

Unreliable Confessions: An analysis of Philip Meadows Taylor's Confessions of a Thug (1839)

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“ I have never heard of such atrocities, or presided over such trials, such cold-blooded murders, such heart-rending scenes of distress, misery; such base ingratitude; such a total abandonment of mankind above the brute creation...mercy to such wretches would be the extreme of cruelty to mankind...blood for blood.”

F.C SMITH, Agent to the Governor-General of India Calcutta, 1832.

The Thugs as portrayed in the colonial representations emerge as a cult of professional stranglers who murdered travelers as an act of divine offering to the Hindu goddess Kali. Furthermore they were presented as hereditary killers drawn from various regions, religions, castes and united in their devotion to the Hindu goddess of destruction as well as to their supreme art of strangulation. Thuggee therefore in discourse and representation alike would emerge as what eminent postcolonial historian Parama Roy views as a “quasi-religious fraternity” embraced equivocally by all the natives of the Indian society. So, as to establish on a firm footing the savage nature of Indian society, life narratives in the form of testimonies of captured thugs, memoirs of colonial bureaucrats, first hand reports of judicial proceedings etc. were aptly brought into play by the colonizers. The inextricable link between life narratives and the hegemonic discourse (by hegemonic discourse I refer here to the deliberation of Gramsci, who defined hegemony as the power inherent in the ruling class to persuade other subordinate groups to believe that their interests and preferences are the interest and preference of all) on law and order of the colonized societies is well evident in colonial Thuggee, identified by the British as a “System” of ritualistic murder and robbery. Although numerous historians and cultural critics have repeatedly delved into the issue of invention of Thugs as ritual murderers by the colonizers in the interest of propagating a degenerate image of India yet, adequate attention has not been paid to the role of life narratives in the form of confessions and testimonies of the captured thugs in the discourse of law and order of the colonial state as put forward by stalwarts like William Sleeman, Philip Meadows Taylor etc. The paper will with a special reference to Philip Meadows Taylor 1839 novel *Confessions Of a Thug*, endeavour to articulate the trajectories in which life narratives in the form of sensationalist purported confessions, testimonies, judicial proceedings, memoirs and autobiographies because of their appeal to

authenticity and lived realities were used by the colonizers to construct a discursive formulation, of criminal behavior in nineteenth-century India. The life narratives at the locus of colonial discourses about the decadent aura of Indian society do not merely take into account factuality of colonial construction of native socio-cultural rituals and customs but because of their emphatic claim on reality, play an inordinately important role in cementing these factuality into the boggy courtyards of the Indian society.

In Philip Meadows Taylor's *Confessions Of a Thug* the centrality of sensationalist life narrative is evident in the construction of Thuggee. He speaks of Thuggee as "the offspring of fatalism and superstition, cherished and perfected by the wildest excitement that ever urged human beings to deeds at which humanity shudders" (Taylor:1839). Taylor claims that the novel is based on the experience and exploits of a real thug, Ameer Ali, in the very introduction to the novel Taylor states :

"The tale of crime which forms the subject of the following pages is, alas! almost true; what there is of fiction has been supplied only to connect the events, and make the adventure of Ameer Ali as interesting as the nature of his horrible profession would permit me" (Taylor : 1839).

At the time of publication of the novel the campaign against Thuggee as spearheaded by William Sleeman had gained profound sway in England and the reading public embraced this new documentation of the Thuggee warm heartedly. This extraordinary ardor of the reading public in England can definitely be attributed to sensational depiction of thuggee in the works like Sleeman's guide to Ramaseeana, the secret language of the thugs and *The Thugs or Phansigars of India*(1839), Edward Thornton's *Illustrations of the History and Practice of the Thugs*(1837), which posits itself as a path-breaking documentation of the lives of Thugs, the history and practice of Thuggee and its suppression by the efforts of the Thuggee and Dacoity department lead by William sleeman.

The practice of thuggee that these texts chronicle presents thuggee as ritualized murder. While doing so, these narratives claiming the status of "sovereign truth" engage in sensational depiction of those very trajectories through which the socio-cultural impulses of the colonized society traverses. For instance, in the *Confessions*, Meadows Taylor by presuming to unmask an evil truth behind the fair face of Ameer Ali, makes the readers listen to the chiming sounds of mystery surrounding the noble appearance of the Thug and also make them confront their ignorance about the insidious nature of thuggee. By adopting this stance of making the readers confront the insidious nature of evil as embodied in the ritualistic strangulation and robbery of travelers, the *Confessions* perfectly upholds the tenets of a sensational novel as articulated by Patrick Brantlinger in his essay entitled "*what is sensational about the sensational novel?*". Brantlinger in his essay elucidates that the function of a sensational novel is to unmask the violence behind stability, "(...) innocent appearances cloak evil intentions, reality itself functions as a mystery, until the sudden appearance of guilt, which is lurking in the

shadows(...)"(Brantlinger:1982). Meadows Taylor too claims that by representing the sojourn of Ameer Ali right from his initiation into the inhumane profession up to the point of being captured by the authorities, he is making public the skeletons hidden behind the colourful socio-cultural tapestries of India. Taylor views the novel as a 'strange' and 'horrible' page in the larger book of humanity. In Taylor's portrayal so debased and inhumane a murderer is Ameer Ali that before him ;

"every murderer of the known world, in times of past or present, except perhaps some of his own professions- the free band of Germany, the Lanzknechts, the Banditti, the Condottieri of Italy, the Buccaneers and Pirates, and in our own time the fraternity of Burkes and Hares(a degenerate system of Thuggee, by the by, at which Ameer Ali...laughed heartily and said they were sad bunglers)- must be counted men of small account" (Taylor:1839).

While doing so, the *Confessions* seems to substitute a different measure of reality and tries to read the objective appearances of the natives as "question marks or clues to mystery and insists that the truth has been hidden, buried, smuggled away behind the appearances." In the introduction to the *Confessions* Meadows Taylor asserts :

"How the system of Thuggee could have become so prevalent, remain unknown to and unsuspected by, the people of India, among whom the professors of it were living in constant association, must, to the majority of the English public, who are not conversant with the peculiar construction of the oriental society, be a subject of extreme wonder. It will be difficult to make this understood within my present limits, and yet it is so necessary that I cannot pass it by". (Taylor : 1839).

Moreover, the novel in a very sensational manner portrays Ameer Ali, the thug as someone whose success in his inhumane profession depends upon of his ability to maneuver from the domain of invisibility which he inhabits to the domain of accepted sociological order. During his sojourn Meadows Taylor reveals Ameer Ali to be hiding behind the veil of familiarity. Hiding behind the façade of everyday familiarity Ameer Ali is a 'Bhula Admi', a devout man in his life and conduct, one who observes the namaz five times a day, loves fine dresses and good food and above all is a devoted son and a loving father. Ameer Ali never fails to introduce himself as an individual who inhabits the mainstream of the society, therefore at times he is the Meer, and at others he is also the soldier carrying boldly the duty endowed upon him by divine providence. In his encounter with the brave Nawab Subjee Khan, Ameer disguises himself as the son of a well to do horse dealer returning from Hyderabad. So thick is the veil of familiarity behind which Ameer Ali's insidious nature hides that it is impossible for anyone to tear open the veil and look beyond the everyday familiarity which he wears. Ameer Ali never fails to assert his bravery. Revealing his courageous nature, to the nawab , Ali asserts; " My heart never failed me(...) those who know me well, also know that I am burn for an opportunity to prove that I am a man and no coward." (Taylor:1839). The sojourn of as portrayed by Taylor Ameer Ali from the domain of

invisibility to the accepted sociological order embodies what Alberto Gabrielle in his work on 'sensationalism' entitled *Reading Popular Culture In Victorian Print*(2009), views as "the thrill created by the overflow of new commodities." (Gabrielle:2009). A sense of excitement always pervades the sojourn of Ameer Ali, and it is also this suspended excitement which plays a crucial role in the narrative strategy of the novel, by aiding Taylor to portray how Indian society is devoid of the light of civilization. The Poean element of 'fear' and 'trembling' also pervades the courtyards of the novel. Taylor accentuates the sensational effect by allowing Ameer Ali not on the act of murder but also on the grotesque method considered for eliminating the dead bodies. In volume I of the novel grotesque details of eliminating the dead body of a merchant named Kamaal Khan comes to the forefront. Kamaal Khan's head is chopped off from the corpse and stuck up near the gate of the town; furthermore stark images of jackals digging up the graves of the victims and preying on them add to the sensational and chaotic portrayal of the Indian society:

"we have brought the head and put it where you have told us.it was well we went, for we found a troop of jackals busily scratching at the graves;..." (Taylor 1839).

Yet, the fact that the sensational depiction of the thuggee cult is ambivalent becomes evident when Meadows Taylor in the novel accepts that the thuggee cult is something which is not wholly comprehensible to him; "It will be difficult to make this understood within my present limits".(Taylor:1839). Therefore it can be assumed without any discursive hazard that the sensational nature of representation of thuggee was inevitably linked to the "incompleteness and inadequacy frequently spawned generalizations" (Schwarz : 2010) about the Indian population on the part of the British which led to generalizations take the shape of sovereign truths. Eminent Historian C.A Bayly deciphers in the sensational generalizations of various itinerant communities, a dual system of information in colonized India, creating what he believed to be "knowledge gaps" leading to "information panics". According to Bayly at the levels of official administration such as revenue, military, political service immense information and power has been garnered. However, this information and power concentrated at the upper rungs of administration, was at the lower level of administrative mechanism somewhat incomplete. When these two levels of British administrative mechanism were integrated it brought forward the anxiety of the colonizer about the feasibility of the administrative practices on ground. So, as to counteract the anxiety related to the practicability of the administrative measures, British adopted the policy of sensational generalizations about collective identities which led them to a sort of illusory belief that their policies were affecting large groups of untamed and uncivilized Indians uniformly and evenly.(Bayly:1996). In Meadows Taylor's novel too, this "knowledge gap" leading to the creation of a information crisis and thereby "information-panic" becomes evident in the manner in which Taylor generalizes his ideas about the Indian society;

"It has been ascertained by recent investigation that in every part of India many hereditary landholders and chief officers of villages have had private connexion with Thugs for generations, affording them facilities for murder by allowing their atrocious

acts to pass with impunity, and sheltering their offenders when in danger, while in return for their services they received portions of their gains, or laid a tax upon their houses which the Thugs cheerfully paid. To almost every village (and at towns they are in a greater proportion) several hermits, fakirs and religious mendicants have attached themselves. The huts and houses of this people, which are outside the walls, and always surrounded by a grove or a garden, have afforded the thugs places of rendezvous or concealment; while the fakirs, under their sanctimonious garbs, have enticed travellers to their gardens by the apparently disinterested offers of shade and good water. The facilities I have enumerated and hundreds of others which would be almost unintelligible by description, but which were intimately connected with, and grow out of, the habit of the people, have caused Thuggee to be everywhere spread and practised throughout India". (Taylor:1839).

Taylor's generalization that "every part" of India is home to hereditary criminal groups is inextricably linked to his attempts as a British administrator to identify and censor those groups which pose a threat to the ideal sociological order. These groups of people as identified by eminent postcolonial scholar Bernard S. Cohn in his scholarly research titled *Colonialism and Its forms of Knowledge : The British in India* (1996) " were people who appeared by their nature to wander beyond the boundaries of settled civil society : sanyasis. Sadhus, fakirs, dacoits, goondas, thugs, pastoralists, herders and entertainers. The British constructed special instrumentalities to control those defined as beyond civil bounds and carried out special investigations to provide the criteria by which whole groups would be stigmatized."(Cohn:1996).

The practice of Thuggee that the novel chronicles by dwelling upon the confessions (narratives claiming the status of sovereign truths) of Ameer Ali, is presented as religious murder of travelers for the propitiation of Kali, the tutelary deity of the Thugs. In a very sensational manner, the story about the divine origin of Thuggee is repeated by Taylor, after Sleeman who claims to have received the story from one of his Thug approvers. The originary myth of Thuggee as articulated by almost every colonialist text is as follows: Long time ago there was a demon named Rakta-bija-dana, who terrorized the earth. Goddess Kali descended to Earth so as to destroy Rakta-bija-dana, who terrorized the inhabitants of the planet. However, Kali after engaging in duel with the demon realized that every time she cut the demon with her sword , more demons sprang from the drops of blood that fell on the ground. The battlefield soon was filled with innumerable demons and Kali had to stop in exhaustion. To contest this strategy of the demon Kali created two men from the beads of her sweat and gave them each a handkerchief, and ordered them to kill the demons by strangulation so that no blood was spilt. After the mission had been accomplished, the men came to return the handkerchiefs to Kali, the goddess however told them to keep the handkerchief and use it to practice their profession.() The murder of human beings in thuggee as portrayed by Taylor and his contemporaries was thereby constructed as a practice enjoined by divine authorities. The plunder with regard to the discursive construction about thuggee was only incidental. Ameer Ali's revelation about the

origin of thuggee is but only a small variation of the master narrative of thuggee as constructed by Sleeman :

“In the beginning of the world according to the Hindoos, there existed a creating power and a destroying power, both emanation from the supreme being. These were as a matter of consequence at constant enmity with each other, and still continue to be so. The creative power however peopled the earth so fast that the destroyer could not keep pace with him, nor was he allowed to do so; but was given permission to resort to every means he could devise to effect his objects. Among others, his consort deavee, Bhowanee or Kali (...) assembled a number of her votaries, whom she named Thugs. She instructed them into the art of Thuggee; and to prove its efficacy, with her own hands destroyed before them the image she had made, in the manner which we practice now. She endowed the thugs with superior intelligence and cunning, in order that they might decoy human beings to destruction, and sent them abroad into the world, giving them, as the reward for their exertion, the plunder they might obtain from those they put to death; and bidding them be under no concern for disposing the bodies, as she would herself convey them from earth.” (Taylor:1839).

This sensational generalization of Indian socio-cultural ethos was a part of a well planned administrative strategy. If we follow the route traced by eminent historian Sandria Freitag with regard to thuggee, it becomes lucidly visible that these sensational generalizations created by the British by relying on the confessions native approvers , were less concerned with instituting law and order in the colonial state than in establishing a uncontested authority in India. And to emerge as an uncontested authority the British used the policy of stigmatizing those social groups which it felt could threaten their sovereign paramountcy. Freitag further notes a dichotomy of the colonial government in treating crimes committed by individuals and those committed by groups. Swayed by the motif of diminishing the cost of administration , the colonial government directed its energies towards thwarting the existence of communities which it believed to be posing threat to the colonial regime. Emergency powers were initiated to control and contest any hint of rebellion by collectivities; “The British perceived collective criminal actions to be either directed against, or weakening, the authority of the state”. (Schwartz:1996) . Moreover as elucidated by Bayly who deciphered in the colonial knowledge of thuggee a kind of “information panic”, the sensational production of knowledge about caste, race, hereditary etc. can be seen as an attempt by the colonizer to mask its failure in upholding the so called “rule of law” in India.

Meadows Taylor too in the novel by allowing Ameer Ali to sensationally reveal the insidious traits of his inhumane profession , tries to mask the failure of British Government to uphold law and order in the colonial state. It is vehemently argued in the discourse about thuggee that the natives not only whole heartedly support debased rituals and customs but also proudly engage in upholding these dehumanized customs, In the novel the killing of a traveler is portrayed as something which is very grand and “ wonderful”. The insidious nature of thuggee is

shown to proudly upheld by its stalwarts who view the tradition of ritualized murder as religiously sanctioned and thereby a sort of divine service, In the novel Ameer Ali expresses his wonder about the preparation leading upto the murder of a traveler as follows;

“ who could have told sahib, the intentions of those by which he was surrounded! To me it was wonderful. I knew he was to die that night, for that had been determined when he arrived in our camp, and while he was arranging his sleeping-place. I knew too that a spot had been fixed on for his grave(...) and yet there sat my father, and Hossein and Ghous Khan and many others.”(Taylor:1839).

The above quoted passage aptly brings out the psychological degeneration of the thug. In a very cold – blooded manner the thugs can very jovially prepare for the murder of the victim. The fact that everyone is portrayed as being delighted testifies the inhumane nature of the thugs, By portraying the casual approach of the thugs towards murder, Taylor seems to be asserting that the criminal instincts are so deeply steeped in the courtyards of Indian society that it is almost impossible for the colonial government to deal with an evil which lays hidden behind the mask of common humility, Meadows Taylor further asserts the inhumane manner in which thuggee operates, he states that the modus operandi of thuggee requires one to sacrifice his softer side and thereby let his fierce animal instincts to predominate . Sensational depiction of murder pervades the length of the novel. The murder of Ghous Khan and his companion is for instance portrayed by Meadows Taylor as follows:

“ ‘Then in with them!’ cried my father(...) ‘ we had better open them’ said Lugh, ‘ for the ground is loose and they will swell’. So gashes were made in their abdomen and the earth quickly filled in on them; it was stamped down and smoothed, and in a few moment no one could have discovered that eight human beings have been secreted beneath the spot”(Taylor:1839).

Two characterization of thuggee , as pointed out by Radhika Singha becomes evident in the sensational life narratives originating under the imperative of Colonialist logic- 1). Thuggee as a system. 2) Thuggee as ancient and religiously sanctioned.

“ System” under Sleeman begins to acquire the status of a fundamental descriptive term for thuggee. Sleeman refers to “the peculiar system of thugs” (Sleeman: 1839)), to thuggee as “an organized system of murder”(), and to the development by the thugs of “ their system to deprive all governments of every other kind of direct evidence to their guilt but the testimony of their associates”(). Meadows Taylor, by drawing from the deductions of Sleeman, in the novel portrays thuggee to be a well established system; “ our encampment broke up towards the evening” (Taylor: 1839), Ameer Ali emphasizes his appearance to be that of a person belonging to a military establishment; “ I felt, I was superior to them in appearance; and a little pardonable vanity gave me an air and swagger which were not unfitting the military profession I had set up.” (Taylor:1839). References to thuggee as a military system convey a sense of thuggee as a vast

and willful criminal organization, rather than as the contingent responses of different subordinated social groups to contemporary Chaos and dislocation.

Thuggee therefore in the hands of Colonial administrators like Sleeman and Meadows Taylor emerges as a hierarchal system, with ranks designated on the basis of performance and superiority. Designations such as “subedars” and “jemadar” are military terms. Yet, what is noteworthy in the Confessions is that the fact that the English Sahib’s emphasis on the “systemic” aspect of thuggee is entirely dependent on Ameer Ali’s confession. The testimony of the approvers, provided under compulsion, is severely compromised and of uncertain validity. Shahid Amin in his essay “*The approvers Testimony, Judicial Discourse :The case of Chauri Chaura*” has examined the features of the discourse of an approver(a rebel who has turned informer), who testified in the court case which followed the chauri chaura incident. Amin’s observation regarding the approver Shikari’s discourse is also relevant in our analysis of Thuggee approvers of almost a decade earlier: “ Despite its length scope and detail, the approvers testimony bears just too many traces of outside structuring, raising too many problems with regard to its autonomy and authorship. This AT(approvers testimony), the vehicle of the prosecution, bears the impress of an interrogating power and the stamp of violence intervention: fear for punishment, actual torture and most crucially, promise of pardon and reward...” (Amin :1978).

Therefore it can be elucidated in light of the above arguments concerning Thuggee that the reason behind sensational depictions of Thuggee in the discourse produced by the colonizer was to mask its own failure as an administrative mechanism and thereby hide behind the mask created out of its attempts to reduce social phenomenon into Indian degeneration and savagery (backed by its immense material as well as political and economic power). Thuggee as an universal system of savagery ad ritualistic murder is repeated again and again until it acquires the status of ostensible historical truth. And then this truth is reiterated in a manner similar to Meadows Taylor’s novel in other so called factual account reliant on life narratives in the form of confessions, *memoirs*, judicial proceedings etc.

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