

The Idea of England in Eighteenth-century Indian Travel Writing

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**Abstract:** In her article "The Idea of England in Eighteenth-century Indian Travel Writing" Amrita Satapathy discusses how Dean Mahomed's 1794 *The Travels of Dean Mahomed* maps out territories of the mind of the colonizer and the colonized, how the narrative redefines contours of two diverse communities and cultures, and determines forms of cultural representations. Mahomed's *Travels* presented for the first time the idea of England from an Indian immigrant's point of view and altered the prejudiced outlook of early Western travel writings about the East. Mahomed's narrative opened an alternative vista for the wide-eyed Easterner of the world of the West and exposed a life less ordinary lived by inhabitants of Cork, Brighton, and London. Satapathy argues that Mahomed's text is not a reductive account of England; rather, it reduces the colossal idea of England as imagined by Indian writers at the time.

**Amrita SATAPATHY**

### **The Idea of England in Eighteenth-century Indian Travel Writing**

In European travel writing the East was perceived from the point of view of expansion, power, and knowledge intermingled with a sense of curiosity, which buttressed and legitimized the so-called truth that the East was exotic and aesthetically antiquarian. This image was fraught with a dualism that contested "idea" with "imagination" and "image" of the East (see, e.g., Andras; Leask, Mohanty; Pratt; for a bibliography of travel studies see Salzani and Tötösy de Zepetnek). As Susan Bassnett argues, travel writing is not just an innocent account of what one sees; rather, it throws light on how one culture constructs its image of other cultures: "Two hundred years ago India was the land of the fabulous and fantastic, the 'Exotic East.' Travellers returned with tales of marble palaces with gilded domes, of kings who weighed themselves in gold, and of dusky maidens dripping with pearls and rubies. Before this sumptuous backdrop passed elephants, tigers and unicorns, snake charmers and sword swallows, pedlars of reincarnation and magic, long haired ascetics on beds of nails, widows leaping into the pyre. It was like some glorious and glittering circus-spectacular, exciting, but a little unreal" (Keay 13). In fact, one can argue that in European travel writing the "East" has always been — from the middle ages to modernity — viewed from an oversimplified, provincial, and reductive position. Edward W. Said's observation that "Orientalism is premised upon exteriority" (20) is thus relevant and suggests the mythical synonymy that the West is Europe and consequently, its denizens belong to a superior race. The East, its natural antonym by default, is insipid, tame, and thus constitutes the lesser "other."

Bassnett proposes that the cartographer, the translator, or the author of a travel narrative is not an innocent producer of texts and that in this process travel writing becomes a vicious circle where images of the "other" undergo distortions whereby the white traveler's "first impressions" almost always eclipse the empirical order of seeing things. Also Barbara Maria Stafford argues that the positivist bias of the enlightenment travelogue was superseded by a "romantic quest which [leads] ultimately, not unidirectionally out into the blank plains, dense forests, or nebulous skies of a beckoning or unknown land, but back into a tangled self" (Fulford and Kitson 167). Said attributes these wide range of assumptions to a "high-handed executive attitude of nineteenth-century and early twentieth-century European colonialism" (2). Colonialism marked the historical process whereby the "West" attempted systematically to cancel or negate the cultural difference and value of the "non-West" (Gandhi 16) thus the clash between authenticity and imagination in a close and circumscribed zone. Authenticity and imagination in travel narratives became complicated and problematic: "bound to a negative account of the wonder aroused by distant lands, associated with a socially exclusive desire to possess the 'singular' object or else (especially in the later part of the period) a vulgar, popular interest in exotic objects for commercial purpose" (Leask 4)

Dean Mahomed's 1794 *The Travels of Dean Mahomed* is a redefinition of the East as East and not as non-West. As the first Indian immigrant in Britain, Mahomed reinvented himself and the idea of the Easterner and simultaneously the idea of the West unlike the European travel writer who was obsessed with phantasmagorical visions and images of the East and its people. In his *Travels* Mahomed presented for the first time the idea of England from an immigrant's point of view and "discovered" the West for the East. He explored England like an open-minded tourist for whom the East was no longer "exotic" because to him Britain was the reverse of what Western travelers thought of the East, namely *Vilayat*, the metonymic and Indocentric concept of the White/foreign "other." *Travels* shows how the East fought passivity by appropriating the language and territory of the West, i.e., England, and brings to life his view of West (i.e., England). Importantly, Mahomed anticipates Paul Fussell's thought that travelers

tear themselves from their native country in search of things rare and new; and novelty converts into a pleasure the fatigues and even the perils of travelling. To what cause shall we ascribe these singular appearances? To curiosity undoubtedly, a principle implanted in human nature for a purpose extremely beneficial, that of acquiring knowledge; and the emotion of wonder, raised by new and strange objects, inflames our curiosity to know more about them ... but the explorer seeks the undiscovered, the traveler, that which has been discovered by the mind working in the history, the tourist that which has been discovered by entrepreneurship and prepared for him by the

arts of mass publicity. The genuine traveler is, or used to be, in the middle of the two extremes. If the explorer moves towards the risks of the formless and the unknown, the tourist moves towards the security of pure cliché. It is between these two poles that the traveller mediates, retaining all he can of the excitement or the unpredictable attaching to exploration and fusing that with the pleasure of "knowing where one is" belonging to tourism" (35).

I am also drawing on another example to illustrate Mahomed's point of view: Bhagvat Sinh Jee Thakore Saheb wrote about his experiences in England during the 1880s and like Mahomed negates the idea of being "fixed, stable, and in need of investigation, in need even of knowledge about himself" (Said 308) when he wrote that "many people seemed to remark upon my dress. It was a novelty to most of them and it would have afforded me great amusement to hear their criticisms on it. I could not exactly make out whether their smile was indicative of their approval or disapproval. At any rate it was pleasing to me to be told that the peculiarity of my dress had made me for a time the cynosure of all eyes" (29). Saheb makes this comment in a jocular manner, but it speaks about the "rational" approach of the citizens of the metropolis of London. It is an intriguing fact that the idea of the West is also the colonizer's construction of it and redefined by the suffering of the non-Western colonized. This is indeed an inversion of the theory East-as-construction-of-the-West's-other and the that argument that "India is not non-West; it is India" (Abraham 33) lends justification to the inversion.

Since the narration of travel — certainly so in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries — is controlled by European hegemony, there is a clash between authenticity and imagination. India is not pictured from an empirical point of view but from an imaginary one and thus the actual and factual India is imagined and thus nullified in the narratives of European travelers and this can be gleaned from texts of Eastern travelers such as Mohamed and Sahib. The Indian reality (its way of living, its way of life, its customs, rituals, thoughts, and dreams) is often perceived through a code of opinionated texts. Thus the "other" internalized in the Western imagination has always been regarded as a menacing and destabilizing experience for Europeans. In turn, what is lacking is the study of how the East has perceived the West. Interestingly, the East has also been busily building psychological images of the West and concretizing it in autobiographies, novels with the thematic of the diaspora, travel writings, and memoirs. In particular Indian diaspora travelogues explore the many dimensions of visualizing the West and they have show that the West is a bundle of oppositions and negations. Rabindranath Tagore's *Europe Prabasir Patra*, exemplifies his veritable disappointment about the London metropolis: "Before coming to England I had expected that this small island from one end to the other would reverberate with the ideas of Tennyson, I had thought that wherever I would stay in this two hands expanse of soil I would be able to hear Gladstone's eloquence, Max Mueller's vedantic exposition, Tyndall's scientific theories, Carlyle's profound thoughts and Bain's philosophy; I had imagined that people everywhere would be engrossed in intellectual pursuits but I have been disappointed. The women are engaged in discussing fashion, men are engrossed in work, life is flowing as it does everywhere else — only politics inspire occasional storm and furor" (234). Gradually the rich glossy veil lifts from the clean, meticulous, efficient, organized and orderly London to show a London that is not only dirty and squalid but also poor, filthy, neglected, and grimy: "In East London, removed from the 'glossy' and 'glassy' sheen of the 'city part,' the readers were told, lay the working class hovels. Most of the travellers provided depictions of the squalor and poverty of working men's quarters, and much of what they said would remind an informed reader of Dickens, Disraeli or Kingsley. In this site of a very different cosmopolitanism the saw the 'appearance of order' collapsing into an inhuman abyss of misery" (Sen 80).

My argument is that imagining England may have been one of the favorite pastimes of Indians, but it is an exercise taught by the West to glorify and legitimize itself. Once the idea and the image clash due to an actual encounter, the East feels the urge to fight back by writing narratives in defamiliarized Indian English and Mahomed's travelogue cum autobiography confidently presents the real India for the West. A classic example of this is the travelogue of the eighteenth-century Indian immigrant Dean Mahomed. Published in Cork in 1794, *The Travels of Dean Mahomed* is a fascinating account of an Indian immigrant as an insider and outsider in India, Ireland, and England. In *Travels* Mahomed sketches the journey from military life to "that part of the world" (101; all quotations from are from Fisher, *The First Indian* which includes an edited version of *The Travels*). Written in epistolary form the text also tells about the re-appropriation of Mahomed, of his becoming the symbolic

ambassador of the Indo-British encounter who not only successfully markets the "brand" India, but also exposes a life less ordinary lived:

The people of India, in general, are peculiarly favoured by Providence in the possession of all that can cheer the mind and allure the eye, and tho' the situation of Eden is only traced in the Poet's creative fancy, the traveler beholds with admiration the face of this delightful country, on which he discovers tracts that resemble those so finely drawn by the animated pencil of Milton. You will here behold the generous soil crowned with various plenty; the garden beautifully diversified with the gayest flowers diffusing their fragrance on the bosom of the air; and the very bowels of the earth enriched with inestimable mines of gold and diamonds. Possessed of all that is enviable in life, we are still more happy in the exercise of benevolence and goodwill to each other, devoid of every species of fraud or low cunning. ... Cork would have been the first major European city he encountered. At one level, much would have seemed strangely familiar from his life in Calcutta. Both cities rose out of swampy, low-lying land along a river (although hills surrounding Cork differed from the flat deltaic lands around Calcutta). Architecturally, Calcutta and Cork shared the same mercantile orientation that favoured a mix of practical commercial ware-houses and neo-classic public buildings set among prosperous bourgeois homes. Indeed, both cities contained many of the same families and values characteristic of the burgeoning commercial classes of British empire. (15-202).

Mahomed plays artfully with the word "exotic" to show an image of England that literally thrived on this exoticism of its colonized territory and narrates a different picture of the cosmopolitan idea of England. Mahomed takes exoticism a step further by alluring to the "sensible" mind of the West to an aromatic and sensual world of therapeutic massages: "Although thousands of Indians made the trip to Europe over these years, apparently no one else had exactly Dean's status. Most were sailors, servants, wives or mistresses of Europeans. A few were travellers or visiting dignitaries. Dean Mahomed clearly fitted into none of these categories. In his decisions to remain in Britain as an immigrant, to create a distinct identity there, and to record his life in his own words, he remained unique during his lifetime" (191-92).

At the start of *Travels*, Mahomed began to lay out a central theme about the fundamental distinctions between Indian and European culture and his own point of origin within the former. In his view, Indians (including himself) were essentially natural and artless, in his words "ingenuous" and filled with "sincerity" as part of an ancient and innocent society. In contrast, he characterized European society as artful: epitomized by "cultivated genius ... sophisticated, highly refined philosophers and polished litterateurs" (218). The tussle between nature and art was internalized within the traveler and enables Mahomed to comprehend his Anglo-Irish audience: "While these initial characterizations romanticized and essentialized the two cultures, as he proceeded in *Travels*, he expanded on these characterizations to describe the less admirable extremes of these models. The sophistication of Europeans led some of them not only to 'boasting' but also to scepticism toward India's more sincere faith. He illustrated this with the incident of a scoffing European, contemptuously urinating on the grave of the revered saint of Pirpahar (VIII)" (218-19).

Mahomed catches hold of this fetish of the West and plays with the twin motifs of "exoticism" and "Orientalism" to create a fragrant world of *hamams* (baths for the stiff, upper-class Englishmen as cures for their rheumatic aches and pains). He adds to Sir Basil Cochrane's vapor bath a practice that becomes famous amongst the high profiled Londoners as "shampooing":

In London at that time, medical practice remained largely unregulated. Various individuals, often with no formal medical training, set themselves up as surgeons and dispensers of medicine. When Cochrane established his vapour bath to cure the people of London of a range of ills, he legitimized his practice not through any pretence of medical training but rather through his social prestige, and what he asserted was the inherent quality of his method. Over the years, Cochrane's wealth and social standing enabled him to enlist large numbers of the most prominent members of the medical establishment to observe and authenticate his innovation. Cochrane publicized his contribution to public health repeatedly and widely. Cochrane's most famous work, *An Improvement on the Mode of Administering the Vapour Bath* (1809), in many ways epitomized the self-promotional, quasi-medical literature of that era. (254)

Based on his observations of English society and making his "curry roots" into a survival strategy, Mahomed opened the Hindostani Coffee House in 1810. An idea ahead of its time, the coffee house catered to the expectations of the affluent English clientele: "He sought to appeal and cater not to the numerous Indians then living in London but rather to the same type of men who had been his patrons in the past: Europeans who had worked or lived in India, men he called 'Indian gentlemen'" (257). At a time when taverns and coffee houses were becoming popular, the Hindostani Coffee House provided

authentic Indian cuisine and ambience to its European patrons. It served Hookah with real Chilm tobacco along with "Indianized" English food.

Mahomed prepared a range of meat and vegetable dishes with Indian spices served with seasoned rice. He constructed bamboo-cane sofas and chairs on which the patrons would sit and recline. He adorned the walls with a range of paintings including Indian landscapes, Indians engaged in various social activities and sporting scenes set in India. One observer reported "Chinese pictures' as well, so he may have drawn upon Asia generally rather than India alone. In a separate ensuite smoking room, he offered ornate hookahs with specially prepared tobacco blended with Indian herbs" (257). This was quintessentially "Oriental" and "exotic" for the English. The Hindostanee Coffee House was advertised in the *Times* as follows: "Hindostanee Coffee-house, No.34 George-street, Portman Square — MAHOMED, East-Indian, informs the Nobility and Gentry, he has fitted up the above house, neatly and elegantly, for the entertainment of Indian gentlemen, where they may enjoy the Hoakha, with real Chilm tobacco, and Indian dishes, in the highest perfection, and allowed by the greatest epicures to be unequalled to any curries ever made in England with choice wines, and every accommodation, and now looks up to them for their future patronage and support, and gratefully acknowledges himself indebted for their former favours, and trusts it will merit the highest satisfaction when made known to the public" (258).

The stage was set and the atmosphere was conducive for the Oriental therapeutic masseur to make his debut into the world of luxury treatments for the wealthy and rich citizens of London. With promotional strategies, Mahomed and his wife Jane Daly readied themselves "to launch an independent business of his own, using his Indian identity as the calling card" (257). Since Mahomed assimilates a number of cultural habits in his personality and resolves them to form a bipolar identity for himself, he makes his own life a minor theme in his book, and goes on to describe the outer world of the events, customs, and life and living he encounters during his visit to Cork, Bath, and London. He displays a double vision throughout the book and shows the ability to swing between the twin perspectives of being a foreigner and a Native. Thus, Mahomed's eyewitness account of contemporary Ireland and its milieu gives the writing a persuasive tone and lends it an air of authenticity. His apparent goal in writing the book seems to have been to provide pleasure and edification to his readers about India, while shaping an English identity of his self. At no point in the travelogue do we find him denying his roots, thereby sparing him from becoming the archetypical "ceaseless wayfarer." Rather, he plays with his "Englishness" to deconstruct it at a later stage. Mahomed's travel writing shows "how the eighteenth-century Indian author sustains his identity in the face of a series of challenges from different variants of English culture — how personal, social, and religious aspects of Indian identity are defended in the confrontation with the European Other" (Schürer 138).

I argue that Mahomed never marginalized his social position in the society into which came as an immigrant to create a space for himself nor did he embark upon a reductive account of England in his writing; rather, he reduced the colossal idea of England as imagined by the East. In 1789, Olaudah Equiano, a Nigerian who had been brought to Europe as a slave published *The Interesting Narrative of the Life of Olaudah Equiano or Gustavus Vassa, The African, Written by Himself*. In his book Equiano describes how he gains his freedom before traveling back to Africa. Equiano's narrative is the first of its kind to subvert European supremacy by knocking the idea of European pre-eminence off its alabaster pedestal of sophistication. The book acts as a corrective to the European idea of Africa and Africans as "dark continent" and *noble savage* (212-13). In a similar fashion Mahomed gives a vivid picture of his community and its members: "Sake Dean Mahomet ... not only set up a bath house offering 'oriental' massage to the affluent Londoners but also ended up by giving the world a name for a hair-cleaner-'shampoo' originally 'champi' in Hindi (80; *champi* is derived from the Hindi verb *champna* or *champu*, which means to kneed or press the muscles to relieve fatigue). It is a classic example of transculturation by incorporating an Indian word into the English lexicon. It is believed that the word and the concept of shampooing came into widespread usage in the West through Mahomed (173).

*Travels* differed from the typical English travelogue of the time in the sense that he described the Anglophone world by becoming a Native of the place: he did not marginalize or exoticize himself. The book is replete with incidents from his own life in the West, the adventures of others, and the customs, objects, and scenes he observed is an example of a resourceful and functional travel

literature. Mahomed, as an Indian immigrant in Cork, also narrated matters pertaining to his identity. But the travelogue has a dual feel to it: the first half concentrates on military escapades, experiences, and travel within India and it is action packed, whereas the second half is more descriptive, with a detailed account of the two cultures of the East and the West. He thwarted the idea that "the colonised was henceforth to be postulated as the inverse or negative image of the coloniser. In order for Europe to emerge as the site of civilisational plenitude, the colonised world had to be emptied of meaning" (Gandhi 15). *Travels* is peppered with images of England, its culture, its way of life, and customs which appear ordinary and dull.

At a time when England was reigning over India, British ascendancy held sway in Ireland with the Irish resisting: like India, Ireland was torn by raids and attacks from insurgents who assaulted the ruling class. While by the beginning of the nineteenth century Cork slipped in its competition with other industrializing areas of Britain, the city remained a base for British rule and culture in southern Ireland and Mahomed recognized the industrial and merchant importance of the city: "Cork would have been the first major European city he encountered. At one level, much would have seemed strangely familiar from his life in Calcutta. Both cities rose out of swampy, low-lying land along a river (although hills surrounding Cork differed from the flat deltaic lands around Calcutta). Architecturally, Calcutta and Cork shared the same mercantile orientation that favoured a mix of practical commercial ware-houses and neo-classic public buildings set among prosperous bourgeois homes. Indeed, both cities contained many of the same families and values characteristic of the burgeoning commercial classes of the British empire" (202).

It is the whim of every traveler to find some similarity with his homeland when in a foreign territory and thus no wonder Mahomed sees glimpses of Calcutta in Cork. Cork during that time was known for its prosperity owing to its breweries, distilleries, ship-building, and textile industries but in Mahomed's observation prosperity the downsides of industrialization are relevant factors: "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). The opulent and grand picture of the Occident dissipates and Mahomed comes to realize that Cork is no better than any other colonized urban space:

If the commercial elite of Cork shared features with those of Calcutta, the numerous poor families of Cork must have been shocking to Dean Mahomed. In India, there were few poor White men and virtually no poor White women or children. Even Dean Mahomed's long experience in India with European soldiers (many of whom came from this very Irish poor) would not have prepared for such extensive and highly visible destitution among white families. Poverty-stricken women and children, as well as men, lined Cork's streets and markets. Most of the poor were indigenous Catholic Irish. Thus, Cork was a colonial city, where the colonizers but the colonized were somewhat familiar to Dean Mahomed ... The evil of taking possession of land and lives had impoverished even the West's own so-called wealthy territories to mere wastelands ... The candidly commercial character of Cork struck most visitors. Another Indian, Mirza Abu Taleb Khan, who visited Cork in 1799, remarked on the filth and smell of the streets, concluding "as this city has been erected for the purposes of commerce, more pains have been taken to facilitate the importation and exportation of goods than to preserve [architectural] uniformity and regularity." A French traveller to Cork in 1797 named it "the dullest and dirtiest town which can be imagined ... hideous troops of beggars, or pigs ... run in the streets in hundreds, and yet this town is one of the richest and most commercial of Europe ... The spirit of commerce and self-interest has laid hold of all branches of the administration" ... The Anglo-Irish elite — including the Bakers — held economic, administrative, and judicial power in both the city and countryside. Cork served as the base for English rule and culture in southern Ireland. In Cork county, great country houses dotted the landscape, surrounded by tenants and small freeholders. A total of less than 2000 people (.5 percent of the population), by Law all Protestants, held the franchise in the country. Similarly, in the city only some 1600 (1-2 percent of the population) were freemen or freeholders with franchise for Parliament. (203-04).

I posit that Mahomed, as Bassnett put it, "act[ed] as a kind of translator, reading the signs he encounters on his journey and endeavouring to translate them for his target reader. Indeed, it is helpful to think of travel writing as linked to translation, for a similar relationship occurs in that there are two distinct poles — the culture of the writer and the culture which is depicted and only the writer has access to both (6). Mahomed translated the image of the West (i.e., England) for the East as he

experienced it. We find that the idea of the West has actually undergone a paradigm shift from his tales of Cork, Brighton, and London: Mahomed displayed an exotic and unfamiliar land of the Whites for his "brown" readers. As the first immigrant travelogue *Travels* maps out territories of the minds (of the colonizer and the colonized), defines contours of two diverse communities and nations and determines forms of cultural representations. Mahomed's *Travels* played a vital role in redefining the East as East and not as non-West. As a tradesman and a writer, he constructed a new identity of the East in the West and as the first Indian immigrant in Britain he reinvented himself and the idea of the Easterner and the idea of the West simultaneously, unlike the culpable European travel writer who was obsessed with phantasmagorical visions of the East and its people (Bassnett 6).

In the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries it was the West that viewed the East from the lens of curiosity and Mahomed presented for the first time the idea of England from an immigrant's point of view. While the East had already been categorized with nomenclature — the Other, the exotic Other, the Oriental Other — this compartmentalization was challenged by the onset of anticolonialism. It was a radical discourse of liberation launched by the English educated and English-speaking colonized intelligentsia. *Travels* highlights how the East fights the resistive tag of a hyphenated existence by reversing the roles. Instead of being written about, it writes back. Mahomed's discovery of London for the East heralded a sudden reversal and suggested that East is no longer to be discredited as "exotic" and "Orientalist" or its history to be judged as a mere discourse of curiosity. The white and worldly West too has its share of mystery that has to be unraveled for the curious visitor from the East. If by definition, exoticism implies "the charm of the unfamiliar" then it is the charm of the unknown that beckons him to explore and see the much talked about Britain. The alluring quality of England remains a common factor for all who at some point of time have migrated to Britain.

In conclusion, Mahomed anticipated Homi Bhabha's concept of "journeys of migration" (306). *Travels* shaped a new way of perceiving the West and appropriated the process of reverse decolonization which was not a political process in the strict sense of the term. The implications of *Travels* were numerous because it introduced speculations regarding representations, history, language, culture, and capitalist modernity. These concepts in turn challenged the paradigmatic limits of the enlightenment, the source of colonial and imperial rule. *Travels* also showcases Mahomed, the man from the East making the journey as an explorer, a traveler, and a tourist who through his encounters with the foreign redefines the idea of "Oriental personality, an Oriental atmosphere, an Oriental tale, Oriental despotism, or an Oriental mode of production" (Said 31). Thus *Travels* throws open for the wide-eyed Easterner the world of the West which was as mystifying as a fantasy world. To paraphrase Said, Mahomed the Oriental engaged with the West as an Occidental to write about it.

Note: The above article is a revised extract from Satapathy, Amrita. *Shifting Images: England in Indian Writing in English*. Saarbrücken: Lambert Academic Publishing, 2011. Copyright release to the author.

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