

Beyond Orientalism: Early English Travelers Accounts Fiction or Reality

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1. Introduction

India, the home of an ancient civilization, has been much written as a land of Luxury, exotic beauty of pearls and jewel of the Banian, the palm, of mystic religions and the center of the choicest condiments. This classical image of India was established by travelers – those remarkable people who ventured to remote lands in the grab of missionaries, ambassadors, merchants, chaplains, writers or even rulers. Many of them conveyed back the impression to their countrymen through lively tales, narratives, anecdotes and travel journals. These travelers came from far and near. They were from China, Russia, Persia, Slavic countries, Italy, Germany, Holland, France, Portugal, England and many other lands; first Greek traveler Seylax to Megasthenese, or Muslim mathematician Albruni to Buddhist priest Fah-Hien, they adopted various routes to enter Hindustan. The Land routes to India cover the north-eastern and north western boundaries of Sub-continent. Travellers had to cross Iran, Afghanistan, Russia, Tibet, China and Burma before arriving Hindustan. The Indian Ocean provided other routes for India through the Persian Gulf and Arabian Sea. It is probably the most ancient and maritime commerce route of Indus Valley civilization and was likely linked with West Asia.

In 1486, the Portuguese discovered the route through the Cape of Good Hope, established by Vasco Da Gama, when he sailed from Lisbon on 8th July 1497 arriving Calicut on 19th May 1498 A.D. This new development created interest for Indian curiosities and commodities in European markets. Many European nations traveled by sea after Da Gama discovered the Cape route.¹ these routes had many fears and difficulties with them due to hurricanes, gales and winds, spending months in traveling. In spite of all these difficulties, the prospect of reaching the destination could not be explained in words. As Sir William Jones described this pleasure: "When I was at sea last August on my Voyage to this country which I had long and ardently desired to visit, I found one evening, on inspecting the observation of the day that India Lay before us, Persia on our left; whistle' a breeze from Arabia, blew nearly on our stern. A situation so pleasing in itself and to me so new, could not fail to awaken a train of reflections in a mind which had already been accustomed to contemplate with delight, the eventful histories and agreeable fictions of the eastern world. It gave me inexpressible pleasure to find myself in the midst of so noble an amphitheatre almost encircled by the best regions of Asia which has never been esteemed the nurse of science the inventers of delightful and useful arts, the scene of glorious actions, fertile in the productions of human genius, abounding in natural wonders and infinitely diversified in

the forms of religion and government, in the law, manners, customs and languages as well as in the features and complexions of men."²

Da Gama had made history, revisited India with 20 ships in 1502 and with the arrival of Afonso de Albuquerque in 1503, and the Portuguese became more involved in the trade and occupation. Many Portuguese travelers tried to consolidate their power and spread Christianity in India after the arrival of Da Gama. The Jesuits reached Akbar's court in 1580, the name of father Anthonia Monserrate is very important, a distinguished scholar who wrote his account in Latin and father Jerome and Xavier who was received by Akbar in 1596 A.D.³

The arrival of Portuguese paved a way for French, Dutch and British through sea route. The first English man who wrote his account is father Thomas Stephens, who arrived in India in 1579 A.D and remained here until his death in 1619 A.D. He produced several works including "The Christian Purana" in Marathi. Another missionary, Henry Lord, who was appointed as a preacher by the East India company around 1630 A.D, devoted his energies in studying Hindus and Parsis, he was the author of "A discoverie of the sect of the Banians" his second work "The religion of the Perses." Irrespective of their religious activities, the British travelers were the only one who produced a wealth of literature on India in comparison to other travelers.⁴ This trend began with Ralph Fitch, the first English merchant traveler to India who arrived in 1583 A.D. This was followed by the accounts of Thomas Coryate, Sir Thomas Roe, Francois Bernier, Niccaolo Manucci and many more about the Mughal rule in India. The English writings covered every aspect of life in India especially economic, social and cultural. In the mid of seventeenth century with the process of governing India, these writings were naturally influenced through the ideas, activities and pattern of life. The seventeenth century traveler writings portrayed Hindus as "gentiles" "barbaric" and "others". The English made numerous distinctions about Hindus and Muslims.⁵

2. Beyond Orientalism

The idea of presenting Hindus as "Gentiles" and "barbaric", through these writings of travelers, mostly influenced by the Said "orientalism Said sought to untangle the way in which western literary and scholarly representation of the east were fatally inflected by political power.⁶ Said's idea of political power was much influenced by the Michael Foucault concept of power. "The productivity of Foucault's concept of power/knowledge lies in its refusal of an epistemology which opposes essence/ appearance, ideology/science.

“Power/Savoir” places subject in a relation of power and recognition that is not part of a symmetrical or dialectical relation-self/other master/slave.... Who can then be subverted by being inverted. Subjects are always disproportionately placed in opposition or domination through the symbolic decentering of multiple power relations which play the role of support as well as target or adversary. . it is difficult to conceive of the process of subjectification as a placing with in orientalist or colonial discourse for the dominated subject without the dominant being strategically placed within it too.”⁷

Homi. K Bhabha is of the view that “having introduced the concept of discourse (Said) does not face up to the problem it creates for an instrumentalist notion of power/knowledge” he seems to require. Bhabha’s concept of “ambivalence disrupts the clear cut dichotomy between the colonizer and the colonized. The colonial discourse wants to produce compliant subject who mimic the colonizer, but instead it produced ambivalent subject whose mimicries not quite”. His argument is based on these lines “Discursive process by which the excess of slippage produced by ambivalence of mimicry (almost the same, but not quite) does not merely rupture the discourse but becomes transformed unto an uncertainty which fixes the colonial subject as a “partial” presence. Partial means both “incomplete” and virtual”. It is as if the every emergence of the colonial is dependent for its representation upon some strategic limitation or prohibition within the authoritative discourse itself.”⁸

Said’s concepts of European discourse on Middle East were linked to power trafficked in racist stereotypes and continually reproduced it. As all kinds of controversies Said performed a major political as well as intellectual service. He made this orientalism available to all; especially this work is considered one of the foundational texts not only in the field of orientalism but also in the large spectrum of post colonial cultural studies. Colonial representations were instrumental in shaping the cultures of those world inhabited by colonizers and colonized. Said effectively portrayed the dichotomies between powerful, active colonizer and “passive native people.”⁹ But these “passive native people” resisted against colonizers. This Foucauldian insight is scarcely adequate to explain the relationship between “the West” and “the Rest.” Europe has always tended to consider itself as a cultural capital of the world that is as “heading” or “promontory” not only in geographical sense but in the sense of providing a lead for “world civilization” or human culture in general as Jaccob Derrida observes. Derrida calls the ethnocentrism of European science of writings in the late seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries “a symptom of the general crisis of European consciousness”. It is a part of greater system or perhaps the crisis itself, the slow form of Feudalism to Capitalism through the first wave of capital imperialism¹⁰ but on the other way round; “Orientals are despotic and clannish they are despotic when placed in the position of power and sly and obsequious when in subservient position. Orientals are impossible to trust. They are capable of sophisticated abstraction but not of concrete, practical organization or rigors. Their men are sexually incontinent while their women are locked up behind the bars. Orientals are by definition strange.”¹¹

These ideas and thoughts about East were the creation of systematic knowledge of West about East in 18th and 19th century. Ronald Inden makes an attempt to reconstruct the India politely in early medieval period, the build of Indies focuses on the deconstruction of essentialist categories such as caste, color, Indian mind and divine kingship. This work analyses the orientalist ideas about India. It differentiates the orientalist ideas and colonial projects to organize the rule on Indian society” but this was the development of 18th century.¹²

Most critical works dealing with seventeenth century European representations of India follow Said discourse of Orientalism, but also attempt to qualify Said argument by situating their critique within the critical frame work provided by critics like Lowe and Bhabha ,”they have noted the dialogic strains within colonial narratives and called for anti-essentialist revision of previously monolithic history in which colonial/postcolonial identity is already overwritten by the differential play of colonialist ambivalence. Conceptualizing colonial power as a discursive formation in the foucauldian sense, they challenge the notion of colonial discourse as a close system “that mange and colonizes otherness”¹³

Daniel Martin Varisco’s surveys, the extensive criticism of Said’s methodology, he argues that “the politics of polemics need to be superseded by more academic discussion of real cultures in the region once imagined as an orient beyond the binary blame game” he concludes “The notion of oriental homogeneity will exist as long as prejudice serves political ends. But to blame the sins of its current form on hegemonic intellectualism moves mitigation of bad and biased. It is the time to read beyond orientalism.” But orient is an integral part of European material civilization and culture. The time sense or colonial project may be different as Varisco defines.¹⁴ Gayatri Spivak highlights how Gilles Deleuze and Michel Foucault confine the decentering of subjectivity to the West, which represents the non western, others as real and knowable.¹⁵

This orientalism was quite logical in Late 17th and 18th centuries when European colonial domains expanded from about 35% to about 85% of the earth surface. Every continent was affected not only Africa and Asia. The two greatest empires were the British and French¹⁶ as Lisa Low’s concern about situating the argument with in the specific historical context, “a concern with the diversity and historical particularity run through.”¹⁷ “The problem of the colonizer is in some sense the problem of writer; in the face of what may appears a vast cultural and geographical blankness, colonization is a form of self-inscription onto the lives of people who are conceived of as an extension of the landscape.”¹⁸

However one of the problems with the approaches of critics: critics such as Homi Bhabha and Lisa Lowe among several others (who) have noted the dialogic strains within colonial narrative and called for anti- essentialist revisions of a previously monolithic history . . . in which colonial/post colonial identity is always already over written by the differential play of colonialist ambivalence They challenged the notion of colonial discourse as closed system

that manages the colonial “otherness”.¹⁹ Aijaz Ahmad clarifies this statement in these words; “If there really is only this seamless and incremental History of “Orientalist Discourse” from Aeschylus to Dante to Marx to Bernard Lewis, then in what sense could one take the eighteenth century” as a roughly defined starting point”? “In other words, one does not really know whether “Oriental discourse” begins in the post Enlightenment period or at the dawn of European civilization, whether in the period of the Battle of Plassey or in the days of the Battle of Tory.”²⁰

The narrative, histories, tales and explorations represented as principal authority, an active point of energy that made senses not just of colonizing activities but of exotic geographies and people. The native people who had been appeared either as subservient or sullenly and non-co-operative. One of the imperialism achievements was to bring the world closer, although in the process of separation between European and native was an insidious and fundamentally unjust one.²¹ Colin Thubron has pointed out (article in the TLS, 30th July 1999), “it is ridiculously simplistic to see all attempts at studying, observing and empathizing with another culture necessarily as an act of domination – rather than of understanding respect or even catharsis.... if even the attempt to understand to seen as an aggression or appropriation, then all contact declines into paranoia”²²

The stage for the British Empire in India was set in the seventeenth century. This setting was provided by British travelers who created “India as a land of ‘alertly’ and otherness vis-a vis a European hierarchy of differences” British had to establish and consolidate their power in India but the contrast between Britain and India during this period was striking. Britain was a growing nation in possession of the techniques, organization and energy which would enable her to become a world power. She was in the midst of a political, social and economic transformation. She was losing her medieval aspects. Britain transformation (from rural to industrial) was the great importance to the development of British attitudes towards her colonies. Britain was noticeably rural, its industry was largely handicrafts, its society and culture was predominantly aristocratic and conservative. As the main phase of the industrial revolution occurred in Britain, the physical appearance and intellectual outlook of the nation was transformed. With new industries, new sources of railway and steamship lines had been established. Britain foreign trade had expanded greatly. But before industrial revolution the English society was just like the societies of Africa and Indies as narrated by travelers.²³ Aijaz Ahmad observes, “narrative of convergence between colonial knowledge and colonial powers simply cannot be assembled within cultural studies itself because histories of economic exploitation, political coercion, military conquest play the far more constitutive part (in colonialism); those other histories are the one which provide the enabling conditions for the “orientalist discourse.”²⁴

A vivid sense of this interpretive process can be found in the travel narratives of the man who came to India in a variety of rules like father Anthonio Monserrate for the rise of Christianity, Sir Thomas Roe as a diplomat, Thomas

Coryate as an adventurer or Chaplin Edward Terry administrating to English Souls and Pertrio Della Valle as independent traveler. The methodology of these writers reflect certain concern about cataloging the social custom of the land, day to day events, cultural and religious ceremonies of “others” to which they had an easy access. Overall they functioned as historian as well as ethnographers revealed the way in which history, ethnography and literature intersect in the blend of “fact” and “fiction”.²⁵

There is a large rather old tradition of cultural criticism which addresses the issues of empire as well as the use of literature and knowledge industry that generates imperial ideologies, both for domestic consumption within the metropolitan countries and for the export to the imperial formation. As Kate Teltscher states, “The seventeenth and early eighteenth centuries it is possible to speak of European tradition of writing about India. Travel accounts were frequently translated into several European languages and gathered into collections of voyages. Francois Bernier’s hugely influential accounts of Mughal history for instance was published in France in 1670-71, translated into English in 1671-73 and 1675. In a study of the first European traveler’s representations were different Though divers and internally competitive, easily crossed boundaries of nation and creed; the same can be said of early representations of India, and so, like Greenblatt. I have decided not to accord. Those boundaries an absolute respect.”²⁶

From the earliest encounter with non-European natives, European’s have described their travels in terms of discovering marvels and monstrosities. In doing so, they have deployed the rhetorical strategy of mingling eye-witness descriptions with fables and myths derived from the poetic geography of medieval, classical and biblical text. Samuel Purchas Claims in “Purchas his Pilgrims (1625) the generic expectations of travel narratives by mentioning “varities of nature” and “extra ordinary wonders which god providence hath hericin effected.” Thus given such generic pre-requisites, English travelers to India in seventeenth century tended not to recognize the discrepancies of their roles, functionaries or beneficiaries of the East India company and as compliers of knowledge of all that is curious and strange. Henry Lord (A Discoveries of the sect of Banians 1630) describes travelers as worthy adventures and praises their works that hare in them anything foreign and exotic in the limit and confine of you adventures.”

Thomas Coryate (1618) describes in his oration before the Mughal king embellishes the account of his journey with the received narrative about fables “Tamburlaine” whose fame by reason of his waves and victories is published over the whole world.”²⁷

The Roman aristocrat Pietro Della Valle who introduced in the travelers list in a letter of 1623 A.D. His expedition from the Dutch factory at Surat towards the mysterious customs, rites and temples of gentile India. Peterio Della Vella was particularly aware of the diversity of oriental nations and religions and of the distinctions between Muslims and non - Muslims since he had already spent many years in Ottoman Empire and Persia. He had created his own myth as traveler

from the social and religious values of chivalric Renaissance and the Catholic counter – reformation. Della Valle personal experience was not whimsical but based on human diversity.²⁸

Cultural criticism that makes use of logic of “otherness” must historicize and theorize its own method and object. It is to say that theories are produced as are all narratives in particular social context and pressures of the historical moments. Instead of using homogeneous categories the above mentioned those factors make these narrate ambiguous. Terry and Roe are typical in projecting the images of English society onto Indian Society and recording the differences “The Accounts of Roe , Terry and others are . . . implicated in religious, social and ideological codes of time such as a belief in the natural superiority of Christianity” over the non-Christian heathen. Whether one considers Thomes Roe as an early colonist or not, his struggles in interpreting proliferating cultural signifiers in the Indian society reinforce”²⁹. It is necessary to sort out the problem of language understanding to decode the cultural system of any country. The limits of such dialogues are obvious; the constraints of the space and time, the depth and complexity of assumptions beyond certain points, but these limits do not detract the fact that people from different cultures were able to meet and learn about each other .As Rubies suggests, but the problem with Indian continent was, a vast region having numerous languages even the language of southern and northern India did not match with each like European In this scenario, the problem of language understanding could not be sum up in few lines.³⁰In the relationship between orientalism and colonialism Portuguese were much more colonial even in the 16th century. As R.S Whiteway comments, “There does exist a common right to all to navigate the sea and in Europe we (Portuguese) acknowledge the right, but this right does not extend beyond Europe and therefore Portuguese’s as “Lords of the Seas” by strength of their fleet are justified in compelling all Moors and Gentiles to take out safe conducts under pain of confiscation and death. The Moors and Gentiles are outside the law of the Jesus.”³¹

Da Gama tortured helpless fisherman, Almeida tore out the eyes of Nair who had come with the promise of his life, Albuquerque cut off the nose of a woman and hands of man who fell into his power on the Arabian coast and there is every reason to believe the horrible cruelties which were committed on their hold of Calicut.³² Joan- Pau Rubies described the observations and comparison of those travelers who visited southern India specially after the period of Renaissance like Varthema, Durate Barbose ,Poggio and Conti. These valuable accounts of south encompassed the discourse of orientalism. Valignano ruthlessly defined the Indian Gentiles as; “These people who were almost black and go half naked are universally contemptible and held to be base by the Portuguese and other Europeans.”³³

In the analysis of Akbar’s Mughal state Botero had announced the general thesis that oriental kings could muster enormous armies because they arm them sanctity, feed them poorly and kill them easily.”³⁴ However, in the latter half of sixteenth and in the early years of seventeenth century there was a substantial change in English policies towards Mughal Empire because of the East India Company’s charter of

1657A.D “Included a grant authorizing the company to fortify and colonize any of its establishments and to transport to them settlers stores and ammunition.” Before that English diplomat Sir Thomas Roe warned about the incapability of trade and conquest. The idea of trade based on alliance not on military conquest is evident in his travel writing in which the Mughal Empire is constructed as a friendly trading partner of its English counterpart.”³⁵

English were struggling to compete with their rivals; to capture the trade route in Arabian Sea; Mughals also wanted English to support them against the Portuguese. Thomas Roe also assured prince Khurram that English would be “good ally and friend” of Mughals against Portuguese. They destroyed the power of Portuguese with this alliance in Persian Gulf (1622).³⁶It is very easy to write with the discourse of orientalism but very difficult to evaluate the travel writings without orientalism as it is very easy to criticize but difficult to rationalize. These travel accounts are a great source of history and culture of medieval India. They recorded their observations about those things which were usually ignored by local historian. The detailed record of Portuguese and Dutch are not available except a few. The account of other European nations like Italian, Spanish and English provide details about every aspect of Indian life. Sometime these travelers criticized the customs, rituals and taboos of Indian society and sometime they appreciated them vigorously.

3. Conclusion

These cultural observations could not gauge with the banner of Imperialism as Edward said identifies, "Culture is a concept which includes refined and elevating element’s of each Society’s reservoirs of the best that has been known thoughts as Mathew Arnold put in ,if it does not altogether neutralize the revenges of modern, aggressive mercantile and brutalizing Urban existence. Culture in a sense is a source of identity -----rather than the source of superiority. Culture is a historical experience. All cultures are involved in one another; none is single and pure, all are hybrid heterogeneous, extra ordinary differentiated and un - monolithic.”³⁷ culture is a “Source of identity. Culture never looks through the course of orientalism and colonialism” Indian culture is deep rooted, existed from centuries in the same order and indigenous people who are heatedly called “Gentiles” were the care taker of this culture. Invaders come and go whereas the, culture sustain. The reason behind this notion is irrespective of absorbing many nations of the world, this culture is still versatile. Travel writings also describe the features as Edward Terry high lights “Every culture has it goods and bads.”³⁸ Besides the travel accounts, other sources of information regarding Indian culture during 16th and 17th centuries are those letters and records which are valuable with regards to the commercial, social and political conditions of India These letters were written by the servants of East India Company and English factory record (1635-56).

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