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RESEARCH ARTICLE

REREADING ANNIE BESANT'S *AN AUTOBIOGRAPHY*: TRACING THE RUNNING THREADS

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ABSTRACT

Though known to the world as a champion of radical ideas, Annie Besant has today fallen out of favour of critics worldwide. Critics have claimed to find a chasm between her private and public selves which they have interpreted as an inconsistency, almost amounting to a case of double lives. However, much of the readings that have focused on the "inconsistency" of views of Annie Besant have failed to take into account the context in which the shifts in her career took place. Besant's public image did not mask the divided self as some say, but rather it was the purposeful channeling of energies considered to be appropriately confined to the private world of women onto a much wider public canvas. Annie Besant's conversion to the theosophical faith needs to be seen in the context of many women of the Theosophical Society became suffragists to promote the spiritualizing of politics, attempting to create a political role for women as a way to enter the public sphere.

INTRODUCTION

Author Introduction

Debarshi Nath currently teaches Cultural Studies at Tezpur University, Assam, India. His fields of interest include Gender Studies, Comparative Literature, Translation and Literary and Critical Theory. Nath has translated an award winning Assamese novel by Yeshe Dorjee Thongchi, a writer from the state of Arunachal Pradesh, into English. Titled *Silent Lips Murmuring Hearts*, the translated version was published by Sahitya Akademi, the National Academy of Letters, in April 2010. Nath taught English at Rajiv Gandhi University, Arunachal Pradesh, India for close to ten years before taking up his current assignment at Tezpur University in 2009.

Bold and celebrated, Annie Besant was known to the world as a champion of radical ideas, outraging the Victorian public quite frequently. Initially married to an Anglican minister, she left religion (and the marriage) to extol what she had come to appreciate as the higher morality of atheism. Never shy of speaking out her mind, she spoke on feminist issues and printed and distributed pamphlets on birth control. As a Fabian socialist she fought for the privileges working girls. As a member of the London School Board, she established a programme of serving breakfasts to poor schoolchildren. All these, though provocative for the Victorian public, were not even half as controversial as her decision in 1889 to embrace the tenets of Theosophy with its mystical and occult teachings that were heavily influenced by Hindu spirituality. In spite of the controversies in which she got entangled, even her fiercest critics could see that she remained devoted to social service. Not the one to be daunted, she continued to maintain a high public profile throughout her life. Her social activism was set on fire by her impressive oratorical skills and powerful writings. She was publicly lauded for her wit and sarcasm and her matchless power of reasoning and eloquence and John Haynes Homes called her the "greatest of women orators – a flaming spirit ever questing with unquenchable ardour after truth" (quoted in Nethercot 444).

In India, Annie Besant is mainly remembered as a British who fought against imperialism for the rights of Indians. Apart from joining the Indian National Congress she was the editor of a newspaper called *New India*. Thanks to her, with the launching of the Home Rule League, for the first time India had a more or less unified political platform to fight for change. The League built a strong structure of local branches, enabling it to arrange demonstrations, public meetings and agitations. When Annie was arrested in June 1917, she flew a red and green flag to register her defiance. Congress and the Muslim League together threatened to start protests if she were not set free. In a way Annie's arrest only helped to create a focus for protest, giving those who wanted long-term independence for India a chance to work together for a simple, achievable goal.

Finally, the government relented under pressure to make some significant declarations. It was announced that the ultimate aim of British rule was Indian self-government, and moves in that direction were promised. Annie, who by then came to symbolize protest, was freed in September 1917 to a tremendous welcome from crowds all over India. She took over as President of Congress for a year in December 1917. After the war, a new leadership emerged around Mohandas K. Gandhi - one of those who had written to demand Annie's release. The new leadership too was committed to action that was both militant and nonviolent, but there were differences between them and Annie. Despite her past, she was not happy with their socialist leanings. Gradually, she withdrew from active politics. Annie Besant died on September 20, 1933 at

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Adyar. As per her wish her ashes were immersed in Ganga in Banaras. Until the end of her life, however, she continued to campaign for India's independence, not only in India but also on speaking tours of Britain. She produced a long list of letters and articles demanding independence for India.

And yet Annie Besant has today fallen out of favour of critics worldwide. The only other individual to have probably gone through a similar process of rise and fall of reputation in twentieth century India would be Jawaharlal Nehru. One can see the reasons for her falling out of favour of the critics in her *An Autobiography* itself. Firstly, critics have claimed to find a chasm between her private and public selves which they have interpreted as an inconsistency, almost amounting to a case of double lives. And secondly, they have claimed that there had been unwarranted and unjustifiable changes in her ideological moorings. Much of the readings that have focused on the "inconsistency" of views of Annie Besant have failed to take into account the context in which the shifts in her career took place. In reality, it is impossible to dissociate the writings and views of Besant from the context.

Writing an autobiography is basically a matter of reconstructing life retrospectively. The act of reconstructing the past allows the writer a certain degree of freedom – a distance and objectivity that in turn permits him/her to tie together disparate incidents and experiences of life. However, an autobiography may also be used as evidence of the inconsistency and unpredictability of the writer. The recent instance of the report that was published in many newspapers relating to the Pakistan Cricket Board's decision to refer to the autobiography of Shoaib Akhtar to prove the validity of their condemnation of his erratic lifestyle on a previous occasion is a case in point. So while an autobiography does provide a chance to the writer to absolve herself of previous misinterpretations, this in itself can be a tricky issue as the autobiography bears the stamp of a truthful restatement of actual events of life. And as said earlier, the writer of an autobiography sometimes gets too involved in establishing linkages between events of the past at the risk of making the work itself a series of dramatic events without any context.

Annie Besant was first and foremost a feminist. And much of what she said and preached needs to be seen against the background of the early stages in the growth of feminist thought. This was a period when feminists were exploring different fields in search of tools that could come to their aid in countering patriarchy.

Besant's *An Autobiography*, which was published in 1893 after her 1889 conversion to Theosophy, was indeed a rewriting of her life story from her new perspective of Theosophy as has often been said. But it is also a rewriting of her life from the point of view of what was till then, theoretically uninformed feminism. *An Autobiography* begins by telling us about the early life of Annie Wood who was born in 1847 in London into a middle-class family of Irish origin. She was always proud of being Irish and supported the cause of Irish self-rule throughout her adult life. Her father died when five years old, leaving the family in an impoverished state. Her mother supported the family by running a boarding house for boys at Harrow.

It was after being lawfully separated from her husband that Annie began to question her own faith. She turned to leading churchmen for advice. She even went to see Edward Bouverie Pusey, leader of the Catholic wing of the Church of England, who scoffed at her, saying she had read too many books. Display of intellectual talents by women was definitely not taken very kindly in those days. Once exposed to new currents of thought, Annie began to question not only her long-held religious beliefs but also the whole of conventional thinking. She began to write attacks on the Churches and the way they restricted people's lives: a distinctly feminist act of resistance. Annie Besant also tells us about her association with Charles Bradlaugh, leader of the National Secular Society. She frankly discusses her relationship with George Bernard Shaw whom she calls one of the most brilliant of Socialist writers and most provoking of men. In this context, biographers like Arthur Nethercot and Anne Taylor have tended to say that for Annie Besant politics, friendship and love were always closely and messily entangled.

In *The Varieties of Religious Experience* William James (1982) sketches the various kinds of character and disposition that compose what he calls the "divided self" and describes certain individuals as "heterogeneous" in that, as against those with an interior tendency directing them toward harmony and balance, these other individuals live out the inconsistencies of their often capricious temperaments, often with astonishing effects. He names Annie Besant as one such characteristic figure, whose extreme social shyness gave little indication, least of all to her, that she held vast reserves of public presence. According to William James, Annie Besant's *An Autobiography* is a free declaration of the sharp contrast between her private and public selves. William James quotes a frank passage in Besant's autobiography in which she freely confesses the wide disparity between her private and public selves:

Combative on the platform in defense of any cause I cared for, I shrink from quarrel or disapproval in the house, and am a coward at heart in private while a good fighter in public … An unkind look or word has availed to make me shrink into myself as a snail into its shell, while, on the platform, opposition makes me speak my best (*An Autobiography*, 83).

Yet, there is not really as much of a contrast between Besant's private and public selves. Besant's public image did not mask the divided self, as William James portrays it, but rather it was the purposeful channeling of energies considered to be appropriately confined to the private world of women onto a much wider public canvas. I read much more into the quotation from Annie Besant that William James picks up. Viewed from the standpoint of Victorian norms, Annie Besant's crossing of boundaries appears to split the lives that she led, her chosen vocation of public speaker and social activist bearing no relation to the life of settled domesticity that she was expected to live.

Gauri Viswanathan has pointed out that critics like William James have failed to notice that Annie Besant's honest remarks in *An Autobiography* about her shyness are crammed between descriptions of her pointless marriage to the clergyman Frank Besant and her confession that "she slid into marriage blindly and stupidly, fearing to give pain" and her

"resigned acquiescence to a life of disappointing conjugality is offset by her refashioning of her persona as a public speaker; the lecture platform is redesigned as the site for the molding of a public personality whose private face disappears behind the elusive façade of integrated wholeness conveyed by the lectern (Viswanathan, 177). Furthermore, the "split" between the bold public image of a woman and her reticent private self is not as unique as William James makes it out to be. There is a long tradition of women writers who have talked about a deep sense of discomfort and uneasiness that continue to mark the lives of women with a public face. The idea of an ambitious woman with a public image was in many ways considered to be a contradiction in itself.

In *An Autobiography* Annie Besant tells the story of her first experience as an orator. It was when she was a young woman of twenty four. She was in her husband's empty church in Sibsey, England when she suddenly decided to ascend the pulpit, just to see what it felt like. Taking her place behind the pulpit, she began to deliver a sermon, imagining a church full of rapt listeners. It was then that she realized the amazing power of words and her own remarkable oratorical command:

I shall never forget the feeling of power and delight – but especially of power – that came upon me as I sent my voice ringing down the aisles, and the passion in me broke into balanced sentences and never paused for musical cadence or for rhythmical expression. All I wanted then was to see the church full of upturned faces, alive with throbbing sympathy, instead of the dreary emptiness of silent pews. And as though in a dream the solitude was peopled, and I saw the listening faces and the eager eyes, and as the sentences flowed unbidden from my lips and my own tones echoed back to me from the pillars of the ancient church, I knew of a verity that the gift of speech was mine, and that if ever – and then it seemed so impossible! – if ever the chance came to me of public work, this power of melodious utterance should at least win hearing for any message I had to bring. (*An Autobiography*: 116)

It is remarkable that Besant's sense of power as a speaker dawns on her as she surveys the empty rows in the church where her husband customarily delivered his sermons. Her role-play is expressive of much more than a simple curiosity about her husband's chosen vocation. Rather, it is a realization, almost a revelation of the amazing power of words as against the silence to which domesticity had consigned her. The power of speech is "so immediately connected to the immediacy of public presence that it draws a line between the life of detached domesticity to which Besant is consigned as a married woman and the world of public engagement preemptively made available by her breaking across the barriers of silence" (Viswanathan, 178).

To read her autobiography with the expectations of Victorian male chauvinism is therefore to see abrupt breaks in her life rather than consistency, and disruptions rather than connections in her doctrinal shifts. Annie promoted the secularist cause with remarkable vigour in the 1870s and 1880s. She was highly respected as the Vice-President of the National Secular Society. In the 1880s Annie started writing for the Fabians and also joined a Socialist organization in 1888. And then in 1889 she joined the Theosophical Society, much to the surprise of even her closest friends. However, the representation of Annie Besant's conversion as an abandonment of the

…progressive markers of masculinity and modernity does even less justice to her intellectual shifts than the attribution of romantic entanglements. Besant was lampooned on numerous occasions by critics who proclaimed that "like most women, [she] was at the mercy of her last male acquaintance for her views" (Viswanathan, 180).

Biographers have turned to her emotional make-up to explain her flight from reason, and they then explain her earlier commitments by reference to the emotions they have uncovered. The fact that Besant's most recent biographer, Anne Taylor, who is well positioned to take a more objective outlook, also concludes that love interests largely governed Besant's attraction to differing ideologies indicates the degree to which the biographical fallacy has succeeded in thwarting any attempt to place Besant's "intellectual shifts and religious conversions in a context larger than her own personal travails" (Viswanathan, 180). On the other hand, in her autobiography,

Annie Besant, placed her doctrinal shifts within a continuum of sameness and considered theosophy as the natural heir of challenges to religious orthodoxy. Her doctrinal variations are held together by the structure of ultimate concern**.** Annie Besant's life as a devout, a secularist and, towards the end, a theosophist, was not merely an opposition to the most widely accepted ways of thinking. Besant was aware of intrinsic gender inequalities of Victorian society. In her writings, she takes a feminist approach to her topics, considering gender as culturally constructed. To a certain extent, her autobiographical representations express not only the Victorian compromise, but also a constant desire to do her own evaluation in an attempt to find her own identity. Being suspicious of the existing systems of belief which were to differing degrees male dominated, she sought to check and experience these on her own.

To a certain extent, after overcoming the evangelical notion of sin, and later the problems concerning individual freedom, Annie Besant was able to fight for spiritual development. Annie's continuous process of self-examination reached its highest degree with her conversion to theosophy. It permitted her a new way of understanding life. Enlightened women of Besant's age were aware of the fact that the traditional epistemology of western science was far from being woman-friendly. Thus, they searched for alternatives in the public sphere. Having joined the Fabian Society, Annie Besant had initiated the new Unionism, which swept Britain in the eighties. She also contributed to the creation of a new political force toward the granting of Home Rule to Ireland and later to India, coming "to the forefront of agitation for women's education" as Edward Said (1994, 264) states. Looking at the late Victorian period and its double standard values, we have to admit that to a certain extent spiritualism was a way of challenging the dominant values. This subversive belief was very important to many contemporary women as a way of revolting against patriarchy. This ritual of resistance attracted Annie Besant too.

The relationship between alternative or esoteric spirituality and the feminist movement in England has been looked at by

historian Joy Dixon in his *Divine Feminine*. She examines the Theosophical Society's claims that women and the East were the repositories of spiritual forces which English men had forfeited in their scramble for material and imperial power. Theosophists produced arguments that became key tools in many feminist campaigns. Many women of the Theosophical Society became suffragists to promote the spiritualizing of politics, attempting to create a political role for women as a way to enter the public sphere. Dixon also shows that Theosophy provides much of the framework and the vocabulary for today's New Age movement. Many of the assumptions about class, race, and gender which marked the emergence of esoteric religions at the end of the nineteenth century continue to shape alternative spiritualities today. Ann Braude's *Radical Spirits* claims "that Spiritualism formed a major – if not *the* major vehicle for the spread of women's rights ideas in the mid-nineteenth century" (xx). Dixon puts forward a similar view of theosophists, who may be distinguished from spiritualists by their emphasis on ancient esoteric knowledge and occult practice. She claims that many of these women saw women's suffrage as "a spiritual crusade" (180). As Dixon points out, we find it is hard to see the connections between religion and feminist politics because "post-Enlightenment discourses of modernity" have polarized the sacred and the secular, associating the former with tradition and the latter with modernity. Accordingly, we find it "difficult to perceive those moments when a 'progressive' politics, such as feminism, has been founded on and grounded in claims that are as much spiritual as political or economic" (232). The theosophists associated the East with women and primitive spirituality and the West with men and science. At a time when Christianity was criticized for being "feminized," renewed interest in Eastern spirituality gave some leverage to women who embodied the spiritual force.

In the nineteenth century, spiritualism promoted, Braude asserts, "both rebellion against death and rebellion against authority" (2). This allowed spiritualists to support issues of abolition, health care and women's suffrage. Further, the domain of spirituality granted women the leverage to lecture to mixed audience which was not seen as a defiance of the widespread belief that women should not speak in public. At a time when convention banned women from speaking at abolition conventions or in churches, trance speaking gave them spiritual authority.

Though not clearly focusing on gender issues, Besant's writings expressed her conviction that gender differences are a justification for the inequality between women and men. She referred to the fact that women's oppression was not founded on biological principles but on convictions, which had been culturally constructed. Besant's attitudes, sometimes considered shifty and too flexible by the critics make more sense when we read the chapter on her conversion to theosophy, namely 'Through Storm to Peace'. In this chapter, she shows that she did not aim at a coherent identity but that it was simply a point of departure to her process of self-consciousness, which she identifies with Theosophy. As the declared purposes of the Society were the formation of a nucleus of the Universal Brotherhood, the encouragement of the study of comparative religion, philosophy and science and the research of the laws of nature, there was no justification for the distinction of sex, race or caste. Fighting against gender roles, she anticipates many of the issues of the twentieth century and her relatively privileged situation led to a greater possibility of social transformation.

She states in her *Autobiography* that 1886 meant a complete shift in her convictions to be confirmed three years later. Having in mind not only radical social transformations, but also human fraternity, she admitted at the time that both Socialism and Materialism were not operative. There was a need of redirection which was compulsive in Besant's behaviour. Nevertheless, we disagree with those critics who can only see the explanation for her attitudes in her extreme incoherence and not in a sincere quest aiming at a unified way of perceiving reality.

The interesting specificity of Annie Besant is that she represents a wide range of the Victorian episteme, particularly corresponding to a structure of feeling which has been forgotten. We see an unending dialectic between the social and the psychic dimensions with the political continuously intruding in all her works, studying "the obscurer sides of consciousness, dreams, hallucinations, illusions, insanity" (*Autobiography*, 339). The distance from secularism and socialism to theosophy was not as great as one might suppose. As a Theosophist, Besant's beliefs still provided suitable solutions to the doubts in her mind that had led her away from the faith that she was born into. Besant recalls in her autobiography that as soon as she had read *The Secret Doctrine* by Helena Blavatsky or Madame Blavatsky, she knew the 'very truth was found':

I was dazzled, blinded by the light in which disjointed facts were seen as parts of a mighty whole, and all my puzzles, riddles, problems, seemed to disappear. The effect was partially illusory in one sense, in that they all had to be slowly unravelled later, the brain gradually assimilating that which the swift intuition had grasped as truth. But the light had been seen, and in that flash of illumination I knew that the weary search was over and the very truth was found. (*Autobiography*, 340).

The law of karma met the doctrinal requirements set by Besant's early doubts. For a start, it implied morality and the moral nature of the universe had a natural basis in a law of cause and effect. Moreover, Besant equated "the theosophical ideal of a universal brotherhood with the social morality she had come to see as the true basis of a socialist society" (Bevir, 62-93**).**

A re-reading of Besant's autobiographical texts and pamphlets reveals to us not a disjointed series of romantic escapades. It was all a way of reframing resistance. It was Besant's crisis of faith shaped by specific social pressures that led her successively to secularism, socialism and theosophy. Her departures from secularism to socialism, and later from socialism to theosophy, do not represent complete breaks brought on by the arrival of a new man in her life. They represent successive attempts to answer the same basic questions, with each new answer also being a response to the perceived feelings of the earlier one. From her perspective, her socialism brought together the diverse demands of her earlier secular radicalism into a single programme. Her theosophy, in

addition to accounting for the new psychological facts that had been revealed by the spiritualists that she could not account for from her secular socialism, also opened up new avenues for her as a feminist.

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