

## Portrayal of English Women in J.G Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur*

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### Abstract

Tradition is a very deep word and its associations are vast and intense. It is ancient, religious, superstitious, practical so on and so forth, but a deep rearing of the term makes the vision clear. Indian English Literature may be defined as literature written originally in English by authors Indian by birth, ancestry or nationality. It is clear that neither 'Anglo-Indian Literature', nor literal translations by others legitimately form the part of this literature. Indian Literature is a very literary phenomenon worthy of serious scrutiny. Freedom is perhaps the prerequisite for human life to flourish. Freedom means to be able to breathe freely, to meet people, to have an openness of experience to do as one likes. But in India a woman has been kept in kitchens and parlours, whether in purdah or in luxury she has been deprived of freedom. To express her wrath against patriarchy, a woman these days is moving outside cultural and disciplinary boundaries and is defying the traditional role of woman as a dutiful wife, mother or daughter. She is trying to break the walls of silence that habitually surround her. But the social pressures which mould her very thinking make her non-communicative about her real needs and desires. As a result there arises a contradiction in speech and behavior making her sometimes submissive and sometimes harsh. The same is the case with contemporary Indian women poets taken up for study in this project. The poetry written by contemporary Indian women poets is generally considered to be revealing the growth of feminine poetic consciousness on one hand and on the other hand the changing position of women in Indian society. Race, ethnicity and sexual identity, are the major tools of the poet with which she attacks and writes back against the established canon. The Present paper focuses on the different shades and treatment of Indian world(s) in Indian English Literature. It also concentrates on the location and status of queers in mainstream national iconography and discourses in the light of tradition

**Keywords:** Postcolonialism, Hegemony, Center/Periphery

James Gordon Farrell (25 January 1935 – 11 August 1979), popularly known as J.G. Farrell, was born at Liverpool on 23 January 1935, to an English father and Irish mother. His father's family was originally from the Republic of Ireland and though they had an Irish Catholic name, were Protestants and had settled in Liverpool after their life in the Indian sub-continent, East Bengal which was the part of British Empire in India and where his father worked in a rubber industry. His family experiences of India may have inspired him to write about the British Empire and India. He spent a great deal of his life abroad, including periods in France, America and the Far East. Farrell published his first novel, *A Man From Elsewhere*, in 1963. Two years later came *The Lung* (1965) and in 1967 was published *A Girl in the Head*. Farrell gained prominence for his historical fiction, most notably his *Empire Trilogy* (*Troubles*, *The Siege of Krishnapur* and *The Singapore Grip*). Eventually, Farrell's interest in history and in writing historical novels was rewarded with many 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*, and has also won in 2010, thirty- three years after his death, the Lost Man Booker Prize, a one-off award for books published in 1970, which were not considered for the honour at the time.

The present paper aims at exploring the images of English women to the British Imperialism in *The Siege of Krishnapur*, a novel written by J.G Farrell which was published in 1973 and won the Booker Prize in the same year. This novel is set in mid-1800s in a fictional city of India, Krishnapur. It is based on the revolt of 1857 in India which is called as the 'First War of Independence' by the Indians and 'The Indian Mutiny' by the Britishers. The novel is set in Victorian period. This age in literature is roughly taken to be between 1830-1890, coinciding the long reign of Queen Victoria (1837-1901). This was the age of industrialization, empire and reform. Victorian age is the age when 'woman question' started. It was an age of Patriarchy. Girls were suppressed, omitted and had to hide their identity. Women were considered to be the 'Angel in the House', 'The Household General'. During the Victorian era, the concept of "pater familias", meaning the husband as head of the household and moral leader of his family, was firmly entrenched in British culture. A wife's proper role was to love honour and obey her husband, as her marriage vows stated. But far from being considered unimportant, although a

wife's place in the family hierarchy was secondary to her husband, a wife's duty to support her husband and properly raise her children were considered crucial cornerstones of social stability by the Victorians. Women falling short of society's expectations were believed to be deserving of harsh criticism. Representations of ideal wives were abundant in Victorian culture, providing women with their role models. The Victorian ideal of the tirelessly patient, sacrificing wife is depicted in *The Angel in the House*, a popular poem by Coventry Patmore, published in 1854:

Man must be pleased; but him to please  
Is woman's pleasure; down the gulf  
Of his condoled necessities  
She casts her best, she flings herself [...]  
She loves with love that cannot tire;  
And when, ah woe, she loves alone,  
Through passionate duty love springs higher,  
As grass grows taller round a stone.

To run a respectable household and secure the happiness, comfort and well-being of her family women were expected to perform her duties sincerely and diligently. Domestic life for a working-class family was far less comfortable. Legal standards for minimum housing conditions were a new concept during the Victorian era, and a working-class wife was responsible for keeping her family as clean, warm, and dry as possible in housing stock that was often literally rotting around them. Women lost the rights to the property they brought into the marriage, even following divorce; a husband had complete legal control over any income earned by his wife; women were not allowed to open banking accounts; and married women were not able to conclude a contract without their husbands' legal approval. These property restrictions made it difficult or impossible for a woman to leave a failed marriage, or to exert any control over her finances if her husband was incapable or unwilling to do so on her behalf. The ideal Victorian woman was pure, chaste, refined, and modest. Either she was a 'pure' or a 'fallen woman'. Women were expected to have sex with only one man, their husband. However, it was acceptable for men to have multiple partners in their life. If women did have sexual contact with another man, they were seen as ruined or fallen. Victorian literature and art are full of examples

of women paying dearly for straying from moral expectations. These are some historical images of an English woman during Victorian age. These images are well reflected in the novels of Victorian age.

Realism was the preferred form and was predominantly concerned with the social issues. Moral and the social codes were of major concern. Realism gave birth to the novel therefore novel is called as the 'child of realism'. Aphra Behn first reacted against the women oppression. The official date of the rise of the English novel is 1740, when *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* was published. *Clarissa or the History of a Young Lady* (1748) by Samuel Richardson is the second novel where there is a female protagonist. Thus the debate started in seventeenth and eighteenth century. The dilemma of divided consciousness is found in the four novels where we have female protagonists: Moll Flanders and Roxana by Daniel Defoe, Pamela and Clarissa by Samuel Richardson. Jane Austen (1775- 1817) is the first woman novelist. She has written six major novels: *Sense and Sensibility* (1811), *Pride and Prejudice* (1813), *Mansfield Park* (1814), *Emma* (1816), *Northanger Abbey* and *Persuasion* in 1818 and *Sedition* is her unfinished novel. She wrote gynocentric or women centred novels, where female was her primary focus. Love and marriage were the major themes of her novels. Jane Austen was followed by the three sisters who had created the storm in the field of women education. They are: Charlotte Bronte (1810-65), Emile Bronte (1816-55) and Anne Bronte (1818-45) who adopted the male pseudonyms Charlotte Bronte (Currer Bell), Emile Bronte (Alice Bell) and Anne Bronte (Acton Bell). They formed sorority and rejected the tradition of social realism. In their novels passion spinned the plot and they give privacy to emotional ecology. They ignited the fire of feminism therefore their novels - Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre* (1847), Emile Bronte's *Wuthering Heights* (1847) and Anne Bronte's *Agnes Grey* (1847) have the fiery fire of feminine sensibility. One of the most important figures in Victorian literature is Mary Anne Evans (1819-80), better known by the pseudonym George Eliot. Eliot's fiction has some strong criticism of the strict gender codes of English Life. Her women characters try to break out the stereotypes and have to battle the social norms to do so. For example, in her novel *Middlemarch: A Study of Provincial Life* (1871-72), Dorothea's desire for learning was a very unusual trait in the Victorian woman. And last but not the least Thomas Hardy (1840-1928) whose concern about the fate of women is best exemplified

by the portrait of Henchard's action in *The Mayor of Casterbridge: The Life and Death of a Man of Character* (1886). In a fit of drunkenness, Henchard auctions his wife Susan, at the fair. Susan goes away with Newton, a sailor. After he became sober, he repents but fails to locate the sailor. He abstains from alcohol. Years later, when Susan returns, things become more complicated. He loses Susan first, and then Lucetta (another woman his life). When he dies, he states his will that no one should remember him. The subjugation and degradation of women, which renders even marriage a business transaction is linked to the expansion of capitalism which casts women as objects. Exploring the social codes and hypocrisies of the rural England, Hardy's fiction presents some strong character portraits, an extraordinary sense of place and a vision of humanity that is not flattering. Social codes stifle individuals who think differently. Sue in *Jude the Obscure* (1895) discovers when she decides to leave her husband Philliston and tries to live together with Jude without being married. Society rejects the sensitive individual, as exemplified in Arabella's treatment of Jude. Tess is executed for being driven to killing her oppressor Alec in *Tess of the D'Urbervilles* (1891). These are some images of English women in Victorian novels.

*The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973) is based on historically true events of the revolt of 1857 in India. To remember 1857 as the first war of independence is quite relevant in the present age of globalization where neo-colonial tactics are used by the colonial nations to subjugate the weaker sections of society around the world. The names of the main male characters in this novel are Mr. Hopkins (the Collector), Mr. Tom Willoughby (the Magistrate), Mr. Dunstable (Civil Surgeon in Krishnapur), Harry Dunstable, Mr. George Fleury, Mr. Rayne who was the Honorary Secretary of the Krishnapur Mutton Club and of the Ice Club, Mr. Barlow, who worked in the Salt Agency, Mr. McNab (regimental surgeon) etc. Women have always been the victim of patriarchy. In this novel too, one major patriarch is Mr. Hopkins who draws parallel between the situation of women and the situation of natives as he says, "Women are weak; we shall always have to take care of them, just as we shall always have to take care of the natives" (Farrell 169-170). In this novel, since it is written from the colonizers point of view, the focus is only on the English women. There is no mention of Indian women. The female characters in this novel are Miriam, Louise Dunstable and Lucy Hughes. The whole novel highlights these three major women characters. Miriam is the sister of George Fleury and is a

widow of Mr. Lang. She lives her life in an independent way. She works as a nurse in a hospital in Krishnapur to serve the people injured during the time of siege and develops friendship with Louise Dunstable who is her colleague in the hospital. She breaks the image of the Victorian stereotypical woman by remarrying Dr. Mac Nab. Throughout the novel she is depicted as a very lively and obvious character. When the city of Krishnapur suffers from cholera, she also gets affected by the disease. She becomes so weak that she can not stand. So when the collector, in a teasing way, asks her, "Can I do anything for you?" (359). She replies, "I'm perfectly all right. You must consider your other responsibilities" (359). This depicts her self-reliance and independent personality.

Louise Dunstable is the daughter of Dr. Dunstable (a civil surgeon). She works as a nurse at the hospital during the siege and cares for the patients to serve her nation. She is very close to her father and always takes care of him. George develops friendship with her because he loves her. She does not have much interest in the politics and as it is not accepted by the patriarchal English society. In order to fit herself into the norms of the society, she remains silent. In Fluery's view, "she was quite right to sit there rightly and listen to what the gentlemen had to say, because speaking a great deal in a company is not an attractive quality in a young lady. A young lady with strong opinions is even worse" (305). This clearly shows the typical Victorian ideology of males that women are supposed to have their ideas neither in daily issues nor on national issues. Her friendship with Miriam presents the Victorian sorority. She starts disliking Dr. MacNab because she thinks him responsible for her father's death. Her father is also caught by the cholera disease and is rushed to the hospital. He gets almost recovered by his daughter's care and service but again his health starts receding and finally he dies of a heart attack. Life becomes tasteless for Louise. As time passes she moves ahead in her life. Meantime it is shown that attitude of the whites becomes very bad towards the natives and the indigenous people were treated like slaves by them. The indigenous people, in return, take revenge by surrounding the English people and confining them to the shortage of food. As a result, When George Fleury tries to console her by bringing cake on her birthday; Louise is so hungry that she cannot concentrate on her lover's words that he made the tea for her and moves ahead for the cake. But the cake turns out to be so hard that she can not eat it. Louise Dunstable suffers from

scurvy, which causes her loose her teeth. Metaphorically, the white people who exploit and usurp the indigenous people with their “teeth” begin to loose them, which might get interpreted as the decline of the colonial power. She marries George Fleury. The portrayal of Louise is that of an English woman belonging to the upper strata of society having the sense of femininity in her. When everybody refuses to accept Miss Hughes, she treats her as a human being and even supports her.

The image of Lucy Hughes is that of a ‘Fallen Woman’. The term fallen women is used for a woman who has lost her virginity and fallen from the grace of God. In 19th century Britain especially the phrase was closely associated with the loss or surrender of a woman's chastity. Its use was indicative of the belief that to be socially and morally acceptable a women's sexuality and experience should be entirely restricted to marriage, and that she should also be under the supervision and care of an authoritative man . There was a new type of “slavery” that arose during the Victorian era: prostitution. Respectable men and women would lure young women, usually from a lower-class background, away from their homes and sell them into prostitution. The same happens to Lucy Hughes. She was brought from England and was thrown into the profession of prostitution. Her life gets controlled by the young men and women as if she was their possession. She lives in a ‘a dak bunglow’. When Louise, Miriam, Harry, Fleury get to know about her, they feel bad and try to get her rescued from there. But again, after being rescued, she suffers from a problem of the discrimination of a woman by women. “She was ostracized even by the members if the lowest group” (184). This depicts the Victorian treatment towards working class women. Lucy is admired by Harry Dunstable and later gets married to him. Lucy is an English woman belonging to the working class but she never loses her hope and strength to fight. She even resists against the patriarchy. Her resistance is shown, when the Magistrate tries to take the advantage of her. He tries to seduce her but her reply is a slap on his face. Metaphorically this slap is perhaps on the face of patriarchy which thinks:

... in Lucy had a person ideally suited to his purposes ... a person who was subject to a very powerful propensity. Lucy was Amative. Nobody could deny Lucy’s Amativeness. Not only she had a history of past Amativeness (the fact that she was a

‘fallen woman’ and so forth), but anyone who looked at her could see Amateness written all over her. (286)

Finally she engages herself in sending cartridges to the English soldiers to serve her nation. If a comparison is made between her and the other literary ‘fallen women’ like Ruth by Elizabeth Gaskell, Tess by Thomas Hardy and Clarissa by Richardson, she appears to be more strong and assertive while all others succumb, but ultimately she fights against the conventions.

Thus there are varieties of images of women displayed by J.G Farrell in *The Siege of Krishnapur*. Most of them are contrary to the expectation of the Victorian temper of England that English women are proved to be stronger at the time of Mutiny and they do their best to make sure the progress of British Raj in India. It is true that Miriam begins to appreciate being a person released from the necessity of responding to the conventional ideas of womanhood, even if she is a widow. The pink- and white, bread and butter, Louise Dunstable develops a self-reliant tower of strength during the siege and had the shades of Florence Nightingale. Yet during the siege, both Louise and Miriam do no more than confirm to the age old stereotype women as the ministering angel. The ‘fallen women’ Lucy Hughes’ acquires the sense of ability and achievement by the skill of her fitting cartridges, performing a masculine task. Although patriarchy does its best to control its colony (female), but the colonized has broken all conventionality and is presented in a different way. It not only peeps out and enters into the outer world, but also helps them in maintaining their sovereignty. In other words, as opposed to the image of weak, vulnerable English woman, who can do nothing, but be a burden on the shoulders of men at times of dangers and wars, in *The Siege of Krishnapur*, it is shown that women can be creative and helpful at times of crisis and have crucial roles in preserving national benefits. So English women contribute to the spread of imperialism and their contribution should not be ignored. It must be taken into consideration.



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