

The Burden of Imagination: Mapping the Centre through the Colonised Gaze



A. Rahman*

University of Virginia, USA

Abstract

The relationship between travelling activities and travel narratives is obvious and profound as they are generically intertwined. The act of travelling ushers in fresh narratives and reframes, reinterprets existing narratives of a given time and space. However, the act of reframing, reinventing and/ or cross-cultural understating happens in a way where existing, personal and collective information or spatial imagination plays a pivotal role as no travel activity happens in an 'informational vacuum'. Englishness, as it was systematically displayed and represented in colonial India, was very much politically coded and culturally charged and had always been aided by English literature. This article explores how and to what extent, based on their literary acquaintances, Indian travellers created an imaginary space and invested meaning on the rhetoric of England in general and Englishness in particular. It also explores the ways through which literary representation of Englishness was closely linked with the colonial enterprise which effectively created an illusion about the Mother Country in front of its colonial subjects. And, how such an illusion eventually made almost impossible for the colonised Indian traveller to 'see' and narrate geographical and cultural terrain of imperial Britain, rather than being haunted by their rich, concomitant images drawn from an already familiar literary imaginary.

Introduction

In 1935, Professor Sunitikumar Chatterjee, the famous linguist, was travelling to Europe to attend two international conferences on Phonology and Indology as a representative of Calcutta University, the former conference being held in London and the latter in Rome. It was his second voyage to Europe since his return journey in 1922, after finishing his doctorate degree from the University of London. After an overnight stay at Port Said, in Africa, the ship was heading towards Port Brindisi, in Europe. By the time the ship reached the midpoint between Greece and Italy on the Mediterranean Sea, Chatterjee had done something very unusual.

* Dr A. Rahman, Lecturer, South Asian Faculty, Department of Middle Eastern and South Asian Languages and Cultures, University of Virginia, PO Box 400781, MESA, B-27 New Cabell Hall, Charlottesville, Virginia, 22904, USA, Phone: 434-924-3488 Email: ar3by@virginia.edu

He had offered to the sea, on behalf of his poet friend, a book of poetry authored by the latter that Chatterjee had been carrying all the way from Calcutta. As the poet himself had viewed it, the act symbolised a reverential offering to Western civilisation from one of its Eastern admirers. That is why, in his forwarding note the poet had written, *'To the Mediterranean, Mother of Modern Civilisation, and the Creator of Human Destiny'* (Chatterjee, 1965: 33).

The admiration for the West in general – as evident from the above mentioned act – and Britain in particular, widely prevalent among educated Indians was a unique product of contemporary colonial education and imperial cultural hegemony. Britain in this discourse represented a glorified space, the home of modern civilisation, and the torchbearer of emancipation. This article explores the role played by English literature in shaping the Indian imagination in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, and the ways in which such an imagination framed in turn the outlook of those travelling to Britain during that period. In that sense, I argue, Indians actually 'saw' the imperial centre through their literary and not physiological eyes, layering their actual experiences with rich, concomitant images drawn from an already familiar literary imaginary. Not surprisingly, such expectations as the travellers carried with them could not always be matched in real life, leading to a breakdown of the literary imagination, and prompting more sober and grounded re-evaluations of their self and community.

Even long before the British presence in India, there was an indeterminate collective imagination of Europe in the Indian mind. In the early seventeenth century, Britain and Britons had been judged and accepted by Indians in the light of existing information about the other European nations, who ventured into India much earlier than the British (Raychaudhuri, 1992: 158-159). As Indians themselves rarely travelled to Britain or Europe, except an insignificant number of sailors employed by European merchant ships, such ideas remained vague and untested. From the later part of the seventeenth century and the outset of the eighteenth, however, a few Indians had the opportunity to see Britain for themselves. They were the early subaltern travellers, comprised of ayahs, lascars and soldiers as well as the courtly elite, travelling to Britain for business or pleasure. By the nineteenth century, the initial trickle of visitors had swollen to a steady stream to include students, intellectuals and the leisured classes most of whom were travelling to Britain in search of a dream, to visit the land of the 'bard' and see for themselves the grandeur of London.

A key factor in the construction of such fantasy was the role played by English literature in India. Having sufficiently acquainted themselves with and been inspired by English literature and art, the nineteenth century English-educated colonised Indian travellers when they came to Britain, brought with them tremendous expectations about the Mother Country. The texts I examine here¹ suggest that the geographical space of Britain was not an unfamiliar terrain as it was already known to the travellers. England to them as some have admitted was as familiar as if it were the next village to their home.² Throughout their sojourn therefore, rather than making sense of what they were confronted with, the travellers relentlessly chased their literary illusions.

Roger Ebbatson has showed how English literature successfully moved imperial margins outwards by popularising the concept of an imaginary England that contributed greatly in

constituting the idea of the Mother Country. He argues that such a politics of representation was closely linked to the imperial territorial expansionism that conversely drew the marginalised inwards, although the question of their belonging to the Mother Country was always undetermined (Ebbatson, 2005). In a similar vein, but from a different perspective, John Brewer showed how the commercialisation of the publishing industry helped disseminate reproductions of eighteenth century British paintings all over the world. These reproductions, Brewer argues, were commercialised and consumed by a rapidly expanding urban populace which reshaped the visual idiom Britain's representation both at home as well as in the colonies (Brewer, 1997).

The role of literature in the production of the colonial imagination has been critically analysed by many scholars.³ But, as far as Indian travellers to Britain are concerned, how and in what ways the literary representation of England and Englishness shaped the travelling gaze have not been sufficiently examined. Most scholars like Simonti Sen record the Indian desire to emulate Englishmen and imbibe a certain 'Englishness' in dress and habits, without further analysis of the ways in which Indian experiences in Britain represented a fulfilment of literary expectations (Sen, 2005: 93). Here I am interested in the functionality of the Western literary representation that inspired and guided Indian travellers to formulate their perceptions of the West. The gaze that Indian travellers employed in perceiving the West was idealised according to English literary representations of the West. Therefore, in order to perceiving the West, Indian travellers used the Western canon, and the West was viewed through the Western prism or as the West wanted to be viewed by others.

Indian Travel Writings: Reframing Britain

Following the founding of the East India Company in 1600, the first ship sailed from England towards India on 2 May, 1601. After several misfortunes, the voyage ended on Indian shores in 1608 to initiate one of the most significant phases in Indian history, culture and literary production. Initially, interaction between the British and Indians were confined to the royal courts and business communities. According to Kenneth Jones, '[f]rom the early seventeenth through the mid-eighteenth centuries, extremely limited forms of cultural interaction had existed between the English merchants and South Asian society' (Jones, 1989: 25). However, it is certain from the narratives of early English travellers or commissioned-explorers that the English had left an indelible impact on Indian society.⁴ Meanwhile, the East India Company had started recruiting Indians, (Visram, 2002: 3) and it did not take long before it had started hiring Indian seamen and soldiers, sailors and *native* servants making it possible for Indians to travel to England. These subaltern people were some of the earliest travellers to Europe from India and among the very first to experience Britain so intimately.

However, the early '[t]ravellers', as Billie Melman suggests, though her observations are in the context of the Middle East, 'regardless of sex, or class or education did not operate in an informational vacuum' (Melman, 1995: 63). They must have known something about the country they were travelling to, regardless of the reliability of the information. However, it is well known that early subaltern travellers often ended up with terrible experiences in Britain, especially when they were refused finance legitimately due to them for the return

passages to India. Thus, through the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, several hundreds of Indian servants or slaves came back to India with bitter memories of being abandoned by their master or mistress. The oral narratives of these early travellers initially attracted private audiences⁵ but later also became available in the public domain in the form of newspaper reports and memoirs that effectively extended the Indian collective imagination of Britain (Hickey, 1925: 150-51; Visram, 2002: 14-24; Fisher, 1997: 145).

The subalterns' were not the only experience of Britain. Many early travellers to Britain got back to India as virtual celebrities and experts owing to their first hand knowledge about a European nation.⁶ Through their voyages, these people had seemingly attained an unchallenged right to speak about the British and their country. These narratives about Britain its topography, lifestyle, food habits, moral values and so on acted as a snowball, interacting with reality, imagination and expectation, and unleashing different kinds of imaginative thresholds for their audiences. Before this, arguably the Indian imagination about Britain had been limited and linear, closely following the systematic self-representation of Englishness in India. But henceforth, it became more evidently discursive with Indian travellers seizing the opportunity to formulate their own interpretation about Britain and Britons at home.

Indians travelling to Britain in the eighteenth century were also simultaneously engaged in negotiating the images of Indians themselves in Britain. The processes were invariably interlinked. Mirza Abu Taleb Khan thus recorded (Khan, 1972: 20) a long list of possible adversities to be faced by the Indian travellers in Britain and suggested how to deal with them: '[f]or the benefit of my countrymen who may be inclined to travel, I shall here relate a few of the hardships and mortifications which I endured,... in hopes that they will take warning by my sufferings, and derive some advantage from my experience.' Among them, he listed neglect from 'even the servants', 'the impossibility of [physical] purification', 'tyranny or rudeness' of neighbours, 'abusive language' and the like. Such experiences constituted definite interventions in the processes of imagining Britain for Indians.

Inspired by the precedence of the eighteenth century accounts, the tradition of writing and reading travelogues on Britain gradually emerged in India and eventually reframed the collective imagination on Britain. Although it is impossible to determine what size of readership the travelogues attracted, the emergence of the genre itself proves that the periphery had started to make its own interpretations about the centre, which posed considerable challenges to the hitherto unilateral British self-representations in India.

Abu Taleb's experiences were echoed by another traveller, Lala Baijnath, an ICS officer who mostly worked in the Judicial Department of India. Lala encountered two distinct responses to his presence in imperial Britain in the nineteenth century. The first came from 'Londoners who had no interest in India' and were 'naturally shy and formal towards a stranger' and 'some of them, particularly the female[s] ..., now and then stared at Indian dresses' (Baijnath, 1893: 39). The other was expressed by those 'who had been in India [and] seemed to take a pleasure in speaking' to Indians in their 'broken or half-forgotten Hindustani' to emphasise their powerful colonial connections. Lala Baijnath met one Englishman at a railway station in London who came forward to him and introduced himself "*Ham Bengal*

General Sahib tha,” i.e., I was a General [sahib] in Bengal – laying great stress upon the word *Sahib*’ (Baijnath, 1893: 38). The added emphasis on Sahib, as Baijnath suggests, underlay the loaded nature of relationship between Indians and Britons where Indians will always be considered as colonised subjects and Britons as their masters, no matter how different the situation – an uncannily astute observation that carries currency in other comparable contexts. West Indians as late as the mid twentieth century recorded similar experiences:

When a [West Indian] makes up his mind that he is going to Britain, he... expects the British people to be exactly like the colonial officials and missionaries he might have encountered in the Caribbean. He believes he ought to be accepted, and his being a British subject is reason enough. The first disappointment is that the British at home are unmindful of the Commonwealth (Hinds, 1966: 35).

Colonised Imagination: British Self-Representations and English Education

Through the battle of Plassey [1757], the East India Company had entered into a new era of Indian history. Their changing status, from a trading to a colonial power, not only made Englishmen *superior* to the Indians in political life but also pushed the *natives* squarely towards a mental state of abject subjugation (Jones, 1989: 25). It is evident in a huge spate of writings from Milton to E. M. Forster, which relentlessly declared British superiority over the colonial subjects not just in India, but all over the world.⁷ Over the years, English writings established such a privileged position for Britain that even the ‘poorest coloniser thought himself to be...superior to the colonized’ (Memmi, 1965: xii). This imperial social grammar and mind-set in turn, were absorbed by the colonised mind, thus imprisoning it ‘as securely as chains imprison the body’ (McLeod, 2000: 21).

The Trinidadian writer Sam Selvon, who had grown up under British colonial rule, recalled in his 1979 lecture how when he was a child, a partly paralysed Indian angler, Sammy, used to come to his street for hawking and children used to ridicule him for his distorted figure. One day Sammy brought a white assistant on his round. Selvon admits he felt sympathy and dismay for the white man and at the same time utter annoyance to Sammy for deploying a white man in such an indecent work. This anecdote, according to Sam Selvon, exemplifies how a child had learnt to regard a white man in the colonial context:

When one talks of colonial indoctrination, it is usually about oppression or subjugation, or waving little Union Jacks on Empire Day and singing ‘God Save the King’. But this gut feeling I had as a child, that the Indian was just a piece of cane trash while the white man was to be honoured and respected – where had it come from? I don’t consciously remember being brainwashed to hold this view either at home or at school (Selvon, 1989: 211).

Through this process then, which John McLeod calls ‘colonising the mind’, (McLeod, 2000: 18) the subject people underwent a deep indoctrination, in Selvon’s case deeper than he had thought, from where it was impossible to gaze at the coloniser as an equal. Indian travellers could hardly be an exception.

The imaginary status that was bestowed by Indians on Britain had been distilled from many related ideas and rhetoric. English education, which had dug its roots in India from the early nineteenth century onwards, had successfully created an illusion about Englishness and the West as a whole. English language and literature, as Rajeswari Sunder Rajan and Braj B. Kachru argue, was a means for colonised Indians to connect with the imperial power (Sunder Rajan, 1986: 23-35; Kachru, 1986: 7-13). But that connection, according to Gauri Viswanathan, was systematically designed and executed as teaching English literature was a vehicle of implementing imperial ideology in colonial India (Viswanathan, 1990: 43).

The Hindu College was the first western style educational institute to be built in India in 1817. Despite an initial controversy between the supporters [Anglicists] and opposers [Orientalists] of English education in India, nobody denied the need for and appropriateness of such education in nineteenth century Bengal.⁸ The Anglicists won in the end and its initial impact was seismic in its proportions. A group called Young Bengal, mostly graduated from the Hindu College, not only eagerly embraced the English way of life but also created much social anarchy by publicly drinking liquor and eating food, forbidden for Hindus. These 'cultural radicals', under the guidance of the famous orator and teacher of Hindu College, Henri Louis Vivian Derozio [1809-31], says Kenneth Jones, 'viciously attacked Hindu religion and society' (Jones, 1989: 29). The impact on contemporary Bengal was tremendous, and shook its social foundation to the roots. The faith in the munificence of English education had to be built more gradually and cautiously, and through the efforts of reformers, educationists and officials, Bengalis eventually began to warm to it. The number of students in Hindu College gradually increased and upper class Hindus took lead in sending their boys in Hindu College.

The reasons behind the growing popularity of the English education in India were varied and complex. By 1817 when Hindu College was established in Calcutta, Britain had already secured its position, at least militarily, throughout the subcontinent. The political and administrative superiority of Britain over India undoubtedly played a vital role in making people believe in English education. Besides the associated job prospects in an economy that fostered only the service professions for Indians, were obvious. People's aspirations were heightened and the upper caste Bengali Hindus, moved ahead in the process of attaining English education compared to their peer groups. In previous generations individuals from these same groups had mastered Persian to gain employment under the Mughal and post-Empire Muslim rulers. Now they learned English (Jones, 1989: 28).

The colonisers, for their part, firmly believed that 'English [wa]s the study of [English] culture and not simply the study of language' (Viswanathan, 1990: 3). After the Charter Act of 1833 and the English Education act of 1835, it became clear that colonial administrators believed that the more Anglicised Indian society and the Indian collective mind was the better it was for colonial rule. At one level, the teaching of English had a practical use for office hands. But, as Trevelyan and Macaulay believed, it was also an opportunity to impart moral teaching to colonised people through the agency of literature, and help reorder the Indian collective mind.

Under the supervision of British educationists school syllabi were designed in such a way that it ensured first and foremost: 'the prevention of situations leading to political disunity or lawlessness' (Viswanathan, 1990: 75). Literary texts for high school and college students were selected 'on the basis of the religious and moral ideas reflected in them' (Kumar 1991: 62). Texts and examination questions also played a pivotal role in developing congenial student mindsets, as Gauri Viswanathan shows (Viswanathan, 1990: 54). English literary, historical and philosophical works inculcated a deep sense of British imperial superiority and examination questions corroborated the idea. College students were thus asked to write essays in their examinations on the topics such as: 'On the disadvantages of Caste, and the benefits of its abolition', 'On the Merits of Christianity, and the Demerits of Hinduism', 'The Advantages India derives in regard to commerce, security of property, and the Diffusion of knowledge, from its Connexion with England,' and 'The Diffusion of Knowledge through the Medium of the English Language in India' (Viswanathan, 1990: 136).

Needless to say, those topics were not benign, and had far more sinister intentions than apparent. By asking students to respond to those issues, the authorities were in fact encouraging students to be critical about Indian socio-religious and cultural practices while conversely warming them to English ways of thinking and culture. Gauri Viswanathan has demonstrated how the students' response to these questions clearly underline the growing emergence of an unconditional admiration for all things British - from the parliamentary system and rule of law to intellectual activities and literature (Viswanathan, 1990: 136-141). Nobinchunder Dass, a student at Hooghly College, Calcutta was thus asked to respond on 'The Effects upon India of the New Communication with Europe by means of Steam,' wherein he compared British rule in India to the Roman invasion in Britain. The use of steam, he said, will help the English to govern India with great prudence and vigilance:

The English are to us what the Romans were to the English; and as the English are the children of modern times, and command more resources and power than the Romans, we derive the greater advantage. The facility afforded to communication by the use of steam has enabled the English to govern our country with great prudence and vigilance, they do not appear to be at any time at the risk of forbearing in the glorious work which they have commenced, of improving the native mind and condition, but prosecute it with honour to themselves and favour to their subjects, till they are styled the regenerators of India.⁹

It is of great interest to note that the nineteenth century ordinary college student's voice was echoed, arguably in even more subservient way, by a twentieth century intransigent Anglophile, Nirad C. Chaudhuri, in 1955, eight years after India had won freedom. Chaudhuri took his admiration even further while he determined his cultured position in Indian society:

As an Indian of the ordinary type I am not ashamed to say that if I am to be anything of an Englishman at all, I would rather be an imitation of Jeeves, the manservant, than of his gentleman master. We stand nowhere in regard to England if we give up things like [English] literature. Neither the racehorse, nor cricket and football, nor even whisky, on which greater reliance is often placed, can be an adequate substitute....It is not for us to say that blood is thicker than water. The only ties felt in the heart that we can have with England are those

created by things of the mind. The Englishmen who did their best to break those ties have lost the Indian Empire, and the Indians who allowed them to do so are the most bored or querulous set of foreigners who visit England (Chaudhuri, 1989: 16).

Chaudhuri has shown in his travelogue how Britain was to him very much a known space, with such familiarity occasionally acquiring bizarre proportions. Thus, out on the streets of London for the first time, Chaudhuri instructed the cab driver like a veteran Londoner, much to the latter's surprise. What further baffled the cabbie was that some landmarks that Chaudhuri mentioned no longer existed. These had either been demolished or bombed during the World War II. At Oxford while walking from the railway station to his hotel, by 'catching sight of a line of low hills to the south', he readily recognised that the line was Cumnor Hills. He had read an intimate description of the Oxford landscape in Matthew Arnold, and thus found no problem in recognising those landmarks (Chaudhuri, 1989: 15). In Chaudhuri's words England was as real as the 'the sky above ... [his] head' in his 'remote ancestral East Bengal village' (Mukhopadhyay, 2002: 293).

Equipped with such hyper-real images many Indians, like Lala Baijnath we saw earlier, when standing at the footsteps of the Tower of London, saw before them a vision reflected from the inner most recesses of their minds, re-invoking from their school days entrenched images when they knew 'so much' about these things, in the Lala's case this being the Tower of London (Baijnath, 1893: 23).

An analogy can again be drawn with the Caribbean situation. Donald Hinds writes how English education played a pivotal role in the lives of Caribbean people and how London became more 'real' than the ports and villages that lay nearby (Hinds, 1966: 17). Over the years like the Indian educated youths, Caribbeans too started fantasising about Britain. Through 'the classic novels, history primers and geography texts, the school syllabi presented a gallery of triumphalistic images – Big Ben, Nelson's Column, the Houses of Parliament – all monuments signalling a lofty and noble past, concrete reminders that England was a land fit for heroes, the home of democracy' (Sandhu , 2003: 185). The Barbadian writer Austin Clarke recalls: 'In the classes at Combermere we were taught that the best things were made by the English'. These included clothes, books, pencils, book bags, tortoiseshell combs, medicines, neckties, perfume, and the 'brilliantine which made our heads shine, slicked back, concealing the African kink in our hair' (Clarke, 1980: 50-51).

Travelling To Britain: An English Pilgrimage

Growing up under the wings of Englishness in the colony, by the mid-nineteenth century, there were hardly any Indians, especially English-educated Indians, who had not longed to travel to Britain. Their strong desires are symbolised in the following extract from Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi's *Autobiography*. After a long tussle with the impending prospect of social and religious transgression implicated in the forbidden crossing of the seas, when Gandhi's family finally decided to send him to England, for young Gandhi, it seemed like a dream come true:

Joshiji [a friend of Gandhi-family] – turned to me with complete assurance, and asked: ‘Would you not rather go to England than study here?’ Nothing could have been more welcome to [me]. ...So I jumped at the proposal and said that the sooner I was sent the better. ...Joshiji went away, and I began building castles in the air. ...I dreamt continually of going to England’ (Gandhi,1927: 26-29).

No doubt such enthusiasm can be partly explained by growing aspirations among the English educated youths in India for getting a higher degree from Britain, which most of the time was a guarantee of higher posts in the Indian Civil Service or lucrative private practice [for doctors and barristers]. Nevertheless, parallel to their worldly success, social recognition and honour were immense as the ‘England returned’ represented a unique social category.

The longing for travelling to Britain among the British-educated youths can be discerned through the life style and other activities of one of the later representatives of the Young Bengal, Michael Madhusudan Dutt, the famous Bengali poet who dramatically embraced Christianity in 1843. So that he may travel to Britain to train in being a great poet in the English language. Dutt had always expressed his longing through his early poems for England. According to Dutt, it was the place ‘Where virtue dwells and heaven-born liberty/ Makes ever the lowest happy’ and where he wished to live and die: ‘There let me live and there let me die’ (Dutt, 1956: 449).

Even as late as the twentieth century the fantasy of Britain had not completely faded away. Debaprasad Sarbadhikari wrote in the introduction to his travel narrative how he, like many of his peers, was inspired by the travel narratives on Britain written by Indians and how his school days were filled with a romantic imagination of Britain. Sarbadhikari writes:

During those days the students were more inspired by Romeshbabu’s [Romesh Chundar Dutt, one of the earliest ICS officers] book than by the travels of Gulliver or Robinson Crusoe. Washington Irvine’s ‘Sketch Book’ was at one time on the list of text books –...[and] when late Nilmani Chakraborty, the famous teacher of Hare School used to recite in his bass voice from Irvine’s Voyage and Shoals of Porpoises, a fascinating picture was impressed upon minds of the students, most of whom were livened by the dream of a tour to England (Sarbadhikari, 1920: 1-2).

Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi’s host in Britain Dr. P. J. Mehta, at the outset of his sojourn, reminded him that Indian students ‘come to England not so much for the purpose of studies as for gaining experience of English life and customs’ (Gandhi, 1927: 33). Travelling to Britain, according to some others, was nothing less than a *pilgrimage*. ‘There is a visitor’s book kept [at Shakespeare’s birth place, Stratford-On-Avon]’ writes Rakhil Das Haldar, ‘and I wrote in it my name – ‘a pilgrim from the far Ind’ (Haldar, 1903: 82). In conformity with nineteenth century educated aspirations, Lala Baijnath too starts his travelogue by saying that:

It is now-a-days the ambition – the dream of every educated Indian, to pay a visit to the home of his rulers, to those lands of civilization and liberty of which he has read so much, or which he wishes his own country to come up to' (Baijnath, 1893: 1).

The word *dream* echoes in many Indian travel writings when the authors were expressing their *raison d'être* of coming to England. T. Ramakrishna thus declared that 'to visit England was the dream' (Ramakrishna, 1915: 1) of his life, while Beramji Malabari admittedly fulfilled his 'youthful dreams' by travelling to Britain.

It is interesting to contrast the homilies paid to the English people in the nineteenth century travelogues with the more robust self-positioning of the earlier Indian travellers. Thus, Mirza Sheikh I'tesamuddin who had worked all along with the East India Company and travelled to Britain in 1765 with his British companion Captain Swinton, referred unequivocally to the British as both his 'employer' and 'friend' (I'tesamuddin, 2002: 17) At best the earlier travellers saw themselves as native allies to the East India Company. In contrast, Lala Baijnath, who worked for the North-West Province Judicial Service and travelling in 1890, more than a hundred and twenty five years later than Sheikh I'tesamuddin, calls England 'The Home of my Masters' (Baijnath, 1893: 21). The progress of the colonisation process in the intervening period had certainly left its mark.

There was a vital difference between the eighteenth and nineteenth century travellers in general. The eighteenth century travellers' pre-visit imagination about Britain had been constituted of available scraps of oral narratives of early subaltern travellers' and a variety of eclectic formulations of British self-representation in India. Except Dean Mahomet,¹⁰ most of the eighteenth century travellers had a nodding acquaintance with English literature because of their linguistic inability. Unlike the late nineteenth or twentieth century travellers, they or other Indians had never set sail to Britain before to put to test what they had learnt through English literature taught at their schools, colleges and universities. For them, Britain was still a relatively unknown place regarding which they did not have any definite expectation. The huge canon of English writings on English literature, philosophy and history that they had been exposed to on the other hand, burdened the later travellers heavily with expectations that were not always compatible with their first hand experiences of British society. As such, their journeys were very much in the nature of a hunt for an illusion.

The extent to which English literature, particularly, informed their imagination is astounding. Like the photographer's lens, prior knowledge of the English terrain – its flora and fauna, its parks and gardens, its historic locations or sign-posts and heroes – incessantly framed the experiences of the nineteenth century travellers. When Sibnath Shastri, famous Bengali preacher of Brahma Samaj, heard the skylark's whistle for the very first time in his life, he was instantly reminded of Shelley's 'Ode to a Skylark'. Another traveller, Debesh Das, a well known novelist and poet of Bengali, who travelled in Britain just before the World War II, was haunted by the literary images he was already so familiar with. It is evident that from the very beginning of his travel narratives that Das was looking to match the literary images that he had in his mind.

Not even for a day did this England appear new to me. Nor indeed did I feel a stranger. The English village green of my imagination, the village of Thomas Hardy, the smiling village of the May festival with its maples and poplars fitted in exactly with what I discovered here. I had acquaintance with this village through pages of literature. Here the sun shines but does not burn. Nature smiles but does not frown. Here, like the pastoral shepherd, I shall enjoy the perfect bliss the smell of the gorse under the greenwood tree and hum a song....

Lying in the hay all day

I feel as lazy as the hazy summer day.

Here indeed I shall watch with joy how Nature warms up under the tender kisses of the sun and shall realise under its mellow rays how Charles Lam could 'feel ripening with the orangery' (Das, 1956: 10-11).

For travellers like Das and Chaudhury, geographical space was only a necessary route for making their literary images true. It was a process of encountering imperial space through what Chaudhuri calls 'visual evocation [of] English literature' (Chaudhuri, 1989: 23). Debesh Das's visit to Edinburgh can be seen as a case in point.

During his Edinburgh tour, Das relentlessly sought out images that he could fuse together from the works of Walter Scott. For him, Princes Street, the Castle of Edinburgh and the villages of Scotland were fascinating not because of their natural beauty or geographical location but because of Scott's writings. And, for Das, the whole experience of Scotland was nothing but an authentication of Scott's descriptions that he knew like the back of his hand:

I started moving about in the border area with Edinburgh as headquarters. I would consider the whole of the border as Scott's country, because it is his pen which has made it so romantic and full of life. The country and the scenery we get in his description remain still the same though the human beings of that lovable age are no more. The ruins of Melrose Abbey are still there. The same still and sad beauty in which Scott saw it in the Lay of the Last Minstrel remains still the same. But the magician Michael Scott cannot be found there any more (Das, 1956: 11).

Similarly, while travelling to the Isle of Skye, Das tried to match images with descriptions of the Scottish Highland that he read in Wordsworth's poem 'The Solitary Reaper' (Das, 1956: 23). On a return journey from the Fairy Island in Loch Maree, while the boat was almost capsized by an unexpected storm, instead of panicking, incredulously, he chose to recite from Campbell's 'Lord Ullin's Daughter' (Das, 1956: 23).

I am not suggesting that the experience stated above was generic. Each traveller experienced the imperial centre in their own way even though almost all travelled in the same decade of nineteenth century. Rabindranath Tagore, the great Bengali poet and later Nobel Laureate, came for the first time to Britain in 1878, while M. K. Gandhi, the great Indian nationalist leader reached Britain in 1888. Both Gandhi and Tagore, had come to Britain for they had been called to the Bar. Gandhi eventually managed to finish his studies but Tagore did not find any point attending the class lectures on British and Roman law. Instead, he busied himself visiting art galleries, hobnobbing with young litterateurs and taking lessons in ballet and English music.¹¹ These two eminent Indians had perceived

Britain very differently. Tagore's perceptions of Britain were very much through the eyes of a poet and artist, informed as he was of the glories of creative England. But as he tried to explore and authenticate his mental images, he was disappointed. Tried as hard as he might, Tagore was unable to find the imaginary Britain that he had constituted through his reading of English literature and philosophy in his subconscious mind. In his *real* life explorations, he found Britain failing him as it was more mundane than he had imagined.

Like a fool I expected that this small island would reverberate with Gladstone's oratory, Max-Müller's discourse on the Vedas, Tyndall's scientific theories, Carlyle's deep thoughts and Bain's philosophy. But, I have been disappointed. Women here are slaves of fashion, men are busy with their work, and things go on as usual with the exception of some occasional furore about politics (Tagore, 1881: 803).

Similar to Tagore, Gandhi's restless desire to travel to England too was met with considerable disappointment and the difficulties of being in a 'strange' land. For Gandhi '[e]verything was strange – the people, their ways, and even their dwellings' (Gandhi, 1927: 33) He never felt like 'one of them'. Even when he was living with an English family he felt 'more or less like living in a boarding house' (Gandhi, 1927: 211). The cultural variances seemed to him infallible and unavoidable. However, like other Indian students of that time, he learnt to cope with the alien culture, food and especially with British cooking. In his gruelling attempt 'to become polished' and belong to 'polite society', he even undertook the 'impossible task of becoming an English gentleman'. Gandhi provides a very vivid and touching account of this angst haunting educated Indians in Britain at this time, which I am tempted to quote at length here:

The clothes after the Bombay cut that I was wearing were, I thought, unsuitable for English society, and I got new ones at the Army and Navy stores. I also went in for a chimney-pot hat costing nineteen shillings – and excessive price in those days. Not content with this, I wasted ten pounds on an evening suit made in Bond Street, the centre of fashionable life in London; and got my good and noble hearted brother to send me a double watch-chain of gold. It was not correct to wear a ready-made tie and I learnt the art of tying one for myself. While in India, the mirror had been a luxury permitted on the days when the family barber gave me a shave. Here I wasted ten minutes every day before a huge mirror, watching myself arranging my tie and parting my hair in the correct fashion. ...Each time the hat was put on and off, the hand would automatically move towards the head to adjust the hair, not to mention the other civilized habit of the hand every now and then operating for the same purpose when sitting in polished society. As if all this were not enough to make me look the thing, I directed my attention to other details that were supposed to go towards the making of English gentleman (Gandhi, 1927: 37-38).

Beset with many other things including hair style, and the 'Bombay cut' dress, Gandhi recounts his experience of becoming 'an English gentleman':

I directed my attention to other details that were supposed to go towards the making of an English gentleman. I was told it was necessary for me to take lessons in dancing, French and elocution. ...I decided to take dancing lessons at a class and paid down £3 as fees for a term. I

must have taken about six lessons in three weeks. But it was beyond me to achieve anything like rhythmic motion. ...I thought I should learn to play the violin in order to cultivate an ear for Western music (Gandhi, 1927: 37-38).

The mission of being 'civilised' was not an easy job for the travellers. The centre was not really welcoming to its peripheral subjects as the latter thought it ought to be. The subject was required to 'blot out completely memories of youth ...to forget, to reject the past' (Hinds, 1966: 1-2) of oneself, as part of the civilising process, a task that proved difficult. Gandhi's host in Britain, P. J. Mehta, designed such regulations for young Gandhi that Mehta expected one day would make him a *real* English gentleman:

Do not ask questions as we usually do in India on first acquaintance; do not talk loudly; never address people 'sir' whilst speaking to them as we do in India; only servants and subordinates address their masters that way (Gandhi, 1927: 32).

The literary representations of Britain, in fact, caused more problems than possibilities of understanding imperial Britain from the perspective of the colonised. They inflated travellers' expectations to such a degree that a breakdown became inevitable. It was as if it were Britain's *responsibility* to appear in front of the Indian travellers' gaze as they had imagined it from their exposure to English literature. On the other hand, the breakdown that invariably occurred among Indian travellers paved the way for a new form of understanding in which another Britain started to take shape instead of a fantasised idea.

End Notes

¹ I have examined Indian travel narratives on Britain mostly written in Bengali and in English, or translated into English from vernacular languages and I did limit myself up to 1947. For a comprehensive understanding I have also taken into consideration some of the Caribbean travel narratives on Britain.

² For how gathered information about Britain worked in the making of the traveller's gaze see: Nirad C. Chaudhuri, *A Passage to England*, London: The Hogarth Press, 1989 [1959]. Although Chaudhuri's travelogue was not written within the time frame that I concentrate on [he came to England in 1954], nevertheless, his account on England has an obvious connection with the travelogues discussed here. From that point of view Chaudhuri is extremely relevant for me.

³ For example see: Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, 'Three Women's Texts and a Critique of Imperialism', *Critical Inquiry*, 12: 1, 1985, pp. 243-56.

⁴ For a detailed discussion on early English travellers and commissioned explorers writings see: Joan-Pau Rubiés, *Travel and Ethnology in the Renaissance: South India through European Eyes*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000; Kate Teltscher, *India Inscribed: European and British Writing on India 1600-1800*, New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1999.

⁵ Mirza Shaikh I'teshamuddin had come to Britain in 1765 [Hijri 1180] but wrote his narrative almost twenty years later in 1784 [Hijri 1199]. Mirza informed his readers that within this period he kept on narrating his travel experience, which became popular among private audiences that included family, friends, sometimes even people from nearby villages. I'teshamuddin also informs us that it was the earnest request from these audiences that encouraged him to turn the oral narrative into a written form.

Mirza Sheikh I'tesamuddin (2002) *The Wonders of Vilayet*, Kaiser Haq trans. Leeds: Peepal Tree Press Ltd., p. 11.

⁶ 'On his return from Europe the Mriza [Sheikh I'tesamuddin] became a local celebrity and was given the nickname of 'Vilayet Munshi', Vilayet being the Indian word for Britain and Europe.' Kaiser Haq, Introduction, *The Wonders of Vilayet*, p. 10.

⁷ For a detailed discussion on this issue see: Jyotsna G. Singh, *Colonial Narratives: Cultural Dialogues "Discoveries" of India in the Language of Colonialism*, London and New York: Routledge, 1996.

⁸ Unlike some scholars of nineteenth century Bengal, for instance Ghulam Murshid, who is interested in labelling the Anglicists and Orientalists as fundamentalists and progressives respectively, David Kopf and Brian Hatcher have showed that there was a consensus among those conflicting groups in the attainment of English education but the differences lay with the appropriateness and limit. See: David Kopf, *British Orientalism and the Bengal Renaissance: The Dynamics of Indian Modernization*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1969; Brian A, Hatcher, *Idioms of Improvement: Vidyasagar and Cultural Encounter in Bengal*, Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1996.

⁹ Great Britain, *Parliamentary Papers, 1852-53*, Appendix N, Hooghly College Essays, 32: 594-595; Cited in, Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest*, pp. 139-140.

¹⁰ For detailed discussion on Dean Mahomet and his travelogue see: Michael H. Fisher ed., *The Travels of Dean Mahomet: An Eighteenth-Century Journey through India*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997.

¹¹ In nineteenth century, it was vogue for the Indian students to learn English music, dance or to play any musical instruments. Gandhi had also tried hard to learn English music and ballet when was in Britain. Mohandas Karamchand Gandhi, *An Autobiography*, pp. 37-38.

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