

CONSTRUCTION OF THE 'OTHER' IN COLONIAL TRAVEL WRITING ON ASSAM: READING SELECT TEXTS

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Abstract

*This paper seeks to have a close reading of nineteenth century colonial travel writing on Assam with its focus on two texts – Susan R Ward's *A Glimpse of Assam* (1884) and George M Barker's *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* (1884) – in the light of travel theories offered by Mary Louise Pratt. It attempts to offer a critical observation of the transculturation of the native in the 'contact zone' and the different ways adopted by the colonial travelers in structuring the Other. In fact, the contention of the paper is that this structuring has been done purely on European cultural paradigm with a colonialist motive. Using the methodological tools of postcolonial criticism, the paper will endeavour to explore what Mary Louise Pratt calls the 'anti conquest', i. e., the strategies adopted by the colonial travelers in their representation or rather construction of the Other and its culture. This indeed points at the different factors at work behind the construction of the native Other in the select texts. At the same time, it will also examine the shifts that can be seen in the culture of the Self in the 'contact zone'*

“...“contact zones,” social spaces

where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination...”

(Mary Louise Pratt in *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, P. 4)

Representation of the colonial subjects in colonialist texts has been a subject of critical enquiry in postcolonial studies and how this subject is being dealt with in the travel texts written by the colonial travelers is definitely an important as well as interesting area of study. This paper is an attempt to explore the modes of representation of the Other in colonial travel writing on Assam in the light of travel theories offered by Mary Louise Pratt and the select texts under discussion are, Susan R ward's *A Glimpse of Assam* (1884) and George M Barker's *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* (1884). It is an attempt to view the transculturation of the Other in the 'contact zone' and the concomitant structuring of the same by the colonial travelers; in other words, it is an endeavour to look at how two disparate cultures come in

contact with each other and how the dominant one posits an identity of the subordinate and its culture. The paper seeks to explore what Mary Louise Pratt calls the 'anti conquest', i. e., the strategies adopted by the colonial travelers in their representation or rather construction of the Other and its culture. It focuses on the different factors at work behind this structuring of the native Other in the select texts and the various adoptions entertained by the colonial author travelers in their construction of the same. In fact, the contention of the paper is that this image construction has been done purely on a European cultural paradigm with a colonialist motive and that the whole process of transculturation and the structuring of the Other is but a part of the colonialist design.

Mary Louise Pratt in her seminal work on travel theory, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992) describes the terms 'contact zone' and 'anti conquest'. She defines 'contact zone' as "the space in which peoples geographically and historically separated come into contact with each other and establish ongoing relations, usually involving conditions of coercion, radical inequality and inequitable conflict." (Pratt, 6) Pratt uses the term 'anti conquest' to refer to "the strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence at the same moment as they assert European hegemony." (Pratt, 7) She calls transculturation 'a phenomenon of the contact zone.' (Pratt, 6) In the colonial travel writing on Assam, the 'contact zone' is marked by the presence of two cultures – the colonizer's and that of the colonized; the author traveler gives a portrayal of both, discerning the subordinate latter from the dominant former. A great amount of colonial travel texts is characterized by this conspicuous feature which invariably brings in to discussion what Edward Said calls the Occidental way of looking at the Oriental based on a binary opposition. This binary is as important in structuring the inferior Other as it is in the fashioning of the superior Self.

The select texts under discussion, *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam* by George M Barker and *A Glimpse of Assam* by Susan R Ward, are very remarkable as far as the phenomenon of transculturation is concerned. In both the narratives the author travelers have portrayed the native Other in their own ways. The 'contact zone' and the coercion of the dominant are made very distinct in Barker's narrative where as Ward seems to be a bit tactical while dealing with that. In fact, Barker's narrative can be called openly prejudiced as throughout the narrative, the author is seen to have positioned himself in a particular standpoint where from he sees only the inferior status of the country along with its inhabitants. To him, the travelled land is one of mystery where every manner and design is an oddity. Starting from their disposition, all the cultural affairs, behaviours and the way of living are surprising to Barker. He views the Assamese as a lazy but mischievous people who "pass through life enjoying a mere existence." (Barker, 64) A passivity or non-entity is conferred on the native who is made active by the domination of a superior culture. The conflict and transculturation of the native is more perceivable in the description of the tea garden labourers. Barker in his narrative describes in detail how people from thickly populated places around the country were migrated to this region in order to work in the tea gardens. Here, the tea garden becomes the physical social space of 'contact zone' where we see the establishment of a relation of

dominance and servitude. The epithet 'coolie' itself is a referent of that since these people were migrated from a differing place and were transposed into Assam with a new cultural identity as the 'coolie'. Barker himself gives a fine description of the "shameful fashion" (Barker, 164) in which these people were brought to work in the tea gardens of Assam overloading the ships. However, totally ignoring this aspect of difference Barker uses the terms 'native' and 'coolie' interchangeably while describing the Assamese people.

A similar description and image of the native Other is given and made in Ward's narrative too. In the same fashion as pointed out by Edward Said, Ward attributes the natives with every characteristic that can be bestowed on an Orient namely, lying, deceitfulness, indolence, unreliability, unscrupulousness etc. According to Ward,

"sincerity is foreign to native character; self interest is the ruling principle under a show of humility and regard. Falsehood is universal from the oldest to the youngest, in fact they are so much in the habit of lying, that they sometimes neglect to tell the truth when it would be for their interest to do so" (Ward, 28)

The conflict is seen also between the religions as the author is very critical about the religion of the native. She calls both Islam and Hinduism as dark and hopeless where as the only hope is with the religion of the colonizer. An important as well as interesting point made by Ward is the influence of the dominant on the subordinate which can be called the activity seen in the 'contact zone'. She proclaims that the native character is much improved by the European residents and that clearly shows the asymmetrical relation between the two. Another important aspect of note is the shift in the culture of the Self which Ward talks about in her narrative although with a negative viewpoint. She talks about the possibility of a shift in the character of the European planter who can be influenced by his surroundings. She calls it a great danger for the planter as according to her, it is an immoral country where people are in want of moral principle; hence, it is no wondering that in such a monotonous place, devoid of and hope and company, the European gentlemen transform into 'perfect wrecks'.

It is indeed the 'contact zone' where the colonial travelers come in contact with the native as well as discover the inferior or debased Other in the latter which becomes the resources for their narratives. They are seen to adopt various ways by which to represent the inferior status of the Other. In *A Tea Planter's Life in Assam*, Barker is seen to be very open with his extreme critical views about anything and everything he comes across in the land he visits. He perceives the native as the unknown Other, always associating a mystery with the place they live in. The 'anti conquest' in Barker's narrative is that of a traveler coming from a superior culture and who is taken by surprise in this unknown country. His strategy lies in comparing everything in the travelled region with their English counterparts; indeed, his is an endeavour to familiarize the unfamiliar by discriminating the latter from the former. To him everything both natural and artificial are surprising and of degraded status in the unknown region. Not only is the stillness in the surroundings monotonous for Barker but the simplistic and self-sufficient life of the native too is criticized for being so. Right from the scenic view, the climate, the weather, the food, the customs of the people and their simplicity along with

the lack of commercial knowledge are things of wonder to Barker. We see both the Self and the Other are placed at two opposite poles – the European and the Eastern. Barker, in his effort to degrade the native does not even spare the animals of the region. He categorizes the birds as Eastern while drawing a parallel between them and the humans and tries to prove that these creatures show a longing for the European.

Contrary to Barker, Ward seems to be very positive and appreciative while dealing with the ‘anti conquest’ in *A Glimpse of Assam*. What makes her narrative different is the degree of praise which gives a picture of the land completely different from the image we find in other narratives of this type. She seems to counter her contemporaries while commenting on the region. The country which according to Barker is an ‘out of the way corner of the universe’ (Barker, 84), for Ward, is a developing place from where “a message can be sent to England in four hours from any point.” (Ward, 25) The sight of the landscape which is dull to other travelers’ eyes is different to Ward. She says, “in grandeur of hill scenery, we venture to say, Assam has scarcely a rival in any part of India of equal extent.” (Ward, 2 and 3) Also, her comment on the climate of the place which is considered unfriendly by many colonial writers is remarkable. According to her, those who complain about it “should not find fault with the climate but with themselves.” (Ward, 12) However, she is one with Barker in her views on the natives and their affairs: she seems to be critical not about the place but about the inhabitants and their culture. She calls them ignorant, indolent and morally of inferior status and feels that “the only hope of an improvement in the race is the diffusion of Christianized education.” (Ward, 43)

The assertion of the European superiority reveals the colonialist standpoint of the traveler writers and their subjective viewpoint regarding the culture and affair of the Other. In *A Tea Planter’s Life in Assam*, the Barker who almost at every page of his narrative despises the natives appreciates the latter for continuing the servility that the Europeans exacted in the days of the Company. The same prejudice can be seen towards the animals when he distinguishes the loyal elephants from others who in his opinion are against the Europeans. His comparing the ‘vindictiveness’ of the natives to the evils of Shakespeare’s Shylock is important to note in this context. Barker’s strategic position as a colonialist is apparent through his attitude towards the natives, particularly the tea garden labourers. He is very much critical about their laziness and cunning nature but, important to note, the cunning way adopted by the Europeans in bringing those ‘coolies’ from different places of India is not given any critical observation. This story is two dimensional: Barker the traveler, on one hand, pities the labourers whom the planters managed to engage by inducement of every kind possible (155) which is but another name for treachery; on the other hand, his colonialist position does not see any wrongdoing on the part of the planters since a huge margin of collective profit was at work behind that. This is an important point which offers a larger area for criticism. That he is describing everything he comes across in the region from a subjective viewpoint is apparent throughout the narrative which can give only a partial view of anything under description.

Unlike Barker, Ward adopts a subtle way of representing the Other. She not only shows her colonialist attitude in her narrative but is seen to promote colonialism as well. In fact, her motive seems to show the 'grace' of colonialism. To realize this 'grace' of colonialism it is necessary to see the native people as of a certain disposition and keeping this in mind Ward projects them in her book. Ward's tactics lies in giving a reprehensible image of the native so as to justify the need of guidance and governance of the Europeans. She calls the natives inefficient as rulers. In her opinion, they are too unscrupulous to rule; she says, "give a native power and he is likely to be tyrannical, as native history proves." (Ward, 126) Ward offers an astute criticism of their religion and governance too. According to her, theirs is a 'dark and hopeless' (Ward, 36) religion which is devoid of Christ's light. She shows a particular grievance towards the people coming from Islamic religion and then tries to give an abominable picture of the Hindu religion. Having created a despicable image of the native she says that it has been 'much improved by the influence of European residence' (Ward, 28) and then gives emphasis on the welfare done to the country by colonialism. In the beginning of her narrative, she talks about a glorious past of the natives which has been devastated, and which can be regained through a "benign Christian Government." (Ward, 19) With the skill of an expert debater, Ward goes on giving logical reasoning for a colonial government endorsing its civilizing mission. She gives her logic – the natives are sickly and the colonial government is providing health services to them; they are ignorant and the government is providing education and founding schools for them; the people are in darkness and the government is bringing light with them through the gospel of the Christian God. But, interestingly, the same health services are not considered sufficient or proper when it comes to treating a European patient, the physician provided for the natives in a tea garden thus is reduced to a mere 'coolly doctor' whom the planter can never trust. This shows only the hollowness of the so called civilization and enlightenment that Ward is talking about and this again points at the covert aim of colonialism and of the author as well.

Important to note that both the texts under discussion appeared in the same year but their narratives are different in many ways. This indeed shows the difference of motives on the part of the two authors. Barker is too discouraging where as Ward is inviting and shows a positive attitude so far as her colonialist motives are concerned. Here, an important factor to be discussed is the people who they are addressing to, i. e., the reading community. Both Barker and Ward are addressing mainly the Europeans who were willing to come to Assam thinking it as a land of promise. According to Barker, it is 'worse than useless' (Barker, 2) to come to Assam in search of any occupation as there was already a surplus of competent men. At the same time he thinks that the place is not fit to live in which is always in want of comfort and society. Contrary to this, Ward sees immense prospect for her fellow countrymen. In the Preface, Ward declares that her "Glimpse" may be of use to those who are interested to invest in Assam. She aims at highlighting the future prospect in the country in the economic field and at inviting the colonial investors to come to this magnificent place. She gives brief information on the industries of the country, focusing on the tea industry, with every possible bit of information on the profit that can be gained. But, to access those, they

need to profess colonialism along with the spread of Christianity. She does not deny some of the discomforts pointed out by Barker but Ward holds the view that this opulent place is ostensibly a livable one which is in the process of development with the 'grace' of colonialism. Hence, her viewing the native is based on a subjective standpoint of an Orientalist, whose intention seems to promote colonialism. She criticizes the natives and their affairs, focuses on the shortcomings and finally comes to the conclusion that only through colonialism these can be resolved. This indeed refers to the conversion and appropriation of the land and the establishment of colonial hegemony.

It is apparent that the transculturation of the native in the 'contact zone' has much to do with the colonialist propaganda and that the whole process of imagining the Other and then to structure a debased image of it is indeed a way of legitimizing the colonialist scheme. Here, it is pertinent to bring in the question that the postcolonial thinker, Albert Memmi puts in his *The Colonizer and the Colonized* (1957): "can one accuse an entire people of laziness?" (Memmi, 125) Abdul JanMohamed calls it Manichean Allegory or the 'imperialist duplicity' (JanMohamed, 61). According to him, there is an ambivalence of colonialist discourse which is made clear if only we analyze them in relation to actual colonialist practices. The economic and political factors along with the exigencies of European culture play vital roles in such representation. Moreover, the effect of the reading community is an important factor in the structuring of the Other. One must keep in mind that the reading community consisted of the colonial people living in the mother country and that the natives did not have access to those writings. These imperious reading public did not want to see the colonized pictured as a civilized community but as one of debased status. And the same community would again never accept any European to be portrayed without a superior image. Therefore, it was the very cultural demand of the reading community that to a great extent shaped the account of such narratives. As a result, the representation of the Other is based on the negative comparison between the civilized traveler and reader and the uncivilized inhabitants of the travelled region.

This not only shows the fantasizing of the Other but at the same time the fashioning of the Self as well. The colonial travelers make a binary construction of the Other and the Self as the inferior and the superior respectively. This is evident in both the narratives under discussion. It reveals the author travelers' subjective positions as colonialists whose representation of the Other can be viewed as mere construction of the native as part of an agenda for propagating a mission. Moreover, both Barker and Ward seem to be contradictory at times which again shows that individual perceptions have also much to do with the structuring of the Other. This not only points at the presence of certain prejudices in the observations but also offers room for critics to raise questions on various aspects including the reliability and veracity of such narratives.

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