



The Representation of the West and the Ideological Position of the Author in *Belayettira Baralinda*

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Abstract

Written by Tana Sarma Belayettira Baralinda [Roaming through England] is a pioneering work of travel account in Nepali literature. It recounts the author's observations of European society during the mid-sixties of the twentieth century. The purpose of this paper is to see whether the author accepts the hegemonic discourse of the west of its progress and civilization or resists and contests it. For the textual analysis, it uses Antonio Gramsci's concept of Hegemony, Michel Foucault's Discourse theory and Edward Said's notion of Orientalism and the generic parameters of travel writing. As the original text is in Nepali, the writer has translated the cited parts into English and wherever is necessary, the Nepali is also used followed by its English equivalent. This review finds that it undoubtedly is a classic work of travelogue in Nepalese literature which presents a vivid picture of Europe of the mid-sixties of the twentieth century. It is more varied and surpasses its predecessors like Jungabahadurko Belayet Yatra and it is more analytical and multifaceted. It has saved itself from the fault of admiring the west without being objective and critical. Thematically, it covers three areas: admiration of the west as the place of progress, plenty and freedom, sporadic critiquing its inhumanity and the expression of authorial ethos in the description of the west. The paper concludes that, despite sporadic moments of critiquing, Sarma's travel account approves western hegemonic discourse.

Keywords: *Discourse, Hegemony, Travel Account, West*

Travel Writing: A Generic Description and Parameters in the Context of Nepal

The literary genre known as travel writing is inalienably connected with the history of travel itself. In academia travel writing or travelogue is often associated

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with the European conquest and colonial expansion of the non-European locations. The information travelogue writers collected and accumulated became instrumental to carry out and validate imperial conquest. Lindsay (2009), for example, holds that travel writing was important “not only for its capacity to generate curiosity, excitement and adventure; it was also instrumental in the economy and machinery of empire (p.25). Whitehead (2002) sees the emergence of travel writing in the west as result of “the earliest encounters between Europeans and Americans” (p.124).

The study of travel accounts has been buttressed by ideas of Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault and Edward Said. Antonio Gramsci’s notion of hegemony enables one to study the relationships which operate on the plain of dominance and subordination. Gramsci (2012) advances: What can we do

. . . is to fix two major superstructural “levels”: the one that can be called “civil society”, that is the ensemble of organism commonly called “private”, and that of “political society” or “the state”. These two levels correspond on the one hand to function of “hegemony” which the dominant group exercises throughout society and on the other hand to that of “direct domination” or command exercised through the state and the “juridical” government. (p.12)

Hegemony, as Gramsci uses the term, is nothing but domination of one class (the bourgeoisie) over the other (the subaltern or the proletariat). He also states that it operates on the level of superstructure as well. But it functions through two channels—through the civil society and the state. Hegemony exercised through the state machinery like the security forces, judiciaries, executives and parliament is direct. But hegemony executed through the private organs or the civil society is indirect and the subordinated do not feel it. Dominance through texts can be taken as a form of hegemony. He advances that dominant class tries to co-opt subordinate group by partial containment to maintain its rule (p. 161). According to him if the ruling class fails to contain the general mass, or they pass from a state of political passivity to a certain activity and put demands which the authority cannot fulfil, there arises the crisis in hegemony (p. 210). This shows that hegemony of any form is not stable but a contested zone.

Saussurian linguistics focuses on the sign system of language based on the relationship between words and concepts they represent. It turned out to be a useful structuralist tool to study various disciplines in which surface signs correspond with the underlining meaning. Michel Foucault, however, finds the structuralist notion insufficient to see the role historical and spatial factors play in determining the meaning. Foucault (2000) states:

Then, it seems, the moment came to consider these facts of discourse no longer simply in their linguistic dimension, but in a sense- here I'm taking my cue from studies by the Anglo-Americans- as games, strategic games of action and reaction, question and answer, domination and evasion, as well as struggle. On one level, discourse is a regular set of linguistic facts, while on another level it is an ordered set of polemical and strategic facts. This analysis of discourse as a strategic and polemical game is, in my judgement, a second line of research to pursue. (pp. 2-3)

Incorporating historical perspective into linguistic dimension, he takes discourse as a tool to analyse texts as the zone of contest and change. He takes it as polemical and strategic category containing wider issues found in various forms of representation. Without ignoring linguistic dimension, he emphasizes on "an ordered set of polemical and strategic facts." of discourse (p. 31). Gordon (2000) explains:

Foucault was interested in the role of knowledges as useful and necessary to the exercise of power because they were practically serviceable, not because they were false. He had developed for this purpose an analysis of "discourses," identifiable collections of utterances governed by rules of construction and evaluation which determine within some thematic area what may be said, by whom, in what context, and with what effect. (p.xvi)

Therefore, in Foucault's scheme of things knowledge power and discourse are interconnected, each producing, influencing and strengthening the other. Like Gramsci's hegemony, Foucault's power-knowledge-discourse relationship is not fixed. It also is subject to changes depending on historical contexts. Heavily drawing upon Gramsci's concept of hegemony and Foucault's discourse, Edward Said coined the term "Orientalism" which explores the faulty representation of the east in the European literature. Said (2001) maintains:

Orientalism can be discussed and analysed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient- dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient. I have useful here to employ Michel Foucault's notion of a discourse, as described by him . . . to identify. (p.3)

Said's main contention is that western scholars strategically misrepresent and disfigure the Oriental society to dominate it. The east not the east as it intends to be but it has to be the east as defined by the west. The chunks of travel writing and other forms of discourse produced in the west attest to the claim made by him.

Rubies (2002) associates the origin of travel writing with the post sixteenth century ethnographic impulse of the European intellectuals. According to him their interest in peoples, their nature, customs, religion, forms of government and language lie behind such impulse (p.243). He motions that the European ethnographic impulse itself was the product of the combination of colonial expansion and intellectual transformation (p. 243). Travel is the very inalienable part of travel writing. To know the would be colonial subjects was necessary before conquering them. Travel writing provided the necessary information for colonizing project. By depicting the non-European peoples as barbarians and savages, such texts prepared the intellectual ground for the justification of colonial rule as “civilizing mission.”

Hulme (2002) takes “the mixture of personal reportage and socio-political analysis” as major components of travel writing (p.94). He adds that it is an account of “experience of foreign cultures and language, . . . they are visiting, acquiring the sort of intimate knowledge which gives them access to people and places unknown to short-stay travellers” (p.97). So for Hulme travel writing comprises a personal reportage and socio-political comments on foreign culture, foreign language, people and places.

The generic definitions given by Joan Pau Rubies and Peter Hulme help fix the boundary and area of Tana Sarma’s *Belayettira Baralinda* (2017) [Roaming through England] as a Nepalese travel account. As Rubies has stressed it represents the peoples, cultures, languages and governments which interest the writer and Nepalese readership. But unlike the western travel accounts, one cannot expect it to be motivated by any colonial and hegemonic interests. Therefore applying the theoretical concepts of Antonio Gramsci, Michel Foucault and Edward Said and the generic definitions of Joan Pau Rubies and Peter Hulme, the article sets out to analyse *Belayettira Baralinda* [Roaming through England] as a text of travel writing. Divided into twelve chapters, it opens in London of 24 October 1966 (p.2) and ends with the description of the National Republic Day of Eire on 26 March 1968 (p.159). The forthcoming section of the article proceeds with the selected citations from the work and analysis of them.

A Brief Survey of Study on *Belayettira Baralinda*

Discussion on travel writing as a separate genre is still in its infancy in Nepali literature. Such writing receives very little critical attention. Materials for literature review can be gathered from the prefaces and forewords to books. Pokhrel (1968) in his preface to the book praises it as a path breaking work of travel account and Sarma as the progenitor of the new genre of travel writing in Nepali literature (pp. Kha, gha).

He also praises the account for its beautiful prose style, confessional mode and brilliant polished writing which are the hallmarks of talented writer like Sharma (p. gha). He also commends the work as an immortal account of Europe from a Nepali (p.cha). Bhandary ((1982) in his Ph. D. dissertation commends it for its powerful, vivid and realistic representation of the industrialized, progressive and freedom loving British society despite being an imperial power (p. 125). He finds progressive elements in the account for it sporadic critiquing of the government's imperialist policies and practices (p.189). Upadhaya (2000) has extensively studied the Nepalese travel literature treating it as a separate genre. He praises Sarma for presenting a lively and objective picture of various aspects of social, political, economic, cultural and scientific progress of the western society to the Nepali readers and calls it a balanced work of travel account (214).

Most of these comments highlight only the surface description of the western society and the author's personal experience and observation that is found in it. They do not address the deeper issues like ideological position of the author in connection to hegemonic western discourse which designates the western societies as backward and regressive. Therefore, to look into *Belayettira Baralinda* in terms of ideological position of the author is a researchable task.

Looking into the Text

Belayettira Baralinda was first published by Sajha Prakashan in 1969. Tana Sarma was in England for post Master's level study. The word 'baralinda' of the title denotes a casual or aimless wandering. Although it indicates the lack of seriousness, it has proved a classic travel account in Nepalese literature. It contains twelve chapters. The fourth chapter is a letter written to Alice which this paper does not touch.

The book begins with the lively description of a fair beside the Menai Bridge where various types of articles, games, and shows are put on display and sale. However, it is the waywardness of the girls what strikes the author. He remarks, "Just contrary to what happens in our places where it is boys who press against girls, in England it is girls who collide with boys. Here teenage girls are too much wayward and naughty" (translated from Nepali p. 3). He goes to see wrestling but the men and women making love in the public places draws his attention. He admits, "What attracted my attention more than wrestling was the scene of the three or four couples of youths who were kissing each other without caring the world. Men and women folks in this place do not feel awkward to embrace and kiss at any part of the body in public" (translated p. 5).]

He spends a lot of spaces relating the scenes and events in which people are indulged in love making in the public. He gets impressed by open and frank behaviours (pp.12-13). He gets introduced to many girls like Alice, Kim, Su, Lee, Suzan and others who have been there from various parts of the world for study. At functions he develops intimacies with them and exchanges kiss (p.28).

Sarma shows himself in the process of acculturation in the metropolitan London atmosphere. He presents himself as the ladies' choice figure. He narrates:

Later I carried Alice up to the right sofa and Naji to the left. The Indian boys became too much jealous as I kissed on Joji's hand and read her palm. They said I was the king of girls and taking pleasure. Light heartedly I retorted that they were not girls; they were nymphs and queens: Naji the youngest nymph and beautiful queen and Alice mature queen and grown up nymph. (translated p. 33)

In the beginning the author simply presents himself as a spectator of the wonderland. By now he has undergone a metamorphosis into an actor, an acculturated participant of the wonderland itself. His success to promote himself to that position is so remarkable that it arouses jealousy in his Indian counterparts. Indirectly the author presents English society as an indicator of manners and openness, a model for the Nepalese to follow. Despite the substantial presence of male figures, Sharma's spotlight on England is as the city of warm girls, a city of polite and civilized people, a city of openness, therefore a role model.

Sometimes Tana Sarma's description reminds the reader of *Jangabhadurko Belayet Yatra [Jungabhadur's England Visit]* in its unrestricted praise of the west as a place of progress, prosperity, miracles, advanced civilization and plenty. He admires the western life as "very easy and comfortable, without worry and suffering and without seriousness, sentimentality, tears and sadness" (translated p.66). Although Sharma's ideal qualities of life in the west are open to the opposite interpretations, for a society without problems is also problematic. But to present the British society of the mid-sixties as this is less than a presentation based on sufficient evidences and in-depth analysis.

The author painstakingly describes the lively and dramatic scenario of the Speaker's corner in London with its sounds and sights. This is the place where all forms of radicals, communists, dissents, anti-colonial and black activists, anarchists, misfits of all sorts and the like from all over the world can air their views without any fear and obstruction. This corner is presented as a synonym of freedom itself in the literal and metaphorical sense of the word. The author remarks:

But friends! Where ever you get off, I advise you never to forget this tiny corner of England, the mother of democracy. This place does not look so important; London has thousands of more beautiful places than this. But this Speaker's corner is the only place in the whole world where a man can speak out freely whatever he has in his heart. (translated p. 88)

Besides being a highly civilized and developed country, England is pictured as a country of unrestricted freedom and democracy, the only liberal and open country in the world which can accommodate and shelter all sorts of oppositions, dissidents, discontents and even rebels.

Happy, polite, educated, liberal and advanced England versus unhappy, parochial, uneducated, traditional and backward Nepal is not only the theme Sharma has to present. More than this he presents England to find and show the pride of his nation and his national identity. In fact he shows that one's true identity can be discovered when one encounters the foreign country and culture. He mentions an incident in which he is asked where he is from. Instead of replying, he makes the guess about where about. As the person fails to make a right guess, he discloses his identity as someone, "from the country where lies the world's highest peak, from the country which has the best warriors" (translated p. 46). The author retorts the British superlatives with the Nepali superlative. If England is the most advanced, most civilized nation in the world, Nepal is also not less important country because it has Mt. Everest and brave Ghurkhas. But how much Everest and Ghurkhas establish Nepal's superiority is debatable because both of these are famous because of the British hegemony which Sharma has unwittingly accepts.

The description of France is presented in a separate chapter "Pariski Pokchi" [The Plump Woman of Paris]. If London represents England, Paris represents France which is symbolized in a female figure, the painting. The whole chapter is an attempt to describe the mysterious beauty of the painting Mona Lisa. After Mona Lisa, it is the Paris women and arts which arouse his interest:

The framed colourful paintings on the wall were looking at me as if they would speak tome instantly. The nude women were tempting my heart and the young French, Spanish and American girls were pulling me toward them with their bodies with erect Mt. Everest and Makalu. Although I was enjoying their warm push, my attention was fixed on the photos which looked like the Renaissance period. (translated p. 108)

Therefore, France is represented through Paris which, in turn, is synonymous to art, paintings and women with erect breasts. As a viewer, the author presents himself as a lover, a male voyeur and connoisseur of all sights whether they are paintings or live girls of Paris.

Unlike *Jungabhadurko Beleyet Yatra* Sarma's travel account includes the descriptions of a few more European Countries like Switzerland and the Republic of Eire in the last two chapters. Although they occupy little space in the book, they are important to have a more comprehensive view of Europe and the writer's attitudes to the subject matter itself.

The author praises Geneva, the capital city of Switzerland, as "devapuri" [city of gods], "alakapuri" [heaven] and "anautho ra painasaknuko nagari" [wonderful and celestial city] (p.144). The heavenly beauty of the city reminds the author of his native capital city which he thinks could be made as beautiful as this city. But the heavenly impression of the city soon gives way to anti-climax when he describes an accident in which nobody comes to rescue the lying wounded person. He relates:

No, nobody helped that living being. Night was approaching, but nothing happened. Clinching fist, biting teeth and shaking my lips, I kept walking to and fro along the pavement. A desire to pull and squeeze my own hair and strike myself for my own inaction arose in me. But nothing happened; no, nothing was done. (translated p. 149)

The intention of showing the contrast between the heavenly beauty and neatness of the city and the apathy of its inhabitants towards the suffering of a fellow being is clear. Sarma cites a similar incident in Nepal in which people rush to rescue the injured person take him to hospital where doctors work according to the personal approach and power connection. Switzerland is heavenly and advanced but people have lost humanity. Nepal has humanity but its institutions are corrupt. In this way Switzerland is painted in both colours: light and shade.

The book concludes with the description of the author's travel to the Republic of Ireland. This section of the book throws light on the less highlighted side of Europe, especially of Great Britain. The Republic of Ireland is not only a colony of west inside west, it also shows that barbarism finds its place under the garb of civilization and liberal democracy.

The author visits this nation on 26 March which happens to be its National Republic day. He mentions the warm welcome and hospitality he receives from the people of Dublin. A twelve year Irish boy informs the author of the Irish history in the

following words:

Mr. Sarma! British imperialist killed, cruelly slaughtered innumerable of our leaders in prison on Sunday of the spring of 1916. If they had been killed in the war front, I would have nothing to complaint, but the British butchered our lights of republic and nationality with chains in their hands after they were put in prison. All of them were buried in the same grave on this hill. (translated p.158)

The boy is further quoted with expression of the determination of the Irish people to continue to fight till the independence of the whole of Ireland (p.158). The author describes the parade, the singing of the national anthem by the whole of the crowd, people's enthusiasm and their hatred for their national enemy, the British imperialism (pp166-167).

Therefore, Sarma's travel writing presents a multifaceted view of Europe. It is more varied and more down to earth representation of the west than *Jungabhadurko Belayet Yatra*. It presents England as a country which is highly advanced with its level of progress, civilization, freedom and democracy, for its beautiful and wayward women, modern education and science. France is represented as the country of Renaissance arts and beautiful women. Switzerland is heaven but it has lost humanity. Ireland represents the dark side of the west, a country whose freedom has been robbed by the nation which teaches the whole world the lesson of freedom and democracy. More than this Sharma discloses his own identity and ethos through the contrast with the places which he describes and through his selections of areas of interests to describe.

Conclusion

The study of Tana Sarma's *Belayettira Baralinda [Roaming through England]* shows that it undoubtedly is a classic work of travelogue in Nepalese literature which presents a vivid picture of Europe of the mid-sixties of the twentieth century. In terms of width and depth of area and themes, it is more varied and surpasses its predecessors like *Jungabhadurko Belayet Yatra*. It is more analytical and multifaceted. It has saved itself from the fault of admiring the west without being objective and critical. Thematically, it covers three areas: admiration of the west as the place of progress, plenty and freedom, sporadic critiquing its inhumanity and the expression of authorial ethos in the description of the west. His praise of Europe, especially of England, does not qualify him as a keen observer, a critical scholar and writer. His honesty lies in showing the imperialistic British ethos through the Irish eye. His admiration of Europe

outweighs his critiquing of it. So far as areas of his personal likes and interests are concerned, a very significant portion of the account is devoted to the description of females and his relationship with them. His male ethos has found an unrestricted expression in his account. In a nutshell, largely, in its core, the travelogue *Beleyettira Baralinda* does not counter but conforms to the west's discourse of civilization and progress.

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