

The Influence of the Sepoy Mutiny on British Literature & The White Man's Burden

Albert Zhou

Abstract:

The paper explores how the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny that marked the beginning of the Indian Independence Movement shifted the British psyche, as demonstrated by marked trends in post-Mutiny literature. Given how the Sepoys still were able to strike fear into the heart of the Empire, despite being unsuccessful in their immediate goals, authors such as Wilkie Collins and Henry Kingsley produced new works that questioned Britain's colonial rule over India. Yet, their cohort's seemingly progressive gestures in favor of the Indian people were anything but post-colonial, still operating within colonial mindsets. By analyzing the Collins' *The Moonstone* and Kingsley's *Stretton*, I argue that post-Mutiny literature reinforced paternalist attitudes towards India, specifically the "White Man's Burden".

Keywords: British literature, Sepoy Mutiny, Indian independence, colonization

Introduction

When the mass movement for global decolonization reached the borders of British-controlled India, the British Empire's days were limited. The 1857 Sepoy Mutiny, although unsuccessful, marked the beginning of the Indian Independence Movement, striking fear in the Empire located 7,000 kilometers away. Furthermore, it is believed that following the Sepoy Mutiny, there was an increased public support of the Independence Movement, particularly in the British literary world. However, upon closer examination of the core texts of Mutiny fiction it is revealed that the authors were only more critical of their own army's corruption, rather than recognizing their own complicity in colonizing India as literary agents working

in the Imperial core.

The Sepoy Mutiny

Popularly deemed as "The Jewel [of] the British Crown," (Aparajita Mukhopadhyay, 2023), India was crucial to the British Empire in providing profitable goods, such as silk, spices, opium. Not only could the British capitalize on the abundant land, but also the huge Indian workforce that could easily provide cheap and exploitable labor. Such labor was utilized to produce precious commodities at a lower cost, ultimately making India the economic powerhouse of the British colonies. Thus, the British Empire was able to become and flourish as a superpower through

colonizing India.

Problems began to emerge in India under the leadership of the East India Company (EIC), who governed the colony from the 18th century to the mid-19th century. The Company devoted its effort fully to maximizing the profit while oppressing Indian peasants, soldiers, and workers. For example, workers were forced to toil in harsh environments while being offered low and unlivable wages; Sepoys soldiers would be the first ones deployed in wars before the actual British army. Their unrestrained greed and cruelty caused dissatisfaction to build among the Indian people, leading to the 1857 Sepoy Mutiny.

The Sepoys were Hindu Indian soldiers that were controlled by Britain. According to Hindu tradition, it is strictly prohibited to come into contact with any cow products, such as the animal fat that their rifle cartridges were equipped with, as their culture sees that animal as sacred. When the Sepoys suspected the British Empire was using animal fat on the cartridge without their knowledge, they decided to rebel. The Sepoys launched violent attacks on the British army first, shooting British officers and marching onto Delhi. Following the event, about 6,000 British soldiers 800,000 Indians were killed. After the Mutiny, the British government realized that the EIC could not handle India well, eventually deciding to downgrade it from its role as governors.

The Sepoy Mutiny, although ultimately failing and ending in 1859, effectively kicked off the beginning of the Indian Independence Movement and traumatized the psyche of the British Empire. As the rebellion ended, the British Empire realized that the Sepoy Mutiny was not just a one-time military uprising caused by the animal fat in cartridges, but rather the beginning of a long and concerted effort for Indian independence. This slow and steady determination scared them and as a result, the Empire started paying more attention to Indian movements, overestimating the influence of events.

For example, in India, there was a group called Sadhus who traveled between Hindu sites with bodies covered in ash. Although their purpose for traveling was strictly religious, the British Empire assumed that the Sadhus were actually spreading information and uprising against them. As a result, the British Empire conducted an investigation on them in 1893 to squash any potential rebellion. The inquiry was proved to be useless in the end, as Kim Wagner, a professional British Empire historian, stated: "The British were not starved of information—the problem was, ironically, that in many ways they 'knew' too much and their understanding of local movements and politics was overdetermined by the trauma of 1857" (Wagner, 2013). This quote shows the long-term effect of Sepoy Mutiny that the British Empire was afraid that it could lead to

more social and cultural resistance of Indians, so that they were trying their best to secure the situation and prevent future rebellions. The Sepoy rebellion, regardless of its failure, threatened British reign and its internal sense of security and stability, forcing the British Empire to adjust its strategies.

Post-Mutiny Literature: Shifts in the British Psyche

Shortly after the Sepoy Mutiny, there were a few notable changes in British literature that reflected people's opinion on India's independence movement. *The Moonstone* was a detective novel written by Wilkie Collins in 1868, only eleven years after the Mutiny. The book depicted a story of the diamond being stolen and how the thief was found. Originally, the diamond was stolen from a Hindu temple that was guarded by three Brahmin priests, only to be later stolen by a British officer who then gifted it to his unknowing niece as a birthday gift. After the niece's birthday party, three Indian jugglers were hired for entertainment and the diamond was stolen again. The family hired an investigator to look into the case, and after a year of no leads, it finally was revealed that two cousins were implicated at the incident, one of which was Godfrey Ablewhite. But before the diamond could be tracked down, Ablewhite was murdered by the three Indian jugglers, who were actually the Brahmin priests and returned the diamond back to its rightful home in the Hindu temple.

As Walden argues, "Collins utilized the theft of the moonstone as a vehicle to emphasize the arrogance and often negligent nature of British imperial rule" (Walden, 2011). Although the event was not explicitly mentioned within the story, there were factual depictions of life in India under the EIC's control. One particular quote stands out: "[the soldiers] loaded themselves with gold and jewels. It was in the court outside the treasury that my cousin and I met, to enforce the laws of discipline on our own soldiers" (Walden, 2011).

Furthermore, it was "‘emancipated’ in its ‘serious treatment of Hindu faith’ and of Brahmins at a time when ‘the very word “Indian,” conjured up grim visions in most Victorian minds’" (Free, 2006). Given that Victorian literature rarely mentioned British officers being corrupt and arrogant or depicted, let alone Indians being civilized and advanced, Collins' novel marked a distinct departure from the literary works that preceded it.

Another novel of the same time period, *Stretton*, written by Henry Kingsley, expressed a similar point of view, though focusing more on the atrocities done by both the British Imperialists and Indian Sepoys. Through the lens-

es of three young British men, the violence of the British empire was vividly demonstrated throughout the book. As adults, they were involved with the Sepoy Mutiny, and recalled the brutal atrocities they had witnessed upon their return to Britain after their crown's victory. In a debate between the main characters on what would be the ideal punishment for the rebel Sepoys, one British soldier, Claverhouse, remarked, "we have no authority [to decide their fate]. India was not conquered by authority, was it" (Walden, 2011) ? Here, Kingsley is careful to use Claverhouse's unique authoritative position within the empire to cast doubt on Britain's presence in India.

From Collins' metaphorical moonstone to Kingsley's perspective from a British army insider, both post-Mutiny authors had the same message: that the real enemies during the Sepoy Mutiny were the cruel British authorities, not the uprising Indian Sepoys.

The White Man's Burden

Still, British post-Mutiny authors limited their commentary to merely criticising the poor conduct of British soldiers and officers. Although Collins and Kingsley daringly challenged the noble reputation of the Empire's frontliners, it is questionable whether they fully advocated for the Sepoy's grander cause of Indian independence or used them as a means to paint themselves as 'progressive' colonizers.

For example, Collins spends a significant part of *The Moonstone* focusing on the bad characteristics of the British officers and soldiers rather than depicting how socially advanced the Indians were. Given that the story's major conflict stemmed from the greed of British soldiers, it can be deduced that Collins sought to mainly criticize the British soldiers, perhaps out of compatriot shame or moral disgust. Authors such as Collins sought to relieve themselves of colonial guilt,

chalking up immoral behaviors to "strivings after good." (Satia, 2022). The young Punjabi-American historian Satia Priya details "how the British managed their conscience despite the overwhelming evidence of brutality [they] perpetrated" (Satia, 2022), in her book *Time's Monster: History, Conscience and Britain's Empire*. On an ideological level, this looked like pursuing a liberal imperialism that "was a kind of earnestly deliberate hypocrisy" (Satia, 2022). Such liberal thinking also manifested in John William Kaye's, a British military historian, response to the Sepoy Mutiny: "Because we were too English the great crisis arose, but it was only because we were English that, when it arose, it did not utterly overwhelm us." When asked by the interviewer whether or not Kaye made the statement without any self awareness, Priya responded

that it was precisely this type of public attitude, held by everyone from officials to authors, towards historical wrongdoing that allowed the British to produce a "kind of moral martyrdom undertaken for the sake of history" (Satia, 2022).

Such attitudes were common during the time Collins developed the novel's manuscript. For a long time, India was believed by the Western world as unable to self-govern itself, and thus needed another entity to step in and guide it. Rudyard Kipling, a British author born in India, stated, "Law and order is what they want and we are there to give it to them and we give it [to] them straight." As illustrated in the quote, the British Empire believed that they were helping India by colonizing them by delivering them lawfulness and peace. In fact, these paternalistic ideas, also known as the "White Man's Burden" were echoed in a large part of post-Mutiny literature.

Conclusion

As Scottish author, John Wilson once, famously wrote: "The sun never sets on the British Empire" (Strout, 1933). But as India became completely irrelevant to the British Empire, the British lost its last chance to survive as the Empire whose "sun never sets". An increasing number of colonized countries began to gain their independence, further weakening the British power. At the end, it shrank to one tenth of its original extent, and became known as the United Kingdom. Just as the Mongol Empire, which once stretched from the far eastern part of Asia to Europe, and fell because of conflicts after Genghis Khan's death, its counterpart in Europe, the British Empire, ended similarly to the Mongol Empire. Would the history of the British Empire change, if they had kept control of India? Nobody knows.

References

- Aparajita Mukhopadhyay. (2023). *"The jewel in the crown": India and the making of imperial Britain – HIST5103* [Syllabus]. University of Kent. <https://www.kent.ac.uk/courses/modules/module/HIST5103>
- Bite Size. (2023). *Case study: India's independence campaign*. BBC News. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/bitesize/topics/z8dfvwx/articles/zn6496f>
- Brown, J. (2020). *The twentieth century*. In *The Oxford history of the British Empire (Vol. IV)*. Oxford University Press. https://www.academia.edu/3378659/The_Oxford_History_of_the_British_Empire_Volume_IV_The_Twentieth_Century
- Editors of Encyclopædia Britannica. (2025, June 12). *Dominance and dominions*. Encyclopedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/place/British-Empire/Dominance-and-dominions>

- Free, M. (2006). 'Dirty linen': Legacies of empire in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone*. *Texas Studies in Literature and Language*, 48(4), 340–371. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40755470>
- General Assembly Resolution 1514 (XV). (1960). *Declaration on the granting of independence to colonial countries and peoples*. United Nations. <https://www.ohchr.org/en/instruments-mechanisms/instruments/declaration-granting-independence-colonial-countries-and-peoples>
- Mark, J. J. (2016). *Ten minute history - The late British Empire (short documentary)* [Video]. History Matters. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uifyFUL22PA>
- McNamara, R. (2020, November 7). *The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857*. ThoughtCo. <https://www.thoughtco.com/sepoy-Mutiny-of-1857-1774014>
- Nicora, F. (2022, May 6). *The crack in the cornerstone: Victorian identity conflicts and The... Cahiers Victoriens et Édouardiens*. Presses universitaires de la Méditerranée. <https://journals.openedition.org/cve/10462>
- Pati, B. (2007). Historians and historiography. *Economic and Political Weekly*. <https://www.epw.in/journal/2007/19/1857-special-issues-specials/historians-and-historiography.html>
- Ramaswamy, S. (2023). *Bapu behind bars*. B is for Bapu. <https://sites.duke.edu/bisforbapu/learn-more/bapu-behind-bars/>
- Rathee, P. (2018). Freedom through the eyes of historians. *Deccan Herald*. <https://www.deccanherald.com/specials/freedom-through-eyes-687657.html>
- Satia, P. (2022). Interview: Priya Satia on the 'earnestly deliberate hypocrisy' of the British Empire (R. Venkataramakrishnan, Interviewer). *Scroll.in*. <https://scroll.in/article/1022390/interview-priya-satia-on-the-earnestly-deliberate-hypocrisy-of-the-british-empire>
- Saville, J. (2017). *From India to Hong Kong: How Britain's empire crumbled* [Video]. *Newsweek*. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MABC4wNjsFg>
- Sriram, A. (2020). How India's independence movement set the tone for future global political movements. *Deccan Herald*. <https://www.deccanherald.com/specials/how-india-s-independence-movement-set-the-tone-for-future-global-political-movements-873259.html>
- Strout, A. L. (1933). Samuel Taylor Coleridge and John Wilson of *Blackwood's Magazine*. *PMLA*, 48(1), 100–128. <https://doi.org/10.2307/457975>
- Walden, H. D. (2011). *Sahib and Sepoy: The British perspective on the Sepoy Rebellion of 1857* (Master's thesis, Marshall University). Theses, Dissertations and Capstones. <https://mds.marshall.edu/etd/43>
- Wagner, K. A. (2013). 'Treading upon fires': The 'Mutiny'-motif and colonial anxieties in British Empire. *Past & Present*, (218), 159–197. <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23360258>
- Yergin, D., & Stanislaw, J. (1998). *The commanding heights – Excerpt* (pp. 82–83). Simon & Schuster. https://www-tc.pbs.org/wgbh/commandingheights/shared/pdf/ess_africadevel.pdf
- Abhi & Niyu. (2022). *Royal Indian Navy mutiny 1946 | Why did the British finally leave India?* [Video]. YouTube. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=4nzS4uSe8aU>