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The Travels of Dean Mahomet: A Postcolonial Exploration of Mobility, Identity, Hybridity, and Self-Representation

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Abstract

The Travels of Dean Mahomet (1794) holds a pivotal place in literary and cultural history as the first known English-language travel narrative written and published by an Indian author. The two-volume work documents Mahomet's experiences as a camp follower and later as an officer in the Bengal Army of the East India Company, followed by his migration to Ireland and eventually to England. Unlike later anti-colonial writers, Mahomet writes from within the colonial apparatus, simultaneously observing British imperial structures and revealing his strategic self-positioning as a cosmopolitan Indian subject. This article argues that *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* represents a foundational text in postcolonial life writing, anticipating notions of cultural hybridity, mimicry, and self-fashioning later theorized by Homi Bhabha. Through the narrative, Mahomet negotiates the tension between his Indian identity and his aspiration to become a participant within British cultural systems. Employing postcolonial frameworks from Homi Bhabha, Edward Said, Gayatri Spivak, and Paul Gilroy, this research analyzes Mahomet's rhetorical strategies as he positions himself as both insider and outsider within the imperial world. The article further demonstrates that Mahomet not only participates in colonial discourse but subtly subverts it by inserting an Indian voice into a genre dominated by European explorers. By publishing in English and addressing a European audience, Mahomet challenges the colonial monopoly on representation, asserting authority to narrate India to the West. His text therefore destabilizes the colonial hierarchy of voice, agency, and authorship. The article concludes that *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* occupies a transformative space in early postcolonial self-representation, making Mahomet an intellectual precursor to modern diasporic writing.

Keywords: Dean Mahomet; travel writing; postcolonialism; diaspora; mimicry; hybridity; Orientalism; colonial identity; self-fashioning; British Empire; transcultural narrative; Indian autobiography.

1. Introduction

Travel writing played a critical role in constructing the European imagination of the world during the eighteenth century. European explorers, merchants, diplomats, and missionaries wrote narratives that mapped not only geography but also cultural differences. These works created a discursive space where Europe defined itself as modern, rational, and civilized, while categorizing non-European cultures as exotic, primitive, or irrational. Edward Said identifies this genre as a foundational instrument of *Orientalism*, through which the West constructed knowledge about the East in order to dominate it. In this discursive landscape, *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* emerges as a radical intervention.

Published in 1794 in Cork, Ireland, *The Travels* is the first published English travel narrative written by an Indian and one of the earliest autobiographical texts by a South Asian author. Unlike travel accounts written *about* India, Mahomet's work is written *from* India. He writes not as an object of ethnographic study but as a narrator who observes, interprets, and mediates cultural experience. His narrative aligns with European travel conventions, adopting the epistolary style and dedicating the work to European patrons, yet it simultaneously challenges the monopoly of the colonial gaze. Mahomet becomes the first Indian to present India to the European reader using the tools of European discourse.

Dean Mahomet (1759–1851) was born in Patna and served the East India Company as a camp follower and later as a subaltern officer. In 1784, he migrated to Cork with an Irish officer, Captain Godfrey Baker, and eventually became a fashionable entrepreneur in London and Brighton, where he founded the first Indian restaurant in Britain and introduced therapeutic “shampooing” (Indian head massage). *The Travels* thus precedes both Indian anti-colonial writing and Anglo-Indian memoirs, positioning Mahomet as a literary and cultural pioneer.

This article examines the text through postcolonial frameworks to demonstrate that Mahomet's travel narrative negotiates multiple identities: Indian, Muslim, colonial employee, immigrant, cultural translator, and early diasporic intellectual. His writing oscillates between admiration of British modernity and nostalgic attachment to India. This oscillation forms a narrative hybridity that anticipates Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry: “almost the same, but not quite.”

Mahomet does not reject empire; he strategically uses imperial networks to gain dignity and self-advancement. Yet, by publishing in English, he challenges the colonial hierarchy of representation. If colonial travel writing historically silenced the voices of colonized people, Mahomet claims narrative authority by reversing the gaze.

2. Historical and Cultural Context

To situate *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* historically, the eighteenth century must be understood as the formative period of British colonialism in India. The East India Company transitioned from a trading corporation to a political authority, acquiring regulatory power over taxation, military control, and administrative institutions. Travel writing flourished during this moment because the British public demanded detailed accounts of India, a territory increasingly central to British expansion.

Travel narratives such as those by James Rennell and William Hodges portrayed India as exotic, chaotic, and culturally stagnant, requiring Western intervention. These texts supported the ideology that Edward Said later calls *Orientalism*, “a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient.”

Dean Mahomet inserts himself into this imperial literary culture but does so from the opposite direction. Instead of Europeans traveling to India and reporting to Europe, Mahomet reverses the direction: an Indian travels through India and reports to Europeans. This reversal is not trivial. It challenges the power structure that connects **seeing** with **knowing** and **knowing** with **dominating**. Mahomet's writing therefore disrupts the epistemic hierarchy of travel writing itself.

Moreover, Mahomet's decision to publish in English must be understood in relation to colonial language politics. Unlike later figures such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy, Mahomet lived before the English Education Act of 1835 (Macaulay's Minutes). English was not yet the language of the Indian elite. For Mahomet to write in English in 1794 required exceptional linguistic and cultural navigation. His mastery of English and knowledge of British literary conventions allowed him to occupy a linguistic space normally reserved for Europeans.

Thus, *The Travels* becomes a document of cultural encounter, not merely describing travel but performing a cross-cultural identity.

3. Narrative Strategy and Self-Fashioning in *The Travels*

Mahomet constructs himself within the narrative not merely as a traveler, but as a **gentleman subject** of the British Empire. This self-fashioning is deliberate. He addresses his letters to a fictional European "gentleman," mimicking the epistolary form popular among British travelers. He adopts a refined tone, emphasizing civility and courtesy. Such stylistic choices reveal his strategic assimilation into British narrative norms.

Yet, beneath this mimicry, Mahomet subtly asserts his authority. He describes Indian customs, landscapes, and historical events with confidence and authority. For example, when describing Patna, he asserts its commercial significance and rich culture in terms that counter British assumptions of Indian backwardness. His travel narrative rejects European stereotypes of India as irrational or superstitious.

In his letters describing military campaigns, Mahomet positions himself as a participant rather than a native observer. His insider perspective grants him narrative legitimacy. He demonstrates mobility—geographical, social, and cultural—which contradicts colonial narratives that portray Indians as static and immobile.

One of the most notable elements is his use of ethnographic description. Mahomet describes festivals, weddings, religious practices, and courtly rituals with anthropological detail. However, unlike European travel writers who exoticize Indian culture for spectacle, Mahomet explains Indian customs with dignity and rationality. His tone suggests cultural pride rather than apologetic justification.

Thus, self-fashioning becomes a key strategy in *The Travels*: Mahomet writes himself into existence as a modern, rational, cosmopolitan subject.

4. Hybridity, Mimicry, and Identity Negotiation

Homi Bhabha's theory of mimicry argues that colonial domination encourages the colonized to imitate the colonizer—"almost the same, but not quite." Mahomet embodies this hybridity. He adopts European manners, writes in English, and praises British administration, yet he remains emotionally tethered to India. His admiration of British order coexists with nostalgia for Indian landscapes and social intimacy.

Mahomet embodies hybridity through:

1. Linguistic hybridity: writing as an Indian in English
2. Cultural hybridity: adopting Western worldview while narrating Indian culture
3. Spatial hybridity: physically moving across colonized and colonizing spaces

He is both insider and outsider. He travels with the East India Company army, witnessing colonial expansion from within. Yet, he also experiences displacement and cultural longing. His narrative reveals the psychological tension of moving between civilizations.

Mahomet also anticipates the diasporic condition. His migration to Ireland and later to England requires constant reinvention. In Brighton, he eventually rebrands himself as “Dr. Brighton,” introducing Asian therapeutic treatments and founding Britain’s first Indian restaurant *The Hindoostane Coffee House*.

His identity becomes entrepreneurial rather than fixed. His life shows that colonial subjects were not merely passive victims – some actively navigated and exploited imperial structures to build careers and identities.

5. Postcolonial Theoretical Frameworks: Reading Mahomet Through Said, Bhabha, Spivak, and Gilroy

A postcolonial reading of *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* reveals the text as a site of negotiation between colonial power structures and individual agency. Although written before formal anticolonial resistance, the narrative exemplifies intellectual maneuvers that later theorists – Edward Said, Homi Bhabha, Gayatri Spivak, and Paul Gilroy – identify as strategies of cultural negotiation and self-representation.

Edward Said’s theory of Orientalism is crucial to understanding Mahomet’s intervention. Said argues that Europe did not merely observe the East but **constructed** it through discourse: a system of representation that allowed the West to define itself as rational and modern by depicting the East as sensual, exotic, and static. Travel writing served as one of the strongest cultural vehicles for Orientalism, because it allowed European observers to speak about foreign cultures as if their perspective were objective and final. In this context, Mahomet’s narrative destabilizes Orientalism by shifting the speaking position. He writes not as the object of description, but as the narrator who describes India. Authorship becomes an act of resistance: Mahomet denies European travel writers exclusive authority over the interpretation of India.

Said also argues that Orientalism produces the East as “the other” – a silent territory awaiting Western interpretation. Mahomet’s act of writing reverses that direction. By publishing his travel narrative in English and consciously addressing a European readership, he claims narrative space in a genre where colonized subjects were expected only to appear, not speak. For the first time, an Indian speaks **from** within the imperial narrative, asserting agency through authorship.

Homi Bhabha’s theories of mimicry and hybridity further illuminate Mahomet’s textual strategies. Bhabha describes mimicry as the colonized subject’s imitation of the colonizer – a strategic imitation that is “almost the same, but not quite.” Mahomet performs mimicry by adopting the epistolary form, mastering polite eighteenth-century British prose, and addressing a European patron. Yet, the mimicry is not total submission. Beneath the surface of his stylistic imitation lies subtle assertion of cultural pride: Mahomet describes Indian cities, markets, and courtly rituals with reverence and expertise, positioning himself as authoritative cultural mediator.

This performance of mimicry operates as a form of **agency within constraint**. By adopting the colonizer’s narrative form, Mahomet creates a textual space within which he can insert Indianness. The hybrid identity that emerges is not shameful or fractured but creative. He is not “less Indian” for adopting English; instead, he becomes an early example of the diasporic intellectual whose identity expands across multiple cultures. A postcolonial reading shows that hybridity was not a colonial imposition but a strategy for survival, advancement, and representation.

Gayatri Spivak’s concept of the “subaltern” – those denied access to structures of representation – sharpens the significance of Mahomet’s authorship. Spivak argues that the subaltern “cannot speak” when structures of power deny them representation. Mahomet disrupts this condition by seizing the power to narrate. He refuses to be rendered voiceless. His text becomes an early instance of a colonized

subject writing himself into visibility and intellectual legitimacy. He does not wait to be represented; he represents himself.

Paul Gilroy's theory of diaspora adds yet another dimension to Mahomet's self-representation. Gilroy argues that diaspora subjects exist in a space between cultures and develop identities characterized by mobility, multilingualism, and resistance to singular national belonging. Mahomet's travel narrative anticipates this diasporic condition. He navigates India, Ireland, and England, moving between languages and identities. The result is a transcultural subjectivity – not fully Indian, not fully British, but something larger and more fluid.

Thus, Mahomet becomes not merely a participant in colonial history, but an early theorist of transcultural identity through lived experience. His narrative embodies postcolonial concepts before they were articulated theoretically. He is a precursor to modern diasporic writers such as Salman Rushdie and Amitav Ghosh – writers who negotiate cultural multiplicity.

Mahomet's *Travels* must therefore be recognized as an early foundation of postcolonial life writing. His ability to write himself into existence – using the language and literary forms of empire – challenges the colonial monopoly on voice, agency, and representation.

6. Contemporary Relevance: Diaspora, Immigration, and Early Globalization

Dean Mahomet's life anticipates major themes in contemporary social and cultural studies: globalization, migration, entrepreneurship, and cultural assimilation. His work prefigures the experience of modern immigrants who navigate multiple cultural identities while negotiating belonging, legitimacy, and selfhood.

Contemporary diasporic writing frequently explores the tension between nostalgia and assimilation. Mahomet experienced this tension long before such discourse existed as literary theory. His narrative reveals emotional attachment to the landscape of India – its food, its communities, its gardens – while simultaneously attempting to ingratiate himself into British society. This emotional oscillation is emblematic of the immigrant consciousness.

Mahomet's entrepreneurial ventures further illuminate his navigation of identity within the colonial metropole. In Brighton, he opened The Hindoostane Coffee-House, which historians recognize as the first Indian restaurant in Britain. In advertising, he presented the restaurant as a space offering "the highest perfection of dishes of India." Here, Indianness becomes not a burden but a commercial and cultural asset. The restaurant becomes a performance of cultural authenticity, offered to a British clientele that viewed Indian culture as desirable when packaged through exoticized consumption.

Later, Mahomet rebranded himself as "Dr. Brighton," offering therapeutic shampooing and Indian massage. His reinvention echoes modern immigrant survival strategies: identity as adaptive and strategic, not fixed.

Mahomet's relevance also extends to race and religion. A Muslim man writing in English and marrying an Irish Protestant woman at a time of strict racial and religious hierarchy challenges assumptions about immobility and segregation. He demonstrates that cultural mobility existed within the empire, albeit limited and contingent upon performance of loyalty and assimilation.

In contemporary Britain and Ireland, where debates about immigration, national identity, and multiculturalism continue to intensify, Mahomet's narrative reminds us that diaspora is not a twentieth-century phenomenon; it has deep historical roots. The struggles faced by immigrants today – negotiating foreignness, performing belonging, balancing identity – are visible in Mahomet's writing.

His life illustrates early globalization: the movement of people, ideas, and cultural practices across continents. He embodies a world where boundaries are permeable and identity is a dynamic product of cultural negotiation.

7. Conclusion

The Travels of Dean Mahomet stands as a landmark in literary and postcolonial history, not merely because it is the first English travel narrative written by an Indian, but because it radically reconfigures authorship, representation, and cultural identity. Mahomet enters a genre historically dominated by European voices and reverses the direction of narration: an Indian writes about India for a European audience. In doing so, he claims intellectual authority over the representation of his own culture. His narrative employs mimicry and hybridity as strategies of empowerment rather than submission. Through his adoption of English literary styles and forms, Mahomet inserts himself into the symbolic center of the empire while maintaining emotional and cultural attachment to India. Postcolonial theorists help illuminate Mahomet's narrative as a negotiation of identity, a subtle challenge to Orientalist domination, and a precursor to modern diasporic writing. His self-fashioning reveals that identity is not fixed but performed – an evolving construct shaped by mobility, language, and power. Mahomet's narrative is therefore not merely autobiographical; it is a text of cultural resistance, representation, and survival. It asserts that the colonized subject can speak, can write, and can possess narrative authority. The legacy of *The Travels* extends beyond literature into contemporary conversations about migration, multiculturalism, and global citizenship. Dean Mahomet stands as one of the earliest architects of Indian diasporic identity and a foundational voice in postcolonial literary history.

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