Original Article
ISSN (Online): 2584-1300

ShodhGyan-NU: Journal of Literature and Culture Studies
July-December 2023 1(1), 1–5

CONTEMPORARY TRAVEL LITERATURE: A POSTCOLONIAL READING OF FLÂNEUR IN MONISHA RAJESH'S AROUND INDIA IN 80 TRAINS

Tiajungla Longchar [1], Dr. I. Talisenla Imsong [2]

[1] Ph. D Research Scholar (English), Nagaland University, Kohima Campus, Meriema, Nagaland, India
[2] Assistant Professor, Department of English, Nagaland University, Kohima Campus, Meriema, Nagaland, India

Received 28 August 2023
Accepted 29 September 2023
Published 13 October 2023

Corresponding Author
Tiajungla Longchar,
tiajungla1997@gmail.com

DOI
10.29121/Shodhgyan.v1.i1.2023.4

Funding: This research received no specific grant from any funding agency in the public, commercial, or not-for-profit sectors.

ABSTRACT

In the postmodern period, there has been a visible theorization of travel writing in the literary domain as the genre gains constant recognition for its close relation to issues such as colonialism, postcolonialism, globalization and multiculturalism. In fact, early travel writing and its involvement in European expansion has been noticeably reshaped with less exploitative practices of dehumanizing spaces and culture in the contemporary travel narrative. With the socio-political changes that are taking place in the new century, the genre's establishment in the postcolonial scene has given an impetus to travel literature. This contribution has also given birth to the concept of the postcolonial flâneur, who is often referred to as a modern spectator immersed in observation and overwhelming experiences of the postcolonial society. In connection with this, the paper shall attempt to study the author, Monisha Rajesh as a postcolonial flâneur in her travel book, Around India in 80 Trains (2012). Further analysis shall focus on cultural diversity and paradox, language, religion, capitalism, and the after-effects of imperialism in India through the lens of the postcolonial flâneur.

Keywords: Contemporary Travel Literature, Postcolonialism, Postcolonial Flâneur, Monisha Rajesh, Indian Railways

1. INTRODUCTION

While the critical world seems to recognize travel literature as a significant socio-historical document of travellers' experiences written during the course of their journey, it also allowed us to get useful insights into their travel perceptions, narration of events, keen observation and remarks on people and places. This genre of literature under travel writing may range from travel writing collections and memoirs to travel related fiction. Travel literature as we commonly perceive it, works as a channel that reflects on human history and culture, while also celebrating the rich diversity that exists in the world. It captures in written form, the

advancement of time and space; as it tries to analyze how we define ourselves and how we identify others. Its construction of our understanding of 'me' and 'you', or 'us' and 'them' operates on both individual and national levels Youngs (2013). Further, these recorded narratives on travel have been raising our awareness of and connections with the rest of the world which seem relatively foreign to us. By doing so, it humanizes distant places that seem alien and distant; by providing various insights of their society, culture, and religion.

Travel literature and its contribution to the growing global connections have also been proving instrumental in the development of mass tourism. But with extensive touring, the feeling of fascination and exploration that existed in past travel writings was greatly reduced. While this may seem adverse, it is important to note that much of the past travellers' passion for exploration also came with self-consciousness and self-absorption, or generalizing and stereotyping of the Other. In this regard, the genre of travel literature has constantly found its connection with the pre-established colonial assumptions based on other cultures. In consequence, even though contemporary writers choose to divert their path from the traditional patterns of colonial scrutiny, their narratives may still consist of some elements of cultural power politics. Such an orientation implies that travellers even before their travel are influenced by previous cultural representations that they have encountered. For this reason, they never look at places in a fresh or completely independent manner. Rather, they also identify them through extensions of others' account. Nonetheless, contemporary travel writers have been making attempts to reverse the colonial impressions of their predecessors which often diminished the value of colonized people and their cultures. While these past writers focused on the material landscapes and objects, the contemporary writer focuses on human beings and the changes that have taken place in the social scene. In this regard, Colin Thubron's 1984 essay (as cited in Ropero (2003) rightly stated that one of the most distinct characteristics of the contemporary travel writer is "an awakened social consciousness" (p. 53). This transformation in contemporary travel writing has further set the scene for the study of the role of the postcolonial *flâneur* in literature.

Flâneur is a French term identified by the nineteenth-century French poet Baudelaire (2020) in his essay "The Painter of Modern Life", which referred to the concept of a "passionate observer" of modern urban society, with certain additional associations such as stroller, lounger, saunterer or loafer (Baudelaire, 1963, para. 22). In addition, Urry (2002) in the field of tourism proposed the well-known theory of the 'tourist gaze' which was closely related to flânerie, as it pointed to the importance of visual aspects in contemporary tourism. To this end, he also stated that such a tourist gaze focused on "features of landscape and townscape which separate[d] them off from everyday experience" (p. 3). Following this, in the field of urban studies, critics have implemented Walter Benjamin's concept of the flâneur, which he described as a necessary tool of the modern spectator; while observing the urban panorama and capturing momentary experiences in the guise of a leisurely stroll. Seal (2013) commentary states that for Benjamin, the flâneur is the observer, the witness, and the stroller of the commodity-obsessed marketplace (para. 14). On this basis, the concept of postcolonial flâneur then may apply to a traveller who observes contemporary societies, culture and people in the formerly colonized regions and considers the precedent stereotypes that had shaped their images in the urban context. Further, the role of the postcolonial flâneur potentially becomes an interesting concept to explore; especially when discussing about travel narrative as a colonial discourse.

Exploring this idea further, Rajesh (2012) in *Around India in 80 Trains* attempted to understand the position of the flâneur, who embarking on a railway adventure, covered 40,000 kilometres around India in 80 trains. Such a distance is almost equivalent to the circumference of the Earth. In fact, in this journey, Rajesh encountered various landscapes and people that helped her realize why the railways were considered as the lifeline that kept the country's heart beating. The book provides an amusing perception of a traveller's eye view of India from inside the train, with slight hints of dry wit and humour. Rajesh in her book refers to the present India as "India Version 2.0" which in her observation, often consisted of juxtaposing elements such as the urban and the rural, the good and the bad or the victim and the prey (p. 4). In this regard, she elucidated that the country which has potential to become the fastest growing economy is also the same country where a random two year old could be married off to a dog for superstitious reasons.

The author's manifestation of the flâneur from a postcolonial standpoint withdraws from the colonizing gaze and inclines itself more towards an analytical observation surrounded by the complex flow of capital and people. In this attempt, Rajesh also pointed out the presence of stark differences between the rich and poor which seems to be a direct consequence of globalization and economic liberalization after the end of colonial rule. She further exemplified this difference by contrasting the image of beggars, pavement dwellers and sick children with the image of ladies on the train with jasmine and garland adorning their hair. In her train journey, she meets a handful of locals who are over-qualified for their jobs. In fact, one of them throws light on the reality of India, where "The rich are even richer, but the poor are even poorer than before" (p. 33). In the process of her examination, the author also illustrated Mumbai's inequality with great juxtaposition of the rich and poor. She explains that it is both a city of dreams as well as nightmares because while some of the residents cannot even afford shoes, the remainder would happily spend money on fishes that nibble dead skins from their feet. Another contradiction made by the author is that India is not the biggest fan of punctuality, yet the country is "always in a hurry, racing to keep up with itself" (p. 43).

Rajesh also tries to capture the postcolonial reality of India comprising of an array of cultural diversities. Indian railways thus offer an insightful analysis of this diversity and coexistence of people amidst cultural differences Dubey (2020), p. 322. In her journey by the royal Indian Maharaja-Deccan Odyssey train, the author's anticipation of passengers was predetermined by her notion of trains that she had witnessed in television – a bunch of retirees, rich grannies, and Belgian men with moustaches. As against her expectation, it was rather a "pick 'n' mix of passengers" from different places like Switzerland, Japan, New York, and Russia with the author as the only Indian on board Rajesh (2012), p. 27. Her encounter with fellow passengers, train staff and locals like the professor, the engineering graduate and even the *hijras* (eunuchs) also paints the picture of multiplicity as she travels to different places. However, their cultural diversity does not always imply a sense of unity because with the country's mass population, education, and industrialization, each of them has to compete with each other for resources to survive. The author adds, "A history of struggle has instilled within Indians an inimitable instinct to survive" (p. 235).

Owing to colonialism, a large number of Indians speak English today. Rajesh explores the locals' use of their colonizer's language with distinctively identifiable Indian English accents and the so called "Hinglish" which is a hybrid mixture of Hindi and English words. She also tries to identify their speech and accent based on the influence from different regions. For example, the waiter from the Kerala Express

would say "Yegggggggger biryani" to egg biryani, while the waiter in the Indian Maharaja-Deccan Odyssey says eggs in a more articulate manner but then reads out the lengthy breakfast order "Poachedfriedscrambledboiledbenedictomelettemadam?" in such swift and uncompromising utterance Rajesh (2012), pp. 45, 29. Among the Hinglish words, the author's favorite is said to be *junglee* which in literal term means a "jungle dweller," and is used in the book as a prejudiced expression by an Indian for an Indian (p. 203).

Through the author's agnostic eye and examination, religion seems to be filled with hypocrisy and often blinded by capitalist motives. During her visit to the Meenakshi temple, hypocrisy is observed in Hinduism which is known to be an inclusive philosophy but heavily contradicted by the sign on the door written "HINDUS ONLY ALLOWED" (p. 52). On the other hand, she finds it amusing that Parvathi the temple elephant taps on the heads of visitors with her trunk as a form of blessing in return for coins. Rajesh considers this a smart and entrepreneurial move. With regard to religious pretense, the author also hears the news of the self-proclaimed holy man who had been caught in a sex-tape scandal with a Tamil actress. In India, the existence of multiplicity in religious beliefs cannot be disregarded. And while clashes often occur due to the religious diversity, Rajesh suggests that all these religions display a feeling of unity and universality when it comes to cricket, and not through any other spiritual or sacred philosophy. She demonstrates to the readers that "Indians don't cheer for him (Sachin Tendulkar) because he's Hindu, or Harbhajan Singh because he's Sikh, or Zaheer Khan because he's Muslim. They support them for being successful Indians who are good at sports they love" Rajesh (2012), p. 138.

The author also visits the island of Diu, "a Portuguese colony relatively known to Westerners infatuated with Goa" (p. 102). This formerly colonized region is said to have plentiful Catholic churches but with the departure of the colonizers, the Christian community in the island had gradually fallen off. Now the churches have been reduced to only three, two of which are used as a hospital and a museum respectively. The colonizer's exit from the country also proved detrimental for some regions like Assam which seems to have been neglected by the central government of India leading to underdevelopment, unemployment, and lack of investment. Such imbalances can also be the reason why there is hostility, tension, and bitterness among fellow Indians. While the Assamese people are viewed as dirty people with broken trains, the latter likewise confesses that the mainland Indians are terrible people for the reason that "they complain that Britishers came and raped the country, but Indians do no better among their own people" (p. 207).

The postcolonial flanerie is ideal for observing India in the modern context because according to Rajesh "To understand India you have to see it, hear it, breathe it and feel it" (p. 4). But in order to perform this act of inspection through experience, one needs to possess the luxury of moving across the globe. Simon Gikandi (2010) in his essay "Between Roots and Routes: Cosmopolitanism and the Claims of Locality" associates the flâneur with the postcolonial elites and cosmopolitans who "move freely across boundaries" and can "choose when to engage with the Other and when to retreat" Wilson et al. (2010), p. 32. This idea of privilege is also reinforced by Rajesh who confirms that "the only way to get under the skin of a new place is by being free to come and go as you please" Rajesh (2012), p. 169. This connection brings out the coexistence of the Self and the Other in postcolonial flânerie. The interaction between the two often produces several conflicting estimations about the specific country. For instance, a passenger in Rajesh's travel account gives her the suggestion of capturing the sight of malls and wonderful new

buildings in India instead of recording the lives of the villagers and snake charmers which he considers as "nonsense" (p. 121). But for Rajesh who is the flâneur, the fascination that comes from malls and modern buildings is an ordinary sight back in London, and the supposed nonsense things are what she thinks Indians should be proud of. Additionally, in another account, the author is called selfish by a fellow passenger because she does not offer him a seat during their time of conversation. But she justifies that in London, it would be unwise to expect people to offer spare seats, to which the passenger further implies that she is from a selfish country. In this sense, the travel narrative is dominated with contradicting viewpoints and cultural misunderstandings between the outsider and the insider.

In reference to the postcolonial flâneur and his/her encounters and experiences with the Other, it is then important to have a sense of cultural sensitivity and interest. According to American travel writer Potts (2018), travel narratives have always existed in the emphatic tension of what a writer from one culture tries to comprehend when visiting another culture (para. 14). It may well be argued that a true postcolonial flâneur takes into account not only the acknowledgement of both thrill and discomfort in one's journey, but also their limitations of the first-person perspective. Thus, the postcolonial flânerie and its recognition of the connections between travel in the postcolonial world and the traveller's subjective ideologies give a significant inspiration for contemporary travel studies.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

None.

REFERENCES

Baudelaire, C. (2020). The Painter of Modern Life. Poetry in Translation. Retrieved From 2022, December 15.

Dubey, S. (2020). JOurneying Through the Indian Railways in Around India in 80 Trains (2012) by Monisha Rajesh and Chai, Chai : Travels in Places Where You Stop but Get Never off (2009) By Bishwanath Ghosh. Rupkatha Journal on Interdisciplinary Studies in Humanities, 12(3), 320–328. https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v12n3.38.

Potts, R. (2018). Why Travel Writing Matters. Rolf Potts. Retrievd From 2022, December 16.

Rajesh, M. (2012). Around India in 80 Trains. Lotus Collection.

Ropero, M. L. L. (2003). Travel Writing and Postcoloniality : Caryl Phillips's "The Atlantic Sound." Atlantis, 25(1), 51–62.

Seal, B. (2013, November 14). Baudelaire, Benjamin and the Birth of the Flâneur. Psychogeographic Review. Retrieved From 2022, December 16.

Urry, J. (2002). The Tourist Gaze (2nd ed.). SAGE.

Wilson, J., Welsh, L. S., & Sandru, C. (Eds.). (2010). Rerouting the Postcolonial : New Directions for the New Millennium. Routledge. https://doi.org/10.4324/9780203862193.

Youngs, T. (2013). The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing. Cambridge University Press. https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511843150.