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The Moonstone: A Representation of the British Imperial Project in India

The Moonstone was once described by T.S. Eliot as "the first, the longest and the best of the modern English detective novels". It was written in 1868 by Wilkie Collins, who was one of the most popular Victorian writers in the 19th century (McCrum). The novel tells the story of a gem that was stolen by John Herncastle, a British officer in India in 1799. He brought it back to England but with a curse placed upon it by the killed three Indian soldiers. Herncastle wanted to pass the stone to his niece, Rachel Verinder, to inherit when she became 18 years old. However, the night Rachel was given the stone on her 18th birthday, it went missing. All people connected with Rachel at her family estate in Yorkshire were under suspicion when the London detective, Sergeant Cuff, came to solve the crime (Collins). However, through the lens of the postcolonial theory, this novel stands as a representative model of the British imperial project in India.

At the outset of the novel, the sharp contrast between the rational or scientific view of the West and the irrational or supernatural view of the east is evident. In the prologue of the novel, Franklin Blake connects India with the supernatural and irrational when he relates the story of the Yellow Diamond as it was first "set in the forehead of the four-handed god who typifies the Moon" (Collins 9). From that time on, three Brahmins (priests) were appointed by the deity, who ordered them in a dream to watch over the Moonstone and prophesied a curse on anyone who

tried to steal it. The Moonstone passed from a hand to another with its curse through generations till it reached the hand of Herncastle (10). When the three Indians appear in England, they are given that air of bewitchery; that's why, Gabriel Betterage judges them to be "strolling conjurers" (24). In addition, his daughter Penelope emphasises her father's judgment with the account she told her father about the magical trick the three Indians did to the little boy in order to locate where Franklin and the gem were. Therefore, Collins sets the scene for India as the land of superstitions where irrationality seems the normal and typical way of life.

On the other hand, imperial England takes another scientific or rational stance when the Moonstone is lost. The family of the Verinders resort to Sergeant Cuff, a detective who can demystify the confusion over the loss of the diamond. It is his task to rationalize situations that can cause confusion. For this reason, Franklin Blake the main narrator declares from the very beginning that the entire story of the loss of the diamond ought to be recorded in writing "in the interests of truth" (Collins 17). By the end of the novel, all mysterious happenings are given satisfactory scientific interpretations. For instance, Rachel's change of behaviour towards Franklin is due to seeing him stealing the diamond. Franklin steals the diamond unaware under the impact of opium, and Rosanna Spearsman commits suicide when she feels sure that Franklin cannot fall in love with her. Hence, Collins seems to create "a knowable universe that could be interpreted by human reason" (Sahin). Every vague action that takes place in imperial England seems to have an eventual scientific explanation.

'Otherness' is another aspect that stresses the imperial stance dominating the novel. For the English, as for most other Europeans, the east is the place where you can find "exotic beings" (Said 9). *The Moonstone* is full of exotic characters that are treated as 'others', and therefore, cannot be trusted. The first three characters who are treated as others from the first encounter are

the three Indians. Betterege describes their appearance on the terrace outside his lady's residence as "three-mahogany coloured Indians in white linen frocks and trousers..and had small hand-drums slung in front of them"; it was an exotic sight which required Betterege's instant "warning them off the premises" (Collins 24). When they appear after Rachael's birthday dinner party, Betterege dismisses them again at once when they ask to perform their magic tricks in front of the guests. Murthwaite, an Indian explorer, talks to them in Indian and tells Franklin and Betterege that they are high-caste Brahmins disguised to retrieve the diamond. They can even kill for the Moonstone (67). They also visit both Mr. Bruff and Mr. Luker to ask for a loan. When they are denied their requests, they ask within how long it is usual in England to repay a loan. It is clear that they need to learn about the English economic system. Although they never break the rules of decorum, they are always denied access into the English sphere. This is because they are treated as others, and others are not to be trusted.

Ezra Jennings, Dr. Candy's assistant, is another exotic character. He is also mistrusted for being out of the place as he is of mixed parentage and was raised in a colony. He has a strange appearance and is socially rejected. Franklin says, "His complexion was of gypsy darkness...His nose presented the fine shape and modeling found among the ancient people of the East, so seldom among the newer races of the West...His marks and wrinkles were innumerable" (Collins 264). Though he is often ready for helping others and is the only one who can lead to solving the mystery of the diamond, he is treated with suspicion and disgust. Betterege says that after Dr. Candy's illness, people "must put up with the man with the piebald hair and the gypsy complexion – or they would get no doctoring at all" (265). Nobody seems to like him since he is not of the place and has no friend there. The only one who can sympathize with him is Franklin

Blake, but one must not forget that Blake himself has "the varnish of foreign education" (30). It was difficult for the English society to accept 'others' at that time.

The Moonstone is also a manifestation of the wealth and glory that Britain enjoyed due to imperialism. Throughout the novel, different luxury items brought to Britain or usurped from India reflect the economic flourish that colonizing India meant for the Victorian English society. In the first few lines of the prologue of the novel, Franklin speaks of the stories that were told in their camp of "the treasures in jewels and gold stored up in the Palace of Seringapatam" (Collins 9). This was preceding the assault in 1799. Franklin confesses that following their conquest of the camp, "the camp-followers committed deplorable excesses; and, worse still, the soldiers found their way into the treasury of the palace, and loaded themselves with gold and jewels" (11). Herncastle becomes obsessed with taking that diamond even if it costs him killing some Indians. The value of that diamond for the British was a materialistic one unlike the Indians who considered it of a sacred merit. Murthwaite sums up this dichotomy of perspectives in the last few lines of the epilogue when he saw the Moonstone placed once more on the forehead of the Indian god of the Moon as he says, "And there, in the forehead of the deity, gleamed the yellow Diamond whose splendor had last shone on me in England from the bosom of a woman's dress!" (385). It is evident that for Rachel the Moonstone was no more than a luxury ornament without any implicit spiritual significance. Even Godfrey Ablewhite stole it and intended to break it into pieces in Amsterdam to get its value for money (374). Lady Verinder's house is also a further indication of the luxurious items brought from India such as: the Indian cabinet, where the diamond was kept, the chintz curtains that hung over the beds in the house, the carpets, the tea, or even the opium. For the British, India or all other colonized areas overseas were the places from which they could heap up gold and riches.

The Moonstone confirms the fact that scientific progress and technological advancement were of extreme importance for the British imperial expansion. Betteridge asserts that by stating that they were living "in an age of progress and in a country which rejoices in the blessings of the British constitution" (Collins 40). Various references are made in this novel to advancement in the world of technology and transportation. Characters could travel by trains all over the country. Long voyages could also be made by ships and steamers; this enables the three Indians to escape in no time to India. In addition, England became the place where scientific experiments were performed successfully even to prove a person's innocence like Franklin. It seemed that "British technical excellence became one of the more common yardsticks used to differentiate between the British and their imperial subjects" (Peers 63). It was this technological superiority that led to their economic and political control of others.

Crime and punishment are other signs of the imperialistic aspect of *The Moonstone*. All British people's acts of brutality against the colonized cannot be blamed or considered as crimes, but a single act committed by the colonized whether violent or non-violent must be of a criminal nature and has to be traced and punished. Herncastle, who steals the diamond and kills the Indians, cannot be punished or imprisoned, and he is only treated as an outcast in his family. In addition, Rachel sees Franklin taking the diamond, but she keeps silent till the end "just like other British people strive to keep this colonial crime of their country as a secret" (Oztekın 547). Even when the secret is disclosed, Franklin is not judged or punished. His act of stealing the diamond is also justified under the pretext that it took place under the effect of opium; this unconscious taking of the diamond could be a reference to "the British endeavors to be justified of their imperial crimes" (549). On the other hand, the three Indians are looked upon as thieves and criminals though they seek to retrieve their stolen sacred diamond. They are suspected,

followed, captured by the police, and then released when they are not found guilty. Then, they are followed even in their land when they take the diamond, but luckily they escape. Sergeant Cuff believes that "there is a moral if not legal evidence that the murder was committed by the Indians" (Collins 368), and Murthwaite comments on them in the end of the epilogue, "by what accident, or by what crime, Indians regained the possession of their sacred gem" (385). The retrieval of the diamond is seen as a crime from the perspective of imperial Britain.

The curse, which the Oriental Moonstone inflicts on the family of the Verinders, can also represent the breaking of the British domesticity. From the moment the diamond gets into the house of the Verinders, it breaks the unity of the family as Betteridge confirms, "here our quiet English house was suddenly invaded by a devilish Indian diamond" (Collins 42). Rachel leaves home and cuts her relationship with Franklin after she sees him steal the gem. Rosanna kills herself as well. Then, Franklin travels, and Lady Verinder dies. The Orient sounded like the place that afflicted evil since "Victorians took great satisfaction from the notion that the evil in literature could be attributed to a foreigner and not an Englishman" (Kobritz 3). However, the solution to the mystery of the Moonstone lies in the hands of the "exotic" characters, those who should be regarded as outsiders. Both Rosanna Spearsman and Ezra Jennings offer real tangible evidence that can lead to solving this mystery. Rosanna writes a letter in which she gives details of what has happened while Ezra performs the opium experiment that replay the entire scene of the theft. However, those, who can find the truth, die in obscurity as they are outside the circle of the imperial British family. Only when the Indians take the Moonstone back to India that the family of the Verinders is reunited. The house is reopened, and Franklin and Rachel redeem their lost love and get married. It is through the discard of this exotic oriental material that British life returns to its normal course.

The retrieval of the Moonstone may be symbolic of the Indian independence from the British rule but not the end of the imperial influence on the East. Murthwaite ends the novel with the following lines leaving the question unresolved, "So the years pass, and repeat each other; so the same events revolve in the cycles of time. What will be the next adventures of the Moonstone? Who can tell?" (Collins 385). Nobody can tell what the future of the Moonstone (India) will be like. Britain may adopt a new form and plant new roots of imperialism. It is true that the West could carry on its domination of the Orient through the various practices of capitalism as it was anticipated that "capitalism may, in some form or another, survive the war, but it will only be able to do so by calling to its assistance the whole organization of the State" (Newbold). Therefore, the novel ends with a rhetorical question that paves the way for other various interpretations and endings.

To sum up, this paper makes a reading of Collins' novel *The Moonstone* through the lens of imperialism. It has been found out that many aspects of imperialist works can be traced in this novel. First, the representation of the West as the domain of rationality and the East as the place of irrationality and superstition give clear proof of the impact of imperialism. Second, the "othering" of various characters makes it clear that imperialism depicts the colonised or those who are outside its sphere as exotic or strangers. Other signs of imperialism include technological superiority, economic supremacy and British domesticity. Even its end proposes a continuation of imperialism; perhaps it is the new form of economic imperialism, which is the inevitable outcome of the application of capitalism.

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