



THE STRAND OF HAIR:  
AN ANGLO-INDIAN READING OF CAUVERY MADHAVAN'S *THE  
TAINTED*

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ABSTRACT

There is a 11th-century Indian collection of short stories in Kathasaritsagara by Somadeva (Wikipedia) where a fastidious man sleeps upon a pile of comfortable mattresses but still feels a strand of hair under them. I use the hair as a metaphor for my discomfort when reading Cauvery Madhavan's novel *The Tainted*. I contend Madhavan, despite her admirable talent, over supplies her narrative for a modern readership with a colonial trope, that of Anglo-Indians having 'tainted blood'. Madhavan deftly recreates these 19th century Racial Science inspired stereotypes in her main characters, two Anglo-Indians, Rose and May Twomey. These characters are presented in problematised ways with regard to their femininity, sexuality, identity, complexion, accent, self-perception, aspirations, customs, and loyalties. However, I acknowledge that stereotyping is a signifying practice that "is central to the representation of racial difference" (D'Cruz quoting Stuart Hall, 2018, p.36) and that Anglo-Indian stock character literary vigilantism could do well to go beyond 'spot-the stereotype' (D'Cruz, 2018, p.45) towards a deeper understanding of the milieu producing the stock images. I refer to various post-colonial analytical discourses of Anglo-Indian literary representations during the British Raj and Independent India to inform my point of view. I further posit that Madhavan has wandered into mimicry without empathy and possibly risks re inscribing and perpetuating a repugnant, salacious, and hurtful stereotype of Anglo-Indian females for modern readership.

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*The Tainted*, by Cauvery Madhavan, is a novel of two parts driven by a somewhat tired theme, "Anglo-Indians, tainted by their mixed blood" (Madhavan, 2020, back cover). The first section, set in 1920's India, focusses on the doomed relationship between Michael Flaherty of the Royal Kildare Rangers, an Irish regiment of the British army based in Nandagiri in South-East India, and a local Anglo-Indian, Rose Twomey. Young Flaherty also becomes fatally entangled in a mutiny against his regimental British superiors when he protests the deployment of the Black and Tans against the Irish in their War of Independence back in Ireland. The Flaherty rebellion is based on the 1920 real-life mutiny of the Connaught Rangers in India. The second section – 1980s India – is orchestrated around a chance meeting of the Aylmer and Twomey descendants in 1980s India. Richard Aylmer, grandson of Colonel Aylmer of Nandagiri, arrives to photograph the landscapes of his grandfather's paintings. Hosted by Mohan Kumar, Collector of Nandagiri, Richard meets the grandchildren of Rose: May and Michael Twomey. This sets the stage for another romantic pursuit by Richard and Mohan for May Twomey.

Every review reflects the positionality of the reviewer, and in the interests of transparency, I mention I am Anglo-Indian and my reception of the novel may be what it is because it cuts close to the bone. My Anglo-Indian mother was the focus of curiosity, and derision, in post-Independence India, (Calcutta, 1960's) because she had married an *Ingrazi* – Englishman. Also, Mother's dark complexion meant she faced colour prejudice, sometimes even from Anglo-Indians. In marrying an *Ingrazi* she had jumped up the social order, got uppity, and the term 'mehsahib' was sometimes hurled at her in mockery. In all frankness, Mother also admired whiteness. My sister and I were encouraged 'to improve the stock' by seeking fair complexioned over darker companions. I cannot say that I personally felt pointed discrimination but I'm conscious that many Anglo-Indians, for complex reasons, existed in a social bubble, where they ignored societal jibes and just got on with their lives. However, protected space or not, my sister, fair in complexion and light eyed, was pursued in all sorts of ways for reasons beyond and because of her charming appearance. It's important to also acknowledge that the so called 'Eve teasing' or harassment by Indian males was not reserved solely for Anglo-Indian females and I was not the only brother

assigned by parents to protect a sister. So, perhaps, I was always going to find *The Tainted* an uncomfortable, albeit fascinating read.

The novel caused me to recall, in one particular way, a 11th-century Indian story collection titled *Kathasaritsagara* by Somadeva. There is a tale of a young man, reputedly fastidious about beds, sleeping on seven mattresses and clean sheets especially placed upon a bed for his comfort, yet he still rose in pain. A crooked red mark is discovered on his body and upon investigation a hair is found on the bottom-most mattress of the bed. I felt that hair when reading Cauvery Madhavan's novel *The Tainted*. Her resurrection of a Raj literature meme – “Anglo-Indians tainted by their mixed blood, belong . . . nowhere” (Madhavan, 2020, back cover) – driving her characterisation of Anglo-Indians was the hair under the mattress for me.

It has to be acknowledged that Madhavan is a talented writer. The celebrated Indian author, Shashi Tharoor endorses the novel as, “A moving story, compellingly told” (Madhavan, 2020, front cover). Madhavan deftly creates vivid imagery and stock figures in her book. She provides many charming scenes in *The Tainted*; Father Jerome and Flaherty at the Emerald Tearoom (Madhavan, 2020, p.13), Mohan Kumar correcting little Apu's English syntax (Madhavan, 2020, p.149), absorbing details of the Indian wedding (Madhavan, 2020, p.289) and the tiger hunt (Madhavan, 2020, p.235). When it comes to depicting the Irish Father Jerome, and Flaherty Madhavan gets it just right with her characterisation, voice and Irishisms according to the Irish interviewer Miriam Kilmurry (2020, 13 mins). Adept at recreating the British Raj of the 1920's, Madhavan has the colonial lexicon of India break out of the starters gate on page one, past fine Eastern beauties, majestic tamarind trees, obsequious natives, *bakeesh*. The second page picks up the pace with Lonely Planet type notes on dysentery, shitting oneself to death, cholera, opium, consumption, dog, snakes, and mosquito bites, madness, sanatorium. Then there's venereal disease. “Jaysus, I wouldn't wish it on my worst enemy” (Madhavan, 2020, p.4) says Tom Nolan of the Kildare Rangers warning Private Michael Flaherty about the local bordellos.

Using broad writerly brush strokes Madhavan effectively recreates the class-conscious bubble of 1920's British Raj in Nandagiri. At the social dictating heart of this society are the Burra Sahib General Charles Aylmer and his Burra Memsahib wife,

Beatrice, living in the Big House. Madhavan accords them a stock pedigree. Charles' forefathers gained their wealth in West Indian sugar plantations. Beatrice, the only daughter of wealthy County Kildare landowners brought to the marriage an independent income of four thousand pounds. The Aylmers were a career soldier family awarded battle honours in India. Burra Memsahib Beatrice awards positions in society. Obviously the General and she are at the top of the class pyramid. Indians, generally, are despised and are at the bottom. Anglo-Indians don't know their place in society and need to be controlled or they'll get uppity. Burra Memsahib Beatrice is just the person to put them in their place.

When it comes to finer detail of individual characterisations, especially of the Anglo-Indian females, Rose and May Twomey, Madhavan's imagination is fecund. It may be said that Racial Science inspired Raj stereotypes featuring Anglo-Indians, especially females, employed in colonial fiction could be reduced to a formula: Anglo-Indian = hybridity = tainted blood = promiscuity. Madhavan employs this algorithm ubiquitously and enthusiastically with a few twists of her own. She's at it early in the novel when over a cup of tea Father Jerome leans over conspiratorially to Flaherty to share his wisdom about the haughty Anglo-Indian waiter, "These Anglo-Indians all have a chip on their shoulder. They're mixed blood, you see and are highly complexed as a result" (Madhavan, 2020, p.14).

Madhavan gifts a surfeit of the colonial imagination to Rose's character; the yearning to be white when she admires all things in the world of whiteness in the sleeping figure of Mrs Aylmer in the train; fair flawless skin, gloves, copper bath, tea tray arrangement, and "flowers like lupins and sweet peas" (Madhavan, 2020, p.78). Mrs Aylmer thinks the native flowers are 'vulgar' (Madhavan, 2020, p.78). Elsewhere we learn, lest we forget, that Rose dislikes the sun as it may darken her skin. Then there's Rose's "frank gaze" (Madhavan, 2020), so potent it sent Michael Flaherty into an immediate and somewhat juvenile flashback of his amorous moments in Ireland with the Cullen sisters, and of Nuala, who everyone thought slow "except they hadn't seen the speed with which she could undo her buttons" (Madhavan, 2020, p.28). And there's more speculation about Nuala's huge breasts.

Finally, inevitably, and with some wry relief to me as a reader, Rose seduces Flaherty. After a dance in a room at Dr Swamy's house where they were taking refuge from an angry mob, Rose flopped onto the bed and began to fan herself.

'Come here Michael, and I'll share my little punkah with you.'

'Well, I never thought I'd make a punkah-wallah of you,' said Michael [...] 'You could make anything out of me', she whispered and bent down to kiss him.

She offered no resistance when a few minutes later he slid his hands under her shift or when he began unbuttoning her dress, but instead seemed to urge him on wordlessly with little intakes of breath and acquiescent movements of her hips (Madhavan, 2020, p.109).

It's easy enough to select from the burgeoning scholarship on Anglo-Indians, ideologies accounting for colonial stereotypes. Glenn D'Cruz's seminal *Midnight's Orphan's* (D'Cruz, 2006) proffers that most colonial texts inspired by contemporary discourses such as Racial Science and imperatives of hegemony and control, cast Anglo-Indian female protagonists as "predatory half-caste vamps" (D'Cruz, 2006, p.33). On account of their 'tainted blood', a female is 'a very dangerous creature, commonly figured as a bewitching siren and an unscrupulous, manipulative whore' (D'Cruz, 2006, p.33). It's important to see these literary texts performing specific ideological functions in the service of imperial power and prestige (D'Cruz, 2006 p.164).

Whilst stereotyping of Anglo-Indians continued past the colonial period, it's important to state there also appeared a fetishising of Anglo-Indian ethnicity on the literary science of modern India. But first, to sample the derogatory stereotypes: To employ an Anglo-Indianism, the one that always gets my goat – irritates me – is Nirad Chaudhuri's *The Continent of Circe* (1960) where he opines "Young Eurasians, both boys and girls, showed a weak and degenerative form of the exuberant animal spirit of the English schoolboy and girls...'. Eurasian (Anglo-Indian) females "were driven by a heady but very volatile essence of sensuality..." (Chaudhuri, 1967, pp.260-261). This genetic imperative, so it seems according to Chaudhuri, qualified them admirably as sought-after prostitutes, blitzing competitors, "the Hindu prostitutes were not piquant

enough" (Chaudhuri, 1967, p.262). Then there's a father nostalgically recalling, "We had the little Anglo-Indian girls from the railway colony, to do our growing up with...Little beauties some of them were. Young men now have a real problem. A man has to get his experience somewhere" (Sahgal, 1985, p.162).

As noted above, it's not that the characterisation of Anglo-Indians remained unchanged from colonial times in Independent India. Alongside the derogatory, there arrived a fetishising of ethnicity. Salman Rushdie's acclaimed *Midnight's Children* (1981) celebrates hybridisation in all its forms. Saleem Sinai, the narrator of Rushdie's novel is technically an Anglo-Indian. Here, Rushdie "partially inverts the degeneracy stereotype and uses the Anglo-Indian as a sign of a fecund and critical hybridity" (D'Cruz, 2006, p169). Although the innovative brilliance of the novel is widely acknowledged I don't break out into a jive because the community is now being promoted as, perhaps, the solution to the clash of civilization. (It has to be said, sections of our community sometimes see themselves thus.) Is this not Anglo-Indian hybridity, possibly once again, being employed for a political agenda?

Part two of *The Tainted*, centralises the love triangle of Mohan Kumar, Collector of Nandagiri, Colonel Aylmer's grandson, Richard, and May Twomey, granddaughter of Rose. Set in the 1980s things remain the same and different. Madhavan has been busy reincarnating the Anglo-Indian May Twomey. Now Indianised, May first appears in part two as "a tall strikingly elegant woman in a lavender sari" (Madhavan, 2020, p.185). With a bug-eyed Kumar watching her every move – Kumar's mother had warned him about Anglo-Indian females knowing how to have a good time, unlike good girls (Madhavan, 2020, p.203). May glides with sophistication in different circles. She has all the 'soft skills' (Andrews 2021, p.140) attributed to Anglo-Indians. At clubs she deftly handles Bala's double entendre when he suggests his gift of a fan to his wife was, "all the better to cool her." She parried with, "You don't need to play the big bad wolf, Bala, I know how you spoil your wife," (Madhavan, 2020, p.288) and then directs everyone's attention to the bride. May is a sage on stage for Indian wedding ceremonial rites and demurs against Richard's assertion that arranged marriages are "a baptism of fire" (Madhavan, 2020, p.283). A teacher by profession, May is accorded agency by Madhavan for her future and is in a different socio-economic register to Rose but never let it be said that the Anglo-Indian apple doesn't fall far from the tree

in this narrative. When recalling the past for Richard, May says, “The Anglo-Indian motto was all about keeping up appearances” (Madhavan, 2020, p.285). She then patronisingly remembers her mother’s affectation for the Queen, that her brother Gerry dressed up like a mini-Prince Charles with Peter Pan collars, and May admits to being like Princess Ann (Madhavan, 2020, p.285). And of course, like Rose, there’s the perennial self-pitying and identity crisis thing, “We’re tainted – we were never white enough then and will never be brown enough now” (Madhavan, 2020, p.259). May is clearly invested with an incipient Indian nationalism by Madhavan but when Madhavan scratches her, May’s tainted Anglo-Indian roots are exposed. Through all of this, Kumar, fortified by his voyeurism (Madhavan, 2020, p.242), bumbles around her like a lovesick puppy. His ultimate compliments to May are that she’s a “dame” (Madhavan, 2020, p.215), and a “Sitar-Guitar girl” (Madhavan, 2020, p.242).

Whilst Anglo-Indian females seem to be Madhavan’s preoccupation, men also, to use another Anglo-Indianism, ‘get it in the neck’. Faithful to colonial characterisations the males of the species are represented as, “wasters’, ‘lazy, stupid and lack(ing) leadership qualities” (D’Cruz, 2006, p.35). Harkening back, *Kipling’s His Chance in Life* depicts the story of Michele D’Cruz, “‘a sickly weed’ who lacks character because of his tainted blood” (D’Cruz, 2006, p.106). Similarly, Madhavan’s male characters are cloned as unremarkable because of their tainted blood and wayward ways. The Anglo-Indian waiter is arrogant (Madhavan, 2020, p.13) and later, George Twomey, May’s brother, has a chip on his shoulder (Madhavan, 2020, p.177), but then what can one expect of a race of bastards – the inference made by Mohan Kumar (Madhavan, 2020, p.177). When May and Kumar visit her uncle, the gormless Ronnie, an Anglo-Indian Lothario if ever there was one, regales them with tales of his romantic conquests before he left India for Australia. He returned to his *bap ka raj* where, in Kumar’s distorted sense of India, Ronnie had the confidence to “defecate, urinate and spit anywhere with ease, bribe...cheat and defraud” (Madhavan, 2020, p.263).

What conclusions could one offer about Madhavan’s characterisations of Anglo-Indian females? In interviews, such as one with Miriam Kilmurry (2020), Madhavan freely admits that the character of Rose Twomey ran away with her. Although Rose can’t be faithfully portrayed other than in keeping with colonial mores, does Madhavan, with the knowledge of discredited ideologies such as that offered by Racial Science,

present the granddaughter May Twomey differently sixty years later? *Mushkil se* – hardly. I think Rose Twomey ran away with Madhavan's imagination and burrowed straight into May Twomey. May seems an avatar or manifestation of Rose. Madhavan appears to focus on the physicality of their being with a near obsession. She obviously enjoys writing about breathless sex and the perfect foil for her seems to be the Anglo-Indian woman. This brings to mind Chew's summation: 'There is the stereotype of the Anglo-Indian woman displaying a perverted agency as a conniving creature, governed by her sexuality, or the converse, the Anglo-Indian woman as victim; an object of pity' (Chew, 2021, p.257).

I doubt that Madhavan set out to malign an already maligned minority Indian community. To the contrary, she is of the view that Anglo-Indians are an educated and resilient people (Gilligan, 2020). However, she has marshalled a cawing choir of characters through which she dumps a plethora of objectionable characteristics upon her Anglo-Indian characters. At the heart of this collection, she has recreated a repugnant, sexualised stereotype of Anglo-Indian females for popular consumption. So, at the centre of this conversation there is a question to be asked: Could Madhavan's mimicry of the Anglo-Indian stereotype reinscribe the stereotype for the modern reader?

Whilst it may be contended that Madhavan created Rose and even May Twomey thus to showcase their plight and appeal to the reader's empathy, the authorial voice is much too enthusiastic and insistent with inscribing their inherent shortcomings for this view to hold water. Chew is probably closer to the mark: "All and sundry – at times unwittingly – contributed to the ubiquity of these stereotypes. And as a result, gender and racial stereotypes became an integral ingredient, deployed to add sizzle, augment plot, characterisation and even local colour by those who have little to no knowledge of the community, its history or experience, let alone lived experience, and who then draw on what's been written before" (Chew, 2021, p.261).

In summation, many factors can attach themselves, like those crown halo spikes on Covid-19, to colonial stock images of Anglo-Indians. An abundance of research suggests Racial Science as the spike head for this stereotype. Another threat, in a somewhat worrying and immediate sense, is that stereotypes could put the



stereotyped at some risk in the real world. I know members of my family suffered discomfort because of *gup* – gossip about Anglo-Indians – possibly from trace memories of Racial Science inspired stereotypes in popular fiction. Although Anglo-Indians quit India in droves since Independence, many still live in the sub-continent. My hair of discomfort is this: although *The Tainted* is presented as fiction for a modern audience, it can jump out of its dust jacket and influence contemporary mores, titillate appetites, confirm prejudices. Stories reflect lives, even imagined lives. So, are Anglo-Indian females in the 21st century, possibly being subjected to a reinscribing of a repugnant and salacious stereotype of themselves by Madhavan's, *The Tainted*?

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