

Modern Masculinities in an Age of Imperial Decline

Contested Masculinities: Crises in Colonial Male Identity from Joseph Conrad to Satyajit Ray.
Nalin Jayasena. New York and London: Routledge, 2007. 252 pp.

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<1> Nalin Jayasena's *Contested Masculinities* offers scholars of late-Victorian and early-twentieth-century literature and culture an interesting complement to the groundbreaking work of Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather* (1995). Both works concern themselves with a nexus of issues involving competing, evolving, and "contested" narratives of empire, race, gender, and sexuality. Whereas McClintock's work focused primarily on the nineteenth century, women, and Africa (particularly South Africa), Jayasena's gaze is more firmly focused on the twentieth century, men, and the South Asian subcontinent. Jayasena, like McClintock, also pursues interdisciplinary analysis and cultural criticism: two of his four case studies involve the furor around a famous cricket test series between Australia and England in the 1930s and a Satyajit Ray film, *The Home and the World*, from the 1980s. However, unlike McClintock's book, Jayasena's work is primarily a work of literary criticism. The other two case studies discuss Conrad's *Lord Jim* (1900) and Orwell's *Burmese Days* (1934), while even the chapter on Ray's film is as much, if not more, concerned with the 1916 novel on which it is based.

<2> In a short introductory chapter, Jayasena uses Stoker's *Dracula* (1897) to frame his central concerns. His book continues an important conversation about the confluence in the late nineteenth century of the emergence of the New Woman, increased public attention to homosexuality and erotic relations between men, and narratives of imperial decline and colonial resistance. While the claim that "colonial masculinity did not operate independently of the colonial cultural milieu" is far from novel, Jayasena does add to our understanding in his extension of the analysis by "examin[ing] how colonized men negotiate between competing notions of masculinity represented by the imperial culture as well as the indigenous culture" (3). Indeed, I found his discussions of Dain Waris and Cornelius (*Lord Jim*), Australian cricketers, Veraswami and U Po Kyin (*Burmese Days*), and the protagonists of *The Home and the World* (1916) to be significant contributions to our understanding of the politics of colonial resistance and contested gender identities in contexts that were informed by metropolitan transformations as well as local tensions based in competing traditions.

<3> Jayasena's analysis of *Lord Jim* details the novel as an example of "the tension between imperial male desire and its inevitable limitations and failures" (21). Curiously, the argument in

the chapter is much clearer in a brief framing discussion of Millais' painting "The North-West Passage" (1874). Of *Lord Jim*, Jayasena argues that he will show "how both gender and imperialism cohabitate" in order "to lend credence to a long-running fantasy of English male ascendancy" (22). Indeed, Jayasena's chapter follows much Conrad criticism in detailing the importance of imagination, fantasy, and ideals in Jim's sense of himself, as well as Marlow's fascination with Jim. I found myself disappointed with Jayasena's reductive characterization of Conrad criticism as divided into competing camps of formalists, feminists, and postcolonialists, the occupants of which had little interest in issues in other spheres of analysis. Certainly most criticism of the past twenty years has recognized the importance of both. In the end, Jayasena locates in the novel a discussion "on the limited opportunities for imperial, white, male heroism at the end of the nineteenth century," (60) which explains a deeply idealistic and doomed-to-be-frustrated investment in fantasies of colonial male omnipotence. I believe this interpretation of Conrad, reminiscent of Christopher Bongie's reading of *Lord Jim* in *Exotic Memories* (1991), is right on the mark.

<4> The third chapter of this book focuses on a famous cricket series between Australia and England in 1932-33, known in the cricket world as the "bodyline" series. Unlike the other chapters that primarily pursue textual analysis, Jayasena pursues interesting historical or cultural criticism in this chapter. Approximately half of the chapter provides important context about post-WWI relations between Britain and Australia, culminating in independence, as well as information about the place of Australia and its origins as a convict colony in the British imagination. In the series that became known for the "bodyline" controversy, the captain of the English team, Douglas Jardine, was accused by the Australian team and government of resorting to ungentlemanly tactics when he and his teammates deliberately bowled at the body of the batsman. (For readers like myself, more familiar with American baseball, this was apparently the cricket equivalent of pitchers who intentionally throw at the bodies and heads of batters to intimidate them.) In a fascinating discussion, Jayasena outlines Jardine's education in the elite English public school tradition (he was a graduate of Winchester) and that tradition's emphasis on Spartan ideals of self-sacrifice and unflinching silence in the face of pain. The "bodyline" controversy became an international incident when the Australians accused the English of engaging in ungentlemanly tactics that betrayed traditional English values associated with fair play (and class and race privilege) in an attempt to win by any means necessary. (One might recall the controversy in the film *Chariots of Fire* [1981], when the Anglo-Jewish athlete, Harold Abrahams, is blackballed for hiring a coach and betraying the ideal of the amateur.) The English and their elite, public-school-educated, cricket federation countered that the Australians were being unmanly for complaining and exhibiting a lack of stoicism. Perhaps more successfully here than in other chapters, Jayasena details how voices on both sides of this international controversy tried to deploy norms associated with the public-school tradition to make accusations of gender and race betrayal.

<5> In the final two chapters of the book, Jayasena returns to literary textual analysis in order to show how Orwell's narrative of colonial malaise and decline, as well as Tagore's novel of colonial complicity and decline, concentrate on "contested masculinities" involving, at the extremes, the virile and the effeminate. In a chapter on *Burmese Days*, Jayasena demonstrates how Conrad's lament for the loss of masculinist modes of identification associated with empire gives way, in Orwell, to something much more bitterly satirical: "this is what Orwell hopes to

accomplish – to expose the emptiness of the imperial model of heroism in the waning light of the British Empire” (105). This chapter traces the subversion of traditional “modes of masculine identification” brought about by the “foreclosure of empire” by focusing on three imperial institutions or practices: the European Club, the imperial hunt, and concubinage (105).

Jayasena’s discussion of the politics of club membership is particularly fascinating as he details the complicated intersection of gender and racial politics. In his argument, we see how Orwell’s novel details the admission of women to an institution that, in the metropolis, is a bastion of male exclusivity. Such inclusion, while making partial concessions about male privilege and eroding the notion of separate spheres, is predicated on English empowerment: “the protection of white womanhood becomes the pretext for both the inclusion of Englishwomen in and the exclusion of Indian men from European clubs” (114). Of course, one can see that, even for women, this is an ambivalent victory as their inclusion comes at the cost of representing them as needing protection by their (traditional) male protectors.

<6> The chapter on Tagore/Ray details the conflict between an effeminate male landowner, Nikhil, and his friend and antagonist, Sandip, who represents a more virile, and villainous, masculinity in the cause of nationalist resistance. In the novel, the political conflict is figured through a love triangle in which the two compete for the affections of Nikhil’s wife, Bimala. The analysis of Nikhil is especially fascinating. Jayasena explains how Nikhil’s anglophile tendencies help shape a gender identity that is effeminate and result in him losing, at least temporarily, control over his wife to a more traditional and, at times, predatory male, in the name of modernist liberation. My description here is, however, fairly reductive because Jayasena also discusses the ways in which modern effeminacy both revived and differed from traditions, perhaps “invented traditions,” of Hindu androgyny dating back prior to the Muslim conquest. Although this chapter is ostensibly about Satyajit Ray, as I mentioned above, it seems to be primarily about Tagore. At some moments, Jayasena does provide fine analyses of how Ray frames shots, but his argument is mostly based upon plot and his historical claims are exclusively about the early twentieth century, when Tagore published *The Home and the World*, and not about the “contested masculinities” of the 1980s, when Ray directed his film adaptation.

<7> This last point raises a final comment to be made about *Contested Masculinities*: while it does offer some informative readings of colonial and postcolonial texts that demonstrate the mutual implication of gender politics and colonial struggles in particular historical moments, its historical work is fairly limited. Early on, Jayasena informs us “From the 1800s, however, as a result of a series of historical events such as the Industrial Revolution, the suffragette movement and the emergence of Victorian Science, not to mention the proscription of homosexuality, these two contiguous gender categories came to assume truly antithetical properties” (11). With the exception of his cricket chapter, History, even “historical events,” tends to be a large, abstract category of analysis in this book and this impels Jayasena to make claims that frequently lack nuance. Fortunately, he is a careful and considerate reader of texts and these readings, particularly in the second half of the book, substantially increase our understanding of crises in colonial male identity.