

A Critique of John Beames's Assessment of Chittagong in his *Memoirs of a Bengal Civilian*

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John Beames's *Memoirs of a Bengal Civilian*, an autobiography of a member of Indian Civil Service, can be grouped within the category of colonialist literature. He was a colonial in the sense that he lived in a colony, namely India, for thirty-five years, from 1858 to 1893. His autobiography, divided in twenty chapters, records, among other things, his experiences in India. The last chapter of this book, Chapter XX, is devoted to his days in Chittagong where he came in February 1878 after he had been transferred there as Commissioner and Judge. He stayed there for about eighteen months. This paper focuses on Beames's assessment of Chittagong, as evidenced by his representation of the people and the place, and purports to examine his observations in the context of colonialist literature of the 19th and the early 20th century.

To begin with, I would like to shed light on the trajectory of Beames's career. In the 'Preface,' he calls himself "an ordinary, average Englishman" who lived in the reign of Queen Victoria. Son of a curate, he was born at Greenwich, London in 1837, the year Victoria ascended the throne. Having finished his schooling at Merchant Taylors', he entered Hailebury College, located in Hertfordshire, in 1857. He came to India in 1858---the year of the first war of independence---as one of the last batches of cadets to be appointed by the East India Company. Until his retirement, he worked in different parts of India. Aside from working as a District Officer, he was also interested in Oriental philology. His *Comparative Grammar of the Modern Aryan Languages of India*, published in three volumes between 1872 and 1879, was a highly acclaimed work and was still in print as late as 1981, more than a century after its first appearance. This book was preceded by his *Outlines of Indian Philology*, published in 1867. A fellow of both the Royal Asiatic Society of Great Britain and of the Asiatic Society of Bengal, he wrote *Grammar of the Bengali Language* (1891), which was still a textbook as late as 1922 for ICS probationers. It could be argued that Beames's career embraced both imperial power and orientalist knowledge. As Edward Said has shown in his *Orientalism* (1978) there

was "nexus of knowledge and power" which is not "an exclusively academic matter" (Said 27).

In her book *Colonial and Postcolonial Literature* (1995), Elleke Boehmer has drawn a distinction between the terms 'colonial' and 'colonialist' when applied to literature. According to Boehmer, colonial literature is "concerned with colonial perceptions and experience, written mainly by metropolitans, but also by creoles and indigenes, during colonial times" (2). In addition, colonial literature "includes literature written in Britain as well as in the rest of the Empire during the colonial period" (2). This second view is controversial because it treats a literary work which may not be about colonial experience as a specimen of colonial literature. On the other hand, colonialist literature was "[w]ritten by and for colonizing Europeans about non European lands dominated by them. It embodied the imperialists' point of view" (3). Colonialist literature drew on "theories concerning the superiority of European culture and the rightness of empire" (3). Such literature is characterized by the use of a 'stereotyped language'.

Now let us examine how Beames represents the people of Chittagong. To say the least, his representation of the people bears many hallmarks of colonial discourse. He seems to speak in the authoritative tone, as he describes the people of Chittagong: "A very large proportion of the populations are Mughls, a race akin to the Burmese. Another, and perhaps larger, section consists of Bengali Musulmans, the most quarrelsome, litigious and, vindictive race in India" (*MBC* 276). Here, we should notice the word "most" that precedes three adjectives which are used to describe the "Bengali Musulmans" of Chittagong. The word "race," in the context of colonial/colonialist literature, is also loaded with significance. In the same paragraph he describes the people in relation to the place: "It is still a sink of iniquity, full of the scum of various nations: Bengalis, Hindu and Musulman, Mughls, Portuguese, and others [. . .]. The dirt, the noxious vermin, and the smells are unique. 'Chittagong the Loathsome' we called it" (*MBC* 276).

In the light of the above quotations, we can say that Beames has tried to represent the colonized people in a stereotyped form. The colonized people are projected as offensive, degenerate, quarrelsome and vindictive. This process by which colonial discourse produces its subjects is termed as "othering" (Ashcroft, et al. 171). According to Elleke Boehmer, in colonial literature "The colonized made up the

subordinate term in relation to which European individuality was defined. Always with reference to the superiority of an expanding Europe, colonized peoples were represented as lesser: less human, less civilized, as child or as savage, wild man, animal, or headless mass" (79).

It could be argued that colonialist authors who wrote during the Victorian Period and the early twentieth century used to speak in derogatory terms of other cultures to justify and validate colonial rule. "The characterization of colonized people as secondary, abject, weak, feminine, and other to Europe and in particular to England, was standard in British colonialist writing" (Boehmer 80). To illustrate this point, we can take Joseph Conrad's novella *Heart of Darkness* as an example. In his narration, Marlow, the narrator, represents the Africans as the 'others.' As we read, we find the use of number of binary oppositions: light-darkness, civilized-uncivilized, calm-frenzy and so on. Importantly, he privileges the earlier one and associates the Africans with the second one. For example, in one place he describes the Africans as follows: "They howled, and leaped, and spun, and made horrid faces; but what thrilled you was just the thought of their humanity---like yours---the thought of your remote kinship with this wild and passionate uproar. Ugly" (*HD* 51).

Apart from using the process of "othering," colonialist writers tended to present the colonized people in a stereotyped form. To put it simply, as a discursive strategy the notion of stereotype is based on "fixity" (Childs 125). It is noteworthy that Beames's representation of the people of Chittagong is marked by the use of this technique. Being a judge, he claims to have witnessed local people's predilection for litigation. But he succumbs to the pressures of colonialist rhetoric when he calls the people of Chittagong "the most litigious people in the world" (*MBC* 284). In the same breath he writes, "It was well said of them by Sir Henry Ricketts, an experienced administrator who knew them well, that every Chittagonian was born with a 'stamped paper' in his hand, and as soon as he could walk went to a lawyer and got him to put a case in court for him" (*MBC* 284).

The above quotations show how the colonized is presented in fixed, stereotyped form. The other is presented "fixed as unchangeable, known, and predictable" (Childs 125). Here we should notice the word "knew". No wonder it is the experienced administrator who claimed to

know the people of Chittagong. Beames in his turn repeats the administrator's comment, which includes a generic statement, signaled by the phrase "every Chittagonian."

However, Beames's comments on the judicial system of colonial Bengal reveal one important point: the paradox of the 'civilizing mission' of the imperial government. This is echoed in the following observations on the Munsif courts: "In every district there are four or five of these petty courts dotted about all over the country, so as to bring justice close to everyone's door--a much valued boon in a land where litigation is the principal amusement and joy of all men. Chittagong, the litigious district *par excellence* of all Bengal, supported twelve such courts!" (MBC 296). Although the author himself was part of the judicial system, he admitted that the system gave rise to evils like mindless litigation, as is evident in this quotation.

It is noteworthy that Beames's description of the people of Hill Tracts is couched in fewer disparaging comments. At one place he writes, "The people in the Hill Tracts were amusing, and that was the only part of the Division I liked. But they were always up to something" (MBC 285). He describes in details his visit to Rangamati. In this regard, he highlights the colourful lifestyle of the indigenous people. He describes his meeting with the chiefs in the following way: "They are all Mongolian in type, short, broad figures with regular Chinaman's features, slanting pig's eyes, flat, board nose and high cheekbones" (MBC 281). Here we can see the play of an "anthropological" or ethnographic interest, which was a part of "colonial discourse" (Ashcroft, et al. 85). To put it simply, anthropological notions were used by colonialist writers to construct the primitive others.

Generally speaking, the theory of evolution was also manipulated by some colonialist writers of the late 19th century. Drawing on Darwin's *Origin of Species* (1859), they posited that cultural differences were based in nature. Consequently, they tended to present the colonized people in an hierarchical order. "The cultural traits and inclinations of peoples, graded relative to the West, were seen as bound up with their inherited physical characteristics" (Boehmer 84). The idea of "miscegenation, the sexual union of different races" (Ashcroft, et al. 142) haunted many colonialist writers. Beames makes the following comment on the Portuguese community whom he found during his time in Chittagong: "Few, if any of them were of pure Portuguese blood;

they were mostly descended from the intercourse between the old piratical Portuguese and Mugh female slaves, and though they bore grand Portuguese names such as Pereira, Teixeira, da Silva [. . .] their features were often purely Mongolian. A frowsy, worthless, debauched lot they were" (MBC 287). Here, as it was customary for a colonialist writer, he seems to draw a link between racial impurity and moral degeneration. The above quotation shows how Beames thinks about the issue of miscegenation.

Let us turn to Beames's representation of the place---geographic features, climatic conditions and so on. He had a fascination for landscape painting, and so he seems to appreciate the scenic beauty of the landscape. At the same time he bemoans the remoteness of the place and lack of amenities which characterized Chittagong. However, in Chapter XX, he gives a bird's-eye account of the place, which smacks of imperial gaze. That is, it seems that he is speaking from the high vantage point of knowledgeable position. But his description is marked by an attitude of ambivalence, as he writes, "From these hilltops the eye ranges landwards over a rich, fertile plain bounded in the distance by beautiful blue hills. The scenery is everywhere enchantingly lovely. I have never seen so lovely a place to look at, nor one so loathsome to live in" (MBC 277).

Broadly speaking, European writers, while writing about the unfamiliar place, tended to translate different landscapes, environments and climatic conditions, using a set of phrases and words. A gap existed between these representations and those distant places the writers sought to understand. As we see in Joseph Conrad's portrayal of African forest in *Heart of Darkness*, colonialist authors often rendered a distant place in a diabolized form. Similarly, Beames describes the monsoon in such a way that the season appears anything but life-giving: "The rain in Chittagong was phenomenal; [. . .] It begins early in the morning before daybreak on the first of the month, and when you go to bed at ten o'clock on the 31st it is still drizzling on in the same remorseless way." In the same paragraph he writes: "Whatsoever things are loathsome, whatsoever things are slimy, whatsoever things are stinking, [. . .] these things abound. And over everything steadily, slowly, pitilessly, drenchingly, comes down by night and by day the dull, deadly rain like a pall covering the flaccid corpse of the soil" (MBC 288).

In the above quotations we find a series of adjectives and adverbs,

which suggest a sense of evil. In the last sentence the rainfall is presented as a fatal phenomenon. Parallel to his representation of the people as the 'others,' he represents the place, at least the rains, as strange, unreadable and different.

Finally, it would not be wrong to say that Beames's representation of the people and the place of Chittagong shows an unequal power relation. It is the authoritative 'I' from whose perspective the colonized people and place are being viewed. In other words, this pronoun 'I' is at the center of the text, whereas the colonized people inhabit the margins of the text. We can relate this 'I' to Kipling's 'White Man.' As Edward Said puts it, "Kipling's White Man, as an idea, a persona, a style of being, seems to have served many Britishers while they were abroad" (226). In the same vein Said argues, "Being a White Man was therefore an idea and a reality. It involved a reasoned position towards both the white and the non-white worlds. [. . .] It meant specific judgements, evaluations, gestures" (227). In his observations on Chittagong, John Beames takes a similar position. We can argue that, writing in the last decade of the 19th Century, he submitted to the pressures of colonialist rhetoric which served the imperial power.

In spite of the scathing attack on the people of Chittagong, Beames's remarks, however, when put in the postcolonial framework, seem to be rather a much more sanitized view than it sounds when read as a diary of an individual.

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