

Paul Scott's Magnum Opus – The Raj Quartet

Dr Vidya Patil

Assistant Professor

Department of English, Government First Grade Women's College, Bidar, Karnataka, India.

Abstract - Paul Scott was a well-known British novelist, playwright and poet who wrote the famous tetralogy, *The Raj Quartet*. The books in the tetralogy series outline the final years of the British occupation of India from manifold viewpoints and address moral conflicts of British army officers in the East. *The Raj Quartet* is a long, leisurely, high-detailed set of novels. 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. *The Raj Quartet* comprises four volumes, 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.

Key words - Novelist, Tetralogy, Masterpiece, Engrossing tale, Poignant

Introduction

Paul Scott was a well-known British novelist, playwright and poet who wrote the famous tetralogy, *The Raj Quartet*. He was born in Palmers Green, a suburb of London, in 1920. Scott was born to a family of commercial artists. Despite his early ambitions of becoming a poet, he trained in accountancy to become an accountant, and later on a literary agent. The war, in which he served in the British Army in Malaya and India, turned Scott's mind to literary pursuits. His experiences on the war front powered his drive to write. Thus, he wrote his own poetry, a number of radio plays and several novels based on his experiences.

The most famous of all his works was his tetralogy series titled *The Raj Quartet*. The books in the tetralogy series outline the final years of the British occupation of India from manifold viewpoints and address moral conflicts of British army officers in the East. A Booker Prize recipient, all of Scott's works focused on Indian themes and characters - even in those novels that were set outside the geographical boundaries of India. Paul Scott considered the novel "*the most exciting form of literary composition there is.*" But he was no miniaturist. He required a broad canvas. He never wrote a short story, for example, and he preferred "*to write about people in relation to their work, which strikes me as a subject no less important than their private lives.*" He once declared "*Novelists don't know answers. They pose questions in an oblique way.*" Scott, with his significant literary output, became one of the leading figures of Indian and British literature.

The Raj Quartet

The Raj Quartet is a long, leisurely, high-detailed set of novels. 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 June 1964, Scott began to write *The Jewel in the Crown*, the first novel of what was to become *The Raj Quartet*. It was published in 1966 to minor and muted enthusiasm. The remaining novels in the sequence were published over the next nine years – *The Day of the Scorpion* (1968), *The Towers of Silence* (1971) and *A Division of the Spoils* (1974). Scott wrote in relative isolation and only visited India twice more during the genesis of *The Raj Quartet*, in 1968 and in 1971.

The Jewel in the Crown engages with and rewrites E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), and so is necessarily set in a small, Hindu-majority rural town with an army garrison, but the wider province is implicit, and the later novels spread out to the cold-weather capital on the plains, the hot-weather capital in the hills, a neighboring Muslim-ruled Princely State, and the railways-lines that bind them together — as well as Calcutta, Bombay, and the Burmese theatre of war.

The cast also expands to include at least 24 principals, more than 300 named fictional characters, and a number of historical figures including Churchill, Gandhi, Jinnah, Wavell, and Slim. The story is initially that of the gang rape of a young British woman in 1942, but follows the ripples of the event as they spread out through the relatives and friends of the victim, the child of the rape, those arrested for it but never charged and subsequently interned for political reasons, and the man who arrested them. It also charts events from the Quit India riots of August 1942 to the violence accompanying the Partition of India and creation of Pakistan in 1946-7, and so represents the collapse of imperial dominance, a process Scott describes as "*the British coming to the end of themselves as they were.*"

At the time of their publication, the novels of *The Raj Quartet* were, individually and collectively, received with little enthusiasm. Only *The Towers of Silence* and *Staying On* achieved success with the award of the Yorkshire Post Fiction Award and the Booker Prize in 1971 and 1977 respectively. Sadly, Scott was too ill to attend the Booker presentation in November 1977. He died at the Middlesex Hospital, London on 1 March 1978.

Scott stated that "For me, the British Raj is an extended metaphor [and] I don't think a writer chooses his metaphors. They choose him." (Spurning, 1970) From his earliest experiences in north London, he felt himself an outsider in his own country. As his

biographer comments, probably only an outsider could have commanded the long, lucid perspectives he brought to bear on the end of the British raj, exploring with passionate, concentrated attention a subject still generally treated as taboo, or fit only for historical romance and adventure stories. However Scott saw things other people would sooner not see and he looked too close for comfort. His was a bleak, stern, prophetic vision and, like Forster's, it has come to seem steadily more accurate with time.

In 1980, Granada Television filmed *Staying On*, with Trevor Howard and Celia Johnson as Tusker Smalley and his wife Lucy, famously advertised at the time as "Reunited for the first time since Brief Encounter". The success of its first showing on British television in December 1980 encouraged Granada Television to embark on the much greater project of making *The Raj Quartet* into a major fourteen-part television series known as "The Jewel in the Crown", first broadcast in the UK in early 1984 and subsequently in the US and many Commonwealth countries.

It was rebroadcast in the UK in 1997 as part of the 50th anniversary celebrations of Indian independence, and in 2001 the British Film Institute voted it as 22nd in the all-time best British television programmes. It has also been adapted as a nine-part BBC Radio 4 dramatisation under its original title in 2005.

The Raj Quartet comprises four volumes, 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.

The Raj Quartet is set in 1942. This was the period after the great heyday of the British Empire in the 1920s, when over a one-fifth of the world population rose in the morning under the British flag. Though the empire had begun to crumble still the British government continued to propel earnest young men around the globe to reinforce their interests in far flung kingdoms. The British had accomplished an amazing feat of controlling a population of millions using a few thousands of their loyal officers and young men. The world had been pulled apart by the war and Britain was short on resources. With this scenario as a backdrop, this was the perfect point in history for India to press for independence.

After nearly seventy years of independence, when we now try to understand this period of British occupation of India (The British Raj), we realize that the British Raj is not a concept which can be easily comprehended. The nuances and the finer aspects of the Indo-British relations have been washed away by a relatively simple narrative of unjustified occupation and its eventual and inevitable demise. This is just a part of the story and doesn't capture the complexity of the situation.

But Paul Scott's book is no jingoistic celebration of the Empire. On the contrary, it lays bare the pretensions, the racism and above all the class divisions that characterize the society that Britain exported to its colony and, in the final analysis, while India embarked upon an unsatisfactory, divided independence, the British remained trapped within their cocoon of often inappropriate and certainly blind presumptions.

The action of *The Raj Quartet* takes place over a five-year span, from the nationalist "Quit India" disturbances of 1942 to Britain's departure in 1947. The consequences of these tremendous events are still echoed in the modern world of today. Paul Scott's four novels show us this history through the fates of several persons, most of them English. By the novelist's art we see the birth pangs of modern India, Pakistan, and Bangladesh — nations that contain over a fifth of the world's present population.

Four novels form Paul Scott's series known as *The Raj Quartet: The Jewel in the Crown, The Day of the Scorpion, The Towers of Silence, and A Division of the Spoils*. The quartet takes a panoramic view of India during the last days of the Raj, the British ruling class in India. In 1945, the British government voted to grant India independence from Great Britain; the days of colonialism ended and an uneasy transfer of power began. Scott's novels cover a five-year period from 1942 to 1947, and he uses that particularly turbulent and disturbing era to introduce a large cast of characters and the events that shape much of modern life—the last gasp of imperialism, World War II, and the dawn of the nuclear age.

While the four novels can be read separately, in isolation or out of chronological order, the narrative scope is best enjoyed by an orderly perusal. Each successive novel casts a new light on the one that came before; the later novels footnote, explain, and revise the history given earlier. Characters deepen and change subtly as India's history requires that they play a different role. Scott uses his wide-angled approach to demonstrate the cycles in the affairs of history and the emotions of men and women. His technique allows for graceful repetitions and recurring symbols. Yet this is not a sweeping tale that blows its character into the middle of tumultuous events. Scott delineates his characters in such a manner so that each individual stands as unique and very human.

The first novel, *The Jewel in the Crown*, describes the doomed love between an English girl and an Indian boy, Miss Daphne Manners and Hari Kumar. This affair touches the lives of other characters in three subsequent volumes, most of them unknown to Hari and Daphne but involved in the larger social and political conflicts which destroy the lovers. 1942. Britain fears a Japanese invasion and Indians demand for independence. On the night after the Indian Congress Party has decided to support Gandhi, riots break out and an ambitious British policeman takes a young Indian into custody with the accusation of having raped a woman, who both men love.

In *The Day of the Scorpion*, Ronald Merrick, a sadistic policeman who arrested and prosecuted Hari, insinuates himself into an aristocratic British family as World War II escalates. The arrest of Mohammed Ali Kasim, who sympathizes with the known Quit India Movement, by the British police means an impairment of the Anglo-Indian relations. For families like the Laytons, which

have lived in India for generations, the immediate social and political realities are disturbing and tragic. With increasing confusion and perplexity, the British are now forced to counter the violence and brutal years to follow.

The third volume, *The Towers of Silence*, follows the fate of the Layton family and a retired missionary, Miss Barbara Bachelor, who witnesses the connections of human dramas: the love between Miss Daphne Manners and Hari Kumar, the desperate sadness of an old teacher and the cruelty of Captain Ronald Merrick. The fourth and the last volume of the Quartet, *Division of the Spoils*, shows the divided loyalties of the British, when they flee, retreat, or cling to India, in the presence of the violent partition of India and Pakistan.

On occasions unsparing in its study of personal dramas and racial differences, *The Raj Quartet* is at all times profoundly humane, not least in the author's capacity to identify with a huge range of characters. It is also illuminated by delicate social comedy and wonderful evocations of the Indian scene, all narrated in luminous prose.

The Raj Quartet is one of the most important works of fiction of the twentieth century. It is a complex, multi-layered story of two countries, their colonial relationship and eventual "divorce" told from the many points of view of the supremely detailed characters Scott created. *The Raj Quartet* is especially relevant today in terms of the ongoing problems of "Nation Building" in the Middle East and other parts of the world. The question of how one person (Sarah Layton in the book) can break away from the ties of nationality and chauvinism that appear to define us and eventually create one's own identity is sensitively and beautifully detailed.

The Raj Quartet is the epic account of the last years of the British occupation of India. India was the "Jewel in the Crown" of the British Empire, and the relationship of the Indian people and their colonial masters was vastly complicated, to say the least. Paul Scott weaves together the lives of many unforgettable characters whose destinies are shaped by the British rule in India. He recounts the political, personal and historical joys and tragedies of the dissolution of that rule. He has created fascinating characters - Indian and British, Muslim and Hindu, who personify the complex relations which existed between the rulers and the ruled. He does so in a way that is never sentimental; never preachy or overwrought.

It is long and fairly deliberately paced, but absolutely riveting in its dramatic construction, characters and their inter-dynamics, historical interest, etc. The subject is a difficult one, dealing as it does with the conflicting needs of colonial Britain and the entire country of India, before it gained Independence and the Partition of that country into the "new" India and Pakistan. The canvas is enormous and the book is huge, comprised of four novels in one volume, for a total of 1,926 pages! Many historical figures are referenced and quoted and are interspersed among the day-to-day recorded lives of the people actually in the thick of things...the latter characters are all figments of Scott's story-telling imagination although it's not hard to imagine them being really based on actual people. Scott manages to present the sights, smells and experiences of India to readers.

It is hard to read many of the ways in which Britain controlled India and its people. There was a strong "parental" model of rule, in which white administrators dominated their Indian "subjects" by force and even physical punishment, such as public canings and other humiliating actions, emphasizing the superiority of the "white sahib" (and even the "meh sahib"...or ruling-class women) over the native population. The British were generally ignorant of the customs and religious requirements of the many tribes and religions present in that vast country and generally, could only ever see it through their own eyes and prejudices. There were, of course, ruling-class individuals whose foresight put them at odds with their superiors, but they proved to be a very small minority of the "Raj" (the name given to the ruling class) and who were unable to have much edifying effect on the overall administration of that country. To be fair, perhaps the one advantage left behind by the Raj was a strong Governmental and Legal process and tradition which the Indian Government eventually emulated.

Many historical events are described in the Quartet. There are many lessons to be learned in the battles between rulers and ruled; between upper and lower "classes" and between the powerful and the powerless. Scott gives us a significant portrayal of human nature under stress, of race relations and racism on the part of the Raj and a very engrossing and impressive telling of that contentious period and place and time in history.

The Raj Quartet has at its heart the confrontation between Hari Kumar, the young, English-public-school educated Indian liberal, and the grammar-school scholarship-boy turned police superintendent Ronald Merrick who both hates and is attracted to Kumar and seeks to destroy him after Miss Daphne Manners, the English girl who is in love with Kumar and has been courted by Merrick, is raped.

Critics have seen this conflict as one fundamentally influenced by Scott's own deeply-divided bisexual nature, with Kumar representing everything young, bright, and forward-looking that had been brutally crushed in Scott's own youth. At the same time Merrick, probably (but not absolutely certainly) a repressed homosexual, with authoritarian leanings and an arrogant sense of his own racial standing, is partly a self-portrait in which Scott confronted his own and his compatriots' defensive impulse to racial and personal self-aggrandizement, and to moral and political pretense. The result is widely seen as a substantial, and to date definitive, fictional exploration both of the underbelly and of the moral workings of the Raj in India.

Conclusion

In *The Raj Quartet*, Paul Scott recounts the final years of British India, the "Jewel" in the crown of the Empire. As he simply states in the first book, "*This is the story of a rape, of the events that led up to it and followed it and the place in which it happened.*" (JC, 1996) Through the gang-rape of a young English girl by Indian thugs, Scott takes us on a brilliantly exhaustive journey which brings together the time, the place and the people, and shows through the eyes of one family how the sun finally set on the British Empire. No set of novels so richly recreates the last days of India under British rule - "two nations locked in an imperial embrace" (JC, 1996) as Paul Scott's historical tour de force, *The Raj Quartet*.

Paul Scott's *The Raj Quartet* is probably one of the best examples of excellent writing about a foreign culture. These four books are a real tour de force - he writes in several different voices throughout, but remains completely sensitive to the political and social complexities and subtleties of the situation in India towards the end of the British occupation. Scott's writing is nuanced

and extraordinarily sensitive. The character development and plotting are superb and Scott's writing is powerful, and dignified without pretention. It is a story that deeply involves the reader. The books flesh out the dramatization and add a deep resonance to a remarkable achievement in writing. The Time called it "*one of the most important landmarks of post-war fiction.*"

References

- [1] Scott, Paul. *The Day of the DS*. London: William Heinemann, 1968 Revised edition, St.Albans : Panther,1970 ; Mandarin, 1996
- [2] Spurling, Hilary . *Paul Scott: A Life* (London, Hutchinson, 1990).
- [3] Scott, Paul. *The JC in the Crown*. London: William Heinemann, 1966 Revised edition, St. Albans : Panther,1973 ; Mandarin, 1996
- [4] New York Times . Review of *The Raj Quartet*.
- [5] Haswell, Janis E . *Behind Paul Scott's Raj Quartet: A Life in Letters* (Amherst: Cambria Press, 2011).
- [6] Swinden, Patrick : *Images of India* (Windsor: Profile Books, 1982).
- [7] T. Janis, & Popham, Janet : *An Introduction To The Raj Quartet* (Lanham, Md: Up of America, 1985).
- [8] Verma, Anil Kumar. *Paul Scott: A Critical Study Of His Novels*. (New Delhi: Radha Publications, 1999).
- [9] Weinbaum, F. S., *Paul Scott : A Critical Study* (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1992)
- [10] S. C. Reece Ed. *On Writing and the Novel: Essays by Paul Scott* (1961) (1975).New York: Morrow, 1987.

