

CHAPPTER IV:

THE MUTINY: NIGHTRUNNERS OF BENGAL AS A

HISTORICAL NOVEL

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1857?

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 The year ¹⁸⁵⁷1987 stands as a landmark in the history of India for it saw the first national struggle for liberation, which almost shook the foundation of the company Bahadur's Raj. More has been written about this event than any other in the long years of British occupation of India. Most British writers dismiss it as a mere revolt of disgruntled elements in the army or at best a half-fading Indian aristocracy to regain its lost power; they refer to it as the Sepoy Mutiny rather than a true war of independence and see it as another episode of British heroism, another proof of the superiority of the imperial race.

The Mutiny was, however, not just a military rebellion nor a hysterical reaction of the old aristocracy threatened with extinction. It was above all a spontaneous expression of the grievances of the Indian

masses against a tyrannical, alien misrule. The Indians only had to look around them to see the British interfering at every level of life; they feared and resented this interference that threatened their identity, culture, and religion. It was against this background of widespread discontent that a mass uprising started against the *ferangi* (the British), a rising in which Muslim and Hindu got united.

The Rebellion, though finally crushed, was a bloody and brutal affair. There were atrocities on both sides; Sepoys killed the beleaguered British, including women and children, in the earlier days of the Mutiny, though on a much smaller scale than the British public was led to believe. And there were many Indians who protected the British despite grave danger to them. Nevertheless, the British avenged themselves with a savagery seldom witnessed. While rebel Sepoys were blown to death from the mouth of the cannon, civilians were hanged on a mass scale.

The Mutiny opened a gulf of hatred and distrust between the British and the Indians, which could not be bridged completely later on. It also saw the demise of the East India Company; the transfer of India to the Crown; and the beginning of a process which culminated in the independence of the sub-continent in 1947.

In Nightrunners of Bengal, Masters has captured some of the pain, horror, and violence of the turbulent days of the Mutiny as well as its cause and effects. In his foreword, he writes:

England - Victoria's pompous, stolid Christian England-sprang up in an ecstasy of outrage, to answer murder with mass murder, hate with a demoniacal fury of hate. This was at once the noon of courage and the midnight of barbarism.¹

As for the cause, Masters, in a Forster-like manner, finds it in the indifference of the British towards Indians, in their refusal to establish personal relationships with the natives: 'they [the British] were like men in an upstairs room, secure, cut off... so the house cracked. The world cracked.'

John Masters is rather evasive on the most moral and politically important aspect of the Raj- why should there be the British rule in India? This moral issue that forms the very core of the novels of the writers like E.M. Forster and Paul Scott, is dealt with by John Masters in passing only. The English in his novels never for a moment question their right to be in India and believe that it is their 'manifest destiny' to rule over such backward nations. Only Rodney Savage, who when he is sheltered in an Indian village, makes a direct probe in this area. "Do you think, ~~he~~ asks the villages, "it is not right for the English to rule India?"² The village *bania's* answer is what Masters himself would like to say in reply, that "we do not care who rules us as long as he rules well."³ We also know that when Rodney asks this question he is full of hatred and his purpose is to bring out the treachery of the Indians. He himself knows the answer; that the Indians are not fit to rule themselves and if the British leave there would be total anarchy and civil war. Even

his 'awareness', brought on by the affection of the villages, is deceptive in the apparent innocence. For him a foreigner was a man who did not love. And that "to the men of English blood had been given an opportunity such as God grants but once in thousand years" to prove themselves as "giants of understanding, forerunners, of a new world of service". One can see where the catch is. The definition of a 'foreigner' eliminates all objections to the British presence in India and makes them a nation of guardians, reformers and well-wishers who acted out of love and at great cost and sacrifice on their part.

Masters' story is set in the imaginary town of Bhowani, a small military station on the outskirts of state of Kishanpur of which it originally formed a part we are given a fairly credible account of the privileged life of the 'Anglo-Indian' of the time, the emphasis being on the division between the British and the natives.

In order to objectify his emotional crisis in his novels, John Masters went back in history in search of his roots. He thus

created the fictional Savage family whose men have lived in India from the 17th century onwards in various cities. The fact that each of Masters' novels has a protagonist from the Savage family provides a sense of historical continuity as well as a deeply imaginative quality to his stories.

The world of the *sahibs*, particularly that of the *memsahibs*, has no place for the Indians except in the role of a servant. There is some historical basis for the view that throughout the imperialist era, the influence of English women on their men folk has largely been negative. The English women in India were more supercilious and contemptuous of everything Indian. They hated living in this country and made their husband's lives miserable. They were overtly racist and were responsible for creating a wide gulf between their men, ^{who} gave birth to the idea of the stereotype female known as the '*memsahib*'. Masters shows awareness of this common variety in depicting '*memsahib*' type characters whose lives are full of mediocrity and empty gossip Joanna, the wife of captain

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Rodney Savage - the protagonist of the novel - is a typical *memsahib*. She is interested in money, parties and her own appearance. Despite six years in India, she hardly knows twenty words of Hindustani; she insists on calling her servants blacks; her interest lies in balls, fancy dresses and liaisons; she reminds one of Mrs. Hauksbee, the socialite of Kipling's Simla.

Against this standard image, Masters has created the myth of what can be described as the ideal woman. It is demonstrated again and again in his novels that the ultimate salvation of man is in finding a 'perfect' woman further, that such perfect women do exist, at least in Masters' fiction, and one has only to recognise them. In fact, so significant is the role of the perfect woman that none of his heroes achieves completeness and maturity, without the active did of such a woman. Catherine becomes Jason's self-appointed guiding spirit who never lets him forget his dream. She is a personification of devotion, selflessness, love and wisdom. Mary is a friend, companion and a guide, who

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chooses to face the embarrassment of her husband's disappearance so that he may succeed against the thugs. Caroline Langford is perhaps the most forceful of these women characters. In direct opposition to the ⁹ ~~nations~~ commonly held, she believes that the main flaw in the English presence is that they haven't identified themselves with the Indians. Her stamina, grit and uncompromisingly human approach make her a missionary and a moral crusader. Her insistence on love, charity and service finally prevails upon Rodney so that he regains his humanity after having been reduced to a beast by the violence and bloodshed of the mutiny. In a way, Caroline's lonely voice is the voice of the English conscience. She represents the best and the purest of whatever goes into the fabric of the English civilization. However, even in her case, John Masters stops short of issue concerning the moral right of the English to be in India. Caroline's anger is not directed at the colonial idea, as it is against English prejudices and their aloofness and

snobbery. When Rodney wants to leave the village of Chalisgon where cholera has broken out, Caroline's appeal to him reads like a direct lesson on the theme of the 'white man's burden'

We'll be risking our lives here, as many unknown servants in unknown places have done before us. It is not showy. No one will ever hear of it. 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. Don't you see that this is the great thing to do, come to our hands? We can leave something here which will live when all the fights are done, and our places are rains, and we've gone home, as some day we will.⁴

Caroline Langford, a recent visitor to India, is set up as a contrast to Joanna and other Englishwomen in Bhowani. She is interested in knowing India and Indians; she has already spent six months alone in the state of Kishanpur; and while in Bhowani she does not hesitate to go to the bazaar all by herself in some ways she is like Forster's Adela Quested though the differences are also obvious; Adela rejects imperialism, but Caroline is a firm believer in the Raj and the imperial idea.

As others dance at the club in the New Year of 1857, Caroline Subjects Rodney to a barrage of penetrating questions, particularly on the issue of the gulf between the British and the Indians. Rodney admits that there is no real social contact between the two sides; that in order to feel India in the way she wants, one must become Indian and 'as a race we don't do it - we can't; and that perhaps it is best to keep things the way they are. With complacency he adds that as far as he is concerned, he knows his Sepoys well finally, their conversation changes, he knows his Sepoys well finally, their conversation changes to the possibility of a rebellion by the Indians. 'Doesn't he (the Indian) want to be his own master?' asks Caroline. And Rodney given the traditional reply:

Perhaps, if it were possible. But first he wants peace and protection - which means power - and we've giving them to him sometimes I feel ashamed. Take this very Bhowani Territory it used to be part of Kishanpur state as I expect you heard when you were there. We took it on tight here. Yet now the peasants and the lower castes generally would do anything rather than revert to Kishanpur rule.⁵

Rodney's argument for the Raj is based on the practical benefits of British rule rather than its moral or legal right.

The scene then shifts to another India, the princely India as Rodney is dispatched to restore law and order in the neighbouring Kishanpur state where the Rajah has been assassinated. What follows is a thrilling tale of palace intrigues, adventure, and sex in a highly exotic setting. Here we meet another major character of the novel - Sumitra, the Rani of Kishanpur and a leader of the Mutiny, who seems to have been modeled on the famous Rani of Jhansi, she is presented as a courageous, patriotic, charming young woman with the morals of a harlot. Where she cannot buy with money, she offers herself in order to attain her goals. She takes a fancy to Rodney and wants him to command her forces. However, our hero resists all these temptations - he is so devoted to his duty. Sumitra too is following her duty, the nationalist's duty of ousting the foreigners from the land: 'I killed my husband for India; I pretended to be a whore

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for India; I lied, for India I am Indian first and woman afterwards'. She declares openly.⁶

Soon after Rodney's return to Bhowani, the Mutiny breaks out; and Rodney, as he stands in the blood-bath around him, is overcome with shame at English failure in India 'All that he had failed. The English in India had failed England', the Bengal Army had failed these men; they, who were a part of him, had failed themselves.' Rodney along with his little son is able to escape though Joanna is killed. Guided by Peroo, the Indian carpenter of his regiment, Rodney joins Caroline and seeks refuge in Kishanpur. However, he soon becomes suspicious of the Rani's intentions towards the British, and flees from her place. Now he is headed towards Gondwara, a British Garrison Station.

Much of the story is taken by the description of Rodney's escape as he travels through the countryside and jungle trails, brushing closely with death. This narrative also brings into focus the hospitality and humanity of Indian villagers who offer them

food and shelter though they themselves are suffering from the ravages of war and disease. Their sacrifice is best illustrated in the way the priest of Chalisgon saves the life of Caroline with his last supply of opium, the only remedy known at the time against cholera, although he or his family could have fallen sick and no opium was available for miles around. This incident makes Rodney aware of the need ~~of~~ love on the part of the English if they really wanted to stay in the country Rodney is ready to love Indians, but not prepared to hand them back their country for he is convinced that the Indian cannot handle the job:

The company is not going to lose India... and if it did, do you think Indians are fit to rule themselves, or protect themselves, yet? There'd been a year of anarchy, civil wars between Rajahs had for power, I know now why the Rani wanted me to command her army. And who would suffer in all that but the ordinary people of India? And afterward - Russia! ⁷

Finally Rodney reaches Gondwara and sees ~~things~~ of British brutality all over. Here he reports to general ~~Nector~~ for duty and is instrumental in identifying the rebellious Sepoys. Shortly afterwards, the British

forces march toward Kishanpur and invade the state, the Rani, who had been an active leader of the Mutiny, is intercepted by Rodney as she tries to flee the area. However, she refuses to surrender and jumps to her death in a nearby river with these last words: 'but the rebellion will go on, until I and those who will follow me are wiped out.'⁸

Within the Mutiny's context, Masters depicts the relationship between the colonisers and colonised at different levels.

There are some colonisers who have a liberal attitude towards the colonised. That is why they have a relationship of sympathy towards the Indians. For example, Captain Rodney, British officer talks with Caroline Langford, about his treatment to Indians, which shows his trust and love towards them:

Only trust that matters, and we do trust each other, we and native officers and Sepoys completely unconditionally.⁹

On the contrary it is to be noted that his private soldier's attitude of hatred towards Indian when Rodney is injured in battle and is shifting to safe place. He says:

Filthy furching black bastards. You wite!
You wite.¹⁰

Later on Rodney who loves and trusts his Indian officers and Sepoys goes almost mad to take revenge when he sees his wife and son killed before his eyes. Rodney crushed the head of Prithvi Chand who comes to offer Rani Sumitra's protection to him. Similarly a soldier from Rodney's regiment thinks about colonised people. It is reflected:

You must of killed a 'undred of furching niggers yourself, Sir... We'll kill every nigger in the country...¹¹

Some coloniser's enmity reflects from the action of their kicking Sepoy:

The man knelt in the mud. His coat was a rag, and his bowels hung out of his stomach, trailing on the earth. One gunner held his neck and tried to make him lick the ground; another jerked him back by his hair and rammed axle grease down his throat? ¹²

On the other hand, native Sepoys ^{also} thinks ^{also} also to take revenge. For example, the mutineers gathered on 10th May 1857 in their barracks to take revenge on English. Among them one says:

The English have hanged Brahmins, stripped our princess, attacked our goods in their temples and we have done

nothing. We have helped them, now they are going to kill us. They do not need us any more. They are going to kill us, for only we can protect the old gods they despise... Now they've started yes, yes, they've started haven't you heard? They disarmed our brothers at Gondwara last night and blew them to pieces with guns... they will take away our old rights, the lied; we know the cartridges are greased with defilement, we know...kill or be killed.¹³

All colonisers and colonised do not think taking revenge of each other. There is a friendly relation between the colonisers and the colonised. For example, Rani Sumitra of Kishanpur and her relation with Rodney is revealed in the following lines:

She put up the hand that had rested on his arm and adjusted her sari... you see my India... Yet you are a soldier. The greatest hero of our family was like that... Rudraprasad Rawan. You know, I too am a Rawan, of another branch? But you are a foreigner- oh it is not true! None of you English are quiet foreigners, or even will be.¹⁴

Moreover, colonised people are more frank and hospitable towards colonisers. For example, Sumitra' hospitality towards Rodney reveals in the following manner:

... seized his arm, and almost screamed, 'My lord, Rodney- you must, you must I must have you here and your wife and child, everything you love...' My lord, you must leave Bhowani and come to live in my

fort, now, before Now! I will give you all the money you want, all the money your wife can possible use ten thousand acres of land.¹⁵

Colonisers dislike of Indian gurus and fakirs is seen in the following lines:

An English girl has no business to involve herself with gurus and fakirs and the edges of magic. Besides, he had lost his nerve and she must have noticed it. He spoke curtly and meant to be rude.¹⁶

Colonisers take care of Indians and they think that it is their part of duty, which reflect their nature of healing attitude. It is seen from the discussion about diseases like cholera, smallpox among Isabel, Rodney and Mr. Mc. Cardie, as follows:

Rodney, I know how you feel, but those are risks we have to take. We would go insane; we would want to commit suicide. If we world shut ourselves up in our bungalows whenever any disease was about.¹⁷

There is love relationship between the colonisers-colonised. For example, love relationship between Rani Sumitra and Rodney is seen as follows:

My lord, I love you, I love you. I did wrong you don't know, but go on, go on, I love you.¹⁸

There is also a relationship of detachment in the novel. The character like Caroline Langford who wants to detach from certain things which she doesn't like. It is reflected when she talks about Kishanpur and its politics while returning with Rodney to her residence. She says:

There are no two standards for us, for the English only one. We must keep our standard, or go home we must not, as we do now, permit untouchably and forbid suttee, abolish tyranny in one state and leave it another, have our right hand Eastern and our left hand Western. It is not India is wicked; she has her own ways. If we rule we must rule as Indians or we must make the Indian English.¹⁹

In this manner, the novel brings out the ethos of India during the Mutiny of 1857 and hence it can be treated as a historical novel.

NOTES AND REFERANCES

1. John Masters, Nightrunners of Bengal (England: Penguin Books Ltd. 1976), p.3
2. Ibid. , P.272
3. Ibid. , P.273
4. Ibid. , P.280
5. Ibid. , P.29
6. Ibid. , PP. 248-49
7. Ibid. , P.306
8. Ibid. , P.353
9. John Masters, Nightrunners of Bengal (London: W.C.1: Michael Joseph and Ltd. 1957), p.31
10. John Masters, Nightrunners of Bengal (England: Penguin Books Ltd.1976), p.344
11. Ibid. , P.345
12. John Masters, Nightrunners of Bengal (London: W.C.1: Michael Joseph and Ltd. 1957), p.365
13. Ibid. , 210-212

14. John Masters, Nightrunners of Bengal (England: Penguin Books Ltd.1976), p.65
15. Ibid. , P.95
16. Ibid. , P.14
17. John Masters, Nightrunners of Bengal (England: Penguin Books Ltd.1976), p.116
18. Ibid. , P.93
19. Ibid. , P.176