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Possessed by Africa: Bengali Adventure Heroes in African Jungles

The early adventure narrative written in Bengali, following the English model of literary travelogue shows the construction of the character of a travelling hero and traces his journey through difficult and unknown terrains, often portrayed as yet – to – be – discovered. These novels experimented with sending their heroes to overseas destinations among which Africa became one of the most dominant settings. While the actual travel writings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century focussed on the travels of the Bengalis to popular destinations in Europe, Africa became the wild unexplored land where the literary characters found a suitable landscape to prove their heroism. These texts, most effectively, lay out the setting of Africa, which got stereotyped as a land synonymous with hazardous natural environment, wildlife, and the indigenous population as wild as the forests. Africa thus becomes the essential other of both urban and rural Bengal in literature. This paper will discuss such early Bengali adventure novels and will try to analyse why Africa became a common setting in these narratives. Since the authors of such novels have mostly never travelled outside India, the representation of Africa and its inhabitants is largely based on what the authors were reading themselves. As such, this paper will try to relate this portrayal of the deep dark region of Africa with the rise of the pedagogical knowledge of geography under colonial education policy which brought in the notion of race and the associated discrimination among the Bengalis. The paper will show how the construction of the concept of Africa in the Bengali adventure narratives is a reflection of the long discussions on European race theory featured in geography textbooks of colonial Bengal.