**In the Round Tower At Jhansi' June 8 – A postcolonial and feminist reading**

**Reading the poem from a 21st-century perspective, Suzanne Williams draws attention to aspects of the representation of gender and race that would have been read very differently by Christina Rossetti’s own readers.**

The siege at Jhansi was just one terrible event in a series of terrible events which are now collectively and variously referred to as The First War of Independence, the Indian Rebellion or The Indian Mutiny. Horrific atrocities were committed by both sides in the conflict: the massacre and mass rape of non-combatants were key weapons of this war, as of all wars. The fears of the husband in Rossetti’s work are justified rather than histrionic, although the full story told by the poem is perhaps apocryphal – reports as to how the real Captain Skene and his wife died vary. However, a contemporary letter from a relative of a Captain Gordon, who also died at Jhansi, insists the story is true and that Skene, rightly seeing no hope of surviving the siege, did indeed shoot his wife and then himself. However, other accounts suggest that all the Europeans at the siege surrendered, having been falsely assured of their safety, and were then in fact brutally massacred by rebel forces. The truth of it will probably never be known with any degree of certainty.

**Creating Realism**

However, for the purposes of Rossetti’s poem, the precise location and date in the title seems like reportage and gives us a sense of verisimilitude. We feel the poem is telling us about a real event and giving us a vividly painful picture of the last moments of these two people. The repetition of the word ‘close’ in the third stanza creates a claustrophobic atmosphere as we realise there is no possibility of escape. The focus is very much on the central relationship, and the intensity and intimacy of the moment: the man and woman’s final kisses and embraces before their despairing, suicidal deaths. Such a moment undoubtedly has a strong appeal to the imagination and similar stories are amongst the most celebrated in literature (Romeo and Juliet; Antony and Cleopatra for example). The appeal to Rossetti of this highly-charged situation is clear; after all she was a writer who returned again and again to the theme of lost or doomed love and Captain and Mrs Skene might stand as the standard bearers of this recurring trope.

**Beyond Victorian Sentimentality**

On first reading we may admire the stoic matter-of-factness of the wife’s question and the husband’s answer:

‘Is the time come?’   
‘The time is come.’

We may feel moved by the contrast between the tenderness and intimacy of their final kisses and the inescapable danger that surrounds them. And the driving force of the line ‘Gained and gained and gained’ may thrill us and recall to us that other famous Victorian case of doomed heroism, Tennyson’s ‘Charge of the Light Brigade’ (‘Half a league, half a league, half a league onward’). And yet as modern readers we cannot merely enjoy it as a classic piece of sentimental Victorian melodrama.

**A Feminist Reading**

Firstly, from a feminist perspective, in terms of the central relationship depicted, Rossetti creates a very conventional pairing. The husband is protector and the wife is infantilised as women frequently, in fact usually, are in much Victorian literature: ‘Will it hurt much?’. He is strong, an almost parental figure, who reassures and asserts ownership ‘no mine own’. The two embody the cliché of the stiff upper lip spirit that built the empire. She is all womanly obedience and purity, he is stoical and masterly, yet tender too:

'... I wish I could bear the pang for both.’  
‘I wish I could bear the pang alone:   
Courage, dear, I am not loth.'

When I read the poem all in all I can’t help but feel a little disappointed in Rossetti because while it has a certain enjoyably emotional narrative force, it seems to me to be a conventional offering. If we think about some of her other works, in many subtle ways she often seeks to subvert Victorian poetic and societal conventions. Her fallen women do not necessarily have to die to be redeemed and are often given a voice with which to speak back against their ruination; sisterly love is prized above romantic or sexual love in Goblin Market, and her female characters often defy the norms of Victorian womanhood: neither proud Maude Clare, outspoken Jessie Cameron nor the bitterly triumphant narrator of ‘Cousin Kate’ conform to Coventry Patmore’s ideal of the domestic ‘angel in the house’. Yet Mrs Skene might have been modelled on Patmore’s own wife.

**A Postcolonial Perspective**

When we come to the depiction of the Indian rebel troops, other, even more disquieting, thoughts emerge. The poem is imbued with an entirely non-critical view of Empire – the noble white hero killing his wife in order to save her from defilement by the terrifying ‘other’: the native ‘wretches’ closing in on them like parasites or predators. The poem conveniently ignores (in fact seems entirely unaware of) the fact that it is the white-skinned English who are the aliens, the parasites, and the predators in this Indian setting. This is a reading which, from our twenty-first-century perspective, we simply cannot ignore.

The ‘pale’ skin of the woman serves as an implicit contrast with the presumed brown skin of the dehumanised ‘wretches’ who threaten the heroic couple. The Indians are depicted as animal-like, barely human, an out of control mob ‘howling’ like wild animals about to make a kill and ‘swarming’ like flies or locusts. Absent from the poem is any sense of the immense suffering inflicted by British empire builders on indigenous populations, in India and, in fact, all over the world. No questions are raised about the couple’s right to be in this place at this particular time.

**The Limits of Rossetti’s Social Conscience**

Rossetti was more than capable of empathising with the poor and wretched in her own country and often shows a keen awareness of the wider contexts influencing her narratives. Her understanding of female suffering and exploitation in particular was ahead of her time and even, at points, almost proto-feminist. She also seems to have had a strong social conscience, volunteering at the Highgate Penitentiary and offering ‘A Royal Princess’ to an anthology to raise money for suffering Lancashire mill workers during the cotton famine. However, her view of Empire in this poem is narrow, blinkered, and, I hate to say it, clichéd. But perhaps we can hardly expect Rossetti to have been capable of anything akin to our own postcolonial sensibility – she is, as all writers are, a product of her era and culture, and the time in which she lived and wrote was jingoistic and blinkered to say the least. Contemporary newspaper reports of atrocities committed in India tended to be one-sided and the massacre at Jhansi in particular made the British homeland population virulently in favour of the terrible punishments and reprisals that British forces visited on rebellion troops. The year after the siege during which Captain Skene and his wife died, British forces recaptured Jhansi. Reports vary as to the manner in which this victory was accomplished:

A priest from Bombay who witnessed the British victory, said that what followed were four days of fire, pillage, murder and looting without distinction. He said it was difficult to breathe due to the strong smell of burning flesh. British historians, on the other hand, suggested that while four to five thousand people died in battle, the civilians were spared.  
http://www.distinguishedwomen.com/biographies/bai.html

As ever, one side’s massacre is the other side’s heroic victory; one person’s terrorist is another person’s freedom fighter. So perhaps, above all, the poem can show us the importance of perspective and context. It is an excellent example of how changing contexts of reception can shape our understanding of both literature and history. There can be little doubt that Rossetti’s audience in the 1800s would have seen the Captain and his wife as the unequivocal heroes of this story. But now, from our postcolonial, twenty-first century perspective, we see the story as more complex. We see the ‘wretches’ not as wild animals, inhuman and cruel, but as members of an oppressed and brutalised population, lashing out in revenge at the unjust British occupation of their homeland. Some might even see the Indian ‘wretches’ as the heroes of the tale – early freedom fighters; their rebellion the first broadside in a long struggle for independence from British rule that was to take another 100 years of pain to achieve.

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