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Contesting the Colonial Dichotomy of Centricity and Margins and the Hegemony of Authorial Discourse: Postcolonial and Postmodern Concerns in Peter Carey's *Jack Maggs*

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Abstract

Aim: *This paper examines Peter Carey's Jack Maggs as a postcolonial and postmodern rewriting of Charles Dickens's Great Expectations. It aims to explore how Carey challenges colonial constructions of centre and margin, interrogates the authority of canonical literary discourse, and reclaims marginalised voices through the strategy of writing back to the British literary canon.*

Methodology and Approach: *The study adopts a qualitative textual and comparative approach grounded in postcolonial and postmodern literary theories. The paper examines the fictional representation of Tobias Oates, Carey's counterpart to Dickens, to investigate questions of textual ownership, narrative authority, and the politics of literary representation.*

Outcome: *The analysis reveals that Jack Maggs destabilises colonial binaries of centre and periphery by repositioning the transported convict from the margins to the centre of the narrative. The novel challenges imperial assumptions regarding Australia as a penal colony while simultaneously exposing the mechanisms through which canonical authors appropriate and shape subordinate voices.*

Conclusion and Suggestions: *The study concludes that Jack Maggs functions as a powerful postcolonial counter-discourse and a sophisticated postmodern interrogation of authorial authority. Future research may further investigate the intersections of postcolonial rewriting, neo-Victorian fiction, and metafictional strategies in contemporary literature to understand their role in reshaping literary and cultural memory.*

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In recent years, there has been a movement towards rewriting, or writing back, to contest the master narratives of the established British canon from the postcolonial, as well as postmodernist and feminist points of view. The desire to rewrite the master narratives of the Imperial discourse is a common postcolonial preoccupation. Since language has long been recognised as one of the most dominant forms of cultural control, the rewriting of established narratives of colonial superiority is a liberating act for those from the former colonies. The telling of a story from another, mostly opposing, point of view can be seen as an extension of the deconstructive project to explore the gaps and silences in a text. Thus, resurrecting the silent characters from a canonical text and giving them a voice, an identity and sometimes a different name, such as Bertha Mason nee Antoinette in *Wide Sargasso Sea*, Dule in *Indigo* and the eponymous Jack Maggs in *Jack Maggs* become favourite tools of post canonical rewritings.

Writing Back, Counter discourse, oppositional literature, con-texts and rewriting, these are some of the terms that have been used to identify a body of contemporary works that take a classic English text as a departure point, supposedly as a strategy of contesting the authority of the canon of the English literature. The term 'writing back' was popularized by Salman Rushdie in the early 1980s when, playing on the title of Star Wars sequel, "The Empire Strikes Back" (1980), he entitled a newspaper article on British racism "The Empire Writes Back with a Vengeance". It subsequently became fairly generally associated with the project of dismantling Eurocentric literary hegemonies, particularly when Bill Ashcroft, Gareth Griffiths and Helen Tiffin adopted it as the title of their 1989 influential study of "theory and practice in post-colonial literature".

The empire's 'writing back' has commonly taken the form of rewritings of the coloniser's master narratives or canonical texts. Many postcolonial critics argue that the origin of the margin/centre paradigm is found in the relationship between the colonies and Britain as the centre of the Empire, and that most of the theories of marginality originate in the writings of the critics of colonialism such as Frantz Fanon, Albert Memmi and Jacques Berque. More recently, Abdul JanMohamed's identification of the Manichean allegory, according to which the

coloniser's dualistic world-view becomes superimposed on the experience of the new world, has become an important model for reading postcolonial texts.

Counter discourse is yet another term for the process of rewriting, introduced into postcolonial studies in the late 1980s by Helen Tiffin who adapted it from Richard Terdiman's "Discourse/ Counter-discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in 19th Century France" (1985), a study that offers a theorised investigation of the problematics of adversarial discourse. Tiffin's appropriation of the term for a postcolonial practice clearly proposes an analogy between the 19th century French writers' attempt to break free from the bourgeois and the postcolonial writers' need to engage in a similar contestation of the hegemony of a colonially constructed canon of literary texts, with particular instances of writing back to an English canonical text being viewed as metonyms for "not simply writing back to an English canonical text but to the whole of the discursive field within which such a text operated and continues to operate in the postcolonial worlds" (Tiffin 23).

John Thieme in his *Postcolonial Con-texts: Writing Back to the Canon* has introduced a new terminology of canonical 'pre-text' as the pretext of rewriting and the postcolonial 'con-text' as contesting the context of the canonical work it seeks to interrogate. If we extend the definition to include postmodernist and feminist counter-discourses, 'writing back' is still an interrogation not only of a particular canonical text but also of the context in which the writing of such a text could be possible and accepted without being challenged. It is a subject that has attracted considerable interest over the last few decades, particularly when postcolonial, as well as modernist and feminist con-texts have been seen as engaging in the kind of combative relationship with the canon that Tiffin describes.

Since the relationship between the con-text and canonical pre-text is invariably a complex and ambivalent one, it is more appropriate to use the terms counter-discourse or writing back and rewriting, rather than oppositional, to cover the varied range of interpretive strategies adopted by the con-texts. They are counter-discourses that write back to the canon in a multiplicity of ways and simply to label their stances oppositional is invariably reductive. Con-texts

frequently uncover meanings in their English pre-texts that may not be apparent when the latter are read in isolation. These con-texts not only offer different perspectives in themselves, but also release new meanings within their supposed pre-texts. So the very notion of the stable text is interrogated and, while this may be a cliché of the reader response criticism, it is one that gathers momentum when supported by the works of creative writers whose responses put flesh on the barebones of such theorising. Rewriting of the canonical literature now takes on a deconstructive role, not only undermining a logocentric literary tradition and its division of the world into binary categories, but also pointing to the fact that the canonical text is already engaged in a process of self-contradiction or, as Jacques Derrida would put it, self-deconstruction. The role of postcolonial literature is to expose the fact that colonial discourse is already in a state of instability and self-deconstruction. The ways in which the canonical pre-text plays a role in its own deconstruction can be revealed by looking into the context in which they were written and how the social and political environment coloured their perception of the reality. When we try to uncover the ways in which the con-textual rewrites challenge the assumptions of their literary pre-texts, we find that certain elements of alterity and subversion already present within the canonical pre-text allow for such a revision of the canonical stance.

Another term that has been coined for the literary responses to the classical texts, especially the Victorians, is 'Neo-Victorian Novel', by Dana Schiller in his article published in *Studies in the Novels* in 1997. According to Anne Heilmann and Lewellyn, it is not only that the novel is set in Victorian era but a self-conscious engagement "with the act of (re)interpretation, (re)discovery and (re)vision concerning the Victorian that is the focus of the neo-Victorian novel (Heilmann and Llewellyn 4). Peter Carey's 1997 Commonwealth Writers' Prize-winning novel *Jack Maggs,* a rewriting of Charles Dickens's *Great Expectations,* falls into all these categories. It is a counter-discourse to the discourse of Victorian Supremacy, con-text to the pre-text, writing back to the centre from the antipodes and also neo-Victorian in that it tells its own story set in the Victorian age. Peter Carey talked about his attitude towards Dickens in an interview "I was a bit slow in coming to Dickens for all sorts of reasons, but there

is no doubt that what that book encourages you to do- what so many of the books we grew up reading encourage you to do- is to take the British point of view" (Koval 669). As Edward Said has pointed out in *Culture and Imperialism* (1983), by presenting a glorified image of the Empire, the Imperial texts implant Western-centric perspective in the readers' value systems that results in their unconscious complicity in Western hegemonical discourse.

Post canonical responses to Dickens's writings have been complex and ambivalent since he is alternately seen as holding a central position in the canon on one hand and as a comical yet severe critic of the social and economic conditions of the Victorian Age on the other. Even during his lifetime his fame and popularity crossed international boundaries which can be seen as an indication of the extent to which his writings transcended cultural differences. The particularly ambivalent nature of Dickens's influence outside Britain can be ascertained by observing the rewritings of Dickens's works which are more complex than directly adversarial counter-discourses.

His writings challenged many of the canonical codes of his age and his crusading zeal against the injustice in British social system in general and within the penal system in particular is the reason behind his enthusiastic response to Australia. His work engages with both of the main Victorian constructions of Australia, as the convict hell as well as the site of Arcadian promise. He is reported to have considered migrating to Australia in 1841 (Wilde et al. 217) and seems at one time to have considered the colony as offering immense possibilities for growth to its free settlers which were impossible in the class-conscious England. The unforeseen success of Mr Micawber after migrating to Australia in *David Copperfield* is a case in point.

However, in *Great Expectations* Australia is mainly represented as a penal colony, to which convicts are banished for life. As in much of Dickens's work New South Wales is the site of transportation, the place to which Britain has been sending its convicts that could not be accommodated in its scant prison system. Apart from Magwitch, transported convicts in his novels include Wackford Squeers in *Nicholas Nickleby* and Uriah Heep in *David Copperfield* as well as characters in the *Pickwick Papers* and *Martin Chuzzlewit*. In *Hard Times*,

transportation is Bounderby's proposed punishment for trade unionists and in *Our Mutual Friend* Jenny Wren threatens her delinquent father with transportation. As a convenient site for transportation of the undesired elements of British society, Australia's image becomes a reflection of English society's supposedly banished criminal elements.

Carey has called the theme of the convict transported to Australia but wanting his son to be an English Gentleman "such an Aussie story" (Koval 669) as he places his novel within the Australian literary tradition. *Jack Maggs* writes back against the negative representations of Australia as the antipodean penal colony by taking a returned convict Jack Maggs, the counterpart of Dickens's Magwitch, as its protagonist. He presents a version of Australia as a place of good fortune, and in the final section of the novel that is totally different from the end of *Great Expectations* Jack Magg returns 'home' from the centre of Empire to the Antipodean colony, to live out a prosperous and happy life.

Nicholas Jose has called *Jack Maggs* "an Antipodean revenge on one of Albion's literary glories" and Carey's rewriting of the convict motif is consistent with such an interpretation. Yet reading the novel as a straightforward oppositional counter-discourse ignores the fact that the revenge element is already present in the original text in the revelation that it is the outcast criminal who has been responsible for the establishment of Pip as a gentleman with expectations in London society. The unravelling of Magwitch's character and his ultimate redemption towards the end of *Great Expectations* together with the assertion that Compeyson, the other villain of the novel is much more evil than Magwitch despite belonging to the gentility, is in itself a vindication of the marginalised and downtrodden in Dickens's work.

At the outset, *Jack Maggs* appears to be a rewriting of the later parts of *Great Expectations* from Magwitch's point of view. Magwitch is transformed into the ex-convict Jack Maggs who is reclaimed from the margins of Dickens's *Great Expectations* and placed in the centre as the protagonist. He resembles Magwitch in many respects, including his return from exile to meet the young boy he has helped in becoming a gentleman with his money. In the beginning of the novel, we find him coming to the house of Mr Henry Phipps, reminiscent of Phillip

Pirrip, also known as Pip, of *Great Expectations*. He is surprised to find nobody at home as he had informed of his arrival and he doesn't know that it is to avoid him that Phipps has left the house and has gone into hiding at his club. Jack is observed by Mercy Larkin, the maid to Mr Percy Buckle in the house next to Phipps and she mistakes him for the footman come in answer to the advertisement by Mr Buckle's house-keeper. Jack Maggs takes up the post of the footman to wait for Phipps's arrival and every night he travels over the roofs to go into Phipps's house where he starts writing a letter to him to explain his position. This letter gradually takes the form of his life history beginning from the time he was taken up as a foundling by one Silas who brought him up with a view to train him for a life of criminality.

During the course of his duties as a footman he comes to meet Tobias Oates, an upcoming writer who is Carey's take on the character of Dickens. *Jack Maggs* not only undertakes to interrogate a colonial text from a postcolonial perspective but also deals with the elements from the writer's other novels and, like Coetzee's *Foe*, Tennant's *Tess* and D.M. Thomas's *Charlotte,* the figure of the canonical author himself. The circumstances of Oates's life and career quite closely resemble those of Charles Dickens himself till 1837 when the action of the novel takes place. Oates is represented here as a fictional creation, one of the two protagonists of the novel and by presenting Dickens as a fictional character Carey denies him the creative authority with regard to the delineation of Jack Maggs. Oates starts writing a novel based on the life of Jack Maggs and his perception of the character changes with every change in his relations with the returned convict. As parallels to Dickens's career we have the facts of Oates's achieving initial popular success with the publication of *Captain Crumley*, a comic novel reminiscent of Dickens's *Pickwick Papers*, the irresponsible financial transgressions of his father, his being a newspaper reporter, his amateur dramatic performances and the circumstances of his personal life, particularly his love for his wife's sister Mary Hogarth, living with the couple at the time of the birth of their first child and who died in 1837 at the age of seventeen (Ackroyd 225) corresponding to Lizzie's death at the age of eighteen in the novel. The details

about the final writing and publication of the various editions of *The Death of Jack Maggs* closely resemble the publishing history of *Great Expectations*.

Like Dickens, Tobias Oates is very much interested in the extraordinary incidents in the life of quite ordinary people and he is known to invite them to share their experiences in exchange for a shilling. These experiences and confessions, he uses as raw material for his writings. At the time the events of the novel are taking place, Dickens was in the middle of writing *Oliver Twist* and the incidents of Jack's early life resemble Oliver's experiences as an orphan and we have Silas training Jacks for a criminal career as Sykes trains Oliver in *Oliver Twist*. Moreover, we are told that:

> The death of the children had always had a profound effect on him. When the young victims were also the children of poverty, it produced in him a considerable rage…for Tobias had been a poor child too, and he was fiercely protective of abused children, famously earnest in defence of the child victims of mill and factory owners. (Carey 130)

We can find here echoes not only of *Oliver Twist* but also of *David Copperfield* and Dickens's biography. We also find references to Dickens's love of London in Oates's work:

> Now each day in the *Morning Chronicle*, each fortnight in the *Observer*, it was Tobias Oates who 'made' the city of London. With a passion he barely understood himself, he named it, mapped it, widened its great streets, narrowed its dingy lanes, framed its scenes with the melancholy windows of his childhood. (Carey 182)

Again, like Dickens, Oates has a hobby of studying workings of the criminal mind and when Oates comes across Jack Maggs, he appears to be an interesting subject to him and he makes a bargain with Maggs that he will help him in finding Phipps in exchange for two weeks of subjecting him to a kind of hypnotic mesmerism which will reveal the innermost secrets of Maggs's soul:

> here is a world as rich as London itself. What a puzzle of life exists in the dark little laneways of this wretch's soul; what stolen gold lies hidden in the vaults beneath his filthy streets…. It's the criminal mind awaiting its first cartographer. (Carey 90)

Oates wants to chart the criminal mind as the material for his next novel which he aims to entitle *The Death of Jack Maggs*. Carey suggests that Oates is trying to control a new territory, that of the criminal mind, as a 'coloniser', appropriating Magwitch/Jack Maggs story for his own purpose. Carey shifts the moral focus to issues of textual authority or the question of who has the right to write a story. In delineating Oates's attempts to steal or appropriate Maggs's story to be used in fiction, with references to Dickens's own practice as a literary collector of stories to be used in his fiction, Carey exposes "the deceptions practiced by imperial fictions of England on its own offspring" (Woodcock 122).

During these hypnotic sessions it is revealed that Jack Maggs has come back from Australia and as such he is a felon from law at the risk of capital punishment but Percy Buckle refuses to report him to the police as he:

> had an older sister who suffered transportation to that same cursed place. …. Lord knows what became of her…She had no letters—how could she get word to those who loved her? I never did forget that day, God help us all, that Mother England would do such a thing to one of her own. (Carey 88-89)

Matters come to a crisis once Jack Maggs comes to know that his secret has been extracted out of him and finding himself in danger, he holds the entire household of Buckles hostage. Percy Buckles offers to arrange for his safe return to Australia so that he will not be hanged but Maggs, although he has made his fortune in Australia, has the coloniser's low opinion of the colonies as a place of permanent settlement:

> I am a cockroach, isn't that so? It was very clear what would happen to me if I were ever to set foot in England again…. But you see, I am a fucking *Englishman*, and I have English things to settle. I am not to live my life with all that vermin. I am here in London where I belong. (Carey 128)

As Edward Sais points out in *Culture and Imperialism* "the prohibition placed on Magwitch's return is not only penal but Imperial: subjects can be taken to Australia, but they cannot be allowed a 'return' to metropolitan space" (Said xvi). The sentence of transportation to a marginalized penal colony is also deprivation

of 'Englishness'and an exile from the dominant centre that is also a part of the punishment. Despite being one of the downtrodden, the poorest class of people in England and treated so unjustly, Jack Maggs harbours a love for his native country that nothing can take away. The image of England as home sustains him throughout his ordeal and he comes back to it risking his life, wealth and freedom:

> The flies might feast on his spattered back; the double-cat might carry away the third and fourth fingers of his hand; but his mind crawled forward, always, constructing piece by piece the place wherein his eyes had first opened, the home to which he would one day return, not the mudflats of Thames, nor Mary Britten's meat-rich room at Pepper Alley Stairs, but rather a house at Kensington whose kind and beautiful interior he had entered by stumbling down a chimney…Clearing the soot from his eyes he had seen that which he later knew was meant by authors when they wrote of England and of Englishmen. (Carey 322)

The text is interspersed throughout with Jack's abhorrence of the antipodean colony and its population in comparison to his ideals of life in england, as in his declarations that "I'd rather be a bad smell here than a frigging rose in New South Wales" (Carey 230), and "I am not of that race…the race of Australians" (Carey 313). One reason for this might be the negative associations of the place where he was sent as a punishment and where he had to undergo inhuman treatment in the beginning as he tells Mercy when she suggests going back to Australia to provide a home to his biological children instead of waiting for his "English son" to appear— "You don't know nothing what it was to be in that place. You would not be judging me. You would shoot a man you saw treat a dog as we were treated" (Carey 317).

Over a decade before the writing of *Great Expectations,* Dickens had been influenced by another popular view of Australia as a working man's paradise. Jack Maggs's success as a brick maker after his conditional pardon in Australia may point to that ideal of the colony not only as a convict hell but a place where a hardworking man could rise above his situation and gain not only wealth and fortune but, unlike England, social prominence as well. So we are told that in addition to having a grand mansion in Sydney there is also a street named after

Jack Maggs in the city— "I am some vermin who made ten thousand pounds from mucky clay. I have a grand house in Sydney town. There is a street named for me, or was when I sailed" (Carey 280).

Jack Maggs follows *Great Expectations* in including an autobiographical account of Jack's early life as the Dickens novel is an autobiographical account of Pip's. In his letter to Henry Phipps Maggs records the events of his life prior to meeting him outside the village forge— (an oblique reference to Joe Gargery's forge in *Great Expectations*)—and in that sense is a prequel to *Great Expectations* just as *Wide Sargasso Sea* is a prequel to *Jane Eyre*. Again, just as in *Wide Sargasso Sea* Rhys reverses the situation by presenting Antoinette as the friendless orphan, Carey also tilts the balance of the reader's sympathy towards Jack by recounting the harsh realities of his early childhood. It is only towards the end of the novel that Jack recounts to Tobias the circumstances of his first and in a sense last meeting with Henry. The coach carrying him for transportation had stopped at the forge and Henry, a four-year-old "orphing" who pointed to the graveyard when asked the whereabouts of his parents, had not only given him the pig's trotter he was eating himself but held it for him as his hands were manacled. Hearing that the next day he was going to an orphanage, Jack had promised Henry that he will take him out of the orphanage and make him as good a gentleman as ever there was. He has subsequently fulfilled this promise through a tutor hired for the purpose who also acts as Henry's guardian in his minority and has now come himself to live with his English son on English soil.

By the time Henry finally appears, the roles of Pip and Magwitch have already been reversed and he has become a shadowy figure on the margin of the story and Jack Maggs has established himself as a much more substantial figure. *Jack Maggs* finally severs its bonds with *Great Expectations* in the climax of the novel when Jack is waiting for his protégé who arrives only to fire at him in an attempt to kill him. The attempt is thwarted by Mercy who stops the bullet with her hand, losing her ring finger in the process. Jack Maggs returns to Australia with Mercy where she not only "civilizes" his two biological children but also gives birth to many children of her own. Unlike Magwitch of *Great Expectations*, Jack Maggs dies serenely in his own bed, surrounded by all his family. The

alternative happy ending of *Jack Maggs* is a reinforcement of the image of Australia as the land of opportunity. "Carey's novel" in this sense, "confirms that it is staking out different territory for postcolonial fiction" (Thieme 109).

Jack Maggs does not simply challenge the premise of *Great Expectations* by telling the story from the "other side" like Jean Rhys to present a parallel version of events that can be imposed, if somewhat imprecisely, on the pre-text. But in addition to the storyline of the pre-text, Carey introduces multiple other plots, that of Tobias Oates and Mercy Larkin, the maid in the Buckle household who has her own history of destitution and exploitation. With the protagonist coming face to face with the writer who supposedly created him and Dickens's biography and other Dickensian texts finding a place in the novel, the effect, like Coetzee's *Foe* and Tennant's *Tess*, is to destabilise the very basis of fictional authority and in that sense, *Jack Maggs* is as much a postmodernist as a postcolonial novel.

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