

POST-ORIENTALISM: A STUDY OF PAUL SCOTT'S *STAYING ON*

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Abstract

This paper presents a study of Paul Scott's Booker Prize- winning novel *Staying On*. The novel is quite unlike western discourses of the past on India in that it does not wholly subscribe to the ideology of the colonial discourses. The novel, instead of propagating stereotypes about India, displays an attempt to subtly critique the Raj by undermining and subverting the stereotyped assumptions on which the Raj was founded. This it does through the use of inversion of stereotyped images about the Orient and the Occident. Such a mode of representation is termed "Post-Orientalism" in the paper.

Paul Scott was a famous English novelist, best known for his tetralogy of novels called the *Raj Quartet* — *The Jewel in the Crown* (1966), *The Day of the Scorpion* (1968), *The Towers of Silence* (1971) and *A Division of the Spoils* (1975). Scott won the Booker Prize in 1977 for his work *Staying On*. The novel is often read as an epilogue to the *Raj Quartet*. *Staying On* tells the story of the decline of the old India of the Raj and the emergence of a new commercial ruling class of Indians.

Scott's Booker Prize-winning novel makes an interesting study on account of the fact that the novel, though written by an English novelist, is quite unlike western discourses of the past on India. Edward Said had noted that irrespective of whether the particular area of discourse was scientific, historical, linguistic, anthropological or literary, the same set of ideas about the Orient or Orientals emerged. Commenting on Orientalism in the works of nineteenth century writers, Said wrote:

[T]he differences in their ideas about the Orient can be characterized as exclusively manifest differences, differences in form and personal style, rarely in basic content. Everyone of them kept intact the separateness of the Orient, its eccentricity, its backwardness, its silent indifference, its feminine penetrability, its supine malleability; this is why every writer on the Orient, from Renan to Marx (ideologically speaking), or from the most rigorous scholars (Lane and Sacy) to the most powerful imaginations (Flaubert and Nerval), saw the Orient as a locale requiring Western attention, reconstruction even redemption. (206)

The extreme repetitiousness of these representations in works by scholars from different disciplines led Said to treat Orientalism as an enormous discourse, producing stereotyped knowledge about the Orient. Applying Foucault's concept of power and knowledge and Antonio Gramsci's concept of hegemony, Said argued that Western representations of Oriental inferiority provided an ideological basis that helped justify Western military or political domination. Arguing along similar lines, Homi K. Bhabha saw colonial discourse as "a form of discourse crucial to the binding of a range of differences and discriminations that informs the discursive and political practices of racial and cultural hierarchization" (67). Its objective was to "construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction" (70).

However, Scott's novel charts a fresh territory. The novel based on the Raj was published decades after the Raj period in India ended and therefore reflects a changed political scenario in which old power structures are reversed. Though Scott's novel is nostalgic about the Raj, it does not wholly subscribe to the ideology of the colonial discourses of the past. Instead, the novel displays an attempt to subtly critique the Raj by undermining and subverting the stereotyped assumptions on which the Raj was founded. Significant in this respect is the writer's use of inversion of stereotyped images about the Orient and the Occident.

The novel's central characters are Lucy and Tusker Smalley, who are the last of the "stayers on" of the Raj in independent India. During the days of the Raj, Tusker and Smalley had never been a part of the elite class of English in India. Tusker had an unimpressive employment record as a "Mahwar Regiment chap" and knew he "didn't begin to rank with them at all" (85). He had made the mistake of marrying Lucy whose father was only a vicar and not a bishop, thereby bringing down his social standing. Lucy's naïve declaration that she was skilled at shorthand immediately had also had the impact of lowering their social status by identifying as "a girl who once had to work for a living" (104). India became independent when Tusker was forty-six years old: "too bloody early in life for a man to retire but too old to start afresh somewhere you don't know" (231). He did not think he had good prospects in going back to England at that age. He reasoned that his "pension would go further in India than in England" (231).

Tusker Smalley went on to live with his wife in the hill station of Pankot at the Lodge at Smith's Hotel, a decayed annexe to the main hotel building where they had lived before for twenty years while Smalley was in army service. But Smith's Hotel is now under the shadow of a new hotel called the Shiraz owned by a consortium of Indians. The Smalleys' have in their service a maid named Minnie, a Muslim servant, Ibrahim and a Christian gardener, Joseph. Their landlord is Lila Bhoolabhoy, wife of Francis Bhoolaboy, Tusker's friend. Lila, who intends to sell the Smith's Hotel to the Shiraz consortium, issues an eviction notice to the Smalleys, disregarding her husband's strong protestations. The notice shocks Tusker Smalley and he ends up having a fatal coronary attack. His wife Lucy is left homeless and hapless after his death.

The novel looks at decline of the Raj in a comical, yet poignant manner, by reversing the image of the colonizer-colonized. The name of the Smalleys itself suggests their diminished position in India, now that British colonization of India has ended and India is independent. The fact that a "new five-storey glass and concrete hotel, the Shiraz" (5) with an Indian name and Indian owners overshadows the Smith's hotel that carries an English name also signifies the change in the political scenario of Pankot.

The Smalleys are not in a financially good condition, yet they pretend to live on like the elite, genteel English of the Raj days, pursuing their meaningless pastimes. Even though the days

of Raj are over, the couple tries hard to conform to the image of the White abroad. Tusker keeps himself occupied in penning a history of Pankot, while Lucy gets her hair blue-rinsed, goes to the cinema, and dances to the music of her favourite songs. Scott attempts to show how the identity of the British is dependent on the enactment of certain roles that marks them as distinct from the Indians. However, their poor condition is in sharp contrast to the lives of their Indian friends who lead a life of luxury and gaiety. The Smalleys could only afford the luxury of "a bottle of Carew's gin a week and a monthly bottle of Golconda brandy [and] a dozen bottles of beer" (89). Mr. Bhoolahoy, Tusker's Indian friend, had money to go "heavy on the gin and light on the tonic" (137) whenever he wished to. The poor financial condition of the English couple therefore makes it difficult for them to maintain their superiority over the Indians.

While Lucy Smalley had to be content with "thunder boxes" in the toilet with new mahogany-stained seats, the Bhoolahoy's were rich enough to install flush-toilets at the hotel. The novel contains an episode when both Tusker and Lucy, suffering from diarrhoea are in the toilet and "half way through the performance Tusker had begun to laugh and after a while she had begun to laugh too, so there they had been, enthroned, laughing like drains" (251). Peter Childs sees in this episode "the most extreme description of a mixture of high and low; the enthroned raj of post-Independence India sit in state, laughing and excreting" (138).

Another reversal occurs in the Smalleys' relationship with their servants. In the days of the Raj, the English were the paternalistic figures, ensuring the welfare of the Indians. Now, the roles have become inverted and Ibrahim not only helped "at cooking the porridge which kept his old master's and old mistress's bones warm. If either was ill he could and did turn his hand to anything in the line of nursing and commissariat. Years younger than both he felt for them what an indulgent, often exasperated but affectionate parent might feel for demanding and unreasonable children whom it was more sensible to appease than cross" (20).

However, it was a difficult task to keep the eccentric English couple in good humour and the servants often found themselves sacked and later reappointed by the couple, leading Ibrahim to conclude that "they are a bit cracked" (62). This is again another significant moment in the novel, for the English couple with their idiosyncratic actions not only comes under the Indian scrutiny here, they are also judged as insane, thereby challenging any credible claims they may have on being superior to the Indians. Again, at a Holi party, Tusker Smalley, far from being the English figure looked upon with respect, awe or fear, is reduced to "a gesticulating clown, coloured from head to foot and giving a performance that was not so much attracting attention as forcing laughter from the immaculately dressed and well-behaved Indians whom he was haranguing, or telling some unseemly story to" (175).

The fact that the English couple are now under the supervisory gaze of Indians points to the change in the power structure of the decolonized country. The emergence of America as a neo-colonial power is also brought to light when Scott notes that the English couple have become a tourist attraction for American tourists who wanted to see "old-style British" (86) in independent India: "After the Taj Mahal, after the rock temples of Khajarao, after Elephanta, after Fatehpur Sikri, after the beach temple at Mahabalipuram and the Victoria Monument in Calcutta, the Smalleys of Pankot" (89).

The Smalleys also finds themselves at the receiving end when the ruthless Mrs. Bhoolahoy, the owner of the Lodge treats the poor Smalleys with vengeance: "What they [the Smalleys] can afford or not afford does not interest me. It is no concern of mine. When they ruled the roost our concerns did not enter their heads. It is tit for tat" (193). Lucy Smalley is humiliated by Mrs. Bhoolahoy when she attempts to discuss the loan of a pair of garden shears.

Mrs. Bhoolaboy summarily dismisses Lucy by telling her that she does not have to discuss such trivial matters over her lunch. Two Indian men present there witness Lucy's humiliation and see in the act "their own old humiliations . . . being adequately paid for by new" (223)

Lucy is left in a hopeless situation when Tusker dies leaving her alone "amid the alien corn, waking, sleeping, alone for ever and ever" (255). She is anguished by the fact that she now has "to rely for human sympathy and moral support upon [Indian] people who frankly do not care for" (103) her. Susy, Lucy's Eurasian hairdresser comes to comfort her: "So long as I have a roof over my own head, Mrs Smalley, you always have a home with me . . . People like us must stick together" (251). Lucy's words of comfort come off as another rude jolt to her as she had always maintained a condescending relationship with Lucy because of her mixed-race. Any illusion that Lucy may have had of leading the superior and dignified life as a memsahib has now ended, now that her life depended on the compassion of Indians and the Eurasian Lucy. This is again an inversion of the colonizer-colonized image of the benevolent colonizer and the colonized beneficiary.

At the end of the novel, we find Lucy sitting on her "throne" in the toilet next to Tusker's reminiscing about her days with Tusker: "Waiting on other people's verandahs for tongas, then, too, you took my arm, and in that way we waited. Arm in arm. Arm in arm. Throne by throne. What, now, Tusker? Urn by urn?" (253). This poignant scene mourning the death of Tusker Smalley not only brings the novel to an end, but also more significantly marks the definitive end of Raj days in India

Paul Scott, in his novel, successfully accomplishes subversion through a mode of representation that can be called "Post-Orientalism". The term "Post-Orientalism" is borrowed from Peter Morey, who in *Fictions of India: Narrative and Power* (2000) applies the term to Farrell and Scott. Morey notes:

The inadequacy of the term 'post-imperial', often applied to these writers – which fails to distinguish between radical and conservative aesthetic moves – perhaps calls for the creation of an alternative term such as, for example, 'post-orientalist', more applicable to writers like Farrell and Scott who show an awareness of the way in which orientalist structures of thought underpinning empire are textually determined and transmitted, and who intervene in this transmission in a radically destabilizing way. (13)

The term "Post-Orientalism" has also been proposed by Lidan Lin in 2006 as an alternate critical idiom for relations that do not neatly fall within the scope of Orientalism. Lin agrees with Dennis Porter's argument that Edward Said fails to "envisage the possibility that more directly counter-hegemonic writings or an alternative canon may exist within the Western tradition" (qtd. in Lin130). Following Morey and Lin, this study posits "Post-Orientalism" as a mode of Western representation that is counter-hegemonic in nature. Post-Orientalist representation shows an awareness of the constructed nature of identities under hegemonic relations and attempt to subvert or undermine such identities using techniques like inversion, parody and ironic treatment of Orientalist images. The significance of Post-Orientalist representation lies in the fact that it offers a critical perspective of colonialism from the very site of colonial epistemology that had once produced the hegemonic colonial discourse.

Therein also lies the greatest weakness of such a mode of representation. Although writers like Scott have been to India and have attempted to comprehend life in India from a sympathetic perspective, the fact remains that their consciousness is largely Western. Though Scott subtly deconstructs British hegemony in *Staying On*, there is a strain of pathos in the novel that renders the novel's signification ambivalent. Lucy and Tusker do not represent the best of

the English in India. They come off as pathetic figures who are forgetful and quarrelsome and at times racist and stupid. However, they still embody within themselves the virtues of the English. Mr. Bhoolabhoj is shown to be quite impressed with Tusker's knowledge : "The range of Tusker's knowledge of the world had astonished him, fascinated him" (4). Lucy too commands the respect of Mr. Bhoolabhoj for "the gift of quietly commanding obedience from those who owed it to her" (96) The end of the Empire is a tragedy and Lucy and Tusker bear witness to it, silently and without applauding: "It was so moving that I began to cry. And Tusker put his hand in mine and kept it there, all through the hymn and when we were standing all through God Save the King, and all through that terrible, lovely moment when the Jack was hauled down inch by inch in utter, utter silence" (171). The tragedy of the event is heightened by the fact that in Pankot, the English ruling class gives way to a new brown race of rich sahibs and memsahibs. Representative of this class are Mrs Bhoolabhoj and Mr and Mrs Desais, who "with their chicanery, their corrupt practices, their black money, their utter indifference to the state of the nation, their use of political power for personal gain were ruining the country or if not ruining it making it safe chiefly for themselves" (97). Scott thus points to a bleak future for India, making the reader mourn the end of Raj days. Therefore there is a certain degree of ambivalence in their writing, making it difficult for one to say with whom the writer's sympathies are. However, Scott does deserve credit for showing the English and the Indians in the new light of postcolonialism.

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