



NIGHTRUNNERS OF BENGAL: A DISCOURSE ON NARRATIVISING HISTORY AND ROMANTICISING IMPERIALISM

Sheeba V. Rajan, Assistant Professor,

Department of English St. Xavier's College for Women,

Aluva Ernakulam, Kerala, India

Abstract

This research article attempts to explore the full implication of John Masters' engagement with India and to show how he fictionalises the British-India encounter. The mutiny novel has been identified as one of the pieces of the mosaic in the construction of identity. This model of identity supports the national imperialist vocation, extolling British qualities and representing historical events in mythical, stereotypical and racist fashion. The historical romances provide an optimal literary realm to make a perfect blend of realism and fantasy. Masters' Nightrunners of Bengal, a mutiny novel, is an ample testimony to it and claims an important niche in the Anglo-Indian canon of imperial romance.

Keywords: Discourse, Imperialism, Mutiny, Revolt, Romance

Introduction:

The British colonial encounter with India has always been a great inspiration for many English and Indian authors. Particularly the rebellious events of 1857 have inspired a voluminous output of historical fiction. The Uprising has been called by English as the Great Mutiny or Sepoy Mutiny whereas the Indians call it as the First War of Independence or Liberation. Mutiny fiction can be considered as the most referential sources for the English at home to develop an image of India and also to form a British imperial identity. The immense output of imperial romances with the Uprising theme in the second half of the nineteenth and the first quarter of the twentieth centuries are indicators of imperialist literary trend.

In "The Indian Mutiny in Fiction", an article written in 1897 for Blackwood's Magazine, Hilda Gregg proclaims: "Of all the great events of this century, as they are reflected in

fiction, the Indian Mutiny has taken the firmest hold on the popular imagination” (quoted in Brantlinger 199). The Indian Mutiny of 1857-58 was one such event that became the subject of numerous works of fiction. One possible causal factor for this was the enormous quantity of available narratives on 1857. In more recent literary appraisals of the Mutiny, Patrick Brantlinger declares that “no episode in British imperial history raised public excitement to a higher pitch than the Indian Mutiny of 1857” (199). He stated that “at least fifty Mutiny novels were written before 1900, and at least thirty more before World War II” (199).

The Mutiny novel, like the Empire novel, endorsed and reinforced a sense of British national identity. Great Britain, a vast Empire, was a structure that spanned continents and held the destiny of millions in its hands. The fiction drew attention to the role of British in intervening the cultures of their subjects and changing or improving them. Thus British national identity was built around not only the imperial ideal but also around the cultural and moral task. The Mutiny unsettled English power and led to the transition from an economic colonisation to a politics of colonisation symbolised by the establishment of the Raj. Mutiny novels relied on a polarisation between Indians and English presenting the former as violent and cruel and the latter as brave and manly.

Romance is a perfect tool to mask domination and resistance in all forms of power relations, including imperialism. The power dynamic that the romantic internalizes is even greater in the imperial romance. In other words, there is a conscious or an unconscious connection between imperial discourse and romance where the latter becomes the narrative frame for representing the former’s ideology and vice versa. John McClure in his *Late Imperial Romance* points out a symbiotic relation between romance and imperialism.

According to McClure:

Romance requires a world at war—starkly divided, partially wild and mysterious, dramatically dangerous.... Without unordered spaces or spaces disordered by war, it is impossible to stage the wanderings and disorientations, the quests and conquests and conversions, the ordeals and sacrifices, and triumphs that are the stuff of romance. (2-3)

Helen Hughes states that in historical romances,

The past presented may be as imaginary as the forests of medieval romance, the detail selectively chosen and interpretation subjective, but an impression of an accurate representation of a past reality which led to the contemporary world of the reader through a sequence of cause and effect, is given by the use of period detail and reference to familiar historical issues. (1)

Romance can be defined as a narrative featuring adventures, heroic or stunning deeds and love stories with a happy ending which usually take place in a historical or imaginary setting. Northrop Frye, in his intense study of romance, associates it with wish fulfilment of the “libido or desiring self” (193). Moreover he claims that “in every age the ruling social or intellectual class tends to project its ideals in some forms of romance, in which the virtuous heroes and beautiful heroines represent the ideals and the villains, the threat to their ascendancy” (186). According to Gillian Beer, romance is a prominent literary form to express the utopian longings of the collective subconscious. She asserts that “romance gives repetitive form to the particular desires of a community and especially to those desires which cannot find controlled expression within a society” (13).

Nightrunners of Bengal

Combining the flare of a true story teller with an intuitive sense of history born of his deep knowledge and love of India, John Masters recreates the horror of the Great Revolt of 1857. Published in 1951, a prequel to *Bhowani Junction*, *Nightrunners of Bengal* remains as graphic, intense and gripping a tale as any modern novel of suspense. In *Nightrunners*, Masters benefits from all the literary advantages that both the romance as a genre and India as a country provide for his imperialist writing. *Nightrunners* is set at the eve of the Uprising in 1857 and its protagonist is Captain Rodney Savage, an English officer in the Bengal Native Infantry, working for the East India Company. Rodney is a professional soldier who has respect for the sepoys and the Indians in general. He believes in English superiority but nevertheless criticises the ignorant attitudes of the company and of his own countrymen towards the Indians. Experiencing problems in his marriage, he comes closer and even has a sexual relation with Sumitra, an Indian Rani who offers him a post in the army. The Rani later appears to be in a plot against the English which begins with the rebellion of the sepoys. Rodney’s wife is killed during the Uprising and he and his infant son manage to escape with the help of some Indians. While fleeing from the rebels and the Rani, they are cared for by

Caroline Langford, with whom he later falls in love. They undergo many dangerous adventures before they are able to inform a distant British army about the Uprising. The British forces are able to suppress the revolt and the Rani dies and Rodney and Caroline are united at the end of the novel.

The narrative of *Nightrunners* starts in an imaginary town called Bhowani. But it is stated that this place is located near Kishanpur, a real city in India. This setting is vital for the development of the plot because it is geographically very close to the two historically important states of Jhansi and Oudh. The novel provides a detailed description about the general condition of India and the policies of East India Company. In the novel, Masters declares that the story has been drawn from local traditions, official reports and contemporary letters. Moreover he states that the purpose of writing this work is to make the fictional whole as a true perspective of the fact. The author's claim comes from his effort to make his fiction as an authentic and reliable source.

The title *Nightrunners of Bengal* evokes the old Indian prophecy that the Indians, a hundred years after the Battle of Plassey, will rise against the English and give an end to their rule over India. The *Nightrunners* in the title are messengers who distributed chappatis, shortly before the outbreak of the rebellion. The presence of such exotic elements adds to the value of romance. Masters chooses a soldier as his hero who at times serves as his mouthpiece. The choice of a typical British officer of the 19th century colonial India as a central character coincides with the romance characters in general, who in their "psychology and destiny always represent social trends and historical forces" (Luckas 33). Such characters provide "a perfect instrument of presenting the totality of certain transitional stages of history" (35).

The Rani of Jhansi is a prominent historical figure during the uprising and appears as the Rani of Kishanpur in *Nightrunners*. She becomes a subject to orientalist stereotyping in many imperial romances. These fictions also portray her as a cruel person who is responsible for all the conspiracies against the English. Masters also tries to reveal his endeavour to tarnish her reputation as a national heroine.

She lay on the cushions and smelled of musk: she crouched in a darkened temple room, the revellers came, slipped money to the priests, and went into the room; they fumbled at the

femaleness of her. Twenty times between now and dawn-the hands, the seeking, the sweaty struggle; peasants hog-drunk and acrid from the plough, syphilitic officers of her army, strong coolies, fat merchants, sepoys. She lay there in the dark and wriggled. (150)

The love relations of Colonel Rodney Savage become a leitmotif which reveals the author's concealed attitude towards the subjects of the empire. Rodney has three relations with women-Joanna, his wife; Sumitra the Rani and Caroline. Joanna represents those English who sees India as a place which provides them with a status quo. Rodney is not happy in his marriage and only seems to endure because of his infant son. Joanna is an egocentric and indifferent person and her love towards her husband is also questionable. She encourages him to accept Sumitra's offer to command her army though she senses her affection towards him. Joanna is killed by the sepoys during the Uprising. Rodney suffers from a mental collapse when Joanna is killed. Because of the temporary insane hatred he feels towards all Indians, he becomes a psychopath who is motivated even to kill innocent Indians. Hence, only with the love of Caroline he is able to recover his true identity, reflecting the ideology of romance that love is capable of solving all problems.

As a typical feature of the romance, Caroline and Rodney at first dislike each other. But during the Uprising they escape together from the conspirators and come closer. The injured hero and the caring female is a strikingly frequent motif of the romance. Rodney typical of sacrificial romance hero regards the imperial relationship as a kind of love in which the English "give all they have" to the Indians and "don't keep accounts" (26).The Indians, on the other hand, are depicted as yearning for English rule.

It is like this, sahib. Here we do not care who rules us as long as he rules

well. We would like best to be left in peace, but that is not possible, because the world is full of tigers and we are poor starving goats. Someone must protect us and give us peace. The twins snorted in unison at the bannia's description of himself as a starving goat. The talkative one continued in his vile accent. Someone's got to do it, and we pray it'll be the English.(250-51)

Any distinction between friend and enemy is blurred when a holy man named the Silver Guru appears to be Rodney's own countryman. Loyalty and treachery become more indistinguishable and it is implied that no one should be trusted in imperial affairs. However

the guru turns out to be of Irish origin and this device of disguise is conventional of romance and is intended for narrative suspense. *Nightrunners* intensifies the stance for imperialism by stating that the good are those who favour the British rule and the evil ones are those who against it.

Conclusion

John Masters is a sui generis phenomenon in the history of the novelists of the Raj. The novelists loyal to the empire fictionalised the mutiny as a life and death struggle between British civilization and Indian barbarism. The novels on the rebellion had a strong penchant for romance and sensationalism. *Nightrunners of Bengal* combines Masters' mastery of storytelling with an intuitive sense of history. It deals with the romantic and heroic episodes of the Empire rather than the shortcomings and excesses of the imperial period. The romance not only voices ideologies but also expresses the individual needs of the writer. As a result, imperial/historical romances display the writers' own truth and function as literary expressions of their dissatisfaction and hopes of their time. In nutshell, The Indian Uprising was crucial in changing the relationship between Britain and its most important colony, but its abruptness and violence become food for thought to the historical romances.

References

- Beer, Gillian. (1979). *The Romance: The Critical Idiom*. London: Methuen.
- Brantlinger, Patrick. (1988). *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism 1830-1914*. New York: Cornell University Press.
- Frye, Northrop. (1990). *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. 1957. London and New York: Penguin.
- Gregg, Hilda. (1897). *The Indian Mutiny in Fiction*. *Blackwood's Magazine*. Page 218 to 232.
- Hughes, Helen. (1993). *The Historical Romance*. London and New York: Routledge.
- Lukacs, Georg. (1962). *The Historical Novel*. 1962. Hannah Mitchell and Stanley Mitchell Trans. Harmondsworth: Penguin.

Masters, John. (1951). *Nightrunners of Bengal*. United Kingdom: Michael Joseph.

McClure, John A. (1994). *Late Imperial Romance*. New York: Verso.

Onega, Susana.Ed. (1995).*Telling Histories-Narrativising Histories, Historicizing Literature*.
Netherlands: Atlanta.

