

“The Persian Prince in London”: Autoethnography and Positionality in *Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan*

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Abstract

This paper explores the strategies and dynamics of Asian representation of the self and the colonial other in *Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan* (1810). I argue that while the process of autoethnography in an early period of colonisation anticipates the subsequent oscillation between submission and resistance, such representations are made complex by the positionality of the author within his milieu. Taleb's text is marked by the ambiguity of his response to colonialism, engaging in a simultaneous admiration and critique of western practices, a critique that is made possible by his identity as the “Persian Prince.” Yet in its history of print, circulation and reception it becomes a tool in the propagation of colonial power.

Keywords

Contact zone, autoethnography, positionality, transculturation, resistance

Travel writing has been a fertile ground for enquiry into the process of representation and identity in a cross-cultural encounter. While much research has been initiated into the British representation of India, the reverse is not necessarily true. This paper explores the strategies and dynamics of the Asian representation of the self and the colonial other in *Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan*. I argue that while the process of autoethnography in an early period of colonisation anticipates the subsequent oscillation between submission and resistance, such representations are made complex by the positionality of the author within his milieu.

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I would like to begin this paper by placing two critical models that have often been used to discuss the politics of travel writing. In Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes*, travel writing becomes the site where

Contestory expressions... are brought most forcefully into play... imperial intervention is met headlong by the critique of empire... these elaborate intra-cultural texts and their histories exemplify the possibilities of writing in contact zones. (5)

Pratt proceeds to define the contact zone as one where "disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (4). This leads to a process of "transculturation," the process through which "subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant metropolitan culture" (6). The ultimate result is what Pratt calls "autoethnography" or "autoethnographic expression," referring to

instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in ways that engage with the colonizer's own terms... it involves partial collaboration with the appropriation of the idioms of the conqueror... autoethnographic expression is a very widespread phenomenon of the contact zone. (7)

While I accept Pratt's theory of autoethnographic expression, one question that bothers me is whether the autoethnography is uniform within the responses of the various strata of the same culture. My argument is that the autoethnographic process is contingent upon class, gender and racial concerns. It is here that I would like to borrow the notion of "positionality" that Amartya Sen foregrounded in the first Abha Maiti Memorial Lecture titled "On Interpreting India's Past." Sen argues that

the objectivity of an observation or an analysis can be judged not only in uncompromisingly universalist terms (what Thomas Nagel has called the view from nowhere). Positionality can influence both (i) observation of events seen from a particular position and (ii) the overall assessment of an event, from a particular perspective taking note of different observations. (28)

Having outlined my theoretical basis I would now like to explore the workings of autoethnography and positionality in *Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan in Asia, Africa and Europe during the Years 1799, 1800, 1801, 1802 and 1803*, written by himself and published both in English and Persian.

Abu Taleb's fascinating career was marked by a series of progressions and

reversals. His father Haji Mohamed Beng Khan was a Turk who fled from Persia to India and earned the friendship of Nabab Abdul Munsur Khan Sufder Jung, assistant to Mohammed Cully Khan of Oudh. He prospered, but Sufder's son Shuja seized power and Abu Taleb's father was forced to flee to Bengal with all his wealth. He died in Murshidabad in 1768. Abu Taleb, born in 1752, returned to Lucknow in 1766 and rose to be the Aumildar (Collector) of Etawah and two other districts. Having defeated the Rajput Zamindars he was spurned by the Nababs. At this point he tried to find shelter in the East India Company, associating himself with Lord Cornwallis. But even the Company did not provide much support, and in 1795 Abu Taleb was forced to conclude:

all my dependents and adherents, seeing my distress, left me, and even some of my children... abandoned me. I was quite overcome with grief and despondency. (5)

At this point he was persuaded by Captain David Richardson, a member of the East India Company to travel with him to Europe, all costs borne by the Englishman. Abu Taleb writes that he agreed because

the journey was long and replete with danger, some accident might cause my death, and I should be delivered from the anxieties of this world, and the ingratitude of mankind. (6)

The journey on the ship was nightmarish. He had a small cabin and was constantly abused by his European co-passengers. Abu Taleb landed in Cape Town where he found the Dutchman "low minded, inhospitable and cruel" (27). He proceeded to Ireland and it is here that his transformation occurred. He earned the patronage of Colonel William Baker and became a source of curiosity for the neighbours:

some said I must be a Russian general... others affirmed I was either a German or a Spanish nobleman... but the greater part agreed that I was a Persian Prince. (26)

He arrived in England in 1799 and met Lord Cornwallis, who in turn introduced him to the Queen who commanded him "frequently to court" (80). Overnight he became a social celebrity, and Abu Taleb proudly notes, "the nobility vied with each other in their attention of me" (81). In an amusing anecdote he writes that once it was announced

Prince Abu Taleb would honour Vauxhall Gardens... the crowd of people who assembled in the evening was greater than ever before known... they did me

the honour of naming me the Persian Prince. I declare I never assured the title; but I was much better known by it, than by my own name, that I found it in vain to contend with it. (96)

The “Persian Prince” left England for France, went on the grand Tour, then travelled to Persia and finally returned to India in 1804. His *Travels* was probably written in 1805, initially in Persian for a domestic audience. Abu Taleb however requested for a translation himself and through a devious route the manuscript reached Charles Stewart, Professor of Oriental Languages in England. It was due to his efforts that *Travels* was published in 1810. The East India Company published the Persian manuscript only in 1814. Abu Taleb had died in 1806 and till his last day was known in India as Abu Taleb “Londony.”

The “gazer and gazed,” the oriental traveller and continuously on display, Abu Taleb’s text reveals the features of transculturation and autoethnography in the cultural contact zone in myriad ways. They reveal a curious tension in his selfhood with a simultaneous admiration and critique of English customs. The autoethnographic mode uses the generic and linguistic strategies of the coloniser’s language to seek identification with the “other” culture, yet critiques it by underlining its difference. In this process it attempts, “not merely to reproduce but to engage western discourses of identity, community selfhood and otherness” (Pratt 6). Although inevitably distorted by the process of translation, Abu Taleb’s account highlights important issues of cultural identity. To what extent does the narrator identify with the British? In what ways does he adopt or subvert an “orientalised” persona?

It is tempting to read Abu Taleb’s *Travels* as an early example of postcolonial hybridity anticipating the duality that is so characteristic of colonial selfhood. The desire to identify and participate in the imperial process is manifested in Abu Taleb’s admiration of British customs. Abu Taleb is enthralled by the British system of education in England, especially the gigantic strides in science and industry. He records the British “excellence for mechanism and their numerous contrivances for facilitating labour and industry” (97). There are examples strewn all over the text – Taleb is fascinated by pumps, the pipes of cold and boiled hot water, the system of taps, the hot-house. His description of an English factory is marked by a tone of hushed reverence:

The mind is at first bewildered by the number and variety of articles displayed therein; but after recovering from this first impression, and having coolly surveyed all the objects around, everything appears conducted by so much regularity and precision, that a person is induced to suppose one of the meanest capacity might superintend and direct the whole process. (105)

The same tone is marked in the passages where Taleb describes the bridges in

London and the ship-building yard in Woolwich.

Mushirul Hassan notes how Abu Taleb was one of the first Asians to uncover, “the roots of Britain’s maritime power and establish the connection between the Industrial Revolution and economic prosperity” (xxiii). Taleb also lauds the industry and virility of the English nation, “The men of this kingdom are extremely impatient and averse to trivial and time consuming work” (110). This is coupled with Abu Taleb’s praise of the British sense of honour which he attributes to the “effect of a liberal education” (115) and the privileging of “liberty,” equipping British boys to be “honourable, courageous and capable of hardships.... I have often seen an English child of five years old possess more wisdom than an Asiatic of fifteen” (115). Are we witnessing here an acknowledgement of the discursive patterns of colonialism that privileged the European as virile, honourable and industrially advanced as the binary to the colonised self? Are these discursive spaces already so much in place that Taleb is merely replicating them?

The gaze of admiration seems to reach a climax in Taleb’s fascination for the wealth and variety of London. In an interesting passage he composes an ode in imitation of Hafiz, praising the city. This transcultural moment utilises the supreme Oriental aesthetic form to submit itself to the structure of the European Ode. The language is one of intoxication, rejection and embracing that conflates the aesthetic and the political:

Henceforward we will devote our lives to London,
And its heart-alluring Damsels:
Our hearts are satiated with viewing fields, garden,
Rivers, and palaces
We have no longing for the Toba, Sudreh, or other
Trees of paradise
We are content to rest under the shade of these
Terrestrial Cypresses. (70)

The text however spills over from its conformist stance into dangerous areas of subversion. In the initial sections of the journey, Abu Taleb reveals the English as pompous and hypocritical. His fellow passenger disturbs him but never apologises, while

if the smallest noise was made in my apartment he would call out, with all the overbearing insolence which characterises the vulgar part of the English in their conduct to orientals – “What are you about? You don’t let me get a wink of sleep.” (8)

In the second volume, entire chapters are devoted to a critique of the English systems. This critique is based on twelve counts: the English lack religious faith;

they are proud and insolent, acquisitive and fond of ease. Taleb attacks them for being irritable, wasting time in eating, drinking and dressing, and for being excessively fond of luxury. I would here like to concentrate on two aspects of this critique. The first is the English contempt for the customs of other nations. In two anecdotes, Abu Taleb challenges the English claim of superiority. On the ship, he is ridiculed for going to bed in trousers; in response, he puts forward the logic that if the English ship faces an emergency its European inmates will have to rush to the deck naked. When the English attempt to ridicule the Muslim ceremonies at Mecca, he asks them

why they supposed the ceremony of baptism by a clergyman is requisite for the salvation of a child, who could not possibly be sensible what he was about....
By this mode of argument, I completely silenced all adversaries and frequently turned the laugh against them. (153)

In fact, Abu Taleb repeatedly foregrounds the English anxiety about the Muslim religion. While the English ridicule Islam, he meets the Bishop of London who asks him, “whether I was come to England to convert the people to Mohammedanism and to make them forsake the religion of their forefathers” (153).

The praise of science too is met with considerable scepticism. He criticises the English for their misplaced assumption of expertise in science. In fact, he seems to almost ridicule the icon of English science, Isaac Newton, when he says:

it is possible in future ages, philosophers will look with as much contempt on the acquirements of Newton, as we now do on the rude state of the arts among savages... and all his boasted knowledge may be but vanity. (147)

In fact, one reading of *Travels* continuously privileges the Asiatic over the European – the Muslims of Cape Town are kind and superior; the savages of Andaman are preferable to his European shipmates; Oxford is almost like the ancient Indian temples; the Quazis are superior to the English jury system – which is frightening and often prone to mistakes. The European and the oriental perspectives crisscross at points and no necessary order of privileging is provided. Yet in passage after passage the “admirable” qualities of the English are challenged by counter critiques. Consider that in the same page Abu Taleb praises the English “equality of all” (136) before the law and yet proceeds to suggest that this “equality is more in appearance than in reality” (137). He attacks the British legal system as corrupt and convoluted:

In short, the ambiguity of the English law is such, and the stratagems of the lawyers so numerous, as to prove a course of misery to those who are unfortunate enough to have any concern with it or them. (139)

In one fascinating passage Abu Taleb trades on his exoticism. Dubbed “The Persian Prince” by the press, he accepts this generic oriental title. The transformation into eastern potentate secures his social success. Invited to the Lord Mayor’s banquet, he is seated at the high table with Nelson, the national hero. The other guests approach, bowing and curtseying not only to the Admiral, but also to the Persian Prince for, as Abu Taleb explains, “this mark of respect they thought due to Lord Nelson, for the victory of the Nile; and to me, for my supposed high rank” (133). The ironies in the passage are obvious. For Taleb, the erstwhile bankrupt servant of the Company, this moment of power must have been enjoyable, even though bizarre.

What I see here is the fuzziness of the contact zone – the transcultural motif where Abu Taleb is engaging in a sort of autoethnography. Using the travel writing as strategy he is partially challenging the European’s rhetoric of superiority and therefore destabilising the entire inscribed notions of cultural privileging.

The problem of reading the text within this paradigm lies in the debate as to the extent of Taleb’s consciousness of his colonial identity. It is to be noted that Abu Taleb was writing in the earliest periods of colonisation where the process of trade was yet to be superseded by a larger discourse of cultural superiority. As Fisher points out:

These scholars did not approach British culture with a sense of inferiority, particularly during the late eighteenth century – while the British drive for cultural hegemony over India was only incipient. Many admitted their own society’s less advanced knowledge of certain physical sciences and technology – including medicine, military sciences and print-publishing. Yet most such early travellers remained staunch advocates of their own religion and customs. (105)

The same point is made by Simonti Sen when she argues:

Their xenology thrived on differences and disjunctions in which the other was seen as equal to the self. In other words, these multi-subjectivity, contingency-oriented accounts did not betray any compulsion to assimilate and transform the differences in terms of a singular structure of values. (52)

Thus for Sen, these authors are “precolonial travellers not simply in terms of temporal precedence but as referring to a different sense of historicity and most significantly a different sense of I and the other” (28). For Van de Veur this historical juncture was marked by a British participation in Indian culture rather than establishing hegemony:

In the early decades of the nineteenth century the company was still giving patronage to Hindu temples and festivals, especially in the South. Under strong pressure from the evangelicals the Company had to withdraw from that policy. It did so hesitantly. Even as late as 1838 a committee had to be formed in England for the purpose of diffusing information relative to the connection of the East India company's government with the superstitious idolatrous system of the natives, and for promoting the disillusionment of that connection. (112)

As such, it was another instance of a new colonial politics of representation that replaced the older patronage network in which the company had participated to further its prime purpose tradition, trade. Sen, in fact, argues that it was the mutiny that was the defining moment where the definite segregation of identities of the colonial self and the colonised other took place and this was the moment that led to the rise of the nationalist discourse and identity (28).

The problem with such an analysis is that it veers towards one historical moment that witnesses a shift in paradigm. Abu Taleb's text demonstrates that the tension within the identity of the other was an ongoing process that was continuously engaging with the European perspectives and interrogating notions of power and cultural assimilation. The mutiny may have accelerated the rupture of identities but the process was already in formation.

This process is made immensely complex by the notion of positionality. There are two aspects at work here – why was Abu Taleb engaged in this critique and from what social position was this made possible?

Taleb's personal compulsions behind this representation are also replete with ambiguities. His initial project in London was:

to have opened a Public Academy to be patronised by the Government, for instructing such of the English as were destined to fill important situations in the East, in the Hindustani, Persian and Arabic languages... beneficial both to myself and the Nation I came to visit... many individuals were so desirous of learning the oriental languages that they attended the self taught masters, ignorant of every principle of the science and paid them half a guinea a lesson.
(64)

Taleb had in fact complained about the available Persian grammars translated by William Jones as difficult and laden with errors.

Taleb's position was thus not merely of a visitor gazing upon an alien landscape. He was deeply involved both politically and personally in the process of representation. Thus the cultural critique is steeped in personal politics – to secure a position and an annuity from the government. The resistant colonial subject becomes, in this view, a willing comprador – one who seeks to be a facilitator for the colonial power – to offer them a better understanding of cultural difference

mainly for his personal profit. Moreover, Taleb records that his critique of the British was intended as a gallant compliment to Lady Spenser, wife of a former first Lord of the Admiralty:

Her ladyship particularly requested and made me promise to publish an account of my Travels, and to state my opinion, candidly, of all the customs and manners of the English, and without either fear or flattery, freely to censure whatever I thought reprehensible amongst them. (144)

Was this then a form of legitimised dissent, a rhetorical strategy to please the whims of a powerful patron, or was it the frustrated complaint of a man whose educational project the British government had rejected? Or was it the acute awareness of a colonial subject caught in a moment of response in the early colonial process?

My point here is to problematise this entire notion of transculturation and autoethnography by the notion of positionality. I was and still am tempted to see Abu Taleb's text as an early postcolonial response but his ambiguous positionality resists such simplistic stances. His transformation as the "Persian Prince" adds another dimension to his positionality. Early in his narrative his critique of the English is guarded and he is keenly aware of his status as a colonial subject. Once he attains his title (which ironically he never sought but was thrust upon him) his gaze is transformed to the critical and almost superior. To what extent was this critique possible because of his supposed vantage point? Does this class identity permit Taleb to engage in a sustained critique of the British? Contrast for example this passage with stray passages of critiques from other contemporary colonial subjects such as Dean Mahomet, and Taleb's radical status is manifested. Taleb's transformation thus raises a basic issue about the degree to which postcolonial discourses are moderated upon by the positionality of the individual.

The last issue that I will raise here is that of reception of the autoethnographic text. As Pratt points out, "Autoethnographic texts are typically heterogeneous on the reception as well, usually addressed both to metropolitan readers and to literate sections of the speaker's own social group and bound to be received very differently by each" (6).

In his Preface, Taleb had outlined his intentions for recording his travels:

It therefore occurred to him that if he were to write all the circumstances of his journey through Europe, to describe the curiosities and wonders which he saw... all of which are little known to Asiatics, it would afford a gratifying banquet to his countrymen. (xxxv)

He further added:

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. (xxxv)

In this context, the journey of Taleb's text offers a fascinating insight into the operation of the colonial machinery. The text existed originally in manuscript form circulated among his friends and acquaintances. It was presented to a Captain in the Bengal Artillery, and it finally reached Charles Stewart, Professor of Oriental Languages at Haileybury College, who prepared a translation of the work. This translation was published in 1810 as *Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan in Asia, Africa, and Europe, During the Years 1799, 1800, 1801, 1802, and 1803, Written by Himself in the Persian Language*, and reissued in 1814, with translations into French and German. The advertisement to the 1814 edition adds that the Bengal government, convinced of the policy of disseminating such a work among the Natives of the British Dominions in the East, ordered the Original in the Persian language to be printed.

The Persian text, edited by Abu Taleb's son, then employed at the Company College at Fort William, Calcutta, was published in Calcutta in 1812, with abridged versions following in 1827 and 1836. The decision of the Bengal administration to print the journal in Persian (the official language of the East India Company government) was perhaps influenced by the conclusion of a review of the *Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan* that appeared in the *Annual Register* for 1810:

if the original Persian MS could be circulated in our oriental territories, through the medium of the press, we conceive that it would produce, in the minds of the natives, impressions highly favourable to the British nation, and to its interests in India (*Annual Register* 1810, "Account of Books" 757).

The colonial machinery to present the superiority of European civilisation and justify the process of colonisation thus appropriated Taleb's text. For the British translator, Taleb's critique of British culture was largely overcome by the sense of wonder at British technological, scientific and educational progress. For the European reader, the *Travels* became a document for discerning the Oriental response to British culture and civilisation. Stewart explains this in his introduction to the English translation:

The free remarks of an intelligent Foreigner, and especially of an Asiatic, on our laws, customs and manners... must always be considered an object of liberal curiosity. (xxxiii)

Abu Taleb remained an object of curiosity to the English, a valuable source of the Easterner's perception of the West and a mode of disseminating the wonders of the West to the East. He was a subject of display while he displayed the land and its values himself.

My paper thus seeks to highlight the complex energies that are released by texts of transculturation that exist in "contact zones." Abu Taleb's travelogue records his keen awareness of the dynamics of the cultural negotiation in an early period of colonisation. It locates the ambiguity of his response engaging in a simultaneous admiration and critique of Western practices, a critique that is made possible by his identity as the "Persian Prince." Yet in its history of print, circulation and reception it becomes a tool in the propagation of colonial power. Abu Taleb "Londony," the "Persian Prince," thus raises vital questions about identity, cultural interfaces, the politics of travel writing and the politics of its reception.

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