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Dr Vidya Patil
Assistant Professor of English
Government First Grade
Women's College, Bidar,
karnatka, India

India as the Setting in the Raj Quartet

Dr Vidya Patil

Abstract

Paul Scott is certainly the most outstanding of all the English novelists who have written about India and its impact on the British and also about the last years of the British Raj in India. He has constructed each novel with much thought and care as revelations of human behaviour. *The Raj Quartet* is one of his most enduring works. It is a tetralogy comprising of the four novels, *The Jewel in the Crown* (1964), *The Day of the Scorpion* (1968), *The Towers of Silence* (1971) and *The Division of the Spoils* (1975). Taken as a whole, The Quartet gives us a panoramic view of India from the Quit India Movement to Partition and Independence. Times and places are clearly charted. Readers travel from 'The Mac Gregor house' via 'The Bibighar Gardens', 'The Moghul Room', and 'The Dak Bungalow' to the 'Circuit House'. Paul Scott brings each of these places to life with his detailed descriptions - both of their historical past and their tumultuous present.

Keywords: Quartet, English novelist, British Raj, Historical past

Introduction

"The Raj Quartet is a series of long, interlinked, closely documented series of novels that aim to recreate on a grand scale the political and human clashes between British and Indians during and after the Second World War." (Walker, 1980:1221)

Paul Scott is certainly the most outstanding of all the English novelists who have written about India and its impact on the British and also about the last years of the British Raj in India. He has constructed each novel with much thought and care as revelations of human behavior. *The Raj Quartet* is one of his most enduring works. It is a tetralogy comprising of the four novels, *The Jewel in the Crown* (1964), *The Day of the Scorpion* (1968), *The Towers of Silence* (1971) and *The Division of the Spoils* (1975). Taken as a whole, The Quartet gives us a panoramic view of India from the Quit India Movement to Partition and Independence. Scott paints on a large canvas which does justice to the great subject he has chosen. At the same time, however, like a miniature artist, he draws every small detail of the complex love-hate relationship between Indians and Englishmen. He does not portray just two oversimplified versions – one British, the other Indian of the Raj. He depicts the viewpoints, impressions and attitudes of the innumerable characters he creates, till the various subtle nuances of British India and of the relationship between the two races are set forth before us. *The Raj Quartet* is a monumental series of novels dealing with the basic struggle of the human race. It is a richly rewarding, touching and truthful look at a pivotal time in the history of mankind. Much of the novel is written in the form of interviews and reports of conversations and research from the point of view of a narrator. Other portions are in the form of letters from one character to another or entries in their diaries. Still others take the form of reports from an omniscient observer.

Paul Scott's decision to set his novels in the dying days of the British Raj in India was to replace the misconception in the public mind, that the British presence in India was not about constitutions, law courts and railways but about rajahs, holy men, tigers, and the sahibs and memsahibs in their clubs. Scott was able to create the sheer drama of the small island ruling the huge, complex country but along with that, he also asked awkward questions. What were the British doing there anyway? Were they, as several of his characters wondered, doing any good at all? And he insisted on putting power and politics at the centre of his novels, not as some static background for his characters to play against. His India is the one

Correspondence:

Dr Vidya Patil
Assistant Professor of English
Government First Grade
Women's College, Bidar,
karnatka, India

of the Second World War, when the power of the European empires in Asia was broken forever by the Japanese advance. *“Although India itself remained under British control, time was clearly running out for the Raj. Indians demanded independence and the British no longer had the energy or the will to refuse them.”* (McMillan, 2007)

Political Setting

A Division of the Spoils is spectacular. It is a wonderful book, and a fantastic finale to the Quartet. *It is fast moving, almost a political thriller, and a love story.* Siva's arc, the deity of fiery destruction and creation, comes full circle in the fourth volume of the Raj tetralogy. Through Scott's pantheon of characters we see the Raj crumble, while simultaneously India is born through the rupture of its partition. We see the fiery destruction of both the old colonial order, as well as any attempt at unifying a Hindu/Muslim nation; while at the same time, India is born in fire.

Those of the Raj, the middling class of Britain who ruled the subcontinent for more than two centuries through the East India Company and then through the Raj, reap the karma of their administration. And the people of the subcontinent reap their own karma in the violence between its two major religious sects whose differences were accentuated by British rule.

All are in a limbo. The characters of the Raj, middling English at home, are marginally English at this point because of their experiences in ruling a foreign land. There is a lineage of female characters, the last of which Sarah Layton determines to leave, only to stay at the end because she is no longer English, even if she also obviously is not Indian either. Other characters of the Raj are faced with the same decision.

Muslims who have been elevated by the Raj to ruling positions are faced with their social order going up in flames as a modern nation, and a Hindu one at that, is born. Their sons become sacrificial offerings. The politics of British India had to take into consideration the two major religions, Islam and Hinduism. To a history of one ruling the other, is added the complication of a determinedly, in part evangelical Christian colonial administration that lords it over both and in recent memory has massacred innocents. Calls for independence are frequent, but the detail of “from what” remains negotiable. There is civil disobedience in a state whose imperial government can only function by virtue of local cooperation. But should independence lead to a unitary state, religiously mixed, or should it divide along ethnic lines in an attempt to avoid conflict of interest?

Then there's a World War against an invading Japanese army to be coped with. And when a new kind of independence is called for, one that not only politically rejects the colonial masters but also wages war against them, new complications emerge. Those who deserted to fight alongside the enemy risk courts-martial and death sentences for treason, despite their being viewed locally as freedom fighters by those who desire independence at any cost, whilst remaining traitors in the eyes of anyone seeking any form of accommodation with the status quo.

And then we have the princely states, each with its Nawab or Maharajah at its head, ostensibly independent but landlocked in their geographical and political dependency, surrounded by colonialism that has nurtured them. This is India in the 1940s.

Geographical Setting

The Raj Quartet is a long, leisurely, high-detailed set of novels, superficially about the rape by Indians of a young Englishwoman in India in 1942, just when the country was on the verge of splitting up between the Muslims and Hindus and becoming independent from England. The story is enriched by being told from multiple points of view, and by the incredible amount of detail in it about Indian and British lives. After reading descriptions of the layout of Mayapore, and the division between "black town" and the British "civil lines" there, we could almost draw a map of the place. The rape is, in part, a metaphor for Britain's relationship with India.

Paul Scott's monumental opus is inevitably complex and potentially confusing. Its central action spans a period of five years and is set in an area which went on to become five nations. It consists of more than 300 named characters, including 24 principal characters. In order to comprehend this massive work, it is important to be as clear as possible about its internal structure. The best guide for this is the volume, time period and setting.

The Jewel in the Crown is set in 1942 in Maya pore, a fictional city in an unnamed province of British India. The province, which is located in northern India, shares characteristics with Punjab and the United Provinces. The names of places and people suggest a connection to Bengal; however, the physical characteristics place the setting in north-central India, rather than in northeast India. The province has an agricultural plain and, in the north, a mountainous region. Dibrapur is a smaller town about 75 miles away.

Mayapore, although not the capital of the province, is a relatively large city, with a significant British presence in the cantonment area, where native Indians are not permitted to live. Across the rail lines lies the “black town,” where the native population resides. There is also a Eurasian Quarter, the residence of the mixed-race (Anglo-Indian) population of the city.

The Day of the Scorpion, *The Towers of Silence* and *A Division of Spoils* are set in the period 1942-1944 in several locations throughout India, particularly in a northern province. The province shares characteristics with Punjab and the United Provinces. The names of places and people suggest a connection to Bengal; however, the physical characteristics place the setting in north-central India, rather than in northeast India. The province has an agricultural plain and, in the north, a mountainous region.

The capital of the province is Ranpur. Another large city in the province is Mayapore, which was the key setting in *The Jewel in the Crown*. The princely state of Mirat is a nominally sovereign enclave within the province. Pankot is a "second class" hill station in the province which serves as a headquarters for the 1st Pankot Rifles, an important regiment of the Indian Army, who fought the Axis in North

Africa. During the cool season, the regiment moves to Ranpur, on the plains. At Premanagar there is an old fortification that is used by the British as a prison. Another town, Muzzafirabad, is the headquarters of the Muzzafirabad ("Muzzy") Guides, another Indian Army regiment, as well as the Bishop Barnard mission. Other towns in the province are Tanpur and Nansera. Sundernagar is a "backwater town" in the province. Another hill station is in the Nanoora Hills.

Times and places are clearly charted. Readers travel from 'The Mac Gregor house' via 'The Bibighar Gardens', 'The Moghul Room', and 'The Dak Bungalow' to the 'Circuit House'. Paul Scott brings each of these places to life with his detailed descriptions - both of their historical past and their tumultuous present.

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