

Sneha Elcy Jacob

Asst. Professor of English

St.Thomas College, Ranni, Kerala

Email- snehajacobsneha@gmail.com

Dr. Asha Susan Jacob

Asso. Professor and H. O. D.

Post-graduate and Research Dept. of English

St.Thomas College, Kozhencherry, Kerala

Travel Narratives as Counter-Discourse: An Analysis

Abstract : The history of travel and travel writing dates back to antiquity. But the genre is however regarded as a prerogative of the Europeans and the travel narratives of non-European travellers that predates European ones are often overlooked and ignored. European travel writing has been instrumental in upholding European supremacy and legitimising the continual subjugation of the East as well. However, recently, there have emerged travel narratives by some writers which subvert the long-held notions of European cultural high-handedness in Western travel writing. Such narratives employ techniques and methods that render them antithetical to the generic tradition of Western travel writing and function as counter-discourse that subvert dominant discourses. Caryl Phillips' *The European Tribe* (1987) and Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* (1992) are two travel narratives written in this vein challenging many of the established norms and dominant discursive patterns of European travel writing.

Keywords: Travel, Eurocentrism, subvert, counter-discourse

The history of travel is as old as the history of man. Travel writing, the literary by-product of travel also has a long tradition. But today, as Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund remark, “the problem is that ‘travel’ has so often been conflated with ‘European(ized) travel’” (2). In fact, there had been travellers from Asia and Africa even before the travellers from the West emerged and they had crisscrossed the world much before the Western travellers set out for their journeys. There also existed textual and visual representations by Eastern travellers that were of great use to the European travellers. It is a misconception that it was the Western travellers who mapped the world. In *Other Routes: 1500 Years of African and Asian Travel Writing* (2006), Tabish Khair excellently makes a case that there is “textual and cartographic evidence of vast parts of the world being navigated and traversed by Asians and Africans before, during and after Europeans set out on their post-Enlightenment voyages” (12). Surprisingly, it is often forgotten that there had been travel narratives by the travellers from non-European territories even before the Europeans embarked on their journeys.

However with the onset of European colonialism, the history of travel writing changed dramatically. Travel stories of the European travellers soon spread the Western world and were wholeheartedly welcomed by the European audience. As years advanced more and more Europeans began to travel taking advantage of the improved travel means and “by the twentieth century, human movement in the past came to be seen as a predominantly European activity, an imagined trope connoting modernity, technological advancements and power” (Edwards and Graulund, 2-3). Thus, Western travel writing up to the middle of the twentieth century is chiefly a compilation of the history of Europeans writing about the non-European parts of the world, especially about the territories Europeans had taken possession of as colonies. These travelogues adopt an imperialist gaze and narrative authority based on a combination of historical evidence and eye-witness accounts.

Western travel writing is often associated with the phenomenon of colonisation. It not only legitimised colonialism but also exposed the East to the Western audience. Thus Western travel writing had fundamentally been an imperialist form of writing by the colonisers to narrate their experiences of colonisation and were principally meant for an audience encouraging colonisation at home. These narratives cashed in on the depiction of the East as exotic and fostered a sense of social, cultural and racial difference which established the supremacy of the West over the East. For the most part, travel writing is labelled as an imperial medium, which chronicled and sometimes promoted colonisation, doing so particularly strongly in the Victorian period. Hence Western travel writing has always been considered as a form of colonial discourse and majority of the current investigations of the genre tend to criticise it for maintaining rather than dismantling colonial paradigms.

Counter-discourse is a term coined by Richard Terdiman to designate the theory and practice of symbolic resistance. He introduced this term in his book *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth Century France* (1985) wherein he explores the means of generating change against the “capacity of established discourses to ignore or absorb would-be subversion” (13). This term has been adopted by the postcolonial critics to describe the intricate methods with which challenges to a dominant or established discourse might be mounted from the periphery. As a practice within postcolonialism, counter-discourse has been used to designate attempts that challenge the established norms.

Recently there emerged travel narratives by some Anglophone writers that oppose and defy the Eurocentric notions of Western travel writing and thus function as counter-discourse. These writers in their travel narratives record experiences that nullify the dominant Euro-American notions of the East. They intercede in the history of travel writing by adopting

narrative modes and techniques that subvert the imperialist patterns inherent in Western travel writing. They use the genre for registering their resistance to the cultural prejudice of the colonial travel writers. In fact, they challenge the imperialist notions of the genre and work against Eurocentrism through their unique representations of travel. They thus explore the genre's potential as a counter-discourse and engage in a cultural critique. Such narratives subvert the colonial authority and the knowledge thus produced by using alternative representations of travel. In doing so, it deconstructs the Eurocentric views that sustained and maintained the genre. Caryl Phillips' *The European Tribe* (1987) and Amitav Ghosh's *In an Antique Land* (1992) are two travel narratives written in this vein.

Caryl Phillips is an Afro-Caribbean novelist, born in the tiny island of St. Kitts in the West Indies and brought to Britain as an infant. He grew up in Leeds and graduated from Oxford University. Though he was brought up in Europe he could not fully participate in its culture. His travel narrative *The European Tribe* (1987) is a book of essays recording his experiences of travelling across multiracial Europe of the 1980s. He sets out for the journey in 1984 beginning in Morocco, Europe's closest southern neighbour. He then proceeds to Spain, Southern France, Venice, Amsterdam, Poland, Norway, Moscow and finally back to Britain.

In this richly descriptive narrative of Phillips journey through modern-day Europe, his search is guided by a moral compass rather than a map. He was not seeking sights or adventure. Instead his journey is one of personal exploration. In other words it can be described as an attempt to solve the question of what it means to be an exile and a minority in Europe. Phillip very carefully describes the scenes and characters he meets, in places like poverty-ridden Casablanca, lively Costa del Sol, and tranquil Provence where he deliberates with writer James Baldwin over dinner about the state of human mind. He probes Venice

through the Shakespearean outcast Othello and perceives Amsterdam through the eyes of young Anne Frank.

He travelled as a black man among the racist white European community and returns home without having widened his experiences that would naturally ensue one's travels. Phillips does not learn much from his travels except the fact that racism is ingrained in Europe's self-identity. Everywhere in Europe, his original thesis is confirmed: that Europe is a tribal society, closing ranks against outsiders, especially those considered as belonging to a different race. Phillips' anger and hostility are directly expressed in this book. He "find(s) little empathy with the cultural bravado of a Eurocentric past" (128). The tone of the travelogue is one of contempt and anger.

It is a travel narrative set up in opposition to European norms. In these essays Phillips explores the racism in Europe. Strongly critical of European cultural prejudice, the book lashes against the oppressive value-system enshrined in hierarchies of race. Thus the book is an outright critique of European-centred history and the form of travel writing associated with this history.

Phillips' readers are the white Euro-Americans and he articulates his antagonism against these readers, who read travel narratives for the consolation it brings with the confirmation of the supremacy of Euro-imperialist values. In this sense the book is a counter-discourse "that interrogates the privileges that accrue historically to the genre" (Holland and Huggan 50). He ends his book with a powerful criticism of what he calls the European tribe, the global community of white power brokers who have imposed their culture and language on their non-white neighbours of the Third World.

Phillips' year-long journey as a black man in different parts of Europe alters the usual travel route depicted in Western travel writing. It is customary for the genre to document the observations and impressions of the Europeans among the non-European people. But in *The*

European Tribe, a black man presents the account of his tour through European territories that are White-dominated and chiefly antagonistic to blacks. Thus he attacks the generic tradition of European travel writing. He writes back against those European travel writers who chronicled their encounters with the tribes of Africa and other non-European people, deconstructing the modern/primitive opposition that white travel writers maintained in their travel narratives. Here black man is the traveller and the white “tribes” of Europe are the observed. In this manner *The European Tribe* (1987) makes the reader realise what it is to be like the object of the travel writer’s gaze. In addition to this, Phillips also attempt to make the European readers acknowledge how they themselves exhibit racism and tribalism, which are usually attributed to supposedly more backward cultures.

Through his book Phillips parodies the Grand Tour narrative in which the white gentleman would gain their knowledge of (superior) European civilisation. In this version of Phillips’ Tour, his education is completed by gaining an understanding of the enduring racism inherent in European culture.

If Phillips in his travel book subverts the conventions of the genre by depicting Europe as inherently racist and by altering the travel route and the object of traveller’s gaze, Amitav Ghosh adopts a different strategy to deconstruct the dominant discursive patterns in European travel writing.

In his travel narrative *In an Antique Land: History in the Guise of a Traveller’s Tale* (1992), Ghosh tries to develop and remake the genre by exposing the histories and cross-cultural associations of non-Western countries that have often been neglected by the West. In it Ghosh relates his own experiences conducting anthropological field work in Egypt. This personal narrative is interwoven with Ghosh’s historical remaking of the lives of a twelfth-century Indian slave Bomma and his Jewish owner Abraham Ben Yiju. The chief record of these figures is a letter written to Ben Yiju by an Arab merchant Khalaf Ibn Ishaq.

Ghosh discovered this letter by chance in the synagogue of Benzra in Babylon where he came across a collection entitled Letters of Medieval Jewish Traders, edited and translated by S. D. Goitein, the great historian of Mediterranean Jewish societies. The letter was written in 1148 and contained greetings for Ben Yiju's slave Bomma, a faithful business agent who journeyed more than once to the Middle East in connection with his master's business enterprise. "The slave of MS H.6", as Ghosh calls him, is an important link connecting the Mediterranean Fustat and South India and Ghosh became increasingly interested in the history of cultural relations between the Middle East and India. Ghosh was attracted by the story of a slave that has survived all these centuries without being lost. He found it interesting because all the history is about kings, wars, foreign policy and so on. To have found the story of a slave inspired him.

Ghosh retraces ancient trade routes between India and the Middle East, and calls to mind travels that occurred outside the European history of travel. Thus he unravels a long history of intercultural relations between India and the Middle East-contacts not identified and recorded in the history of European expansion.

Unlike much of the English travel writing this is not an account of the world through European eyes. As Ghosh reconstructs the links between Bomma, Ben Yiju and Ibn Ishaq, he presents a telling account of the mutual alliance and nexus of trade, commerce and amity that connected India and the Middle East in the centuries preceding European colonisation. The book reaches back to a twelfth century cosmopolitan world linking Arabs, Jews and South Asians, a world not yet structured by five hundred years of Western economic and cultural expansion.

Through this book Ghosh thus recovers a submerged tradition of contact between South Asia and Middle East. The book underlines the unarmed nature of Indian trade and commerce before the advent of Vasco de Gama in India. The author wants to bring to focus a

forgotten period of history, which shows how free and liberal India's collaboration with the Arabs was. The writer here unveils the history of how business relations existed between India and the Middle East. For instance, one of Yiju's business partners Madmun had joint business ventures with a Muslim, a Gujarati Bania and a member of a land owning caste of Tulunad. Despite linguistic, cultural and religious differences, they had complete mutual trust and understanding. Such profound and meaningful relationships existed between people of such background. They were sharing cultures and were making money too. Ghosh also highlights the easy flow of human warmth and trust that existed between the Jewish merchant and his Indian helper Bomma. The book is thus a diatribe against a search for cultural differences and exoticism of the colonial travel writing.

Mixing conversation and research, imagination and scholarship, the book also exposes the special relationship between India and Egypt with regard to their colonial background, underdevelopment and impoverishment. The significance of these two countries here is that both can be considered post-colonial, and although they might be considered Third World today, they are both antique lands, in that they have been home to very ancient civilisations. Reconstructing the relationship between India and Egypt Ghosh writes:

India, like Egypt, was largely an agricultural nation, and majority of its people lived in villages, like the Egyptian fellaheen, and ploughed their land with cattle. Our countries were poor, for they had been ransacked by imperialists, and now they were both trying, in similar ways, to cope with poverty and all the other problems that had been bequeathed to them by their troubled histories" (134).

Thus the depiction of its colonial history, its agricultural background, their present poverty, the similar way in which they try to cope with their problems are contrary to the European historical record. As Carl Thompson notes:

A region of the world which Western 'Orientalist' scholarship has generally regarded as backward and culturally inferior to the West is thus revealed as the site of a sophisticated, Cosmopolitan culture. The historical role of the West in this region, meanwhile, comes to seem not the introduction of 'civilisation', as Western travel writers have so often claimed, but rather its destruction. (165)

Historically Western travel narratives served to render a sense of self-satisfaction and solace in the minds of the readers by reasserting their racial and cultural superiority. These travel narratives not only opened up the outer world for the Western world but also affirmed their supremacy in every sense. However, the emergence of travel narratives that act as vehicles of cultural critique rather than cultural prejudice, is a turning point in the history of travel writing. Its exponents, mostly Anglophone writers exploit modes of resistance and opposition to challenge the imperial ideologies inculcated, stabilised and maintained through travel narratives.

Thus Caryl Phillips and Amitav Ghosh in these travel narratives employ methods that destabilise the dominant discursive practices of the genre and pose a challenge to the established norms in Western travel writing. Their travel narratives are antagonistic and antithetical to the privileges accorded to the genre historically and can be rightfully termed as texts of counter-discourse

Works Cited

- Edwards, Justin D., and Rune Graulund. "Introduction: Reading Postcolonial Travel Writing." *Postcolonial Travel Writing: Critical Explorations*. Ed. Justin D. Edwards and Rune Graulund. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2011. 1-16. Print.
- Ghosh, Amitav. In *An Antique Land: History in the Guise of a Traveler's Tale*. New York: Vintage, 1992. Print.
- Holland, Patrick, and Graham Huggan. *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan, 2010. Print.
- Khair, Tabish. *Other Routes: 1500 Years of African and Asian Travel Writing*. Oxford: Signal, 2006. Print.
- Phillips, Caryl. *The European Tribe*. London: Faber, 1987. Print.
- Terdiman, R. *Discourse/Counter-Discourse: The Theory and Practice of Symbolic Resistance in Nineteenth-Century France*. Ithaca and London: Cornell U P, 1985. Print.
- Thompson, Carl. *Travel Writing*. London: Routledge, 2011. Print.