



PRODUCING OTHERS IN SELECT TRAVEL WRITINGS OF PRATIBHA RAY

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ABSTRACT

*This paper broadly focuses on the question regarding what does it mean to be a cosmopolitan travel writer? The term 'traveller' offers a positive and independent model of selfhood (Thubron 58). Michael Kowalewski argues, post-war travel writers have an "enriched sense of diversity and complexity of other cultures" and the post-touristic recognition of plurality calls "our collective ability to represent foreign people" into question (Kowalewski 10) and demands new approaches. The post-tourist turn to travel writing demonstrates heightened awareness of the politics of writing about another place and culture and of the problems inherent in representing the voices of the people encountered (Thompson 243). In this context Debbie Lisle argues that the cosmopolitan travel writers place cultural difference on a plane of equivalence - they locate, administer and celebrate difference within an accepted global order (Lisle 87). The present article explores the process of producing the other in Pratibha Ray's *Africa Nayika Nila Nadi (Africa's Heroine the Nile River)* and *Swapnara Alaska (Dreamy Alaska)*.*

Key Words: cosmopolitan travel writer, individuality, self-hood, othering.

INTRODUCTION:

Debbie Lisle argues that travel writes assume that there is a more authentic way to engage with cultural difference and as much as possible travel writers move "off the beaten track" and thus outside the convenience, familiarity and mechanics of the constructed tourist gaze as tourists are different, but not different enough: they don't exhibit the obvious traces of the exotic and the primitive that travel writers require as markers of difference. In effect, the more difference displayed by locals, the more authentic the encounter is. It is not difficult to see how the identity/difference logic as some travel writers secure their position as the

SUPRIYA SUBHADARSINI SAHOO

1Page



morally enlightened and superior traveller by depicting the locals as cartoonish, primitive beasts. But self-consciousness and individuality are so central to modern subjectivity. For example, Paul Theroux's self-consciousness and independent mind allow him to locate, translate and interpret foreign cultures through the universal logic of identity/difference: others are always different, and always inferior. Theroux as a modern subject who possesses the self-consciousness and individuality, needed to translate Jaipur through more universal categories. Although Theroux is a foreigner, he is an enlightened traveller whose self-possession allows him to place the sites of Jaipur and its fortresses, its museums - on a universal scale of world history. His subject position as an omniscient travel writer explains cultural artefacts of universal interest. Because the other is primitive and ignorant, he/she must be taken care of and guided in a paternal manner towards the enlightenment possessed by the civilised travel writer. In this way, the supposed 'ignorance' of primitive others can be understood through a more romantic vision: locals are not superstitious, but are 'noble savages' that remind the Western world of what it has lost in its pursuit of modernity. (Lisle 78, 83-85)

Lisle again states that romanticising the other is the flip side to colonial judgements: instead of reading the ignorance of others negatively, better to read it as an expression of ancient wisdom that has been lost in the modern world. In this case, others should be valued because they are closer to the mysteries of nature, spirituality and the universe. This romantic paradigm characterised many colonial travelogues: others were figures to be subjugated and governed by a 'sovereign Western ego', but they were also figures of great mystery, to be discovered, honoured, gazed upon and wondered at. What makes travelogues - both colonial and contemporary - provocative translations of difference is that others are rendered in contradictory ways (2006). This juxtaposition of difference as both inferior and romantic is evident in select Odia travel writings by Pratibha Ray when she travels further into the 'heart' of Africa and Alaska. Ray writes in the chapter "Chanda Mukhara" (Resounding with Music) in *Africa Nayika Nilanadi* (Africa's Heroine the Nile River):

"There is a significant role of dance and song to the African folk life. Irrespective of adverse situation, they are resounding with music like a mountain torrent in the lap of nature." (Ray 104)

The Ugandans excelled her Odia notions of civility, when Ray encounters the 'wondrous land of the Ugandans'. As she writes in the chapter "Snehara Runa" (The Debt of Love): "Sitting in the reader Rose's extremely modern style living room I was appreciating its artistic spirit." (ibid 70)

Similarly she writes in the chapter "Africa, Rakta Mage" (Africa Asks for Blood):



“I said - “I want to sit next to Alex’s mother”. His elder brother said - “In our house the place of a guest is special. The sofa on which our mother is sitting is used for our personal use. The other one is meant for our guests. So you have to sit on that one”. We followed the instructions. This kind of a wonderful tradition pleased us as much as it influenced us as well. The Africans’ guest is God like the Indians. Hence the have kept a special place for guests like the place for God.” (ibid 66)

However, Pratibha Ray projects otherness in contradictory ways. Her romantic interpretation of the Ugandan women is beautifully described in the chapter “Alexra Maa” (Alex’s Mother):

“Whether educated or illiterate Ugandan woman is brave, powerful, hardworking, kind and extremely fond of her own children. After intimately meeting with women professors, the writer’s sense of dearness and respect was increased for Ugandan woman. Their way of dressing up and behavioural simplicity had impacted me. Like the workaholic women I our country all of them come for work after cooking at home and sending their children off to school and taking care of household chores. They prove their confidence and capability at their job. They do shopping, drive of by themselves and sweep their houses. They become an active housewife after returning from the office. The writer has witnessed all this after visiting to some of the professors’ houses. Here some of them have four to five children. They have not yet given importance to the fact that two children are enough or the concept of we two and we have two.

There is no comparison with the hard work done by rural women. As they give birth to more children, similarly they do hard labour. So they do not have sadness or repentance inside them. Many of them think that as man grows up likewise giving birth to children serially is nature’s law. If a tree is not abandoned from bearing fruits then why a woman should be stopped to become a mother? A mother is like a fruit-bearing tree! Alex went to the village to get his mother with him. She is a mother of multiple children. Irrespective of her old age she prefers to live alone in the village. Still she never thinks herself to be lonesome... Alex was saying that his mother never asks her sons for money. As she was living her life by doing hard work when Alex’s father passed away during his childhood, she is doing the same now as well... Hearing about his mother’s nobleness it took the shape of a glorious idol in my imagination.” (ibid 61-62)

Much like the nomads in Bruce Chatwin’s *The Songlines*, the Ugandans are idealised in the chapter “Nila Nadira Chithi” (The Letter from the River Nile) in *Africa Nayika Nila Nadi* (River Nile: The Heroine of Africa):



“I looked at the boy. He is a tall, comparatively less black, normal health, twenty year old young man. He has shaved head and straight nose. Alex Philip is a humble young gentleman with a gracious face, intelligent eyes. His English pronunciation is marvellous. After stepping on the Ugandan soil the cloudy sky cleared up as I met this well-disciplined, dear son who could recognise the face of a mother.” (Ray 8)

She again writes in the chapter “Bhasa O Bhugola Separe” (Beyond Language and Geography):

“There is dance and song in the ‘gene’ of African people and this can be traced when one witnesses their dance form. First of all the elders danced; in this dance form the movement of the waist is unique. This dance is quite graceful. All the villagers were swinging according to the tune of the musical instruments.

... ..
After the presentations of four to five types of dance forms by the elders, the younger boys and girls presented theirs. Even children of two to three years old were also gracefully dancing moving their waist. The dance form by the younger children was more enjoyable. These small children who were dancing continuously surprised us. We not only lost our identity at that mountain-village but lost thoughts of the outside world and our busy life for a day. It was the all consented truth beyond dance, song and the language of love and geography.” (ibid 49)

In Ray’s narrative, the Ugandans become something to marvel at rather than disdain, especially as they are ‘pure-blooded’ others. According to her the Ugandans are ‘elegant’, ‘mystical’ and romantic. Ray’s projection of ‘romanticised Aborigines’ is repeated in another travelogue of hers - *Swapanara Alaska* (Dreamy Alaska). During a visit to Kuruga’s house from her transcontinental trip, Ray contemplates the Ugandan woman as she writes in the chapter “Snehara Runa” (The Debt of Love):

“Kuruga’s sister opened the door and took us inside. We were surprised to see her because she was one of the main coordinators at the inauguration event at the summit. She coordinated the event so well that really impressed us. Her coordination pleased all the guests present there as it had the wonder of excellent communication in English, tint of literariness, sentiment, intellectuality, and skilfulness.” (ibid 70)

She again writes in the chapter “Snehara Runa” (The Debt of Love),

“African children are beautiful and healthy like African fruits. However, starvation and poverty in Africa snatch away the round shape and freshness from their face. But where there



is a clean family their children are healthy and sweet. The most attractive feature in the African children is their curious and sagacious eyes. They immediately capture one's eyes." (ibid 71)

Similarly in the chapter "Lekhakiya Bilasa" (A Writer's Luxury) Ray records:

"My two African sons Alex and Kuruga were equally worried for the wound on my hand as much my daughter Adyasa was. Lisa's worry (nick name of Adyasa) knew no bound. She was blaming herself for I tripped on the road. Alex was not all feeling ok about the bandage on my hand. Along with giving me advice to take off the bandage and put a Band-Aid; that evening he bought me a good number of Band-Aids. Till today some of those are still in my medicine box and they smell of Alex's kindness.

Alex said - "You shed so much blood. As we did not see you in the conference hall we enquired and got to know that you have fever. We felt very bad. We thought that you might not come downstairs for food, hence we brought fruits". After saying this much he started cutting a pineapple he said - "Your hand is not well. How will you cut it?" He brought a new knife along with a steel plate. Sweet juice was coming out of the already chopped pineapple. And my eyes were streaming with salty tears. How I thought of these two kind boys in such sinful manner!

Uganda's fruits are very tasty and juicy. I have never eaten such juicy pineapple, water melon, mango in any other country. The smell of banana there is also uncommon. They have not yet used chemical fertilizers in the soil, may be this is the reason." (ibid 55, 57)

However, Ray projects otherness in contradictory ways. Her romantic interpretation of the Ugandan women and children contrasts sharply with her descriptions of the behaviour of the local people which daunted her as she witnessed the shameful incidents in the chapter "Bipanna Charitra" (Distressful Behaviour):

"In this materialistic modern life, not as much as hunger but the increased amount of need misleads man. That day Isabirye snatched away a European lady representative's bag from her hand and tried to be lost inside the cocktail party... Due to heavy crowd the guests were stampeding on each other even if there were fish, meat and other varieties of food heaped in a huge amount. Everyone wanted to be in the front row. It was a scary and indisciplined situation created over there"



Another Ugandan lady told me about a scintillating incident that took place there. She said that, “It is not only for sexual harassment but for illiteracy women face exploitation and oppression”....

Another lady passenger used to cheat the taxi drivers using innovative ways on a regular basis.” (ibid 77, 79, 81)

As Debbie Lisle says, others are ignorant, threatening and sometimes violent, or they are majestic, calm and beautiful. And it is this juxtaposition that Paul Theroux, for example and Pratibha Ray have in common: they resuscitate the coloniser/colonised framework precisely because it allows them to project difference in such a variety of ways. Others can be located anywhere on the continuum between fear and desire - objects of such ignorance and primitivity that harsh judgements are justified, or objects of such mystery and beauty that a form of idealisation is warranted (Lisle 87). As Pratibha Ray denotes “Bipanna Charitra” (Distressful Behaviour):

“Irrespective of being a man and woman there is a habit of deceit inside a human. Financial scarcity is not always responsible. Characteristic poverty is also accountable for the same, is what was discussed with everyone’s common opinion. It is man’s distressful character that distresses his own self and others.” (Ray 81)

Lisle argues saying that the continuum of fear and desire is transformed in cosmopolitan travel writing that works against the imperial gaze of colonial narratives. Rather than reviving the coloniser/colonised framework like Theroux, cosmopolitan travel writers place cultural difference on a plane of equivalence - they locate, administer and celebrate difference within an accepted global order. Travel writers like Theroux who revive the imperial gaze see no change in the generic form of the travelogue, no matter who is doing the writing. However, cosmopolitan travel writers take the democratisation of the genre seriously: it does matter who is doing the writing, especially when it comes to resisting the colonial heritage of the genre. Indeed, it is those who have been objectified most by travel writing who must be welcomed into the genre in order to resist its continuing colonial ethos. Many colonial travelogues provide detailed descriptions of the travel writer being the ‘first white man’ in a foreign country - a sentiment forcefully echoed by many colonial travel writers (Lisle 83-90). But this trope is inverted in Ray’s narrative when she describes the reactions of the locals after arriving in Uganda. While she admits that some of the locals were frightening and indisciplined, she is more concerned with expressing the friendliness of the Ugandans, their warmth and hospitality. The Ugandans’ fascination with Ray continues throughout the narrative. As she writes in the chapter “Africa, Rakta Mage” (Africa Asks for Blood) about the expressions of dearness towards their guests by Alex’s elder brother who says:



“Those who treat Africa’s soil with love, she asks for their blood; no - do not be afraid. Earlier in our culture when a guest comes to the house first of all, both the guests and the host of the house used to mix their blood by cutting their veins. After this they no more stayed like guests. They became a part of their relatives. Before coming to our house you have mixed your blood with the African soil. So there is no need to cut the veins. Now you are our relative. By that time Alex’s sister-in-law had already kept a plate full of apple, banana and orange with a fruit knife.” (ibid 66)

Similarly she also writes in the chapter “Sahodara Bhoka” (Hunger of a Uterine Brother):

“In developing countries like ours and poor rural areas like that of Uganda and even in cities, children not only pursue their occupation but take care of their parents because without their help the parents cannot go to the fields and granaries. These children work in the fields, collect wood for lighting the stove, bring drinking water from faraway places, collect food, cook at home and take care of their younger siblings who are born every year.” (ibid 110)

Particularly significant in her another text *Swapnara Alaska* (Dreamy Alaska) are the connections she makes with the indigenous Eskimo in the chapter “Alaska Matire Rakta Samparka” (The Blood Relation on the Alaskan Soil), and the solidarity she feels with them:

“But I was more attracted towards the prehistoric Alaska than the modern version of it. The Aborigins of Alaska have already captured me. Because, they were Asian, the continent I was born in - Eurasian Siberian Eskimo. Today’s Alaskan Aborigins are the descendants of Eskimos. While reaching here on the ship I had already finished reading about the gory struggle of those humans’ love for life. As if my soil has some kind of attraction towards them! As if they are my blood relatives!” (Ray 38)

Ray’s expression of solidarity is with the indigenous Alaskans. Lisle argues, what is more significant, however, is how these writers disrupt the automatic transposition of an identity/difference logic onto a coloniser/colonised framework: they occupy both sides of the identity/difference logic. They have been produced as subjects marked by difference, but their position as travel writers gives them the power to project their own categories of difference (i.e. their identity is secured by marking out others). When subjects are no longer contained within specific positions of difference, the category of ‘identity’ must be re-imagined. In other words, we move from external projections of difference (the subjectification of others) to internal constructions of the identity (the subjection of the self). Thus it is not only the depiction of others (e.g. tourists, locals) that is being re-imagined through the democratisation of the genre - it is also the depiction of the travel writer (Lisle 83-90). In this context the critic Prafulla Kumar Mohanty writes in the section



“Samalochakanka Drustire” (From the Critic’s Perspective) in *Swapnara Alaska* (Dreamy Alaska): “Pratibha has travelled Russia, America, Australia, Africa, most of the countries in Europe. It will not be wrong if we say that she has seen the entire world. But she has not been wonderstruck or astonished witnessing the modern progress and development as a small town middle class house wife. Being able to go on behalf of *Sahitya Academy* and other cultural institutions which ever country she has visited, she has impartially analysed their culture, civilisation and advancement. But she has given more importance to the people of those countries. She has not studied the foreigners independently by associating the history and culture of that country rather as a humanist she has made an effort to examine the process of human development by comparing the custom and tradition of her own country with the man and woman of those countries”. (Mohanty 9)

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