

## Writing Back Through Travel: A Study of *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan*

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### Abstract

Mirza Abu Taleb Khan who travelled to England from 1799-1802 is one of the early Indians who participated in what Michael Fisher calls 'counterflows to colonialism' and recorded his experience in the form of a travelogue. Taleb's *Travels* foregrounds how a colonized subject from the periphery tries to understand and negotiate with the metropolitan centre that attempted to dominate and control the Other. It is pertinent to explore the cultural dialogue initiated by a 'contact zone' formed through the travel of an Indian. The oriental traveller who was both the gazer and the gazed, came up with a highly complex gaze that created a version of what Mary Louise Pratt calls 'autoethnography' and a space for 'transculturation'. Taleb's entry in print culture through writing a travelogue seems highly significant because he tried to write back a genre called travel writing that played an integral part in the consolidation of empire by mapping the cultural topography as well as the flora and fauna of the Other. The travel of the 'Persian Prince in London' problematized an important binary created by colonial discourse-- Britain's mobility as opposed to the stasis of the Other. Though Taleb accepted some of the binaries created by the Orientalist discourse, there are areas where he refused to accept the superiority of the British culture. First published in 1810, *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan in Asia, Africa and Europe during the years 1799-1803* brings out the dialectic of the acceptance and rejection of the dominant metropolitan culture. He admired the science and technology of Britain, their education system and law. He also sharply criticized the British as proud, insolent, intolerant, non-religious, luxurious and lazy and his criticism of British culture provides a strong sense of postcolonial resistance. He debunked the empirical codes of European travel writing by positing the worldview of the Other through the form of 'safarnama'. This paper attempts to critically locate Taleb's text as an 'autoethnographic expression' and the problematic position of an Indian traveller who can question empire and also serve the interest of empire by teaching oriental languages to the colonial masters.

**Keywords:** contact zone, autoethnography, transculturation, colonial discourse, postcolonial resistance

Postcolonial criticism has paid considerable attention to bring out how the European travel narratives played a significant role in the development of the process of the discursive production of knowledge and perception about non-European territories. It gradually extended its scope to include non-European travelogues in the wake of imperialism and a critical focus on the travellers from non-Western countries to the West has opened up new avenues in postcolonial thought as travel writing is much about imagining the other as about inscribing the self. Indian travellers created a body of knowledge about themselves and their homelands which often countered the British orientalist representations of Indians. This paper attempts to look at Abu Taleb's *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan in Asia, Africa and Europe during the years 1799-1803* to critically engage with the Indian responses to the process of colonization, his direct self-representation in

the British public sphere, and his negotiation with the complexities of identity fostered by colonialism.

The British began to travel to India on a large scale during the late eighteenth century and their presence multiplied as the East India Company gradually shifted its focus from mere commerce and gradually evolved into an administrative body to plunder the wealth of India. The reversal of travel (from India to the West) is also discernible since the eighteenth century. Michael Fisher calls this phenomenon “counterflows to colonialism” and claims “by the mid nineteenth century, tens of thousands of Indian seamen, servants, scholars, soldiers, students, envoys, royalty, officials, merchants, tourists, and settlers had all journeyed to Britain” (Fisher, 1996, p. 1). Abu Taleb was not the first Indian traveller to embark on a journey from the periphery to the metropolitan centre. Taleb had many notable antecedents like Mirza Sheikh I'tesamuddin and Dean Mahomet who travelled to England also recorded their experience in the form of travelogue. Dean Mahomet's *Travels of Sake Deen Mahomed* published in 1794 is the first written account in English by an Indian and an unprecedented entry into the print culture that proliferated during the Enlightenment. Unlike Mahomet, Taleb wrote his travelogue in Persian probably in 1805 for a domestic audience. It was translated into English by Charles Stewart, Professor of Oriental Languages at Haileybury College and was published in 1810 as *The Travels of Mirza Abu Taleb Khan in Asia, Africa and Europe during the years 1799-1803 Written by Himself in the Persian Language*. The Persian text was brought out again in 1812 by the East India Company with an aim to have a favourable impression in the minds of the Indians. It is pertinent to note that initially Persian was the Company's official language of administration and in 1837 the Company officials decided to switch over to English as the administrative language. Mirza I'tesamuddin went to England as a Persian diplomat in 1770 and formally offered tuitions in Persian and Taleb was known as the Persian prince in London and provided tuitions to more than twenty persons during his brief stay. One can clearly notice the politics of language as an essential tool to run colonial administration as knowledge of the Persian language would be conducive to draw the cultural map of India. It is important to note that in the eighteenth century all the Indian travellers were Muslim by religion as the traditional Hindus believed that crossing *kalapani* (blackwater) was a kind of sin.

Abu Taleb started his European travels in 1799 at the invitation of Captain David Richardson, a Persian lexicographer. Though he was employed as a local revenue officer by the East India Company, his career underwent several phases of crisis and at the time of his travel he was in debt and the cost of travel was given by Captain Dermis. He wished to die during the journey to get delivered from the anxiety-riddled life. The journey on the ship shows that the colonial mindset of the British began to gain momentum. On the ship to Britain, Mirza's cabin was separated only by a canvas partition from that of an Englishman called Mr. Grand. He recalled how he was abused rudely by the Englishman on a stormy night. In *Europe Prabasir Patra* (1881), Rabindranath Tagore underwent similar experience in his encounter with two obnoxious Englishmen whom he designated as “John Bull” (1881, p.8). The abuses of the Europeans during the journey clearly brought out their racist attitude to the Indians. Though in Cape Town Taleb found the Dutchmen as ‘low minded, inhospitable and cruel’, fortune smiled on him when he came to Ireland and earned the patronage of Colonel Babu. He arrived in England in 1799 and got a chance to meet Lord Cornwallis who in turn introduced him to the Queen and he became the Persian Prince.

The first attempt of the Indians to write back to the English manifested in the form of travel writing. Though it was not an overtly declared nationalist discourse against the rhetoric of

colonialism, it created a platform for the emergent Indian nationalist self-fashioning. Taleb wrote his account of travel in Persian that could be transformed into English and the project of translation was primarily taken up to disseminate the wonders of the West to the East. Taleb's *Travels* was not a naïve appropriation of Western travel writing. While the traveller repeatedly fell back upon his Muslim/Indian identity and began the travelogue with an invocation in the Islamic tradition, the "Translator's Preface" highlighted the liberal curiosity of the traveller. It is important to quote Charles Stewart here:

The free remarks of an intelligent foreigner, and especially of an Asiatic, on our laws, customs, and manners, when they are ascertained to be genuine, must always be considered as an object to liberal curiosity" (1810/2005, p. xxxiii).

The readings of Taleb's *Travels* often try to locate it in the tradition of writings like Montesque's *Letters Persanes* (1721). It is nearly contemporaneous with Elizabeth Hamilton's novel *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796) where we see the deployment of a fictional Indian traveller to England. Taleb's text is different from that of Hamilton's because an actual travel took place from India to England unlike the fictional travel in Hamilton's novel. Hamilton provided a negative image of Islam and justified the British intervention on the ground of releasing the Hindus from the rapacious reign of the Muslim rulers. Taleb's travelogue brought out the voices from the periphery instead of encountering how a British hand cast a silenced Other into a speaking subject. His entry into the British public sphere also dismantled the European attempt to construct the Muslims as outsiders of India as he represented India in England.

The narrative strategy of early Indian travellers is often seen in terms of the model of travel writing by the Europeans leading into oblivion the travelogues of the Indo-Persian literary tradition. While discussing Dean Mahomet's travelogue, critics immediately link it to the epistolary British travelogues of the eighteenth century without thinking about Persian *Insha* which literally means creation and construction of letters. Taleb's text is steeped in the tradition of *safarnama*, a Persian style of writing travel where the sense of the real and the sense of the mythical get merged as opposed to the eighteenth century British travel writing where empiricism played a key role. The sense of '*ajhab*' (wonder) in *safarnama* is in striking contrast with the European tradition where only the empirical was considered as the truth. Taleb deliberately chose the form so that he could posit his Islamic worldview different from the Christian worldview to circulate his perception of the West. He was enthusiastic about the translation as he realized that in spite of some basic distortions, the form of *safarnama* could have been introduced in reading public across the globe and his narrative strategy is one of the early examples of narrating the nation through literary genre. It is interesting to note that at the very beginning of his travelogue Taleb differentiated between a historian and a traveller arguing that a traveller writes with emotion and feeling while a historian is free from the emotional touch. The emphasis on emotion and feeling not merely denoted how the age of Reason gradually moved to the cult of sensibility but also a strong denial of a colonized subject to steer clear of the stress on the factual and the empirical of the contemporary European travel writing.

Abu Taleb, the traveller grappled with the complexity of identity as his primarily allegiance was to the service of the East India Company. He was conscious of his identity as a Muslim/Indian and a resident of a colonial territory. It was not at all easy to negotiate with these conflicting identities entering into what Mary Louise Pratt calls 'contact zone'. Pratt defines 'contact zone' as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today" (1992/2003, p. 15). She

takes up the term from the discipline of linguistics and justifies why she prefers 'contact perspective' instead of 'colonial frontier'. The idea of 'colonial frontier' is inscribed within the European expansionist ideology as the frontier is frontier with respect to Europe while the 'contact perspective' focuses on how subjects are constituted in asymmetrical relations of power. Taleb's *Travels* is one of the early voices of a Muslim intellectual from the 'contact zone' that sought to negotiate with the metropolitan centre.

Having entered a new 'contact zone' Taleb initiated a cultural dialogue with the European civilization. He was aware of the main contours of the categorization of the Other in British Orientalist discourse that created several identifiable binaries like male-female, rational-superstitious, civilized-barbaric and so on. It was really not an easy task to reconcile and respond to the conflicting identities that jostle for space. His gaze became deeply fractured when he meticulously observed and extensively commented on the British culture. The oriental traveller in Europe experienced the complex power dynamics fluctuating between the identities of the gazer and the gazed. He knew that his presence became a source of meeting the European interest in the exotic and instead of merely showcasing exoticism, he rendered the exotic into a marketable commodity in a reverse way. He enjoyed his social status as 'The Persian Prince' popularized by the press. Though he went from one of the outposts of empire, he secured a social and cultural recognition. When he was invited to the Lord Mayor's banquet, he was seated at the high table with Nelson, the national hero. The other guests who came to the banquet bowed to convey courtesy not only to Nelson but also to Taleb for his "supposed high rank" (1810/2005, p. 96).

Taleb not only recorded his critical observations in his travel to the West but also thought of a possible space of finding parallels between British culture and Indian culture. From the "Translator's Introduction" we come to know that he was of the view 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" (1810/2005, p.xxxv). The colonized subject was in a position to arrive at a phase of what Mary Louise Pratt calls 'transculturation'. Pratt defines 'transculturation' as a process through which "subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture" (1992/2003, p.17). The term 'transculturation' was actually coined in the 1940s by Fernando Ortiz in a description of Afro-Cuban culture to replace the binary model of acculturation and deculturation. Taleb did not blindly adhere to the path of emulation of the West but engaged in a process of selective appropriation of many of the aspects of the Enlightenment discourse of modernity. He was surprised to witness the huge proliferation of print technology. He stated:

Of the inventions of Europe, the utility of which may not appear at first sight to an Asiatic, the art of Printing, is the most admirable. By its aid, thousands of copies of any scientific or religious book, may be circulated among the people in a very short time and by it, the works of the celebrated authors are handed down to posterity, free from the errors and imperfections of a manuscript. To this art the English are indebted to the humble but useful publication of the newspapers, without which life would be irksome to them. These are read by all ranks of people from the prince to the beggar (1810/2005, p. 95).

Here Taleb referred to the phenomenal rise of print culture that the Enlightenment initiated. He was an astute observer of the conspicuous changes that Britain underwent as a result of the Industrial Revolution. He witnessed that the economic prosperity of England lied in the excellent use of machine and technology. He observed: "In England, labour is very much facilitated by the aid of mechanism; and by its assistance the price of commodities is very much reduced: for it in

their great manufacturers, they made use of horses, bullocks or men”( Taleb, 1810/2005, p.102). He described “the mills for grinding corn” (Taleb, 1810/2005, p.102), his excitement to see the manufacture of needles (Taleb, 1810/2005, p.103) and his astonishment at the use of hydraulic machine for getting water (Taleb, 1810/2005, p.104). If the European colonial gaze was geared towards, to put into the words of Elleke Boehmer, “an attempt at both extensive comprehension and comprehensive control” (1995, p.97), the reverse gaze of the colonized subject aimed at ‘comprehensive’ understanding of the strength of the British that provided them the capacity for colonial expansion. Prior to his minute observations of the development of science and copious use of technology, he discovered the maritime power of the British that played a pivotal role in colonial conquest: “the great perfection to which the English have brought their navy, is doubtless, the chief cause of their prosperity, and the principal source of all their wealth” (Taleb, 1810/2005, p. 97).

Taleb identified the factors that went into the making of empire. He accepted that Europe exceeded India materially and therefore he sought for a possible cross-cultural exchange through a transcultured space. It definitely paved the way for the emergence of a cosmopolitan worldview. But it was not apolitical. From the churning of his experiences of travel Taleb realized that the Europeans would establish the superiority of the West by asserting, as Partha Chatterjee contends in *Nationalist Thought and the Colonial World*, “the materiality of its culture, exemplified by its science, technology and love of progress” (1986, p.51). Taleb’s gaze was not a naïve gaze at the European culture but a critical gaze. His admiration for science was also marked by skepticism. He criticized the English also for their misplaced assumption of expertise in science. In fact he ridiculed the iconic English scientist Isaac Newton when he said “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” (Taleb, 1810/2005, p. 97).

Taleb expressed his admiration for the British culture and then proceeded to undercut passages of praise with some critical observations, thereby undermining the British rhetoric of superiority. He reiterated the colonial stereotype like a docile colonized subject and then subverted it from within. He began with an apparent praise of the British law and constitution by arguing that “it is impossible for human wisdom to produce any other system containing so many excellences, and so free from imperfection” (Taleb, 1810/2005, p. 97). The praise for the British legal system was problematized when he claimed English laws as “excessively voluminous, and in many instances either contradictory or obscure” (Taleb, 1810/2005, p.135). He expressed his dissenting voice regarding the excessive use of fees and fines in British law and argued that it was distressing for the poor and beneficial for the rich. He was highly critical of the establishment of the British judicial system: “I cannot pass over this opportunity of freely expressing my sentiments with respect to the establishment of British courts of law in India; which, I contend, are converted to the very worst of purposes, and, unless an alteration takes place in the system, will some time or other produce the most sinister consequences” (Taleb, 1810/2005, p.137). The initial praise of the British law was just to gain a platform to articulate his voice against transplanting British judicial system in India. He too pointed out the fact that British legal system would be dangerous to the Indians who had to employ an attorney who would not understand a word of their language. As the voice of resistance surfaced, the travelogue marked Taleb’s position as an Indian who refused to submit to the authority of British law.

Taleb’s awareness of an Indian national identity is reiterated in the way he wrote about the drawbacks and vices of the English. His sharp criticism of the English culture was grafted

within a strategic frame as he claimed that he was requested by Lady Spenser to state his opinion in his travelogue “without either fear or flattery” (Taleb, 1810/2005, p.59). Getting the license to put forward his critique, Taleb noted twelve vices of the English nation --lack of religious faith, pride or insolence, acquisitiveness, love of ease, irritability of temper, wasting time in sleeping, eating and dressing, love of luxury, the misplaced assumption of expertise in science and foreign languages, selfishness, lack of chastity, extravagance and contempt for the customs of other nations (Taleb, 1810/2005, pp.127-55).It is important to note that many of the vices that he pointed out in the English culture were often shown in the culture of India through its discursive production within the Orientalist binary of the Self and the Other. In his criticism Taleb created a sharp distinction between the English culture and the Indian culture creating an alternative set of binary -- religious India and materialist West. The British love of ease and luxury subverted a prominent colonial stereotype as the Britons projected themselves as industrious and the orientals as indolent. Taleb was outspoken in his views of the British contempt for the customs of other nations that brought to the light their racist face lying behind the white mask of civilization. He noted how he became a butt of ridicule for going to bed in trousers and argued that if the English ship faced an emergency its European inmates would have to rush to the deck naked. Thus he turned the discourse of cultural privileging of Europe upside down. Kate Teltscher points out “Here, then, we have the rare opportunity of listening to the voice of an Indian answering back, albeit in the form of legitimized dissent” (2000, p. 421). The text gradually moved from the personal to the political ramifications regarding the nature of the British empire as Taleb made a clear distinction between Arabian conquest and British conquest of India. He argued that as opposed to the oppressive British rulers, the Arabian predecessors were liberal to the people. This argument contravened one of the major logics of the British empire as the Europeans associated the Islamic rule with brutality and tyranny and justified their colonial rule as a release of the Hindus from the rapacity of the Muslim rulers. While discussing the selfishness of the English, he talked about the Governor of Madras who wanted to interfere in the internal management of the revenues of the Carnatic and referred to the treaty between the Nabob and the East India Company. As the colonized subject got a chance to speak on the vices of the English culture, he subtly worked through the text a trenchant critique of the British presence in India crisscrossing between the personal experiences and subtle subversive political opinions.

Taleb perhaps realized that his travelogue gradually moved towards a sustained critique of the British empire and therefore he proceeded to note the virtues of the English in order to create a balance within the text. His list of virtues included the English high sense of honour due to liberal education, reverence for everything or person possessing superior excellence, the dread of offending against the rules of propriety, a passion for mechanism, and their numerous contrivances for facilitating labour and industry, plainness of manners and sincerity to disposition and so on. Most of the English virtues noted by Taleb upheld the ideas associated with the Enlightenment and therefore reiterated an image of the Enlightened Europe. He saw the English society as anti-feudal, knowledge based and marked by the application of science and technology. It is important to note that most of the vices like intolerance, pride, selfishness, disrespect for the cultural other, and so on were shown in the domain of colonial transaction while the virtues were shown to be practised at home. Thus his praise and admiration for the English was not merely symptomatic of an emergent comprador class who facilitated the process of colonialism but the presence of a critical colonized subject who foregrounded how the ‘Enlightened’ British turned selfish and intolerant in the colony.

The question of foregrounding indigenous identity vis-à-vis the rise of the British empire appeared extremely important when Taleb talked about his own religion and discussed the

position of women in Asia. He emphatically rejected the influence of Europe in the domain of religion and in his treatment of women. He refuted the English claim that Islam is irrational and pointed out the deficiencies of Christianity. When the English mocked at the Muslim ceremonies at Mecca he said “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” (Taleb, 1810/2005, p.153). Taleb’s repudiation of the dismissal of Indian religion underlined his strong sense of resistance to the British attempt of rendering Indian belief-system as irrational. He repeatedly pointed out the lack of faith of the English in religion and their anxiety over Islam. Taleb narrated his experience of meeting the Bishop of London who asked him whether he came to “England to convert the people to Mohamedanism, and to make them forsake the religion of their forefathers” (Taleb, 1810/2005, p.153). Edward Said genealogically studies the western treatment of Islam and unmasks the historical, cultural and ideological basis of misrepresenting Islam. He rightly comments: “Orientalism turned Islam into the very epitome of an outsider against which the whole European civilization from the middle ages on was founded” (1978/2001, p.70). European representation of Islam as outsider in orientalist discourse was problematized as ‘the Persian Prince’ went to teach them the Persian language. Taleb did not accept the European notion that “the women of Asia have no liberty at all, but live like slaves, without honour and authority, in the homes of their husbands” (1810/2005, p.153) and reversed the Orientalist position to speak for India. The negative analysis of the British of Asiatic culture and religion through purdah, polygamy, male-initiated divorce, inequality in judicial testimony, marginalization of widows and others had been translated as the strength of the indigenous culture instead of its drawbacks as the Europeans too had similar or inferior practices. For example, Taleb argued that Asiatic men did not force women to practise ‘purdah’ and women indulged in it naturally as they could prevent strangers, afford time for “work and useful employments” (1810/2005, p.298) and save them sharing husbands’ work. The voyeuristic sexual fantasy of Europe regarding harem was debunked through a misogynist joke as he said “it is easier to live with two tigresses than two wives” (1810/2005, p.270). Taleb’s was an extremely protective outlook in his treatment of religion and the woman question brought out the fact that he accepted European colonial modernity in the public sphere and rejected any European influence or critique in his private sphere. Partha Chatterjee in *Nation and its Fragments* (1986) divides this kind of social space into “ghar and bahir, the home and the world.”

The question of representation of one’s own self and culture in an early ‘contact zone’ of colonialism is a matter of paramount importance as it opened up the path of the formation of resistant self of the colonized. Taleb’s voice not only complicated but also negated the Orientalist claim that the colonized India was not capable of representing themselves. Taleb was engaged in the process of what Mary Louise Pratt calls ‘autoethnography’

...instances in which colonized subjects undertake to represent themselves in way that engage with the colonizer’s own terms. If ethnographic texts are a means by which Europeans represent to themselves their (usually subjugated) others, autoethnographic texts are those the others construct in response to or in dialogue with those metropolitan representations. (Pratt, 1992/2003, p.18)

Taleb’s venture into travel writing through a dialogic encounter with the West reversed the basic epistemological foundation of Orientalist discourse that Edward Said uses as an epigraph to his book *Orientalism* quoting Karl Marx “they cannot represent themselves; they must be represented” (1978/2001). He contested the negative construction of Islam, openly criticized the

vices of the English and drew parallels with Indian institutions and practices. Yet his participation in the imperial process could not be overlooked as he was in England as a teacher of Persian who helped the British to comprehend the linguistic and the cultural nuances of India. By facilitating the process of mapping the cultural Other, Taleb advertently or inadvertently took part in its domestication through his teaching of Oriental languages like Persian and Arabic.

To conclude, through Taleb's text we see that colonial transaction was neither a one-sided process of subjugation nor a pure artefact of native resistance. Taleb's textual production of India made the European representations of India problematic and destabilized the binary of civilized Europe and the barbaric Orient. A close reading of Taleb's *Travels* provides us an insight to the strategies of representing Indian resistance to colonialism. He adopted an apparent submissive position by stating that he sought to educate his community through his travelogue. Under the veneer of a declared conformist stance, Taleb initiated a counter discourse to British colonialism and resisted the attempt to appropriate the voice of the colonized. He was in a position to endorse and to reject European influence. When he accepted the colonial modernity, he was engaged in a process of selection where he could retain his subjective selfhood. So Taleb's *Travels* can be located in the genealogy of subversive contestations of colonial discourse. It is a cultural testament that provides ample insight into our understanding of the formation of the nascent Indian nationalist self.

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