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POST-COLONIALITY: A DOMINANT THEME IN MASTERS' *TO THE CORAL STRAND*

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Abstract: Postcolonial literature addresses the issues of political and cultural independence of the ex-colonized countries. It is a discourse that seriously takes into account the emerging identity of postcolonial people in terms of their native values, indigenous use of language and retheorizing of literature and culture. Postcolonial theory explores how colonial ideology, strategies of representation, and racial prejudices are coded into the literary texts. Postcolonialism seeks to understand how oppression, resistance, and adaptation occurred during colonial rule. Postcolonialism is concerned with the political and cultural independence of people formerly subjugated in colonial Raj. As the novel *To the Coral Strand* was published in 1962 and dealt with ex-officer who refused to go gracefully after Indian Independence, it is peculiar product of post-coloniality by Masters. Masters himself was born in India and served in India for a long time. His feelings and attitude to this country are expressed by the characters like Rodney, the hero and Mrs Margaret Wood, a missionary widow. Rodney was, like Masters himself, eye witness of both colonial and postcolonial period in India as he told Margaret that he had been in India for seventeen years. Similarly, we have Indian characters like Janaki, Mr Ranjit Singh and L P Roy in this novel who objectively commented on the coloniality and its effects on their culture and tradition.

Keywords: colonialism, postcoloniality, oppression, racial prejudice.

INTRODUCTION

Postcolonial literature addresses the issues of political and cultural independence of the ex-colonized countries. It is a discourse that seriously takes into account the emerging identity of postcolonial people in terms of their native values, indigenous use of language and retheorizing of literature and culture. Postcolonial theory explores how colonial ideology, strategies of representation, and racial prejudices are coded into the literary texts. In postcolonial studies, colonialism – exploitation of backward or weak peoples by a large power – has a clear pejorative meaning with oppression, inequality, racism and exploitation. Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin defined 'postcolonial literature' as:

We use the term 'post-colonial' ... to cover all the cultures affected by the imperial process from the moment of colonization to the present day. This is because there is a continuity of preoccupations throughout the historical process initiated by European imperial aggression. We also suggest that it is most appropriate as the term for the new cross-cultural criticism which has emerged in recent years and for the discourse through which this is constituted (qtd. in Nayar: 12, 1989:2).

Postcolonialism seeks to understand how oppression, resistance, and adaptation occurred during colonial rule. Postcolonialism is concerned with the political and cultural independence of people formerly subjugated in colonial Raj. Many practitioners of postcolonialism take Edward Said's path-breaking book *Orientalism* (1978) as the basis for their theory. Postcolonial literature deals with the issues of decolonization i.e. once colonized have finally achieved independence. Protagonists of postcolonial writings are always struggling with the questions of identity and in between old culture and new culture—colonial abandonment and alienation. Homi Bhabha, a postcolonial theoretician, used the term 'hybridity' to describe the situation of both cultures—native and non-native cultures.

As the novel *To the Coral Strand* was published in 1962 (in postcolonial period) and dealt with ex-officer who

refused to go gracefully after Indian Independence, it is peculiar product of postcoloniality by Masters. Masters himself was born in India and served in India for a long time. His feelings and attitude to this country are expressed by the characters like Rodney, the hero and Mrs Margaret Wood, a missionary widow. Rodney was, like Masters himself, eye witness of both colonial and postcolonial period in India as he told Margaret that he had been in India for seventeen years. Similarly, we have Indian characters like Janaki, Mr Ranjit Singh and L P Roy in this novel who objectively commented on the coloniality and its effects on their culture and tradition.

We came across how Rodney felt torn between to leave and to live in India. Masters portrayed the frustrated condition of Rodney. For Rodney, the accession of princely states to free India was wrong because it would destroy old cultures by modernizing them. He spoke to the dhoti wearer Indian:

'Indians, you are in new independent. ... You are taking over this country as a gift from me. ... It is mine. I made it, from a hundred countries. I and my great-great-grandfather, and my great-grandfather, and so on. ... You don't believe in India, because you're too, too small to understand India. Only understand your own dungheap. ... Time to go. *But I'm not going. Never.*' (16-17)

Rodney knew very well that his hero days were over still he suggested a plan how to deal with the Gonds. But Mr Ranjit Singh, ICS, the DC, didn't like because he was now in power. He said gently:

I appreciate your offer, Savage—but I'm afraid I can't permit that. After all, I'm trying to make the Gonds realize that there's a new government of India—and that they're a part of it. (22)

Rodney, the ex-officer of 13th Gurkha Battalion, was confident about his relations with the Gonds. Though he had no position, he did know those people and had guarantee there wouldn't be any trouble. Rodney also told the DC that he knew Bhilghat pretty well. He was there before war and once or twice in 1946 as well as he had got a sort of family connection with the Gonds. It seems that Rodney had good relations with the natives in colonial as well as postcolonial India.

Masters observation of the Gonds seems to be keen and sharp. He describes their habited, diet and drink and addition to their means of entertainment. He finds probably half a dozen small darkmen and bows and arrows trained on them. They do not eat rice or warms but a fine fish with curried vegetables and chapattis. They don't eat beef because they have no cattle but only a few goats. They drink Mahua arrack which is fiery and is kept in a barrel. They ask the guests to come to the village and they will eat and drink. (28) Here Mahle (1985:16) comments:

To highlight the poverty of the Gonds Masters makes Rodney Savage, the hero of *The Coral Strand*, faint at the sight of an eight year old Gond girl starving to death and lying unconscious in front of the old temples. Savage swears, "I'd eat the same as the poorest people—really know what it was like to starve—but life isn't all sense, thank God" (71).

According to Mahle, Masters' protagonists are Englishmen and are drinkers, womanizers, adventurers and pleasure seekers. This is true about Rodney in this novel but not about Rodney from *Nightrunners of Bengal*. The words of Rodney Savage of this novel are reminiscent of any British officer of the British regime:

Poor girls ... She smelled very different, and she was beautiful where these are ugly ... her hair flowing like dark river so that all I could see was hair and all I could feel was flesh, and all I could smell was ... India. (33-34)

Though the situation was changed, the Gonds were under impression that Rodney was their ruler. The DC had to tell the Gonds that they came as the representatives of the Government of India and not as the colonized. It was Major-General Ran Singh Dadhwal who thought they came under the protection of an Englishman in their own country. On the contrary, Rodney had still responsibility and he was getting many of the advantages of the Raj—to roam in all India. He had the same routine like last night and he was not born to be a bystander not in India. Here Masters speaks of Colonel Rodney Savage's attempts to stay on. In this connection H S Mahle (1985:7) points out the importance of Rodney:

Danger, hardship and poverty mean little to him as long as he can stay in India. He is an adventurer. He has been a benefactor of the Gonds and a very active participant in the activities of the states disinclined to merge with the Indian Union after independence. He is ever in action.

L P Roy, MLA, is a rebel and all his hatred is against the British and always contrives to overthrow the British Government. Lok Chand, a village head, is the counterpart of Roy. His views are very clear in his thoughts. He spoke to Rodney:

'Do you expect Indians to hurry out of your way, still? There is Independence here now, you know' (57) Like Roy, Ranjit Singh, the DC, had harsh reaction towards the British Raj. He said,

When the British left this country they left it divided up into two sovereign nations—India and Pakistan—and several hundred princely states, varying in size from a few acres to thousands of square miles. Nearly all those states have since acceded to one nation or the other. (69)

Ranjit Singh felt happy but as a formality he himself handed over a long envelope containing a letter signed by the Governor of the province—Sir Chandragupta Chenur to Rodney regarding his termination.

Francis Clayton was in love with Rodney and wanted to marry him. She didn't like native women and particularly loved by Rodney. Rodney, mixed with natives wholly, told her if they married he should stay physically faithful to her but it must be in India. He cannot live without the atmosphere wherein they exist—that air, that dust, those smells, those skies. ... As Rodney had no position, he had an idea to be a white hunter starting a shikar camp for rich foreigners.

Margaret Wood was also afraid of India and got bored and frustrated because she was lonely in a post colonial India. She expressed her views. 'I am not a missionary, I have no real faith, I was terrified my husband would find out—'

(117) Rodney had the same experience: 'Something's pushing us out of India—rejecting us' (118). It seems that not only the natives have been affected by colonialism and postcolonialism but non-natives are the victims also. Masters comments: 'There was no place for the English sahib, then' (122)

Postcoloniality can be seen through the need of non-natives in India. Though the natives were happy in free India, they were in need of help from the British. For example, there was the need of Rodney's help to maintain Chambal's independence from both India and Pakistan and Rodney knew a good deal about Chambali Industries Ltd. Rodney 'had no one job but was involved in everything' (136) Masters narrated that the time had come to use Rodney in the political maneuverings designed to bring Kishanpur and smaller uncommitted states into some sort of alliance with Chambal (141)

As mentioned earlier protagonists of postcolonial writings are always struggling for their identity, Masters' Rodney is also from the same category. In independent India, Rodney got married Sumitra and appreciated the depth of her involvement with her native soil and his also. But suddenly he realized the reality: 'We'd got to win our fight for Chambal's independence; otherwise we would both be exile for ever' (170). He also shocked with Chadi's remark who betrayed him: Sahib, you are on India soil' (170) The natives knew that the day of the pukka sahib was over and the whole of his guerrilla organization among the Gonds wrecked. Rodney was part and parcel of the British military system so he had chance to mix with the natives at various places and could take view of India freely from the natives. Thus, Masters has been able to present this fluid and unstable nature of Rodney's personality which is a characteristic of the art of a postcolonial writer. N S Pradhan (1989:99) in his essay "John Masters' India" has appropriately summarized the condition of Rodney:

The same Rodney finds himself as an unemployed adventurer in *To the Coral Strand* as his personality is shattered by his refusal to accept the reality that after independence, power has gone from the English hands to those of the Indians. Rodney is the most tortured and mixed up of Masters' heroes. His feeling of emptiness and loss is heightened by his sharp awareness of the historical and traditional position his people have held in this country. He now feels like an anachronism, a leftover, having been "thrown on a rubbish heap". In his violent and naïve efforts to stem the march of history, Rodney symbolizes the agony of the Raj in its death-throes.

Most of the natives were habituated with non-native customs in colonial period and still continued afterwards also. L P Roy discussed about Chambalpur with General Max and the general offered Roy a drink. Roy reminded him the changed situation in India: 'I recall advising you that the alcohol habit was un-Indian and a relic of British imperialism' (218) though he was famous for two things: his fanatical hatred of the British and his short temper (219)

Such writing seems to work both to make and preserve the English sahib as India's hero. It also indicates that English political and moral legacy is continued in the new India. In this regard Peter Morey (2000:102) writes:

It sees the British in India as a defining presence without which India the Nation would not exist. It is Masters' avowed belief that the British created modern India out of a collection of disparate and hostile states and gave them unity and stability. In *Road Past Mandalay* he comments on the Indian troops passing into recaptured Mandalay: Twenty races, a dozen religions, a score of languages passed in those trucks and tanks. When my great-great-grandfather first went to India there had been as many nations; now there was one-India; and he and I and a few thousand others, over two and a half centuries, sometimes with intent, sometimes unwittingly, sometimes in miraculous sympathy, sometimes in brutal folly, had made it. (*Road Past Mandalay* p.312)

To sum up, in the words of Dr Madhavi Nikam (a modern critic) 'the same colonial psych is still continued in modern man from India'. Thus, continuation of colonial psyche is one of the major aspects of post-colonialism which is mainly focused in this novel.

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