of Muslim men’s bewitchment by uncovered women whom they took for slaves to ensure that they do not lack beauties in their harems to satisfy promiscuous desires. What suffices our interpretation of Javed’s behaviour here is the element of similarity that all normal male sexual desires for the eternally beautiful female share. The absurdity of fulfillment of such concupiscence is indicated metaphorically in the image of Haggard’s Ayesha, a woman who veils her dotage under the magical charm of an eternally beautiful outward form. Despite the racist allegation against Haggard, the reader should not miss reading the import of a male collective libidinal unconscious embedded in the myth of Ayesha.

Mrs Labadoor, a mature woman, and probably out of fashion in terms of male fantasies of feminine beauty, nevertheless, rides herd on Javed’s interest in her young and beautiful daughter. She metaphorically explodes the myth of Ayesha’s eternal beauty. In order to demonstrate the impossibility of fulfillment of ever changing choices, the superegoic image of the fatherer is invoked in the form of Ruth’s male guardian and satisfactorily played upon. By showing the dangers inherent in man’s everlasting quest for ageless female beauty, Haggard’s *She* becomes a parable of sexual fatalism. Mrs. Labadoor, as Mother in Ruskin’s story, polices such fatalistic drives.

Haggard’s gothic fantasy is set somewhere in Central Africa in the lost city of Kor. Holly, Leo and their servant, Job, were inspired by an inscribed fragment of ancient Greek pottery known as the sherd of Amenartas to embark on an adventurous journey from Cambridge University to Kor. In Kor, they meet the semi-savage people known as
the Amahaggers. The sexually proactive women of the tribe were led by Ayesha, a woman who draped her irresistible gaze with a gauzy veil. She was the keeper of the Fire of Life that burnt eternally in a revolving pillar of flame in the inner most cave of the Chinese-box-like caverns. Leo Vincey had found inscribed in the Greek artifact the exhortation of a woman directing him to kill Ayesha who had murdered her husband, his father, Kallikrates. But when he found Ayesha at last, he fell in love with her. Ayesha escorted Leo to the magical fire, kissed him on his forehead like a mother and stepped naked into the fire. Her sham beauty disintegrated into her real self – an old crone – and then into the shape of a monkey. (The reader will be reminded of the beautiful girl on the mirror changing into a “wizened hag” in Ruskin’s story, “Whispering in the Dark” discussed earlier). The ensuing frustration in Leo was the penalty he had to pay for his yearning to return to the womb because Ayesha was his ancient mother disguised in the persona of a youthful beauty. Ayesha, however, returned again in the sequel to renew her spell on Leo, this time in Tibet, with the obvious intention of impressing the incantatory impact of the dream upon spaces of the East.

In the wake of Darwin’s postulations, Haggard points out the irony implicit in patriarchal sensuality by demonstrating its self-annihilating nature. The need for the female of the human species to fake beauty as a form of survival strategy underlines the vulnerability of male sexual fantasies. The anthropological metaphor central to the novels is based on the originary and dispersal motifs of the human species on earth. The novelist reverses the chronology of the species’ civilizational expansion across geographical spaces to show how fantastically porous the boundaries of communities, races and nations are. The primordial human “id” is mapped characteristically onto an inclusive
portion of the known landmass of the world. If Leo's unconscious desire for the mother is deceived and spurned by a fake beauty in Central Africa, the possibility of its recurrence looms like a ritualistic encore in Tibet, while a version of it is enacted in Javed's court at Shahjahanpur. The superegoic socio-cultural strictures have successfully put a curb on such a primordial passion. But in the absence of such rigours the role of the Mother becomes dauntingly problematic in communities where men enjoy religious endorsement of infantile longings. It is in this context that we see Mrs. Labadoor performing the role of a formidable Mother.

Scarcely any women having Indian blood in their veins were perforce rendered objects of public humiliation as early as the middle of the nineteenth century. Only the Anglo-Indian women faced the hazard and, according to the documentary evidences that Ruskin uses for his story, they negotiated with such odds in a space that Indian Nationalist discourses on women's liberation prescribed as cultural sites for female activity only later in the century. If any Indian woman who could enact, despite the fear of ostracism, the cinematic role of being a public exhibit, like Ruth and her Mother, at a time when the purdah divided the domestic world of women from the public world of men in Indian society, it was definitely the Anglo-Indian. Only when femininity was invested with nationalistic content that two separate spheres of activity, "ghar" and "bahir", were discreetly carved out with some switching allowances for the Hindu women. Distinguishing between the two roles of a woman in the binary spaces of Hindu Nationalist culture, Partha Chatterjee says:

It is this latter criterion [femininity], now invested with a characteristically nationalist content, that made possible the displacement of the boundaries of the home from the physical confines earlier defined by the rules of purdah to a more flexible, but nonetheless culturally determinate, domain
set by the differences between socially approved male and female conduct. Once the essential femininity of women was fixed in terms of certain culturally visible qualities, they could go to schools, travel in public conveyances, watch public entertain programs, and in time even take up employment outside the home. But the “spiritual” signs of her femininity were clearly marked – in her dress, her eating habits, her social demeanor, her religiosity” (Chatterjee, The Nation 130). The need to codify behavioural patterns for the two sexes in a liberalized Indian social matrix is felt by Rabindranath Tagore when he toyed with the idea of the binary spaces in terms of women’s liberation. In Ghare Baire (translated by Surendranath Tagore as The Home and the World), he emphasizes the need for precautions that would deal with the attendant hazards of such liberation.

In Bimala, Rabindranath demonstrates how susceptible to corruption the myth of Mother India becomes when nationalistic feelings are overwrought with passion. Emotional upsurge tends to hide personal interests behind the façade of a crusade. Bimala is – despite her husband Nikhil’s plausible harangues on the dangerous consequences of worshipping passion – overcome with narcissism. She wishes herself to be worshipped as the fire goddess who would inflame the Nationalists. Ashis Nandy calls Sandip “a professional politician” (Nandy, The Illegitimacy of Nationalism 13), in whom Bimala finds “a heroic role model and a love object which she cannot break away from” (13). Underlying these two supplementary roles of Sandip in Bimala’s life is an element of selfish interest that the latter in a complicit state of emotional involvement conveniently occludes. I think the personal substance in Bimala’s relationship with Sandip overrides the gravity of an impersonal cause that seemingly sways her initial doubts about the man’s character. The alloy that she detects in Sandip’s making by looking at his picture and coming to know about what she thinks is his foppery is refurbished by the dramatic
appurtenances of the occasion of the temple pavilion oratory, in which all the masculine compliments of his feature are desirously accentuated. Seething with an unconscious desire to attract Sandip’s gaze at herself, she draws the screen that veiled the women’s gallery during the show. No sooner does Sandip espy Bimala’s steadfast vision than his speech gains in fervour and vivacity. Bimala wishes to think that the fire from her eyes has inflamed the spirit in the man. “I said within myself that his language had caught fire from my eyes; for women are not only the deities of the household fire, but the flame of the soul itself” (Tagore 31). Her desire to be desired by the man which Lacan calls “objet petit a” – one of the two constituents of subjectivity – showing initial signs of satisfaction, she is drawn unconsciously to invest in the erotic iconography of the image. Her words sound like Ayesha’s summons to Leo to replenish potency by bathing in the pillar of fire that she identified herself with. In order to realize her little object (“objet petit a”) fully, Bimala detains Sandip, the stormy petrel, in her house for dinner and appears before him garnished in a sartorial elegance that she thinks would ensure her “demand” (read in contrast to Lacanian “need”) in Sandip’s eyes. She knows very well that “the eyes of men fail to discern the goddess, if outward beauty be lacking” (32). This is what Mernissi realized, Haggard allegorized and Ruth becomes victim of – a phenomenon whose invincible spell transcends the limits of communal, religious, social and geographical spaces. The sign’s designated meaning in each case is put under erasure for what Irene Harvey calls the proprietary economy of the theory of “Exemplarity”:

Exemplarity, as the transformation of the given into a sign for something else (either not present now but with the capacity to be made present, or never present intrinsically) or as the transformation of the given into a case, a particular that illustrates or represents a universal, always
invokes the same metaphysical assumption. This assumption is the supposedly valid structure of the sign as determined by Plato and Aristotle” (Harvey 265).

Bimala allows her passion for Sandip to be fuelled by the latter’s adulatory comments about her spirit, which are wistfully peppered with the heroic rhetoric of nationalism. Her unconscious “id” works in the direction of a libidinal engagement towards a man who is not her husband. Her ego acts as a false connector to allay her compunctions by relating her attraction for Sandip with the broad self-effacing objective of a public crusader rallying for the cause of the motherland. The motherland issue becomes the superego from where her falsifying ego constantly tries to procure license for her unconscious libido. Sandip is a wizard in manipulating the situation. His assessment of Bimala’s emotional regress sounds like a variation of the Lacanian exegesis of the ego: “When Reality has to meet the unreal, deception is its principal weapon” (Tagore 55). Rabindranath is not raving against the fervour of patriotic activism but advising the seasoning of passion with reason and objectivity before exercising it. To look back on history, the turn that the 1857 Uprising took glaringly validates his advice. He wants to ensure that when the Hindu woman is liberated from the precincts of “ghar” to the public space, “bahir”, as a metaphoric Mother embodying “shakti” (power), she is capable of committing herself to motherhood against the Oedipality of the male activists. Neither Sandip nor Bimala is irreligious, but the obverse of religion becomes more pronounced in them due to the personal content of their unseasoned passions. For example, Bimala is roused to the responsibility of a true mother when she thinks it imperative to restrain the impassioned frenzy of Amulya to kill the treasury cashier of Nikhil’s estate and rifle the coffers for what he thinks is the cause of the country. Bimala
is suddenly alarmed to hear Amulya’s imperious thoughts of action literalized through the
grandiloquent rhetoric borrowed from Sandip:

To hear Sandip’s phrases in the mouth of this mere boy staggered me. So delightfully, lovably
immature was he – of that age when the good may still be believed in as good, of that age when
one really lives and grows. The Mother in me awoke” (139).

For once she is moved by the maternal spirit within her and evokes Rabindranath’s image
of the true Mother:

How was he [Amulya] to be saved [from evil]? Why does not my country become, for once, a real
Mother – clasp him to her bosom and cry out: “Oh, my child, my child, what profits it that you
should save me, if so it be that I should fail to save you?”

I know, I know, that all power on earth waxes great under compact with Satan. But the Mother is
there, alone though she be, to contend and stand against this devil’s progress. The Mother cares
not for mere success, however great – she wants to give life, to save life. My very soul today,
stretches out its hands in yearning to save this child” (140).

Rabindranath was sagely conscious that primal human drives might endanger the
prospects of opening up a common public space for men and women in a society which
avowedly believed in the segregation of the sexes for too long. Not only do Javed’s
passion for Ruth and the licentious excesses perpetrated by the marauding sepoys and
their accomplices of the Mutiny demonstrate the consistency of Rabindranath’s
apprehensions, but the fiery quality of the drive is so sweeping in its nature that the
contemporary West – comparatively more liberal in their standards – sensed alarm in
legislating equality to the sexes. J F Bierlein in his book *Parallel Myths* points out: “It is
interesting to note that in our own time, during the fight for the ratification of the US
Equal Rights Amendment, opponents of the bill warned of a type of hetaerism (although
they never used the word) that would result from the equality of the sexes” (Bierlein
“Hetairism” is a curious coinage – from the Greek word, “hetero”, meaning “both”, by the 19th century Swiss classicist, Johann Jakob Bachofen – that describes the practices of the early European culture when neither males nor females were dominant in society. It was a period of widespread sexual promiscuity, when children did not know their fathers, women were defenseless, rape took the place of marriage, and family life was virtually nonexistent. The kind of woman that Nikhil idealizes in Bimala early on in their marital life is one who would be able to fit in both the spaces of “ghar” and “bahir” in accordance to their respective decorum. That is not to say that he wants her to be devoid of sexuality, but to have ability to sublimate libido into “shakti” that would not at least turn the social order into a Hetairist’s dream and confound the role of the Mother with that of the mistress. It is the idea of such a maternal figure that we see embodied in Mrs. Labadoor.

The Mother-daughter duo can be looked upon as metaphorically embodying the Nationalist credo of femininity both in Hindu and Muslim cultural spaces. Especially, Mrs. Labadoor, as Mother, reminds one of Mehboob Khan’s 1957 Bollywood hit, Mother India, in which Nargis, a Muslim subject, is brilliantly cast as a Hindu Mother. Interestingly, Nargis’s role of Radha in Mother India marks the centenary of the 1857 Uprising, in the context of which the Labadoor women’s ordeals are situated. I cannot resist the temptation of referring to just another contemporary Hindi film by Nargis, in which she plays the role of a Hindu wife suffering from Multiple Personality Disorder. In Raat aur Din (Night and Day), she performs the dual personalities of Varuna, the chaste and devoted domestic wife of Pratap during the day, and Peggy, a Westernized, fun-loving public woman, yielding to the erotic desires of Dillip at night. The anxiety of
solecism tropicalized in the split feminine persona is perhaps what Rabindranath forebodes in his construction of the behavioural trajectory of Bimala. The postcolonial angst revolving around subjects of dynamic and contradictory cathexes is temporarily suspended by Ruskin Bond through a curative model, in which Indian femininity during Nationalism is shown to approximate idealism on a liminal interface. By describing the Anglo-Indian women in conformity with the high values of Hindu and Muslim codes of conduct, Ruskin is vindicating their Indianness against the traditional Indian attitude of rejection directed at them. Ruskin Bond’s identification with them underscores his own Anglo-Indian concerns that stemmed from the discriminatory practices of the time. If he considers India to be his mother’s land, the concept of the mother needs to be invested with ideal worth, distinct from the image of his own mother that festered in his mind in contrast to his father’s exemplary iconicity of British belonging. He required depending on an anthropological trove of cultural exempla, which is Indian in its relational worth, to negotiate with the originary crisis compounded by the allure of paternal values and reminiscent desires. In Mrs. Labadoor, he identifies his “ego ideal” and literalizes the idea of Indian modernity.

This modernity has been an aporia, like the double bind (maternal-paternal) of Ruskin’s cultural dispensation, all along the story line. Who, for example, finally saves Ruth and her Mother? What happens to their Christian allegiances? Do they undergo mutation in their continued mimicry of Hindu and Muslim cultural practices? Does not the secular concept of Indianness accommodate in itself a sanctuary for the Christians? All these rhetorical questions point to that historical contingency when the absence of the Self is filled in by the undecidable relation between the Self and the Other. In terms of
cultural specificities, the Labadoor women try all along to perfect the roles of simulacra. But in terms of nature or in the role of the Mother, Mariam subsumes cultural variances by virtue of the ontic nature of the role itself. Ruskin's retelling of the incidents confirms human ability to remain in a bind between nature and culture.