
Narrating the known and the unknown: Orientalism and mimicry in the travel writings of Sake Dean Mahomet and Mahipatram Rupram Nilkanth

Dhairya Barot, Assistant Professor, P P Savani University, Surat – 394125

Email id: barotdhairya20@gmail.com

Paper Received on 08-06-2024, Accepted on 12-07-2024
Published on 13-07-24; DOI:10.36993/ RJOE.2024.9.3.95

Abstract:

This paper emphasizes upon the ideological function of travel narratives and scrutinizes the contribution of 19th century Indian travel writing to the colonial discourse. By analysing and comparing the travel narratives originating from the writers of the West, a certain discourse can be identified which idealises the hegemony of the West over the colonial nations. This phenomenon has been studied in Edward Said's 'Orientalism' in detail which says that such narratives reinforce Western hegemony over the colonies which help colonisers to further justify their role in their colonies. Remarkably, in the 19th century, Indian writers such as Mahipatram Nilkanth and Dean Mahomet in their travel narratives mimicked the writers of the West and idealize colonisers' cultures instead of advocating for their own cultures. For studying this phenomenon, this paper analyses the travel narratives of these Indian writers from the perspective of Homi Bhabha's theory of 'mimicry', Edward Said's theory of 'orientalism' and Mary Louis Pratt's theory of 'contact zones' and attempts to draw out conclusions have been made.

Keywords: known, unknown, colony, orientalism, travel narratives.

Travel narratives can be found in almost any bookshop today and have been in vogue amongst all kinds of reading public. Throughout its history, the genre of travel writings has evolved, resulting in various definitions for this genre. For a critic named Paul Fussell, in his Norton Anthology of Travel, he prefers to call travel writings as 'travel books' and distinguishes a travel book from guidebooks (Fussell 15).

Since the genre is a result of centuries of development, there have been ongoing debates about a working definition of travel writing. The travel writing of the fifteenth century is very different from that of today's travelogues or the recently created sub-species of travel writing which is called 'travel-blogs'. Hence, the task then becomes to trace out a few traits of this genre. The literariness of travel writings has also been a site of debate. This was not the case in the age of English Enlightenment when John Locke introduced his empirical theories. With positivism on the rise, and reason being given utmost importance, the European travellers maintained a journal or account of their discoveries of unknown lands. The accounts may be somewhere in between the limits of completely fictional to scientific narratives. This fantasy of providing discourses upon those unknown lands gave rise to the corpus of 'orientalist' writing in which the 'travelled' was described to be of an inferior race that must be salvaged and developed into a civilised man. Ironically, this hegemonic control over the Orient do not comply with Locke's views on individual liberty.

Sake Dean Mahomet was a sepoy in the English army, an Indian traveller, surgeon, entrepreneur and a very popular immigrant figure in Europe. In context to this research, his role as the first Indian English writer who wrote travel writings describing his native country is at the centre of the argument. It shall be compared with Mahipatram Rupram Nilkanth's *Englandni Musafarinu Varnan* (Description of the travel to England), published in 1862. He was a reformer, educationist, novelist and biographer from 19th century Gujarat, India and is said to have written the first travelogue of Gujarati literature. His travel narrative is a description of the West through the eyes of an Indian scholar. The works are located in a space which is generated by *contact zones* (Pratt's idea, elaborated further) between the orientalist and the Indian realm, where the elite class of Indians, emerging through these contact zones, functioned under the hegemonic and imperialist ideologies of the colonisers.

Orientalism:

Orientalism, by Edward Said, is an account of the West's conception of the Orient and how it came into practice. Said uses Michel Foucault's conception of discourse, to identify Orientalism. For Said, Orientalism is "a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western experience" (Said 1). Thus, Said conceives orientalism as a way the West adopts an empirical method to understand the Orient. In order to gain control and maintain it

over their colonies in continents of North and South Americas, Africa and Asia, the colonisers collected information about their cultures and societies and discursively established control through Western knowledge categories.

Thus, a whole area of study called “orientalism” was initiated by European states and the Church, resulting in the ‘othering’ of the people of the colonies. Marking this othering, oriental studies became increasingly removed from empirical observations and functioned under prejudices about the orient. This institution of oriental studies proved to be productive for the West and tyrannical for the colonies. According to Said, “orientalism isn't merely a fantasy but rather a constructed frame with substantial historical purpose, not solely consisting of falsehoods but also carrying a developed body of theory and practice about the Orient” (Said 6).

Of Mimicry and Man:

The administrative class introduced the institutionalised study of European disciplines in India that manufactured a class of elites in colonies which can appreciate the culture of the ruling class and remain loyal to them. In this process, there arose an interest in ‘mimicking’ the norms and manners of the ruling class amongst the elites. They not only mimicked the colonisers in their manners but also their thoughts, and hence, the western notion of the Orient as well and contributed to this discourse.

Contact Zones:

Mary Louis Pratt in her keynote address to the Modern Language Association, titled *Arts of the Contact Zone*, had introduced the idea of contact zones which she defines as those places where different cultures exist in struggle with each other, especially where power is uneven, like in colonialism. When the concept of contact zones was introduced, it only referred to the context of literacy and literary theories but was later used in fields such as feminism, postcolonialism, critical race theory, etc.

Travel writing of 18th and 19th centuries:

During those years, travelling was in vogue due to industrialisation and the search for capital opportunities outside the *known* world. Discoveries and inventions were made to make travelling possible to distant lands. An early example of travel writing of the seventeenth century is William Dampier's *New Voyage Round the World* (1679) which consists notes on natural history and customs of inhabitants of the Caribbean and South Pacific regions. In this vein, followed a series of travellers

Research Journal Of English (RJOE)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal Impact Factor: 8.16(SJIF)Vol-9, Issue-3,2024
Indexed in: International Citation Indexing (ICI), Cite factor, International Scientific Indexing (ISI),
Directory of Research Journal Indexing (DRJI) Google Scholar, Cosmos and Internet Archives.

like Mungo Park, James Bruce and Francois Le Valliant in Africa; Comte de La Perouse and Louis Antoine de Bougainville in South Pacific;

Alexander McKenzie in North America; and Alexander von Humboldt in South America. Carl Thompson, in his book on travel writing, comments: "The knowledge and specimens they brought back were usually intended to be put to practical use, and to be harnessed to the larger economic and strategic goals of the European great powers." (Thompson 47)

Indian Travel Writing:

The Indian writers who generally executed the task of travelling and recording their experience belonged to the elite classes. In 1895, under the guidance of Captain Thomas Cook, Maharaja Jagatjit Singh travelled to Europe and published his travelogue in George Routledge and Co. After the opening of Suez Canal in 1869, the number of Indian travellers visiting European countries had risen significantly but limited to an elite background. Such Indian writers can be seen as inclined towards mimicking the colonial ideologies in their travel writings by examining the conventions, styles and languages they used to write their travelogues. In this process, they also mimicked the orientalist ideologies and discourse on Indians.

The objective of this research is to prove that Sake Dean Mahomet and Mahipatram Rupram Nilkanth, in their respective travel narratives mimicked the British representations of India and Europe. This leads to the conclusion that their writings were, majorly, of European hegemony and represented West as a 'father figure'. Research on Indians travelling to the west and their travel writings have also been conducted extensively on writers such as Maharaja Jagatjit Singh, Mirza Sheikh Itesamuddin, Mirza Abu Talib Khan, etc. and even on Mahomet's travels in western countries like England and Ireland, but nowhere can be found the research which claims to establish him as an orientalist writer who was largely mimicking (through the perspective of Bhabha's mimicry) the colonial writers in his works. The same can be said about the research conducted on Nilkanth. Substantially lesser amount of study has been conducted on his *Englandni Musafarinu Varnan* and nowhere can be traced the study on his depiction of West as a father figure.

Orientalism in Sake Dean Mahomet's 'The Travels of Dean Mahomet':

Sake Dean Mahomet's travel narrative *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* is written in epistolary form, divided into twenty letters dedicated to William A Bailie, a colonel in the service of the East India Company and for his subscribers in England

and Ireland. The subscribers were mostly from the bourgeoisie circles of England and Ireland who were interested in expanding their knowledge about the Indian subcontinent. Keeping his audience in mind, Mahomet wrote it in a manner that appealed to the readers' expectations of exotic descriptions and the praise of the Europeans.

Many instances in the text establish the West as a father figure while India is given a submissive feminine entity and is described as exotic. There are many orientalist descriptions of the kings, their abodes and Indian forts in the text. In these descriptions, he frequently employs hyperbole to describe the 'exotic life in the palace enjoyed by the elites' in India. In the fourth letter, a British officer offers to adopt him in his childhood and the thought of living with the Europeans excited him to the extent that he had determined to leave his mother for a European friend/father, symbolising the father figure metaphor even further. There can also be found the description of the division of labour in the British Indian army. The labour was divided according to the caste and class of the employee. British officers were ranked higher than the Indians and the lower caste Indians were regarded very lowly in this text. In the eighth letter from this text, a tribe called "pahareas" are depicted to be thieves and "savages", and when their camp gets plundered and looted by thieves, the army catches random pahareas from their farms and punishes them without any concrete evidence. Mohamet justifies punishments such as cutting off their noses and ears and killing them. He describes "dancing girls" of India in the fifteenth letter. A description of their seductive dancing style and their dressing/ornaments can be observed. There are many such descriptions of "beautiful and seductive" women. The orient itself is presented as an exotic woman who is to be fertilised by Europe who is an ideal male. Thus, these metaphors serve to establish a patriarchal discourse and to seduce the European male and to depict the dominance of Europe over the orient. These were a few instances and examples where it is evident that Dean Mahomet has written his travel narrative in an orientalist manner in order to comply with the expectations of its European readers.

Educating the Indians: Mahipatram Rupram Nilkanth's submission to the discourse of the occident.

Mahipatram Rupram Nilkanth is known to write the first travelogue of Gujarati literature,

'Englandni Musafarinu Varnan' (1862) which is a description of his travel to England in which he describes the socio-political condition of England, the condition

of education in England, and some of the popular places in England. His trip was a colonial project as he was sent to England by the government and his expenses were covered by the English Company. This project was carried out so that Mahipatram would be able to set up educational institutes in India based on his observations of the English education system in England. There are asymmetrical relations of power between Britain and India in his text. Mahipatram describes England as a father figure from which India needs to learn. He describes England as an educated and civilised society, which needs to be mimicked by the Indians. In his travel narrative, the middle class and the lower classes have an elevated space just because they belong to an enlightened society. Thus, he was under the influence of the discourse of the superiority of British people over the Indians in an efficient manner. He also describes in detail the educational institutes and the libraries of England and seems to be quite impressed with these institutions. He also wishes for such reforms in his own country in his narrative and thus, expresses his inclination towards the appropriation of Indians and Indian culture.

Power relations between the colonized and the colonizers in the travel narratives of Mahipatram Rupram Nilkanth and Sake Dean Mahomet.

From the study of the travel writings of Mahomet and Nilkanth, the power relations between the British and the Indians can be drawn out. The authors of both the texts are writing to promote British culture and its people as superior to those of their own country. This feature of praising the foreign culture over their own culture is rare in the travel narratives of the English when they described India. India has been mostly described as an uncivilised colony which needed to be appropriated by the colonisers. Owing to this ideology, their travel narratives to the colony (India) were exotic and rich in descriptions so as to attract the British to investing in the project of colonisation. Orientalist features of the Western discourse of civilising the Indians is also found in the travel narratives by the Indian scholars and influential people of India who travelled in India and represented their land to the foreign readers or who travelled to European countries and represented Europe to the Indian readers. This astonishingly reflects the asymmetrical power relations present in the travel narratives of the writers such as Dean Mahomet and Mahipatram Rupram Nilkanth. Both the writers described Europe as a better society and comparatively better civilised and organised community.

Metaphorically, the West becomes a father figure in their travel narratives. The need for appropriation in India and the appreciation of the colonisers is created

out of the lack that is produced in the Indian cultural geography through the imperial and colonial ideology of the European nations. This argument does not prove that the authors of the travel narratives lacked imagination and creative vigour. On the contrary, these texts are very creative in nature as Dean Mahomet employs for the first time, the use of Indian English in his travel narrative and for the first time, the technique of translation of English terminologies into Gujarati is employed by Mahipatram Rupram Nilkanth.

The role of Western education in the hegemonic submission of Dean Mahomet and Mahipatram Rupram Nilkanth.

Western education system in India is a contact zone between British culture and Indian culture. The English Education Act was passed as a legislative act of the Council of India in 1835. This act enabled the relocation of funds from the traditional educational institutions to the English educational institutions. As a result, there emerged institutions which provided Indian elites with English classical learning as these institutions were majorly accessible by the upper class/caste men in India because of socio-political reasons. These upper class/caste men formed a new elite scholar class in India who were heavily influenced by the ideas of European enlightenment.

Mahipatram Rupram Nilkanth was dedicated towards reforming the state of Indian education and his community. The English education system left a deep influence on his ideology. He travelled to England with the funding provided to him by the English Company in order to study the English education system. This trip was made by him so that he can be equipped with the norms of education in England and try to employ the Western educational institution in India. Thus, in his travel narrative as well, we can find the traces of Western hegemony and the ideology of a coloniser. Both the narratives are very different from each other and yet there are ideological similarities which result out of the English education which both had gained and arguably, both the writers mimicked the ideology of the coloniser.

Conclusion:

Due to various factors like the introduction of western education in the Indian subcontinent, identity of native elites in Britain and India, popularity among the British and Indian elites, etc, the authors could not provide a counter narrative to Western orientalist accounts. Thus, from the partly orientalist and partly fictional narrative of Dean Mahomet's 'Travels', and from the appreciative account of England

Research Journal Of English (RJOE)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal Impact Factor: 8.16(SJIF)Vol-9, Issue-3,2024
Indexed in: International Citation Indexing (ICI), Cite factor, International Scientific Indexing (ISI),
Directory of Research Journal Indexing (DRJI) Google Scholar, Cosmos and Internet Archives.

by Mahipatram Rupram Nilkanth, it can be concluded that ‘Travels of Dean Mahomet’ and ‘Englandni Musafarinu Varnan’ are the travel narratives which are a result of asymmetrical power relations between India and the West. The question of why the power relations between the travel narratives of the Indian writers of 19th century and the writers of the West have a certain affinity is explained using the theory of mimicry of the western writers and the emergence of contact zones in India between the European cultures and the Indian cultures. This research also opens up a different set of questions which can be addressed in further research such as, how do issues of class, caste, and religion intersect with race and colonialism in the travel writings of Indian authors? How do contemporary Indian writers living in the West describe their experiences? Are there traces of Orientalism and mimicry in their narratives? How do Mahomet and Nilkanth negotiate their own identities within their travel writings? How do the travel writings of Indian authors compare with those of other colonized regions, such as Africa or the Caribbean, in their treatment of Orientalism and mimicry? And so on... Addressing these questions in further research would bring further nuanced insights into this area of study.

References:

- Bhabha, Homi. "Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse." *October*, vol. 28, 1984, p. 125.
- Biddlecombe, Peter. "French lessons in Africa: travels with my briefcase through French Africa." *Abacus*, 1995.
- Das, Alok Kumar. "Life and Legacy of Sake Dean Mahomet: A Forgotten Enigma." *Communication Studies And Language Pedagogy* (2016): 2-1.
- Fisher, Michael Herbert. "Counterflows to colonialism: Indian travellers and settlers in Britain, 1600-1857." *Orient Blackswan*, 2006.
- Fisher, Michael Herbert. "The First Indian Author in English: Dean Mahomed (1759-1851) in India, Ireland, and England." *Oxford University Press, USA*, 1996.
- Foucault, Michel. "Archaeology of knowledge." *Routledge*, 2013.
- Foucault, Michel. "Discipline and punish: The birth of the prison." *Duke University Press*, 2007.
- Freud, Sigmund. "The unconscious." *The Journal of Nervous and Mental Disease* 56.3 (1922): 291-294.
- Fussell, Paul. "The Norton Anthology of Travel." *Routledge*, 1987.
- Fussell, Paul. "Abroad: British literary traveling between the wars." *Oxford*

Research Journal Of English (RJOE)

An International Peer-Reviewed English Journal Impact Factor: 8.16(SJIF)Vol-9, Issue-3,2024
Indexed in: International Citation Indexing (ICI), Cite factor, International Scientific Indexing (ISI),
Directory of Research Journal Indexing (DRJI) Google Scholar, Cosmos and Internet Archives.

University Press, 1982.

Hulme, Peter Duncan. "The Cambridge companion to travel writing." Vol. 10.

Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Kerr, Douglas. "Eastern figures: Orient and empire in British writing." Vol. 1. *Hong Kong University Press, 2008.*

Leask, Nigel. "Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel-writing, 1770-1840:'from an Antique Land'." *OUP Oxford, 2002.*

Marx, Karl, and Eden Paul. "The eighteenth brumaire of Louis Bonaparte." (1978): 1869.

Mukhopadhyay, Bhaskar. "Writing home, writing travel: The poetics and politics of dwelling in Bengali modernity." *Comparative Studies in Society and History* 44.2 (2002): 293-318.

Naipaul, Vidiadhar Surajprasad. "An area of darkness." *Pan Macmillan, 2002.*

Panigrahi, Tanutrushna. "Revisiting the Narrative Powers of the Global South through The Pratt, Mary Louise. "Arts of the contact zone." *Profession* (1991): 33-40.

Ray, Avishek. "The Aesthetic Gaze: Siting Nineteenth Century Indian Travel Writing." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 8.4 (2016): 122-9.

Said, Edward. "Orientalism: Western concepts of the Orient." *New York: Pantheon* (1978).

Smith, Amy Elizabeth. "Private letters, public narratives: Epistolary travel writing in eighteenth-century Britain." *The Pennsylvania State University, 1998.*

Thompson, Carl. "Travel writing." *Routledge, 2011.*

Travels of Dean Mahomet." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 12.3 (2020).

Vaishnav, Dhvani. "Can the Hypnotized Subaltern Speak? Assessing 19th Century Gujarati Travelogues to England." *Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities* 12.3(2020).

How to cite this article?

Dhairya Barot ,“ Narrating the known and the unknown: Orientalism and mimicry in the travel writings of Sake Dean Mahomet and Mahipatram Rupram Nilkanth” Research Journal Of English (RJOE)9(3),PP:87-95,2024, DOI:10.36993/RJOE.2024.9.3.95