

# RECONSTRUCTING THE PAST CULTURE: IN JOHN MASTERS'S NOVEL "THE RAVI LANCERS."

**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 his novels with historical perspectives. The research paper is the study of reconstructing the past cultures in John Masters's novel *The Ravi Lancers*. It attempts to study the socio-cultural perspectives and also the contemporary historical events which are the subjects of his novels. This research tries to produce a critical analysis of contemporary culture and dominant culture in the society.

**Key words:** New Historicism Cultural Materialism, The socio-Cultural Perspectives, The Cultural Study and Dominant culture.

"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 noted 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.

*The Ravi Lancers* (1972) The novel deals with an Indian regiment in World War I. This novel concerns on an Indian Regiment sent to the Western front in the First World War. It centers on the conflict developed between the regiments of British Commander and Indian Commander. The Ravi Lancers was the private armies belongs to Indian princes, Krishna Ram, Warren Bateman was a new commanding officer for the Ravi Lances. Warren Bateman brought Krishna Ram and his lancers to the Western Front. Krishna Ram had an affair with Warren's sister Diana and Warren's wife had affair with Ralph Harris. Warren became a tyrant to his men to dominate their traditions and religious customs with morals. At the end of the novel Warren Batmen shot dead himself. Krishna Ram still fought for England in France. Because of Krishna Ram's word had given for him. In this novel John Masters presented reality of the society in a slice and crafts with his own imaginative faculty.

The research paper is recreating the past culture in John Masters's novel *The Ravi Lancers*. It attempts to study the socio-cultural perspectives and also the contemporary historical events which are the subjects of his novels. This research tries to produce a critical analysis of contemporary culture.

John Masters noted this British culture as well as Indian culture. History is the study of facts of past as well as the culture of the past. John Masters portrayed the cultural facts in this novel.

History, in the words, is not a calculating machine. It unfolds in the mind and the imagination, and it takes body in the multifarious response of a people's culture, itself the infinitely subtle meditation of material realities of under pinning economic fact, of griity objectives (Cultural and Imperialism, 1).

John Masters represented the dress code in the past in this novel.

The long afternoon wore slowly on and as the sun set in red flame down the vale Krishna bathed and then dressed for the ball at Manning ford Bohun. He was going to wear uniform, but after he had put on his khaki shirt and trousers, he stopped. In the suitcase he had a set of the formal dress of his kingdom — white jodhpur trousers, tightly wrinkled from ankle to knee, fuller above that, and a long gold-silk achkan, like a frock coat, buttoning to the stand-up collar, cuffs and collar heavily embroidered with silver metal thread. With these there were ornate white and gold slippers, a necklace of worked gold chain, sapphire studded, and the diamond and ruby star of the Royal Order of the Sun of Ravi. He only hesitated a second before quickly taking off his uniform and dressing again as the Yuvraj of Ravi. (299)

The different cultures were spread out during the war time. John Masters narrated the British game cricket. "It was almost as when they had first met, at the cricket field in Lahore and he was interestedly sharing opinions with a member of a different culture." (365) John Masters portrayed cultures of the wearing cloths culture of Indian people in this passage. Krishna Ram's

Grandfather,' said earnestly, leaning forward, and realizing suddenly how strange and out of place his trousers and tie and jacket looked against the Rawal's dhoti and kurtha and the rajah's white robes, with the grains of rice sticking to the painted stripes on both men's foreheads (52)

John Masters introduced the caste system to the readers in this passage.

That is good. But we will be among heathen, who know not our gods, and might have no respect for our ways. It is in my heart that we might be given improper food, and there will be no redress. Also that we will be unable to perform prayers and

ceremonies in the appointed manner. We are Rajputs, Kshatriyas all, and it lies heavy on my heart that we may return unclean, though we go now pure in our faith.'(77-78)

John Masters described the British greeting in this passage. But Indian greeting is different from British greeting. In this novel John Masters noted down it.

Krishna could tell from the other's accent that this was another gentleman, and noted also that he made no attempt to shake hands but greeted the introduction with an offhand nod. Now he said to Warren Bateman, 'Are you playing Fuller?' (104)

Indian people never eat western food in the olden days. The British came to India and Indian followed the western habits of food culture. In this novel Krishna Ram He ate curry puffs from his saddlebag, drank a little from his water bottle. Three horses lame, one with a severe girth gall. Nothing to be done (115)

Even John Masters never left to describe the Indian gesture in this novel. He narrated like this. "The adjutant made a very Indian gesture of sleeping, that contrasted comically with his clipped British moustache and cap." (120) John Masters narrated the local custom of native people who made a pyre. Readers can understand the past culture about the pyre in the olden days.

There, a hundred yards beyond the last house, a pyre of logs stood on the grass. It was eight feet long by four feet wide and four feet high. A few men were already squatted round it, smoking bidis through cupped hands. The Brahmin was there, a short cavalry greatcoat of coarse khaki over his dhoti and kurta, his feet bare on the cold grass. Other sowars of A Squadron were coming, their Stables over. They had put on tunics and turbans now and some wore their greatcoats as well. It was not as cold here as it would have been in most of Ravi on this date, but there the air was fresh and dry and a man could see far and breathe deep. Here there was a dampness in the air, a clutch at the throat, as of drowning, and the air itself often so thick that a man could not see the spire in the next village (131)

Namasti is the one of etiquettes to Indian people. The Indian people put the dead bodies in the funeral pyre. John Masters described it here. John Masters depicted the Indian culture in this passage.

The Brahmin made namasti to Krishna, the rissaldar-major, and Ishar Lall, as they sat at the head of the pyre. Four sowars came from the house that was the Regimental Aid Post, where the dafadar's body had lain since the accident last night. It was wrapped in an army blanket, and under that, revealed as the bearers laid the body on the pyre, a white sheet, from which the bare feet stuck out at one end and the battered head at the other. The bearers removed and carefully folded the blanket. The Brahmin began chanting the funeral hymn from the Rigveda as a couple of men beat on the little hand drums that Quartermaster Sohan Singh had managed to smuggle into the regimental baggage, together with half a hundred sets of ceremonial nautch clothes and costumes for the great Hindu festivals of Dussehra, Holi, and Dewali. ( 131)

John Masters defined the Indian culture in this passage

Him who has passed away along the mighty steps, and has spied out the path for many, him the son of Vivaswati, the assembler of people, Yama, the king, do thou present with oblation... Two bandsmen played softly on clarinets. The gathered sowars chanted the name of Rama and the sacred formula Rama Noam Sat Hai. Unite with the fathers, unite with Yama, with the reward of thy sacrifices and good works in highest heaven! Leaving blemish behind go back to thy home, unite with the body, full of vigour! Only the Brahmin wore his caste marks, Krishna noticed. He himself felt awkward, to be seated cross-legged at a burning without the presiding Brahmin having pressed grains of rice on to his marked forehead, and murmured a word of blessing.(130-131)

John Masters narrated the funeral pyre performance in this passage.

As the dead man had no son in the regiment or within reach, the youngest sowar in his troop acted as his son and performed a son's sacred duty of setting fire to his father's pyre. The sowar was barely seventeen, and looked unnaturally solemn as he took the lighted taper from the Brahmin's hand. The Brahmin and others poured melted ghi over the corpse and the piled wood.

Then the young sowar thrust the taper deep into the pyre. Smoke began to curl out. The chanting grew louder.(132)

John Masters described the Hindu feast of Dewali. It was the culture of Indian people. Readers can understand it.

The festival of Dewali was due in a week's time. Would there be proper nautches, feasts, and prayers, as was customary?

Warren hesitated a moment before answering. The big Dussehra celebrations soon after the battle of Poucelle had gone off very well from one point of view, but they had emphasized the men's far origin and foreign faith, and brought crowds of British troops and French civilians to stare at the prayers and garlands and sacrificial ceremonies. It had made Warren feel, he said, that he was commanding a mob of circus freaks, or beings from another planet. His officers' carefully applied Englishness had temporarily evaporated, like a thin layer of wax burned away by the Brahmin's prayers; and he had had to demote a lance-dafadar to the ranks for wearing a caste mark in defiance of orders.(139)

Indian people made some custom during the cultural practices. Tamash and Therukoothu are the famous customs to Indian people. John Masters depicted it in this novel.

He'd have to allow the men to celebrate Dewali in the usual way. He answered the question. 'Yes, if we are not in the line. I shall tell the Quartermaster-sahib he can spend 300 rupees out of the regimental fund. As you know, he has some costumes. There will be a great tamasha.' The men clapped and cheered. Then, after a few more minor points, as full darkness fell, and rain began to drip from the beech boughs, Warren Bateman said, 'Anything more? Very well. Durbar is ended. The next durbar will be one month from now.'(139)

John Masters tried to bring out the past culture about Holi to the readers.

It was March 20th, the second and most important day of the great Hindu spring festival of Holi. The Brahmin, squatting in front of the lingam, rocked back and forth in white robes, palms joined, eyes closed, chanting endless Sanskrit verses of prayer to the Fire God. A dozen sowars seemed to fill the room, some chanting holy names, some praying silently with hands joined and heads bowed. They were all wearing their grey army socks, for the tiles were cold and damp, though the boots were left outside. O Fire, you are immortal among mortals, You protect us as a friend does, In front and at the back and at higher levels and lower levels. Destroy the strength and might of the demons!(198)

John Masters narrated the culture with historical meanings in this passage.

O beloved we are celebrating the festival of Holi today in Brij Two ladies of fair complexion and two of dark have come out of their homes to play Holi(199) ...Holi was the Rite of Spring. The men had not seen their wives and lovers for over six months now. They were drinking, too, passing round brandy and wine. (200)

John Masters described the festival of Dewali as well as the Holi festival in India.

He went back into the village. The doors were open, the men inside drinking and singing lascivious songs. Other men ran down the street hurling the red powder, symbol of women's blood. From behind half drawn curtains French villagers watched, wondering.(200)

All the people celebrated like anyone festival "He moved on, among men now dancing in the street in the dusk, and powder bursting like bombs against doors and windows, and the sound of the band a spring wind in the air, full of longing." (201) In this novel warrern allowed the Indian to celebrate the Holi festival.

During Holi it was permitted, as a special case, that men should wear caste marks. I remind all ranks that this will not be permitted again while the regiment serves directly under the King-Emperor. Many of your uniforms were spoiled or stained by the powder thrown during Holi. This is a shameful mark to put upon the King-Emperor's uniform. Let it be known now, that there be no misunderstanding later — it is forbidden to throw powder during Holi or on any other occasion! Hukm hai!' 'Jo hukm!' the regiment cried. (209)

It was the Indian believes that dead bodies must be burnt into ashes and leave it into Holy Ganga river. John Masters brought out this custom in this novel.

A lance-dafadar of the Machine Gun Section said, 'Lord, when we came out of the battle of St. Rambert, bringing with us as many of our dead as we could find, they were buried in a common grave behind the trenches. It is our right and custom that the dead shall be burned. It is understood that the ashes cannot be scattered on a stream that will take them to Holy Ganga, but certainly the bodies should be burned, not buried, to hold the spirit under this foreign soil instead of releasing it to the air, that circles the whole earth, and might perhaps carry our dust to fall on Holy Ganga's waters.' The quartermaster said, 'Lord, I indented for wood, but was refused. The DAQMG sahib said there was a grave shortage of wood, and what he had was needed for revetting the trenches.' (231)

In this novel John Masters noted many ideologies about the cultural description. Readers can see it. "Major Bholanath barked, 'Attention!' His palms joined, Krishna bowed to the men and they to him. He walked quickly away across the field, through the dusk to his billet, his suite following respectfully ten paces behind him". (232)

India people used opium and British people used opium too. "After a brief hesitation Krishna Ram said, 'You will catch Major Bholanath, sir. He smokes opium nearly every night with one or two others... older men.'" (258) But India had forbidden using opium. It was sins to Indian people for using opium. John Masters described it here.

They have been doing it all their lives.' 'And you knew, and did nothing about it, knowing that the taking of any form of dope is forbidden?' 'I didn't think it was... I knew it wasn't doing any harm,' Krishna Ram said. 'Not to these men. It's our custom.' 'It's going to end, now, with Bholanath's being cashiered and sent to prison.' 'He'll kill himself with his own sword rather than go to prison, sir,' Krishna said. 'We'll see. Follow me.' (258)

British believed the Christianity believes. Hence they went to church and followed Christian custom.

Sunday morning, the bells ringing for church, and the Bateman women pulling on their gloves in the hall. 'I don't know why I go,' Joan Bateman said. 'Not many people in this country are behaving in a Christian manner... and certainly none of the parishioners here.' 'Now, Joan,' old Mrs. Bateman said equably, 'while you're in this house, you'll go to church, like the rest of us.' (291)

John Masters described the reality of Christian faith in the society.

It would be very impolite to Mr. Wyatt if we didn't.' 'Oh, Mother,' Joan said impatiently, 'politeness doesn't matter compared with honesty.' 'One can be too honest for one's own good,' Mrs. Bateman said. She looked at Krishna, who opened the door, and offered her his arm. From behind them Joan, her arm on Ralph Harris's, said, 'And charity is another thing that's missing here. You wait till the trial tomorrow and see how much charity there'll be for Sam, on account of six miserable pheasants. Six! It isn't charity that'll help him, but the lawyer I've got from London.' (291-292)

British had a custom to go the ball where they enjoyed themselves.

Then old Mrs. Bateman came down, exclaimed over Krishna, and made sure they were well wrapped; and Joan came and said, 'Well... enjoy yourselves. It may be the last time.' 'Joan,' her mother-in-law said reprovingly. 'I didn't mean the war,' she said. 'I meant, the last time anyone will be holding balls like this. Anyway, I really mean, have a good time.' She pecked Diana on the cheek. (299-300)

John Masters showed the some superstitious believes which followed blindly in India. Indian people used Vedic medicine. British never allowed Indian to use Vedic medicine.

Do you think' Krishna lowered his voice. 'Do you think that Vedic medicine might help, if you were permitted to practise it?' The doctor said, 'Yes — not because it is Vedic, but because it is Indian. The men are suffering fundamentally from starvation, as I said. I have been experimenting. The results aren't definite, but the fact is that these NYD fevers go down in a day or less if I put the patient in a ward where I have the Brahmin chanting mantrasy giving out Ganges water, and putting rice and caste marks on the man's foreheads.' 'The CO allows that?' 'I don't ask him,' the doctor said grimly. 'I have a very efficient spy system and when he is seen coming everyone washes his forehead and the Pandit hides... Don't bother to see those men. The ones who aren't asleep are in shock by now (307)

John Masters described the western culture and British culture about using toilet paper in this novel. Readers can understand the British culture.

She was dabbing herself with paper. She said, 'What's that thing for? Another lavatory?' Krishna looked and laughed, and said, 'I didn't know, either, when we first came to France. It's called a bidet, and it's for cleaning your behind — and this.' He



cupped her vulva in his hand, pressing a finger gently between her wet lips. 'But how?' she said, at first making as though to push his hand away and then spreading her legs to give him deeper access. 'You sit on it, run the water — either just into the bowl, or there's a vertical spray — then use your hand to soap yourself. Your left hand only, if you're an Indian.' 'The left hand?' she said, puzzled. He nodded. 'This one' — he held it up — 'we use it for wiping ourselves, instead of toilet paper.' 'Instead of toilet paper,' she gasped, 'you mean...?' (327-328)

It was about the Indian culture in this passage. Krishna Ram said

We think that toilet paper is really very insanitary. You can only get clean in running water so when we defecate we take a pot of water called a loti, and when we have finished we run some of the water over our left hand, and then rub the backside and go on doing it until the hand comes away clean.' She moved to the basin and began to run hot water. She said, 'Do you do that?' He said, 'Not now, because the general and Warren ordered us to act like British officers. But I shall again soon... We also think it's dirty to bathe in a bath, like that' — he nodded at the elaborately decorated bath tub. 'We only bathe in running water, usually a river. A woman will go in wearing her clothes.' 'How dirty!' Diana said. 'But it isn't really. She washes under a layer of cotton. The cotton dries on her, she's clean, and she hasn't displayed herself in invitation to men.' He held her from behind, again cupping her breasts in his hands. 'Get dressed, and we'll go out and see Paris.' (328)

John Masters described the western fashion in this novel

He stripped to the Indian testicle bag he had taken to wearing instead of European underpants, and ceremonially washed from head to toe in water which Hanuman poured into his hand from a big German container. The Brahmin watched, praying (394)

The research paper provides the past culture in John Masters's novel *The Ravi Lancers*. Readers can realize the socio-cultural interpretations and also produce the contemporary culture.

## WORK CITED

- Barry, Petter. *Beginning Theory: An Introduction to Literary Theory*, Manchester University Press, 2002 print.  
 Harold, Veaser. *The New Historicism*, London: Routledge, 1989. print.  
 Masters, John. *The Ravi Lancers*, Great Britain, The Chaucer Press Ltd, 1972. print.  
 Said, Edward.W. *Cultural and Imperialism*, Random House, 1993. print.

