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Reconfiguring Colonial Subjects as Informed Travellers: Cross-Cultural Encounters and Representation of Australia in Two Indian Travel Narratives of late Nineteenth Century

Dr Sudipta Chakraborty

Assistant Professor of English,
Sreegopal Banerjee College
(Govt. Sponsored), West
Bengal, India

Abstract

In recent times, an urgency is felt within the postcolonial scholarship as well as in the area of cultural studies to address the diverse ramifications of colonial history and ideology beyond the narratives of colonial encounters between Great Britain and its colonies so that hitherto unfamiliar patterns of cross-cultural and intersubjective relationships can be explored between such colonial cousins as Australia and India. This paper presents a case for two early travel narratives by Indian travellers – Nunda Lall Doss and Hajee Sullaiman Shah Mahomed – about Australia. I have examined how these travellers have represented the Australian landscapes and urban centres. They worked largely within the framework of colonial travel writing about Australia and described the continent in terms of wide, empty spaces, opulence of natural resources, dwindling indigenous population and spectacular urbanization and modernization under colonial rule; yet their accounts are not without complexity. These accounts present their writers casting themselves as imperial subjects beyond the colonial stereotypes and trying to carve their distinct identity as Indian travellers abroad. In this way they emerged as informed travellers with their critical judgements vis-à-vis the naïve and the passive tourists struck by awe and wonder at every spectacle witnessed. More remarkably, their critique of British imperialism and white Australian policies regarding immigration and “race” helps us to understand the late nineteenth century pro-Federalist discourse of Australianness in its racist and ethnonationalist contexts.

Keywords- *White Australia, Travel, Informed traveller, Imperialism, Aesthetic*

In recent times, an urgency is felt within the postcolonial scholarship as well as in the area of cultural studies to extend its horizon of interests in the diverse ramifications of colonial history and ideology beyond the narratives of colonial encounters between Great Britain and

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its colonies so that hitherto unfamiliar patterns of colonial relationships in terms of the exchange of human resources and dynamics of identity formations through cultural encounters can be explored between such colonial cousins as Australia and India. If there are Australian men and women who came to India as missionaries during 1890s and 1910s, a number of Indian men also came to Australia during the late nineteenth century. Most of them were illiterate and did menial jobs as hawkers, labourers or camel drivers in various parts of the country. However, there were also independent visitors from both sides travelling in each other's homeland and making cultural observations about each other ever since the late nineteenth century. From India a few better-educated and well-informed visitors came to hit the Australian shore right in this period. This paper presents a case for two of such earliest travel narratives by Indian travellers – Nunda Lall Doss and Hajee Sullaiman Shah Mahomed – between 1880 and 1900, which must be of some crucial interest to cultural studies and area studies researchers as well as to scholars of travel literature in the colonial period.

Nunda Lall Doss, a middle aged Bengali from erstwhile Calcutta and a Baptist missionary converted to Christianity in 1857, made his trip to Europe in 1887 before he proceeded to Australia and New Zealand. He visited Tasmania, Sydney, Melbourne and Geelong, Adelaide and some rural townships nearby and returned to India in mid-July 1888. In 1893 Doss published his *Reminiscences, English and Australasian Being an Account of a Visit to England, Australia, New Zealand, Tasmania, Ceylon etc.* It was published by the London Missionary Society in Calcutta and its target readership must have comprised of the members of that society. His life and career was dedicated to the evangelical mission of Christian institutions in India and in connection with this mission he had the opportunity to work globally in association with other Christian societies outside India as well. Prior to his visit to Australasian colonies in East Bengal he was associated with and worked for the Australian Baptist Missionary and this experience must have provided some moral impetus to his visit to Australia. However, while writing his travel account Doss kept in mind a general Indian readership who he expected to have been interested in knowing some other parts of the world than Europe and America. Like all of his contemporary Indian travellers Doss also imbibed the “Euro-imperial”¹ notion of travel, meaning he travelled as the enlightened subject of colonial modernity induced by western education and believed in the Baconian dictum that travel plays an important role in the formation of our personality by giving us the benefits of both knowledge and experience. For a whole generation contemporary to him travel carried a pedagogical motif, which is to bring back home the best civilizing and modernizing notions of the metropolitan centers. It may explain his comment below in the dedicatory piece of his travelogue, addressed to William Blomfield, Director of the London Missionary Society, as a message to his readers about the civility of Europe and European colonies as well: "Many an English home was thrown open to me in England and the

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colonies, and the greatest cordiality was shown, [. . .] Although a member of an alien and conquered race, I was made to feel at home in every one of them" (Doss *Reminiscences* I). It gives us some insight regarding how his target readership shaped his representation of Australia.

We get information about the life and career of Sullaiman Shah Mahomed from what he wrote about himself in the preface to his travel account published with the title *Journal of My Tours Round the World 1886-1887 & 1893-1895* (1895). He was born in 1859 in the village of Dhorajee in Kattyawar of Gujarat. A member of "the well-known Memon section of the Mahomedan community" (*Journal of My Tours round the World* 1), he lost his father while he had been but an infant. His father had been a small trader in Mauritius. On his father's death he was brought up by his mother struggling with poverty. He was educated in the local traditional schools and he could not receive higher education owing to poverty. Early in his life he moved to Rangoon and later on settled in Cape Town in business. Before his world tours he had been to Mecca and subsequently earned the distinction of Hajee for himself. In 1886 he had left Rangoon for extensive touring and proceeded to Cape Town, Arabia, to Egypt, Syria, Jerusalem and Turkey, finishing his tour in 1887. On his second tour, he departed from Cape Town in February 1893 for Australia and New Zealand before continuing on to China, Japan, the Yosemite Valley, Salt Lake City, Chicago, Niagara Falls, New York, Holland, Belgium, Germany, Denmark, Russia, Poland, Austro-Hungary, Switzerland, Italy, Spain, France, England, Bombay, Bagdad, Nineveh, Babylon, Persian and Hindustan, i.e. his homeland where he returned in 1895. In a sense Mahomed had been an early Indian globetrotter, a man of empire and a citizen of the world. Unlike most of his contemporaries his inspiration for travel did not come from western education, but out of a desire to free himself of the spiritual constraints of poverty, to see the wide world beyond "the sordid pursuits of life" (*Journal of My Tours round the World*, "Preface"), and above all out of his boundless love for natural beauties described in a rhetoric carrying romanticist overtone. In the preface, he clarified his aims and objectives behind the publication of this account of his travels and also identified his target readership. "My principal object in publishing these pages", he says, "is to give some idea, however faint and crude, to my countrymen, and particularly to my Mahomedan brethren, that beyond the narrow bounds of their home, there lies a world of joy and beauty" (*Journal of My Tours round the World*, "Preface"). He had already made clear what he meant by "a world of joy and beauty" — "the immense advantages, moral and material, to be derived from an earnest study of all that constitutes the life and society of the white peoples inhabiting the western countries" (*Journal of My Tours round the World*, "Preface"). Like all of his contemporary Indian travellers to the metropolitan centres and to the colonies of white settlement like Australasia and South Africa, Hajee Sullaiman Shah Mahomed thus subscribed to the colonial discourse

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of travel by underscoring the educational role of travel for the individual and the society. Again like all of them, he, too, seems to have been dazzled by the symbolic whiteness of the “West”, its material advancements, the richness of its arts and sciences, and the high moral values that it is professedly associated with. At the same time he kept the spirit of his critical judgement alive by noticing “a great deal of squalid poverty, and of vice and wickedness” (*Journal of My Tours round the World*, “Preface”), which served to punctuate his wonder and admiration for the white people with moral discretion. This interplay between wonder and discernment characterizes both Doss’s and Mahomed’s accounts of Australia as well, enabling them to judiciously analyze the salient features of Australia with an air of aesthetic detachment and to criticize sometimes the double standards of white people being reflected in the exclusionary policies of colonial authority.

From the very beginning Doss’s account seems to be cast in this self-conscious mode of displaying informed enchantment on his part, gaining him not only the authenticity of a serious traveller but writerly glamour as well. We find an assortment of rhetorical play besides a plethora of information in his initial descriptions. When he came to Tasmania, the first Australian shore he touched on, he showed his prior knowledge of the island, which had been made to complement his physical encounter with the land and thus to attenuate its foreignness: “In our younger days we knew this island by the name of Van Dieman’s Land on the map in books of geography” (*Reminiscences* 145). He recounted Tasman’s discovery of the island, its convict history and its geography and described its industries, infrastructure and economy for his readers. His description of the natural scenery around the River Derwent reminds us of the tropes to be found in European travel writing: “A bold hill scenery is presented to you, and you see immense hills and crags on either side, and taller and still taller hills rise behind, until the more distant ones grow fainter and eventually melt away from sight” (*Reminiscences* 150). The spectacle is suggestive of the “picturesque” in landscape and evocative of the “sublime”.

Similarly, Mahomed stood enamoured of the “natural charms” of Sydney harbour and described the harbour in such superlative terms as “most beautiful and splendid”, “unrivalled by any other harbour in the world” and so on (*Journal of My Tours round the World* 73). He enjoyed the outdoors and in the Blue Mountains, he was fascinated by the beauty of Jenolan Caves (*Journal of My Tours around the World* 74-76). Like the European travellers to Australia, he also saw the country as replete with natural beauties and his appreciation of nature speaks volubly of his penchant for the sublime.

Doss’s description of nature in Australia often conveys his Indian perception striving to domesticate an alien landscape. Margaret Allen has pointed out how often Doss commented upon the richness and variety of Australian vegetation, introduced and native, particularly noting plants from Bengal (“Observing Australia” 564). Thus we find Doss

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claiming, “[again], the Hybiscus, or the red *Jaba*, and other flower plants of Bengal were to be found in almost every garden in the town” (*Reminiscences* 193). Clearly Doss’s identification of Australian vegetation had been shaped by the planetary consciousness of colonial travellers who invented taxonomic specification of local plants in order to monopolize natural resources of the non-European world. Simultaneously, he appropriated the ethnographic prerogative of the colonial traveller by domesticating the landscape, as we see in the passage below. Travelling from Sydney, down along the coast to Wollongong, he observes,

[. . .] we suddenly emerged out of the forest, and came near the sea-coast. All the sea-ward slopes and ravines of this locality were like vast conservatories covered with tropical verdure and bloom. Among other species of the vegetable world, all new to me, there were numberless palms here that rose about a hundred feet. They looked so much like the *Tal* [. . .] of Bengal. (*Reminiscences* 198)

He is also critical of the settlers’ destruction of the wild life and the natural environment. He was disappointed not to find a ‘Tasmanian Devil’ and observed with bitterness, “To my disappointment the Englishman’s gun, I found, has done as much havoc on them, as his axe has done on the giant trees of the island” (*Reminiscences* 148). Similarly, Mahomed’s delicate sensibility played on the aesthetic choices he made sometimes even contrary to the popularly held notions. For an instance, he preferred the Katoomba Falls to the more well-known Wentworth Falls. This kind of self-fashioning as an aesthetic subject, which had always been the prerogative of the European travellers, was appropriated by the Indian travellers including Doss and Mahomed, enabling us to trace new aspects of the colonial subjectivity often cast in Orientalist stereotypes in colonial imagination.

Both Doss and Mahomed wrote about the awe-inspiring rapidity of urbanization and modernization in Australia. In this connection they have poured in verbal tributes to new colonial capitals like Melbourne and Sydney in profusion. Doss wrote of “marvellous Melbourne”, “Melbourne has recently celebrated her Jubilee, and what a wonderful progress she has made during the last fifty years. Perhaps there is no other city in the world which can be said to have made such progress in such a short time”. (*Reminiscences* 201)

Doss took us on a routine tour around urban sites of social, cultural and political importance. The implicit idea behind such touristic activity is that these sites are associated with certain civic values required to be inculcated among the Indians. Doss spoke particularly about the Public Library and it was clearly shaped in the direction of British dominated India, which stands largely deprived of these kinds of amenities. It brings out Doss’s awareness that colonial situations in India and Australia are widely different and divergent. Australia is not a subject nation of the British empire in the same manner as India is. Doss’s understanding that

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as an Indian traveller in Australia he was positioned in an uneven structure of subjecthood that existed between colonial India and settler Australia, makes his representation of Australia suffused with the suggestions of imperialist double standard in relation to British India. His awareness of being a “member of an alien and conquered race” (*Reminiscences* 1) in Australia, as Margaret Allen rightly observes, intervenes his witnessing and documentation; it is deeply informed by his pessimistic awareness that finally Australia remains “alien” to him because as an Indian his subordination to foreign race is more complete and more humiliating than Australia’s constitutional subjection to the Crown.

If Doss travelled as a Christian missionary, Mahomed did his tour of Australia as a man of the world. He enjoyed his stay both in Sydney and in Melbourne in terms of food and accommodation as well. He was quite captivated by the night life of Melbourne and observed,

Melbourne at night presents a grand and imposing appearance [...] On Saturday night, Melbourne, as is the case with large European cities, was gay and brilliant with illuminations and crowds of pleasure seekers going to theatres, concert and restaurants. I wandered about in amazement and wonder till a late hour. (*Journal of My Tours round the World* 62)

Both Doss and Mahomed had drawn our attention to the prominence of women’s participation in public services. We need to remember here that our Indian travellers’ attitude to women must have been shaped by the Victorian discourse of Women’s reform. Nationalist leaders and thinkers in contemporary India advocated the need for raising consciousness about women’s education and women’s social advancement. Very few of them spoke about the need for women’s economic independence. Mahomed may have sounded a bit exaggerating in claiming that in Hobart, “females are four times as many as the males” (*Journal of My Tours round the World* 66) and that in Melbourne, “women formed the majority of the population” (62). Here we need to consider that Mahomed hailed from a country where female foeticide had been rampant. “What struck me at the Post Office, a magnificent building of granite”, continues Mahomed, “was that most of the employes [sic] there were females, instead of males. For myself, I saw but one male in the establishment (*Journal of My Tours round the World* 62). Margaret Allen has noted a presence of anxiety in Doss regarding women’s social and economic advancement, despite the fact that the Indian missionaries and evangelists saw themselves as the key agents behind women’s reform in contemporary India (Allen 565-66). She has referred to Doss’s “lecture about woman's entry to the public sphere” (566), bringing out his latent conservativeness:

I noticed in some places women being employed as station-masters, signalmen, &c. on these railways. I saw in a station, on the Tasmanian Main Line of Railway, an elderly dame of a portly figure, holding out the little white flag on the

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approach of the train by which I was travelling [...]. In England I had seen a great deal of the Post Office work being done by women [...] and I was therefore not prepared to find the softer sex pressed into the railway service of the colony, where labour is dear. With the march of civilization and the increase of the requirements of man, things are changing even in the remotest corners of the world and among people of stereotyped conservativeness: but I hope that the day will not come, when in India woman will in this manner push her way to the forefront of business life, and displace man, and be his rival in the great competition of winning bread. (*Reminiscences* 148-149)

This discussion of our Indian travellers' representation of Australia will remain incomplete without a few words on their critique of the race problems in contemporary Australia and the white Australian policy arising out of the debate on Australianness in late nineteenth century pre-Federal Australia. Although both Doss and Mahomed looked at the aborigines through the anthropological lens of the "primitive", they have shown their awareness that originally the land belongs to the aborigines and that the British have conquered this land by coercion. Towards the end of his account Doss presented a record of a trial of a 'native outlaw' by the court. He reproduced the words of the accused in verbatim, in which the accused posed a few disturbing questions to the court,

"Why do you white people," said he, "come in ships to our country and shoot down poor black fellows who do not understand you? You listen to me! The wild black fellows do not understand your laws." (*Reminiscences* 187)

At the end Doss commented, "The speech speaks for itself" (*Reminiscences* 187). It brings out Doss's awareness of the brutality and the suffering the indigenous people were undergoing under colonialism.

Both Doss and Mahomed dwelt extensively on the white Australian attitude to the "Asiatic" presence in Australia. We should remember here that the threat of Chinese immigration was one of the key agenda behind the movement for Federal unification of Australia. Our Indian travellers travelled at a time which coincided with the anti-immigration agitation by the settlers. Indeed they knew it very well that although Australians were playing good hosts to them, their friendliness might have had turned into hostility if they wanted to stay in Australia (Allen 567). Initially voicing local prejudices about the Bengali Mahomedan hawkers, Hajee Sullaiman became more critical of the settlers' views later on, and more sympathetic towards "Asiatics" as they faced "stringent regulations [which had] recently been passed against their further encroachments" (*Journal of My Tours round the World* 62). Doss's terms for the Chinese immigrants and the aborigines are dictated by nineteenth century discourses of racial hierarchy legitimizing white male supremacy. In this scheme Doss identified himself as an "Aryan" and grouped the Indians and the British in the same racial (i.e. "Aryan") fold. Although he regarded the Chinese – the yellow race – as his

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inferiors, his opinions regarding the problem of Chinese immigrants were tempered by his awareness of the social and economic reality. He was astute enough to see that the Chinese immigrants had actually been causing the “jealousy” of the “English Australian”, who sought to perpetuate their monopoly in the labour market by excluding the Chinese from “the land of his adoption” (*Reminiscences* 196). Doss may have suggested that the white settlers are unjustified in their opposition to the Chinese immigration because like the Chinese the settlers are also no indigenous presence in Australia, they have also adopted this land from the ‘black’ aborigines who are the original inhabitants of this land. “The Chinaman had no fault”, says he, “except that they were Chinese, and not English or Scotch, and that they could live on much smaller wages than their fellow craftsmen of the English race” (*Reminiscences* 196). Margaret Allen notes that Doss was in Sydney in 1888 and witnessed the events, when the *Afghan* attempted to land a number of Chinese in the face of vehement local opposition (568).

The people held monster meetings to adopt measures for preventing these Chinese inroads. A very crowded and excited meeting was held in the Town Hall, under the presidency of the Mayor of Sydney; and that gentleman had the weakness to yield to the populace, and was led to talk at their head to the house of the Premier of the colony, in order to present a petition to government for taking effective measures at once to send these Chinese away. (*Reminiscences* 196)

Thus the Indian travellers, discussed in this article, present an excellent example of what Mary Louise Pratt has termed ‘transculturation’ and ‘autoethnography’. As members of a colonized people they had appropriated the practice of travel from the white Europeans and set their lens on the white people in the Australian context. Although they have described the charm and beauty of Australian landscapes in rapturous terms and expressed their awe and wonder at the growing urban capitals as new world cities, they travelled as informed travellers and reserved their critical judgement for what they had chosen to witness and document as well (*See Sen 2005, Burton 1998 for this interpretation in the context of Great Britain*). In course of their travel these Indians could challenge the dominant stereotype of colonial subjectivity as intellectually passive and transform themselves into the aesthetic subjects of the empire. As Indian travellers they worked in negotiations with the ambivalence of racial hierarchies they had imbibed from the Empire. In this connection their criticism of British imperialism and white Australian policies has enduring historical significance.

End Notes

1. The term “Euro-imperial” derives from Inderpal Grewal. *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel*. Durham & London: Duke University Press, 1996.

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