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TOLERANCE, ACCEPTANCE AND ASSIMILATION: A REVIEW OF FANNY PARKES' *BEGUMS, THUGS AND ENGLISHMEN*

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ABSTRACT

The rich literature of the Raj includes writings of Fiction, of Officers posted in India, lay Travellers, Missionaries and the Families of the officers and other Functionaries of the Raj. Two diametrically opposite view points emerge from these writings: the East that was exotic and the East that was moribund, regressive, uncivilized. In this melee, there is a significant book that defies classification – *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque*, written by Fanny Parkes and edited as *Begums Thugs and Englishmen* by William Dalrymple. The book is a first person account of India through the eyes of this memsahib. The present paper explores how Fanny Parkes escapes stereotyping India and how her writing is an important landmark in Oriental Studies.

Key Words: Raj, Memshahibs, Orientalism, Natives, Sati, Thugee, Travel Writings

Introduction

Writings on the Raj tend to be viewed through the lens of Orientalism Theories. It is a rich body of literature, comprising works of fiction writers, colonial officers, missionaries and families of all the above. *A Passage to India, Kim, The Far Pavilions, Annals and Antiquities of Rajasthan, Confessions of a Thug, Man eaters of Kumaon, Rambles and Recollections of an Indian Official* etc are some of the tantalizing titles that have kept the interest in colonial writings alive through the ages. Literary and cultural theorists have traced in them two primary patterns. First are the creators of Exotic East – the land of snakes, of tight rope walkers, of mystics and maharajas. The second category of writers are the bearers of White man's burden who found the land and its people filthy and uncouth and who needed the British supervision to civilize. There is enough evidence to justify both the claims and the debate is not likely to settle ever.

However, amidst the raging controversies and conflicting palpable designs in writings, there is a writer who defies classification. She is Fanny Parkes, who was the wife of a British Civil Servant and who resided in India between 1822 and 1846. Her journal by the name of *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in search of the Picturesque* has been edited into a book titled *Begums, Thugs and Englishmen: the journals of Fanny Parkes* by William Dalrymple.

Fanny Parkes arrived in Calcutta and then travelled up towards the Hills in the North. Her significant stays were at Calcutta, Allahabad, Kanpur, Agra, Fatehgarh, Benaras etc. She travelled with her husband, setting up house across the country and all the while availing every opportunity to travel and explore. Hence her journals are eye witness accounts of life in the Zenana, of Sati, Thugee, Hindu and Muslim marriage ceremonies, the art and architecture of India, of flora and fauna. An independent woman, Fanny Parkes has freely

commented upon the conduct of Indians and the British.

The Indian Character: Significantly, there is no uniform stereotypical Indian character in Fanny Parkes' writings. Her servants demand 'dasturi' from merchants, her aaya sleeps on the floor all day. And yet when before her departure from Calcutta she was required to sell her prized horse to an Indian, even after the payment was made, she records, the Indian requested her to retain the horse for the remaining days of her stay in Calcutta. (Parkes, p 36). Fanny Parkes has also demonstrated unmitigated admiration for Baiza Bai, erstwhile Queen of Gwalior. She concludes with, "Were I an Asiatic, I would be a Mahratta". (Parkes,p265)

The British: It goes to Fanny Parkes' credit that she is not swayed by brotherhood of English in exile while writing of the British in India. She is absolutely charmed by Col Gardener who is a social pariah among the English on account of having taken an Indian *bibi*. She is revolted by the English men and women who danced on the Taj.

Indian Social Customs: During her sojourn in India, Fanny Parkes happened to witness several Indian festivals, customs and traditions. She has devoted entire chapters to Thugee, Marriage Ceremonies, and written extensively on Sati, Nut Log, Durga Puja, etc. Once again her commentary is impartial. A woman is made to commit sati, she writes, else it takes away from the share of property inherited by the son. Intoxicated and indoctrinated, women themselves are anxious to commit sati for the upkeep of the honor of the family. It is only when the flames torch them that they try to jump out of pyres- only to be pushed back by the surrounding relatives (Parkes, pp 58-60). Elsewhere she writes how the Hindus who cremate their dead leave partially burnt bodies to rot in rivers, a practice most abhorrent and demeaning to the dead. But she has prefaced this observation with the remark that the poor of India cannot afford the wood or the oil required for the complete combustion of the body.

Of Curios and Curiosities: Fanny Parkes is fascinated by the numerous curios that were peculiar to India. First is the Punkah- a bolt of cloth swaying near the ceiling and pulled by a punkhawala parked outside in the verandah. She has also

described the Thermanditode at length which was a kind of a mechanical contraption designed to beat the heat in North India during Summer. Fanny's husband was made in charge of the Ice Management at Allahabad. Hence she familiarized herself with the complete process of manufacture and preservation of ice that fed the entire station for upto 4 months of summer.

Indian Art and Architecture: Indian architecture has come into fulsome praise in the journals of Fanny Parkes. While the Govt was contemplating auctioning the Taj Mahal for its marble, Fanny writes, "January 1835-I have seen the Taj Mahal; but how shall I describe its loveliness? Its unearthly style of beauty! It is not its magnitude; but its elegance, its proportions, its exquisite workmanship, and the extreme delicacy of the whole that render t it the admiration of the world." (Parkes, p 181)

The journal, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque*, was written for Fanny Parkes' mother back in England. As one turns the pages, the superlative skill of the author in catching the milieu impresses upon the mind. The appeal of the writing is to all the senses - the whistling and blowing of the Pipal tree in the wind, the earthy aroma of khas as it is watered in the dry season, the rhythmic grunting and breathing of the palanquin bearers as they move their load from place to place, the tranquillity of the earthen lamps as the devout immerse them in the Ganga in the evenings and myriad images of the town and the country make the reader nostalgic of the bye gone days , a way of life lost for ever.

Fanny's 'chutnification' was complete. She was a sitar playing, Urdu speaking Indophile who had mastered the idiomatic use of language in India. Baiza Bai, the erstwhile queen of Gwalior was being persuaded by the Govt to move to Benaras, a proposition not to her liking. As she pondered over her predicament, she sought Fanny's advice. 'Jiska lathi uska bhaisn' (might is right)was Fanny's succinct and convincing response. On another occasion, a much admired bust of a Sati was procured for Fanny. She was reluctant to accept it 'Chori ka maal hazam nahi hoga'(stolen goods cannot be digested) she protested. While the said Baiza Bai looked askance at the said bust once as it

lay on Fanny's boat, Fanny replied cheekily 'Hawa khane ke vaaste'(we have brought her out for the fresh air)."

The Uniqueness of Fanny Parkes' Discourse:

There was no dearth of travel writers, writings on India. *The First Firangis* mentions how travel to India in pre-colonial times meant adjusting to dangerous new environments where one's life was potentially at risk from extreme climates, deadly diseases and human as well as animal predators (Harris, 48). '*Husband hunting in the Raj*' lists the following popular travel advisories for travel to India: *Indian Outfits and Establishments : Practical Guide for Persons about to Reside in India*, Maud Diver's *The Englishwoman in India*, *The English bride in India*, *Tropical Trials: A Handbook for Women in the Tropics* by Maj Leigh Hunt and Alexander Kenny etc. ([https:// scroll.in /magazine/855336](https://scroll.in/magazine/855336)). Likewise the writings of Emily Eden are much celebrated. Nupur Chaudhury has contended that, " Because of the influence of the letters and diaries that their female relatives sent back from India, beginning in the 19th century, many British women were formulating their own opinions about the Indians ,long before the emerging dominance of late British imperial cultures or of Social Darwinism.(Chaudhury, Web.) But while Fanny's contemporary writers were writing of the servants and Indians but in their memoirs the divide of 'us' vs 'them' is complete. The servants for example are viewed only with respect to their utility for the British : the darzi(tailor) is skilled in duplicating but not in originating designs or the dhobi or washer man attacks buttons and laces with vengeance (<https://scroll.in/magazine/855336>).

Conclusion

Fanny Parkes' Journal challenges Said's seminal work on Orientalism wherein he claims that the Orient was an invention of the West, whereby the West judged, studied, or disciplined the East. Not so with Fanny Parkes. Fanny Parkes' world in India comprised primarily what she calls 'we' or 'us in India' vs Home. This world away from home is peopled by a great variety of people- each with his/her own idiosyncrasy, charm, or ugliness and they are both English as well as Indians. They have not been classified as 'us British' and 'them natives'.

The only dichotomy is geographical – we in India and Home ie England. Beyond that, it is a vibrant account of a traveller who is zestful and eager, looking at a different life style- without judging, sanctioning or condemning it.

The charm of Fanny Parkes is the pleasure of listening to a master raconteur, an elder of the family, recreating the magic of the yesteryears.

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