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Jack Owens: Champion of Truth

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Abstract

Due to my interest in his writings, this paper explores sources that report on the life and legacy of Jack Owens, including his influences, his primary novel *Forced Allegiance*, and his contributions to society. Using a biographical lens, I will focus on how Owens’ life experiences impacted his perspectives and sense of moral right. With a historical lens, I will investigate how the era in which he lived influenced his writings. Through the Marxist lens, I will connect these ideas to the issues of rampant British prejudice in India in the Victorian Era due to imperialism. Furthermore, I will argue that his ongoing relevance today is due to the lives he continues to impact through the authors he affected, the scholarship he began, and the orphanages he established. I will conclude by using the evidence of his life experiences to support how Jack Owens always championed the truth, even at personal cost.

**(152 words)**

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Jack Owens: Champion of Truth

**I. A. Introductory Hook**

RATATATTAT. The sound of gunfire from off in the distance juxtaposed eerily with the ominous quiet of the jungle. Daivat knelt in the leafy underbrush, shaking. Scores of booted feet marched through on a half run, just inches from his hiding spot. Soon, a glow of red lit up what used to be his village. Before he even entered the outskirts of the dwellings, he knew what he’d find. The stench of death hung heavily in the air. He started fearfully as something touched his shoulder. He turned to find his father’s corpse – disemboweled – swinging from the tree, empty eyes catching the smoldering ruins of the village huts. And then Daivat ran.

**I. B. Introductory Biography**

The author of this excerpt taken from the novel *Forced Allegiance*s published in 1842 was born James Russell Owens on June 7, 1801 in India. His parents, Robert and Sarah Owens, were British citizens living abroad. James, nicknamed Jack, began his education at his mother’s side. As he grew older, his parents were able to find him a British tutor to teach him the finer aspects of a life that they did not want him to lose in this “savage land” so far from their more cultured homeland (English Broadcasting Company, 2015, para 7). At 10 years of age, Jack was sent across the sea back to England to a Catholic boarding school. Here his education continued, far from the only home and family he knew. Early on he developed an interest in writing, probably due to his habit of journaling (“James Owens,” 2015, para. 9). Eventually becoming a journalist specifically covering Britain’s interests in India, Jack became a prolific author, dying August 10, 1872 (EBC, 2015, para. 13). A significant author of the Victorian Era, Jack Owens’ influences shaped his political novel *Forced Allegiance*, contributing to his legacy.

**II. A. Influences Introduction**

Born and raised in India, Jack was exposed to other cultures and ideas from a young age. His birth and youth in this exotic land set the stage for all the events that would follow him throughout his life. Specifically, the tragedies that unfolded there in his boyhood affected his outlook on life and set a new path for his future. His parents’ religion was another major factor influencing his upbringing, even to determining his educational experiences. Jack’s experiences in India, the tragedies that haunted his formative years, and the Catholic tradition in which he was raised influenced his perspective as an author.

**II. B. India**

The England of Jack’s era was an empire conquering its way across the world, its sights set on taking advantage of economic opportunities in many foreign ports, regardless of the ravaging effects on the peoples who lived there. A major arm of this force was known as the East India Company whose interests in India included cotton, silk, indigo dye, salt, saltpeter (potassium nitrate), tea and opium (*Encyclopedia Englander*, 2008, p. 67). It was the needs of the East India Company that brought Robert and Sarah Owens to India; Robert was part of the military force protecting the Company’s assets and interests. Here, Jack was born and raised till the age of 10, experiencing many adventures that would later impact much of his work and seeing firsthand who Britain really was outside its own borders. This perspective would shape his political satire (“James Owens,” 2015, para. 9). Within his circle of friends and confidantes, Jack often voiced his frustrations concerning the monarchy’s insistence on deluding the people about England’s true purpose in foreign places. “The time will come,” he vowed, “that there will be no way to cloak their true agenda anymore because the voice of truth will break through their web of lies” (O’Flaughtery, 1952, p. 81). Little did Jack Owens realize that he had foretold his own destiny.

**II. C. Tragedy**

When Jack was 10, triple tragedy struck. His best friend, somewhat remarkably for his era, was a little Indian boy of his own age named Daivat. Although they were from different cultures and raised by different standards, they grew up more as brothers than friends. “He was everything to me,” Jack emotionally explained.

He took me into his family and his heart and taught me everything he knew. The best fishing spots. How to recognize the sounds of the jungle and the tracks of the animals. Which plants or fruits were edible and the best season to pick. Only later would I be told he was the barbaric savage and I the cultured, educated lord (O’Flaughtery, 1952, 110).

On a surprise raid to Daivat’s village one night, the British soldiers torched the huts, brutally killing the inhabitants. It was the British way of claiming their ownership of certain mineral rights. Daivat’s family were among the casualties of this cultured, sophisticated British enterprise. Daivat was seized to be trained as a British houseboy. His grief overwhelmed him, and he eventually jumped to his death, drowning in a deep well. At this same time, Jack’s mother, pregnant with a younger brother, sickened. No medicine was effective enough to save her. Early labor pains took the baby brother, and his weakened mother soon followed. Bereft without his wife’s anchoring presence, Robert Owens sent his 10 year old son across the sea back to England to boarding school while he lost himself in his military work. It would be the last time Jack would ever see either parent. Robert himself succumbed to a combination of overwork and jungle illness about two years later. Jack was kept in boarding schools the rest of his formative years by relatives on his mother’s side. These tragedies profoundly affected his perspective of Britain’s “right” to “cultivate” other nations (O’Flaughtery, 1952, p. 133).

**II. D. Boarding School**

The boarding schools in which Jack was educated were “strictly, bleakly Catholic. Here learning was whipped into me and moral character was pounded into me” (O’Flaughtery, 1952, p. 150). These boarding schools emotionally starved a growing boy grieving for his lost family and for the only home he had ever known. He also smarted under the idea that God had anything to do with Britain’s bloody conquests throughout India. “I soon decided if the scenarios I’d seen in India, if the experiences people like Daivat had, were a result of religion, I wanted nothing to do with it. This was not the face of God to me” (O’Flaughtery, 1952, p. 170).

**II. E. Influences Conclusion**

Jack’s many experiences growing up influenced his perspectives and his writings. The Indian culture to which he was exposed for the first 10 years of his life shaped his perceptions of Britain’s so-called advanced society. The rigid, coldly cruel structure of the Catholic boarding schools made him wary of the purported truths of Britain’s occupancy of India, and his yearning for the family taken from him planted the seed of compassion for other children in similar situations (“James Owens,” 2015, para. 11). Most importantly, experiences such as seeing his best friend Daivat suffer the crushing loss of his family altered forever any notion that Britain was in India to free the barbaric savages from witchcraft and bring them to the truth of God. Having his life so uprooted and his own family taken from him further added to his grief as he had to make his peace with the meaninglessness of it all (O’Flaughtery, 1952, p. 170). These influences all worked together to shape his perspectives in his novels as he sought a way for truth to make a difference.

**III. A. *Forced Allegiance* Introduction**

The most meaningfully memorable work Jack Owens completed in his lifetime was undoubtedly his political novel *Forced Allegiance* whose main character, Daivat, was named after his dearest childhood friend. Semi-autobiographical, *Forced Allegiance* allows readers to experience the India of Jack’s time through the eyes of the conquered: the Indians. Satirically written, a puzzled Daivat is shown again and again the supposed “superior British culture” that is so different from his own savage, backwards race (O’Flaughtery, 1952, 212). As Daivat struggles to understand how Britain’s barbaric practices and treatment of his people signals a superiorly educated culture, the reader will likewise see the irony. The critical analysis, literary devices, and theme all work together to portray how backwards and morally bankrupt the British nation was in its takeover of India.

**III. B. Literary Criticism**

Jack’s writing of this novel, including the setting and specific incidents, are drawn from his own memories of growing up there as a boy. “I wanted readers to experience India as I had – to sense its mystery and wonder shrouded by this black cloud of British sovereign power. I wanted them to grieve with me for the rape of its land, culture, customs, and people. I wanted them to mourn the loss of one of its brightest souls, Daivat” (O’Flaughtery, 1952, 215). Historically, these events did unfold as Jack Owens dramatized. The East India Company is now synonymous with political corruption and crime (*Encyclopedia Englander*, 2008, p. 67). The Marxist lens is also clearly evident in his novel as the distinction between the British invaders and their subjugated Indian subservients is graphically painted. While not all British occupants treated the Indians malignantly, it is unthinkable that any culture should have to suffer so ignobly on their own land whose culture dates back hundreds of years before a country like Britain was ever established.

**III. C. Literary Devices**

*Forced Allegiance* relies heavily on irony to portray its theme. Even the title, *Forced Allegiance*, is ironic. True allegiance is not forced. As Jack portrays the indignities and savageries the Indians suffered at British hands, he reminds the reader over and over of the obvious superiority of the British culture and how God applauds their deeds, dramatically wielding his irony as a relentless machete hacking away the bulwark of lies hedging Britain’s true character and intentions in India. Even as Daivat runs from the horrific scene of his the destruction of his village and savage butchery of his father, he is struggling to understand why the British God wants His people to forcibly educate them concerning British superiority (Owens, 1842, 93). Britain represents oppression while India symbolizes innocence and virtue. In the end, oppression is overthrown.

**III. D. Theme**

Making no apologies for its truth-telling, *Forced Allegiance* presents twin themes of imperialism and prejudice. Jolting the reader from complacency, it is easy to burn with zealous indignation at the obvious murderous prejudice that the Indians are subjected to at the hands of their British lords. *Forced Allegiance* also presents a more accurate portrayal of what imperialism truly is:

…a dogged pursuit of what is another’s to own it for oneself – but is this in and of itself not breaking one of the Ten Commandments which plainly states it is a sin to covet? Not only have we coveted, but good God! We have pillaged, murdered, lied, dishonored our heritage, in short, violated every commandment while we brazenly insist this is all for God (O’Flaughtery, 1952, 224)!

After reading this book, it is evident that two of the truths that Owens espouses is there is no divine right to another’s life, livelihood, or country, and that all people are worthy of life and love.

**III. E. *Forced Allegiance* Conclusion**

*Forced Allegiance* is a vivid portrayal of the extremes greed can take a country and the propaganda that a country will use to cover its tracks in its endeavor to delude its citizens. It paints the reality of British occupancy of India unerringly. Most of all, its themes point out the truth that we are all equal, regardless of color or creed.

**IV. A. Legacy Introduction**

Unsurprisingly, Jack Owens profoundly impacted society. His work was met with harsh criticism at his time and was even banned, but this did not stop his devotion to his cause of justice (O’Flaughtery, 1952, 219). While his literature caused quite the controversy in the British circles of his time, his legacy after his death continued on thanks to the authors he inspired, the fund he created, and the orphanage he established in India.

**IV. B. Authors**

Many authors look to Jack Owens as a leader in political satire. George Orness is one such author who was impacted by Jack Owens’ role in this genre:

I don’t know where my father acquired his copy, since I know it was highly contraband, but in my father’s study I happened upon a copy of *Forced Allegiance* and it profoundly altered my outlook. Suddenly, I had many questions. What else had we been told that was not the truth? It became my life goal to expose social issues to make room for reform (“James Owens,” 2015, para. 13).

George Orness was just one out of several authors who were impacted by Jack Owens’ novel. Britain tried to stamp out the light, but it spread like a wildfire, burning away the jungle of lies.

**IV. C. Scholarship**

Although Jack was checked in his desire to release his book to the public, he found another way to make a difference. He established a fund for writers of political satire and set it up through his own former alma mater. Part of the requirements of being awarded these funds for any given year is the aspiring author must prove they have contributed to the betterment of society in some pivotal way (EBC, 2015, para. 17).

**IV. D. Orphanage**

Most significantly, on a return trip to India as an elderly man, Jack realized his dream. He was able to personally interact with orphans in a very special orphanage he had funded and established. His personal touches are all over the home, from meaningful cultural sayings painted colorfully on the wall to classes in exploring the jungle. The Indian culture is encouraged, love is doled out in large doses, and children thrive in a new sense of family (O’Flaughtery, 1952, 219).

**IV. E. Legacy Conclusion**

Leaving behind an impact on society, Jack contributed more than he could have imagined. His work and ideas inspired other authors. His political satire scholarship encourages young aspiring authors today to make a difference. Most importantly, his children’s home continue to impact many lives, inspiring hope.

**V. A. Overall Conclusion**

Jack Owens’ background heavily impacted his future. As a child, he could not know that his birth in India was prodigious for generations of orphaned children to come. The many tragedies he suffered in his prepubescent years were shattering, and yet from this brokenness, a compassion took root that served to heal and restore lives of other children who would similarly lose their families. While the rigid structure of his boarding school experiences stifled him, he used it as an example of what not to follow in creating his own home for orphaned children. When his religious instructors insisted that God and divine right was the purpose of Britain’s conquests abroad, he stubbornly clung to the belief that Britain had no right violently subjugating another people.

**V. B. Relevance**

Most importantly, Jack Owens’ orphanage tremendously positively altered many lives. While it may be impossible to have an exact count of how many children have passed through its doors, it is true beyond a shadow of a doubt that his children’s home sheltered many little broken hearts, bringing them new hope and security. Because of one man’s tenacious pursuit of his purpose in life, countless lives have been touched. Jack Owens, champion of truth, used his small light to renew the flame of hope in countless hearts across the world.

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