

READING VIVEKANANDA/READING TRAVEL: A POSTCOLONIAL DISCOURSE

*Mr. Subhashis Banerjee, Assistant Professor of English: Government Model College Seppa,
(Rajiv Gandhi Central University), Arunachal Pradesh, India*

Abstract:

*In the annals of literature, we see how travel writing has participated actively in the world panorama by both addressing and questioning the Empire. The depiction of faraway lands and culture were critically important to establish the unjust colonial rule. Edward Said in *Orientalism* (Vintage, 1978), pointed that the travel narratives of significant authors such as Richard Burton and Gustave Flaubert were indeed very influential to the cause of Orientalism. Said's interpretation provoked many postcolonial scholars to take travel writing seriously and they engaged in illustrating the way travel literature reinforced or transgressed colonial canon. In the post-modern field of travel literature, the writers focus more on contemporary socio-political issues rather than colonial and post-colonial debates, but the bulk of this literature deals with the legacy of Colonial-Empire, either in popular stories of adventure and travel or in the narratives on Third World countries during the colony. Perhaps, for this reason, many scholars have viewed travel literature as an inseparable part of post-colonialism. This paper has no intention to examine Vivekananda either a celebrated travelling monk from India or only an Orientalist subject; the problem of situating him in any category, as Rolfsen said, "is very complicated than his embodied polarities" (35). He appears to be a vibrant character that discarded orientalist discourses and accepted material science and religious reformation of the West together. Thus, the purpose of the study is to judge how Vivekananda defended himself not as a typical subject as constructed by the Orientals, but proved himself mosaic through his available writings. Confined neither by history nor by any ritual, Vivekananda stands as a modern man and unlike any monk ever known.*

Key Words: *Orientalism; Empire; Polarity; Liminal; Mosaic.*

Edward Said has examined a wide range of texts which were chiefly written about the Orient during the colonial period. He argues that the Western writers of the eighteenth-century have constructed the Orient as the 'Other' and by doing so; they have attempted to make the natives of the colonized countries powerless and inferior to the European colonizers. Said argue:

Everyone who writes about the Orient must locate himself in vis-à-vis the Orient; the type of structure he builds, the kinds of images, themes, motifs that circulate in his text all of which add up to the liberate ways of addressing the reader, canting the Orient and finally, representing it or speaking in its behalf. (20)

In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said examines Foucault's 'regimes of discourse', 'power and knowledge' in western countries by applying this model to what he calls orientalism, or 'colonial discourse'. Like Foucault, Said emphasizes how the will to know and understand the non-western world in colonial discourse is inseparable from the will to power over that world. The Foucauldian insight which informs Said's *Orientalism* points out the extent to which 'knowledge' about 'the orient' as it was produced and circulated in Europe was an ideological accompaniment of colonial 'power'. Said shows how this discipline was created alongside the European penetration into the 'Near East' and how it was supported by various other disciplines such as philology, history, anthropology, philosophy, archaeology and literature. British curiosity about the Orient and distinct Anglo-American travel cultures are taken as the ultimate

sign of an asymmetry of power between Britain and America. The Western traveller's eye is identified as an 'imperial eye', performing a colonial act of appropriation. (Pratt 4). *Orientalism* uses the concept of discourse to re-order the study of colonialism. Said argues that representations of the 'Orient' in European literary texts, travelogues, and other writings contributed to the creation of a dichotomy between Europe and its 'others', a dichotomy that was central to the creation of European culture as well as for the maintenance and extension of European hegemony over other lands. It is 'hegemony' or the 'cultural hegemony' as Antonio Gramsci, the Italian Marxist theoretician would say, that gives Orientalism its durability and strength.

The dialectic between self and other has been influential in the subsequent studies of colonial discourses. According to one critic, 'colonial discourse analysis ...forms the point of questioning of western knowledge's categories and assumptions' (Young 1990, 11). In his book *The Location of Culture* (1994), Bhabha writes, 'The objective of colonial discourse is to construe the colonized as a population of degenerate types on the basis of racial origin, in order to justify conquest and to establish systems of administration and instruction.' (70) He further suggests that colonial authority is necessarily rendered hybrid and ambivalent when it is imitated or reproduced, thus opening up spaces for the colonized to subvert the master-discourse. In Bhabha's terms, colonial discourse produces the colonized as a social reality which is at once an "other" and yet entirely knowable and visible. Bhabha argues that identities are possible only in differential relations and displacement. The colonizer can construct his identity only through the stereotype of the 'Other'. The stereotypes help the formation of the colonizer's identity while simultaneously rendering it unstable and dependent. Colonial discourse is ambivalent in its attitudes because it both desires similarity/unity with the native and yet fears of the wholly 'Other' nature of the native. According to him, the entire colonial mission is to transform the native into 'one like us'- a copy of the colonizer. The native is also in a position to return the gaze of the colonial master as he is now camouflaged. Mimicry becomes the active resistance which rather helps in reflecting the distorted image of the colonial master. Hybridity and a third space are born out of it. For Bhabha, colonial presence is ambivalent, split between the two positions: its appearance as authority and original and its articulation as repetition and difference.

Mary Louise Pratt has focused widely on travel writing and the impact of imperialism. In her seminal book, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992), she sketches the growth of travel literature against the socio-political movements during English imperial involvement with various nations. Undoubtedly, her concern is mainly theory, though she admits the influence of travel to change an individual's perspective. Once she argued:

While travel literature is certainly a place where imperialist ideologies get created, it is equally certainly a place where such ideologies get questioned, especially from the realm of particularized and concrete sensual experience. (Pratt: 215-216)

The concept of 'Othering' is further developed by Mary Louis Pratt. The book (1992) examines how travel and exploration writings have *produced* "the rest of the world for European readerships at particular points in Europe's expansionist trajectory" (5). Pratt draws attention to the incident that Eurocentricism was engendered by a noticeably 'planetary consciousness', which as an ideological framework, "makes a picture of the planet appropriated and redeployed from a unified, European perspective" (36). Pratt advocates that 'Othering' is one of the significant means in which the colonial power organizes thoughts and actions towards the colonized and it is perhaps achieved through choice of language.

Vivekananda's thoughts and ideas are rich in spiritual philosophy, and can be unveiled through a close study of his writings. His writings deal mainly with social, religious and political reformations. His very objective understanding of any social panorama makes him an ardent social critic. He was not a politician in the very common sense of the term. Yet, he was one the most intellectual nationalists of his

time.

The paper penetrates into the writings of Vivekananda during his travel to the West. Vivekananda's negotiation with the West and the way he has represented himself and his country are the primary concerns of the study. He tried to replicate himself very consciously as an embodiment of India, her culture and Hinduism. Wherever he travelled, he tried to showcase India in a very intelligent manner. Even the lecture series that he accepted was an inseparable part of his travel. It is true that his lectures are mainly based on his typical spiritual understanding, but those spiritual discourses in different platform facilitated a scope to understand and revitalize the cultural bonding between India and the West. Another important aim of the discussion is to throw light on the Indian saint who tried to justify India's status in particular relation to the colonial discourse. Further, it analyses Vivekananda's self-created otherness under the light of Said's *Orientalism* (1978). *The self-created otherness is a concept that has been discussed in Said's Orientalism (1978), as the idea becomes prevalent in the Western world in terms of its colonial relationship with the East.* In this respect, Said's claim is very important. He justifies that the basic and fundamental dichotomy between the West and the 'Other' has pushed the Western culture to create the Oriental. Here Said's argument is very general and not exhaustive. He observes that the West neither understands nor represents the East according to its native cultural production. The West stands as the colonizer that has exercised administrative power over the East for hundreds of years. Now, the paper tries to analyse two questions. How Vivekananda as an Orientalist subject to the West refuted the existing thesis on effeminate East or precisely India and how through his lectures, he regained the status of India as a Nation from which even the Western world can learn many things. Vivekananda's messages also can be seen as an answer to the colonial hegemonic power and have showed how the oppressive rule of the colonizers blocked the intellectual capacity of the colonized. Foucault's concept of knowledge and power is very much evident here. Acquiring knowledge is a process that leads to political and social power. Vivekananda tried to come out from the false concept of dualism as the gift of colonial cultural legacy. Homi Bhabha (1994) deconstructs Orientalism in terms of form and content and according to him, the exact location of culture is hanging somewhere between self and other. Vivekananda's academic and spiritual venture in the West was a process of understanding himself by examining the other. Said also propagated the same thing in his discourse on Orientalism (Said, 54), but further criticized the academic practice of translating and compiling material from Orient as it broadens the scope of hegemonic knowledge, as Said has mentioned that it is the "linear prose authority of discursive analysis." (284). The polarity between the Orient and the Occident, as Rolfsen observed, is due to the projection of alien features to the former (58). Said discusses the predominance of "Oriental backwardness, degeneracy, and inequality" (206) which actually emphasize the West's central role in all the matters. It becomes very obvious that the West has always tried to identify the Orientals with subordinate qualities of their society to achieve and maintain the hierarchy. Orientals have been diminished as, "delinquents, the insane, women, the poor" (207). It can easily be understood that the colonial scholarships are predominantly male-centric which show the legitimate polarity with the 'effeminate' colonized (207).

The Western perception of 'Hinduism' is the base of European thesis to judge Indian mind. Scholars from different backgrounds have done the similar kind of analysis to appreciate the line of history in minute details. In the work, *The Heathen in His Blindness* (1994), S.N. Balagangadhara examines "how western administrative control affects more than the Eastern geo-political boundary; spiritual and religious control" was the chief motive of the Orientalists (Prakash 395). Rolfsen in her thesis finds it a kind of European discovery of Hinduism and Critics like R. King (1999, 96-117) and Balagangadhara advocated that it redefined Hinduism under a typical structure provided by Christianity (Rolfsen 37). Now, classifying a religion as degenerating is somehow ambiguous. It is rather a historical process of fusion and development. Guha, another critic has argued that the historical study of Indian civilization shows that it was one of the important colonial agents. Guha found that "It was a kind of conquest which empowered the

conquerors to impose on the colonized people a past written form of the colonizer's point of view and uphold those writings as foundational and fundamental to the law of the land" (1997, xiv). The colonizers tried their best to justify the past in order to propagate the validity of the Western rule. They created the discourse in such a way that not only the Hindus, but the entire India with her all proud historical past appeared inferior to them. It was their inability to understand Hinduism in practice that they often termed it as mystical, derogatory and symbolic. Inden (1990) in his work demonstrates how the colonizers tried to create a "Hegelian juxtaposition of the concept of the material European Christian with the insane, crazy and mystical Hindu to retain their superiority over them" (Roflsen 14).

The influence of Western knowledge was inseparable and it affects every aspect of Indian spiritual life. The Vivekananda and Ramakrishna movement slightly differs from the others in respect of their acceptance in the general masses. They both rationalized and liberalized Hindu religion no doubt, but not separated their thinking from the common practices and sentiments of the masses. Mohapatra has defined the movement as "the object lesson of all the theoretical knowledge given in the Shastras" (8). She writes:

He (Ramakrishna) showed by his life what the Rishis and Avatara really wanted to teach. The books were theories, he was the realization....His teachings gave the Hindu Revivalism a moral sanction, a philosophical basis, and a new spiritual significance of immense value. (8)

Jackson relocates Ramakrishna- Vivekananda movement as 'centrists', and has observed how it actively "defended Hinduism against Western attack while selectively accumulating the ideas from Europe" (Roflsen 16). In Vivekananda's words this concept becomes very evident. He addressed his countrymen to be rational and liberal in their outlook without sacrificing the main root of their culture and religion:

There are many things to be done, but means are wanting in this country. We have brains, but no hands. We have doctrine of Vedanta; we have not the power to reduce it into practice. In our books, there is the doctrine of universal equality, but in work we make great distinctions. It was in India that unselfish and disinterested work of the most exalted type was preached, but in practice we are awfully cruel, awfully heartless...I too believe that India will awake again, if anyone could love with all his heart the people of the country...Then only will India awake. (CW 5:125-26)

The critical work of Williams (1974) also accepts Vivekananda's central position (106). It is true that there is no specific reason behind Vivekananda's withdrawal from the Brahmo Samaj. It is possible that he could not get his spiritual answers from such a rationalized setup. The relationship between Indian religious reform and Western spiritual ideas are very subtle and Jackson points out a very complex relation of Vivekananda with the West by occupying a liminal position between conservative and liberal responses to the time.

The discussion of this paper doesn't focus on Vivekananda as a unique figure in this respect. Rather, it tries to situate Vivekananda within his own Indian context to concentrate on the matter of his dialogic negotiation with the West through his extensive travels. In this regard, Vivekananda's dynamic engagement with the Western discourse is fascinating. Shamita Basu's text on national revivalism of Vivekananda argues that the Indian monk was very much aware of the West as both were a "stimulating and a threatening force for India" (Shamita Basu 73). Vivekananda presented his philosophies of Hinduism very strategically to confront indirectly with the theses of Orientalism. Even by his self-fashioning "Vivekananda alternatively refuted, inverted, and manipulated Orientalist theses of 'the nature of India' in a deliberate attempt to reconstruct the hierarchies of power perpetuated by such discourses" (Nikhilanda 1953, 8); however, Jackson points out that he was justly overwhelmed by the success of the Brahmo Samaj among the elites of Bengal to admit that, "but for Ramakrishna I would have been a Brahmo missionary" (Jackson 23). But, later he left it because Brahmo Samaj became very much elitist and perhaps it forgot the

main root of Indianism. Moreover, it could not quench the spiritual thirst of Vivekananda. Mohapatra observed:

For a time, the intellectual atmosphere of the Brahmo Samaj satisfied him, he felt uplifted during the prayers and devotional songs. But it could not satisfy the deep spiritual yearning of his soul. Nevertheless, he was attracted by the social philosophy of the Samaj. The emphasis of the Samaj on 'rationalism', 'universalism', 'religion of humanity' and the ideal synthesis of the East and the West must have provided succour to the humanistic, internationalist character of the Swami's socialistic thinking. (18)

Vivekananda's great contribution lies in the fact that he tried to bridge the gap between the Indian culture and the Western culture. His interpretation of the Hindu scriptures and philosophy and putting them forward to the western people provided an international platform to Hinduism and Indian culture. His endeavors established the importance of India and its contribution to the formation of world culture which brought an end to the isolated status of India culturally. Thus, the paper examines Vivekananda as the first great cultural ambassador from India who had challenged the issues of identity in the West.

Western humanism gradually accepted and practiced especially through the importance on the ideas of individual freedom, social equality and justice and respect for women. It shows Vivekananda's acceptance of the challenges by proving himself as a liminal cultural agent who integrated the best elements from Western thought and culture with Indian culture. At one side, he acted as a silent observer of the new world, and on the other, he used his ingenuity and politics to find a permanent place in the Western world. Revealing the true foundations of Indian culture and her spiritual heritage, Swami Vivekananda strengthened the sense of unity of India as a nation in front of the world and added glory and pride to the country's past. It was his travels that influenced his worldview.

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