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Newgate Novels, *Confessions of a Thug* and the Narrative of Oriental Criminality

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Abstract

In this paper, the author compares the novel *Confessions of a Thug* (1839), written by a colonial official named Philip Meadows Taylor, with Newgate novels in general and the novel *Jack Sheppard* (1839) by William Harrison Ainsworth in particular. During the first half of the nineteenth century, two English colonial administrators named Philip Meadows Taylor and Colonel William Henry Sleeman published two works named *Confessions of a Thug* (1839) and *Ramaseeana* (1836). These two works popularised the notion that a religiously motivated murderous cult named 'thugs' operated on the roads of India, and they strangled and looted the unfortunate travelers. However, studies by Postcolonial scholars such as Kim A Wagner (2004), Aijaz Ahmed (1991), Maire Ni Fhlathuin (2001), and Amal Chatterjee (1998) questioned the veracity of the phenomenon of 'thuggee' and especially its supposed religious foundation. Ajay Dandekar (2014) notably considered thuggee and its religious associations to be a fictional creation of Sleeman and Taylor that led to the Inhuman Criminal Tribes Act of 1871. In this paper, the author analyzes the contradictions within the narrative of *Confessions of a Thug* and proves how the novel's similarity with Newgate novels effectively negates the colonial narrative that portrays criminality and lawlessness as something unique to Asian and African nations. This paper also clarifies that the different critical receptions of *Confessions of a Thug* and *Jack Sheppard*, despite similar themes, effectively illustrate the argument of Edward Said that no knowledge is non-political.

Keywords: British Colonialism, Thuggee, Philip Meadows Taylor, Edward Said, Colonial Civilising Mission, Newgate Novels

1. Introduction

Citing Michael Hardt, Antonio Negri, and their path-breaking work *Empire* (2000), Upamanyu Pablo Mukherjee, in his work *Crime and Empire* (2003), asserted that the language of policing, law, crime, and punishment regulated the relationship between the British Empire and its most prized possession, India (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 2). Upamanyu Mukherjee further claimed in his work that the imperial rhetoric of crime and policing, which Britain employed in the context of India, originated in the strategies of power within the domestic boundaries of the Empire. However, for postcolonial critics, an analysis of the imperial strategy of crime and policing reveals that it generated the very possibilities of dissent it attempted to do away with.

The primary strategy British imperialists like Warren Hastings, Charles Cornwallis, Charles Grant, and philosopher historians like James Mill and Jeremy Bentham used to justify the British colonization of India was to clearly distinguish between the British regime and the entire Indian civilization before the arrival of the British. They attempted an ethical and moral justification of the country's colonization by simultaneously denigrating India before the arrival of the British as a land of lawlessness and criminality and Indian religions like Hinduism and Islam as primitive belief systems promoting superstition.

Cornwallis asserted that the British regime in India attempted a new order of things that had as its foundation the security of individual property and fair administration of civil and criminal justice (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 17).

However, the paradox of colonialism comes to light when the tall claims of reformation, development, and fair administration of civil and criminal justice are contrasted against the reality of British rule in India. According to Ranajit Guha, Britain, which was the largest capitalistic power in the world during the nineteenth century, instead of transforming the semi-feudal landscape of India, manipulated it to gain maximum profit for the foreign regime (Mukherjee, 2004, p. 126). The growth of industrial capitalism in Britain benefited from letting India remain a semi-feudal economy and treating it merely as a source of raw materials and cheap labor. Hence, all the narratives of the progress and development of India as a colony were only guises for legitimizing colonial expansionism in the name of capitalist growth.

It would be worthwhile at this instance to elaborate on the history of the thuggee campaign in India during the first half of the nineteenth century, undertaken by the newly formulated thuggee and dacoity department in 1830 under the leadership of William Henry Sleeman. In many ways, the phenomenon of thuggee itself was manufactured for the extension of colonial knowledge and power, especially concerning the surveillance of various tribes and communities in India. For Britishers, the so-called 'thuggee' crisis presented the best opportunity to create an official typology of 'criminal' India.' For Edward Thornton, the phenomenon of thuggee was a product of mainstream Indian culture and religion. However, not everyone considered thuggee to be a unique product of Oriental religion and culture. Samuel O'Sullivan believed that the analogies to criminal behavior exhibited by thugs could also be found in other cultures and communities.

2. The Origin of the Narrative on 'Thuggee' and its Contradictions

Who were these thugs, and what made the British create a narrative of criminality and Oriental degeneration around them? Thugs were believed to have been a secret religious-criminal group who strangled and robbed more than 40000 people on Indian roads before they were rooted out by the Thuggee and Dacoity department officers during the 1820-40s. The first native references regarding the system of thuggee date back to a period much farther than the seventeenth century. One Jaina Prakrit work named *Kumarapalacarita*, which dates back to 1145-1229 AD, is known to have the first historical reference concerning the system of thuggee. The biography of Firoz Shah Tughlaq (1290) also refers to a deceptive practice termed 'Thug.' Surdas, one of the most celebrated poets within the Bhakti tradition in Hinduism, compares Krishna's Leela to the deceptive practice of thuggee in what was most probably an "innocent" allusion (Parveen and Rath, 2018, p. 160). In *Kumarapalacarita*, the word 'thaga' is used to refer to the system of thuggee. The term 'thaga' has an etymological connection with the Sanskrit word 'sthag,' which means to cover or conceal. The renowned Indologist Wilhelm Halbfass, in his *work Tradition and Reflection: Explorations in Indian Thought* (1991), refers to the ninth-century Pasupata logician Bhasarvajna, who makes a mention regarding the sacred texts of Thags (Halbfass, 1991, p. 103).

The first mention of this group of criminals by a Westerner was made by a Frenchman named Jean De Thievenot during the seventeenth century. The work *Ramaseeana* (1836) by William Henry Sleeman brought this secret group to the British government's attention and the British reading public for the first time. Colonel Sleeman is usually credited with discovering this dreaded organization and commencing the operation, which eventually rooted out the menace. Later, another English gentleman named Colonel Philip Meadows Taylor fictionalized the lives of thugs through his highly popular novel *Confessions of a Thug* (1839). However, the whole narrative of a highly organized group of criminals who murdered people on Indian roads as a part of a religious ritual rests on flimsy grounds.

During the nineteenth century, Dr. Richard Sherwood recovered Thevenot’s account of these criminals on Indian roads from their unnoticed state and wrote an article regarding the same in 1816. Sherwood interpolated that the road Thevenot mentioned in his account was the road from Delhi to Agra and that the criminals were thugs. However, Sherwood was willing to consider economic and political reasons behind the phenomenon of thuggee, and he never considered thugs to be a special group of murderers motivated by religious reasons (that was the invention of Colonel Sleeman and first mentioned in his work *Ramaseeana*). However, later, the narrative of thugs by Sherwood entered the 'Thug' archive proper, and East India Company began consummate operations against thugs, stressing their 'special' nature of being religiously motivated murderers. Such a narrative obviously fitted in with the civilizing mission of the colonizers. Later, the seminal postcolonial scholar Aijaz Ahmed described the narrative of thuggee produced by Britishers as "the realm of pure untruth" (Fhlathuin, 2001, p. 42). Amal Chatterjee produced a counter-narrative of thuggee as an invention of Sleeman, Thornton, and Taylor (Fhlathuin, 2001, p. 42). Another seminal scholar, Kathleen Gough, characterized thugs as "social bandits" and related them to a long series of local peasant insurrections. She dated their first appearance to 1650 in the area between Delhi and Agra (Fhlathuin, 2001, p. 42). Martin Van Woerkens, in his work *The Strangled Traveler* (2002), analyses the work *Ramasaeena* by Sleeman directly and comes to the conclusion that the whole British narrative on thuggee during the nineteenth century was a discourse aimed at glorifying the colonial enterprise. However, Woerkens still argues that thugs may have existed as a criminal group holding onto a degenerate religious belief (Macfie, 2008, p. 394).

East India Company, which carried on the dual roles as the administrator of British India and chartered trading interest till the revolt of 1857, had amassed an alarming debt on Indian administration by 1825, which was not offset by the profits received from trade. James Silk Beckingham and other critics of the Company clamored for reform, retrenchment, and some measure of accountability on the floor of the Commons on 10 July 1833 (Poovey, 2004, p. 10). The Company was forced to adopt certain drastic measures to hold on to its role as the administrator of British India. The campaign against "Thuggee" proved to be the

perfect platform to showcase the efficiency of the Company's administration of British India. In 1829, the Court of Directors of the English East India Company approved an initiative by Sleeman that an extensive operation against thugs would prove the fiscal and judicial efficiency of the Company to the British government. In 1835, Sleeman was appointed as the general superintendent of the Thuggee and Dacoity Department, and more importantly, the Company's charter had also been renewed. Even though the campaign against thuggee ended up just as cumbersome and expensive as other operations by the Company, for the time being, the initiative put forward by Sleeman extended the Company's life span.

In the final analysis, what conclusions can be reasonably drawn from the narrative on thuggee and the vortex of analysis surrounding this criminal group supposedly motivated by religious reasons? The scholarly article "The Deconstructed Stranglers: A Reassessment of Thuggee" (2004) by Kim A Wagner provides the most convincing and rational solution to the puzzle of thuggee. Wagner, in his article, deconstructs Van Woerken's narrative in *The Strangled Traveller* and argues that Sleeman's perception of thuggee as a religious cult was flawed as it was based on the statements of few informers and Sleeman often made sweeping generalizations based on single statements (Wagner, 2004, p. 947). Wagner, in his article, concludes that thugs really were bands of robbers who sometimes joined large armies and sometimes served petty zamindars. The phenomenon predated the colonial British rule as well. However, he asserts that thugs were not motivated by religious reasons, nor were they centrally organized (Wagner, 2004, p. 963).

In an article titled “Invisible People, Inaudible Voices: The denotified tribes of India," published in the autumn 2014 edition of *India International Centre Quarterly,* Ajay Dandekar expands upon the arguments of Wagner and takes a more serious look at the political and historical condition of India at the time when the narrative of thuggee was constructed by the British. According to Dandekar, the colonial narrative on Thuggee and the Criminal Tribes Act of 1871 was merely the means to criminalize any protest against the British Empire in India (Dandekar, 2014, p. 9).

3. Newgate Novels and the Narrative of Criminality in Britain

The narrative of thuggee and, consequently, that of 'criminal India' is also curiously connected to a literary development in Britain during the 1830s. The portrayal of the literary scene of nineteenth-century Britain comprised the later generation of romantic poets such as Shelley, Keats, and Byron, followed by Victorian writers and novelists such as Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Thomas Carlyle, and Bronte Sisters. However, there was a strain of writing from the late 1820s to the early 1840s in British literature, which literary critics and historians usually neglect. That strain of writing is presently known as the Newgate School of Writing. The political ideas of this school of writing were associated with the Newgate prison.

Newgate was a place of confinement for many eighteenth-century criminals before their execution. Political activists burned it down in a gesture of defiance during the Gordon riots of 1780. After it was rebuilt in the 1790s, it became a gathering place for British Jacobin cultural resistance. Newgate prison became known as "the English Bastille," a potent symbol of resistance to political oppression in England. Along with Newgate Prison, *The Newgate Calendar* influenced the formation of the Newgate School of Writing. *The Newgate Calendar* was a compilation of the memoirs of notorious criminals who were convicted of offenses against England. Even though this quasi-literary phenomenon was intended to caution the general public about the consequences of living a life of crime, it also romanticized the lives of criminals, portraying them as rebels against an oppressive social system and criminal laws that decreed capital punishment even for minor offenses. There was also social unrest in England during the nineteenth century due to the passing of the New Poor Laws of 1834 (Buckley, 2002, p. 431). From 1837-1839, England witnessed many changes in its criminal laws. These changes significantly affected the lower-class sections of society. These newly fangled laws criminalized many activities in which the members of England's lower classes participated in the past, either for livelihood or for pleasure (Stearns, 2013, p. 435). This further aided in creating sympathy for the criminals in nineteenth-century England. It is also easy to notice the parallels between the new criminal laws passed in England during the nineteenth century that penalized the sources of livelihood of the lower classes and the Criminal Tribes Act passed by The East India Company in India in 1871 in order to neutralize any perceived opposition against the British rule in India.

4. *Jack Sheppard, Confessions of a Thug* and the Politics of Narratives

The plots of many of the Newgate novels of the 1830s were taken directly from the criminal biographies that appeared in *The Newgate Calendar*. Edward Bulwer-Lytton and William Harrison Ainsworth were two of the chief Newgate novelists. Bulwer-Lytton’s crime novels include *Paul Clifford* (1830), *Eugene Aram* (1832), and *Lucretia* (1846). These novels explored the relationship of different forms of crime and transgression to social circumstances and psychology. For example, the novel *Paul Clifford* (1830) was a Godwinian novel of ideas that portrayed a protagonist who was primarily an innocent victim of an unjust society.

In contrast to Bulwer-Lytton, Ainsworth romanticized the lives of criminals through his novels like *Rookwood* (1834) and *Jack Sheppard* (1839). Some critics have also considered *Oliver Twist* (1839) by Charles Dickens and *Catherine* (1839-40) by William Makepeace Thackeray to be Newgate novels, even though both of these writers disavowed the title and criticized the glamorization of the lives of criminals in many Newgate novels. Many of these Newgate novels were very popular among the British reading public, ran into many editions, and were adapted for the stage. *Jack Sheppard* by Ainsworth is a notable example. This novel was adapted for the stage, and eight different theatrical versions were produced in the autumn of 1839. Just like

thugs in *Ramaseeana* (1836) and *Confessions of a Thug* (1839), criminals in Newgate novels were also outcasts in their respective social order; however, just like the thugs, a kind of heroism and romanticism was attached to them as well.

It would be untrue to history to argue that the lives of criminals or criminality, in general, were completely avoided in English literary works before Newgate novels arrived on the literary scene. However, in contrast to the dark agents in the Waverley novels by Walter Scott, the outcasts and rogues who frequently appear in the poetry of Lord Byron and the typical villainous characters in gothic fiction, Newgate novels viewed criminal characters from lower social classes in London in a sympathetic and even heroic light (Gillingham, 2009, p. 891). The eponymous character in *Jack Sheppard* is especially portrayed as a character who is haunted by his wretched lineage, dim future prospects, and facial features, unfortunately resembling that of his father, who was a criminal. Ainsworth's novel portrays Jack as an enterprising and heroic character who is regrettably fated to end up on the gallows as a result of the social stigma attached to his lineage and social class(Gillingham, 2009, p. 891). Gillingham argues that Ainsworth endows his criminal hero with a brazenness and spiritedness, which was unheard of in earlier novels in English history. The novel ends with the execution of Jack Sheppard, watched by thousands of Londoners. This is in direct contrast to the fate of heroes with noble birth who were destined to finally regain their high status in English society of the nineteenth century despite all the hardships they may undergo in between. A great example of this is the titular character of *Oliver Twist* (1838) by Charles Dickens. It is precisely this unapologetic celebration of social transgression that distinguished Newgate novelists such as Ainsworth from Charles Dickens, who, while creating spirited characters such as the artful dodger in Charles Dickens, shied away from truly exploring him and instead preferred to focus on the noble birth of the novel's eponymous protagonist:

> Dickens must shy away from the Artful Dodger at the same time that the narrative betrays its author's enchantment with the pickpocket's exuberant, youthful energy. Where Dickens cannot, Ainsworth places at the heart of his narrative the transgressive criminal subject, allows the criminal's appetite and ambition to drive much of the plot line, and thus stages openly his productive agency. In the substantial latitude that Ainsworth's novel extends to its protagonist to act on his impulses and take pleasure in his crimes, Jack Sheppard constitutes a limit point of the narrative arena for heroic action that is made imaginable in the Newgate school. (Gillingham, 2009, p. 887)

The real-life Jack Sheppard, on whose life Ainsworth based his novel, was a housebreaker in nineteenth-century England who was executed at the very young age of 21 years before a massive crowd of thirty thousand spectators (Buckley, 2002, p. 429). He had gained considerable fame for his last attempt to escape from the New Gate Prison through sheer cleverness, skill with tools, and incredible physical flexibility:

> Sheppard had squeezed his wrists from their irons, twisted and snapped the fetters from his legs, scraped loose the bricks covering his cell's barred flue, worked loose the iron bar blocking ascent, and climbed up the narrow chimney passage to the prison's "Red Room," a cell long reserved for aristocratic prisoners and long empty. Once there, he broke with the help of the heavy flue bar-the massive lock of its ironbound door, gaining entrance to the prison chapel just off the prison's rooftop court. After several more hours of grueling effort, he broke through the seemingly impenetrable exterior door of the prison, climbed the courtyard's sheer wall to the highest leads of Newgate, and vaulted off over the rooftops of the Ci Sheppard was recaptured shortly thereafter, but this, the third, m sustained and challenging of his prison breaks, earned even the admiration of Newgate's astonished warden. (Buckley, 2002, p. 429-430)

Jack Sheppard's popularity in the nineteenth-century English literary scene was totally unprecedented. From the summer of 1839 in which *Jack Sheppard* was published, it enjoyed inexplicable popularity, and by autumn, it had outsold even *Oliver Twist*, written by Charles Dickens (Buckley, 2002, p. 426). The novel affected the London population so much that B.F Courvoisier, a London valet who murdered his employer Lord William Russel in 1840, claimed that *Jack Sheppard* inspired him to commit the crime. Ainsworth's novel was widely disseminated among the lower classes in England through the form of ballads, songs, cheap plagiarisms, and theatrical performances (Stearns, 2013, p. 435).

However, the reception of *Jack Sheppard* was not unanimously positive, and it is worthwhile at this instance to draw a comparison and contrast between the novel by Ainsworth and *Confessions of a Thug* by Meadows Taylor. *Jack Sheppard,* as well as *Confessions of a Thug,* arrived on the English literary scene in the year 1839. Both of these works were enthusiastically received by the British reading public. Both of these works sensationalized the lives of criminals, Ameer Ali in the case of *Confessions of a Thug* and the titular protagonist of *Jack Sheppard.* However, all these similarities mask one crucial difference: the critical reception of both novels.

Fraser's Magazine argued in 1840 that the problem with the Newgate novels lay in the fact that these novels portrayed a vulgar ruffian as a melodramatic hero, and thereby, they would influence many juvenile minds to indulge in the crime of housebreaking (Gillingham, 2009, p. 884). As was noted earlier, two of the seminal novelists in Victorian England, Dickens and Thackeray, denounced the Newgate School of writing, and their criticisms were mainly directed against the novel *Jack Sheppard* by Ainsworth. Ainsworth was once a friend of Charles Dickens, but as a huge controversy brewed after the publication of *Jack Sheppard*, the relationship between the two dissolved. Dickens was infuriated when certain critics compared *Oliver Twist* with *Jack Sheppard* and expressed his indignation in a letter he wrote to Richard Hengist Horne in February 1840.

Many other literary figures also took offense to this novel in particular and the Newgate School of writing in general. Edgar Allan Poe wrote in a March 1841 review, "Such libels on humanity, such provocations to crime, such worthless, inane, disgraceful romances as 'Jack Sheppard' and its successors, are a blot on our literature and a curse to our land." William Makepeace Thackeray also critiqued the Newgate School of Writing. The chief criticism against *Jack Sheppard* was that it

glorified crime, and its popularity would have a baneful effect on Britain's young and impressionable minds. After the murder of Lord William Russel by his valet in 1840, the accusations against Ainsworth's novel further strengthened. The press began to explicitly refer to the novel as one designed to make men commit crimes. The British Government stepped in as well and refused permission for any further theatrical productions based on *Jack Sheppard* (Buckley, 2002, p. 429).

Just like *Jack Sheppard*, *Confessions of a Thug* by Philip Meadows Taylor was also one of the sensations of the 1839 London literary scene. Queen Victoria herself seems to have been greatly impressed by the debut novel of Meadows Taylor. Unlike *Jack Sheppard*, *Confessions of a Thug* received almost unanimously positive reviews from London press and periodicals. The provincial press was filled with the novel's flattering reviews and long extracts. The novel was considered by many of its readers to be true to reality. For many readers, this novel was sufficient proof of the evils of the Hindu religion and ample justification for the British rule in India. Frederick Holme, a well-known Greek scholar of his time, wrote regarding the novel in 1841:

> The vigilance of the British Government in India has been due to the first complete detection of thuggee, in its real character of an organized and systematic fraternity; and, if under the same way, this monstrous hybrid of superstition and cruelty is destined to be finally eradicated, a title will thus be earned to the gratitude of the natives of India, which will alone make the benefits of our later administration more than atone for the injustices and rapacity which marked our early acquisitions of Indian territory. (qtd in Poovey, 2004, p. 4)

It is self-evident that it was the portrayal of 'criminal India' that elevated the status of this novel in the eyes of many of its readers. While the portrayal of 'domestic crime' in Newgate novels like *Jack Sheppard* was denounced by the domestic press and many literary critics, these same notable figures wholeheartedly embraced the narrative of Oriental criminality. *Confessions of a Thug* perfectly fits into the Orientalist fantasy of an East, which is in dire need of the values of Western civilization.

5. Contradictions in the Narrative in *Confessions of a Thug*

Confessions of a Thug (1839) went on to become the British Empire's most sensational ethnographic fiction in the first half of the nineteenth century. The chief source material for *Confessions of a Thug* was the seminal work *Ramasaeena* (1836) by William Henry Sleeman. The work *Ramasaeena* was supposed to be an exhaustive guide to the peculiar language and vocabulary supposedly used by thugs. The plot of *Confessions of a Thug* revolves around the fictional anti-hero protagonist Ameer Ali and sketches the rise and fall of his fortune as he devoutly follows the vocation of thuggee. The novel begins with the murder of Ameer Ali's parents by Ismail and his group of thugs, and Ismail decides to adopt Ameer Ali. When Ali comes of age, Ismail reveals to him that even though the villagers know him as a respectable trader, in reality, he follows the vocation of thuggee.

Ismail begins his narration by recounting to Ameer Ali that he is a member of the sacred order of thugs, which, according to him, is a glorious tradition transmitted from the remotest periods. Ismail states that the origins of the practice of thuggee lie in the Hindu religion, and the patroness of this practice is the Hindu goddess of Bhowanee. Hindus taught this practice to Muslims, and according to Ismail, the practice of thuggee is also sanctioned by Allah. Ismail continues his narration by stating that the fact that Hindus and Muslims unite in this profession as brothers is a sure sign of the divine origin of the profession because such unity is known nowhere else in the world. He warns Ali that at the beginning, he may feel some revulsion at the practice, but it will be soon overcome as the rewards to be gained are too glorious (Taylor, 2011, p 16-17). Prosperity on earth coupled with entry into the blessed realms of paradise. He concludes his narration by exhorting Ameer Ali to be firm, courageous, subtle, and faithful. Ameer Ali responds to Ismail by expressing his consent to become a thug.

With the passage of time and under the guidance of Ismail and other elders among the thugs, Ali became one of the most talented and respected thugs in his community. He demonstrated his capability in not only strangling the victims but also in successfully luring innocent travelers into the death trap set for them by thugs. When Ismail retired from active service, Ali took over as the leader of the thugs in their area and led his group on several successful ventures. However, the British ruling India then noticed the increasing number of robberies and murders on Indian roads and deduced that thugs might be the culprits behind these heinous acts. They formed arrangements with Indian native princes to catch these wrongdoers, and Raja of Jhalone was one of their allies. Raja of Jhalone, under whose protection Ali and his followers lived, trapped Ismail and Ameer Ali by deceit and condemned Ismail to a brutal death. He sentenced Ameer Ali to incarceration in a dungeon, and Ameer Ali decided to become an approver for the British to save his life. This novel is structured as the conversation between Ameer Ali and his British interlocutor. Ameer Ali narrates his life story to him, thereby unraveling the narrative of thuggee in British India.

However, the elaborate process of criminalization of the Indian that is on display in this novel does not go unchallenged. Ameer Ali, who is allowed to confess freely by the British officer, manages to construct a narrative of thuggee that contests the authority of the British. Ameer Ali describes to the British officer the diverse class/caste composition of the thugs, thereby presenting thuggee as a system of honorable brotherhood. In fact, the noble brotherhood of thuggee, as described by Ameer Ali, is remarkably close to that of the highwaymen found in Newgate novelists of the period. He also tells the British interrogator that, unlike the British, thugs have managed to unite Hindus and Muslims, and amongst thugs, bad faith is never known. Similarly, even though the British officer tries to describe Ameer Ali as a devious criminal, Ali is largely unrepentant about the murders he had committed and considers himself a brave leader of his men, a loving son, and a caring husband (Taylor, 2011, p. 293).

However, the denigration of the narrative of thuggee by the British interrogator in the name of the values of Western civilization is not without its contradictions. The phenomenon of imperialism and the institution of the British Colonial Raj

operates by listening to and later denigrating oriental narratives like that of thuggee. However, the very similarity between the British interlocutor and Ameer Ali dilutes the pseudoscientific metanarrative of imperialism that pretends to denigrate the practice of thuggee. The British interrogator himself described Ameer Ali as a man of prepossessing appearance and dignity. He is also described as being fearless, confident, and unbroken by his sufferings in prison. In one significant paragraph in the novel, Ameer Ali demonstrates his ability to feel emotions like grief and guilt, just like the British officer who records his testament.

In an important paragraph in this novel, the white narrator provides a physical description of Ameer Ali for his British readers. The narrator enlists the sympathetic engagement of his reader and describes Ameer Ali as being fair to a native and having a broad forehead. The narrator concludes his description by stating that looking at Ameer Ali, one can never doubt even for a moment that they are looking at a murderer. The white narrator proceeds to address Ameer Ali and reads out to him the description he has written of him. However, the narrator tells Ameer Ali that even though his physical description is prepossessing, his heart is not in the right place, and he is essentially evil. Ameer Ali promptly rejects the description of him as an evil person and describes himself as a kind husband, faithful friend, and an honorable member of his society who never broke a social tie (Taylor, 2011, p. 293). Even though the narrator pointed out to Ali the hundreds of murders the latter had committed, Ali believed that he was merely fulfilling a providential role. This is a clear instance in this novel in which the frame of judgment used by the white narrator and the frame of judgment according to which Ameer Ali lived his life conflicted with each other. It should be noted at this instance that the question is not whether Ameer Ali is truly an innocent man. Ali is unquestionably a murderer and a criminal, however he is no more of a criminal than the protagonists of New Gate novels.

The novel *Confessions of a Thug* also offers a powerful counter-narrative to the narrative of civilizing the Orient, which the Britishers often advanced. Cheetoo Pindaree, under whom Ameer Ali worked for a short time, enlisted Ali's help for a grand expedition he had planned to aid Marathas in their battle against the Britishers. Cheetoo Pindaree planned to raid the territory of the Nizam of Hyderabad and lay waste the provinces of Britishers so they would be in a constant state of alarm. Cheetoo Pindaree considered Britishers to be an affront to the dignity of the Muslim faith and a blot on the land of Hindostan. He planned to help the Marathas in their impending battle against the Britishers so that not only would the land be rid of their presence, he was promised the post of a powerful and dignified general in the army.

6. Conclusion

The phenomenal success of the novel *Confessions of a Thug* speaks volumes about how much Sleeman and Taylor succeeded in creating a local narrative of thuggee to justify the metanarrative of benevolent colonialism. A review of this work that appeared in *British and Foreign Review* in 1839 upheld this work as the prime example of the power of the English government in spreading the virtues of Christian civilization and being instrumental in defeating the worst form of superstition in Oriental nations like India (Poovey, 2004, p. 4). However, the reviewer conveniently forgot that the criminal propensities exhibited by thugs very much resembled the New Gate criminals of nineteenth-century England.

Hence, a critical analysis of *Confessions of a Thug* raises several contradictions. First, the novel is a work of fiction supposedly based on real events. Secondly, the investigations by Postcolonial scholars such as Aijaz Ahmed, Ajay Dandekar, and Kim A Wagner question the veracity of the thuggee phenomenon and its supposed religious foundation. Hence, the referent in the discourse itself fails to pass critical scrutiny. Thirdly, the similarity of *Confessions of a Thug* with Newgate novels effectively negates the narrative of criminality as something unique to Asian and African nations, thereby neutralizing the narrative of the colonial civilizing missions. Finally, the fictional narrative in *Confessions of a Thug* itself is riddled with contradictions. Ameer Ali, the anti-hero protagonist of this tale, often manages to subvert the narrative of the British interrogator who intends to criminalize Ali and his fellow thugs. The minor narrative of a political revolt planned by Cheetoo Pindaree with the aid of Ameer Ali portrays Britishers as illegitimate aggressors from outside the Indian subcontinent who are a threat to the indigenous civilization of India.

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