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Travel Writing as a Means for Colonialism: Reading Park's *Travel in the Interior Districts of Africa*

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Abstract

This paper argues that since Euro-imperialism faced legitimation crisis in the late eighteenth century due to increasing rationalist and humanitarian ideologies, travel writing had to grow with a metaphorical use of sensibility to cover the grand design of colonialism in such situation. Mungo Park's narrative is characterized by the trope of sensibility for the same purpose. Being under the guardianship and protection of Joseph Banks, who was the president of the Royal Society and great designer of Britain's colonial expansion, Park tries to project himself in his narrative not as an ambitious and aggressive colonizer but an innocent genuine knowledge seeker.

Keywords: *Travel writing, colonialism, reverse ethnography, reciprocity, and Euro-imperialism*

Introduction

Travel writing had a powerful influence on British culture in the Romantic period. By stimulating the contemporary imagination, it shaped the consciousness of the age towards British imperialism. Following the seventeenth-century course of studies in empirical inquiry, most eighteenth-century travel narratives in the beginning caught an objective style. From the latter part of the century, however, the travel writing showed a subjective element, and there grew a general tendency of travel narratives to foreground the travellers' sensibility. Mungo Park represents in his *Travel in the Interior Districts of Africa* (1799), the spirit of the age maintaining both subjective and objective elements: science and sentiment, religion and improvement. He handles them in his narrative in such a way that subjective comes to the foreground for an instrumental purpose to meet the goal of British Imperialism. Park's *Travel in the Interior Districts of Africa* would not be possible without help of the Royal Society. The Royal Society was formed in 1788 for the commercial and geographical exploration of the continent. It was led by Joseph Banks (1743-1820), who was a scientist, collector, traveler, adviser of monarch and ministers, and president of the Royal Society. His interest in British imperialism and his relation with Park is clearly stated in a critical writing called "Mental travelers: Joseph Banks, Mungo Park, and the Romantic Imagination" by Tim Fulford and Debbie Lee, "He [Banks] was the unseen hand, the shadowy impresario of Britain's colonial expansion.... He sent explorers out to Africa, China and the Poles. He

prepared their journal for publication. Mungo Park had been his protégé”(118). His diplomatic guidelines enabled Britain to achieve imperialism.

Being under the guardianship and protection of Joseph Banks, Park had to project his exploration through his narrative as an "innocent, unaggressive activity, in no way threatening to the local population" (Thompson 569). So in Park's travel, he is seen unaggressive and passive, often enduring to cover the spirit of British colonialism.

For covering the grand spirit and design of colonialism, travel writing had to grow with a metaphorical use of sensibility. Of course, Park's narrative is characterized by the trope of sensibility for the same purpose. As a traveller, he undergoes a lot of suffering in the interior districts of Africa. His suffering in Africa grows to its great intensity which, of course, is capable of drawing the sympathy from the readers as well as from the Negroes in the interior districts of Africa. The mode of his narrative wins the sympathy of his readers in such a way that they see Park as "a lone traveller in the wilderness, engaged in a heroic quest for knowledge..." (Thompson 571). This response from the readers does not indicate Park as an ambitious colonizer but a genuine knowledge seeker.

Orienting Readers to Different Pathetic Situations

In the actual design of Park's narrative, colonialism is hidden by the trope of sensibility that is evoked in different situations. The readers are drawn by his narrative either to his own pathetic situations or to those of the negroes. His journey was full of obstacles and he had to rely solely on native guides and the generosity of local peoples for his food and shelter. In the beginning, his travel was oriented towards Gambia. He stayed there for six months. He tried to adjust himself with the place by learning local language called Mandingo and this helped him to be familiar with local people's custom. Slowly and gradually he gained the power of adjustment with the African peoples through the beginning experiences and this enabled him to go further, which brought him close to many different peoples including black African tribes in west Africa. Among these tribes who lived among the forests and fertile river basins, the nomadic Muslims were most threatening for him as they had a suspicion that he was a trader or a spy though, outwardly, he wanted to show himself as an innocent traveller. In spite of his precaution, the moors (the Muslims) captured him and treated him very badly. He almost died of starvation. During his travel, he had fever many times. He also got a chance to see frequent wars and observe how slave trade was flourishing there. While he was coming back from the Niger, Park made his journey with an armed slave caravan, being escorted safely back to Gambia. Throughout the Park's journey, there are several situations of his own sufferings and those of the African Negroes. It is better then to observe some of the major situations separately to see how they have contributed to Park's politics.

Towards the beginning of his journey, or particularly the moment before he leaves Gambia, he foresees his journey ahead as "painful and perilous" (Park 18) which he later experiences when he leaves Dr. Laidley and rides on his horse slowly into the woods:

I had now before me a boundless forest, and a country, the inhabitants of which were strangers to civilized life, and to most of whom a white man was the object of curiosity or plunder. I reflected that I had parted from the last European I might probably behold, and perhaps quitted for ever the comforts of Christian society. (Park 21)

Painful Experiences with the Moors

His sense of pain and peril actually grows in the area of moors who show their ill-mannered behaviour towards him; it is very hard for him to tolerate the suffering caused by the moors, which he describes this way, “The Moors are here in greater proportion to the negroes than at Jarra. They assembled round the hut of the negro where I lodged, and treated me with the greatest insolence; they hissed, shouted, and abused me; they even spat in my face, with a view to irritate me” (Park 75). Besides this, Park also draws reference to how he was robbed of everything he had in his bag thinking that he was a Christian. They had a thought that his property was lawful loot to the followers of Mohammed.

The situation grows pathetic when the Moors at another moment proved them very rude while treating Park even in the conditions of his high fever, which Park has drawn to his narrative successfully to win the sympathy of his readers. While he was taking rest in his high fever, a group of Moors entered the hut, where he was lying, and pulled the worn clothes from me. To irritate him with their usual rudeness was just like a sport to them. Being perplexed at this situation, he left his hut and somehow walked to some trees at a little distance from his camp to take rest there.

His painful journey gets more intense when his horse fails to go ahead towards the eastward after the Niger River has been approached. His fatigue and hunger together with the failure of his horse, affect the readers' mind with sensibility, which is given in second volume of the narrative:

I sat down for some time beside this worn-out associate of my adventures, but finding him still unable to rise, I took off the saddle and bridle, and placed a quantity of grass before him. I surveyed the poor animal, as he lay panting on the ground, with sympathetic emotion, for I could not suppress the sad apprehension that I should myself, in a short time lie down the perish in the same manner, of fatigue and hunger. (Park 8)

In all these situations of Park's suffering, what we very often find is his act of Orientalizing the Arabians or the Muslims more than African people. The reasons for this may be that Britain was planning to colonize Africa; but the Arabians had already established themselves there before the Britishers. So in a sense, they were their enemies or obstacles on their way to colonialism. By growing the sensibility against the Moors but for himself and the Negros, he had cleverly blended politics and sensibility in his narrative. For the same purpose, he draws several scenes in his narrative in which the Moors are called and depicted as cruel animals whereas the negroes as having human qualities. One of such references of contrast situations is presented here, which we find in the volume one of the text:

As I had some reason to suspect that this day was also to be considered as a fast, I went in the morning to the negro town of Farani, and begged some provisions from the dooty, who readily supplied my wants, and desires me to come to his house every day during my stay in the neighbourhood.—These hospitable people are looked upon by the Moors as an abject race of slaves, and are treated accordingly. (Park 94-95)

The very contrast of the Moors with the Africans in Park's narrative caught the eyes of Nicholas Howe too. He wrote about this in his critical writing called *Looking for a River, or, Travelers in Africa* in this way, “Repelled by their [the Moor's] treatment of black Africans taken into slavery, and bitter at the cruel treatment he received as a destitute traveller from them, Park can write with great anger of the Moors” (232). Park contrasts the Moors sharply to the black Africans and highlights their positive

character. They were kind to him and treated him with kindness and generosity. Howe reinforces the same, "It is hard not to feel sometimes that Park works hard to cast black Africans as noble savages too innocent to resist the mercantile cruelty of the Moors" (232).

Reverse Ethnography

To downplay the sense of colonization, Park has foregrounded in his narrative some situations of reverse ethnography in which he inferiorizes himself. It would be relevant here to draw one such situation from the first volume of his narrative in which he is surrounded by the women of Fatteconda, the capital of Bondou, desirous to see him:

They rallied me with a good deal of gaiety on different subjects, particularly upon the whiteness of my skin and the prominency of my nose. They insisted that both were artificial. The first, they said, was produced when I was an infant, by dipping me in milk; and they insisted that my nose had been pinched every day, till it had acquired its present unsightly and unnatural conformation. On my part, without disputing my own deformity, I paid them many compliments on African beauty. (Park 37)

We find similar situation of reverse ethnography in his narrative when he reaches a very large town called Sansanding and is again surrounded by the curious crowds to see him perform his "evening devotions, and eat eggs" (Park 5). The situation suggested by the following lines of volume two of the text draws him being inferiorised, "My landlord immediately brought me seven hen's egg, and was much surprised to find that I could not eat them raw; for it seems to be a prevalent opinion among the inhabitants of the interior that Europeans subsist almost entirely on this diet" (5). However, he had succeeded in persuading them that this opinion was without foundation.

African Women Sympathising Park

In addition to the drawing of the Moors and the scenes of reverse ethnography, Park's narrative focuses our attention to another important part of sensibility that is related to the African women. Women are supposed to be kind and sentimental by nature. These African women too sympathise with Park in his sufferings, which he depicts in his narrative, "I do not recollect a single instance of hard-heartedness towards me in the women. In all my wanderings and wretchedness I found them uniformly kind and compassionate" (Park 49). When he reaches Segou, the capital of Bambarra, the women's rites of hospitality is expressed by the women there as they serve him with food and shelter at night, and sing a song composed extempore in a sort of chorus that focuses on the pathetic condition of Park himself, which we find in volume one of the text:

The winds roared, and the rains fell. The poor white man, faint and weary, came and sat under our tree. He has no mother to bring him milk, no wife to grind his corn. Chorus — Let us pity the white man, no mother has he", & c. &c. Trifling as this recital may appear to the reader, to a person in my situation the circumstance was affecting in the highest degree. I was oppressed by such unexpected kindness, and sleep fled from my eyes. (Park 132)

While refreshing themselves after their hard labour, the above piece of song was sung by one of the young women, the rest joining in a sort of chorus to sympathise with Park.

By this extract of the narrative, we come to know that Park is kindly responded by African women. There are many other scenes in the narrative in which he identifies himself with them and they identify themselves with him too.

Sensibility Attached with Slavery

Slavery in West Africa is another focus of Park in his narrative that has charged it with great sensibility. One of the important functions of Park's narrative for this purpose is to produce several situations in which Park identifies himself with the negro slaves of Africa. One among them is the situation of Sibidooloo in Africa, where a slave is understood only in terms of commodity or money. When Park observes a scene of burying the dead body of a slave, which for its slaver, is just a loss of money, he is deeply affected by this commodifying of a human being, and renders it in his writing in volume two, "The slave, who had before gone the village, to my surprise returned with the corpse of a boy about nine or ten years of age, quite naked. The negro carried the body by a leg and an arm, and threw it into a pit with a savage indifference which I had never before seen" (27). Just before throwing the corpse into the pit, he repeatedly used the rough words like "dankatoo" ("good for nothing") — "jankra lemen" ("a real plague") — for the dead body. Park thought that such words could also be applied to nobody but himself. Park observes closely that the pit was very much similar to a grave. When he covered the body with earth, the dooty often expressed himself, "naphula attiniata" ("money lost") (27).

Reciprocity

Park's narrative design also includes reciprocity that thickens the cover of colonialism. Recalling Marcel Mauss's classic analysis of reciprocity in *The Gift*, Peter Hulme makes a point that "reciprocity has always been capitalism's ideology of itself" (Pratt 84). The reciprocity in his narratives can be observed in a scene of Segeo, the capital of Bombarra, where he is taken in by a woman slave as a charity case and he presents his "compassionate" lady with "two of the brass which remained on my waistcoat—the only recompense I could make her (Park 132). Mary Louise Pratt rightly observes the Park's politics of reciprocity in his *Imperial Eyes: Studies in Travel Writing and Transculturation*, "In Parks [narrative], expansionist commercial aspirations idealize themselves into a drama of reciprocity. Negotiating his way across Africa, Park is the picture of the entrepreneur" (Pratt 81). Of course, there are many instances of reciprocity in the narrative. Since the sensibility that Park produces in his narrative is part of a dramatic design, it is associated with politics.

Politics of sensibility was, of course, the product of the eighteenth century atmosphere of Euro-imperialism that faced a legitimization crisis. Mary Louise Pratt observes this crisis in the following analytical writing:

Euro-imperialism faced a legitimization crisis. The histories of broken treaties, genocides, mass displacements and enslavements became less and less acceptable as rationalist and humanitarian ideologies took hold. Particularly after the French Revolution, contradictions between egalitarian, democratic ideologies at home and ruthless structures of domination and extermination abroad became more acute. (Pratt 74)

The eighteenth century sentimentality is aptly observed by Peter Hulme too, "Sentimental sympathy began to flow along the arteries of European commerce, in search of its victims" (qtd in Pratt 75).

Conclusion

Park's *Travel in the Interior Districts of Africa* is thus the inevitable result of a legitimation crisis that Euro-imperialism faced in the late eighteenth century caused by the increasing rationalist and humanitarian ideologies. The expansion of commercial colonization could be made possible in such a situation only by adopting the new forms of travel writing as well as colonialism. So, Park, a protégé of Joseph Banks, who was the president of the Royal Society and a great designer of Britain's colonial expansion, could prepare the way for British colonialism only by projecting himself as a modest or self-inferiorizing traveler and his narrative as an appropriate helping tool for British colonialism.

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