



## Projection of India: A Study of Fanny Parkes' Travel Narrative

Dr Akhilesh Kumar, Assistant Professor , Govt. College Ateli

**Abstract :** Travel writing is a daunting task and it becomes all the more difficult for a female because she has to face problems twice once as a female traveller and then as a female writer. According to the patriarchal ideology of separate spheres, a female's proper and fit place is the home; women are therefore traditionally associated with immobility and with domesticity. In the popular genres of literature; novel, drama, poetry, story etc. females have contributed fairly well. But in travel writing females are disproportionately few. In the present paper an attempt has been made to provide an overview of

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Fanny Parkes as a travel writer. Her projection of India is also central to this paper. Fanny Parkes' travel account was published by Pelham Richardson, London in 1850 as *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque, During Four – and – Twenty years in the East: With Revelations of Life in the Zenana*. In this long little key words are pilgrim, picturesque and life in the zenana. She calls herself a pilgrim. Oxford Advanced Learner's Dictionary defines pilgrim as, "a person who travels to a holy place for religious reasons" (Wehmeier 1384). And picturesque is pretty. The travelogue can be approached through this angle also that here the pilgrim in Fanny Parkes is searching beauty and picturesque in the holy land called India. Yet another way of understanding the text is provided by William Dalrymple who has altered the title of the book and called it *Begums, Thugs and Englishmen: The Journals of Fanny Parkes*. Both titles are certainly different from each other but one thing seems clear from both these titles that Fanny Parkes' chief focus is the presentation of the life of Indian Females.

### Fanny Parkes' travel narrative

A study of Fanny Parkes' travel narrative reveals that she has spent much ink in the portrayal of Indian woman from both communities Hindu and Muslim. Through presenting Indian woman she also throws light on English woman in particular and pitiable plight of each and every woman of this world in general. It is not Fanny Parker' alone who narrates the life of females but we have other figures who reveal life in zenana to us and Fanny. These are Colonel Gardner and some anonymous male. In her travel narrative Fanny Parkes' focus is on upper class females i.e. begums, queens and princesses. She seldom talks about their servants and lower class females. She herself is familiar with this fact as she says, "I heard that I was much blamed for visiting the Princess, it being supposed I went for the sake of presents. Natives do not offer presents unless they think there is something to be gained in return; and that I knew perfectly well: I went there from curiosity, not avarice ...gold mohur, the customary sweets and necklaces of flower. (BTE 313)

Fanny Parkes projection of Indian woman reveals the fact that Fanny Parkes' description of the life of Muslim ladies is more detailed and comprehensive than the portrayal of the life of Hindu ladies. Another drawback of her travelogue is that in it her chief focus is upper class females. The females whose lives are explored are queens, princess and near dear of begums. Among Muslim ladies one finds graphic portrayal of Mulka Begum, grand-daughter of Colonel Gardner, his wife and other rich Muslim ladies. Among Hindu women we have detailed pictures of Her Highness, Baiza Bai and her granddaughter Gaja Raja. But this does not of course mean that she is not familiar with lower class females. She also mentions slave girls, domes, nach women and other poor females in her travel narrative. To quote an illustration from the text: "Women of the lower class, on entering the female assembly, must not say "salam", if the hostess be a lady of rank, they perform kudumbosee (the ceremony of kissing the feet) to her and merely make salam to the rest. When going away they request permission, in the same way as the man in the male assembly, and take their departure." ( BTE 219)



Though Fanny Parkes gives her justification and reason of visiting begums, one partly agrees with her. She says in her defense, “I went there for curiosity, not avarice, offered one gold mohur and received in return the customary sweetmeats and necklaces of flower. Look at the poverty, the wretched poverty of these descendants of the emperors! In former times strings of pearls and valuable jewels were placed on the necks of departing visitors.” (BTE 313) Though it is not our intention of going into the whys and the wherefores of her visiting to begums alone still her justification raises pertinent questions. Why does she seem curious only about begums? Why does not she wish to visit poor ladies? They might be poor now but they are not as poor as lower class females are. Fanny gets hurt by these remarks and she takes a decision of not visiting these places again. As she says, “...I was so much disgusted with the ill – natured remarks I had heard, I would not enter the place again.” (BTE 314) Whatever may be reason (s) of her visit to begums but because of ‘ill remark’ we are at loss. If she had not received ‘ill remark’, we would have more observation from the lady.

Though Fanny Parkes’ focus is on Indian females, she also gives a portrayal of Indian Male. It seems quite interesting to examine the projection of a male (powerful) by a lady (powerless). This evaluation becomes all the more interesting by the fact that the lady happens to be powerful because she is from ruling race and the male happens to be powerless and colonized. British females have complicated and complex relationships with Indian males. Perhaps some times they approach him as women and at other times as representative of ruling class. But it seems clear that in both roles, as an exploiter of fair sex and as barbarous, uncivilized and dishonest, this male is the target of her attack.

What is special about memsahibs’ projection of Indian male is that they talk mainly about servants. Perhaps they are more familiar with Indian servants. Indra Ghose beautifully asserts, “What is striking about these accounts is that while they expend page after page on the picturesque landscape of India, encounter with Indians – other than servants – are rare” (3). And Fanny Parkes is no exception. She is a typical memsahib in her dealing with servants. Fanny Parkes lists fifty – seven servants in a ‘private family’ with their work, and wages in the chapter, “The Return to Allahabad – Execution of Twenty Five Thugs.” Total wages of these 57 servants are Rs. 290 or about £ 290 per month. On special occasions like Christmas Day these servants demand tip. As Fanny says, “On Christmas Day the servants adorned the gate ways with chaplets (hars) and garlands of fresh flowers. The bearers and dhobees brought in trays of fruit, cakes, and sweet mates, with garlands of flowers upon them, and requested bakhshish, probably ... we gave some rupees ... (BTE 17)

Fanny Parkes gives detailed description of sircar, the head servant. Other servants respect him. He allots services to rest of servants. About the dress of the sircar Fanny writes, “He dresses himself with the utmost care and most scrupulous neatness in white muslin; and the turban often consists of twenty – one yards of fine Indian muslin; by fourteen inches in breadth, most carefully folded and arranged in small folded and arranged in small plaits; his pen is behind his ear ...” (BTE 15). These servants hold a pen and the roll of paper in their hands and note the orders of sahib and memsahib every morning. In all purchases this man takes the lion’s share. To quote from the text: “... Whatever may have been ordered: his profit is a heavy percentage on all he purchases for the family” (BTE 15). The sircar uses exaggerated language. He says to Fanny Parkes, “ You are my father and my mother ,and I am your poor little child ... my God ... my protector and my support”(BTE 15). Fanny Parkes notices “strong specimen of Eastern hyperbola” in these sugar quoted words.

What also emerges from the text is the fact that most of the servants are lazy, dishonest and thieves. For example in chapter XI Fanny Parkes says, “We have had much annoyance from the servants stealing all sorts of little things, as also wine. Two of the khidmatgars were the culprits” (BTE 64). Yet another instance is the stealing by tailors. About her tailors Fanny Parkes says, “In Calcutta I found my tailors great thieves – knives, scissors, seals – they would steal anything” (BTE 79). According to the



narrator Indian servants insist on keeping 'caste' that is why they don't work the work of other servants. This is the reason which compels Britishers to have a large number of servants. To quote from the text: "One man will not do the work of another, but says, 'I shall lose caste', which caste, by and by, may be regained by the expenditure of a few rupees in a dinner to their friends and relatives" (BTE 118). To her Indian servants are lazy and idle. Fanny Parkes writes about her maid, "The idleness of the natives is excessive, for instance, my ayah will dress me, after which she will go to her house, eat her dinner, and then returning, will sleep in one corner of my room on the floor for the whole day. The bearers also do nothing but eat and sleep, when they are not pulling the pankhas" (BTE 18). Fanny Parkes' description of servants is ambivalent. She talks about the pros and cons of Indian servants. About the servants of hilly areas Fanny says, "They are very honest and very idle; moreover, most exceedingly dirty" (BTE 18). Her ayah is very good in hilly area. Praising her ayah she says, "My ayah is so kind and so careful of me: what a good servant I find!" (BTE 331).

In the words of Indra Ghose, "Fanny Parkes is one of the most energetic of travellers who gains access to a multitude of events of native life that remain closed to other travellers" (Memsahibs Abroad 50-51). Fanny Parkes in her travel narrative also describes Indian festival, religions and various ceremonies of Hindus and Muslims. These festivals include Deepawali, Ram Leela, Muharram, Eid and Nag Panchmi. She also describes Doorga Pooja and The Churuk Pooja. The subtleties of Hinduism and Islam also find expression in the text. Fanny Parkes gets surprised to see pictures in the house of a man considered to be so religious as the Nawab. As the Prophet says, "Every painter is in hellfire... whoever draws a picture will be punished, by ordering him to blow a spirit into it; and this he can never do; and so he will be punished as long as God wills" (BTE 253). On the other hand, when Fanny Parkes asks from a Hindu lady about worshipping idols then she replies, "Their power is great" (BTE 337).

Fanny Parkes' travelogue shows that she is in love with India and she is very eager to 'see India'. She appreciates India's monuments and buildings. She also likes Indian music and learns Urdu. She has great reverence for Taj. She beautifully conveys her respect for Taj: "I cannot enter the Taj without feelings of deep devotion: the sacredness of the place, the remembrance of the fallen grandeur of the family of the Emperor and that of Asaf – jah, the father of Arzumund Banoo, the solemn echoes, the dim light, the beautiful architecture, the exquisite finish and delicacy of the whole, the deep devotion with which the natives prostrate themselves when they make their offerings of money and flowers at the tomb, all produce ... and sacred feelings; and I could no more jest or indulge in levity beneath the dome of the Taj, than I could in my prayers." (BTE 184-185). She calls it most delicate and elegant tribute and the highest compliment ever paid to the woman on the earth. While saying adieu to the beautiful Taj, she makes a commitment of remembering its beauty until her death. Perhaps it seems greatest respect ever paid to the Taj by some English traveller. She drives pleasure even in the ruins of Delhi. She applauds, "In the evening we drove through the ruins of old Delhi... The drive is most interesting... the ruins of old Delhi is very beautiful" (BTE 307). She calls the tomb of Humaon 'a fine massive building'. To her Jama Masjid is 'a fine mosque'. Fanny Parkes reminds us of Mrs. Moore, from *A Passge to India*. Mrs. Moore too has great respect for India. Dr. Aziz forbids her entering into a mosque by saying, "You have no right here at all; you should have taken off your shoes; this is a holy place for Moslems." (Forster 42). Then Mrs. Moore replies, "I have taken them off." (42)

Despite her level best she is unable to understand India completely. As she says, "I had the greatest difficulty in understanding what the begum said..." (BTE 312). That is why she seems ambivalent in her projection of India. Elleke Bohemer also says, "... Lack of comprehension can be found ... in colonialist writing" (85). In spite of her wide claim that "don't suppose I am painting; this is the plain fact" (BTE 23), her projection of India does not appear mere factual representation rather she is observing India from white glasses. Actually travellers come with pre-conceived convection. Fanny too



has confessed it in the travelogue. She says, “So much are we ruled in our ideas by what we read in childhood of ... the East” (BTE 266). Like her male counterpart she too is on civilizing mission and she too has burden of educating uncivilized and uneducated Indians.

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