

Disowning Imperialism and Remembering Dhaka University in A.G. Stock's Travelogue

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Abstract

Memoirs of Dacca University is the record of a British teacher's experience of being Head of the English Department at the transitional time of 1947 to 1951. The traveller's focus on Dhaka University makes it a valuable historic document of the institution in her depiction of the challenges of English language teaching in a former colony. The aim of this article is to analyze A. G. Stock's memoir as an example of post-imperial travelogue and to examine the traveller's attempts to overcome colonial representations in her treatment of Dhaka University and the people she encounters. I show how Stock's text differs from colonial travel writing and embraces a more empathetic and liberal view in her analysis and description of the university and East Pakistan. At the same time, following Holland and Huggan (2000), I also interrogate and trace the lingering residues of a colonial discourse in this travel narrative.

Keywords: Travel writing, English language teaching, colonial representation, post-imperial, women travellers

In the essays and articles commemorating Dhaka University's centennial anniversary one finds several references to A. G. Stock's *Memoirs of Dacca University* (1973/2017) which gives an index of its value as a historic record of the university. In coming to teach at Dhaka University's English Department, Stock was following in the footsteps of "maternal imperialists" Barbara Ramusack's (1992) label for the reform seeking British women who came to India in the colonial period. Stock emerges as an outlier figure in British women's colonial travel discourse because she arrived in South Asia at the very moment, August 1947, when British rule was poised to end. She was motivated by a desire to "contribute to the cause of liberation" (Stock, p. 2) which she planned to attain by teaching literature in an emerging country, East Pakistan as the case turned out to be. While a student at Oxford University, she was "the only European student" (p. 30) to attend the Majlis, an anti-colonial student forum. Eventually she left the London training college where she was a lecturer to undertake a long and arduous journey to the provincial town of Dhaka that is reminiscent of the travels of nineteenth century intrepid women. Her book, a record of her experience of working as the Head of English Department for four years, functions as life writing and travelogue since both genres share a focus on journeys of the self (Huggan & Holland, 2000; Korte, 2000; Thompson, 2011).

Written at the time of the formal dissolution of the British Raj, when the ashes of Partition were still smouldering, this text falls under post-imperial British travelogues. It

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represents a point of departure in Western accounts of the East and invites a re-examination of the politics of travel and potential for a reconstructed post-Orientalism. Stock decentres colonial stereotypes in her refusal to exoticize, mystify or condescend. The strength and distinctiveness of Stock's travel narrative are located in her liberal subjectivity. She displays a new humanitarian perspective where she is ready to acknowledge difference and convey respect, if not complete understanding. Her attempt to free the narrative from being a tool of the empire is evident in her sympathetic account of Dhaka and its people. In this regard she is "the antithesis of the memsahib" (p. xiv) as Kaiser Haq comments in his preface to the *Memoirs*; unlike her predecessors, Stock humanizes and individualizes the people she meets. However, reading Stock in a postcolonial context means that the long history of colonial discourse casts a shadow over the text and complicates her link with the tradition of imperial women coming to the colonies to reform colonial society, particularly education. Colonial rhetoric, in Patrick Holland's and Graham Huggan's (2000) opinion, continue to pervade contemporary Anglophone travel writing in various guises. This argument is also taken up by Robert Clarke (2018) who highlights the difficulties of escaping colonialist rhetoric and "complicity of the genre with colonialism" (p. 10). My paper, therefore, aims to interrogate such colonial undertones and evaluate to what extent *Memoirs of Dacca University* can be considered an emancipatory text for its privileging of "an awakened social consciousness" that Colin Thubron (as cited in Roper, 2003, p. 53) considers a hallmark of contemporary travel writers. I analyze such countering of Orientalism and evidence of disowning colonialist tendencies in favour of a new perspective to travel in *Memoirs*.

I base my reading of Stock's travel narrative on the arguments of Holland and Huggan (2000) to identify the writer's success in resisting imperialist attitudes. Although this travel narrative is pleasantly free from overt racism and debasement of locals, it still needs to be interrogated for an underlying colonial perspective. The paper is, thus, divided into two parts; the first deals with Stock's vision of Dhaka University which forms the core of the travelogue, and the second part examines perpetuations of a nuanced colonial vision.

Moving beyond imperial tendencies

Stock's travelogue is a remarkable attempt at transcending the imperial framework in its acceptance and respectful treatment of the cultural and geographical Other. The narrative differs from conventional depictions that either present Orientalist exoticism or document poverty and social ills as in Katherine Mayo's notorious *Mother India* (1927). It has been said that memsahibs would only write about servants because they were the only natives they interacted with¹. More importantly, by delineating the academic and cultural life of Dhaka instead of poverty and developmental hurdles, Stock breaks with typical colonial representations by female British travellers. The enduring appeal of *Memoirs* rests on her critical and historically significant representation of Dhaka University which in her own words reflected the turbulence of the times, for the university was a "mirror" (Stock, p. 81) through which she can "trace the cross-currents as far as they were clear to my

angle of vision” (p. 81). The experience of working at the English department gives her insider knowledge about issues and problems of a new nation trying to define and assert a conflicted national identity.

It is perhaps not surprising that a British woman teaching English literature at a South Asian university was alert to the subtleties of cultural prejudice and linguistic imperialism vis-à-vis the issue of state language and differences in culture and psychological mindsets of the two wings of Pakistan. As an outsider, a female, and one who had studied language and literature, Stock could appreciate the importance of linguistic culture. The fact that she was also Irish may have contributed further to her sympathy for East Pakistan. In his analysis of postcolonialism in James/Jan Morris’ travel writing, Phillips (2011) identifies sensitivity to internal colonialism and language politics as aspects of a de-centred outlook. Stock is similarly sentient to these issues in *Memoirs* in her focus on politically marginalized Bengali culture and population in Pakistan’s internal colonialism. There is a postcolonial perspective in her analysis of West Pakistani hegemony and prejudice of Bengalis. The professor is astute in gauging the political situation and identifying the stirrings of resentment and resistance among the students. The theme of student politics and Bengali nationalism requires a separate article to do justice; however, it must be stated that Stock’s travelogue is a valuable addition to historic documents tracing the foundations of Bengali nationalism, and “gives an insight into the causes leading to the Liberation movement” (Haq, p. xii).

Cultural vibrancy: The zeitgeist of Dhaka University

In delineating the only university of a provincial town in South Asia, the writer encounters the challenge of breaking free from colonial assumptions to explain the difficulties and shortcomings. To this end, she tries to present experiences and ontologies outside frames of European knowledge. The image that emerges is that of an institution with potential which was, nevertheless, undermined by vicissitudes of the Partition. As Stock clarifies, Dhaka University was a teaching university, and she firmly states “Dacca did more than most universities to make learning active” (p. 145). She indirectly places the university on the same par as Oxford in commenting that she had taken the tutorial system for granted:

With only my own memory of Oxford to measure by, I did not think it remarkable that students wrote essays and attended tutorials, that the library was not guarded jealously from would-be readers... (p. 145)

In her representation, Stock underscores a lively atmosphere despite political unrest. The numerous extracurricular activities that she remembers indicate that the university was an enabling space for cultural activities, a view supported in a Bengali memoir titled *Prithibir Pathe Hente* by Alaknanda Patel too:

Every evening, something is happening somewhere in the university –sometimes a debate, sometimes a drama, somewhere a seminar, somewhere a lecture. I used to think— what a grand arrangement just for teaching us. (cited in Rahman, 2021)ⁱⁱ

Stock’s narrative also evokes a new “literary culture in the making” (Haq, 2021). She mentions several literary endeavours undertaken by students and teachers among which there is the literary magazine *New Values* brought out by Khan Sarwar Murshid, a young

faculty member during Stock's time who went on to become a leading intellectual and educationist of Bangladesh. She considers his journal a "remarkable venture" of "high standard of writing" that "set an intelligent critical standard" (p. 54). Stock's assessment is corroborated by Khademul Islam's opinion; he cites *New Values* as the starting point of a tradition of literary studies "[t]his, historically, is where it began for us" (Islam, 2015, para. 6), and Haq (2021) considers it as the beginning of an inclusive literary culture. Through her reminiscences, she recreates a vibrant department as she recalls her memories of the symposium: "The State of Literature in the Two Bengals" organized by departments of English and Bengali, as well as the celebration of Wordsworth's centenary with public lectures, recitations, translations into English and an exhibition of "Wordsworthiana-portraits, facsimiles, pictures" (p. 194). She also records that students insisted on sending a telegram of condolence on Bernard Shaw's death.

Department students did not confine their literary pursuits only to English literature. Stock recalls that several students had contributed to a publication of Bengali poems. Other examples of the rich cultural milieu include Munier Chowdhury, a recent M.A. graduate, who had already written "one or two successful comedies in Bengali" (p. 22) and went on to become an important writer in Bengali literature and eventually a martyred intellectual. These examples of Bengali writers emerging from an English department signal a remarkable advance in decolonialization of culture. It is unusual because Western education transplanted to India by a colonial ruler often did not nurture local traditions. Seth (2007) observes that Western education had wrecked "national self-respect" and had "ignored or despised almost every ideal informing the national culture" (p. 162) for colonized Indians. In contrast, there was in Dhaka University a valorization of local culture comparable to the situation in colonial Algeria. Harrison (2019) cites the example of Assia Djebar, a committed anti-colonialist despite her French colonial education in the Grand Lycee (p. 43). Thus, one finds indications that colonial education could occasionally contribute to anti-colonialism in "complex and paradoxical ways" (Harrison, 2019, p. 43). For example, the poet Jasimuddin, through whose acquaintance Stock learnt of Bengali folk culture, was, for a short period, a teacher at Dhaka University. Furthermore, he was instrumental in introducing her to the harmonious co-existence of Muslim and Hindu communities in East Bengal. Jasimuddin had taken her to a *milad* in Mirpur that culminated in a musical performance of songs and dances, even one dedicated to Kali, the Hindu deity. The image of cultural syncretism and peaceful integration of Muslim and Hindu dwellers in the village counters the prevailing image of Partition communalism, and she is impressed by the cultural pluralism she witnessed:

The village was predominantly Muslim with a large Hindu minority. If, as Jasimuddin said, some of the stricter maulvis disapproved of the singing and dancing, which were not Islamic ways of honouring the Prophet, there was no sign of it that evening. (p. 34)

Stock soon became actively involved in the flourishing cultural enterprises of Dhaka. She produced an abridged version of *The Vicar of Wakefield* for the intermediate board and a few prose pieces for another textbook. More pertinently, she translated with Shamsul Huda, a graduate of the department, Bengali poems from the fifteenth century to the modern era including poems of Nazrul Islam. This interest in the Other's culture suggests transnationalism rather than Orientalism since she was not patronizing in her

attitude. Her appreciation is clear in her comment, “it was a glorious way of discovering Bengali poetry” (p. 51) and the positive evaluation to “discover poetry so good and so new to me” (p.53). Unlike stereotypical memsahibs who resist native culture, this British teacher enthusiastically learned about East Pakistan.

Challenges to cultural syncretism and communal harmony

Stock’s exploration of Bengali culture reveals a surprisingly cosmopolitan dimension in the peaceful and organic meshing of Hindu and Muslim cultures. Given the timeframe of 1947-1951 with the effects of Partition still fresh, the harmony among the people and its manifestation in literary culture is noteworthy. According to the *Memoirs*, the Partition had initiated an exodus of Hindu teachers, and there were policy measures taken to enforce a more “Muslim” character to the syllabus and the nation itself. However, within the university she finds that people are tolerant and above parochialism. In 1948, the department still managed to form “a good mixed team- four Hindus who had no intention of quitting, three Muslims, one Indian Catholic and myself” (p. 83). Also Stock was not the only European faculty in the university as she mentions Professor Zernike. Amidst a sense of peace and communal goodwill, she registers an undercurrent of tension and suspicion. She writes of difficulties faced by Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta, a brilliant teacher of the department. Stock mentions the “hard fight to get him appointed” (p. 169). Although she considered him to be “the best applicant for the post” (p. 169), his identity as a Hindu candidate was a deterrent to his appointment. Then he had to face further discrimination even after becoming a lecturer. While most Muslim lecturers were given leave with pay to study abroad “fairly early”(p. 170), Guhathakurta had to wait several years before he obtained leave to do his doctoral research in England and that, too, only at half-pay. Stock explains that the university took this step because of fears that Hindu employees may not return to Dhaka. Sadly this “first-rate teacher” (p. 169), as Stock describes him, had to pay a heavy price for his devotion and commitment to the university with his martyrdom in 1971. Stock recalls that Guhathakurta and his wife could have easily remained back in England and there was no surety of a secure life in Dhaka. Still, they returned to the university when “nothing drew them home but devotion to the work itself” (p. 170). She inserts the story of Guhathakurta and his death at the hands of Pakistanis “by way of a memorial” (p. 170); but it also serves to remind readers of the complex reality of a tenuous concord among Hindus and Muslims and among East and West Pakistanis.

Despite the undercurrent of discrimination against minorities, Stock claims that “personal relations between Bengali Hindus and Muslims were not strained” (p.85) within the universityⁱⁱⁱ. This amity would be tested and vindicated in the riot of 1950. She recounts that the Vice-Chancellor Professor Dr. S. Moazzem Hussain and the Registrar arranged help and food supplies for the Hindu employees and Hindu lecturers (p. 176) during this eruption of violence. They also ensured that Miss Bose, the warden of the Women’s Hostel, female Hindu students and Hindu employees whose homes were not safe could move to Dacca Hostel, which became “a small refugee camp” (p. 178).

The spirit of communal harmony was also found in individuals such as Khan Sarwar Murshid who deferred his own medical treatment to “rescue the university chief accountant’s family from a looting party” (p. 172) and to look after other Hindu colleagues such as Amiya Chakrabarty. Later, he saved Hindu families who were being attacked when they attempted to leave Dhaka. Students, too, helped in their own ways by advising R.A. Gomes, a Christian lecturer to stay home to avoid being assaulted. Syed Mahmud Ali along with others volunteered to guard Hindu teachers’ homes and run their errands. Yet another student Khorshed went and visited Hindu teachers. Stock’s narrative shows that there was an element of liberal humanism in Dhaka University even when the nation was caught in a maelstrom of rumours and religious bigotry. The well-meaning efforts of the sympathetic teachers and students did not succeed in persuading all Hindu faculty members to stay back, though Jyotirmoy Guhathakurta, Amiya Chakraborty and Kalipada, the department office clerk, chose to remain in Dhaka.

Stock’s narrative is valuable for bringing alive a terrible history of religious antagonism and conflict in Dhaka. While the facts of the riot are easily available, her text provides the personal and emotional contours of the horror. For instance, she writes of female Muslim students’ anxiety at the Women’s Hostel “that a party of *goondas* might enter the hostel in search of Hindu women, and possibly, if they found none to murder, make up for the disappointment with rape” (p. 177). There is the poignant predicament of the gardeners and the servants who dare not go to Dacca Hall for fear of losing their cows. Fortunately, the Proctor seems to have been a kind person who allowed them to share the Vice-Chancellor’s servants’ quarters to be within “earshot of the cows” (p. 178).

Dhaka University’s sensitivity to religious harmony and cultural diversity was also expressed in its policies as evidenced in the syllabus design of secondary education. The university exercised an indirect influence on shaping the curriculum because several professors served on the board and sub-committees. Stock writes that this board was tasked with incorporating a nationalist ideology: “the ideals of Islam had to be given practical shape, for a nation claiming to embody a religious idea cannot be indifferent to what is taught in its schools” (p. 72). The board, aware of religious minority groups in East Pakistan, had wanted to respect the diversity. But sadly, according to Stock, the central government had no sympathy for minority feelings and with almost no minority in West Pakistan they could not envision cultural pluralism. The open-mindedness of East Pakistan and Dhaka University contrasted with the parochialism of the other wing. She confronts a similar divergence in attitude again when she worked on another textbook. She was assigned to select and prepare suitable reading texts for the matriculation exam for which she wrote “brief lives of five heroes of undivided India-Gandhi, Gokhale, Dadabhai Naoroji, Rabindranath Tagore and Vivekananda” (p. 73). Although the board in East Pakistan had agreed to this selection, the central government disapproved of it, and Stock writes “it was quietly dropped, and as far as I know, was never reprinted” (p. 74).

Student activism

Another feature of Dhaka University which left a mark on Stock is the social and political activism of the students. Their commitment to help the Hindu minority is acknowledged

in her narrative of the riot. Additionally, students were politically conscious and ready to act for “vital principle [was] their Bengali identity” (p. 113). Stock describes the student protests against linguistic imperialism and social injustice. She had witnessed first-hand the strike of the Fourth Class employees with which the students had sympathized, and for which many students including Bangabandhu were penalized and had to suffer expulsion. Stock writes of her students who were imprisoned. One was Munier Choudhury whom she visited in jail. At the time of his arrest, he was already teaching at a college having completed his degree, and he happened to be in Dhaka on March 11th for a routine college work. As Stock recounts, “there was no specific charge against him” (p. 121), but his former association with the communist party had instigated police suspicions; consequently, he was “arrested and spent several months in Dacca gaol as a security prisoner” (p. 121). The second student was Nadera Begum – N as she has been identified in *Memoirs*; as a student, she was a firebrand female activist whose daring escape from the clutches of policemen and later her sitting for the M.A. exam from jail have become legendary. Later she joined the English department as a faculty member. Stock’s decision to highlight the bold actions of N is a crucial decentering of conventional views. N’s courage and activism counter the passivity and deference to authority that mark South Asian women. Stock found most female students bound to social conventions of feminine submissiveness. She mentions that they hardly ventured to ask questions in tutorials and “did not normally speak to the men who sat in the same classroom” (p. 145), and “accustomed to purdah, did not go to the cinema without a chaperone” (p. 145). To her astonishment, these same girls took part in picketing, defying the police and even violating conventions by visiting the wounded in hospitals. The duality of adhering to gender convention and political participation is a feature of women’s history in South Asia; for example women’s public involvement in the anti-colonial movement led by Gandhi did not represent an opposition to prevailing gender ideology or patriarchy (Sinha, 2014).

Memoirs also offers evidence that there existed an easy and free relationship between teachers and students, “part of the Dacca tradition for students to be in and out of teachers’ houses,” though “it had lapsed in recent years” (p. 41). In fact the travelogue notes that initially student protests were directed against the state and not the university authorities; unfortunately, students gradually became opposed to the university’s central power, and this perhaps dented confidence and friendship between faculty and students. Stock’s own role as a teacher provides a model of a good teacher. She was a good listener in whom students could confide. Although she was ambivalent towards student protests, her fair-mindedness made her appreciate opposing views. At the beginning of her tenure, she was bewildered by student politics:

I was fresh from the England of a quarter of a century ago, where we still took our democratic institutions with simple seriousness and even undergraduates did not talk of student power. (p. 101)

Initially, she was not completely swayed by student protests since “I often found fault with the students’ logic”; later she concedes “I was fundamentally on their side” (p. 102). She develops a position where she combines sympathy with professional responsibility. She writes that most of the teachers of the university shared this attitude:

The sympathy was tempered by an old-fashioned conviction which I shared with most of my colleagues that a university exists for learning and teaching and should stick to its function though the skies fall. (p. 102)

Stock's benevolent neutrality came under trial when a student activist approached her to edit his speech. She agreed to polish the language but refused to type copies for "advance distribution" (p. 102). She explains that it meant crossing "the border between pedagogy and participation" (p. 103). This conflict between professional responsibility and empathy for student causes is one that confronts many teachers in moments of crises. *Memoirs* is, consequently, replete with introspections on this dilemma. In her ability to apprehend a world outside the cloistered classroom, she shows a critical consciousness which Edward Said demands of intellectuals.

In the lively portrayal of Dhaka University, Stock does not reduce the representation to a facile view of optimism and perfect harmony. She balances the optimism and goodwill she observed with her awareness of the insidious presence of sectarian politics and prejudices in appointments of teachers such as Guhathakurta and in curriculum development in conflicts over syllabus design and examination. She records hassles of text selection that would meet the language standard without offending moral sensibilities of desired national ideals. These revisions and conflicts are common phenomena in newly independent nations striving to construct national identities as Navneet Sharma and Showkat Ahmed Mir (2019) note in their research on decolonizing schooling in India. The sudden transition from being a teaching university to an examining university, overseeing all the colleges in East Pakistan (which were previously under Calcutta University) had placed a tremendous burden on the staff. Stock's memories of the daunting task of printing thousands of question papers and checking mountains of scripts resonate with current efforts of Dhaka University to tackle the inclusion of several colleges and her analysis remains relevant.

Stock's colonial lens

Writing as a Western traveller describing the non-West, Stock evokes the authority and hegemony of Western domination and Orientalism. Still, she mitigates this Western discursive power through what Paul Smethurst (2011) calls a revisionary' strategy in Dalrymple's travel writing. The critic explains that Dalrymple offsets Eurocentrism by including local perspectives and voices which render Dalrymple's *City of Djinn*s multivocal:

This multivocality extends the form of travel writing from 'sightseeing and witnessing' to a form which locates subjectivity in the ruins, mementoes and living memories of others. Secondly, by writing from India, as well as about India, Dalrymple shifts the subject position geographically. He tries as far as possible to become an *insider* by adopting a 'travel-in-dwelling' approach to reverse James Clifford's term (1997: 26). (Smethurst, p. 159)

In like manner, Stock's memoir, though published in 1973 and written mostly in England, does incorporate diary entries made while living in Dhaka in 1947 to 1951 to provide the immediacy and first-hand account of "travel-in-dwelling" (Clifford as cited in Smethurst, p. 159) and insider approach. Furthermore, including the views of

Khorshed, Sikdar and the others is an enunciative strategy expressing the “living memories of others” (Smethurst, p. 159).

Privileges of race

Despite such strategic interventions, the residues of a Western perspective linger in Stock as it does in Dalrymple. Following Holland and Huggan who argue that a colonial vision persists in contemporary travel writing, this part of the article investigates the traces of colonialism in Stock’s narrative. Richard Phillips’ (2011) analysis of James/Jan Morris and Smethurst’s (2011) reading of Dalrymple indicates that colonial remnants cannot be wholly erased. Consequently, a Western colonial viewpoint tentatively manifests in Stock. To begin with, she is carrying on the tradition of intrepid Victorian female travellers in search of adventure and release from a circumscribed domestic existence (Ghose, 1998; Lawrence, 1994). By her own admission the cold weather and the postwar shortages in Britain formed “a good argument for escaping into sunshine” (p. 2). Travel to Dhaka in 1947 provided a sense of adventure and “the sense of exhilaration of shared enterprise” (p. 2) of being able to contribute to the cause of liberation and nation-building. In her enthusiasm, there is the arrogance of Western civilization coming to the aid of the colonies even though she is modest in her tone and self-deprecating. Antoinette Burton’s investigation of British imperial feminists reveals that India was a fertile ground for British women’s professional opportunities. The cultural historian alludes to Mary Carpenter’s promotion of India as a platform for female British teachers (Burton, 1994). Stock accesses a comparable professional privilege in obtaining a senior teaching position in the East which frees her from many constraints of gender conventions and even political bindings. For example, the Vice Chancellor’s decision to place Stock in charge of the Women’s Hostel during the riot may have been predicated on her impunity of being British. She seems to have enjoyed some influence as she was able to visit Munier Choudhury in jail. Unfortunately, her sympathies for the Bengalis made her “a dubious influence” (p. 139) in the eyes of the government subsequently, and she was denied a visit with N (Nadera Begum) in jail. In preparing the matriculation textbook, she is chosen since as a British individual she would be free of bias, and, therefore, her written historical biographies would be acceptable to both Hindus and Muslims.

Stock’s entry to social and academic circles in Dhaka society was facilitated by her race. She could easily visit a village school with two newly met college students, attend a village *milad* with Jasimuddin, and go to Noakhali with Khorshed. Her travels demonstrate that she felt a sense of safety and lack of sexual threat and danger not shared by local women. Thus, the alterity of geographical space releases her from gender constraints in line with imperial females enjoying liberation from patriarchy through travels. Chaudhuri and Strobel (1992) comment that “[e]mpire provided opportunities to maternal imperialists... to test their independence from the constraints of patriarchal society” (p. 9). Stock’s situation is comparable to the Irish travel writer Dervla Murphy in Afghanistan, often the only woman present in a group:

It is certainly a curious experience to be travelling alone in Muslim countries. Most of one’s time is spent in the company of men only, being treated with the respect due to a woman, but being talked to man-to-man, so that in the end one begins to feel somewhat hermaphroditic. (Murphy, p. 213, cited in Holland & Huggan, p. 117)

Stock appears to occupy a similar position and enjoys an easy camaraderie with Khorshed, Sikdar, Shamsul Huda, Munier and Murshid. However, she is also their teacher so the relationship is always asymmetrical. The transnational friendship that emerges from a shared vision to improve education recalls earlier cross-cultural links between British women such as Sophie Dobson, Mary Carpenter, and Sister Nivedita who were sympathetic to Indian reformers. However, these travellers always retained their imperial selves: “[b]elieving in their own racial and cultural superiority, the majority of Western women and men rejected indigenous institutions and cultures of the colonies” (Chaudhuri & Strobel, p. 10).

Although Stock is careful in distancing herself from imperial attitudes and haughtiness, she is the “*memsahib*” albeit, “the *memsahib* who refuses” (Holland & Huggan, p. 113). She realizes this when confronted with poverty and need of the people she meets. One poignant example is that of the boy hawking knick-knacks to whom Stock lends fifteen rupees, a paltry sum for the professor; when after two years the boy paid her back, she “felt thoroughly ashamed of taking the hard-earned coins, but dared not affront his pride by cancelling the bond” (p. 24). Even though she can appreciate and understand the hawker’s need to preserve self-respect and dignity, she cannot change the power imbalance. The British professor’s awareness that she occupies an elevated status of a ‘*memsahib*’ manifests in her recognition that she is the object of local people’s gaze in her Noakhali visit. She underscores that she was under intense scrutiny as her female sex made it socially acceptable for village women to visit her. She explains “Also, since I was a woman, the women could come (at different times from the men) to look at me without losing their characters” (p. 46). Her appeal extends beyond voyeuristic curiosity. Due to the reverse exoticism of being white, one woman considers her as a holy saint and wanted a cure for her wart. In an interesting instance of cross-cultural encounter, two widows ask her about her personal life and make it clear that “[t]hey were not happy about it. Without a husband and children, I was not fulfilling my task in the world and my duty to God” (p. 47).

Colonial exploitations of comic potential

These self-deprecating anecdotes are entertaining and an index of a good humoured personality. Stock enlivens her narrative of a poverty-stricken land and the often dull academic life of examination and syllabus setting with comic moments. Holland and Huggan (2000), however, ask us to reconsider the self-mockery and comic interludes in a critical light. They point out that humour often “seeks to promote harmless entertainment while claiming a spurious disengagement” (p. 34). They cite the travelogues of Eric Newby, Evelyn Waugh and Bruce Chatwin to show whimsy and parody can be connected to cultural superiority and nostalgia for imperialist travel. They further argue that ridicule and irony are used for the defence of the traveller’s privileged status and cross-cultural encounters are reduced to farces.

While Stock’s narrative refrains from imperialist nostalgia, there are moments when humour may indicate cultural relativism. One such example would be the comic presentation of the cook Abdul when he does not want to take orders from “Indian guests” (p.16), his term for local guests. Unable to speak English, he cannot communicate

his refusal to Stock. Hence, he takes recourse of a roadside scribe to submit his grievances in a written document stating that he had no complaints against the professor, but “He was not accustomed to waiting on Indians and objected to taking orders from them and ‘washing their eaten dishes’” (p.16). Stock is forced to write back “in the same strain of high courtesy” (p.17) to appease his dignity. After this gesture, he happily carried out all his duties. While this is indeed an entertaining anecdote, it does position the local individual in a less than flattering light; Abdul’s conceit and vanity act as a foil to offset Stock’s wisdom and understanding. The incident of being offered a meal “steaming hot and smelly with the breath of a nearby latrine” (p. 34) at the end of the village *milad* is an example of the comic peril of living in a third world country; the tribulations of a poverty stricken world is transformed into an entertaining escapade.

Such comic rendering is more problematic when this treatment is used in themes of education. Though Stock is compassionate and offers considerate opinions regarding the teaching situation, there is a tendency to trivialize serious issues. One notices this tendency in her commentary on the examination system and the standard of English language. Being a good writer she dramatizes and makes interesting the routine work of preparing for exams and script checking with humorous touches. In her depiction of the laborious work of printing of the English question paper for Intermediate examination, she deploys self-deprecation and irony in her self-presentation. In a tongue-in-cheek manner, she alludes to Kipling’s “‘Pillars of Empire’ who sent their memsahibs to the hills and groaned as they sweated at their desks” (p. 60). The allusion draws attention to her individualism and anomaly as a memsahib since instead of going to the Himalayas with the Dutch professor of chemistry she stayed back in the sweltering heat of Dhaka to type exam questions. At the same time, she is aligning herself with the imperialists in reminding readers that Europeans in the past and in the present did not remain in the lowlands during the summer. Also of note is that she mentions she is the only head of department “who could use a typewriter well enough to cut stencils” (p. 60) to insinuate her technological expertise. The comic sketch of Stock working in the heat using “dexterity to prevent the sweat from dripping from one’s face and arms from botching the stencil” while she typed and “soothed my envy by telling myself that I was getting acclimatized” (p. 61) could be a way of deflecting attention from her privilege and protecting herself as Holland and Huggan theorize about the use of humour where self-mockery is self-exoneration.

Holland and Huggan (2000) also find a connection between contemporary use of humour and the older Edwardian tradition of gentlemen travellers who impose British standards and cultural values on the places they visit. This comes across in the incident of the mother cat, who nested among bundles of scripts in a locked room. Stock presents her attempts to remove the cat in a witty manner:

...she [cat] decided that her family needed the Intermediate to fortify them from the shocks of the world. I found them established behind the stacked barricade, and turned them out. She replaced them; I removed them; the argument went on for a week. She had a mother’s ambition and never dreamed of surrender, and from her point of view she was right. What with kites, snakes and prowling toms the world was dangerous for newborn kittens. (p. 65)

One finds in this passage a superb display of wit and panache for story-telling. Once again the comic side of the story is, however, underpinned by reminders of a third-world location. She is implying that she, too, like the mother cat is living in a world of kites and snakes and heat. Huggan and Holland (2000) mention that the portrayal of such difficulties is common among travel writers who capitalize on ‘hardships’ for self-promotion. In a similar manner Stock had also pointed out the lack of running water and modern toilet facilities in her bungalow.

Stock’s view of English language learning

Another funny story that appears in *Memoirs* is that of a young man who had written “Keats had vomited his feelings for the beauty of nature into his ‘Ode to a Nightingale’” (p.71). He had earlier impressed Stock with a piece where he had written that “[i]n the examination-room they [students] vomit as much as they can remember into their answer-books” (p.71). However, his later use of the word *vomit* was an ironic repetition that exposed his ignorance. This anecdote illustrates, on the one hand, the problem of learning English as a second or foreign language in the subcontinent; on the other hand, it manifests the detrimental effect of imposing a foreign language on learning in that the study of English did not enhance students’ critical thinking, rather it posed as an obstacle that limits critical thinking as in the case of the student who wrote “Keats vomited his feelings” (p.71). This is a point that Stock underscores through several instances including her analysis of the weakness and strengths of the examination system. She writes that the examination system was geared to provide speed and equity. She is also correct in her conclusion that the colonial education policy had given rise to this instrumental use of English language learning, where students memorized selected answers rather than learn the language properly. She explains the consequence of prioritizing practicality and expediency in her description of the Intermediate English language exam that was:

mechanized as far as possible, and private judgement, which might vary from one examiner to another was minimized. If this meant that intelligence and sensibility, qualities that might usefully be valued for further education, slipped through the mesh of the machine, not much could be done about it. (p. 64)

English language studies at the tertiary level were also affected by students’ language deficiency and lack of familiarity with the world of English literature besides cultural disparity between the students’ culture and the context of the literature they were studying. Stock captures the pathos of the situation in:

They had chosen to graduate in English for the love of literature, and had achieved the Second Division MA, which was a passport to a college lectureship but not to the academic paradise of their dreams. Their reward for devotion to the Jacobean dramatists or the greater Romantics or the poetry of Yeats and Eliot was to be posted in some remote place where not a soul shared their interests. (p. 62)

This passage draws attention to the alienating effect of learning English. Stock also recognized the obstacle of cultural unfamiliarity in that few students:

had read English books since childhood, so that their imaginations were familiar with a world unlike their own, there was a growing number to whom those subtle

preconceptions, which a Western reader does not notice because they are in his own mind as well as the author's, were uncouth, bewildering or delightful in their novelty. (p.145)

Her view remains valid as similar challenges continue to beset the current teaching situation of English literature in Bangladesh.

A further impediment to teaching English was the repercussions of political unease and tension in a new nation. One of Stock's students, a school teacher, was sacked for introducing a Tagore poem in his class. Stock, too, had to face several instances of state suspicion and disapproval. She concedes that her decision to leave Dhaka University was prompted by government surveillance and their reading of her private correspondence "with disapproval" (p. 207).

Lingering colonial tendencies

A nuanced and possibly unconscious colonial attitude, however, emerges in her narrative of English learning practices in East Bengal. She states more than once that the problem of education in all Indian universities, not just Dacca was an "undiscriminating memory combined with a fear of anything like independent thinking" (p.143). She considers overreliance on memorization and insufficient or neglect of critical thinking to be detrimental causes of weakness in the education system. She appreciates the reason why "it was safer to repeat prefabricated sentiments of indisputable authority" (p. 143) because of the competitiveness of the exams, the pressures on examiners and the poor quality of teaching at the school level. While she is correct in her estimation, the repeated references to memorization and lack of creativity were perhaps a cultural bias. She reports that South Asian students who had gone to universities in England and America had informed her that they only learnt "to think" after going abroad and had they done so earlier they would not have attained the marks required for an overseas scholarship (p.144). In her description of the Intermediate examination, she discovered:

The most striking thing about these thousands of answers was their unanimity. To illustrate what was often called a Transferred Epitaph, nearly everyone cited a line from Gray's 'Elegy' and observed reproachfully: *The way is not weary; the ploughman is weary.* (p. 66)

Stock was correct in identifying the lack of originality to be a major problem with student responses. Many of her observations such as the one quoted above are true even now, and her findings will be affirmed by local teachers of English who have made similar remarks about the lack of grammatical competence and comprehension of unseen passages among examinees. The criticism of memorization or cramming is, nonetheless, problematic. Stock's concerns with rote learning and unoriginal answers echo the anxiety of colonial educationalists. Lord Curzon in his convocation address of 1902 declared:

The great fault of education as pursued in this country is, as we all know, that knowledge is cultivated by the memory instead of the mind, and all that aids the memory are mistaken for implements of the mind (as cited in Seth, 2007, p. 22)

In his historical analysis of colonial education, Seth underscores the colonial bias behind these complaints. The scholar discovered that a few years after this convocation speech Lord Curzon defended Oxford students' propensity for cramming; thereby, indicating that rote learning and memorization are not limited to India though it may have

been more exacerbated in the colonies (p. 28). Such criticisms about native learning were prevalent in colonial discourse because Harrison (2019) finds similar complaints of cramming and instrumentalization of learning against Algerians in French colonial education. Seth regards Governor General Lord Irwin's aspersion that university education in India had become a turnstile to government service (p. 18) as typical of the colonial disparagement of native learning. He further argues that the complaint of Indian students' inability to absorb western education in the desired manner was an indication of the failure of Western education to produce modern subjectivity. He objects to the belittling of transmission learning and claims that subjectivity did actually develop, but it differed from Occidental notions, and it adapted and retained indigenous knowledge practices. The fact that Indian intellectuals emerged, and Dhaka University successfully produced and fostered creative writers such as Munier Choudhury, critical thinkers such as Khan Sarwar Murshid and politically conscious activists such as N/Nadera Begum demands a re-examination of our pedagogy to ascertain how students develop critical thinking.

Harrison, who like Seth has researched colonial education, offers another explanation for the prevalence of rote learning and memorization in Algeria. He highlights the common problems of inadequate resources for teaching French effectively and adds that the disjuncture between the concepts and the reality of students' lives may have encouraged rote learning. He puts forward "propagandistic aspects" and "restrictive bias" (p. 297) of curriculum as factors contributing to memorization. Both of these aspects were present in colonial education in Bengal. Set against the points raised by Seth and Harrison, Stock's criticism of rote learning may not present the complete picture and may be limited by her own cultural and colonial biases. Furthermore, the comic and ironic portrayals of the difficulties in teaching English could be a form of self-exoneration or even abjuration of colonial responsibility in creating this predicament. Holland and Huggan (2000) argue that travel writers often resort to humour to absolve themselves from moral responsibility. They reference Susan Sontag's view that Camp, which is often understood as exaggerations and anti-serious apolitical playful humour, is a moral solution to counterbalance "moral indignation" (Sontag as cited in Holland & Huggan, 2000, p. 34). One could, thus, argue that humour becomes a strategy for Stock to contain and manage the difficulties of English language students. This anxiety corroborates Seth's point that colonial authorities were uneasy at the failure to mould native students according to their values.

Post-imperialism in Stock

Apart from an alignment with earlier colonial views of English learning, Stock's travelogue is distanced from the imperialist discourse of colonial travel writing. In fact, she herself was different from other British people working in Dhaka. She writes that she had met a few English civil servants who were culturally open-minded and not prejudiced like the stereotypical colonists caricatured in literary texts, "the types found in Forster's or Orwell's novels" (Stock, p. 40). She considers that the English professionals who were working in Dhaka "genuinely liked the country" (p. 40). Despite their more liberal attitude, she notes they did not share her sympathetic views and her attempts to bridge

cultural differences since they were not acquainted with young ordinary East Pakistanis. Stock concludes that the English expatriates she met were aloof and remained ignorant about the simmering discontent of the Bengalis for their knowledge did not include “the hopes and fears and prejudices of the young Pakistanis” (p.40), while she, having worked with and met the young people of East Pakistan, was more attuned to the pulse of the region. In her understanding of the Bengali cultural values and pride, she could develop empathy for the Bengalis and also critically interrogate West Pakistani hegemony and nationalist discourse. Thus, *Memoirs* is a cultural critique by an engaged teacher as opposed to a passive teacher. It shows the potential for post-imperial travelogues to become postcolonial, and in the words of Dennis Porter the best form of travel writing comprises “an effort to overcome cultural distance through a protracted act of understanding” (as cited in Smethurst, 2011, p. 165). Stock’s travel narrative is an example of such modern contemporary form of travel writing; it is one that seeks to forge transnational bonds and connections through new experiences and encounters.

ⁱ Emma Postans only mentions servants in *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan*.

ⁱⁱ Alanknanda Patel is referencing Parimal Roy’s reminiscence of Dhaka University

ⁱⁱⁱ Alanknanda Patel refers to pre-Partition communal harmony in the university in “relations between students, teachers and colleagues of different faith were of great amity, respect and warmth” (‘Memories of Dacca’ in *Economic and Political Weekly*, 38(48), pp. 5006).

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