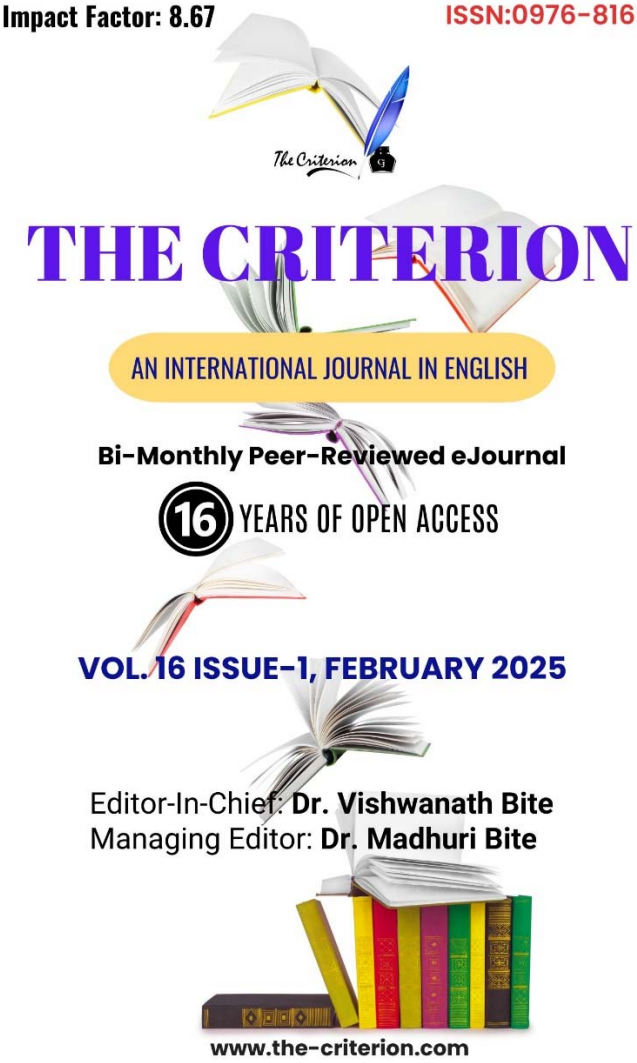
Impact Factor: 8.67

ISSN:0976-8165



AboutUs: http://www.the-criterion.com/about/

Archive: http://www.the-criterion.com/archive/

ContactUs: http://www.the-criterion.com/contact/

EditorialBoard: http://www.the-criterion.com/editorial-board/

Submission: http://www.the-criterion.com/submission/

FAQ: http://www.the-criterion.com/fa/

Construction of Thuggee: The Fabrication of Criminal Identity in *Confessions of a Thug*

Suman Rani
Assistant Professor,
Dept. of English,
Govt. College Baund Kalan,
Charkhi Dadri (Haryana) India.
Ph. D Scholar,
BPSMV Khanpur Kalan, Sonipat.

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.14977396

Article History: Submitted-31/01/2025, Revised-06/02/2025, Accepted-26/02/2025, Published-28/02/2025.

Abstract:

The portrayal of Thuggee by the colonizers as a pervasive and systematic practice was a calculated strategy aimed at reinforcing their dominance in India while diverting scrutiny from their administrative failures. The British endeavoured to rationalize their supremacy and maintain hegemonic influence over Indian culture by dramatizing Thuggee and accentuating its ceremonial and religious aspects. The research further explores the importance of life narratives in shaping the discourse surrounding Thuggee, particularly examining how confessions, testimonies, and memoirs were employed to construct a narrative of criminal behaviour and identity during the colonial period in India. Taylor's novel *Confessions of a Thug* receives special attention since it depicts the life of a Thug named Ameer Ali and the horrific reality of Thuggee. According to the study, the elimination of Thuggee in colonial discourse served as a tool for colonists to highlight their power and justify their rule while also obscuring the complex realities of Indian culture. This research contributes to a better understanding of

the imperialist goal in India and its influence on beliefs of Indian culture and identity by investigating how Thuggee is portrayed in colonial narratives.

Keywords: Colonial narratives, hereditary, identity, religious fraternity, Thuggee.

The Britishers portray Thugs in India as highly skilled criminals who strangulated passengers and inherited this crime from generation to generation. They were also represented from various religions, castes, and cultures who shared a common faith in the Hindu Goddess Kali, who was considered the Goddess of destruction. Both Muslims and Hindus believe in the divine origin of thuggee and the power of the goddess Bhowanee. A renowned postcolonial historian, Parama Roy calls thugs a "quasi-religious fraternity" which is unquestionably accepted. To demonstrate the horrific nature of Indian culture, the colonizers used memoirs of colonial administrators, first-hand accounts of court procedures, and statements from arrested thugs. The power of the ruling class to convince other disadvantaged groups that their interests and preferences are the interests and preferences of all is what Gramsci defined as hegemony. This hegemonic power is evident in colonial Thuggee, which the British labelled as a "System" of ritualistic murder. Even though numerous historians and cultural critics have repeatedly investigated the issue of colonizers establishing Thugs as ritual murderers in their pursuit of spreading a deteriorating image of India, sufficient consideration has not been given to the role of life narratives in the form of confessions and testimonies of arrested thugs. In the discourse of law and order of the colonial power, this issue is put forward by stalwarts like William Henry Sleeman, Philip Meadows Taylor, etc. The paper will attempt to explain the processes in which life narratives in the form of sensational confessions, testimonies, legal proceedings, memoirs, and autobiographies were used by the Britishers to construct a discursive formulation of criminal behaviour and identity in nineteenth-century India. A special emphasis will be placed on Philip Meadows Taylor's 1839 novel *Confessions of a Thug.*

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

The development of Thuggee in Philip Meadows Taylor's *Confessions of a Thug* demonstrates the sensational life story of Ameer Ali. He portrays Thuggee as the product of fatalism and superstition, supported and sharpened by the fiercest enthusiasm that ever inspired human beings to do things that humanity shudders at. In the novel's introduction, 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 iv).

When the novel was published, William Sleeman's anti-Thuggee campaign had acquired significant traction in England, and readers enthusiastically welcomed this new record of the Thuggee. This unusual zeal of the English reading audience may undoubtedly be traced to incredible depictions of thuggee in books such as 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 Practise of the Thugs*(1837), which stands out as ground-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 Henry Sleeman. Philip Meadows Taylor reveals a malicious reality hidden behind Ameer Ali's innocent face in *Confessions of a Thug*, forcing the readers to pay attention to the ringing sounds of mystery around the noble look of the Thug. Meadows Taylor claims that by depicting Ameer Ali's journey from the moment he was introduced to the cruel profession to the moment the police captured him, he is exposing the bones that lie beneath the vibrant sociocultural tapestry of India. According to Taylor, the book is a "strange" and "horrible" chapter in the bigger story of humankind. Ameer Ali is portrayed by Taylor as being a disgusting and merciless killer before him;

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

> "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 condottiere 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 131).

Meadows Taylor's portrayal of Ameer Ali suggests that he is hiding behind a recognizable façade when travelling. While posing as a regular acquaintance, Ameer Ali is actually a "Bhula Admi," a devout man who performs the namaz five times a day, likes elegant clothing and delectable meals, and above all is a loving father and son. Ameer Ali is always sure to make it clear that he belongs to the middle class. Because of this, he is sometimes referred to as "Meer," while other times he is a valiant soldier completing the task that God has given him. When Ameer encounters the brave Nawab Subjee Khan, he poses as the returning son of a wealthy Hyderabadi horse trader. Because Ameer Ali's cloak of familiarity is so thick and hides his terrible nature, it is difficult for anybody to see beyond the everyday familiarity he creates. Ameer Ali's bravery is evident all the time. Ali declares to the nawab that he is brave and reveals this to him, "My heart never failed me (…) those who know me well, also know that I am burning for an opportunity to prove that I am a man and no coward." (Taylor 121). Ameer Ali's journey is constantly filled with anticipation, and it is this suspended anticipation that is essential to the novel's narrative method, helping Taylor show how Indian culture lacks the rays of civilization. The novel's courtyards are infused with the themes of "fear" and "trembling." By enabling Ameer Ali to talk about the gruesome manner that was thought of for getting rid of the dead corpses rather than just the murder itself, Taylor heightens the sensational atmosphere. Grotesque details of removing the dead body of a trader named Kamaal Khan are brought to light in volume I of the book. The head of Kamaal Khan was cut off from

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

the corpse and hung up before the town gate. Additionally, horrifying shots of jackals digging up the victims' graves and scavenging on them contribute to the sensational and chaotic depiction of 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 75).

However, it becomes clear that the dramatic portrayal of the thuggee cult is equivocal when Meadows Taylor in the book acknowledges that he cannot fully understand it. “It will be difficult to make this understood within my present limits”. (Taylor iv). A parallel system of information existed in colonized India, which eminent historian C.A. Bayly deciphers in the dramatic generalizations of diverse nomadic tribes, leading to what he thought to be "knowledge gaps" and "information panics." According to Bayly, there has been a great deal of knowledge and authority accumulated at the levels of official administration, including the military, political service, and revenue. However, in the lower levels of the administrative structure, the information and authority that were concentrated at the top were somewhat lacking. The integration of these two British administrative levels raised colonizer concerns about the viability of administrative procedures in practice. Therefore, to allay their concerns about the viability of the administrative measures, the British adopted a policy of sensational generalizations about collective identities, which gave them the delusion that their policies were having an even and uniform impact on large groups of untamed and uncivilized Indians (Bayly 165). This "knowledge gap" that results in an information crisis and subsequent "information-panic" is also visible in Philip Meadows Taylor's book in how he generalizes his perceptions of 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

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

> 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 these 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 practiced throughout India". (Taylor v).

It is impossible to separate Taylor's assertion that hereditary criminal groups may be found in "every part" of India from his efforts as a British administrator to locate and ostracise such groups that he saw endangered the ideal sociological order. In his scholarly work *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India,* renowned postcolonial researcher Bernard S. Cohn recognized several types of groups who "were people who appeared by their nature to wander beyond the boundaries of settled civil society: sanyasis. Sadhus, fakirs, dacoits, goondas, thags, 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 10- 11).

The story depicts the thuggee practice of strangulating travellers in the name of worshipping Kali, the tutelary deity of the thugs, by focusing on Ameer Ali's confessions.

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

Taylor, who follows Sleeman, who claims to have heard the tale from one of his Thug approvers, repeats the tale of Thuggee's heavenly origin in an extremely dramatic manner. Almost all colonialist texts present the following as the Thuggee origin myth:

Rakta-bija-dana was a demon who frightened the Earth a long time ago and was destroyed by Goddess Kali when she descended to Earth. However, Kali discovered after fighting the demon that other demons would emerge from the bloody drops that fell to the ground each time, she struck the demon with her sword. Kali was forced to halt due to tiredness as the battlefield quickly became overrun with many demons. When the task was complete, the men came to Kali to return the handkerchiefs; however, the goddess instructed them to keep the handkerchief and utilize it to carry out their particular line of work. Thus, Taylor and his colleagues presented the practice of killing people in thuggee as one mandated by heavenly authority. The looting in relation to this discursive thuggee creation was just accidental. The information provided by Ameer Ali on the origins of thuggee is merely a minor variant of the Sleeman-constructed master story of thuggee:

> "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 permitted to resort to every means he could devise to affect his objects. Among others, his consort device, 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, so that they might decoy human beings to

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

> 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 of the bodies, as she would herself convey them from earth." (Taylor 18).

This sensationalization of the sociocultural ethos of India was intended as a strategic administrative move. Following Sandria Freitag's research on thuggee, it is clear that the British were more interested in establishing undisputed authority in India than enforcing law and order in the colonial state when they made these sensational generalizations based on native approvers' confessions. To establish themselves as an unchallenged power, the British adopted a policy of stigmatizing any social groupings they believed may pose a danger to their sovereignty. Furthermore, Freitag draws attention to a distinction in how the colonial authorities handled crimes committed by individuals and by groups. The colonial authority focused its efforts on preventing the existence of communities that it perceived as posing a danger to the colonial system because it was swayed by the idea of reducing the expense of administration. Thus, emergency powers were established to regulate and combat any indication of revolt by collectivities. Additionally, as described by Bayly, who identified a form of "information panic" in the imperial understanding of thuggee, the sensational fabrication of data regarding caste, race, hereditary, etc., can be viewed as an effort by the colonizer to cover up its inability to maintain the so-called "rule of law" in India.

Meadows Taylor also attempts to hide the British Government's failure to maintain law and order in the colonial state in the novel by letting Ameer Ali sensationally display the pernicious features of his brutal vocation. In the discussion of thuggee, it is strongly maintained that the natives not only enthusiastically accept dehumanizing rites and traditions but also actively participate in upholding them. The murder of a traveller is depicted in the book as

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

being "wonderful" and "very grand." It is evident that thuggee's participants, who see the practice of ritualized murder as being approved by religion and hence performing a type of divine duty, are happy to uphold the destructive traits of the practice. In the book, Ameer Ali describes his astonishment at the planning that went into killing a traveller 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 22).

The above-quoted passage aptly depicts the thug's psychological degeneration. In a very cruel manner, the thugs can very jovially get ready for the brutal murder of the intended victim, and the fact that everyone is depicted as excited confirms the brutal behaviour of the thugs. Taylor seems to be claiming that criminal instincts are so deeply ingrained in Indian society's courtyards that it is nearly impossible for the British colonial administration to tackle a demonic force that hides behind the façade of common humility by depicting the thugs' relaxed behaviour towards murder. The modus operandi of thuggee, according to Meadows Taylor, compels one to forsake his human traits and allow his savage animal instincts to take control. Meadows Taylor goes on to further explain the barbaric method in which thuggee functions. The entire book is filled with thrilling descriptions of murder. For instance, Meadows Taylor describes the killing of Ghous Khan and his partner as follows:

> "Then in with them! ‟ cried my father (…) „We had better open them, ‟ said Lugha, 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

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

> a few moments, no one could have discovered that eight human beings have been secreted beneath the spot" (Taylor 24).

Thuggee thus developed into a hierarchical organization under the rule of colonial rulers such as Sleeman and Meadows Taylor, where thugs were given allotted ranks according to their supremacy and performance. They had a strange vocabulary and language. The Confessions are noteworthy, nevertheless, since Ameer Ali's confession is the sole source from which the English Sahib draws its emphasis on the "systemic" nature of thuggee. The approvers' testimony is substantially tainted and has doubtful legitimacy because it was taken under pressure. Shahid Amin examined the features of an approver's (a rebel who became an informant) testimony in his work "The Approvers Testimony, Judicial Discourse: The Case of Chauri Chaura," which was written in the court case that followed the Chauri Chaura incident. Amin's observation on the speech of the approver Shikari is similarly relevant to our study of Thuggee approvers from nearly ten years ago. "Despite its length scope and detail, the approver's testimony bears just too many traces of outside structuring, raising too many problems concerning 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, a promise of pardon and reward…" (Amin 178).

Conclusion:

In light of the aforementioned claims regarding Thuggee, it can be concluded that the colonizer's attempt to minimize social phenomena of Indian degeneration and crudeness (backed by its enormous material as well as political and economic power) was the reason behind sensational depictions of Thuggee in the discourse it produced. This allowed the colonizers to conceal their own failure as an administrative system. Thuggee is repeatedly cited

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030

as an example of an all-pervasive system of brutality and ritualistic murder, to the point where it is accepted as historical fact. Then, in other purported factual accounts relying on life narratives in the form of confessions, memoirs, legal hearings, etc., this reality is repeated in a way akin to Meadows Taylor's novel.

Works Cited:

Amin, Shahid. "Approver's Testimony, Judicial Discourse: The case of Chauri Chaura." *Subaltern Studies V*. Ed. Ranajit Guha. Delhi: OUP,1990.166-202.

Bayly, Christopher A. *Empire, and Information: Intelligence Gathering and social communication in India,1780-1870*. New York: Cambridge University Press,1996.

Cohn, Bernard S. *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. New Jersey: Princeton University Press,1996, 10-11.

Freitag, Sandria B. "Collective crime and Authority in North India." *Crime and criminality in British India*, Tucson: University of Arizona Press, 1985, 140-63.

Meadows Taylor Philip. *Confessions of a Thug.* Blackmask Online, 2002.

Roy, Parama. *Indian Traffic: Identities in Question in Colonial and Postcolonial India*. University of California Press, 1998, http://ark.cdlib.org/ark:/13030/ft8s20097j/.

Sleeman, William Henry. *The Thugs or Phansigars of India*. 2 vols., Carey and Hart, 1839.

https://doi.org/10.5281/zenodo.10448030