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**Locating the Elements of White Saviour Complex in Maeve Galvin's  
*The Saviours***

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**MAHI KICHU**

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Paper Received on 09-02-2025, Accepted on 06-03-2025  
Published on 09-03-25; DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.1.398

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**Abstract:**

Writings on expatriate lives predominantly discuss themes of marginalization, identity crisis, cultural alienation, among others. When humanitarianism and discourses on human rights becomes an evident underpinning of these writings, the focused engagement of various tacit layers of euro-centrism and its manifestation as a neo-colonial sensibility is an area that needs more intervention. The focus of this article is on the socio-psychological aspect of the “white saviour complex”, a misguided emotionally elevating experience associated with ‘saving’ the ‘helpless’ which in turn validates one’s racial privilege as a ‘whiteman’. This article will argue how Maeve Galvin’s *The Saviours* (2020) epitomizes the ‘white saviour complex’ in the portrayal of the privileged white expats and their hedonistic attitude towards Cambodia as a place that needs to be ‘fixed’ and Cambodians as underprivileged Asians who needs to be ‘saved’.

**Keywords:** White Saviour Complex, Expatriate Writings, Neo-colonialism, Racial Discrimination

**Introduction:**

White Saviour Complex or White Messiah Complex is established when a privileged white individual exhibits a superiority power over colored or non-white individuals and considers saving them from a “sad fate”, best exemplified when white people are projected as protectors of the racially underprivileged (Hughey and Bandyopadhyay). This conscious or unconscious behavior further institutes power dynamics with respect to race, culture and gender. *The Saviours* (2020) written by Irish writer Maeve Galvin, illustrates this pietism and the “saviour complex” of the western expats residing in the developing nations as the UN’s ‘missionary’ workers.

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The author questions and challenges this “undeserving” privilege, predominantly experienced by the white people while portraying the hitherto tacit layers of neocolonial sensibility.

The novel is set in the backdrop of politically unrest Cambodia and the events portrayed are partly autobiographical as the narrative is influenced by Galvin’s own personal experience as an expat in Cambodia. The narrative unveils through the eyes of three characters who are UN expats in Cambodia - Janice Steiner, her daughter Caitlyn Leahy and Tom. The moral and political ambiguity of these characters in dealing with the socio-political circumstances of Cambodia forms the crux of the novel. While doing so, the novel also delineates the hypocritical and (anti)humanitarian policies of various UN missions, a truth that is hardly politicised by any mainstream discourses.

The writer, hegemonically, employs negative racial stereotyping as the primary tool for depicting Cambodian characters and environment in the novel. The novel opens with the reference to ‘monkeys’, a stereotypical western racist terminology used to address the Asians. The Prologue, set in a refugee camp at Thai-Cambodia border in 1991, introduces Janice Steiner a dental surgeon who is volunteering.

“Hours of sweating left Janice’s t-shirt caught up in her armpits. Stealing a moment for herself between conducting dental exams, she itched under her arms, aware that it likely made her look as if she were impersonating a monkey. A sharp pain jabbed at her gut reminding her that her diarrhoea hadn’t gone away. She had long since concluded that taking the anti-diarrhoea pills her doctor had given her before she left the States was about as effective as popping Tic Tacs” (Galvin ch 1)

The recurrent mentioning of sweating, diarrhea, “foul, hole in the ground toilet”, etc. exemplifies the contemptuous attitude of a white individual towards the Asians. Janice, found it “torturous” to leave the States for the “Cambodian humidity”. The emotions of contempt, sympathy, mercy and the urge to “save” Cambodians from the cusp of suffering, kindles a saviour complex in Janice and this was instrumental in setting up the NGO, Cambodian Hands. As her “saviour” instinct engulfed her physical consciousness, she had decided that it is her true call to “save Cambodia”. (ch 2) This self- realization can be rightly justified as the psychological manifestation of saviour complex as we see Janice reinforcing her power and privilege of a superior race. Teju Cole, the Nigerian American novelist, defines this “syndrome” as “white saviourism” and observes how practices, psychological processes and social institutions objectify cultural and historical inequalities to establish white privilege. (Hughey 23).

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Janice, according to the novelist, is “‘Cambodia’s answer to Princess Diana” (ch 2). During the volunteering and her subsequent role in setting up the NGO, have made her feel “purposeful” of her existence. She felt “more alive”. She never wanted to leave this life of contentment to go back to her old life as a mother and a wife. For, she wanted to be a ‘mother’ to the Cambodians- to save them, to empower them. “She felt a responsibility to this country” (Galvin 2020). Janice, in her own words, was “seduced” despite the “violent, dirty, incredibly poor, and zero infrastructure” of Cambodia. The country’s natural beauty, tremendous culture and the tenacity of the Cambodian women “seduced her into taking the “duty” of “rebuilding” the entire nation on her own shoulders. Janice’s volunteerism thus establishes stereotypes of Third World ‘othering’ dynamics where the Global North is situated as a super power, and the Global South as an inferior race.

Furthermore, a stigmatized representation and homogenization of Asian culture is evident in the portrayal of Cambodian politics and subjectivity in the novel. “The child was beautiful with caramel-coloured skin, big almond-shaped eyes and a fluff of jet-black hair. Her mother, not more than a child herself had her left arm amputated almost entirely. The vast number of amputees in the camp had been jarring for Janice when she first arrived there. Over decades of conflict, landmines laid by the Vietnamese and Cambodian armies, the Khmer Rouge and to her intense shame, the United States forces, were still causing dozens of deaths and injuries across the Cambodian countryside” (Galvin ch 2)

The kids at the camp were stung with the “rare combination of trauma and poor nutrition”. Janice realises that she came to Cambodia at the ‘right time’ to set up an NGO. Cambodia was socio-economically ruined by the Khmer Rouge regime and the conflict between Vietnam and Cambodian forces. In the book *No More Heroes: Grassroots Challenges to the Savior Mentality* (2016), Jordan Flaherty argues that “the saviour mentality” is underpinned by racism, capitalism and colonialism. The unjust and unethical establishment of power relations are often undermined in such psychology.

“The prototypical saviour is a person who has been raised in privilege and taught implicitly or explicitly that they possess the answers and skills needed to rescue others, no matter the situation . . . Saviours fundamentally believe they are better than the people they are rescuing. Saviours want to support the struggle of communities that are not their own, but they believe they must remain in charge. The saviour always wants to lead, never to follow. When the people they have chosen to rescue tell them they are not helping, they think those people are mistaken. It is almost taken as evidence that they need

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more help” (17-18)

All the white characters in the novel embodies the above characteristics. A pseudo-Altruistic characterization of Janice, as a strong opinionated white-saviour woman, is undeniably the novelist’s mouthpiece to reflect on many socio-cultural issues in Cambodia that were actually the result of the proliferation of Western expats from the UK, US and Australia. They have brought nothing but anarchy into Cambodia.

“Those bastards...Coming in here and spending so much money on their fat cat expat salaries. You know they actually brought in AIDS and they caused thousands of Cambodian women to enter into prostitution. It ended up helping the Khmer Rouge and they had the nerve to call it a success.” (Galvin ch 2)

Elsewhere in the novel, the novelists make Janice condemns the double standard of the NGOs and their expats in their so called “service to Cambodia”.

“...this country has an infection. It has been festering in the pit of its belly since the 1990s. It’s called hypocrisy. We are, my friends, massive hypocrites. Many of you are well-meaning hypocrites but hypocrites nonetheless... This country has provided wonderful incomes and enviable lifestyles for foreigners while poverty for Cambodians persists. There’s a cure for poverty, it’s called jobs. We need to be putting our energy into creating good jobs for Cambodians, real jobs, particularly for Cambodian women because when women are employed, entire families benefit. We need the private sector who are profiting enormously from this country’s natural resources to be held accountable for the damage they cause. And we ourselves, the NGOs and UN agencies, we need to rethink how we operate and stop avoiding the hard questions about our role in this country” (Galvin ch 12)

The above passage spoken by Janice while addressing a gathering of expats, truly reflects the “service” minds and the hidden politics under such disguises. Her dispassionate speech calling out the “hypocrisy” only irks the expats and this ultimately leads to her dismissal from her NGO. She further showers light on the funds and the “donating” psychology of the West/US towards “humanitarian causes” to the East. She scorns that the US donors were more interested in the Middle- East than the Asian countries. The war in Syria has accumulated the largest number of donations compared to the donations segregated towards the Asian/Cambodian poverty-alleviation cause. This ‘game play’ of the rich is merely an amusement for them as their ‘interests’ and ‘saviour mentality’ evolves with time.

Janice’s “duty” towards Cambodia is contrasted with Caitlyn Leahy, Janice’s

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daughter whom she abandoned for her work in Cambodia. Her abandonment left her with deep trust issues and a lack of self-confidence.

“She filled up her only pot with water and began to prepare a money-saving dinner of boiled rice and egg. In college, Caitlyn had briefly seen a therapist who had equated all of eaving. Irritated by the therapist’s lack of imagination, she had refused to go to any more sessions. As if she was such a basic entity that her entire life’s issues derived from having a Mommy-shaped hole like she was fucking Bambi. (ch 3)

Caitlyn is the representative of the third generational expats in Cambodia. She is the female representative of the category of expats who have come to Cambodia with a romanticised vision of service. Galvin’s unidimensional characterisation of Caitlyn is suggestive of how the modern new -generation expats in Cambodia are merely searching for hedonistic pleasure rather than ‘service’. In the novel, Caitlyn’s identity is represented only through her relationship with Tom. On the other hand, Tom, the UN expat from Ireland, decided to choose Cambodia to escape the mundaneness of his life in Galway. He and his friends are portrayed as (s)expats whose primary motivation for “service” is the scope for a trouble-free sexual escapade that they could enjoy exclusively in “deprived” countries like Cambodia. In the introductory scene, the reader finds Tom indulging in the “the irony of writing a proposal entitled Empowering Vulnerable Cambodian Women when a local prostitute had left his apartment only a few hours” ago. (Galvin ch 1)

“How many people should he say would benefit from the work? The project plan was to train 500 women in basket-weaving but 500 was kind of a low number. He needed to make it sound more impressive for the donor. He did the maths in his head. ‘If rural Cambodian women have on average three children, let’s assume all of them are beneficiaries of the programme too because their mothers are trained, plus husbands, plus the fact that they may have parents who live with them in the communities... He was in the middle of typing ‘3,000 beneficiaries...’ (Galvin ch 1)

Moreover, Tom’s sole motive to choose UN and Cambodia for career prospective was how effortless was it is to find an expat job considering his status as a ‘white’ or native-English degree holder. This exclusivity of the prerequisite in itself is evocative of how the developing countries are “aid-hungry” from the west. The novel also demonstrates a crucial aspect of white saviorism and gender. The objectification of local Cambodian women in the novel is appalling. Tom himself believes that being with an expat girl is exaggerative considering the “plethora of locals who were as good-looking as they were available” (ch3). The novelist portrays the drunken sexcapade of Tom and his friends.

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“This is un-fucking-believable!” He roared. ‘Look how far up I can get it!’... ‘Look at this, mate. I can feel her fucking kidneys!’ He shouted to Tom. A hot spurt of whiskey bile shot to the top of Tom’s throat. ‘Aw, man, that’s nasty,’ he croaked. ‘I don’t need to see that.’ (Galvin ch1)

The objectification of the native Cambodian women as mere sex-toys of the expats is a realistic portrayal of the racial objectification and subjugation of women of colour. The novel also highlights how these expats’ hedonistic ways have caused more damage than ‘service’ to such underprivileged nations of the Global South. In the portrayal of objectified native women, the author problematizes the hypocritical moral empathy epitomized by the UN expats of the Global South. Although, the author challenges the racial attitude of her white characters, we can rightly justify how her focus on white characters have silenced the marginal non-white characters of the novel.

In summation, the novel delineates the complexities of aid-work and sheds light into why many foreign workers are addicted in “fixing” a country that is not their own. The novel offers a critique and also initiates dialogues into “white saviour complex” or “white messiah complex” as a conscious or unconscious manifestation of a superior racial privilege. The essay has delineated how the ‘saved’ are hegemonically silenced as their choices are disregarded, and also how the ‘saving’ is rather disempowering, revictimizing and is racially subjugating when studied through a neo-colonial lens.

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[www.rjoe.org.in](http://www.rjoe.org.in) Oray's Publications ISSN: 2456-2696

## Research Journal Of English (RJOE)

An International Peer-Reviewed and Refereed English Journal Impact Factor:8.373(SJIF)

Vol-10,Issue-1(Jan-Mar),2025

Indexed in: International Citation Indexing (ICI), Cite factor, International Scientific Indexing (ISI), Directory of Research Journal Indexing (DRJI) Google Scholar, Cosmos and Internet Archives.

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*Comparative Study Of Select Irish, Asian-Irish And African-Irish Writings In English.*2021. Jawaharlal Nehru University, New Delhi. PhD thesis.

### How to cite this article?

**MAHI KICHU,** " Locating the Elements of White Saviour Complex in Maeve Galvin's *The Saviours*" Research Journal Of English (RJOE)10(1),PP:393-398,2025, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2025.10.1.398