

## CHAPTER VI

### MASTERS

John Masters was born in India, the son of a captain in the Sixteenth Rajputs. He was sent to England, his parents' homeland, for education.

After graduating from Sandhurst in 1934, Masters returned to India to join the British-Indian Army. After Indian Independence in 1947, Masters no longer had a place in the Army. Therefore, with his wife and children, he went to the United States. Now he lives in New York City, New York.

Masters is the fifth generation of his family to have lived in India. Consequently, his involvement with India is deep and personal. This gives him a certain real understanding of the problems of the subcontinent and an accurate basis for his novels, most of which deal with India. Masters has written and published many books; all are widely read. Only two will be discussed here: Bhowani Junction (1954) and To the Coral Strand (1962).

Literarily speaking, Masters cannot be compared to the writers we have mentioned earlier. Kipling has a reputation as a story-teller; Forster is one of the most important writers of the twentieth century; Orwell, although not quite a first-rate novelist, is important and has written

some of the most excellent essays of the twentieth century. Masters does not belong in their company. He does not have the stature of the other three, but he has been chosen for discussion because after Forster and Orwell, there is no writer of the same quality who deals with India.

Masters is a serious writer in the sense that he has ideas and opinions which he wants to express and which he does embody in his novels. On the other hand, he is essentially a popular novelist whose style is competent in a slick kind of way but not original. It is clear from the reading of his novels that he does not hesitate to use any cheap sensationalism or melodrama to further his plot. And at least once in each of his novels, the readers must suspend his credibility if he is going to be able to finish reading it at all. Nevertheless, Masters is someone who knows India very well, who is very interested in it, who cares about it, and whose genuine concern is quite evident in his fiction.

As Masters has spent almost all his early life in India, he knows India very well. Consequently the India he puts here into his novels is convincing and a reflection of his experiences there. While reading his books, any reader of Masters' work will unavoidably feel the actuality of India. A good illustration is a description of Chambaipur in to the Coral Strand in which the old and the new are blended:

Shantapur was a complete epitome of India, in essence, in fable, and in actuality. The old city stood around a mile-square lake. The Nawab's rose-red palace soared above from the water on one side, hanging like a vivid dream against the blue sky and the sharply etched backdrop of sand-colored hills. Other palaces and mansions surrounded the lake - among them Army Head-quarters, which was mid-Victorian in its taste. On the other side of the lake an immediately ugly factory belched foul-smelling smoke from three tall tin chimneys. In the city there was narrow alleys where time seemed to have stood still for ten centuries, and others, nearby, where the squalor was not patriarchal but modern. And there were real slums, and tin cans piled in the official dumps, and chemicals running down the open sewers from hidden shops and factories. 128

With his novels, Masters tries to portray the long period of the British Raj in India. To give the whole picture, he has linked the stories to the characters and adventures of a single family, the Savages. It is obvious enough that Masters derived his inspiration for the saga of the Savages from his own family history. Masters is successful in sustaining his readers' interest in this family, and as he proceeds he makes his attitudes about the English in India clear enough. Characteristically, he deals with the high adventurous elements he can find in two centuries of Indian history: the ritual murder society known as Thuggee which is uncovered and destroyed by William Savage in The Deceivers (1952), the "great game" of espionage between England and Russia on the high steppes of Central Asia in the 1880's in which Robin Savage participates in The Lotus and the Wind (1963), and the mountaineering of Peter Savage who becomes the most famous and ruthless Himalayan mountaineer before the First World

War in Bar, Bar the Mountain Peak (1957). It is noticeable and significant too that there is an omission of a more important element than mountaineering in modern Indian history: Gandhi and passive resistance and all the turmoil and excitement of the Indian Independence movement have as yet received no treatment.

It is also noticeable that all members of the Savage family have much in common. They all possess some ruling passion. They are tall and thin with a hawk-like face, (alarmingly resembling the photograph of Masters on the dust-jacket of To the Coral Strand). They all have English wives who are impressively feminine and lady-like but underneath tough, resolute and able to adjust to any situation; the perfect Savage women for the heroic Savage men. That the Savages are all in some essential way self-projections of Masters himself need not in any way deter us from studying them as symptomatic of Masters' attitudes about the English in India.

The member of the Savage family we have chosen to discuss here is Rodney Savage. To date, two books have been written about Rodney. The first is his adventure during the time of Independence and Partition while he still is a lieutenant-colonel in the Indian Army, in Ahowani Junction, Masters' best-known novel. He reappears in To the Coral Strand, which is about Rodney in India immediately after Independence, looking unsuccessfully for a new role to play

in the new India. Apparently, Rodney is the last member and the end of the Savage family in India, departing from the coral strand at Bombay where Jason, the first Savage in India, had landed in the seventeenth century. Perhaps, however, we have yet to look forward to meeting Rodney's son as a volunteer in the V.S.O., the British version of the Peace Corps, bringing the twentieth century to the impoverished countryside of the India of Mr. Sheetri and Mrs. Indira Gandhi.

Rodney Savage is a good soldier as well as a good commander; his expressly military virtues are important to the understanding of his character. He has a reputation for being very brave in fighting together with his soldiers and they are very fond of him, as he is of them. Rodney is intelligent and strong-willed. He seems far superior to the other characters. His actions in a crisis, for example, when the Communists, in trying to protest against the English, lie on the railroad tracks and hinder communication, are precise and effective.<sup>129</sup> He can be cruel and ruthless in order to get his work done successfully. He is as he wants himself to be: "cold, cruel, efficient ice-blue eyes, all steel and sex."<sup>130</sup> He is, interestingly enough, Orwell's Verrall from the plying fields of Eton to the plains of Northern India seen in a sympathetic light. Yet he never takes advantage of any Indian.

In his way he is a kind of "bridge" character; when seen from a distance, the same character as Flory and Fielding. Fielding is a bridge since he is a man-of-good-will and respects human affection. Flory is a bridge due to his personality and psychological problems. Rodney is a bridge because of his passion for India and its people. He naturally and powerfully commits himself to India. He speaks the languages fluently and thus can mix easily with the Indians. In the village at Fettes where he is going to settle down, after he and the villagers came back from stag-shooting, successful in getting food for all the starving villagers, he is entitled "Gora Raja - Pale Face King"<sup>131</sup> while entering the village:

All the small boys ran out, shrieking and dancing and singing round me. I gave one of them my rifle to carry, and he put it on his shoulder and marched beside me like a bodyguard. I soon had a naked little girl in each hand and another riding on my shoulder, her thin legs clasped round my neck fists beating a tattoo on the top of my head. Their mother and elder sisters were out, too, some smiling from the doorways, a couple of girls running out and throwing hurriedly made garlands round my neck.<sup>132</sup>

These villagers love and respect him as their chief and he loves them and cares about them as his people. He arranges game-hunting expeditions for rich foreigners at this village to help these poor villagers. But when one of his people is injured by his client's carelessness, he is so angry that he calls her names and chases her away although she is rich and powerful. He even temporarily resigns from being a sahib and participated with rare energy and abandon in an

orgy at the village erotic temple in which all the villagers join.

Rodney feels a deep kinship with India, but this commitment is highly qualified. Even in Rodney's feelings of connection with India, at no time does he believe that he altogether belongs there. He feels India is his home. Yet he thinks, "This was my India, not because of the capering or the drunkenness but because these people had no desire to become like me, nor I like them."<sup>133</sup> Rodney is an Englishman and he can never be an Indian. Although he is deeply committed to India, he still is an outsider.

Dhowani Junction is mainly the story of the Anglo-Indian community, with Victoria Jones as the center of the plot. The word 'Anglo-Indian' in *Masters* is different from the word in Kipling, Forster and Orwell, for by *Masters'* time it has assumed its new meaning. The 'Anglo-Indian' is no longer an Englishman in India but a new caste, Eurasians, the mixture of the English and the Indians. The story shows the picture of this society at the time of Independence. Anglo-Indians feel superior to all Indians because they have European blood in them but they are only being pretentious when they consider themselves Europeans. They cannot help feeling inferior. They are not accepted by either community because they

are "half-castes." Their trademark is spite of their attempt to rid themselves of them are "inferiority feelings, resentment, and perpetual readiness to be insulted."<sup>34</sup>

Victoria Jones is chosen as representative of this community. She is trying desperately to find her identity and position in life, and Victoria's means is through love. She comes to find it first in Patrick, her Eurasian boyfriend, but in him, she sees only what she wants to get away from, the trademarks of her people. His obtuseness also makes her reject him. Feeling vexed, uncertain and insulted, Victoria runs to another extreme, to the Indian community. In self-defense, Victoria has killed Macaulay, Rodney Savage's adjutant, who assaulted her one night while she was going home. Nanjit Singh, the Sikh, her Indian colleague, takes her to his house. Nanjit's mother and the other Indians (who later turns out to be H.P. Roy the leader of the Communist Party) help Victoria conceal the crime. Thus Victoria becomes deeply involved with the Indian community.

Although Victoria wants to be Indian, she does not want Nanjit's mother to have any influence on her as she goes over Nanjit. Nanjit rejects his religion under his very political mother's orders. She believes socialism is the path for a free, modern India. Yet Nanjit cannot



help feeling guilty and lost and finally he decides to come back to Sikhism again. Believing that in marrying Ranjit she can take away his father's grip on him and that she can find herself by taking on an Indian identity, Victoria decides also to become a Sikh. Although she has read about it before, she is afraid of the ceremony and the solemnity and strangeness of it. She is nervous to see Ranjit, in punishment for deserting his religion, wash the feet of every Sikh at the congregation, including the feet of a coolie and a driver. Then the baptism begins, Victoria feels like a great object is yawning before her feet. She is really frightened when the loved ones of the ceremony use a twelve doublebladed dagger to stir the 'patashas' into the water. All voices seem to boom around her, merciless and emphatic. She realizes with terror that she does not love Ranjit and that he doesn't love her. She is no longer able to control herself as the congregation is finding a new Sikh name for her. She runs away, feeling that she cannot be one of them. Becoming Indian is losing her old identity only to be enslaved by "bright new iron chains."<sup>35</sup> As a matter of fact, Victoria is too English to understand the real India, mysterious, incomprehensible and violent.

Nevertheless, Victoria is not English enough to become wholly an English woman. Next, she has an idyllic

love affair with Rodney and almost believes that she has found herself in him. However, at the culmination of the plot, Victoria returns to Patrick in spite of all his defects because he is, like her, a Tussockian. They were born in the same community, which is the best place for them. There they do not feel displaced. There they are not subjected to the scrutiny of other communities.

The message from Shovani Junction is unmistakable. Identities cannot be shed like suits of clothing. Each society must keep apart and like should stick to like. Nicely, Rodney is not to be a bridge because Masters believes bridges ought not to be built. Here also is shown incidentally 'masters' hostility, perhaps unconscious, towards Independence. Members of the Indian Congress are portrayed as terrorists who are hypocritical and irresponsible. Congress approves of strikes, fomented by J. B. Roy and his Communists, to maintain their influence. Yet at the same time they are pretending to support the strike, they are searching for a way to end it. With such leadership, Masters believes, India will only deteriorate and collapse. Only the British know how to rule India and Indians responsibly and efficiently. Only the British can save India from her politicians.

In To the Coral Strand, 'masters' objections to

Independence are more obvious. As his family had lived there and served India for generations, Rodney Savage believes himself a part of British India and India is a part of him. Then suddenly Independence changes everything. He no longer has any place in the army yet he struggles to find a way to maintain his life there. First, he becomes a businessman but there is no place for any non-Indian in this field. Then he tries but abandons the idea of being a big-game hunter because he cannot stand seeing India and Indians being exploited and misused by the rich but stupid and insolent clients. His last job is as military adviser to a princely state and here he at last realizes that he can no longer influence India's destiny and his future is not in India.

After Independence, the whole sub-continent is divided into three main parts: the Republic of India under the Congress Party, Pakistan, and the princely states. The third group becomes more important because these states are free and do not have to depend on the other two groups. Yet each of them is small and cannot defend itself from being annexed. They have to find friends or yield to either India or Pakistan. Chachal is one of the princely states whose ruler wants to retain its identity and traditions. Thus the ruler of the state

employs Rodney in order that Rodney can help him find friends who will back him up against the Indian Government. He thinks that Rodney will be successful in negotiating with the Rajah of Nishanpar through their family connection and through his personality. The Savage family and the Rajah's family are very close and Rodney is the Rajah's friend. They had studied and lived together in England.

Rodney accepts this third job very willingly because he feels that the Congress Party is misleading India, bringing her into the modern world only by destroying all that is great and unique about her. Rodney wants twentieth century India to have continuity with the India of the past. Thus, he works for Chembal to save at least one part of the India he loves from the Indian Union and to try to maintain some links with the old India against the cynical politicians of the Congress Party.

Rodney fails in this job because he is betrayed by the girl he loves, Sumitra, the Wani of Nishanpar. Sumitra believes in the Independence of India and thus she is a part of the new India. Rodney has to escape as a common political criminal with a price on his head. The only person who seems to understand is Margaret Wood, the widow of a missionary who, like Rodney, has no place to go. She tries to give him help which he does not want, believ-

ing also that she has found her existence in him (it happens all the time in Hesters' novel). The last link that Rodney has holding him to India is the child that is carried by Tunitra. Here at any rate would be the living product of his connection with India, and through the child he would have reason to stay. But India is no longer for the Savages, as we see clearly with the final crisis in a hut on the beach north of Pombay. Because Tunitra refused to see the doctor, the date of her delivering the baby has been miscalculated, and when Rodney and Margaret find out, Tunitra has gone to the beach hut. They cannot take the doctor with them because a violent and terrifying storm has broken out and there are more patients than usual at the hospital. It takes them hours before reaching the hut. Thus, by the light of a kerosine lantern and with no sanitation, Rodney with the help of Margaret, who has a little medical knowledge, delivers Tunitra's baby. The baby is lying in a wrong position in the womb and it cannot be delivered naturally. They need a skilled doctor and an operation to help both the mother and child but there is not enough time to get any doctor or to take her to the hospital. Therefore, they have to chop the baby out of the womb, part by part, to save Tunitra's life. Rodney's last link is destroyed and with a horrifying violence that

shows the intensity of Masters' feeling about the British departure from India at the same time it exemplifies the depths of his sensationalism. Rodney on the final page of the novel, enthralled by his first experience with medical science, decides to return to England and to become a surgeon. The retreat to the coral strand has been completed.

Though separated by half-a-century, Masters in many respects has the same attitudes about India that Kipling had. Like Kipling, Masters thinks the British are governing efficiently, and that this is the most important consideration. The British are simply the most competent to govern India; they belong there. Masters even has some of Kipling's missionary fervor. The British are there to do the job they alone can do well. He furthermore seems to have no sympathy nor concern with the national movement in India.

Rodney Savage's story is Masters' elegy for the British Raj. To Masters, the departure of the British is historical injustice and tragedy; it seems the departure of improvement and progress in India. With Rodney, the final recession is sounded. The British had served and served well in India, but they were not remembered fondly when they left. The jewel of the Empire was no more. Kipling had himself glimpsed the end many years before:

God of our fathers, known of old,  
Lord of our far-flung battle-line,  
Beneath whose awful hand we hold  
Dominion over palm and pine—  
Lord God of Hosts, be with us yet,  
Lest we forget — lest we forget! 136

Recensional (1897).