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Colonial Nostalgia and Destabilizing the Imperial Voice: A Study of William Dalrymple and Vikram Seth's Selected Travel Narratives

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Abstract

The proposed paper is an attempt to interrogate the concept of 'Othering' which restricts a Western traveller to 'know' the 'other' culture. The cultural superiority of a Western traveller and his self-representation as a unique travel ego which legitimized 'Othering' in the 'Orient' was a result of the imperialist project. The imperial travel writers described the myths of a place, and emphasized on narrating the details of a place or monument, instead of bringing into life or giving voice to the people they encountered. As a result, these writers manage to furnish limited details about the place they visit. This trait is reflected in William Dalrymple's travel narratives. In this context, this paper aims at expanding the parameters of knowledge and space in travel narratives by destabilizing the colonial discourse, thereby offering an alternative epistemology to the imperial centre. By way of articulating experiences that are removed from dominant productions of knowledge, the travelogue of Vikram Seth offers frames of reference that exist outside the boundaries of essentialist 'knowledge' production. He writes chiefly about the people he encounters throughout his journey and unlike Dalrymple, Seth prioritizes their voice, and strives to decipher the 'other's' point of view. In the process, Seth dismantles the binary oppositions of self/other or the subject and the object positions. Thus, the paper aims to focus on the reversal of perspectives and presents the underlying differences in dealing with the travel narratives of both the writers and enables the readers to decipher the underlying meanings.

Keywords: Travel writing, Self, Other, Orient, Imperialism, Epistemology, Subject, Object.

Travel writing has fueled aspiration in producing and circulating knowledge about the other cultures. It has depicted other cultures in a condescending manner. They conjured

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up imaginative geographies, and through certain images a specific place of imaginative geographies can be perceived. These images are constructed and then circulated by the most dominant class. This worked as a stirring force in the formulation of binaries such as the 'self' and the 'other'. Modern Western travel writers attempt at destabilizing the colonial discourse, yet they fail to get rid of the colonial nostalgia in their narratives. They, consciously or unconsciously adopt a superior approach while presenting the other cultures. In Dalrymple's works, it becomes evident that ideologies become crucial for the Western travellers. He cannot totally undo the past, in spite of his larger sympathies for India.

The imperialist agenda is responsible in formulating the concept of 'othering'. This 'Othering' is not actually viewing new culture in a new way with a new perception, but it is an accumulation of already received perceptions that a traveller has received over the years. Thus, occurs the concept of power which becomes the sole possession of a traveller. The 'Subject' and 'Object' are the two elements which become crucial in travel writing. The easiest way to define oneself from another is to use the terms 'self' and 'other', where the 'self' is the 'subject' and the 'other' becomes the 'object' of speculation. In the words of Carl Thompson:

> Othering (1) denotes the process by which the members of one culture identify and highlight the differences between themselves and the members of another culture and (2) refer[s] more specifically to the processes and strategies by which one culture depicts another culture as not only different but also inferior to itself. (132-133)

Western representations of the East have hegemonic purposes and Edward Said agrees with this. In *Literary Theory: The Basics*, Hans Bertens explains:

> For Said, Western representations of the Orient, no matter how well intentioned, have always been part of this damaging discourse. Wittingly or unwittingly, they have always been complicit with the works of Western power. Even those Orientalists who are clearly in sympathy with Oriental people and their cultures – and Said finds a substantial number of them – cannot overcome their Eurocentric perspective and have unintentionally contributed to Western domination. So interested of the disinterested objectivity in the service of the higher goal of true knowledge that Western scholarship has traditionally claimed for itself, we find invariably false representation that have effectively paved the way for military domination, cultural displacement, and economic exploitation. (204)

Born in Scotland, William Dalrymple has been living in Delhi since 1989. The end of the colonial rule in India has not brought an end to imperialism because India is still being represented in a dismissive light. Regarding this imperialism, Edward Said points out: "Imperialism still lingers where it has always been in a kind of general Cultural sphere as well as in specific political, ideological, economic and social practices." (8) Dalrymple is a Western travel writer of the postcolonial era who is of the notion that the Britishers were a civilizing force for the development of India. He belongs to that category of Western travellers who in his celebrated work, *City of Djinns* chronicles

his observations and his encounters in Delhi. In various interviews and talks, he mentions of maintaining neutrality and confesses to be in love with India, yet the imperialist agenda finds reflection in his narratives. *City of Djinns* was written on his second visit to India with his wife, Olivia.

Dalrymple strategically employs the colonial nostalgia in *City of Djinns* by ennobling the colonial past of Delhi. Modern travel writers, like William Dalrymple, continue to employ Oriental tropes in their writings. In this context modern travel writers play a dubious role. They write in such a manner that manages to preserve the West's overpowering presence in India. In this context Robert Clarke points out:

> Modern Western travel culture, like celebrity, it could be said, has played a dubious role in the development of capitalist democratic cultures, as a force and symbol of enfranchisement and liberation, on the one hand, and equally of containment and exploitation, on the other. In recent scholarship, travel has been figured either as oppressive and colonizing, or as a force for disruption, hybridity and liberation. (14)

In *City of Djinns*, Dalrymple, despite his projection of fascination for Delhi, projects his colonial hegemonic strategies. He visualizes Delhi as a place which has been civilized in the colonial times. He constructs the perception of Delhi and a certain sense of authority can be sensed in his narration: "Delhi, it seemed at first, was full of riches and horrors: it was a labyrinth, a city of palaces, an open gutter, filtered light through a filigree lattice, a Landscape of domes, an anarchy, a press of people, a choke of fumes, a whiff of spices." (7-8)

Dalrymple's portrayal of the people of Delhi is negative and depicts them as corrupt and materialistic. He unravels the city and its people like an Orientalist. Dalrymple holds a strong disliking for the Punjabi residents of Delhi and states in his *City of Djinns*: "This explained why Delhi, the grandest of grand old aristocratic dowagers, tended to behave today like a nouveau-rich heiress: all show and vulgarity and conspicuous consumption. It was a style most becoming of a lady of her age and lineage; moreover, it jarred with everything one knew about her sophistication and culture." (4) Dalrymple's disgust for the Punjabis especially his taxi driver, Balvinder as coarse and uncivilized finds reflection in his narrative. His wife Olivia has a strong disliking for him. Her reactions are pointed out by Dalrymple: "Olivia is quick to point out that Mr. Singh is in many ways an unattractive character. A Punjabi Sikh, he is the Essex man of the East. He chews *paan* and spits the betel juice out of the window." (17) These lines very well portray the Western mindset towards the East. The manner in which Dalrymple presents the entire episode that grips Delhi after the assassination of Indira Gandhi is noteworthy. Dalrymple finds it difficult to get rid of his colonial baggage. The following lines bear testimony to the fact:

> I was intrigued by the degree to which India has managed to shed its colonial baggage. True, people spoke English, played cricket and voted in Westminster style election. Nevertheless, far from encountering the familiar, I was

> astonished how little evidence remained of two centuries of Colonial rule. (Dalrymple7)

Dalrymple's praise for the architectural perfection of Lutyens compared to the newly constructed Delhi proves his pre-conceived notions of the West. He comments: "The Bungalows gave New Delhi its character: shady avenues of *jamun* and *ashupal* trees, low red-brick walls gave on to hundreds of rambling white colonial houses with their broken pediments and tall Ionic pillars." (23) Dalrymple believes that under the influence of British rule, Indians were developing fast and ever since the British left India, there have been a sea change. It is the ideology that a traveller carries from the home culture to the alien culture. The colonial regime has left a permanent impression in the mind of Dalrymple, so much so that he is unable, to 'see' and 'accept' anything that occurs after the phase of colonialism. That pre-conceived notion has been thrust into the very consciousness over the years.

Postcolonial travel narratives attempt at countering these Eurocentric pre-conceived notions by way of writing back, but it still reinforces the hierarchies of self and the other or subject and the object positions. Vikram Seth is such a writer who manages to cross such distinctions. In comparison to Dalrymple, Vikram Seth offers a much more accommodating perspective on travel writing. Vikram Seth was born in India and got his education abroad. Seth has lived and travelled in many countries, and this has made him experience a significant amount of inter-cultural mobility. Being a student of Oxford, Stanford and Nanjing University in China, he had to travel widely. This made him well-versed with different cultures. His multicultural background enabled him to carry less cultural baggage and offer an alternative epistemology which serves as a site of contestation to the imperial centre. He is a cosmopolitan traveller who moves beyond the binaries of colonialism/postcolonialism. He cannot be perceived as a postcolonial writer, but a world writer, who can easily assimilate with the world. His views vary from that of an Orientalist, wherein 'one' culture seeks to counter the 'other' cultures based on prejudices which reinforce the hierarchies between the self and the other, or the subject and the object. Vikram Seth is such an adaptable writer who manages to negotiate the borders and blur them. This becomes evident when we find that he was unclear if he had crossed the border and stepped into Nepal. In his book, *From Heaven Lake*: *Travels through Sinkiang and Tibet,* he remarks:

> We traverse a smooth, meadow green yet almost vertical slope hundreds of metres above the river… A woman wearing a sari is washing clothes in a small stream. She looks up at us we cross the forest continues beyond… (Seth 169)

A Nepali customs officer warns them to stop, and it is only then, Seth realizes that he stepped into Nepal. As he points out: "But I didn't know we had crossed the borders, I say that stream there, that's the border, you have just crossed it… I look back at the stream. The woman is winging out clothes over the water. Her soap lies on one rock, her washing on another…" (170) These lines bear testimony to the fact that Vikram Seth does not consider man-made borders between countries to be important. He

knows how to negotiate borders. He is a modern day traveller in true sense of the term who succeeds in destabilizing the imperial voice in his travel narrative. Only people made him realize the difference created by these man-made borders.

The impact of globalization is reflected in Vikram Seth's travelogue where all the boundaries of colonialism have collapsed. The ideal condition of Seth as a traveller is that he does not claim to be an omniscient traveller whose mere responsibility remains fixed merely to study the objects. Thus, in Seth's travelogue, there are no hierarchies of subject – object position. He disrupts the status quo and moves out of his comfort zone and confronts the uncomfortable unlike his Western counterparts. Nandini Chandra marks the difference between the Western travellers by asserting: "who seeks to find an original essence or untarnished self in these remote lands and the cosmopolitans of the subcontinent, whether rooted or exiled, who are more interested in recovering marginal histories and suppressed voices." (Chandra 22)

Seth's choice of taking the unusual route shows his interest to deeply understand the diverse culture of China from its veil of ideology. He came across a variety of Chinese people like Hans, Kazakhs, Muslims, truck drivers and so on. He travels with his truck-driver Sui and meets many friends with whom he spends time and learns about each other. Seth exhibits the traits of a global writer who effortlessly accepts a new culture. He is a sensitive traveller who does not pass judgements on the Chinese or Tibetan cultures. He describes the Tibetan ritual of chopping the dead body without censuring it as an act of barbarism. Seth allows people to speak up their minds and makes effort to listen to their stories instead of imposing his own point of view. An instance of it can be seen when Norbu, a local resident of Lhasa speaks about the political situation of Tibet:

> It's different now, we can talk to you freely, you can come to our house, we aren't afraid. But a few years ago if you had talked to us, if you had even approached us on the street, we could have turned to avoid you. We couldn't dare to speak to a foreigner. We would be observed. The contact would brand us as counter-revolutionaries, unrepentant children of a counter revolutionary, in those days, you know, in this area, even the people on the streets would turn away when we went past, would pretend not to know us, children of counter-revolutionaries, even those we had thought of as friends. (Seth 145)

Seth does not consider their culture to be inferior. He treats them with respect and applauds the diversity of the country, unlike Paul Theroux's *Down the Yangtze* where the Chinese were designated as materialistic, unspiritual and so on. Seth's view of China is different from the civilizing mission of many Western travel writers which enables the readers to appreciate the diversity of different cultures. He does not travel with a pre-conceived notion of cultural superiority unlike the Western travel writers and this is what makes him a different writer. Vikram Seth compares both Indian and the Chinese cultures and discusses the pros and cons of the two old civilizations and leaves it for the readers to choose which is the best for them. His notion of 'self' and the 'other' becomes clear when he remarks:

> … on a personal level, to learn about another great culture is to enrich one's life, to understand one's own country better, to feel more at home in the world, and indirectly to add to that reservoir of goodwill that may, generations from now, temper the cynical use of national power. (Seth 178)

This differentiates Seth's travel narratives from that of his colonial counterparts. In my opinion, the manner in which Seth keeps his opinions and judgement in the background by foregrounding the voice of the 'other' lends an effortless charm to his narrative where the readers discover transparency and a new perspective. In the process, a different kind of knowledge or an alternate way of thinking emerges which is in contrast to the dominant forms of knowledge production.

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