Unspeakable Outrages and Unbearable Defilements: Rape Narratives in the Literature of Colonial India

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Abstract

E.M. Forster was hardly the first writer to broach the subject of rape in the literature of colonial India. This paper considers narratives of rape not only in A Passage to India, but also in three other colonial-era texts: Flora Annie Steel's On the Face of the Waters (1896), a "historical" novel about the Rebellion of 1857, Dinabandhu Mitra's The Blue Mirror (1860), a Bengali play about the abuses of indigo planters in Bengal, and Rameshvar Chaumuval's Bhima's Glory (1935), a Hindi play based on an episode from the epic Mahabharata. Steel's "Mutiny" novel seems to support Fanon's suggestion that if rape is the master trope of imperialism, it should be a colonizing woman raped by colonized man. The two Indian plays, however, contest such a tropology, casting Indian women as victims of aborted rapes, and suggesting that the violation of idealized Indian heroines is tantamount to the rape of Bharat Mata (Mother India). While On the Face of the Waters and A Passage to India allude to unspeakable outrages perpetrated against white women, The Blue Mirror and Bhima's Glory describe the unbearable defilement of Indian women.

Keywords
rape, Sepoy Rebellion, indigo, Mahabharata, Flora Annie Steel, Dinabandhu Mitra, Ramesvar Chaumuval

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