

Dean Mahomed: Challenging the West with the Best of Indian Culture

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ABSTRACT

The idea of England as a land of superiority or a perfect utopia has been heralded in the psyche of the Indians and this is an exercise taught by the West to remain superior in the eyes of Indians. This utopian idea of England clashes due to an actual encounter or ocular impressions of the Indians. This paper focuses on the resistance to the dominant centre and to create a counter – discursive strategy that has enabled the Indian writers to fight back in the form of writing back to the Empire. Writing back to the West was important in order to redefine the image of India and also to unravel the larger – than – life idea of England. Dean Mahomed is one of those writers who focuses on this, and through his writing, he showcases this.

Dean Mahomed is the first Indian writer in English. His *The Travels of Dean Mahomed* was published in Cork in 1794 and gives an account of an Indian immigrant about the imperial metropolis. He was born in Patna, India in 1759 and his family served in the Mughal imperial court. Both his father and older brother served within the Bengal army of the East India Company. From his life and background, it may be inferred that Dean Mahomed deals with two supposedly oppositional worlds – the Orient and the Occident with poise and subtlety. He travelled extensively in India and observed the culture of the eighteenth century colonial India. He went to Ireland in 1784 and married an Anglo – Irish woman and settled there. He emigrated from Ireland to London, in 1807 and settled in England in 1814.

In the West, the concept of shampooing came into widespread usage through Dean Mahomed. When he moved to London early in the nineteenth century, he not only practised 'oriental' massage, but also initiated a name for the shampoo ('*champi*' in Hindi). This shows the example of transculturation, by means of which he debunked the coloniser's language and employed an Indian (Hindi) word instead of using the English word. Dean Mahomed carved a successful niche for himself in London. He dealt in Indian, therapeutic form of massage called 'shampooing' (*champi*), that made him popular as Sake Dean Mahomet, the Shampoo Surgeon. Through this concept of shampooing, Dean Mahomed left a lasting legacy. Thereby, he published *Shampooing, or, Benefits Resulting from the Use of Indian Medicated Vapour Bath*, published in 1822 which was further republished in 1826 and 1838 with expansions. Thus, he brought the face of India on an international level through his notion of 'shampooing'. His unique concept of shampooing also finds special mention in his *Letter XXV of The Travels*. This is a strategy of redefining the idea of East and placing the East outside the Orientalist canvas. He further challenges that the British sought to imitate his exercise. Dean Mahomed echoes Bhabha's notion of 'mimicry' here, whereby the coloniser assimilates the colonised's ways. This evokes a new sense of freedom by which the binary oppositions between the Occident and the Orient erase.

Dean Mahomed's travelogue demonstrates his encounter with varied cultures, landscapes, people, but it may be noted that his narrative never ascribes a fixed identity to himself. The self/other position is problematised and it can be discerned that he endeavours to construct a native cultural identity by showing his affiliation to Indian rituals and arousing a national consciousness, yet he also identifies himself with the British army. Thus, it may be reiterated that Dean's identity is a hybridized one. It showcases what Bhabha has referred to as "the ambivalence and antagonism of the desire of the other [from which] we can avoid the increasingly facile adoption of the

notion of a homogenised other[that underpins] oppositional politics of the margins and minorities (101). This ambivalent position in which Dean Mahomed situates himself offers him space to provide alternative ethnographic accounts of the Indians, keeping in mind his British audience. Mahomed's travelogue appears to take the shape of epistolary form where Mahomed writes to a certain imaginary friend whom he addresses as Sir. Through his travelogue, he not only demonstrates his consciousness of how the Orient was imaginatively represented within the British literature, but also attempts at destabilising those constructs:

The fig-tree, not that kind for fruit reknown'd, But such as this day to
Indians known. In Malabar, or Deccan, spreads her arms, branching so
broad and long, that in the ground. The bending twigs take root; and
daughters grow. (82)

The aforesaid extract highlights the significance of the fig tree for Indian rituals. He alludes to 'Paradise Lost' and attempts at showing his importance as a writer for the British market so that his accounts could be trusted as well as be a reference point for his depiction of the Orient.

Dean Mahomed, in describing the landscape of the Orient, represents it in a positive light. The city of Calcutta, is portrayed thus:

The principal streets are the Cholerk, where an endless variety of all
sorts of goods are sold; the china bazaar where every kind of China is
exposed to sale; the Lalbazar, Thurumthulla [Dharmatala], Chouringee
[Chowringee].... Where European gentlemen of every description,
mostly reside. The greatest concourse of English, French, Dutch,
Armenians, Abyssinians, and Jews, assemble here; beside merchants,
manufacturers, and tradesmen, from the most remote parts of India.
(37)

From the above description, it becomes evident that Dean Mahomed demonstrates Calcutta as a hub for economic activity. The concept of a modern city is exhibited in the above lines. This subverts the notion of a modern city as being a Western

phenomenon. The lines further exhibit the depiction of power from centre to colony. By giving such descriptions, Dean Mahomed highlights the differences between his travelogue with that of a Western travelogue. The notion of 'Orient', which lies at the periphery is undermined, thereby focusing on the shifting relations of power. Thus, there is a dire need to reappraise the theory of Orientalism, and Dean Mahomed's travelogue offers the readers with this fresh perspective.

Dean Mahomed highlights the virtues and value system of the Muslims in India, thereby undermining Orientalist assumptions. He maintains that, "...the Mahometans are, in general, a very healthful people: refraining from the use of strong liquors, and accustomed to a temperate diet" (68). This is not merely to present a superior representation of the Orient, but in order to subvert the colonialist assumptions of his native culture, including the dietary cuisine. Likewise, Mahomed vividly paints a positive picture of Hindu faith and rituals. The purity of the Hindu faith is highlighted:

While wasteful war spread her horrors over other parts of India, this blissful country often escaped her ravages, perhaps secured.... by the sacred character ascribed to the scene and the prevailing idea of the simplicity of the native Hindoo's [sic] a people unaccustomed to the sanguinary measures of, what they term, civilised notions. (80)

Dean Mahomed depicts the characterisation of the Indians in such a manner which debunks Said's notion of the Orient as an exotic race. He offers frame of reference which enables the Western readers to view India and its people beyond a land of mere exoticity and mysteriousness. He opines:

The native Indiansare men of strong natural genius, and are, by no means, unacquainted with literature and science..... We may trace the origin of most of the sciences, in their ancient manuscripts. Even before the age of Pythagorus, the Greek travelled to India for instruction: the trade carried on by them with the oldest commercial nations, in exchange for their cloth, is a proof of their great progress in the arts of industry. (83)

Thus, it becomes evident that Dean Mahomed's *The Travels* rediscovers himself and the idea of the East to a Western audience. The stereotypical images of the East constructed by a Western traveller are subverted and alternative ways of perceiving the East are offered by him. The travel narratives of the colonial era are dominated by the Western hegemony which heightens the problems between imagination and authenticity. As a consequence, images of the East appear out of a figment of imagination and not from a realistic perspective. In this context, Dean Mahomed's travelogue appears to be a relief for the people of the East (here India) because it offers a new image of India and the idea of the dominant hegemony is challenged. Just like the West has been framing certain stereotypical images of the East, the East also has certain impressions of the West. There is a deep distinction of both the impressions. The East has been taught to look up to the West in a certain way and this is fraught with difficulty due to actual encounter by the travellers belonging to the East. Dean Mahomed becomes astonished after his actual encounter with Cork. He maintains:

The commerce of Cork must have assailed Dean Mahomed's senses in a way quite different from Calcutta. The smell of Cork's breweries, which produced nearly six million gallons of porter (ale) annually, would have made a strong impression on him. He probably arrived in the midst of the slaughtering season (September to January), when the butchers of Cork killed and cured some 100,000 heads of cattle and filled 100,000 barrels with pork; in this season the streets of the slaughterhouse quarter and the River Lee ran red with the blood of these animals. (203)

Dean Mahomed's visualisation about Cork shatters and he realises that Cork's grand picture existed only in the imagination of Indians as represented by the West.

Dean Mahomed opened the first Indian restaurant in London, the Hindustani Coffee House in 1810 in London. The coffee house catered to the needs and demands of the elite English society. It offered authentic Indian cuisine and ambience

to the English people and served traditional Indian *Hookah* with real Chilm tobacco as well as Indian cuisine. In Dean Mahomed's *Travels*, it may be noted that there are no indications of nostalgic pangs or identity crisis. Instead, he employs the Indianness to lure the Western elite and intends to change their perception of India and to make a place for himself as an Indian in the West. Thus, it becomes evident the Dean Mahomed interrogates, corrects and displaces the West's representation of India. His writing stands in antithesis to the West's textual representations of India and acts as a counter-text to the conventional representation of India by the West. Furthermore, it is interesting to note the usage of English by Dean Mahomed in his text. He employs Indian words and mixes it with English. The usage of words like 'Champi', 'Hindoostani' and others bear testimony to this fact. He artfully fuses Indian words with English and lends a fresh touch which does not lose the essence of Indianness. Thus, the grand narratives are debunked. Thus, it can be maintained that Dean Mahomed's text stands as a counter-narrative against the perceived stereotypes. This counter-narrative disrupts the Eurocentric discourses. At a time, when the non-European voices were silenced, Dean Mahomed dared to narrate and represent his own experiences which served as powerful modes of resistance to Eurocentric discourses. Although Dean Mahomed was born in a colonial era, his attitude was that of a post-colonial writer in many aspects. He was much advanced than his times. It can be said that he is a colonial writer who shifts between cultural worlds. According to Elleke Boehmer, these colonial writers were able to borrow from several traditions, yet belonged to no one. He reconstructs his self and preserves his Indianness, without giving up the British identity. He stands between both the cultures – British as well as Indian, and does not belong entirely to any particular culture. His 'self' does not hold any fixed position and keeps on oscillating between these two cultures. This state of 'in-between' selfhood in Dean Mahomed may be related to what Eugene Irschick characterise as a

dialogue system of colonial knowledge production. Thus, Dean Mahomed's *Travels* offers an insider account of the Indian landscape as well as cultural traditions.

Dean Mahomed's personal life and career is composed of fluidity which enables him to speak from multiple subject positions. In this context, Mona Narain opines that Mahomed 'speaks from a variety of subject positions – Indian, Muslim, colonial subject, British soldier, and immigrant in Ireland' (151). Similarly, in *Home Truths: Fictions of South Asian Diaspora in Britain*, Susheila Nasta shares the same opinion:

His negotiation of a number of different cultural and racial roles [...] were self-consciously manipulative of the prevailing attitudes of the society he lived in; similarly, whilst drawing on the familiar epistolary genre of the European travel narratives of his time, he managed both in *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* and in *Shampooing* to construct himself within a range of differently inflected positions. He thus avoided marking out an insupportable territory of conflict between East and West, colonisers and colonised, or the need to take up a distinctive cultural identity or political positions. (152)

It is noteworthy to look at how text complicates assumptions of self:

Since my arrival in this country, I find you have been very anxious to be made acquainted with the early part of my life, and the History of my Travels: I shall be happy to gratify you; and must ingenuously confess, when I first came to Ireland, I found the face of everything about me so contrasted to those striking scenes' in India, which we are want to survey with a kind of sublime delight, that I felt some timid inclination, even in the consciousness of incapacity, to describe the manners of my countrymen, who, I am proud to think, have still more of the innocence of our ancestors, than some of the boasting philosophers of Europe. (153)

The above lines assert Dean Mahomed's position as an immigrant to Ireland. He refers to his Indian background which bears testimony to this fact. Simultaneously, in his description of the striking scenes in India, he makes reference as an outsider to the Indian community who adopts the perspective of a curious

Western traveller. Thus, Dean Mahomed employs deliberate and ambivalent position as an insider and outsider. He employs a narrative device that is polyphonic and challenges Eurocentric assumptions on India and the West. He resides between the two opposing world by strategically reframing his cultural position. He reduces the colossal idea of the West without being reductive as well as deconstructs the pre-conceived notions about India. In this sense, Dean Mahomed is a post – colonial writer.

The challenge of two contrasting cultures in his mind form a saner basis for him and it renders his narrative a modern direction. He may be hailed as the precursor of the postcolonial quest for identity consciousness. Dean Mahomed's time-frame is different. His book *Travels* is an exception because it chronologically belongs to the writing of a much earlier generation of the pre-independence era, being published in 1794, yet thematically, this book may be appropriately situated in the postcolonial era. He is a unique and exceptional writer who has laid the foundation for creating an identity through his own culture, even though cult nationalism had not reached at its zenith during his time. Thus, *Travels* implores other Indians to undertake travel and provides a direction to the future generations to make them feel proud of their country and build a national identity. Through his *Travels*, he succeeded in creating a counter – narrative against colonial discourses on the need to 'civilise' other colonial people. In this sense, he is exceptional and 'modern' and his book reflects postcolonial issues. His life abroad made him aware of his existence as an Indian who was under subjugation.

Dean Mahomed challenges the basis of the civilising mission undertaken by the European colonialism, at a time when imperialism was not at its peak. In Said's *Culture and Imperialism* (1994), Edward Said employs the expression 'La mission civilisatrice' to focus on the Western master as the sole custodian of truth and is obliged to the colonial through the task of

Enlightenment, that is, an act of intellectual charity towards the completion of a globally civilised world. This is essentially an imperialist tendency and is accelerated by the rise of ethnography. Thus, the role of the ethnographer is reshaped and destabilises the omniscient, narrativising voice of the conventional historian from the centre to a shared historian within a polyphonic discourse alongside other voices. Dean Mahomed's way of 'writing back' to the centre is by debunking the binary oppositions dividing the East and the West upon which Orientalism is based. Thus, he is the subaltern ethnographer who lays claim to his own agency in the construction of scientific knowledge. This new role of the ethnographer demystifies the image of the nation, here India as naïve and innocuous in desperate need of Western enlightenment and guidance.

In order to create a new image of India, Dean Mahomed constantly defends and admires the Indian ethos, and his endeavours at removing the pre-conceived notions about India is noteworthy. He strategically describes the customs and rituals of his country and deftly describes the Muslim as well as Hindu rituals, and social habits. He situates his native land (India) at a superior position, although he identifies himself with the British army. In an incident, he describes that the British army censured a sacred tomb, and Dean Mahomed stands in defence of his native land. In *Letter VII* he maintains:

Here is an awful lesson to those who through narrow judgment and confined speculation are too apt to profane the piety of their fellow creatures, merely for a difference in their modes of worship. (32)

Dean Mahomed's utmost desire to construct the image of an exotic India finds reflection in his glorification of Indian nawabs and their grand lifestyle. By doing so, he destabilises the West's notion of the orient as a primitive race. It may be noted that Dean Mahomed's motives is not as much as it is to censure the British administration as it is to interrogate the dominant modes

of representation and also to defend his own culture to the Western audience. He is different from a classic Orientalist and does not create new hierarchies. Instead his text acts as a corrective by offering an alternative picture of India in the face of Western hegemonic designs.

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