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Destroying Myths: Farrell and the British Raj in *The Siege of Krishnapur*

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Abstract

The revolt in the Indian sub-continent against British rule in 1857 stirred the imagination of the British who churned out books by the dozen in order to decry the savagery of the Indians who had turned against their benevolent British masters who had ushered in an age of peace, progress, and prosperity. However, this myth of an Enlightened Empire was deconstructed in J.G. Farrell's 1973 Booker-award-winning book, *The Siege of Krishnapur*. Basing his fictional city of Krishnapur on Lucknow, the fortitude (and ultimate victory) of whose British citizens was celebrated ad nauseum by English writers, Farrell exposes the 'heroism' of the British community and in doing so gently uncovers the myths that the British Raj had solidified around itself.

Keywords: *1857, British raj, mutiny novel, sepoy revolt, historical fiction*

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The revolt which began on 10th May, 1857, in Meerut, provides the background for British author, J.G. Farrell's (1935-1979) second historical novel, *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) which won the Bookers for the year. The revolt or the war of independence or the sepoy mutiny, as it is known variously, was a momentous event of far-reaching significance which made a deep impression on both the lived and imagined reality of two people: the British and the Indian.

In 1897, the anonymous author of "The Indian Mutiny in Fiction" (an essay which appeared in Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine) noted that "of all the great events of this century, as they are reinforced in fiction, the Indian Mutiny has taken the firmest hold on the popular imagination" (qtd, in Crane 11). Written by those swayed with passion and prejudice, most of these works sink to mere propaganda pieces, shrill in their praise of the nobility, heroism, and fortitude of the English on the one hand and hysterical in their condemnation of the brutal, coarse, bloodthirsty, ungrateful Indians on the other.

Largely inferior, these novels seem to exist in an imaginative universe with little regard paid to the nuances of history. Even their plots are repetitive as Shailendra Dhari Singh points out in Novels on the Indian Mutiny:

> "The hero, who is an officer, meets the young charming lady, just out from England, or who happens to be in India from before, and falls in love or both come to India in the same ship, and strike a liking on board the ship itself. In India the historical situation is already ripe for mutiny, and the lovers are suddenly pitched into the upheaval" (183).

Singh continues, "The hero takes a lead, he plans, and soon, by his courage, strategy, perseverance and luck, the action begins and the opposing forces are gradually defeated" (183).

So, we have a romance brewing at a time of great upheaval and it is imperative that the hero win both in the romantic and political arenas. And so, as Singh expounds,

> "His rival in love, if any, is discovered to be a villain, and any other complication is resolved by the death or disappearance of the person causing obstruction. In this way the two parallel plots of action are resolved by the hero, who, in most of the cases, gets a V.C, as well as a wife, if not also an estate and a title to lord it over at home in England" (183).

J.G. Farnell, however, overturns the trope of the Mutiny novel, on its head, in this novel which is deliberately set in a period when the Empire was at its most energetic thanks to the new technology of the Industrial Revolution and seemed to be offering a "vast range of physical, social and moral benefits" (Dean 11). The Victorian mood of optimism and benign complacency is personified in the figure of the Collector: "I believe that we are all part of a society which by its communal efforts of faith and reason is gradually raising itself to a higher state…the foundations on which the new men will build their lives are Faith, Science, Respectability, Geology, Mechanical Invention, Ventilation and Rotation of Crops" he proclaims (37).

The highpoint of his life has been his attendance at the Great Exhibition held in Hyde Park in 1851. There the goods of 14,000 exhibitors were on display, representing Victorian commerce at its zenith. The Collector has cluttered the Residency with objects from the Exhibition which he has proudly brought over to India. As the prophet of this new materialistic age, he sees possessions as a concrete embodiment of progress: "…are not possessions important? Do they not show how far a man has progressed in society from abject and anti-social poverty towards respectability?" (38). By the end of the novel, however, this reflection of a culture of high sensibility through possessions, is to him, nothing but a sham. This is the insight that he gains from the siege.

In fact, discussions about civilization, culture, and progress abound throughout the novel. Farrell makes use of Fleury's first dinner at Krishnapur, for a discussion about progress.

Rayne, the opium agent, opines that the revenue collected from the growth and sale of opium is progress. The reader is at once reminded of the infamous East Indies triangle in which the peasants (ryots) of India were forced to grow opium which was then exported to China in return for tea, silk, and other precious commodities. The exploitation of two colonies is mentioned in a throw-away manner. While they are glutting down the lavish dinner (and Farrell describes each dish lovingly), two countries are being ruined by their greed. This is the progress of the English!

The invitation for tea that Rayne extends to Fleury is used by Farrell to show the supposedly civilized side of the British. Rayne has named his servants after animals and treats them disgustingly. Then there is the arrival of Lieutenant Cutter who rides in with his horse, waving his sabre and jumping over furniture till he falls to the floor. Through Fleury, the only sober man at this drunken gathering (which was supposed to be a tea party) we are given a perspective of the antics which disgust the readers and Fleury but are amusing to the other English. However, as the rebel sepoys force the British in cramped spaces, the noise in the billiards room becomes "deafening… the ears were roweled by high pitched voices raised in disputes or emphasis, the competition here was extreme for anyone with anything to say" (170). The British had maintained a contemptuous attitude towards the Indians whom they thought uncivilized, always arguing or fighting amongst themselves. Now in strained circumstances, they are also behaving and bawling in a similar manner.

If the ears are assailed by the cacophony of noises, the eyes too are assaulted by the way the room has been utterly changed from the time it was seized by the ladies. Trunks, clothing, work-baskets et al lie scattered throughout the room. Possessions are piled in such a haphazard manner that it becomes difficult for the Collector to make his way through them. The reader is reminded of how the British accused the Indians of a lack of planning. How the native town was full of congested, ill-lit, suffocating streets. The sight of English gentlewomen sitting around in their underclothes parallels Fleury's first glimpse of the "people dressed in white muslin" that he had seen in the bazaar and which had made him wonder as to where such people could possibly live (47). "The answer is," as Ralph Crane puts it, "in surroundings as public as those that the British women are now forced to endure" (36).

The smells of filth, urine, perspiration, lavender, and rose-water also penetrate the Collector's senses. The stinking reality of India, which they have had a hand in making, will no longer be shut off as it could be in the solid cantonment bungalows instead through the smells it has seeped into the consciousness of the British and cannot be ignored any longer.

As the British are literally and metaphorically, stripped down, the imperial narrative loses its varnish. Not that everybody had been taken in by the superior British culture in the first place. The Magistrate, Willoughby, had been dismissive of it, right from the beginning,

> "The great majority of natives have yet to see the sign of our superior culture," he exclaims, and has no time for the fabled British sense of justice, "This justice is a fiction! In the Krishnapur district we have two magistrates for almost a million people. There are many districts where it is worse" (177).

English education, likewise, has not brought much benefit. The only Indian whom we see as the product of English education is Hari, the son of the Maharajah, who seems to be caught in the two words of East and West and being in the uncomfortable position of belonging to neither. During the siege, the Collector, his faith in Science, Art, and Knowledge, rapidly shrinking, acknowledges the fact that little has been done to improve the conditions of the Indians:

> "He thought again of those hundred and fifty million people living in cruel poverty in India… Would science and political economy ever be powerful enough to give them a life of ease and respectability? He no longer believed that they would…" (324)

In fact, the Collector is the one who tries his hardest to understand Indians. The contempt, ignorance, and disregard of the others for India, her customs, and her people are appalling. The British, even in important administrative posts, do not feel the need to learn the local languages, their work being conducted by a few sharp commands and gestures.

The Collector, whatever his failings in trying to comprehend the British situation in India, does try to understand India and Indians. His thoughts on the Magistrate

illustrate his understanding: "Even after all these years in India Willoughby doesn't understand the natives. He is too rational for them. He can't see things from their point-of-view because he has no heart" (98). And it appears that the magistrate is not alone since hardly any British is interested in India as a land with a history of its own, for them it is just a land they can profit from.

However, to go back to the billiard-room, we find that "the ladies in the billiard room had divided themselves into groups according to the ranks of husband or father" - an act which reflects the social divisions among the British and their rigid class-consciousness (172). And in fact, they have their pariahs too as in the figure of the 'scarlet lady' Lucy Hughes. Wryly touching on untouchability which segregates human beings into different spaces, Farrell writes about the positioning of Lucy's bed: "It was the only bed that had any space around it, for even Louise's bed, which was next to hers, stood at a small but eloquent distance" (173).

While references to social snobbery and class divisions among the British are spread throughout the novel, Farrell also constantly destroys any romantic notions of bravery. Fleury and Harry are beside themselves with excitement as the sepoys make their first charge. So excited, in fact, that they are ready to fire at any Indian coming towards them, conveniently forgetting that they were themselves being helped by Indian pensioners and certain sepoys who had remained faithful to the Company Sahab. The deaths that occur are not presented in heroic terms but rather border on the burlesque. The general falls off from his horse, slips into a coma, and dies in his bed; Hogan comes on the verandah to deliver a rousing speech to his troops and instead swallows a musket ball and drops down dead. The survivors too present a rag-tag group when relief finally arrives. One look at this stripped-off picture of British heroism and General Stapleton decides that they would have no place in the pictures of heroism:

> "He must remember to insist on being in foreground…with luck this wretched selection of heroes would be given the soft pedal…an indistinct crowd of corpses and a few grateful faces, canons, and prancing horses would be best" (373).

As Ralph J. Crane elucidates,

> "Victorian public was protected from the knowledge of much of this, and it is the relief troops, rather than the survivors of the siege, that the Victorian reader would have seen as 'realistic'. In other words, it is the relief troops, not the survivors, who fit the myths of the India invented for and by the Victorian public, as Farrell exposes here" (38).

To conclude in view of the above discussions, Farell writing in the twentieth century, has demythologized the Company Raj of the 1850s. Stripping it of romanticism, he has presented such truths that would be hard to find in other books of the Raj. In a gentle, ironic, detached manner, Farrell has depicted the 1857 revolt in a manner unique amongst British writers.

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