

A Fictionalized Account of Indian Historical Event in “ James Gordon Farrel’s *The Siege of Krishanpur*”

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Abstract

History, for the common man has been nothing but a story of the countries, civilizations and rulers. It is considered a record of wars and victories and not defeats, innovation and fall of empires and emperors, which reflects that history is written by the strong and victorious. In this way, the power and sovereignty being a common factor regulate the creation of history. When history becomes a tool in the hands of the wealthy and the powerful, naturally the poor and the weak are marginalized. This is a natural response and opposition to the oppression and domination of the Western world over other nations, cultures and civilizations. All these oppressions were bursting out in India in the form of the revolt of 1857. The Indian revolt of 1857 has played a significant role in the history of Indian literature and also in world literature. It is described by many writers and historians in different ways and styles. James Gordon Farrell describes the historical revolt of 1857 in a fictional framework, which was known as the Indian Sepoy revolt in England. He tries to show the various problems of the British, which they have to face in India, during the revolt of 1857, such as starvation, disease of cholera, fear of the soldier’s attack and the Indian hot environment. Apart from it, he describes some revolt incidents of Barahmpur and Barrackpur battles.

Keywords

Historical Fiction, Indian Sepoy, Revolt of 1857, Cholera Epidemic, Western Writing in Indian Literature.

Introduction

The term “history-fiction” is meant to be the authors’ involvement with the history and about the influence of the history upon fiction and creating historical novel or fictionalized history. The novelist combines the historical facts and fictitious history into literary text. It elaborates and evaluates the

relationship between history and fiction. Thus history and the fiction appear in the fictional narratives. It would not have been possible for the younger generations to get themselves acquainted with rulers and fighters like Tipu Sultan, Rani Laxmi Bai, Nana Sahib, Taty Topi, Bahadur Shah Zafar etc. On one hand a historian records the lives of the people of the past, while on the other hand; a novelist gives life to their bodies and makes the imaginative characters universal. A novelist generates the historical character in such a way that they become meaningful for all times. Shakespeare's characters such as, Othello, Hamlet, King Lear, or Macbeth is known worldwide. They give meaning to life; act as advisers in our lives. The depiction of the past events either venerated as having completely bearing on the present and the future or denounce as an act of unimportant outcomes.

James Gordon Farrell as historical fiction writer describes the revolt of 1857 in his book *The Siege of Krishnapur*. For this purpose, he visited Lucknow in India in 1973 before writing *The Siege of Krishnapur*. This historical fictional novel was influenced from the Lucknow uprising and he come to India only to see the places which had influenced the revolt of 1857. Lucknow was the famous siege of the British Residency during the 1857 and the Sepoy mutiny took place here. Farrell shows his deep knowledge about India in this novel.

The Siege of Krishnapur elucidates about the mystery of the chapati revolution, which was used by the Indian as a secrete communication source in deciding the date and time of the battle. These chapatis were passed on from village to village over a very wide area, thus it was a very important incident of that time, which was noticed by the writer. The mystery of the chapatis, shows the first sign of trouble in Krishnapur, which was noticed by the Collector. Farrell has elaborated about the mystery of the chapatis:

The first sign of trouble at Krishnapur came with a mysterious distribution of chapatis, made of coarse flour and about the size and thickness of a biscuit; towards the end of February 1857, they swept the countryside like an epidemic.

One evening, in the study room the Collector, Mr. Hopkins, opened a dispatch box and, instead of the documents he had expected, found four chapatis. After a moment's surprise and annoyance, he called the *khansamah*. He showed him the open dispatch box and the chapatis inside. His normally, impassive face displayed shock. (5)

There has been a wide distribution of chapatis, just before the start of the upheaval in 1857. The reason and purpose behind the distribution of chapatis among the Indian Sepoys deployed within the service of The East India Company during 1857. In this way, the mystery of the chapatis shows the first symptom of trouble in Krishnapur and The Collector found chapatis again, which defined by the writer in the first chapter of *The Siege of Krishnapur*:

The following afternoon, however, he found four more chapatis. This time they were not in his study, but on the desk in his office, neatly arranged beside some papers. Though there was still nothing very menacing about them, as soon as he saw them, he knew beyond that there was going to be trouble. He examined them carefully, but this told him nothing, that they were rather dirty. (6)

According to the known historical details the chapatis were basically circulated among the Indian soldiers, who were, doing service under the British military. Farrell remarks that chapatis are symbolic of the revolution and a kind of sign of revolt. It is only Mr. Hopkins, the Collector of Krishnapur, who finds the distribution of Chapatis unusual and takes it seriously. He alerts the other officials in Calcutta as well as in Krishnapur, of the forthcoming insurrection. Though, anyone didn't take him seriously till the mutiny occurs. Farrell describes this incident in his novel, perhaps trying to show the non-serious attitude of the British officers.

Generally, the Indian revolt of 1857 started in Barrackpur when Mangle Pandey, an Indian soldier of the 34th Native Infantry openly rebelled over the issue of the greased cartridge with his officer and at last he shoots his officer. Farrell describes the reasons and place, where the Indian revolt of 1857 started. He gives information about the Cartridge in his book, with the help his character of Hudson. Hudson explained it in front of their British group such as:

As you know, we load a gun by pouring a charge of powder down the barrel into the powder chamber and after that we ram a ball down on top of it. Well, the powder come in a little packet which we call a cartridge ... in order to get at the powder we have to tear the end off and in army drill we teach the men to do this with their teeth.

And the native feels themselves defiled ... well, good graces ... Of course it was, that's what worried Jack Sepoy Somehow he got the idea that the grease comes from pork or beef tallow and he didn't like it touches his lips because it's against his religion. That's why there was trouble at Barrackpur. (30, 31)

Then, the revolt was held in Berhampur, which was situated a few kilometers away from Barrackpur. Though, at both places, situations were brought under control by the British officials and the two regiments were dismissed. The revolt first appeared in Barrackpur and then in Berhampur. Farrell takes the real historical records here, when he writes about General Hershey, who was actually the commanding officer at Barrackpur during that time. The writer mentions very shortly about Berhampur revolt in this novel, where Hudson explains:

Twenty-seventh of Februarys, at Berhampur, a hundred miles to the north where the 19th Bengal Infantry had refused to take percussion caps on parade; the absence of any European regiment had

made it impossible to deal with this mutinous act on the spot ... Now the defaulting regiment was slowly being marched down to Barrackpur for disbandment. (31)

Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* present sufferings of the British in India during the revolt time and give the description of how the uprising of 1857, has destroyed the calm and quiet life of the British men and women, who lived in the British colonies in India. People's lives had to go through very difficult position and frightening circumstances. Disease and death had become common for the siege. It stirred human life. Death happened during the revolt which disturbed the lives of people. He defines the fearful phenomena of cholera disease in the first chapter: "In Calcutta the Government held an inquiry, but no reason for the phenomenon came to light and the excitement it caused to die down within a few days. It was suggested that it might be a superstitious attempt to avert an epidemic of cholera" (16).

The first cholera epidemic began near Calcutta and spread throughout Southeast Asia to the Middle East, eastern Africa. While cholera had spread across India many times previously, this outbreak went further; it reached as far as China and the Mediterranean Sea before receding. Hundreds of thousands of people died as a result of this epidemic, including many British soldiers, attracted European attention. This epidemic of cholera was affecting almost every country in Asia. There were death, murder, crises and tears everywhere. The Padre, in a sad mood speaks about truth in human life. Hopkins experiences a panic situation. The Collector, Mr. Hopkins and the Padre buried many dead bodies; they experienced the awfulness of war. Death and cries made them aware of the uselessness of war and human life:

The Collector was invaded by a great sadness. The sadness emanated from the three silent figures sewn up in bedding and he thought again of his death statistics, but was not comforted... And as he dug, he wept. He saw Hair's animated face, and numberless dead men, and the hatred on the faces of the sepoy ... and it suddenly seemed to him that he could see clearly the basis of all conflict and misery... (212)

The British ladies were not able to tolerate the hot Indian environment. They have to suffer a lot in a hot environment because they belong to cool environment country. The helpless conditions of the British women and children and the hot sun-drenched atmosphere were unbearable for them. They were living without fans. They had to prepare a poor meal because there was a shortage of ration. During the mutiny, prices were high. There were not enough clothing, ration, and water also. The pathetic situation of the British is illustrated by the writer:

They passed a row of flushing chaperones alongside the floor; the incessant movement of fans gave a fluttering effect to these ladies, as of birds preening themselves. Their eyes, starting out of the pallor of heavily powdered faces, followed Fleury expressionless as he strolled by; he thought: 'How true

that English ladies do not prosper in the Indian climate! The flesh subsides and melts away, leaving only strings and fibers and wrinkles. (40)

Before the revolt starts, the British enjoyed delicious food, first class life and parties. They enjoyed luxury live in India. However, during the rebellion time, there was no storage of food like rice, *dal* and wheat. J G Farrell represents a contrast picture of Victorian India. The British lives change into starvation, threatening condition and isolation during the msutiny. Thus, *The Siege of Krishnapur* presents the suffering of the British, during the mutiny time. Colonizers enjoyed the feeling of richness and great harmony before the revolt of 1857. Their dignity, equal to Indian Emperors and also enjoyed social status, wealth and intellectual life. Their rich life was stimulated by the mutiny. They have feared of violence and killings, but they couldn't avoid it. Mutiny ruined everything. During the siege, the British people had to protect their family because conditions became worse day by day. Frightening condition made them restless. Everywhere there were cries and threats of the rebellious soldier: A weird, melancholy cry has started up now, echoing over the moonlit hedges and tamarinds and spreading like a widening ripple over the dark cantonment. Beside Fleury, the Magistrate said: 'Listen to the jackals. The natives say that if you listen carefully you hear the leader calling "*Soopnci men raja hooa...*" which means "I am the king in the night" ... and then the other jackals reply: "*Hooa! Hooal hooal*" "You are! You are! You are!" (110)

The Indian mutiny burned some cantonments. The British people were frightened by all these troubles. There was fire, violence, disorder everywhere. The costume of the Indian soldiers is explained in detail, "they wore *dhotis* instead of uniforms and carried heavy, oddly-shaped burdens on their shoulders and around their necks; they had broached a cartload of silver rupees and filled the legs of their breeches with them. Now, it seems that, they were staggering away with heavy, trunk less men on their shoulders" (140). Farrell has elaborated the Indian soldiers' revolutionary activities in Meerut in *The Siege of Krishnapur*:

Two native infantry regiments had shot down their officers and broken into open revolt; in due course they had been joined by the Badmashes from the bazaar who had set to work plundering the British cantonment. The British troops had been on church parade when the trouble started... The telegraph wires had been cut soon after the first word of the outbreak had come through, but all sorts of grim rumors were circulating. Krishnapur was almost five hundred miles from this trouble. All the same, news travelled fast in India even without the telegraph ... (62)

Anxiety was created by the Indian Mutiny with their shots and burning in India. The Indian mutiny reached in Captanganj, which was situated near Krishnapur. The Indian mutiny started attacking some British officers in Captanganj. They have set fire on the British bungalows and also attacked the British officers during parade. Harry explained it "they set off to find the courtyard where the Sais was waiting with horses for them. Nobody knew yet how serious it was. 'It's damnable,' he added. 'I came out here without a

pistol.' And Fleury realized from the tone of his voice that Harry, finding himself unarmed..." (104). The British has noticed the danger of the Indian mutiny in Krishnapur.

The Rainy season comes with a heavy rain and the river will have to flood again this year. The Indian mutiny revolt in Krishnapur was dreadful act that was pursued by Sikh soldiers to seek revenge:

The sepoy's officers shouted at their men and tried to rally them. This was the time to charge at, while the cannons were being re-loaded. Victory was theirs if only they would press on now! But the men were blinded and confused by the snow storm. They could see neither their officers nor the *feringees* ... A few more seconds of hesitation and all were lost...The survivors scrambled back to the Sepoy lines pursued by a vengeful squadron of Sikh cavalry. (256)

These soldiers mercilessly attacked upon the British and destroyed their cantonments and bungalows. The British life was in danger of death. They were very physically weak, because they have no ration. Apart from it, they have to fight with Indian mutiny to save their women and children's lives and then Harry gives advice to their ladies to change their clothes like Indian women, which help them to escape from here and their journey also. The British has to face a lot of problems because their arms and weapons were not working properly:

Beside the brass six-pounder there stood another there stood another six-pounder, this one of iron with a long chase. This cannon, too, had been fired a great deal and although its muzzle has shown no distortion Harry had an uneasy feeling that it might soon be about to burst ... But the cannon on the north-facing ramparts had an essential function if the garrison was to survive the morning; these cannons must break the impetus of the enemy attack ... (341)

The Collector and his companions took the pistol and started killing the Indian sepoy's. And then, some of the sepoy's were shot and some were cut down by the British. The Collector, Dr MacNab, Louise, Harry, Fleury, Lucy, Miriam and other were faced trouble in the revolt of 1857 and they survived both shot and cholera. At the end of the book, they became successes in saving their lives.

Farrell had studied Indian culture, religious beliefs and his positive attitude toward Indian culture has been reflected in his novels. India is a country of rich, cultural heritage. People of different castes, religion and faith, live together. He describes not only Christian, but also gives a description of Hinduism and Muslim religion. Here, he describes about the three religions equally without any partiality. He discusses the religious stories about Hindu's gods and goddesses. He describes about the ancient Hindu gods and goddesses like Kartikeya, Parvati, who is a lady of Siva and River Ganga. A peacock, feathers spread, was revolving on the roof of the buildings and then Fleury, pointed out:

‘That is a very holy bird in India because our God Kartikeya ride peacock. He was born in River Ganga as six little babies, but Parvati, lady of Siva, she loved them all so very, very, dearly, she embraced them so tight she squeezed into one person, but with six faces, twelve arms, twelve legs ... “and so on and so forth”, as my teacher used to say, Mr Barnes of Shrewsbury’. (85)

The ancient Hindu customs and rituals, and the example of the clean shave head of the Prime Minister, elaboration of the myth are found in his work, “The Prime Minister’s head was bare. It was not simply that he had removed his French military cap; he had removed his hair as well. His skull was shaved and oiled, and it gleamed in the lamplight. For some reason it was covered by a hair net with a large mesh” (209). The collector understood that this shaving had some religious importance. He knew that Hindus are always shaving their heads for some reasons. Here, he also clears the difference between Hindu and Muslim religions, customs and ceremonies in, *The Siege of Krishnapur*, where Fleury asks Harry:

‘What I should like to know, Harry, is whether it’s a Moslem or a Hindu cemetery?’

‘The Hindus don’t bury their dead so it must be Mohammedan’.

‘Of course it must, what a fool I am!’ Fleury glanced at Harry for the sign of derision that newcomers to India, insultingly termed ‘griffins’, had to expect from old hands. But Harry’s pleasant face registered only a polite lack of interest in the burial habits of the natives. (43)

Ferrell highlights the history of the Bible. The Bible is a sacred book of Christians, like the Geeta for Hindus. The old version of the Bible was written in Hebrew and Greek. Later, it was translated into the English language. The English language is a well known language in comparison to the Hebrew. The writer describes the value of the English language in comparison of the other language of the world. He has explained the importance and history of the English language, “Why the Bible should have been written in Hebrew and Greek when English was the obvious language, for outside one remote corner of the world hardly anyone could understand Hebrew, whereas English was spoken in every corner of the continent” (56). The Padre believes that the Bible is the lighthouse in the world. The Padre highlights the importance of the Bible in *The Siege of Krishnapur*:

I thought of the many lives it had saved the way a lighthouse saves men from shipwreck. The Bible is the lighthouse of the world. Those nations which are not governed by it are heathenish and idolatrous. Men without the Bible, worship, stars and stones. For example, ancient history gives an account of two hundred children being burned to death as a sacrifice to Saturn ... which is, of course, the Moloch of the Scriptures. (135)

In this way the British always show that their religion, holy Bible and their language were superior in comparison to the other religions and languages of the world. The Padre always preaches the people and teaches them about the greatness of the Bible and English civilization. The British tried to represent the Indians and other colonized countries as inferior and their race was superior which create the frustration and aggression in the heart of the people and this caused revolt and rebellion latter on.

Conclusion

As a fictional writer, Farrell presented the history within an imaginary town and elaborated the past incidents within a fictional framework. He defined the actual circumstances in a fictional environment, introduced imagined characters to present Indian history. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* gives a brief description of the Sepoy revolt of Barrackpur and Berhampur due to rifle cartridges. There were due reflections of British faith and beliefs upon Christianity and Bible, considering them superior to all the other religions. In Krishnapur, there were preaching to the people about spirituality and the greatness of the Christianity. The writer has also presented the hollowness of the religion when a number of people were dying in the war and due to cholera at the end of the novel. J G Farrell also highlighted the health issues of that time with the help of the historical health records and medical survey of cholera epidemic in Krishnapur, where thousands were dying, including both the Indians and the British.

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