



# INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

## Beyond Stereotypes: The Postcolonial Concerns in a Colonial Travel Text

Kalpana.R

Associate Professor of English

Government First Grade College

Sulibele, Hoskote Taluk

Bangalore - 562129

### Abstract

Travel texts produced during the colonial era by both men and women adhere to stereotypical models written from the Eurocentric point of view and are therefore always one sided. The *Other* is not given any agency to represent the *Self*. English is the language of the colonizer, as far as India is concerned. Very few Indians had the knowledge of English. It is therefore imperative that they had no knowledge on how they were represented. Another reason was that their views were never considered. Since this paper pertains to a travel text by a British journalist Mary Frances Billington, written during the colonial times, the expectation would be naturally along the lines of the other travel texts produced during the colonial times. But, the text that is being written about in this paper which is titled, *Woman of India*, written by Mary Frances Billington, published in the year 1895 defies all norms, stereotypes and expectations. It stands out in the entire body of travel texts. This text also stands out for another reason. Though travel journalism and war reportage are other forms of travel writing considered as travel writing in the present day, the text in question is related to travel journalism, it has not been accorded the merit it truly deserves. Subsequently, it will be substantiated why this text alone should be viewed differently, if not totally apart, a bit away from Colonial tendencies.

**Keywords:** Stereotypes, Colonialism, Post-Colonialism, Racializing, Colony, Subversion, Colonizer

### **Salient features which places the text uniquely beyond stereotypes:**

I argue that the travel text titled, *Woman of India*, by the British travel writer Mary Frances Billington is a very rare one as far as the content and the delineation of subject is concerned. Though the text was produced during the high point of colonial era, it raises postcolonial concerns. There is no established norm as to how travel texts should be viewed especially those produced by women. They were tacitly allowed to write mainly to support the colonial enterprise. They largely appeared to adhere to the norms of the patriarchal society but, taking advantage of the amorphous boundaries and interdisciplinarity of the so called sub-literary genre called travel texts, women writers did succeed in expressing their own truth encapsulated in small, palatable doses among pages of the generally voluminous texts. Therefore the focus has shifted from using simplistic tools of linear, biographical analyses to reading the texts against the grain. This kind of reading reveals subversive spaces for a feminist mainly, an interesting critique of the patriarchal society from the margins. Billington's text requires no such indirect analysis nor is there any camouflage for voicing out her truth. This paper explores the chief features that makes the text truly postcolonial through its postcolonial concerns. To show how different the text is a few aspects will be elaborated upon and the rest indicated for the perusal of the reader.

### **Journalistic Travel Writing**

Journalistic travel writing and war reportage are the forms of travel writing recognized in modern times. But even during colonial times, this form of writing is available although as a rarity. This is especially the case as far as travel texts produced by the women writers are concerned. During the Victorian era, *travel* and *writing* were forbidden zones for women. Beyond these two concerns, a career in journalism for a woman was unthinkable. But, Billington does all three of them at once through this text. Unlike the other woman writers who make their works appear spontaneous and make them look like an accident, which they publish with due apologies, Billington's work is deliberate. This text is a result of her journalistic mission to India under strict editorial instructions. Therefore unlike women like Postans who bases her opinion on the testimony of some non-descript Brahmin, Billington's sources are the extant monograms of sir George Birdwood, Sir Monier Williams, Maxmuller, etc.

### **Avoidance of Sweeping Generalizations/ Acknowledging Differences**

Even the organization of the content is befitting a research work. Billington writes about the intentions in her authorial preface regarding her chief motive in visiting India which was based on her realization on how very little effort there had been in giving brief updates to the English newspaper readers on the workings of the various social agencies, educational, medical and religious institutions working for the woman in India. She

centres her study in just three cities and streamlines her subject to women. She later visits Cochin and Colombo. This parameter gives a glimpse of the vastness and complexity to the country as a whole. The colonial texts stand accused of sweeping generalizations. The colonial subject is represented as a homogeneous mass or in the hands of the colonial narrator, the colonial landscape is made to look like *terra nullius*. The purport of this attitude is that the natives are totally absent or reduced to non-entities in the eyes of the conquistadors. The places that she explores are very limited, hardly dots on the maps.

Unlike the others who collapse all the natives into one mass overlooking the spatial, class, caste and other differences, the limits she sets for herself is the most refreshing. The variety in the delineation also reveals the complexity. Her representation shows that she is aware of the names and traditions of the different tribes. She relies upon the work of learned men whose monograms she refers to in her in her work. The reason why setting spatial limits is necessary has to do with the fact that travel writers often pretend to represent the whole of the sub-continent in the course of a few months' or one or two years of their stay. In such cases the authenticity seems suspect. This is evident in the case of Isabel Burton. One tends to have high expectations about the text but it is rather disappointing to read the text written after just six months' stay which includes travelling time to and fro, which largely contains her opinions. As far as the real travel is concerned the spatial bankruptcy is so evident in her assiduously filling up the page with the names of the railway stations while travelling from Bangalore to Gulbarga by train. Within this short distance, she manages to put in the names of at least ten railway stations.

### **A Distinct Subject: Nuances Considered**

Billington presents a brief comprehensive picture of women from her birth to death, dressing, arts and crafts, their amusements, funerary practices, zenana system, caste, child marriage. Unlike the other texts collapsing natives into one mass and generalizing, she is aware that even within this limited space, the existence of heterogeneous castes, classes and communities make the delineation more complex. Even within this limited space she identifies several tribes with different practices apart from the majority of Hindus, Muslims and even Parsis, who if not a dominant section of the populace formed a prominent component through their influence, education and resourcefulness and for treating women as their equals. She makes the sources of people who had researched on them available to the readers. Billington cites these sources. It is inevitable to once again draw upon Isabel Burton who in a span of four pages gives the description of four tribes numbering twenty millions. The inherent heterogeneity in representation gains significance considering the fact that it was a general tendency to paint the landscape as *terra nullius*, vacant, divest of natives, divest of history, culture especially in the case of the male writers. At least Billington acknowledges those aspects though she doesn't delve deeper. The reason why she does not delve deep is because of her self imposed limitations and those were necessitated by her profession. She had come to India as a representative of *Daily Graphic* and she was to limit her stay to six

months, limit her space to three cities mainly Delhi, Bombay and Calcutta, incidentally she also documents her visit to Cochin and Colombo. It is necessary with a serious intent to research deeply to set spatial limits also. She peoples her landscape and does it heterogeneously. This is one very significant strand in the postcolonial analyses. The case while representing women, class and race are also vital parameters. For example the Parsi women cannot be placed on an even keel with the tribal women. Billington is cognizant of such differences through which lens the postcolonial critics access the travel texts.

### **Against Colonial Mimicry: Ahead of her Times**

The concerns raised by critics such as Homi Bhabha and Edward Said regarding colonization of minds are surprisingly the concerns expressed by Billington as well. Right from the colonial influence upon the native way of dressing, needlecraft and embroidery, silver and metal filigree work, the textile industry, she finds the European style superimposed on them, resulting in distortions of the original forms, an abomination of sorts in her opinion. During one of her informed visits to schools, the native children who had been instructed to be dressed in their best for the occasion had shocked her. Just a sample of her critique reads, “Horror of horrors upon Hindu heads, these included about a dozen bonnets as turned out in the native bazaar in a kind of travesty of the styles favoured at home some six or eight years ago!” (177)

Critics in the present day have proved how this kind of colonial mimicry challenges dominant cultures. But the Colonial government had an agenda to produce a reformed, recognizable other. But it is not a loyal kind of mimicry but the kind which is continually full of slippages, excesses and differences. This way, the subject is constructed to be in desperation to adhere to the dominant culture but the imitation only produces failed or ridiculous results. In other words, it is a way of showing how impossible it is for the natives to turn into English men or women. It is this kind of a distorted ideal that Billington is against. In the first place it was not required for a native to imitate the British to receive the British. This concern extends to all the other areas too. She writes of the fall in standards of the filigree work:

“Especially noticeable, too, is the Europeanization of design and purpose that has come over the filigree work of Trichinopoly and Cuttack. It is exceedingly fine still in execution, but all that was primitive and simple has gone out of it. the most horrible degradation, however, that I saw was at Cochin, which possessed once a very good little school of silver filigree workers, who produced stronger and bolder work than that of the two seats of industry. I wanted an example of one or two to bring home, and eventually secured one or two to bring home, and eventually secured one or two that did not offend me, but I was offered-take note, O Society for the Encouragement and Preservation of Indian Art- brooches in the form of banjoes, tennis racquets, and parasols! Even so far have the horrors of Birmingham designs wrought their mischievous effects!” (213)

Billington understands that the Western models of dressing, art works, textiles need not be the ideal for the rest of the world. She is severely critical of the European influence on the native art which corrupts the nativity and defeats the purpose of art. She rejoices at the attempts made by a few individuals to retain the designs purely Indian. She, unlike most Europeans seems to be well informed in the field of art or is enlightened enough to draw her sources from the monograms of scholars rather than on the opinionated and prejudiced missionaries and memsahibs. She shares her concerns with Miss Brooke of Mahiraj School. She writes:

“Since my return to England, however, I learn with great satisfaction that the Society for the Encouragement and Preservation of Indian Art has taken the matter up, for if once there comes a suspension in the sequence of teaching as mother has passed it on to daughter the beautiful arts of stitchery and taste of colour may be lost, and that would in truth be a loss to India herself as well as art-loving Europe.” (192)

She is objective when she writes about the advanced state of Indian textiles unlike what the colonial government was trying to project. The colonial government had ruined successfully the flourishing textile towns by imposing punitive measures massively by way of taxation and making the raw material required for the looms as exorbitant as possible. They had done this with the intention of encouraging the import of Manchester finished textiles which was way too low in quality compared to the Indian textiles. She quotes from Sir George Birdwood’s monogram:

“Very poetic and pretty are the names by which some of the designs and colourings in favourite use for silk are known. These have come down from the sixteenth century at least, for Sir George Birdwood tells how in 1577 three shiploads of Berhampore silks were dispatched by way of the Persian Gulf to Russia, and that among them were patterns described as “ripples of silver,” “nightingale’s eyes,” “Peacock’s neck,” and “Sunshine and shade.” Such names exist still.” (182)

### **Critique on Missionary Activities**

“Sentimentality, and that insular habit of thought which decides that what is right in England is of necessity the only right course anywhere else in the world has launched a big weight of prejudice against the system, which is not at all borne out, viewed in the dispassionate light of working results.” (82-83) A sense of objectivity however pervades her depiction of the missionaries and their activities. While she recognizes that these missionaries have done a commendable job as teaching agencies in cities such as Negapatam, Delhi, Calcutta and Calicut, she is simultaneously critical about their other activities based on their evangelizing zeal. The following passage clearly shows her positioning herself in support of the missionaries. She also gives her reasons where she is not in agreement with them. She writes:

“Personally, my own bias was to have admired and defended all missionary labours. Brought up and still an attached member of the Church of England...” Her stance is clear. She is appreciative of the missionary endeavours at educating the natives. But she is against their evangelizing zeal which often produces negative and violent effects in the community and families of the converts which will only harm them rather than serve any good purpose. The meddlesome nature of the ill informed missionaries in the native arts is another grievance she has against them. She writes about the ridiculous effects of this incongruous imitation thus:

“One may go into a middle class zenana and find a young wife crocheting an abomination in violet and yellow for her husband, who is employed on night railway duty, which he will wrap about his pate and speak of in the vernacular as a “head comfort”. In fact, to take an Indian journey by night in mid-winter suggests nothing so much as that a violent epidemic of acute toothache has broken out, so many are the heads swathed up in these woolen marvels of ugliness”. (190)

Just as her concerns about arts and crafts, she views the caste and zenana systems differently. Unlike the other European writers who chose to sensationalize these issues, she looks at them through the eyes of a researcher. In this context, she tries to analyze with a fresh perspective from the Indian point of view. She writes:

“But caste and the zenana systems are interlocked, and together they are the two keystones of the whole fabric of Indian social life. The former teaches pride or humility, as the case may be; which they are called that is marvelously discouraging to the restlessness and outside ambition. The latter possesses a prestige and a dignity that I scarcely know how to express adequately...” she continues, “While these two forces are the dominant influences in the life, there can be no appreciable change, even with education and European example.....But the tinkering meddlers who would graft a lot of Europeanized excrescences on to the Eastern habits and beliefs seem unable to grasp this as a truth.” (175). Thus, Billington’s conclusions about missionary activities are substantiated by reasons and observations and I argue here that Indira Ghose’s observations that Billington shows an elitist attitude towards missionaries is unconvincing at its best.

## Conclusion

Till here I have just analyzed a few strands from the whole book. Her treatment of issues such as child marriage, female criminals, woman labourers, funerary practices, the way she highlights the women of the Parsi community and its companionate weddings, the community’s modernity that she projects in her book and the Zenana and caste system which she deals with most elaborately through the eyes of the researcher are other interesting reasons this why this book should be read in the present day. This is a rare book which gives voice to the *other* to not only represent themselves on an important topic, but also documents the other’s criticism against the Europeans. European mindset is always to racialize the differences. Billington is also critical of the English Society in the colony who with their rampant prejudices and shallowness of minds do more damage to the national interests.



For any possible argument that the spirit of journalism required all of this from Billington, let us take briefly the example of Katherine Mayo, an American journalist who visited India more than three decades later than Billington and published her book titled, *Mother India*, in the year 1927. The two women's concerns are as different as their nations, their continents, their societies and their political conditions. The profession which calls for an apolitical stance is what makes them different. To what extent are these women apolitical should be an interesting study. The paper proposes to stick on mainly to the topic on why this text is refreshingly not only different but unexpectedly postcolonial in most of its concerns. This firmly takes the text beyond all stereotypes. A comparison with Mayo's text strengthen these concerns phenomenally, while also shedding light on how unexpectedly different Mayo's text is. If anything it should have been more objective compared to Billington's since it came decades later. But the text by Mayo is so prejudiced that Mahatma Gandhi had dismissed it as a *drain Inspector's report*. Several critics hold the opinion that she was a propagandist for the white colonial government. The question that arises in the minds of the readers is, how could she be this objective, critical of the self, appreciative of the native all the while standing apart from her counterparts when the colonial government was in place. It is these aspects that are missing in the entire body of travel writing by women writers but found in Billington's text.

## BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Billington, Mary Frances. *Woman in India*. London: Chapman and Hall. LD, 1895.
- Chapman, Priscilla. *Hindoo Female Education*. London: R.B. Seeley and W. Burnside, 1839
- Ghose, Indira. *Memsahibs Abroad*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Ghose, Indira. *Women Travellers in Colonial India: The Power of the Female Gaze*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1998.
- Hulme, Peter & Tim Youngs. (Eds) *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. Cambridge University Press: Cambridge. 2002.
- Mills, Sara. *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism*. London: Routledge, 1991.