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From Rescue Mission to Colonial Ambitions: A Reading of Stanley's *My African Travels*

Toya Nath Upadhyay

Tribhuvan University

Author Note

Dr. Toya Nath Upadhyay (<https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6299-4106>) is Associate Professor of English at the Central Department of English, Tribhuvan University. Previously, he served at Ratna Rajya Laxmi Campus, Kathmandu. His Ph.D. is in the area of Travel Writing, and has published several research articles in this area.

Correspondence concerning this article should be addressed to Toya Nath Upadhyay, Tribhuvan University. Email: toya771@gmail.com

Abstract

This study examines Henry Morton Stanley's *My African Travels* through a post-colonial lens in order to explore how Stanley's mission of rescuing a missing explorer turns into his colonial ambitions in the interior of Africa. Primarily with a project of finding the missing missionary and explorer David Livingstone by name, Stanley sets out on his African journey in 1871. But after finding Livingstone, Stanley's eyes fall upon the plenitude of natural resources and backwardness of the native people that instantly stimulate in him a sense of the possibilities of commerce and Christianization of the natives. Consequently, he makes more explorations, draws maps and fills them with names, fights the locals, and establishes stations at different locations that ultimately turn into European colonies. This study analyzes and interprets his *My African Travels* as a colonial discourse in that it operates as a tool for the European colonial enterprise. The study employs conceptual terms related to colonial discourse for analysis and interpretation.

Key words: colonial discourse, othering, monarch-of-all-I-survey, appropriation

From Rescue Mission to Colonial Ambitions: A Reading of Stanley's *My African Travels*

This study explores Henry Morton Stanley's colonial ambitions in his *My African Travels* (1886/2009), which documents his journeys to different locations in the interior of Africa from 1871 to 1884. Stanley commences his first journey in January 1871 with a mission of finding the missing British missionary and explorer David Livingstone. Livingstone, who has been in central Africa for missionary activities and scientific exploration, has been reported missing in the wilds for three years. The Royal Geographical Society officially sends a rescue team in search of Livingstone. Parallely, the editor of the *New York Herald*, sensing a viable story for commercial purposes, pays Stanley handsomely and deutes him for the search operation of Livingston. Stanley luckily happens to trace Livingston in the village of Ujiji on Lake Tanganyika. After the meeting, both of them conduct explorations together for four months. Stanley recorded his discovery and rescue of Livingston in his famous book, *How I Found Livingstone* (1872). Stanley's assigned rescue mission gets completed there.

But the finding of Livingston does not put an end to Stanley's travel in Africa. The profuse prevalence of African natural resources in different forms like fertile land, dark forests, beautiful lakes and rivers, and many other precious materials temptingly triggers his mind with a sense of high possibilities of prosperous trade. Further, the observations of the condition of the native people, supposedly backward, allows him to infer that they are awaiting Christian doctrines to be civilized. Thus, fueled with such commercial and Christianizing ambitions, Stanley continues exploring the deeper interior. He partakes in launching surveys of the geography, draws maps and fills them up with mostly European names, encounters the natives and attempts to control them, sets up different stations at appropriate places, and makes route connectivities. The

stations he sets up later turn into the colonies, and the experiences, observations, and information that he captures in *My African Travels* become tempting stimuli, at large, for the European and American powers to commence penetration into the African interior for commerce and land acquisition as well as a civilizing mission with Christian doctrines.

As regards the assistance of *My African Travels* in the opening up colonial project in Central Africa, this study reads it as a colonial discourse. The rationale behind selecting this text is that, although Stanley's other texts have received critical responses from this perspective, this text is under-researched yet. The study focuses its analysis primarily on Stanley's depiction of the plentiful natural resources and supposedly savage people and his call for Western intervention in the African interior for commerce and Christianization. For the analysis and interpretation, the study employs conceptual terms and rhetorical tropes related to colonial discourse, such as othering, savage, appropriation, monarch-of-all-I-survey, etc. The study first analyzes the theoretical terms, then analyzes and interprets the text in question, and finally offers a conclusion with a claim that the text underpins colonial ambitions.

Theoretical Perspective

Travel and narrations of travel experiences are ancient phenomena having a parallel history with human existence. Human beings always moved from one location to another for this or that reason and loved to narrate their travel stories. While reading world-famous mythical and classical writings such as Mesopotamian *Gilgamesh*, Homer's *Odyssey*, Virgil's *Aeneid*, Indian *Mahabharata* and *Ramayana*, Herodotus's *Histories*, Athenian *Anabasis*, Pausanias's *Guide to Greece* and so on, one finds the travel theme in the center. The travel theme gets space in many later writings, too, whether medieval, early modern, or modern. Travel and its narrative part, whether oral or written, have been incontrovertibly connected for a long time. Interestingly, all civilizations of

the world have their travel writing of their own kind, but as Lindsay (2016) has remarked, Western travel writing has remained dominant over the others due to “privileges of mobility and representation which stem directly from Empire and which continue to be associated predominantly with the West” (p. 31).

The critical studies about Western travel writing began only after Edward Said published *Orientalism* in 1978. In this book, Said makes a sharp critique of Western travel writing, mainly written during the colonial era, claiming that it participated in the making and proliferation of Western imperialism in the form of colonial discourse. Said defines colonial discourse as an imaginary representation of other cultures, regions, and peoples. He has noted, “In any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a *re-presence* or a representation” (p. 21). For Said, colonial discourse does not underpin the fact (or presence), but instead the ideological bias (or re-presence) of the author. It rarely presents the facts about the others as they are but in a fabricated manner for “dominating, structuring and having an authority” over the others (p. 3). Like Said other scholars define colonial discourse as the “*representations and modes of perceptions*” (McLeod, 2002, p. 17), “the variety of textual forms” (Williams & Chrisman, 1994, p. 5), or “the system” (Ashcroft et al., 2000, p. 42) which the West produces to represent and dominate the non-West. Colonial discourse establishes an asymmetric relations between the West and the non-West where the latter is subordinated to the former and represented as its other.

Thompson (2011) has argued that travel writers produce two kinds of othering—general and pejorative—in their writings. In general othering, the travel writer merely presents the differences between members of two cultures, which is helpful to know each other. In pejorative othering, a writer depicts the differences between two cultures representing the other culture as inferior. Thompson illustrates:

In a weaker, more general sense, 'othering' denotes the process by which the members of one culture identify and highlight the differences between themselves and members of another culture. In stronger 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 it. (pp. 133-34)

In colonial travel writing, pejorative othering is more pervasive. The colonial writers represent the members of non-Western cultures with othering tropes such as irrational, lawless, savage, uncivilized, and so on.

Besides othering the other cultures, colonial discourse also claims the surveyed territories. Pratt (1992) has contended that a traveling explorer makes a survey of the landscape and establishes an imaginative authority over it. She has termed it a monarch-of-all-I-survey scene that “would seem to involve particularly explicit interaction between esthetics and ideology, in what one might call a rhetoric of presence” (p. 205). This scene involves the author’s valorization of the aesthetics or the beauty of a landscape as well as his or her ideology. Pratt has further pointed out, “the relation of *mastery* [is] predicted between the seer and the seen” there (italics original, p. 205). The traveling author produces a verbal painting of the scene, judges, appreciates, and makes it available to the targeted audience.

Spurr (1993) has defined mastery of the surveyed territory as appropriation. Appropriation is one of the twelve rhetorical tropes Spurr has figured out in colonial discourse. By appropriation, Spurr has meant the explorers’ claims of the surveyed territories as their own. The European colonialists “saw the natural resources of colonized lands as belonging rightfully to ‘civilization’ and mankind rather than to the indigenous peoples who inhabited those lands” (p. 28). The European colonialists assumed it was their right to explore the indigenous

peoples' natural resources and exploit them with the pretension of bringing civilization.

After all, Western colonial discourses like travel writing misrepresent the non-Western peoples as the other for domination. The Western colonialists pretend it is their responsibility to uplift others as per the Christian civilization. Further, they also assume it is their right to explore, survey, and exploit the natural resources available in the territories of the non-Western peoples.

Colonial Aspirations of Stanley

Bridges (2002) has remarked on Stanley as: "Certainly, Stanley easily made the transition from geographical explorer to land grabber and exploiter" (p. 66). Bridges is right in his statement about Stanley's transition from a geographical explorer into a colonizer. To his comment, though, I like to add that Stanley's transformation begins from a journalist that turns into an explorer first and then into a colonial founder later. Apparently, Stanley's first travel to the interior of the African landscape was funded by *New York Herald* for the purpose of tracing the whereabouts of the missing missionary and explorer, David Livingstone and producing a commercially profitable story about him. Stanley traces Livingstone alive in the market place of Ujiji village, which means his assigned task is complete, and he requires to go back home with the story. But he refrains from doing it and, instead, keeps traversing across the interior of Africa, for he gets deeply lured by the plentitude of natural resources. He senses the high feasibility of conducting commercial activities there. Besides, he also assumes that the native people, who he misconceives to be in backward and uncivilized conditions, can be perfect human resources for commercial purposes. These possibilities stimulate his mind with ambitions of acquiring the land and controlling the people.

Stanley's colonial ambitions seem to have been impregnated only after his first-hand observations of the African landscape and its people. Livingstone has

already provided him with the information about the viability of commerce, but Stanley takes him lightly. Regarding this, Stanley states:

For a second time, after considering the various countries about it, their natural resources and peoples, the conviction gradually came to my mind that Livingstone after all was not very wrong when he tried to persuade me that there were vast expanses in Africa. (p. 16)

The passage clarifies Stanley's belittling the worth of Livingstone's message about the possibilities for the white race to possess the wide expanses of the African landscape and settle there. Livingstone considers it a necessity even for the civilization of the black race. Stanley comes to acknowledge it only after his actual observations in various countries, their natural resources, and peoples. The more Stanley traverses, the more intense his colonial ambitions become into him. Wherever he goes, he imagines having discovered a new world fit for him. He feels of being at home there. The land was glorious in a variety of vegetation, herbs and leaves, fruits and flowers, deeply fascinating his eyes more and more. All this kind of marvelous landscape keeps his travels moving ahead. Stanley records:

I felt as though a witness of the creation of a new world, anxious that it should be a masterpiece to be hailed as the home of new nations. Glorious in vegetation, unequalled in tis tropical verdure, remarkable for its variety of herb and leaf, generous in its promise of unbounded fruitfulness, beautiful in its budding bloom, the land went softly gliding by our eyes, mile after mile, until a thousand miles had been counted. (p. 26)

The passage delineates the magnitude of the productivity of the land. It depicts how fertile it is and how comfortable home it can be for the new comers. Stanley keeps traversing across a thousand miles by surveying the magnificence of the African landscape.

Surveying geography in travel writing has a special significance. Pratt (1992) has stated that a traveling explorer creates a monarch-of-all-I-survey scene through the survey of the landscape. The surveyor involves “an interaction between esthetics and ideology” and establishes a “*mastery*” over the scene (p. 205). Stanley paints a monarch-of-all-I-survey scene of the landscape of the interior of Africa in his travel narrative. The scene is targeted at the Western audience. Calling for the Western presence in the African landscape, Stanley initiates a foundational set up for the colonial intervention. He strategically arranges the landscapes primarily for economic purposes. Spurr’s (1993) comment on Stanley is worth bringing here. Spurr has remarked that Stanley takes a “noble coign of vantage” and surveys “the scene below in such a way as to combine spatial arrangement with the strategic, aesthetic, or economic valorization of the landscape” (p. 17). As Spurr has claimed, Stanley takes a comfortable position as a surveyor and paints the scene of the landscapes strategically for commercial utility.

Preparing maps of unknown landscapes was of high significance for colonial explorers. It would help them to control and possess such landscapes though imaginatively. Maps, along with other documents like charts and scientific data, as Smethurst (2016) has stated, would provide “practical information for colonization, as well as revealing an imperialist mindset” (p. 232). Stanley as an explorer prepares maps of the territory he traverses. He records, “After a sufficient rest, I began the preparation of my map, in order to see what was the gain of our long journey” (p. 27). Along with the maps, he also calculates the gain that he has made from his journey.

While preparing the maps and tracing his gains, he also happens to realize his weakness of suspecting his precursor, Livingstone, who has already informed him about the value of Africa. Stanley admits this as:

You will remember that when with Livingstone, I was a strong skeptic as to the value of Africa, and though I deferred to his greater knowledge of it, with the courage of ignorance, I was prompt in giving proofs that to men equally ignorant with myself would have appeared unanswerable. (p. 27)

But only after Stanley prepares the map himself he realizes the worth of the African landscape, which has tremendously wide lakes, splendid rivers, countless tropical treasures, vast areas of fertile land, and so on. He explains:

When the map was finished, and I regarded the 30,000 square miles of lakes, and that splendid river, with its length of 3200 miles, which we had just descended, and speculated as to the thousands of miles of navigation which its noble tributaries would furnish over and above its own, and remembered the countless tropical treasures I had viewed, and the vast area of fertile land, great enough for a mighty empire. (p. 27)

While surveying and making maps of such a magnificent African landscape, Stanley gets tempted by an imagination of converting this vast landscape into an empire.

To this point, Stanley again feels guilty for ignoring Livingstone, who has rightly depicted the possibility of exploiting black people as laborers for the sake of empire. Stanley illustrates this as:

[I] thought of the millions of dark men I had seen, and considered what might be created by their muscles if rightly directed, then was I rebuked by my own work for my skepticism, for behold, I saw only the development and corroboration of Livingstone's ideas and words!" (p. 27).

Stanley corroborates the exact value of the African landscapes and its people only after some years of retaining first-hand experiences in travels. He also confirms that the land still lacks official control of any nation. So, he urges the rulers in England to take the necessary steps and proceed ahead in this matter. His urge goes this way:

You will proceed to annex it if you are wise, lest you be forestalled, for other nations are stirring and striving. It is a grand market for your cloth manufactures. Those dark millions require clothing and ornament, guns and powder, knives and needles, pottery and glassware, and they have rich products of ivory, and rubber, and dyes, and gums, and oils to exchange for them, and in barter there is great profit. (p. 28)

Stanley urges the rulers poignantly to proceed for annexing the African land for its potentiality for commerce. In this sense, he is a “tireless advocate of commercial and political intervention in Africa” (Driver, 1991, p. 137). Stanley enlists the valuable products available in Africa, such as ivory, rubber, dyes, gums, oils, and so on. The British could buy these goods from the natives and sell them products such as clothing, ornament, guns, powder, knives, needles, pottery, and so on. While trading, Stanley points out that the British can make high profits. But unfortunately, the concerned authority in England does not take Stanley’s urge seriously. Instead, the Belgian King Leopold immediately understands it. So, he calls Stanley to Brussels and assigns him a commission for the exploration into the interior of Africa, mainly the Congo area. Regarding this, Stanley mentions:

I was not greatly surprised that those concerned in England with such things were equally slow to learn. But across the Channel in Belgium, King Leopold was a great reader of explorations, and an earnest student of geography. He soon arrived at a conception of this case of discovery, and summoning me to Brussels, he placed in my hands a commission to return to the Congo to explore more closely the commercial resources of the country. (p. 28)

Commissioned by the Belgian King for the further explorations of the commercial resources in the Congo region, Stanley sets out again towards the destination on the 19th of January, 1879.

After reaching the place called Vivi, Stanley and his team occupy it by obtaining a concession from the natives. They established this place as the first station from where they could make route connections to different locations. Stanley states, “After a cession of the district of Vivi, duly made by the natives to us, we proceeded to erect our first station . . . and to make waggon-roads in the neighbourhood” (p. 28). Besides Vivi, Stanley’s team constructs many stations at different locations. They also arrange caravans for maintaining communication extending their influence across different locations, and obtaining “as much territory as possible from the native chiefs” (p. 31). Stanley strategically takes possession of the African land as much as possible.

The land acquisition process gets intense from the beginning of 1883. More than 400 native chiefs give up their lands to the Europeans by making stringent treaties. Finally, Stanley became successful in acquiring the vast area of the Congo banks from the natives for the Association International Africaine. Stanley mentions this as:

Over 400 chiefs had consented to treat with us, and to cede the government of their lands into our hands. The treaties were drawn up in the most stringent manner, by which the destiny of the Congo banks had been given to the Association. (p. 33)

Now the Congo basin comes into the hands of the Association. Later in 1885, at the Berlin Conference, the European Powers recognized the right of the Association to govern the Congo territories as a free and independent state. After a few months, the Belgian King receives the title “of the Sovereign of the Independent State of the Congo” (p. 34). Here begins the colonial authority in the interior of Africa officially. Stanley predicts the Congo basin “will continue to supply many a score of tons of ivory annually to the European market” (p. 42). With all this, Stanley turns out a colonial initiator or as Youngs (2013) has remarked, he is “a figurehead of new imperialism” (p. 57) in the Congo territories.

Stanley believes the civilization of the native people is equally important to the acquisition of the land. Unless the supposedly ferocious, lawless savage tribes are civilized according to Christian standards, it is always a horrifying threat to the white race's presence in the newly acquired territories. Immediately after he arrives at Zanzibar, Stanley wonders at the strangeness he observes among the black people. He describes: "all these black men were in a manner lawless; that many of them were savage; that some might be ferocious as wild dogs; that Africa possessed no theatres, newspapers, or agreeable society" (p. 4). Stanley considers black people to be savage, having no agreeable society and effective laws. Nor do they have any achievements of civilization, such as theaters, newspapers, and so on. They have rather aggressive behaviors like that of wild dogs. Representation of other races in such derogatory terms is what postcolonial thinkers like Edward Said term as a colonial discourse, which operates as an imperial tool "for dominating, structuring, and having an authority" over others (Said, 1995, p. 3). Representing the native peoples of Africa in such an uncivilized state, Stanley calls for the Western Powers to commence colonial intervention there for transformation.

Thompson (2011) has termed pejorative 'othering' for the traveler's judgment of other races as uncivilized and inferior. Thompson has argued that the use of such othering by travel writers is "ideologically motivated" and seeks "at some level to justify and encourage a particular policy or course of action towards those others" (p. 133). Stanley's portrayal of the natives in othering terms is motivated by Christian ideology. Although Stanley is reluctant to agree with Livingstone's suggestion: "Africa fit for the white man to live in, without which of course civilization for Africa was forever impossible" (p. 16), he gets convinced after gaining first-hand experiences by himself. So, he seeks the presence of the white race to intervene in civilizing mission in the supposedly savage communities of the vast expanse of Africa, "I advised the English man to

send a mission. . . . The Church Missionary Society responded the call” (p. 16). Stanley is quite sure that the development of the African peoples is possible only when they are civilized as per Christian standards. In this sense, he is, from the Western perspective, “the bringer of light, civilization, and commerce to the continent” (Whitfield, 2011, p. 234) and “the great pioneer and field marshal, blazing the trail for civilization” in Africa (Brantlinger, 1988, p. 183). So, his identification as “one of the great Pioneers of Christianity, Civilization, and Hope to that dark land of Africa” has been inscribed on his tomb stone (*Autobiography*, 2011, p. 517). But he is also a “geographical explorer . . . land grabber and exploiter” (p. 90), as Hulme and Youngs (2002) have argued.

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study affirms Stanley’s *My African Travels* as a colonial discourse for underpinning his colonial ambitions in the interior of Africa. It explores the transformation of Stanley’s mission of finding and rescuing David Livingstone from the African wilds into his ambitions for commerce and the Christianization of the natives. It analyzes Stanley’s appropriation of the African territories, creating a monarch-of-all-I-survey scene. It analyzes how Stanley surveys the landscapes, prepares maps, tames the locals, sets up stations and route connections, and finally initiates a foundation for establishing the free and independent state of Congo. Finally, agreeing with Youngs’s (2006) assertion: “millions in Europe and the US had their image of Africa formed by Stanley’s writing, which still casts a shadow” (p. 3), the study claims *My African Travels* paints a fascinating image of Africa in the Western mind, which constantly gazes at it for exploitation. Along with this claim, the study expects to add a new critical response to the study of Stanley’s travel narrative.

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