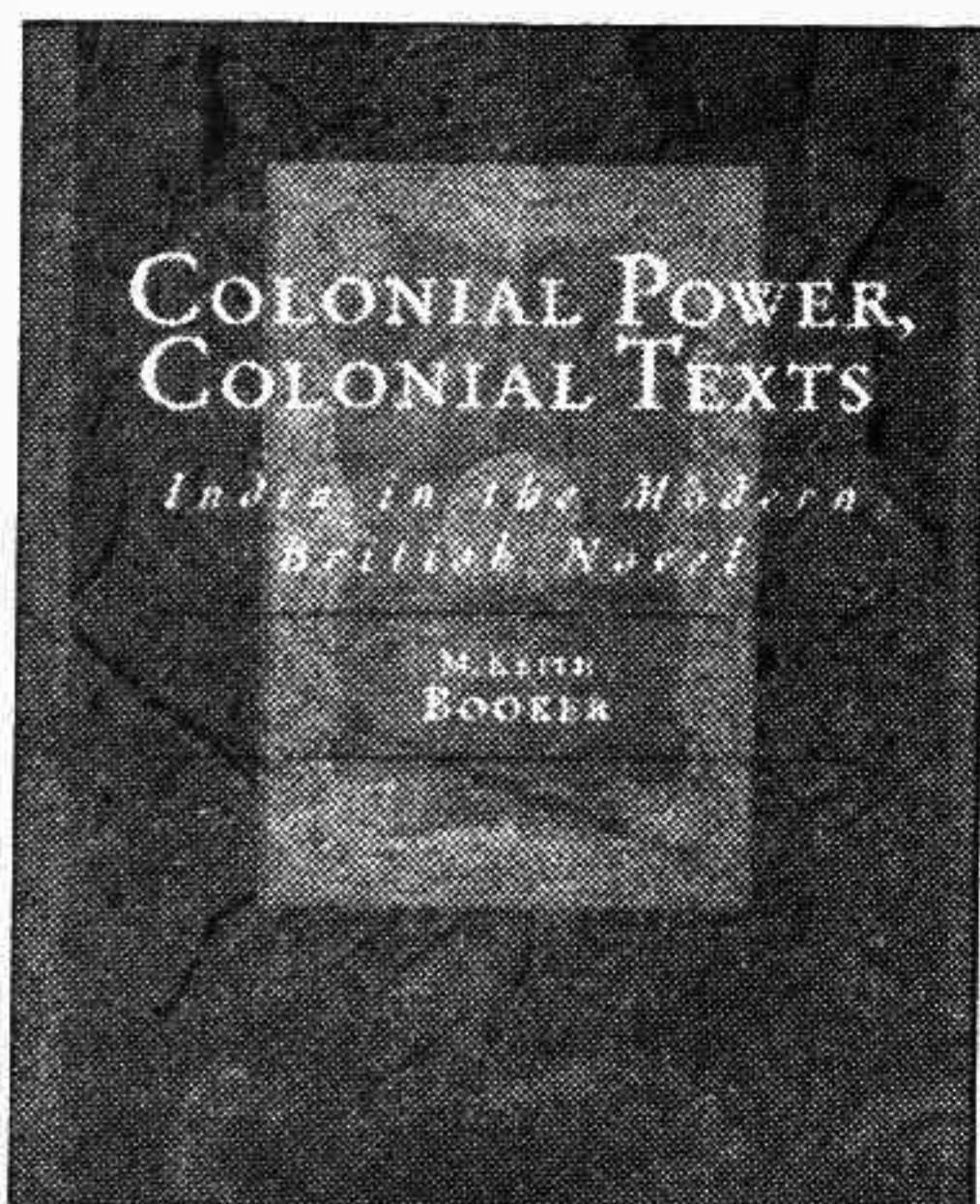


book review

The Decline and Fall of the Raj in British Fiction

by Fakrul Alam



"Outside the Whale," a typically pugnacious and polemical essay written in 1984, the novelist and controversialist Salman Rushdie confronts headlong what he sees as a disturbing trend in contemporary English culture: a conscious attempt to rekindle English desire for empire through fiction, films, and television serials. Making a connection between the decline of Britain in the 1980s, Thatcherism, and movies such as David Lean's *A Passage to India* or Richard Attenborough's *Gandhi*, the BBC television series based on Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet*, M. M. Kaye's best-selling novel *The Far Pavilions*, and its ignoble film version, Rushdie attacks what he calls "the Raj revival" and the "popularity of Raj fictions". As far as Rushdie is concerned, they are all symptoms of the "recrudescence of imperialist ideology" and of "the rise of conservative ideologies".

Rushdie's proceeds in debunking the Raj mystique in 1980s English culture on the basis of the critical assumption that for every text there is a context and that the context for the Raj revival is nostalgia for empire in post-imperial England. M. Keith Booker's recent book of literary criticism *Colonial Power, Colonial Texts: India in the Modern British Novel* (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1997) seems to have been inspired partly by Rushdie's observation and partly by the American Marxist theorist Frederic Jameson's dictum "Always historicize!". What Booker does in his work is to deconstruct British cultural productions on India, particularly English fiction, in the twentieth century, and relate them to the decline and fall of the British empire. To do so, Booker analyzes in some detail novels such as Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* (1901), E. M. Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), George Orwell's *Burmese Days* (1934), Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet* (1966-75), and J. G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) and *The Singapore Grip* (1978). Then in a long concluding chapter titled "A Meditation on Nostalgia — Imperial and Otherwise," Booker finds in Hollywood and American involvement in the Raj revival evidence of neoimperialist tendencies in the United States. Booker, in other words, in suggesting that the baton of global imperialist culture had passed from Britain to America by the middle of this century.

Booker begins his study of the rise

and fall of colonial power in the modern British novel with a chapter titled "Imperial Epistemologies: Science, Knowledge, and Power in British India." Drawing generally on Michel Foucault's observations about the nexus of knowledge and power in discourse and particularly on Edward Said's mapping of the complicity between the orientalist and the imperialist, Booker demonstrates how novel after English novel reveals the British desire to appropriate India through knowing it and the anxiety resulting from the discovery of the ultimate impossibility of such a project since the sub-continent would never yield itself fully to imperial epistemologies.

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Booker's second chapter, titled "Staging the Raj: Colonial Literature and the Theatrics of Power in British India," focuses on the theatrical nature of the Raj as evidenced not only in grand spectacles such as the coronation durbars of Queen Victoria but also in the novels written by the English about India. The point that Booker makes here is that the show of imperial power in India as well as British writing was essential in the construction of British national identity. But the underside of the desire to impress with ceremony, Booker argues, is a sense of insecurity and anxiety about retaining control over India. The sub-continent thus could be the locus of romance on the one hand and the site of neurosis on the other. Thus British novels about India have exotic elements in them but are also tinged with anxiety.

As in his first chapter, Booker begins his analysis of the theatrical nature of India in British fictional representations of the sub-continent by discussing *Kim*. He points out that Kipling's novel partakes of genres such as fantasy, romance, and adventure. Thus *Kim* participates in the Great Game, hobnobs with secret agents, and outwits the Russians, helping thereby to keep the empire trouble-free. But he can do so only in a "Raj undisturbed by the nastiness of politics and history" and only because Kipling represses all signs of Indian resistance. *A Passage to India*, however, presents a Raj riven with conflicts, even as it shows its Anglo-Indians staging a romantic comedy called *Cousin Kate*, as if to draw attention from the tumultuous times they were going through. Which is to say, like Kipling, they preferred to keep up appearances of order

and harmony in the face of mounting and unsettling evidence of Indian resistance. Aziz's trial in Forster's novel is an excellent example of colonial rule as a spectacle designed to emphasize imperial power, but the outcome of the trial shows that the British were losing their grip on the performance and that the script could no longer be followed. Booker examines *Burmese Days* and Orwell's brilliant essay, "Shooting an Elephant" to further highlight the role-playing that went on in British India and the stereotyping and fantasizing that the British resorted to in the process. By the time Farrell wrote about India in this fiction, Booker observes, he could only depict the British imperial adventure as farce. Irony and the subversion of romance are thus the tools utilized by this postmodernist novelist of imperial India in *The Siege of Krishnapur*. With the benefit of hindsight, Booker concludes at the end of the chapter that "the British empire, built on illusion and theater from the beginning, was doomed from the opening act."

Chapter 3 of *Colonial Power, Colonial Texts* is about colonial violence and British power in India. Booker shows in this chapter how violence often accompanied imperial spectacles and how terrorizing Indians became a favorite ploy for perpetuating colonial rule. In fact, Booker argues, "colonial power was an amalgam of violence and theater," best evidenced after the mutiny when the defeated sepoys were blasted from cannons or hanged by the thousands to emphasize the power of the British to Indians.

Booker's third chapter describes the long shadow cast by the Mutiny over almost all the fiction produced by the English about India. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* is obviously a mutiny novel but so is John Master's *Nightrunners of Bengal* (1951) and George MacDonald Fraser's *Flashman in the Great Game* (1975). Masters, Booker points out, depicts the mutiny as an occasion for imperial romance. In contrast, Farrell and Fraser parody the genre and highlight "the absurdity of the Raj". Farrell, in particular, subverts "British pretensions to grandeur by showing the utter irrelevance of British fantasies of power and glory to Indian social reality." As in the other chapters, Booker suggests that the underside of the domineering nature of the English imperialist was anxiety about his staying power and about the insufficiency of the techniques of domination employed by the imperial regime. Booker thus reads Kipling's memorable long story, *The Man Who Would Be King*, Orwell's *Burmese Days*, and Paul Scott's *Raj Quartet* as works displaying such anxiety as well as violence. He also focuses on the coercive, carceral side of the Raj and the use of rape as a metaphor for colonial violence in novels such as A

Passage to India and Scott's *Raj Quartet*.

Colonial Power, Colonial Texts moves on next to a chapter on the treatment of history in the British novel about India. Booker observes at the beginning of this chapter that "most British colonial writers...have an inherent sense of history, if only because they tend to be strongly aware that the British Empire about which they write is in the process of being swept away." To put it more bluntly, the decline and fall of British power loom largely in the minds of novelists such as Forster, Scott, and Farrell. This makes them either pessimistic or skeptical or conservative in outlook. No wonder then that most characters of British colonial fictions seem to be alienated and anxious individuals who fail to connect with others or who often display signs of morbidity. No wonder, too, that an air of crisis is ubiquitous in novels such as *Burmese Days* and *A Passage to India*.

By the time Booker brings *Colonial Power, Colonial Texts* to a close, it becomes obvious that his favourite novelist of empire is Farrell because he had the clearest vision about the decline and fall of empire and because he could see overt imperialism being replaced by global capitalism in his novel *The Singapore Grip*. At this point, Booker ties post-imperial nostalgia in England and America with "the post-modernist culture of late capitalism." That is to say, Booker ends his book — as he began it — as a student of Frederic Jameson who in his 1991 book *Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism* had focused on the way global capitalism has determined cultural productions in the closing decades of this century. In fact, the final pages of *Colonial Power, Colonial Texts* has Booker depicting the Raj revival of the 1980s in the West as the outcome of the link between "the British ideology of empire and the American ideology of Cold War anti-communism."

It will be clear from my summary of *Colonial Power, Colonial Texts* that Booker has written a useful and thought-provoking book. What makes his work especially valuable is his ability to synthesize the best of contemporary theory (Michel Foucault, Edward Said, Frederic Jameson, Louis Althusser, Benedict Anderson) and draw on recent work done on post-colonial theory by Said, Sara Suleri, Cauri Viswanathan, Ranajit Guha and others to read British novels on India from a truly post-colonial perspective. That Booker is an American scholar — he teaches English at the University of Arkansas — makes this a truly amazing and admirable feat.

Nevertheless, I must end this review by registering my reservations about Booker's perspective and commenting on the unsatisfactory aspects of his book. For one thing, there is something

very reductive in Booker's outlook that limits his vision. Thus in p. 3 we read that his premise is that texts "are the products not of the individual imaginations of their authors but of complex historical phenomena that do a great deal to condition the kind of literary texts that authors are able to produce." While one can understand a Marxist critic privileging history over the individual, surely Booker returns again and again in his book to *A Passage to India* and not to, say, Edward Thompson's *A Farewell to India* (1931) because E. M. Forster's is the much more acute sensibility! In other words, a text is great not only because it is the product of "complex historical phenomena" but also of a brilliant individual.

As a critic Booker is nothing if not industrious and *au courant*. The extensive bibliography appended to his book is testimony to his reading and his acquaintance with the latest work on colonialism and post-colonialism and with recent literary and Marxist theory. But Booker often gives me the impression of someone who would rather flit from text to text rather than stay for an answer. For example, in Chapter 2 of his book, where, let us remember, he is talking about staging the Raj in British colonial fiction, he makes the excellent point of the theatrical display of British power in Aziz's trial. He then follows it up by contrasting the Britishness of the trial scene with the unscripted and chaotic nature of the Indian Gokul Ashtami festival at the end of the novel. This point is also quite convincing, but soon we have Booker discussing alienation as a motif in all of Forster's novels *a la* Jameson. Next, he takes up Orwell's *Burmese Days* as "a striking example of both colonial alienation and the *bovarystic* processing of colonial reality through prefabricated texts." By now the theatrics of British power is almost forgotten as Booker turns his gaze in the next few pages to a comparison between the Anglo-Indians of Burma and "Flaubert's exhortation of French bourgeois society in *Madame Bovary*". This leads Booker to a potted review of the Merchant-Ivory film *Shakespeare Wallah*. Booker is tangentially justified in discussing the film in his analysis when he discusses the lack of interest in English Shakespearean productions in post-independent India and the triumph of Bollywood, but the point is scarcely made when he brings in first Jameson and then Foucault in a paragraph to view the travelling English actors of *Shakespeare Wallah* as "characters from the age of imperialism and monopoly capitalism shipwrecked on the sands of time in the age of post-modernism and global late capitalism, much in the mode of Foucault's depiction in *The Order of Things* of Don Quixote as a figure from an earlier system who appears mad because he exists in the context of the new episteme

of the classical age." Got it? If you have not, it cannot be your fault, for you have had very little time to accustom yourself to such vertiginous heights and spectacular conclusions! In passages such as the one I have been analyzing Booker often gives me the impression that he works on the principle of association than on sustained and in-depth analysis.

On many an occasion, I found Booker drag in references that seem to be gratuitous. Satyajit Ray, for instance, gets three entries in the index, but the sole reason why he is mentioned seems to be an unmerited sentence-long comparison between his depiction of the steam engine in a pastoral setting and Kipling's depiction of the river and the road in *Kim*. That *Kim* itself is subjected to an offhand Bakhtinian analysis at this point must reinforce my objection here: Booker is at times more bent on dazzling readers and on local effects than incisive analysis and sustained argument!

But what I find most irritating about Booker's perspective is his tendency to use the bourgeois as his whipping-boy for all the evils associated with colonialism and with everything else. Did you not think that "the invention of the tradition of English literature 'with Shakespeare as its core' became a major tool of bourgeois hegemony in nineteenth-century Britain"? If you did not, you must be wrong, because the bourgeois is consciously out to interpellate you with such awful notions such as the greatness of Shakespeare! Without offering any evidence and solely on the basis of the certainty that comes "naturally" to a Marxist critic, Booker can indict the British bourgeoisie as the only group in that country which "used India as a sort of laboratory of power in which it could try out various techniques of domination for use in maintaining its new position of power in Britain." Was the British aristocracy, then, totally uninvolved in imperial practices? But that is a question Booker will not brook, for to him recent history is one unending scene of bourgeois conspiracy!

On the whole, Booker's *Colonial Power, Colonial Texts* is lucidly written and one must be thankful that Booker does not let his Marxist and literary theoretical interests clog his prose style. But just as his Marxism occasionally leads him to mechanical and reductive interpretations of colonial and cultural formations, Booker's prose at times becomes formulaic and/or wooden. For example, the phrase, "it is no accident" or its variants, so popular with Marxists, is banded about endlessly in the concluding chapter, and the word "bourgeoisie" is used so often that I found it numbing at the end.

Despite these shortcomings though, *Colonial Power, Colonial Texts* must be viewed as an important work of literary criticism. Students of the modern British novel, of colonialism and its aftereffects, and of cultural studies will find much in the work that is engaging. And read in conjunction with Michael Gorra's contemporaneous work *After Empire: Scott, Naipaul, Rushdie* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997), Booker's book will allow us to see the lasting and powerful consequences of the British Raj in the British fictional imagination.

reflections

Relaxing [naughtily] in Dhaka

by A Husnain

WHEN the politicians can play naughty tricks upon us, we can do the same in our drawing rooms and indulge in some leg pulling on the foibles of our changing society (the mores are losing the moorings). This pastime is particularly suitable on hartal days, when we wish to work (to develop our nation), but are not allowed to do so, as politics is not yet developed enough to handle the development of the society, but is earnestly and ferociously engaged in self-improvement movements (without any direction).

Here are some quotations from "The Left-handed Dictionary" by L. L. Levinson, Collier Macmillan, 1963, with some native comments.

* "A zoo is a place where animals study human". A deshi parliament in a super-macro under-developed country is a place where the true human nature could studied officially and openly on the television screen, (thanks to the freedom enjoyed by the electronic media). The bleeding heart is laid bare before the Hon Speaker, and behind the speaker (open-heart hypocrisy), but the brain goes on working secretly for

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* "Married men can open their mouth when they yawn". Our public speakers do not yawn when they open their mouth, but the listeners do. The mouth leads into the bottomless basket just a dozen inches below. No dredging is necessary as it is bottomless.

* Writing is the art of putting black on white to make the effect colourful. "Reading and writing are the only respectable profession in bed". Standing on the feet, in our society, the fastest way to build up a profitable professional career is to become a public speaker with the nasty power of oratory, using spicy and simmering language in vogue in the hot tropical countries. There must be a lot of adjectives in the vocabulary, otherwise the audience

doze off, and swat flies. Compliments must be paid indirectly, on the liens of traditional Greek style, such as "He is an honourable man"; being a military officer's widow, she slept in the cantonment. In all cases of writing or speaking, it must be remembered that language was given to man to conceal his thoughts, not to reveal it. That is the first commandment of the politicians and the lawyers. The judges are supposed to decode the hidden meanings. The voters only vote.

* "What is never out of fashion? For men, it is women". The local preference is for leaders who are Begums. So far we have had two such charismatic ladies. The third successor is yet to emerge. But we are not a matriarchal society. While

a woman is the better half (compared to a male-female pair), she is actually one-half (0.5) of the better half (0.75). The remaining half (0.25) of the woman is looking for the better quarter (0.25) of the man. The arithmetic is a bit tricky, but this bonus is an unpredictable variable; which led to the mysterious term 'the feminine mystique'.

"Only a woman can skin a wolf and get a mink". Here our financial wizards can skin money and become prominent citizens otherwise known as the bank-loan defaulters. The freedom has so far been guaranteed due to cleverly built-in delaying tactics.

"A woman always look into a mirror, but not when reversing a car". Or a man reversing himself (without a car). This

is a quiz. What does it mean?

* There are two types of virtue: the feminine virtue is the lack of temptation; and masculine virtue is lack of opportunity. It is won't-power. Here we have a third type: What is political virtue?

* Sonar Bangla: a country (below the legendary Shangri-la) where the forecast is that democracy will really work during the millennium.

* An undertaker is the guy who is sure to let you down. In our country, there are more options. The examples are left to the readers, as a quiz.

* "Trousers is singular at the top and plural at the bottom". What is plural in the beginning and singular afterwards? Ask a person who is not a bachelor.

* To practice tolerance, slam the

door, not the landlord". For initial practice, try driving in Dhaka, and getting 'kissed' publicly. It is a romantic misadventure, without wild goose chase (there is no space for the chase). It is a chase-proof city, where close proximity breeds contempt.

* Tomorrow is the greatest labour-saving device ever invented". Locally, to whom do you impart this piece of wisdom? Try the Information Minister. She won't mind, because her busy mind is full of other priorities.

* "Thinking is merely rearranging one's prejudices". Corollary: Thought is the son of a wish. What is the daughter?

* "Success is the ability to pay the arrears income tax". Local amendment: for 'arrears income tax,' read 'arrears bank-loan/s'.

* "Statesman are personalities who appear in the past or the future". An unchangeable statement in the Third World.

* "A spinster s a lady who knows all the answers but who was never asked the questions". Can you spot a political spinster? There is a surplus in this country, but not suitable for export, even after processing, and reprocessing.