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## Socio-Cultural Perspectives in John Masters' *Bhowani Junction*

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### Abstract:

The present paper attempts to study some socio-cultural perspectives in John Masters' *Bhowani Junction*. Socio-cultural perspective is an adjective that tends to be used in the Anglo-Saxon scholarly literature. The adjective is used to denote an epistemology that in its original conception uses society, culture and history as the defining characteristics of human beings. John Masters attempts to focus his attention on the choices which confronted the Anglo-Indians. Assigning an unprecedented centrality to the Anglo- Indian consciousness, he attempts to analyse their sense of identity in a fast changing environment. He also explores the psychological impact of a self image imposed on them by the prejudices of others, as well as by their own perceptions of their ambiguous position in colonial society. The novel also portrays relatively contemporary events. It also privileges the perspective of a community which had rarely been given a voice in colonial fiction. Masters' interest in Anglo-Indians may have, initially, been aroused by his half acknowledged awareness of a distant Indian connection. In *Bhowani Junction* John Masters presents some socio-cultural perspectives such as Quest for Identity, Validating Hybridity etc.

**Keywords: John Masters, Bhowani Junction, Anglo-Indian, socio-cultural, perspective, hybridity etc.**

The socio-cultural perspective is a theory used in various fields such as psychology and is used to describe awareness of circumstances surrounding individuals and how their behaviors are affected specifically by their surrounding, social and cultural factors. In her book *Social Psychology* Catherine A. Sanderson points out, 'Socio-cultural perspective: A perspective describing people's behavior and mental processes as shaped in part by their social and cultural contact, including race, gender, and nationality.'(Sanderson 8). Socio-cultural perspective theory is a broad but yet a significant aspect in our being. It applies to every sector of our daily lives. How we communicate, understand, relate and copy with one another is partially based on this theory. Our spiritual, mental, physical, emotional, physiological beings are all influenced by socio-cultural perspective theory. The Anglo-Indian community is a culturally lost ethnic group which experiences a sense of marginality and pathos. They are helplessly lost in an anachronistic 'identity crisis'. Lionel Caplan in his book *Children of Colonialism : Anglo-Indians in a Post Colonial World* states, 'Colonial milieu left back with the Anglos a porous boundary, a fluid identity, and also with an oscillated identity' (Caplan 12). John Masters is one

of the few Anglo-Indian writers who authentically represents the peculiar pathetic life of the Anglo-Indian community. His *Bhowani Junction*, published in the year 1954, is about the Anglo-Indian predicament in India which is on the verge of its independence. It specifically concerns the plight of the Anglo-Indians with their problematic cultural identity and their social status in the waning days of British rule.

- **Quest for Identity**

In his book *Theory of Stages of Psycho-Social Development* Erik Erikson defines, the word quest for identity, 'as a subjective sense of efficient uniqueness as well as a remarkable predicate of personal continuity'.(Erikson4)

*Bhowani Junction* is primarily narrated in the first-person by Victoria Jones, the daughter of an Anglo-Indian railway family. Victoria has recently returned to her hometown, Bhowani, following a tour of duty as a WAC officer. For years she has been courted by an Anglo-Indian railway man, Patrick Taylor, whom she sees as embodying 'the worst trade marks of our people— inferiority feelings, resentment, perpetual readiness to be insulted' (73). Victoria's recent exposure to the world beyond the railway colony has led her to become impatient with such attitudes in her own community; thus, she terminates her relationship with Patrick, and grows increasingly irritated with the Anglo-Indians, particularly their deference to and mimicry of the British, and their allusions to far away England, which they have never seen, as 'Home.'

Victoria's quest for identity, and for cultural and social space is the main theme of *Bhowani Junction*. The novel portrays the uncertainty of belonging in a volatile, changeable environment, which forces the protagonists to re-examine old loyalties and patterns of behaviour. The representation of events, primarily from the point of view of the Anglo-Indians, focuses attention on an area of the British-Indian encounter, which was frequently relegated to the periphery of the colonial consciousness. The novel is basically about the Anglo-Indians, juxtaposes some of the basic motifs which had contributed to the stereotypical picture of the community, and especially of its women. Victoria's irritation explodes into full-blown anger one night when her British supervisor, Lieutenant Macaulay, attempts to rape her, she says, 'I have always admired the English and, like the rest of us, pretended to be more English than I am. When Macaulay tried to rape me he broke that chain. I was free . . . If I wanted to turn toward India, my home, I could' (75). At this point Victoria deepens a casual friendship with one of her Indian co-workers, a Sikh named Ranjit Singh Kasel—a friendship which proves fortuitous. One evening following a riot which has resulted in British violence against Indians, Macaulay insists upon escorting Victoria home in order to "protect" her. He then tries to rape her for a second time. In the ensuing scuffle, Victoria kills Macaulay and Ranjit is the only witness of the incident.

Ranjit helps Victoria to cover her tracks and offers her refuge in his mother's home. His mother encourages Victoria : 'Why should you support the British law? You're half Indian, aren't you? . . .Have you ever met an Englishman who didn't insult you? . . .Why don't you see that you're an Indian, and act like one? We're strong now. We'll look after you' (133). She then dresses Victoria in a sari. Victoria is astonished when she looks in the mirror: 'It was me, but this person in the mirror was more beautiful than me. She was a beautiful Indian girl in her own clothes' (133). Victoria subsequently explores an Indian identity for herself, wearing the

sari and embarking on a romantic relationship with Ranjit. She grows increasingly resentful of the superior attitudes displayed toward India by the English, which she realizes her own community has largely absorbed.

- **Validating Hybridity**

The word 'hybridity' has its origin in biology and botany where it designates crossing between two species by cross-pollination that given birth to a third-hybrid species. Hybridity is itself a hybrid concept, the term which is often discussed in connection with such notion as diaspora, transculturation and in between-ness has become a buzzword of cultural and literary studies and used carelessly to describe a disparate body of subjects in widely differing domains.

John Masters uses the railways as a defining metaphor for the existence of the community. The events are seen chiefly from the perspective of his Anglo-Indian protagonists, with the English colonel Rodney Savage providing an alternative point of view. Master's use of the first person accords a deceptive independence to the opinions and judgement of the narrator. Their patterns of thought and behaviour, thus acquire an individuality and authenticity. They appear to validate the superiority of the 'good' colonizer, and assign a relatively negative assessment of the Anglo-Indian community to its own members. This inevitably raises questions about the extent to which author's desire to project a positive image of the empire influenced his portrayal of the community. The responses of the Anglo Indians, Patrick and Victoria, are influenced by their location within the hierarchy of colonial society, as well as by their personal experiences. Despite the relatively optimistic note on which the novel ends, and his vivid portrayal of the dilemma faced by the Anglo-Indians in the last years of the Raj, Master's depiction of the community remains ambivalent. When Victoria accuses Patrick of embodying, 'the worst trademarks of our people-inferiority feelings, resentment, perpetual readiness to be insulted she is, in effect, subscribing to, and legitimizing, a stereotype, which is further augmented by Patrick's arrogant, racist and bumbling behaviour'(75). When she confronts Patrick and Rose Mary, after finding them in a compromising situation, she comments 'a flood of Hindustani and our chee-chee English, thick with a language that I have tried all my life to believe I never knew'(81). She feels as though she has gone back to where she came from, 'the Indian lose women of a hundred years ago'(81). Victoria's comments endorse popular perceptions of Anglo-Indian character and genealogy. Her recognition, that an effort of will is required to rise above the norms of behaviour commonly attributed to the community, appears to reinforce rather than destabilize conventional opinions. She is a slatternly reminder of mixed antecedents, and the dangerously proximate possibility of descent into a non-European way of life. Even Victoria, who is engaged in a quest to come to terms with her ambivalent heritage, never appears to feel the need to communicate with her mother, or share any experiences with her. Mrs. Jones exists merely at the periphery of the action, and Pater's dismissive attitude relegates her to the background of his life and the narrative. Similarly, Rose Mary's questionable morality, crudity, and lack of integrity almost reduce her to the level of a caricature. Her inexcusable behaviour provides a contrast to Victoria who, despite conforming in some measure to the popular image of the sexually liberated Anglo-Indian woman, progresses beyond the stereotype. It is possible to interpret Victoria's sexual and psychological independence and it is true that her various relationships do not mark her negatively within the admittedly limited

context of the novel. But it is difficult to see Victoria as a latter day feminist, for her ultimate definition of herself, and her future, is inextricably linked to her choice of a suitable husband. She has, however, had a greater opportunity to escape from the debilitating social and economic restrictions, and the narrow mindset, which circumscribe the thinking of the men of her community. Her service in the army gives her an opportunity to interact with the English, without the need to resort to any subterfuge regarding her origins, and she is definitely more at ease with them than either Patrick or her father. Throughout the novel, it is Victoria who retains her poise situations, which reduce Patrick to an inefficient, hysterical incompetence. She is assigned a competence, adaptability and objectivity, which lacks even in the men of her community. Victoria also retains an unusual capacity to view the behaviour of people around her with an objectivity denied to the two male narrators, who are more deeply engaged with their respective communities. She points out the flaws in Patrick's behaviour and in the general attitude of her community, but she is equally capable of seeing the British with critical perception, and with a clarity denied to most of her community. Victoria has the prerogative of choice. She has a specifically Anglo-Indian identity, and the situations she encounters often dictate a response related to her feelings of ambivalence regarding her true place in society. Her attempt to align herself with the Indians or the British, leads her to the recognition that she does not belong clearly to the world, either of the colonizer or the colonized. She remains an outsider to both cultural identities. Initially, Victoria does not appear to take her own mixed, yet individual, ethnicity into account, but at the end of the novel, she looks forward to a future which is relatively secure. It includes an acceptance of the drawbacks of her situation, as well as an assertion of the viability of a hybrid identity, which does not necessarily have to align itself with the British or the Indians in order to attain a measure of self worth and individuality. It is the Anglo-Indian woman's occupation of an ambivalent space within the colonial context, which provides her with a distinct identity and sets her apart from her English and Indian counterpart.

John Masters deals socio-cultural perspectives in his various novels. In *Bhowani Junction* Masters attempts to show Victoria's quest for identity and validating hybridity in relation to all the characters in the novel.

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