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THE NARRATIVE TECHNIQUE IN PAUL SCOTT'S THE RAJ QUARTET

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ABSTRACT

The Raj Quartet is a four-volume novel sequence about the concluding years of the British Raj in India. The series was written during the period 1965–75. *The Times* called it "one of the most important landmarks of post-war fiction." Though the four novels can be read separately, in isolation or out of chronological order, the narrative scope can be best enjoyed when they are read in an order. Each successive novel casts a new light on the one that came before. The historical facts are explained and revised in the later novels. Characters evolve and change subtly to play different roles in the ever-changing historical context. Scott displays how big and small historical events affect the emotions of men and women.

The Raj Quartet is a masterpiece of post-colonialism fiction, historical fiction, romance, mystery, post-modernism, and even a thriller. *The Raj Quartet* is one of the greatest works of literature ever.

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INTRODUCTION

The Raj Quartet is a four-volume novel sequence about the concluding years of the British Raj in India. The series was written during the period 1965–75. *The Times* called it "one of the most important landmarks of post-war fiction." The story of *The Raj Quartet* begins in 1942. World War II is at its zenith, and in South East Asia, the Allied forces have suffered great losses. Burma has fallen, and the Japanese invasion of the Indian subcontinent from the east appears imminent. The year 1942 is also marked by Indian nationalist leader Mahatma Gandhi's call for the Quit India movement to the British rulers of India. *The Raj Quartet* is set in this tumultuous background for the British soldiers and civilians stationed in India who have a duty to manage this part of the British Empire, known as the "jewel in the crown" of the British Monarch. Some critics have compared *The Raj Quartet* to the epic novels of Proust and Tolstoy. Though some critics have thought the *Quartet* to be a straightforward example of nineteenth-century style realism, others have argued that its non-linear narrative style and occasional "outburst of dreams, hallucinations and spiritual revelations" give it an added dimension.

The lead characters in the first novel, which sets the stage for the subsequent ones, are Daphne Manners, a young Englishwoman who has recently arrived in India, and her British-educated Indian lover, Hari Kumar. Ronald Merrick, a

British police officer belonging to the Indian Police Service, is another main character.

The manner of narration is, especially in the first volume, looping and elliptical, shifting from 1942 to 1964 and back again, with detours back to the early 1900s. The voices shift as well as the perspective, from a third-person narrative about the doomed schoolteacher Edwina Crane to a first-person narration by another character, Lady Chatterjee, to a tour of Mayapore one evening in 1964. This shifting chronology, while never confusing, has inspired much discussion.

One has to take the series as a whole because it tells one story with many points of view. The series deals with the years 1942 to 1948. The books start with WW II still raging. India, under British rule, seemingly is fighting with the allies, but some of the Indians feel that anyone, even the Japanese, would treat them better than the British. So there is espionage. The four volumes of *The Raj Quartet* overlap and complement one another. At the same time, the main storyline of the slow twilight of the British supremacy in India, is endorsed through all the four novels. The rape of a white girl by Indian men remains the central lodestone ever present in the background. It is the recurring nightmare which is seldom mentioned but which none can drive from their minds.

Events occur, are discussed, witnessed as newspaper reports, court documents, interviews, vague recollections from years later, or perceived directly by the main characters. Then the

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next volume will take two or three steps back into previous events, and these same events will be perceived from another angle, perhaps only as a vague report heard far away across the Indian plain, or witnessed directly by another character, or discussed in detail long after their occurrence over drinks on a verandah. This may at times seem like rehashing, indeed as one reads the four volumes one will be subjected to the account of the rape in the Bibighar Gardens many times over; but what will also become apparent is that additional details, sometimes minor variations in interpretation and sometimes crucial facts, are being added slowly to the events discussed, as though the window to the past were being progressively wiped cleaner and cleaner with successive strokes of Scott's pen. In this way he draws the picture of the last days of the Raj not in a conventional linear fashion, but recursively, and from multiple angles. One gets the clear impression of life in India during the first half of the 20th century as similar in nature: Fragmented, multifaceted, largely dependent upon perspective and experience and never perceived whole or all at once.

Paul Scott has somehow used a simple plot to produce a very engaging read which keeps us intrigued, engaged and beguiled throughout as it circles around the same rape incident from different narrators over and over again, making the story very thought provoking and extremely holistic indeed. It is a carefully wrought story, with many strands, told from shifting points of view (mainly but not exclusively British). Scott does multiple narrators more cleanly than any other author. He's particularly good with the female narrators.

The Raj Quartet is very old-fashioned in one sense, because it has a very languorous pace but it's also a classic example of contemporary fiction: lots of symbolism but also the whole story is seen as though we are in a hall of mirrors. The truth and the narrative are fractured. The narrative framework of the books is a skillful mix, much of it in the voices of the characters themselves, some in letters or official reports, some presented from a distance by a detached observer. In the fourth book, as if the author was concerned that we might be tiring of the characters we've so far encountered, a major new personality is introduced and, a little later, given a narrative voice. One of the major reasons for the popularity of the *Raj Quartet* is partially due to the way the story is presented, switching narrators and a nonlinear timeline.

Though the four novels can be read separately, in isolation or out of chronological order, the narrative scope can be best enjoyed when they are read in an order. Each successive novel casts a new light on the one that came before. The historical facts are explained and revised in the later novels. Characters evolve and change subtly to play different roles in the ever-changing historical context. Scott displays how big and small historical events affect the emotions of men and women.

As Janis Tedesco explains, this means that **'there is no advancement of plot, no surprise tragedy to which a series of episodes builds.'** Thus more attention can be paid to details, to how the conclusion is reached, rather than to what the conclusion will be. The interest of the story shifts from a desire to know the outcome of the plot, to a desire to understand why. This is the case with much historical fiction. The reader may often know the outcome of a particular event. Scott's structure gives the reader that same knowledge at the beginning of the

Raj Quartet, and in so doing ensures that the whole is viewed from a position of hindsight.

He uses the actual settings and events that were happening at the time, even though most of the characters are fictional. He uses allusion in his writing which causes the reader to stop and think. We are forced to wonder if we have interpreted his meanings correctly. Each reader may see some of the situations differently. Regardless of our conclusion about any characters' actions, the story coalesces beautifully.

Knowledge of the British preconceptions of India is crucial to an understanding of the British attitudes to the country. It is because of the multiplicity of western responses to India and the consequent inadequacy of presenting a single narrative viewpoint, that Paul Scott makes use of a multi-angled narrative technique to unfold the sequence of events in *The Raj Quartet*. This technique also takes into account the different shades of opinion amongst the Indians. Consequently, life under the Raj emerges as a multi-faceted entity where conflicts and contradictions coexist with peace and harmony.

Scott implicitly suggests that high standards of objectivity should motivate the historical novelist. He is of the opinion that that there are or can be as many versions of history as there are people. The multi-angled narrative used in *The Raj Quartet* is in keeping with his approach to history. The kind of narrative adopted manifests his intention to give a voice to as many varying shades of opinion as possible.

However arriving at a dispassionate and widely acceptable view of history is not easy. This feature of narrative reporting is illustrated in the representations of India contained in Scott's *The Raj Quartet*. Very often characters succeed in telling their own story, while ostensibly engaged in telling the wider story of the British in India. Only a multi-angled narrative would be able to provide a comprehensive, although not an absolute account of the truth. Scott uses the different viewpoints as mutual commentaries on each other and on the characters with whom they are associated.

Patrick Swinden describes the basis of Scott's prose as **"a slow-moving, hesitant, grammatically complex and heavily loaded sentence structure which gathers together fragments of what has already been, more than it propels forward events that are about to come into being."** (4) The effect of this technique is that one is kept aware of each little episode as an integral part of a larger whole.

Throughout the tetralogy Scott uses four main methods of presenting his material: the use of first - person narrative ; documentation (such as diaries, letters, newspapers and a notebook); the transcription of interviews with different characters ; and a skillful use of third-person narrative to pick out and highlight the lives, thoughts and opinions of his characters. Frequently it is by subtle changes of technique that Scott manages to combine a gathering-together of what has been with what is about to happen.

CONCLUSION

The narrative technique of *The Raj Quartet* provides the framework which makes Scott's characters come to life. The key to the balancing of clarity with illusion seems to be the demand Scott makes on the imagination of the reader. On a

surface level, the imagination is needed to bring the characters, the historical background and the landscape to life. On a deeper level, and through a fuller exploitation of the imagination, it is possible to link the events of the narrative to the abstract imagery and symbolism crucial to the thematic side of Scott's "writing purpose".

Concerning the text's formal arrangement, Colwell notes, "*The Raj Quartet is pluralistic in form, recounted through a polyphony of memoirs, letters, diaries, newspaper articles, political cartoons. Competing Indian 'voices', Hindu and Muslim, formulate a considerable amount of the narrative*" (229).

The story is relayed in a nonlinear format, and *The Raj Quartet* is constructed as a frame story, where an unnamed historian has travelled to Mayapore in the 1960s (the present time relative to the story) to research the incident of Daphne Manners's rape in the Bibighar Gardens. The historian serves as narrator for the first novel, and his interviews and research, which involves reading and cataloging various textual artifacts, form its text. Concerning this narrative structure, Morey asserts, "immediately . . . one finds an example of Scott's frustration with generic expectations and the beginning of his unraveling of the imperial narrative, since the medium is poised between the dynamic, story-led impulses of the novel and the meticulous collation of the history book" (136-7). Scott not only explores history, but he simultaneously creates history through the self-conscious creation of text within the frame narrative, which follows Morey's suggestion that "*This is a book about writing histories*" (137). Overwhelmingly, the narrative form of the *Quartet* conveys a fundamental distrust of conventional methods of historiography that seek to reconstruct the past from textual evidence.

The Raj Quartet does not present a central narrative voice to which other narrative voices are more or less subjugated; instead, Scott's *Quartet* constructs a **mosaic of narrative voices** that revolve around significant events and locations, as opposed to specific characters. Scott's text seemingly has a "realistic texture" which is more in line with the documentary realism of the day. He adopts an emphatic political approach in *The Raj Quartet*.

Scott's approach to chronological and progressive construction is best elucidated by Peter Childs. He suggests, "*Both Scott's presentation of history and the form of the Quartet are indebted to [Ralph Waldo] Emerson's first series of essays of 1841*" (50), and in particular, Emerson's essay "History." Childs suggests that Scott's narrative design, "*where lives parallel both other lives and the histories of countries*" (Childs 50), follows directly from Emerson's ideas in "History."

Theodore Steinberg offers a notable point concerning Scott's representation of history in the *Quartet* when he compares the text to Leo Tolstoy's *War and Peace* (1869). His comparison is not unique, and he cites a number of writers and critics who have drawn similar parallels between Scott and Tolstoy: K. BhaskaraRao has called the *Quartet* "*an Anglo-Indian War and Peace*," M. M. Mahood writes, "*[the Quartet] aspires to be an imaginative creation of Tolstoyan breadth and depth*," and Francine Weinbaum contends that the *Quartet* is "*like Tolstoy's War and Peace, a world unto itself, a totality*" (qtd. in Steinberg 125-6).

The tetralogy ends with the closing of a circle, bringing the rhythmic and structural shape of the work to a geometrically perfect conclusion. It is monumental. *The Raj Quartet* is a masterpiece of post-colonialism fiction, historical fiction, romance, mystery, post-modernism, and even a thriller. *The Raj Quartet* is one of the greatest works of literature ever. The New Yorker stated in its review of the *Quartet* that "*An artful triumph. . . . [The Raj Quartet] goes forward with considerable power and urgency. . . Besides storytelling, Mr. Scott uses his remarkable techniques to portray a place and a time, a society and its social arrangements, that are now history.*"

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