



POLITICS OF GENDER AND COLONIAL TRAVEL WRITING

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Abstract

Travel writing now is a power influence in Western understanding of, and interest in the rest of the world. Travel writing issues both out of gender and power as well as colonialism and post-colonialism. Colonialism is always viewed in terms of gendered conceptions and the colonial enterprise suggests masculine energy and subsequently the colonize countries are viewed "feminine", Sometimes with teeming sexuality waiting to be mastered. Gender and sexuality had been integral to the land, politics and policies of colonial regimes, the discourses that constituted imperial knowledge and the tropes in which colonial relations were resented.

Travel writing once dismissed as a sub-literary genre or best a historical archive of unsystematic travel impressions I now being studied in terms of its history, formal characteristic and problems of representation. Travel writing, centrally concerned with the structural representation of identity and difference, has now become a power influence on a Western understanding of, and interests in the rest of the world. However, the genre though shaped by the experience and interest of the western elite can never be seen as the prerogative of this group alone, because many others have travelled and have given expression to their multifarious experiences of the world. As a result, travel writing issues both out of gender and power as well as of colonization and postcolonialism. Travel writing, in an age where identities cut across the traditional conceptual categories, has become useful discursive practices for the study of diasporas, globalization, postmodernity, race, gender and class. Since Edward Said's litmus work, *Orientalism*, established that European expression is as much a matter of discourse and hegemony as of the technological economic dominations, studies have been initiated to analyze the ways in which the Western colonial discourse explicitly and implicitly negotiate the movement between political and aesthetic discourses The colonial discursive analyses examine how the

West's political representations of its "Others" against which and through which it defines itself; how European and British texts create a network of intersecting and contending discourses about India and other colonies; how travel books by Europeans about non-European parts of the world went and still go about creating the "Domestic Subject" of European imperialism; how they have engaged metropolitan reading public with the expansionist enterprise whose material benefits accrued mainly to this very view and how the Europeans viewed the Indian women as their "Other" (Spivak 34). The fruits of the empire were pervasive in shaping European domestic society, culture and history. European constructions of the subordinated 'others' have been shaped by those others, by the constructions of themselves and their habitats that presented to the Europeans. Europe, in fact, was constructed from the inside out. Travel writing is heavily organized on Europe's obsessive need to present and represent its peripheries and its 'other' continually to itself. Travel writing constituted the central agent in legitimizing scientific authority and its global project alongside Europe's other way of knowing the world and being in it.

Seventeenth and eighteenth-century European travel writing is preoccupied with a wide range of questions on authority and subjugation of the colonial folk, especially the women. The concentration on issues of power provides a discursive framework that is particularly amenable to colonial use. Colonialism came to be considered in gendered terms and the colonial enterprise suggested a masculine energy" and consequently the colonized countries were viewed "feminine, sometimes with teeming sexuality waiting to be mastered" (Mac Clintock 117). In Rider Haggard's novel, *King Solomon's Mines* (1880), a map projects the sprawling African continent as a supine female body imparting to the topography of the land and its luxuriant vegetation and hills – all the suggestions of an abundant female sensuality. The land which is also female is mapped in male fluids. Haggard's map, thereby, hints at "a hidden order underlying industrial modernity and the conquest of the sexual and labour power of colonized women (Mc Clintock 3). Nineteenth-century English cultural representations too cast the subcontinent as female. A cartoon in *The Punch* (1800), for instance, depicts the subcontinent as a voluptuous "child-wife yet alluring like one her purdah Princes" (97). The colonial enterprise always named the land as female; as a passive counterpart to the massive thirst of a male knowledge; caught in his gaze, the woman is naked, subservient and vulnerable to his advance. The cult of representing land as female began with Columbus who blundered into the Carrebeans in search of India. He argued that the ancient had erred in considering the earth round. Rather, he contends, the earth was shaped like a woman's breast with a protuberance upon its submit in the unmistakable shape of a nipple (Mc Clintock 21). Columbus' image feminizes the earth as a cosmic breast in relation to which the epic male hero is a tiny, lost infant yearning for the Edenic nipple. Columbus's breast fantasy like Haggard's map established the long set mores of male travel as an erotic of ravishment. Consequently, the

unknown and uncertain continents such as Africa, America and Asia refigured in European lore as libidinally eroticized.

In the wake of Victorian imperialism, Africa, America and Asia were considered the porno tropics for the European imagination – a fantastic magic lantern of the mind on to which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears. Within this porno tropic, culture women were represented as the epitome of sexual aberration and excess. Gender, dynamics, thus, formed the foundation, buttress and prop to the security and maintenance of the imperial enterprise. Knowledge of the unknown world was always mapped as metaphysics of gender. Francis Bacon's comment "my only earthly wish is to search the deplorable narrow limits of man's domination over the universe to the promised bounds" aptly epitomizes the imperial crush for power based on gender (62). Bacon's perspective of world knowledge was inspired not only by the imperial geography of power but also by the gendered erotic of knowledge. Imperialism always operates by constructing discursive positions for its subjects and works to suppress the voice of the colonized subjects. One of the buttresses on which imperialism is built upon is gender, and the divisions of gender mediated the structure of imperialism. It is located as sexually constructed and created by men as well as women, embracing contradictions and complexities with women simultaneously both victims and agents. Gender is recognized by the imperialists as "a foundational dynamic that shaped all aspects of the empire from the conduct of war to the drafting of statutes and regularities, to social and medical codes governing sexuality, to stories that appeared in the Times and juvenile fictions" (Wollacott 3). The explorer called the unknown land 'virgin territory, philosophers veiled truth as female and then fantasized about penetrating the veil and inseminating it. In myriad ways, colonized women served as the figures by which the occident oriented itself in space as agents of power and agencies of knowledge. Katherine Wilson argues the multiple wars and imperial engagements of the eighteenth century were understood and represented in forms mediated by conceptions of gender as well as race. the articulation of Englishness always is linked to "empire building and exploration and colonial war were highly gendered (9) Under this dire situation, in certain social contexts " women perform femininity as a necessary masquerade" they "learn to mimic femininity as an ironic performance that is no less theatrical for being a strategy for Survival. Homi K Bhabha calls this mimicry "one of the most elusive and effective strategies of colonial power and knowledge (107). Gender and sexuality were integral to the land, policies and administration of colonial regimes, the discourses that constituted imperial knowledge and the tropes in which colonial relations were represented, all of which helped to shape definitions of masculinity and femininity in Europe itself. The imperial power could be characterized in either maternal or paternal terms involving a differently gendered notion of authority. European colonies were cast in gendered terms in their relations with colonized 'others'. Europeans always styled themselves as more disciplined, Apollonian,

more responsible and masculine, whereas the colonized were sensual, childlike, Dionysian, irresponsible and female. The anxiety of the empire manifests itself everywhere in the imperial attempts to classify the colonized subjects in homoerotic narratives. The colonies are often represented in Western travel writing as the antithesis and analogue of Europe. Gender often cut across the metropolitan and the cultural divide, so as to stigmatize European and colonized women simultaneously as differently effective ways. For example, the European resistance to the first wave feminism forced some Europeans to decry women as unisexual and colonized women more passive, feminine and something to be consumed.

This “Otherness”, is often portrayed erotically and lasciviously in the travel writers’ depictions of colonized women. It is characterized by ambivalent movements of attraction and repulsion, sexual economy of desire in fantasies of race and of races in fantasies of desire. This fantasy of desire is well illustrated in Dequincy’s many dreams of desire of searching in crowds, wading through an endless fluctuating reduplication of myriads of female faces that link up with the widespread cultural fantasy of the numberless, swarming dehumanized population of Asia. Dequincy writes:

The causes of my horror lie deep and some of them must bbe common to other. Southern Asia, in general, is the seat of awful images and associations. As cradle of the human race, it would alone have a dim and reverential feeling connected with it. But there are other reasons. No man can pretend that the wild, barbarous, and capricious superstitions of Africa or of savage tribes elsewhere, affect him in the way that he is affected by the ancient, monumental, cruel and elaborate regions of Indostan &C. The mere antiquity of Asiatic things.....is so impressive, that to me, the vast age of the race and name ever powers the sense of youth in the individual. A young Chinese seems to me an antediluvian man renewed, Even Englishmen... cannot but shudder at the mystic sublimity of castes that have flowed apart, and refused to mix through such immemorial tracts of time (7).

As a result, no analysis of the relationship between the colonizer and the colonized can occur significantly without reference to he politics of gender. Colonialism was a machine: a machine of war, of bureaucracy and administration and above all, of power, expressive of enormous power put forth, and resistance overcome. However, colonialism was not only a machine of war and administration, it was also a desiring machine with its unlimited appetite for territorial expansion, for endless growth and self reproduction, for making connection and disjunction, for continuously forcing disparate territories, histories and people to thrust together like foreign bodies in the night. In that sense it was itself the instrument that produced its own darkest fantasy – the unlimited and ungovernable fertility of unnatural unions. In a study of the first representation of

the 'New World', Stephan Greenblatt remarks "European mimetic capital though diverse and internally competitive easily crossed the boundaries of nation and creed to gender" (5). Within the patriarchal narrative woman is "the earth that is to be desired, entered, named, and above all owned", remarks McClintock (31). The representations of the colonies by the empire were always in gendered terms. The European travel writers considered the colonial as something out there to be devoured, consumed and waiting to be deflowered. All relationships between the west and the colonies could take place only within the contest of gender. However, gendered imperialism assumed diverse forms in various colonies. India, for example, was seldom considered a virgin land. Its harems and brothels fascinated the European travelers. Writers frequently categorized Indian women according to their religious affiliations placing Hindu and Muslim women in complementary opposites. John Fryer remarks, "the Moors' wives were cloistered from the sight of any besides the capon that watched them whereas the Hindu women are manacled with chains of silver (88). Indian women in colonial discourses were typically represented as both dangerous and attractive mistresses who answered all the purposes of a wife without any of its bother. The iconography of the harems was not part of South African colonial erotics. North African and Asian women were often trammled by the iconography of the veil. Very often the West defined itself against its other –the East. To the westerner, Said comments, "the orient was always like some aspect of the West, to some general romantics, for example, Indian religion was essentially an oriental version of Germano – Christian pantheism (6)

The ideology underpinning the colonial enterprise contributed in multiple and complex ways to the strengthening of the polarities and the privileging of masculinity over femininity. There occurred, as a result, "a marked shift from the medieval notion of manliness as a moral integrity to physical robustness, hardness and discipline and the rejection of anything effeminate and weak as un-English" (Sen 70). The English were seen as the legitimate ruler and the institution of administrative control. The colonized women's body in effect became the terrain upon which the cultural contest was staked out, resulting in complex ways in sharpening the cultural servitude and marginalization of women, thereby indicating the patriarchal ideologies of the West and their hegemonic hold over the colonies. Clearly colonist interactions led only to a reification of the hierarchies of race, class and also gender contributing in the long run to an overall hardening of masculine biases in the colony.

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