
Re-locating 'space' in Representation: *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners* by Charles Dickens

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Though apparently classified as two different disciplines, history and literature seem to share a common strand in adhering to a narrative structure. Just as literature conveys and creates meanings through the realms of a narrative, sense of history also depends upon the same in order to root an individual/ group/ nation to a particular space and time. The entire root of belongingness in terms of nationality, culture and ethnicity thus comes to derive its existence through a tapestry of narration. As a result, every conflict in the history of the human civilization has inspired literature in various forms since times immemorial, which may be regarded as unofficial histories of the period, complementing the factual documentation.

While history portrays a collective record of a supposedly historical event in which the subjective comprehension of truth remains latent, literature brings to the surface those fears and apprehensions related to human loss and suffering which enables a historical event to permeate through the pages of archival records into the lives of the common people and imparts a sense of shared experience beyond the rigid borderlines of time and space. The Uprising of 1857 has been no exception. It has been a continuous source of inspiration to the creative artists of both the countries for more than a century, and in tracing the pattern of these representations one may get to comprehend the multiplicity of the nature of the historical event,

where each of these works holds up a certain truth – each true in its own way and yet projecting the parochialism of finite human perception.

One of the first narratives of this kind was *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners* – a novella by Charles Dickens, published almost immediately in the *Household Words* in December 1857. As one of the earliest reactionary creative pieces towards the Uprising, ‘The Perils of Certain English Prisoners’ stands out in its technique of voicing and contextualizing the violence related with this historical event in the mind of the 19th century English society. Dickens defies the constraints of time and space in relocating his response towards the Uprising of 1857 in the island of Belize – an English colony in North America, where apparently the English men and women are trying to escape from the pirates. In one of his letters, Dickens states with reference to this novella: “I wish to avoid India itself; but I want to shadow out in what I do, the bravery of our ladies in India.”¹ Probably the fact that his son Walter had left for military service in India in July 1857 might have been one of the reasons behind his discretion. Nevertheless, Dickens is seen to do what he declares in his letter successfully through *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners*.

In this novella, Dickens portrays life of the English men and women at Belize – their society and interactions with the colonized Other, through the arrival of Gill Davis and his fellow soldiers on the island. Gill records “in those climates, you don’t want to do much”, thereby initiating the effect of alienation by verbally imposing the different climate and through this difference, the larger dissimilarities of mindsets and cultures (Dickens 02). He begins with the recollection of his dream of “the shepherd” who “used to give me so little of his victuals and so much of his staff, that I ran away from him—which was what he wanted all along, I expect”, quite distinctly threading in the concept of Christianity and the white man’s burden to discover

and civilize new terrains into the discourse, and at the same time he mentions how the shepherd “seemed to move away from the ship’s side, far away over the blue water, and go right down into the sky” as his ship came into the vicinity of the island – which is perhaps an implication of the god-forsaken identity of the colony (ibid).

First introduced to Christian George King, “one of those Sambo fellows” who “was fonder of all hands than anybody else was”, Gill Davis recollects how he wanted to have “kicked Christian George King—who was no more a Christian than he was a King or a George—over the side, without exactly knowing why, except that it was the right thing to do” (Dickens 04). In this statement the Othering of the native is achieved through the identification of the very basic slippage in his identity, which though it may resemble the colonizer, can never make him their equal. The elaboration of the instinctive repulsion towards the native which follows in the latter half of the statement portrays the ability of the protagonist as a colonizer almost blessed with a divine capacity to see through the intentions of the native, especially as his remark stands out to be justified in the course of the novella when Christian George King is discovered to be the traitor amongst the English. In this manner, Dickens establishes judgmentalism and absolutism of the colonizer as perceptions of intuitive wisdom, which establishes them justly in their civilizing and ruling mission of the conquered territories.

The power equation operative between the colonizer and the colonized is concealed in the novella when Gill gets to learn from Miss Marion Maryon, the sister of the captain of the sloop, about their interaction with the natives – “we are all very kind to them, and they are very grateful to us”, and further about Christian George King – he “would die for us” (Dickens 06). Two ideological ends are achieved in this process – the benevolence on the part of the colonizer is established and the natives are represented as benefitting from this

civilizing mission, and at the same time, the innocence and kindness of the Victorian women is brought out in the affectionate approach of Miss Maryon, who as her name suggests, symbolizes all that is inclusive, accommodative and positive.

It would be significant to note Dickens's pattern of characterization here. Christian George King is seen to be speaking in rough pidgin English, which makes him sound all the more alienated and automatically distances him from the sympathy or understanding of the readers, much in the technique of Caliban in Shakespeare's *The Tempest*. Similarly, the protagonist Gill Davis repeatedly reminds the readers that he is illiterate, the reason why his recollections are being written down by the lady beside him, and the political implication of an uneducated, unrefined, illiterate protagonist can be understood later as he declares regarding his attitude towards the natives – "I have stated myself to be a man of no learning, and, if I entertain prejudices, I hope allowance may be made. I will now confess to one. It may be a right one or it may be a wrong one; but, I never did like Natives, except in the form of oysters" (Dickens 07). Through this statement, matters of humanitarian tolerance of cultural difference are completely obliterated, for the readers soon get to realize that Gill Davis despite his educational drawbacks is the proper English man of commands and that his "prejudice" towards the "barabarus" natives, is essentially "a right one" – thereby promoting a judgmental approach towards the colonized.

The Pirates attack the Island left alone by the English men who were misguided by Christian George King and sent down the river so that those left on the Island, including the ladies and the children, could easily be taken captives. The first description of the panic the word "Pirates" has on the women and children left ashore is justified thus by the first person eye narrator: "for, those villains had done such deeds in those seas as never can be told in writing, and can scarcely be

so much as thought of” (Dickens 16). It is from this point in the text that one may clearly see the parallel being drawn between the pirates and the ‘mutineers’. The description of the battle at the fort resembles the siege of Lucknow, and the role of the women, especially Miss Maryon and Mrs Fisher is highlighted in a memorable manner to reflect the contribution of the second sex, otherwise perceived as delicate and fragile, in hours of immense crisis.

The alternative discourse on heroism begins with the description of Miss Maryon of whom the author recollects: “...Miss Maryon had been from the first with all the children, soothing them, and dressing them...and making them believe that it was a game of play, so that some of them were now even laughing” (Dickens 17). The resemblance between this fictional account and the factual account provided in *A Lady’s Diary of the Siege of Lucknow* which was published a year later in 1858, is astonishing, as it describes the women taking care of the children in the *tyekhana* and nursing the wounded soldiers during the Siege. This recognition obliterates the Victorian demarcations of the public and the private sphere, for the woman is portrayed doing as much service in preserving lives of the young ones as the men did in the battlefield fighting the enemy directly. Nevertheless, the Victorian concept of the sanctity of a woman is retained as Miss Maryon tells Gill Davis: “...if we are defeated, and you are absolutely sure of my being taken, you will kill me” (ibid). This idea of preservation of honour at the cost of one’s life is reiterated later in Christina Rossetti’s poem “In the Round Tower at Jhansi, 1857”.

At this hour of crisis, Gill Davis observes further “to my astonishment, little Mrs Fisher that I had taken for a doll and a baby, was not only very active in that service, but volunteered to load the spare arms” and quotes the words of Miss Maryon who also volunteers for the same service “I am a soldier’s daughter and a

sailor's sister, and I understand it too" (Dickens 18). These statements uphold the legacy of English courage and valour as natural attributes, as they permeate the conventional concept of division of labour. It is in fact these two women who detect that the gun powder had been spoiled, and this introduces a new discourse into the social stream of projecting and perceiving a woman, as she transcends the constructed barriers of gender in her efforts to preserve life, through knowledge based on keen observation – thereby obliterating the domains of active and passive in being “steady and ready with the arms” (Dickens 20).

Another description worth mention is that of Mrs Venning, an aged English lady on the Island, as she is killed in her attempt to save her grandchild: “I...saw Mrs Venning – standing upright on the top of the steps of the trench, with her gray hair and her dark eyes – hide her daughter's child behind her, among the folds of her dress, strike a pirate with her other hand, and fall, shot by his pistol” (Dickens 21). The child, it is later seen in the novella, is saved by this sacrifice of her grandmother and is returned to her mother by the Captain of the English ship and the story given is thus : “the child had kept quite still, where her brave grandmamma had put her...and had remained quiet until the fort was deserted; she had then crept out of the trench, and gone into her mother's house; and there, alone on the solitary Island, in her mother's room, and asleep on her mother's bed, the Captain had found her” (Dickens 28). This episode celebrates the effectiveness of this form of alternative heroism based on resistance and self-defence in portraying the life of an innocent child saved from the brutal Pirates by an ageing woman whose only weapon was her outfit and her presence of mind.

In this manner, Dickens as a creative artist provides vivid pictures of silent defensive heroism on the part of the English women in *The Perils of Certain English Prisoners* recreating the terror and the pathos associated with it. Though the heroism of General Havelock

and the other English officers during the Uprising was celebrated in many poems, Stephen Henry Sharman's poem 'The Relief of Lucknow' (1858) being one of them, this other side of heroism which lay in resistance, was yet to be explored in the immediate context, and this is what makes Dickens's novella stand out as a literary piece of exceptional dimensions.

Though it comprises three chapters – the first one describing the siege, the second one describing how the prisoners taken are first made ransom for the treasure left on the Island and how they eventually escape from the pirates, and the third one relating the relief of the prisoners in reuniting with the English officers who had returned to the Island much after the siege and had set out looking for the survivors – only the first and the third chapters of this novella are attributed to Dickens, while the second chapter is believed to have been written by Wilkie Collins as a later addition to the existing text.

In the third chapter, Dickens provides a description of the prisoners of the siege escaping down the river in a raft and the moment of ecstasy when they are relieved by the English soldiers. Probably since Dickens wanted to focus upon and highlight the bravery of the English women, he does not provide a detailed account of the men at the battlefield with the pirates in the novella. The determination of the English soldiers and their valour is described thus as they stand on the English ship: "every man lying-to at his work, with a will that had all his heart and soul in it. Every man looking out for any trace of friend or enemy, and burning to be the first to do good or avenge evil" (Dickens 27). The allegorical cross reference to the basic tenets of Christianity in the repeated use of "every man" tends to generalize the heroic spirit and courage as a national and racial attribute and may be related to the illustration in the Punch magazine entitled 'The British Lion's Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger' published in August 1857.

The moment of re-union of the English officers with the prisoners finds a very graphic depiction in the novella: “there was a tumult of laughing and crying, and kissing and shaking hands, and catching up of children and setting up of them down again, and a wild hurry of thankfulness and joy that melted every one and softened all hearts” (ibid). The joy of rescuing the survivors, in its intensity of emotions and gladness, transcends the confines of space and time and merges with the basic humanitarian perception of being reunited with one’s own, as valid today as it was in 1744, or 1857. A very similar picture can be found in *A Lady’s Diary of the Siege of Lucknow* where the author writes upon the arrival of the English troops in Lucknow: “...our compound and verandah filled with our *deliverers*, and all of us shaking hands frantically, and exchanging fervent “God bless you’s” with the gallant men and officers of the 78th Highlanders” (Anon 68). It is here, in this merging and blending of fact and fiction across the boundaries of fact and fiction, that literature becomes a documentation of things past, present and future, and therefore, records those sheer moments of existence which do not find place in the archives of conventional historiography.

The Perils of Certain English Prisoners when read in this light, provides a rare glimpse of a very unknown Dickens, as he moves away from the realms of familiar subject matter to reflect and comment upon matters related to colonialism and the colonized Other – the historical fact which marked the emergence of England as a dominant nation. It also exemplifies the freedom of a creative artist as he represents the moments of utter crisis in an alien land as perceived from his own subject-position, and brings into light a very different authorial self compared to that portrayed by the other works such as *Oliver Twist*, *David Copperfield* or *Tale of Two Cities*.

Re-reading this novella enables a better understanding of that aspect of a creative individual which springs from a sense of belongingness

towards the nation based on narrated facts, and in turn, helps in consolidating the same view further, through yet another string of narration – the blending of fact, imagination and fiction. While history as a discipline, operates within strict limits of factual records within a rigid frame of time and space, Dickens by entirely relocating the axis of space in this context, explores the infinitely transcendental potential of a literary artist who can re-create his own space to convey the spirit of a certain time, while retaining his own identity. In a way, his novella also portrays the colonizer's power to ascribe an identity upon the colonized Other, through imaginative obliteration of cartographic territories.

Notes:

1. The Imperial Context of "The Perils of Certain English Prisoners" (1857) by Charles Dickens and Wilkie Collins - <http://www.victorianweb.org/authors/dickens/pva/pva354.html>

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