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## **The Moonstone's Vengeance<sup>1</sup>: Reflections on British Imperialism in Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone***

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**Abstract:** Having been one of the most notable writers in his age, Wilkie Collins generally criticizes upper class, patriarchal order by displaying different and unknown side of the society in his time. Additionally, he may be recognized to be a critique of British imperialism especially in India through precise symbolism and numerous references to empire in *The Moonstone* (1868). This study attempts to analyze in what ways Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* is considered as a criticism of imperialism in India. He provides a prominent insight into Victorian society with regards to imperialism by depicting the discrepancies between British and Indian identities, conditions, and using significant symbols deliberately in order to show these issues. His difference from his contemporaries in Victorian era is another focus of the article.

**Keywords:** Wilkie Collins, *The Moonstone*, imperialism, Indian identities, British empire.

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<sup>1</sup> The title is taken from a scene in the first part of the novel. The dying Indian tells Herncastle that "The Moonstone will have its vengeance yet on you and yours!" (7).

Victorian Sensation Novel is generally described by several scandalous aspects which challenge Victorian morality such as deception, sexual intimations, contrivances, and even madness. However, some representatives of this genre can also be regarded as social critics behind these unconventional topics. Having been one of the most notable writers in his age, Wilkie Collins generally criticizes upper class, patriarchal order by displaying different and unknown side of the society in his time. Additionally, he may be recognized to be a critique of British imperialism especially in India through precise symbolism and numerous references to the empire in *The Moonstone* (1868).

British imperialism was on its peak in the nineteenth century after the loss of American colonies as it led them to other parts of the world in order to have huge gains in territories, particularly in India (Schmitt 9). Some writers took different directions in either celebrating or criticizing British imperialist actions on other countries. In this respect, *The Moonstone*’s imperial overtones become quite clear when the text is read and studied in depth. This study attempts to analyze in what ways Wilkie Collins’s *The Moonstone* is considered as a criticism of imperialism in India, for it is the story of a diamond stolen from India and brought to England. He provides a prominent insight into Victorian society with regards to imperialism by depicting the discrepancies between British and Indian identities, conditions, and using significant symbols deliberately in order to show these issues.

Progress and development were the significant characteristics for the British in order to expand the empire especially after the industrial revolution. They gave huge importance to improvements in many fields in an attempt to become one of the most powerful forces in the world, and they had never hesitated to take advantage of other countries and territories. Gabriel Betteredge, the most apparent representative of the Victorian British society in *The Moonstone*, states that “in the nineteenth century, mind; in an age of progress and in a country which rejoices in the blessings of the British constitution” (40), nobody heard before that an English house was invaded by an Indian diamond. For him, as for all the British, progress and constitution are fairly important that they are aware of this to become a world power.

Technological developments brought by industrial revolution were important steps in expansion of the country politically and economically, and transportation was quintessential as a mark of these improvements. Indicating the outcomes of industrial revolution on technology in Europe, Deirdre David postulates that “in the nineteenth century evidence of supremacy in factory production, agricultural yield, and elaborate systems of transportation” were the milestones that the empire depended on (88). Thus, this technical pre-eminence secures their power in relations with other countries in terms of imperialism.

Collins explicitly makes a variety of references to developing technology and transportation in the novel, which shows the current situation of the country in that time. In many parts of the novel, characters travel by train which was the newest transportation system in the nineteenth century. Therefore, he places train journeys in several parts in order to imply the technological developments. Ships and steamers are the other innovations in transportation mentioned in the novel when the Indians and Mr. Murtwaithe travel by ships on their way to India. Also, the experiment carried out by Ezra Jennings and Dr. Candy to prove Franklin Blake’s innocence is another reference to scientific researches and improvements. Their struggle to show opium’s effect on Franklin’s act of taking the diamond have clear scientific overtones in terms of showing the country’s conditions.

All these advancements coincide with the striving for being a huge colonial power and superior to others. Douglas Peers suggests that “British technical excellence became one of the more common yardsticks used to differentiate between the British and their imperial subjects” (63). Thus, many scholars and historians are of the same opinion that imperialism means oppression and exploitation of the colonized nations and countries. The novel starts with a brutal colonial crime, the theft and removal of a diamond from an Indian shrine. John Herncastle who commits this crime is a true representative of imperial British identity. He is described as a mean-spirited, greedy man who is implied to kill the Indians cruelly in order to own the diamond. He is described with “a dagger dripping with blood” (7) in a room where two Indians died and a third one is dying painfully.

Just after this first part, we are introduced to Gabriel Betteredge’s narration and his peculiar obsession with *Robinson Crusoe*; he looks for the book whenever he needs assistance and finds some relevant passages to comfort himself. He is the servant in the house of Lady Verinder and he represents Victorian British attitudes truly in the novel. *Robinson Crusoe* can be seen as a symbol of imperialism because it marks the beginning of individualism and imperialism, and also the birth of the novel. As Ian Watt points out, the rise of the novel corresponds to the birth of a new economic system, capitalism, and states that Robinson’s “travels, like his freedom from social ties [...] by making the pursuit of gain a primary motive, economic individualism has much increased the mobility of the individual” (67). Hence, Betteredge’s obsession shows the British independence and loyalty to technological development, economic expansion, and imperialism.

These historical foundations in the beginning of the novel lead us to analyze the central symbol, the Moonstone, which represents different aspects for different people. It is given as a thing that reveals the real differences between two cultures through their attitudes towards the diamond. Throughout the novel, Collins shows the British and Indians with different identities and attitudes. While the diamond means knowledge, wisdom, and religious beliefs for Indians, it has price value as a commodity for British imperialists. Being the marker of new wealth and sign of an imperial power, the diamond represents “the wealth to be had in India, Britain’s power to extract that wealth, and the luxury of the ruling classes” (Nechtman 76). Moreover, Indians are depicted as thieves, frightening individuals as “the others” from the eyes of the British, but English characters are described as greedy, hypocrite, and materialistic people in addition to their prejudice to other colonized nations.

England’s technical and imperial power made its people proud of themselves and prejudiced towards some other nations considered inferior, primitive, and need exploiting. Vicki C. Willey points out that “the intensified sense of racial hatred and imperialist superiority pervaded British popular imagination” in the nineteenth century (225). In spite of their own colonial crimes throughout the history and the theft

of the Moonstone in the novel, the British see the three Indians as thieves, demonic people and murderers.

The house where the theft occurs refers to the England in many senses, and they want to feel secure at home in their own country. The middle-class house is constructed as a shelter from fears and worries; and it is as important as the colonies that must be protected. The British don’t want to be disturbed and threatened by anyone, especially by the ones they colonize and oppress. When the diamond is found missing in Verinder’s house, “family name is usurped, as well as the sanctity of an English home” (Roy 663). While England is secure, India is described as a dangerous place by the British characters in the novel. “Miss Rachel, safe in England, was quite delighted to hear her danger in India” (76). Hence, the Indians wandering around the house and looking for the diamond on the day of Rachel’s birthday are a great threat for the household.

This fear of danger from these Indians also comes from their sense of guilt because they are actually aware of their imperial crimes. Thus, they are afraid of being attacked because of those colonized people’s aim of taking revenge. Furthermore, the belief that the Moonstone will bring ill luck and curse to the one who stole it from its rightful place also implies the fear of the British (3). Just as Indians believe this divine prophecy about the diamond’s curse and power, the British secretly believe that they will be avenged because of their oppressive colonial deeds.

In this way, Indians are depicted as dangerous beings, although they are almost harmless but aggressive because of their lost diamond. The diamond is also cursed as it has been told before; it intrudes the English home and destroys many lives that had a connection with it. Rosanna Spearsman kills herself because of her love to Franklin and his act of taking the diamond. Lady Verinder’s state of health deteriorates after the events at home, and she cannot live any longer.

Description of Indians as jugglers shows two different sides of British approach to Indians. They were disregarded as sources of amusement, which displays their humiliation as “the other” by the

British. On the other hand, it signifies the Indians’ great ability and ingenuity because juggling needs significant competence and intelligence. While giving a historical background of Indian jugglers in England, Crispin Bates and Peter Lamont claim that these Indian jugglers were mysterious to Victorians and it refers to deeper “knowledge beyond that of West” (310). It is also related to occult powers of India, which is impressive to the British as another factor that makes them afraid of Indians.

As a loyal servant to a British family in the time of imperialism, Gabriel Betteredge is rather prejudiced to others different from the British in spite of being aware that he is just a servant. British pride is highly emphasized through Betteredge’s attitudes. He “ended the day of rest as hundreds of thousands of people [...] in these islands- that is to say, we all anticipated bedtime” (204). He mentions a single habit in the island, in England, and means that they are all a community, so all these people are British and should have a mutual culture. As a true British, he is openly against that Franklin studied abroad and adopted some European culture. He criticizes Franklin’s behaviours and mentions;

...his discussing the lengths to which a married woman might let her admiration go for a man who was not her husband, and putting it in his clear-headed witty French way [...] he shifted to the German side, of his telling the lord of the manor his experience in the breeding of bulls [...] answering, from the Italian point of view: "We have got three things left, sir—Love, Music, and Salad"? He not only terrified the company [...] but, when the English side of him turned up in due course, he lost his foreign smoothness; and, getting on the subject of the medical profession... (79)

A British should behave like a British; he should not be affected by other European countries. Also, should we understand that the British only talk about serious and scientific subjects like medicine, while the others talk about women’s morality, breeding of animals, and salads? It is implied that the guests are terrified because of these foreign effects on him and his estrangement to his own cultural roots.

Besides these prejudiced attitudes, the materialistic and capitalist ideology is symbolized by their greed and amazement by the diamond. Although Herncastle commits terrible murder to take the Moonstone, he is never judged because of that. In addition to his bad-temper and cruel personality, he’s described as “bold” (37) and brave when he stole the diamond from the Indian shrine. However, he sends it to his cousin as gift to compensate for his colonial crime for which he could have never been forgiven.

Although the Indians are regarded as evil and brutal from the eyes of the British, they never possess any demonic aims. They only want to repossess what they deserve to take back in their home. The diamond belongs to India, but it was stolen by the British. The three Indians risk even their lives to restore the diamond in its original place; however, Victorian British people don’t understand their sacrifices and what it means to them. Actually, it has such a great value that the gem symbolizes for the Indians what empire symbolizes for the British. These different values are equated in these two dissimilar cultures.

The act of taking the gem is described with words “conquering” (4), “seize” (5), and “assault” (6) which are also references to imperialism. Nevertheless, it “fell into the possession of Tipoo” (5); it is not depicted as theft because he is the true owner of the diamond as an Indian Sultan. The British still consider Indians as thieves and Murthwaite says in the end “by what accident, or by what crime, Indians regained the possession of their sacred gem” (515). Although they seem accepting that Indians repossess the diamond, it should be by some crimes just in the way the British had always done their colonial oppression.

Throughout the story, the Indians are never involved in a crime as violent as the British committed. The only murder they commit is of Godfrey in the end to take the diamond back. They do not kill anybody cruelly unlike Herncastle did before, and they do not use any weapons or daggers. Also, the Indians are followed in the aim of catching them even when they get the gem and go back to their homeland. However, no British is judged and punished because of taking the diamond. Herncastle can be an outcast in the family and society, but he is never



imprisoned because of his act of stealing the diamond and killing the Indians. Moreover, Franklin is not judged and questioned after he is learned to have taken the diamond though unconsciously by the effect of opium. “If Mr. Godfrey Ablewhite chose to keep the Diamond, he would do so with perfect impunity” (501). It is clear from this passage that Godfrey also would not be punished because of stealing the gem.

In addition, Rachel accepts the diamond as a gift from Herncastle without questioning much, albeit she and her mother never accepted him in the house as a relative. They had never wanted to see him because of his revealed crime, but they just receive the diamond as it is something precious and showy of their wealth.

Rachel sees Franklin’s taking the diamond but she never tells it to anyone as she loves him. If Franklin’s act of stealing the diamond is regarded as a reference to act of imperialism, Rachel’s silence is quite symbolic here. She witnesses this crime and remains silent just like other British people strive to keep this colonial crime of their country as a secret. The only person who reveals this secret is Rosanna Spearsman, the servant girl in the house. As she does not belong to the upper class, she is able to disclose this secret in a letter she wrote before she commits suicide. Ross Murfin indicates that “the theft of the diamond has the same blighting effect on the lives [...]; Rosanna Spearsman is destroyed by the diamond” (653).

Sergeant Cuff is seen as another threat by the family because he tries to reveal the truth about the family. He accuses Rachel of stealing her own diamond, which is regarded as an insult by Lady Verinder. Cuff is not wanted in the house anymore and sent back with a payment. The Lady, as a usual British upper class, sees money as the only way to make him dismissed from his duty.

Godfrey Ablewhite is another significant figure in terms of representing British hypocrisy and materialistic instincts. Godfrey is the most hypocrite character in the story as he seems a philanthropist of a charity, but he lives in luxury with all the money he uses on his own interest. His name is also quite significant; he is an “able”, “white” man who is quite cunning when it comes to financial terms. He is “able” to

cheat people behind a moral personality and thinks fast when he sees Franklin taking the diamond. Ablewhite’s unmasking in the end shows his real identity and hypocrisy; his other self is revealed as a conscious thief unlike Franklin who takes the diamond unconsciously (Murfin 660).

Although he is representative of educated and fair-minded British self, Franklin’s excuse of taking the diamond under opium’s effect does not seem very reliable. How can we be sure of his innocence? Cannot we say that he may have cooperated with Godfrey or did not want to break Rachel’s confidence in him? Besides these paranoid and sceptical opinions on Franklin, his unconscious act of taking diamond can be reference to the British endeavors to be justified of their imperial crimes.

The Moonstone’s journey in the novel gives a course of the imperial history and different circumstances. First, the reader is presented a lot of assaults and plunders throughout the history; that is a simple way of showing the relations of power in the world. Then we see the diamond in the forehead of the Indian God in the temple which is the right place it should be. The place in the forehead also represents the third eye and esoteric knowledge of the Indians. After that, it is displayed in the pommel of a dagger which pointed against the Indian by a white man, Herncastle. This dagger primarily symbolizes Imperialism’s brutality and the miserable situation in which the colonized natives are left. Finally we see it in the breast of an English woman’s dress as a show of wealth and prosperity.

Ezra Jennings is a hybrid, mixed race character that is positioned in the story in order to challenge British superiority as a race. His black and white hair represents his mixed identity, so he “embodies the ideological contradictions in *The Moonstone* [...] and the novel’s obsession with borderlines” (Leighton and Surrige 231-233). He is an outcast in the society, and Collins gives the British superior attitude to others as inferior once again. Before Ezra dies, he states: "Let my grave be forgotten. Give me your word of honor that you will allow no monument of any sort—not even the commonest tombstone—to mark the place of my burial. Let me sleep, nameless. Let me rest, unknown."

(505-506). These words of him contributes to his situation as a secondary person in a British Victorian society. He does not want to be remembered as he has never been given importance as an individual. He wants to be nameless and unknown just like he was treated when he was alive.

Finally, the British are characterized as morally inferior to the Indians although they see themselves as superior in many ways. The portrayal of Indians as negative identities change into religious figures that are morally superior. Additionally, the diamond’s being taken and restored to its original place on the forehead of the Indian God acknowledges the Indians to be right. Many of the British characters’ punishment are justified because of their imperial and egocentric personalities. All these contribute to Collins’ status as a social novelist. Stressing the difference of Collins as a writer, Melissa Free writes of how he contrasts and differs from other writers of his time in discussion of imperialism on India (348). As she points out, he faced censorship and risk of not earning enough for his humanitarian ideas about social issues. Otherwise, he could have expressed his ideas in a more explicit way, showing his criticism of British imperialism, class differences and patriarchal society.

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