

“The White Town of Calcutta”: Re-reading Poems written in the First Half of the Nineteenth Century**Anwasha Dutta Ain¹**

The consolidation of the power of the British in India during the whole of the nineteenth century and beyond not only depended on military and mercantile powers of the Englishmen, but a strong ideological machinery was also carefully designed, so that it served a two-fold purpose: to convince the colonised about the supremacy of the coloniser, and to persuade the colonisers themselves to believe in the importance of the British rule in India. Social and cultural exchange between the English and the Indians provided fertile ground for the breeding of such texts of colonisation. The “the men who ruled India” (Mason) produced volumes of poetry, which formed a significant part of this ideological machinery besides fulfilling the creative desires of these men.

This essay discusses the questions of value and fetish raised by such prized, yet priceless, goods, the focus being narrowed down to “the white town of Calcutta” (Marshall 308) under the rule of the ubiquitous John Company, the name by which the English fondly referred to the East India Company, to hint at the exclusive Englishness of the enterprise. These poems were often collected in anthologies, which are textual methods of representing solidarity and containing difference. These poems were produced at the heart of the Orient by Englishmen, not unconscious of their impotence at home and their incapacity to prefigure the desires of their culture at large, yet engaged in a relentless struggle to select and manipulate their new environment, to shape it so that it captures their imagination, becoming the apotheosis of desire and the final jewel in the crown of the Empire.

Why should a nascent colonising culture, confident both of its mercantile and military prowess, expend so much labour on the production of apparently unsalable goods and

services? What sorts of gains did those who claimed to “love your India ... [as] your India

me” (“Art of Living in India” 12)— the phrase is from an anonymous versifier of the time— anticipate, when they staged the encounter between India and the English self in terms of the poetic metaphor of travel? A search for this answer leads one to surmise that the logic of colonisation requires the kind of intellectual economy that confounds texts of desire with texts of submission. If the written text has a certain primacy in the culture of colonisation because it legitimises the patriarchal gestures of the colonisers and their bodily acts of ownership, how, if at all, might its intentionality be retrieved and its conventions interpreted?

This has to be one of my leading questions in this paper, given that the unnamed poem I quote below by Warren Hastings, Governor-general of Bengal in the latter half of the eighteenth century, displays certain generic features, including a quiet Barthesian narcissism,

that recur in subsequent texts:

From the days of Job Charnock, scarce known on record To
the triumphs of Plassey’s redoubtable Lord The Company
traffick’d unheeded:

She sent her ships forth, the wide ocean to roam With rich
cargoes well freighted, and brought richer home And in all she
adventur’d succeeded.

By oppression provok’d, she to arms had recourse,
And soon made her oppressors submit to her force;
From defensive proceeded offender:
And her courage attemper’d with wisdom conspir’d To
aggrandise her pow’r, till at length she acquir’d Of an empire
entire the surrender. (13)

I wish to draw attention here to the act of naming and deistic reference that has been used in this poem as a rhetorical device. Both “Job Charnock, scarce known on record”, but certainly known to Hastings as the founder of Calcutta, imperial capital, and Clive, “Plassey’s redoubtable Lord”, were important nodal figures in the genealogical tree of colonisation that now led, with considerable bravura, to Hastings himself. Naming, listing, referencing, and, most important of all, signing with a flourish, constitute tantalisingly obvious features of the

poetic texts of the period. The problem for the contemporary reader is to decode these provocative signatures satisfactorily. In poem after poem, a chief rhetorical device is to collapse and conflate the complex movements of history from sending out ships to mercantile adventures to achieving “the surrender” “[o]f an empire entire” in order to make place for towering male figures, like those huge cut-outs found dominating skylines today in political or advertising campaigns. We find Job Charnock marks the beginning of time; a triumphant “redoubtable Lord” of Plassey, Clive, might be substituted by a proud Wellington or Wellesley victorious in a battle over the “locust swarms” of Marathas— but each stands invincibly blocking historical passageways in the poetry of those times. I quote from a respective stanza in John Leyden’s “The Battle of Assaye, 1803:”

Hail Wellesley! Who led’st the martial fray Amid the locust swarm,
Dark fate was in thine arm;
And his shadow shall alarm The Maratha when
he hears thy name for aye. (17)

Company verse presents a march-past of British colonial heroes, mostly dead, yet deathless, in order perhaps to glorify and strengthen the imperial machinery.

In 1818 began a long, acrimonious discussion that historians and literary critics— Percival Spear, Francis Hutchins, Ketaki Kushari Dyson, Gauri Viswanathan, S. N. Mukherjee, to name a few— agree was of fundamental import. The debate lasted nearly fifteen years. It concerned how India was to be governed, now that the British controlled it. The doctrine of Orientalism suggested that things should be left as they were. Evangelism, on the contrary, sought to “bring the Christian West to the East and India will reform herself as a flower turns to the sun” (Spear 121). Utilitarianism again not only consisted of a belief in the doctrine of free trade, but an equally passionate faith in “the superiority of the Western world and in its indefinite progress with the release of the principle of reason as the mainspring of development. All other civilisations were static or in decay; moreover,

they lacked the secret which might enable them to catch up” (Spear 122). Although scholars standardly declare that this was the age that witnessed the sharpest conflicts on how India was to be governed, the poetry of the time appears to effortlessly transcend differences between quite antithetical factions. It does so, I suggest, by presenting itself reassuringly as an indivisible poetic corpus that yields no surprises— which may be a recipe for bad poetry, but is, as it turns out, impressively sound political strategy. Therefore, although India was the vast amphitheatre where actual try-outs of these conflicting views could be staged, it is my contention that Company verse offered a smaller and more intimate venue: here, sharp political differences could be transcended through representations of an India to which all Englishmen could comfortably relate— in private.

In this paper, I would like to narrow down the focus of my study to the construction of the idea of Calcutta from around 1800 to 1850 as the seat of the British Empire. I would like to find out how these men at work would construe and engage their imagination in the construction of the jewel in the crown of the Empire. Late eighteenth and early nineteenth-century Calcutta was the setting for the first sustained encounter between Asian intellectuals and the West. Indian intelligentsia living in Calcutta responded in a most creative way to aspects of European culture that became available to them in the city:

[The] private self-indulgence by individual Europeans made a greater contribution to Indian awareness of the west than public policy. Any attempts made by the East India Company to propagate western knowledge, through educational grants after 1813, the founding of colleges or official encouragement of the use of English, probably had less practical effect than the largely accidental diffusion of western culture by the British elite of the white town of Calcutta. (Marshall 308)

My choice of Calcutta as a setting is primarily because Calcutta became the hub of literary and cultural activities during this particular period, that is from 1800 and 1850. Calcutta turned out to be an extremely vivacious intellectual city because of the vigorous printing

industry that proliferated here during the 1800's. Forty printers and seventeen presses were reported to be operating in Calcutta even before 1800 (Shaw 3). In 1852, seventeen European-owned presses and six lithographic presses were identified in Calcutta (*Scott and Company's Bengal Directory* 374-7). The colonisers wanted to set up a cultural hub that would replicate their life in Britain, as a result of which books were also imported to Calcutta in large numbers during this period. The administrators of the East India Company, like Clive and Warren Hastings, actually ordered great consignments of books to be brought to Calcutta. Publishers vied with each other to capture that vast market and shipped books at a much lower rate. The famous bookshop known as the Thacker's became an important establishment in the city. The immense capital that the colonisers harnessed during this period was somewhat invested towards an attractive fashionable life which gave rise to several cultural activities like poetry, music, painting, theatre et al. As the white city was thriving on the cultural effusions, the black city was slowly catching up.

In the passage below, the anonymous poet describes Calcutta in a way that strangely reflects another metropolis:

Calcutta, lo! As London on the Thames,
Lifts her high head over Hougly's streams:

Let eight trim bearers uniformly dressed Attend
your palanquin of modern taste;

But on the shining side emblaze your arms,
This elegant convenience first procure,
Before you thrust your nose without the door.

(“Art of Living in India” 11)

This poem is one of the liveliest in the annals of Company poetry, finely satirical, and self-mocking. Social entree into Company circles, it is apparent from this poem, is assured through travel in the right kind of emblazoned style. Nowhere is the cliché that travel broadens the mind more ironically proven

than in this verse written by the English administrator in India , whose reduction of India to tightly controlled textual congeries almost ideally meet Edward Said’s criteria for discussing and analysing “Orientalism ... as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient...” (3). But such verse does more. In it, India, like the “mirror” of the abyss in the middle of the medieval coat of arms, shrinks to a vanishing point in the horizon, so that to travel toward India is also to stand absolutely still. And to open up India via the text of this poem is also to decline to be open. Travel becomes its own negation in this verse. Despite its neo-Popean mock-heroic style, generously sprinkled with “hail”s and “lo”s, the narrative thrust of the epic is always resisted in the poem, where the pause is crucial. The possibility of forward movement is ever present, but its enactment is impossible. It is a poem of scene, of image, of image alone, disguised as narrative.

The element of disguise seems even more pronounced because this poem, like so many others in the corpus of Company Verse, is anonymous. Anonymous production could, of course, be considered a characteristic of many kinds of collective creative enterprise, but I suggest that in the writing of the Company poets, donning the cloak of anonymity is a self- protective act. The consistency with which the erasure of the poet’s identity is found to be at work in the body of this poetic text, through announcing oneself as anonymous, implies a deliberately puckish attachment to both illusion and mischief, while keeping decorously within the bounds of proper behaviour and diction. The following lines are a fairly tongue-in- cheek representative:

Thus I’ve selected, with a judgement nice,
Instructive lessons of oblique advice;
Be your attention to the Muse inclin’d,
And print them on the tablet of your mind.

(“Art of Living in India” 12)

It is true that some brisk movement does at first seem suggested by the “eight trim bearers” attending on the Englishman’s palanquin, emblazed with the aristocratic stamp (“India’s function was to turn

Englishman into instant aristocrats” (Hutchins 108)); yet that magnificent palanquin is designed so as to get to no destination, even as it produces an impression of ordered activity. It simply marks time, its task being to reinforce an image of absolute mastery:

’Tis then the crouching slaves our orders take,
Before they know what we’re about to speak:

(“Art of Living in India” 11)

The anticipatory adverbial is to be noted in the above lines as it is to be noted in the lines quoted below that reveals a showy talk of enormous nabob-style riches:

... ... let the shining plate,
Arranged with splendour, indicate your state;

(“Art of Living in India” 11)

It is this strategy that makes the “[i]nstructive lessons of oblique advice” conventionally offered to the addressee’s Muse so delightfully suspect in this poem. They brazenly mark the patterns of selection and manipulation which are essential to the process of the commodification of desire.

These poems on Calcutta, that I have chosen to focus on in this paper, are significant in many ways: they reproduce as well as illustrate Anglo-Indian life in Calcutta from close quarters; they perceive, interpret and, in certain ways, construct the life of the colonised. On the other hand, it can be seen clearly from a poem that I will discuss shortly that the impressions of the Englishman who had stayed in India for a long time varied considerably from that of the young man fresh from Britain: a comparative study of the difference in their approaches would be a pointer towards their relative capabilities of adaptation to the hostile climate here, their desires and expectations from this city, as well as their acceptance or denial of life as it was lived in the orient. They had also sought to understand, know and interpret the oriental culture in their own terms through translation and

transcreation. The dialectical variations depending on one's upbringing, and other sociological factors as well as the linguistic vivacity of the times enriched their poetic effusions. The most important aspect, however, that gets revealed in the poem is the theme and spirit of exile. The spirit of exile always held a special charm among the colonisers, because their life was characterised by travel and that often meant that they were denied the comforts of family life. My analysis of the poem then would seek to focus on these various themes in connection with the working of the colonisers' imagination pertaining to the cognition, construction and creation of Calcutta as the heart of the imperial centre in India.

This poem titled "Calcutta" was written in 1811 by an anonymous Englishman around the year 1811, and I have come across two different versions of the poem from two different sources, and this interestingly leads us to two different interpretations of the poem. When I first read the poem in the volume titled *Poets of John Company* selected and arranged by Theodore Douglas Donne and published in 1921 from Calcutta, I found out that the Englishman's impression of Calcutta and his ideas about the Indian way of life were not quite favourable, and the only reason he uses to justify his arrival at Calcutta, or in India, for that matter, is his desire to earn a fortune by working for the John Company. Then I chanced upon reading the same poem, as is found in a review of it in the March 1828 issue of *The Asiatic Journal and Monthly Register* which has been archived in the Vol. XXV of the said Journal.

The poem is titled "Calcutta: A Poem" and had been first published in 1811 and it delineates the impressions of an Englishman who was set to spend some twelve years in service in India, and most probably in Calcutta, to make some fortune for himself. The poem, as it is found in Dunn's anthology, has a neat structure— although with five different disconnected parts to it— "The Arrival", "Regrets", "John Company", "Insects" and "Home". It appears as if it had been written at

different times— a sort of bringing together some diary entries in the poetic form.

In the first part of the poem named “The Arrival”, the impressions of the anonymous versifier borders on the delusions that he had had about the empire from the tales he had heard from his predecessors:

Deluded, listening to the tales they told,
Lands rich in mines, and rivers streaming gold; (21)

Then he quickly moved on to anticipate the consequent hardships he had to undergo in Calcutta and his expected relief at the possibility of returning to England. The poet described the moment of his landing in Calcutta as an “inauspicious hour”, where he was distressed by “[t]he melting gaze of India’s fervid sun!” (21) and knew that he would not be able to buy a return trip back to England with the little fortune that he had amassed.

The second part titled “Regrets” deals with the poor conditions of the civil service whose pay did not justify the labour of the body and the mind. The civil services demanded great competition during those times and was considered an honourable and lucrative service. The British officers in high ranks were frequently offered money (“nuzza”), which they were inhibited from accepting. However, the poet informs us that there still were some Englishmen who preferred affluence to honesty: under the cover of ceremonious usage, the natives could purchase, from those abandoned and rapacious men, the sanction and favour of law, on the side of fraud, oppression and enormity. The poet regretted those easy-going days when accepting money was not considered a corruption for a civil servant:

When hands and pockets wisely understood No rule of
guidance but their master’s good;

Thought it no fault, whatever were the drift,
To take a handsome nuzza as a gift!
Now rules and scruples all our prospects blast Touch but
the money, and you lose your caste. (22)

The third part of the poem is titled “John Company” and it describes the modest but

rapid rise of the factory on the banks of the river Hooghly that ultimately swelled up to become an empire. The poet depicts the story with a sort of wry humour about how the company gained in eminence:

For kings amazed in passing years beheld The modest
factory to an empire swelled,
The power of India's ancient rulers flown,

And nabobs take a pension for a throne! (23)

There is also a passing reference to Mir Jafar's betrayal of Siraj-ud-daullah and the final ascension of the East India Company to power and its complete domination over India. It is not clear though whether the poet used the words "Meerum's poignard struck Surajah's throat" in the figurative sense implying treachery or whether he did not have proper knowledge of the history of the conspiracy hatched against the Nawab of Bengal and the consequences of the Battle of Plassey that took place in 1757.

The next part of the poem titled "Insects" is a little removed from the other three stanzas and gives an impression of the speaker's dislike of the native food habits and also the abundance of insects in Calcutta during that period:

On every dish the bouncing beetle falls,
The cockroach plays, or caterpillar crawls;
A thousand shapes of variegated hues Parade the
table, and inspect the stews!
To living walls the swarming hundreds stick,
Or court a dainty meal, the oil wick,
Heaps over heaps their slimy bodies drench,
Out go the lamps with suffocating stench! (23)

The abovementioned lines almost remind one of the satiric intent and mock heroic vein of the poetry of the Restoration period. The scene is deliberately set, once again, in such a manner that the reader is forced to mistrust these lines as lessons in poetry, while trusting them entirely as lessons in the art of colonial appropriation. Appropriation of what though, one

might legitimately ask. Well, apart from the usual territorial and business takeovers associated with colonisation, there are also reverse literary appropriations to be noticed here.

One might consider, for instance, the neat swiping of the formal poetic modes— Popean couplets, the cadences of Gray and Milton— from within these poets’ own English culture— for innovative non-literary purposes. Worth recalling in this connection is the fact that this poetry correspond in period to the age of Romanticism in Europe and England, but one would scarcely guess this from its choice of poetics, which betrays a strict backward-harking conservatism, with little or no sympathy for any contemporary literary trends at home, except perhaps the Gothic.

In the last part of the poem titled “Home”, we find the same feeling of nostalgia that is evoked in exile and a longing to return home. The shores of Sagardweep (spelt “Saugor” in the poem) some kilometres away from Calcutta, the port from which all ships bound to England departed during those days, made the poet dream of reaching the happy shores of England and “bid a long farewell” to “heat and India”. England, to the poet, becomes a sacred place:

Where Liberty and Justice reigns entwined

And wakes to life virtues of the mind: (24)

Be it night or day, the thought of his homeland is always uppermost in his mind. In stark contrast to this image of rational and benevolent England, it is worth noting the derogatory tone in which the poet speaks of the port of Calcutta: “I view low Saugor fading from the sight”. In its constant policing of the boundaries between their own subjectivity as rulers and the “low” subject position of the ruled, poems like these fulfilled the prime objective of maintaining a “distance between the two races, distance in every sense of the word” (Hutchins 108). The poem gives an impression that the narrator had arrived fresh from England to work in the civil services in Calcutta and found it difficult to adjust

to life in Calcutta and longed to go back to his country.

The poem, as it appears in the March 1828 issue of *The Asiatic Journal*, is in the form of a dialogue between two persons; one was an youth fresh from England and had come to India to join the civil services, while the other person had stayed in India for quite a time and had been acclimatised to the vagaries of its weather. The poem is much longer than the version that is printed in Dunn's anthology and also guides the reader with copious notes which explain in detail the context as well as the terminology used in the poem. The footnote was an important feature in orientalist verse and generally in the Indian English poems of the

early to mid-nineteenth century. In their footnotes, poets carried on political arguments and literary controversies and legitimated themselves as experts on Indian intellectual and historical matters. The practices of annotation developed in India were widely adopted in Britain for orientalist subjects. In India, poets such as H. L. V. Derozio and Emma Roberts used footnotes to provide a running commentary and framework for reading. In addition, the learned footnote cataloguing the flora and fauna of India was endemic to poems that the authors imagined might be read in Britain. Footnotes to the poems, like the other para-texts to volumes of verse published in India, are a crucial part of the reading experience. The context of the poem "Calcutta" and the apparent impression the reader is expected to have of it is thus explained in the March 1828 issue of *The Asiatic Journal*:

Observing, in an Indian periodical work, commendations bestowed upon a poem which we had never seen, entitled "Calcutta" published in this country many years ago, which is described by the editor of that work as affording a remarkably correct and happy picture of the passing scenes and feelings of an Indian life; we sought out the work, and with some difficulty found it. A perusal of it justifies us in pronouncing it a very amusing production. It is of a satirical character, and accompanied by copious notes explanatory of its allusions; but the satire is harmless, and the verse which conveys it is smooth, and occasionally elegant. Two speakers are introduced, discussing subjects fairly propounded, after the manner of the Latin

satirists, in two dialogues: this form was adopted, says the author, “as it afforded the best opportunity of compassing, in a desultory manner, a variety of unconnected topics, which the order and arrangement of more formal composition would have associated with difficulty.” (303)

The Indian periodical work referred to in the opening lines is *The Oriental Observer* No. 1 for February 1827, which used to be published weekly and was fairly popular in India during those times in which it was circulated. I have quoted this long opening paragraph in order to draw attention to two facts: one, the poem, as is printed in this *Journal* and as is explained by the note from the author, is not a collection of disconnected fragments— it appeared to be so when we read it from Dunn’s anthology— but it is rather a more composite whole which held in its vial a variety of subjects related to the ways of life in Calcutta; and the other fact which I would like to highlight is that the reading and interpretation of the poem by Englishmen (the editor of *The Oriental Observer* as well as the writer of this particular column in *The Asiatic Journal* were both British) is “amusing”, “satirical” “smooth, and occasionally elegant” and offers “a remarkably correct and happy picture of . Indian life”, unlike the unfavourable impression that we have had from a reading of the poem in Dunn’s anthology. Indeed, if one carefully reads the entire poem along with the explanatory notes accompanying it, as it is printed in *The Asiatic Journal*, one may come to the conclusion that the comments of the English editors are not entirely baseless. These facts again call into question the authenticity of Dunn’s anthology. The volume edited by Dunn titled *Poets of John Company* is considered to be one of the most reliable and representative collection of the poems written by British men and women settled in India during the nineteenth century. Mary Ellis Gibson, in the “Introduction” to the critical anthology of *Anglophone Poetry in Colonial India*, writes:

Nationalist parameters have, to date, shaped most attempts to collect English language writing in India. With the exception of Elleke Boehmer’s wide-ranging collection, *Empire Writing* (1870-1918), which is global in scope, English language poetry written by British

poets has languished, the last collection of any note being T. O. D. Dunn's *Poets of John Company* (1921).

... In the many years since Dunn's work, British and North American scholars have tended to ignore most English language poetry in India, focusing instead on prose fiction and nonfiction. (2)

However, reprints of such poems as "Calcutta", as is found in *The Asiatic Journal*, brings to surface questions like whether Dunn's collection is an authentic one and whether Dunn has been meticulous enough to reprint the poems in their original and complete versions after a careful scrutiny of the poems, some of which might have had more than one version in the sense that they might have been contained in more than one local vessels, like newspapers or journals or pamphlets, and might, therefore, have different forms in which they were published at different times. In any case, to lay such tall claims and to doubt the established authenticity of Dunn's collection, more detailed analyses and research of documents related to those times need to be examined and more poems need to be taken into purview.

Coming back to the poem which was my main focus of discussion, the youth is defined as a "griffin", a term derived from the word "griffinage" which was used to refer to newcomers from England during their stay in Calcutta for the first twelve months. In the dialogue, his friend, who had become habituated to the ways of oriental life by dint of his long residence in Calcutta, reproached him for "viewing subjects with distempered eyes" and "laying a burthening stress on paltry evils" (*The Asiatic Journal* 303); the griffin broke out cursing the ship and the hour and his ill fate which had brought him to Calcutta— this is the point from which the poem begins in Dunn's anthology, keeping the reader completely unaware of the exchange of the dialogue previous to this one. When the older friend reminded him of the study and application that he must put in in order to become successful, of the hours to be spent "housed up all day with moonshee at his side", he replied that he would scorn to learn "the hated language of the clime" and that he was in no mood to repeat

the “hapless toil” (304) of learning oriental jargons and lexicons, while the more learned and admired works of Hadley or Gilchrist would remain neglected. In this part of the poem, the reader comes across an interesting phrase: “well-brushed books”. The explanatory note at the bottom of the page reads:

The library, in India, has many subtle insinuating enemies, which penetrate into books and devour the leaves. Their ravages are best prevented by brushing the volumes occasionally. (304)

This shows the poor state of the archives in British Calcutta during the first half of the nineteenth century. There is hope expressed by the young Briton that on pleasant evenings, which are comparatively cooler than the daytime, he might take a ride on a gig along the Race Course. The mention of the Course insinuated the poet to adjoin a detailed note on this “favourite place of resort” from where an Englishman could appreciate the “beauty and fashion of the presidency” after a “wearisome day of confinement” (304). Although he talked of the amusement derived from “the scene of various gradations of equestrian grace and charioteering excellence” (304), he quickly cautioned the reader of the perils that might befall the “unfortunate speculatist, who indulges curiosity to the neglect of his reins” (305), as the tedium of a six months’ voyage on the sea (the time it usually took to arrive at Calcutta from England by ship) was taxing enough for an Englishman to forget the tricks and balance of riding on horseback. One cannot help but note the tone of sardonic hilarity that is prevalent in this description, something that was absent in the version printed in Dunn’s anthology.

The older and experienced friend also warned the young man against the “angry flame” or the unbearable heat of the city where one might easily fall sick. One had to exercise, the poet tells us, great prudence in order to survive in such weather. There is a detailed description of the ride in a palkee in the torrid heat of the scorching sun, which only “proudly mocks / The stifling shelter of your feeble box” (305). The inhuman tone with which the palkee-bearers were described in the footnote was the same conscious derogatory

voice that was used whenever the Englishman spoke of the native subjects:

Bearers are laborious drowsy beings, employed in carrying the palkee
... They are richly blessed with an apathy and stupidity that seems
proof against all excitements, save from sordid love of money, which
engrosses and debases the Hindoo character.

(305)

Such gross generalisations and demeaning comments about the natives were rampant in the discourses used as the tools of the colonial machinery, which made all possible attempts to pit the superior English self against the nefarious Indian. Then the reader comes across an incident where the Englishman is portrayed as being kind-hearted and benevolent enough to alight from the palkee and walk under the sweltering sun, in order to give some relief to the bearers whose incessant noise gave the idea of great labour and fatigue. This Englishman in question, however, had just arrived in the city and owing to his lack of experience soon found himself engulfed by the heat waves and consequently fell ill. In the notes, the poet actually warned the fresher not to engage in such activity, as the bearers were paid to do the job and they would not understand the singular motive of acts of such benevolence. Once again, there is clear hint at the incapacity of the Indian to appreciate kindness, let alone be kind himself. And, at the same time, the Englishman is invested with the capacity to bestow compassion on the uncivilised native.

The poet referred to DumDum and also suggested that the places of internment of Calcutta were shaped like the Egyptian pyramidal structures and Roman sepulchres. When the older friend recommended practising temperance and prudence in saving money for the future, the young Englishman fresh from Britain refused to lead such a life of austerity and suggested:

Must we all comforts dastardly refuse,
And learn the art of saving from Hindoos?
And all for what? Oh, patriot's pretence!

A mutton-chop in England twelve years hence! (306)

The friend clarified that he was not asking him to be miserly, but rather suggested him to “steer the right course” (306) by avoiding, for example, extravagance in appointing too many idle servants. The poet here acknowledged the prevalence of “some dirty characters” who were found to be “rummaging among small lots of an auction, and venturing cautiously into a competition for half a dozen of sour beer or execrable wine”. He, however, prefaces this description of unscrupulous Englishmen with the words that “instances of sordid parsimony are not numerous among our countrymen in Bengal” (306). The servants, who were usually Mussalmans, were described as “the scum of the country”, “suspicious herd” (307) who were eager to rob the knives, forks and spoons after a ceremonious dinner, and did not flinch from touching pork or other items which were considered unclean or unholy in the Koran. So, we find that irrespective of whether the Indian in question was Hindu or Muslim, he was without an exception portrayed as inhuman, unscrupulous, brutal and uncivilised. This disposition of generalised animosity towards Indians was missing in the reading of the poem, as it was found in Dunn’s anthology.

The unhappy griffin, oppressed with the weight of ennui, sighing for “a respite from blue devils, heat, and bile,” (307) was sarcastically consoled with by his more experienced interlocutor, who wished his fits of torpor might be undisturbed by the “intrusion of sircar or dun”; and then drew a dejecting picture of the fate of an “unmonied wight” (307). There is also reference to the “punkah” which was explained as an “ingenuous contrivance” used for the “partial circulation of air” in order to “make existence supportable in those sultry suffocating hours” (307). The editor of *The Asiatic Journal* tells us that the poet had subjoined the description of the “hookah” in a note “con amore”. He wrote that “among the resources of the ennuyes in India” (308), the hookah found itself in the first rank; it was a device for smoking and many were driven to that “fashionable and delectable pastime” because of “sheer want of occupation” (308). The old Briton expatiated upon the resources which

might be found in the course and in the sports of the field, where “the jackall’s brush is coveted instead of Reynard’s” (308). These recreations, and the topics of conversation they afforded, diminished, he said, the tedium of time. On hearing this, the young man alleged that such ill habits of engaging in useless conversations during dinner were signs of bad breeding and of gross violation of decorum. The poet drew an amusing picture of the usage of coats in the sultry weather of Calcutta. He described that it was rarely used, except at formal parties where maintaining proper decorum was considered important. However, he cited the example of Lord Cornwallis, who, he said, “had a character to disregard these petty distinctions” (310), and exempted his dinner visitants from the burden of warm clothing, and on sitting down to table, gave the word of command, “Off coats!” (310). Such insights into the life of the Englishmen in Calcutta during the nineteenth century are rarely found in accounts of British social life; and poems such as this is a valuable repository for this type of information on social practices and customs. At any rate, the reader of Dunn’s anthology would miss this bit of social documentation. The poem revealed in a rather sharp and incisively humorous way the various aspects of life in Calcutta during those times. The engaging confrontation between the griffin and his elder friend revealed the type of adjustment that a young man was required to make in order to become successful with the business of empire building. The poem described in detail the hateful climate, the severe heat that the British had to put up with, and the type of insects that continuously hovered around in such climate and were ready to spoil any dish. It also referred to the type of diseases that could befall the newcomer because of the exposure to heat and insects. The poem thus becomes a valuable source of information about the Anglo-Indian life in Calcutta. Although in terms of literary merit the poem might not have gained eminence, but nevertheless it is a first-hand description of life lived in those times.

Poems such as the ones discussed in this paper, which do not excel much in literary quality,

enable the modern reader to understand the encumbrances that came with the desire to colonise a place much different from their own. The poetry written by these men at work have been greatly ignored by modern scholars; yet these poems are of great significance in terms of their social value and in terms of the life that they recreate. These poems allow us to ask how writing in English, writing verse in English, in nineteenth-century India was legitimated and what it legitimated. They allow us further to understand the complex processes by which languages and the people who speak, learn, and teach them encounter each other. Though most of them were written by British officials, these poems move us away from official discourse and into the drawing rooms and school rooms, clubs and booksellers' establishments of India and Britain. They arose from a global circulation of texts, tropes, ideas, and arguments. And if we look at them not merely through the dyad of metropolis/colony (or, say, London/Calcutta), but trans-peripherally, we can identify the complex relations of developed and nascent nationalisms that now patrol the boundaries of literary canons. These texts taken together allow us to ask what they *once meant* and how those meanings continue to shape literary endeavour in parts of the world which were once colonised and also in the lands of those who colonised them.

Notes

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