

From a paper given at the Children's Literature Association India Conference, Mangalore, January 2008.

Personal and Political Identity and Disguise in The Tiger of Mysore by G.A. Henty (1832-1902)

Introduction

This paper was given at the Children's Literature Association India Conference, Mangalore, January 10 – 12, 2008. It was with some trepidation that I proposed a paper on G. A. Henty for a conference in India. Why? Henty's stereotypical image is of one who promoted exclusively masculine values in adventure stories written for boys often in the historical setting of the British Empire. Like all stereotypical images, this critique represents a facet of a wider actuality, but it is perhaps, prevalent enough to account for my anxiety. However, since Henty is one of the two authors examined in my current research, I offer this investigation of 'Personal and Political Identity and Disguise in The Tiger of Mysore (1896).

Henty's story The Tiger of Mysore is based on historical events that took place in India in the late eighteenth century, 1790–92, and 1799.¹ All the place and language names mentioned are as in the book.

The story, summarised below, demonstrates the narrative elements of the quest tale² and is focalised through the boy hero Dick Holland. Dick's mother, the child of an Indian father and English mother, has raised Dick, in England, with the intention of returning to India in order to search for her captive husband. Thus the story is an account of Dick's quest for his lost father. Henty's story includes passages in which Dick discusses with his uncle, the Rajah of Tripataly, the politics of regions under his uncle's supervision and those regions through which he, Dick, may have to pass in order to discover his fathers' whereabouts. During the course of the story the complexity of the historical political situation unfolds.

Dick sets out on his quest in the company of Surajah, a young officer from the retinue of Dick's uncle. The story of Dick's quest is superimposed onto the backdrop of the political situation and the military encounters

¹ Information taken from John Keay, India: A History, Paperback edition ed. (London: HarperCollins, 2004) 399-401.

² See Vladimir Propp, Morphology of the Folktale, 2nd ed. (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1968) 38-39.

between the armies of Tippoo and the English. Thus Dick is operating in two worlds, the world of politics and the world of the personal. The imprisonment of Dick's father is the link between the two worlds since it touches both of them. Dick's persona in each of the worlds is constructed to meet the political and personal demands of whatever situation he is in. At the opening of the story, he is depicted as an English boy, which politicizes him in relation to India and English foreign policy. In the first chapter of the book, Dick's identity becomes more complex as the reader learns more about his circumstances. He has grown up under the direction of his mother, since his father was shipwrecked when he was eight. She has brought him up with a view to returning to India to find his lost father. In practice this means he is fluently bilingual in both English and Hindustani and he has become proficient in a number of physical activities designed to build his strength. Dick's subjectivity, his, 'concept of selfhood developed and articulated through the acquisition of language,' (Wolfreys, Robbins and Womack 94) therefore locates him in two cultural worlds.

Dick's personal identity as both English and Indian develops gradually as he travels to India. As he undertakes his quest, his Indian persona takes precedence as he progresses through a variety of identities. Dick's progressive movement through these identities invests the story with the 'cyclical movement' noted by Northrop Frye as typical of the romance and folk tale narrative that results in the eventual resolution into the hero's full identity (The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance 54). However, Dick's original identity is complex. His changes in identity could be more accurately described as a demonstration of that part of his complex identity which is foregrounded at any particular stage of his adventure. On the sea journey to India, Dick is advised by his mother to conceal his Indian identity and give only the barest details of the object of his journey. His mother advises him as follows:

Say nothing about my having been born in India, or that my father was a native rajah. ... we don't want our affairs talked about (Henty 21)

His mother's reason for this concealment is to protect Dick and therefore his quest from any external prejudice or interference. Frye notes the use of the

device of, 'deliberate deception, of the concealment of the identity of the main characters,' (The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance 71) as a form developed,

which regularly portrays the victory of the weak over the strong,
of the young over the old, of women over their lords, ... (The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance 71).

In this instance, all of these characteristics are present. Dick and his mother are in the position of the weak in that they have no official protector. Dick may be a strong and active boy but he is nevertheless a boy and therefore regarded as vulnerable in the face of men with experience of the world and of danger. Dick's employment of disguise as, 'deliberate deception and concealment,' (Frye, The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance 71) continues throughout his quest with the result that he outwits both political and military strength as he effects the rescue of his father.

Henty's story evidences the themes of descent and ascent discussed by Frye in his study of the romance tale. Frye notes that the confusion of identity is characteristic of the theme of descent, which may also include imprisonment. Dick's experience of imprisonment is minimal whilst that of his father is extreme. Themes of ascent apply to the story of both Dick, his mother and his father in that they escape from their respective prisons and from disguise into a world of freedom and identity recovery. Dick's personal range of disguises changes range from partial to total concealment of identity. He begins by concealing his Indian identity on board ship by the simple means of not revealing his origin or his ability to speak any language other than English. As he nears the end of his quest, his disguise is total and includes not only his English identity but also his age. His only constant is that he remains masculine throughout his quest. In her discussion of disguise in From Mythic to Linear, Maria Nikolajeva notes, 'The change of clothes brings about a change of mentality, (150). A change in mentality affects thinking, feeling and acting. Dick's training for his quest involves becoming the person whose disguise he takes on. He must, as his uncle points out,

bear in mind ... that your life depends upon your being
perfect in every respect. (176).

Thus Dick's personal identity is prepared for development towards maturation and transformation. Dick approaches his quest with a new identity, in a disguise so practised over many months that he sees with the eyes of his alternative, disguised, self. He is therefore able to accomplish that which as an English boy he could not attempt.

His political identity however, is less complex. I have already intimated that Dick's identity is politicized by his allegiance to the English political position. Where Henty's writing is based upon an historical event in which England features, the given assumption is that patriotism will be part of the hero's identity. As Dick has a dual identity, his Indian identity aligns politically with that of his uncle, the Rajah, who, conveniently, supports the English against Tippoo and his French allies. Thus Dick's political identity unites his dual personal identity. Initially, Dick is part of his uncle's troop of horsemen who become attached to the English army. Apart from his dress, Dick does not take on any persona other than his Anglo-Indian self, although he is moving away from his predominant Englishness. His second disguise is taken on after the troop is sent into the hills to find information about Tippoo's movements. Together with Surajah, [his friend and the son of the Captain of the troop], he proposes a scouting expedition further into the hills. He convinces his uncle that the danger is minimal by arguing,

Of course we should not go dressed as we are, but as shikarees ... we ... should begin by asking whether the people are troubled with any tigers in the neighbourhood (99).

In this disguise, Dick and Surajah disassociate themselves from any obvious political allegiance by identifying themselves with the villagers, the people acted upon by the political struggle going on around them rather than the soldiers performing the action. As a disguise adopted early in his quest, Dick is able to, as he explains to his uncle get 'a little practice in this way' (99), before he is in the position of having to adopt a dangerous and unforeseen political persona as the adventure unfolds.

Despite the practice and the experience of wandering about undetected, Dick still needs to go deeper into his Indian persona in order to pursue his quest independently of the war and of his uncle's protection. His training and preparation continues for several more months on his return (to

Madras) after which time he sets out with Surajah who was, 'filled with elation at the prospect of adventures and dangers' (182). Their intention was to, 'wander about enlisting in the garrisons of forts,' (181) and talking to soldiers who were already attached to a fort, in order to discover whether prisoners were held. The boys soon discover a flaw in this plan when they find themselves in a part of the country where the people speak a different dialect from the one they speak. This difference could easily identify them as strangers in any village. They therefore have to reinvent themselves again in order to maintain a credible and sustainable subjectivity within their language limitations. To do this they advance another step into a distinctive politically aligned position by actively promoting themselves as,

desiring to be soldiers, and hating the English raj, we have
crossed the hills to take service of some sort in Mysore (187).

The result of this change is far reaching as they find themselves in the heart of Tippoo's court where an unexpected adventure brings them to his direct attention. [Until this turning point in the story, they appear as peasants]. However, their entry into the city launches them into the heart of the action of the quest. Talking to an old man, Pertaub, they discover in him a friend who enables them to fulfil their search not only by his provision of further disguises but also by his knowledge and understanding of the political and geographical lie of the land. Dressed as the retainers of an absent rajah, Dick and Surajah maintain their political identities as followers of Tippoo whilst, Pertaub, works on a plan to enable them to gain entry into the hill forts. The unexpected adventure is the killing of the tiger in the palace (see point 4 in the story summary). After this escapade, they can no longer remain anonymous and have to change their carefully prepared plans to tour the hill forts as merchants as Tippoo rewards them by making them officers in his service. This alteration is a step further into their altered political identity. As Tippoo's officers they are as far from their original allegiance as it is possible for them to be whilst at the same time coming closer to the fulfilment of Dick's personal quest. Thus they enter into the paradoxical position of maintaining the ultimate concealment of both political and personal identity by means of a disguise which propels them closer to the realization and recovery of their full personal identity. In terms of political identity, their position as Tippoo's

officers, puts them at their most vulnerable. If their disguise were penetrated, they would certainly be killed. In order to avoid suspicion, Dick and Surajah prepare deeper physical disguises so that they may not be recognised if they need to get away quickly. Their persona as youths, hitherto sufficient to carry them through any difficulties begins to give way to the possibility of becoming old men. As a theme of descent, old age and its association with closeness to death continues the downward spiral as they are caught in the need to submerge more of their own identity in disguise in order to effect an escape from the circumstances they are in.

As Dick and Surajah undertake increasingly responsible duties under Tippoo, they are detailed to conduct inspections of his hill forts. On this assignment, their political allegiance must appear genuine. They are granted access to Tippoo's most impregnable strongholds. Any slip or indication of anything other than loyalty to Tippoo's cause would mean death and the failure of the quest. During this part of their adventure, they are not disguised in order to act as spies, [which would mean they retained their original personal and political personae], but they become Tippoo's officers, dress and act accordingly, and fulfil the mission upon which he has sent them successfully. On their return to the palace, the primary world of Dick's personal quest is foregrounded in the next episode in the adventure, that is, the rescue of Annie. (See point 4 story summary and point 8 for eventual outcome).

After delivering Annie to his mother and uncle, Dick and Surajah begin their final journey in disguise. It is at the point of deepest descent, when they are furthest away from their personal identities, that they begin their ascent towards recovery of political identity. This ascent begins when they embark on a journey to the furthest hill fort, visited initially disguised as Tippoo's officers, where Dick intuited the presence of his father. They gain entrance to the fort in the guise of old men, merchants able to travel to the fort since hostilities have ceased and the country has become more peaceful.

Throughout the story, the underlying purpose of Dick's quest is external to the political agenda of either Tippoo or his opponents. Since this externality is the driving force of Dick's actions, both his personal and political identities are transcended by what may be termed the ethical considerations pertinent

to the primary world of his quest. The most important of these considerations is that of friendship. It is in the closeness of friendships that Dick's identity is revealed. When he arrives in India, his first close friendship is with Surajah, without whom he could not have undertaken, let alone succeeded, in his quest. The boys' friendship with Pertaub, opens up the way to the heart of their quest and his help enables them to reach the object of their search. The friendship of Dick's father with the governor of the fort in which he is held is the reason that he is still alive. In the initial stages of the quest, Surajah enables Dick to recover his Indian identity, thus redressing the imbalance of his former Englishness. Their political identities are essentially the same throughout the story. Dick's father's friendship with the governor of the fort transcends both personal and political identities as they are officially enemies. Their friendship also transcends the deception of the boys in entering the fort in disguise and provides a pivotal point after which the ascent towards the recovery of their identities begins. Dick and Surajah agonise over the deception of a good man who regarded them as honest elderly traders. Dick makes this decision:

I think we will write a letter to him, and leave it here ... thanking him in father's name for the kindness that he has always shown him, saying who I am, why I came here, and asking his pardon for the deception that I have been obliged to play upon him (338).

Leaving a present with the letter, Dick prevents pursuit and thus all three are able to escape, recovering their identities by stages on their journey. Frye notes that, 'images of ascent are those of escape, remembrance, or discovery of one's real identity, (and) growing freedom ...' (The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance 129).

The story ends with the reunion of Dick's parents, who return to England, whilst he remains to become a professional soldier for a short time. Thus his entry into adult life marks the end of his quest. When Dick ultimately recovers his identity on his return to England, he is both changed and unchanged. His personal identity has changed not only through maturation but in that his origins have been more fully integrated into his identity through understanding and experience.

In conclusion:

I have noted that Frye comments on the importance of disguise in the establishment of; the shift in; or the escape from an identity (The Secular Scripture: A Study of the Structure of Romance 138 -). Dick escapes from his English identity into his Indian and repeatedly shifts identity within his initial disguise in response to changing political circumstances.

In The Tiger of Mysore the quest takes place in the 'other' world of the exotic, which in Henty is often the world of the east. Although Dick has his adventure in the exotic, unexplored setting necessary for the romance narrative (Frye, Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays 36), the Otherness implied by the exotic is not outside of him, it is part of his identity. The 'radical alterity' (Wolfreys, Robbins and Womack 74) in this story is found in otherness encountered in political allegiance, that is, in the court of Tippoo, and not in the otherness of race or nation. Characters such as Surajah, Pertaub, and the Governor of the fort where Dick's father is found are aligned with Dick and his uncle in a circle of friendship characterised by sameness.

Demonstrations of the transcendence of political allegiances through friendship in this story give an example of how Henty's stereotypically critiqued position is subverted by his portrayal of the individual subject's journey towards personal and political identity.

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Story Summary

1. The hero, Dick Holland, travels to India with his mother, whose father was an Indian rajah, to search for his lost father.
2. Dick meets his Indian family, his uncle, aunt and cousins.
3. Dick's uncle explains details about the political situation involving Tippoo. Dick, his uncle and Surajah join the war as English allies. Dick gains experience of the country. (First disguise – Indian soldier)
4. Dick and Surajah set off on their quest. (Second disguise – shikarees). They meet Pertaub, become officers in the service of Tippoo, (third disguise) explore the hill forts, rescue Annie a captive English girl and return to Dick's family.
(Disguised as armed retainers of another local rajah, Dick and Surajah attend an event at which Tippoo is present, in order to observe him at close quarters. During the sports, a tiger leaps into the zenana where the ladies of Tippoo's harem are kept. Dick's prompt action results in the rescue of the tiger's victim (Annie) as well as the death of the tiger as it attempts to attack again. As a reward, Tippoo appoints them as officers in his retinue, enabling them to explore the forts and the surrounding area, a necessary preliminary step towards the finding of Dick's father.)
5. Dick and Surajah set off as merchants (fourth disguise) to the furthest fort and discover Dick's father.
6. All three escape and return to Dick's family. Dick's parents return to England, taking Annie with them.
7. Dick enters the adult world as a professional soldier.
8. Dick returns to England and marries Annie.