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The Indian Mutiny and English Fiction

A striking feature of the Indian Mutiny¹ is the contrast between the relatively small military scale of the event and its enormous impact on the British consciousness. The rebellion spread mainly in the northern and central provinces while much of the country remained uninvolved or loyal to the British. The Mutiny erupted on 10 May 1857 in the town of Meerut and involved a series of attacks on the British in several places but did not evolve into a centrally-organised movement. Initially surprised by the rising, the British took action fairly quickly, suppressing the Mutiny within about a year. The fall of Gwalior on 20 May 1858 marked the actual end of the rebellion, despite the subsequent minor skirmishes.

The political consequences were far-reaching, however: after abolishing the East India Company, the British Empire took direct control of India, establishing the Raj and carrying out reforms both in the government of India and the Indian army. At that time the British rule in India was strengthened and formalised but, as Gautam Chakravarty claims from his contemporary Indian perspective, the Mutiny heralded an awakening of India's desire for independence. He treats the Mutiny (which he prefers to call "rebellion") as a foreshadowing of future global conflicts:

the rebellion and its much-debated causes underscored a model of radical conflict between cultures, civilizations and races; a conflict that at once justified conquest and dominion and proved the impossibility of assimilating and acculturating subject peoples. No less significant were the several thousand British casualties in the war the rebel militias launched. For, not only did the fatalities reveal the precariousness of British power, and the inherent difficulty of knowing and controlling the motions of the communities and polities of India, they were also a serious

¹ In recent sources, especially those written from a postcolonial perspective, the preferable terms are "the Great Rebellion," "the First War of Independence," "the Great Indian Uprising," etc. (Herbert 2008: 8).

interruption of the habitual hierarchy of status and authority that structured British relations with India. (Chakravarty 2005: 4)

At the time when it happened the Mutiny, too, was seen by the British as an epoch-making event which was likely to transform radically the British rule in India and, on a larger scale, the British Empire itself. General Hope Grant estimated that the Mutiny “had shaken the British power in India to its very foundations.” John Colvin, the lieutenant-governor of the North-Western Provinces warned that “the safety of the Empire was imperilled” (Herbert 2008: 1). Although before the rebellion there had been no unanimous public approval of the British rule in India, criticism of the system that the British had created in India was relatively rare, and what was questioned was not the idea of British expansion but the mismanagement of the imperial mission. When news of the rebellion reached England, Benjamin Disraeli in a parliamentary speech asked whether it was only a military mutiny or perhaps a national revolt, and argued that the anti-British feelings might have more substantial causes than the sepoys’ discontent over the introduction of the Enfield rifle:² “first, our forcible destruction of native princes; next, our disturbance of the settlement of property; and thirdly, our tempering with the religion of the people” (Herbert 2008: 8–9).

But the predominant reaction was one of surprise and disappointment. The British officers in India were dismayed by the disloyalty of their subordinates – the mutineers were mainly Indian mercenaries in the service of the East India company. It had been assumed that the British rule over the Indians was exercised by mutual consent, and that the Indians were benefiting from the influence of the superior culture which instilled liberal ideas, freeing the Indians from despotic native rulers as well as primitive rituals such as suttee. The entire rebellion as well as the particular incidents it involved reinforced the image of the Indians as shift, unreliable and treacherous, obstinately resistant to progress, driven by oriental cruelty and primitive passions. The event that exerted the greatest influence on the British imagination was the Cawnpore massacre. Fleeing from the large-scale murders of Europeans in and around Delhi, a group of British survivors found shelter in the town of Cawnpore. The local maharaja Nana Sahib (later seen by the British as the chief villain but never caught) falsely assured the British of his protection. Soon he joined the rebels who besieged the makeshift British fort. Sahib offered the British safe passage from the town if they surrendered but this was

² The Indian soldiers were convinced that the rifle had been designed to be greased with animal fat so as to defile both the Muslims and the Hindus among them.

only a trap: the soldiers and civilians were attacked while leaving the town, and the surviving women and children were herded back to Cawnpore, only to be later butchered on Nana's orders. Their mutilated, dismembered bodies were thrown into a well.

The Cawnpore slaughter became a focus for the Victorian ideological perspectives, exemplifying national, racial and religious sentiments at once. On his way to Cawnpore before the massacre General Havelock, head of the relief forces, had urged his soldiers: "Men, there are still women and children of our race in the hands of those fiends. By God's help, we will save them, or every man of us will die in the attempt" (Smith 2004: 62). The relief came too late. When details of the massacre became apparent, the British forces launched a campaign of retaliation, from then on going into battle with the cry "Remember Cawnpore!" In Britain, the public was uniformly appalled. Newspapers supplied regular reports of Indian cruelties and British heroism, and there was a widespread demand for revenge. Dickens, among others, expressed such attitudes in very strong terms in a private letter:

And I wish I were Commander in Chief in India. The first thing I would do to strike that Oriental race with amazement . . . should be to proclaim to them in their language, that I considered my holding that appointment by the leave of God, to mean that I should do my utmost to exterminate the Race upon whom the stain of the late cruelties rested; and that I was there for that purpose and no other, and was now proceeding, with all convenient dispatch and merciful swiftness of execution, to blot it out of mankind and raze it off the face of the Earth. (Nayder 1992: 694)

The Mutiny, recounted in numerous personal letters, memoirs, newspaper reports, also inspired a series of novels. Commenting on the persistent narrativisation of the event, Christopher Herbert notes that from the start the Mutiny was not only a political but also a fictive event:

a story recounted over and over, in one stylistic inflection and literary register after another, in various journalistic media, in the voluminous historical accounts that began appearing before the cannon had fairly ceased firing on the battlefields, in a spate of memoirs and biographies, in pictorial imagery, and in the innumerable poems and fifty or sixty novels . . . (2008: 3)

Most of the novels appeared before the First World War, the peak of their popularity being the 1890s. In 1897 in her article "The Indian Mutiny in Fiction" Hilda Gregg recognised the growth of a distinct fictional genre dealing with the Mutiny. She aptly noted the narrative potential inherent in the rebellion: "[T]he event of the time seemed to provide every element of romance that

could be desired in a story. Valour and heroism, cruelty and treachery, sharp agony and long endurance, satiated vengeance and bloodthirsty hatred were all present . . ." (Erll 2006: 163). In his 2005 study of Mutiny novels Chakravarty stressed the hybridity of the genre, which comprised "the historical novel and the colonial adventure novel, romantic orientalism, historiography and the pictorial cultivation of the oriental picturesque" (2005: 92). Astrid Erll claims that this type of novel was a main instrument of the transformation of the Mutiny in collective memory (2006: 164).

Since the mode of recounting the Mutiny evolved over the years, several subgenres of the Mutiny novel may be distinguished, although practically all the Mutiny novels published before Indian independence conform to a predictable formula. Nancy L. Paxton claims that "One of the most extraordinary features of novels about the Indian Uprising of 1857 is their sameness and persistence" (1996: 263).

The earliest novels, appearing immediately in the years following the Mutiny, were typical military-historical romances. The first novel directly addressing the subject was *The Wife and the Ward; or, A Life's Error* (1859) by Edward Money, followed by H.P. Malet's *Lost Links in the Indian Mutiny* (1867) and *First Love and Last Love: A Tale of the Indian Mutiny* (1868) by James Grant. Being chronologically closer to the event, they capture the British reaction of horror and dismay better than the later novels, which tend to end on a note of triumph after regaining control and avenging the victims. *The Wife and the Ward* ends with the death of the main characters at Cawnpore.

The novels lay much emphasis on racial stereotyping. The valiant, honourable and rational behaviour of the British contrasts with the image of the Indians as false, brutal and deceitful. Although the British are frequently outnumbered, they manage to hold out thanks to their high morale, loyalty to one another, self-sacrificing spirit, endurance and remarkable resourcefulness. They also have the advantage of superior technology and organisational skills, compared with the backward, disordered native hordes. There are frequent appeals to the shared ideology of nation, race and religion: the besieged individuals and communities overtly identify themselves as British, white and Christian. Erll draws attention to the myth-making impulse behind the novels, which converted the Mutiny from a relatively small colonial war to a "foundational myth" of the British Raj, effectively legitimising the British imperial rule in India (2006: 164). The novels draw on the epic tradition by recounting their protagonists' heroic exploits in an elevated style and describing the Mutiny hyperbolically as a great national crisis. Paxton also points to the chivalric romance as a pervasive influence on these stories of love and war (1996: 252–6).

James Grant's *First Love and Last Love: A Tale of the Indian Mutiny* (1868) tells the intertwining stories of three English sisters at the time of the Mutiny. Kate Weston marries a young officer Rowley Thompson but their wedding ceremony is disrupted by the rebellion. The newlyweds are reunited only after the crisis is over. In the meantime, Rowley performs his duty as a British soldier while she struggles to preserve her chastity. Kate is abducted by Indians and avoids rape only thanks to the fact that her captors cannot come to an agreement as to which of them can claim her. The eldest of the sisters, Madelena, who just before the Mutiny made the wrong choice of fiancé, is given a chance to undo her wrong decision as her rejected lover loyally protects her in the time of crisis. Thus the novel ends with the happy reunion of two pairs of lovers. The fate of the third sister, however, epitomises the greatest fears of the British at the time when the colonial social hierarchy was collapsing – Poly is raped, humiliated and finally killed by a savage rabble. Grant's narrator says that "women were outraged again and again, ere they were slaughtered, riddled with musket balls, or gashed by bayonets; and every indignity that the singularly fiendish invention of the Oriental mind could suggest, was offered to the dying and the dead" (qtd. Brantlinger 2001: 164). In *The Wife and the Ward* Nana Sahib desires an English woman who, in order to avoid dishonour, asks the hero, an English captain, to shoot her when the danger becomes imminent. He fulfils his promise when the Indian forces attack the English survivors escaping from Cawnpore.

A recurrent theme in Mutiny novels is the sexual threat allegedly posed by the lecherous barbarians to the English women. Although the matter was investigated immediately after the Mutiny and no evidence was found of English women being sexually abused, the theme continued to recur in numerous novels (Paxton 1996: 263). Fears for the safety of the women reflect the strongest taboo in British India, which was a combination of strict Victorian moral ideas, especially regarding women's sexual conduct, and conviction about the moral, intellectual and cultural superiority of the English race. Since the Mutiny had brought about a temporary break in imperial control and subversion of the seemingly solid colonial order – as the sepoys revolted against their officers and the servants against their masters – there were fears that the rigorously observed prohibition against a native man laying his lustful hands on a white woman would be violated, too. Anxiety about the supposedly lecherous nature of Indian men survived well into the twentieth century – in E.M. Forster's 1924 novel *A Passage to India* Adela persuades herself that she has been abused by an Indian doctor, while the strong reaction of the English community testifies to the still vivid memory of the Mutiny.

A difference may be observed between the Mutiny novels written by metropolitan writers and those produced by Anglo-Indian novelists, in the sense that the latter display a less polarised image of the English and the Indians (Paxton 1996: 252). One of the best Mutiny novels, Philip Meadows Taylor's *Seeta* (1872), is coloured by the author's own fascination with India and marriage to a racially mixed woman. In the novel, too, the hero Cyril Brandon marries a beautiful Indian widow Seeta, presented as superior to the shallow and dull English girls. During the Mutiny, Seeta bravely stands by her English husband and, disguised as a man, accompanies him during his military campaigns. The conflict between the English officer and the Indian leader Azrael Pande focuses on their rivalry for Seeta. Although the novel is ambivalent about the Indian grievances against the British, it still presents Pande in accordance with the stereotype of a superstitious, irrationally passionate villain. Pande, the rebel leader, used to be a thug and a robber. Seeta's heroism and loyalty to her English partner culminate in her tragic sacrifice as she dies willingly taking Pande's blow aimed at her husband. After the Mutiny, with his interracial marriage violently terminated, Brandon returns to England and marries an English woman. Patrick Brantlinger asserts that *Seeta* is quite unique among Mutiny novels by offering "a halfway credible account of the motives for the Mutiny, and is also almost unique in its sympathetic portrayal of an interracial love affair and marriage" (2001: 163). An example of a more sympathetic portrayal of the Indians may also be found in Flora Annie Steel's novel *On the Face of the Waters* (1896). Like Taylor, Steel was well-acquainted with India and impressed by its exoticism and cultural variety. She spent about twenty years in India, studying Indian languages and superintending Indian girls' schools. The novel's heroine Kate gets assistance from Indian women, a Muslim princess and her Hindu servant, as she is forced to hide and escape during the revolt. However, even during her ordeal Kate maintains her sense of racial superiority. Quite implausibly, the Hindu servant Tara sacrifices herself for the sake of the English woman, and leads her to safety while paying for it with her own life. When her adulterous husband conveniently dies during the Indian attack on Delhi, having at least partly redeemed his earlier ignoble behaviour with his acts of heroism, Kate is free to marry Jim Douglas, the man she truly loves. Douglas, for years ostracised by the Anglo-Indian community, has a chance to be readmitted to it as he bravely proves his worth during the revolt. Like *Seeta*, the novel ends in a marriage of purely English, morally worthy partners. Hence Paxton accuses the writer of eventually endorsing the racial and gender stereotypes she initially seemed to challenge (1996: 266–71).

Most of the Mutiny novels written in the 1890s, the most productive decade for this type of fiction, take on a dimension of adventure stories, aimed mainly at a young readership. As such, they typically develop themes of military exploits, exotic adventure, espionage and character-building. G.A. Henty's *Rujub the Juggler* (1893), H.C. Irwin's *A Man of Honour* (1896), J.E.P. Muddock's *The Star of Fortune* (1895) and *The Great White Hand* (1896), Hugh Stowell Scott's *Flotsam* (1896) illustrate what Erlil calls "amplification of 'Mutiny' memory." The event itself had by then become historically more distant, and facts had largely been replaced by collective imaginings. And so the fictional troops had become more numerous, the battles more violent, the British more heroic and the Indians more savage, lustful and bloodthirsty (Erlil 2006: 167).

This formula persisted well into the twentieth century. Charles Pearce's *Love Besieged: A Romance of the Residency of Lucknow* (1909) adopts the siege of the British Residency at Lucknow, one of the best known episodes of the Mutiny, as its historical backdrop. In the foreground there is a story of romance and adventure. A familiar pattern is enacted: the hero Jack Hawke, unfairly condemned for his supposed amorous transgressions, makes amends for his misbehaviour by feats of bravery, which not only atone for his social disgrace but also earn him a Victoria Cross and the hand of his beloved, of whom he is at last worthy. The novel contains the basic components of the Mutiny novel's formula: the romantic emplotment, the adventure story and the imperial hero (Lea 1999: 69). Mutiny novels continued to be written in the same vein until the outbreak of the First World War. Among the most popular boys' novels were E.S. Brereton's *A Hero of Lucknow* (1905), Louis Tracy's *The Red Year* (1907), C.E. Pearce's *Red Revenge* (1911), Talbott Mundy's *Rung Ho! A Novel of India* (1914). Interestingly, the last novels written in the (semi-)Victorian paradigm appeared almost a century after the event. *The Masque of Mutiny* by C.L. Reid came out in 1947, i.e. the year of Indian independence; *Nightrunners of Bengal* (1951) by John Masters still reiterated the heroic-romantic narrative pattern.

A distinctly un-heroic and un-romantic vision of the Mutiny is offered in J.G. Farrell's neo-Victorian novel *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973), loosely based on accounts of the siege of Lucknow. The beleaguered British display all kinds of weaknesses, follies and typically Victorian prejudices. However, Farrell does not modify the dominant tradition of representing the Indians – in his novel, they are reduced to an anonymous, collective menace, blending with the hostile natural environment. The only native individual Hari, the maharaja's son, is a figure of fun, admitting his own cultural inferiority and ineptly imitating the English. Farrell, however, is more interested in re-examining the English perspective. For that reason he creates a quasi-Victorian novel, taking

up familiar themes and stock characters, only to deflate the romantic-heroic mode of typical Mutiny novels. Descriptions of the dire circumstances of the siege are interspersed with a comedy of human behaviour, presented in an ironically detached manner. Farrell, aware of the convention he parodies, emphasises the literary and artistic transformations which the story of the Mutiny has undergone. Therefore, his characters play roles and are highly self-conscious about the way they are perceived; there are frequent gaps between the roles they aspire to and the tragicomic reality of their lives. The scene of the relief of Krishnapur is distinctly farcical in its anti-climactic nature: trying to fend off the frenzied Padre, the Collector (head of the British community) barely notices the moment of liberation:

“I say,” said a voice a little distance away. “We’ve come to relieve you.”

“A cathedral of Baal! A cathedral of Mammon!” The Collector, trying to prise the Padre’s fingers from his throat and at the same time turn his head, was just able to see a pink young face with a blonde moustache surmounting a brilliant scarlet tunic. This man was peering winningly over the rampart.

“I say, d’you mind if we come in. We’ve come to relieve you.” (Farrell 1973: 338–9)

The General in charge of the relief forces is himself relieved when the initially stunned and bewildered survivors begin to act in the expected manner, and in his mind’s eye he already envisages an incorporation of the scene into the repository of national myth:

Even when allowances were made, the “heroes of Krishnapur,” as he did not doubt they would soon be called, were a pretty rum lot. And he would have to pose for hours, holding a sword perched on a trestle or wooden horse while some artist-wallah depicted “The Relief of Krishnapur”! He must remember to insist on being in the foreground, however; then it would not be so bad. With luck this wretched selection of “heroes” would be given the soft pedal . . . an indistinct crowd of corpses and a few grateful faces, cannons and prancing horses would be best. (Farrell 1973: 342)

The novel is framed by a vision of Krishnapur as an abandoned place, and of India reverting to its primordial condition, after shaking off the British influence. Written with the benefit of hindsight, the novel presents the supposed British victory at Krishnapur as the beginning of the end of the British rule. In portraying a representative spectrum of middle-class Victorian society, Farrell’s book seems to imply that this society, full of confidence and energy, is in fact on the brink of decline. Even though the age is still mid-Victorian, the writer retrospectively diagnoses the first symptoms of the eventual eclipse of the British Empire as far back as 1857.

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