

The Unnamed Hero: Postcolonial Agency of Lala Ramjimal in Champa Sharma's *Dwaari Kabootaren Di*

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Abstract

Literary history is full of characters who perform extraordinary acts in extraordinary times and are rewarded, by the critical tradition, with near-total silence. The study of postcolonial literature has done much to recover marginalized voices from the shadows of colonial representation, yet certain figures remain curiously overlooked even within this recuperative tradition, not because they are invisible in their texts, but because the categories through which we read have not yet found adequate language to describe them. Ruskin Bond's *A Flight of Pigeons* (1978), one of the most celebrated works of Indian-English historical fiction, is a novella deeply engaged with questions of identity, loyalty, and human solidarity during the upheaval of the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny. At its moral centre stands Lala Ramjimal — a figure whose courage shapes every turn of the narrative and whose postcolonial complexity has, until now, received little sustained critical attention. This article undertakes a postcolonial reading of Lala Ramjimal, a central yet critically neglected character in Ruskin Bond's historical novella *A Flight of Pigeons* (1978) and its Dogri translation *Dwaari Kabootaren Di* by Champa Sharma, published by Sahitya Akademi. Set against the upheaval of the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny in Shahjahanpur, the novella presents Lala Ramjimal as a Hindu merchant who shelters an Anglo-Indian family at great personal risk. Drawing on Homi K. Bhabha's concepts of the Third Space and mimicry, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's interrogation of subaltern voice, Frantz Fanon's analysis of the colonized subject, and Edward Said's critique of the 'faithful native' stereotype, this article argues that Lala Ramjimal is a figure of considerable postcolonial complexity whose moral agency cannot be accommodated within the binary logic of colonial encounter. Far from a simple emblem of loyalty to colonial power, Lala inhabits a liminal cultural space, enacts a form of cross-communal solidarity that constitutes quiet resistance, and is simultaneously granted heroic status and denied full interiority by Bond's English narrative. The article further argues that Champa Sharma's translation into Dogri — a language only formally recognized in India's Eighth Schedule in 2003 — constitutes a postcolonial act in its own right, repositioning Lala as the entry point into the narrative and restoring to him a degree of centrality that the English original does not sustain. The analysis thus operates on two levels: the postcolonial complexity of the source text and the cultural politics of translation into a marginalized regional language.

Keywords: Postcolonial, Dogri translation, Third Space, subaltern, cultural mediation, faithful native, marginalized.

Introduction

There is a particular kind of invisibility that attaches itself to certain literary characters not because they are absent from the page, but because the critical frameworks through which we read refuse to see them clearly. Lala Ramjimal, the Hindu merchant at the heart of Ruskin Bond's *A Flight of Pigeons*, is one such figure. He appears in almost every pivotal scene of the novella: feeding a displaced Anglo-Indian family from his own household, navigating the dangerous streets of a city gripped by the violence of the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny, and holding together, through sheer moral will, a domestic space in which human life takes precedence over political allegiance. And yet, for all his centrality to the plot's survival, Lala has remained one of the most under-examined characters in critical readings of the novella [1-4].

Scholarship has gravitated toward the more dramatically legible figures Ruth Labadoor, the young narrator, and Javed Khan, the brooding Pathan who both threatens and desires her, while Lala remains in the margins, loosely categorized as the 'faithful native' and left there.

This article is an attempt to bring Lala Ramjimal forward from that margin and to ask what a sustained postcolonial reading reveals when it looks at him directly. What emerges is a character far more complex than the loyal retainer he is often assumed to be: a man who occupies what Homi K. Bhabha would recognize as a Third Space between the colonial and the anti-colonial, whose solidarity with the Labadoor family cannot be explained by colonial allegiance, and whose inner life is simultaneously everywhere implied and nowhere given voice in Bond's English narrative [5].

His story acquires an additional layer of significance through Champa Sharma's translation of Bond's novella into Dogri as *Dwaari Kabootaren Di*, published by Sahitya Akademi. Sharma structures the first story-section of her translation around Lala himself, restoring to him a narrative centrality that Bond's text narrated entirely through Ruth Labadoor's perspective does not sustain.

The argument of this article moves across three interconnected axes. First, it reads Lala Ramjimal through the major frameworks of postcolonial theory, Bhabha's Third Space and mimicry, Spivak's interrogation of subaltern voice, Fanon's colonized subject, and Said's critique of the faithful native stereotype to show that his character encodes a form of moral and political agency that these categories illuminate even as he exceeds them. Second, it situates Lala's choices within the specific historical conditions of 1857, arguing that his decision to shelter the Labadoors is not a passive act of service but a radical assertion of human solidarity in a moment designed to make such solidarity impossible. Third, it considers Sharma's *Dwaari Kabootaren Di* as a postcolonial act in its own right, a translation into a recently recognized regional language that repositions Lala's story for a readership whose own cultural memory gives it a very different set of resonances [6]. Together, these three axes of analysis establish Lala Ramjimal as what this article calls the unnamed hero: a figure whose significance has been hiding in plain sight, waiting for the critical language to articulate it.

Bond Between Two Worlds: The Author's Postcolonial Position

To understand Lala Ramjimal fully, one must begin with the writer who created him, because the relationship between Bond's biography and his fiction is unusually direct [7]. Ruskin Bond was born in 1934 in Kasauli to a British father and a mother of mixed heritage, and he has spent virtually his entire life in India in the hills of Uttarakhand, in the towns and cities of the North Indian plains, in a landscape he has always insisted is home. Debashis Bandyopadhyay describes Bond as representing 'an odd but exemplary attempt at absorption as a member of the Anglo-Indian ethnic minority' (*Locating the Anglo-Indian Self* 1), a man who belongs to India without belonging to any single stable category within it. This biographical in-betweenness is the animating condition of *A Flight of Pigeons*. The novella is set in Shahjahanpur, a town in which Bond's own father was born, and draws on family history passed through generations; Bond is writing about people who may have been his ancestors, in a place that is part of his own inherited memory, in a language English that marks him simultaneously as insider and outsider to the story he is telling.

Arup Pal has argued that Bond's fiction consistently explores 'the dilemma of Bond's two selves and his existential search for an identity' (*Ruskin Bond's Desh* 14), and nowhere is this more apparent than in his treatment of characters who refuse easy categorization.

Some critics have noted that Lala Ramjimal may carry a projection of Bond's own dual identity, a character who is 'neither on the side of the British nor on the side of the Indians' (Fatma 4), and whether or not this is a conscious authorial decision, the resonance is real and productive [8]. A character created by a writer who has navigated between cultures his entire life is unlikely to be a simple emblem of colonial loyalty; he is more likely to be an attempt to imagine what genuine human solidarity looks like when the political machinery of history makes it nearly impossible.

Shahjahanpur, 1857: The Stakes of Ordinary Choice

The historical setting of *A Flight of Pigeons* is not merely a backdrop; it is the condition that makes Lala Ramjimal's choices meaningful and dangerous. The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 was a moment of total social rupture in the towns and cities of northern India. In Shahjahanpur, on 31 May 1857, British officials and their families gathered in a church were attacked, and many were killed within hours. Those who survived found themselves in a city where the colonial order had collapsed overnight, where the streets were controlled by armed rebels, and where every Indian they knew faced an impossible question: what do you do when someone you know is in danger, and helping them could cost you your life? Badri Prasad Pokharel and Parash Adhikari, in their study of the novella, observe that Bond depicts 'the traumatic and painful experiences of people, both the natives and foreign-origin people with their families,' refusing to reduce 1857 to either a heroic liberation narrative or a tale of British victimhood. What Bond is interested in and what his focus on Lala makes clear is the experience of ordinary people: merchants, householders, community members suddenly caught in the machinery of historical violence. Lala Ramjimal's answer to the impossible question of 1857 is given not in words but in action [9]. He opens his home to the Labadoor family, six people who have lost their father, their home, and all protection and sustains them through weeks of danger. Bond records that the family was served food 'once a day in platters made of stitched leaves': a detail whose material specificity speaks volumes. This is a household stretching its resources to care for people it did not have to take in. Lala is not fulfilling a feudal obligation; he is making a deliberate, costly, morally serious choice in conditions designed to prevent it.

The Third Space: Where Lala Lives

Homi Bhabha's concept of the Third Space, developed in *The Location of Culture* (1994), is well suited to reading Lala Ramjimal because Lala so completely inhabits the liminal zone between the colonizer and the colonized that the binary itself becomes inadequate to describe him. He is a Hindu merchant firmly embedded in Indian social structures, yet he moves with ease through the Labadoor family's world, understands their customs, speaks their language, and is trusted by them as something more than a servant.

When the uprising breaks out, he does not retreat into a purely Indian identity or align himself with the forces attempting to reimpose colonial control. He remains in the gap, sheltering the British family in his Indian home, maintaining enough legitimacy with the surrounding community to avoid being marked as a collaborator, navigating a crisis that the binary logic of colonial conflict cannot accommodate.

The physical space of Lala's house becomes, in Bhabha's sense, a Third Space itself: a site where different cultural identities coexist and sustain one another, belonging fully to neither the colonial order nor the anti-colonial uprising. A Hindu household becomes the shelter of an Anglo-Indian Christian family; the codes of Indian hospitality operate alongside the bonds of personal affection and the practical necessities of survival. This domestic Third Space is, in the conditions of 1857, a more radical cultural act than any political statement could be, because it demonstrates at the level of lived reality rather than ideology that a different kind of India is possible: one organized around human bonds rather than communal and racial division [10]. Bhabha's insight that cultural negotiation happens most powerfully in the everyday and the mundane finds its most precise embodiment in Lala's quiet, persistent hospitality. He does not make speeches or articulate a philosophy; he feeds people and keeps them alive. This domestication of radical cultural work is both the key to understanding Lala and the primary reason literary criticism has so consistently overlooked him.

Mimicry and the Limits of the 'Faithful Native'

Bhabha's related concept of mimicry adds a further dimension to this reading. Mimicry, for Bhabha, describes the process by which the colonized subject partially adopts the colonizer's values — not in complete imitation, but in a form that is 'almost the same, but not quite' (*The Location of Culture* 122). This partial adoption is ambivalent: it can appear as compliance with colonial power, yet simultaneously undermines that power by demonstrating that the colonizer's values are not exclusively colonial property. Lala Ramjimal is a mimicry figure in precisely this sense. The values he enacts, loyalty, duty, and the protection of the vulnerable, are values that British colonial discourse claimed as evidence of its own civilizing mission. Yet Lala applies them in ways that exceed the colonial logic: his loyalty is not to the British as colonizers but to specific human beings in specific danger. If his solidarity belongs to people rather than to the empire, it cannot be recruited as evidence of colonial legitimacy.

Edward Said's analysis in *Orientalism* (1978) traces how colonial and postcolonial literature has consistently produced loyal Indian figures whose devotion to British employers serves to naturalize colonial presence and to imply that the most virtuous Indians were those who stood closest to British power. Lala, at first glance, appears to fit this pattern. But the pattern breaks down under close reading. The Labadoor family is not straightforwardly British: they are Anglo-Indian, occupying their own marginal and hybrid position in colonial society, entirely dependent on Indian community networks for survival.

Lala's protection of them is not the protection of the colonial master by the grateful servant; it is the protection of a vulnerable, mixed-heritage family by a member of their shared community. Moreover, his hospitality is fully intelligible within the Indian ethical tradition of *atithi devo bhava*, the guest as god, a pre-colonial moral framework that colonialism did not create and cannot claim. The 'faithful native' stereotype, which depends on the loyal Indian being formed by colonial contact, collapses when we recognize that Lala's moral resources are entirely his own.

Communal Solidarity as a Form of Resistance

To shelter a British family during the 1857 uprising was not only personally dangerous but also communally and politically charged. The Mutiny was, among other things, a moment of intense communal fracturing in which the boundaries between Hindu, Muslim, and British identities were being violently redrawn. Both British colonial discourse and Indian nationalist discourse tended to reduce 1857 to a story of antagonistic communities. What gets lost in both narratives is the experience of people like Lala Ramjimal, who refused the communal logic of the moment and acted out of a human solidarity that cut across every boundary the crisis enforced.

Frantz Fanon's analysis in *The Wretched of the Earth* (1963) is illuminating here. Fanon argues that colonialism operates partly by imposing a binary logic on the colonized world, dividing it into colonizer and colonized, the loyal and the rebel, and that anti-colonial resistance often reproduces this binary rather than dismantling it, simply inverting the hierarchy. The colonized subject who refuses the binary, who will not substitute native domination for colonial domination, occupies a position of moral complexity that neither side of the colonial encounter can fully accommodate. Lala Ramjimal is precisely such a figure: his refusal to participate in anti-British violence is not collaboration, because he is not acting in the interests of the colonial system; it is a refusal to allow the colonial logic of communal division to dictate his choices. As Gunaz Fatma observes, Lala is 'a true Indian who does not discriminate people by race, color, caste or creed' (4), and in the conditions of 1857, that non-discrimination is not a passive quality but an active moral achievement, maintained at great cost against the grain of his historical moment. This dimension of Lala's story acquires particular resonance when Bond's text moves into Dogri. Champa Sharma's Dogri readers bring to *Dwaari Kabootaren Di* a social and political memory shaped by the layered history of the Jammu region, its communities of Hindus, Muslims, Sikhs, and others negotiating coexistence across centuries of political upheaval. For readers shaped by this history, Lala's cross-communal solidarity is not merely historical; it speaks directly to a recognizable and urgently relevant moral challenge.

The Silenced Interior: Spivak and Narrative Agency

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's foundational question 'Can the subaltern speak?'

has a specific and revealing application to Lala Ramjimal's position in *A Flight of Pigeons*. Lala is not a subaltern in the most rigorous sense: he is a merchant with standing in his community, resources, and social relationships. He speaks in Bond's narrative; his words are recorded in dialogue. And yet, in the most important sense of Spivak's question, Lala does not speak because his interiority, his inner life, his sense of what he is doing and why, remains entirely inaccessible to the reader throughout the novel.

This inaccessibility is structural, not accidental. Bond's novella is narrated entirely through the perspective of Ruth Labadoor, a thirteen-year-old girl who can perceive Lala only from the outside, through the lens of her own cultural position. Ruth sees what Lala does; she does not and cannot know what he thinks or feels. Does he shelter the Labadoors out of personal affection? Moral obligation rooted in the Indian ethical tradition? Religious conviction? Sheer human decency in the face of catastrophe? Bond's narrative does not say, because Ruth does not know, and Bond writing through her perspective gives us no access to a version of Lala that exists outside her perception. The consequence is that Lala's heroism is visible while his subjectivity remains muted. He acts heroically, and Bond clearly admires him, but his fears, his calculations, his moral reasoning, and his moments of doubt are never rendered on the page. As Spivak would note, he speaks and acts, but the person performing those acts cannot make himself fully present within the dominant discursive structure of the text.

This is where Champa Sharma's translation performs something more than a linguistic transposition. When Sharma opens *Dwaari Kabootaren Di* with a story-section centered on Lala Ramjimal, making him the first figure the Dogri reader encounters, she is making an interpretive translator's choice that functions as a critical reevaluation. She is saying, in effect: this is his story too. The Dogri reader who enters the narrative through Lala's story rather than through Ruth's perspective is primed to read him as a central figure rather than a supporting character. This structural repositioning does not restore an interiority that Bond's narrative withholds, but it begins to compensate for the silencing the English text performs, restoring Lala to the narrative prominence his moral significance deserves.

Champa Sharma and the Politics of Translating into Dogri

Champa Sharma is not, in any ordinary sense, simply a translator. She is one of the most significant figures in the modern Dogri literary tradition, a poet, writer, and cultural advocate whose Sahitya Akademi Award in 2008 for her poetry collection *Cheten Di Rhol* marks both personal achievement and institutional recognition of Dogri's place within the larger landscape of Indian literature. Her translation work, which includes both *Dwaari Kabootaren Di* and a Dogri rendering of Robin Sharma's *The Monk Who Sold His Ferrari*, reflects a purposeful project of expanding the range of texts available to Dogri readers and demonstrating that the language is capable of carrying the full complexity of literary experience, its own indigenous traditions, and the

wider world beyond them.

This project has a specifically postcolonial dimension rooted in Dogri's history. Dogri was included in India's Eighth Schedule of officially recognized languages only in 2003, after decades of advocacy by writers, scholars, and cultural organizations in the Jammu region. Its long exclusion was not merely bureaucratic; it reflected and reinforced a hierarchy of languages in which regional languages like Dogri were treated as less literary, less significant, and less worthy of institutional support than Hindi or the other scheduled languages. The formal recognition of 2003 was a significant achievement, but the work of building Dogri's literary infrastructure, expanding its corpus, and asserting its capacity to bear complex content continues [11]. Sharma's translation of *A Flight of Pigeons* into Dogri, published by Sahitya Akademi, is part of this continuing work: when a celebrated English novella appears in Dogri through India's most prestigious literary institution, it is not only the text being validated but the language itself.

Tejaswini Niranjana's analysis in *Siting Translation* (1992) is illuminating in this context. Niranjana argues that colonial translation typically moved from Indian languages into English, extracting Indian cultural material for European audiences and subjecting it to colonial interpretive frameworks that distorted and diminished it. Sharma's translation reverses this direction: she takes an English text and brings it into a regional Indian language, restoring an Indian story to an Indian linguistic community. In Niranjana's terms, this is an act of cultural self-determination, a reclaiming of translation as a practice that serves Indian communities rather than extracting from them. The postcolonial significance of *Dwaari Kabootaren Di* lies not only in what it says but in the direction it travels.

A Double Postcolonialism: Lala in Dogri

Reading *Dwaari Kabootaren Di* through the analytical frames developed above reveals what might be described as a double postcolonialism: the postcolonial complexity embedded in Bond's English original is refracted and extended by the specific conditions of Sharma's Dogri translation. For a Dogri-speaking reader, Lala Ramjimal is not an abstraction but a recognizable social type, the *lala* of North Indian commercial culture, the local merchant whose home and shop are community institutions, whose word is trusted, and whose hospitality carries the weight of tradition. The social world Lala inhabits in Bond's novella, its mohallas and domestic spaces, its codes of mutual obligation and neighborly solidarity, has strong resonances with the social world of Dogri-speaking communities in Jammu. When Sharma translates this world into Dogri, she is not importing a foreign narrative; she is claiming a regional affinity with it, asserting that Lala's story is, in some meaningful sense, a story about people her readers already know.

At the same time, the Dogri reader brings to *Dwaari Kabootaren Di* a political memory that the English reader does not share. The Jammu region has its own layered history of colonial administration, partition, communal negotiation, and ongoing conversations about language, culture, and belonging [12].

For readers shaped by this history, the story of a man who shelters refugees across communal lines during a moment of political violence is not simply historical; it speaks directly to the experience of communities that have had to navigate precisely these kinds of divisions. Lala's refusal of communal logic his assertion of human solidarity over political allegiance is not an abstraction in this context but a recognizable and urgently relevant moral stance. The Dogri translation transforms a novella about 1857 in Shahjahanpur into a text that speaks to the present in Jammu, and in doing so, it transforms Lala Ramjimal into a figure of regional cultural significance whose story the Dogri literary tradition can recognize as, in some sense, its own.

Conclusion

Lala Ramjimal has been hiding in plain sight for nearly fifty years. He appears in almost every crucial scene of *A Flight of Pigeons*, his actions drive the plot's survival, and Bond's narrative voice clearly admires him. Yet critical scholarship has consistently treated him as peripheral a supporting character whose loyalty is noted and whose complexity is left unexamined. This article has argued that this neglect is not incidental but symptomatic: it reproduces, in the academic register, the narrative silencing that Bond's text itself performs, marginalizing a character whose postcolonial significance far exceeds the role he has been assigned.

Seen through Bhabha's Third Space, Lala is a figure of cultural negotiation who inhabits the liminal zone between colonial and anti-colonial without belonging fully to either. Seen through the critique of the faithful native stereotype, he is a man whose loyalty belongs to human beings rather than to empire, whose hospitality is rooted in Indian ethical tradition rather than colonial deference. Seen through Fanon's analysis, he is a colonized subject who refuses the binary logic of the colonial encounter and asserts, through daily acts of care rather than grand political gestures, a moral framework that the encounter was designed to make impossible. And seen through Spivak's lens, he is a figure whose heroism is visible but whose subjectivity is muted a man whose actions speak but whose inner life the narrative's structural choices keep perpetually just out of reach.

Champa Sharma's *Dwaari Kabootaren Di* cannot restore to Lala an interiority that Bond's narrative never granted him, but it does something equally important: it centers him, makes him the reader's first point of contact with the story, and in doing so performs a subtle yet significant act of critical reevaluation that postcolonial scholarship is only beginning to follow.

By bringing this story into Dogri a language with its own history of marginalization and recent formal recognition Sharma also doubles the postcolonial stakes of the text, making it speak to communities and conditions that Bond's English original could not have anticipated. The title of this article calls Lala Ramjimal the unnamed hero not because Bond fails to name him, but because the critical tradition has not yet found adequate language to say what he is. Postcolonial theory provides that language.

It allows us to see that what Lala does in the violence of 1857 is not loyalty to the British but something far more radical: the refusal of a world organized entirely by colonial logic, enacted through the patient, quiet, daily work of keeping people alive. He is the unnamed hero not of a particular nation or community, but of a moral possibility, the possibility that human solidarity can survive even when history is designed to destroy it. It is past time that postcolonial literary criticism gave him his name.

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