

History and Memory in J. G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur*

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ABSTRACT

Unlike most Victorian novels in which the colonies and colonial matters are kept in the background, J. G. Farrell's *The Siege of Krishnapur*, as the title suggests, brings the colonial affair to the fore and depicts the minutiae of an event in Victorian imperial history that brought about lasting anxieties, namely the 'Indian Mutiny' of 1857. Following Astrid Erll's study on the event as a shared lieu de mémoire, this essay examines the ways through which the text offers an alternative memory narrative to the British mutiny myth. Through unreliable narration, stereotypical characterization, unsettling the long-held hierarchies, widespread disillusionment, and role reversals, Farrell aims at undermining the British faith in progress and civilization that justified imperial encroachment on Indian land.

Keywords: counter memory, disillusionment, neo-Victorianism, postcolonialism, uprising

1. INTRODUCTION

In an introduction to J. G. Farrell's ^[i] *The Siege of Krishnapur* and *Troubles* – the two award-winning novels of his 'Empire Trilogy' ^[ii] – John Sutherland presents him as "one of the finest post-colonial novelists of his time". ^[1] He even writes that Farrell "was well-mixed, genetically, to be the obituarist of empire". ^[1] Indeed, what corroborates these claims is Farrell's trio of novels pivoting around the theme of empire, on the second of which this study concentrates. *The Siege of Krishnapur* is the outcome of Farrell's brooding over colonial India. Inspired by what he came across in the British Museum, namely Mark Thornhill's *Personal Adventures of a Magistrate during the Indian Mutiny*, and the Siege of Lucknow, "an iconic event in British imperial history", ^[1] he wrote the story of the eponymous fictional town under siege during the rebellion of 1857. Sutherland writes, "The intertwining of Thornhill's personal account with the commercial rapacities of the British Empire

combined critique and strong narrative line – the mix J. G. Farrell particularly wanted".

^[1] The novel views the events from the British outpost invaded by the sepoys. The community holds out for months until finally, while retreated to the banquetting hall and in a devastating, grotesque condition, it is saved by the relieving force. It is mainly through the comically disillusioned character of the Collector, who believed wholeheartedly in the British narrative of progress, that Farrell illustrates the decline of the empire. This essay examines Farrell's remarkable text as a medium of cultural memory that aims at providing a counter memory to the prevailing (imperial) narratives about the so-called 'Indian Mutiny'. Following Astrid Erll's study on the Mutiny narratives, this study argues that the text does not follow their inherent ideology and, in many respects, aims at undermining the British faith in progress and civilization that justified imperial encroachment on Indian land.

2. “Indian Mutiny” and the Mutiny Narrative

This section engages with the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and the narratives that later aimed at its illustration. What has been known as the “Indian Mutiny” was, indeed, an uprising by the Indians against their then British rulers. It broke out in Meerut, northern India as a rebellion of native soldiers who were in the service of the British East India Company – i.e. sepoys – and soon spread all over to Delhi and Lucknow, joined by civilians, native rulers and princes that were disinherited by the British. What triggered the rebellion was the sepoys’ discontent at the new Enfield rifles, the use of which they found in sharp contrast with their religious beliefs – in order to load it, they had to bite the end of cartridges, which were believed to be lubricated by grease produced from animal fat, that of pigs and cows. ^[iii] It is needless to say that what triggered the mutiny was merely a repercussion of the problems that were much more deeply-rooted than the greased cartridge issue would indicate. Indeed, the multiplicity of cultural conflicts reaches back to the beginning of the British ‘colonial affair’ in India. The rebels were against the British policies that attempted to change their long-held customs and beliefs. They believed these policies among others aimed at destroying their religion and converting them to Christianity. Discontent grew and the cumulative effects of these factors resulted in the uprising which, however, was put down by the British who had regained power and called for relieving forces from other territories. From the British perspective, the following atrocities committed against the natives were justified as reprisals for the death of the British residents and officers. However, in Indian history and cultural memory the events are remembered differently. ^[iv] Indeed, in order to examine the ways the narrative of *The Siege of Krishnapur* could possibly be regarded as revisionist, acquiring knowledge about the conventions of what are known as ‘the mutiny narratives’ seems

necessary. In this regard, the essay draws on Astrid Erll’s selective study of these conventions over one and a half centuries.

Studying the ‘Indian Mutiny’ as a shared *lieu de mémoire*, ^[v] Astrid Erll, in her essay, “Remembering across Time, Space, and Cultures: Premediation, Remediation and the ‘Indian Mutiny’”, relates the different memories the term *triggers* in different cultures, epochs, and media. Maintaining that different images and narratives have been associated with this memory site, she writes:

For example, the Victorians, and indeed up to the mid-twentieth century, mainstream British culture associated the term ‘Indian Mutiny’ with images of ferocious sepoys raping English women, with British cantonments on fire, with heroic Highland soldiers charging into battle, and with narrative plots such as ‘last-minute rescue’ and ‘last stand’, ‘faith and delivery’ and ‘virtue rewarded’. ^[3]

Indeed, the person who remembers certain images of the event has to be “part of a ‘media culture’ in which representations of the ‘Indian Mutiny’ are constantly being circulated”. ^[3] Media (newspaper, literature, movie, . . .) play an ineluctable role in shaping these memories. After the uprising, the British newspapers began reporting the ‘treacherous’ event in detail, and soon appeared “the atrocity stories” of rape, treachery, massacre and mutilation. ^[3] Elaborating on the possible origins of these stories, Erll writes: “All of these are texts, genres and images which an uninformed public resorts to in order to imagine and make sense of an exotic and dangerous reality which is barely understood”. ^[3] Thus, she emphasizes the importance of premediation, which is “a cultural practice of experiencing and remembering: the use of existent patterns and paradigms to transform contingent events into meaningful images and narratives”. ^[3] Examining the historical accounts of the period which appeared right after the outbreak of the rebellion, she concludes that along with newspaper accounts, they provided the

material for the literary appropriations of the event. What is known today as the “British Mutiny writing” has its roots mainly in the latter part of the nineteenth century, manifested in the period’s “most prominent literary genre”, the novel. ^[3] It flourished during the 1880s and 1890s with works like G. A. Henty’s *In Times of Peril* (1881) and Flora Annie Steel’s *On the Face of the Waters* (1897). Erll demonstrates that in literary narratives, for instance in Henty’s juvenile fiction, the heroic deeds of the British figures are, more often than not, made bold and celebrated. Such a mode of remembering is “clearly meant to instil imperialist values and norms in its young readers”. ^[3] Conversely, British jingoism and glorified heroic actions have no place in the Indian memory culture, specifically after the Indian independence of 1947. What follows is an attempt at reading Farrell’s *The Siege of Krishnapur* with regards to the aforementioned conventions of the British Mutiny myth. In other words, this study asks how these conventions find expression in this novel. Does the text offer an alternative memory narrative to the British Mutiny myth? To what extent could the text be considered revisionist? Needless to say, this study considers the text as a medium of cultural memory.

3. The Siege

The novel opens with a third-person narrator depicting the outskirts of the fictional town of Krishnapur towards which a supposed traveler is heading: “Anyone who has never before visited Krishnapur, and who approaches from the east, is likely to think he has reached the end of his journey a few miles sooner than he expected”. ^[4] The narrator follows: “While still some distance from Krishnapur he begins to ascend a shallow ridge. From here he will see what appears to be a town in the heat-distorted distance. He will see the white glitter of walls and roofs and a handsome grove of trees, perhaps even the dome of what might be a temple”. ^[4] Indeed, the way this stranger focalizer’s account is treated in the following paragraphs is very

telling in that by depicting his (colonial) ‘gaze’ and then marking it as (ridiculously) wrong, the novel establishes its aim at engaging with the theme of empire. To the traveler’s eyes, it is “surprising” that the “dreary ocean of bald earth” surrounding the walls “is not quite deserted, as one might expect”. ^[4] Albeit:

[A]t least to the eye of a stranger, within the limit of the horizon there does not appear to be anywhere worth walking to, unless perhaps to that distant town he has spotted; one part looks quite as good as another. But if you look closely and shield your eyes from the glare you will make out tiny villages here and there, difficult to see because they are made of the same mud as the plain they came from; and no doubt they melt back into it again during the rainy season, for there is no lime in these parts, no clay or shale that you can burn into bricks, no substance hard enough to resist the seasons over the years. ^[4]

Therefore, since there seems to be “nothing that a European might call civilization”, ^[4] he is all the more determined to move towards the white walls. However, to his utter consternation, those bricks that are “undoubtedly an essential ingredient of civilization; one gets nowhere at all without them”, ^[4] turn out, as he gets closer, to be surrounding another ‘city’, a deserted ancient cemetery – “one of those . . . that are called ‘Cities of the Silent’ . . . in northern India”. ^[4] The narrator then explicitly draws on the similarities between the two ‘cities’ by stressing that though Krishnapur was once an important center to a large district, in which the company’s representatives led a lavish life, it lost its importance and now “a visitor might well find himself reminded of the ‘City of the Silent’ he had passed on his way to Krishnapur”. ^[4] The rest of the novel illustrates the trouble that set in “towards the end of February 1857”. ^[4] The putative hero of the novel, the Collector, is the only person in the Residency to detect signs of an impending threat, when he finds piles of chapattis ^[vi] arrayed at different corners of

his dwelling. The district collector in India had many responsibilities; among them were revenue collection and cooperation with the police superintendent in order to maintain order and peace. Yet in a playful use of the term, the text also – and perhaps largely – refers to Mr. Hopkins' fervent desire for practically everything presented in the Great Exhibition of 1851, the symbol of the British ideals of progress. He decides to take action in order to stave off the “still hypothetical” threat. Yet again, while he is thinking in the hall of the Residency, the (already shattered) image of safety when surrounded by the “so very thick” walls “made of enormous numbers of the pink, wafer-like bricks of British India” is conjured up – “you could see yourself how thick they were”.^[4] The attentive reader knows what to expect.

The Residency holds a “fortnightly meeting of the Krishnapur Poetry Society”, the founder and the President of which is the Collector. In the room where the British ladies sit – poem in hand, waiting to be judged by Tom Willoughby, the Magistrate – it is “hard to believe that one was in India at all, except for the punkahs”. This time the Collector thinks of items other than bricks:

His eyes roamed with satisfaction over the walls, thickly armoured with paintings in oil and water colour, with mirrors and glass cases containing stuffed birds and other wonders, over chairs and sofas upholstered in plum cretonne, over showcases of minerals and a cobra floating in a bottle of bluish alcohol, over occasional tables draped to the floor with heavy tablecloths on which stood statuettes in electro-metal of great men of literature, of Dr Johnson, of Moliere, Keats, Voltaire and, of course, Shakespeare . . .^[4]

Little did he know that all these items – among them *the Bard's* head – were to be used either as substitutes for cannon balls or bricks in order to fend off the approaching sepoys.

Before leaving for Calcutta to send his wife to England, the Collector orders for trenches to be dug, and ramparts to be built

around the Residency compound. A poet, George Fleury – “commissioned by the Court of Directors to compose a small volume describing the advances that civilization had made in India under the Company rule”^[4] – and his widowed sister Miriam, both of whom have just arrived from England, Dr. Dunstaple (later to be rival to Dr. McNab), his daughter Louise (with whom Fleury falls in love), and his son Harry (a Lieutenant) all enter Krishnapur, where they would soon face the plight of the siege. The novel is replete with stereotypes in its characterization of the ‘Victorian’ residents and values: Ladies that are constantly worried about their clothes, mothers that are mainly preoccupied showing off their “nubile” daughters before ‘potential suitors’, balls and picnics, young officers in scarlet uniforms, “vivacious young widows” versus “girls of the most respectable kind”, a “fallen woman”, phrases like “domestic tragedy”, “utmost propriety”, and “the soft and milky rabble of womankind”.^[4] Indeed, the text's satirical mimicry of the Victorian past is more pronounced in an argument – “conversation of the most civilized sort”^[4] – over the merits and dimensions of civilization. Gathered in the Residency for a dinner party, Fleury, the Padre, Mr. Rayne, and the Collector find their ideas on the superiority of the practical and spiritual aspects of civilization in conflict. In fact, the text tacitly implies the way the white British revere themselves as God's superior representatives on earth with a mission for civilization. Hence to them, the only question that remains is whether to look for signs of progress in practical matters or in spiritual ones. While to Mr. Rayne, the Opium Agent, opium is “progress exemplified”,^[vii] the Collector believes the increase of revenue is “not simply to acquire wealth, but to acquire *through* wealth, that superior way of life which we loosely term civilization”.^[4] As regards the Padre, who is so worried that Fleury's ideas would culminate in loss of his faith, the text reveals the extent to which he takes for

granted imperial Britain's occupation of land and rapacious plunder throughout the world that he even starts questioning 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 every continent. The Almighty had, it was true, subsequently permitted a magnificent translation, as if realizing His error . . . but, of course, the Almighty could not be in error, such an idea was an absurdity. ^[4]

Finally, while impatiently insisting that “every invention is a prayer to God”, the Collector, Queen’s loyal subject, calls the Great Exhibition “a collective prayer of all the civilized nations”, and hence a symbol of mankind’s *progressive* movement “towards union with that Supreme Being . . .”. ^[4]

Soon the news of the mutiny breaks out. In Meerut, a group of sepoys had shot their officers down and were joined by the “badmashes” of the bazaar to attack the British cantonment. ^[4] The revolt was quelled, however, the mutineers had run away. The five-hundred-mile distance between the two regions did not assuage the widespread fear of suffering the same plight. Soldiers at Captainganj could easily follow their fellows’ scheme in Meerut and attack Krishnapur. These anxieties divided the cantonment into two groups: those who supported the Collector and his strategies, and those who believed they had to act normal, otherwise the natives would build on their fear and attack them. Some had overheard the natives chatting about restoring the Emperor and reviving the Mogul Empire. The Collector mused over bringing women and children into the Residency. However, he was deterred by the obstinate, senile General Jackson, whom, along with other officers at Captainganj (including Lieutenant Harry), believed there was nothing to worry about since ‘Jack Sepoy’ was not to be feared. These conflicts seem absurd as the threat becomes more

imminent and General Jackson’s lacerated body on horseback is spotted at the Residency entrance. The scene, which Earl Rovit calls “Chaplinsque”, ^[5] is worth mentioning here since it depicts the manner through which Farrell presents the events contrary to the aforementioned illustrations of heroic deeds in the mutiny narratives. While in a previous vignette the General was “escorted by half a dozen native cavalymen, known as *sowars*,” who had to help him dismount since he was “portly and small in stature” and “could no longer leap in and out of the saddle”, ^[4] this time “something was amiss” since “The General, instead of waiting to be lifted, had plunged forward over the horse’s head and slithered to the ground. And there he continued to lie until the sowars came to pick him up”:

Blood was running freely from the General’s body and splashing audibly on to the baked earth. The *sowars* were evidently trying to stop the flowing of blood by holding him first one way, then another, as someone eating toast and honey might try, by vigilance and dexterity, to prevent it dripping. The General’s blood continued to patter on the earth, however, and all the way up the steps and into the hall where he was laid down at last, after some hesitation, on a rather expensive carpet. ^[4]

Such grotesque scenes are abundant in Farrell’s illustration of the siege which is yet to come. The news of the massacre at Captainganj brought swarms of people, along with whatever possessions their coolies could carry, to the Residency. As it was his ‘duty’, the Collector was now in charge, and walked around giving orders. Harry, who along with Fleury, had been out informing planters to come to the Residency, “found that because of his sprained wrist he had missed an adventure at Captainganj”. ^[4] He, however, managed to *concoct* some adventurous story by telling his fellows that a musket had been fired in their direction, but that they had obviously escaped it. Indeed, the idea of ‘adventure’ is reminiscent of the ‘adventure novels’ written in the nineteenth century,

specifically those by G. A. Henty, “one of the empire’s most productive bards”.^[4] In *Times of Peril*, writes Erll, The fictive teenage protagonists, the brothers Dick and Ned, take part in every major campaign of the “Indian Mutiny”. They experience the siege and the storming of Delhi; they spend time in the Lucknow residency among the besieged and later take part in General Campbell’s so called “second relief”; they even witness the Satichaura Ghat massacre of Cawnpore.^[3]

Not surprisingly, they always escape and are safe. In *The Siege of Krishnapur*, however, the view of the “Mutiny” as an adventure, is abruptly disabused in the following paragraph. Contrary to Harry’s perspective, the traumatized survivors have different memories:

Those of his peers who had escaped with life and limb from the Captainganj parade ground did not seem to be thinking of it as an adventure, those who had managed to escape unhurt were now looking tired and shocked . . . Strangely enough, they listened quite enviously to Harry. . . . They wished they had had an adventure too, instead of their involuntary glimpse of the abattoir.^[4]

No sooner had the sepoys arrived than the whole community felt the horror of the siege. Bloodshed, amputation, putrefaction, insects and pariah dogs, rations, and cholera could hardly be associated with the heroic image of a British subject the Victorians probably had in mind. The novel depicts the minutiae of the burgeoning conflicts inside the Residency which were no less, if not more, fatal than the sepoys’ attacks. Apart from constant struggle for food and the shrinking rations, many feuds embarked among the ladies who did not relinquish their class-bound hierarchies even in ‘times of peril’ and had divided the billiard room accordingly among themselves. Thus the hottest corner of the room (and later the banqueting hall) was allotted to Lucy Hughes, the “fallen woman”. The Collector was obliged to visit their room constantly to calm them down as they either fought over their servants or the

lice in their hair. Accordingly, with the spread of cholera “the great cholera controversy, which had been smouldering for some time, at last burst into flame”.^[4] The two doctors’ (McNab and Dunstaple’s) dispute over the best possible treatment for cholera, led to a rift between the community members as they did not know which one to trust, and according to the Magistrate “would inevitably support the man who shouted loudest”.^[4] Finally, Dusntaple’s insistence on the repudiation of McNab’s theories and treatment ended up in his death as when in a rant against McNab he deliberately drank an infected liquid, he refused to be treated by him. Yet, even after his death, the community remains dubious till the end about whether McNab was right that one caught cholera by drinking contaminated water.

4. Afterglow

In “J. G. Farrell and the Imperial Theme”, Earl Rovit includes Farrell among those “serious novelists” that he associates with “a more considered embrace of History” in a period during which “the discipline of History has suffered serious assaults on its credibility”.^[5] However, he stresses that in *The Siege of Krishnapur*, “Farrell’s attitude toward British colonialism is neither polemical nor justifying – neither more nor less judgmental than Dr. McNab’s careful bedside notations on the devastating process of the cholera to which his own wife succumbed”.^[5] In fact, Rovit traces the roots of such “radically distanced attitude”, and in one word perhaps apathy, to Farrell’s debilitating disease, polio.^[5] According to Rovit, the period he spent in the lung box made him move beyond self-pity into a lack of feeling for the world altogether. A sign of this apathetic outlook in the novel, indicates Rovit, is its omniscient narrator who hovers above the events and rarely does descend to state his own opinion. Meanwhile, as the present study has attempted to clarify, Farrell inevitably does take side in his attempt to distort and counter the heroic accounts of the so-called ‘Mutiny’ and the

belief in the progressive movement of British civilization. In fact, apart from what has been discussed so far, there are plenty of signs that the text unsettles the Self/Other dichotomy. A major strategy is the way the novel ends in role reversals. During the picnic scene at one of the opening sections of the novel, the merry British are described consuming the contents of their hampers containing “a real York ham . . . oysters, pickles, mutton pies, Cheddar cheese, ox tongue, cold chickens, chocolate, candied and crystallized fruits, and biscuits of all kinds made from the finest fresh Cape flour: Abernethy’s crackers, Tops and Bottoms, spice nuts and every other delicious biscuit you could imagine”, while the “ragged” natives are “sitting on their heels at the edge of the clearing, gazing at the white sahibs”.^[5] Strikingly, the same scene is repeated some two hundred and fifty pages later, however with a complete reversal of roles. After months of living on meager rations, Farrell’s beleaguered characters, who are now to the eyes of the native ‘onlookers’,^[viii] “just a few ragged, boil-covered skeletons crouching behind mud walls”,^[4] use telescopes to *glare* “for hour after hour” at their cheerful spectators eating, among others, “chapatis, nan, and parathas” as well as “richly bubbling curries and glistening mounds of rice”.^[4]

The dichotomy between the ‘ragged’ natives and the ‘civilized’ Europeans is even more stressed through the ubiquitous presence of and constant reference to the animals, specifically dogs. What the Collector observes is very telling in this respect. As he walks through the enclave, he spots two collections of dogs, the (by implication) ‘civilized’ dogs, like Chloë, the spaniel Fleury bought to win Louise’s heart, and the “uncivilized” pariah dogs that are “dreadful to behold”.^[4] “Hideously thin, fur eaten away by mange to the raw skin, endlessly and uselessly scratching, timorous, vicious, and very often half crippled”, they are, according to the Collector, “a parody of what Nature had intended”:

He had once, as it happened, on landing for the first time at Garden Reach in Calcutta, had the same thought about the human beggars who swarmed at the landing-stage; they, too, had seemed a parody. Yet when the Collector piously gave to the poor, it was to the English poor, by a fixed arrangement with his agent in London; he had accepted that the poverty of India was beyond redemption. The humans he had got used to, in time. . . the dogs never.^[4]

While the pariah dogs resemble the poor in India, the civilized dogs obviously represent the British – there are numerous references to Chloë’s “golden tresses” resembling those of Louise’s.^[4] What is striking, however, is the way this hierarchy is inverted during the siege. In other words, as in the case of the picnic scene, the dogs’ positions are interchanged. At first, the Collector is worried that the pets starve to death since, unlike the pariah dogs, they cannot devour their (by then deceased) masters. As the days go by, he observes the change: “What a sad spectacle they made! The faithful creatures were daily sinking into a more desperate state. While jackals and pariah dogs grew fat, they grew thin; their soft and luxurious upbringing had not fitted them for this harsh reality. If they dared approach the carcass of a horse or bullock, or the fuming mountain of offal beside the croquet wall, orange eyes, bristling hair and snapping teeth would drive them away”^[4] This transformation culminates in a scene where, after months under siege, Fleury sets eyes on Chloë: “Chloë’s golden curls had grown foul and matted and in places mange had already begun to remove them; a cloud of flies followed her and every few yards she stopped to scratch”.^[4] When he finds her under a sepoy’s attack, he orders a native to kill the sepoy. However, he turns his face away and is “sickened” by what he observes: unlike Ram, who spent so much time killing the sepoy, Chloë “wasted no time in bounding forward to eat away the sepoy’s face”.^[4] This incident comes as a

great shock to Fleury – obviously like the Collector he shares the same premises about ‘civilized’ dogs – to the extent that he orders Ram to shoot Chloë as well: “He told Ram to kill her as well and hurried away to take refuge in the banqueting hall and try to erase from his mind the scene he had just witnessed”.^[4]

The troubles of the siege come as a revelation to the Collector and culminate in a drastic transformation of his outlook towards the idea of progress and the white British sovereignty. This gradual ‘conversion’ is revealed, among others, in his appearance as when after a period of illness he sees his reflection in the mirror, he finds that the hair grown on his chin resembles that of the cynical atheist Magistrate, a former Chartist who has now lost hope in humanity. When his earthen ramparts started to melt away during the rainy season, the Collector’s “beard continued to grow”, which was a “bad sign”.^[4] Indeed,

The longer his beard grew the more ginger it became; another bad sign. No longer did he lecture people on the splendours of the Exhibition or on the advance of civilization. Civilization might be standing rock still, or even going backwards, for all the Collector seemed to care these days. It was clearly all up with the Collector. But still, he stayed out there shovelling, confounding the pessimists . . . even though his task was clearly hopeless.^[4]

The Collector is further disillusioned when he finds out that even the Greek pillars, which like the British India bricks gave him a feeling of security, were in fact not what he thought they were: “These pillars, he could not help noticing, were dreadfully pocked and tattered by shot. He thought contemptuously: ‘So they weren’t marble after all.’ He lingered for a moment sneering at the guilty red core that was revealed beneath the stucco of lime and sand. He hated pretence”.^[4] Along with others, he lost all of his “possessions” – including his electro-metal figures – in a “matter of

improvised ammunition”.^[4] Once a symbol of European civilization, the figures were now being used as missiles. Ironically enough, among all the items presented at the Exhibition, only his collection of pistols remain to be used at last.

The fundamental question the novel asks reverberates throughout the narrative. In fact, what preoccupies Fleury and the Collector, and perhaps by extension every ruminant member in the besieged community – and finally the reader – is the question of how little they know of the Indian culture and whether Britain’s presence in India is worth the candle? At some point in the narrative the Collector is seen:

[D]iscoursing in an objective way on the perplexing question of why, after a hundred years of beneficial rule in Bengal, the natives should have taken it into their heads to return to the anarchy of their ancestors. One or two mistakes, however serious, made by the military in their handling of religious matters, were surely no reason for rejecting a superior culture as a whole. It was as if, after the improving rule of the Romans, the Britons had decided to paint themselves with woad again. ‘After all, we’re not ogres, even though we don’t marry among the natives or adopt their customs.’^[4]

A little further, when in the tiger house visiting Hari – the Maharajah’s westernized son whom the collector had kept hostage along with the Prime Minister – he realizes, “that there was a whole way of life of the people in India which he would never get to know and which was totally indifferent to him and his concerns”.^[4] Similarly, Fleury – who had reacted to the Collector’s idea of ‘a superior culture’ by retorting “*All* civilization is bad. It mars the noble and natural instincts of the heart. Civilization is a decadence!”^[4] – is in awe when he hears in the air a voice singing “the name of God” and as he sees “an expression of tender devotion come over his [Ram’s] lined face”, he too thinks “as the Collector had thought some weeks earlier in the tiger

house, what a lot of Indian life was unavailable to the Englishman who came equipped with his own religion and habits".^[4]

As the siege approaches its end, the fundamentalist Padre's views towards the Exhibition change drastically. During the siege, he continually pestered everyone, specifically Fleury, as he believed they had sinned. If he urged them to repent, God would show them mercy. Previously a fervent supporter, he now called the Exhibition "The World's Vanity Fair", shouting "The Crystal Palace was built in the form of a *cathedral*! A cathedral of Beelzebub!" And now he thought it was his duty to "persuade the Collector of his error and make him realize that his veneration for this Vanity Fair of materialism was misplaced",^[4] and as it happens:

[T]he Collector would not have minded agreeing with the Padre about the Exhibition. He had come to entertain serious doubts about it himself. He, too, suffered from an occasional enlightening vision which came to him from the dim past and which he must have suppressed at the time . . . The extraordinary array of chains and fetters, manacles and shackles exhibited by Birmingham for export to America's slave states, for instance . . . Why had he not thought more about such exhibits?^[4]

One more time the role reversal has happened. The Collector now thinks Fleury was right in stressing the importance of feelings and the spiritual aspects of civilization. However, by that time, Fleury "had given up talking of civilization as a 'beneficial disease'; he had discovered the manly pleasures to be found in inventing things, in making things work, in getting results, in cause and effect. In short, he had identified himself at last with the spirit of the times".^[4] Once, the Collector had compared their time with that of their ancestors, and had talked about the irresistibility of their 'superior civilization'. "By combining our advances in science and in morality", he would say, "we have so obviously found the best way of doing

things. Truth cannot be resisted!" Yet the text mocks his ideals even as he utters these words. Right after he finishes the sentence, "a round shot struck the corner of the roof and toppled one of the pillars of the verandah", making him to add: "Er, that's to say, not successfully".^[4] Indeed, the Collector believed – as did Fleury – that the past centuries – the "arid" eighteenth century for instance – "were at best only a preparation for our own century. . . we have gone forward . . . Ah!".^[4] Once more, his sigh is accompanied by a round shot. As he narrowly escapes the shot, he thinks alarmed: "This notion of the superiority of the nineteenth century which he had just been enjoying had depended on beliefs he no longer held, but which had just now been itching, like amputated limbs which he could feel although they no longer existed".^[4] As "From the farmyard in which his certitudes perched like fat chickens, every night of the siege, one or two were carried off in the jaws of rationalism and despair", a few pages later, he ponders, "We look on past ages with condescension, as a mere preparation for *us* . . . but what if we're only an after-glow of *them*?"^[4] This quotation is remarkable, indeed, in that more than a revelation to the collector, it could be read as a warning to the reader observing the events at a safe distance, who might face the same plight in looking at the nineteenth century with condescension while unquestioningly glorifying the ideals of his/her own age.

The Collector's 'last impression' of India at the closing pages of the novel, is roughly the same as the stranger traveler's 'first impression' at the beginning of the novel. Saved by the relieving force and finally on his way back to England, he comes across the same scene which was earlier described from the perspective of the traveler. He sees a pond, two men with two bullocks, however, contrary to the traveler's *gaze*, "As they crept slowly forward over the plain *his eyes searched for* those tiny villages made of mud with their bamboo groves and their ponds".^[4] In the end, years

after the siege is over, the Collector meets Fleury in the streets of London. As if they have exchanged personalities, it is the Collector who says “Culture is a sham”, “a cosmetic painted on life by rich people to conceal its ugliness”.^[4] Now, it is Fleury’s turn to reject his ideas – as he is the one who now has “a large collection of artistic objects”.^[4] He is the new Collector.

CONCLUSION

The critics views on the revisionist potential of the novel vary. Apart from Sutherland and Rovit, it seems to Marie-Luise Kohlke that Farrell’s comedic outlook towards the events and his humorous depiction of the sepoys’ death fails to engage the reader’s conscience.^[6] As depicted in this study, there is an abundance of evidence that shows the reader’s conscience is thoroughly engaged. This study attempted to illustrate the many ways Farrell’s *The Siege of Krishnapur* does not follow the ideology of the mutiny narratives. Through unreliable narration, stereotypical characterization, unsettling the long-held hierarchies, widespread disillusionment, and role reversals, Farrell reveals and underscores the pretensions and absurdity of the British civilization in India. It is, indeed, true that the natives are not as richly depicted as the British. They are most of the times present in the background. However, this lack could partly be justified by the fact that the text is viewed from the perspective of the British and narrated by an unreliable narrator who at times finds his ideals in line with those of Fleury and the Collector. Furthermore, as discussed in this article, at the closing pages of the novel, the significant turn of the gaze is manifest. Yet again, this very notion, along with the undeniable fact that the empire has not yet ceased to exist, makes it seem a hyperbole to suggest, as Sutherland would, that Farrell could be an obituarist of empire. One should bear in mind that in Farrell’s novel, the Collector’s disillusionment is followed by Fleury’s kindled interest in the civilizing powers of culture. Indeed, the text indicates

that this “beneficial disease”^[4] keeps spreading forever.

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Endnotes

- i. James Gordon Farrell (1935-1979); he was born in Liverpool to Anglo-Irish parents. Though his parents had been to India before he was born – for “a promising career . . . as the manager of a molasses factory” awaited his father – he himself visited the country in the 1970s to gather information for his novel. He spent most of his life in Britain and only stayed in Ireland for about two discontinuous years. Yet it was in Ireland that he spent his last days. In 1979, he went fishing on a stormy day and never came back. Apparently his body was so weak as a result of polio, which he had contracted in 1956, that he was unable to swim. According to Sutherland, “what had made him a writer killed him” (see Sutherland). His first three novels, namely *A Man From Elsewhere* (1963), *The Lung* (1965), and *A Girl in the Head* (1967) were not as well-received

- as his 'Empire Trilogy', which, according to critics, marks a turning point in his career.
- ii. *Troubles* (1970), *The Siege of Krishnapur* (1973), and *The Singapore Grip* (1978).
 - iii. Hence offensive to both Muslims and Hindus. Muslims consider pork to be unclean, and cow is a sacred animal in Hinduism.
 - iv. While the event is labeled and reproached as "Mutiny" in British history, the Indians regard it as the initiator of the struggle for freedom, calling it the First War for Independence.
 - v. Meaning site of memory. The concept of lieu de mémoire was introduced by the French historian Pierre Nora in the 1980s in his study *Les lieux de mémoire*. These sites can include "geographical locations, buildings, monuments and works of art as well as historical persons, memorial days, philosophical and scientific texts, or symbolic actions. Thus, Paris, Versailles, and the Eiffel Tower are sites of memory, but so are Joan of Arc, the French flag, [and] 14 July. . ." As a lieu de mémoire the "Indian Mutiny" is the result of the convergence and compression of various medial representations over time. See 2. Erll A. *Memory in Culture*. Basingtoke: Palgrave Macmillan; 2011.
 - vi. Chapatis: "made of coarse flour and about the size and thickness of a biscuit" (see Farrell).
 - vii. In a scene in the opium factory, it is revealed by Mr. Simmens, that each of the "great balls" – "as big as a man's head" – into which the finished opium was formed "would fetch about seventy-six shillings, while to the *ryot* and his family the Government paid a mere four shillings a pound" (see Farrell). *Ryot*: an Indian peasant.
 - viii. Since the beginning of the siege native spectators came to watch their British rulers perish. Yet, this time they were "coming in greater numbers than ever before" and some of the wealthier ones "brought picnic hampers in the European manner" (see Farrell).

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