

Philosophy Matters: Interpretive Communities, Travelogues and Colonialism

T J Abraham

Associate Professor

Central University of Tamil Nadu

tjabraham2000@gmail.com

Travel writing has been the mainstay for those dissatisfied with the mere 'fictive insubstantiality' offered by imaginative literary products. Travelogues were privileged for their truth value over their fictional counterpart that dealt in imaginative concoctions. Accordingly, the readers of travelogues who set great store by their objectivity, chose to view imaginative literature, despite all their alleged literary merits, as purveyors of untruth, and hence, at best, only to be tolerated. A tinge of overt or covert condescension towards such mental exercise could be generally detected in the illustrious line of votaries of truth from the Platonic era. However, a more fundamental question addressed here is about the status of truth value ascribed to travelogues, and to see whether they are any less constructed than the avowed fiction or indeed, any writing. It may be seen, instead, that the 'truth' of travelogues is the handiwork of interpretive communities. Stanley Fish demonstrates the way meaning is constructed by active interpretive communities in literary works. However, the process of truth construction may be seen as no different in the allegedly objective writings as well.

Travelogues as a genre, subsumes a variety of writings of exploration and adventure, reports of life lived in alien lands and contributed by people so varied as diplomats, missionaries, sailors, fortune hunters, adventurers and so on. There were actual and pseudo travelogues, the latter being 'fiction' in the form of travelogues à la Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* or R.L. Stevenson's *Travels with a Donkey*. Though travelogues have global sweep and great antiquity, the Western travelogues describing the non-West have been dominant both in terms of number and influence from the sixteenth century obviously due to the increasing stress on exploration and travel in the wake of the growth in European science. That the unprecedented swell in the ranks of the literate middleclass, especially women with a lot of leisure and avid for reading, was kept engaged with the exotic lore from far off lands is a commonplace.

Mary Louis Pratt, a trailblazer in travelogue analysis, through her reading of the 18th and 19th century travel reports, demonstrates how the seemingly innocent and neutral descriptions in such accounts textualize and naturalize the cultural or character traits, which in turn has become a platform for constructing and determining the 'other'. Pratt's analysis cogently sets forth the

subtle but persistent ways in which the discourse of travel imaginatively represented, both the self and the ‘other’, and how that in turn transformed itself into the canonical pronouncement about the inferiority of the nonWest.

The interface of travelogue and fictive construction by the West during the post renaissance centuries has received adequate attention of theoreticians. For instance, how travelogues played a determining role in the production of colonial discourse and the process of othering have been ingeniously demonstrated by thinkers such as Edward Said and Homi K. Bhabha. Notwithstanding the other differences in their positions, one might say that according to them, the colonizing *Other* and the colonized *other* are gradually, but surely and simultaneously created.

Here, a few related questions such as why the Western travelogues present the non-West in a particular manner, whether there is uniformity in their presentation, whether any differences could be noted in the travelogues according to time, place and other variables, and how they differ from the nonwestern travelogues should be posed. The answers to these questions will veer towards the fact that the texts of the travelogues per se have only a minimal role in the construction of the other. It may be seen that travelogues do not rest on an unproblematic ground in relation to the East-West construction. If travelogues are constructs (hence, the truth of the matter inaccessible), one should focus, then, more on the subjective process of truth construction.

Here it is useful to look into the antecedents that shape the imaginings prior to travelogues. These antecedents assume the form not so much of a concerted and unilateral process, as a gradual and undersigned worldview resulting from centuries of expectations. The shape of the travelogues was no more determined by ‘truth’ than what was agreeable to the European public. The fact that there is a pattern of meaning production, more or less skewed, typical of travelogues, and which we find suspect today, underscores how meaning is a function of the clichés of various subcultures of a particular group. Hence meaning is no more a function of individuality than individuality itself is a product of one’s cultural situation.

The interface of community perception and meaning construction is best seen in racial distinction. If race, now recognized as a biological nonentity, functioned once, as a mighty agency in fixing identities and marginalizing a large section of humanity, its roots may be traced to community perception and superstitious imaginings, which may have been reinforced by travelogues, themselves products of interpretive communities.

If, as Henry Louis Gates says, “by 1850, ideas of irresistible racial differences were *commonly* held” (3, emphasis added), whether deliberately or mistakenly being immaterial, it betrays a sure community perception. Gates goes on to refer to the incident when a small group of black leaders met Abraham Lincoln in 1862, he informed them about his plans to return the American blacks to Africa because the white and black races were *essentially* and naturally different due to their races. Thus goes Lincoln: “you and we are different races; we have between us a broader difference than exists between any other two races” (Gates 3), and hence, blacks, in the fitness of things, should be returned to Africa. However, the extent to which the great humanitarian leader Lincoln was singularly influenced by travelogues is a moot point.

There is more cogency in viewing Lincoln as sharing the assumptions held by intellectuals of the period, the interpretive community, that race was a thing, a fixed quantity, which definitively sprung from an identifiable ‘essence’, and which made different groups appear physically different. If race, a biological non-essence and a scientific nonentity became an objective and identifiable term to classify, marginalize and subjugate the majority, travelogues did not do the trick as much as centuries of European imaginings. The economic and other interests in racial essentialization have already attracted much attention of writers.

It may be informative to observe how great European philosophers have been instrumental in crystallizing the interpretive community. Indeed philosophies themselves have been built on the bedrock of interpretive communities. For instance, David Hume, in his essay, “On National Characters” (1748), dwells on racial differences, which like his other observations carries the stamp of authority of a philosophical treatise: “I am apt to suspect the negroes, and in general, all other species of men (for there are four or five different kinds) to be *naturally* inferior to the whites” (Gates 10, emphasis added). He goes on to emphasize that “there never was a civilized nation of any other complexion than white, nor even any individual eminent either in action or speculation” (Gates 10). Hume concludes that the whites and blacks are so opposed to each other everywhere and always, and they cannot be different, “if nature had not made an original distinction betwixt these breeds of men” (Gates 10). Here the focus shifts from the superior/inferior debate to the source of race which is reckoned to be natural, and hence unalterable and only to be lived with.

Besides, Africans, according to Hume, have not shown any sign of intelligence. This inference, evidently is based not on travelers’ reports but on the philosopher’s own personal experience. Hume observes: “Not to mention our colonies, there are negro slaves dispersed all over Europe, of which none ever discovered any symptoms of ingenuity” (Gates 10). Moreover,

Hume makes a deliberate attempt to subvert the authority of travelers' reports, when he chooses to summarily dismiss a report about a certain black poet named Francis Williams in Jamaica who was said to be writing poems in Latin. He says: "In Jamaica, indeed they talk of one Negro as a man of parts and learning, but it's likely he is admired for very slender accomplishments, like a parrot who speaks a few words plainly" (Gates 10). So much for the fragility of travelogues in the construction of truth.

Immanuel Kant in his *Observations on the Feeling of the Beautiful and Sublime* (1764) holds that "so fundamental is the difference between races (black and white) of men . . . it appears to be as great in regard to mental capacities as in colour" (Gates 10). Interestingly, Kant emphasizes the definitive correlation between colour and intelligence with the following facile conclusion: "this fellow was quite black from head to foot, a clear proof that what he said was stupid" (Gates 10-11). This absolute correlation between black and stupidity, according to Kant is too self-evident to warrant a testimony from a travelogue.

Hegel, like Kant and Hume, held that Africans had no history, because they had no system of writing. In the absence of writing, the philosopher also denied them a collective racial memory. Hence it was concluded that Africans were without memory or mind and therefore without humanity. Famously, whether he was a racist or not, Karl Marx advocated a double duty for England in India: "England has to fulfill a double role in India: One destructive, the other regenerative – the annihilation of the Asiatic society and the laying of the material foundations of Western society in Asia" (Qtd. in Said 154). Yet there is no denying that these thinkers were philosophers par excellence, and doubtless, they tried to be conscientious adherents of truth. And if they reached such irrational conclusions, the source may be traced to the expectations informing an interpretive community.

These expectations of an interpretive community underwent changes as much as they were shaped by a host of complex factors such as ethnocentrism, capitalism, nationalism and so on. Many a time, in the guise of travelogues, one is offered a palatable and distinctively European fantasy. For Stanley Fish, meaning production has no "natural validity beyond socialization" and "institutionalized assumptions" (Atkins 88). Travelogues, then, may be seen as both constructed and read in relation to often, unconscious, communal norms, values and experience. Hence one can see that the European capitalist expansionist drive has been a potent force in the evolution and definition of interpretive communities.

Famously, David Livingstone in his book *Narrative of an Expedition to the Zambesi and its Tributaries* confesses that his account is written in the earnest hope that it may contribute to the information which will cause the great and fertile continent of Africa to be no longer kept wantonly sealed but made available as a scene of European enterprise” (Gates 144). These observations which, as a matter of fact are not objective, pure and disinterested description, are born of one’s prior stock of assumptions and expectations.

According to Fish, readers do not interpret writings, they create them. To him, interpretive strategies are a condition of possibility for reading, not vice versa. And he says that “they are the shape of reading, and because they are the shape of reading, they give texts their shape, making them, rather than, as it is usually assumed, arising from them” (Lodge 302). This is true not only of reading the travelogues but more of their construction. For Fish says, interpretive communities share interpretive strategies not for reading “but for writing texts, for constituting their properties and assigning their intentions” (Lodge 304).

This is precisely the dynamics informing the allegedly ‘objective’ travel narratives. Pratt, for instance, refers to Speke’s description of the newly discovered Lake Victoria Nyanza wherein he says that the “pleasure of the mere view” gives way to “those more intense and exciting emotions which are called up by the consideration of the commercial and geographical importance of the prospect before me” (Gates 145). It is a full scale reverie with precious little objectivity.

Interpretive community produces meaning but it creates as already noted allegedly materialistic products such as race too. Race was created to be destroyed by the successive interpretive communities. And Fish says that meaning production will always be regulated by the more or less limited repertoire of interpretive strategies available at a particular time. Besides, that we continue to read travelogues differently today and possibly still differently later underscores that there is nothing definitive about the text any more than the sentiments of successive dynamic and vibrant interpretive communities. And truth, as always, is at stake.

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