

IMAGES OF ENGLISH WOMEN IN THE SIEGE OF KRISHNAPUR¹

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Abstract

The English people in India go through difficult times at the time of the Indian Mutiny of 1857, which is the first nationalistic movement against the British rule in India. They have to find a way to survive until the English relief forces come to their rescue. Meanwhile, not only the English men, but also the English women do their best to preserve the British Raj and to regain the British supremacy in India. In James Gordon Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur*, the experiences of the English women and men during the Mutiny are narrated. Relying on his narration of the Mutiny, it is possible to have an idea about the roles played by the English women in the British Raj. In this article, through a close analysis of the stances of English women towards the Mutiny and towards the British Raj, the images of the English women in *The Siege of Krishnapur* will also be scrutinised. When the gender of the characters is considered, it is seen that in the novel, both English men and women are against Indian nationalism and they try to preserve the British supremacy in India. English women make important contributions to the British Raj such as being the carriers and preservers of English culture in India. Though, the contributions of English women have been ignored so far, in this article it will be suggested that actually, English women are very functional in the spread of British Imperialism and culture.

Key Words: English women, Indian Mutiny of 1857, Victorian gender patterns, British Raj, Indian nationalism

THE SIEGE OF KRISHNAPUR' DA İNGİLİZ KADINININ İMAJI

Özet

Hindistan'daki İngilizler, İngiliz yönetimine karşı ilk milli ayaklanma olarak da kabul edilen 1857 Hint İsyanı sırasında çok zor anlar yaşamışlardır. James Gordon Farrell'in *The Siege of Krishnapur* adlı romanında anlatıldığına göre, İngiliz destek kuvvetleri gelene kadar İngilizlerin önce hayatta kalmanın ve daha sonra ise İngiliz otoritesini korumanın bir yolunu bulmaları gerekiyordu. Romanda ayrıca gösteriliyor ki bu zaman diliminde, sadece İngiliz erkekleri değil, İngiliz kadınları da İngiliz yönetimini ve İngiliz üstünlüğünü korumak için ellerinden geleni yapıyorlardı. Fakat genellikle, akademik çalışmalarda, İngiliz kadınlarının bu katkıları göz ardı edilmektedir ve İngiliz erkeklerinin kahramanlıkları ön plana çıkarılmaktadır. Bu makalede, aslında İngiliz kadınlarının da İngiliz emperyalizmini ve kültürünü yaymada önemli roller üstlendikleri öne sürülerek, bu öneri *The Siege of Krishnapur*'dan örneklerle desteklenecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: İngiliz kadınlar, 1857 Hint İsyanı, Viktoryan sosyal cinsel kimlik kalıpları, Hindistan'daki İngiliz yönetimi, Hint milliyetçiliği

¹ This article is derived from my PhD Dissertation entitled "Contrasting Approaches towards Indian Nationalism in Mary Margaret Kaye's *Shadow of the Moon* (1957), James Gordon Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) and Zadie Smith's *White Teeth* (2000)," (November 2008, Hacettepe University, Ankara).

INTRODUCTION

This article aims at exploring the images of English women and the contributions of the English women to the British Imperialism in James Gordon Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973), which deals with the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and therefore which is categorised as a Mutiny novel, as well. In order to have a better understanding of *The Siege of Krishnapur*, first of all the term Mutiny novel must be explained and it can be defined as a type of the novels, which takes the Indian Mutiny of 1857, the first nationalistic rebellion against the British rule in India, as the main topic and fictionalizes this historical event. Parallel to this, in James Gordon Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur*, the Indian Mutiny of 1857 is placed at the center of the novel as the main topic. The reasons of his interest in India can be explained with reference to his life story. He was born in Liverpool on 23 January 1935, to an English father and an Irish mother. His father's family is originally from the Republic of Ireland and though they have an Irish Catholic name, they were Protestants and had settled in Liverpool (Crane 27) after their life in the Indian sub-continent, East Bengal (Binns 29) which was a part of the British Empire in India and where his father worked in the rubber industry. His family's experience of India may have inspired him to write about the British Empire and India (Crane 13). Binn states:

In those days Chittagong [the place where Farrell's parents lived in East Bengal] was a small isolated port with a population of only eighty or so Europeans. This was the period of the 'freedom riots' and the situation was threatening for the white expatriate population. Farrell's father was himself shot and wounded (although not seriously) in a raid on the armoury at Chittagong. Farrell showed a keen interest in his father's Indian experiences.
(29)

As observed in his famous Empire Trilogy which consists of "Troubles (1970), *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) and *The Singapore Grip* (1978)" (Bergonzi 42), Farrell has a keen interest in British imperial policies as well. These three novels present three different aspects of the decline and fall of the British Empire. In *Troubles*, the period of Irish history from 1919 to 1920 is scrutinised in *The Siege of Krishnapur*, the Indian Mutiny of 1857 is depicted, and in *The Singapore Grip*, the fall of Singapore to the Japanese during the Second World War is dealt with (Crane 13). Thus, in the Trilogy the main theme is the attacks against the British colonial rule in general. Descriptions of these attacks become more vivid and realistic because Farrell's childhood covered the years of the Second World War (Binns 23) and he lived in Paris during the Vietnam War protests. Moreover, he worked in Arctic Canada, and at various times travelled in America, Morocco, and Asia (Crane 26). Eventually, Farrell's interest in history and in writing historical novels was rewarded with literary prizes. In 1971, he was given the Faber Memorial Prize for *Troubles* and then in 1973 the Booker Prize for *The Siege of Krishnapur* ("James Gordon Farrell").

The Siege of Krishnapur (1973) is based on a historically true event, the Indian Mutiny. However, the setting is fictional Krishnapur instead of Lucknow. In *The Siege of Krishnapur*, events develop around the Indian Mutiny of 1857 and in the novel, during the *sepoys'* rebellion it is shown that English people in India go through very difficult times. In the beginning of the novel, the British government in Calcutta does not take the rebellion seriously. Therefore, they are unable to take measures against the *sepoys* on time. These neglectful attitudes of the English authorities lead to the death of many English and Indian people. Contrary to English assumptions, the *sepoys* manage to spread the Mutiny throughout India day by day and they resist the British Empire longer than expected. Only very few foresighted English people are able to grasp the fact that it is a signal for the coming of bad events. News of rebellions at Meerut, Calcutta comes to the ears of the English authorities, but they continue to deny the existence of a Mutiny. They rely on the mistaken assumption that Indian people would not dare break the *sahib's* word, and thus they are not worth being feared. Meanwhile, the *sepoys* continue to put their plans into action and they surround the English Residency in Krishnapur. The English community in the Residency begins to lose their hope of survival, but with the efforts of both the English men and English women, they succeed to keep their morale high. Eventually, the English relief forces come to their rescue and the British control over India is regained.

1. ENGLISH WOMEN'S CONTRIBUTIONS TO THE BRITISH RAJ DURING THE MUTINY OF 1857

As mentioned above, this article aims to analyse the images of the English women in *The Siege of Krishnapur* by looking at their stance towards the Mutiny and towards the British Raj. When the gender of the characters is taken into consideration, it can be observed that in *The Siege of Krishnapur* both English men and women are against Indian nationalism and they do their best to hold the British supremacy in India. English women may not be physically as strong as the men, but this does not decrease the importance of their roles in national issues considering that they are seen as carriers of culture in *The Siege of Krishnapur*. This may originate from the idea that it is the mothers who give the first education to the next generation. Hence, mothers have an important role in the transfer of culture. Women thus may become a powerful weapon in the hands of the British Empire against the indigenous people. Therefore, Indian people tend to see English women as a strong means of erasing the Indian population and Indian culture from Southeast Asia:

"There was a rumour in the bazaar this morning," said the Magistrate as the General disappeared from view. "They say that because so many British were killed in the Crimea there's nobody left in England for the memsahibs to marry. And so they're going to be brought out here and forcibly married to the native landowners. Their children and the lands they own will thus become Christian." (Farrell, 1985: 64)

However, on the English side, women in general, are perceived as weak. Farrell draws a parallel between the situation of women and the situation of the natives as the Collector says, "[w]omen are weak, we shall always have to take care of them, just as we shall always have to take care of the natives" (Farrell, 1985: 169-170). Thus, Farrell believes that men should take care of women and the English people should take care of the indigenous people. Thus, there is a parallelism between the oppression of the women by the patriarchy and the oppression of the colonised by the coloniser. Another parallelism is drawn between the desire for women and the desire for new lands (Farrell, 1985: 170) in the words of the Collector: "They [women] are made of a softer substance. They arouse our desire, but they are not our equals" (Farrell 170). In other words, untouched far away lands and women are attractive enough to arouse the appetite of the English men but they are not good enough to be their equal. For the English, women, like the indigenous people, are weaker and should be guided by English men. Thus, women are depicted as mere objects either to be protected or to be tortured by men. It is the men who organise rebellions and who invade or defend the land; women are subjected to the wills of men. The English women are not depicted as displaying heroic actions. In *The Siege of Krishnapur*, English women become tools to bring the patriotic feelings of the males to the surface (Rosaldo 1996: 248). They become the driving force behind the men. For instance, as often is the case, the war is fought through women's bodies. According to the rumours, "English girls had been stripped naked and dragged through the streets of Delhi" (Farrell, 1985:224) and among the English "now there was even talk of shooting wives if the situation became hopeless, to spare them a worse fate at the hands of the sepoys" [sic] (Farrell, 1985: 153) and to preserve national honour and dignity. V.G.Kiernan, in his critique of the illustration of imperialism in the *New Cambridge Modern History*, has complained that "[a]trocities committed on both sides [on the English and Indian side] during the Indian Mutiny are only fleetingly mentioned. Imperial history altogether was a vastly more painful business..." (qtd. in Binns, 1986: 80). Farrell's descriptions give us glimpses of the situation of India during the Mutiny. Thus, only brief moments of sorrow and violence are presented. Atrocities committed during the Mutiny are not given in detail, but just implied or simply ignored. By ignoring the dark side of the British Raj, Farrell tries to justify the British rule in India.

Moreover, when the whole novel is scrutinised, it can be seen that many atrocities committed against the Indian people in the Mutiny days are not referred to and are simply ignored. However, throughout the novel, the sufferings of the English such as the fear of rape on the side of the English women during the siege of the English Residency are referred to (Farrell, 1985: 224). Thus, English women are also exposed to psychological violence during the Mutiny. There is not a word referring to the rape of Indian women by English men. However, a researcher named Jenny Sharpe expresses "at the outset of her *Allegories of*

Empire, [that] British Magistrates charged with investigating 'Mutiny'-bred reports of rape, torture, and mutilation found no substantiating evidence" (qtd.in Randall, 2003: 6). Furthermore, related to the rape issue in Mutiny novels, Salman Rushdie says, "[i]t is useless, I'm sure, to suggest that if rape must be used as the metaphor of the Indo-British connection, then surely, in the interests of accuracy, it should be the rape of an Indian woman..." (1991: 89) and suggests that English writers provide "fake portraits" of India, in order to "provide moral, cultural and artistic justification for imperialism" (1991: 89).

Contrary to the fears of English men, in *The Siege of Krishnapur* women prove to be stronger in the face of difficulties. Louise, for instance, becomes more mature during the Mutiny days:

Louise... remained constantly at his [Dr.McNab's] side, helping him to care for the sick and wounded. From this pale and anaemic-looking girl who had once thought only of turning the heads of young officers, and whom the Collector had considered insipid, he now saw a young woman of inflexible will-power emerging. He [the Collector] watched her as he passed the section of the hall reserved for the sick, the wounded, and the dying. (Farrell, 1985: 331)

Louise Dunstaple suffers from "scurvy" (Farrell, 1985: 305), which causes her to lose her teeth. Metaphorically, the white people who exploit and usurp the indigenous people with their "teeth" begin to lose them, which might be interpreted as the decline of the colonial power. The indigenous people, in return, take revenge by surrounding the English people and confining them to shortage of food. When the English Residency is surrounded by the *sepoys*, its contact with the outside world and as a consequence, its food supplies are cut off. As a result, Louise is so hungry that she cannot concentrate on her lover Fleury's words. At her birthday party, "...she stared at [cakes] with a fearful concentration, ignoring Fleury's polite conversation as he made the tea" (Farrell, 1985: 305). Despite all these obstacles, Louise works as a nurse during the siege and cares for the patients, to serve for her nation. She does not have much interest in politics as it is not acceptable by the patriarchal English society. In order to fit into the norms of her society, "Louise, too, remained silent. In Fleury's view she was quite right to sit there quietly and listen to what the gentlemen had to say, because speaking a great deal in company is not an attractive quality in a young lady. A young lady with strong opinions is even worse" (Farrell 1985: 47). Women are supposed to have ideas neither on daily issues nor on national issues. Within the limits of the nineteenth century English social codes, English women could contribute to the national cause by taking up feminine jobs, like working as nurses (Farrell, 1985: 229).

Like Louise Dunstaple and many other English women, Miriam works as a nurse at the hospital and helps the wounded and ill people there. Miriam, sensitive about the interests of the British nation, remains indifferent to the

exploitation of the indigenous people in India especially in the opium factory. As Binns argues, "Miriam is given a tour of the opium factory outside Krishnapur and neither she nor anyone else in the English expatriate community finds this trade at all incongruous (although in fact there was a century-long campaign in Britain against the opium trade)" (1986: 67). This indifference to the plight of the workers adds to the negative image of the *memsahibs* who are as cruel as the *sahibs*. Miriam remains silent in the face of the exploitation of the indigenous people in the opium factory.

Another English woman character, Lucy, makes cartridges to help the English soldiers (Farrell, 1985: 332, 339). Other unnamed English women donate their stockings to the army on Harry's suggestion that silk stockings could be used to contain iron balls (Farrell, 1985: 314). Women play a significant role during the Mutiny: "[T]his powder-hose fuse had been extemporized from a tube of linen sewn by the ladies; it was immensely long and about an inch in diameter, and had provided the ladies with a task which had occupied their fingers for many hours" (Farrell, 1985: 199). Thus, these efforts of the English women show that they are certainly against Indian nationalism and they do everything to stop it. They do not have a questioning stance towards the British Raj and they do not regard the *sepoys'* being right in their struggle as possible.

It can be suggested that, in *The Siege of Krishnapur*,

[o]n the one hand, male protagonists prove their virility by displaying military abilities and taking chivalric care of the British women... protecting them from the danger of real or imagined rapes; on the other, female characters confirm the "British character," accepting heartily the sacrifice of their privileges to become nurses for the wounded, supporters and source of inspiration for their partners and children. (Nicora, 2007: 359)

CONCLUSION

Thus, under the light of all the examples given so far, it can be suggested that in *The Siege of Krishnapur* contrary to the expectations of the nineteenth century English men, English women prove to be more strong at the time of the Mutiny and they do their best to make sure the continuance of the British Raj in India, as far as they are allowed by the Victorian social codes and gender patterns. In other words, as opposed to the general image of weak and vulnerable English women, who can do nothing, but be a burden upon the shoulders of men at times of danger and war, in *The Siege of Krishnapur* it is shown that women can be very helpful and creative at times of crisis and have crucial roles in preserving national benefits. Eventually, it can be suggested that as it is shown in *The Siege of Krishnapur*, the English women contribute to the spread of British imperialism and culture and their contributions should not be underestimated and ignored any more since without their assistance and help, things would not have been the same for the British Empire and it would not have lasted for that long all over the world.

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