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Using Opacity To Fashion A Scholarly *Self* Through Colonial Discourse

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Abstract

The Memsahib in colonial India generally took every opportunity to fashion her own *self* with whatever the circumstances had to offer. The white women had an advantage of being away from home where women were subject to strict monitoring. The narrow minded Victorian society took any transgression seriously. Writing, which was not meant to be a woman's domain was tacitly permitted in the colonies where these women along with their male counterparts represented the *Orient* in their writings. Since women did not have their own role models, they emulated the male writers and selected as content for their books, matters pertaining to the colony. This is the context to this paper. Several women writers started emulating well-known Indologists and Orientalists the likes of Sir William Jones, Maxmuller, etc. They, for some reason felt a need to appear scholarly which would have been a matter of transgression back home. A *scholarly self* and *feminine* never went hand in hand in the Victorian society. But, the hunger for news in the distant colonies represented through the exotic lens of travel writers, transformed many a woman into a writer. Travel in itself was looked down upon. It was more or less equated with adventure. Women with adventurous bent of mind were the objects of ridicule. But, this again was tolerated when it came to the question of colonies because it helped replicate the social structure of Britain and was seen as essential. The fear of miscegenation was so overpowering that relaxing strict norms was imperative. Marianne Postans, writing about the Orient under such circumstances is a worthy writer to revisit since her representation of India in the role of an Oriental scholar that she dons on

shows problematic spaces while reading against the grain although Postans executes it dexterously. For this paper, I will take an example of an Ode supposedly belonging to the Cutch region while touching upon the contours of such representations throughout her travel text *Cutch or Random Sketches , Taken During A Residence in one of the Northern Provinces of Western India*, published in 1839. It is the very opaqueness of the culture, folklore, mythology of the colonies from the white people's point of view which the Memsahib like Postans exploited to constitute and project a *Scholarly Self*. The paper will touch upon the ways in which she does so. But unlike the earlier Orientalists, the latter day Orientalists were negative in their attitude and Postans follows them in their negativity. This paper explores the exception to this and the politics behind the appreciation of the native Odes.

Keywords: Opaqueness, Miscegenation, Subversive, Cultural devaluation, Cultural hegemony, Dexterously, Colonialism, Orientalist

Marianne Postans accompanied her husband Thomas Postans to India in 1833. Thomas was interested in antiquities and was assigned the task of obtaining copies of Ashokan inscriptions in Girnar, Junagarh. Both were talented artists and writers. She was a good linguist who knew the language of Cutch and wrote two books on Western India and she contributed articles to *The Asiatic Journal*, a popular periodical at that time. She was too accomplished for her times. This paper illustrates how Postans uses the opaqueness of the content for the English readership on the one hand and one sided representation which does not involve Indians on the other, to constitute her *Scholarly Self*. This also gives the bigger picture of the politics of representation. To show how colonial agenda and *Self fashioning* went hand in hand, I have chosen a Bhat or an Ode, that forms a part of her text. The following Ode is from her text, *Cutch or Random Sketches, Taken During a Residence in one of the Northern Provinces of Western India, Interspersed with Legends and traditions*. She writes, "A Bhat signifies a relater of songs and stories, and a chaunter of local odes in praise of the Jharrejah chiefs and Rajpoot princes of Cutch; known as Bhats, from the title of the men who sing them..."(193-194) She further adds,

The Bhats and odes being all in the Cutchee language, it is impossible to do justice to them by translation, or to convey an idea of local manners so exact as may be required to render them intelligible. The possession, however, of an art of poetry by so rude a people may be considered interesting to the curious in such matters; I will, therefore, subjoin for their amusement a few literal translations of these primitive compositions, which may enable the reader to judge both of their peculiar style, and the degree of merit they possess. The following Bhat contains the "History of the Birth of Lacka-phoolanee, or the Flower of the Sun," a celebrated Rajpoot prince, who is said to have reigned at Kairah in this province about nine hundred years ago. (194-195)

After introducing the significance of Bhats which are sung generally during the weddings and her appreciation for them, Postans includes the Bhat, narrating the story of Lacka-Phoolanee, first in the language of Cutch and subsequently gives the translation of the same in English. In addition, she narrates elaborately the prosaic version of the same.

LACKA-PHOOLANEE

Prusm wurs puchwees pat bieto pat o dur

Mungul dummul pirj milee kunuk foolie foolie dur

Wulee wurs puchas phirio Kutuki Phoolanee

Mao kund tanar nir nimae an phiree apanee

Jac surj sukat Lako jus baro lio

Puchwees wurs doonah puchee Kot Raj Karah Rio

Sehees ek samut boop dus lak bunejie

Weparee punj lak lak bat charon bhae

Katur ud lak lak neesan bujae

Beeju neerunt beeha soojee nuheen

Pundur phir jojun puree choud Kror purgo numut.

Tudco "Puhoo Pasar" Lako churee.

Translation

Lacka Phoolanee was twenty- five years old when he on the throne became king.

Dancing, and rejoicing amongst much people, the world blossomed like gold.

After twenty-five years with large force, Phoolanee made excursions;

The nine divisions of the earth he conquered, and his order was absolute.

After another twenty-five, he established his Raj at Kaira;

Seventeen lacs of Zemindars, a krore of nobles,

A thousand heroes, ten thousand great men,
Five lacs of merchants, one lac of story-tellers,
Half a lac of cultivators, beaters of royal drums one lac;
Of other people beyond calculation.
Fifteen jojuns, the circuit of his army, fourteen krores of salaams,
When Lacka mounted his horse, Puhoo Pasar

This is supposedly a local legend of Lacka Phoolani. (196-197)

The Politics of Appreciation of the Bhat

Of all the legends she represents elaborately and dismisses as nonsense, she reserves her appreciation for the Odes in Cutch language. The content of the Odes is similar to the local legends fraught with magic realism. At the outset, it is impressive to know that the Memsahib was so well acquainted with the local lore and legends in its various forms. She seems to justify her inclusion of the Bhat in the language of Cutch by informing that translation does not do justice to the original, would not bring out the essence nor the local flavor of the Bhat. She gives the translated version with herself being the translator with all her technical expertise on the subject showing in a footnote. She notes, “In the original Cutch character, this metre is governed by the number of letters which compose each line, without being restricted to any particular number of metrical feet.” (196) Even after giving the translated version, she narrates elaborately the story of Lacka-Phoolanee in the prosaic form, fraught with magic realism. The pertinent questions which crosses the reader’s mind are:

- Whom was the Memsahib addressing when she writes, “I will, therefore, subjoin for their amusement a few literal translations of these primitive compositions, which may enable the reader to judge both of their peculiar style, and the degree of merit they possess” if not the English readership. She also gives the Cutch version using the language of Cutch. For this readership Cutchee was an alien language and the translation hence becomes opaque too.
- As far as the Indian readership is concerned, she never wrote for them. The book is in English, obviously meant for English readership.

The whole purpose of including the Bhat in the original language is to fashion her own *Scholarly Self*. Strangely, enough, she is appreciative of the story line and does not dismiss it as some old wives’ tale. To make my point clearer, let me give an overview of the text to show how depreciative of the legends and the lore are that she narrates in the text, *Cutch or Random Sketches, Taken During A Residence in one of the Northern Provinces of Western India, Interspersed with Legends and Traditions*. In keeping with the title, Postans includes the local legends. She narrates story after story elaborately, in great detail, for which she

claims a non-descript source and in the end she dismisses every story as nonsense. For any doubts regarding why she has to narrate so many stories only to dismiss them as old wives' tale and why she had to choose such an unreliable source, the answer is that the colonial agenda of cultural devaluation found an agent in Postans. The stories that she narrates are no less fraught with magic realism far removed from time and space in the same manner as found in *Lacka-Phoolanee*. The magic realism is especially seen in the third version, in her elaborate and prosaic narration where she glorifies this Ode.

Folk lore, especially narrated by suspect sources, the likes of which Postans chooses do not represent cultural and religious reality of a people. The depth of her scholarship stands suspect in such instances wherein she footnotes Parvati to be the wife of Vishnu (p.128)

Lacka-Phoolanee is singled out for appreciation since it provides scope to project her scholarship in local language and tradition. Cultural devaluation and *Self fashioning* goes hand in hand. Postans' book is replete with such contradictions. Her positioning of her writing comes as no surprise since she accompanied her husband who was assigned with a noble mission although she never mentions anywhere all throughout the book. She writes in a scientific/ quasi scientific style. This comes as no surprise since the imperial authorities were deeply involved in the knowledge mapping exercises by way of collecting artifacts, archaeological discoveries, studies in languages, antiquities, systematic documentation of everything that was studied that it suited the times and purpose. How authentic this knowledge mapping is obvious in the source that Postans selects. This seemingly objective style could also have been for greater acceptance and authenticity. The subject range is vast and the representations are in keeping with the prevalent strategies of highlighting the prevalent excesses and complexities in the social and the cultural life of the native populace like the despotic kings, the cruelty of caste system, Sati, infanticide, the superstitions. Negativity and excess seems to have attracted a lot of attention for, it finds sections in many books, in the end, pointing towards the cunningness of the natives, their ignorance etc. All the themes mentioned above find resonance in the book.

She was also writing at a time when the Orientalists had produced a lot of work with regard to India. But, as the critics have pointed out, Orientalism was not an altogether innocent project for, they, through unearthing the golden glories of the past, they pitch what they perceive as decadent present alongside. Covertly, it means outside intervention was a necessity, especially in the case of the latter day Orientalists. Postans writes about the debauchery of the kings of Cutch which necessitated British intervention and the appointment of a British Regent for the then King. On this theme she is too elaborate but she is silent on the similar matter. Ashoka, the benevolent king finds no mention at least as a matter of contrast even if it were to have been in the past. The Colonial discourse never made margin for the histories. If she had selected some historical depiction, there would not have been a necessity to dismiss the same as old wives' tale. It should be remembered that one of the main points in the colonial agenda is to erase the history of the natives.

Postans is meticulous with dates of a hundred years ago when it comes to the representation of issues such as earthquakes but she gives no date to a sensational event for the then readership in the west, an incident of Sati. Postans writes as if she was a witness to it. Her depiction and the use of language is so tricky that only on close examination the reader wonders if she was there or if she was reporting the event as told by someone. Sati obviously was a much discussed and awaited topic then in Britain and Postans ensures that she includes it in some way, which is only seemingly authentic. She flaunts her knowledge in Geography, weather conditions, soil conditions, projects her own opinion of the earthquakes bringing Italy as comparison to the similar quakes having happened there. In short, she is successful in fashioning a *Scholarly Self* which would have been impossible back home.

The term *Self fashioning* finds mention in Stephen Greenblatt's classic study, *Renaissance Self-fashioning : From More to Shakespeare*, and ever since, it has greatly impacted literary studies so much so that Greenblatt is hailed as the progenitor of a new methodological approach called New Historicism, a phrase first used by him in *The Forms of Power: The Power of Forms*. Self-fashioning is the process of constructing one's identity and public persona according to a set of socially acceptable standards. Women writers who had to negotiate a heavily gendered terrain had to construct their identities based on experiences of travel, a role forbidden to them expressly but permitted tacitly within the colonial domicile. It is then imperative that they had to show allegiance to the institution of patriarchy while transgressing them. Two of Greenblatt's observations about the Renaissance Age and its self-fashioning tendencies are pertinent here. One is a relative decline in the autonomy that individuals had in constructing their selves, that is both individual and social identities. The second one is an increase in the degree and manner of discipline and control over individuals exercised by powerful institutions of society namely, family, state and religion.

Such circumstances were prevalent during the Victorian age when these travel texts were produced by women writers. Greenblatt lists out a set of governing conditions common to most instances of self-fashioning. He notes that it involves absolute submission to an absolute power or authority situated outside the self and self-fashioning is achieved in relation to something perceived as strange, alien or hostile as in the Saidian framework which must be invented or discovered to be attacked. There can be more than one authority and more than one alien at any given point of time and submission and destruction are always internalized as inward necessity as well. It is this conflict that takes place in the *contact zones*. Meanwhile, Authority gets perpetuated. New Historicism looks at the literary texts as cultural artifacts or practices. And New Historicism works on the basic premise that the human self is not an autonomous entity but rather a site on which broader institutional and political forces coalesce. The concept of self-fashioning is extracted from this frame. The question that remains is at whose cost did such writers achieve Self fashioning? This was chiefly an individual agenda within the Colonial agenda. The answer is that it was achieved at the cost of the native.

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