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The Dilemma of the Anglo-Indians: A Reading of I. Allan Sealy's *The Trotter-Nama* (1988)

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ABSTRACT

The article explores the history of the Anglo-Indians in the Indian sub-continent as chronicled through the fictional family of the Trotters by I. Allan Sealy in his 1988 novel, *The Trotter-Nama*. Using a host of literary postmodern techniques, Sealy questions the veracity of official history that has been handed down to us. He also evocatively brings forth the divided selves of the Anglo-Indians as they deny their Indian roots in order to pass off as totally British.

KEYWORDS

Anglo-Indians; Border-Area; History; I. Allan Sealy; Indian Writing in English; Liminality; Mixed- Parentage; Postmodernism; Race; The Trotter-Nama.

Talking of Justin Aloysius Trotter's maiden balloon flight, the narrator says: "Had the Great Trotter returned to earth in his Salamandre, the day would have been sufficiently momentous... But an empty gondola took Friday the 21st of June outside and beyond history" (Sealy 241).

The narrative intention becomes clear. The narrator is going to talk about events that are 'outside and beyond history', suppressed or forgotten incidents. Further, by contradicting the public record of 'official history'; by flaunting anachronisms; and by integrating facts with the fantastic, the narrator questions the validity of accepting a history that is available to us officially, and instead, offers an alternative history which brings to the centre the marginal community of Anglo-Indians.

The history of Anglo-Indians begins with the setting up of European trade companies in India. Marriages with Indian women were encouraged by the East India Company and a pagoda of five rupees was paid to every child born of this union. The children called 'country- born' were lavishly provided for. Upper and Lower Orphanage schools were open for them and after completing their education, they could join the covenanted and commissioned ranks of the service as also the combatant ranks of theBritish army. At the beginning of the eighteenth century when Britain, largely occupied in wars in Europe, was unable to send British troops toIndia, it was the Anglo-Indians (as shown through the exploits of Mik)who fought the various wars of supremacy in the Indian subcontinent.

Things began to go wrong for the Anglo-Indians, when the share holders in England demanded that important positions should become the perquisite of their family members. Various orders, passed between 1786 and 1795, prohibited Anglo-Indians from studying in England; denied them posts in Civil, Military, and Marine services; and disqualified them from service in the army except as non-combatants. The second Trotter, Mik (Sealy's inversion of Kipling's Kim.) faces all these discriminations.

However, when the dismissed Anglo-Indians offered their services to Indian rulers, the British realized their folly. During the Martha war of 1803, all the Anglo-Indian officers were asked to rejoin the British army. Mik (who is partly based on the Anglo-Indian gallant James Skinner) istormented by this: "The division in himself hurt more than his shoulder,tormented as he was with doubts..." (Sealy 224).

In 1808, on the basis of a report published by Viscount Valentia (who makes an appearance as Viscount Lantavia) the Anglo-Indians were discharged from all ranks of the British army. Thereafter, a dense wall ofsocial and economic discrimination was drawn around them. Some escaped by claiming to be fully Europeans. The denial of Indian blood had begun.

During this period, many Anglo-Indians distinguished themselves not only as soldiers but

also as outstanding writers of Persian or Urdu verse. Mik maintained a diary in Persian. Already in the first-generation Trotters, we see, a different language being used. The First Trotter spoke in French, but his son was well versed in Persian. Issues of nationality and language run throughout the text. In the first and second generation, we see Europeans learning Indian languages and vice-versa. However, as contempt for Indian culture grew, the British and the Anglo-Indians gave up learning Indian languages, their knowledge now confined to a few simple commands. The Trotters, in their desire to fit thoroughly in the English society, even forsake their mother-tongue French and their adoptive language, Persian. In the beginning, their estate, Sans Souci is a multi-lingual, multi-racial society. As time passed, however, and the British became the master race, the identification with English started. Henry Luis Fonseca Trotter usespoetry in English toprotestagainst the British while Pearltakes lessons in making her accent British. The Trotters thus are seen in oneway as losing a part of their identity by assimilating themselves within British culture but in another as creating an identity, a sphere of theirown, different from the British.

The foray of Henry Luis and Charles Augustine (both based on reallife figures of Henry Louis Vivian Derozio and Charles Pote,respectively) into poetry and painting suggests the beginning of anauthentic Anglo-Indian culture. That the Anglo-Indians saw themselves as a separate entity is pointed out when Jacob Kahn-Trotter (John Rickets) presents a petition in the British parliament. With entry into soldiering and the civil services severely restricted, many Anglo-Indians branched out into trade and commerce. Thus, the Fonseca-Trotters establish a chain of bakery shops. With the coming of Railways and Telegraphs, Anglo-Indians flooded to these two fields. The various Trotters who leave their families to work in the railways are accurate representationsof Anglo-Indians who did the same. In fact, the laying down of these life lines of India owes much more to the Anglo-Indians than to the British.

By allowing Anglo-Indians to take over the working of these systems,British imperialism served first its own interest by filling strategic positionsin key services with Anglo-Indians on whom they could rely in times ofcrises. One such time was in 1857. During the Revolt, the Anglo-Indians showed complete devotion to the British. The Delhi telegraphist GeorgeBrendish (Cyril Brendish Trotter) whose telegram disarmed the Punjab and saved the Empire; the fourteen boys of La Martinier school who did their dutyas soldiers in Lucknow Residency; the clerk Thomas Henry Kavanagh(Thomas Henry Trotter) the first civilian to be awarded the V.C. Not only these, but many such subsequently rewarded were referred to as British in the records! "Amongst those who failed to return were numerous Trotters who in the moment of theirdeaths were transformed into Britons" (Sealy 432).

The disappearance of Thomas Henry in the painting is a poignant reminder of how the commendable and brave acts of the Anglo-Indians were obliterated or simply not acknowledged by the British. The painting exposes the difference between reality and representation. Artists like Thomas Jones Barker in *The Relief of Lucknow* show the victorious relief forces rather than the survivors of the siege. It is the relief troops not the survivors who fit the myths of India invented for and by the Victorian public, as Sealy exposes here. That Art might depict falsehoods in order to glorify or perpetuate certain myths is implicit in the forging of miniatures that Eugene indulges in.

Indeed, the plight of the Trotters can be described in the terms in which GeorgeLamming describes Caliban: "(He) is the excluded, that which is eternally below possibility. He is seen as an occasion, a state of existence which can beappropriated and exploited to the purposes of another's own development" (qtd. in Said 213).

Further, the Trotters are also a 'border subject'. As Gloria Arzaldua pointsout: "A borderland is a vague and undetermined place created by the emotional residue of an unnatural boundary. It is in a constant state oftransition. The prohibited and forbidden are its inhabitants." (qtd. in Henderson i).

Divided between the two races, the Trotters choose to be members of the master race. While the earlier generations had no qualms in admitting to Indian blood, the subsequent generations usually denied it. The strong reaction against the Ilbert Bill as well as Gandhi and the Indian National struggle can be seen as efforts to place themselves securely on the Britishside. Love for Indian things or wearing of Indian dresses is done furtively. The tragedy is that though the Trotters cling to the British, they like other border land inhabitants are considered as transgressors and aliens. Thus, they are unableto get high positions in other countries. Australia, in fact, opens its border to only those Anglo-Indians with at least fifty percent white blood in them!

Despite such discrimination, the mass exodus of Trotters from India in1947 opens the whole issue of home and belonging. Queenie considers this,"She turned the word home over in her mind, slowly, deliberately, wondering what it concealed" (Sealy 501). The First Trotter falls

in love and makes Nakhlau his home. Mik and Charles think of it as their home, but their off-springs either look towards England or some other place. Thus Paul, hits upon the idea of making an Anglo-Indian homeland in the Andamans.

Closely associated with these ideas is the idea of identity. Many Anglo-Indians pretended to be completely White in order to get either into the services or tomigrate from India. But this put a terrible strain on them. It gave them a good job and pay but they had to severe all connections with their families and friends. Further, they were scared to get married and have children as that might reveal their true origins. This life is portrayed through Pearl Trotter who finds herself increasingly lonely in an alien land. Yet she cannot admit toher Indian origins or even dare bring her family over.

The border area occupied by the Trotters is what Victor Turner calls aspace of liminality. It describes a border zone, mediating between cultures, races or nations- a zone sometimes characterized by what Turner describes as"the blurring and merging of distinctions" (Henderson i). In this space there is something enabling as well as potentially damaging. Thus, theachievementsof the Trotters in various fields- military, railways, medicine, sports, cinema, arts can be seen as creative but their constant refusal to acknowledge their Indianess can be seen as destructive.

The omnipresent narrator Eugene Trotter uses the language of memoirs,diaries, histories, recipes to present the epic of the Trotters in the form of historical demography-— that of the reconstruction of families —leading to theuncovering of attitudes to life, birth and death, of relationship between the sexes and different age groups. There is a suggestion that there is an alternate history present in these journals, memoirs etc. which had earlier often beenrelegated to the realm of silence by written documents either because the historian remained oblivious of their existence or else they were considered unworthy of academic research.

Inter-textuality runs throughout the text. The narrator copies his stylefrom various authors and acknowledges it. The duel between the First and the Second Trotter, written in the style of Firdausi, not only brings in mind the Akbar-Salim duel but also the numerous father-son duels that have been fought in the past. As Linda Hutcheon points out,"A literary work can actually no longer be considered original; if it were, it could have no meaningfor its reader. It is only as part of prior discourses that any text derives meaning and significance" (127).

Yakub Khan on his way to his room finds someone stalking him. To the anxious questions about the identity of the stalker by the Cup-Bearer (who is a stand-by for the reader), the narrator replies thus: "Who but the seventh Trotter? I cast no shadow. I am the light. I can come up close, squawk at his shoulder, make him jump, knock him about the ribs and run-off. Or shall I be fleshless, flat? Cancel his anxious sleep, give it to somebody else? Very well" (Sealy 107).

In providing a critique of his methods of construction, the narrator (and through him, Sealy) not only examines the fundamentals of narrative fiction, he also explores the fictionality of the world outside the literary fictional text. The history that he is narrating is in a way made by him but there isalso a suggestion that all histories might be false. Thus again and again his scathing comments about Montagu's history in which he had dared to questionthe First Trotter's balloon flight. That the process of questioning the 'unshakable truths' of the past has begun is shown when Pandit Nishan Chandquestions the greatness of the First Trotter in his pamphlet.

As a postmodernist novel, *The Trotter-Nama* questions the authenticityof historical records and history. That chronicles might err in their recordingis shown by the way, the name of the First Trotter's ship is recorded as FattySalaam by the Calcutta Register of vessels, though in his letter Justin refers toit as Fatah-i Islam.As Linda Hutcheon says "Histiographic metafiction plays upon the truth and —lies of the historical record. Certain known historical details are deliberately falsified in order to foreground the failures of the recorded history and the constant potential for both deliberate and inadvertent error" (114).

Thus the narrator acknowledges the paradox of the reality of the past but its textualized accessibility to us today. Further, the ship is supposed to bethe French Ship Insulaire which is being secretly refloated. Nothing it seemsis what it appears to be. And thus at the end of the text, Eugene discovers that he is perhaps not even a Trotter! In Umberto Eco's terms:"The postmodernreply to the modern consists of recognizing that the past, since it really cannot be destroyed because its destruction leads to silence (the discovery of modernism) must be revisited but with irony, not innocently" (qtd. in Hutcheon 39).

In the final analysis then the irony turns on the narrator himself.

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