



## Travel Writing and Colonial Consciousness: A Postcolonial Interpretation

Dr Anuradha Chaudhuri

Associate Professor and Head, Department of English,  
Lanka Mahavidyalaya, Lanka, Hojai, Assam

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*Travel Writing has played a remarkable role in instilling colonial consciousness among the adventurers and explorers which ultimately paved the way for the beginning of imperialism and establishment of colonies in various parts of the world. The conceived space is translated into reality in the process. Ideas are being rendered by literature and implementation of the enterprise is done by the explorers and the colonisers to various resourceful but exotic lands around the world. Now travel and its documentation has been a continuous process undergoing different phases of its development from time to time. While the first phase of European colonial travel writing was characterised by a curiosity about the 'unknown', gradually it turned into a vision of world geography in the seventeenth century which asserted the centrality of Europe, specially of England in dauntless imperialistic manner. Travel, however, paves the way for cultural interchange among the conflicting people and out of their negotiations new equations of life are being created. Pratt's theory of transculturation thus talks about the absorption of dominant ideologies by the subordinates. Thus the present paper discusses the gradual development of travel writing since ancient age with its upsurge in nineteenth century and further continuation in the following ages as well, the role of women travel writers and particularly the contribution of this genre in generating and perpetuating colonial mindset followed by the vigorous colonial adventures in various far-flung areas of Asia, Africa and Latin America. Postcolonial theory has, in-fact, viewed travel and travel literature with their multidisciplinary connotation from a different angle of vision in which a number of postcolonial concepts like hybridity, liminality and ambivalence also contribute their part.*

**Key Words:** Colonialism, Postcolonialism, Travel, Travel Writing, Transculturation.

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Travel Writing has definitely created colonial consciousness in the colonisers around the world over the ages. It has prepared and polished the mindset of those exploring colonisers who conceived the idea of colonizing the so-called less developed but resourceful distant lands of Asia, Africa and Latin America etc. The writings of such European travellers like Sir Walter Raleigh's Discoverie of the Large, Rich and Bewtiful Empeyre of Guiana and William Dampier's Voyages in post-medieval period started operating as a discourse that demarcated the boundaries between the so-called civilized world of its narrators and the savage, exotic or strange worlds to which they are journeying with a view to appropriating those conceived lands with all its resources. Such writings have facilitated converting unknown to the known, strange to the familiar, a great role played indeed in the exploration of this wonderful human habitation which was once a vast open space yet to be explored for the Renaissance men and now a tightly networked space giving rise to the concept of global village in postcolonial period. In manufacturing the sense of self through the creation of binary oppositions between Europe and its others since early Renaissance period when European expansionist colonial ventures began and continued till the late nineteenth century, travel writing acted as a determining discourse beyond any doubt. As Mary Louise Pratt opines that travel writing produced the idea of contrasted existence of two opposite selves, Europe and its others, that is, the rest of the world. Ania Loomba talks about European travellers' reworking of the stereotypes taken along with them while journeying to the unknown and unexplored, to the newly colonised lands. While the first phase of European colonial travel writing was characterised by a curiosity about the 'unknown', gradually it turned into a vision of world geography in the seventeenth century which asserted the centrality of Europe, specially of England in audacious imperialistic manner. Postcolonial theory has, in-fact, viewed travel from a different angle of vision, in a broader connotation in which different postcolonial concepts of liminality and ambivalence encounter. Travel in that sense paves the way for cultural interchange among the

conflicting people, the coloniser and the colonised, master and slave, white and non-white, centre and margin, orient and occident creating new equations of life and history in the process, a unique contribution to the march of civilization from one phase to the other. One of best-known essays of Edward Said, "Traveling Theory" considers travel as a trope for the activity of theory itself, functioning as a discursive contact zone for newer relationships to grow and developing newer identities in the process. Travel ultimately turns out to be a site for cultural exchange. As a discourse, it further challenges the monocultural variations of identity. It, in-fact, questions the notions of home and fixed positionality making way for the replacement of older notions of stable, discreet locations by 'borderland' places and 'transnational' discourses in contemporary world of us.

In the present times, the marginalised or unexplored genres of literature are foregrounded and are given space in academic arena too. Travel writing is one such genre, an emerging theme for the humanities and social sciences, a genre, much researched upon. Many of the branches of scholasticism like literature, history, geography and anthropology have given a privileged position to it for generating an interdisciplinary body of criticism for the better comprehension and appreciation of the historical complexity of the genre in the postcolonial era. Writing and travel are the two sides of the same coin because travel does not have any significance until it is shared, to be followed by others for the greater interest of humanity and storage of knowledge. A traveller's tale is no less ancient than a fictional work. Again travel in the form of pilgrimages has a spiritual connotation for the Christians. Life is, in-fact, symbolised as a journey for them, a belief, best represented in John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* and it has perhaps prepared the ground for Chaucer's *Canterbury Tales*, a masterpiece of its kind to come into being and becoming the source of narrative art for many renowned story tellers over the ages. Now as the discourse on travel writing is being prioritized here, hardly anyone can forget the epic journey, described in Homer's *Odyssey*. The adventurous, powerful, and the ambiguous figure of Odysseus can be assessed as the appropriate archetype for the traveller as well as the travel writer. Apart from that, the works like *Exodus*, the *Punishment of Cain*, the *Argonauts*, and the *Aeneid*, rich in literal and symbolic travel stories, provide an assemblage of multifarious references and intertexts for modern and postcolonial authors. Migration and immigration are the basic characteristic features of human beings. Thus, travel constitutes the inherent urge of the people to render a charm and variety to life which is full of challenges and monotony. Travel writing has, in-fact facilitated and has played the role of a catalyst in creating an international literary platform by unifying all the diverse cultural, racial, ethnographic, anthropological, and linguistic identities. Robert Louis Stevenson rightly said that there is no foreign land; only the traveller is foreign. It is true that travel has always received a mixed response from the society, a rather ambivalent one. Travel contributes a lot to the broadening of mind and adding extraordinary and awe-inspiring knowledge about strange lands and the people at large. But interestingly travelling has such a magnetic power that the travellers are, very often, found to be settling in the travelled lands, as can be very much found in Joseph Conrad's wonderful travel stories and colonial fiction. With travel is associated the spirit of adventure, chivalry, heroism and romance which have always decked out fictional writings over the years till date. Curiosity, excitement, amazement and intoxication lend flesh and blood to the narratives and travel has definitely multiplied the scope, dimension, beauty, width and variation of the sagas, legends, mythological narratives exploited in modern stories and other creations as well. These are somehow or other indispensable. The two medieval texts by Marco Polo and John Mandeville have changed the traditional paradigms of pilgrimage in late Middle Ages giving rise to a new impulse and curiosity about other ways of life, embedding the seeds of modernity in the arena of travel writing. Mandeville's *Travels* fascinated the lovers of travel and travel writing for centuries. The first voyage of Christopher Columbus to America in 1492 is said to usher in a new era of travel writing. As a writer he had been greatly influenced by both Mandeville and Marco Polo, echoed in his writings. From sixteenth century onwards, practice of documentation of travel experiences became almost a passion which ultimately facilitated the colonial enterprises to be initiated. These travel accounts inspired the ambitious European nation-states to conceive the idea of aggression and domination in foreign lands, narrated to be resourceful with much potentiality. Before the realisation of ground realities of a land, the knowledge about it is quite essential. The major impact of discovery of America is perceptible in Thomas More's prose romance, *Utopia* (1516) which along with a good number of fictional texts remarkably influenced the subsequent travel writing across the world. The real power of travel writing lies in the freedom it enjoys in exploring various perspectives for critical interpretation. Samuel Purchas, one of the first-ranking English collectors of travel texts refers to the power of this individuality in the 1625 introduction to his *Purchas His Pilgrimes*:

What a World of Travellers have by their own eyes observed...is here...delivered, not by one preferring Methodically to deliver the Historie of Nature according to rules of Art, nor philosophically to discuss and dispute, but as in a way of Discourse, by each Traveller relating what is the kind he hath seen.

For Purchas's contemporary, Francis Bacon, travel writing based on experience and observation rather than the narrations and dictations of ancients paved the way for the scientific and philosophical revolutions of the seventeenth century. Locke critiques the tradition of being confined to the circle of the Grand Tour and envisions a world beyond Europe such as the East and Africa etc. Rousseau talks about the need to travel to far-flung parts of the earth to add new spices to the existing knowledge on human societies though it is another

matter that neither Locke nor Rousseau travelled far and wide. Despite various instructions sent from home regarding studying Nature rather than Books to the seamen on their long arduous journey to exotic lands, it was very often ignored by them as they relied more on their instincts and opportunities, eccentricities and extravagances virtually drawing more attention of the readers to the genre of travel writing. It is no wonder that in present times there is the foregrounding of such genres in academic domain. Now western traveller's eye is identified as an 'imperial eye' performing a colonial act of appropriation (Pratt, *Imperial Eyes* 4). If the knowledge about colonies gave rise to colonialism at all, none can deny the contribution of travel narratives to it. It may be mentioned in this connection that Edward Said's *Orientalism* has been perhaps the first contemporary theoretical text giving much space to travel writing as such which in turn has proved to be one of the leading texts for postcolonial studies. It initiates the process of scrutinising and analysing the colonial representations in travel texts. Even feminist waves helped in evacuating many of the travel writings by women giving an opportunity to the critics and researchers to look at the obscurity of some of the women travel writers in opposition to the popularity of others and also the relationship between women as observers as well as observed along with the position of women travellers with respect to colonial consciousness. Interestingly when looking at the past from newer perspectives has been the focal point of discussion in postcolonial studies, the disciplines of philology, philosophy, anthropology, history, geography, archaeology and translation studies have added an extra dimension to the travel studies. European penetration to 'Near East' and British curiosity about the Orient have triggered off a new train of thoughts and ideas and different equations are drawn on the relationships established after colonial encounters. Said argues that representations of the 'Orient' in European literary texts, travelogues and other writings have given birth to the dichotomy between Europe and its 'others'. The West had a pre-conceived notion that the East was a land of strangeness and exoticism but interestingly these exotic materials enhanced the entertaining aspects of the travellers' tales. To tell the truth, travel writing is not just a geographical account, it takes the form of a memoir or an autobiography. Travel writings are said to have laid bare the territories of mind and discover many underlying cultural, national and political issues. Travel writing now-a-days has interdisciplinary connotation creating a vast storehouse of knowledge. Travel is not a mere vacation enterprise but a serious activity having multifarious purposes, an arduous job, a kind of work in-fact. Thus from the ancient age till date, travel literature has undergone a number of remarkable phases of development. Both conceptually and practically, thematically and stylistically travel literature has marched forward with every new dimension, colour and vigour. Whatever might be the labels assigned to travel writing, the fact remains that it is a collective term encompassing within itself varieties of fictional and non-fictional texts with travel as the main theme. Travel gained much popularity during Victorian period as Victorians travelled extensively around the world. Apart from that Victorian prosperity, imperialistic ventures and explorations in a large scale also acted as stimulants in the rise of travel writing during that period onward. Travel writing is viewed as one of the ideological apparatuses of empires. And it is best represented in Joseph Conrad's colonial fiction. All his colonial heroes are seen undertaking travels to the East and other exotic lands, mapped and brought to the knowledge of the whites in the nineteenth century. Postcolonial treatment of travel writing enlarges its scope and area as unconventional interpretations crop up and not only the self but the other also gets some privilege to unearth the facts generally ignored or not recorded for sustenance of mainstream domination and colonial exploitation. Thus Pratt uses the term 'transculturation' to describe how subordinate groups absorb dominant cultures. There is, in-fact, no denying the fact that consolidation of large empires popularised the travel writing in the nineteenth century. It helped in creating alternate identity formation under colonial rule. British travellers were always fascinated by exotic lands and cultures and co-incidentally the era of empire co-incides with that of travel and travel literature. The British travellers from casual holiday makers, sightseers to a range of explorers, colonialists and orientalist, have played a vital role in constructing the idea of foreign lands and cultures for the British people. With the beautiful admixture of the practical experiences of the voyagers and the material handed down from oral tradition and classical authors, as well as the integration of fact, fiction and fantasy lends a unique texture to the genre of travel writing. Since many disciplines started giving priority to colonialism and postcolonial studies adopted a multidisciplinary magnitude, there has been a tendency to rescue and revive the colonial past by the thorough perusal of travel writing, the repository of multifarious exciting and interesting information. In the wake of crisis in identity, the travel writing has contributed to the formation of new identities as such. It has acted as a catalyst in dealing with the Saidian East-West binaries. The genre has in-fact contributed to the dissemination of the discourses of difference trying to establish the fact of inferiority of the other and freedom of the West to conquer and colonise the Non-West, particularly the blacks and the browns. But the fact remains that travel literature has given an opportunity to be used as a platform for socio-cultural studies. The richness of modern travel writing has enhanced issues of diaspora, migration, exile, excursion and exploitation etc. It is a hybrid product of the negotiations between overarching expectations of the writers and realities faced by them, Recreation of the portrait of the unknown, the other which in turn seems to have legitimised the selfhood implying the fact that narratives are being designed and created according to the understanding of the concerned quarters. Travel is a liminal experience, a contact zone in the words of Pratt where the strangers encounter to appropriate one

another, the self meets the non-self and there is the clash of the opposites, diverse socio-cultural and political orders. The major works of renowned travel writers like Joseph Conrad, Rider Haggard, Rudyard Kipling, R.L. Stevenson, E.M Forster etc with huge colonial experience basically represent the outdoor life though race, class and gender issues also inform many of the travel writings. Interest in women's travel writing grew with the unfolding of the fact that women travel writers played a determining role in colonial expansion by scholars like Jane Haggis. Sudden changes in socio-economic and political status of women, they got the access to travel. On the top of this, social security to women was ensured in Europe in 1990s which stimulated tour and travel by women. The people so far in margin claim the centre, reclaim their past, search for new identities, define their selves in new modes of representations. There has been a trend to write back so that the other side of the picture becomes obvious. The women travellers' accounts are born out of the conflict and negotiation between femininity and colonialism. The women critics like Margaret Macmillan, Indira Ghose and Indrani Sen have been greatly influenced by theoretical formulations of Mary Louise Pratt and Sara Mills in critical assessment of women travel writers of the Raj as there has been an emergence of women travel accounts in twentieth century. Even the progressive travel writers also come under colonial gaze. Postcolonial treatment creates an interface between travel literature and gender studies, a new addition to the realm of travel studies indeed..

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