



## SARAH LAYTON: PAUL SCOTT'S MOST COMPLEX LITERARY CREATION

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### **Abstract:**

*The Raj Quartet* is one of the most important works of fiction of the twentieth century. It is a complex, multi-layered story of two countries, their colonial relationship and eventual "divorce" told from the many points of view of the supremely detailed characters Scott created. Sarah Layton provides some of the most astute observations on the moral evils of the Raj. She contributes to the comprehensive social vision of the text by providing a domestic counterpoint to the militarized masculine atmosphere of the period. Sarah is one of the most attractive characters in the whole Quartet; she has a quality of detachment from the accepted stance of Anglo-Indian society. Sarah Layton is indeed Scott's most complex and expansive literary creation.

**Key Words:** Fiction, Colonial Relationship, Multi-Layered Story, Social Vision & Literary Creation

### **Introduction:**

*The Raj Quartet* is one of the most important works of fiction of the twentieth century. It is a complex, multi-layered story of two countries, their colonial relationship and eventual "divorce" told from the many points of view of the supremely detailed characters Scott created. *The Raj Quartet* is great and incredibly engrossing historical fiction. It is unmatched, both in complexity and the richness of the characters. This is a perfect novel in which the characters leap off the page, as they are so real. The story covers all kinds of lives of both Indians and the British in the years of World War II just as the Quit India movement is at its height. There are so many memorable characters whose lives play out on the pages of this book. Set in the turbulent years during World War II, Britain is struggling to hold onto to her most precious possession, the colony of India.

Sarah Layton provides some of the most astute observations on the moral evils of the Raj. She contributes to the comprehensive social vision of the text by providing a domestic counterpoint to the militarized masculine atmosphere of the period. All the unconventional female characters of the *Quartet*, at a certain point of their lives protest against the gulf between races and refuse to be mere passer byes of the "good intentions" carried out by the British society (Scott JC 28). Daphne attempts to soothe Hari's tortured mind from feeling invisible and marginalized and Sarah forms a close friendship with Ahmed Kasim. Their association with Indians, thus their trespassing social codes and laws, places them on the periphery of British society. It is their violation of ingrained norms and beliefs regarding colonial politics in India that makes them stand out and be pointed at and were not easily forgiven (MacMillan 169).

It is mainly individuals like Sarah Layton, who have the courage to go against the mainstream culture and attitudes, unafraid of her associations with the Indians. These characters were unconventional not due to their eccentricities but due to their audacity in standing up against rigid social and racial demarcation.

*The Quartet* is especially relevant today in terms of the ongoing problems of "Nation Building" in the Middle East and other parts of the world. The question of how one person (Sarah Layton in the book) can break away from the ties of nationality and chauvinism that appear to define us and eventually create one's own identity is sensitively and beautifully detailed.

### **Sarah Layton:**

*"I question everything, every assumption. I'm not content to let things be, to let things happen. If I don't change that I shall never be happy."*

(Day Sc, p.127)

Sarah is one of the most attractive characters in the whole Quartet; she has a quality of detachment from the accepted stance of Anglo-Indian society.

Sarah Layton, a principal female protagonist in the Raj Quartet, manages to survive the adversity of fate and ends in a content marriage with Guy Perron despite all the tragic events enveloping her life and despite her long-term friendship with a Muslim Congress leader, Ahmed Kasim. She witnesses the decline and death of Barbie Batchelor, the fall of her mother, the nervous breakdown of her sister Susan, the shocking death of Ronald Merrick and the horrific loss of Ahmed Kasim. In addition to these tragedies, she struggles with her personal losses and failures. She too goes against the stream in her benign attitude towards her multiracial friends and unconventional characters. Unlike the majority of the British society, she does not exclude from her circle of friends and acquaintances Lady Manners, the great-aunt of the gang-rape outcome, Parvati, or the half-insane missionary Barbie Batchelor. Her love and friendship extends to a Muslim Congress leader, Ahmed

Kasim and his homosexual friend Bronowsky. Her years in India are filled with pain and loss, nonetheless, she finds love, returns to Britain where she leads a contented life with Guy Perron.

Sarah Layton, the first-born daughter of Colonel John and Mildred Layton, plays an important role in her family as well as the social scene during WWII and at the verge of partition and gradual disintegration of India. Sarah is an unconventional woman, breaking the boundaries within and outside British society. While in India, she is a memsahib but not a typical one. Even though she could have married Teddy Bingham, she refuses and finds a momentary pleasure in an affair with another British officer, resulting in her pregnancy and a following abortion. Sarah is not only an outsider in the British circles, but also within her family. During the war she joins the Women's Army Auxiliary Corps, however, she is needed at home in order to help her mother who is unable to cope without her husband and turns to drink for consolation (Spurling 326-27). Spurling also claims that Sarah is *"a sceptical observer, an outsider in Pankot society, without prejudices or preconceptions"* and it is this attitude that attracts Guy Perron, *"the liberal spirit – a humane, informed, tolerant and open approach to relations between the races"* (327, 365). Sarah does cross the inter-racial boundaries, however, unlike Adela Quested or Daphne Manners, does not go beyond the acceptable norm and the criticism she receives is not only in regard to her relationship towards Ahmed Kasim but mainly concerns her personal standpoints and principles within the British circles.

The first time Scott introduces Sarah into the Quartet, he makes it clear through Lady Manners' first impressions that she is different from the rest of her family. The old lady realizes that there is something complicated behind Sarah's gesture in visiting her on the houseboat and asking to see the baby. Sarah's broodiness strikes her as *"odd and intricate, not at all the result of simple self-absorption."* It is obvious to Lady Manners that Sarah has assumed the responsibilities of her father during his enforced absence, an idea that is endorsed later in the second novel when we see her left, by her mother, to tell Susan that Teddie has been killed. Lady Manners is touched by the fact that the flowers Sarah brings with her do not last, but the significance of her journey across the water is not lost. The transience of the flowers is a symbolic comment on the fragility of an individual stand against the weight of raj society values, pretensions and prejudices. Sarah's reactions against a claustrophobic society dates back to her childhood when she swears to make her life *"of use to someone, somewhere."*

Sarah differs considerably from her mother, sister and other women in her relationship towards Barbie Batchelor or Lady Manners – the former having an impact on her, the latter epitomizing goodness and bravery. Sarah develops a special relationship towards Barbie, she cares for the elderly missionary when she is at the Samaritan hospital, speechlessly awaiting her death. Only Sarah seems to understand her seeing birds in the distance and it is Sarah to whom she leaves her trunk that covers the whole of her past. The garden becomes a sacred place for talking, confessing, contemplating. Walking in the rose garden, Barbie asks Sarah if she knows who Gillian Waller is, a name pronounced when Mabel Layton falls asleep, explaining she is afraid to ask the woman herself. Even though Barbie has been trying to find out who this woman is, she does not wait for an answer and instead confesses how she feels about her life in India, saying that her sister Susan should marry for *"some people are made to live and others made to help them. If you stay you'll end up like that, like me"* (Scott DS 386-87).

Even though Sarah does not practice Christianity, her behaviour is certainly hinted by unconditional love. In this sense her personality is similar to Barbie's and that is also why Barbie warns her about a plausible futile future. Barbie, as well as Lady Manners, are women on the verge of the British society; Barbie for her missionary work and Lady Manners for keeping her niece's child, Parvati. Peter Childs points out that Sarah Layton makes up for her family's rudeness after the announcement of Parvati's birth which *"was evidently directed at the Anglo-Indian community which ostracized any English person who mixed freely with Indians"* (DS). Sarah refuses to be a passive observer of her family's racial and social prejudices. According to Lucy Smalley, Sarah should settle, which might mean taking seriously the British role in India, however, Sarah does the opposite: she questions why and what they are doing in India (TS 104).

In addition to associating with the British women not accepted by society, she makes the acquaintance of Ahmed Kasim, a secretary of the Muslim Congress Party. Sarah herself classifies her encounter with Kasim as a novelty in the sense that *"it wasn't until we actually set out that I realized it was the first time I'd been alone with an Indian who wasn't a servant"* (DS, 159). What Sarah means by the first time is the time when such an encounter makes both parties self-conscious. Sarah even admits it was unwise of her to go off riding with him alone as it put both of them into a difficult situation. With Ahmed riding a few paces behind her, keeping appropriate distance, Sarah suddenly realizes the presence of Daphne Manners who *"was alive for [her] completely. She flared up out of my darkness as a white girl in love with an Indian. And then went out because – in that disguise – she is not part of what I comprehend"* (DS, 160). Sarah does not fall in love with Ahmed, nonetheless, after his death realizes she has loved him. When she returns from Susan's wedding, it is again in the garden she talks to Barbie and Barbie senses that Sarah has *"not come back but sent only her reflexion home"* (Scott TS 181). Barbie feels the distance and understands at the end of the talk about Sarah being

haunted by something from the past, someone vis-à-vis Parvati and for Barbie it is the unknown Indian (TS, 183).

It is not only Ahmed and Parvati, Sarah is happy to associate with, but she also does voluntary work in the Mirat hospital for purdah women, crossing cultural as well as social boundaries by taking the Nawab's difficult and hasty daughter to hospital, letting her hold a baby of a commoner. Sarah dedicates her time and energy to Shiraz out of compassion and understanding the girl's unhappiness. When asked what made her give her so much time, devotion and care, Sarah replies: "*Her unhappiness*" (DS, 552). And maybe it is also Sarah's own unhappiness she projects in helping Shiraz. Sarah makes it possible for Shiraz to cross the social boundaries designed by the Muslim laws. By going to the hospital and holding the baby of an ordinary woman, the life of the former and also of the latter is enriched. Shiraz finds some meaning in life and the common woman will never forget that her child was once held by a girl from the palace. Sarah's contribution to diminishing the rigid stratification is priceless. Her attempt is challenging, however, she does not go beyond the racial barrier. Her relationship to Ahmed develops into a friendship and when his life is abruptly finished, Sarah is shattered. In his essay '*Mourning the Death of the Raj? Melancholia as Historical Engagement in Paul Scott's Raj*', Mezey claims that Sarah Layton provides another level of melancholic self-criticism as she registers her discomfort and disgust with her role as defined by the gender codes of the Raj, which transform her sincere desire to assist into an easily dismissable stereotype; she acts the part of the "*brave little memsahib*" but hates herself for her performance. She recognizes that her role in India is as useless, meaningless, and as much a part of the "*bloody code*" as Ahmed's death. (327-

The final scene of the *Raj Quartet* is horrific and shocking as is the final partition and division of India and Pakistan. Ahmed's death symbolizes the seemingly unexpectedly expected bloodthirsty partition. None of his co-travellers are certain what Ahmed has exactly said, however, they are led to belief that they heard "*it seems to be me they want*" (DS, 582). When the train is attacked by Hindu mob, Susan and two other English women panic, Ahmed is trying to hide Edward's ayah under the seat, asking a co-traveller to make sure no one can see this young Muslim girl. And when Kasim's name is chanted and everyone is trying to do their best, for example Mrs Grace reassuring Susan, Sarah rocking and soothing Edward, Kasim suddenly opens the door and disappears. That is the moment Sarah realizes her role in India is meaningless and futile, despite her brave face through her father's imprisonment, Susan's mental breakdown, mother's drinking and affairs or Barbie's miserable decline and death.

No matter how much Sarah has suffered, the reader finds out later on that Sarah is married to Guy Perron. When he comes to India, he sees Sarah as an ordinary girl, recognizing she is the daughter of the Raj, a memsahib, however, lacking the qualities of a typical memsahib: "*a compound of self-absorption, surface self-confidence and beneath, a frightening innocence and attendant uncertainty about the true nature of the alien world they lived in. They were born only to breathe that rarified, oxygen-starved air of the upper slopes and peaks, and so seemed to gaze down, from a height, with the touching look of girls who had been brought up to know everybody's place and were consequently determined to have everybody recognize their own.*" (DS,17) Sarah does not fit this definition and the commonplace knowledge or classification of Anglo-Indian women. It is Sarah's quiet self-reliance that attracts Guy Perron and as he gets to know her he also finds out that she lacks the common racial prejudice (DS, 147). Moreover, it seems that what they have been through brings them closer and seals their future. Guy Perron witnesses Sarah sister's struggle with Merrick's death and becomes familiar with Susan's attempt to burn her own child, Edward. The most significant incident they go through together is, however, the death of Ahmed Kasim and the slaughter of other Muslims "a week before the official hand-over of power, independence and partition, in August 1947" (Spurling, 359). The bloodshed of Muslim men, women and children is helplessly watched by all the other travellers and this passivity and helplessness haunts Sarah who cannot comprehend how they just could have let him go. She is scared of the fact they have been paralyzed, incapable of doing anything, of protecting Ahmed, stopping him from jumping into the midst of the enraged Hindu crowd. Sarah's questioning and repenting probably matches the author's own conviction what the British should have done, and as Guy Perron is struck by something '*greasy and evasive*' about the gliding motion of that train. He [the author] certainly came to feel later that there was something greasy and evasive about the way the British had left India, their lack of foresight or preparation beforehand, their precipitate haste at the time, and their invincible reluctance to discuss it afterwards. (Spurling 165)

This reluctance and unwillingness is again broken by Sarah who, together with other compassionate British people, "*assists the dying Muslims on the platform that was becoming littered with blood-stained bundles of white cloth, with black limbs sticking out of the cloth. One body lay on the roof of the coach. No one seemed to have noticed it. From some of the windows of the coaches heads and arms hung down. Blood slowly made shapes on the dirty grey concrete of the platform.*" (DS, 585) When Perron finally finds Sarah, she is kneeling at a tap, pouring water into vessels and when asked to stop and that Perron will take over she asks him to do "the other thing" and he goes to distribute the water among the dying (DS, 587). No matter how many times it has been Sarah's duty to deal with tragic situations, to tell Susan her husband died, to see Barbie struggling with life, to go through abortion, no matter how many times she has been able to cope, she is broken

and defeated now, kneeling, filling thoughtlessly vessels with water. On that muddy wet ground with dying Muslims all around her Sarah probably fights her biggest battle. She is on her knees, clutching bowls and other containers, pouring water into them hoping the water might save some of the dying. Kneeling Sarah resembles a praying woman, Barbie who has also struggled with the presence of the unknown ghost, sending it to the Lord.

Barbie's helplessness and gradual loss of faith strongly resembles Sarah's brave but meaningless act on that platform with crying, shrieking, mourning survivals of the dead. Of course, her help does not end in vain for those who do survive thanks to the intake of liquids while bleeding, nonetheless, Sarah is aware the future will be filled with helplessness, they will just stand by and watch the Hindus killing Muslims and vice versa, as she has just witnessed in the case of her friend, Ahmed. Such an attitude is already performed by the British when criticism is heard from the mouth of a white woman, claiming that they were savages and a reply from a white man "*What do you expect? It's only the beginning. Once we've gone they'll all cut each other's bloody throats. Non-violence. Makes you laugh*" makes one wonder at the remark, especially after the wars fought by 'civilized' countries, 'civilized' men killing in order to overthrow dictatorship, bring freedom to occupied countries and to fight injustice and evil (DS 586). The white man can kill another white man just because he believes it is correct, and this killing will not be regarded as barbarous. However, the action of a black man killing another black man is classified as savage. Any killing, for whatever reason, for whatever belief is wrong and their condemnation of the Indians only shows their narrow-minded views and racial prejudice. Unlike Sarah, the other British present are judgmental and are not moved to help the dying and those who might survive (DS, 586).

From the moment of her contact in 1942 with Parvati Manners as a squalling infant, to her strange relationship with Ahmed, Sarah tried to make that real and human contact with India, and with an Indian, that eluded and destroyed Miss Crane and Miss Manners. Neither she nor Ahmed could rise above the political forces they both found so irrelevant to the life in hand. Despite all Sarah goes through, she, together with the others, leaves India to her own fate, to her own struggle as she feels there is no more she can do. Sarah Layton is indeed Scott's most complex and expansive literary creation.

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