

# RECAPTURING THE PAST CULTURE IN JOHN MASTERS'S NOVEL "NIGHTRUNNERS OF BENGAL"

**Mr. A. Thiruthurai.**

Research Scholar,  
PG & Research Department of English,  
St. Joseph's College,  
Tiruchirappalli – 620 002.

**Abstract:** American critic Stephen Greenblatt who coined the term 'New Historicism'. It is the reading of literary and non-literary texts in the same historical period. The writers can perceive the facts of the past and depicts these facts from their own concepts to create history. John Masters also wrote with historical perspectives. The research paper is recapturing the past culture in John Masters's novel *Nightrunners of Bengal*. It attempts to study the socio-cultural perspectives and dominant culture in society.

**Key words:** *New Historicism, Cultural Materialism, the Cultural Study, Dominant Culture, the values, conventions, social practices and social forms.*

"History is textualised and texts are historicised". 'New historicism' was coined by American critic Stephen Greenblatt. The simple definition of the new historicism is that it is a method based on the parallel reading of literary and non-literary texts usually of the same historical period. Its main aim is not to represent the past as it really was, but to present a new reality by re-situating it. John Masters also presents his novels in historical perspective.

Lieutenant colonel John Masters (1914-1983) was an English officer in the Indian Army and a Novelist. John Masters is also known for his historical novels set in India. His works are distinguished for their treatment of the British Empire in India. John Masters' novels are a reconstruction of the past from a present perspective and highlight the role of the present in remaking the past and making it more usable to the present.

In this novel *Night Runners of Bengal* (1951) the protagonist of the novel captain Rodney Savage was an officer in a Bengal native infantry Regiment. Captain Rodney had bitter experiences about the British rudeness and hauteur. In this novel John Masters provided the 'terror' and tragedy of the 1857 Indian Mutiny. It was all about "The Sepoy Rebellion". John Masters focused the Socio-Cultural perspectives in this novel. He also represented the historical events in mythical, stereotypical and racist fashion.

Rodney Savage was the captain of the 13<sup>th</sup> rifles Bengal native infantry. Rodney married Joanna. They lived in Bhowani. The native sepoy were forced to follow certain rules and regulations. But the native sepoy never gave up their culture and customs. Hence they were against the ruler of the British East Indian Company. It led both British and Indian people into strong violence. It led to Indian mutiny in which most of the British and native people were killed. Rodney's wife also was killed. Savage escaped with his son and Caroline Langford, a visitor from England to India. Later native sepoy were forced to give up their violence. The British East Indian company made the native people becomes marginalized class.

The research paper is recapturing the past culture in John Masters's novel *Nightrunners of Bengal*. It attempts to study the socio-cultural perspectives and dominant culture in society.

New historicism or cultural materialism reflects a literary work within the context of the author's historical background. New historicism means that art and literature are combined into the material practices of culture. Therefore new historicism focuses on the life of author, the social, economic and political conditions and non-literary works. It also includes the cultural events of the author's historical environment. Raymond William coined the term cultural materialism. The cultural studies combined political, economy, communication, sociology, social theory, literary theory, media theory, film studies, cultural anthropology, philosophy, art history, and criticism and so on.

Richard Hoggart and Raymond William established center for contemporary cultural studies in England in 1968. Stephen Green Blatt used the term 'Cultural Poetic'. Bakhtin coined the term "Cultural Prosaic and Raymond William coined "Cultural Materialism. Cultural studies and Criticism these terms are used. Some cultural critics interested in the cultural art facts such as food habits, music, cinema, sports, events etc. According to Antonio Gramsci culture is a key instrument of political and social control for hierarchy people. Capitalists are brute force in order to maintain control the mass. They penetrate hegemony culture into the culture of working class people. Cultural studies represents the culture (signs, meaning from sign and knowledge of meaning) through author's experience in the text.

John Masters spoke about culture in this novel *Nightrunners of Bengal*. According to him "That is unfortunate—but we cannot judge these things by our own standards, can we, gentlemen?" Sometimes I have to wear my greatcoat because it's chilly." (*Night Runners of Bengal*, 69)

John Masters portrayed the fashionable clothes of his own time.

The two men were dressed so fashionably as to be all but foppish—Torrance in tan trousers, a flowered green waistcoat, a single-breasted tan coat reaching nearly to his knees, and a huge black cravat polka-dotted in green; Geoghegan in black and white dog-tooth-check trousers, double-breasted grey frock coat, and thin yellow tie. Torrance's youth and floridly Byronic handsomeness suited the style to perfection (192)

John Masters depicted the British custom and culture in this novel. According to Luke Hodgkin

Self-fashioning is in effect the Renaissance version of these control mechanisms, the cultural system of meanings that creates specific individuals by governing the passage from abstract potential to concrete historical embodiment. Literature functions within this system in three interlocking ways: as a manifestation of the concrete behavior of its particular author, as itself the expression of the codes by which behavior is shaped, and as a reflection upon those codes. (*A History of Mathematics: From Mesopotamia to Modernity*, 147)

John Masters showed to the readers about English ball, gossip and games.

The Club was a sunbaked mausoleum until five or six in the evening, when nearly every day the cantonment gathered to gossip and play whist, cribbage, or croquet. At this season, especially, the ladies practised their archery, for the Club's annual Hot Weather Tournament of Toxophily (Ladies' Section) would take place on Saturday, April the fourth, beginning at four-thirty p.m. (sharp), and Mr. Dellamain had undertaken to present the Silver Arrow to the winner. (*Night Runners of Bengal*, 114)

John Masters compared the Indian culture and British culture in this passage. In this novel the white women lade Isobel showed these cultures to the readers.

She could cut when she wanted to, and she certainly wouldn't tolerate Victoria's spreading prurient gossip about her cousin. A clean, beautifully delivered cut, heard by as many people as heard Victoria's chatter, all of them knowing that Victoria talked with ayahs to ferret out the gynaecological, obstetrical, and matrimonial secrets of Bhowani. (116)

John Masters revealed the British India through his own understanding of the culture. Both British and Indian cultures are portrayed in this passage.

The carriages rolled to a stop under the As the grown-ups stopped to gossip, the children broke free and ran among the flowerbeds, yelling to each other in Hindustani and English, until their shrill clamour invaded every corner of the lawn. No one could tell boys and girls below six apart, unless he knew them, because all wore white dresses and several petticoats, and all had long curls flowing over their shoulders. The bigger girls looked like dolls which might have been made by women of another generation, for they were dressed in the adult fashions of twenty years before; their skirts were shorter and less full than the modern crinolines, and showed their pantalettes beneath. (200)

John Masters experienced from the both culture. His words are here for readers. "What a country! They might just as well live their most secret moments in the middle of the Pike". (118-119) John Masters rendered the ruler's culture in this passage. The ruler's rings are symbolized as great power to the particular person who has the ring. John Masters showed to the readers that,

Do you think I believe that?" "It's true. Here." He got one hand free and felt in his coat. "Here's her ring, the ruby ring she gave you. She's been crying on the stones in the courtyard and has tried to stab herself. She said 'Give him this ring and tell him to remember when I gave it to him first.' Sahib, no one's pursuing you, but a lot of the soldiers are out of hand—the country's in turmoil. She says you won't be safe except in the fort But——" "But what?(274)

Past is always full of artifacts of cultural interpretation in the text. Thus "each action and thought illumined dark corners of the past, and would throw light somewhere in some heart, for the rest of time". (310). In India opium was used as a medicine for cholera. In this novel

The headman's wife snatched it from his hand, whispering, "Who gave you this? I did not know there was any in the village. This could have saved—it doesn't matter." She broke off a piece, called for milk, and crumbled the opium between her fingers into the bowl... When the spluttering stopped he looked again and saw that the headman's wife was giving her the milk. She did not want it; her throat muscles clenched to refuse it, and when it was down her stomach heaved to reject it. Slowly, while sweat burst out on her forehead and her eyes started, she forced her will to mastery and drank, sip by sip and drop by drop. (310)

In India, women respected the men. They kept the men as a God for them. Hence women are marginalized. John Masters described the female custom in India in the past to the readers. Female never show their faces to male. John Masters represented this custom in this novel. "The gardener's wife hurried down the drive and took the child away. She threw Rodney a quick shy smile before adjusting the end of the sari to cover her face." (17) British followed Christians religion and faith even in the alien lands. In this novel Joanna said to her child. "Careful! Good night, my sweet child. Run along now and say your prayers and get into bed." (21)

Indian culture is different from western culture. But today western culture is grown as tree, whereas native cultures are died. British women danced with all others men. It is not serious act for their husbands. But India never allowed the women to dance with other men. John Masters built it here. "Joanna, let's dance." "Let me look... I can't, Rodney. Major de Forrest booked it just now." "Fine, he can wait. Come on." She came then, with an obvious gladness, a display of happiness—and ownership." (32)

It was the culture of India that the travellers singing songs in the forest at night. The songs would be about Mahabharata, Ramayana, portrayal of kings victory and their history. John Masters portrayed this culture in this novel.

Midnight they were singing “Auld Lang Syne” in chorus in the ballroom, arms linked and feet stamping. He glanced at Eustace Caversham and saw that he was pale. Every year, by Bhowani custom, Caversham allowed himself to be persuaded into singing the first verse, solo. Now the biggest moment of his year was lost and all his gargling gone for nothing; he’d have to wait till ’58. (36)

John Masters represented the past culture of tiger hunting. Tiger hunting was a pride for the kings’ bravery. Therefore John Masters presented the past culture of tiger hunting in this novel.

Joanna stared coldly at Miss Langford and then turned to Rodney. “Has the Kishanpur tiger hunt been cancelled?” He’d forgotten that. It had been the old Rajah’s custom to invite a small party from Bhowani to his annual tiger drive. This year invitations had come for the Hatton-Dunns and Caroline, among others, but not for the Savages. Rodney said, “It wasn’t mentioned—but I hardly think the Rani will go through with it so soon after this. It’s in February, isn’t it? Anyway, it doesn’t concern us, dear.” “But if they do have it, and you’re still there on duty, they’ll have to invite me too, won’t they?”(39)

John Masters presented thick description in this novel, about tiger hunting in the olden days.

FRIDAY, February the twenty-seventh, was the fourth and last day of the hunting. Many tigers had been killed, and the arrangements for their slaughter were by now little more than a drill. At four o’clock each morning the naked beaters trooped off in hundreds to surround the appointed square of jungle. At seven the cavalcade of elephants began to form up in an avenue between the tents. At that hour dewdrops trembled on each blade of grass, the tents stood knee deep in a lake of mist, and the sun touched the bright flags.(86)

John Masters illustrated the food culture of British people in this passage. Readers can understand from this discourse.

Rodney tiptoed along to the dining-room. Two beef chops were swimming in congealed gravy on a cold plate. That fool of a cook must have got up and prepared them at three a.m. He couldn’t face them, forced down a thick slice of bread, drank some more tea, and went out into the open. (43)

British enjoyed the life. They followed make and merry culture in which they enjoy women, money, wine, parties, and land. Etc. John Masters demonstrated this British culture in this novel

He was riding away from Bhowani, and the tea parties, and the whist parties, and the bezique parties, and the interminable talk of sepoy’s boots, officers’ pay, and ladies’ virtue. Caversham’s tremulous tenor dropped back with the furlong stones, and Bulstrode’s bass grunts, and McCardle’s dour Calvinism, and Geoghegan’s Catholic humour. He liked these things; they were Bhowani, Anglo-India. Yet—another India lay ahead and waited for him, a princely, Indian India. Caroline Langford’s metaphor came to him; now, unless he deliberately shut his eyes, he would see into another room of the palace.(45)

British enjoyed the drinking alcohol like anything else in the world.

Airily drunk with sweet wine, he reclined now on a bank of cushions at Rodney’s elbow. The water bubbled in the silver bowl of his hookah; from time to time he belched explosively, for he too had eaten well and gave thanks there for in the customary way. (61)

Joanna asked Rodney to drink the brandy “she said, “Will you have some peach sherbet? It is cold. I think this tent is hot? And I have sweetmeats, and brandy to drink your health. Please sit down.” (95) British people imported the produced drinking from England. The native people also adopted this culture.

Nothing. I am sure I heard a noise. Please have some more of this. It is good brandy, I think? It is imported through England.” “It is from a shop in London. The Rajah bought from them. Mr. Dellamain told him about the shop—that was Mr. Coulson. I met him once. He was a small man with pale hair, and I think his manners were coarse, but he was liked by the Rajah. Do you think the brandy is good? It is easy to make a mistake when you do not know exactly (97)

Hindus never eat cow’s flesh. Hindus believed cow as a goddesses. Here John Masters presented through the character Ramlall Pande. “Who was that sepoy? Ramlall Pande—Brahmin, eight years’ service, a poor shot, home in a village near Cawnpore. He might have eaten some cow’s fat or flesh by mistake somewhere and the sweeper come to hear of it.” (108)

John Masters explained local descriptions about the British game in this passage.

The Club marker potted round the far line of targets, his turban on the back of his head and a ball of twine in one hand. A dozen or so English people stood in groups in the shade of the front verandah, talking and unlocking bow cases...Joanna took out her bow and began to wax the string.(115)

In those days the technological vehicles were not used. People used non- vehicles such as ponies, donkeys and coolies. John Masters minutely presented it. “The regiment would march; women and children, furniture, pets, and toys would travel in pony traps and bullock carts.”(187)

John Masters described the balls and club culture of British in this novel.

The Committee of the Bhowani Club has selected Saturday May the 9th (at 4:30 o'clock) as the date of the annual hot-weather children's party. New members are requested to note that it is not customary for ayahs to accompany children, nor should infants under 2 years of age be brought. W. O. Ransome-Frome. Honorary Secretary February 13th, 1857 He pulled out his watch: two o'clock. He had plenty of time.(188)

Hindu believed the Hindu custom and culture. John Masters illustrated the Holi, the Hindu festival. He explained the significance of Holi festival to the readers.

The N.C.O. was Naik Parasiya, who had been in the temple at Kishanpur that night of the Holi. He was stooped down, fastening a guy rope, and Rodney heard him answer, “It's true.” “How long is he going to do it for? And why?” “He said ‘Until the destruction promised by the gods overtakes the wicked.’”(190)

John Masters explained the authentic old costumes in this novel.

The bigger boys glowered sullenly as “Aunts” exclaimed over their finery. Peter Peckham, aged seven, wore elastic-sided brown boots, cotton stockings barrel-striped in blue and green, full-hipped tartan trousers ending an inch below the knee, a plaid gingham blouse, and a tam o' shanter with a cockerel's feather; he clutched his mother's hand and frowned ferociously at the grass. Master William Osbert Ransome-Frome, ten, wore a sailor suit and a ribboned straw hat. Master Timothy Osbert Ransome-Frome, eight, wore stockings and kilt of the sickly (200)

John Masters explained the past culture about wearing clothes in this novel.

Dress Stewart tartan, and full Highland trappings, and Rodney found time to wish that the Queen had never heard of Balmoral. Albert Bulstrode, nine, wore a blue Dutch boy's costume; its high-crowned maroon velvet cap, with short peak and long tassel, clashed in anguish with his ginger hair and freckled face.(200)

In India caste system was followed. Therefore they never touched low caste people or ate with them. John Masters showed this culture to the readers.

Long ago the Native Officers and sepoy's of his company had arranged an open-air party for tomorrow, the tenth, and had invited him. Their caste laws forbade him to eat with them—they didn't even eat with each other for that matter—but he would come later, in time to watch the amateur juggling and listen to the stories. They'd smoke rolled-leaf cigarettes and hookahs, and talk about crops and cattle. (214-215)

John Masters brought out the real custom of Hindu people during the Holi festivals in this novel.

All together, they tried to force into the narrow part of the alley. They could not, and doubled their yelling as the red water and coloured powder flew, and lifted their torches so that sparks showered up. At the flank a coolie woman in a dark red skirt and brief separate bodice leaned back in giggling stupor against the wall. A man stumbled by and slobbered the whole of his jar of red water over her. She collapsed across Rodney's feet and spread her knees; the man dropped the jar and, as he bent swaying down to rip her bodice open, fell forward on top of her. His head hit Rodney's thigh, and he looked up, hiccupping. “Out of the way, friend. I'm going to have this one!” (160)

During the festival some hierarchy people enjoyed the women. Therefore John Masters brought out this incident to the readers. “The man shouted, “It's an English sahib! Sahib! Sahib! He's come to our Holi!” He meant no harm; Rodney thought for a second the man was going to offer him first go at the woman.”(160)

Brahmins were called as twice born caste people. They created some identity for themselves to show other that they were superior to others.

The chief Brahmin of the temple waddled in. His forehead was marked with a red line down the centre, the sacred thread looped diagonally across the rolls of fat on his bare stomach, and his face was grey with fright. He whispered to the Guru.(162)

In the olden days travellers travelled in a group because they didn't want face the dangers on the roads. “Men travel by night in this season. I do not think we are in great danger, but keep hidden; and remember, do not shoot unless I say the word.”(251) The travellers they shared experiences among the travellers “once a group of men trotted by, bunched together and singing to frighten off wild beasts. Beside a deserted shrine there was a sepoy; his rifle was in his hand and he was getting up from sleep.”(251-252)

John Masters never omitted any culture of India People. John Masters spoke the female custom in this passage.

In the far corner were the women: Amelia Hatch, Caroline, and the headman's wife—the last a brown version of Amelia, with the addition of a small gold nose ring and a caste mark. All three wore white saris. Mrs. Hatch's dress had fallen to pieces days before and her black buttoned boots, prominently displayed, were wildly incongruous under the oriental flow of the sari.(283)

John Masters tried to differentiate the British culture and native culture to the readers.

The headman's wife was leaning back, cackling with soft laughter and holding her sides. He watched her lean forward with another of her eager questions—about English clothes, servants, food, perfumes, housekeeping expenses, feminine hygiene, obstetrics, care of children. The catechism had gone on for twelve days, and no end was in sight. She found a vast humour in every answer; probably she didn't believe half of them, and laughed in admiration of the white women's fabulous ingenuity. (285)

In those days the native people believed that cholera was a punishment for the sins. John Masters clarified the superstitious beliefs in this novel.

Rodney pursed his lips. Perfect! He could tell at once that they were speaking the truth, though of course he'd look at the burning ghats later and make sure. Perfect! The bitter bit! The poor superstitious fools believed that the cholera was a punishment for their sin in plotting to murder the refugees. They'd be glad now to see them go, alive. Now he could lead Caroline, Robin, and Amelia Hatch to safety, and leave the village to a fate more dreadful than even he could have devised for it. After that only Piroo would remain to be dealt with.(292)

John Masters portrayed the past culture of British and Indian cultures. John Masters was recapturing the past culture to the readers.

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