

**CHAPTER III:**

**BHOWANI JUNCTION AS A HISTORICAL NOVEL**

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John Masters' Bhowani Junction presents Anglo-Indians' search for their identity against the historical background of India's struggle for Independence. The story of the novel takes place in 1946 when it has become almost clear and clear that the British will soon leave India and the Congress Government will take over the reign of India.

The texture of Bhowani Junction is woven into internal and external conflicts of the Anglo-Indians' characters named Patrick Taylor and Victoria Jones. There arises a crisis in the lives of Anglo-Indians when the departure of the British from India to England is in the offing. Some of the Anglo-Indians begin to make a search for their identity. They are troubled with the question: Who are they? The English or the Indians? Will they go along with Englishmen to England to which all the

time they refer as their "Home"? Or will they continue to live in India supposing this country of their birth as their real motherland and home? Now, it is a time to come out from the illusions and face the reality and get freedom from the question or problem.

The writer presents the story of the lovers against the historical background of Royal Indian Navy's Mutiny, which took place in 1946 as the part of India's Freedom Movement.

It seems that Bhowani Junction is a historical novel in a broader sense of the term. The novel does not give the whole account of the Royal Indian Navy's Mutiny of 1946 from its beginning to the end. ~~The novel~~ only gives its readers the news of the beginning and the end of Navy's Mutiny. Readers read that the British Government broke down the resistance of the mutineers by deploying the paratroopers who used motors, machine guns, shells and bombs to destroy the mutineers and their mutiny. The novel does not want to elaborate the story of Royal

Indian Navy's Mutiny. It wants to show the effects of this mutiny on the Indians, but not all over the country but only on those who live in and around Bhowani Junction. The writer shows the responses of patriotic Indians and the adverse reactions of the Anglo-Indians to Royal Indian Navy's Mutiny in this novel.

By the late thirties the British were more or less reconciled to the idea of leaving the country at some point. His idea was not a voluntary one; it had been painfully forced upon them through half a century of nationalist agitation, massive unrest, sporadic outbreaks of rebellion, and two World Wars, which exhausted the British will and ability to hold the colonies. The Second World War helped to hasten the process of independence. By June 1942 the Japanese had swept forward to the eastern front of India; they, along with the Germans were encouraging Indians to armed uprising against the British through sponsoring an Indian National Army called 'Azad Hind Fauj' under the leadership of Subhas Chandra Bose (1897-

1945); So communist and fascist threats were very real. Taking advantage of the situation, Gandhi led the Congress in a demand to the British to quit India, that was followed by a mass nonviolence, civil disobedience that paralyses the country. In 1940 the Muslim League had put forward the two nation theory and made a demand for Pakistan, a separate homeland for Muslims, which complicated the matters. And there were large-scale communal riots threatening to engulf the country in a civil war. The failing power of the British to enforce control was particularly emphasised by the 1946 mutiny of some units of the Indian Navy in Bombay and Karachi. The naval Mutiny lasted only five days, but it raised fears. The British were no longer masters of the situation, and were ready to leave as soon as a settlement acceptable to the people of India was found Bhowani Junction gives us a feel of this atmosphere of tension and uncertainty at the end of the Raj.

John Masters' Bhowani Junction deals with the life of the Anglo-Indians living in

Is this necessary at this stage?

Bhowani city during the last year of the British Rule over India. Through the Anglo-Indian lovers, the writer mainly presents the search of the Anglo-Indians for their self-identity and their real home. However, the writer presents the story of the lovers against the historical background of Royal Indian Navy's freedom movement. In this sense, the novel is historical.

It is worthwhile to see how much this novel is historical. The writer dedicates this novel to Number I Down Mail. In his dedication, he says,

"This book is wholly a work of fiction, and no reference is intended in it to any person living or dead, except that a few public figures are mentioned.

In spite of the fact that I have altered, by a few months, the date of the mutinies in the Royal Indian Navy, I hope this book is also a work of history—because I have tried to give the 'feel' of the times and a sense of historical perspective.

This book might have been dedicated to the Anglo-Indian communities of India and Pakistan. But so many thousands of Anglo-Indians, over so many years, have dedicated their lives to the service of the railway that I am happy to follow their example.<sup>1</sup>

The writer <sup>talks of an</sup> declares <sup>aspect of</sup> two paradoxical truths.

He says, 'this book is wholly imaginary' and

*Correct*

later says, "this book is also a work of history, because he has tried to give the feel of the times and a sense of historical perspective".

John Masters says that all the characters of this novel are imaginary. The story of the lovers is also imaginary. But he has created the historical atmosphere and background and a sense of historical perspective for the story of the lovers in the novel.

It is worthwhile to see how the patriotic Indians respond to this great historical event. The novel presents three Indian forces working against the British:

1. The Union of Railway workers of India
2. The local Congress Committee and its leader, Mr. Surabhai, and
3. The communist undergrounds.

A train is derailed at Pathoda Bridge and the government sends a battalion of 500 Gurkhas commanded by Colonel Rodney Savage. The novel starts with this event brought about mainly by the communist undergrounds. Mr. Kartar Singh, the leader of U.R.W.F. receives instructions from the top leaders of

U.R.W.I. that a strike be declared soon. The English and Anglo-Indian railway workers are spared from the standing duties where they have to separate running rooms but only Indian running rooms, which they do not use. They don't want to share the same running rooms with Indians. Even, Govindswami, the collector thinks the running rooms must be common for Indian workers, but the government is not favourable to the demands of the Indians and the strike is declared. The Anglo-Indians do not take part in this strike. Their union is different and comprises all the departments led by Mr. Meredith Sullivan. The Congress and the Communists support the railway workers' strike directly and indirectly also. But the government declares a state of emergency and high-handedly breaks down the strike of the workers. Mr. Kartar Singh is arrested, and the police and the soldiers freely use lathi charge, bayonet charge and threats to end the strike. The workers are forced to join their duties.

The second force working against the government is the local Congress Committee led by Mr. Surabhai, a true, honest and simple-minded Gandhian. Mr. Surabhai is a patriot always ready to sacrifice. When Royal Indian Navy's Mutiny starts and he learns that hundreds of Indian Navy soldiers are mercilessly massacred, he arranges a procession and takes it to the railway station. They have banners 'Long Live the Mutineers', 'A Blow for Freedom' and 'Quit India'. The crowd in the procession shouts these slogans. Mr. Surabhai stops a troop special train at the station with his men lying on the railway lines in front of the train. Collector Govindswami tells him that the train is carrying Madrassi soldiers for disbandment and the soldiers are almost choked up with the heat inside the train. Mr. Surabhai's eyes are filled with tears but he says the soldiers are the lackeys of the government. Later Colonel Savage tells the Gurkha soldiers to drink glasses of water each and urinates over the lying down satyagrahis. The Gurkhas urinate over the

satyagrahis and the railway train passes. The satyagrahis are high-handedly treated. Mr. Surabhai enters the office of the Colonel who is sitting there with the Collector and others. He is excited with anger and strikes the formula of his umbrella on the ground. He tries to complain against this treatment given to them by the soldiers who acted shamelessly.

The third force working against the British is the Communist underground. The novel begins with the derailment of a train at Pathoda. Soon we see a railway train carrying ammunition is looted at Malra. Mr. Surabhai thinks the Muslims of the town may have looted the ammunition to use it against the Hindus. He thinks the British may have purposely got the ammunition looted by the Muslims, as they want to raise up Hindu-Muslim riots. The collector and the Colonel think the communists who do not follow Gandhian way of satyagraha and non-violence may have looted the ammunition train. They use violence, sabotage, murders and blowing up of bridges and trains to achieve their

ends. They are as much interested in gaining freedom from the British Rule as from the Congress party. They suppose Mahatma Gandhi and Indian National Congress as the stooge of the British and the capitalists in India. Their leaders are K. P. Roy and the Sirdarni. He is an underground and carries on a guerrilla movement against the British as well as the Congress. The unseen presence of K. P. Roy is all the time felt whenever a violent act takes place in the novel. K. P. Roy and his men have already derailed a train at Pathoda and then looted another train at Malra for ammunition.

Hindu-Muslim riots start in Bhowani city. Surabhai thinks the British manipulate these riots. The British think the communists manipulate these riots. Mr. Surabhai wants to state a Hindu procession and a Muslim procession meeting each other in the center of the city to demonstrate Hindu-Muslim unity. The processions reach the center of the city and join each other. But in the crowd their flags drop and some people start a riot. The police and the soldiers quail the

riot, but Surabhai is wounded with a soda-water bottle and feels humiliated because of the failure of his program. He thinks the hired men of the British started the riots. He thinks it is the policy of the British to set a brother against a brother to divide them and rule over them. He only says a violent action against the British will be justifiable. But he is not a man to practice violence as he is a Gandhian.

The collector and the Colonel decide to search the whole city to recover the looted ammunition. The Sirdarni and Surabhai are questioned on this point. But they do not accept the charge. During the house search Mr. Surabhai protests the inhuman treatment given by the soldiers to the innocent Indians. But much of the looted ammunition is recovered from some places.

The Sirdarni is already put into jail for her violent and incendiary words at the time of Hindu-Muslim procession and the riot. She has been for a long time put into jail without a bail and so the communists plan to rescue her from the jail. Even Mr. Surabhai

is one of them. He does not want to harm anybody. In the evening, the Colonel and Victoria Jones are walking and the rescuers and Mr. Surabhai catch them and hold them to see that the Sirdarni is peacefully rescued. But soon the police van arrives and the rescues run here and there. The rescues and the police have a scuffle in which somebody strikes Mr. Surabhai with a stick and he dies ~~some~~ people think he is killed by Mehto, a member of Congress Committee of Bhowani to get the chairmanship of Bhowani Congress Committee. Later Ranjit Singh Kasel becomes the chairman of the local Congress Committee.

The Colonel and the Collector think K. P. Roy is still in hiding somewhere in Bhowani city. One day K. P. Roy takes away Victoria Jones to use her as a shield in getting into the train and against the firing of policemen. The Colonel's Gurkhas and the policemen try their best to pursue him. He gets into a coal train with Victoria as his shield while the army men and the police are chasing him. But he manages to escape leaving Victoria behind in the train.

In the last part of the novel, we see how K. P. Roy with his two companions dressed as veiled Muslim ladies plan to kill Mahatma Gandhi on the railway train. The men in disguise of veiled Muslim ladies drop a golden bangle by mistake at the railway station of Pipalkhera. The assistant station Master of Pipalkhera cautions Mr. Patrick Taylor, K. P. Roy, his men and the Sirdarni to purchase tickets for Chakra Nawda. Soon an expedition containing mainly the collector, Colonel Savage, Victoria Jones, Patrick Taylor and the police officer chase the train. The stationmaster of Chakra Nawda is informed the matter on telephone. He checks the train but the ladies with veils are not found on the train. That means they have got off at Mayani Tunnel where they want to blast the bridge with a bomb and wreck the train. The collector and the Colonel stop the train there and supposed three ladies now are found to be disguised as Gurkhas. The colonel tells Patrick Taylor to shoot K. P. Roy and the Gurkhas. Mahatma Gandhi's life is saved as the Sirdarni is arrested while K. P. Roy and

his men are killed. The movement carried on by the violent Communists ends at last and with it the novel also ends.

In this way, John Masters creates the historical atmosphere of 1946 when the mutiny took place. This political movement is used as a historical background against which the life of the Anglo-Indians is presented.

The main concern of John Masters in writing the novel Bhowani Junction seems to be the presentation of the life of Anglo-Indians towards the end of the British Rule in India when the winds of India's Independence were blowing in the Indian sub-continent. The novel presents the racial and cultural problems of the Anglo-Indians and their attitudes to Englishmen and Indians.

The Anglo-Indians depicted in Bhowani Junction are a small community living at the railway lines and the telegraph lines. These people live only in the big cities and have no roots in the rural India. They are largely employed in railway department and telegraph department of the British Government. Bhowani city is the representative locality of the

Anglo-Indians. Theirs is a narrow world not only geographically but culturally also. Their life is different from that of other Indians. Other Indians mostly form a unity amidst diversity. Anglo-Indians lead mostly an insular life and so they have insular ideas about themselves. Victoria's mother secretly goes to Indian women in her neighbourhood, as her father does not like mixing with Indians. They want to have a separate school only for Anglo-Indians.

The Anglo-Indians maintain their insularity for two reasons. Firstly, they are racially different from other Indians. They have descended from English men and Indian women. Outwardly they suppose themselves superior to other Indians thinking that they have running in their veins the blood of English rulers. Secondly, they are really conscious of their hybrid descent and inwardly feel a sense of racial inferiority, as they are neither English nor Indian. They try to hide this fact by maintaining a purposeful distance between themselves and other Indian to give the appearance that they

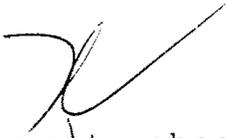
are superior to other Indians. Patrick Taylor, the chief male character of the novel, is also conscious of his hybrid descent, but he pretends to be superior to other Indians by being arrogant to them. He acts as if he is an Englishman, a member of the rulers' community and treats Indians as his subjects. When he sees Indian passengers crowd in his office he addresses them as 'black bastards', He hates Ranjit Singh Kasel because Ranjit is an Indian. He contemptuously calls Indians as wogs. He does not tolerate the idea of the British leaving India some day for Indians to rule over themselves. He does not like Victoria to speak or smile or even to look at Ranjit Singh Kasel and Kartar Singh. Patrick Taylor supported by others, requests Meredith Sullivan to continue to run St. Thomas's School for Anglo-Indian children and not to sell it to turn it into a day school open to all the Indian Children. Patrick does not like the idea of Victoria going alone to Kartar Singh and talking with Kartar Singh on the issue of the railway workers prospective

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strike. Even Victoria's father, Mr. Thomas Jones, a railway driver does not like the idea of Victoria marrying an Indian and wearing a sari. He thinks Indians are backward, ignorant and dirty. After Victoria has declared that she is going to marry Ranjit Singh Kasel, the Anglo-Indian community is angry with her and nobody dances with her at the club, and Patrick gets angry with her when she and Ranjit see a cinema sitting together. But both Patrick Taylor and Thomas Hones are inwardly conscious that they are neither English nor Indians. Englishmen look down upon them and label them as 'half-castes', 'chee-chees', 'Khaki', 'eight annas,' 'Eurasians<sup>2</sup> etc. They hide their inferiority under their pride in the English blood. Victoria Jones, the heroine of the novel, does not like calling themselves Indians and England as their "home". Patrick Taylor wears *topi* day and night to distinguish himself from Indians. He wants to hide his brown complexion, Anglo-Indian parents' dream of marrying their daughters into the Englishmen's society. But such a

marriage is very rare, because an Anglo-Indian wife is not treated respectably in England. Still fathers like Thomas Jones want their daughters to get familiar with English gentlemen, the Colonel starts sexual affair with Victoria But both of them know very well that they will not marry. English officers keep only sexual relation with Anglo-Indian girls as they think Anglo-Indian girls are cheap to have for this purpose.

The crisis in Victoria Jones is deeper. She represents more fully the conflict of identity, loyalty and self-respect within the Anglo-Indian community as a whole. To begin with, she shares the sub-conscious inferiority complex of her people that they are descended from the "Indian loose women of a hundred years ago". Her character depicts a dramatic movement towards the attainment of freedom and self-respect, although in the process she pays a heavy emotional price. Macaulay's murder releases her from the chains of her so-called English connection and her attempt to attain an identity leads her to almost marry Ranjit in a *gurdwara*. In



the next phase of her quest, she forms a sexual liaison with Savage with whom she recognizes common cultural factors. Her cyclical return to a consciousness of selfhood has a striking similarity with her initial state of mind when she had declared: 'you don't realize how fresh and few it is to be English or Indian. Why must we torture ourselves with ideas that we are better than some people and worse than others? Why don't we put on *dhotis* or *saris* if we want to, and marry Indians?'<sup>3</sup> Victoria thus emerges as a dignified character that subsumes the built in tragedy and the rootless ness of her people.

These Eurasians thought of the Indians as inferior, and despised them thoroughly, and in 1946 the Eurasians stood on the brink of a first-rate identity crisis. Even the cocky and boastful Patrick Taylor who talks of going 'home' to England and wears his solar hat all day and most of the night, has a remote sense of the coming events. "What are we going to do?" he asks Victoria in sheer frustration knowing that they could neither

become English nor Indian, Taylor's  
conclusion: 'We couldn't become English,  
because we were half-Indian. We couldn't  
become Indian, because we were half English.  
We could only stay where we were and be what  
we were.'<sup>4</sup>

John Masters throws a flood of light on  
the life of the Anglo-Indians in this novel.  
He shows their attitudes towards Indians and  
Englishmen through the representative Anglo-  
Indian characters of this novel. In this  
sense Bhowani Junction can be very well  
treated as an important Anglo-Indian novel in  
general and historical fiction in particular.

NOTES AND REFERENCES

1. John Masters, Bhowani Junction  
(London: Michel Joseph  
Publications, 1954), p.1
2. Ibid. , P.13
3. Ibid. , P.26
4. Ibid. , P.25