Narayan – Reconstructing *The Skull of Alum Bheg*

The remembered trauma of the real and imagined violence that marked the Indian Uprising of 1857 drives Kim Wagner's *The Skull of Alum Bheg: The Life and Death of a Rebel of 1857*. Wagner's project in this book is the reconstruction and contextualization of the events of a particular moment involving the violent death of an Indian sergeant. His story begins in 2014 when he received an email from a couple, Dee and John, who "had come into possession of the skull [which] . . . they did not feel comfortable with" (xxi). Wagner received the skull from them with the purpose of restoring "some of the humanity and dignity" that had been denied to Alum Bheg in his life (xxii). Wagner's eventual aim of reconstruction through writing was to "prepare for Alum Bheg to be repatriated to India" (xxi). Repatriation of the skull, however, is both complex and bureaucratic and "can only take place between institutions" as Wagner points out (224). This means that Wagner can only use the considerable power of language and archival research available to him in the hope that South Asian activists will call for the return of human remains now housed in "Western museums and collections" (224) as enduring trophies of a violent and unequal history.

The facts of the case are simple: the Bengal Infantry Regiment "mutinied" on the 9th of July 1857 in Sialkot in what is now Pakistan. During the course of this outbreak, Dr. Graham along with Thomas and Jane Hunter and their child were killed. Alum Bheg was held responsible for these deaths. He was also regarded as a principal leader in the "mutiny of 1857" (xix). He paid the ultimate price for insubordination and violent reprisal against the British by being blown away from the mouth of a canon following the Uprising of 1857. Captain Costello brought his "trophy-skull" to England (2). There is a macabre balance in this brief narrative of Alum Bheg's violent actions and appropriately violent end; the action of being blown from the mouth of a canon seems to be just retribution for the dastardly killings Alum Bheg undertook. Wagner shows, however, that this narrative is both "closed and self-referential" (xx). Its designation of Alum Bheg as a principal leader would have put the British Victorian reader in mind of other "deceitful" and well-known "Indian rebels like Nana Sahib or the Rani of Jhansi" (xx). These unannotated but resonant references carried embedded narratives of terror in to the British colonial imagination so that, to British readers, Alum Bheg became a synecdoche of native

violence. He became more than his own story as his story – and eventually, his skull – functioned as a stand in for other stories of violence, real and imagined. Wagner shows that the skull of Alum Bheg acquired a symbolic value well beyond the meagre facts of the case.

Despite these verifiable facts, the problem with narrating "the biography of the skull" (3) is what Wagner calls the profound "archival absence" of Alum Bheg. The British imperial archive contains very little about this or, indeed, any other event of insubordination from the perspective of the so-called native. Wagner, therefore, relied on "the letters, petitions, proclamations and statements made by Indian rebels, *sepoys* and others before and after the outbreak of May 1857" (7). Wagner also avoided the standard so-called biography of Sita Ram, *From Sepoy to Subedar*, as he finds it to be "a literary construct and an example of colonial ventriloquism" (7). Wagner's reconstruction of the life and death of Alum Bheg is what he calls a "subaltern prosopography," or a collective study of Indian *sepoys* and the British response to them (8). Accordingly, Wagner provides information such as details about the ethnic profile of the Indians in Sialkot. Alum Bheg, although a Muslim, was from the Gangetic plain and, therefore, tied to the Hindu community by way of cultural belonging. This sense of cultural commonality came to be strengthened around anti-colonial sentiment prompted by events such as the annexation of Awadh in 1856 (25). In the context of this trans-religious affiliation, the European population emerged in the Indian imagination as "zealous Christians" (29).

The Christians on their part began to regard their servants with "a new-found suspicion bordering on paranoia" as they received news of the outbreak of hostilities in Delhi in May of 1857. They articulated this fear along the lines of racial and religious difference. Religious difference, as Wagner shows, was to play a major role in the Uprising of 1857. Hindu and Muslim *sepoys* were both equally outraged by their firm belief that the cartridges that their British officers required them to operate were greased with unclean animal fat. The "threat posed by the greased cartridge was," as Wagner shows, the erasure of all distinction between "high and low, pure and impure" (40). This was a threat to social order and to belonging in an established social taxonomy as far as the Indian soldiers were concerned. Consequently, there was widespread panic about possible British design to convert and conquer the Indian soldiers evident to the Indians in seemingly minor details such as the order that prohibited Indian soldiers from wearing caste-marks or

jewelry while on duty and the "removal of . . . [the] brass vessel, the *lota*, which allowed high-caste inmate to maintain their purity" (57). In addition to the growing suspicion created by the cartridges, there were other events that consolidated anti-colonial sentiment such as the execution of Mangal Pandey who was hanged for the offense of attacking and seriously wounding two British officers.

On the British side there was similar panic especially after the outbreak in Meerut. Wagner recounts British fear and quotes from witnesses such as Alexander Duff, a noted missionary, who attested to the "abundant details of the most harrowing description" regarding the violence perpetrated by the Indians on the Europeans (66). In his early chapter on the British fear, Wagner accepts as fact the circulation of horror stories by the British regarding Indian violence. In later chapters Wagner subjects the "fact" of Indian violence to interrogation and concedes that British accounts regarding this violence were vastly exaggerated in order for them to justify their own punitive response to native insubordination. Early in his account, though, he devotes considerable detail to the plight of the British and the Americans including their loss of money in the sack of the Delhi Bank (72). Much more significant than this loss was the escalation of suspicion on both sides of the imperial divide that resulted from "mutually reinforcing fears that were exacerbated by reciprocal cultural misreading" (74). Even as the British tried to control the flow of information, they were not able to control the royal decrees and proclamations issued by Bahadur Shah Zafar and his sons to the people of "Hindustan" who now rallied behind these rulers with dreams of resurrecting lost glory.

The growth of a patriotism which was more than merely local was troubling to the colonial authorities and on the 9th of June 1857 "the British for the first time took recourse to a particularly brutal form of execution by blowing two *sepoys* of the 35th from the mouth of a cannon near Lahore" (89). Wagner finds that the growth of colonial brutality was very substantially aided by "colonial officers such as John Nicholson, who was described as an 'imperial psychopath' . . . embodying a new and militant ideal of vengeful Christianity" (90). Nicholson headed a Moving Column which marched through so-called troubled areas disarming Indian troops who were then ruthlessly punished. Alum Bheg and his fellow soldiers retaliated against the British and "for all intents and purposes . . . [broke] out in mutiny" but Wagner

qualifies their outbreak by pointing out that they did not completely abandon "their loyalty" to the British" (106). Despite this enduring loyalty, there were mutineers like Hurmat Khan who responded to British violence with the kind of reciprocal violence that Frantz Fanon theorized in *The Wretched of the Earth*. The idea of reciprocity gets lost in a historical maze of mirrors as Wagner shows. The British insisted on their reactive stance in the face of native violence and Nicholson's Moving Column moved relentlessly forward while *sepoys* like Alum Bheg found themselves caught in the moment of history and, thereby, unable "to avoid a battle" (138). They engaged with the British in what came to be known as the Battle of Trimmu Ghat (141) but were "fatally outgunned" (142) by the British. The Sialkot brigade came to be "completely annihilated" (147) by Nicholson's Moving Column and Alum Bheg's dreams of "entering the service of Bahadur Shah" lasted "exactly five days" (148).

The British regarded Alum Bheg's patriotic dream of resistance as betrayal. Since the notion "of betrayal was central to the British understanding of the outbreak," British accounts argue that "there could be no question of severity" in the British response (154). Wagner makes a revealing point about British rule in India as he demonstrates that "it was the certainty of punishment that ultimately sustained British rule in India" (155). He quotes Sir Charles Metcalfe who called for the restoration of the "personal inviolability of the English race in India" (155). Wagner's analysis of brutal British punishment as a mask to cover the "vulnerability of the colonial state" is strongly persuasive (155). He presents a well-documented discussion of "colonial retributive violence" (158) which mobilized with cries of "Remember Cawnpore!" (162). Wagner also provides several illustrations which reinforce his verbal argument about the manner in which the rebels were hunted down as "a new myth of British colonial mastery was established" (171). Wagner's very forceful example of the figure of Nana Sahib in London's Madame Tussauds' "Chamber of Horrors" with a placard describing his violence against women and children enables him to make a strong argument about the power of narrative. Wagner's argument is that although Nana Sahib was never caught, this placard and figure effectively create "a cathartic narrative, that brought closure and justice, albeit imagined, to the trauma of the 'Mutiny'" (172).

Alum Bheg, himself, was sentenced to death by being blown from a canon after a brief court martial on the 8th of July 1858. Wagner contextualizes Alum Bheg execution with descriptions of

this practice that was “regarded as the ultimate tool of exemplary deterrence” (177). A larger part of the efficacy of the practice was that it denied the closure of death rituals to the person who was blown up and thereby worked as a form of “spiritual warfare that transcended mere physical punishment” (179). The British “re-established colonial rule” via the spectacles of these executions which the Indian were forced to witness. Alum Bheg was one of the last of the Indians to be so executed. His head was picked up by Captain A. R. Costello. Wagner discusses at some length the general interest and the scientific curiosity in the human skull at this time by way of explaining why Costello might have picked up this skull. He also offers the argument that Costello redeemed his somewhat uneventful colonial career by picking up this trophy. What is clear, though, is that Costello’s note identifying the skull as the skull of a “principal leader” was more than a little mistaken. His description was a more apt description for Hurmat Khan who had evaded capture. Costello’s note, thus, transforms the skull from the debris of brutal colonial violence into “proof of British victory” (202). Costello did not, however, keep the skull as it was “morally incompatible with the rhetoric of liberal imperialism” that defined British imperialism in the second half of the nineteenth century. Wagner should possibly have concluded his book with this point. The concluding discussions in the book are about the collecting of skulls by victorious armies and they somewhat dissipate the impact of the particular moment that Wagner seeks to reconstruct.