

Informative Travels: historicization, hybridity, and local determinism in Iyer's *Falling Off the Map*, Seth's *From Heaven Lake*, and Ghosh's *Dancing in Cambodia, at Large in Burma*

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Abstract: Travel writing has played an active role in the discourse of colonialism and the aggrandizements of European empires since the Renaissance. In her book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Multiculturalism*, noted critic Mary Louise Pratt observes that the sentimental travel writings which accompany colonial appropriations functioned as a way of capital infiltrations into the 'contact zone' and that even passive European travel writers rely on and extend the reach of colonizing structures. She also observes that the passive travel writers go through a form of anti-conquest based on reciprocity, which function as spreading points of the imperialist economy into the textual landscape of the 'contact zone'. But the revisions brought about in episteme by post-structuralism (more specifically post-colonialism) over the last fifty years have problematized older – or traditional – methods of representation of the 'contact zone' in travel-writing. By looking at travel pieces by Pico Iyer, Vikram Seth, and Amitav Gosh in the context of arguments and theories developed by critics such as Said, Bhabha, Lyotard, Pratt, etc., I propose to show how the new hybridized travel writers consciously historicize the 'contact zones' they write on (making them texts-in-context), represent the ubiquitous hybrid or mutt presences, and show a form of local determinism and resistance which fits within what Lyotard dubs postmodern paralogy.

It must first be noted that the authors of the three pieces examined in the paper are hybrid writers. They are hyphenated Indians, subjects of and constituted within the meshed-up and overlapping global cultural of the post-colonial era. Pico Iyer was born in England to Indian parents, grew up in Canada and America, and currently lives in Japan. Vikram Seth was born in Kolkata and California, and currently lives in England. Amitav Gosh was also born in Kolkata and currently lives in the USA. By the occasion of their birth and race, these three writers are not exclusively constituted within the Western metropolis, though they are profoundly formed by Western disciplines, educations, hegemonies, consciousnesses, etc. By being born within post-colonial legacies, Iyer, Ghosh, and Seth must be read as being placed within the overlaps of the

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imperial metropolis and the periphery: between the Western world and the peripheral worlds. And their travel writings must be understood as not singularly a part of the possession through representation that Pratt says is: “[the metropolis’s] obsessive need to present and re-present its peripheries and its others continually to itself. Travel writing, among other institutions, is heavily organized within that imperative.” (Pratt, 6)

What these three hybrid writers present in *Falling Off the Map*, *From Heaven Lake*, and *Dancing in Cambodia, at large in Burma* might be read as what Pratt explains as “transculturation”. She says about this idea of “transculturation”: “Ethnographers have used [transculturalism] to describe how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from the materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture.” (6) Upon defining the term, Pratt then goes on to explain that even from its beginnings, the Western travel writings ended up representing the colonized people as actively controlling “the materials” they were absorbing from the metropolitan centres, how they were being absorbed and what they were being used for. But what can also be understood is that the material that the ethnographers refer to can be a genre of writing, and if that is the case then the three travel books written by these three hyphenated writers are examples of transculturation travel writing. These texts use the method and material of the Western travel writing (the form, the techniques, and the discursive language) to elucidate and produce themselves not along Western agendas but ones that play with those agendas. This complicated method of acquisition along one’s own lines, not being driven by the requirements of perpetuating imperial economies, might be read as the subtext of what Vikram Seth says when he ruminates about his travels. In page 35 of *From Heaven Lake*, he says:

Increasingly of late, and particularly when I drink, I find my thoughts drawn into the past rather than impelled into the future. I recall drinking sherry in California and dreaming of my earlier student days in England, where I ate *dalmoth* and dreamed of Delhi. What is the purpose, I wonder, of all this restlessness? I sometimes seem to myself to wander around the world merely accumulating material for future nostalgias. (Seth, 35)

In this passage, Seth says that he often remembers his past and thinks that he travels so that he can “merely acquire material for future nostalgias” driven by a sort of “restlessness.” This trope of remembering and thereby showing possession of places is a common technique in travel writing, but what Seth does through it in his text is to show that, for him, it is always about a state of thinking of previous places he had visited, where he also thought of places he had visited before that. Everything is “material for future nostalgias.” California does not have preference over England or Delhi; all are equal and all recalled in the same act of drinking or eating. None of them is home or ‘the center’ to which he must

make his final report. This point is stressed by his use of questioning the purpose of his "restlessness." While to the colonizing travel writers it was about adding to Western acquisitions, reporting to some epistemological society and spreading imperial influences, Seth, as someone not centered in the West, seems to be doing it solely for himself, to gather "materials" for personal "nostalgia". Not to promote tourism or panoptican systems of knowledge.

The reason Seth provides for traveling is selfish but also gracious. He says he travels for solely personal benefits, yet does so in a manner that conveys deep respect and value for the places he travels through. This sensitivity of representation towards the places covered in the writings is marked through conscientious and constant historicization of them. Both *Orientalism* and *Empire Writes Back*, seminal works of post-colonial theory, points out that one of the hallmarks of the Western imperializing texts is that they show places as being blank and stuck in a single moment of time, lacking a process of social evolution or history that have brought them to the state in which they were being represented in those texts. Said explained this phenomenon as being about representing the non-European ahistorically:

According to traditional orientalists, an essence should exist ... this essence is both "historical," since it goes back to the dawn of history, and both a-historical, since it transfixes the being, "the object" of study within its inalienable and non-evolutionary specificity, instead of defining it as all other beings, states, nations, peoples, and cultures – as a product, a resultant of the vection of forces operating within the field of historical evolution. (Said, 97)

According to the arguments of Pratt, this trope of "ahistoricism" is conveyed in travel writing in the form of aestheticizing the landscape; it is represented as "a painting and the description is ordered in terms of background, foreground, symmetries between foam-flecked water and mist flecked hills, and so forth." (204) Now while in these lines, Pratt explains an instant of the explorer's first sight of some "undiscovered" landscape in Richard Burton's *Lake Regions of Central Africa*, she also says that it is typical of the colonialist trend of travel writing, texts which function as methods of imperial acquisitions and spreading the colonizer's economy.

However rather than making the subjects of their travels ahistorical, Iyer, Gosh, and Seth highlight that cultural, political, and social histories are fundamental to the ontology of the places in the way they represent them in *From Heavens Lake, Dancing in Cambodia, at large in Burma*, and *Falling Off the Map*. In *From Heavens Lake*, Seth makes the Cultural Revolution a constant presence through continuous references to internal displacements, Communist totalitarianism, or through the recording of the effect it had on the minority Muslim community. Seth writes that a young Muslim man says: "The whole flavour of our life

changed during those years. We could hardly even eat meat, because none of the meat sold in the shops had been slaughtered in the prescribed manner. It was considered a vestige of feudal thought for us to maintain the custom' ” (31). What is shown here is an example of the polity and political history playing themselves out in the daily lives of the ordinary people. It shows that the everyday experience of a young Muslim's personal faith and identity is directly dictated by the changes brought about through the Communist government's policies.

Ghosh also makes the historical perspective a central point of his representation of Cambodia in his book. He begins *Dancing in Cambodia, at large in Burma* representing the arrival of the Cambodian royal family to France in 1906, thereby highlighting the dynamics of power in France's colonization of the South-east Asian nation. And after the prologue of the first chapter, which in addition to introducing the dancers who play a critical part in his narrative of search also presents the traces of European imperialism, Ghosh shows how the horrors of the Cambodian genocide become central in forming one of the characters in the narrative. Molyka, a friend of Ghosh and a civil servant in the post-Khmer Rouge Cambodian Government, who lost most of her family during the genocide and so her daily life is also a manifest testimony to the historical and political upheavals that made up Cambodia at that moment in time when Ghosh is traveling through. It is an active choice made by the author that the eras of Angkor Watt, French Colonialism, and the Khmer Rouge years are all the focus for most of the narrative. He does so to underscore the importance of history in the place that he is describing. Even the moment of January 1993 is consciously historicized by Ghosh in what he says of the ubiquitous UN Transitional Authority in Cambodia (UNTAC) presence in Phnom Penh: “Phnom Penh had temporarily become one of the most cosmopolitan towns in the world, its streets a traffic nightmare, with UNTAC's white Land Cruisers cutting through shoals of careering scooters, mopeds and *cyclo-pousses*, like whales through drifting plankton.” (Ghosh, 5) Through this image of whales and planktons, what Ghosh does can be read as showing the historical vection of forces as manifested in the movement of the larger international community gradually moving into an underdeveloped and uncoordinated Cambodia waking up from decades of devastating civil war.

And Iyer situates the places he writes about in the context of the historical global community too. *Falling Off the Map* contains pieces on North Korea, Argentina, Cuba, Iceland, Bhutan, Vietnam, Paraguay, and Australia, places that Iyer feels does not “fit in,” “[had] no seat at our international dinner tables,” were not “on international wavelengths.” (Iyer, 4) His presentations of these places are completely historical, contexted with relation to the international community and economic progress based on a historical perspective. He says that the places are isolated and situated within time: “More than in space, then, it is in time that Lonely Places are often exiled, and it is their remoteness from the present tense

that gives them their air of haunted glamour... You wind back the clock several decades when you visit a Lonely Place.” (7) What he says is explicit articulation of his intent at writing about these places. He says that the places are constituted in time, and one “[winds] back the clock several decades when [one] visits a Lonely Place.” Those places have histories that are not conflated with the history of the wider world. The “lonely places” have their own remote histories, which must first be understood if one is to understand the places themselves.

In addition to this historicization of places, the three writers also focus on the hybrid identities peopling in the landscapes they travel through. In ‘Remembering Fanon’, Homi Bhabha contends that a new hybrid identity or subject-position emerges from the interweaving of elements of the coloniser and colonised challenging the validity and authenticity of any essentialist cultural identity (Williams and Chrisman, 117). Iyer foregrounds the presence of these hybrid populace – parts of the populace containing both Western and non-Western characteristics – in his text on Vietnam. He shows that the global polyglot culture is such that it even manifests in individuals in the “Lonely Places.” In the section on Vietnam in *Falling of the Map*, called ‘Yesterday Once More’, he shows that the resort of Nha Trang is full of Vietnamese tourists and locals who present Western yuppie personas:

They are from Ho Chi Minh City...belong to a “new species” (as the Japanese call their yuppies). Around them, as the road goes south, you also begin to feel corruption in the air: Vietnamese Bruce Springsteen sound-alikes growl from every café, pirated cassettes fill the marketplace, and the line between tourist and native blurs. One is back, one senses, in Marlboro country. (130)

In these lines we see that the tourists are not Westerners but from Ho Chi Minh City; they are Vietnamese. These “new species” or the yuppies, are affluent and have been exposed to, and significantly influenced by, the Western culture constituting the base of the culture of globalization; these “new species” are the hybrids identities. But Iyer says that what he sees in Nha Trang is even more remarkable because it is what he calls “corruption,” where “the line between tourist and native blurs.” What he presents is that the rich Vietnamese tourists influence the locals into taking on hybrid identities too; direct Western colonial systems are no longer required to create the hybrid identities. Elements of colonizers and colonized are omnipresent and influence subject formation everywhere through the interactions between the powerful and subject classes: everywhere is “Marlboro country.” Thus, Iyer shows, the formation of hybrids has become standard, it is the norm; the double vision identity, which denies essentialist cultural identities, have become the situation on the ground regardless of whatever purists dictate.

Ghosh also presents an example of the hybrid character in his narrative when he describes the Cambodian soldier who tries to extort money from them. Ghosh describes the soldier:

“I looked up and saw a State soldier standing in the middle of the dirt road, directly ahead. He was in his teens like most uniformed Cambodians; he was wearing round, wire-rimmed glasses and his pelvis was thrust out MTV-style. But instead of a guitar he had an AK47.” (9)

Here too we see the description of the teen hinting at an identity interweaving different elements, mix the AK 47 of civil war Cambodia with MTV style cockiness.

The last point to note about the representations of places by the three authors is that all show the places they go through and narrate are unique and exist separately as themselves. While the writers do acknowledge that their subject matters are connected to other regions and other parts of the country covered – tie in with other places – they also show that the places function and exist by their own logics, reasons, or systems of legitimization. Jean-Francois Lyotard termed this phenomenon of being organized by smaller local ideas about determinations as postmodern paralogy. In his work on postmodernism called “The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge,” the professor of Philosophy said about the new form of knowledge:

the society of the future falls less within the province of Newtonian anthropology (such as structuralism or systems theory) than a pragmatics of language particles. There are many different language games – a heterogeneity of elements. They only give rise to institutions in patches – local determinism. (Cahoone, 482)

What Lyotard explains in the passage is known as postmodern paralogy, a way where large singular and unifying methods of organizing and understanding gives way to institutions in patches. He informs that knowledge in the postmodern condition is locally determined. While the subject of Lyotard’s analysis in “The Postmodern Conditions: A Report on Knowledge” is about the production of knowledge, how meaning is made in the postmodern condition, his prognoses also apply easily to notions such as the single homogenous nation state or the idea of a globalized human family.

In an astute commentary, Seth reports that Mao is still revered in Tibet even though he is largely discredited in the rest of China. In pages 141-142 of *From Heaven Lake*, he asks a local Tibetan name Nrobu why the Mao cult persists in Tibet despite the fact that he is largely “criticized as having made grave errors of policy and practice” in the rest of the nation. Nrobu replies that “the problem [is that] the deification worked too well. Because of the precedent of the worship of the Dalai Lama, Mao is now seen by many as another god-king.” (142) This

example that the tradition of deification in Tibet soon turns into an adoption of a Chinese symbol, largely discredited as a part of government policy, as an icon because it helps maintain Chinese control and legitimacy is an instant of Lyotard's idea of local determinism. It is ironic that the local people of Tibet enforce the continuing use of Mao's cult status there despite the Chinese Government's firm policy against it but it is also pragmatics. It is because deification in Tibet is a deep rooted tradition and so the central government adopts it to their ends as a form of pragmatics – kept in place because it works to promulgate their objectives in that place, even though it is strictly against the policy of the absolute and totalitarian central government in the rest of China.

Iyer also shows that even though some of the nations he visits might be a part of a larger ideological continuum in name, as in the Western first world (Australia and Iceland), or the Communist second world (Vietnam, Cuba and North Korea), each one is its own entity. Each is different from its progenitors, each is organized along its own reasons and creates itself because of itself, separate from other nations. This is what he explains when he says, “[the] ruling passion in Vietnam is not any imported political system but simply for Vietnam. Nationalism, not Marxism, is what drove people to lay down their lives.” (133)

Lyotard would probably also feel validated if he read or lived in the Australia Iyer describes; he would immediately term the society as created along the knowledge systems of postmodernity. Iyer says about Australia:

At times, in fact, one has the impression that it is less a culture than an aggregation of subcultures, a society of fringes – of surfers, cowboys, boozers, and hippies. Alternative life-styles are the norm in many places, and the prospect of starting a new life has natural appeal for those committed to Rebirthing. (181)

The representation of the landscape is irrefutably what is understood as the postmodern. It is a society that is “an aggregation of subcultures, a society of fringes – of surfers, cowboys, boozers, and hippies.” A place where the alternative is the norm and is committed to “Rebirthing.” There, what is normal elsewhere in the world is not applicable, everything is made up of the “fringes.” Australia does not function along the tradition of the Western metropolitan centers of England and America, both of which are its benefactors and progenitors.

Thus looked at through the prism of theory we see all three texts presenting the themes of historicization, hybridity and local determinism that allow for significant post-colonial and poststructuralist readings. Ghosh, Seth and Iyer are among the most respected writers in the world; they are well-informed, highly educated and consciously observant. When they decided to write works along the tradition of travellogues, they took on the trope conscientiously and produced texts that wrote themselves along the lines informed on the power inherent in

traditional system of the genre. The revisionist movements in epistemology and ontology initiated by the post-structuralism, which morphed into post-colonialism, continue to be politically and aesthetically notable. Post-colonial texts are some of the most significant writings in English produced in the last thirty years. And as can be seen by informed readings of *From Heaven Lake, Dancing in Cambodia, at large in Burma*, and *Falling Off the Map*, the agendas of subversion, appropriation, heterogeneity of representations, when applied to the genre of travel writing also produce texts that are subtly powerful and profound in their honesty.

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