

"Game of Duplicity" Analyzing American Southern Slaveholder Newspaper Reactions to The Indian Mutiny of 1857

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Cultural similarities can bring two groups closer together into partnership or deeply divide them because of differing ideas in implementing their shared practices. In the nineteenth century, both the United States and Britain practiced a system of racial paternalism, but they implemented it differently due to variations in their economic systems, such as the differences between colonialism and the plantation system and other major cultural disparities. These differences lead to conflict when, in May 1857, Indian Sepoys at Meerut rebelled against their British colonizers and their ideas of racial paternalism. While one would expect American observers to side with the racially paternalist British, this “Indian Mutiny” produced very contradictory reactions from the American media. While Northern abolitionist and Irish-American nationalist newspapers condemned the violence of the Sepoys in order to keep the support of British abolitionists’ and establish themselves as “white” American citizens, slaveholders in the American South displayed a more sympathetic response. In order to accomplish this goal, the Southern press manipulated the British news, such as articles from *The Times*, to fit their agenda; used critics of the East India Company to support their argument; and even resorted to spreading false rumors and gossip. Several Southern newspapers attacked British imperialism as unofficial slavery enforced by a brutal and hypocritical power. These articles aimed to use Britain’s violent oppression of the Indian Mutiny in order to discredit British abolitionists’ moral authority on slavery and to further their own domestic agendas. Therefore, these articles reflect not genuine sympathy to the Indian rebels, but a deep underlying resentment towards the high-handed attitude of Britain towards Southern slavery. Also, they intentionally paint British governance over India as infinitely harsher than the ‘benevolent’ system of slavery practiced in the American South.

To the nineteenth-century American public, British India was an exotic land known only through missionary’ writings, Hindu literature read heavily by Southern intellectuals, and, most importantly, the British media.¹ However, this reliance on heavily biased information did not stop the Southern press from

criticizing the British government’s handling of Indian affairs. On the contrary, in antebellum America, pro-slavery Southern newspapers were certainly not the first to criticize Britain’s harsh governance over India. According to historian Nikhil Bilwakesh, American abolitionists had the same criticism of Britain’s previous allowance of

slavery in India as they did of slavery anywhere. He points out “most Liberator [an American Abolitionist newspaper] articles prior to 1843 equate British colonialism with Indian slavery. Garrison, in a speech delivered in London, speaks of 500,000 dying in an Indian famine that he attributes to misrule, asking, “was there anything in American slavery worse than that?” However, it is important to note Bilwakesh specifically says “Garrison criticized legal slavery in India as it existed prior to 1843, he did not fault exploitative colonialism itself,” which is critical to analyzing the true aims of pro-slavery articles.² The pro-slavery newspapers were not criticizing Britain’s presence in India per se, but instead used Britain’s violent oppression of the Indian mutineers to emphasize Britain’s moral failings and contrast British colonialism with Southern slavery.

The question as to why the Southern slaveowners would be willing to criticize a system fairly similar to their own oppressive and race-based society is a complex one. Culturally speaking Antebellum plantation owners had a lot more in common with East India Company officials than the mostly Hindu and Muslim Indian soldiers. Also, aside from Northern factories, British manufacturers were the top buyers of Southern slave-picked cotton. About 80% of British factories relied on their products, so these Southern newspaper’s promotion of the Sepoy cause would

seem to have made no economic sense.³ However, for the sake of their wounded cultural pride, Southern slaveowners were willing to contradict their own system of racial hierarchy in order to preserve it against the attacks of British abolitionists, and in so doing defend against their abolitionist allies in the American North.

In order to blacken the reputation of Britain as the defender of Abolitionism, various Southern newspapers resorted to creating false gossip surrounding the British government and their treatment of captured Sepoy mutineers. An example of this can be seen in the false news article published in *The Mississippian and State Gazette* shortly after the official crushing of the Indian Mutiny titled: “Sepoys vs. Negroes.” The article asks, “what is the difference then between an African king selling his prisoners of war and Queen Victoria who robs the people of India of their lands and because they attempt to regain them prefers to sell or give away her prisoners rather than blow them from the cannons’ mouth?”, accusing the Queen of playing a “game of duplicity” in the field of abolitionism.⁴ The article’s reference to slavery and false accusation of the Queen is significant because of her support of her husband Prince Albert’s staunch abolitionism and even his active participation at a meeting held in Exeter Hall by the American Anti-Slavery Society in 1840 to denounce the slave trade’s continuance

1 Nikhil Bilwakesh. ““Their Faces Were like so Many of the Same Sort at Home”: American Responses to the Indian Rebellion of 1857” *American Periodicals* 21, no. 1 (2011): 1.

2 Nikhil Bilwakesh. ““Their Faces Were like so Many of the Same Sort at Home”: American Responses to the Indian Rebellion of 1857”, 10-16.

3 Gray, Elizabeth Kelly. ““Whisper to Him the Word ‘India’”: Trans-Atlantic Critics and American Slavery, 1830-1860.” *Journal of the Early Republic* 28, no. 3 (2008): 379-406.

4 “Sepoys vs. Negroes.” *The Mississippian and State Gazette*. (Jackson, Mississippi), 17 Feb. 1858. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

in Africa.⁵ The article's accusation against the British monarch's "game of duplicity" is a direct attack on British abolitionism and its supporters in America.

One Daily Dispatch newspaper article went even further in its proclaimed sympathy to the Indian rebels and its attack on Britain's moral authority. Named "The Sepoy Story," the article suggests that accounts of Indian Sepoy soldiers raping white women were grossly exaggerated or even falsified. Though it admits the stories about Sepoys could be credible, owing to their status as 'savages' given free access to British firearms, the article also suggests that the claims of Indian atrocities are merely a cover up for Britain's own moral failings. Stressing the excesses of the British in previous wars such as the recent Crimean War and the French and Indian Wars, the objective of the article is to prove that the British are violent hypocrites lacking in Christian goodness.⁶ The article takes a deeper jab in attacking British abolitionism by using the general points of a speech spoken by a British politician named 'Mr. Layard' published in *The Times*. The words of 'Mr. Layard' are credible in comparison to the previous false news article of the *Mississippian* and *State Gazette*. Sir Austen Henry Layard was a British amateur archeologist and politician who toured India investigating the causes of the Indian Mutiny and

came back to England denouncing claims of Indian atrocities as exaggerated and without foundation.⁷ But the *Daily Dispatch* leaves out Sir Layard's further points in his argument that demonstrate how Indian subjects were treated as inferior to the British in order not to juxtapose their situation and that of Southern slaves. More importantly, it ignores his original overall message that India should be given over to the British Crown for governance. Instead the newspaper conveys its own message that the British have no right to question the South's right to own slaves when they don't have the 'Christian conscience' to take care of their own colonized people.⁸

Another South Carolinian newspaper, *The Abbeville Banner*, manipulates the words of a *London Times* article in order to depict the ending of the Indian Mutiny as a terrible lesson for the non-slave-owning British. The *Abbeville* version contains a British soldier's description of Britain's defeat of the Mutiny and her great victory in reestablishing order in India. This is a copy from an article in *The London Times*. However, while the aim of *The London Times* article is to reflect Britain's 'heroic' victory in resolving the crisis of the Indian Mutiny, the *Abbeville Banner's* main motive is to emphasize that Britain's power was almost destroyed in India thanks to a lack of a rigidly controlled slave system. For example, in the

5 William Lloyd Garrison. "Prince Albert and great Anti-Slavery Meeting, in London." *The Liberator* Files. *The Liberator*. Accessed December 12, 2017.
6 "The Sepoy Story." *The Daily Dispatch*. (Richmond [Va.]), 11 June 1858. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

7 A. H. LAYARD. "Mr. Layard's Lecture Upon India." *Times* [London, England] 21 Aug. 1858: 9. *The Times Digital Archive*.

8 "Mr. Layard On India." *Times* [London, England] 12 May 1858: 12. *The Times Digital Archive*.

the London Times article the soldier lauds the bravery of his countrymen, saying, “We cannot but congratulate the country once more on the deliverance of the heroic band [the defenders of Lucknow]...it will we think be found among the many exploits that has made England famous throughout the East, nothing has surpassed the stern courage and chivalrous devotion.”⁹ However, the South Carolinian article rearranges the British soldier’s words and changes it to sound like a fairly accurate, detailed but emotionless description of Britain’s crushing of the Indian Mutiny. It leaves out the several important lines that show the original main message of Britain’s overall greatness and heroism in the Mutiny and instead emphasizes the soldier’s last paragraph “So ends the great mutiny of 1857, the terrible outbreak which was to shatter the power of Britain and send her begging for foreign assistance...The lesson will hardly be forgotten by ourselves or by the nations around us.”¹⁰ The words of a proud British soldier then are used by Southern critics in order to emphasize the weaknesses of British abolitionism and the violence of the colonial system in India.

In conclusion, Britain’s violent quelling of the Indian Mutiny gave American Southern slaveholders the chance to discredit England’s abolitionist movement. Emphasizing Britain’s moral hypocrisy in their treatment of the Sepoys, the Southern press used British media coverage, British critics of the war, and even false stories about the

Mutiny in order to further their own domestic and cultural agendas rather than legitimately show sympathy for the rebels themselves. Despite their shared cultures of white superiority and a slave-based society, and even their advantageous economic ties with one another, American Southern slaveowners still could not reconcile themselves with the British Abolitionist movement’s gall to criticize their system of slavery, while applying racial superiority to their own colonies, and in order to legitimize their own hierarchy, they used the opportunity of the “Sepoy Mutiny” to attack the equally racialized British hierarchy existing in occupied India.

9 “London, Thursday, December 24, 1857.” Times (London, England) 24 Dec. 1857: 6. The Times Digital Archive.

10 “The Indian Mutiny Crushed.” The Abbeville Banner. (Abbeville, S.C.), 21 Jan. 1858. *Chronicling America: Historic American Newspapers*. Lib. of Congress.

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