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## COLONIAL STEROTYPES AND MASTERS RAVI LANCERS

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### ABSTRACT

**J**ohn Masters is a British novelist, born in colonial India, has written twenty three novels and sung the saga of Anglo Indian life. In all these novels, he portrayed the British as superior racially and culturally compared to the natives. The British characters occupy the center position,



while the Indians exist at the margins and too as negative stereotypes.

**KEYWORDS** : Colonial Steriotypes , British novelist , colonial India.

### INTRODUCTION

The Ravi Lancers (1972) is set against the background of the

First World War. The Indian soldiers helped their British masters to face the challenge in Europe. There was a mixed response from the Indian nationalists as to whether the Indians should assist their colonial masters at all. Some resisted it tooth and nail. Their opinion was that it was the best opportunity to teach their masters a fitting lesson by humiliating them in the international arena. But there were moderates, including Gandhi, who towed a softer line and said that it was not the time. The moderates felt that by helping the British in a Critical moment they (Indians) would create an environment in such a way that the British would be, at least on the moral grounds, obliged to free India from the shackles. Ultimately, the Indian cavalry did participate in the war.

Masters devotes this novel to put forth the arguments from both the sides. The British were slowly beginning to realize the inevitable fact that the ground beneath their feet was collapsing. The hard-line approached mixed with adamant attitude would work no longer in containing the developments. The Ravi Lancers were actually a part of cavalry maintained by an independent kingdom in the northern part of India at the foot hills of the Himalayas. The king was not at all under the mercy of the British to oblige them by sending his own army especially in the dire threat of facing death and

destruction at the hands of enemies in a totally hostile and strange environment. But the young Yuvaraj, the heir to the throne, takes the side of the British and takes his men to the battle ground in Europe.

The Ravi Lancers is probably the most powerful work by John Masters trying to argue out the things in favour of and against colonialism. The characters display the real experience of the time when hundreds and thousands of colonial masters felt the pangs of losing their colony. India was fading at last. The sun was setting on an empire where they had thought he would never set. Warren depicts these sentiments of a forlorn world. The attitude of love and hate is very clearly seen in the description of landscape as well as in the characterization in the novel. For example the beauty of the landscape of India and the significance of an ayah and the cook called Khitmatgar are described in the following lines:

They drove back from the picnic lunch in the great Mogul gardens after three o'clock, the children dozing fitfully between ayah and Diana on one seat, himself and Joan opposite, the Khitmatgar in full livery smart on the box beside the syce, the fox terrier, Shikari, sitting proudly between them. Shalimar was very beautiful, Warren thought,. All the works of the Moguls had a great strength and calm, at least the early ones. The TajMahal felt flashy and somehow foreign after one had really absorbed FatehpurSikri and the Red Fort. He had tried to point out to Diana some of the special graces of Shalimar. She listened, because he was her brother – he could tell that she was not really interested; but the crowds of Indians in the gardens had held her attention. After six months she could barely tell a Sikh from a Muslim, but that didn't matter for it was always the children that absorbed her – they, and the marks of poverty and disease, which were prominent enough even in this rich capital of rich province.

The Englishmen, who had come down to India in the earliest days, watched the luxurious life style of the Kings. Later, they themselves wanted to enjoy a similar kind of luxurious life. Every household would have hundreds of servants, sprawling bungalows, a dozen dogs that enjoyed a better privilege than most of the Indian servants. In fact, there was a sort of unproclaimed war of rivalry – between the kings 'who had lost their crowns' but still somehow ruled their kingdoms with the help of the British – and the Indian kings enjoyed their life without any labour. For them, it was a divine gift.

But, for the British rulers it was hard-won and they thought they deserved it and that is why justified. Of late, among the young Indian princes, at least a few of them tried to imitate the English in working hard to attain positions. The colonizer's mind had the satisfaction that the Indians were learning a bit of responsibility. To that extent, the stay of the British was justified.

The men offering him more whisky were not soldiers dedicated to their regiment, but personal servants dedicated to protect the Yuvraj's life with their own. Krishna Ram did not command by experience or rank, but by divine right, and all this gave the gathering in the dusk at the river's bank a mysteriously feudal atmosphere. But he was glad to note that he (Warren) misjudged the young man, in at least one respect. It wasn't idleness but his responsibilities as heir apparent that had prevented him riding down to Ratanwala Camp with his regiment.

But the hard truth is that they cannot change all the attitudes of the natives in a day or two. It might require a long time, because some of the Characters have come down by heredity. To wipe off these characters it is not only difficult but also a time consuming process. Krishna Ram knows the maladies coming in the way of his country's progress. He tells Warren;

"Of course, sir. There is much that I would be sad to see the end of ... even panchayats... but nothing will really change or improve until our ways of thinking are changed. Better education, for instance. Better health and more real medical case, not old superstitions. Better care of women and babies. Sanitation, hygiene ..."

A few of the dysfunctional qualities of the natives that are hated by the English rulers are that the natives do not have patience at all. "That's the trouble with these people." Warren's neighbor muttered, "no perseverance." Another thing is that they lie unashamedly Warren Bateman accuses even the Yuvaraja of Ravi, Krishna Ram, of lying to protect the honour of his Indian soldiers caught in smoking bhang, visiting the harlots, making money by violating the set norms of the regiment etc..

Warren Bateman said, "You have betrayed the trust I put in you, which is not important. You have forced half a dozen men to lie for you ... the doctor, your orderly, all the officers of the regiment, except one. But I see that lying is nothing to an Indian, especially an Indian Prince.

Incompetence, inefficiency and lack of discipline are another side of the Indian society which are disliked by the English. In one of the exercises of mock practice, a lancer called Mangla Ram dies drowning in water. Warren tries to reason it out that the soldier had died because of the lack of the discipline. He remarks that the Indians would ignore such serious lapses as if they did not matter much. On the other hand, the English system is so particular that they would have spent months and years in conducting an inquiry on what caused the death of the soldier. The fear of inquiry itself would have chastised the responsible people. Indians do not bother about these things at all. Value of life is so insignificant here.

And Sogar Mangla Ram could probably have been saved with better discipline and supervision in the ranks.

"You're lucky," Warren said. "If Mangla Ram had been one of ours we'd be holding courts of inquiry from now till the rains to establish whether he died as a result of military service or not, and who should pay for the lost and damaged equipment..."

The Yuvaraja is made to believe that the English were right. They have a system of set rules and regulations whereas in India it never existed. The Yuvaraja argues with himself and convinces himself that he sometimes behaved cruelly and sometimes very kindly. Wasn't it arbitrary unlike in England? Sometimes he was cruel and sometimes he was kind. It was impossible to tell what he was going to do because he didn't act according to a definite set of rules, like the English did.

Krishna Ram, the Yuvaraja seems to express the thoughts of an Indian with the Western influence. He is young, but was educated by an English tutor in his childhood.

Though he is grown up now and despite the fact that he is the heir, the typically Indian characters like shyness, inferiority complex are still found in him. His description goes like this:

The prince was the same height as Warren, about 5' 10," but slimmer, his skin the color of wheat, his hair shining black and wavy, his eyes dark brown and deep set under strong straight eyebrows. He was bowing awkwardly to Diana, obviously a little ill at ease with her. He wouldn't have much knowledge or experience of European society, living up in that remote pleasant little kingdom nestled in the foothills of the Himalayas.

His upbringing makes him look at India from the Western angle too. He has the dual advantage of placing the viewpoints, juxtaposing them and taking a balanced decision. Masters tries to depict his view of a reforming Indian through Krishna Ram. The Indian superstition of playing down the importance of a girl child in the family is described in the following lines. The practice resembles the ancient Spartan ways of treating the male child to assure that only the healthiest survived:

Krishna nodded. Among the Paharis girl children were put out naked on the ground for the first twenty-four hours of their life. Most died, leaving the few who survived to be the brides of the men. A girl born at this season, August, was more likely to live than one born in December, when a foot of snow covered the high pastures. More barbarism ... indeed the British treated it as murder, when it was practiced in British Indian territory, such as Bashahr.



The worshipping of Lord Shiva, in the form of Lingam – a shape that resembled the human phallus – that stood for the power of regeneration. Anglo-Indian authors repeatedly pondered over the national significance of the worship. It was an intriguing riddle of the European and it could not be resolved convincingly. Warren Bateman could not guess of whereas his wife Joan could:

She found nothing shocking in the sexuality displayed in the temples. “Shocking” wasn’t the right word for his own thoughts about it, but he didn’t know what was. “Degrading”, perhaps- for surely it was degrading to equate God with the animal functions of procreation. There must be more to it than that, of course. With luck, he might learn a lot from the Ravi Lancers- at least as much as they were going to learn from him.

The English were not very keen to have the Indian participate in the war fought on the European plains. They have their own fears; the foremost being the possible exposure of their weaknesses. The exposure could be Achilles’ heel later through which the Indians could outsmart them. Secondly, the experience of participating in a hi-tech war could give the Indian soldiers a confidence that might prove detrimental to the Imperial interests. In spite of these possible apprehensions, the Indian participation in the First World War becomes inevitable. But, they have to move very cautiously. The instructions to the officers from their higher-ups were very clear and subtle at the same time: to handle the Indian regiments carefully.

The colonel said, “I agree. But frankly. I think we’re laying up trouble for ourselves in sending any Indian troops to France at all. It’s a white man’s war, and they’ll learn to kill white men. The sepoys and sowars are going to meet white women very different from memsahibs. They’re going to see things it would be just as well for all concerned that they should never see. Even the most loyal of them are going to return here questioning, wondering....Well, all that’s in the future. For now I’ll just give some advice. If you don’t want these Ravi fellows to run away the moment a German says boo to them ... or land you with the regimental funds embezzled ... or lie around smoking bhang when ought to be inspecting stables ... or bribe the defenders for small favors ... you are going to have to drive them, take no excuses, show no mercy, right from the beginning. These people are not our Indians, but the Indians are they were before we came, the Indians, we walked all over at Plassey and Laswarrie ... individually brave, often enough, but idle, corrupt, self-seeking, vicious when your back’s turned.

Warren receives his officer’s advice that he should be careful. The Indians need to be handled in a special way. His Colonel tells him:

“If I may venture a word of advice, Bateman, I would go slowly, go cautiously. React rather than act. We civilians have to deal with the Indian more as he is, less than with what we can make him, than you do in the army. We have learned that methods, which will work with Englishmen, won’t necessarily work with Indians. It’s what outsiders could call deviousness, but often it isn’t devious, it is just ... Indian. They have their own ways of thought, you know.

Warren tries to instill discipline, honesty and confidence in the soldiers. There were men who used to smoke bhang and behave madly. Warren had the guts to walk straight to such soldiers and face them. On one of such occasions, a soldier was behaving like an elephant amuck. He was about to shoot his own men under the influence of bhang. When other soldiers warn Warren not to go near him, Warren walks straight without any fear of being shot. He asks him:

“Why were you shooting?” Warren demanded.

“Sahib ... I don’t know ... I thought ... I saw the enemy ...”

“Bhang”, Krishna said disgustedly, naming the popular North Indian type of hashish, “I can smell it on his breath.”

Warren feels that it is miserable on the part of the officer who has no self-confidence, unable to act on his own and take a decision. Such an officer does not deem fit to lead his squadron – indirectly suggesting that Indians are incapable of governing themselves. This is the attitude which suggests that a ‘weakling’ – or the ‘colonises’ as Albert Memmi would put it – needs to be protected.

The nationalist feelings wake up in Krishna once he comes to know that the attitude displayed by the Englishmen in the war was based on the duality of values. Krishna resists Warren’s hypocritical attitude towards him once he comes to know that Krishna had fallen in love with his sister Diana. The true colours of an colonial mind come out. Warren calls Krishna and tells him:

“You will not marry my sister,” Warren Bateman said forcefully. “These things that you have done proved finally what Rudyard Kipling said, East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet. Your ideas of decency and honor are not the same as hers, and I am not going to see her life ruined by a ... you. Nor have her bear children like Flaherty here.” He looked at Flaherty. “Are you happy with what you are?’

The burly Anglo-Indian looked startled, then his mouth quivered and he said, “No, sir ... I hate it, sir! I often pray God to make me English or Indian, or the other.”

Krishna feels sorry for the predicament Warren was suffering from. He thinks that Warren loved India and Indians without understanding either of them’. He questions the double-dealing attitude of Warren and threatens to withdraw his men from the war and return back to India. Many of his own soldiers had already suggested it to him to return back as it was of no use fighting a useless war. The Christians, they said, preached something and practiced something else. Warren loses hearted to learn that no one supported his stand – a stand to preserve the purity of his race, the stand to preserve the imperialistic stature of his country. He goes and meets his maternal uncle, Rodney Savage, the retired hero of the Mutiny, and complains of the loss of ‘values’ everywhere. The decadence was making its way in a world that was full of honour and values once.

Thus we see that a good deal of debate taking place in this novel speaking for and against the colonialist forces. Masters has successfully analysed the subject from both the coloniser’s point as well as from the colonizer’s point of view. A lot of introspection and self-study has gone into the plot of the novel. The first hand experience of Masters who saw the colonialist trends inside India, and his advantage of looking at the English view from an American point of view, has given him much insight into the subject. But there are some usual pitfalls too. The treatment of sex by Masters, especially in this novel, goes a little too close to the novel of pornography. It seems unnecessary and unwarranted. If one has to consider the sensuous exploitation as one of the elements of imperialistic exploitation, may be Masters has a justification. But, at the outset the matter appears as an inevitable personal obsession for Masters.

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