

Indian Writing in English and the Global
Literary Market

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Indian Writing in English and the Global Literary Market

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Foreword

In 1787, Mirza Abu Taleb Khan, a minor Indian Muslim nobleman despondent about ‘professional’ and family matters in India, decided to strike out in new directions. Even as the early years of colonisation were being consolidated by an increasingly one-way traffic in travel accounts, Abu Taleb set out for Europe. However, even in that age, Abu Taleb was by no means the only Indian to travel to England (or Europe) and write about his experiences there. He mentions at least one such contemporary: Deen Mahomed (1759–1851), who left us an exquisite *Travels* (published in Cork in 1794), justly acclaimed as the first Indian book in English, and reputedly a multidollar heritage of shampoos. Abu Taleb stayed with the ‘family’ of Deen Mahomed – one Captain Baker, whose company Mahomed had joined at the age of 10 and in which he had risen to the rank of *subedar* (captain). Later, Mahomed accompanied his patron to Ireland, where he married an Irish girl of ‘respectable parentage’ after a runaway romance.

There are many similarities between Abu Taleb’s and Deen Mahomed’s accounts of their travels and experiences in Europe and England. While the Indian servants, mistresses and (very rarely) wives of Englishmen either did not or could not keep written accounts, not least because of their position and lack of independence, Deen Mahomed did leave behind a written account. Again unlike dependent Indians resident in England, he had the social standing to disagree with established English opinions – and he did so. In this he resembles Abu Taleb, who has a chapter on the defects of the English (along with a chapter on their virtues) as well as one defending the Irish against English slander.

However, Deen Mahomed wrote in English and addressed Europeans. As he states in his *Travels*, which is composed in the form of a series of letters,

...[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 the innocence of our ancestors, than some of the boasting philosophers of Europe.¹

Mahomed's authorship faces Europe: he speaks up on behalf of and about his 'countrymen' in response to the voices of Europe. This is not altogether surprising, because Mahomed is writing in English. However, Abu Taleb, who wrote his account in Persian, has a different muse. He states in his introduction that his travel account was set down in writing to 'afford a gratifying banquet to his countrymen' by describing the 'curiosities and wonders which he saw' and giving 'some account of the manners and customs of the various nations he visited'.² Speaking in the formal and polite third person, Abu Taleb adds that 'he was also of the opinion that many of the customs, inventions, sciences and ordinances of Europe, the good effects of which are apparent in those countries, might with great advantage be imitated by Mohammedans'.³

Abu Taleb, then, is largely addressing his own culture(s) in his travel account. Perhaps the very fact that he wrote in Persian – then the language of culture in many parts of India and Asia – ensures that his readership is different. What this entails is too complex a matter to be teased out here, but the general problem ought to be kept in mind every time we set out to valorize postcolonial texts written in English or French. The problem of the audience being faced has never been settled and one can argue that writers who have an Indian or an African audience in mind are likely to be less celebrated than metropolitan writers, even when both write in, say, English. This is one of the issues that some of the chapters in this anthology address, from various perspectives and often in different language.

There are various other (related) issues, some of them pertaining not to the status of English as an Indian language vis-à-vis other Indian languages, but to the status of different kinds of writing and writers within English. While it is often and justly celebrated that the rise of postcolonialism removed literature from elsewhere from being a selection of sterilized dishes consumed in the banquets of the 'commonwealth', what is often forgotten is that postcolonialism or postcolonial criticism – unlike the historical term 'postcolonial' – is a discourse. Like all discourses, it tends to see in distinctive ways.

Some kinds of postcolonial writers and writing are not visible to it. If the Commonwealth permitted a largely apolitical conglomeration of readings, it nevertheless chose the texts-to-be-read from spaces of geographical and cultural otherness in relation to England; postcolonialism, on the other hand, increasingly focuses on British or American authors with a different name. This usually leaves out authors like Kiran Nagarkar, mostly based in the ex-colonies, from many discussions. It also, to be honest, leaves out an author like me, situated in the entirely liminal space of a village off Aarhus in Denmark. Moreover, the concerns and styles of some writers are less amenable to postcolonial criticism. For instance, if you draw on the colonial bridge, a horde of postcolonial critics will come and troop all over your texts; if you do not, well, you will need to be rescued by an anthology like this one. The booming industry of ‘prizing’ a certain kind of otherness that Graham Huggan critiques in *The Postcolonial Exotic: Marketing the Margins* is also part of this nexus of perception and occlusion, as is the overlap, not always justified, of the cosmopolitan with the metropolitan.

All these elements favour the visibility of some kinds of Indian writing in English. However, there are some other, more specific factors too: for instance, the bias in favour of authors ensconced in metropolitan spaces, in India or abroad, or the continued dominance of British and American literary patronage. Many of these factors remain under-examined; some are totally obscured. This anthology of papers edited by Dwivedi and Lau attempts to excavate some of these factors. I can only hope that it will give rise to more work along these lines.

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Notes

1. Michael H. Fischer (1996) *The First Indian Author in English*, Delhi: Oxford University Press, p. 15.
2. Abu Taleb Khan (1972) *Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan in Asia, Africa and Europe during the Years 1799 to 1803* (1814), trans. Charles Stewart, New Delhi: Sona Publications, p. xiv.
3. Khan, *Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan*, p. xv.

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