

THE FAILURE OF THE CONCEPT OF THE WHITE MAN'S BURDEN IN JAMES GORDON FARRELL'S *THE SIEGE OF KRISHNAPUR**

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Abstract

With the discovery of new lands and with the improvements in sailing, the role of being enlightening colonisers is imposed on English men and this role is defined as "the white man's burden" by Rudyard Kipling. Imperialist British policies impose this role, that is the concept of the white man's burden through education and literary works of art on the English men. The influence of the concept of the white man's burden on English men may also be seen in James Gordon Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973). In this novel, Farrell aims at showing the failure of the concept of the white man's burden and the claims of bringing civilisation into the so-called backward places like India and he suggests that if more sound policies had been followed, both the physical and cultural clashes between the English and the Indians may not have been occurred.

Key Words:The Siege of Krishnapur, the concept of the white man's burden, the *Sepoys'* Mutiny, Anglo-Indian relationships, culture, civilisation

Farrell's novel *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) is based on a historically true event, the Indian Mutiny or the *Sepoys'* Mutiny. However, the setting is changed as "the fictitious town of Krishnapur ('city of Krishna')" (Crane 84). In *The Siege of Krishnapur*, Farrell takes histories and memoirs of the Siege of Lucknow and makes some changes so as to use history in a very flexible way (Binns 80). In *The Siege of Krishnapur*, it is narrated that during the *sepoys'* rebellion English people in India go through very difficult times. The British government in Calcutta does not take the rebellion seriously and take measures against the *sepoys* on time relying on the mistaken assumption that Indian people would not dare break the *sahib's* word since they do lack the culture and values to resist the British dominance in India. Meanwhile, the *sepoys* continue to put their plans into action and they surround the English Residency in Krishnapur. The English community in the Residency begins to lose their hope of survival, but eventually, the English relief forces come to their rescue and the British control over India is regained. Though, the British supremacy is reached, in the novel, Farrell adopts a critical look towards the British policies, however, not for being against the British imperialism, but for the improvement of British imperial policies. He suggests that because of the wrong British policies, the concept of the white man's burden fails in India.

The aim of this paper is to show how the concept of the white man's burden and the claims of bringing civilisation to India fail as a result of the manipulation of these concepts by the English people themselves. Farrell makes an in-depth analysis of these issues in *The Siege of Krishnapur* in order to raise awareness among the British imperialists and English people. For instance, an incidence during the *Sepoys'* Mutiny, which depicts the fight between the *sepoys* and the English people in which the latter use teaspoons and forks, is very illustrative of this point:

Below nothing was moving, but there appeared to be a carpet of dead [sic] bodies. But then he [the Collector] realized that many of these bodies were indeed moving, but not very much. A sepoy [sic] here was trying to remove a silver fork from one of his lungs, another had received a piece of lightning-conductor in his kidneys. A sepoy [sic] with a green turban had had his spine shattered by "The Spirit of Science"; others had been struck down by teaspoons, by fish-knives, by marbles; an unfortunate *subadar* had been plucked from this world by the silver sugar-tongs embedded in his brain. (Farrell 317)

In the passage above, the process of the decline of the British Empire in India is illustrated by giving reference to the wrong policies of the English authorities and the wrong behaviour of the English people in India. Farrell is pointing out that the use of violence against the civilians in India is one of the wrong policies of the English authorities there. Moreover, instruments of civilisation such as a fork becomes a means of destruction since the English use them as weapons. Hence, rather than civilisation, the English bring violence and bloodshed to India. Farrell draws the readers' attention to these wrong

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British policies since he believes in colonisation through persuasion, not colonisation through violence. Therefore, he mocks the English, so that they could see their mistakes and learn from these mistakes. Farrell by drawing bad examples and by mocking the English, in fact tries to raise the consciousness of the English people about the importance of the application of the right methods of colonisation. Furthermore, he depicts how the concept of the white man's burden fails in India.

In addition, Farrell may be suggesting that if more sound policies had been followed, the Indian Mutiny may not have been realised. Thus, he focuses on the process of how the concept of the white man's burden fails. The scene above is illustrative of his focus on the process since the usage of forks and sugar-tongs as weapons is in conflict with the British claim of bringing civilisation to the backward people or places. By depicting the English people using "forks and sugar-tongs as instruments of killing and violence, rather than instruments used in civilised life, Farrell criticises the colonial wrongs such as the use of violence by the English authorities during the British *Raj*" (Bozer, Seminar notes 2008). In other words, he "is concerned with the gap [and with the discrepancy] between imperial ideals and imperial practice[s]" (Taylor 41). Despite the claims of the English people having a superior and a deep-rooted civilisation as it is also illustrated through the statues of Plato and Socrates in the novel, the invalidity of this claim becomes apparent in the passage below:

European civilization is personified by the giant marble busts of Plato and Socrates that gaze implacably over the hostile plain, and which provide cover for Harry Dunstable's cannon on the ramparts. Their final appearance, 'terribly pocked by round shot and musket-fire', reveals the inability of Western systems of thought to contain and 'speak for' the East... With his collection of artefacts from the Great Exhibition, the Collector begins the novel as the embodiment of that part of Victorianism which sought to exploit the potential offered by cultural and technological innovation to bring Western civilization to the 'uncivilized' East. The wealth engendered by capitalism (and colonialism of course) should also be used to this end. [However, towards the end of the novel the Collector seems to realise that India has a significant civilisation of its own.] He says, 'It's not simply to acquire wealth, but to acquire through wealth, that superior way of life which we loosely term civilization and which includes so many things... both spiritual and practical'... (Morey 116).

Eventually the Collector realises two facts; first, the inability of the English to bring "civilisation" to India, as they end up bringing bloodshed and violence and secondly, the Indians actually already have a civilisation of their own. Thus, Farrell seems to be making the following points: In order to have a long-lasting colony in India, the English have to accept that indigenous people have their own unique culture, which deserves the respect of the English as well. After accepting the uniqueness of indigenous cultures, English colonisers should learn to mingle with the Indians more easily and to colonise Indian society, not from the outside but from within the Indian society. The English coloniser should know the Indian society so well that he should manipulate their weaknesses and should prove that the British rule is the ideal rule for Indians.

Moreover, with regard to the British mission of bringing civilisation to India and the British *Raj*, Farrell makes good use of metaphors in *The Siege of Krishnapur*. Even the title itself is metaphorical and this is explained in the following words by Farrell himself in an interview with Malcolm Dean from the *Guardian* on 1 September 1973; "[a siege] is a microcosm of real life and [the] human condition - hostility all around you with the individual in a rather temporary shelter" (qtd. in Binns 18). Considering this explanation, it can be suggested that Farrell foresees the coming end of the British Empire and the British culture and he feels the rising hostility of the Indian people against the English people. If this is evaluated within the context of the British *Raj*, and applied to Anglo-Indian relationships, more precisely, Farrell may be fearing that the English people are so vulnerable against the problems which may arise unexpectedly in India that they will have a temporary existence there, not a permanent one. In relation to these issues such as temporariness and insecurity which are felt more acutely during events like wars and sieges, Binns makes the following statement:

The bomb attack [childhood experience of Farrell] on 'Boscobel' in 1941 and the 1956 polio attack seem to have combined to colour Farrell's vision of human existence as frail, insecure and temporary. In Farrell's mature fiction human beings and their communities are in perpetual states of siege, battered by circumstance both from without and within. (23)

The theme of temporariness, especially of the British culture's temporariness in India, is further illustrated through the depiction of some illnesses in *The Siege of Krishnapur*. For example, the Collector is an English man with myopia and his myopia should not only be taken literally, but also metaphorically. He can see the near future, the uprising of the *sepoys*, but cannot see the distant future, the end of the British Empire. Similar to Binns' arguments, Crane takes the Collector's illness metaphorically:

Telescopes cannot help the Collector's cultural myopia or his Whig view of history, but the siege itself provides the displacement which unsettles his deeply entrenched habits of sight and thought. His resulting illness (one of the recurring metaphors of disease and decay, both personal and imperial, here as in *Troubles*), is significantly a problem of the eyes. It leads him to retire to bed at noon, a sign of cultural and ideological disorientation. When he recovers he becomes not a collector but a disperser, giving instructions for the removal of everything possible out to the ramparts. He realises that his confidence in the superiority of his own time over all past times has quite vanished. (100)

After the loss of his faith in the superiority of his Anglo-Saxon culture over the Indian culture, the Collector, namely Mr. Hopkins, utters the following lines, "[c]ulture is a sham... It's a cosmetic painted on life by rich people to conceal its ugliness" (Farrell 343). At the end of *The Siege of Krishnapur*, the Collector realises that Indian and British cultures are totally different (Farrell 226) and consequently two different things cannot be compared and categorised as superior or inferior to one another.

In the novel, not only the Collector, but also General Jackson suffers from illnesses. In relation to these diseases and illnesses, Binns suggests that they are not only reflections of historical or environmental truths but they are also metaphorical:

In *The Siege of Krishnapur* "sickness functions as a metaphor for the rottenness of the imperial order. The Joint Magistrate is absent from Krishnapur, having 'gone to the hills for a cure from which it was feared he would not return'(p.42). The collector's wife is in poor health and is despatched home to England; her youngest child has died of ill-health only six months earlier. Dr McNab's wife has died from cholera. Mr Donnelly dies of a heart attack and so, too, does Dr.Dunstaple. During the course of the siege Mrs Scott gives birth but the baby is stillborn and she herself expires shortly afterwards. In August two more babies are born and one dies almost immediately. Little Mar Porter dies. This inventory of sickness and death is in a sense more credible and realistic than that found in *Troubles* [sic], since India in the nineteenth century was a land with a high mortality rate amongst Europeans. (69-70)

Binns further expresses that the cholera outbreak in the English Residency can also be taken as the "manifestation of moral decay and sickness" . In addition, as mentioned above, the Collector suffers from an illness called erysipelas and therefore he is delirious. He recovers when he abandons his social idealism, which may be interpreted as his disease-like hysterical belief in the superiority of the Western culture and civilisation. Not only cholera and erysipelas, but "partial blindness" and "swollen heads" begin to influence the English community and these health problems become the "physiological manifestation of their moral myopia" (Binns 71).

Moreover, another English man's, General Jackson's poor mental health metaphorically stands for the unhealthy-decisions taken by the British government in India, such as retarding the disarming of the *sepoys* and ignoring Indians' capacity to implement national consciousness among their countrymen. General Jackson becomes the embodiment of all these wrong decisions as they are in the same line with his physical qualities, too. He is over seventy; his memory and his perceptive faculties are very poor, but because of his age and his seniority he is promoted General. He thinks that the Collector exaggerates the events like all civilians (Farrell 65). He sees no reason for the disarming of the *sepoys*. He cannot evaluate the uprising in Meerut properly and he refuses to see the discontent among the *sepoys* with the dominance of the English culture in India.

Though, General Jackson is not taking the Collector's warnings and ideas into serious account, the Collector represents the English race, the English values and the English attitudes towards life. In *The Siege of Krishnapur*, the Collector is the representative of the Company. Therefore he is the stereotype of a nineteenth century English man in India, who is a believer of British colonial policies and of the white man's burden. Even his choice of a job as a collector is functional and is used functionally by Farrell. As

Crane suggests “his ‘collecting’ represents the whole British philosophy which urges the accumulation not only of objects but of colonisable (usable) countries, a philosophy of dominion, possession, materialism, all in the name of ‘the spread of civilization’ ”(94).

Especially in the passages depicting the Collector’s defence-strategies against the *sepoys* and in the passages where he gives morale to other English people in the Residency, it is shown that he believes in the continuity of the British rule in India by claiming that it is beneficial for the indigenous people. As opposed to him, Fleury, a young English man, sometimes questions the superiority of the English culture over the Indian culture. Therefore, Mark Saunders suggests that Hopkins, the Collector and Fleury, “each embod[ies] warring sides of Farrell’s own psyche” (457). In the passage below, Fleury’s and the Collector’s ideas are compared:

The Collector had been discoursing in an objective way on the perplexing question of why, after a hundred years of beneficial rule in Bengal, the natives should have taken it into their heads to return to the anarchy of their ancestors. One or two mistakes, however serious, made by the military in their handling of religious matters, were surely no reason for rejecting a superior culture as a whole. (Farrell 170)

The Collector here ignores the assumption that religion is an important factor in the constitution of national identity and national culture (Delanty 150-151). In *The Siege of Krishnapur*, many English people think that English culture, is superior and should be accepted by the Indians as the only true culture. Fleury rejects this argument by developing a counter-argument on the basis of refusing civilisation altogether. He suggests that “[i]t’s wrong to talk of a ‘superior civilization’ because there isn’t such a thing. All civilization is bad. It mars the noble and natural instincts of the heart. Civilization is decadence!” (Farrell 171). Fleury further supports his argument by emphasising that civilisation brings bombs and death (Farrell 173). The Collector stubbornly prefers to turn a deaf ear to Fleury’s arguments and preserves his belief in the white man’s burden.

Even the name of the Collector’s collection of statues and small scientific objects, which was intended as the title for Farrell’s novel in the beginning, reflects his belief in the white man’s burden. Crane remarks that,

[o]ne of the statues owned by the Collector is an allegorical group of figures called ‘The Spirit of Science Conquers Ignorance and Prejudice’, a phrase which sums up part of this ideological justification, and one which Farrell at first planned to use as the title for this novel. A phrase which was sincerely meant and without irony in its time is full of irony in almost any circumstances now, but most particularly as the title for this self-aware fiction in which the Collector and his Exhibition voice the ‘shaping concept of history’ which justifies the enterprise of colonisation. (94)

Farrell’s intention in using the statement “The Spirit of Science Conquers Ignorance and Prejudice” reflects the negative attitude of the English people towards Indian culture and on a wider scale, to the indigenous cultures because here science stands for the British culture and ignorance and prejudice stand for Indian culture. Farrell may have given up using this phrase as the title, since the word “conquer” is pejorative, depicting the English as invaders who kill other people for the sake of gaining more land and power. Finally, Farrell makes his mind up on “*The Siege of Krishnapur*”. In this title, he associates the negative images with the Indians, as they raised a siege around Krishnapur. The irony is that in their own land, they are defined as invaders, whereas the real invaders like the Collector are depicted in a positive light.

In *The Siege of Krishnapur*, the references to the Great Exhibition, of which the Collector is very proud, works in two opposing ways to show the two different facets of the British Empire. On one side, the power of the British Empire, on the other, its fragility in the face of Indian culture is shown. John McLeod in ‘Exhibiting Empire in J.G. Farrell’s *The Siege of Krishnapur*’ argues:

Farrell’s “use of the Exhibition” is “to reveal the collection as the display/performance of imperialist culture and order. McLeod argues that Farrell uses the collection to demonstrate the inherent fragility of the colonially imposed order. The gathering of objects in any collection or exhibition imposes a taxonomy which draws together under a new heading a group of disparate objects, but the new group is always threatening to disperse into its original individualities. Each single object is a startling reminder of the potential for separation and anarchy.” (qtd. in Crane 96)

In fact, the Collector has fears about the fragility of the colonially imposed order from the beginning of *The Siege of Krishnapur*; he is one of the first who foresees the coming of the Mutiny. Due to this fear, he suggests to “disarm the native regiments” (Farrell 65) to prevent them from rebelling, as they did before in Meerut. Rumours of the Mutiny received the least attention from the English authorities, except the Collector: “Only the Collector remained convinced that trouble was coming” (Farrell 14). As a measure, “[h]e ordered the digging of a deep trench combined with a thick wall of earth ‘for drainage during the monsoon’ all the way round the perimeter of the Residency compound” (Farrell 15).

Another important English character in *The Siege of Krishnapur* is Fleury. In spite of the English blood in his veins, he is in the habit of questioning the so-called services of the English race in India. At this point, he differs from the other English men in *The Siege of Krishnapur*. He may be described as an idealist liberal humanist since he has a more positive approach towards the Indian people and Indian culture in general; but his attitude towards the *sepoys* is ambivalent.

In relation to the above-mentioned dilemmas stemming from the discrepancy between the policies of colonial British rule and humanistic ideals, Crane claims that most of Farrell’s characters experience a dilemma whether to follow liberal humanist ideology or not: “a liberal humanist ideology which [Farrell’s] characters can neither continue to believe in, nor yet reject” (18). Fleury’s case, is a good example of the Farrell tradition; especially the following conversation between Fleury and Louise is illustrative of the dilemma referred to:

“Alas,” said Louise, looking sad, “I sometimes wonder whether we shall ever find the right way. I wonder whether we shall ever live together in harmony, one class with another, one race with another... Will not the labouring classes always be resentful of our privileges? Will not the natives always be ready to rise up against the ‘pale-faced Christian knight with the Excalibur of Truth in his hand’ as the Padre so picturesquely referred to him last week?”

...

“Oh Louise,” he [Fleury] exclaimed, “that is why it’s so important that we bring to India a civilization of the heart, and not only to India but to the whole world... rather than this sordid materialism. Only then will we have a chance of living together in harmony. Will there even be classes and races on that golden day in the future? No! For we shall all be brothers working not to take advantage of each other but for each other’s good!” (Farrell 125)

When Fleury mentions working for each other’s good, it is probable that he is referring to the good of the English people since he does not hesitate to use indigenous people against each other and cause brother to kill brother during the Mutiny. At many instances in *The Siege of Krishnapur*, Fleury gets help from the Sikhs and from the indigenous people to hurt the other Indians. Yet, he is not totally carried away by the white man’s burden and he even questions the concept of civilisation which is generally associated with the white man. He is against the concept of civilisation which is solely linked with materialism and technological development. Therefore, at some points in *The Siege of Krishnapur*, he asks if civilisation is only railways or channels or if it has an emotional or spiritual side (Farrell 35, 38). He is reasonable and tries to establish a balance in his behaviours, and in Binns’ words, he “sheds his romantic sensitivity and his sceptical, critical attitude to colonial life” (76). In fact, he is a poet (Farrell 322): “Fleury is, in the early pages, a self-made imitation of a Romantic poet, a Shelley or a Chatterton, a pseudo-Byron... with the addition of a little Keats... a pale Romantic hero of a recognisable, if eclectic, type” (Crane 88-89), but he has to carry out military duties against the Indian *sepoys* during the Mutiny as well.

Crane further adds that “[u]nlike other Mutiny writers Farrell does not celebrate the end of the siege as a great victory for the British” (93-94). In *The Siege of Krishnapur*, Farrell gives the impression that this victory is actually a defeat or a failure as it is the beginning of the end, the end of the British Empire and of the British culture. Out of the ashes of colonialism, sooner or later an independent India is about to rise. This idea is implied in the scene where two Indians are depicted in tranquility drawing water from a well. About the effect of this scene on the Collector, Binns states: “[T]wo Indians drawing water from a well - a scene which sums up India for him, presumably in the way it shows lives which are functioning perfectly satisfactorily without the assistance of western culture, ideas or technology” (82).

This scene may lead to the question marks about the necessity of the white man's burden in the Collector's mind since these two Indians seem to be content and satisfied with their present situation, with what they have in their hands. They may have fallen behind in technological developments or may have been perceived as savages by the members of the Western civilisation, but they seem to be content with their indigenous culture. In this scene, Farrell's criticism of the British policies, which fail to gain the liking of the indigenous people and which make them turn towards their own roots and indigenous culture, becomes noteworthy. The refusal of the Indian culture by the English people results in the refusal of the English culture by the Indians as well. This rejection of the English culture by the Indians means the end of the Empire in the long run, which is an undesirable end for Farrell and which also means the failure of the concept of the white man's burden.

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