

# Symbolism in Paul Scott's *The Raj Quartet*

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**Abstract:-** The Raj Quartet comprises four books, four masterpieces about the fall of the British Empire in India. It is undoubtedly one of the great works of English literature of the last century. It is an engrossing tale where history engulfs loves, lives, hopes, past and present, and it builds, too - something new, despite the forces which try to stop it. It's beautiful and poignant, wonderfully written, and despite its length, it's a compulsively enjoyable novel to read. Paul Scott manages to extract the full potential from the freedom of the novel form. He made use of every opportunity to develop a thought or idea realized to its limits. Scott uses both **overt and covert symbolism** to embroider the structural framework and to exploit the narrative potential of the incidents he describes.

**Keywords:** - *Masterpiece, Engrossing tale, Symbolism, Narrative potential, Framework*

## 1. INTRODUCTION

*The Raj Quartet* comprises four books, four masterpieces about the fall of the British Empire in India. It is undoubtedly one of the great works of English literature of the last century. It is an engrossing tale where history engulfs loves, lives, hopes, past and present, and it builds, too - something new, despite the forces which try to stop it. It's beautiful and poignant, wonderfully written, and despite its length, it's a compulsively enjoyable novel to read.

The *Raj Quartet* is a memorable literary experience. Paul Scott memorializes the complexities of the Indian/British colonial relationship in this massive, four volume work. It is rich in the atmosphere and culture of the Indian sub-continent. The book is an excellent novel, presenting the varying aspects of life in India in the last years of British rule. Paul Scott captures many of the attitudes and struggles of both the British and Indians in those years. The book is a really interesting exploration of the sort of last gasp of the British Empire in India, looking at a certain violent event from the perspective of many characters of different classes and races. It is interesting and well-written. It perfectly describes how the Indians and British viewed each other, the feelings that prevailed in the 30's and 40's when Partition occurred. We are not only introduced to the history of that period but we also get acquainted with the atmosphere of the times.

## 2. SYMBOLISM

*"He woke while it was still dark, from a nightmare that had transformed him into a huge butterfly that beat and beat and fragmented its wings against the imprisoning mesh of the net."*

(A Division of the Spoils , p.551)

In an essay about the historical validity of The Raj Quartet, **Max Beloff** includes the following insightful generalization: *"...the novelist has the freedom both to present the circumstances of the case, and through his personages to evoke either directly or through symbolic reference the complex of feelings, physical and moral, that go to make up the experience as a whole."* The above quotation serves very well as a critical summary of Paul Scott's prose methods. It very effectively summarizes the way in which he manages to extract the full potential from the freedom of the novel form. He made use of every opportunity to develop a thought or idea realized to its limits. Scott uses both **overt and covert symbolism** to embroider the structural framework and to exploit the narrative potential of the incidents he describes.

Let us now have a look at some of the important symbols used by Paul Scott in *The Raj Quartet*.

**Rape:-**

*"This is the story of a rape"*, Scott tells us on the opening page of *The Jewel in the Crown*, establishing

the central symbol of the Quartet at the earliest opportunity. Having planted the seed in the imagination of the reader, he then proceeds to develop the idea throughout the four novels so that even five years after the event, the rape is still a strong presence in the minds of both the reader and characters.

The repercussions of this single happening stretch like tendrils, forwards, backwards and sideways in the narrative. The literal significance of the rape fades with the passing of time. Its symbolic implications multiply and clarify themselves. The question of prime importance is to ask what does the rape symbol stand for ; a clue to its significance on the broader level of the relationship between England and India is also provided on the first page: “...*the affair that began on the evening of August 9th, 1942, in Mayapore, ended with the spectacle of two nations in violent opposition, not for the first time nor as yet for the last because they were then still locked in an imperial embrace of such long standing and subtlety it was no longer possible for them to know whether they hated or loved one another, or what it was that held them together and seemed to have confused the image of their separate destinies.*” (p.9)

Scott’s opening paragraphs of *The Raj Quartet* quickly come to the point on which the novels will elaborate : “*This is the story of a rape, the events that led up to it and followed it and of the place in which it happened..... Since then people have said there was a trial of sorts going on. In fact, such people say, the affair that began on the evening of August 9th, 1942, in Mayapore, ended with the spectacle of two nations in violent opposition, not for the first time nor as yet for the last because they were then still locked in an imperial embrace of such long standing and subtlety it was no longer possible for them to know whether they hated or loved one another, or what it was that held them together and seemed to have confused the image of their separate destinies.*”

In this work, rape is three things: a specific criminal act, an image of interlocked, struggling bodies, and a metaphor for other, more complex and equally violent personal and political embraces. This opening narrative explanation gives the reader the primary message of the four novels: Rape is failure; nothing taken by force will remain long in the possession of the rapist. No matter with what fervor the British Raj clutched at India, India’s initial submissiveness would turn to revolt; rape is failure to love or understand.

Here we have an image of confused passion, a relationship which is capable of oscillating wildly between the two extremes of love and hatred, but which is neither love – affair, marriage nor rape - yet . This rape of a country, when it comes, is in the form of Merrick’s obscene treatment of Kumar, and his interrogation of a captured I.N.A. soldier to the point where he commits suicide; it is there behind the ice - cold exterior of Mabel Layton and the contempt she has for everything she touches; behind the comment at the War Week Exhibition that “*some contractor was putting on a show and making a packet*”. Daphne’s rape is a kind of reversal of the historical rape of India, an Indian rejection of British supremacy and authority, historically expressed in the ‘Quit India’ campaign, but figuratively expressed in the Quartet in the most violent expression of resentment imaginable. Scott brings out the connection between these two rapes, figurative and literal, showing how violence breeds violence, contempt breeds contempt : “*I thought the whole bloody affair of us in India had reached flashpoint. It was bound to because it was based on a violation.*” The violation lies in the gratification without love. Daphne describes in her journal whose Job is to govern fairly but which “*can’t distinguish between love and rape*” because it is a “*white robot.*”

The aptitude of the rape symbol to describe the position of the British in India is a gain made explicit by Daphne in her comment to her aunt that “*there has been more than one rape.*” Scott made his thoughts clear in the 1975 interview with **The Times** : “***I do object to the sense that Britain came away with..... that it had performed its task to the utmost. I do not see how you can rule for 200 years until midnight August 15, 1947: and then stop. We didn’t divide and rule; we tried to rule divided. Perhaps we didn’t care sufficiently to unite. In the end it was a tragedy in the classical sense.***”

#### ***The Jewel in the Crown :-***

The second symbol that is of obvious importance is the painting of ‘The Jewel in Her Crown’, an outdated allegorical representation of the mai-baap idea for the relationship between Britain and India. However, beyond this primary symbolism lies a more figurative interpretation which holds more relevance for the people and events of the Quartet. Barbie Batchelor has a copy of the picture which she decides to show to a gathering of Mildred’s friends at Rose Cottage : “*If you’d asked me to draw it from memory, I couldn’t have but one look at it now and one thinks, Of course! That’s how they stood, that’s how the artist drew them and left them caught them in mid-*

*gesture so that the gestures are always being made and you never think of them as getting tired.*" (The Towers of Silence, P.71)

The last two lines of the above quotation are a much more accurate reflection of the raj. The gestures are empty, never completed, a grand show for display purposes only with no relevance to the real world in which they are made. When Barbie tries to interest the ladies, in her prized possession, she gets no response. Clarissa Peplow, "*holding the picture like a looking-glass,*" has nothing to say because it means nothing to her ; there is no sense of either responsibility or guilt ; in short, there is no reflection. The total indifference Barbie meets with over her precious picture is a graphic illustration of the insensitivity and complete apathy of the British towards the Indians.

Miss Crane used it as a teaching aid : "*This is the Queen. That is her crown. The sky is blue.*" Barbie's admiration of the old missionary teacher is an important factor in determining the reason of her fascination with this out-of-date and indifferent work of art. It communicates something of the vibrance of India to her, and from her confused ideas about Mr Chaudhuri and Hari Kumar, she begins to notice in the picture the absence of a mysterious and 'unknown Indian' who, as Barbie begins to realize, is symbolic of the sum total of her own life in India. The unknown Indian still cries out to her, "*soundlessly, begging for justice and not alleviation.*" Her Indian conscience becomes unbearably real, accentuated by the indifference of her compatriots, and the image of this Indian haunts her dreams.

"The Jewel in Her Crown" is one of those symbols which gathers significance as the story progresses, and as it passes from character to character. Towards the end of the third novel, Barbie makes a gift of the picture to Merrick and makes him take hold of it. She tells him that everything is in the picture except that one important thing – the Unknown Indian. The picture is a visual representation of what Teddie died for, of what Merrick envies but pretends to despise, of the hollowness of the Raj and an accusation of culpability.

It carries with it the weight of the gesture Edwina Crane made when, after her illness, Clancy and the other boys came to tea again as they used to but never, "*so much as looked at old Joseph*", her servant ; unable to find the words to heal the old man's wounded pride, she takes the picture down from the wall and locks it away, "*against the time*

*when there might, remotely, be an occasion to put it back up again.*" Of course, that time never comes.

#### **Places:-**

Paul Scott gave as much importance to places as he gave to objects, in his novels. The places were infused with a symbolic reference to the events of his novels. The gardens of the Bibighar and the Mac Gregor House have a bearing on the narrative of the Quartet, especially in *The Jewel in the Crown*, the opening novel in the sequence. The symbolic relationship these two places have to each other is brought out in the description of their rather confused histories, first by Lili Chatterjee and then by Sister Ludmilla. **Patrick Swinden** points out that the close association of one with the other is made explicit by their juxtaposition at the beginning of Daphne's story : "*next, there is the image of a garden : not the Bibighar garden but the garden of the Mac Gregor house: intense sunlight, deep and complex shadows.*"

The two gardens are similar, one more wild than the other, but the living roots of each are nourished by the necessary lees of decay. The sense of the past is therefore very strong, washed over by the cross-currents of love and hate, joy and pain, of black and white. The uneasy liaison between the races has been absorbed by the vegetation with the resultant emergence of hybrid bushes "*that bear sprays of both colours.*" But because of the bloody past, both retain an aura of death and futility, omens borne out by the events of the first novel. The proof of history is that the connection between the races ends in death and Janet Mac Gregor's ghost is supposed to walk at night to warn others of the dangers of entering the flood that divides the English and the Indian. The Mac Gregor and the Bibighar are "*the place of the white and the place of the black*", and no individuals have the strength to fight against these inevitable pressures of history.

#### **Fire:-**

The Quartet is full of implicit symbolism also. One of the more enigmatic symbols is that of fire, 'the destructive element'. The first powerful image of destruction by fire is the burning car as Miss Crane kneels on the road from Dibrapur cradling the body of Mr Chaudhuri, a symbolic act in itself : "*It's taken me a long time,*" she said, meaning not only Mr Chaudhuri, "*I'm sorry it was too late.*" For the first time, Miss Crane has stepped outside the conventions of society and made a truly human gesture of love to an Indian. At last she has broken the long years of

'instruction' but too late : a reflection on the empty gestures and wasted opportunities of Indian history.

Miss Crane's symbolic importance is broadened when she makes the supreme gesture of failure by becoming "suttee", the traditional Indian way for a woman to acquire grace through self-immolation on her husband's funeral pyre. Merrick brings out the symbolic significance of the act much later, in *The Day of the Scorpion* : "A symbolic act, I suppose. She must have felt the Indian she knew had died, so like a good widow she made a funeral Pyre." (p.407)

This idea of death by fire is behind the dominant symbol of *The Day of the Scorpion* and Susan's sinister reconstruction of Mohammed's scorpion trick. The myth is that the scorpion, when surrounded by a ring of fire, chooses to sting itself to death rather than die in the flames. Susan's extraordinary ritual with the baby shows how the idea has remained lodged in a subconscious corner of her mind. She takes the baby, wraps it in the lace-butterfly shawl, surrounds it with a wide circle of burning kerosene and sits smiling at the flames. A naturally alarmed Minnie 'rescues' the baby, but Susan remains, still staring, still smiling..... Scott brings out the symbolic significance of the episode. India has been for Susan an unwanted experience, and she wants her baby to be free from the suffering she herself has endured, a suffering which has left her with the feeling that there is "nothing to me at all. Nothing. Nothing at all." Her gesture with the ring of fire seems to suggest something else other than the destruction of a nightmare past ; it is as if she is seeking a kind of rebirth for her child in the flames.

The destruction of Barbie and her death at the end of *The Towers of Silence* is an oblique parallel to Miss Crane's death in the first novel. Fire, the destroyer, is the most common denominator, the literal against the figurative, the link between an individual death and the death of an age of innocence in the fires of Hiroshima : "They found her thus, eternally alert, in sudden shine, her shadow burst into the wall behind her as if by some distant but terrible fire." (p.397)

#### **Lace Shawl :-**

In marked contrast to the fires of destruction and resentment is the symbol of the lace christening shawl, first mentioned by Susan in connection with her baby's forthcoming baptism. Sarah, although she has not seen the shawl since she was christened in it herself. When Sarah goes to Mabel and is shown the shawl for the first time, its sad beauty moves her – sad because of the way the lace butterflies are

trapped in the web of fabric by the blind old French lady who made it. The old lady's heart wept for the butterflies with a typical French emphasis, "because they could never fly out of the prison of lace and make love in the sunshine." ( p.367) Although beautiful and apparently alive, they are without a future and without even the scope to stretch their delicate wings ; the relevance of the Shawl as a symbol for the British Raj begins to emerge and to blend with that of the scorpion trapped in the ring of fire. It is particularly important that the baby is wrapped in the shawl when Susan places it in the ring of fire, prefiguring her mental illness with the gently rhetorical and poetic question to her child : "Little prisoner, little prisoner. Shall I free you?"(p.493)

#### **Butterflies :-**

The final images of Barbie's accident and her reconciliation with God are difficult to interpret ; perhaps this difficulty is a sign that a rigid symbolic interpretation is not valid. Scott shows the confused ideas of an old lady in the crisis of a lifetime. Although confusing, the final effect is compelling, and the one image that does not escape is that of the butterflies." (p.392)

The **silver** in the Pankot Rifles Officer's Mess is another slightly less obvious piece of symbolism, a symbol of the permanence and unchanging nature of the values which adhere to the British Raj. It is beautiful to look at but of no use to anyone, locked up in the Mess out of the public gaze. The demand for unquestioning acceptance was one of the unpleasant manifestations of British rigidity and reactionary policies in India.

### **3. CONCLUSION**

It would be tedious to wade through the Quartet turning over all the symbols that lie scattered on the surface of the narrative like pebbles on a beach. The symbolism is an integral part of *The Raj Quartet* and to isolate and examine each individual example out of context gives a false impression. There is nothing heavy or artificial in Scott's style ; he explains the important symbols in clear terms, but leaves the less grand images to wash over the reader as part of the whole reading experience. For instance, the scorpion in the ring of fire is rendered explicit, whereas the lace shawl is less clearly defined. Scott uses his characters to pinpoint the significance of certain events, such as Mildred's decision to pull up the rose bushes at Rose Cottage and lay down a tennis court. Barbie's dismay and tears seem symbolic of the

cleanly efficient desecration of India by the Raj to the preclusion of natural growth, beauty and colour. As M.M.Mahmood points out : *“The death of (Panther) to the accompaniment of Mildred’s tipsy laughter, with Susan segregated from the the child she has tried to kill and Sarah facing the loss of the child she longs to bear, is a bitter image of the end of Anglo-India : of the British as they were. This mixture of subtlety and weight is one of the most important features of Scott’s literary style.”*

Paul Scott found in India a rich metaphor for the interior distances that must be traversed as one person seeks to connect with another, and for the mysterious heart of darkness that prevents even the well intentioned from understanding oneself, much less another person, with any certainty. *The Raj Quartet* is an explicit illustration of Scott’s mastery in the use of Symbolism to enrich the art of storytelling.

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