

BRITISH DIASPORA: REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIA IN COLONIAL BRITISH-INDIAN POETRY

Ramandeep Kaur

Assistant Professor, G D Goenka University, Gurgaon, Haryana, India

ABSTRACT

The history of the colonial era in India reveals that many Britishers approached India with the desire for a profitable trade, plunder, enrichment and establishing an imperial structure. During their stay in India, some of them represented India in different genres. They also produced a huge corpus of poems unifying most of them under one major theme i.e. India. In their poems, they extensively represented the spiritual ethos of India, a socio-cultural milieu of India and the Britishers' experiences in India. While giving a poetic insight into colonial India, they displayed a fairly reasonable proficiency in the use of varied poetic forms and devices. Their representations are not merely intertwined with the concerns of domination and subordination rather they cover diverse things and portray heterogeneous images of India.

KEYWORDS: *Diaspora, Representations, Colonial British-Indian Poetry, Spiritual, Socio-Cultural*

Article History

Received: 08 May 2018 / Revised: 11 Jun 2018 / Accepted: 18 Jun 2018

INTRODUCTION

Diasporas and migrations have long been related to economic growth, whether under Empires, colonialism or post-colonial history of nations. Imperial Diaspora one of the major types of diaspora deals with the colonizers representations about themselves or the indigenous natives. As per this diaspora, the migrants go to another land that has been conquered by the people of their own nation so as to enjoy high status on account of their ethnic ties to the ruling power. The history of the colonial era in India reveals that many Britishers approached India with the desire for a profitable trade, plunder, enrichment and establishing an imperial structure. Alongside capturing and conquering India, some of the Britishers presented accounts of India in their travel accounts, military memoirs, scholarly journals, history books, fiction and poetry. The entire literature produced by them during their stay in India popularly came to be known as Anglo-Indian literature. However, in context of India, the term Anglo-Indian has a long history. Initially it was used to describe the highest social classes of the Britishers. During the British colonial rule, it was used in order to describe the people of mixed race, earlier known as Eurasians. By the turn of the twentieth century, this term was claimed only by the domiciled British who resided in India even after India's Independence. In the genre of English literature, the term 'Anglo-Indian' is used for all of them. But since this paper aims at analysing the poetic representations produced by the Britishers only during the colonial rule on India, so to avoid any confusion the term "British-Indian" nomenclature by "Lord George Nathaniel Curzon, the most imperialistic of the Viceroy's" (Haruda 6-7) has been used instead of Anglo-Indian, and the poetry produced by them has been designated as 'Colonial British-Indian Poetry.' A reading of this poetry reveals that many

British-Indians used poetry as a genre for representing India.

The representations made by the Colonial British-Indians about India during their stay in India have drawn the attention of many postcolonial theorists during the past five decades. Edward Said, Elleke Boehmer, Ania Loomba, Christopher Prendergast and John Mcleod influenced by the constructivist approach of representation have argued in their works that the Britishers after gaining imperialistic advances in India moved ahead towards attaining immediate political control over it and making it their colony. During this mission, along with ruling the natives by military and physical force they also used “representations as a fundamental weapon to keep colonized people subservient to their rule” (Mcleod 17). They paid a lot of attention to language as a tool for domination and constructing identity and made ample representations about them that were “not innocent” but “profoundly connected with the operations of power” (Mcleod 17). In these representations, they internalized the language of the west as representing the natural and true order of life. With the aim of “dominating, restructuring and having authority” (Said 3) over the indigenuous natives, they produced their degenerate images by employing “the myths of power, the race classifications, the imagery of subordination” embodied with “imperialists’ point of view” and “the superiority of European culture” and “rightness of empire” in their representations (Boehmer 3). They governed them by providing this “regulatory matrix of thought” based on “the epistemological subject/object split” with “the knowing subject who observes the world-out-there in order to make it over into an object” (Prendergast 2). With these representations manifested with a distinctive stereotyped language they provided the lens through which the eastern nations would view themselves and the westerners would control them.

A study of the poems written by some male and female poets, a few pseudonymous poets and a few poems written anonymously available in the form of their individual collections and three anthologies namely Theodore Douglas Dunn’s *Poets of John Company* (1921); R. V. Vernede’s *British Life in India: An Anthology of Humorous and Other Writings Perpetrated by the British in India, 1750-1947* (1999) and Maire ni Fhlathuin’s *The Poetry of British India* (2011) presents that they produced a huge corpus of poems unifying most of them under one major theme i.e. India. In their poems, they extensively represented spiritual ethos of India, a socio-cultural milieu of India and the Britishers’ experiences in India. While giving a poetic insight into colonial India, they displayed a fairly reasonable proficiency in the use of varied poetic forms and devices. Their representations are not merely intertwined with the concerns of domination and subordination rather they cover diverse things and portray heterogenous images of India.

A critical analysis of this poetry brings forth that no doubt a few poets just negated, criticized and condemned India in their poems and created a binary division between the east and the west. They had an anti-Indian attitude and consider India as a ‘Land of shit and filth and rags/ Gonorrhoea, syphilis, clap and pox’ (James 597). They address it as fudge from beginning to end!” (Dunn 28) and as ‘an alien soil’ full of heat, dust, dirt, smells, sickness and disease where ‘neither the mind nor the body is at rest.’ A few of the poets refer to India as the most dreaded place on earth

Where insects settle on your meat,
Where scorpions crawl beneath your feet,
and deadly snakes infest” (Vernede 90).

But on the other hand, a few poets enthralled by the spiritual facet of India and expressed their reverence towards India’s holy land where “Gods are worshipped, and their sires revered;” (Richardson 336). Sir William Jones, the first Colonial British-Indian poet, got so fascinated by the spiritual side of India that he composed nine hymns addressed to

different Hindu Gods and Goddesses namely Narayana, Indra, Surya, Ganga, Camdeo, Lacshmi, Sereswaty, Durga and Bhawani. Sir Alfred Comyn Lyall wrote about Lord Siva, John Leyden about Lord Rama and Goddess Kali, William Waterfield wrote extensively about Lord Krishna. A few of them also wrote about the innumerable “palaces of prayer” in India i.e. the Indian temples and especially focused on the “Pearly-white temples in numbers untold” of Haridwar. (Sinha 102). They also wrote about the immense faith of Indians in the holy river Ganges where

Pilgrims in thousands kneel down by the shore

Gaze upon Ganga, and want nothing more. (Sinha 102).

They also wrote about the Indian religious scriptures, their general speculations, the effects of rahu and ketu, the Brahmins and sunyasees and the jogis and fakars.

Some of the Colonial British-Indian poets fascinated by India, Indian culture, Indian life, Indian natives, festivals and many more things related to India represented that in their poetry in quite diverse ways. They wrote about India's exquisite beauty, mountains, hills, snow clad summits, rich flora and fauna, the sights and scenes of Bengal, Velour, Kashmir, Kashmiri Shawls, Doab, Taj Mahal, Dal Lake, Shalimar Bagh, Nishat Bagh, Gulmarg, Mughal gardens, Amarnath and the beauty of rural India, which made their “Hearts (feel) so light and gay” (Dunn 31-32). These poets also wrote about the dutiful Indian wives, the bibs, their dresses, hair styles, earrings, nose rings, armlets and anklets. A few poets focused on the submissive Indian women who spent their entire lives secluded in zenanas and in purdah whereas a few focused on the dancing girls and nautch girls of India. Apart from this a few poets focused on the description of the manners, customs and rituals of India whereas a few wrote about the Khidmatgars, chowkeydars and Bawarchis who served the Britishers in India. Some of them also focused on the themes of the rigid caste system, the monstrous superstitions, poverty and illiteracy prevalent in India, which had engulfed India and had “tainted the fair stream” (Burke 48) of India. A few of them presented a satirical account of the Hindus in India who “to caste do so cling” (Dunn 30) that they prefer dying instead of having food offered to them by some other caste person. A few poets quite ironically presented that whereas the entire world was moving ahead, the Indians were still entangled in their age-old superstitions and believed in ‘the priests’ who assured them that to make their barren lands fertile, they should “... bury a child around its roots” (Hope 29), ‘the quacks’ who gave them “some Hakim’s powder” for the cure of all diseases (Hope 172) and ‘the power of shradh’ to “make the parted spirit glad.” (Hutchinson 4). They also presented a few gruesome pictures of India, where because of poverty a few Indian mothers are forced to sell “their children to get breads” and in a few cases “when food was none; some kissed her infant’s head,/ And then contentedly laid down to die!” (Burke 87). Poets like James Atkinson, James Hutchinson and Emma Roberts expressed their pain on seeing the sati system and untouchability in India in their poems.

A few poets on seeing the plight of Indians due to their utter ignorance and illiteracy wrote about their views of reforming India in their poems. They also focused on the efforts of those Britishers who worked a lot in improving the administration, transportation, education system, abolition of sati system and untouchability in India in their poems. In context with Colonial British-Indian poets, Thomas Francis Bignold translated a few Hindi nursery rhymes into simple English to lure the Indian students to learn English e.g. Hamti Damti chargaya chat;/ Hamti Damti girgaya phat;/ Raja ki paltan, Rani ke ghore/ Hamti Damti kabhi na jore” as “Humpty Dumpty sat on a wall,/ Humpty Dumpty had a great fall./ Not all the Queen’s horses,/ not all the King’s men/ could put Humpty Dumpty together again” (and many more) (Vernede 215).

These Colonial British-Indian poets apart from focusing on the themes of the exquisite beauty of India, the spiritual facet of India and the socio-cultural milieu of India also focused on the Britishers' life in India. They represented the distinctive imperial lifestyle which the Britishers relished in India. James Henry Burke in the poem "Days in the East," says that the British men lived like "Gods" in India and ruled it in "majesty and might" (Burke 56). A few poets in their poems represented the stress free professional life which majority of the British officers enjoyed in India. They state that the British men in India worked only for "three hours at most per day" and were given "Long annual vacations" with special "rates of pay" (Vernede 260-61). They have mentioned that the Britishers apart from drawing "bright rupees" as monthly salary in India got a hefty amount on retirement and also received "Eleven hundred pounds a year" as pension (Cheem 183). A few poets represented the comfortable and easy personal life which the Britishers enjoyed in India. They reveal that an average British family had thirteen to fourteen servants always at their disposal to do all the jobs. These Indian servants made the lives of the sahibs' full of ease, comfort and luxury whether these sahibs' were at home, in the office or on a hunting expedition. These Indian servants were a big support to the British women as well as they freed the memsahibs' from the duties of the house and the responsibilities of child rearing, so that they could freely indulge in plenty of gossip- centering on love, marriage, scandals, shopping and of course the natives who worked for them. R.V.Vernede, after returning to his homeland dedicated a poem titled "The Old-Koi Hai" to his Indian servants. He says in England

No butler staid in gold brocade
 To serve him with his grub;
 No khitmatgar to bring a cigar,
 Or fill the brown tobacco jar;
 No chauffeur now to wash his car,
 No sweeppress to scrub.
 No bhisti thin with glistening skin
 To fill his morning tub;
 No dhobi foots to iron his suits,
 No beaters to attend his shoots
 No bearer to remove his boots,
 Or give his back a rub.
 No fellow bore to share the floor,
 No crony at the pub;
 No boy around to feed the hound,
 No size to bring the pony round;
 No-one to meet on common ground
 and no-one left to snub (Vernede 261-62).

The Colonial British-Indian poets also reveal that as the Britishers had plenty of free time at their disposal some freely indulged in “reading, writing,” “hookah smoking,” “playing cards” or “socializing” (D’Oyly 3) whereas others enjoyed “horse riding,” “playing tom tom,” “hog hunting,” “Antelope shooting,” “polo,” “billiards,” “Dancing girls” and “extravagant parties” (Burke 64-69). These poets also disclose that during the summer, the Britishers shifted to the hill stations with their families and “a whole retinue of servants” (D’Oyly 4) and indulged there in private dances, dinners, theatres, concerts and gymkhanas.

Apart from denouncing and celebrating the Britishers’ life in India, the Colonial British-Indian poets in their poems also represented that there was a caste system prevalent amongst the Britishers are staying in India quite like the caste system in India. In which the member(s) of the topmost British Government service were the so-called heaven-born, occupying a social position equivalent to that of the Brahmins and were regarded as pukka Brahmins. In descending order were the military caste, the box-wallahs or businessmen and finally, the Eurasians, people of mixed blood analogous to the despised Hindu lower castes.

A few poets presented the plight of those British civil and military officers in their poems who were not permitted to get married until “they had moved a several rungs up the ladder of promotion. The British administration believed that ‘a wife and family would hinder the mobility of these officers who often had to travel across rough terrain with minimal equipment and so they would not be able to provide the comforts deemed necessary for a wife’” (Procida 31-32). Two poets namely Aliph Cheem and Charles D’Oyly have stated in their poems that by the time these officers were granted permission to get married, they use to be “around forty,” “high in service, rather yellow, and somewhat grey” but they were taken “special notice of” and were addressed as “young men” by the fellow Britishers. (Nevile 33) These poets in their poems also reveal that as these men amassed huge fortunes in India by the time they turned forty they were much sought after by the parents and guardians of marriageable daughters in Britain who sent their daughters to India in search of a suitable match. Aliph Cheem got so struck by this traffic of girls coming to India that he satirizes “the ambitious husband hunters” in the poem “I’m Going to Bombay” which begins:

By Pa and Ma I’m daily told
To marry now’s my time
For though I’m very far from old
I’m rather in my prime.
They say while we have any sun
We ought to make our hay-
And India has so hot at one
I’m going to Bombay (Cheem 169).

Cheem further adds that these girls were advised by their family not to marry anyone below the rank of a first class civil or military officer. Cheem satirizes this view point also in his poems where a girl says “I do believe in dress and ease/ And fashionable dash./ I do believe in bright rupees,/ And truly worship cash./ But I do believe that marrying/ An acting man is fudge;/ And so do not fancy anything/ Below a pucca judge” (Nevile 31).

The Colonial British-Indian poets used diverse poetic forms such as epic, mock-epic, ballad, mock heroic ballad, lyric, sonnet, ode, epigram, verse de societe, lampoon, chastuskhi, elegy, and varied poetic devices such as simile, metaphor, alliteration, anaphora, personification, enjambment, hypophora, rhetorical question, to name a few. To suit their content they adopted, deviated from and made modifications in the British forms of poetry for their own purposes. They also incorporated some components from Hindustani vocabulary, Sanskrit epithets, coined their own vocabulary and rhyme schemes, and exhibited a lot of ingenuity, variety and heterogeneity in the use of poetic forms and devices in their poems. However, much of this poetry was a product of the imaginations and pens of those Britishers who were not adept in composing verses, but a few poets such as William Jones, William Water field, Edwin Arnold and Rudyard Kipling, who possessed a significant literary background composed their poems in mature poetic style. A few poets, e.g. John Renton Denning, John Dunbar, Ella Doveton, William Francis Thomson and James Abbott, who did not possess sufficient literary merit, could not compose effective poems. Being fully aware of their poetic limitations and capabilities openly admitted it in their poems.

The poetical representations by the Colonial British-Indian poets about India during the Raj generated a lot of interest and curiosity among the British men and women in England. A few perceived India as a place full of “heat, solitude, anxiety, ill-health and never ending pain of separation from wife and children” (Parry 57). While others “at home” assumed “their countrymen’s life in India as luxurious, easy and satisfying” (Medwin 63) and declared India to them as “a lovely home away from home” (Ghosh xi). A few poets in their poems represented the different sentiments of those Britishers who had to leave India at the end of the British Empire in India. They write that some Britishers felt “delighted” as “this was what they had been working for, to hand over India” (Procida 217) whereas a few felt “Everybody in India is, more or less, somebody. It must be very sad change to go home to England and be (compared) poor and shabby, and certainly obscure” (Douglas 81). A few represented those who took ‘it not without regret/ and heartfelt sorrow’ for the next generation of young men and women who could now never have the enriching experience they had of the Raj (Vernede 252).

To conclude, this poetry shows that the representations made by the colonial British-Indian poets about India are not monolithic in nature. They are rather heterogeneous in nature and display the manifold and varied attitudes, perspectives and approaches of these poets towards India. In their poems, they have preserved “a few quaint pictures of an India that has passed away, and have shown an exuberant vitality that it might be our pride to recall” (Dunn xvi).

REFERENCES

1. *Boehmer, Elleke. Colonial and Postcolonial Literature: Migrant Metaphors. UK: Oxford University Press, 1995. Print.*
2. *Burke, James H. Days in the East: A Poem. LLC: Kesinger Publishing, 1842. Print.*
3. *Cheem, Aliph. Lays of Ind. London: Thacker, Spink and Co., 1905. Print.*
4. *D’Oyly, Charles. D. Tom Raw, The Griffin: A Burlesque Poem in Twelve Cantos. London: R. Ackermann, 1828. Print.*
5. *Douglas, O. Olivia in India. Project Gutenberg, 2004. Web. 23 Sept. 2011.*
6. *Dunn, Theodore D. Poets of John Company. Calcutta: Thaker, Spinker & Co., 1921. Print.*

7. Ghosh, Durba. *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2006. Print.
8. Haruda, Ashleigh. *A Reflection of Home Defining the Space of the Raj, 1857-1914*, diss. Mount Holyoke College. Massachusetts: South Hadley, 2006. Web. 21 June 2011.
9. Hope, Laurence. *India's Love Lyrics*. London: William Heinemann, 1902. Print.
10. Hutchinson, James. *The Pilgrim of India: An Eastern Tale and Other Poems*. London: William Pickering, 1847. Print.
11. James, Lawrence. *Raj: The Making and Unmaking of British India*. New York: Macmillan Publishers, 2000. Print.
12. Kabbani, Rana. *Imperial Fictions: Europe's Myths of Orient*. London: Pandora, 1994. Print.
13. McLeod, John. *Beginning Postcolonialism*. U.K: Manchester University Press, 2000. Print.
14. Medwin, C. "A Bengal Yarn". *New York: Ainsworth Magazine*, 1842. Web. 10 Jan. 2012.
15. Nevile, Pran. *Stories from the Raj*. New Delhi: India Log Publications Pvt Ltd., 2004. Print.
16. Parry, Benita, and Michael Sprinker. *Delusions and Discoveries: India in the British Imagination, 1880-1930*. USA: Verso Books, 1998. Print.
17. Prendergast, Christopher. *The Triangle of Representation*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2000. Print.
18. Procida, Mary A. *Married to the Empire: Gender, Politics and Imperialism in India, 1883-1947*. UK: Manchester University Press, 2002. Print.
19. Richardson, D. L. *Literary Chit- Chat: with Miscellaneous Poems*. London: J. Madden Publishers, 1848. Print.
20. Said, Edward W. *Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient*. UK: Routledge and Kegan Paul Ltd., 1978. Print.
21. Sinha, R. P. N. *The Birth and Development of Indo English Verse*. New Delhi: Dev Publishing House, 1971. Print.
22. Vernede, R. V, comp. and ed. *British Life in India: An Anthology of Humorous and other Writings perpetrated by the British in India, 1750-1950*. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999. Print.

