

Krishnabhabini Das, *A Bengali Lady in England*. Trans. and ed. Somdatta Mandal. Newcastle upon Tyne, UK: Cambridge Scholars Publishing, 2015. 168 pp. ISBN 13: 978-1-4438-7701-5.

A travelogue titled *England e Bangomabila* – the first full-length travel narrative by a Bengali woman was published in 1885. Its writer, the twenty-one-year-old Krishnabhabini Das (1864-1919) had travelled to England with her husband Devendranath Das in 1882. Evidently, Krishnabhabini was an enterprising woman. She wrote an account of her travel to and sojourn in England and took the initiative to send it to a publisher in Calcutta. She was canny enough to understand that back home there would be readers curious to know about a Bengali woman's experiences in *bilyet* or *vilayet*, the most popular Bengali term for England. However, her decision to keep the writing anonymous is perhaps a sign of the trepidation she had about the reception of travel narrative by an "ordinary" housewife.

For a very long time, the travelogue, a nascent genre like the autobiography and the memoir, was the preserve of male authors. After all, in mid-nineteenth century colonial Bengal it was men who travelled within the country and to "foreign lands" for education or for pleasure. Theirs was the observation that the literate middle-class wanted to read. Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941), a slightly older contemporary of Krishnabhabini, went to England for the first time in 1878; he had the assurance that Bengali readers eagerly awaited the accounts of his travel, *Europe Prabasi Patra* (*Letters of a Sojourner in Europe*) serialised in the prestigious literary magazine *Bharati* and published as a book in 1881. Even when Bengali women travelled abroad, and quite a handful of them did, they did not feel the need to write about it. Rabindranath's sister-in-law, the dynamic Jnanadanandini, famed for facilitating women's mobility and ensuring women's emancipation, travelled to England in 1877 with her children. Curiously she left no written record of what was clearly a daring act of travelling alone.

Krishnabhabini's decision to write and publish her account of travel was thus, in many ways, an unusual venture. Her confidence seems to be borne of her own absorption in her unique experience and her assessment of its value for her intended readers. Typically, with an awareness of the demands of the genre and simultaneously contributing to its shaping, Krishnabhabini begins with an account of the journey. Chapters 2, 3 and 4 are devoted to the travel by train from Calcutta to Bombay and thereafter the sea voyage to England via Venice. The narrative follows a linear temporal pattern. Even in these early sections, it is clear that her forte is minute observation and reflection of differences between communities and ethnic groups. Chapters 5 to 19 are about her sojourn in England and the narrative is largely thematic providing a kaleidoscope of the

city of London and the spectacles offered by it as one travels, the qualities of the English as a race, English marriage and domestic life, the countryside and peasantry, and the working class. Krishnabhabini's travelogue – with its passages of vivid description of places, its observation and reflections on social customs and mores, racial difference, its inclusion of subject like state politics, parliamentary systems or education, as well the Queen's household, would have appealed to a wide range of contemporary male and female readers.

But it is likely that her travelogue, like many other nineteenth century and early twentieth century texts hugely popular in their own times, could also have been lost to posterity. Yet, Krishnabhabini Das's travel account has had a fresh lease of life, a phenomenon that owes itself to the development of the twin disciplines of postcolonial and feminist studies which began to impact academia and publishing from the late 1980s. One of the most invigorating areas of feminist literary enterprise was the re-discovery of writing by women of yesteryears and its dissemination as reprints with critical introductions and annotations. The reprint of this work by Stree (a publisher well known for its monographs and books in social sciences and feminism), this time incorporating the author's full name in its title, *Krishnabhabini Das er England e Bangomahila* (1996), is part of such an enterprise.

The current translation of Krishnabhabini Das' travelogue, *A Bengali Lady in England*, is by Somdatta Mandal, a scholar widely known for her work on travel narratives. In order to make an assessment of the significance of this translation, it would not be out of place to draw the readers' attention to the invisible politics involved in translation policies and practices in a global market. Traditionally, discourses on translation studies have been dominated by two apparently contradictory modes: fidelity and fluency. It is argued that the two cannot coexist. Given the demands of a global market, fluency in the target language is usually prioritised over fidelity to the source text; the common sense argument being a good translation is one which reads as if were produced in the target language itself. However, such a policy has cultural-political implications, viz. the linguistic and the cultural specificities of the source language gets erased in this politics of fluency and transparency, thus taking away those very qualities which made the source language text unique and worthy of translation. This is particularly true, for instance, of translation of Indian language texts into English, which occupies a privileged position in the global market. In effect, such a translation practice participates in the perpetuation of a neo-colonial hegemonic control.

Somdatta Mandal's translation successfully resists the lure of fluency to maintain fidelity or faithfulness to the original Bengali text. This is not to suggest that the English translation of Krishnabhabini's travelogue is stripped of reading pleasure. Indeed, the challenge which Somdatta Mandal takes up is to make available to a large reading public a nineteenth-century Bengali travel

writing without erasing the cultural and gendered specificity of Krishnabhabini's text. Somdatta Mandal does a remarkable job by retaining the sense of the original Bengali text and does not take liberties which would have removed some of the awkward sentence constructions or turns of phrase. Particular mention needs to be made of her deft handling of the long verse passages that dot Krishnabhabini's travelogue.

In her Introduction to *A Bengali Lady in England*, Somdatta Mandal provides a brief biography of Krishnabhabini Das, reminds the readers of the Bengali women who had defied social restrictions or customary laws and travelled abroad and locates the text in its context viz. the veritable "explosion of travel writing from eastern India, particularly from Bengal" (xiii) during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The most important theoretical point that she raises, drawing upon James Clifford's work, concerns the gendered implication of travel and its articulation. Extending this critical framework to Krishnabhabini's travelogue it might be worth exploring whether there is a specifically female perspective, female authorial strategy and female subjectivity that she brings to her work.

In the Prelude Krishnabhabini addresses her "female readers" who she knows suffer the fate of being confined within the four walls of their home and are likely to identify with the author's longing for experience of the world:

I was also cloistered in a house like you; I had no relationship with my country or the world... if I ever heard someone going to vilayet or returning from there, my heart would jump for joy. I felt eager to go and meet these people and hear about all the new things they had seen and heard there. But the wishes of unfortunate and colonized Bengali women are never fulfilled.... Maybe like me, many of you are curious to know about England and to fulfill that desire I am dedicating this book, *A Bengali Lady in England*, to you. (1)

Krishnabhabini's construction of *vilayet* as the locus of female desire signals her interpellation in colonial ideology. The highest achievement for a colonised female subject is thus to be in England, the seat of power. Once she is in *vilayet*, her language shifts to images of the Empire and its kitchens; the girls in gowns going to universities capture her heart, and slightly dazed, slightly dreamy, she wonders what would become of the women in her motherland. There are recurrent musings on the glorious Hindu past and the deplorable condition to which her country has sunk.

A travelogue is primarily a cartographical displacement. However, in many ways, a journey from one place to another is also a journey within oneself. This opens up an entirely new dimension in perceptions of the self and the other. This is true of Krishnabhabini's observations especially about English ladies. By the time Krishnabhabini wrote her travelogue about England there were several

accounts by Memsahibs who had come to India. The English women, who were mostly married and accompanied their husbands to the colony, kept journals or diaries, wrote letters or fictions about their experiences. They would write back home about their two months long sea voyage, the stifling heat, the barbaric customs of keeping women in *purdah*, the snoopy servants, the anxious ayahs and recipes of Mulligutawny soup. Krishnabhabini's text is a wonderful example of the perspective of the colonised female subject who both mimics and criticises the Memsahibs. Thus Krishnabhabini steps out of her home without a veil, dressed tip to toe as a "pucca memsahib" (3) and sails through Aden, Venice and then to London. And everywhere she goes (Paris, Switzerland, or Calais), she records with great curiosity the women of those places. When Krishnabhabini is in England she appreciates the English women's ability to work hard. This also allows her a critical perspective on the Memsahibs in India; she now understands that the memsahib's elite ways in the colony have little to do with their conditions back home; they can afford to spend their time in leisure because servants in India come cheap.

Krishnabhabini's travelogue continually reminds its readers that she writes as a woman. She glides through the gossips of the landladies and floats among the fresh schoolgirls. The bonnets of the elderly and the pearls of the coquette do not escape her gaze. As a colonised female subject her great interest is in the Queen managing her household. But Krishnabhabini's interests are not limited only to the "feminine." She discusses finance, state governance, legislative documents and educational systems, subjects which were thought of as exclusively "masculine" domains. In devoting entire chapters to subjects that required an understanding of politics and economics, Krishnabhabini busts the nineteenth century patriarchal myth about the "natural" limitations of women's brains, and powers of observations.

Her mode for writing about the Empire is through a constant comparison between the land of prospects and the colony. Even as she describes London – the botanical gardens, the museums, the bazaars or the zoo, her method is to compare everything to the city she had left behind, i.e. Kolkata. It is as if she is interpreting the image of London that the colonisers had reconstructed in her homeland. The colony has always been portrayed as a diseased limb; it haunts. Here, she breaks the binary constructed by the colonisers, showing that the downtrodden are in equal misery in the "City of Wealth" (37). While the poor people of London live "like animals" (39), the *crème de la crème* live in *extravaganza*.

Krishnabhabini dives into the diminutive folds of the society. She is not starry-eyed; the wonders of the sparkling shopping-windows or the vibrant flowers of the Regent Park do not bedazzle her. She roams around London asking about the economy and the politics; she walks the streets of a Dickensian bleak city of murder and mayhem observing, "In this part of London fights and

murders occur quite often... the roads here are so narrow, dark, dirty and smelly” (39-40).

In the Prelude Krishnabhabini had evoked the deplorable condition of her countrywomen; she returns to the subject in the conclusion. Using her favourite device of comparison between the English and other colonised peoples, Krishnabhabini goes back to the subject of the wretched condition of the women in her country. “The more I see the mark of independence on the face of the English woman, the sad and demure face of the Indian woman arises in my mind” (80). The demand for liberation of women as a necessary condition for freedom of the race seems to hang as a suggestion in the conclusion.

What is the status of Krishnabhabini’s travelogue as a postcolonial text? At one level, the text does offer occasional criticisms of the ways of the British or of the actual condition of the seat of the Empire. However, her experiences as a colonised female subject do not create a radical shift in her perception and politics that can demystify colonial ideology altogether. Thus, in the concluding section of her travel narrative Krishnabhabini goes back to a comparison between England and India suggesting the former’s achievement in glowing terms: “After reading about the knowledge, trade, labour and women’s education in England, every Indian will understand how much more developed England is in comparison to India” (161). There are a series of rhetorical questions which lament the deplorable condition of the Hindus who have lost their “courage, strength, wealth, prestige, independence and complete happiness” (161). The cause behind this, Krishnabhabini argues, is the “fault of India’s own sons and daughters” (162). It follows therefore, that seeking independence from British rule is not an easy task: “We should know whether we possess the virtues of the race we want to defeat and bring them down from their positions as rulers” (164).

Postcolonial study has created a protocol that texts which have emerged from the colony are necessarily marked by resistance if not subversion. However, texts marked by their times do not necessarily fit into any critical agenda. The translation of Krishnabhabini’s travelogue into English inaugurates the moment for acknowledging such complexities. If the Empire writes back, it does so in forked tongues, in voices that may not be comfortable. The task of the critic and the reader is to engage with discomforts.

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