Humanities and Social Sciences Journal, Volume 13, Number 2, 2022, pp. 78–87

Reading Michael Palin's *Himalaya* from an Insider's Perspective

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Abstract

This study reads Michael Palin's travel text, Himalaya (2004) from a cultural insider's perspective and argues how the author gets trapped into the vestiges of conventional Western outlook upon the non-West. Surfacely and even intentionally, the author appears to keep himself away from such outlook, but it resurfaces frequently in the text and exemplifies how the traditional colonial tendency of stressing superiority keeps lurking in the Western travel writers' texts. The author makes a trip across seven nations in 2003 but as a resident of Nepal I focus my analysis on his travel in Nepal. For the analytic purpose, the study borrows conceptual insights from scholars in travel writing genre such as Carl Thompson, Robert Clarke and Debbie Lisle. Terms related to colonial discourse theory will be heavily used.

Keywords: colonial discourse, cosmopolitan visions, Gurkhas, travel writing

Introduction

Michael Palin (May 5, 1943), a British travel writer and television presenter, made a six-month long journey to various nations of Asia: Pakistan, India, Nepal, Tibet, China, Bhutan and Bangladesh beginning on 13th May, 2003. Palin records the people, their cultures, languages, and landscapes of most part of the Himalayan range in Asia. Most destinations in this travelogue are examples of what Urry (2002) calls "mediatized gaze": "a collective gaze where particular sites famous for their 'mediated' nature are viewed" and those gazing on the scene "relieve elements or aspects of the media event" (p. 151).

Despite travel writing's democratization and the author's deliberate attempt to showcase himself as a neutral reporter, Palin falls in the trap of conventional identity as a British white male and represents his travelogue accordingly. He happens to record is a native speaker of English. Broadly speaking, this bundle of identities carries the baggage of a patriarchal colonial subject. Meanwhile, many parts of the countries in the Himalayan region were British colonies in the past. It is interesting to see whether and to what extent he reproduces the colonial representations of the other in his narratives.

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Meanwhile, Palin is representative of contemporary media celebrities, who can be seen as a genre of representation in itself as well as a discursive effect that is commodified by the media industries (Huggan, 2013; p. 10). Moreover, Lisle (2006) and others have portrayed Palin as a narrator/writer with a cosmopolitan vision who shows awareness, tolerance and understanding of the diversity of values and cultures. Palin, thus, is a representative character of the modern-day travelogue producer. Then, it is my interest to see how his cosmopolitan vision is enacted in the sub-genre of broadcast travelogue, and to analyze any tensions between the colonial self and the cosmopolitan self. And finally, after watching the travelogue not primarily for a research purpose, I as a cultural insider from the Himalayas, developed an urge to critically analyze the narrative as an instance of a subaltern speaking back (Spivak, 1988) to the center.

In order to closely analyze the representational dynamics, this study operates within a methodological framework of colonial discourse analysis, as propounded by postcolonial thinkers such as Edward Said, Homi K Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravarty Spivak and others. Rather than limiting its analysis in the use of language and the meanings embedded in texts, colonial discourse employs a critical perspective through which the researcher tries to understand and expose the manner in which the Western writers look at the non-Western people, their geography, culture and over all life style (Said 1994). Following insights from the critical discourse analysis traditions, I understand discourse as a powerful instrument that participants use to construct social realities and relations by reproducing and maintaining hegemonic practices. The present study not only illuminates the key role of mediatized discourse in representing a particular version of travelers' spaces but also shows the applicability of colonial discourse to study an important cultural and economic activity of the modern era through which identities and linguistic practices are transformed into exotic and inviting commodities. The analysis will also show the examples of resistance and subversion from those who are the objects of representation.

Excerpts for analysis were chosen through repeated viewing of the travelogue, with accompanying notes both during and after viewing, and a transcription of the selected episodes. The key research question – how does the travelogue represent the identities of the tourist and the host – is a guiding tool that helped me include certain video episodes and exclude others for the analytical purpose. For example, parts of the travelogue that presented only the narratives of the nature (e.g. mountains, landscapes, and forests) were excluded from the analysis. Since my interest lies on what is said and how it is said, the data and subsequent analysis draws mainly on the linguistic aspect of communication although some non-verbal details are also selectively presented

where relevant. I present the analysis into three broad themes based on the observation of the linguistic devices systematically used in the travelogue.

Theoretical Underpinning

Scholars who focus on travel narrative since 1960, in contrast, take the ethical obligations of first-person narration as a primary concern: Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan's *Tourists with Typewriters* and Debbie Lisle's *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing* describe a postwar period of renewal in which the travel genre seeks to demonstrates its "transgressive potential" in new ways and "resuscitate itself in the face of globalization" (p. 5). Lisle traces two narrative strategies, a "colonial vision" that mimics the privileged position of earlier travel narrators and a "cosmopolitan vision" that focuses on "the harmonizing effects of globalization" (p. 5). They coexist in relations that are "sometimes antagonistic, sometimes symbiotic, sometimes ambiguous": a writer might employ a "colonial vision" to interrogate its claims to authority, and a "cosmopolitan vision" might invoke heterogeneity only to manage it for the West. Holland and Huggan identify their book as making "a pitch for the ethical value of travel writing, even as it demonstrates that travel narratives are unreliable in the extreme"; they conclude that the genre continues to demonstrate "possibilities for replenishment" because of its potential to challenge the cultural and discursive "boundaries within which travel risks being reified" (p. 7). Lisle endorses Holland and Huggan's "ethical imperative" but concludes that the genre's self-consciousness has yet to overcome its inherent inequity: "we are, in fact, witnessing the complex rearticulation of Western authority within the most liberal and cosmopolitan gestures" (p. 8)

Debie Lisle points out that the contemporary travel writing faces "tension between colonial and cosmopolitan visions" (p. 5) in the present globalized age. For her, colonial vision is the vision that continues the colonial traditions of the West which travel writers adopt in order to represent and express their judgments on the non-West. She believes that this vision is a strategy of the travel writers to "reproduce the logic of Empire" (p. 5). With this vision, travel writers tend to secure their privileged position in the text and exercise the authority of language to differentiate the people of less-civilized world as the other.

Cosmopolitan vision, on the other hand, refers to the vision that travel writers adopt to ward off their colonial legacy and focus on the harmonizing effects of globalization. For Leslie, cosmopolitan vision is that in which "travel writers make deliberate efforts to distance themselves from the genre's implications in Empire by

embracing the emancipatory possibilities" (p. 4). Writers with cosmopolitan vision attempt to be liberal and democratic and express emancipatory voice in their work. They work for maintaining a symmetric relationship with all the people of the world. They make efforts to develop, as Lisle puts, "a global order based on shared understandings, norms and values" (p. 4). They attempt to create an undifferentiated democratized world order in the present age of globalization when the power of Empire has dwindled and foundations shaken off.

Lisle explains that the tension between these two visions emerges out of their "complex relationship with each other . . . [which is] sometimes antagonistic, sometimes symbiotic, sometimes ambiguous" (p. 5). The relationship is unfixed and hence complex. The complexity has arisen along with the process of decolonization and globalization. In the present postcolonial globalized age, a writer—even from the West—cannot think of overtly possessing the colonial vision, when the ideologies of Empire have been severely protested and dismantled. Likewise, a writer—even from the non-West—cannot claim a crystal cosmopolitan vision by keeping himself away from colonial vision. The self-proclaimed cosmopolitan writer gets into the trap of colonial vision mainly of two reasons.

The first reason is that the writer who enjoys the privilege of travel or mobility—which the common people of the non-West rarely have—also enjoys the opportunity of judging and representing the traveled land and its people. On this, Lisle puts her idea that the privileged travel writers "reproduce the strategies of differentiation that work to secure the position of the travel writer as in control of both the journey and the text" (pp. 114-5). She continues, "The travel writer—no matter what his/her background or ethnicity—identifies difference, places it in a value-laden hierarchy, and judges accordingly" (p. 115). The travel writer tends to use the trope of differentiation, which in itself is a colonial legacy, even though he may not represent a literal colonial authority. The writer, thus, happens to misrepresent the travelled location, its people and goods through his privileged gaze even if he surfacely attempts to reject it.

The second reason is associated to the travel writer's economic motive, which Lisle terms as "obligation to economic and literary patrons" (p. 120). This suggests that the writer shapes his writing as per the wish of the patrons that have sponsored his journey. Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan claim that the writer motivated by economic achievements continues "legacy of [European] exoticism" in order to produce "cultural otherness" for "profitable business" (p. 65). The writer thinks of financial success, for which, he targets at the Western readership, which apparently leads him to follow the Western trend of representation of the non-West as the exotic other.

Even though Western travel writing was once closely bound up with the imperial drive to dominate and exploit other regions of the world, overt racism and a sense of cultural supremacy are rarely found in contemporary travelogues. On the contrary, contemporary travel writers from the West are more likely to espouse a "cosmopolitan vision" which, by celebrating alterity and cultural difference, or by revealing insights into shared values, could contribute to a more general project of mutual understanding and tolerance (Lisle p. 4). Nevertheless, for Lisle (p. 265) and a number of other recent commentators, there is a lack of political reflexivity and critical thinking in contemporary travelogues (Sugnet, pp. 70–85; Kaplan; Holland and Huggan xiii).

The imperialist legacy of the genre continues in several ways, as becomes evident in contemporary travel writing that remains principally a medium through which Western writers address Western audiences, and typically, as underlined by Sugnet, "arrogate to [themselves] … rights of representation, judgment and mobility that [are] effects of empire" (p. 72). This also seems to apply to a large degree to the fictional narrative counterpart of the travel genre: in his recent study of the contemporary Anglophone travel novel, Stephen M. Levin concludes that "much about contemporary travel narratives continues to affirm Edward Said's view that they celebrate, if not the triumph of empire, then the status of the so-called developing world as a cipher and playground for the West" (p. 142). Alternatively, they tend to attenuate their social critique by converting it, in a manner, similar to Joseph Conrad and E.M. Forster's approach, into an "aesthetic discourse" (Said, *Culture and Imperialism,* pp. 187–89).

Contemporary European travelogues on North America offer a variation of the mainstream imperialist model in which the "center" describes the "periphery." Even with Europe's challenged "centrality," which is well emphasized in postcolonial writing, the Eurocentric basis of travel writing remains valid: Europe is implicitly placed at the center of thought, history and being (Edwards and Graulund, p. 2–9). Europe can thus be described as the "old center" and America, as the "new," detached one or even as a center dispersed through globalization. 41

North America, representing an empire in a new sense, without a core and without borders, is characteristically portrayed in Lévy's book as having "its center everywhere and its circumference nowhere" (p. 297), while for Baudrillard, "Americans are the decentered center" (p. 90). This change of perspective underlies a conception of America in spatial terms: its eccentricity is understood as freedom from historical centricity, and freedom in spatial terms is perceived as enhanced movement, which justifies the *topos* of highways, automobiles and speed in travelogues on America. This concept is pushed to its limits and, in spite of the contemporary means of transport and communication, America is, and will always be, as Kiourtsakis predicts, the "faraway

land" (pp. 26-27), and New York will feature as a metropolis which is "always moving further," in "an unstoppable, forward movement" (Kiourtsakis, p. 31). At the same time, we do not have to travel to the United States: in the process of globalization, American culture is travelling and dwelling everywhere. Attributing a kind of movement to the notion of the US could be viewed as an ethical position which refuses to fix it to the stasis of a "utopia achieved," as asserted in Baudrillard's *America*. Nevertheless, even for Baudrillard, "there is no truth for America," the "real" America is not the social or cultural America but what he calls "astral" or "sidereal" America (p. 27–74).

Misrepresentation in *Himalaya*

Michael Palin's Himalaya provides important insights regarding how travel destinations, cultures and people are misrepresented in travelogues. Despite the forces of globalization that have made national and cultural boundaries more porous than ever before, common stereotypes about otherness continue to shape the experience of travel narratives at present. Lisle's (2006) analysis takes into account of the genre as a political endeavor. For Lisle, two types of perspectives are shaping the genre, and these perspectives influence the way we understand the world today. The first, the colonial vision, maintains that travel writers sustain their significance in the globalized world by 'mimicking their colonial forebears' (p. 3). This view reproduces a dominant Western civilization from which travel writers tend to depict other states, cultures and people, continuing 'to secure their privileged position by categorizing, critiquing and passing judgement on less-civilized areas of the world' (p. 3). This way of representing 'the other' assumes the superiority of the traveler's cultural and moral values, through a 'voyeuristic gaze' (Sharp, 1999, p. 203). Lisle's (2006) second notion, cosmopolitan vision, is concerned with the way travel writers make 'deliberate efforts to distance themselves from the genre's implication in Empire by embracing the emancipatory possibilities created by an interconnected "global village"' (p. 4). In this sense, Lisle further argues, travel writers seem to teach the audience or readers how to appreciate cultural differences and diversity common to all humanity through moments of empathy, recognition of difference, realization of equality and shared values in a more positive way.

Likewise, media representation on tourism continues to construct and perpetuate othering discourses by creating dichotomous distinctions between the West and the Rest (Beeton, 2005; Law, Bunnell, & Ong, 2007). Studies show that the discourse content and the discursive strategies used to present that content largely essentialize non-Western people and cultures, presenting them as being fundamentally different from and inferior to Westerners and Western cultures (Santos & Buzinde, 2007). It

should be noted that linguistic and cultural differences are not mere differences but are subject to an ideological interpretation and reinterpretation since these differences often create and reproduce an uneven distribution of resources and power. Jaworski et al. (2003) recorded 18 BBC's Holiday and 10 ITV's Wish You were Here? programs and analyzed 246 instances of tourist-host interactions. Content and semiotic analysis showed three major types of host roles: experts or guides, helpers or servants, and other. In the first role category, hosts were portrayed as experts of local culture and environment and tourists as curious explorers, and in the second category, hosts in the tourist destinations were presented as if they were there only to serve tourists. In the third category, the authors show that local populations in the tourist destinations were represented as elements of scenic environment – which they refer to as peoplescape. They conclude that in these holiday TV programmes, local people are largely underrepresented and objectified, and whenever they are shown, they are there to help, entertain and inform tourists. Hosts are thus largely 'silenced' (Coupland, 2010) from interactive discourses with tourists.

Since discursive representations in travelogues are mostly accomplished without an involvement of the other, they speak more about the culture and the people that produce representations (Caton & Santos, 2009). That is, the othering discourses of representation by no means portray only others; they construct discourse producers as certain kinds of people.

The review of the theoretical and empirical work presented above shows that travel representations are portrayed as emerging from the moments of cross-cultural encounters between the dominant self and the subordinate other. These encounters, however, are not equally accessible and utilized by the self and the other, but are sites of power contestation and struggle. Pratt (1992), for example, conceptualizes the cross-cultural encounters between the traveler and the travelee as 'contact zones', which are 'social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination' (p. 4). Even in what appears to be a cosmopolitan vision, the liberal subject produces, projects and passes judgement on cultural differences (Lisle, 2006).

In contemporary forms of travel representations, then, there is a constant tension between the colonial and the cosmopolitan subject positions. The production of difference, in discursive and other forms, is at the heart of such representations (Coupland, 2010; Lisle, 2006; Thurlow, 2011). Actors of representation, such as Michael Palin in the present study, construct their identities as cosmopolitan and liberal by articulating the universal standards of human values and civilization when judging other cultures and peoples. Meanwhile, they subtly carry on the pejorative and

stereotyping attitudes of their colonial predecessors by producing new forms of power that 'mimic the previous sensibility of the Empire' (Lisle, 2006, p. 5) and continue to reproduce the elitist and exploitative subject positions (Lindsay, 2015). In this sense, the traveler carries the reincarnation of Pratt's (1992) conceptualization of Victorian 'seeing-man' who self-proclaims himself as cosmopolitan by reinforcing the privilege of mobility predominantly associated with the West.

The success of touristic travel is very often identified with a possibility of engaging with the locals and, to a large extent, of becoming oneself, albeit temporarily, the other (Cordeiro, 2011). In contexts of cross-cultural encounters, being able to engage in discourses of multilingualism, either by using the language of the other (performing multilingualism) or by producing metalinguistic comments about languages at destinations (constructing multilingualism), constitutes a part of being the cosmopolitan subject who seems eager in celebrating linguistic diversity. Using multilingual resources at destinations, however fleetingly, makes it appear that the tourist adopts a local identity through which they experience authenticity (Jaworski, 2009). As Kramsch (2006) reminds, narratives in/about multilingualism allow the narrator to take on multiple subject positions in order to display various evaluative, affective and epistemic stances. Multilingualism provides diverse identity options that are valued differently, lending them to contestation and subversion at times (Pavlenko & Blackledge, 2004). The present research attends to this concern by turning its gaze to the themes of identity, multilingualism, and cosmopolitanism, that are deployed as markers of cultural difference in tourism.

Himalaya with Michael Palin is a travelogue by the writer, comedian and travel presenter Michael Palin. It was broadcast as a BBC television series in 2004, but has been viewed in INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF MULTILINGUALISM 5 DVDs, YouTube and read in books by thousands of viewers and readers. Recording the media celebrity Palin's six-month trip, this travelogue starts from north-west Pakistan to India, Nepal, Tibet, China, Bhutan and finally to Bangladesh. Palin in his website comments on this travelogue as a 'continuous narrative' and writes 'while we were there we met wonderful people, learnt a lot and did some incredible things' (http://palinstravels.co.uk/static-187). Represented in the travelogue are cultures, peoples, languages, and natures of most part of the Himalayan range in Asia. Most destinations in this travelogue are examples of what Urry (2002) calls 'mediatized gaze': 'a collective gaze where particular sites famous for their "mediated" nature are viewed' and those gazing on the scene 'relieve elements or aspects of the media event' (p. 151).

The travelogue is worthy of analysis for a number of reasons. First, Palin is a British white male who is a native speaker of English. Broadly speaking, this bundle

of identities carries the baggage of a patriarchal colonial subject. Meanwhile, many parts of the countries in the Himalayan region were British colonies in the past. It is interesting to see whether and to what extent he reproduces the colonial representations of the other in his narratives. Meanwhile, Palin is representative of contemporary media celebrities, who can be seen as a genre of representation in itself as well as a discursive effect that is commodified by the media industries (Huggan, 2013; p. 10). Moreover, Lisle (2006) and others have portrayed Palin as a narrator/writer with a cosmopolitan vision who shows awareness, tolerance and understanding of the diversity of values and cultures. Palin, thus, is a representative character of the modern-day travelogue producer. Then, it is my interest to see how his cosmopolitan vision is enacted in the sub-genre of broadcast travelogue, and to analyze any tensions between the colonial self and the cosmopolitan self.

Conclusion

The article has discussed to what extent travelogues invoke cultural misrepresentations in the context of contemporary global mobility and cross-cultural encounters. The contemporary traveler, as Lisle (2006) also points out in case of travel writing, becomes a site of struggle between an imperial subjectivity (that continues to reproduce colonial tropes) and a liberal, cosmopolitan subjectivity (that celebrates diversity in cultural and linguistic encounters). Under the guise of a liberal subject position, *Himalaya* with Michael Palin does in fact invoke cultural stereotypes to commodify local authenticities, ideologies and identities, keeping in mind the interest and expectations of the media audience who are interested in viewing a different other, not a similar self. While the liberal discourses used in the travelogue appear to celebrate the linguistic and cultural diversity of the world, they simultaneously reproduce the moral superiority of the West when the traveler is presented as an authority to give the judgmental accounts of otherness under the guise of equality and tolerance. The humorous tone adopted in this travelogue plays a key role in presenting the traveler as a liberal subject, helping him to subvert the ideological intent of some covertly pejorative discourses. Although such humor superficially seems to be a non-serious act of performance specifically designed to address the interest of the target audience, it reproduces and constructs a larger social order. Those who make humor build an in-group identity with audience by sharing a 'secret code' (Lisle, 2006, p. 79), and those who are laughed at become the butt of the joke. The discursive representation of tourists and hosts perpetuates power differences between the supposedly cosmopolitan traveler and the relatively static local. In this way, Palin's Himalaya continues colonial traditions.

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