

# SARDONIC ATTITUDE OF THEROUX IN *THE GREAT RAILWAY BAZAAR*

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## ABSTRACT

This study examines Paul Theroux's *The Great Railway Bazaar* (1977) so as to trace his perception on the Asian states, peoples and cultures during his railway journey across Asia in 1973. The study primarily seeks an answer to the question: does Theroux adopt cosmopolitan vision of the contemporary globalized era or follow the colonial vision of the colonial era? The study borrows theoretical concepts of colonial and cosmopolitan visions from Debbie Lisle. In the process of textual analysis, the study also brings theoretical concepts in travel writing theory and criticisms of various critics on the primary text. The study, finally, comes up with a conclusion that Theroux has implicated the colonial vision as it locates numerous evidences of his condescending and sardonic attitude on the Asian states, peoples and cultures.

**Key words:** Travel writing, postcolonial, cosmopolitan and colonial visions, emancipator, mis/representation, white supremacy, sardonic.

## INTRODUCTION AND OBJECTIVE

This study excavates Paul Theroux's perception on the Asian states, peoples and cultures in his first travel book, *The Great Railway Bazaar: By Train through Asia* (Commonly known, and also referred in this study hereby, as *The Great Railway Bazaar* in its short name). The study traces abundance of textual instances that evince Theroux's sardonic and contemptuous behavior on the Asian peoples and cultures, and hence confirms that Theroux perpetuates the colonial vision of the West that began prominently in the Age of Exploration. For the analytical purpose, the study primarily employs theoretical concepts of colonial and cosmopolitan visions from Lisle. The study also engages useful theoretical concepts in travel writing theory and critical responses on *The Great Railway Bazaar* by various scholars such as Holland, Huggan, Youngs, Hulme, Carl Thompson and others.

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Theroux, "The leading figure . . . in travel writing" (Whitfield, 2011), "one of the figures responsible for the revival of the popularity of travel writing" (Youngs, 2013) and "critically acclaimed travel writer" (Thompson, 2011), receives an advance of \$ 7500 from his American editor for writing a book about his travel experiences across various European and Asian countries. He makes a mammoth railway journey of four and half months in the year 1973 and records his observations and experiences in *The Great Railway Bazaar*. Immediately after its publication in 1975, the book was a big hit: "was well received" (Theroux x), and "was an instant best seller" (Lisle, 2006).

The book has since received quite a great deal of critical responses, let alone more than 14000 ratings and 701 reviews on *goodreads*, 148 reviews on *amazon.com*. Having a great success, *The Great Railway Bazaar* inaugurated the modern renaissance in travel writing genre in English: "the most recent upsurge of interest in travel writing" (Hulme & Youngs, 2002) and "modern 'renaissance' of travel writing" (Lisle 2). And, this is the point that strikes me: despite being recognized as a renaissance text of the contemporary postcolonial era, why does it still hang around the colonial vision? The answer found is: Theroux cannot jettison the long standing Western biases against the non-West. He maintains, as Blanton (1997) comments, "the imperialist and othering tropes that are part of the genre's heritage" (109). Theroux moves along the path of colonial vision of the traditional travel writers.

### **Theoretical Framework**

In her book, *The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing*, Lisle (2006) strongly posits her arguments that the contemporary travel writing, i.e. the writing after the 1970s, hangs around the colonial vision of the past. She explains that even if the contemporary travel writers, whether Western or non-Western in origin, may intend to shed colonial vision and promote cosmopolitan vision, they are unable to do so in reality. They rather fall in a tension between these two visions. In her own words, the contemporary travel writing faces "tension between colonial and cosmopolitan visions" (5). This is because as she further writes, these two visions have a "complex relationship with each other . . . [which is] sometimes antagonistic, sometimes symbiotic, sometimes ambiguous"(5). Their relationship is in such a complex web due to the process of decolonization and globalization. Hence, a contemporary travel writer even from a colonial

West cannot overtly frame his writing with colonial vision in the present. Nor a writer from the formerly colonized world can distinctly incorporate his cosmopolitan vision in his writing. So, the crucial thing, for Lisle, is the degree of the vision which the writer emphasizes more on.

According to Lisle, colonial vision continues the colonial traditions of the West which travel writers mimic from their forebears in order to represent and express their judgments on the non-West. Lisle, however, believes that due to the anxieties caused by the democratic possibilities brought about by globalization, the contemporary travel writers do not dare to reveal the differentiating logic of Empire directly as their forebears did. Colonial vision, in this sense, does not resemble exactly to the colonial vision of the colonial era. Rather, it is a contested term that carries both the differentiating nature of the colonial past and resisting nature of the postcolonial and globalized present. To quote Lisle's words, "colonial vision' is a contested term" that reveals "anachronistic forms of authority but also questions, disrupts and interrogates the foundations upon which that authority is grounded" (4). Colonial vision is still at work in the contemporary postcolonial world. Travel writers still tend to secure authoritative voice in the text by differentiating the peoples of less-developed world as the other. Such writers reveal differentiation in a negative way.

Cosmopolitan vision, on the other hand, refers to the shedding of the colonial legacy focusing more on the harmonizing effects of globalization. Lisle explains, in cosmopolitan vision, "travel writers make deliberate efforts to distance themselves from the genre's implications in Empire by embracing the emancipatory possibilities" (4). Writers with cosmopolitan vision express liberal, democratic and emancipatory voice in their work. Such writers intend to create an undifferentiated democratized world order in the present age of globalization when the power of Empire has dwindled and its foundations shaken off. To say this, it does not necessarily mean that such writers do not reveal differentiation. Undoubtedly, they do but in a positive way by celebrating interdependence and common aims. They appreciate other cultures the way they do their own. Lisle employs, "Unlike their colonial predecessors, these writers frame encounters with others in positive ways—they reveal moments of empathy, recognitions of difference, realizations of equality and insights into shared values. To the extent that travel writers seek to jettison their colonial heritage by focusing on the harmonizing effects of globalization" (4). And as Lisle further adds, such writers wish to develop "a global order based on shared understandings,

norms and sensibilities" (4) by maintaining a symmetric and harmonious relationship between all the peoples of the world.

The self-proclaimed contemporary cosmopolitan writer falls into colonial vision mainly of two reasons: travel privilege and economic motive. The travel writer who enjoys the privilege of mobility—which the common people of the non-West rarely have—also enjoys the authority of judging and representing the traveled geography and its people. In this regard, 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" (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" (115). The travel writer, whether Western or non-Western, tends to use the trope of differentiation in the fashion of a colonial trends, even though he may not reveal colonial authority explicitly. The writer, thus, happens to misrepresent the travelled location, its people and cultures 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" (120). This suggests that the writer shapes his writing as per the permission of the patrons that have sponsored his journey as well as the wish of his readership. Holland & Huggan (2000) too have the similar claim that the writer motivated by economic achievements continues "legacy of [European] exoticism" in order to produce "cultural otherness" for "profitable business" (65). The writer thinks of financial success, for which, he targets at the Western readership, which apparently initiates him to follow the Western trend of representation of the non-West as the other. In case of *The Great Railway Bazaar*, it is, as Holland & Huggan (2000) indicate, one of Theroux's "sardonic travel narratives" (14). The author Theroux seems more inclined to colonial vision than to cosmopolitan and thus judges the Asian states, peoples and cultures in a sardonic and contemptuous attitude.

### **Theroux Sardonic Attitude in *The Great Railway Bazaar***

Theroux's journey is a leisurely class one, that of a "sophisticated traveler" (Wilson & Richards, 2004). Unlike previous Western travelers, he does not walk much to explore and interact with foreign geography and people. Instead, he uses trains. The journey begins and ends in London, where his wife has been working. It takes a circuitous route through Europe,

Turkey, Iran, Afghanistan, India, Sri Lanka, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Vietnam, Japan, the Soviet Union and then back to London. He travels almost fifteen thousand miles by thirty trains, only occasionally by buses and aeroplanes in case there are no train routes. The journey covers the major rail routes available in the 1970s across Europe and Asia. Theroux clarifies that his objective of the travel is to write "a long book with lots of people and dialogue and no sightseeing" (vii), suggesting that he loves to watch mannerism of peoples rather than enjoy the natural sceneries. He thus sits exclusively in the trains, observes and complains their conditions and facilities, drinks beer and reads books, watches fellow travelers' manners and interacts with them, and occasionally looks outside the windows. Sometimes, he stops in a hotel for a night or two along the way. He rarely bothers to enjoy natural scenes and praise them. He shows no interest in other places except Istanbul, Peshawar, the Ashau Valley and Kyoto. He is mostly contemptuous towards the people he meets in the trains and sees from the windows outside.

Theroux depicts the colonial logic of differentiation upon the peoples he meets from the very moment of getting ready for the train ride. His logic comes not on positive note but on discriminatory one. Lisle (2006) clarifies this as: "Theroux's self-consciousness and independent mind allow him to locate, translate and interpret foreign cultures through the universal logic of identity/difference: others are always different, and always inferior" (84). This logic of difference enables him to make sweeping remarks upon the Asian peoples as "the Iranians are 'stupid starved creatures,' Afghans are 'lazy, idle, and violent,' the Singhalese are 'idle, stumbling and negligent,' and Bengalis are 'irritable, talkative, dogmatic, arrogant, and humourless'" (83). Theroux (1977), influenced by this differentiating logic, sees all the Asians sardonically as the other.

Theroux speaks via national prejudices against Asian nations. He, as Towers (1975) indicates: "has the courage of his national prejudices" (n.p). Theroux attributes national character from the example of one person or a few. For example, he accuses the Italians of lacking trust from the controller's behavior. When he gives the belongings of Duffill (who has missed the train) to the Italian controller at Venice, he comments: "He (controller) said he would, but spoke with the kind of Italianate carelessness that mocks trust" (33). Similarly, Theroux characterizes Turkish character from Yashar Kemal, a Turkish writer. Theroux writes, "His conviction

defies reason . . . Yashir's complexity is the Turkish character on a large scale" (56). Via Yashir, he mocks at the whole Turks.

Theroux vilifies Iran and the Iranians. He depicts Iran as devoid of modernity. He notes, "It is an old country; everywhere in the gloomy modernity are reminders of the orthodox past" (71). He accuses that the staff at the train stations work only when they get extra money *baksheesh* (71). He further typifies the Iranian men as crazy creatures for sex. For him, the Iranians, who are wealthy due to the oil, crave for women even if their religion forbids them from extra-affairs. He writes, "The men drink in excessive suits, continually searching the room with anxious eyes, as if in expectation of a woman. . . . Money pulls the Iranian in one direction, religion drags him in another, and the result is a stupid starved creature for whom woman is the meat" (76-77). Theroux exemplifies that the Iranians spend their money on drinks and pornographic films.

Theroux hates Afghanistan for its lack of a railway track: "Afghanistan is a nuisance" (87). He, further, complains that Afghanistan has not changed at all even after the king has been dethroned. Only the prices of things and diseases have increased. He mentions, "Now Afghanistan is expensive but just as barbarous as before. The food smells of cholera, travel there is always uncomfortable and sometimes dangerous, and the Afghans are lazy, idle, and violent" (87). For Theroux, Afghanistan is still a barbarous country and its people are passive and violent. More interestingly, he favors the Pakistanis and encourages them to fight against Afghanistan: "I gave them encouragement . . . to invade that barbarous country" (95). He also promises to request the American government to support Pakistan in this case: "I said I couldn't promise national support, but that I would be glad to put a word in for them" (95). From this, it seems that Theroux does not only hate the Afghans but he also works as an American delegate working on 'divide and rule' policy.

Theroux continues his biased attitude in India too. He hates Indian people and their manners. He disdains the Tamils and their manner at Mathura Junction platform: "they were black, thin, with small sharp teeth and narrow noses and thick glossy hair. . . . They were spitting, eating, pissing, and strolling with such self-possession that they might have been in a remote village in the deepest Madrasi jungle" (134). For Theroux, these black looking untidy Tamils with uncivilized behavior must be very poor and undeveloped ones living still in the jungle areas. Later, at Madras,

Theroux finds a Tamil taxi driver unshaven, wild-haired and in torn shirt. He compares him to a feral child: "He had the look of the feral child in the psychology textbook" (159). He supposes there are many feral children in South India who live on wolves' milk: "feral children . . . abound in South India. It is said they are sucked by wolves" (160). Here, Theroux repeats the colonial trope of savagery upon the Tamils. Theroux ridicules even the sex girls in Madras. When he visits the brothel in expectation of an English girl, he sees Indian ones. He gets enraged and thus despises the girls as unfit for sex. He mentions, "Some girls were sitting on a long wooden bench. They watched me, while the rest gathered around me, pinching my arm and laughing. They were very small, and they looked awkward and a bit comic, too young to be wearing lipsticks, nose jewels, earrings, and slipping bracelets. . . . None could have been older than fifteen" (163-64). Theroux seems to have used these words on those girls just out of his racial blindness.

Theroux acknowledges the Bengali people as "alert" but condemns them to be "irritable, talkative, dogmatic, arrogant, and humorless, holding forth with malicious skill virtually on every subject except the future of Calcutta" (199). He insists that such nature of the Bengalis has caused a miserable condition in Calcutta, where a big number of people live on the pavement and get engaged in rag picking and begging: "Calcutta had been very unlucky . . . pavement dwellers were almost exclusively engaged in ragpicking" (199). Calcutta is a "city of mutilated people only the truly monstrous looked odd. This man had one leg—the other was amputated at the thigh" (201). Theroux describes Sri Lanka as a despotic nation, where people cannot raise their voice. He inscribes, "It was not a country where people raised their voices" (174). The people are idle and so the nation faces food shortage that causes the consumption of stale food. To quote from the book, "I saw great idleness, people in all the attitudes of repose. . . . The food shortage was obviously acute . . . stale bread, and tea that was sold as breakfast" (176). To see the nation despotic, and the people idle and starving is none other than the colonial gaze.

Theroux loathes Buddhist tradition in Burma mainly its taboo against killing animals. He proclaims that such tradition has helped in the unnecessary increment of some animals that irritate the society: "garbage is dropped on the floor, and scraps are thrown out of the windows. Pariah dogs leap from nowhere to snarl over the leavings" (208). Theroux also despises the Buddhist tradition of taking off shoes outside their temples. He reveals,

the Burmese take off shoes but litter the inside with spit and cigar ashes: "The Burmese—removing their shoes and socks for sacred temple floors where they spit and flick cigar ashes" (208). Again, he trivializes Burmese bureaucracy as a complete failure because of its base on Buddhist socialism. He affirms, "Burma is a socialist country with a notorious bureaucracy . . . that is Buddhist in nature. . . . Nothing happens in Burma, but then nothing is expected to happen" (208). Theroux seems entirely negative to the Burmese tradition and progress. Theroux contends that Singapore thinks itself as a modern country but actually is primitive. He adds that it has a dictatorial government with repressive laws. People cannot go on strike. Jails are filled with political prisoners and courts with criminals. The social life is backward and dependent mainly on female workers. In his own words:

Singapore thinks itself as an island of modernity in a backward part of Asia . . . [but] is as primitive as Burundi, with repressive laws, paid informers, a dictatorial government, and jails are full of political prisoners. Socially, it is like rural India, with households dependent on washerwomen, amahs, gardeners, cooks, and lackeys . . . At the factory, workers . . . are forbidden to strike—are paid low wages. The media are dull beyond belief. . . . The police in Singapore are assigned to the oddest tasks; courts are filled with the unlikeliest criminals. In what other country on earth would one see such items in the paper? (266). This is quite a gloomy portrayal of Singapore. Theroux is blind to positive aspect of Singapore government. He interprets that the dictatorship of the government is to attract American investment: "American will want to set up factories and employ the non-striking Singaporeans" (267). Theroux's interpretation is set with American eye.

Theroux exempts the Americans from their attack on Vietnam. For him, the attack was based on the moralistic ground but got misunderstood. He states, "The conventional view was that the Americans had been imperialists; that is an inaccurate jibe. The American mission was purely sententious and military" (280-81). He rather blames the Vietnamese for their involvement in raiding and looting after the war. He stresses, "Raiding and looting were skills the war had required the Vietnamese to learn. . . . 'As soon as the last soldier left they rushed in, looted the stores, and commandeered the houses' . . . The refugees, using ingenuity, looted the barracks; the Vietnamese government officials, using their influence, looted the hospitals" (292). Theroux's American eye does not notice the inhumane



behaviors of the American soldiers in Vietnam; instead he blames the Vietnamese for all the consequences.

Theroux belittles the Japanese politician. Comparing him with Winston Churchill, Theroux states that the Japanese leader can never have the quality of Churchill. He notes, "a little Japanese politician giving a speech in living colour do not make him Winston Churchill" (302). Theroux further negates the knowledge of the Japanese of their religion, Buddhism: "The Japanese do not know anything about Buddhism" (329). This indicates Theroux's consciousness of his so-called superior mentality to judge the non-Western peoples in a denigrating way.

## CONCLUSION

The above analysis suffice to confirm that Paul Theroux, the "prolific and bestselling author of *The Great Railway Bazaar* (Decker, 2009)" persists colonial vision even in the contemporary postcolonial era. He continues the colonial legacy that ranks the Westerners in the superior position. He perpetuates the creation of, as Pratt (1992) stresses, "a discourse of negation, domination, devaluation and fear that remain in the late twentieth century a powerful ideological constituent of the west's consciousness of the people and places it strives to hold in subjugation" (219). His consciousness is motivated by the Western ideology of subjugation. He thus denigrates almost all the Asian states, peoples and cultures, even European ones, that he visits. As Pratt (1992) further comments on his use of "esthetic opposites: ugliness, incongruity, disorder, and triviality" (217), his delineation is loaded with negative terms such as barbarous, despotic, lascivious, whores, ugly, idle, monstrous, aggressive, and so on. He proves himself what Lisle claims: "The travel writer—no matter what his/her background or ethnicity—identifies difference, places it in a value-laden hierarchy, and judges it accordingly" (110). He carries residues of the Western travel writing in which the non-West is extremely portrayed as the other and dehumanized.

Finally, Theroux's judgments on the Asian states and peoples are shitfukery. Passing judgments on the basis of the interactions with few people in trains and the readings of English canonical writers can be no more than exaggeration or fictional representation. Such judgments cannot represent reality but the author's preoccupied mind. Theroux's mind thus is preoccupied with the Western mind that is charged with colonial vision.

That's why, he makes sweeping judgments upon the Asian states, peoples and cultures in a sardonic and contemptuous way.

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