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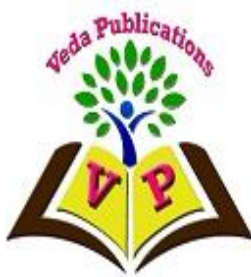
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THE SPEAKING EYE: GAZE, SUBJECTHOOD AND THE FRAME IN A COLONIAL TRAVELOGUE

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ABSTRACT



This article draws connections between colonial forms of travel and their narrativization. Visual observations are key to such representations. 'Seeing' often translates into visual depictions, tying such visualisations to autobiographical recordings, which in turn, tie such attempts at descriptive documentation to the problematics of individuation and validatory claims of witnessing. Therefore, can travel narratives be interpreted as autobiographies with all its aligned questions of representation of the self? Can the travel motif be interpreted as a performative stance engaging the site of travel as a space of self-aggrandizement, subjecthood and virtuoso engagement, carving one's image as a dabbler in science, knowing and gleaning of information? While travel narratives grant the whole space intelligible and legible, can such literature have a literal advantage over represented space and its inhabitants? This paper discusses and problematizes the 'spectating eye' of the autobiographical subject through a reading of General Godfrey Charles Mundy's *Pen and Ink Sketches in India* (1858).

Keywords: *Travel, Travel Literature, General Godfrey Charles Mundy, Gaze, Subjecthood, Autobiography.*

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**INTRODUCTION**

The "Grand Moving Diorama" which opened in December 1850 in the Potland Gallery on Regent Street, London was one of the period's most impressive spectacles. It replicated the oriental picturesque as observed and sketched by James Fergusson through his journey across India. The idea was to recreate the thrill and adventure of the oriental travel through life-size paintings on cloth brought to life by mechanical means and illusory techniques such as improvised lighting. Exotic scenes of the oriental picturesque were to unfold before an audience seated in a dark room that would experience the same excitement even though it was not fortunate enough to visit the distant land. The show took the audience on a conducted tour first of the 'City of Palaces', Calcutta and into the jungles of Orissa, the 'Black Pagoda' of Konarak and the 'Temple Town of Juggernaut'. The phase two of the same tour called 'Diorama of the Ganges' began with the 'Sacred City of Benares' moving upstream to the Fort of Chunar and the City of Allahabad ending at Agra with a grand spectacle of the marvelous Taj Mahal. In one panoramic sweep the spectators were to witness and view the alien country through a simulated mise-en-scene.¹

Performative representations of another kind were the numerous travelogues that thronged the period narrating travels to India and other colonies. While the experience of travel surely included a range of senses, here too the visual element is primarily emphasized.² Widely read and enjoyed

these travelogues were as popular as the fiction which flourished side by side. In fact, the travel motif was a significant trope in fiction of the 18th and 19th centuries culminating into the adventure tales like Rider Haggard's *King Solomon's Mines*. Both these genres involve the reader in a process of hermeneutic exploration, and the question needs to be asked as to why this should be so appealing to British writers and readers of the age. Travelogues, however, depart significantly from works of fiction. They are first person autobiographical accounts of individual or group travel. The starting point of such an account is that which has been observed or looked at or seen. Visual observation is the key and the point of departure simultaneously. But, of course, visual observation is subjective and here we arrive at a paradox, for travel writing is a discourse that is premised upon objective representation of another reality and the generic demand is that the representation cannot be subjective. In other words, imagination should not find entry into the narrative. Though a product of the writer's subjectivity, there needs to be a cautious balance maintained between one's personal impressions and feelings and the responsibility of the writer to give true ideas of the country through which he or she passes. The process of narrating is made much more difficult by the topos of the claim to empirical truthfulness crucial to travelogues. Under such preconditions and generic constraints it can be a fruitful study to enquire into the ways in which travel writers construct images of

constituting cultures as if they were theaters of memory, or spatialized arrays. See 'Introduction' to James Clifford and George E. Marcus ed. *Writing Culture: The Poetics and Politics of Ethnography*. p. 12.

¹ Tapati Guha-Thakurta. pp.18-19.

² Johannes Fabian points out how the taxonomic imagination in the West is strongly visualist in nature,



otherness vis-à-vis the self for a particular readership at a given moment. Simultaneously, the status of the subject as the producer and consumer of such literature should also be analysed.

Post-colonial Studies à la Edward Said and Bernard Cohn have furnished us with handy interpretative categories in analyzing the nexus among empire, knowledge and power. With these tools, one can have the lazy comfort of beginning conveniently with the given binaries of the colonizer and colonized. In fact, the most common analytic aperture employed through which European travelogues about the East is currently studied is that of colonial governmental information and knowledge. While it is true that the rich texture of travel literature laden with various social, cultural and ethnographic discourses can be a storehouse of information, yet there is a need perhaps, to make further exploration into questions of representation which occur via-media and the 'spectating' eye of the autobiographical subject. If such literature was both produced and consumed primarily for the sake of knowledge and information, the question that needs to be asked is why these were chosen in the first place, as authentic sources of knowledge. Why did the autobiographical mode (which could be highly suspect because it often blurred the line between fact and fiction) fit the colonial scheme? Far removed from the economic brass-tacks of empire building, these kind of narratives provided descriptions of a different culture and distant people. I do not mean to say that these were completely innocent activities devoid of a political objective. To the question of economics and commodity culture I shall return later. It will be rather beneficial to see how the colonizer

and the colonized (land, territory, people) get invented in the course of a narrative. In this paper I will use a 19th century travelogue by General Godfrey Charles Mundy called *Pen and Pencil Sketches in India* (1858) to study the complex dynamics of subjectivity and gaze in this work of representation.

Travel writing in the first person form, have often shared a focus on the centrality of the self. Post John Locke's *Essay Concerning Human Understanding*, the experiential knowledge immediately gained philosophical and practical reckoning. The conception that human mind or consciousness is a 'blank slate' and all knowledge is produced from the impressions drawn in through the five senses gave currency to experience. If knowledge is rooted in experience and nowhere else, travel instantly gains in importance and desirability as the age old dictum goes "travel is the best form of learning". The ideology of travel implies a departure from one place and a return to the same place with a booty of knowledge which (s)he could then distribute among the fellow countrymen. Therefore, it can be said that travel provides one with a space for mental evolution and identity formation. This happens to be truer for women travelers in the 18th and 19th centuries such as Isabella Bird, Mary Kingsley and others for whom travel opened up a new space for creation of identity which conservative Victorian households could not allow back home. The very form of the narrative, through chronological entries maps the day to day progress of the mind. That a travel text is a product and assertion of the writer's subjectivity, can be conjectured from the way William Kinglake, the



author of the classic 19th century travel text, *Eothen*, defines his traveler protagonist:

His very selfishness – his habit of referring the whole external world to his own sensations, compel him, as it were in his writings, to observe the laws of perspective; he tells you of objects, not as he knows them to be, but as they seem to him, the people, and the things that most concern him personally, however, mean and insignificant, take large proportions in his picture because they stand so near to him. He shows you his Dragoman, and the gaunt features of his Arabs, his tent, his kneeling camels, his baggage strewn upon the sand;[...] you may listen to him for ever without learning much in the way of statistics; but perhaps if you bear with him long enough, you may find yourself slowly and faintly impressed with the Eastern travel.³

The passage throws light on important aspects of travel literature such as matters of choice, perspective and therefore, of expression of individuality, identity, the narrative and the traveler-protagonist who transforms the Eastern world into a theatre of activity, albeit European. The narrative itself would unfold like the moving diorama revealing the peculiarities of the land as the eye of the traveler sees them. It can be said that the travelers usually

follow their instincts and opportunities, rather than directions from home and it is travelers' eccentricities and extravagances – in the literal sense of wanderings off – become the hallmarks of the works which attract readers to the literature. In fact, it is unjust to club travel narratives of a period into a homogeneous and monolithic group imposing on them a unified hermeneutic of suspicion – of them being institutions-driven with a predetermined set of aims. To quote Susan Bassnett:

[...] if we start to compare different travel writers, what is apparent straight away is not the homogeneity of the genre but the enormous difference between writers. Obviously there are stylistic differences, differences of tone, different emphases etc...⁴

These autobiographical accounts map out territories of the mind as they attempt to define contours of regions and communities determining forms of cultural and political representations. Even with their racist rhetoric, their primary appeal is, as Michel de Certeau calls, "the joyful and silent experience of childhood: [...] to be other and move toward the other". Likewise, Stephen Greenblatt points out in the same vein that the overriding interest in travel literature in the Early Modern period was "not merely knowledge of the other but practice upon the other"⁵, and the primary mode of practice involved here is that of translation which is a

³ Susan Bassnett. 'The Empire, Travel Writing, and British Studies' in Mohanty (2003). pp.1-21. pp.11-12.

⁴ Susan Bassnett. op cit. p.12.

⁵ Though Greenblatt speaks specifically on travels undertaken in the Early Modern period his theory can be adapted to 18th and 19th century European travel literature as well.



form of representation. Susan Bassnett, being a prolific scholar of translation studies, explains the predicament in detail:

The writer acts as a kind of translator reading the signs he encounters on his journey and endeavouring to translate them for his target reader. Indeed, it is helpful to think of travel writing as closely linked to translation, for a similar relationship obtains in that there are two distinct poles – the culture of the writer and the culture that is depicted, and only the writer has access to both. The reader has to take on trust the version presented, because only the traveler has first-hand experience of what is being described, just as the translator alone has first-hand knowledge of the source knowledge. Moreover, like a translator, the travel writer is creating a text for consumption by readers at home, and in consequence a study of the kind of writing that becomes popular at different moments in time can tell us great deal about that particular culture.⁶

The exotic landscape, wildlife, flora and fauna along with careful anthropological details noting down customs, appearance, eating habits and social and religious rituals of the people encountered are all packaged and synthesized into an accessible form. The very equipment of narrating, that is, writing,

serves as a metaphor of control – as a 'literal advantage' over the passive inhabitants of the space. Moreover, in making an entire cultural life intelligible and narratable, such texts transform those according to the cognitive protocols and discursive climate within which the self acts. In other words, the writer's own cultural categories make the alien culture recognizable and consequently serve as target language, privileging the documentation by treating the culturally constituted re-encoding as if it were 'natural' encoding. One can call this an epistemological conquest.

But at the same time, it should be remembered that the traveler writes not in testimony to the ordinairiness and familiarity of the foreign country and people but to its utter strangeness. For example, Mundy's travelogue chooses to relate the plebeian or the bazaar life of the natives. Sports and pastimes such as animal fights, dances (nautches), hunting (shikaar) receive much more exhaustive and detailed descriptions than what he thinks, constitute the mundane native quotidian life. He chooses to narrate the spectacular as part of the oriental exoticism. Of course, Mundy traveled in the society of General Lord Viscount Combermere and he records much of what was shown/ performed/exhibited by the natives as tribute to the official visit. On the other hand the narrative focuses on the British indulgence in these forms of native entertainments. A subsequent reflection on these entertainments simultaneously reveals the writer's own thrill and excitement in another culture as an outsider-participant in that alien culture. Other travelogues such as James Forbes' *Oriental Memoirs* (1831), chooses to depict indigenous day to day life style of

⁶ Susan Bassnett. pp.6-7.



the people divided into different religious sects which receive meticulous commentary. The favourite strategy of these travel writers is the use of local terms such as 'nautch' (dance), 'pattara' (box), 'mussalgees' (torch bearers), to serve a dual purpose: to create a flavour of the different and the other and to invoke authenticity in the narration of native traditions and life. Usually the travel writer picks out and chooses to write about differences rather than similarities. The work can only be believed if it arouses in the reader something of the wonder that he or she has experienced in the transmarine spectacle which would 'link what ever is out there with inward conviction'.⁷ The material object, having first aroused wonder in the writer needs to be recorded and thus possessed as a "marvelous possession". Greenblatt's coinage can be further elaborated when studying paintings and sketches which often went hand in hand with literal descriptions to foreground the visualist ideology. This often involves the writer and painter in an enterprise of aesthetic recreation while invoking terms such as 'sublime' or 'picturesque':

The picturesque [...] provided [...] a congenial, respectable, eminently civilized standpoint from which to study and enjoy the wilderness. To the strong national ego [...] the picturesque added a controlling aesthetic vision – a wilderness-subduing 'eye' – to help organize, shape, and even half-create a native landscape.⁸

This, however, has a complicated bearing on the issue of the writer/painter's identity. The landscape, thus represented through writing or sketching, is internalized into the body of the traveler. The traveler both surrenders to the seduction of the landscape and imbibes it into her or himself. The space-text of the land is recoded and hence decoded by erasing its specificity. This 'de-description' and 're-inscription' is achieved through 'ingestion' into the body-text of the traveler. The body of the traveler becomes a new topos where the landscape finds another ontology or existence. According to Promod K. Nayar:

.... This kind of 'ontopology', [...] with its psychoanalytic imagery is itself extremely fascinating for the problematic of 'identity' (man and land, man and animal, native and outsider-tourist).⁹

Let me here reproduce an inventory of sketches in Mundy's travel text:

Starting for a Tiger Hunt
The Chetah on Hackerie
The Death of the Antelope
The Tiger's Attack on the Elephant
Scene near Hurdwar
The Quail-Thrower
The Family of Seikhs
Elephant Charging the Tiger
Shooting Tiger from Platform
Combermere Bridge at Simla
Travelling in the Himalaya Mountains

⁷ Stephen Grenblatt. p.22.

⁸ Guhathaurta. p.8

⁹ P.K. Nayar. 'Touring Aesthetics: The Colonial Rhetoric of Travel Brochures Today' in Mohanty (2003). pp.112-125. p.117



Palce of the Chief of Khote-kie
 Sangah in the Vale of Dogolee
 The Lion and the Elephant
 Mahratta Chief – distant view of
 Gwalior
 Elephants crossing a Nullah
 Budgerow
 Hindoo Woman and Child
 Ferry on the Ganges
 Travelling Dak
 Tiger Trap
 Juggernaut
 Lion Gate
 Female Statue
 Shikkaree
 Double-edged Sword¹⁰

This visualism can be analysed at three levels. First, as discussed above, the anesthetization of landscape and the imposition of perspective, dimension and frame in casting them as pictures signify a foreign scene with well defined boundaries. It therefore restricts the expanse, awesome size, or overwhelming topoi bringing it under regulated control. Thus, the otherwise awe inspiring, even frightening hills, rivers, forests, wild beasts lose some of their fearfulness and seem pleasant because controlled. Discovering the 'picturesque' in ruins, antiquities and monuments would proclaim the traveler a connoisseur of arts as well as a participant in the land's local and ancient history. Secondly, the scanning or observation confers upon the seer-traveler a position of panoptical power position as

the Foucauldian conception of the gaze inextricably links it to power, control and domination. Third, and at a more psychological level, the site suggests a subjective and an interpretative gaze which may be epistemologically, ideologically, politically or culturally informed or simultaneously by all of them. To identify a landscape or monument as being exotic immediately heralds a whole set of references and value structures which form the baggage the traveler brings with her/himself. Yet, images such as these tend to act as signifying systems positioning and addressing the audiences in diverse although culturally determined ways. Constructed images both visual and otherwise serve to define the contours of the self and the dynamics of self-formation. As John Berger rightly points out, although every image embodies a way of seeing, one's perception and recognition of an image also depends upon one's own ways of seeing and understanding. This applies both to the producer and spectator of images alike. However, as many scholars have convincingly argued, self can best be understood in terms of the autobiographical tradition and the end product of narrative is a powerful self-referential image or a complex of images. Paul Ricoeur cogently points out:

Our own existence cannot be separated from the accounts we give ourselves. It is in telling our own stories that we give ourselves an identity. We recognize ourselves in the stories that we tell about ourselves. It makes very little difference whether these stories are true or false: fiction as well as

¹⁰ Godfrey Charles Mundy. *Pen and Pencil Sketches in India. Journal: A tour of India*. London: John Murray, 1858. Some of these have been reproduced here as attachment.



verifiable history provides us with identity.¹¹

In a 19th Century travel narrative, the telling of self is closely linked with the modern ideas of movement and time. A traveler's discourse as it took a prominent and recognizable pattern by the 1800s charted his/her spatio-temporal movement on day to day basis in the form of a log or journal. For example, Mundy's trip begins on the 20th of November, 1827, evening, and closes with his hitting the English coast on 30th April, 1830, post-noon. The physical and mental progresses with the ongoing journey are closely monitored and put down in a chronological sequence. Here the traveler is placed in a dual position of both knowledge seeker and knowledge giver. Alongside, the familiar polarity of mind and body seems to collapse, for the movement of body triggers mental collection and absorption of empirical data. And in charting the progress in what Mary Louis Pratt calls the 'Contact Zone', two essential European technological equipments come into play – the map, to measure the spatial movement and the clock, to measure the temporal progress. In this Euro-specific mode of plotting space by time, there comes about a collation of data of the exotic space with that of familiar time, marked by dates which the contemporary readers at home could at once recall. This kind of diurnal reportage enables a growing sense of simultaneity and contemporaneity between the sedentary reader and the outwandering travel narrative thus foregrounding a superior status of the traveler-protagonist.¹² Benedict Anderson suggests

how in the mid-18th Century the invention and implementation of Harrison's portable time keeper, the chronometer, by carrying Greenwich time to remote reaches of the globe along with "innovation in [...] navigation, horology and cartography, mediated through print capitalism", made possible the "synchronic novelty", whereby, "substantial groups of people who are in apposition to think of themselves as living lives parallel to those of substantial groups of people".¹³ On the obvious level the parallelism is between human population residing in the global East and West. But on another level the simultaneity is between the active wayfarers and passive bystanders at home. Both these, however, locate both the self and the other in the same temporal order. The temporal emplotment also foreshadows the traveler's maturity and change through the course of his or her travel in the 'Contact Zone'.

However, it must be taken note of, that even though a travel account may deploy autobiographical generic device for narrating the journey yet it gives little details of the person undertaking the journey. Godfrey Charles Mundy remains as unknown and evasive at the end of the journey as at the time he begins his account. His own physical features, relationships with fellow men etc. are not highlighted and though we see the landscape, the people, the community and the native architecture through his eyes, it is much like a photographer's camera image where the cameraman is present in his absence. If the autobiographical endeavour has its telos in 'face

¹¹ 'Introduction' to Dissanayeke. p.8.

¹² Stuart Sherman. *Telling Time. Clocks, Diaries, and English Diurnal Form 1660-1785*. Chicago and

London: The University of Chicago Press, 1996. pp. 159-222.

¹³ Quoted in Sherman. p.166.



making', such a narrative can hardly be called one. The free interchange of "I" and "we" also complicate matters leading to doubt whether the individual can be extricated from the colonial self although it is when the "I" speaks that there comes across a sense of activity. It is at these specific junctures that the reader's interest is kindled in the otherwise tedious narrative. Could one then, turn around and perceive this kind of writing as verging more towards what we know as biography (in recording a cultural life rather than an individual life in its totality? For surely here, the traveler is a cultural traveler and what he is trying to record is an entire life-story placed under a different set of circumstances. The acquisition of culture occurs through the traveler's transplantation into the 'Contaxt Zone'. It transforms native culture and space into a 'Contact Zone' open to the gaze of the foreign traveler/seeker.

On a relatively different and a more pragmatic level, the reason why one decides to write another travelogue and plans to load it with numerous sketches in an age which is already experiencing its surfeit, can be purely economical. Romance and entertainment have always sought exotic locations to evoke pleasure, awe and wander. Here the representation of the orient inevitably dovetails monetization of culture. The alien culture is consumed and commodified and therefore its reproduction in print and visual culture entails a whole range of signifying systems circulating in popular market of the age. That representation of foreign and exotic expanse/space is an important component of entertainment cannot be negated today when visual culture is even more powerful than yesteryears. For one should not forget

contemporary Indian cinema where the "exotic picturesque" of Switzerland or Mauritius receive acclamation when becoming part and parcel of the paraphernalia of the love life of glamorous heroes and heroines.

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