

Examining the Other in Paul Theroux's Travel Writing: A Study of Three Texts

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Abstract:

The objective of this paper is to examine the concept of 'Other' as presented by travel writers. The primary argument here is the representation of the Other in the travelogues of Paul Theroux. This paper analyzes the creation of the imagined Orient by the West, a Westerner's view of the West by separating it as the Other and that the mode of travel can itself be a place for Othering. For this study, three travelogues by Theroux have been selected, including 'The Great Railway Bazaar: By Train Through Asia' (1975), 'The Kingdom By The Sea: A Journey Around Great Britain' (1983), and 'The Old Patagonian Express: By Train Through The Americas' (1979). This paper attempts to look at the issue of the Other from a postcolonial perspective and will involve textual analysis as well as literary interpretation.

Keywords: Other, Self, West, East, Orient, Hybridity

'Othering' is a much-used term in recent travel writing studies, though confusingly it is often used in two slightly different senses. In a weaker, more generic sense, 'othering' refers to the process through which people of one culture recognise and emphasise the distinctions between themselves and those of another culture. In a strong sense, however, it has come to refer more specifically to the processes and strategies by which one culture depicts another culture as not only different but also inferior to itself. So the question arises, how do the travelling subject view the destination and the Other people? How does the Self create the Other and how the Other contributes to the creation of the Self?

The aim of this paper is to examine how travel writers have used the concept of the 'Other'. The writers place themselves as an outsider and look at the new place and people as Other in a conscious manner. The primary argument presented in this paper is the representation of the Other by Theroux. Theroux has travelled to many places around the world on the train. While travelling through various places he notices the differences between his own American self and the people of different countries. Based on this contrast he has created the concept of Othering.

The main hypothesis here is to examine how Theroux has created the concept of the Other. This will be seen in the context of – (a) the way the travelling subject views the destination and the Other people (b) the way the Self creates the Other and how the Other contributes to the creation of this Self (c) the Self thinks to be superior to the Other (d) the Self highlights the shortcomings of the Other (e) the Self looks down upon the Other as fragile.

For this study, three travelogues by Theroux have been selected, including *The Great Railway Bazaar: By Train Through Asia* (1975), *The Kingdom By The Sea: A Journey Around Great Britain* (1983), and *The Old Patagonian Express: By Train Through The Americas* (1979). *The Great Railway Bazaar* recounts his journey through the Oriental countries. *The Kingdom By The Sea* is a written account of his journey around the United Kingdom in 1982. *The Old Patagonian Express* recounts his journey from Massachusetts to Argentina.

Theoretical tools such as postcolonial Other will be used and historical accounts such as Falklands War will be described. Apart from postcolonial Other, this paper also uses the concept of geographical Other and global Other.

Travel literature tends to have an exclusive concentration on the Self, an emphasis on empirical detail, and a linear progression across time and space. Travel writers often describe the ‘other’ in negative terms. They distinguish the manners and customs of the Other from their country and consider the Other as inferior.

Bruce Chatwin’s *In Patagonia* (1977) is usually seen as the beginning text for postcolonial studies. Travel writing first emerged as a significant component of contemporary critique in Edward Said’s *Orientalism* (1978), which viewed it as a body of work that provided unique insight into the functioning of colonial discourses.

The ideological components of travel writing, and the wider rhetorical purposes served by the frequent inclination of travel writers to frame other groups and cultures in an antagonistic or contemptuous fashion, are subject matters that have been concentrated heavily in the most recent flurry of travel literature. In particular, these are issues which have focused their attention especially on the depictions of other people and places offered in Western travel writing, and in Western culture more generally. Leading the way in this regard was Edward Said’s *Orientalism*. In *Orientalism*, Said explored Western images and accounts, from ancient times down to the late twentieth century, the so-called ‘Orient’: that is, the region stretching from Egypt and the Middle East to India, China and Japan. Whether they appeared in works of art and fiction or in ostensibly factual, objective genres such as travel writing and ethnography, he observed that many of these renderings of the ‘Orient’ had the same unchallenged preconceptions and cliches. Orientals were consistently portrayed as sensual and ruthless, while Oriental societies were typically believed to have a predisposition towards despotism. These concepts and visuals eventually formed a discourse, an idea Said adopted from the French theorist Michel Foucault. The simplistic, negative ‘othering’ of Asia and the Middle East, Said suggests has generally served ideological ends, and has often been used to justify the West’s colonial ambitions in these regions. According to Said, the Orient project divides the West from the rest.

The Other functions as the Self's polar antithesis. It helps in the conceptualization of the Self. The Other is looked upon as fragile, incompetent, easily duped and prone to immortality. The image of the Other is produced as inferior

Postcolonial theory is used to study the representation of the Other in travel writings. Travel writers need to discriminate between the familiar surroundings at home and the travelling destination. This is shown by the production of difference. It is done to cater for the interests of the readers. The travel writer constructs the idea of the Other in order to bring forth the distinction in question.

The Other is always seen as exotic, and strange. Exoticism is one of the forms of creating geographical otherness. Whatever constitutes the other is seen with awe and is considered abnormal. Exoticism is visible in the description of the landscape and people and their cultures. In reality, no place is exotic. It is merely a construction by the Self to define the Other. It is used to mystify the Other and create a difference between the two.

Travel writing is affected by colonialism. The culture of the imperial countries is presented as supreme and more practical. The image of the Other reassures the imperial readers not only of superiority over the rest of the world but also of their moral right to that sense of superiority.

Hybridity is a strategy of Imperialism to maintain hegemonic control over the Other. Homi K. Bhabha in his book *The Location of Culture* (1994) describes hybridity as a product of colonialism. Because of hybridity, the Self can show superiority over the Other. Bhabha uses hybridity to bring into focus the struggles of the subaltern subjects.

In the neo-colonial as in the colonial era, positive as well as negative representations of the Other may work to sustain the unequal power relations between the West and the rest of the world. Other people and other places can in a sense be held hostage by the iconography that attaches to them in Western culture. And much contemporary travel writing arguably colludes with the tendency in so far as it works first to establish this iconography, and thereafter to underplay the impact of modernity, and especially of tourism, on many other regions of the world.

Geographical Other can be presented through the picture of Britain. 1882 was the summer of the Falklands War. Britain won the Falklands War against Argentina. They gained supremacy over the world.

One Western country looks at another Western country as the Other. One country considers itself to be superior compared to the other country. They look at the other country as exotic, strange, and unusual.

Sometimes the mode of travel can also be the place of Othering. Whether it is an aeroplane, a train or a bus, people of different cultures, castes and classes travel together within the same means. It is the place where multiple cultures meet. The place becomes multicultural.

There is a world created within the mode itself and the travel writer considers this place as an area to create the concept of Other. He meets various people while travelling together by the

same means. He observes them carefully, talks to them, notices their dressing style, looks at their food habits and based on these observations, he shows them as the Other.

The difficulty of imagining or representing the Other is central to the consideration of the urban Greek writer's discussion of the nomadic Scythian. They share the same 'oriental' enemy with the cosmopolitan Greeks, and with the Darius's and Xerxes's Persians.

The use of the strategies of negation and, more crucially, inversion by Herodotus to address the issue of the inexpressibility of the Other is highlighted by Hartog in his book *The Mirror of Herodotus: The Representation of the Other in the Writing of History* (2009). In Hartog's words, "It is not hard to see why travellers' tales and utopias frequently resort to this method [of inversion], since it constructs an otherness that is transparent for the listener or reader: it is no longer a matter of *a* and *b*, simply of *a* and the converse of *a*" (Hartog 2009: 213).

Hartog's Scythians are presented as simply an example of the functioning of inversion and of a submerged structure of cultural symmetry in the *Histories*. However, he has chosen for his study sample the most basic form of cultural otherness represented in Western ethnographic writing: that of the non-agricultural, and therefore spatially unfixated or unlocatable people.

The Other is the inversion of the Self. The travel writers have used the strategies of negation to handle the Other. Travel writing reveals how the dominant cultures of the world produce representations of the other and draw upon contradictions to produce loci from which Western ideologies emerge as superior. Postcolonial theory criticizes these issues delineated in travel narratives. Edward Said in his *Orientalism* describes Orientalism as "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of them) 'the Occident' (Said 1979: 2).

Most of the travel writers depend on this production to cater to the interests of the readers. In order to bring forth this difference, the travel writer creates the concept of the 'Other'. This is done for two purposes. One is to make the place and the people of a certain locale look alien to create an aura and then use this concept to create an identity to the Self. According to Said, colonial discourse is hegemonic in nature where the West constructs the imagined Other. The construction of the Other helps in the conceptualization of the self.

The Great Railway Bazaar: By Train Through Asia chronicles Theroux's four-month journey by train in the year 1973 from London through Europe, the Middle East, the Indian subcontinent and Southeast Asia and his return via The Trans-Siberian Express. While trying to examine Theroux's way of looking at Others, this travelogue portrays how he looks at Oriental countries. The people of the Orient countries are described in terms of exotic. The West looks at the Other with disdain and this prejudice against the Other is based on hegemonic control.

The idea of the West being better than the Other is portrayed here. One such instance can be observed in the words of Molesworth. Molesworth, whom Theroux meets while he was travelling to Istanbul from Paris by The Direct-Orient Express, says from his experience of being in the Indian Army that there are many Indians who so can be treated as absolute equals. They are so well-bred. By talking to them, it is difficult for one to figure out that they are Indians. As

Theroux puts it, “he had loved the army and he said that there were many of Indians who were so well bred you could treat them as absolute equals- indeed, talking to them you would hardly know you were talking to Indians” (Theroux 1975: 9). These words by Molesworth indicate that the Indians are considered as low by the West. Only the well-breed can be treated as equal. When he says that by talking to them it is difficult to know that they are Indians indicates that the Indians have a peculiar way of speaking which is different from the rest.

Theroux was comfortable while he was travelling to Paris and was at Calais station. But he said that the great express from Paris turned doubtful and irritating as it reached Istanbul’s outskirts. It began to stop at every station to give conductors a chance to fool with notebooks. It became like a Turkish local train. Theroux writes, “The great express from Paris became a doubtful and irritating Turkish locale once it got to Istanbul’s outskirts, stopping at every station to give conductors a chance to fool with notebooks in the Turkish Clapham Junctions and Scarsdles (20). This experience of Theroux shows that the journey in the West is comfortable. But it is not so in the East. Theroux experiences a doubtful and irritating journey in the East.

Hermann whom Theroux met while he was travelling to Amritsar from Lahore paid some extra money to the conductor so that he could travel with a European. He did not want to travel with an Indian because he is afraid that travelling with an Indian might make him face some trouble:

He had bribed the conductor so that he could travel with a European. He didn’t want to be in a compartment with an Indian- there might be trouble. (54)

This activity of Hermann indicates that the people of the West consider themselves superior. They do not want to be in the same room with the people of the Other. The Westerners feel that being together with the people of the East might lead them to some trouble. For them, the West is always superior to the Other, over the rest of the world.

In *The Great Railway Bazaar* Theroux looks at the oriental countries as inferior, low. The people of the Oriental countries are uncivilized, poor. Here he observes things from a Eurocentric perspective. Travel writing is accused of being Eurocentric. It is always the white traveller who travels and defines the Other. This has been discussed by Said in *Orientalism*. The postcolonial theory used here challenges this purview of looking at things from just the perspective of the white traveller. The white structures his narrative in such a manner as to show that the destinations inhabited by the Orientals are not easily accessible or recognizable. It is seen how by the careful use of selected vocabulary and exotic imagery the travel writer mystifies the Other. This is done to prove that the white race is superior. The West always looks at the Other with prejudiced eyes and disdain. The hegemonic control maintained over the Other in socio-political conditions is visible in travel writing too. This makes travel writing a part of colonial discourse.

The Kingdom By The Sea: A Journey Around Great Britain is a written account of a three-month-long journey taken by Theroux around the United Kingdom in the summer of 1982. The travelogue highlights Theroux’s way of othering the West though he himself is a Westerner. Theroux takes a detached position and evaluates the English scenario and the problems which trouble the English people and society despite England’s political supremacy in the global

scenario. 1982 was the summer of the Falklands War. England won the Falklands War against Argentina. They gained supremacy over the world, but there were many shortcomings within England itself. Theroux tries to highlight these shortcomings. As an American, he tries to present the otherness which he sees in England.

In recent travel writings, most travel writers create the concept of the Other. Theroux being an American creates England as the Other in *The Kingdom By The Sea*. Theroux tries to examine the real England beyond the vaunted global superpower. The time of his visit coincides with England's success in the Falklands War where the jubilant Britain managed to prevail over Argentina. However, his tour through Britain brings to light certain contradictions in the condition of people and places which belies its successful image in the world.

Theroux had decided to walk around the United Kingdom (Other) and explore how it was different from America (Self). In the travelogue, there are several descriptions showing the comparison or the differences between the two.

Theroux as an outsider seldom had a good word about Britain. He being an American observes England as the other. Although he himself is a Westerner, he looks at Britain or the West as the other.

The Kingdom By The Sea looks at the difference between America and Britain though both are in the Western hemisphere. In this travelogue a Westerner's view of the West is highlighted, how he has created the difference among the countries of the West is noticed. Theroux being an American looks at the shortcomings of Britain. Britain's winning of the Falklands War has been criticized. Although Britain has gained supremacy over the world, there are many shortcomings within the country. Theroux shows Britain as cityless. He has evaluated the English scenario and the problem which trouble the English people.

The concept of the global Other is highlighted in Theroux's *The Old Patagonian Express: By Train Through The Americas*. Beginning his journey in Boston, where he boarded the subway commuter train, and catching trains of all kinds on the way, Theroux recounts his journey from ice-bound Massachusetts and Illinois to the arid plateau of Argentina's most southerly trip.

Here he creates the concept of the other world within a train. Given that Theroux is a great believer in train journeys, in the travelogue *The Old Patagonian Express*, the train itself becomes the site for the global scenario. Train is a place where multiple cultures meet.

Theroux need not have to look outside for othering; the train itself is a place for Othering. He can see a different world within the train. There are multiple cultures on the train. People from different parts of the world gather, and Theroux while travelling has met different people on the same train.

In the Amtrak's Lake Shore Limited, Theroux met Wendy who was on her way to Ohio, the lady from Flagstaff, a large group of girls heading New Orleans and the Madri Grass, some elderly couple on their way to San Francisco, a couple from Kansas etc. In *The Lone Star*, he met a

middle-aged couple and a man from Texan, a group of two or three hundred women and children who entered in Oklahoma.

The train is a place of multiculturalism. Different people belonging to different cultures are different and based on these differences, Theroux has created the concept of other in *The Old Patagonian Express*.

It can be seen that Theroux loses his own psychic borders to accommodate the Other; and from this paper, the following conclusions can be drawn- (a) the Other is an imagined creation of the Self (b) the Other is based on the hegemonic control of the West over the Orient (c) the Other is presented as an antithesis to the Self (d) the Self focuses on the shortcomings of the other (e) the mode of travel can also be a place of Othering.

Theroux has created the concept of the Other by observing the people and the places very closely. He has looked at the dressing style, the food habits, the way of talking, as well as the beliefs and practices of the people.

Theroux in his travelogues always presents the Other as fragile, and inferior. He shows the Other as uncivilized, and poor. He extensively criticizes their culture, food habits, dressing styles, their beliefs and practices. He considers the Self to be superior, and this is more evident in the case of his representation of Oriental countries. The West consider themselves to be superior to the rest of the world.

Theroux from the beginning of the travelogues describes the Other as the worst and shows all the negative aspects of the Other. He provides various instances in his travelogues supporting the Other to be the worst.

Although Theroux criticizes the Other, towards the end he realizes. He repents for the comments he has made towards the Other. He repents the picture which he has presented regarding the Other. Although he presents the Other as inferior, towards the end he tries to show that the Other is not too low or inferior.

Very often instances of pejorative 'othering' in travel writing serve as an important justification. The traveller's portrayal of another people or place is often ideologically motivated, seeking at some level to justify and encourage a particular policy or course of action towards those others.

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