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The 'Good' European and his 'Disinterested Mistress': Mimicry and Aporia in John Masters

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Abstract

This paper is an attempt to critique John Master's representation of India by analyzing three of his novels and his autobiography. As a member of the Indian army, Masters lived in India for a long time in the final phase of the British Raj. He wrote great many books based on his experiences in India, and the four texts chosen for this paper are central in this regard. This paper isolates Masters's own emotional trajectory, especially how his initial disinterestedness changes into a passionate engagement with India, which he later describes as his mistress. The underlying dualities in the autobiographical narrative are linked to those in his fictional accounts of India, since in all his writings he deliberately blurs the factual and the fictional. However, such attempts to blur binaries are critiqued from Master's own subject position to show how notions like mimicry and interstice, in the colonial context, define not only the colonized subject but implicate his colonial superior as well who has his own ways of encountering aporias.

[Keywords: Mimicry, Aporia, Imaginary, British Raj, Colonial India, Orientalism]

'It was awful trying to be an Indian. No one understood me.'
Bhowani Junction (Masters, 1956, p.238)

Introduction

John Masters (1914-1983) was a fifth generation English settler in India, who served in the Indian Army in the twilight phase of the British Raj in India. He was not just a soldier. He was somebody who initially felt compelled to work in the Indian Army, then gradually fell in 'love' with India while working in the Army, and finally decided to passionately write down his experiences in the form of 'factual story'. In his autobiography *The Bugles and A Tiger: A Personal Adventure* (1956), Masters states his initial reluctance to join the Army: 'I was destined for Indian infantry. I use the word "destined" with intent. I did not want to go to Indian infantry - I thought

myself far too clever to waste my life in that backwater' (35). However, for financial reasons he eventually joined the Army. 'The Indian Army got more pay...And as I have said, we were broke...' (37) Pages after, Masters's attitude towards India would completely change as he would narrate his sense of rootedness in India and his newly developed love for India: 'If there was a justification for my family's long guestship here, for my making so free with the Indian wood in the fire...We removed many fears... I was in love with India, and she'd have the hell of a job getting rid of me' (314). His self-proclaimed love for India would grow to such a degree that he would acknowledge his unavoidable

'Europeanness' to be a bar. He would describe India as his 'lustful, disinterested mistress', since she could not be his 'mother' (314).

An analysis of Masters's autobiographical narrative would indicate how his attitude towards India changed from disinterestedness to a sort of passionate engagement accompanied by a feeling that India herself might be 'disinterested' in him. His artistic urge for 'story-telling' to a great extent derives from this new found love, and in his 'fictional' narratives one discovers similar emotional trajectories on the part of the protagonists. In terms of studying three of his novels based on his experiences in India – *Nightrunners of Bengal* (1951), *The Deceivers* (1952), and *Bhowani Junction* (1954), this paper would accordingly examine Masters's attitude to, and representation of, India.

Critiquing Fictionalised Histories

To begin with, one of the primary aspects of Masters's fictional accounts of India is that his narratives reveal a deliberate blending of the imaginative with the factual and autobiographical. Such a blending blurs the binary of fact and fiction and generates what Masters himself calls the 'fictionalised histories'. In the 'Foreword' to *The Bugles and A Tiger*, Masters states: 'This is a factual story, but not a history. Please do not pounce on me with scorn if it turns out there were seven, not eight, platoons of Tochi Scouts on the Iblanke that night of May 11th-12th, 1937.' He adds: 'In the course of the story I hope to have given an idea of what India was like in those last twilight days of the Indian Empire, and something more than a tourist's view of some of the people who lived there'. If this is how he writes his autobiography which should be strictly historical, he has similar ways of dealing with the fictional. In the 'Postscript' to his novel *The Deceivers*, Masters notes:

In a story of this sort the reader has a right to know how much was fact, how much

fiction. My purpose in this book, as in *Nightrunners of Bengal*, was to recreate the 'feel' of a historical episode rather than write a minutely accurate report. To do this I had to use the novelist's freedom to imagine people and create places for them to live in... (Masters d. 80)

The risk of this deliberate mixing of history and story is manifold. Such an admixture could certainly be considered a postmodernist gesture (the famous notion of 'historiographic metafiction' as described by Linda Hutcheon) to indicate that both history and fiction are human constructs. However, insofar as John Masters's own subject position is concerned, such a representation of colonial India could be read in conjunction with the colonizer's motivated rewriting of the colonial past (Crane 3). On an obvious level, one could talk about a specific form of 'projection' of India on the part of Masters as he exploits and exaggerates the facts and colours them with his own imagination. For example, in his first novel *Nightrunners of Bengal*, the character of the Queen of Kishanpur, Sumitra, is only loosely based on the historical figure Jhansi ki Rani. Masters in this novel also exaggerates the chapati events that played an instrumental part in building up the tension in the early months of 1857 (Crane 16).

Consequently, fictionalized histories would be derivative of what Jacques Lacan would have called 'imaginary' identification with, and projection of, an idea. Imaginary, as part of the Lacanian R-S-I schema (Real, Symbolic, Imaginary – three orders or registers that Lacan had repeatedly talked about throughout his career including in his Seminar XXII, *RSI*), is related to images and the ego, and identification with the idea of wholeness and coherence as opposed to fragmentation and inconsistency. Initially Lacan formulated the notion of Imaginary in relation to the mirror stage. A mirror stage occurs with the infant's first encounter with the mirror that gradually leads the child to become fascinated with its own reflection on the mirror. The

image gives the child a sense of security and wholeness as opposed to its fragmented self in reality, where it has not yet achieved full control over its body. The identification with the false image of its self is crucial at the same time for the child as it comes at the price of alienating the child from its own self/image (or true self or fragmented, split self) and forming an image of its 'other' self:

[...] the mirror stage is a drama whose internal pressure pushes precipitously from insufficiency to anticipation—and, for the subject caught up in the lure of spatial identification, turns out fantasies that proceed from a fragmented image of the body to what I will call an "orthopedic" form of its totality—and to the finally donned armor of an alienating identity that will mark his entire mental development with its rigid structure (Lacan 78).

According to Lacan, this imaginary (false) identification leads to a rivalry that is established between the infant and the image of the infant and this same rivalry anticipates the future relationships between the subject and the others, as the 'specular I turns into the social I' and 'this moment at which the mirror stage comes to an end inaugurates ...the dialectic that will henceforth link the I to socially elaborated situations' (Lacan 79).

In a sense, the 'India' that Masters and his protagonists identify with or even fall in love with is a carefully projected and fictionalised idea (for Lacan, the imaginary is essentially a fiction or falsity) with respect to which they posit and define themselves and assert their own superiority. Masters's repeated attempts to blur fiction and facts hide this unconscious intention to create a romantic image of India with respect to which the white man can assert his imaginary sense of heroism and virility. The situation is quite closer to Edward Said's conclusion that '[T]he Orient was almost a European invention' (Said 1) which functions as a culturally and ideologically

coherent doctrine, and that Orientalism 'depends for its strategy on the flexible *positional* superiority, which puts the Westerner in a whole series of possible relationships with the Orient without ever losing him the relative upper hand' (Said 7). Even though, Said's main target is those Westerners who never visited the East yet wrote books on the East, in the case of John Masters it would be seen how an Englishman residing in the East is sometimes drawn to represent the same 'flexible positional superiority'.

While it would be interesting to examine the 'orientalist' in John Masters, what is most remarkable in his case is how he and his protagonists posit a sort of reversal and critique of the existing notions about the psychological experiences of the colonizer and the colonized. Frantz Fanon in a number of famous passages in *Black Skin White Mask* (1952) suggests how the colonized Other has a desire to identify himself with the white or the coloniser. The black-skinned colonised man wishes to put on the white mask or the façade of the white man because he has internalised the idea that the coloniser stands for innate superiority. (Fanon 2-3) However, such a desire is at the end self-deceiving. The colonised can never really leave aside his native connections manifested most prominently through his skin colour, even though psychologically he attempts to develop a western intellect. The colonised can become white but 'not quite', as Homi Bhabha states in *The Location of Culture* (1994). The imitation of the coloniser is sometimes uncanny and not blind, which is why Bhabha uses the term mimicry to describe the ambivalent attitude of the colonised towards the coloniser. On the one hand, to have a native body and a European intellect is a first step towards constituting a 'hybrid' identity, which would eventually belong neither to this nor to that but somewhere 'in-between'. Such an interstitial space where the colonised would eventually be suspended is a problematic

zone. Here the colonised is neither purely native nor purely white, but rather a threat to both (Bhabha 2). While his desire to become one of the whites is inevitably thwarted, there is possibly no unproblematic return for him to his native people. In this interstitial zone the colonised can experience anxiety, can 'write back', can feel how his desire is thwarted, or can stay suspended in a love-hate relation both with his native people and the colonisers. Bhabha puts it succinctly:

"[C]olonial mimicry is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a *subject of difference that is almost the same, but not quite*. Which is to say, that the discourse of mimicry is constructed around an *ambivalence*; in order to be effective, mimicry must continually produce its slippage, its excess, its difference" (Bhabha 86).

What if this desire to identify with the coloniser on the part of the colonised is reversed and an Englishman himself desires to imitate the native, redefining the idea of 'mimicry'? What if the white man falls in love with the native people, even when he cannot leave aside his Englishness or his sense of superiority? What if he himself, and not just the colonised native, is suspended in an interstitial zone, albeit temporarily? The narratives of John Master touch upon such questions. The following discussion of three of his novels would address these issues.

The Deceivers: William Savage, his Disguise and Deception

The desire of mimicking the Indian man by the European is deftly presented by Masters in the portrayal of William Savage, in *The Deceivers*, who tries to slip into the 'identity' of Gopal the Weaver. 'He [William] wore a white loincloth and a white turban...His chest and legs were bare, and his skin – every square inch of it – had been stained by Mary and "the woman of the Patel's house"'. (Masters d. 10-11)

However, the very first attempt to become an 'Indian' is thwarted at the beginning, where Masters highlights the difference between a native man and a European. William's 'High-ankled Bandelkhand slipper' presents a stark contrast to the bare footed Gopal the Weaver. He could manage to walk barefoot, but "William's souls were soft and European" (Masters d. 10-11). Masters's emphasis of the attempt of identification of William-turned-Gopal with the sorrow of Gopal the Weaver's wife once he sees the dismal condition of her is a subtle presentation of the desire to be a part of the 'savages'. 'But her face was vivid before him. The heat of its love burned him [William].'(Masters d. 12)

Ironically, it does not take much time on William's part to forget her poor plight as soon as he meets the thugs and when Mary, his wife, asks her whether the poor widow is all right or not, he asks her 'She? Who?' However, what started as a trial to save the poor woman from becoming a Sutte gradually leads to the chain of the greater events, with William finally attempting to embrace the identity of a thug. The Thugs (originally derived from the Hindi word *thag*, which means 'deceiver') were an organized gang of professional assassins, who would lure their victims, plunder them, and strangle them to death. William would become one of them only to catch them.

The desire to become something one is not and to deceive the deceivers is further complicated by Masters. Hussein, who helps William in his thug-hunting business, points out the qualities already possessed by William in order to 'become' an Indian – William speaks good Hindi and has dark eyes. Here Hussein instills in William the desire of mimicking an Indian in him. He further instructs William that, for this, what he has to do is to 'leave your [his] law behind and become an Indian'(Masters, d. 38).

William ruminates that only by being exposed to the culture of the thugs, could he

understand the 'real' India. He now considers himself truly a part of India which 'his race had held him back from complete absorption in it' (Masters d. 39-40) until now. His approach till then had been like an Orientalist, who has 'accepted the basic distinction between East and West as the starting point ...concerning the Orient, its people, customs... (Said 2-3)

William's encounter with goddess Kali highlights the tension between William's dual identities – the Indian and the European. During a ritualistic prayer to the goddess, Yasin, one of the deceivers, offers consecrated sugar to William and 'icicles of sweat' start to pour down William's head. He desperately wants to hold a cross amongst his fingers and does not want to swallow sugar, in the name of a goddess, who is strange and an alien figure. For him, she is the goddess of the 'Other', irrespective of William's attempt be a part of 'true' India. William tries to step out of his essential Englishness and takes the sugar offered to him by Yasin and swallows it. He hopes it to taste like death, but after he is finished he finds all his nausea accompanying him until now is gone. He comes back to his senses and prioritizes his mission over his religious inclination that his European identity ties him to. He could drink the milk offered to him without any hesitation, because now he is sure it 'was all rank superstition, and only the chill of the dawn and the remembered horrors of last night had upset his stomach.' (Masters d. 49)

The initiation of William into the discourse of Indian culture and his everyday attempt or hesitation to be a part of it is clearly illustrated when he murders Gopal the Weaver, the disguise of the man he has put on. Confronting him at the whore-house, William kills him in the exactly same manner a thug would kill his victim:

The weighted end of the rumal flew into William's left hand with a precise and simple mastery. His wrists met, he jerked

them in and up against the side of Gopal's neck, under the ear...Gopal's head snapped sideways. His head cracked (Masters d. 52).

Though he attempts as an act of self-defense to continue to preserve his identity as a secret from the thugs, yet the act performed by William gives him warmth hitherto unknown to him. He has seen the thugs practicing them, but this is his first murder and he almost takes pride because he has done it 'cleanly, single-handed'. Only Hussein's bewildered gaze at him shakes him out of his 'exultation' (Masters d.52) and leads him back into the skin of William Savage, the Englishman.

The wavering between two different identities altogether at the same time grants William, in this case not a colonized but an Englishman, what Bhabha calls an 'interstitial space' and 'the overlap and displacement of domains of difference' (Bhabha 2). The feast where William sits to eat after murdering Gopal the Weaver highlights this overlapping of different spheres of identities for William. On the one hand, he was 'William Savage, taking ritual part in a blood-bathed, decorous fantasy.' (Masters d. 53) On the other, 'he was Gopal the Weaver, eating contentedly, with respect' (Masters d. 53).

William's disguise (as Gopal the Weaver) deceives many including Gopal's wife who initially mistook William to be Gopal. At the end William has to clarify this to her: 'I am not Gopal. I am William Savage. It was I who came last time to deceive you' (Masters d. 78). However, this disguise deriving from identification with an Indian also generates moments when William experiences conflict of identities. Such conflicts, however, are not long-lasting. William's imitation of the Indian is a form of mimicry which he sometimes engages in with a purpose, maybe to test his own standard as a soldier or to showcase the superiority of the English people.

Nightrunners of Bengali: Rodney Savage and his Love for India

In *Nightrunners of Bengal* too, there is an attempt on the part of Rodney Savage to identify with the Indians, to understand them and 'do good' to them. The goodness of Rodney is highlighted as early as in the beginning of the novel, where the hero of the novel dismounts his horse to pick up a 'pot-bellied brown infant' (Masters c. 17), the gardener's youngest son. The character of Rodney and his attempt to 'belong' to a different culture altogether is darkly contrasted with her wife Joanna's attitude right after this incident. She pledges Rodney to put the hat on their infant son, otherwise 'He'll get sunburnt and brown, like a subordinate's child' (Masters c. 18). Joanna's manners clearly disturb Rodney, as Masters deftly puts in when Joanna calls the Indians 'blacks' and in return is reprimanded by her husband, 'Joanna, will you *please* remember to call Indians by their race and caste, or, if you don't know, 'natives'?' (Masters c. 19)

The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 and the destruction that came along with it shook Rodney's foundation in India and he went through almost a fit of insanity and rage after witnessing his wife and colleagues being murdered in front of his eyes. Unlike William Savage, the protagonist of *The Deceivers*, here Rodney has to put the dead sepoy Rambir's uniform in order to hide his European identity and escape. Hence, deceiving himself and also at the cost of deceiving the 'Other', can he retain his Englishness. His encounter with the rebels of Mutiny makes him forget his philanthropic purposes for India a while. Piroo, a former thug and now a subordinate under Rodney, murders a sepoy so that his hat could fit Rodney, as the uniform of Rambir was smaller for him. There lies an inherent tone of colonial superiority, where a man of Indian origin is murdered by an Indian to help the European escape. Only by slipping through the identity of an Indian and hiding his own and deceiving himself and the other

Indians – much in the manners of his father William Savage – Rodney can escape. To assume an Indian identity turns to be a compulsion for him and not a choice anymore.

But how does Rodney redeem himself and become the hero again? Peter Morey nicely states in *Fictions of India: Narrative and Power* (2000) that the village Chalisgon, where Rodney briefly stays during his flight, acts as 'the white man's fantasy island in a sea of troubles' (Morey 84). In a fit of insanity for what he has seen the Indians do to him, Rodney murders Prithvi Chand, a former friend of his and then he kills a young villager from Chalisgon who has indeed come to help him find food. Yet, no one from the village threatens him or tries to hand him over to the mutineers. Hence, Chalisgon is a place, where Rodney's faith in humanity, particularly in Indians can be restored. When the village is cholera-struck, Caroline urges Rodney to help them because

At Gondwara victory is a stake; here, it's understanding, love. They're more important. They're more important for England too...We may all die. But if we're to be accepted in India it will be because of things like this – not victories or dams or telegraphs or doctors (Masters c. 296)

Rodney finds his faith back, adhering to Masters's good European myth, and at the end emerges as a true hero by letting the rebel Queen of Kishanpur, Sumitra, escape. He even promises to take Sumitra's boy, but not before slipping into his own clothes, with the finality of acknowledging his identity as a European: 'I'll take him, if you wish. I'll raise him with my own son. You [Sumitra] and I [Rodney] will never understand each other, but perhaps they will' (Masters c. 371)

Bhowani Junction: the Eurasian and her divided self

The racist attitude that Joanna, in *Nightrunners of Bengal*, manifests towards the

Indian community is repeated by Patrick Taylor, the Eurasian male protagonist of *Bhowani Junction*. This novel, however, is unique in the sense the protagonists are neither purely Indian nor purely British. They rather have a hybrid identity due to their Anglo-Indian or Euro-Asian roots. The novel portrays the twilight years of the British rule in India and it represents three communities and their struggles – the Indians, the Europeans and the Eurasians. Here, the novel's Eurasian female protagonist Victoria is in a failed search of her 'true' identity which apparently lies beyond her 'hybridity'. This quest for her identity makes her go through three different relationships – with the Eurasian Patrick, the Indian Hindu Sikh leader Ranjit and the European Colonel Rodney Savage. Her brief encounters with all these three men finally end up making her realize that she should stick to her Eurasian identity, itself a hybrid identity.

Victoria wears a sari which symbolizes her adherence to the Indian culture, though deep down she knows it can never be her true identity. She even goes to the extent of marrying Ranjit and changing her religion, to become a Sikh herself. But she leaves the ceremony midway and is quite sure of the fact that Ranjit did not need her. She can at the most be sympathetic towards the Indians or chide the racist Patrick who absolutely loathes them, but she can never become one of them, nor can she ever become one of the members of British community. Her short affair with Rodney highlights this fact even more. Her relationship with him is overtly sexual and does not have much of affection or love as part of it: 'To use Masters's own metaphor, they can meet in the same room, but they cannot live together in it' (Crane 128-129).

In the end, Victoria decides to get reunited to Patrick, another Eurasian, because she understands he alone could give her 'true' identity, because that is what she is – an Anglo-Indian, neither Indian, nor European.

Ranjit's mother, the sirdarni, tries to remind her of where she truly belongs:

Have you ever met an Englishman who didn't insult you? Haven't your people worked for them for a hundred years? And now how they are going to reward you? You know. They're going to leave you here to us. And what do you think we're going to do? We're going to make you realize that you are Indians- inferior Indians, possibly disloyal Indians, because you've spent a hundred years licking England's boots and kicking us with your own boots that you're so proud of wearing (Masters a. 123-124).

Victoria receives a jolt, when Ranjit's mother picks up a mirror and hands it over to her. Her mind splits into two, as she contemplates over what actually her true identity is: 'I could appraise her [she herself as her own other] as honestly as she had been any other woman I might see in the street, because she was not 'me', Victoria Jones, the Anglo-Indian.' (Masters a.124)

Her half-Indian, half-English identity creates a gap between 'she and herself' as well between she and Ranjit whom she almost ended up marrying. She understands that there will always be a 'very delicate gauge screen or curtain hanging' (Masters, 1954, p.192) between Ranjit and herself. The barrier that exists between them is further echoed by Victoria when she narrates her experience to try to be Indian to Rodney 'it was awful, trying to be an Indian. No one understood me" (Masters a. 238).

Conclusion

A study of John Masters's three novels – *The Nightrunners of Bengal*, *The Deceivers*, and *Bhowani Junction* – reveals some underlying patterns and tropes, two of which can be summarized in conclusion.

First: Masters tells the story of the 'good European'. The idea of the European being a

father figure or a hero who desires to save the Indian race from their distress permeates the *Nightrunners of Bengal*. The essence of the 'good' European is illustrated through the character of Colonel Rodney Savage, who ultimately forgives the Indians and tries to understand them even after they have killed his wife and colleagues in front of his eyes, shortly after a brief spell of insanity and rage. He even helps the Queen of Kishanpur, Sumitra who rebelled against the Europeans, to escape. And in *Bhowani Junction* the female Eurasian protagonist Victoria chides the racist Eurasian Patrick every time he insults the Indians or calls them 'Wogs.'

In a positive light, these attitudes could also be understood as a 'genuine love' for the Indians and an attempt to break down the binary of the ruler/ruled. However, these attitudes of sympathy, forgiveness, and assistance are partly indicative of an attempt to project the idea of innate superiority of the European. These two opposite tendencies are strangely accommodated in Masters's narratives, creating, as they do, a set of 'aporias'. Indeed, as Jack Reynolds points out in his entry on Jacques Derrida in *Internet Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, in the Derridean understanding, 'aporia' (originally meaning 'puzzle') is a kind of impasse or paradox associated with the notions of gift, hospitality, forgiveness. For Derrida, *genuine* gift, *genuine* hospitality, or *genuine* forgiveness involves the impossible. The idea of gift for example is paradoxically undermined by the demands of giving and taking or by self-interest and calculative reasoning. Idea of hospitality is undermined by the demands of superiority, mastery, ownership that create the self-identity of the host. Idea of forgiveness is also caught in an aporia insofar as forgiveness depends on calculative reasoning and not on any purely unconditional, self-less motive. The point here is that the feelings of sympathy, forgiveness, or love of Masters and his

protagonists in relation to India or the Indians are suspended in an impasse where the genuineness of such feelings verges on the impossible.

Second: These aporias are linked to an impasse and irresolvable contradiction which set the self-defeating and self/other-deceiving desire in motion. In this connection, the motif of disguise or clothing into a new identity could be analyzed. The two Savages (William and Rodney) and Victoria are found changing into the Indian cloths to appear Indian. However, mere outward imitation does not guarantee one's acceptance among the 'natives'. There has to be a genuine desire to 'go native', to become one of them. To experience such a desire, let alone to fulfill it, is to experience psychological conflicts. This is because, in the end, no one can truly give up his 'roots' and fit himself into an altogether different culture and lifestyle. The question is not only about an Indian failing to completely become a European or vice versa. The problem is further extended to somebody who is born as Euro-Asian and desiring to belong either to the Indians or to the Europeans. Be it for an Indian or an Englishman, or an Anglo-Indian – the desire to identify with the 'Other' is shown to be self-defeating and self-deceiving. They might meet in the same room, or in the same narrative space. But they cannot do away with their diversity and get united. This seems to be a logical as well as a practical impossibility. This is true not only for the fictional narratives but also for John Masters himself – he who spent such a long time in India, fell attracted to India but in the end felt that India was disinterested in him, and that he should eventually adhere to his European identity. By recording the colonial experience from the perspective of an Englishman, John Masters helps re-visiting the ideas like mimicry, ambivalence, and interstice which define not only the colonized but can also help make sense of the colonizer as well.

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