

Constructions, Contestations, And Postcolonial Masculinity in Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs*

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Abstract—This paper interrogates the constructions and contestations of masculinity within the postcolonial framework of Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs* (1997), a revisionist reimagining of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* (1861). By displacing the narrative centre to the Australian convict-turned gentleman, Carey deconstructs imperial hierarchies of gender, class, and morality, situating masculine identity at the interstice of colonial trauma and self-fashioning. The novel's protagonist embodies a hybrid masculinity one shaped by exile, servitude, and the spectral presence of the British patriarchal order while simultaneously engaging in a performative negotiation of power, desire, and belonging. Through a postcolonial lens, the study explores how Carey reconfigures the colonial male subject as both agent and artifact of empire, revealing the anxieties underlying the metropolitan ideal of manhood. The analysis mobilizes theoretical insights from postcolonial theory, gender studies, and psychoanalytic criticism to expose how *Jack Maggs* destabilizes the binaries of master/servant, colonizer/colonized, and civilized/savage. Ultimately, Carey's narrative articulates a counter-discourse of masculinity that resists imperial inscription, foregrounding the fractured, performative, and contingent nature of male identity in postcolonial modernity.

Index Terms—Postcolonial Masculinity, Hybridity, Gender Identity, Colonial Discourse, Power.

I. INTRODUCTION

Jack Maggs (1997) by Peter Carey is a richly imagined historical novel that reimagines Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations* from a new perspective. The novel is set in 19th century London, the story follows Jack Maggs, an Australian convict who secretly returns to England in search of the young man he once supported from afar. Through vivid prose and complex characters, Carey explores themes of exile, identity,

and redemption, while offering a darkly compelling portrait of Victorian society and the hidden lives beneath its polished surface.

Jack Maggs exposes the ideological fragility of true manhood. The novel's intertextuality also permits Carey to critique Victorian gender norms from a late 20th century Postcolonial perspective, revealing how narratives of gentlemanliness were complicit in sustaining empire. This paper traces three interlocking aspects of Carey's construction of masculinity, they are, the internalization and disruption of imperial manhood, The convict's hybrid, performative masculinity, and the negotiation of power and belonging within postcolonial identity. Together these strands reveal Carey's redefinition of manhood as a dynamic, unstable negotiation rather than an inherited essence.

II. IMPERIAL IDEALS AND THE BURDEN OF MANHOOD

British imperial masculinity was historically defined through dominance, rationality, and moral rectitude, qualities associated with the gentleman. As John Tosh notes, Victorian manhood demanded both "public authority and private restraint," a balance sustained by class and empire. Within this framework, Magwitch in *Great Expectations* represents the antithesis that is criminal, bodily, passionate, and colonial. In *Jack Maggs*, Carey exposes the ideological violence beneath that dichotomy. When Maggs returns to London after twenty-four years in penal exile, he seeks legitimacy through the trappings of refinement: "I come here for the culture ... The opera, the theatre I got a lot of time to make up for" (Carey 17). His longing for culture and respectability reflects the internalization of imperial manhood's moral grammar.

Yet the very phrasing makes up for betrays his awareness of exclusion. Maggs's self-discipline and industriousness echo the Protestant work ethic central to imperial masculinity, but his status as ex-convict marks him as perpetually other. Tobias Oates, the Dickensian surrogate and man of letters, embodies the intellectual and authorial face of British patriarchy. In one revealing moment, Oates declares of Maggs's memories: "What a treasure-house, eh, Buckle? The Criminal Mind! ... awaiting its first cartographer" (Carey 94). The metaphor of mapping turns Maggs into colonial terrain, to be surveyed and mastered by the metropolitan intellect. Oates's cartography of the convict's psyche parallels the empire's epistemological conquest of the colonial body. Masculinity, here, is synonymous with knowledge, control, and authorship. However, Carey's narrative structure undermines that authority. By granting interiority to Maggs and exposing Oates's manipulative ambition, the novel reverses the colonial gaze. The imperial male's mastery is shown as parasitic, feeding on the vitality and trauma of the colonial subject. As critic Colette Selles observes, "Carey revisits the English literary heritage only to expose its complicity with imperial power" (Selles 68). In doing so, Carey dismantles the ideal of the autonomous, rational gentleman, revealing the dependence of English manhood on colonial others for its self-definition.

III. EXILE, SERVITUDE, AND HYBRID MASCULINITY

Maggs's masculinity is forged in the crucible of exile. Transported to Australia, he experiences both degradation and rebirth. The colonial landscape becomes, paradoxically, the ground of his empowerment. He gains wealth, skill, and self-command. Yet this success occurs outside the symbolic heart of empire. His return to England thus dramatizes what Bhabha calls the 'ambivalence of mimicry' the colonized subject's attempt to resemble the colonizer 'almost the same, but not quite' (Bhabha 86). Carey writes Maggs as a man haunted by the contradictions of his self-making. The narrator observes, "He was a man who had been whipped, branded, shamed, but still he stood tall in his broadcloth coat" (Carey 41). The juxtaposition of bodily scars and genteel attire captures the collision

between colonial servitude and metropolitan refinement. Masculinity here is hybrid, stitched together from pain and performance. In psychoanalytic terms, Maggs's sense of self corresponds to what Frantz Fanon in *Black Skin, White Masks* describes as "the internalization of inferiority." Although Maggs is racially white, his colonial and criminal status places him in a symbolic position analogous to Fanon's colonized subject. He is compelled to prove worth through mimicry of the imperial ideal seeking the gaze of English society to confirm his manhood. Yet, as Fanon warns, such mimicry produces alienation: "The black man wants to be white. The white man slaves to reach a human level" (Fanon 9). Maggs's struggle is similar, his very desire for English respectability underscores his exclusion from it. At the same time, Carey infuses Maggs's colonial masculinity with moral depth and compassion. His relationship with Mercy Larkins, the servant girl he protects, demonstrates a tenderness absent in Oates's patriarchal world. Mercy calls him 'a good man', a statement that redefines goodness not as class decorum but as ethical care. Through this revaluation, Carey constructs an alternative masculinity rooted in empathy rather than domination, Hegemonic manhood depends on subordinating alternative forms of masculinity, whether working-class, colonial, or emotional. Carey resists this hierarchy by elevating Maggs's convict virtue, labour, endurance, affection to the level of moral authority. The colonial man, once marginal, becomes the ethical centre of the narrative. Thus, *Jack Maggs* reconfigures masculinity not as imperial conquest but as survival and solidarity.

IV. PERFORMANCE, POWER, AND DESIRE

Maggs's London masquerade as the mysterious benefactor in fine clothes reveals masculinity as theatrical performance. His gentlemanly attire, manners, and property ownership function as props in a ritual of self-authorization. Judith Butler's theory of performativity illuminates this dynamic: gender is not a fixed identity but "a stylized repetition of acts" through which norms are reproduced (Butler 140). Maggs's performance of manhood, however, exposes the cracks in the façade, each gesture reminds us of the violence that made it possible. When Oates hypnotically manipulates Maggs to reveal his past, the

scene becomes a metaphor for imperial surveillance. The colonial male body is subjected to scrutiny, its memories extracted for metropolitan consumption. Yet the process also destabilizes Oates's control; he is drawn into Maggs's psychic landscape and overwhelmed by its intensity. Carey thus reverses the colonial power dynamic; the explorer is consumed by the territory he seeks to map. Masculinity, conceived as mastery, collapses into vulnerability. Furthermore, Maggs's paternal relationship with Henry Phipps dramatizes the anxieties of lineage and belonging. Having made Phipps a gentleman, Maggs seeks filial recognition, but Phipps repudiates his convict benefactor. The rejection mirrors the colonial disavowal of its origins, England's dependence on but denial of its penal colonies. The encounter exposes how class, morality, and masculinity intertwine in systems of exclusion. Maggs's heartbreak reveals that the gentleman's composure is maintained by suppressing the shame of dependency. Carey's depiction of desire also complicates masculine identity. The homoerotic undertones between Oates and Maggs, particularly during the mesmerism scenes, suggest that imperial authority is haunted by the desire it represses. As critic Peter Otto notes, "Carey exposes the erotic investments of colonial mastery" (Otto 203). In these scenes, power, knowledge, and sexuality converge, revealing masculinity as unstable and permeated by the very vulnerabilities it denies.

V. FRACTURED AUTHORITY AND THE COLLAPSE OF BINARIES

Through narrative doubling and intertextual inversion, Carey dismantles the binaries underpinning Victorian masculinity. Master and servant, colonizer and colonized, civilized and savage, all are shown to interpenetrate. Maggs's genteel exterior conceals the marks of punishment; Oates's civilized prose conceals cruelty and deceit. As Bhabha observes, colonial discourse "splits to produce the hybrid figure that is neither Self nor Other" (Bhabha 111). The hybrid masculine subject becomes both agent and symptom of empire's contradictions. Carey's narrative voice underscores this collapse of authority. Unlike Dickens's omniscient narration, Jack Maggs disperses focalization across characters, denying any stable moral hierarchy. The reader's sympathy oscillates between Maggs's integrity and Oates's intellectual

ambition, revealing the fragility of both. This polyphony enacts what Elleke Boehmer calls "the postcolonial condition of divided voice" (Boehmer 157), in which the colonial subject both resists and reproduces imperial discourse. The Australian colony, though offstage, functions as a haunting presence. It is the site of both punishment and rebirth, violence and renewal. In this sense, Carey rewrites the colony as the unconscious of empire of what Freud would call the return of the repressed. Masculinity, likewise, is haunted by what it excludes: emotion, dependence, vulnerability. When Maggs finally returns to Australia at the novel's end, his self-exile signifies not defeat but reclamation. The colony, once the space of degradation, becomes the ground for a new, self-authored masculinity.

VI. POSTCOLONIAL MASCULINITY AS COUNTER-DISOURSE

By the novel's conclusion, Carey has articulated a distinctly postcolonial masculinity one that resists imperial inscription and redefines power as relational rather than hierarchical. Maggs's story foregrounds the capacity for renewal within trauma: he is not the passive victim of empire but the creative agent of his own myth. As said, people ignore the fact While listening that leads to misinterpretation. (Chamundeshwari 3673). His journey parallels the postcolonial project itself: reclaiming narrative authority, revising the past, and forging identity from fragments. The counter-discourse Carey constructs aligns with Connell's notion of "marginal masculinities" (Connell 183) which challenge hegemonic forms by drawing on alternative cultural logics. Maggs's identity, shaped by colonial hardship and moral endurance, becomes a metaphor for Australia's emergence from Britain's shadow. As Selles notes, Carey "reverses the cultural cringe," presenting the colony not as derivative but as morally superior (Selles 70). Moreover, Carey's portrayal of Maggs anticipates contemporary debates about whiteness and settler masculinity. Although Maggs is ethnically white, his convict origins place him in a subaltern position within the racialized hierarchy of empire. His struggle for respectability thus mirrors the broader anxiety of white settlers seeking legitimacy in postcolonial nations. Carey's narrative suggests that

true manhood lies not in domination but in the capacity to acknowledge vulnerability and history.

VII. CONCLUSION

Jack Maggs stands as a powerful meditation on the crisis of masculine identity within postcolonial modernity. By rewriting Dickens's *Great Expectations* from the margins, Carey exposes the ideological scaffolding of imperial manhood and replaces it with a vision of masculinity that is hybrid, performative, and self-reflexive. Maggs's journey from convict to gentleman to self-exiled colonist encapsulates the transformation of the colonial subject into an agent of resistance. In the end, Carey's novel does not redeem the gentlemanly ideal; it redefines manhood altogether. The gentle man is no longer he who commands others, but he who confronts his own history of subjugation and emerges capable of empathy. By collapsing the binaries of master and servant, civilized and savage, Carey reveals that the true legacy of empire lies not in dominance but in the fractured humanity of those it sought to silence. In giving voice to Jack Maggs, Carey offers not only a revision of Dickens but a re-vision of manhood itself, one born from exile, tempered by trauma, and sustained by the possibility of renewal.

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