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Abstract

On a warm evening early in July 1909, a young Indian man dressed informally in a plain suit and a carefully wound light blue turban left his lodgings in Ledbury Road, Bayswater, for the last time. Madan Lai Dhingra, a student at London's University College, had already been out earlier in the evening at a shooting range on the Tottenham Court Road, where he had practised firing his Colt revolver at a paper target, and had asked for the gun to be cleaned before he left. As he walked quickly towards South Kensington, Dhingra carried the Colt, another automatic revolver, and a dagger hidden in his coat. His destination was the Imperial Institute, where the National Indian Association had organised a concert and reception; one of their 'At Homes' held for the purpose of giving Indian students and visitors to London a chance to meet people sympathetic to Britain's colonial subjects. The invitation had asked guests to wear evening dress or 'native costume' and as Dhingra arrived at the meeting he must have realised that his inconspicuous clothes actually made him stand out in the midst of the black tail-coats and brilliant Indian fabrics which made a crowded patchwork in the brightly lit reception room.

ALEX TICKELL

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On a warm evening early in July 1909, a young Indian man dressed informally in a plain suit and a carefully wound light blue turban left his lodgings in Ledbury Road, Bayswater, for the last time. Madan Lal Dhingra, a student at London's University College, had already been out earlier in the evening at a shooting range on the Tottenham Court Road, where he had practised firing his Colt revolver at a paper target, and had asked for the gun to be cleaned before he left. As he walked quickly towards South Kensington, Dhingra carried the Colt, another automatic revolver, and a dagger hidden in his coat. His destination was the Imperial Institute, where the National Indian Association had organised a concert and reception; one of their 'At Homes' held for the purpose of giving Indian students and visitors to London a chance to meet people sympathetic to Britain's colonial subjects. The invitation had asked guests to wear evening dress or 'native costume' and as Dhingra arrived at the meeting he must have realised that his inconspicuous clothes actually made him stand out in the midst of the black tail-coats and brilliant Indian fabrics which made a crowded patchwork in the brightly lit reception room.

Did he arrive at the reception late or did he wait, listening nervously to the concert, conscious of the burden of the two revolvers in his coat pockets? Witnesses later reported that Dhingra had 'done nothing to arouse suspicion', and it was not until the reception was nearly over and the students, visiting dignitaries, and civil-servants had started to leave, moving out onto the landing of the reception hall, that Dhingra acted. He pushed his way through the crowd, trying to keep near the Aide to the Secretary of State for India, Sir W.H. Curzon Wyllie. As Wyllie waited on the landing for his wife to collect her wrap from the cloakroom, Dhingra approached him, raised the revolver, and shot him several times at almost point blank range. Seeing the shooting, a Parsi physician standing nearby, Dr Cawas Lalcaca, tried to intervene, but was also shot and slumped to the floor. Dhingra then raised the gun to his own head, but was overpowered by other guests before he could fire, and was arrested by the police who arrived a few minutes later. The suspicion that he intended to become a political martyr was corroborated by a statement explaining his aims (suppressed by the police) that was found in his pocket. At his trial, Dhingra voiced these aims himself:

I maintain that if it is patriotic in an Englishman to fight against the Germans if they were to occupy this country, it is much more justifiable and patriotic in my case to

fight against the English. I hold the English people responsible for the murder of 80 millions of Indian people in the last fifty years, and ... for taking away [millions of pounds] every year from India to this country.... I make this statement, not because I wish to plead for mercy or anything of that kind. I wish that English people should sentence me to death, for in that case the vengeance of my countrymen will be all the more keen. I put forward this statement to show the justice of my cause to the outside world.¹

Madan Lal Dhingra was quickly convicted and executed in Pentonville prison a few weeks later. His highly-publicised assassination of a British official now barely merits a sentence in the standard histories of the Indian independence struggle. However, at the time, the symbolic impact of a terrorist attack in the metropolitan hub of the Empire, rather than its politically unstable peripheries, was exceptional. The *Times* correspondent, Valentine Chirol, writing of the assassination, stated: 'It required nothing less than the shock of a murder perpetrated in the heart of London to open the eyes of those in authority ... to the nature of the revolutionary propaganda ... carried on outside India in sympathy, and often in connivance with the more violent leaders of the anti-British agitation in India itself' (145). Dhingra's terrorist act had shown that the development of communications and transport networks between imperial centres and the colonies in the late nineteenth century had also multiplied, and interwoven the 'contact zones' (Pratt, Burton) across which radical anti-colonial groups could operate.

In her study of Indian accounts of Britain during this period, Antoinette Burton shows how the steady flow of metropolitan writing about Britain's colonies was matched by an uneven but insistently countermanding set of texts by South-Asians revealing how 'England itself was [also] available for consumption, appropriation, and refiguration by its colonial subjects' (8). For the growing number of students and intellectuals who journeyed to Britain, Paris and other imperial centres after 1900, the process of textual refiguring increasingly took the form of the translation of political biographies, revolutionary works, and historical accounts of nationalist movements such as the Italian *Risorgimento*. Just two weeks after the Curzon Wylie assassination, Mohandas Gandhi arrived in London to petition the government about oppressive registration policies in the Transvaal, where he worked as a barrister. Horrified by the killing, he filed an article for *Indian Opinion*, stating that Dhingra's defence was 'inadmissible', and that he had been motivated by the 'ill-digested reading of worthless writings' (302). Drafting what was to become his political masterpiece, *Hind Swaraj*, on the voyage back to South Africa three months later, Gandhi must have envisaged his work, which drew on a comparably eclectic range of writings, as a timely remedy for directionless cosmopolitans such as Dhingra.

The mobile, often clandestine industry of textual translation and counter-production to which Gandhi refers was not confined to political tracts or historical writings alone. Indeed, I have sketched out this account of an almost forgotten terrorist act, which momentarily dimmed the high noon of British Imperialism,

in order to map out the contexts of two early South-Asian novels in English, both published in London in 1909, which present the sensitive issue of proto-nationalist politics to a metropolitan audience in the aftermath of the Dhingra case. These works are significant because, among other things, they challenge two widely held critical assumptions about the development of the South-Asian novel in English. The first of these is the general agreement that before the 'founding' authors of the 1930s, Indian fiction in English was antiquated and derivative, demonstrating what Tabish Khair calls 'a predictable degree of Eurocentrism or European orientalia and aesthetic slavishness' (47). The second is the assumption that early English fictions written by South-Asians had little political leverage, or that these were works with only a minimal, elite Anglophone readership in the subcontinent.

The novels I discuss in the following pages, S.M. Mitra's *Hindupore* and Sarath Kumar Ghosh's *The Prince of Destiny*, attempt none of the Indian-English linguistic experimentation for which authors such as Raja Rao became famous three decades later; but in their middlebrow mixing of romance and political commentary, a generic blend which seems to invoke the same readership that avidly consumed the work of colonial romance authors such as Flora Annie Steel and Maud Diver (Parry), they enshrine a political complexity which is much more than slavish aesthetic imitation. Contemplating the politically 'incendiary literature' produced in London before 1910 by radicals such as Vinayak Savarkar, Chirol reveals that dissident writings, such as Savarkar's revisionist history of the Indian Mutiny, were often published in false covers with titles such as 'Pickwick Papers' in order to escape confiscation by the police (149). Answering to the commercial imperatives of a colonial literary market but conveying a more intricate anti-colonial critical mandate, novels such as *Hindupore* and *The Prince of Destiny* are, I think, examples of an analogous, though more conflicted formal camouflaging.

THE GRAFT OF WRITING: MIXING GENRES IN THE INFORMATIVE ROMANCE

An urban terrorist attack motivated by nationalism, the Curzon Wylie assassination was, in Anthony Parel's view, a 'modern political act par excellence' (xxvii). In a distant historical prefiguring of the attacks by Islamic militants in the United States nearly a century later, one of the defining features of the British response to the events at the Imperial Institute was a sense of a failure of intelligence. In 1907 the British government had set up a committee to investigate the 'Indian student problem', and had concluded that migration to London actually strengthened nationalist feelings among visiting students. However, little could be done because the British police were unable to arrest or even identify would-be terrorists. In the view of the British Secretary of State, John Morley, writing to Lord Minto in 1908, the British police were 'wholly useless in the case of Indian conspirators' and could not even 'distinguish Hindu from Mohammedan, or Verma from Varma' (Lahiri 128). In his monograph *Empire*

and *Information*, C.A. Bayly argues that in nineteenth-century British India these colonial intelligence failures were nothing new, and suggests that far from signifying Britain's powerful 'orientalising' ideological hold on South-Asian society, the creation of oriental stereotypes actually indicated a 'weakness or limitation in colonial power and knowledge' (70-1). These weaknesses precipitated colonial society into periodic 'information panics' during which an administrative understanding of the (potentially hostile) objectives of the colonised melted into rumour and fearful supposition.

Resident in London, Sarath Kumar Ghosh and S.M. Mitra were, as regular contributors to British journals and newspapers, already part of the imperial information order. As a political journalist and member of the Royal Asiatic Society, Mitra was particularly keen to align himself with the establishment. In the aftermath of the Curzon Wylie assassination their media value as 'native informants', providing insights into the motivations of Indian nationalists, must have increased significantly. I am not suggesting that they exploited the commercial opportunities afforded by anti-colonial terrorism directly; both authors may have already started writing their novels before the Curzon Wylie assassination occurred. Rather, I think that their work exemplifies Tanika Sarkar's injunction that we 'cannot afford to view the colonial past as an unproblematic retrospect where all power was on one side and all protest on the other', and recalls her warning that South-Asian writers and intellectuals developing a 'multi-faceted nationalism' were often 'compliant with power and domination even when they critiqued western knowledge and challenged colonial power' (1870).

The informative brief of Mitra's work is signalled in its full title: *Hindupore: A Peep Behind the Indian Unrest*. In the novel's preface the 'distinguished Indian Expert', George Birdwood, emphasises this specular function, stating that *Hindupore* 'reveals many of the deepest [sic] things of India hidden from Englishmen, even those who may have passed away half their lives in that country'. Outlining the dual appeal of the novel he states: 'Apart from the attractions *Hindupore* may have for the reader of romances it [also] has a political value in this momentary crisis of affairs in India' (viii). Ghosh's *The Prince of Destiny*, features a similar gloss, the publisher's preface assuring us that this 'many-sided romance ... is a presentment of India by an Indian' and 'draws a picture of Indian life from the inside' (v). Both novels would have been read by an elite class of educated, English-speaking Indians in Britain, the Indian subcontinent, and other parts of the empire. However, their preface statements (and the pictures of the authors in South-Asian dress which appear on the flyleaves) anticipate a sceptical non-Indian readership, and play on their authenticity as works which reveal 'the Indian view of the causes of the present unrest, and Britain's unseen peril in India' (v).

While these novels were sold to British readers as representative of 'the Indian view', the way they framed this view was rather more complex. Early Indian-

English novelists worked at the confluence of several literary traditions, and their choice of genre, especially their common interest in history and the romance form, was far from coincidental. As Priya Joshi remarks:

Towards the end of the century, when Indian novelists started writing in English, they were following several generations of highly successful novelists in regional [Indian] languages with whom they were in dialogue, much as they remained in a one-sided monologue with British writers stretching as far back as Defoe through Reynolds, Crawford, and Corelli. From this three-way conversation and the complex circuits of exchange, transaction, translation and consumption, an English novel emerged in India. (137–38)

This is clearly the case with a writer such as Sarath Kumar Ghosh, whose novel reproduces some of the most important features of contemporary Bengali literature — a distinctive, highly political interest in the techniques of historical fiction, and the cultural-nationalist incorporation of Hindu mythology. Both authors' use of the romance mode, which concentrates on heroic quests or struggles, idealises character and 'act[s] out through stylised figures the radical impulses of human experience' (Beer 9), is also telling since, as already noted, it represented a stock 'orientalising' response to India in colonial fiction, but could also be readily adapted to articulate the dreams and frustrations of the colonised.

The 'circuits of exchange and transaction' which Joshi notes in the early novel in English are strikingly evident in the narrative bifurcation of Ghosh's and Mitra's novels, as they promise the escapist pleasures of the romance while also revealing hidden political truths. Indeed, in *Hindupore* the seams which hold together these different textual components are all too visible: in his preface Mitra clearly indicates that his novel, which follows the adventures of an aristocratic Irish MP, Lord Tara, as he visits India and falls in love with the beautiful princess Kamala, is, at the same time, a fictional reworking of a series of articles on 'Indian Unrest' which he published in the journal *Nineteenth Century*. With chapter-headings such as 'An English Missionary', 'The Hindu in Anglo-Indian Politics' and 'Hindu-Japanese Affinity', the romance elements of *Hindupore* are clearly subordinate to its didactic intent, and Mitra's preacherly tone often makes for stilted dialogue.

As Meenakshi Mukherjee points out, Ghosh's *The Prince of Destiny* — technically a more sophisticated work than Mitra's — anticipates much later South-Asian fiction (64) in its cross-cultural thematics and its Rushdiesque use of mythic resonance (throughout the text Ghosh hints that his protagonist, Prince Barath, is a redemptive political incarnation of Krishna). Employing more recognisable formal elements from the romance mode, Ghosh's novel tells the story of the coming of age of Prince Barath, as he inherits the state of Barathpur and tries to reconcile his love for England with his loyalty to his own homeland. As well as mirroring aspects of the Conradian 'romance of integrity' (Stevens 24), a cross-cultural love-interest in *The Prince of Destiny* brings us back to the

work of colonial 'romancers' such as Steel and Diver, whose proscriptions against 'inter-racial' relationships are subtly subverted in the presentation of romantic affinities between Europeans and Indians in both novels. These partnerships are one of the most unexpected aspects of Ghosh's and Mitra's writings, and can be linked to a broader, tactical interest in the presentation of critical collaboration and (sometimes highly ambiguous) friendship between coloniser and colonised, which I shall now examine now in more detail.

MOTIFS OF CRITICAL COLLABORATION

The Prince of Destiny and *Hindupore* both mediate the politics of the freedom struggle before it became a coherent mass-movement, and unlike the later novels of the 1930s, offer little sense of a national political alternative to British rule. Of the two, Ghosh comes closest to envisaging a free India, but only within the feudal dispensation of one of India's princely states, and in both novels anti-colonial resistance is envisaged as either a pan-Hindu *sanyassi* brotherhood (a gesture, perhaps, to Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's Bangali classic *Anandamath*), or as the province of secretive terrorist cadres such as Ghosh's sensationally-named 'House of the Serpent Gem'. The conflicts which are thus played out in these works are evidently, overtly counter-hegemonic. By implying that colonial interpretations of the Indian situation are misguided, both authors claim an epistemological advantage, a point of leverage in the structure of the colonial information order. This can be used either to intimate the dire consequences of imperial hubris, epitomised in dangerously unpredictable events such as terrorist bombings and assassinations, or, alternatively, to call for a greater (more sympathetic) understanding between coloniser and colonised.

Idealised cross-cultural friendships that feature in both *The Prince of Destiny* and *Hindupore* provide a basis for several of the didactic passages about India and Indian political views. In the latter novel Mitra's protagonist, Lord Tara, stays with Raja Ram Singh during his visit to India, and urges his fellow colonials to 'more friendly and intimate intercourse' with Indians since 'India and Anglo-India are two nations without sympathy for each other, and yet they have so many interests in common' (278). Embodying an interesting instance of racial 'passing', Tara, who has become sun-tanned, is told 'you are growing like us' by an Indian acquaintance, to which he replies archly, 'I certainly am well-tanned by your Indian sun. I like it' (165). On the other hand, *The Prince of Destiny*, with its *bildungsroman* structure, incorporates idealised cross-cultural understandings into a surrogate parental relationship. Present at Prince Barath's birth, an army colonel named Wingate who is 'not like other men' in his sympathy for India, offers to be Barath's 'guide and guardian' during his education in Britain. Later in the novel, Barath stays with the elderly Wingate during vacations from Cambridge, and (rehearsing Friedrich Max Müller's work on comparative mythology) discusses mythical and metaphysical similarities between Christianity and Hinduism with him.

However, as I have hinted, these idealised friendships, and the cultural comparisons they foster, also sanction voices that are highly critical of colonial rule. This tonal shift occurs in *Hindupore* when Raja Ram Singh describes the covert racism of the colonial authorities to Tara, and is even more apparent in Ghosh's slightly threatening narrative asides: 'So far I have tried to expound the case for the British government against its accusers ... lest in the future course of this book an accuser should arise against whose charges I could find no defence' (145). During a friendly meeting between Barath and his political Resident Lord Melnor in *The Prince of Destiny*, an 'accuser' duly appears when Barath's minister berates Melnor, saying 'You boast about your wonderful rule in India, too blind to see that you are kept here by our docility ... the marvel is not your wonderful capacity for ruling, but your extraordinary capacity for blundering' (466). As Yu Sheng-Yen suggests, the 'debunking of colonial ideological superiority' in these novels forms a striking counterpart to the almost clairvoyant intelligence gathering of contemporary colonial fictions such as Kipling's *Kim*.² Indeed, in Mitra's novel the panoptical reach of Kipling's 'Great Game' is replaced by a fearful, ignorant blindness, as when Lord Tara's friend Harvey admits that the colonial civil service is 'absolutely in the dark ... we cannot see the subtle but sure processes of pan-Hinduism under our very noses' (221).

The trans-national plot developments of novels such as *The Prince of Destiny*, point to other interesting instances of collaboration. In 1906, while lodging in a boarding-house in Highgate, Ghosh became friends with the poet Francis Thompson, who was staying in a room opposite his; this casual boarding-house acquaintance is transformed in *The Prince of Destiny* into a deep unspoken sympathy between Barath and Francis Thompson.³ In Ghosh's novel the unexpected 'postmodern' technique of citing a 'real' cultural figure promotes an unusual image of literary collaboration, when Barath and Thompson jointly translate Kâlidâsa's classic Sanskrit play *Abhijnânacâkuntalam* (The Recognition of Çakuntalâ).

Barath saw visions. An accurate yet truly poetic translation of 'Sakuntala' into English was worth the whole British army in India. [It] contained the essence of domestic ideals in India and was cherished alike by prince and peasant: was known by heart by the man in the street, and in the hamlet was recited by the village bard to the toilers in the field.

'Francis, complete this work I beg of you', Barath cried in dawning hope. 'Let the British public read it, and thus understand our most cherished ideals', [the translation] will serve to remove a mountain of misconception between Great Britain and India'.
(295–96)

For later postcolonial authors the process of translation would be used to evoke the subjective-transformations of migration, but in *The Prince of Destiny* the shared work of translation anticipates intimate communication, and an ethical Levinasian⁴ recognition of Otherness — a mutually enriching meeting across

cultures which Elleke Boehmer also finds in contemporary trans-nationalist collaborations (Boehmer 176). As Barath and Thompson work together, they enter a transcendent state: 'The midnight hour passed unheeded. The clock of the neighbouring church struck the successive hours ... the two minds worked like one' (298). Even so, this image of cross-cultural teamwork points up, once again, the ambiguous political positioning of these informative romances, as they respond to a colonial audience at the zenith of British imperial rule. By indicating that a collaborative translation of *Ūakuntalâ* will encourage a comprehension of India's 'most cherished' (Hindu) ideals, Ghosh calls, implicitly, for cross-cultural reconciliation, but in stating that the translation will be 'worth the whole British Army in India', he also maintains a sharp sense of the ideological value of translation as a component of imperial rule. At the same time, the phrase admits another reading, implying the possibility of substitution as well as equivalence. In short, the value of translation in *The Prince of Destiny*, as a metonym for the relationship between coloniser and colonised, slips between a power-sharing tolerant imperialism and a utopian politics somewhere *beyond* the colonial present.

The resistance strategies of the informative romance I have sketched here, are flexible and hard to define, tending, in Yu's view, to co-opt a colonial readership as the necessary precursor of any attempt to voice political concerns (209). Certainly the techniques of formal disguise and the motifs of critical collaboration touched on in this essay indicate a struggle for political agency, and point up the difficulties of establishing an authoritative voice (or even a secure sense of a sympathetic reception) at this early growth period of South-Asian fiction in English. Nevertheless, in their attention to the discursive effects of terrorist acts such as the Curzon Wylie assassination, these novels also give us a sense of the spectrum of concessionary *and* counter-hegemonic writings which operated in conjunction with more militant anti-colonial nationalism. Perhaps more than their successors (who wrote 'back' to a national homeland) Ghosh and Mitra reveal in their writing the cultural negotiations of what Amitav Ghosh calls 'that curious circumstance of social dislocation and emotional turmoil ... the turbulent limbo of the Asian or African student in [colonial] Europe' (24), which incubated so many of the great national liberation movements of the last century.

NOTES

- ¹ The Curzon Wylie assassination was reported widely in the press, and all the details of the case described here have been taken from articles in the *Times* from 3, 6, and 12 of July, 1909. Madan Lal Dhingra's statement before the court was reported in the *Times*, 12 July, p. 4. Dhingra was connected with Shayamji Krishnavarma's nationalist group at 'India House' in Highgate, and was hailed as a political martyr in Krishnavarma's revolutionary monthly pamphlet, *The Indian Sociologist*. For a good critical overview of terrorism and the national movement see Peter Heehs.

- ² Yu Sheng-Yen also makes the observation that, paradoxically, Mitra's *Hindupore* borrows its plot-structure from a short-story by Kipling entitled 'The Enlightenment of Pagett MP'. In Kipling's story, Pagett's liberal views about Indian Home Rule are challenged during his visit to India by his friend Orde, a practical, hard-bitten I.C.S. officer, who states 'There are no politics, in a manner of speaking, in India. It's all work' (337).
- ³ The ambiguities of Ghosh's image of collaborative translation are complicated by the fact that the real-life Francis Thompson often expressed staunchly pro-imperialist sentiments.
- ⁴ For his account of an ethical attention to an other which remains irreducible to the self, see Emmanuel Levinas's *Totality and Infinity*.

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