

# Swami Vivekananda, the Saint Traveller: A Neo-Colonial Perspective

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**Abstract:** The trend of overseas journeys had a tremendous impact on the personality of Swami Vivekananda. He acquired his cultural baggage during his extensive travel in India and when he crossed the national boundary, he encountered several new faiths, customs and cultures which questioned his pre-occupied religious and cultural self. But it was not something unique in the colonial milieu, with the advent of rationalism and scientific learning; people started thinking of the new world beyond the 'Kalapani'. Their voyages to the West were an interesting phenomenon in the nineteenth-century Bengal. The paper explains how Vivekananda being a liminal cultural agent between the East and the West assimilates through experience both the scientific material philosophy of the West and the spirituality of the East and attempts to reconstruct his international liberal self, a process which leads him to constant self-examination. His travel writings bring out such dilemma and hybridity, posing Vivekananda as an important contributor in the postcolonial discourse of travel-writing.

**Index Terms:** Liminal, Hybridity, Postcolonial, Identity, Self-fashioning.

## Introduction:

Everything is evanescent, everything is changeable—knowing this, the sage gives up both pleasure and pain and becomes a witness of this panorama (the universe) without attaching himself to anything.

Vivekananda (CW 8: 343-44)

Travel writing is a significant tool which has encompassed all the relevant theories of Colonial and Postcolonial studies. The unknown countries of Africa, Asia and Latin America always attracted the travellers from Europe as *terra incognita*,<sup>1</sup> a world without name and recognition. The European traveller-writers explored the lands and manipulated their writings for the domestic readers of the West. They interpreted the travel documents according to their imagination and thus, created a fascinating mysterious picture of those newly explored lands. Travel literature is intimately linked to the issues of imperialism, diaspora, multiculturalism, nationalism, identity, gender, globalization, colonialism and postcolonialism and it brings into light, ideas of transculturation, center and margin, crossing the border, hybridity and the concept of 'us' and 'them' to observe assimilation and difference in a traveller. Helmer and Mezzo write:

Why do people travel? What is the relationship between the experience and the writing of the journey? How much of the traveller's tale is truth, and how much is fiction? These questions lie at the heart of travel scholarship. The vast body of work constituting "travel literature" ranges from the time of Herodotus to the present. Its genres include tales of exploration, ships' logs, private journals and letters, magazine articles, and a sizeable body of fanciful tales produced by those whom Percy Adams called "travel liars." The motives for travel change, the writing styles differ, and the interpretation of the text can vary, but readers sense that, as travellers write about their experiences, they capture more than descriptions of place: they reveal something of their time, place, personality, circumstances, and prejudices. (Marguerite Helmers & Tilar Mazzeo 2007: 1)

**Neo-Colonial Perspective:**

With the resurrection of interest in contemporary travel literature, there arrives a critical discourse of the new genre within Colonial and Postcolonial boundaries. A close examination of the texts written by European writers about colonized countries has unveiled the real motive of such documents. This type of writings begins with Edward Said's most influential work *Orientalism* (1978), which traces the familiarities in the structure of a vast range of apparently objective writings about the Orient. In the earlier days, travel writings were the crops of the travel undertaken normally for official works. But in the late nineteenth-century and early twentieth-centuries, travel writings have been taken more seriously. The significant travel writers in this period of colonial expansion were Joseph Conrad, Rudyard Kipling, R.L. Stevenson, Jack London, Somerset Maugham, D.H. Lawrence, E.M. Forster, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh and many others. They included their travel experiences in fictional works specifically. The cultural baggage, the preoccupied ideas and ideologies of the traveller encounter the new lands that he visits and thus, it partially helps to form a mental picture of the place. It is certain that those observations are sometimes inaccurate and often negative too. The differences that the traveller encounter in a new land in terms of appearance, customs, faith, culture and beliefs might create a false negative image in the mind of the wanderer which ultimately culminates into a sense of inferiority and otherness. These instances can well be observed in British imperial writings of the nineteenth-century, particularly, the writings which negotiate the land and people of the colonized countries. The orientation and dynamics of travel writings have well been discussed in James Duncan's *Writes of Passage: Reading Travel Writing* (1999): "Representations often reveal more about the culture of the author than that of the people and places represented" (i). In recent times, this documentation of travel attracts many scholars of social science and Humanities as a genre which questions different cultural identities. Travelling to "the different parts of the world indeed has broadened the scope of cross-cultural discussion" (Whitfield 113-14). It creates the 'Contact Zone' (Pratt 04) between two or many cultures to widen the transcultural activities.

In the latter half of the nineteenth-century, the colonized countries started to overcome the age-old colonial legacy by means of establishing their own religious and cultural understanding in the western world. It was a new dawn of enlightenment—the marginal started to take the central role by provincializing Europe<sup>2</sup>. The dual characteristics or the double consciousness among the native colonized people (due to the foreign cultural legacy) was a pivotal reason for confusion. In this time of utter misunderstanding, travel writing emerged as a serious study and research across a whole range of disciplines. What was once underestimated as a 'sub-literary' genre or at best an archive of historical travel impressions is now being studied significantly in terms of its socio-cultural setup, formal characteristics, and problems of representation, and for what it can be best to say about a whole range of themes.

Basically, travel literature deals with one's representations of identity and differences. This fact has a tremendous impact on both Western and Oriental travel narratives and recent studies show that the focus has now been shifted to individual subjectivity, the concept of self and other, self-fashioning, knowledge and power and on imaginative geographies. The genre has been considered more seriously only after the rise of interest in Europe's imperial past and the condition of the subjugated colonized countries since 1980. In the sphere of literary theory, this genre has discussed by Edward Said in his "sharp but controversial observations about the creation of an Orientalist discourse in his influential work *Orientalism* (1978) and later, Mary Louise Pratt's seminal study *Imperial Eyes* (1992) illustrates the complicity between European imperialism and travel writing" (Roflsen 45). Today almost all postcolonial inquiries have tried to locate travel literature within a specific and justified theory of colonialism and postcolonialism. The interesting fact is that when a traveller sets out, he becomes embedded in political structures. "Either in the contact zone or in the bewildering territory of otherness, travellers appear as much a product of the new locations as they are agents projecting their own values and cultures in the environment" (Barison and Bernard 5).

The political importance of travel also cannot be neglected and as a literature, it expresses such political understanding that could be seen beyond the demarcation of its received status as a sub-literary genre. The intention of the paper is to reveal its affinity to the 'serious' business of socio-cultural affairs, identity crisis and its significance to the study and practice of global politics in relation to Vivekananda as a

saint traveller. It defends that the semi-fictional genre of travel writing is at least very handy to judge politically and critically the geopolitics and cultural topography of a particular state through the unguarded eyes of the traveller. In fact, the abrupt travel writings of the travellers, especially the saints in a particular mission have a distinct advantage because they are read widely by the people as first-hand experiences and thus, provide close understanding about how relics of popular culture and religion produce common assumptions about otherness (especially during the Postcolonial era) at the international level.

The serious scholarly travellers who travel with an aim to satisfy their intellectual curiosity often negotiate other cultures. They use the tools of travel to communicate with the other world in respect to culture, politics and religion. Their writings, though superficially provide pictures of travel, offer a study of assimilation and difference. Throughout the history of travel writings, the account of saint travellers stands out as different. Saints from different lands or of a particular religious faith have been acting as the messengers of the common masses as they stand as representing a particular community or nation. They disseminate their own philosophy, but at the same time engage in dialogues with new socio-religious discourses. Thus, the travel accounts of the saint travellers are often dialogic in scope and often provide exposure to a very different perspective of the saint's comments and narrations as a traveller.

The image of Vivekananda as constructed generally is that of a Hindu saint. Researchers have produced a large corpus of works on him as a Hindu reformer. In most cases, his travel accounts remain untouched as researchers are more interested in the religious teachings and lectures for which he took up his travels. Vivekananda travelled almost all over the world—the countries of Asia, Europe and America. While travelling he negotiated different cultures. Thus, his travel accounts document a refreshing view of another aspect of his personality through his unguarded and personal observations. As a reformer of Hinduism, Vivekananda attempted to interpret to the world the ancient Hindu texts from a modern rational perspective. Mohapatra, the noted Vivekananda scholar rightly said that his interpretation of Hinduism was “a defence mechanism against the impact of an alien political power in the country...” (05). His travels in abroad exposed him to those Western cultures that had exported to India ideas of Humanism and Rationalism. His travels within India provided him with a first-hand experience of the poverty, both physical and spiritual of the Indian masses. Thus, the paradox of a nation both exploited materially and at the same time taught rational humanism is apparent in Vivekananda's personality as revealed through his writings. The paper does not here focus typically on the travelling elements of the Indian monk, rather it discusses all the available writings of Vivekananda during his extensive travel within India and abroad. Thus, this brief discussion compares two different shades of the Oriental monk – a spiritual leader and a common man (a traveller). The travels of Vivekananda are very productive in this sense which give a new dimension to the literary genre.

The paper examines the available travel writings of Vivekananda (1863-1902), a 'Paribrajak Sanyassi' (the travelling monk) who travelled America and Europe apart from his own country and had become one of the pioneer Hindus to establish his identity in terms of religion, spirituality and culture in the West. It further proceeds to make a concrete argument that Vivekananda's mission can be analysed as a decisive stand to change the effeminate projection of India in relation to the Western world.

A good reading of the entire journey of Vivekananda in inland and outside makes the reader to understand the complexity of 'self' in his writings. Vivekananda's associations and his multilayered dialogues with the Western masses have been deconstructed to understand the psychological condition and complexity of a liminal colonial subject. Through his travel writings, Vivekananda projected himself as an unguarded traveller with his very receptive nature for the sights and sounds of the foreign lands that he visited. Travel provided him with the platform to project his own country in a very positive manner. Vivekananda was aware of the drawbacks of his country, and he wanted to project the good things, mainly the spirituality in the Western world to gain material support for the downtrodden masses of his land. He manipulated the ancient scriptures deliberately according to his own scientific thinking and re-established Hinduism, as the universal religion of the nation. His Hinduism was very much tolerant and the approach was humanistic. The typical challenges which Vivekananda and his contemporaries faced can be examined through Saidian point of view. The paper explains how, in his representation of India and Hinduism, Vivekananda intelligently used his rhetorical ingenuity and self-fashioning as a way to refute the Orientalist discourses of India's degeneracy and effeminacy, and provided a completely new Vedanta tradition with which he wished to earn for his nation the status of a respected spiritual leader. Vivekananda used his politics to deny the Orientalist essentialisations of his day. His interpretations of Indian culture and religion were not original and can be criticized in terms of the needs and expectations of his Western audience to

gain support for India. In this case, Vivekananda was not completely an innocent victim or a manipulator of the circumstances, but due to his centric position between Eastern and Western cultures, he transcended the polarities.

### Conclusion:

The paper tries to conceptualize the facts of travel writing with special reference to 'Postcolonial Cultural Exchange', 'Questioning Faith', 'Religious Identity' and 'Nationalism'. It widens the scope of discussion on the social and humanistic aspects of travel literature. Apart from these basic issues, it has broadened the scope of further study on saint travel writers in general. On one side, Vivekananda is a common man who can enjoy everything like an unguarded traveller without having any prejudices; on the other, he is a Hindu saint who constantly tries to re-establish the spiritual superiority of India in the West. Both the features are widely different and difficult to incorporate in a single person, but Vivekananda, in this case, appears very productive. Considering Vivekananda as a liminal cultural agent allows for a completely new insight of the discursive dilemma in which he was trapped. It is true that while transgressing the boundaries of culture and the dichotomies of the religious and material worlds, this Indian monk often experienced tensions related to his bicultural self. However, the paper argues that it was due to his position between the spiritual East and material West from where the authenticity of Vivekananda's spiritual teachings emerges.

### Notes:

1. Latin phrase, means 'unknown land'
2. The concept is taken from Dipesh Chakraborty's *Provincializing Europe—Postcolonial Thought and Historical Difference* (2000) begins with a consideration that conventional theoretical models have based on European history. The book in its key theme tries to return Europe back its rightful place in the world with other nations, without any privilege that it has continued to hold on academic platform. See Chakraborty (2000).

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