Beyond Tourist Gaze in Select Odia Travel Writings of Gobinda Das, Golakbihari Dhal and Pratibha Ray

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This paper focuses the question: What does it mean to be a traveller rather than a tourist? The term “tourism” is mostly used in impersonal commercial language, but “travel” often implies the personal, picaresque style of travel writing. The traveller being the hero of the text and the tourist as an unfortunate by-product of globalisation highlight the formation of the important binary opposites through the identity/difference logic. Travel writers deprecate the behaviour of tourists and go for a more authentic way to engage with cultural contrast for a more concrete example of otherness. The primary texts taken for this study are the select Odia travel writers: Gobinda Das’s Dese Dese (In Countries), Golakbihari Dhal’s London Chithi (Letter From London), and Pratibha Ray’s Swapnara Alaska (Dreamy Alaska) and Africa Nayika Nilanadi (Africa’s Heroine the River Nile).

Keywords: tourist gaze, travel writing, travelling gaze, selfhood, othering

Introduction

During the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, travel became recreational and the concept has not diminished since then. “Tourism” and “tourist” were words and concepts circulated majorly for commercial purposes, too. A tourist is a representative of travel in the modern world and modernity in turn. A tourist is a superficial traveller whose travel plans are managed by the tourism mechanism/industry. The destinations are pre-arranged and an encounter with an alien culture is masked by orchestrated, commodified meetings and encounters making the whole experience unauthentic. As a result, the tourist does not get an opportunity to either discern or comprehend the “other” or the “self”.

What does it mean to be a traveller rather than a tourist? The term “traveller” offers a positive and independent model of selfhood, “tourists are never ourselves, always other people” (Thubron, 2012, p. 58). Zoe Kinsley demonstrated that the traveller/tourist dichotomy has its origins in the literature of travel emerged at the turn of the nineteenth century due to mass tourism and this differentiation between traveller and tourist becomes increasingly evident in travel writing. Considering the contrast between the two and the values associated with travellers on the one hand and tourists on the other hand, it becomes clear that the supposedly straightforward dichotomy of good/laudable versus bad/worthless masks a range of cultural assumptions and prejudices and the value of individual over communal experience.
To show that he is not a tourist, the traveller often deviates from the methods used by a tourist, i.e., the mode of travel and accommodation. He believes he can access the culture authentically with his “off the beaten track” approach. Places that are not touched by modernity are often explored by the travel writers. While taking a different path, travellers often have to endure difficulties and hardships and sometimes that is quite risky and challenging too (qtd. in “Chapter One: Introduction”). It is these dangers and challenges that help a traveller realize his self, as Carl Thompson argued that one might suggest therefore that dangers and discomforts often function principally as the markers of supposedly “authentic” travel experience and that they are therefore sometimes deliberately sought out so as to strengthen the traveller’s claim to have acquired a more authentic and insightful knowledge of both self and the other (Thompson, 2011, p. 97).

According to Kristin Kay Winet, popular connotations of “tourist” versus “traveller” perhaps precede the way they have actually been defined in and across literatures. In popular imagination, the discourses are often perceived as being irreconcilable. The word “tourism” is often being paired with largely impersonal and commercial language used in tourism studies and advertising whereas the word “travel” often connotes the personal, picaresque style of travel writing (Winet, 2015, p. 43).

Travel Writer: The Intrepid Traveller

According to Debbie Lisle, the forces of globalisation and more specifically modern tourism have certainly ruined the opportunity for travel writers for adventures and have made the new discoveries impossible. Because the tourist can go anywhere, the travel writer can; the travel writer now secures his/her subject position by producing an other that is easy to hate: the tourist. The traveller/tourist binary is an explicit formation of the identity/difference logic—the former installed as the hero of the text and the latter disdained as an unfortunate by-product of globalisation. The tourist’s manner of travel is wholly abhorrent to the travel writer (Lisle, 2006, p. 77). As Sally Tisdale explained, the traveller/tourist dichotomy is a central feature of contemporary travel writing:

A particular distinction between travel and tourism marks modern travel writing, which sometimes goes to acrobatic lengths to frame it. The self-anointed traveller despairs at the nearness of other visitors, the tiniest evidence of travellers having passed this way before, and is touchy indeed at being mistaken for one of the crowd. What he hates most about tourism is tourists... (Travelogues) serve as flattery for all who wish to separate from the rabble—those other people, those tourists. (Tisdale, 1995, p. 67)

Lisle argued, by disparaging the behaviour of tourists, travel writers assume that there is a more authentic way to engage with cultural difference. By claiming to be “intrepid travellers”, travel writers are able to affirm their subject positions by denouncing the mechanical and routine movements of tourists. Travel writers often represent tourists as pathetic creatures, unable to manage foreign countries on their own—they must be led, pandered to, and taken care of like spoiled children (Lisle, 2006, p. 78). In Dese Dese, the travel writer Gobinda Das interrupts his walk on the Westminster Bridge (London) and moves towards Trafalgar Square to observe a group of British tourists:

I started walking on Westminster Bridge towards Trafalgar Square from the banks of the River Thames. There is a huge pillar with boundaries on the four sides. Nelson’s column is on the top it. This is a point of attraction for the tourists in London. There are numerous pigeons here. Those who do not have work, they come here wandering and buy fried grams and peanuts and feed the pigeons. They take pictures with them by putting them on their hand or head. But there
spread a big disturbance as the London Corporation gave a provision to abandon these pigeons because they litter the pillar and the statue and fill with debris. (Das, 2010, p. 28)

Likewise, during Pratibha Ray’s cruise trip to Alaska, she describes a group of tourists on the ship in the chapter “Alaska Mati re RaktaSamparka” (Blood Relation on the Soil of Alaska) and records:

So many people are on the trip to visit Alaska with different purposes. The old and young couple are roaming hand in hand. Everyone is calling each other “honey”, as if all the couples are happy here! (Ray, 2015, p. 38)

Moving “Off the Beaten Track”

Instead of the contrived situations experienced by tourists, travel writers insist that they are involved in journeys of their own, making their itineraries and, are prepared so as not to participate in common tourist practices. As much as possible, travel writers move “off the beaten track” which is outside the convenience, familiarity, and mechanics of the constructed tourist gaze (Lisle, 2006, p. 79). Similarly while walking with a group of tourists (who were her fellow passengers on the ship cruising to Alaska) led by a tourist guide, Ray writes in the chapter “Bayasara Katakana” (The Restrictions/Austerity of Age):

It is problematic if you stop somewhere while walking along with this group. No one waits for anyone. Everyone follows the guide and goes ahead. Why will someone wait for anyone either… Some tourists were already inside the shops… They had decided what to buy beforehand and that is why they were moving very fast towards the shops… I was not interested in buying things. But I had decided earlier that I will bring three masks or totem pole of their local art from any place in Alaska. (Ray, 2015, pp. 75-76)

It is not that travel writers do not experience the Eiffel Tower or the Pyramids, but the act of “travelling” requires a certain independence and autonomy that mass tourism does not allow (Lisle, 2006, p. 79). In this context, the Odia literary critic P. K. Mohanty writes,

Ray’s focus is not on the awe-inspiring museums, churches, or towers. She reports appreciatively, the beauty and grace of the Picasso Art Gallery, Norte Dame Cathedral, and the Eiffel Tower but at the same time she delves deep into their history. For instance, she tells of how the Parisians had protested when the Eiffel Tower was erected. She also refers to the sight of “beautiful” beggars at the Notre Dame Cathedral. She records both the splendour and the squalor without amazement or disapproval. What seems and what is, are thus authentically rationalised. In the same vein she describes the superstitions associated with the eight ravens guarding the Tower of London. The belief of Londoners that the ravens guard the Tower and dispel all evil for the protection of the people is sauce for credulous Indian readers. (Mohanty, 2008, pp. 77-83)

Lisle stated, by marking themselves off as travellers and not tourists, travel writers maintain the belief that they are escaping the already-scripted nature of tourism and engaging with a much more genuine reality than the one constructed through the tourist gaze. It is only the subject position of the travel writer that has access to “real” difference, whereas tourists are not willing to be deprived of comfort and leisure in their collective encounters with difference (Lisle, 2006). Likewise Ray writes in the chapter “LokakatharaNayaka ‘Raven’” (The Hero of Folk Tale “Raven”):

This Totem Square is a totem park. In this park, there is a Russian canon, three traditional anchors, and some representative totem poles. The most attractive thing here is a conical wooden blockhouse of Sitka; apart from this there is a Russian graveyard and Alaska native brotherhood hall. Visiting all this, the tourists were tired. The graveyard was yet to be visited. An aged tourist said, “What will we get visiting a graveyard, now that we are starting to find ours! Those who want they can get down and visit, we are sitting inside the bus”. (Ray, 2015, pp. 128-129)
Quest for the Authentic

As Robert Kaplan stated, “I wanted to map the future, perhaps the ‘deep future’, by ignoring what was legally and officially there and, instead, touching, feeling, and smelling what was really there” (Kaplan, 1997, p. 6). And the key is to claim the identity of a travel writer is to separate yourself from the “hordes” of tourists—it is to be a modern-day pioneer, adventurer, explorer, moving ever closer to the real world (Lisle, 2006). In this context, Sally Tisdale (1995) explained:

This isn’t something most travellers will admit, but they know that if you really want to stand out in a strange place, show up late and on foot. Act according to the belief that the locals will want to get to know you as much as you hope to get to know them. The single traveller, the one with the small backpack and the notebook, the one looking for the “real” Java, the “real” Sudan, wants something the tour group does not. He wants to be the centre of attention; he yearns to be taken behind the scenes. Knowing he can’t “pass” as a local, the traveller (credit card and all) tries to pass as something else—a pilgrim, a nomad, ever on the move, belonging to no one. (Tisdale, 1995, p. 72)

While visiting the Cairo Museum, Pratibha Ray was with her tour guides Wahlid and Haidi and she wrote in the chapter “Cairo Museum”:

I told them that we want to spend more time at the Egyptian tradition section and the most attractive part of this museum is the section dedicated to Tutankhamun, where there is the huge amount of wealth and riches that are recovered from his pyramid and we want to see these that are displayed in the galleries. (Ray, 2012, p. 232)

This quest for “the real” is echoed by the travel writer Pratibha Ray as she emphasises on the Native American tribes on one of her visits to the tribal villages in Alaska and writes in the chapter “LokakatharaNayaka ‘Raven’” (The Hero of Folk Tale “Raven”):

In Alaska, the native young men and women are the best in all kinds of activities among the entire young American group… This is true that no one can snatch away their original culture, folk tale, and myth from them even if they are deprived of many of their rights. (Ray, 2015, p. 128)

As Lisle argued that travel writers disdain tourists because they cannot experience the “authentic” culture (e.g., a “real” tribal folk culture in rural Tlingit village) and “staged” cultural difference put on for their benefit (e.g., a performance of “NaaKahidi” dance at the Tribal Community House by Tlingits) as Pratibha Ray mentioned in Swapnara Alaska (Dreamy Alaska). Illustrating how tourists allow themselves to be fooled by “fake” displays of cultural difference is crucial in the identity formation of travel writers: It allows them to take comfort in their moral superiority and continue to believe that they, alone, are intrepid explorers experiencing authentic encounters with other cultures (Lisle, 2006). Similarly, Golakbihari Dhal writes in the chapter “EngrejraBiswapritiJojana” (The Plan of Philanthropy by the British):

In this tourist plan a foreigner gets another facility which is difficult to get if he travels alone. With the request of the British Council one gets permission to visit big mills and factories, government offices, and places where general entry is banned. On behalf of this organisation, guides or supervisors come along. They explain about the significance of various tourist attractions and take care of the tourists. They arrange lectures by local well-known professors, orators, experts… Staying at the Indian hostel in London it is quite difficult to understand the beauty of English lifestyle. But coming along with such kind of tourists one gets an opportunity to understand English culture being in the English superintendent. (Dhal, 1995, p. 92)
Travel writers are able to pursue authenticity while distinguishing themselves from tourists because they have a certain freedom in solitude: Travel writers deliberately move alone, and through alternative and lesser-known circuits (Lisle, 2006). For example, when Ray plans her journey through the excursion to the tribal villages and cultural institutions in Alaska in the chapter “Loka Katha raNayaka ‘Raven’” (The Hero of Folk Tale “Raven”); she believes that her independent route will get her closer to aboriginal culture:

Whichever country I visited, first I searched for its natives. I have been attracted towards the tribal village by a mysterious allure. In Alaska as well I had taken excursion to tribal villages and tribal cultural institutions got a chance to meet the local artists at the Baranov Art and Craft Association. After talking to them, I collected so much factual information. (Ray, 2015, p. 128)

Travel writers like Ray are made anxious by the thought of not being able to gain independent access to authenticity as she explains during her journey in Alaska, the circuitry of mass tourism is almost impossible to escape as she writes in the chapter “JahajareSesaRati” (The Last Night on the Ship):

The French guide is an opportunist. First of all he went on describing about himself. We walked fast to be with their group… On the left side there is a bushy jungle and on the other side of it is the Native American village. Small houses were visible. My feet were being pulled towards that direction. But visiting the village where Natives live was not included in the tour schedule. I wanted to go to that nearby village. It was not far away from the ship. It was almost visible from there. Sharing feelings with them is unique… I told Pam, “You go! I am going to this small Native village. After staying there for some time I will return to the ship”. Another old gentleman rudely said, “Do you know anything about Native American village? How can you dare so much? Now they are no more villagers. What is a village inside a city? Earlier they used to stay there. Now there are various kinds of people and incidents… walk along with everyone else. Now many kinds of people are staying there and many incidents happen… Walk along with everyone here”. As if suddenly he became my guardian. I could understand my fault. The civilised society does not believe the Natives at all. But according to my small observation I consider them very simple... Then our group was ready to fly like a swarm of fireflies towards the lighted city. (Ray, 2015, p. 159)

What is particularly significant about Ray’s desire to escape the tourist circuit is her sense that it is always encroaching on her “real” experience. In the chapter “Salmon RangaraKhara” (Salmon Coloured Sunrays) as Ray states, she is happy to place herself alongside other tourists in tourist buses, in hotels, at restaurants, and at various tourist sites. Indeed, Ray spends much of her time in Alaska augmenting her collection of Tlingit tourist souvenirs:

That afternoon I had an excursion to visit Alaska’s Native village (Saxman). That village is situated inside a dense rainforest. It is quite a long walk. That day, my table partners said that I have no co-visitor to go to any place. But amongst our tourist group on the ship, I was only going there. (Ray, 2015, p. 141)

While waiting alone for the tourist bus, she again records:

The shop was at a quite higher place. It is warm and comfortable inside and the racks are filled with interesting books and magazines. I did not buy books, but just checked through the pages. There were some free English newspapers and useful booklets on the racks. I chose some of those and kept it in my bag. (Ray, 2015, p. 142)

And while roaming around local markets in Egypt, she writes in the chapter “SapaPetareBika Kina” (Business Inside Snake’s Stomach):

I told Adyasa, “Instead of stopping at any shop we will roam around and see and we will stop only at book shops. We will buy some good books”. We did the same and continued walking… Till now we had not entered into any shops.
Seeing a book store we stopped by. Without listening to him at all from behind, we bought some books and small souvenirs from the shop by the street. (Ray, 2012, pp. 228-231)

But even as Ray jokes her way through the European tourist circuit and she writes in the chapter “Salmon RangaraKhara” (Salmon Colour Sunrays):

Ed asked me, “Where is your journey today?” I said, “National Totem Park and Saxman village”. Pam laughed and said, “Oh, whenever you go, it is to Native village, Totem Park, Native culture museum! So what did you see in Alaska? Have you seen the salmon fish breeding? Have you done fishing on the boat? This is world’s salmon capital. Today is our Salmon day”. I said, “Today is my Saxman day. You visit salmon hatchery, I will shake hand with the bears and deer in the rainforest, enjoying the salmon coloured sunrays”. (Ray, 2015, p. 142)

The “Good” Tourist and the “Bad” Tourist

As Lisle has pointed out, here Ray accepts that she is a tourist, but simultaneously laments the growth of the tourist industry. She is happy to enjoy the benefits that tourism brings but is worried that some tourists—Europeans—will not respect other cultures in the same way that she does. Rather than portraying herself as an intrepid traveller who disdains other tourists, she recognises her own participation in the tourist industry and engages in a more subtle form of projection. She can no longer negatively position the tourist without coming off as a hypocrite, but she can certainly secure her own position as a “good” tourist by making judgements about the “bad” tourist behaviour of others (Lisle, 2006). She is also worried about what the onslaught of tourism and modern civilisation is doing to the places she wants to visit. She writes in the chapter “Saxman Village”:

I had read a significant statement about the condition of the Alaskan Tlingit Natives by a European tourist who travelled by the Westerdam ship before us. After seeing the Ketchikan’s Saxman Tlingit clan’s traditional houses, folk song and dance forms, Totem Park, and the factory where totem is made, he said, “It feels sad to think about the role of my European ancestors who drove away and occupied the land belonging to these original natives to spread modern civilization. Their historical and cultural lifestyle is forcibly snatched away from original natives. But more regretful than this is the proposal for opening the Native Indian casino as a reaction for the eradication of their problem. This is true that we cannot return their nomadic life to them. But why cannot the progress and development of these tribes keep their significance and pride in tact? If we could connect the significance of their tradition and every element of modernity, it could give a unique future to them”. (Ray, 2015, p. 143)

Tourists, it is often argued destroy the pristine environment of a place and the influence of tourists is often more powerful on the locals because of their economic situation. For example, Helena Norberg discusses the ill effects of tourism in Ladakh in People From Mars (qtd. in “Chapter One: Introduction”). The changes that were brought about in Ladakh and its people are traced by the author and she feels sorry that a culture that represented human values is slowly being eroded by tourism. Patrick Holland is of the view that,

Travellers are tourists although of an independent breed, and the thrills and spills described in travel narratives, if different in kind and spirit from the organized pleasures of the much-derided “packaged trips” still provide their readers with the manufactured wonders, not to mention the scandals, of surrogate tourism. (Holland &Huggan, 2000, p. 8)

When wandering through the Alaskan rainforest, she is sympathetic to local animals and birds that have to deal with the “bad” tourists who infiltrate the natural habitat in their breeding season. Speaking of the disturbance caused by these tourists, Ray highlights the general suggestions in the chapter “Rainforest raPhula”
(The Flowers of Rainforest):

During that season there is instruction from the forest department. The tourists can see them from a distance. There is no permission to go near them. (Ray, 2015, p. 83)

Again in the chapter “Glacier Bay”, Ray stresses on this fact as she writes:

On the day before we got the “explorer” booklet on behalf of the cruise; along with other informations, it had following instructions in capital letter: It is a special rule for the conservation of “Glacier Bay” national park that the ecosystem which is destructible with the slightest attempt of man, so the different kinds of forest animals should not be disturbed by the ship tourists and will not break the solitary meditative nature. (Ray, 2015, p. 91)

Despite Ray’s recognition that the traveller/tourist distinction is problematic, she continues to employ the identity/difference logic by positioning herself as a “good” tourist and others as “bad” tourists. What this suggests is that cosmopolitan travel writers no longer claim the privileged position of traveller, but they do claim to be ethical tourists: They want to learn about difference, protect the environment, and respect the cultural heritage of the local communities they visit. To the extent that others are doing the same, they can be part of the same community as the travel writer. Ray is often magnanimous in her descriptions of others who share her passion for the “right” way to travel, that is, those that share her values (Lisle, 2006). Similarly Ray writes in the chapter “Saxman Village”:

This Saxman village is situated outside Alaska’s port city Ketchikan, on the southern direction. I noticed that the tourists have a great sense of attraction towards this place. (Ray, 2015, p. 143)

According to Lisle, to be sure, there will always be fat, unprepared, culturally ignorant tourists to poke fun at (the “bad” tourists), but Ray holds open the possibility that other travellers might share her approach to travel and they might be “good” tourists. What is interesting about Ray’s distinction between good and bad tourism is that it reveals the same process of subjectification that has always secured the travel writer: It projects difference onto others. But somehow, the “bad” tourist-as-other does not quite satisfy the travel writer’s desire for authenticity in order to secure his/her subject position properly; the travel writer requires a more concrete example of otherness (Lisle, 2006, pp. 77-83). Kwan Wai Eric YU (2008) argued that, the “tourist” and the “traveller” is a pair of important binary opposites in travel culture. The former is imbued with such derogatory meanings as superficiality, routines, and mass consumptions, while the latter implies adventures, individuality, cultivation, and growth or enlightenment through travelling. This distinction is more a matter of how an individual traveller makes sense of the meaning of one’s own travel than of objectivity reality. In this context John Urry (1990) has put forth the famous theory of the “tourist gaze”, emphasizing the centrality of visual consumption in contemporary tourism.

**Conclusion**

The traveller’s insistence that he or she is not a “tourist” is often a claim for individualism, a rejection of sameness. In the emergence of the traveller/tourist distinction, there is evidence of travel narrative form being used to negotiate issues of selfhood. The othering of the tourist being antithetical to the self of the traveller involves a rhetorical manoeuvre, which originates in the discourse developed by travellers to differentiate themselves from the travellers, or the native inhabitants they journeyed to (Kinsley, 2015). Travellers have
always examined their own identity in relation to those they encounter whilst on the move, but as recreational travel increases, the travelling gaze starts to turn to consider fellow travellers (MacCannell, 1990, pp. 9-10; qtd. in Kinsley, 2015). According to Kinsley, the anti-tourist impulse physically, emotionally and intellectually steps beyond the limits of the ground that others trade and this impulse encapsulates the traveller’s desire to be different and individual, both in travel practice and text. The positive model of travel as immersion and participation frequently frames his own travelling behaviour and experiences that is contrasted with the stereotypically “touristy” behaviour (Kinsley, 2015, p. 240). Michael Kowalewski argued, post-war travel writers have an “enriched sense of diversity and complexity of other cultures” (Kowalewski, 1992, p. 10). The post-touristic recognition of plurality calls “our collective ability to represent foreign people” into question (Kowalewski, 1992, p. 10) and demands new approaches. The post-tourist turn to travel writing demonstrates heightened awareness of the politics of writing about another place and culture and of the problems inherent in representing the voices of the people encountered (Kinsley, 2015, p. 243).

References


