

Ins and Outs of Power in *No Heaven for Gunga Din*

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Abstract *No Heaven for Gunga Din* is a semi-autobiographical novella about Gunga Din (Ali-Mir Drekvandi) when he used to serve the British soldiers in and after the Second World War in Iran and Britain. However, his duty in this fictional work is to follow the dead soldiers up to heaven. This article attempts to present a critique of the network of power in and about the book based on the socio-historical circumstances of post-Second World War Iran. Drawing on Robert Young and Homi Bhabha's theories of hybridity and mimicry, the authors of this article conclude that Mir-Ali Drekvandi has written the book as an ironic cry at all the mistreatments of the colonial powers in Iran during and after the Second World War, even though he was seemingly absorbed in a language and culture which the colonial center provided for him.

Key words *No Heaven for Gunga Din*; Ali-Mir; Drekvandi; World War II; Iran; mimicry

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When *No Heaven for Gunga* was published in London and the royalties it earned for its author amounted to 2,248 Pounds, Ali-Mir Drekvandi had already died in loneliness and in extreme poverty in Iran. *No Heaven for Gunga Din* was a novella published posthumously in Britain after the Second World War. Ali-Mir Drekvandi (the eponymous Gunga Din), the author of the book, feeling homesick, had left Britain to return to his hometown and family a few years before the publication of the book. Ironically, he wrote the book merely to practice English and thus he hardly ever cared to bring his manuscript back to Iran. Having returned he found but his mother buried with charity in a cemetery in Borujerd. He remained in this small town in Iran, led a life of beggary and slept the nights beside his mother's grave till he eventually died in misery and was buried next to his mother.

Ali-Mir Drekvandi was born in 1917 in Dad-Abad, a village between Khorramabad and Dezful in Iran, and he died in November 26, 1964 at the age of forty-seven in Borujerd, Iran. He is the alleged author of *Irradiant* and *No Heaven for Gunga Din*. His mysterious life persuaded many to either denounce the existence of such an author or make an aura of mystery over his name after his death. Concerning the authorship of the novella, scholars have put forth many presumptions. Sasan Valizadeh, for instance, writes that *No Heaven for Gunga din*, "received a prestigious award in London. The translation aroused different reactions in Iran. Many denied the existence of such a writer and claimed that the British have forged this fictitious character" (Valizadeh 168). AbdulKarim Jorbozeddar, a local writer, testifies that he had seen Drekvandi and notes that he "used to routinely stroll down Jafari Street [where he used to sleep at nights in Borujerd City] everyday... there were some people who knew him and would often cater for him [...] There was no doubt that he knew Persian, Arabic and English quite well" (Jorbozeddar 47-48).

Although there are many accounts of this sort about Ali-Mir Drekvandi, some have suspected the originality of the authorship on the grounds that the world-view as represented in the work is absolutely Christian which is unlikely of a Muslim author. The story begins, for instance, with "In the Name of the Father and the Son and of the Holy Ghost, Amen" (*No Heaven* 27). However, although he might be a Muslim in name, Drekvandi was not a true follower of Islam. Hemming, his posthumous patron, reiterates that the attitude behind *Gunga Din's* is "part New Testament, part British Army and part American Army" (21) and undoubtedly Drekvandi was heavily influenced by Hemming's indirect educational training. As Hemming says, they "discussed snakes, Doomsday, prophets, his grandfathers and demons, life and death and Jesus Christ." Thus, a peasant who, as Zaehner also

confirms, “as a poor peasant had no right to be literate” (7) certainly has received his theological — if we may call it so — education from a British officer, whose upbringing has been Christian.

Moreover, anthropologically speaking, living in Iran does not necessarily mean that you have received Islamic education. More to the point, Before the Islamic Revolution, Lorestani villagers were mostly away from any religious education let alone Islam. Inge Demant Mortensen in his study of Lori culture argues that in the beginning of the nineteenth century the Lurs gradually became less religious than before. Mortensen enumerates a few other anthropologists who unanimously agree that although the Lurs seem at first glance to be Muslim, they have a very superficial knowledge of the “true faith” and are to a great extent uninformed about or indifferent to it (Mortensen 155). In that sense, any claim that disqualifies Drekvani as the author of *No Heaven for Gunga Din* — on the grounds that the novella reflects Christian worldview — is discredited.

In addition, stylistically speaking, *No Heaven for Gunga Din* has a number of grammatical and syntactical mishandlings that almost certainly are the consequence of the effect of Persian mentality on the author. For instance the phrase “and the General answered and said” (*No Heaven* 40) is a tautology but is common in Persian. Also, the author makes use of the adjective “beautiful” instead of “handsome” in order to describe young boys dead in the war (50); a miscomprehension which stems from the author’s Persian mentality, in which people usually use “*Ziba rou*” (beautiful) both for women and men. Besides, the author uses the phrase “their tongues were extended against us” (56) which is a literal translation of a Persian idiomatic expression “*Zabaneshan baraye ma deraz boud*” meaning “they were so arrogant.” Moreover, the author takes up the phrase “we are hurriedly desirous to see you working” (57) which is exactly the literal translation of a Persian idiomatic expression “*Ma bisabraneh moshtaghim ta kar shoma ra bebinim*” which is used when someone looks forward to seeing somebody. These and many other are lexical and stylistic cases help to prove that the author of *No Heaven for Gunga Din* is not a fictitious figure and, if not the same Drekvandi in Borujerd, is at least an Iranian.

Another reason, which this article aims to explore, is the implicit network of power in and about *No Heaven for Gunga Din*. We will take into account the socio-historical context in which the work appeared and observe the sly colonial and imperialistic attitudes at work in the introduction and preface which were written one by one English officer and the other by an Orientalist. And we conclude that Drekvandi resists this colonial outlook between the lines of his novella and, in

general, wrote it as an ironic cry at all the mistreatments of the colonial powers in Iran during and after the Second World War.

No Heaven for Gunga Din is an account of an extra-terrestrial journey of eighty-two British and American Officers as well as Gunga Din who follows the group as a servant. The members of the group are dead in a war named Harvesting-Living-War, which has taken place presumably between the Communists and the supporters of democracy in 2084. Wandering in the Milky Way in search of Heaven, they have lost their way and are seeking the help of angels who direct them to the Holy Commanders, who are Cloud, Wind, Fate, Snow, and Rain Commanders. There is a long digressive story in the Holy Commanders' abode; however, they learn that they ought to receive Freedom Passes from the Judge in order to pass through the gates of Heaven. The way to the Judge is so long that they prefer to go to the gate of Heaven to see if they can enter without the Freedom Passes. Determined Military Police of Heaven do not let them in and thus the group decides to build huts outside the Heaven in the White Forest and attack the Heaven occasionally to find their ways into it. They launch thousands of attacks, which cause much anxiety for Heaven Military Police. The Military Police decides to consult Adam and Eve and asks them to convince the "Outlaw Children of the White Forest" to visit the Judge before they enter the Heaven. Adam and Eve do so and send the group to the Judge's court. Finally, they visit the Judge who announces the punishment for each member of the group; but Angel Agency who plays the role of the defender tries to exonerate the soldiers. After long a negotiation, they all successfully evade the Hellish punishment except for the unfortunate Gunga Din, who seems to the reader to be the less sinful member of the group. He is sent to Hell for some trivial sins he had committed on Earth. The concluding part of the story, however, becomes a little clumsy when the officers and other dwellers of the Heaven hold an uprising to put an end to the misery of the "hellishes."

The writer recounted the story in a linear style but some digressions frequently disrupt the flow of the story. For instance, a very long paragraph in which the Holy Commanders assign Officers to choose the best Holy Commander (*No Heaven* 53-84); Or a rather shorter digression in which the author explains how some officers try to climb up a tall tree in order to see over the walls into Heaven (93). Except for Major Lawson who is a bit more hot-tempered than the others, the rest of characters and their manners are to a large extent immutable and similar. However, there are times of suspension that encourages the reader not to put down the book. In effect, the reputation that the book has earned is less for the structure and style of the book and more because of the rumors around the authorship of the novella, the author's

mysterious identity, and more importantly the controversial content of the book.

When Gunga Din appears in the novella for the first time, he is ordered by Major Mathews to clean up their eighty-two pairs of shoes although like everybody else Gunga Din is tired, hungry and thirsty (28). He is recalled two more times before he utters his first sentence in the book on page thirteen; so long after the rest of the travelers has expressed their feelings. Yet, Gunga Din's very first sentence is not the expression of his inner feelings; in fact, he merely speaks up to offer some fruit to his master, General Burke (40). Gunga Din polishes the soldiers' shoes every night. He is always the last one walking in the line of the Heaven-seekers and all the time takes the last chair to sit on in every gathering. The second time that Gunga Din is allowed to speak he has the opportunity to express his feelings. Never does he talk about anything before this scene but here he begins chastising Fate Commander for ruining his life on the earth (72). When the soldiers once again point at him, they do so to reprimand him for forgetting his duty to polish the shoes; yet, he does not say a single word here either (91). In the climax of the story, the Judge, against the readers' better judgment, condemns Gunga Din to ninety-six years in Hell for some hilarious "ten million Venial Sins and six Mortal Sins." His sins are such as drinking the officers' beer secretly, accepting gifts without working enough in return, and also wishing that Harvesting-Living-War start as soon as possible so that he could serve his British and American masters in the war. However, he does not, or rather, he is not allowed to defend himself like the officers and keeps silent (108). Gunga Din is allowed to express himself just in two other parts. First when he is going to be sent to Hell, when he says only one sentence in his defense to the Judge. Gunga Din shouts: "You have made a great mistake in your judging, I am Gunga Din the Carrier!" a claim which is rejected forthwith by the Judge who believes that the real Gunga Din the Carrier was an Indian who is now up in Heaven (116). Nevertheless, the irony is that he finds himself even more unfortunate that the Indian Gunga Din who supposedly has found his way up in the White's Heaven.

It is believed that with the progress of scientific thinking, the misrepresentation of the "others" will decrease. However, Western scientific and scholarly developments in fields of science and humanity have proved otherwise. Western science, as Ania Loomba maintains, is far from being "objective, [and] ideology-free" and is "deeply implicated in the construction of racist ways of thinking about human beings and the differences between them" (Loomba 56). John Hemming and professor Zaehner were unable to free themselves of their biases when they wrote the introduction and preface to Drekvandi's novella, despite the fact that

they considered themselves to be caring and protective figures who would procure for this “savage” race to become “civilized.” In fact, as Loomba continues, “the ‘complicity’ of individuals with ideological and social systems is not entirely a matter of their intentions” (59). In other words, Hemming and Zaehner are cogs in a complex and gigantic wheel of a big network of power which perforce they behave in this way. These “kind-hearted” British officer and university scholar seem to be unaware of the buttress they provide for an overarching discourse that reinforces the colonial power.

No heaven for Gunga Din opens with an introduction by John Hemming, the officer who helped Drekvandi’s learn English and journey to Britain. Later, Hemming asked Zaehner to write the preface to the novella, and also found a publisher willing to finance the publication of the book. John Hemming, in the introduction, describes his evangelical role in discovering Ali-Mir Drekvandi’s talent. In that, Hemming asserts in a celebratory phrase that *Gunga Din* holds “mirror up to nature” but soon he concludes that it is so because Ali-Mir is “so natural, so close to nature himself.” Moreover, he adds that *Gunga Din*’s imagination does not belong to the progressive analytical romantic category but to “the vision of the child” (*No Heaven* 21). The preconception with regard to the author lasts to the end of the introduction where Hemming sums up his account of Drekvandi as a person who is so close to nature that for him “God’s sun may well be a better celestial signpost than Man’s clocks” (23).

Hemming’s view of *Gunga din*’s author is far from objective and is strongly reminiscent of nineteenth century Romantic outlook on the “uncivilized” nations which is combined with a “scientific” perspective towards the East and its people. For the Romantics like William Blake, the British visionary poet, and idealist like Hegel, East is the land of good-old-days. Robert Young states that “This remorseless Hegelian dialectalization is characteristic of twentieth century accounts of race, racial difference and racial identity” (Young 170). From this romantic perspective, where once philosophers like Confucius and poets such as Hafiz sprang out, in the nineteenth century, experiences their second childhood and are in need of the Westerners’ attention. For Hemming, Drekvandi, is not a mature human being, his writing is beautiful not because it is on the par with great Western masterpieces but because he believes that an Iranian is incapable of writing fiction and this is a miracle to have Drekvandi, a “savage” write in this way. Drekvandi’s fiction receives the royalty, I believe, less because his writing’s quality is comparable to that of Westerners based on their criteria but more because the committee is astonished to see a “savage” capable of writing.

Also for Westerners, the East is the land onto which they project their innermost silenced desires. They on the one hand desire the so-called exotic, colorful, and innocent culture of the East, but on the other hand, their rational sides forbids them of any warm welcome to that bizarre ethos. Two contradictory feelings are constantly at war within them. They alternatively desire the East but constantly deride it. Racism is in fact to consider a hierarchy for the supremacy of the races: Robert C. Yung remarks:

Race was defined through the criterion of civilization, with the cultivated white Western European male at the top, and everyone else on a hierarchical scale either in a chain of being, from mollusc to God, or, in the later model, on an evolutionary scale of development from a feminized state of childhood (savagery) up to full (European) manly adulthood. In other words, race was defined in terms of cultural, particularly gender, difference — carefully graded and ranked. (Young 89)

Hemming also in his lines effeminates and compares Drekvandi to a child who is incapable of understanding the rational speculation.

John Hemming before publishing Drekvandi's work asked Professor R. C. Zaehner, an Orientalist Professor at the University of Oxford, to write a foreword to the novella. Professor Zaehner's introductory note is the reflection of a characteristic Orientalist outlook on Easterners. Zaehner considers Gunga Din attached to nature rather than his British masters; a tribute that is double-edged in its implications. Drekvandi, Zaehner suggests, is childlike and his account presents his inner "savage nobility". To R.C. Zaehner, Gunga Din "seemed to love dirt for its own sake; he was naïve yet at the same time shrewd; he made you laugh and pretended not to understand why you are laughing" (*No Heaven* 7). For Zaehner, the academically educated figure, Drekvandi is no more than a child. He ignores the mental growth that a person may go through and hard-headedly compares him to a savage who has been tamed and has learned what his masters have taught him.

Both Hemming and Zaehner have portrayed Drekvandi as a person whom you would like to have around but at the same time to keep your distance with; an ambivalent state between desire and derision. Yet, this is the legacy of modern intellectual gesture to lament the corruption of modern man and to yearn for the so-called pure pre-civilization society in which "God's sun" rather than "Man's clock" showed the time and the pastoral lifestyle for this ideals group of intellectuals stands for "simple, healthy, organic life" (Carey 36). In fact, instead of being

treated as an author with a distinctive identity, Drekvandi is mainly considered the epitome of “pure” pre-civilization.

No doubt, Drekvandi was attracted to Western Civilization and received their education. But meanwhile, I claim, he put a question mark over the Westerners’ authority. Gunga Din learned English through a British Officer’s benevolence but the homage he paid in return is absolutely ironic. The book which is supposed to reflect his slavish imitation and subsequent absorption and celebration of Western civilization turns out to be an angry cry which resounds with anguish over being unfairly subjugated by the white race.

Bhabha enumerates three conditions of identification based on which Drekvandi’s ambivalent relationship with the colonial center can be examined. First, in order to exist, the “self” needs to reach an image of itself against an otherness; an otherness of whose place the self desires to occupy (44). According to this view, all the subalterns want to be in place of their masters. Drekvandi learns to speak and write English, absorbs bits and pieces of Christian theology and English culture and follows his masters to England in hope of becoming an English citizen.

Second, Bhabha continues, although the desire persists, it is accompanied by the “slave’s avenging anger” (45). And, thirdly, the process of identification has no beginning and no end. An image is constantly reproduced and the subject is repeatedly transferred to assume it (45). As the triple conditions insinuate, identification is a perpetual and ambivalent process. Drekvandi is an ambivalent character, too. He also both desires and abhors his masters. In a striking scene when General Burke introduces democracy to the Holy Commanders, this irony is revealed. One of the Commanders asks for a parable which could clarify democracy and General Burke replies, “Democracy is like an infinitely beautiful girl, with whom many people have fallen violently in love, and *some crazy people among them* [...] Democracy is like an infinitely precious coat of mail that does not fit everybody and especially *it never fits the wild people*” (*No Heaven* 49, emphasis added). Here, the author ironically shows the innermost intentions of the Westerners who in the name of democracy have occupied his land, Iran, during the Second World War.

The irony intensifies when a few pages after this conversation, the Cloud Commander argues that the British and Americans saved many nations in the second war (which perhaps refers to the WWII). Yet in return some of those nations not only were ungrateful but even caused trouble for them. In reply to Cloud Commander, John Hemming (who also appears as one of the soldiers in the

novella) says, “We did not wait to be thanked by the nations we defended during the war, we only waited to see that the nations could fall on the best of living” (*No Heaven* 55). One can imagine the bitter smile on Gunga Din’s face when he wrote these sentences out of British and American Officers’ mouth.

Gunga Din (Drekvandi) did not read about the hardship of his country during the 1940s, but instead he witnessed and felt the misery of his country during World War II. Iran not only did not “fall on the best of living,” but even it plunged into such a bad economic condition that Gunga Din’s brothers and sisters, as he had said to Major Hemming, “are so poor that they are eating named *ballowt* instead of wheat bread” (*No Heaven* 15). The miserable condition was not solely for Gunga Din’s family. The economic recession caused by the Second World War after a long period of drought in Lorestan brought about the lack of wheat and people had to stay in long lines and fight for a morsel of bread (Mojezi 303). Drought and famine, disease and moral corruption in addition to dozens of other miseries caused by the Second World War in Lorestan forced the unfortunate villagers to leave their homes in search of food and come to towns and dwell around the Allies Military Camps in hope of finding something from the reminders of the soldiers’ food. Gunga Din was one of these hungry people who ate the reminders of the Allies’ soldiers thrown out of the military camp.

It was the upshot of the catastrophic occupation of Iran during the Second World War. The Allies camping in Iran needed food, tobacco, raw material, etc., for the consumption of their forces. Practically, they persuaded the Iranian government to provide them with all what they required. They employed myriads of methods to pay as little as possible. For instance, they decreased the Iranian Currency value to hundred percent which led to seven time increase in the rate of inflation and many other economic consequences (Foran 398). Later Mohammad Mosadiq, the Iranian Prime Minister, proved that the Allies regardless of what they did to decrease their expenses in Iran yet must have paid one hundred and forty million dollars to the Iranian government; amount of which the Allies merely paid 5.2 percent of it (Katuzian 188). They took all these measures by force and all opposition forces within the country, Left or Right, Conservative or Communist admitted the plunder.

In general, even if Gunga Din is not the same man who used to live in Borujerd, he is indisputably an Iranian whose work was an angry but ironic cry at all the mistreatments of colonial powers in Iran during and after the Second World War. It is true that he could have not been successful in making others listen to his voice if it was not for the patriarchal figures behind the publication of his work. Yet, He was a Gunga Din, a culturally hybrid character who surreptitiously betrayed his

“father” who intended to “civilize” him.

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