



RONALD MERRICK – EMBLEMATIC OF THE FAILURE OF THE BRITISH RAJ IN PAUL SCOTT'S THE RAJ QUARTET

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Abstract:

The Raj Quartet is monumental and a masterpiece of post-colonialism fiction, historical fiction, romance, mystery, post-modernism, and even a thriller. The quartet takes a panoramic view of India during the last days of the Raj, the British ruling class in India. Scott's most fascinating creation is the character of Ronald Merrick. Perhaps the truest test of any other character's personality is his or her reaction to Merrick's odd blend of heroism and hostility, decency and depravity. Ronald Merrick, one of the main characters, is a mixture of sadistic evil and latent homosexuality. Paul Scott has created in the character of Ronald Merrick an unforgettably sinister figure, plausible and impressive, a man who can be defined as a person who takes more than he gives of human happiness, whose main talent and interest is to be at the centre and manipulate. To use an old-fashioned word, he may be described as "evil" but he is deeply intelligent. Of all the characters in the *Quartet*, Merrick is the one most frequently present, or lurking noticeably in the background, throughout all the four novels. It is plain that Scott found Merrick the most fascinating of his creations.

Key Words: Masterpiece, Fascinating, Sinister, Manipulate, Evil, Depravity & Homosexuality

"A Major Work, A Glittering Combination of Brilliant Craftsmanship, Psychological Perception and Objective Reporting"

- New York Times

The *Raj Quartet* is monumental and a masterpiece of post-colonialism fiction, historical fiction, romance, mystery, post-modernism, and even a thriller. The quartet takes a panoramic view of India during the last days of the Raj, the British ruling class in India. In 1945, the British government voted to grant India independence from Great Britain; the days of colonialism ended and an uneasy transfer of power began. Scott's novels cover a five-year period from 1942 to 1947, and he uses that particularly turbulent and disturbing era to introduce a large cast of characters and the events that shape much of modern life—the last gasp of imperialism, World War II, and the dawn of the nuclear age.

It is an excellent novel, presenting the varying aspects of life in India in the last years of British rule. Paul Scott captures many of the attitudes and struggles of both the British and Indians in those years. But the language is rich and provoking. It is refreshing to read about this time in history with such even handed frankness about race, privilege and politics.

The distinguishing feature of *The Raj Quartet* is its sense of sophisticated and total control of its gigantic scenario and highly varied characters. The four volumes constitute perfectly interlocking movements of a grand overall design. The politics is handled with an expertise that intrigues and never bores, and are always seen in terms of individuals. Though Paul Scott always saw the inevitability, and the necessity, of an end to the British occupation, and exploitation, of India, he still could see, and sympathize with, the odd virtues that the Raj bred in its officers. No other writer has ever produced a subtler, more nuanced, picture of the Raj in action during its last fraught years, or of the seething, complex, and wildly disparate nationalist forces arrayed against it.

Paul Scott's novel recreates a complete world, a complete history via the experiences of individuals. Statesmen, generals, intellectuals, and merchant princes will pronounce and propose, posture and plead. Still the unrecorded man may have the last word. The events surrounding Indian independence exposed some dark human terrain. In fiction, there has been no better guide to that terrain than Paul Scott.

The characters are unforgettable and so very realistic. The line "*there's nothing I can do*" appears over and over again to portray the impossibility of standing in the way of the change about to come over India. Paul Scott does a superb job of portraying the Raj, the Muslims, the Hindus, the English air of superiority and the class system of the English, all the while depicting the end of the Raj and the beginning of the new India. *The Jewel in the Crown* is no exercise in white-gloved nostalgia, rather a portrait of a world on the verge of collapse, and of the futile struggle to prevent it. "*There's nothing we can do*," says one character at the end. "*After 300 years of India, we've made this whole damned, bloody, senseless mess.*"

On occasions unsparing in its study of personal dramas and racial differences, *The Raj Quartet* is at all times profoundly humane, not least in the author's capacity to identify with a huge range of characters. It is also illuminated by delicate social comedy and wonderful evocations of the Indian scene, all narrated in luminous prose.

Capt. Ronald Merrick:

Scott's most fascinating creation is the character of Ronald Merrick. Perhaps the truest test of any other character's personality is his or her reaction to Merrick's odd blend of heroism and hostility, decency and depravity. From the beginning of *The Jewel in the Crown*, the narrator gives the reader mixed signals; Merrick is demonstrably hard-working and thought to be handsome, if not quite pukka. Initially, the reader analyzes Merrick's dislike of Hari Kumar as jealousy over the affections of Daphne Manners. Merrick's sensitivity to class nuances allows the reader to sympathize with his feelings of unworthiness as a suitor for the impeccably connected Daphne, but Merrick's growing hatred for the public school-educated "gentleman in a brown skin" illustrates a darker side of his personality.

As the *Quartet* progresses, Merrick's character receives further development as the fate of Hari is revealed. Lady Manners opens a private hearing in which Hari tells his version of his wrongful arrest and imprisonment. Hari's testimony plumbs the depths of Merrick's hostility, latent homosexuality, and duplicity. Hari explains Merrick's idea of Anglo-Indian relations as "the calm purity of contempt" on his side which should be answered by fear on the Indian side. As Merrick's inner self moves into uglier patterns of thought and behavior, the handsome outer shell changes as well to a burnt, twisted mask.

Ronald Merrick, one of the main characters, is a mixture of sadistic evil and latent homosexuality. Paul Scott has created in the character of Ronald Merrick an unforgettablely sinister figure, plausible and impressive, a man who can be defined as a person who takes more than he gives of human happiness, whose main talent and interest is to be at the centre and manipulate. To use an old-fashioned word, he may be described as "evil" but he is deeply intelligent. Of all the characters in the *Quartet*, Merrick is the one most frequently present, or lurking noticeably in the background, throughout all the four novels. It is plain that Scott found Merrick the most fascinating of his creations. Cool, intelligent, efficient, and dedicated to his duty, gifted with "an unshakable sense of his own authority," yet burdened with class resentment - ever conscious of his own lower-middle-class origins when among the better-spoken and -educated sahibs and memsahibs of British India - Merrick's development through the story is summed up accurately by Hilary Spurling in her introduction: "*The kind of man always welcome in a tight spot, Merrick slowly comes to seem ... more like the man who brings the tight spot with him.*"

Merrick's fears, desires, ambitions, and hatreds are the catalyst for this story and the stories of the subsequent two novels in the series. Merrick comes from a working-class background and keenly feels his inferior position in British society. In India, he finds a place where he can be on top, and he has developed a sophisticated justification for a virulent brand of racism. Merrick strongly believes that whites are the natural rulers of the world and non-whites must be made subject to them. He also believes that non-whites cannot ever improve their position and that they must be reminded of this.

For his own part, however, Merrick seeks to climb the ladder of British society. He is intelligent, competent, and ruthless in both his quests: to keep Indians in their place and to improve his own social rank. Merrick uses the appearance of frankness and honesty as a tool to impress his social betters. He often reminds them that he is "*only a grammar school boy*" and not the product of an exclusive school like Chillingborough.

Merrick was the district superintendent of police in Mayapore when Daphne Manners was raped. He was admired for his efficiency and skill at his job, but his notoriety after the Manners case (and his sadistic treatment of Hari Kumar, which was never revealed to the public) resulted in his transfer to Sundernagar, a backwater town in the unnamed province. Seeing his opportunity to advance in the civil service frustrated, Merrick calls in his chips to get a commission in the Indian Army at the rank of captain.

Other characters in the story become important when Merrick "*chooses*" them for his personal attention. He chooses the Layton family as an opportunity to climb the social ladder. He gets his opportunity after befriending Teddie Bingham. When it becomes clear that Bingham's regiment will soon be sent into battle against the Japanese, Merrick helps Bingham arrange a quick wedding through his contacts with the government of the Nawab of Mirat. When Bingham's best man falls ill, Merrick is rewarded for his troubles with the honor of the role of substitute best man. From this point on, he insinuates himself into the Laytons' lives.

Although Merrick desperately wants to join the upper classes, as personified by the Laytons, he is contemptuous of their "*romantic*" attitudes towards Indians and India. From Merrick's point of view, it is a simple matter of political subjugation which must be met head on. People like Teddie Bingham, however, see themselves in a familial role, with the English officers of the Indian Army as parent (*man-bap*, "mother and father") to loyal Indian soldiers. This dispute between Merrick and Bingham leads Bingham to fall victim to an INA ambush. Merrick does his best to save Bingham, but is grievously injured, and again becomes a hero in the eyes of the English in India. People from Bingham's class are amateurs—privileged dilettantes—Merrick believes, in contrast with his professionalism, and, from his perspective, Bingham "*died an amateur.*"

Merrick "selects" Hari as his victim in order to prove, emphatically, that social and cultural unity between England and India is impossible. Hari's unique hybrid status threatens Merrick's sense of superiority because it exposes race as the only source of Merrick's power in India. Peter Childs contends that Hari's dual name (Hari/Harry) represents the division of his world (99) and notes that Scott himself indicates that the main

theme of *The Jewel in the Crown* is the "failure" of the British to unify India under its imperial system. In a notebook he kept while writing the novel, Scott writes, "[e]very aspect of this novel should be a variation of the general theme of our failure to unify" (qtd. in Childs 98)⁴. In consideration of the novels' overarching theme of imperial "failure," the relationship between Hari and Merrick functions as a cogent symbol of irresolvable colonial division. Scott constructs their conflict as the representative death of the Kiplingesque desire for social and political unity under British colonial rule.

In the eyes of the Raj, the romantic relationship between Daphne and Hari Kumar is perceived as a threat to the colonial power structure. Ronald Merrick distills this sentiment when he remarks, "It's like a direct challenge to everything sane and decent that we try to do out here" (*Scorpion* 690).

Where Merrick's concern is, "everything's connected." (*A Division of the Spoils*, p.323). Scott introduces the character of Merrick in a very oblique way, using the fleeting judgements of other characters to create a series of first impressions. These impressions are later consolidated when Merrick is placed directly in the mainstream of the narrative in the second novel, but only confirmed in *A Division of the Spoils* through Bronowsky and Perron's posthumous psychological analysis of "this unusual man". This exhaustively roundabout method of character presentation is a comment on Merrick's character itself.

The contrast of this approach to that employed when describing the characters of Perron and Sarah is marked, mainly because of their lengthy passages of first - person narrative which give a clear insight into the way they think, feel and act. It is significant that with Merrick we are never told how he is thinking; we have to rely on the other characters' evaluations and balance these with our own judgement and what we learn of his actions elsewhere. Perron points out that the whole ethos of Merrick's perception of the British raj is based on what he calls "Kiplingesque double-talk" and is as such totally illusory; however, because he has spent too long inventing himself to fit the bogus image, he has insufficient "energy left to realize that as an image it is and always was hollow." As a man Merrick is consumed between his envy for the pukka raj and his contempt for what it is doing (or failing to do). Perron acknowledges the destructive and magnetic forces acting between Merrick and Kumar, and stresses how helpless the Indian was to avoid the white man's predatory revenge, revenge for the unacceptable combination of colour and breeding: "Poor Coomer obviously never stood a chance. An English public school education and manner, but black as your hat." (p.209)

The single most shocking revelation about Ronald Merrick comes in the description of Hari Kumar's treatment in Kandipatgaol. The extent of Merrick's obsession is described, but the unacceptable aspect which emerges is the appalling length to which Merrick is prepared to go to explore its obscene possibilities. His behaviour towards Kumar is a degraded study in humiliation as Merrick attempts to prove the paramountcy of contempt as "the prime human emotion" and that "a man's personality exist(s) at the point of equilibrium between the degree of his envy and the degree of his contempt."

Kumar embodies an unacceptable paradox for Merrick, and as such excites a different permutation of envy and contempt which finds expression in physical violence, sexual molestation, and psychological aggression. Sister Ludmilla voices her misgivings of this character clash early in *The Jewel in the Crown*, a prophecy which proves an accurate reflection of what is to come: "Only I had seen the darkness in him, and the darkness in the white man, in Merrick. Two such darknesses in opposition can create a blinding light. Against such a light ordinary mortals must hide their eyes." (p.146) The effect of this outlook is to alienate Merrick from most sectors of Anglo-Indian society. Although alienated to a certain extent by the pukka British because of his humble origins, he exaggerates this with the crushing weight of his own antagonism.

The second most disturbing incident regarding Ronald Merrick is the Pinker affair, related by Sergeant Potter to Perron in *A Division of the Spoils*. Merrick's cynical exploitation of Pinker's homosexuality, and the elaborate precision of the web he weaves to ensnare the young man just to gain a temporary access to Susan Layton's confidential psychiatric file, is another example of his total disregard for human feelings when they stand in the way of something he desires. Perron expresses disgust at this ability to exploit without compunction and sees the Pinker episode as a demonstration of Merrick's sadistic and predatory instincts: "But once he got what he wanted - in the Pinky affair as in any other - he was no longer interested except to the extent that it pleased him to see his victim suffer. What he wanted in this case was not, I think in one sense, very important to him, but he had made up his mind to have it and had seen how he might get it. He had a talent, one that amounted to genius, for seeing the key or combination of keys that would open a situation up so that he could twist it to suit his purpose." (pp.260/1)

Bronowsky points out the similarity between Merrick and General Dyer (of the Amritsar massacre) in a characteristically oblique way, drawing attention to the unquestioned certainty they shared that their drastic actions were absolutely right. Merrick refuses to accept that the time of rule by force and domination is over, and people like Kumar and Pinker become his principal victims.

Scott, however, takes pains to portray Merrick as a man with a humane side to his nature. He possesses the human attribute of courage to a considerable degree, demonstrated by his attempt to rescue Teddie from the burning jeep, and the positive way in which he seeks to overcome the disability of losing his left arm. He also has a curiously gentle side to his nature. The care Merrick takes over the evening he and Daphne spend together

is quite sensitive in its attention to detail. He buys new bottles of drink, new bars of soap, and displays a passion for music (military bands admittedly) and art.

One of the most commonly-used adjectives to describe Merrick from the beginning is 'twisted'. Lady Chatterjee draws attention to the *"permanent sneer in his eyes"* and Sister Ludmilla describes him as working *"the wrong way, like a watch that wound up backwards."* This is balanced, however, by a curious knack he has of winning people's confidence, revealed in the way Daphne describes how easy it is to tell him things. His chatty, sympathetic manner makes her conclude (with what she considers to be a humorous over-statement) that he *"must be a wizard at interrogation!"* There is something sinister about this feeling of ease Merrick inspires in people, rather like the effects of an anesthetic drug. Anything or anyone who gets in his way is liable to destruction.

An important element in Merrick's character is his homosexuality, and the way this governs his behavior at various points in the Quartet. Scott introduces the idea very gradually through a series of individual signs that mean little in isolation but taken together build up to an understanding of the complete picture. The first of these 'hints' comes in the proposal scene after which Daphne is struck by the absence of any physical contact, not even a touch of the hand. She interprets this apparent coldness as sexual innocence, but adds the qualification that it can be seen as *"ignorance and cruelty as well"*. Pandit Baba makes an unsupported assertion to Ahmed Kasim about Merrick's *"cruelty and perversions"*, but the most effective and revealing piece of detective work, almost smothered in its own subtlety, is the probing by Bronowsky at the wedding reception in Mirat. Merrick's own homosexuality puts the Pinker episode in a slightly different perspective and makes the whole affair more repellent, showing his willingness to exploit in somebody else a condition he recognizes in himself.

Sarah Layton is very helpful to Scott as a medium through which he can mould the reader's assessment of Merrick's complicated character. She seizes on the ideathat Merrick is "obsessed by self-awareness", a sentiment echoed in the last novel by both Perron and Bronowsky in their evaluations of him as a *"self-invented man"*. Scott uses other characters to broaden the reader's understanding including Teddie Bingham and Barbie Batchelor. The encounters Merrick has with these characters in particular endorses the original impression we are given of his unease with individuals on a personal level as opposed to the ease with which he handles people on a professional basis.

Merrick's life revolved entirely around India; it was the only place where he was able to satisfy his lust for power and ambition, and attain a status he would have found impossible back in England. It is inevitable from a thematic point of view that Scott chose to end Merrick's life at the dawning of Indian Independence. Perron points out that Merrick's Christian name is of symbolic importance: *"It means someone with power who rules;"* but this power turns in on Merrick and makes of him a curious amalgam - a predatory victim to "the crumbling pillars of the edifice."

Everybody is connected in some way to Merrick, but nobody connects with Merrick. He is emblematic of everything uncomfortable about the Raj.

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