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Travelogues and the Construction of Regional Identities

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Abstract-- In the past, travel writing has been significant in shaping and contesting regional identities, not least in mountainous and culturally rich places like South and East Asia. This chapter looks to examine the significance of travel writing and the travelogue - whether it was written by colonial explorers, modern-day tourists, or voices of diaspora - as a site of mediation of cultural sensibility and national imaginaries. By focusing on key narratives from first-hand accounts of both intra-regional and extra-regional travellers, the chapter seeks to discuss how identities are constructed via the key themes of encounters, representations, and motion: that wandering re-establishes the original harmony which once existed between man and the universe. In Tibetan culture, this phenomenon is reinforced through the definition of a human being as a 'Gro-ba,' a 'go-er,' one who is expected to go on 'Sacred Journey' and one who goes on migrations. By the comparative approach, the chapter engages with a selection of texts of travel writing in Indian, Chinese, Japanese and Southeast Asian traditions and examines the ways in which they describe local practices or customs or landscapes or the 'Other,' often with a framework that is admiring but with residual orientalist perceptions; sometimes pushing back on imperial perceptions through self-representation. The analysis reveals that travelogues are not a matter of simply journey from A to B but rather ways of asserting cultural belonging, historical continuance, and regional solidarity. The intersection of South and East Asian travel writing also reveals an overlapping colonial past, transnational mobility and modern aspirations for a regional identity. The chapter ultimately shows that travelogues are important sites for the construction and negotiation of regional identity and provide venue for opening discussions in the Asian context about tradition versus modernity, nationalism and cosmopolitanism as also self and the other.

Keywords-- Travel writing, Spatial narratives, Hybridity, Cultural circulation, Pan-Asianism, Regional imaginaries, Narrative positioning, Contact zones, Orientalist discourse

I. REPRESENTATIONAL POLITICS

It is so said that the cultural and genetic history portrays intense power discourse in the emerging tropes of South and East Asian travel writing sensationalized by the people and culture of the region. In order to critically analyze this aspect, this chapter adopts a multi-modal theoretical approach informed by postcolonial theory, transnationalism, and narrative theory.

The purpose of these lenses is to provide a critical examination of the representational politics involved in the practices of travel narratives and to demonstrate how identity, space, and cultural meaning are not a static or binary process, but rather a practice that always takes place while moving.

Edward Said's critique of 'Orientalism' serves as the foundation of the approach presented here. Said argues that centuries of Western representations of the East have consistently served colonial projects by representing Asia as fixity, exotic, and inferior thus legitimizing dominion. While in travel writing, and especially travel writing during colonialism, these habits are explicit and more pronounced, as descriptions of native customs can be gratuitous – romanticized or derided, and representing landscapes as picturesque as the landscape of the other in colonial exploration or conquest. By applying Said's theory of Orientalism, we can look at how colonial travelogues by British, French or Dutch travellers in South and East Asia constructed the "Other." This "Other" is so positioned in post-colonial discourse to construct something that has continued existence. This chapter does not end at critique, but traces how both contemporary and indigenous writing reject and subvert these tropes, and open the space of cultural self-representation.

In order to go beyond the colonial binary of colonizer and colonized, the chapter examines Homi Bhabha's notions of hybridity, mimicry, and ambivalence. Bhabha contends that identity is not static, but rather is negotiated in "in-between" spaces or what he calls the Third Space. This extends to my analysis of intra-Asian travel writing, where the dynamics of power are wholly different than colonial binaries. For example, Rabindranath Tagore was neither omitted from imperial travels nor was he wholly a stranger when he travelled to Japan and China. In this way, Tagore's writings attested cultural respect and philosophical alignments, the liminal positionality Bhabha refers to: a site in which identities are performed, negotiated, and transformed. By contrast, diaspora writers traveling in their ancestral or unfamiliar Asian discourses often expressed themselves as from multiple and/or hybrid positions, exposing how identities transcend borders, histories, and associations.



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Mary Louise Pratt's idea of "contact zones" really adds an element to our schema. Pratt points out contact zones as social spaces where cultures come into contact, often in conflict with and in relation to each other—typically asymmetrically in terms of power relations. Rather than simply a physical space, in the case of travel writing about Asia, the contact zone can be a narrative space where cultures are recontextualized and meanings contested. For instance, whether the South Korean traveller in Kerala or the Japanese scholar writing about Sri Lanka, the travel writing becomes a textual contact zone wherein there are moments of translation, misunderstanding, admiration, and negotiation. Travel writing is often dialogic allowing for both the traveller and the host culture's worldview to be present, which complicates the notion of a singular identity.

The interplay of close textual reading, comparison, and cross-disciplinary synthesis mentioned here makes no attempt to privilege a particular tradition of travel writing, but rather looks to juxtapose narratives from different historical timelines, cultural contexts, and authorial identities to accommodate the range and variability of the genre. The primary texts presented were chosen from:

- ❖ Xuanzang's pilgrimage to India in the 7th Century, which recounts not only the sacred Buddhist places, but also the spiritual and philosophical connectedness of ancient China and India. He chronicles an early phase of pan-Asian religious solidarity, with a non-Western orientation to travel, in which learning and reverence is at the center of his travel.
- ❖ Rabindranath Tagore's diary, 'Japan Yatrir Diary' and speeches surrounding his trips to Japan and his documentation in 'Yatri' through essays, speeches and letters about his 49 days China visit in 1924, which was published in 1929, shared a poetic reflection alongside explicit political sensibilities. His accounts underscore cultural diplomacy, aesthetic similarity, and an Asia spiritually and intellectually joined together—a notion often in apprehension of colonial supremacy and growing nationalist fanaticism.
- ❖ Ibn Batuta in the 13th Century documenting the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia in his famous work 'Rihlah' Chapter xiv, alluding to Hindustan and 'Dehli' at a time when the pre-modern Islamic world was actively engaged with broader Asia, rendering this as an act of curiosity, religious perception, and administrative vision rising apart from the evolving Emir's imperialism. The mediating actor of an Islamic perspective to the medieval world also offers complication to the purely Euro-centric historical observations of both regions as they are met through a Muslim lens.

- ❖ The dialogue of contemporary travel blogs and diasporic memoirs which continue to emerge, independent of the writers' language origin, is particularly favourable among second-generation Asian immigrants or Asian-American writers. Their works are also a resource for both private preoccupation and identity politics, negotiating issues related to heritage, cultural rupture, detachment and identifications of affiliation and belonging. Travel narratives address the contemporary understanding of mobility and self-discovery, reconnecting to ancestral origins in a multi-linked post-national environment.

In addition to exploring the content of narratives, the method considers the form and aesthetics of travel writing, how generic conventions, intertextual references, and narrative voice shaped the reader/viewer's experience of identity and place. Therefore, it examines memory in the narrative: what places are remembered, and why; how landscapes are produced in the imagination; and how nostalgia and time can obscure the boundaries between reality and narrative. So, travel narratives are not neutral texts; they are constructed from the traveller's positionality, privilege, gender, language and broader socio-political context. For example, a Japanese businessman writing about India for leisure will be writing differently from a Bangladeshi labourer returning from work in Malaysia. The differences, in the company of the differences in context, enable us to question who has the authority to narrate, what is worth narrating, and how the power of narrative might influence processes of identity construction.

II. REARTICULATING SPATIALITY AND IDENTITY

As cultural artefacts and storytelling, travelogues offer a unique way to construct, affirm and interrogate regional differences. Below are the key points about the multifaceted contributions travel writing makes to regional sensibilities and cross-cultural relationships between South and East Asia.

- ❖ *Travelogues as Narratives of Regional Consciousness*

Travel writing, fundamentally, is more than traversing unfamiliar geographies or keeping a checklist of encounters with the exotic—it is also about describing, recounting and often reconceiving meanings of space and identity. Within the contexts of South and East Asia, travel writing functions as a particularly potent literary form in the sense that it can help establish regional consciousness for writers as well as readers.



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These travel accounts do not just convey—they establish place, loaded with memory, identity and cultural significance. Travel writing becomes a cultural map of daily life, the routines of rituals, the sensorial experiences of tastes, clothing, dialects, and the architecture of belief systems. When a writer describes the carefully contoured tea rituals of Kyoto or the frenetic ghats of Varanasi, they are not simply cataloguing what they see; the writer is exercising deliberation and interpretation that alludes to perceptions of 'Asia' in its broader form and what it means to be East Asian or South Asian specifically. This construction of symbolic intuitions contributes to a vocabulary that readers formulate to conceptualize regional identity.

Travelogues, significantly, document a subjective performance of place, such that even similar places can be written about differently. A Japanese traveller might describe Kyoto different from a South Asian pilgrim, the former seeing it as a place of spiritual self-reflection and cultural continuity and the latter seeing it as a site of admiration and cultural curiosity. Varanasi is frequently described variously, as a decaying embodiment of past grandeur, a site of vibrant, living tradition, or as the confluence of life and death. These symbolic significations imbue places and regions with a density of meaning that is cultural and emotional—beyond geography.

Consequently, the narrative act of producing a text or "writing about a place" is an act of regional self-definition. In this way, when Rabindranath Tagore was writing about Japan as a traveller, he was not merely writing about what he saw, but rather he was writing and reflecting about what Asian modernity should look like and how that diverges from European examples. His impressions of Japanese aesthetics, discipline and national pride were many moments enmeshed with his colonial critique and hopes for a reimagined or revitalized Indian identity. In such cases, the travelogue becomes an object through which regions understand each other and through which writers articulate; specially with Tagore, this being a mission to synthesize East and the West as being part personal and part civilizational — "of accepting the West without betraying the East."

❖ *Challenging the West: Reclaiming Identity through Indigenous Travelogues*

Throughout the colonial period, much of Western travel writing about Asia sustained a singular framework that was based on imperialism that constructed Eastern societies as exotic, primitive, or mystical subjectivities. Specifically, canonical representations shaped by travel narratives, whether written by missionaries, soldiers, civil servants, or civilian European travellers, depicted Asia as "the Other"—as a site of enduring traditions inhabited by inscrutable people and historical decay.

Not only did these texts shape European imaginations, but they also constituted political projects of domination alongside public cultural projects of the primacy of European civilization over other societies, such as Asia. Knowledge became power as the West dominated by describing the East in the field of travel writing over the course of more than a century. Raja Rammohan Roy and Maharashtrian jurist, Mahadev Govind Ranade worked their way to "clear the way for an acceptance of whatever elements in the British are of value for the true History of India...."

While Western travel writing about Asia has historically been unidimensional, the emergence of indigenous travel writing (by Asian intellectuals, reformers, pilgrims or diasporic subjects) substantially destabilized the one-sidedness of imperial representation of travel in Asia. These counter narratives endeavoured to reclaim agency by presenting alternative texts that were constructions of the cultures being articulated in their texts. Rather than understanding Asia as a static object, as mysterious too, indigenous travelogues put lived experiences, lived histories (and many forms of mundane and persistent intellectual traditions) at the centre of their accounts that had been marginalized or ignored by colonial discourse for many decades.

Take Rabindranath Tagore's travelogues and lectures on his trips to Japan and China in the early twentieth century. Tagore was not simply a passive eyewitness but actively engaged with the cultural and political contexts of their civilizational histories, and finding similarities with India's civilizational heritage. Tagore's writings expressed an appreciation of East Asian cultures, while also cautioning against the dangers of militant nationalism and Western materialism. By combining admiration, critique and self-reflection, Tagore forged a space for intra-Asian solidarity, a counter-image directly undermining the colonial imaginations of racial and civilizational superiority.

Likewise, contemporary Asian travel writers, especially those from the diaspora, continue this legacy of reclaiming voice and space—when a Japanese-American writer returns to Kyoto, or a Pakistani-British writer travels to Lahore, their narratives become vehicles for layered identities and critical self-reflection. These authors are not simply documenting the world as they encounter it; they are also engaging in a complex inner process of belonging, often struggling with notions of inherited national, racial and cultural identity. Their travelogues function as forms of performance or reflection for them—confronting the institutionalization of stereotype, recovering erasure of self-determined histories, and imagining what it might mean to be 'Asian' in an increasingly globalized world.



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In addition, what makes these indigenous travelogues especially impactful is their diversity of voices and their diversity of intent; some authors are seeking to reclaim cultural pride, while others are critically interrogating social or cultural inequalities and foolishly conditioned gender roles in their respective societies. Nevertheless, all the authors in this collection engage in a wider epistemological shift from being the observed—being written onto history—to becoming the observers—being portrayed in their own stories. In doing so, they are not only reclaiming their identity, but redefining its narrative frame, and thus contributing to making travel writing more fully dialogical, inclusive and critical.

❖ *Intra-Asian Dialogue and the Geography of Exchange*

Long before the concept of "globalization" took root in social media, South and East Asia had engaged in a lively and organic process of cultural, religious and intellectual mobility. Travel writings from the region demonstrate that monks, scholars, traders, artists and pilgrims traversed borders often—not only for material reasons but also for spiritual understanding, diplomatic relations and culture exchange. These travelogues are more than a documentation of travels; they provide a glimpse into a shared interconnected regional history rooted in mutual curiosity and exchange.

Consider the example of Xuanzang, the Chinese Buddhist monk who travelled to India in the 7th century CE. Xuanzang's account, 'The Great Tang Records on the Western Regions,' is not just a religious itinerary; it traces a trans-regional circuit of shared belief, academic reverence and linguistic exchange. Xuanzang's travel narrative shows that the Buddhist communities that spanned India, Central Asia and China were engaged in a similar intellectual project united by the translation and communication of sacred texts. Xuanzang's detailed descriptions of Indian universities, lived experience and modes of governance expressed admiration that was motivated by spiritual and educational aims rather than conquest.

The travels of Rabindranath Tagore to Japan and China in the early 20th century also provide a remarkable case of pan-Asian solidarity born from cultural diplomacy. Tagore's lectures and essays on these travels did not merely reinforce cultural differences, but sought to remind us that these countries shared philosophies/ways of being/wisdom and resisted Imperialism and materialism of Western powers. His travel writing becomes a gentle urging for a moral and artistic reawakening across Asia—not so much as fragmented nations, subject to colonizers during Tagore's time, but as a civilization, uniquely joined by aesthetics, intrinsically wise and imbued with courage.

These travelogues construct a so-called "literary geography of exchange" not determined by political boundaries, but by encounter via ideas, feelings and relationships. Through the texts, we will start to draw out how languages, rituals, stories, even architectural styles travelled, blended, adapted and most importantly, occupied a position of mutual enrichment. At these moments of textual exchange, regional identity is not fixed, but dialogic and dynamic.

These intra-Asian accounts represent something very different from the well-worn narratives of Euro-American travelogues in the colonial age. Most of the Western accounts draw a hierarchical gaze upon the 'Orient' while intra-Asian travelogues usually take a horizontal plane of cultural encounter, where the 'self' is not antithetical to the 'other,' but somewhere along the continuum of acceptable values, historical connections and a sense of kinship that one aspired to enact. Furthermore, such narratives of travel are corroborating records of a lived Pan-Asianism, prior to becoming an idealized political imagine. Whether in the seafaring journeys of medieval Malay traders to South India, or the journeys of Japanese scholars to Nalanda to study Buddhist logic, the stories indicate a time of spatial mobility when movement was not just transactional but transformational.

❖ *The Traveller's Positionality and Narrative Power*

In every travel writing, there is a central concern: who is writing, from where? The traveller's social, political and cultural identity—their positionality—affect the way they will describe places, people and experiences. As well as being a matter of biographical detail and description, positionality illuminates the manner in which power, ideology and perception come together in documenting 'the Other.' Take a colonial officer's official account of the British colony of Burma (now Myanmar) as opposed to a record from a Buddhist monk on pilgrimage through the same area. The colonial officer's report will likely render a vision of bureaucratic order, political categorization and surveillance—mapping, controlling, and "civilizing" Burma as territory. For the monk, the journey and the land will be sacred geography rich with spiritual potential and cultural relation. Both travels. Both see. But both reports will emerge from different points of view leading to different perspectives.

This becomes much more blurred when we think about writers that are diasporic or writers who are in a transitional cultural space. For example, a second-generation Japanese-American could travel through India with both an estranged relationship and a surprising sense of similar identity.



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There is a component to their writing that is charged with what Homi K. Bhabha terms 'in-betweenness'; it becomes in-between self-identifying cultures, between the fluid self and the liminal self, navigating and crossing identity across boundaries. Positionality defines what can be seen and what can slip from view. A native traveller may take certain customs for granted and they may pass over those customs with no acknowledgement whatsoever, whereas a foreign traveller may underscore these same customs with curious interest, confusion or admiration. In addition, the traveller's perception may also be shaped by gender, class, religion and language (among other social positionalities). For example, a travelling male merchant from 18th-century Persia (who was wealthy) and a modern-day Indian woman (travelling solo) who is travelling in Southeast Asia will chronicle the same sites with two very different sensibilities.

In this way, travelogues can reveal much more than just the outer journey they tell stories about; they also present stories from the traveller's interior position. The traveller's identity does not simply colour their representation of space and people, it determines tone, authority and purpose. Some write for education, some for persuasion, some for memory and some write for the promise of a better cultural future. The positionality of the traveller allows us to see the ideological subtexts that make up travel writing; what is being centred, what is being erased, and what cultural work is being accomplished through the narrative.

❖ *Recurring Themes as Vessels of Identity*

Themes such as pilgrimage, exile, discovery, nostalgia and return are crucial to building the emotional and ideological contexts of Asian travel narratives. These themes are not incidental to the texts; rather, they serve as foundational symbolic architecture which binds the narration together while providing cultural and affective resonance. Pilgrimage is a wonderful example. Pilgrimage is more than a religious journey; it is entirely a spiritual, and even existential, act of self-definition. An illustration of this is Xuanzang's (Xuanzang) travel - from China to India in the 7th century was not just about locating Buddhist monuments, it acts as an intense meditation on devotion and discipline, and even creating a cultural bridge. Xuanzang is not only describing Buddhist sites in China and India; he is reconstructing an entire spatial geography of spirituality which can cohere two dissimilar places and plenty of others in concert through the same philosophical ancestry. This creates not only a Buddhist, but an entire transnational and Asian solidarity that is deeply enmeshed in sacred memory.

The repeatable motif of exile--whether voluntary or not--allows for themes of displacement and yearning to be articulated within travel writing and more easily defined. When travellers become separated from their place of origin (whose access was sometimes their own decision, or sometimes imposed on them), the resulting reflections tend to express a tone of yearning that conflates individual memory with cultural loss. Discovery and curiosity can also be delineated as acts of empowerment and vulnerability when individual travellers engage with the unknown while reflecting on the parameters of their own cultural assumptions. At the same time, nostalgia—especially in the hands of diasporic writers—responds to ideas of reconnection with ancestral places, or reframing inherited practices and forms. All of these themes persist in ways that can situate individual journeys within a context of a communal cultural experience that situates the individual story in a wider region and historical context. In actuality, the repeated motifs act as containers, enabling not only the story to be told but also facilitate the transfer of shared emotions, identities and memories of that community.

III. CONCLUSION

Travel writing can often become a rich site for exploring identities that are not defined by a single nation, culture, or language but are mediated by movement, memory and multiplicity. With their histories of migration, colonization, diaspora and intercultural exchange, travel narratives examined in this chapter would frequently contain protagonists or narrators with more than one cultural allegiance in the context of South and East Asia. Hybrid identities reflect the lived dynamics of regional and transregional belonging, such as a Chinese diasporic subject's Japan-tempered experience of Japanese-ness, or an Indian traveller's interaction (or transaction) with Japanese Buddhist culture.

This type of traveller experience rarely assumes a neutral observer stance. More frequently, the narrative accounts are intermixed with both personal expressions arising from personal experience and contemplation, and distance between them—possibility (or demands) of both reminisce on connection and anxiety about the distance to that experience. They describe the experience through the lens of the cultural context, however still from the marginality of an outsider—which complicates the narrative voice and situates within an intertwined relationship of being involved (in the content experiencing) and disengaged (in the senses or authorship in the narrative).



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By possessing this simultaneous positionality (or, duality), travel narratives tell us something different about the self (in transit), as well as the places travelled for consideration. Sometimes, it is apparent that the traveller is on some sort of quest to reconcile their fragmented identities; in other examples, there is recognition of the power associated with hybridity and the hybrid subject as both a cultural synthesis and aggregate. Such accounts matter because they can go beyond the nationalistic and contribute to a broader, pan-Asian consciousness. That is, the moral and ethical articulations of travel writers which emphasized shared values creating collective or regional habitus related to, for example, familial duty, life in an association, or out of a spiritual quest, generally helps to reject narrow, nationalistic imaginings. However, travel writers also acknowledge differences and diversity within the Asian experience, especially when they resist an essentializing attitude and foster intercultural respect.

In addition, travel accounts serve a critical role in relation to hegemonic global discourses that either exoticize Asian cultures or reduce them to conscripted abstract forms of geopolitical struggle. Travelling writers work to relay lived experiences and layered forms of belonging into cultural and literary conversations that sincerely engage the complex internal diversity of Asia. In doing so, travel writers create politically non-coercive forms of solidarity from their journeys, histories and hopes rather than already imposing solidarity based on political ideologies.

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