

**Dean Mahomet's *The Travels* :
Liminalities of Colonial Subjectivity and Early Diasporic
Imagination**

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The Travels (1794) by Dean Mahomet, “the first Indian author in English” (Fisher), in many respects documents India’s, the proto-nation’s, imaginative and intellectual responses in the context of its initial encounter with British imperialism. Besides, this travelogue in the epistolary format, which could be called as the earliest Indian diasporic literature, is a historical document that registers the colonial presence in India which was experienced as an ambivalent psycho-cultural reorientation by the natives of the subcontinent. In other words, *The Travels* portrays the beginning of the formation of the political notion of colonial subjectivity amongst the natives of India. As a literary and linguistic artefact, Mahomet’s *The Travels* becomes the first appropriation attempt, by a colonised native, on both the travelogue as the European genre and the English language as the imperial tongue. It is worthy to explore how he looked at Indians and Europeans through the eyes of an early colonized subject. He could also be called as the first emigrant Indian entrepreneur who caught the imagination of the West with Indian cosmetic therapeutic knowledge and oriental cuisine. This “soft conquest,” was nothing less than a rudimentary reverse cultural conquest of the Occident by the Orient. Mahomet’s travels also problematise the concept of “imagined communities” (Anderson) which was in embryonic state well before the formation of nation states with specific geographical boundaries. *The Travels* explores an exilic sensibility that began to form in Mahomet

on alien shores, though the political concept of India as a unified national territory was yet to take even its conceptual birth.

Mahomet always remained permanently on the borders of all sorts, often in no-man's-lands. The trajectories of his official, personal and intellectual forays display an amazing pattern. He began his journey as a subaltern officer in the colonial military apparatus in India (constantly moving from Delhi to Dacca to Madras to Calcutta). Then he became a coloured immigrant in the West (moving from Cork to London to Brighton experimenting with various professions). His next role was that of a pioneer diasporic entrepreneur of perplexing extremes (from running Hindoostanee [sic] coffee houses to Indian therapeutic cosmetic clinics). In the next phase, he experimented with his faith as a religious convert (from Islam to Protestant Christianity). As an individual too, Mahomet experienced mobility in between social classes (from the status of lower a class Indian to British elite). In his matrimonial affiliation also his was one of the earliest instances of an interracial marriage (a brown Indian marrying a White Briton). On the intellectual front, Mahomet dared to experiment with the choice of literary format for his personal reflections (*The Travels* is an autobiography-cum-travelogue) by intermixing the real with the imaginary in his travel accounts (along with his factual narrations, he often describes many places he never visited). And, in his early political allegiance also Mahomet frequently drifted apart refusing to confer any lasting allegiance to any form of power (moving from the nominally sovereign Mogul Emperor and to East India Company). This permanent sense of being a nomad is an essential attribute that qualifies one to become a travel-writer of literary impact and historical importance. Mahomet observed and experienced almost always the grey areas of personal, cultural, linguistic, literary, political and geographical *liminalities*. These properties make his travels an essential text in the contemporary postcolonial discursive paradigms. His representations of India, as historically he was a colonized subjectivity, were bound to infest with hegemonic ideologies of the imperia and the White race; but these things would not diminish the historical relevance of his writings. From a New Historicist perspective, through *The Travels* and *About Oriental and Western Scientific Medicine*, he was engaging himself in an essentially *poetic-act* (Hayden White) of writing History.

Din Mahomet's autobiographical epistolary travelogue functions as a preface to "the transformations he underwent after immigration—a linguistic shift from

Bengali, Hindustani, and Persian to English, a religious shift from a mixture of Islam and Hinduism to Protestant Christianity, and an occupational shift from subaltern soldier to house-hold manager, writer, restaurateur, and innovative physical therapist” (Dharwadker 94). In this context Mahomet’s representations of the East has to be evaluated along with the “Orientalist” (Saidian) representation of the East. This paper is an attempt to trace the liminalities of a colonized subjectivity in Mahomet vis-à-vis *The Travels*.

Mahomet’s reminiscent accounts of his journey through the land of his nativity, in the form of a series of 38 letters to an imaginary European friend, follow a perfect chronology, beginning from his birth in Patna in 1759 and finishing with his arrival at Dartmouth, Ireland, along with his mender Mr. Baker, in September 1784. *The Travels* is a nostalgic narration of Mahomet’s 25 years of Indian experience which he started recording in 1793 and finished in 1794. The very choice of the Self as the subject matter for his first book itself points to the very urge of a colonial subject to make himself/herself heard; and this urge intensified in Mahomet when he spent about ten years away from his homeland. He wanted an audience to listen to his nostalgic narration of his homeland and its people. He knew that his audience would mostly be anonymous upper-middle class British or Europeans who were already fascinated about the “orientalist” narrations of the East; so he addresses his letters to an imaginary anonymous British gentleman who “have been very anxious to be made acquainted with the early part of my [Mahomet’s] life” (Fisher, 1997: “Letter 1”). The invention of an imaginary reader is a creative excuse to tell the world something that is suffocating within one, but no one cares to ask about.

Mahomet’s individual experience in the West and his Eastern cultural legacy create the first fissure in the consciousness of his colonial subjectivity. Indirectly he begins with the recognition of ‘You’ and ‘Us,’ the difference between the orient and the occident. In the very long first sentence of *The Travels* itself this dualism is clearly identified and established. It is a vindication of the Indianness in him as well as an accusation of the Europeanisms which he experienced as a colonial subjectivity. He writes:

[...] and [I] must ingenuously confess, when I first came to Ireland, I found the face of everything about me so contrasted to those striking scenes in India, which we are wont to survey with a kind of sublime delight, that I felt some

timid inclination, even in the consciousness of incapacity, to describe the manners of my countrymen, who, I am proud to think, have still more of the innocence of our ancestors, than some of the boasting philosophers of Europe. (“Letter 1”)

Though the declared objective of *The Travels* is to describe “the merits of men, whose happy manners are worthy the imitation of civilized nations”, many a time Mahomet unwittingly ends up in drawing contrasts between England and India. Though his emigration to the west was not a forced one, his diasporic recollections reveal a deep sense of loss most often in the narrative, except when he describes the disciplined life in the Company’s military barracks back in India.

In his eagerness to provide a presentable picture of his native land, Mahomet invokes the romantic imagination where “the generous soil crowned with various plenty; the garden beautifully diversified with gayest flowers diffusing their fragrance on the bosom of the air, and the very bowels of earth enriched with inestimable mines of gold and diamonds” (*The Travels*, “Letter I”). He talks about a people who are united by an extraordinary sense of solidarity and fellow feeling. This imaginary, unified body of people is then pitted against western individualism that suffers from “profligacy of manners too conspicuous” (“Letter I”). It can’t be denied that Mahomet’s accounts of India provided enough materials for imagining distinct orientalist exotica by the European scholars later on. Surprisingly what was too conspicuously absent from Mahomet’s Travels is the inhumanity of the caste system prevailing in India for centuries. Mahomet’s elitism might not have allowed him to notice this widespread injustice inflicted on the lower castes and outcastes. Whenever he speaks about the tribes, who often resisted the movements of the company battalions through their guerrilla tactics, he treats them as thugs whose only business is to loot people. Mahomet even revels in his descriptions of the punishment given to the forest dwellers by the conquerors. This class affiliation of Mahomet is further noticed in his frequent and elaborate descriptions of the evening parties and revelries organised in the palaces of Nawabs and Rajas. In such descriptions he seems to sport the perspective of an insider who too is involved in the world of luxury and splendour unmindful of the poverty and deprivation prevailing right outside the tall walls of their city fortresses. In fact of the 38 letters he wrote, not less than five are dedicated for the description of such oriental parties and royal parades.

A journey through *The Travels* makes it difficult to subscribe to Fisher's (1998) submission that "Dean Mahomet regarded the royal weakness of many of India's rulers—both the Mughal emperor and his nominal subordinates, the regional rulers—as one of the prime causes of the commercial and political advances of the English Company" (910). Rather than their luxurious lifestyles, during the descriptions of which Mahomet takes an erotic pleasure, Mahomet's implication for the fall of the Indian rulers would be the interprovincial distrust and internal feuds. The disciplined, well-trained, better-equipped, properly-supplied company army often faced only a short-lived or weak resistance from the armies of the local elites. So, Mahomet's travels throughout north India are nothing but the story of the British conquest of India. Many times it is felt that, the company had hired an embedded journalist to record its military exploits through the body of the large nation, "where he watched the area slowly succumb to the might of the British East India Company" (Bartlett, 2007: 8). However, the intellectual ambivalence of a colonial subjectivity forces Mahomet to sport a cultural affiliation to the traditional practices of his homeland as well as an individual admiration to the colonial systems of early modernity that reached him through his exposure to the barrack life. As Fisher says:

[Mahomet] saw the English Company, and especially its army, in contrast, as generally imposing order on this political system and defending Indian society from lawless elements within it. Nevertheless this army also occasioned destructive violence against just Indian rulers and innocent villagers. This differentiation from both his natal culture and that of the British whom he served reflected the problematic location of many Indians who, like him, served the British but harked back to traditions of service to Indian rulers. Dean Mahomet, by leaving India and settling in colonial Ireland, added yet another element to this complex position, a position which he articulated directly for and Anglophone audience" (1998: 911).

The Travels, as a literary piece, diverges from the European literary tradition. Mahomet's simultaneous adaptation of the Victorian literary format, largely 'objective' descriptions of a travelogue, and his frequent departures from traditions attached to the format makes it an autobiographical account too. So there is a deliberate intermixing of genres happening here. "There are puzzles too about *The Travels*. They are written in the polished English that Dean Mahomet had mastered by 1794 and in conventional epistolary form. Some of the content is also travel book materials... Yet he departs from his models in his determination to present 'the

manners of my countrymen' in a favourable light" (Marshall 174). Though modelled on his contemporary Jamima Kindersley's *Letters from the Island of Tenerife and the East Indies* (1777), "What makes *The Travels* significant is the fact that it shows how the author, a colonial 'outsider' in the metropolitan West, appropriates the rational Enlightenment culture of the Europeans [...] without abandoning a marvellously affectionate affiliation to his native culture and countrymen" (Sil 206).

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