

Taking God's Name in Vain: Negotiating Oriental Religious Beliefs and Practices in *The Confession of a Thug* by Philip Meadow Taylor

Dr. Rishu Sharma

Assistant Professor, Amity University Haryana
E-mail: rsharma@ggn.amity.edu

Abstract—*The present paper aims to critically examine the theme of oriental religious beliefs and practices in The Confession of a Thug by Philip Meadow Taylor. The paper argues that the novel is greatly influenced by the then European Christian views on society and people and that these views have been used to present and portray an entirely distinct non-European culture with its own specificities. It contends that the religious beliefs and practices of the thugs have been taken out of its original context and have been used to strengthen the occidental prejudices. It is also maintained that the European-Christian views on the cult of thuggee have been used to generalize the Indian society. Besides, the paper also highlights the historical role the British officers played as Christians to cultivate a Eurocentric image of the natives and the native society. The objective of the paper is to identify and analyse the novel's Euro-Christian perspectives on oriental religious beliefs and practices, and to explore the sociocultural and religio-social situations of the Indian subcontinent in which the profession of thuggee was practised.*

Introduction

The Confession of a Thug appeared in 1839, at the Empire's peak. The novel was an instant hit for its riveting description of the orient and for its dealing of the theme of thuggee which was seen both with surprise and dread by the colonizers. The novel takes up the cult of thuggee as its principle theme and through the life of Amir Ali, a dreaded thug, Muslim by faith, provides the reader with an informed insight into the way of life of the thugs. The novel highlights the thugs' unique unswerving sense of unity centering on the devotion to the Goddess Bhownee. The thugs come from many different socio-religious backgrounds. They are both Hindus and Muslims by religion. Moreover, Hindu thugs are of different caste affiliations who pray together and work together as thugs. Despite being a heterogeneous group they are surprisingly united in their profession under the patronage of Goddess Bhownee.

In the novel, Amir Ali makes confession of his ill-deeds to a British official who assumes the task of exhaustively understanding the "horrible profession" of Thuggee. The thug

is in captive and is being interrogated by this officer. It is a seamless interrogation. Amir Ali, narrates in chilling details his iniquities and savage adventures of his thug life with a firm belief that the Goddess Bhownee is his protector and guide. The interrogator, who listens to the account of this captive thug, is awestruck by the callous description of his crime and the repeated mention of the divine backing he thinks he received during his mis/adventures as a thug. The officer listens to the thug in amazement, and at times in horror, as the thug goes on relating the story of his life. In the present paper who is under scrutiny is not the thug but the officer who represents the civilization. It is in his manners, assumptions, opinions and choice of words one is to find European-Christian views and prejudices. It is in his purposefulness and rationality one finds traces of European Christian prejudices with which the whole adventure of colonialism began; it is in his determination as a reformer one sees the European Christian efforts to fight the lost battle for 'civilizing' the 'incorrigible barbarians'. It is also in him one sees the struggle of a European man of good religion fighting with the resource of reason and rationality against religions which are synonymous with savagery, irrationality and bestiality.

2. Purposeful and Rational Occident

It is an inarguable fact that the Christian missionaries went to distant lands with a firm sense of purpose. Their main aim was to spread the words of Christ among the non-believers. However, there has been very little critical reflection on connections between the religious backgrounds of the colonial officials and the endeavours of these officials in the building of the Empire.

In the novel, the interrogator exudes confidence; he is rational, just and sensible. He considers himself responsible for bringing order and reason in the world of savages. He is steadfast in playing his part in the concerted British resolve to eliminate thuggee from the roads of India. He not only

endorses strict, punitive actions but also considers these actions just, moral and appropriate.

It is indeed too true, Ameer Ali, said I; your old vocation seems to be as flourishing as ever, but it cannot last. Men will get tired of exposing themselves to the chance of being hunted down like wild beasts, and hanged when they are caught; or what is perhaps worse to many, of being sent over the Kala-Panee (transported); and so heartily does the Government pursue Thugs wherever they are known to exist, that there will no longer be a spot of ground in India where your profession can be practised. (1)

Is the interrogator of Taylor's creation just another loyal colonial officer? Is he making the above statement only as a servant of the Empire? Throughout his interrogation he never takes the name of Christ. Nor he ever explicitly uses the tenets of Christianity to expose the vile profession of thuggee. He only seems to use his reason and morality to expose the diabolical work of thuggee.

The officers who served in the colonial India were the servants of the Empire and as per rules and regulations of their profession; they kept religion and profession separate. The interrogator, being an officer deputed by imperial government, must be duty-bound and acts as per the requirements of his profession than of his religion. However, is he truly secular? Is he a rational and dutiful servant of the Empire who keeps his Christian morality at a distance while at work?

The debate that the civilizing mission of Christianity and the British colonial rule mutually complemented each other has been going on for years. It has been argued by many historians that Christian missionary not only sought the imperial back up but also helped in establishing the colonial rule. Vallgarda in her study of role of missionaries in colonizing mission tries to go beyond the general schematic binary of metropolis and colony. She questions the generally held representations of the power relations in the colonial India.

Vallgarda's inquiry, however, overlooks the religious inclination of the officials themselves who were bound to act as more Christian in a land of different faith, tongue and culture as a reaction to religiocultural shock.

It is to be noted that a modern Christian of the post Enlightened Europe was not devoid of basic goods of Christianity but was a possessor of a refined Christianity. The protestant background of the British officers made them see and experience their religion in a liberal light.

However, to think that these officers were modern rational men devoid of any baggage of Christianity will be wrong. In fact, Christianity substantially influenced their actions and opinion as British in distant lands. The upbringing of these officers and the Christian teaching they received both consciously and unconsciously influenced the way they inferred and perceived things in a non-Christian land.

Copland in his analysis of the role of missionaries in colonial expansion points out that there was indeed an imperial backup in the context of India and had the Indian Mutiny not happened, missionaries would have eventually taken up a big role in the colonial expansion.

Vashum analyses the mutual understanding between the missionaries and the colonial authority. In an unsaid way the officials too advocated at least a Christian way of looking at colonial subject even if they did not want the missionaries to work actively participate in the administration of the colonies. Vashum even goes to the extent of branding British colonialism as Christian imperialism. He quotes Penny Carlson's view that "Providence had given India to Britain for a higher purpose..." (48)

It is this belief that it was God's plan to give India to the British that ruled the minds for both the missionaries and the colonial officials alike. However rational the interrogator may sound, it is in his opinion on thugs' religious beliefs and practices that throws light on his Christian background.

The concern for an orderly, peaceful and just world is intense in the interrogator. He wants to establish a rule of law and in order to do so he must extirpate thuggee. He almost appears to have a divine right to save the people of Hindustan from the menace of thuggee. This seemingly divine right does not come from the authority and power of the position of an officer alone. It is the conviction of officer who is sure of morality. This surety comes from Christianity. He does not need to formulate reasons and justifications. A Christian platform in the ways of civilizing mission is already prepared for him. He knows that this is a land of heathens. He is bound to find savagery around and must do whatever it takes establish a humane society. Though the officer does not assume the responsibility of establishing a Christian world, which is primarily left to the missionaries, he must work in the lines of Christianity from which he derives his moral strength.

3. The Remorseless Oriental Conscience

The success of the Oriental project was in establishing that the civilizing mission was an arduous and virtually thankless task. Europe had taken upon herself a next to impossible project. In the writings of the colonial officials, an exaggerated account of their effort in the reformation of the 'incorrigible' natives is often noticed.

The thugs are one such group of incorrigible natives. The thugs in Taylor's novel take great pride in being who they are and seem to naturally lack the rationality of realizing the vileness of their profession. For them being a thug is a service to the almighty and the Goddess Bhowanee. Ismael's friend's piece of advice on Amir Ali's inception to the group of thugs exhibits that pride:

Put the matter in the proper light; talk to him of the glory of the business, and of our surety of Heaven. Describe to him all about the houris which our blessed prophet—may his name be

honoured!—has promised us; and tell him, too, of the heaven of Indur, all of which you know we are sure of; the one by our faith as Moslims, and the other by our profession. He will soon be won over, I am certain." (7)

Although the word confession appears in the title of the work, this confession is without a guilty conscience. Amir Ali, although in captive, and under the good teaching of the British officials, is no way guilty of his deeds. He still firmly believes in the sanctity of his profession. The most interesting part of his confession is the environment in which he makes his confession. He is not under duress of any sort. No statement whatsoever is being taken out of him coercively. He is free to speak his mind. He narrates the saga of the murder committed by him with pride. He holds his profession in high esteem and looks down upon the thieves and the *pindarees* who also follow the profession of same nature and inclination. All in all he is an incorrigible, remorseless criminal.

However, the interrogator shows to the reader that these thugs are not a total monster. Although their redemption is not possible they still have some traits of human beings. Thugs too feel remorse, they too feel guilty but they are sort lived. They can only empathize superficially.

I felt as though a thousand shitans sat on my breast, and sleep would not come to my eyes. It appeared so cold-blooded, so unprovoked a deed, that I could not reconcile myself in any way to have become even a silent spectator of it... as if she wept over the deed she had witnessed, drove me again under the tent. I crept close to my father, who was sound asleep, and embracing him with my arms, sleep came to my eyelids, and I woke not till the usual hour of prayer arrived, when I was roused by my father to join in the morning supplication. (23)

4. Good Religion versus Bad Religion

In places where religious practices were not based on books or on long traditions, it was relatively easy for Christianity to gain its footholds. In such places Christianity was domesticated by natives in a relatively easier manner. In the context of India, however, Hinduism, Jainism, Buddhism predated Christianity. Besides, Islam was as strongly followed as in the place of its origin. It was precisely the reason why the missionaries did not have the mettle to take up religious conversion entirely on their own. In a vast country like India, any interference in the matters of religion often brought political and administrative problem as Indians were over sensitive toward their religion.

In the novel, we notice a detailed account of origin of the profession. The Goddess of destruction is revered by both the Hindus and Muslims alike who pray to her to seek her help and guidance. In an astonishingly scrupulous description of the ceremony in which ritualization of thuggee takes place, Amir Ali tells how the thugs are bound by their faith in The Goddess.

"Oh Bhowanee! mother of the world! whose votaries we are, receive this thy servant—vouchsafe to him thy protection—to us, an omen which may assure us of thy consent."

We waited for some time; and at last, from a tree over our heads, the loud twittering of the small tree-owl was heard.

"Jey Bhowanee! Victory to Bhowanee!" cried the whole of the leaders; ..."

"Loud and fervent were the cries of praise to Bhowanee; and each turning to his companion, congratulated him on the happy prospect" (18)

Thugs always act in groups and their strength from the divine sanction of the Goddess. Once they have the favourable omen; they rejoice together. They need no more back up. However, in the absence of a divine sign or unfavourable omen they retreat instantly as they firmly believe that it is sin to act against her will. "We must return instantly," said my father. "Bhowanee is unpropitious..."

They say Jay Bhowanee before they start their expedition, during the expedition and after the success of the expedition.

Throughout the work it is insisted by the narrator that the thuggee is a cult. The thugs are driven by a belief of sacredness of their profession and the divine backup. It is shown time and gain that their acts have religious sanction and in no way they ever feel guilty or consider themselves sinners. The belief of self-righteousness permeates their mind and they take every ritual of the ceremony in a gravely serious manner. There are various interpretation and elaboration of the third commandment.

In order to present the profession of thuggee in a disdainful manner the narrator questions the very foundation of the profession. The Eurocentric fear of the oriental belief is apparent in depiction of the Goddess. A layman reader with not much knowledge of Hindu theory will naturally misunderstand the whole basis the *avatara* belief in the Hindu Myth. The narrator however, goes far beyond the criticism of idol worship rather he question the very motive of worship.

Amir Ali narrates his life and adventure and absolves himself of all his crimes from the beginning by stating that the life of thuggee choose him and it was god's will. His imprisonment seemed to have done very little to hurt his pride and the feeling of self-righteousness even if he has his share of regrets. His regrets does not come from the guilty feeling of being a thug rather all his regrets come not having followed the rules of his profession. He is extremely superstitious. He believes in divine signs and signals. He believes in good and bad omens.

"To me this was all strange and unaccountable; but the implicit faith which everyone seemed to place in the omens, and the regularity with which the ceremonies were conducted, impressed me with a strong idea of their necessity; though, to my shame I say it, as I acquired confidence in myself, I scorned them as foolish; until misfortune, no doubt sent by

Bhowanee, brought me to my senses, and made me penitent." (20)

The sanction of the Goddess is the most important thing for the thugs in order to begin a thuggee expedition. Without her permission and sanction they do not do a thing.

Did anyone ever hear of a whole band being separated, and each pursuing a separate course, without the omens being taken, or a solemn sacrifice offered to Bhowanee?" (99)

They begin their adventure by seeking the Goddess's blessing and her sanction: "My father and Hoosein were present to guide us by their counsels and experience, and the matter in hand was commenced by a sacrifice and invocation to Bhowanee;.."

The belief in the power of the Goddess is so strong that even Muslim thug have same respect and devotion for her as the Hindu thugs and they do not hesitate in committing the heresy of praising the prophet and the Goddess one at the same time.

"Ul-humd-ul-illa!" I exclaimed; "it is finished, blessed be the Prophet and Bhowanee!" (197)

Ismael, Amir Ali's father, an old and experienced thug by profession reminds Amir Ali of danger of ignoring omens and displeasing the Goddess. "That is all true," said my father; "but it is madness to think of proceeding. Foolish boy! you have never known a reverse, thanks to your good fortune, and the excellent advice by which you have been guided; but beware how you disregard omens—it will one day lead you to destruction. As to this matter, the designs of Bhowanee are inscrutable, and she must be obeyed!" (207)

The Goddess is merciful but to displease her means sudden and definite destruction. She is known to spare none when angry.

As the thugs feel that they have the divine right to carry out the profession of thuggee and the goddess is with them; they even have the spiritual resources to consider themselves victims, if they feel cheated in any of their transactions.

Yet, O Rajah! Bhowanee will question you for this deed—for the destruction of her votary. My blood be on your head, and the curse of a dying man be with you! You have deceived me, robbed me, shared my spoils, taken the produce of murder; nay, be not impatient, you know it is the truth, and that Alla, who is the judge of all, knows it also. He will cast your portion in Jehanum, as a kafir; and Bhowanee will rejoice that the destroyer of her votary writhes in the torments of the damned."(254)

O Bhowanee, hast thou so utterly forsaken Ameer Ali?(268)

The divine sanction that the thugs seek from the goddess is portrayed as a misleading faith. It is to be noted that the multiplicity of God is one of the many reasons for diversity in Hinduism. There are many ways of life and ways of being. Hindus have never been a homogenous community nor they

have they tried to unite themselves as a core group with similarity of culture and belief system. It is the theologies of Hinduism that act as the binding threads. The rational European mind failed to understand the psychological and theological reason behind the idol worship. God is an essential part of the daily Hindu life. No thought can be generated without his presence. To take God's name is intrinsic to Hinduism.

Idols are an inevitable psychological link between the devotee and the god. Idols help devotee give visible meaning to his inner feelings. It helps in connecting the imagination with the material reality of world. Though god cannot be touched and seen, it can be felt by everyone. Idol gives those inner feelings and emotions a visible and tangible form upon which a devotee can concentrate and enhance the spiritual energy. Idols are planned to be original form of the original. They have well-thought form. There is a strong spiritual meaning attached with every idol. The symbolism, in fact, is so strong that the devotee does not feel lack of the original. The idols by themselves, by the inner spiritual force of the devotee become the original. The idol is not the manifestation of god rather it is god.

Regardless of various philosophies and theologies existing in India, the people of India have almost always lived a simple and unsophisticated religious life. They have obeyed to decrees issued by the authorities of religion and abstained from the taboos.

The sophisticated approaches towards life have only partially touched the way of life of the general mass. Besides, the priestly class's indifference towards the psychological and emotional needs of other Hindus have made them largely dependent on the idolized form of god with whom one can associate easily as one can with a human being.

Moreover, the priestly class themselves endorsed idol worship for religiopolitical reasons. Idolatry was used as a means to establish control over the general mass. It is to be noted that the priests took total control of how the idols were to be preserved and worshiped. The *pujari* culture in Hinduism ensured that there be a caretaker to look after the idols. Through their total control of the idols, they exercised control over the worshipers. It was the *pujaris* who decided the protocols, etiquettes and customs in a temple or wherever idol of god was erected. Their profession was revered by the rest of the Hindus because of the common belief that caring for the god was a pious profession. The endorsement of idolatry therefore by the priest only helped in strengthening the belief among the general mass.

The Orient does not have the onus of justifying its inclination towards idolatry or what it seeks from its gods and goddess. The idea of opposition to idolatry emanates basically from the Abrahamic religions. Idolatry was a common practise back then and was vehemently contested by prophets of the then era. This concerted opposition to idolatry signals how strong

must have been the inclination for idolatry (that prophets all in unison opposed to its idea). So strong was this inclination that the use of violent forces to quell idolatry was a justified common practise. It was a direct hindrance in dissemination of the gospels. The informed interrogator of Taylor's work has difficulty in absorbing the idea of taking god's blessing to conduct an evil deed.

If the whole menace of thugs is seen from a socioeconomic perspective, there was very little these thugs could have done to have a decent livelihood. In the Indian Society there was strong undisputed tradition of wealth accumulation for the posterity. The culture of charity and largesse was virtually absent. The practise of alms/ *dakshina* was limited to the priestly class. It was a general notion in the society that by being generous to the priests blessing of the god could be received. The lower echelons of the society had no option but choose a profession for livelihood, however, mean, menial, dangerous and violent. The British too had economic reasons for a concerted crack down on the profession of thuggee. They had come to commerce and exploit the huge resources that Indian subcontinent offered. They needed the road safe and secure for the smooth movement people and goods. Nevertheless, economic reasons alone do not provide the strength to exercise sustained effort to extirpate thugs from the road of the Indian subcontinent. They needed a moral justification for public execution of the thugs, their persecution and their separation from their spouses to wipe out the generation of thugs. "Ah! You are a horrible set of miscreants, said I; I have indeed the experience, from the records of murders which are daily being unfolded to me, of knowing this at least of you. But you must begin your story; I am prepared to listen to details worse than I can imagine human beings to have ever perpetrated."

Protestant Christian views had enough resources to counter the moral crisis which could possibly perturb the British officers in their resolve to eliminate the profession of thuggee.

5. Conclusion

The novel seems to have been penned with the end clearly in mind. The author knows the taste of his readers. He devotes all his energies in the entertainment of his reader. The thugs are incorrigible but they still feel at times like rational Europeans, the thugs are superstitious although they try to overcome their superstitions they are so psychologically and culturally bound to them that some or the other way they just cannot extricate themselves from a superstitious pattern of thought, the thugs are vile murders but still before the persuasive reasons of the European men, they try to act prudently. In short, the thugs are a part of a society wherein religion endorses a way of life contrary the European one. Though all is not hopeless in the land of heathens, there are formidable difficulties and challenges in the place where crimes and iniquities are committed in the name of god.

Amir Ali throughout the work makes repeated mentions of the power of the goddess and the influence she has on the thugs. These references were made to establish that religion played a central role in the institution of thuggee. Amir Ali's association with bizarre religious practises is portrayed as the source of his basic motivation to lead a life of thug. In fact, it is portrayed that the traditions of his religion serves as a safeguard against strong European morals. One of the major reasons why the natives are indifferent to the European moral codes and rationality. The natives simply lack the basic ingredient necessary to think and act like European. It is from this notion the idea that it was the moral responsibility of the British to eliminate thugs came up. More than the lack of determination to act against the thugs it is the native man's collusion with the thugs that perpetuate the thuggee. The natives are the part of the society in which thugs thrive, they follow, more or less, the same religion and are guided by similar kinds of fear and motivation found in the thugs. They may not share the same sly savagery like the thugs but they still are from the same lot and driven by the same religious faiths and superstitions. The whole story is narrated in a way that exposes the society as both victim and accomplice in the crimes of thuggee and other delinquencies of similar kind. Looking critically at this notion that the British harboured, we see that the British did a mistake of generalization in the analysis of the society. In the novel thugs find help at every step of the way, which is an indication of the moral corruption was pervasive in the then Indian society. However, the British generalization only partially holds true. The Christian lenses fail to separate the innocent victims from the perpetrators. It fails to recognize the groups which strived and struggle in the society wherein there was virtually no way for upward social mobility. The blend of European rationality and Christian reason only made the understanding of society inaccurate and bizarre. Hopelessness of the downtrodden in the society which spurned any attempt for reform, was one reason people were in need of a spiritual back up. The fear of religion in the same way was the result uncertain and precarious life in which the majority of the society lived. Deprived of support from their fellow human beings, they sought God's support. God was the only solace which they had in the society in which there was very little empathy for the downtrodden. They needed God's name to justify their deed, good or bad. The Christianised criticism of the thugs and the Indian society in general has ignored the regional specificities which played a vitally important role. The author in his projection of the Indian society through the profession of thuggee subtly and implicitly brings his Christian morality which serves very little in the authentic portrayal of Indian belief system.

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