CHAPTER III

AGGRANDIZEMENT

We are such stuff as dreams are made on

W. Shakespeare,
The Tempest, (IV, i)

COROMANDEL

THE DECEIVERS

NIGHT RUNNERS OF BENGAL
This chapter proposes to discuss the imperialistic attitudes in the first three novels of Masters. The novels are taken up for study on the basis of their historical order instead of the year of their publication. These novels, namely, *Coromandel* (1955), *The Deceivers* (1952) and *Night Runners of Bengal* (1951), cover the period of the British entry into India and the consolidation of their rule up to the Great Mutiny of 1857. These novels are set in the first phase of the Englishmen entering India. The phase covers establishing of the colonies, beginning of trade relationship and gradually taking up the administration in their own hands. The earliest sense of awe mixed with adventurous nature, gradually transforms from business interests to imperialistic dreams. The dreams crystallise and manifest themselves through actions - seen as the dreams to explore, conquer, trade, and to get richer.

The first of these three novels is *Coromandel*116 (First published by MJ in 1955). The novel is set in the early 17th century (1627 AD to be precise). The protagonist, Jason Savage, is a rustic young boy from Wiltshire, who feels that "there was so much to know, and he knew nothing except to be a farmer’s son of Shrewford Pen nel in the county of Wiltshire." (7) We have all the spice of adventure stories of the Jason of Greek mythology in this novel.

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A young boy of 19, Jason Savage is full of dreams to reach *Coromandel* - the land of Pearls. An occasional discussion with an old merchant called Voy, equips him with a piece of magical map of 'the land of Pearls'. The map sets off his dream world. He wants to reach the land somehow. No one guides him properly. His limitation is that he is illiterate and a poor village boy. But still, he has the strengths of his own. Dreaming of great things that seemed impossible to others seems possible for him. The zeal of King Arthur can be seen in him. Besides, he is a great dancer who can exhibit his talent and excel the local dancers even in the city of London. Always restless to achieve something in his life, Jason lands himself in trouble when he had to accidentally kill Hugo in his village. He had to leave his place abruptly and without any forethought, in order to escape punishment. The map sold by an old merchant, called Voy, prompts him to head towards *Coromandel* - the land of Pearls. He heads towards London from where he plans to go to *Coromandel*. Jason is a good dancer in his hometown. And later it is this talent of dancing that helps him earn his bread in London for some time before embarking a ship sailing towards India. His curiosity to know new things, to learn about them and to master them equips him to reach his goal easily. The author seems to have chosen the name of Jason with a specific purpose. This Jason has a similar kind of dream to achieve something
extraordinary in his life like the Jason of the Greek mythology. He nurtured that dream from the beginning itself:

This time he'd seen the Golden Fleece. It was hung on a barn door in a steep valley. He could have described it to her, every golden curl of the wool, but the fleece wasn't so important as the waves of effort that had carried him to the valley, past many discoveries; and he couldn't tell her about those because he didn't know the words. (12)

Jason learns from old Voy about a place called Aleppo, which lies in the East on the edge of the desert. Voy assures him that one can get richer through trading in this place. Voy narrates to him how rich the land is with gold and pearls lying all around. From that moment onwards Coromandel becomes Jason's dream destination. He tells his sister Molly, "I'm going to Coromandel to find the treasure. I'll come back here and buy a bigger place than that of the Pennels. I'll give you diamonds and cedar wood, Molly, and ten thousand pieces of eight. He felt the ecstasy of giving her those things, and in the dark corners the floor creaked under the weight of the golden coins." (29)

The killing of Hugo, was only accidental. It had only hastened the accomplishment of his dream to find Coromandel and ultimately to find out Meru Mountain in the north. "But this that he had run away from was Coromandel. This was the substance of his dreams to travel with men he did
not know and share their wonders and their awes." (4) He would get there somehow. After a short stopover in London Jason lands in India in 1628 at a place called Manairuppu which is one of the four small cluster kingdoms that made a Coromandel. The remaining three were Tiruvadi, Ponpalamai and Krishnapatti. During his stay in London he had learned to read a bit of English and how to understand pictures. From here onwards we begin to get the picture of India - the picture seen through the Imperialistic eye of a Westerner; the sights and their details that are likely to develop interest in the White men.

The author seems to be very enthusiastic and he is in a great hurry to introduce everything about India to his readers in all its hues. We have all the ingredients that formed the Western concept of this strange land. We find animals like elephants and cows roaming about the temples. There are Tamil speaking half-clad brown and dark skinned men of the South - some of them have already been converted to Christianity by the Portuguese. But still the ancient Hindu tradition has not completely died out in them. There is Parvati, a Devadassi, who is ready to serve the State guests on the orders from the King or the priest of the temple. She can sing, dance, cook, and read. Jason wants to marry her and rescue her from ignominy. Kings, palanquins, palaces, luxury are all there. On the other side, we see hunger,
poverty, and dust, muddy water, and hot and sultry weather that makes man sick.

In his over-enthusiasm, the author also finds 'orange trees' (page 104, 106, 110) on the Southern coast of India that could appear to be a strange discovery to the Indian reader. M.K. Naik argues that the information of many Anglo-Indian writers about the flora and fauna of India was sometimes abysmally poor. He quotes the example of Lady Morgan describing the mango trees and bananas in the Kashmir valley in her novel *The Missionary*.117

The Prospero complex is clearly visible in the description of the land and its people. The people are half-naked and use logs to function as the boat, hinting that these people did not know how to build boats.

Half a hundred logs lay along the bank above the high tide mark, and Jason thought they had been dragged up there for firewood until he saw two naked Indians come out of a house, drag together three of the logs, whip cords around them fore and aft, haul the 'boat' to the river, and paddle out to sea in it. (102)

The details of the people's behaviour - aping like monkeys, strange looking animals, unhygienic social conditions in the town can be seen in the following paragraph:

They crossed the wasteland and entered the city. The people gathered together and ran along behind them in scores, shouting cheerfully to one another and trying to finger the English clothes. Sometimes one of the men in pink coats, who was acting as a guide, would shout commandingly, and for a moment the people fall back, only to engulf the party again a minute later. Dust rose thick in the Narrow Street, and flies buzzed about Jason's head as he walked, and the sudden blare of unseen horns deafened him. He saw a cow eating from a shopkeeper's stall: and then a troop of brown monkeys jabbering on a house-top caught his eye; and then, above and behind, he saw a fat man in a yellow hat ...(103)

Jason is so exulted that this was really a dreamland. He exclaims:

"What a place! Anything could be true here! He began to laugh aloud and shout back his few words of Tamil to the people hurrying and jabbering beside him. 'Food! he shouted, and , Pearls! Which way? No. Yes. Woman. Which road? How much?' The people laughed and shouted back." (104)

While he was roaming around the town of Maniaruppu he happens to come across a Devadassi, Parvati, whom he mistakes for a princess in the beginning. From the way she is described in minute details, we get a feeling that this woman as interesting to him as was his dreams about pearls and rubies. The love-hate attitude is clearly perceptible:

Jason stared and stared, and his mouth drooped open, and words failed him. Her face was like a heart; she was inhumanly beautiful. He had never seen, never dreamed of such beauty - and he had dreamed much. She had a flute in her hand. Such riches - gold, rubies, silver! She could be nothing but a princess. (109)
Jason is a very sharp fellow. He knows very well that his first duty is to learn the language of the natives; that is Tamil. He also learns the lie of the land. The locals, Simon, Fremantle, Parvati - all help him in his endeavour. He also learns and studies the political situation that existed at that time. He comes to know that the Portuguese were not as strong as the English considered them to be. "The Portugals have never been so strong here as in Goa. They are just pretending. One good push and they'll fall down." (114) It was an excellent opportunity for the English to exploit the situation. Though the current mission was to trade in pearls and rubies, the troubled state of political affairs rake up the English diplomatic acumen to make the best of the situation. The internal disputes between the four Kings of the area would add strength to the dormant desire for power. Jason Savage truly becomes the representative of the British attitude in the 18th century. The poverty of the common folk in India had made them fatalistic and complacent. They were left with no energy to assert themselves. There was absolutely no resistance to the misrule of the Kings. Any Englishman who visits India for the first time would certainly notice the distinct feature of poverty that exists in the West and the poverty that exists in India. John Masters tells us that poverty in India is a deformation:

After three weeks here with the pearlers, still, whenever he came in from the field or the sea, the poverty of their little settlement struck him like a
chill. Plenty of people in England were poor. Many went barefoot in the winter slush; in many houses women shivered at their work because they had neither wood for fires nor candles for light, and only cracked boards or torn paper to keep out the rain; many men worked all day with only a piece of bread and raw turnip for food. Jason knew families in Pennel who had to make their bread from such ears of corn as they could pick up in the fields after the harvesters had finished.

But the poverty at the pearlers’ cove was like a deformation, something that could not be got rid of, something like Flossie Henman’s clubfoot or Sorfty Turpin’s upside-down brain.

He and Simon were sitting outside Simon’s hut in the twilight, chewing betel nut. Jason said, ‘Simon, we must force the king to give us more money for our pearls.’ By now, he spoke bad but ready Tamil.

Simon said, ‘It is impossible. The king is the king. What can we do?’ He shrugged and spat a stream of red juice into the stream. (127-128)

But, Jason wants to really help the common men somehow by convincing the king. His empathy for the downtrodden would help them live a dignified life at least. At the same time he would win their confidence. It would be mutually beneficial. Jason was on his toes to don the responsibility of a protector for this poverty-stricken mankind. The natives would revere him like a saviour.

But there are some inherent hard stumble blocks in the Indian society itself that makes it is very hard to bring about reformation. Poverty,
exploitation, fatality, caste system, complacency - all add up to a vicious circle. Besides, the nature's fury like drought and flood, heat and cold would multiply the problems. Jason passionately falls in love with Parvati - a Devadassi in the king's court. He expresses his desire to marry her. But she tells him that it would be impossible.

Impossible, she had said, that they should marry. He set his jaw. Impossible was a favourite word here in Coromandel: impossible for the king to pay better price for the pearls; impossible for Simon to change his trade, even though he was starving. But a man could get anything if he tried hard enough. Nothing was impossible - except of course, for there to be women with six arms or men with elephant faces. (140)

The word 'impossible' catches the attention of Jason. He ironically tells that the word 'impossible' has somehow afflicted the Indian psyche so deeply that it is almost impossible to root it out from their mind. Most of the suffering of the country is due to this attitude not to change, as if belief comes out from the depth of their heart with an urge not to invite any change. The English would hate such an attitude. Jason takes it up as a challenge and wants to prove to them that things can change if attitudes can change. There is pleasure in transforming the impossible into the possible. He succeeds in persuading the king to accept better deal for the pearlers. The king appoints him as his ambassador and entrusts him the responsibility to mediate with the remaining three kings on his behalf. The king would also
approve of his marriage with Parvati provided he successfully accomplishes his mission to strike a diplomatic deal with the other three kings of the Coromandel. He wonders at his success trail and prides himself in it. He also takes a dig at the Indian habit of exhibiting secretive attitude and maintaining deviousness in most of the things.

Jason thought; I have come a long way from Shrewford Pennel. I am a farm boy, but I am being asked to rule the affairs of kings. I am already rich. Everyday gifts, which Parvati carefully locked away in a heavy box, came from the king. Courtiers gave presents too - never openly, though Jason could see no reason why they were so secretive. He had decided that deviousness was here a form of disease, and it afflicted everyone.

Painfully recollection came back. He was Jason Savage, ex-sailor, prisoner, ambassador - a strange mixture, and hard to understand. (139)

The desire to help others continues in him. It would bring happiness to him. “It was good to be rich, all right, especially after tasting the miserable life of the pearlers. To think that he might still be living with them! He ought to do something soon about trying to help them. The king would have to listen to him.” (146)

Jason’s skill earns him the post of a diplomat. He has started accumulating wealth. People show him respect for the position he holds and the power he wields. He has realised the importance of money. “And to be
an important man money was useful, but not essential. There was a surer way to become important. That was to become a leader here." (154) Gifts and compliments are showered on him. He takes pride in his achievements. Most of his dreams have already come true. He feels that Indians are stupid people because they think that everything is impossible while they are not impossible at all. The taste of success inspires him to dream about greater things. He could become high caste, chief minister, rich and so on:

Near dawn he had a sudden exciting vision of warehouses full of silk and spice, of the ships of all nations riding at anchor in the Coromandel river, of white men and brown men trading on the wide square and himself under a big tent seeing fair play for all. (155)

Day after day he feels more and more confident of himself. He thinks he knows every one - the merchants, fakirs, beggars, farmers and even the king. As he finds himself on top of the world, he finds the vision of becoming a true saviour. He dreams of many social reformation. He thinks: "Power was a physical thing he could master and ride, as he rode this stallion. His power would grow, because he was Jason Savage. With it he would dredge the river, build the roads, make men wise in the council of the port." (164) He has so many dreams to accomplish. He is very keen and very eager to bring in social transformation in a country that is too reluctant to change.
Jason's euphoria does not last long. He is ditched by one of the kings whom he thought he could bank on. He learns to his amazement that treachery, infighting, double-dealings are all common in this country of his dreams. A war ensues. He is shocked. He is unable to bear it. He wants to run away. Parvati cannot accompany him for her own reason, unable to fight against her society.

He goes back to his old friend Simon who respects him and considers him to be a lucky man. But, Jason is in no mood. He has become rebellious. He wants to teach a lesson to the people who stabbed him in the back. But, Catherine a blind girl and now an orphan, whom he had kept away earlier rejecting the proposal made by her father - a Portuguese, pacifies him and reminds him of his aim to reach the mountain of Meru. She promises him to show him the path to the mountain despite her blindness. She claims to have spiritual power in her that would lead her to the destination. Catherine makes him realise that he had faced difficulties whenever he had forgotten about the map leading to the mountain. The mountain attains the spiritual symbol. Both Catherine and Jason start moving towards north crossing the Vindhya Mountains on their way to Meru. Jason continues to steal, rob on the way - probably in a mood to retaliate. On the way they come across the band of thugs - the worshippers of Goddess Kali. Masters takes up this theme for his next novel The Deceivers.
Gradually the subject takes a turn towards a spiritual journey, thus projecting the spiritual side of the country. Jason's movements towards the elevated landscape metaphorically suggest the transformation from the material world to the spiritual world. Rudyard Kipling finds a similar kind of journey in the novel *Kim*. The journey of the Lama to the mountains ultimately suggests an idea of redemption.

Jason moves from south to the north. He crosses the Vindhyā Mountains and enters the Moghul kingdom. He gets an opportunity to visit the great Emperor Shah Jehan and his wife Mumtaz. The enmity between the Hindu rulers and the Muslim rulers is described. An old man called Ishmel, who is a librarian at the court, offers to accompany them in their search for Meru. We are introduced to Muslim culture, harems, the beauty of the queen etc. Later, we are taken to the Himalayas and come across the Tibetan land and its culture. In his fictional biography *Bugles and a Tiger*, he sums up the Indian continent in the following words:

The summits of the mountains were blinding white; the sands of the Coromandel Coast were blinding white; the hills dark green, the crops rich green, the jungles hot yellow and brown. But overall, the country was matt and motionless. In all the space there was no aloneness. Try to find it, and a man came out of nowhere with a greeting. But there was loneliness, even in crowds, because each man carried it around with him like a portable tent.118

Though the attempt of Jason to find out Meru does not succeed, yet there is a self-realisation in him. Jason wonders why all Indians think that the Gods were up on the mountains in the Himalaya. He realises that “it was a life of inward and outward contemplation.” He thinks that “he could live that life, exploring ever farther among dreams and visions.” (260)

The novel *Coromandel*, thus touches upon almost all the features of India that catch the imagination of the Western readers - animals like elephants, monkeys unknown to the Western world. We have riches like gold, pearls, jewels, and diamonds that are abundant on the land - strange people, strange manners, and strange habits - some praise worthy and some abominable. While the love, affection, devotion and respect shown by Parvati or Simon and his men are admirable, the treachery of the kings is unforgivable. Poverty, hunger and suffering of the people on one side, and yet the unchanging attitude of the multitude on the other side, highlight the fatalistic attitude. There are talented artists, musicians and dancers whose talents are rather exploited than admired and well paid for. People lack the sense of adventure. Heat and dust are intolerable. *Coromandel* becomes a dream world for Jason. The dreams are both fantasies as well as nightmares. The book serves the purpose of informing the readers in England to know something about India. Udayon Missra writes:
Since the works of the Orientalists on India were not easily available or even understood by the average reading public in England, the works of Anglo-Indian novelists often served as a major source of information about Britain’s largest and most profitable colony.119

John Masters himself explains the purpose of attempting a novel on such a subject. *Coromandel* is the fifth novel of Masters in the order of publication. In his fictional biography - *Pilgrim Son* - he writes a few lines about his novel *Coromandel*:

> I had decided I would tackle the first arrival of the British in India, in about AD 1600. What did the British know India then? Obviously very little ... no maps, no tourist reports, only the smallest commerce and that passing a score of intermediaries. A time of wonder, when anything could be believed, and was about the Mysterious East. The coasts of Malabar and Coromandel. Coromandel, the name itself was hung with sea-born pearls. Everyone knows too damn much nowadays. Then there would be this sense of marvel, of acceptance of magic, of seeking after Golcondas. A young, very young hero then, to intensify the youngness of the world, the newness of the British relationship with India.120

Masters’ biographer John Clay, has this to say about *Coromandel*:

> *Coromandel* was catching his interest. Set in the early 1600s when the British first went to India, it follows the fortunes of the first Savage in his family, Jason, a traveller and adventurer. As a young man in England, Jason had come across a map showing a treasure located in the

Himalayan mountains in India. After several escapades in England, centred round Wiltshire where he was born, he ventures to the Coromandel coast of India and then journeys inland and to the north, accompanied by a blind Portuguese girl (perhaps Masters' version of Kim's Lama), and eventually finds the site of the treasure, but the treasure is an illusion. It was really a journey into himself: 'the Golden Fleece was inside you rather than at the end of any road or map.' The blind girl had symbolised inner resources and when Jason concludes, 'I know now that the magic mountain is always the one you have climbed, the coast Coromandel is always over the horizon', we get a glimpse of some of Masters' own changed perspective on the deceptive nature of ambition. Better, the advice seems to be saying, to be grounded and in touch with the 'wise, beautiful, understanding earth which knew which dreams were good and which were evil', and not to go chasing illusions in the mountains of Meru. As in Bhowani Junction, the book forces on a search for identity. The inference is that the dream ultimately is always further on and contentment comes from acceptance of who you really are.\(^{121}\)

The Deceivers is the second novel taken up for study in the current chapter. The novel is set around the period 1825. The title, Deceivers, is a literal translation of the Hindi word which means the 'the smilers'. The Deceivers was later adapted into a motion picture in 1988 with the same name by producer Ismail Merchant, starring Pierce Brosnan, Saeed Jaffrey, Shashi Kapoor, Jalal Agha, Neena Gupta etc.

The British attempted to put an end to the chaos created by evil rituals like sati and thuggee, that existed in the Indian society. The evil practices needed very strong measures to deal with this situation from the administrators' end. Lord William Bentinck, the then Governor General (1828-1835), took up this challenging task to rid the Indian society of evil rituals. Bentinck is chiefly remembered for the abolition of 'Suttee' system. His second accomplishment was to suppress 'thuggee'. Though the law banned the evil rituals, it did not have the desired effect. The simple reason was that the person sitting in Calcutta who signed the ban order, was sitting far way from the area where the rituals were practised. Later, Captain William Sleeman was entrusted with the responsibility to supervise the operation to eradicate thuggee. He was, for most of the time, in charge of the operations. He had trained a dozen young men to work under him to clamp down the menace. These trained men were mostly soldiers, but a few of them were also civilians. In the beginning it was a very difficult task because, first as the ritual was associated with deep-rooted religious belief, and secondly, the mystery behind the murderous act was a top-guarded secret.
Thuggee was practised by a group of thugs called 'the Pindaris'. They were the worshippers of Goddess Kali. The group was active in and around Vindhyai hills in Madhya pradesh. The group conducted its business in such a tactful way that it was impossible to track them down. The ritual had grown up into a great social menace. It was an interesting thing to note that the group conducted its business only during a particular season (between autumn and spring) and, in some cases, the native rulers of the area themselves practised this ritual to propitiate the deities. The group generally attacked the innocent tourists passing through their region. The modus operandi of the Pindaris was that they moved like the co-travellers and trapped the victims and killed them by breaking their necks with the help of a silver coin tied in a silk handkerchief - called 'rumal' in the native tongue. The whole job took only a fraction of a second. The belongings of the victims were looted by the group and shared among themselves. The act was most cruel as well as inhuman. The group was so well knit that it never gave out its secrets. They used coded language among themselves, which was not understood by others. Even their own family members would not know about their operations that were mostly conducted at night. These thugs would be respectable gentlemen and responsible citizens during the daytime. No one suspected his bonafides.

Philip Mason describes the working of these people belonging to the cult of Pindaris in his book called, *The Men Who Ruled India*:
They (the thugs) would camp near a town or a large village; one or two chosen men would go to the shops and wander about the streets. As soon as they saw a small party of travellers they would move nearer and seize on some chance of getting into conversation. The talk would slide round to the dangers of the road and heads would be shaken at the folly of travelling without a sufficient escort. The travellers would speak cautiously of joining parties for safety; the stranger would be reluctant but in the end the two parties would ride on together. Never, the travellers would think, had they met such good company. But a night would come when the company would seem even better than usual, the tales told with more gusto, the jokes more ready and the laughter more uproarious. Then suddenly the leader would cry in a loud voice: 'Bring the tobacco!' and clap his hands as though to summon a servant. And that clap would be the last thing the travellers heard on the earth. In a few more minutes their bodies would be stripped naked and tumbled higgledy-piggledy into a grave already dug; a few more and the grave would be filled and the senior gravedigger would be dragging a thorny bush over the sand soil to hide all the traces.

The killing was done by a handkerchief, a square of cloth, in one corner of which was knotted a silver coin consecrated to the goddess Kali. The knotted coin made a grip for the left hand; the free end went round the victim's neck, then a quick twist, and in skilful hand the victim would be dead before he reached the ground.123

As a part of the process of social reformation in India, the British administrators took an oath to face the challenge and to put an end to this evil practice. It was really a hard job since it involved fatal hazards. But the job had to be accomplished to prove their ability as benefactors before the natives. Bentinck had created a post of Superintendent of Thuggee to cleanse the land. He used informers and latest police technology available at that time. Above all, it was the moral integrity, a sense of sacrifice and dedication on the part of the participating officers that brought success to the mission. Many officers of the British regime fought a long drawn battle and risked their lives before finally putting down the terrifying system. Mason writes that the first step was the most difficult. But once a member of the gang had confessed, then others of the gang would usually hurry forward to gain a pardon and gradually the doings of that group would be cleared up. It was a slow and a laborious work.

The killing was not done either for the purpose of committing a crime or for the booty. These thugs believed that they were carrying out a divine mission assigned to them by Goddess Kali. Some of them had murdered hundreds of people. Mason points out that between 1831 and 1837 more than three thousand Thugs were convicted and estimates (based on a guess work), that nearly twenty to thirty thousand travellers might have been killed.
every year. It was not an easy job to stamp out this great menace. Mason writes:

There was excitement and adventure in rounding up the Thugs - but there was plain slogging hard work when they were caught. It was the task of Sleeman's young men to build up a list of the members of each gang and a narrative of the incidents in which that gang had been involved in each hunting season for the last ten or fifteen years. In court a discrepancy in the evidence would be taken as a sign of innocence. It must be pieced together. The judges must have clear, corroborated, uncontradicted testimony, because they stood for the rule of law as against the individual whim that had ruled before.  

Underlining the necessity to cover this topic in his novels on India, John Masters writes that he finds some kind of a resemblance between the rituals of Christian communion and the Hindu ritual. He writes in his Pilgrim Son:

As I got deeper in my study of the Thug rituals, I was struck by the extraordinary resemblance of some of them to the idea of Christian Communion. It was clear that these men, dedicated to murder, had a deep religious conviction, and received their sacraments as direct from God. God did not give them a mere licence, but a direct command to go out and kill in a prescribed way. 

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In the postscript to his novel, *The Deceivers*, Masters clarifies his intention in choosing the subject on thuggee. He says that his purpose was to "re-create the 'feel' of a historical episode rather than write a minutely accurate report." He further says that the reader has a right to know how much was fact, how much fiction. Masters writes that he uses the novelist's freedom to imagine people and create places for them to live in. The time is almost correct with a difference of a year or two and the physical shape of the land around Jubbulpore-Nagpur-Jhansi-Allahabad in central India, is also almost correct because it was here that the thuggee was first attacked. But, the incidents and the characters in his novel are all imaginary. He writes:

All the incidents are imagined. All the characters are imagined, except a few bystanders. Please note particularly that if any one man can be credited with the real-life destruction of *Thuggee*, that man was William Henry Sleeman of the Indian Political Service, later Major-General Sir William Sleeman, K.C.B. Sleeman did not use the methods I have ascribed to William Savage; in fact, William Savage is in no sense a portrait of William Sleeman.125

The novel, set around the year 1825, opens with the marriage ceremony of the protagonist William Savage, who has left his regiment - though he loved it, as he thought he had a meek and quiet spirit - to join the civil

administration of India. William marries Mary, a motherless child and the
daughter of Mr. Wilson who held the office of Agent to the Governor General
of India for the Kaimur and Mahadeo Territories. Mary is a young and beautiful
girl just returning from England. She has to learn more about India through
William. He was posted as the Collector of Madhya district. In the beginning
we see the usual description of the road, heat and dust, local people paying
their respects to their Sahib etc. The imperial luxury of palanquins, hundreds
of servants appear regularly.

The concern of an officer for his subjects is narrated in the ruminating
tone of William Savage. "As a score of times before, it struck him that India
was always moving, always going somewhere. Between Kashmir and Cape
Comorin, how many hundreds of thousands of people daily faced the dangers,
known and guessed and unguessed, of the road? In the sixty-year anarchy
of the dying Mahratta power, how many had failed to reach the place they
were going to? How many still died on the way and were not missed?" (19-20)
These words are a prelude to the ensuing plot of the novel. The words describe
the chaos that existed in the administration before the British arrived. William
Savage is worried about the safety of the life and property of his subjects.
The 'white man' would like to rise to the occasion - a newly married man
thinking of the welfare of his subjects rather than his own.
We are introduced to another Indian character called Chandra Sen, Jagirdar, and Patel of Padwa and Kahari, who is a very important man. He is a senior revenue official for a time in the Bhonslas' court of Nagpur. He is described as 'a Patel of two villages, he owns most of the lands, was the police chief, magistrate, mayor, and tax collector. As a jagirdar, he held fifty thousand acres of jungle in feudal tenure and was responsible for the protection of the hamlets enclosed in it. Later, we will be shocked to discover the fact that this Chandra Sen was the head of one of the groups of thugs operating in the area.

This Chandra Sen confides with William Savage that a woman who was the wife of a weaver called Gopal was going to commit suttee the next morning. Thus we are introduced to the ritual of suttee. Savage is seriously concerned about it and attempts to stop it. It was against the law. William Savage begins to think very seriously about this suttee system and the rationale behind it. From one angle it appears as a cruel practice to burn the widow alive or the widow voluntarily agreeing to die. But, he thinks from the Christian angle of Adam and Eve and wonders why it should it be wrong if the wife wishes to join her loving husband. There is a dilemma. On the other hand, the husband does not offer to die if his wife dies. It was a mystery for him which he could not resolve.
Most of the Indian customs were very strange to the Western mind. The Indian customs, especially those related to the religious rituals, were beyond the logical perception of the British. It continued to be one of the unresolved mysteries of the land till the end. India had many such paradoxes. Some of the thinkers from the ruling class - like Wellesley- advised the Government not to interfere with the personal and social system of the country and thought that such matters have to be left to the natives themselves. But the other side of the practice is also important because there are many instances where the suttee is not performed voluntarily, but instead, is forced cruelly upon the young and unwilling widows.

Philip Mason considers both the aspects. He writes that the custom of burning widows alive was a more difficult problem. It was widespread, it belonged to the higher castes of Hinduism, it was believed passionately to be a road to Heavenly beatitude. He says that it arose from the Hindu belief that for a married woman her husband is her god on earth; it was preserved by the general opinion that no one can live alone and chaste; it was fed by the natural jealousy of a man who does not wish to leave behind a young and beautiful woman as a plaything for someone else; it was spread by economic interest, for who wants to support a useless mouth? But no apologist has been able to suggest why, even if the widow must die, she should die
painfully.¹²⁶ Sleeman himself had forbidden a Rajput woman to commit suttee but finally yielded to her request on the seventh day when she continued to plead with him that without her husband she would be as good as lifeless. Mason shows us the instances, particularly in Bengal, of how the suttee system was sordid and cruel in forcing the unwilling woman to climb the pyre of her husband. Many a times she was tied to the dead body of her husband so that she did not escape. Gruesome stories are on record where the children themselves pushed their mother into the pyre.

Ketaki Dyson writes that for the European observer, watching a suttee was a traumatic experience: it was a rite that could not but horrify. It was not the crowning, luminous, last act of a perfect wife, not a glorious gesture uplifting the beholders from the temporal world to eternity, but a ghastly social practice, that of widow-burning. The principle of voluntary self-immolation was not acceptable to the European ethos, and the determination and intrepidity of a widow helped only to establish to the European the extent of delusive indoctrination to which she must have been subjected.¹²⁷

The controversy went on till 1829 when Lord William Bentinck legally banned it, because he was ready to take risk. Thus the abolition of suttee and thuggee were considered to be the greatest achievements of the early British rule.

John Masters tries to deal with these two issues (suttee and thuggee) in his book *The Deceivers.*

The protagonist William Savage, weighs the problem in his own way:

William tried to understand, tried in the Western fashion to separate the good from the evil, to balance the beauty of sacrifice against the ugliness of waste, which is an essential of all sacrifice. But to these Hindus there was no conflict between God, who is all-powerful, and Satan, who yet flouts and perverts His intentions. Here, creation and destruction were opposite faces of the same medal, equal energies of the same universal spirit. He had to understand it if he could. Men and women who thought and acted in those beliefs were his charge. If he failed to understand, he could work only from a single sweeping generalisation: that Indians were fatalistic, brutal and loveless. That was the depth of untruth, in spite of the many who believed it.

The battle within himself formed only a part of the trouble. He was a servant of the Honourable East India Company, and that huge organization was as torn by indecision as he was. Suttee was the people's custom and religion; only an act of despotic power could abolish it. Yet, could Christians, having power, tolerate wilful self-murder? (26)

After enquiry, William comes to know that Gopal the weaver had disappeared almost a year ago and his wife came to the conclusion that he had died. Chandra Sen told him that Gopal was of the same age as William was and almost resembled him. The suttee could have been averted if he could disguise himself as Gopal. His wife Mary insisted that he should not allow suttee to take place. She gave her approval to the plot designed by her husband and Chandra Sen. William Savage enters the forest disguised as Gopal to convince Gopal’s wife that he was not dead and that he was only hiding to accomplish a mission and he would return soon after his mission was complete. Thus he succeeds in convincing the woman to give up her attempt to commit suttee.

With this small episode on the suttee, the plot of the novel turns to the central theme of thuggee. While he was returning from the forest, he accidentally comes across a group of thugs. Hiding himself behind the bushes in the forest watches, to his shock and surprise, how the thugs performed their business. Unable to tolerate the crime done in front of his eyes, he shouts out without realising that he was all alone and helpless. The thugs try to catch him, but somehow he manages to fight back and escape from their clutches. He tries to get back to his place and narrates the incident to Mary and Chandras Sen; seeks the help of Chandra Sen to help him out to apprehend the culprits. Chandra Sen arranges for a few men to scour the
area in the night. But, by then all the marauders had disappeared. William decides to report the matter to the Agent to the Governor General and request for additional force.

In her husband's determination to expose the criminals, Mary extends her total moral support. Mary tells her husband: "Now you're going to catch this gang. They must be a gang. And you will save so many more people's lives." (65) Many English women added their strength to their husbands' to boost the moral courage. William finds out that sixty-eight skulls were recovered from the area where he had ordered to dig up. He is shocked beyond belief that the district was not safe for the common man. So far, he had assumed that he managed the law and order to the best of his ability. He tells his wife: "I thought I knew everyone, everything. I could have said, I have said, that not a thief can move in my district without my knowing it. For three years I've sat here thinking that whatever sort of fool I was at books I knew my people and I looked after them. Meanwhile sixty-eight of them have been as benefactors murdered not a day's stage from my headquarters." (67) The strong sense of identification is seen in his words, 'my district'. He is not pacified even when his wife tells him that it was not his fault, for the crime was going on for quite a number of years. He does not agree with her and considers that he was partly responsible for that.
The sense of loneliness, drudgery and desperateness of an English Officer posted in the far-off places can be seen in the following words. The narration highlights how much of sacrifice was required on the part of an Englishman to keep the natives happy and safe:

In a station, suburban England enclosed you, and you saw India only through those windows of the mind that you chose to scrub clean and look through. In the outlying district it was different. One Englishman, the Collector, to whose charge the civil government of the district was confided, lived alone in a headquarters town, such as Madhya. Madhya had a population of five thousand, all Indian. If the Collector did not like Indians, he liked no one. If he despised India, he despised everything. In a district an Englishman could be alone - and lonely; or he could have a hundred thousand friends. His happiness rested in his own hands, and his wife's if he was married. Many English women hated district life so much that they turned their husbands into embittered drunkards. (70)

William Savage is determined to catch the murderers. He requests his senior officer to spare some extra force and some additional money. It was denied. He gets furious, but his determination does not alter. Even without the support of his government he decides to go ahead with his mission, come what may. He convinces his wife that he would return only after accomplishing his task and seeks her co-operation. He wouldn't bother even if he is dismissed from the service or they might send him back to his regiment marking him as a 'failure' in service. But he should not care. He tells his wife: "That they
would send him back, marked 'Failure'. It was the loom of failure that made him fail. If a man did not care about failing, he usually succeeded. He had seen it plenty of times." (83)

But William is fearless. He happens to spot one of the members of the group, Hussein. He arrests him and takes him to his office to extract information about the murderers. Very strange revelations come out. He learns a lot about the working of the cult. Hussein suggests to him that only he has the power to fight against the worshippers of Goddess Kali, because he is not afraid of the Hindu gods. Hussein says: “And it came to me that they (Englishmen) had the power because they did not fear our gods, but that they could achieve nothing until one of them, at least, learned that fear.” (92) It is at this stage, that William Savage decides to join the band of the thugs under disguise to learn more about its working in order to expose them in the end. The rest of the novel narrates the thrilling experiences of William. He learns the native tongue, coded language of the cult, skill to use the rumal etc.

The unique Indian habit of lying - even in the court - is one of the facts that surprised the Englishmen throughout. The Indian sense of sincerity was always questionable. The English officers were very careful in handling the convicts because of their notoriety to turn hostile at the last minute.
M.K. Naik comments that one of the favourite Anglo-Indian axioms is that morality and ethics have no place in the Indian worldview. He quotes one of the characters, Brian, from E.W. Savi's book, *Labelled Dangerous*, who tells that the Indian outlook on life, quite apart from the colour question, is their ethics. An Indian is never a trust-worthy person, Indians do not trust one another. They (Indians) are riddled with corruption. One can never rely on the truth in the witness box. A witness can be bought for a few rupees.\(^{129}\)

We find one such instance in *The Deceivers*. A ferryman, who along with his three associates, is brought to identify the suspects, fails to identify them. William and Mary grow angry with these people. At this juncture, Masters makes a comment that the “spoken word could be forgotten, disavowed. It was an inborn habit of India’s poor, bred over turbulent centuries of intrigue, when the shifts of power made it safer to forget than to remember.” (123)

But an English officer has to take all these risks into consideration and yet work hard to fulfil his duty. Savage decides to leave his pregnant wife behind as well as his job, and decides to follow his ambition to unravel the mystery of thuggee. He has to work not for any kind of recognition by his employer, because no one would acknowledge it, specially when one is out of

the purview of law to accomplish one's job. When Mary tells him that he might win laurels for his great service to the nation, he expresses his apprehensions in the following words: "Organisations as big as the Honourable East India Company did not like admitting mistakes. The bigger the scandal uncovered, the more highly placed the official who would have to take the responsibility. No one would believe it, any way. It couldn't happen". (134)

William comes to know of many things that he did not know earlier. The followers of goddess Kali were called The Deceivers. The word 'thug' was derived from the verb *thugna* meaning to deceive. They followed their own dress code, customs, language, and above all, a strong spirit. Hussein assures him that the Christian cross would shield him. His wife Mary permits him to leave on the condition that he would not kill any one. William thinks of the ways of death that takes place in India. "Everywhere men died by violence, or died gently, their blood clogged by snake venom, or died in a ditch, excreting their life in cholera and dysentery. He saw the road now as an Indian saw it, and for the first time knew he would have to find the Indian, not the British, type of courage to face it." (138)

When he starts observing India from an Indian angle, the beauty of the country starts unfolding in front of his eyes. The following description of the Indian rural side, its customs, natural beauty, gives us the picture of an
Englishman’s appreciation of India. It can be experienced only when you involve yourself deeper and identify yourself with the Indian tradition. William convinces himself that “only by being Indian and thinking Indian and feeling Indian could he hold any hope that he would return at last to his English ways and his English wife.”

William and Hussein walked between fields, and ahead the lights of a little town sparkled through the chilly night. William breathed deeply and wrinkled his nostrils. India was beautiful, above all on this night of the year. It was the Dewali, the festival dedicated to lights and gambling, which fell always on the twentieth day after Dussehra. Hundreds of open lights, in tiny earthenware bowls, flickered outside each house and hut.

Tonight, as for two weeks past, he was truly a part of India. He had worked here all his adult life - nineteen years, the last three in Madhya. As an Englishman he had fallen in love with Madhya, and this central land’s pattern of beauty had grown into him - its earthy reds and deep greens, the shading of its still water in old masonry tanks, its rivers that flowed by white and smoky blue villages. Yet always his race had held him back from complete absorption in it. He had been physically unable to see or hear or smell beauty without noticing the dirt and disease that were part of it. Then, when noticed, his love changed to something else - to reforming zeal, desire to raise up, to alter. (140-141)

In between we get the description of camels, elephant, bear dancing - all reflecting the Indian style. There was an initiating ceremony in which
William was not supposed to join as per the instruction of his guide Hussein, but he participates in it. Hussein warns him that he has accepted the norms to become a strangler. But William protests that he would never be one and he considers the belief merely a superstition. Strange things are revealed by Hussein that the acts of a strangler are not known to anybody - even to the wives. And there are many stranglers coming from very noble families.

Hussein tells him:

Gopal (William disguised), do you realize that not one Deceiver’s wife in a hundred knows what he is? That the Deceivers have homes and places in society? That they leave their homes, and travel as if on ordinary business, and come back? That their children never know, unless a son is initiated into his father’s band? ... Why couldn’t you be a Deceiver? Why not? The Saint Nizam-ud-Din was one. (163)

Though he thought to himself that he would not be one of those stranglers, all the dormant traits of a strangler burst out into open when he happens to meet the real Gopal the weaver who by now had transformed into a thug. He kills him (Gopal) without any pre-thought - almost instinctively in order to protect himself, lest his identity be exposed.

The stranger was himself, and failure, and Death. He was Death. The rumal came to his hand, the rupee in the knotted corner swinging easily. He stepped forward as Gopal the weaver began to fall. He kicked at Gopal’s crotch. Gopal turned away and to say ‘Ali ...’ William’s rumal swung. The sound mewed like a hungry cat and choked off. (187)
He was already under the influence of Goddess Kali without his knowledge. He feels sorry for what he had done and begs Jesus to forgive him. But in order to understand and feel what thuggee was, all these things were unavoidable for him.

The scenes of the thugs enjoying their leisure in the company of nautch girls, the harlotry that was common in those days, make a part of the protagonist's experience. He learns to his shock and surprise that his own Patel, Chandra Sen, was a Deceiver by himself. William wonders how come he did not sense it at all. Hussein explains that that was the reason why the English were not able to catch them or get any information about the thuggee.

Several times some English official or other has got hold of information about us. Then he has chased us out of his district, and reported, I suppose. But they've never worked together, and it always blew over. They'll never destroy us until one of them finds out everything, and forces the Lat Sahib to believe everything, and plans a campaign to cover all India. And that one who finds out must fear Kali, or he will not understand her. But he must not love her. (208)

Thus William is made to understand why it was not possible all these days for the British to know about the thuggee and its operation. He thinks of the Christian values and how they were different from the Indian conception. He recalls that he had said to himself that he would not kill. "He had been a Christian, believing in the value of the life that God lent to mankind and
sanctified by the lending. He could stand no more. He had become two men, a Christian and a Deceiver, and was being torn apart by remorse." The thuggee was stamped out ultimately.

John Clay, the biographer of John Masters, is of the opinion that Masters was exploring hidden Indian life in this book. He was also examining the extent to which the British were justified in intervening in local customs. The following words of John Clay testify the fact how Masters was trying to express the 'Indianness' that was in himself.

Masters soon realised that William Savage would need to be characterised more subtly than his previous Savage family member, Rodney. William, very loosely based on the real life character of William Sleeman, would have to be depicted as an exception to the general run of district officer. Masters read Meadows Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug* in New York Public Library as additional source material. Technically, he needed to make William interesting enough as a character in his own right and yet still credible when he joins the Thugs. Masters's solution was to make him a not particularly bright person, rather slow and hard working, a loner with enough of a liking for India to join the Thugs, and susceptible enough to take their communion and even murder on their behalf. The tension in the book comes from the acute moral dilemmas he faces. Should he kill as the Thugs do? Can he ever regain his former clear conscience? In line with the fascination and enigma of India theme, William soon finds that the longer he remains a Thug, the more strongly he is attracted to them. He even feels a competence as one of them that he never felt as a
district officer. Masters seems to be hinting here at the potential for destruction within all of us and at the fatal attraction of India and the risks this poses for Europeans who, in succumbing to it, lose their identity in the process. Writing in this way was opening doors for Masters too, bringing out the 'Indianness' within himself. William's development as a character was like a journey into his own family past.\textsuperscript{130}

Tapan Jyothi Banerjee in his article, \textit{John Masters: How Well Did He know His India?} writes: "Masters made his mark not simply as a writer of pot-boilers on Indian themes. He not only gave right names to his Indian characters but most of the time employed the right instinct to analyse them in psychological terms and the right method to see into the elusive and intangible Indian reality."

Tapan says that Masters demonstrates a remarkable sense of appreciation of the Hindu rites of religion, in some cases almost bizarre and reeking of death. The Kali cult, which he shows to its best advantage as the inspiring launching pad for the Thuggee assault to take off (in \textit{The Deceivers}) is one of the many mysteries of Hinduism that Masters mastered.\textsuperscript{131}

Around the year 1815, the British had already established paramount power in the southern part of India. In the north too they had their possessions

\textsuperscript{131} Tapan Jyothi Banerjee, \textit{The Literary Criterion}, Ed. by C.D.Narasimhaiah, Pub. by Dhvanyaloka, Mysore, 1988, Vol. 23 No.4, pp - 8, 12.
around Jumna and Oudh. But in the central and western part of India, they could not get a complete grip. Though the Maratha and Rajputs, were gradually becoming weaker because of infighting and lack of administrative skills, yet they had not given up completely. The Pindaris made the best of this situation and were growing stronger and stronger. It was not an easy thing to wipe out the cult because the Pindaris had the image of cult leaders and had the backing of the people living around. The British had to show sheer ruthlessness in controlling their activities. It is said that to execute a convicted Pindari, a trained elephant was used to crush the head of the convict on a piece of stone slab. To this day, people around the city of Jabbalpur, old people still ruminate the stories of William Sleeman’s adventure. There is also a village called Sleemanabad, named after William Sleeman.

The war against this cult and subsequent victory gave a big boost to the British East India Co. to establish its colonies. Masters’ *The Deceivers* celebrates this event in the British history of India. The victory was not in any way a matter of luck but was the result of hard work. William Savage depicts these qualities of determination to fight social evils like suttee and thuggee.
The third novel taken up for study in this Chapter, is *Night Runners of Bengal* (1951). The work is considered to be the *Magnum Opus* of the author. The publication of the novel established John Masters as a famous and popular novelist in England and US. The total sale of the book was more than thirty five thousand copies. The popularity of the book also fetched him considerable amount of money, which was most urgently required for Masters at that juncture. Keith Jennison, a friend in the neighbourhood who encouraged him to write, assisted him in getting the book published. He finished reading the manuscript at one sitting. He was so thrilled with the book that he wrote to Masters: “I'm crazy about it. You're a born story teller, a very perceptive observer and a damn good writer. It was one of the best reading experiences I've had in many years.” In his list of thirty-five areas, on which Masters wanted to write on India, the Mutiny of 1857 was on the top. Masters recollects the days when he decided to start working on the novel. He writes:

I began the preparations for the first novel. The subject must be the most powerful to my mind: the Indian Mutiny. I spent two days wondering whether I could afford to start with another, for the Mutiny was so great a subject that I really ought not to tackle it until I was better equipped to do so. But a man being charged by a tiger is wise to use his biggest gun

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the first time; there may not be a second. So the Mutiny it was.

I defined my object: To tell an exciting story about the Indian Mutiny. Hell, that was no use. That would fit a potboiler for the pulps, and here I was waiting to pull the heart out of my body to transmit the terror and tragedy of 1857. To make the readers feel the true facts and emotions of the Indian Mutiny.¹³⁴

S.D. Singh considers Night Runners of Bengal as one the best novels by Masters because he has not used cheap dramatic sense to play up events.

He writes:

This is certainly one of the best novels on the Mutiny. In the management of the plot, in style and portrayal of characters, John Masters is superb. He has been largely successful in evoking a deep panoramic view of the Mutiny period with the help of only a small number of characters. ... John Masters has done something, which the other novelists have failed to do. He has been able dominate the abundance of incidents of Mutiny, and subdue it to present an interesting and significant whole. The story moves fast forward, and John Masters gives tint and colour to both the Indian and British points of view. He has shown the weakness of both sides, and has indicated that victory or defeat does not rest so much with arms.¹³⁵

The Mutiny is a watershed in the annals of British history. It gave a severe jolt to the British. It made them take a fresh look at their

¹³⁴ John Masters, Pilgrim Son, Corgi Books, Lon. 1973, - p - 121
administration. It was at this juncture that they realised the fact that all was not well with their rule. The Mutiny gave them an opportunity to introspect and alter their strategy to rule the colonies. Karl Marx opined that it was the predatory policy of the British intruders in India and the barbarous methods of colonial exploitation which nurtured the Indian revolt.\textsuperscript{136} Denis Judd writes about the Mutiny in the following words:

The Indian Mutiny has been variously interpreted. To the Victorians it was simply a mutiny: a revolt by sepoys in the Army of Bengal. To some Indian nationalists it later became a freedom struggle, a war for Indian independence. The truth lies somewhere between these two extremes. There was a wide variety of causes: resentment at the westernising policies of the East India Company; fears for Indian religions; sympathy for thousands of landlords deprived of land to which they could not legally prove ownership; dislike of the superior attitudes of the British in India; hatred for the recent annexations during Lord Dalhousie's Governor-Generalship.

But the mutineers had no coherent aims. Some wanted to restore the Mogul Emperor to his former glory; some wanted to reinstate the deposed King of Oudh. The only common factor was that they all wanted to restore some cherished piece of the past. In this sense, the Mutiny was a conservative reaction against the allegedly radical reforms of the East India Company, and in defence of the broad Indian tradition.\textsuperscript{137}

\textsuperscript{137}Denis Judd, \textit{The British Raj}, Wayland Documentary History Series, Lon. 1972, pp - 59, 61
The protagonist in the novel is Rodney Savage. He is a Captain serving the Bengal Native Infantry (BNI) with its headquarters at Bhowani in the central part of India. In fact, he is the first of the Savages taken up by Masters to represent the family in all his novels later. He happens to control the rebellion in the neighbouring state of Kishanpur where the Raja was murdered supposedly by his own wife Rani Sumitra who later takes over the reins. There is a civil uprising by the subjects against the queen’s action. The English army brings the situation back to the normal and Rodney was asked to train the queen’s army which he does quite efficiently. But in the meanwhile, strange and mysterious events take place which British Officers find it difficult to understand. The native sepoys serving the British army unite together and revolt against their rulers. The most unexpected, and unimaginable thing happens that wreaks havoc. For the first time, the British feel the ground under their feet collapsing. The immediate cause is the use of animal fat in the ammunition provided to the sepoys. And a small incident where a sepoy named Mangal Pande, runs amuck and kills an officer in Barrackpore - Calcutta. The incident boomerangs into an almost a nation wide upsurge posing a threat to the British rule in India. The Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 enters the pages of British history as an unforgettable nightmare. It changes the course of the British history, politics, and administration in
India. But the real cause is perhaps the distancing of the English rulers from the common people and ill-treating the aristocracy. The simmering discontentment blows up in an attempt to restore their self-respect.

Some of the other important characters in the novel are:

- Joanna - Rodney's wife, who is later killed in the mutiny. She is a typical English woman who is more concerned with her own physical appearance than anything else. She has all the qualities of the Anglo-Indian lady of that time like snobbery, greed for money, power etc.

- Robin, Rodney's son - still a small child, growing up mostly under the care of an ayah.

- Caroline Langford - an English girl on a temporary visit to India. She is curious to learn more about the Indian culture and language. She has served along with Florence Nightingale in the Crimean war earlier. She is the one who notices strange developments in the country and sounds Rodney about the possible dangers. She is the one who escapes from the hands of the mutineers and later protects Robin. We find that she makes a sincere attempt to probe into the cultural differences between the English and Indian ways of behaviour. She exhibits the qualities of a reformist and a missionary. She marries Rodney after the mutiny.
• 'Silver Guru'- called so because of his white antecedents. He is an English deserted soldier, who has transformed himself into a self-proclaimed saint. He helps the rebels. The natives revere him as a man bestowed with spiritual qualities. He predicts the upsurge.

• Sumitra, the widowed queen of the state of Kishanpur who is ambitious, avaricious and passionate. She is helped by her Dewan, Shiva Rao, in administration. Her plans to join hands with the mutineers to drive away the British fail and is forced to commit suicide. (She is meant to be the Rani Lakshmibai of Jhansi).

• Piroo is another character who is a former thug, but reformed to serve as a carpenter in the army. He risks his own life and saves the life of Rodney many times and remains as the most loyal servant of Rodney till the end.

Rodney and other British characters in the novel represent the relationship between India and Britain during the mutiny. We can see the traces of imperialism in the pomp and glory of the official life, insular life in the club smacking of all kinds of scandals, mysticism of the country that was incomprehensible to the Western mind, hunting adventures, dust and diseases, poverty and various other images.
We get the usual kind of description about the life in the Indian rural side with lazy people loitering, and yawning etc.

Men yawned in the washed afternoon sunlight, and stretched their arms. Brown naked children splashed in the puddles. Women glided down to the river, carrying bundles of clothes on their heads. The holy man sat on a raised earth platform, revetted by loose stones, which had been built up round the bould of the peepul tree. (13)

The description of the bungalow and the number of servants attending it give us an example of abundance of space and glory enjoyed by the British officers. “The bungalow, low and square and dull white, sprawled in the long tree shadows; a colonnaded verandah, ten feet wide and paved with red flagstones, encircled it. Short flights of stone steps, without balustrades, ran down at the front under the carriage porch and at the back under a covered passageway leading to the separate kitchen block.” (17)

There are a number of servants moving in and out of the bungalow. The officers enjoy the facilities that are nothing short of the status of a small king in the native land. With the status that they enjoyed, these officers are filled with a sense of superiority complex. Further, it enhances their feelings of imperialism so that they are assured of the continuation of glory. Let us take a look at the following paragraph that gives us an idea of the number of servants in a household:
Sher Dil, butler, tottered rheumatically out on the front verandah and stood there in bent, dignified immobility, the general of the servant army. Lachman, the bearer, hurried down to take Rodney's cloak. The assistant cook, the dishwasher, the water-carrier, the washerman, and the dogboy, who were smoking rolled leaf cigarettes by the stable wall scrambled to their feet, bowed and put both hands to their foreheads in salaam. From inside the kitchen the cook shouted, "The sahib has come." The gardener, crouched two hundred feet away among a mixed bed of larkspur and pink Clarkia, straightened his back and stood in meditation. The untouchable sweeper, squatting with the basket and broom on the verandah outside a bathroom door, rose and made salaam. (17-8)

K.M. Panikkar quotes the example of one hundred and ten servants waiting on a family of four people. He tells that "as a result of this doctrine of prestige and race superiority, the Europeans in India, however long they lived, they lived as strangers". Sujit Bose, quoting Edward Grierson, writes about William Hickey - a prolific recorder of Anglo-Indian life who left India in 1808 - having forty-five personal servants altogether. The list of his servants consisted of butlers, stewards, table servants, hair dressers, wine waiters, bakers, cook, bearers, messenger, torch-bearers, gardeners, tailors, door-keepers, washer-man, sweepers, grooms, grass cutters, water carriers and coachman. Christopher Hibbert has devoted a whole chapter, in his

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139 Sujit Bose, *Attitude to Imperialism*, Amar Prakashan, Delhi, 1990, p - 41
book *The Great Mutiny*, for describing the way of life enjoyed by the sahibs and memsahibs with a number of servants at their disposal.\textsuperscript{140} Flora Annie Steel (1847-1929), well known for her Mutiny novel, *On the Face of the Waters* (1896), has an essay written on *The Duties of the Mistress* (1889) that counsels the English Ladies on how to deal with the native servants.\textsuperscript{141}

Since there were hundreds of servants waiting at their beck and call, the 'ladies' hardly had any domestic work to do in their bungalows. Even the care of the children was taken by the *ayahs*. The only pastime was either to talk of 'the life back in England' or of hot and torturing weather in India. The recreation clubs became inevitable to kill time. Most of the time the discussion centred on the fashionable dresses, invitation to dinners or gossips and scandals. Snobbery was a part of the Anglo-Indian life for the mem-sahibs. Pat Barr takes exception to this kind of one-sided description of memsahibs. She is of the opinion that demeaning the memsahibs is the 'fictional image' handed down to us by authors like Rudyard Kipling. In the introduction to her book, *The Memsahibs*, she writes:

> Thousands of British women lived in India during Victorian times. They went out as wives, mothers, sisters; later as teachers, doctors, missionaries. But because of the social prejudices and conventions of


the times, their roles were traditionally supportive and secondary. What they did and how they responded to their alien environment were seldom thought worthy of record, either by themselves or by contemporary chroniclers of the male-dominated imperial scenario. Later historians have blamed them for narrowing and domesticating the British experience of India and for exacerbating the racial prejudice which increasingly divided the rulers from the ruled. Writers, particularly the so well known Rudyard Kipling, have handed down to us a fictional image of the typical 'memsahib' as a frivolous, snobbish, and selfish creature who flitted from bridge to tennis parties 'in the hills' while her poor husband slaved 'on the plains.' 142

But, we can see the legacy of Kipling operating in Masters' novels. The constant reminding of Joanna to her husband Rodney to cover the head of their child Robin with a hat highlights wretchedness of the Indian weather. Joanna tells her husband, "Rodney, put his hat on, please. He'll get sunburnt and brown, like a subordinate's child. ... I don't care if the sun is nearly down. He must always wear his hat out of doors." (18)

The club membership was compulsory for all the members of the English community whether they visited it or not. They had to pay the subscriptions regularly. The male members would spend their time either playing games, cards or drinking. The discussions would generally be on the British policies to be adopted. Charles Allen says that the Club was a peculiarly 'Anglo-

Indian' institution. There is a chapter on the club in his book, *The Plain Tales from the Raj*. He writes:

The club represented the 'hub of local society', principally of senior officials. There would be the Collector, the headquarters Sub-Collector, the Sessions Judge, the District Forest Officer, the District Superintendent of Police, the Excise Assistant Commissioner and several other officials from the public works department and so on.' Not surprisingly, 'there were only a limited number of places at which there were any Europeans who weren't officials.' At such places army officers swelled the list of members and club provided 'a meeting place between the Civil and the Military.'

Bhowani had one such club where all the civil and military officers and their ladies got together. The discussion on imperial lines go on. In the Club, one of the young girls, Rachel, comments like this:

She gave a realistic start and sighed heavily. "Goodness me, isn't this boring! Mother's in the lounge, talking nineteen to the dozen with that awful old sick Captain Gosse. Pa is in the men's bar, reading the Bible aloud to prove that dancing's wicked - you can hear him from the hall - and he has taken too much to drink." (27)

Caroline Langford, one of the English girls who is on a temporary visit to India is obsessively struck with the prediction made by 'Silver Guru', a

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white mendicant sitting under the peepul tree and claiming that something
dangerous was impending. She is very curious to know what it could be.
While the other ladies brushed aside the words of the Silver Guru as
superstitious, Caroline insists that many things in India are inexplicable.
She tells that "the English only inhabit the surface of India." The following
words of Caroline show us how the English were trying to understand India
and the Indians:

"I'll tell you why I must find out. After these six months at Kishanpur,
living in a state, I have decided that we English only inhabit the surface
of India. You know I was teaching the Rani our style of deportment, and
improving her English? I saw the old Rajah too, and made him talk
tense" - she lifted her head and her jaw line tightened - "after he'd tried
to fob me off with the nonsense men think will satisfy a woman. Rajahs
are so rich and autocratic that I'd expected them to be even more cut off
from the common people than we are. It is not so. If something worried
his people, the Rajah felt it. I think the crows, and what the Silver Guru
said, worried all the Indians who were by the tree - so it ought to worry
us, because we're supposed to be their friends, as well as their rulers." (28)

The ladies chide her and try to underplay her version. Joanna, wife of
Rodney, tells: "Come, Miss Langford, we will begin to think you have quite
gone native. It is no use bothering about the natives' superstitions, my
husband says - don't you, dear?" (28) Another lady warns that the Indian
customs and Western lives are totally different and they should be very careful so that there is no misunderstanding "to spoil the things."

Rodney, somehow, does not savour the idea of his wife calling the natives 'blacks'. He would like to respect the natives and learn to understand them. He admonishes his wife whenever she uses the phrase 'blacks' to describe the native Indians.

"Oh, it's a trick, of course. That young lady must be spoken to. I'm surprised Lady Isobel hasn't done it already. She must not be allowed to let us all down in front of the blacks."

"Joanna, will you please remember to call Indians by their race and caste, or, if you don't know, 'natives'?" He became angry, as always did when this familiar subject came up, and he gripped the brandy glass more tightly. "God damn it. You ought to know better. We of the Company's service live here all our working lives. We do our work and enjoy ourselves and lord it over the country entirely by the goodwill of the average native - especially the native soldier, the sepoy. If you even think of them insultingly, of course they know it and resent it." (19-20)

Rodney's love for Anglo-India is described many a time in reminiscences. Take for example the following paragraph:

It was a lustrous and silver-gilt morning; he was riding away from Bhowani, and the tea parties, and the bezique parties, and interminable talk of sepoys' boots, officers' pay, and ladies' virtue. ... He liked these things; they were Bhowani, Anglo-India. Yet - another India lay ahead and waited for him, a princely Indian India. (45)
Rodney is proud of his race and his upbringing. He feels quite elated to think that he is fortunate enough to be a part of that empire which has given him a sense of satisfaction. The glory of the past is a matter of pride for him. Bringing the fruits of science and technology from the West to the East to ameliorate the conditions of the natives is no doubt a great contribution. What an amount of sacrifice has gone down in all this!

The railways crept west from Calcutta, the telegraph posts strode across the millet fields, the dams rose in the rivers.

He found it a strange thing to hate his exile, and yet to love the country which was its place. His blood was pure English; could it be that the generations of Savages who worked and made love here had passed on to him this awareness of India? England was over the seas and in the north; he looked up the blurred stars and sighed. (24)

But at the same time, he introspects whether it is justifiable to hold on to the reins forever. The imperialistic dilemma is clearly visible in the following lines:

Colleen, the carriage mare, trotted incuriously past all these symbols of the colossal empire of the Honourable East India Company. Rodney had been born in and out of that empire, but still it took his breath away when he considered the power created by those English merchants who had striven here and made themselves the masters of princes. Two hundred and forty-eight years ago their envoys had come to Agra and begged the Great Mogul to let them build a trading post beside the sea. A century ago they bowed and scraped for the favour of the King of Oudh.
Today, by luck and aggressive skill, by courage and persevering deceit, their footholds had so expanded that their Presidency of Bengal alone extended seventeen hundred miles from Burma to Afghanistan, and seven hundred miles from the Himalaya to the Nerbudda.

Their other two Presidencies, Bombay and Madras, had swallowed the rest of India; the heir of the Moguls existed only as their pensioner; the King of Oudh had no kingdom. The map of India was a daub of British red, patched by yellow islands, to mark the states ruled themselves, but were forbidden to treat with each other or with any foreign power.

The Company had become a weird blend of trading corporation and administrative engine, and the English government in London controlled it. It traded as it wished, and dictated treaties. It minted money, made laws, collected taxes, and executed criminal and civil justice. It kept the peace- and made war from Persia to China. The man who was its chief representative in India, the Governor General, had direct and almost unlimited power over a hundred million people, and indirect power over other millions living in the states. When the governor general spoke, the largest volunteer standing force in the world moved to compel obedience. (23)

The relationship between the ruler and the ruled, compared to that of the father-son, is found in the following lines of Rodney:

"Love? That's a strong word. One man here loves them - Colonel Bulstrode, oddly enough. He loves them - as a father loves a pack of half-witted sons. For most of us it's a sort of giving: we each give all we have, and we don't keep accounts. Of course there are things we don't know about your father, or your cousin Lady Isobel? Things you don't want or need
to know? It's only trust that matters, and we do trust each other, we and the native officers and the sepoys completely, unconditionally.* (31)

We can also note that the valued Christian Biblical tenets, like 'it is in giving that we receive', continue to operate in the subconscious level. The feelings of a benefactor and those of a protector vehemently find their way in the thinking process of Anglo-Indian psyche. There is a need for concern to free the natives from the age-old yoke of tyranny. There is a self-imposed responsibility to take up the cause of the helpless and hapless natives. Let us look at the following lines:

"It would have to be something so fundamental that we wouldn't have sufficient faith - loyalty, trust, whatever you like to call it - to bring it out into the open. Remember that every single native soldier is a volunteer. The people have for centuries been the toads under the harrows of a lot of vicious rajahs. Never again. They can look forward to peace for about the first time in the whole of India's history. Think what that means to a man who needs all his energy, all his life, to get a living out of this soil."(31)

Hunting in the forests of India persisted as an irrepressible obsession of the imperial life in India. The visit to India would not be complete unless one either hunts the wild animals himself or at least watches the hunting of tigers. Visitors would crave for an invitation by the native Kings to join them in hunting. Sitting on the back of the elephants in the houdahas and moving
into the forests to watch the tigers in the wild forest, was an immemorable experience in the life of any Englishman. No wonder that hunting tiger has become an unavoidable part of the Anglo-Indian writing. If we analyse this ‘syndrome’ (if it can be called so), psychologically, it would have probably satisfied the sense of ‘machismo’. But at the same time, this obsession also led to the study of the behaviour of animals and in the latter part, it led to the conservation of wild animals as in the case of Jim Corbett. John Masters himself had an unexpected opportunity to kill a tiger in Bakloh, in the Garhwal hills of North India in February 1938. He narrates this incident in his fictional biography, *Bugles and a Tiger*. He writes how he was treated as hero and how the locals constructed songs in praise of the event and sang them for a long time. He writes; “Men ran about, laughed, danced in the road and slapped me on the back. Women kissed my knees and children brought flowers.”\[144\]

He had the first-hand experience of shooting a tiger. *Night Runners of Bengal* gives us the description of hunting in the seventh Chapter. He describes that the mahout was, “naked but for turban and loincloth sat below and in front, astride the great neck. A shikari, one of the state’s paid hunters,

crowded into the howdah with them; he wore a patched black coat and a loin
cloth and stank of garlic." (86-7)

Rodney Savage acts as a hero by shooting a tiger. He saves the life of
his senior officers and the Rani when a wounded tiger was about to attack
them while the elephant, that was carrying them sagged down:

Before he could fire, the tiger swerved and ran under their elephant's
belly. Geoffery swung round to face the back of the howdah. The tiger
sprang up from out of sight, dug his foreclaws into the hide over the
spine, and jerked with his hind legs at the loose folds of the elephant's
fork. Opening his jaws wide, he roared so that the blast of fetid breath
hit them with the quake of the sound. As he hung, he roared again, and
his yellow eyes glared at them in a fire of fury; his hind claws sliced long
raw strips of meat from the elephant's loins. (89)

Treating the Indian woman, and specially a woman with the status of a
Queen in the case of Sumitra in this novel, appears a little too exaggerated to
believe. It is far from reality, and to such an extent that any Indian reader
would hesitate to accept this fact. It is clearly an attempt to impose the
Western idea of womanhood on the Indian woman. However passionate an
Indian woman is, it is quite hard to believe the way Sumitra makes the
overtures to woo Rodney and to seduce him. The whole sequence appears as
a fabric of imagination on the part of the author, with the sole intention of
stuffing the plot to make the story look like a potboiler or something like a
Bond movie. Masters had a tiff with his editor Helen, on treating sex in a shabby way in his novels. If one takes a closer look at Masters’ treating of Indian women in his novels, one gets an impression that she is considered as a dumb stuff in the imperial hands which one could handle or use in any way that pleased him. The way Sumitra calls him ‘my lord’ or ‘my king’ and prostrates herself in front of him to make love to him (99) stuns the Indian reader. A similar tendency is also seen in the novels like, To The Coral Strand, The Venus of Konpara and in Bhowani Junction.

S.D. Singh, for example, writes that Masters’ insistence on sex dilutes the seriousness of the subject like Mutiny. Singh says, “John Masters’ novel (1951) goes closer to conveying the Indian view-point as an integral part of the novel, with realism and force; but this picture gets distorted and vitiated by Masters’ great insistence on sex as an essential factor in the affairs of state and politics.”

The social injustice that existed in the country at that time, like the caste system for example, and the careful handling of the issue by the Englishmen to succor the humiliation meted out to the suppressed, is explained in the following lines:

146. S.D. Singh, Novels on the Indian Mutiny, Arnold-Heinemann India, Delhi, 1980, p - 198
A sweeper was the lowest of the low, outcast, untouchable through life, dedicated by his birth to the disposal of human ordure. The sepoy was a Brahmin, twice-born, highest of the high. It was all but unthinkable that any sweeper should raise even his voice against any Brahmin. ... Rodney shook the reins impatiently; he didn't want to upset the foundations of society, but he would do all he could to help the sweeper. The general goodwill and good sense of the men made the Bengal Army work - but no thanks were due to the caste system. He'd often seen Native Officers and N.C.O's of middle caste grovel before a Brahmin sepoy; Brahmins were never put on a charge unless a British Officer saw the offence and insisted; even then, everyone was uncomfortable. The sepoys were still unhappy that the Brahmin caste had been subjected to the ordinary criminal laws and could be tried and hanged like anyone else if they committed murder. (109)

Caroline Langford asserts that the English should stop adopting dual standards in dealing with the natives. She advises that there should be only one standard and that should be implemented without any hesitation. She says:

There are not 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 untouchability and forbid suttee, abolish tyranny in one state and leave it in another, have our right hand Eastern and our left had Western. It is not that India is wicked; she has her own ways. If we rule we must rule as Indians - or we must make the Indians English. But we do neither; we are like Mr. Dellamain. We have one foot in a whirlpool. Sometimes
I am sure we will be dragged into another and drowned. God will punish us for compromising. As He will punish me. (184-5)

There is a sense of introspection regarding the duties of an army officer. One of the reasons that caused the mutiny was distancing of an officer from his sepoys during the peacetime. The dependency of the native soldiers on their English Officer was peculiar to the Indian soldiers. Rodney feels it. He thinks: "It seemed impossible to persuade the merchants who ran the Company that an infantry officer must serve with his regiment in peacetime to build the trust between man and officer that makes victory in wartime. They failed to appreciate, or deliberately ignored, another factor peculiar to India - that the Indian sepoy did not care whether his officers were good or bad, but demanded only that they should stay with him a long, long time." (124)

'"The White man's burden' comes as a missionary zeal in many characters of the Anglo-Indian fiction. Caroline Langford, in this case, is actually still a young girl, who shows maturity and understands the nuances of the British rule in India. She says:

"You think I'm doing this for the pleasure of destroying the Rani, don't you? There is no pleasure in it at all for me. I believe that our duty to God's principles - justice and truth - is more important than our duty to people, or any particular person, especially oneself. We are not in this world for our own pleasure, but to further God's principles ... I'm not
crusading against people, or human enemies, but against falsehood, and there is no need to hate any one." (145)

The White man thought that he was pre-ordained to rule the natives. And he had his own reasons to believe so. The sense of discipline and skill were the trump cards with which he played the game. It was one of the reasons why the native Rani Sumitra of Bhowani asked him to train her army and further could lead them if he wished.

She started up and interrupted him with sudden harshness. "Captain Savage, I want to free my Dewan for his other duties. I want you to command my army, instead of him. I have decided that no one but a British officer can make it efficient, and I want it to be." (74)

The laymen in India would not bother who ruled them. Though the Mutiny had tilted the scale, the common man would support any rule that could give them peace of mind and less of taxation. Certainly, the British had done a commendable job in this direction. There was a scientific method in evolving tax strategy which never existed before in the Indian history. People accepted it with full support. Rodney could hear from the people of Chalisgon:

The bannia took up the tale. "It is like this, sahib. Here we do not care who rules us as long as he rules well. All men are foreigners to Chalisgaon except men born in Chalisgon, as all of us here were. 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. Some one must protect us and give us peace." (288)

"Someone's got to do it, and we pray it'll be the English. The villages beyond the Kishan - only thirty miles away - they're under the Commissioner-sahib at Bhowani. There a man can't rob and murder as he likes even his uncle's cousin is a friend of the Dewan's."

"Death and taxes we cannot avoid, but there the taxes are low and regular, and the clerks in Bhowani very reasonable in their extortions." (288)

The greatness of the White rule is seen in a situation where the cholera has broken out in Chalisgon and people were dying of the disease. While many people were running away to escape the epidemic, Rodney too had nursed the idea. But, Caroline stops him and insists that they should stay back to nurse the people who sheltered them during the crisis. She warns him that it is love and understanding which is most important in life and not hatred. We can see similar viewpoints expressed by other characters. In another Mutiny novel named Zemindar, written by Valerie Fitzgerald, Major Barry tells Dearden in a discussion that, "We have the responsibility for this country, and surely a good part of any responsibility is understanding." 147 Caroline Langford in Night Runners of Bengal insists Rodney and tells him:

"We must stay in Chalisgon and help them fight the cholera. ... I know how important it is to reach Gondwara, especially for you. But that's

only military duty - national duty, if you like. The war may drag on, and fifty thousand - two hundred and fifty thousand - people die if we don't get there in time. But that's a guess, and there's no guess about what's happening here in Chalisgon. At Gondwara, victory is a stake; here it's understanding, love. They're more important. They're more important to England too, in the long run. We'll be risking our lives here, as many unknown servants in unknown places have before us. It's 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 fighting's done, and our places are in ruins, and we've gone home, as some day we will. We must fight for Chalisgon, not because Chalisgon is risking everything for us —we are not tradesmen - but because it is right.* (296)

S.D.Singh, who has extensively worked on the Mutiny novels, writes about Night Runners of Bengal, that it is a clear, realistic and true presentation of the issues before the clash that does not occur in any of the earlier novels. He adds, "retributive punishment does not overtake any character. Success and defeat are delineated as matters dependent on little things, uncared for by any man, which may be called chance or fate; the ends are shown as unknown and uncertain factors. Thus, there is no final impression of British superiority, stamped on the novel, and that is why it is far more convincing,
and becomes a matter of realization which comes from the trial, understanding
and the passage of time. This is the greatness of the vision of Masters.148

_Night Runners of Bengal_ can certainly be considered as the *Magnum
Opus* of John Masters. The plot of the novel is tightly knit. Masters tries his
best to keep the emotional aspects at a reasonable distance so that the reality
is not affected. He tries to analyse the facts as objectively as possible. Since
the Mutiny is a watershed in the British history of India, Masters treats the
subject quite seriously. Masters makes no pretence of the matter that the
British learnt a lesson from the Mutiny experience. Failure to get into the
shoes of the Indian cultural psyche led to the disaster. Masters had made
quite a good deal of homework before he took to writing this novel. He never
loses his heart even when the publishers returned the manuscript to him. In
His military experience keeps up his spirit.

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