

Narratives of Vivekananda: A Novel Structure of Religious Politics

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Abstract:

The present discourse offers a fresh insight into the facts of travel narratives with special reference to ‘Spiritualized Nationalism’, ‘Postcolonial Cultural Exchange’, ‘Questioning Faith’, and ‘Identity’. It widens the scope of discussion on the social and humanistic aspects of travel literature. Apart from these basic issues, it has broadened the scope of further study on ‘Sannyasi’ travel writers in general. The paper attempts to provide a new discourse of understanding travel writing as a literary genre. It primarily discusses Vivekananda as a traveller from colonial Bengal and analyses the complex personality in terms of self-fashioning, transculturation and spirituality. Vivekananda appears to be a dynamic personality through a detailed discussion of his writings. On one hand, he is a rationalist man who can enjoy everything like an unguarded traveller without having any prejudices; on the other, he is a Hindu ‘Sannyasi’ who constantly tries to re-establish the spiritual superiority of India in the West. Both the features are widely different and difficult to incorporate in a single person, but Vivekananda, in this case, appears productive.

Key Words: *Travel narratives, Religious- Politics, Identity, Faith, Transculturation*

The Westerners are now rich people. Unless one’s dress is very clean and in conformity with strict etiquette, one will not be considered a gentleman and cannot mix in society. A gentleman must change his collar and shirt twice or thrice every day; the poor people; of course; cannot do this. On the outer garment there must not be stains or even a crease. However, much you may suffer from heat, you must go out with gloves for fear of getting your hands dirty in the streets, and to shake hands with a lady with hands that are not clean is very ungentleman-like. In polite society, if the act of spitting or rinsing the mouth or picking the teeth be ever indulged in—the offender will be marked as a Chandala, a man of low caste, and shunned!

(Vivekananda 2008, 76-77)

Vivekananda's travel writings have been analysed as a comparative discourse between the East and the West. It needs to be understood that the significant development of the colonial power in the fields of politics and education prepared the ground for an indigenous intellectual class during the nineteenth-century Bengal. Simonti Sen (2005) argues how the mental development of this generation was created and structured through a process of mimicking the colonizers. This was the educated middle class, as Partha Chatterjee said in the 'Economic and Political Weekly' (1998), who chose the imperial cultural legacy by virtue of their Western education (33). The British Empire with all her scientific inventions stood in contrast to the native culture of the Bengali middle class. They neither could locate themselves in the Western culture nor justify their own native culture due to the scientific education. This created an utter confusion among the educated middle-class youth who found themselves insufficient to establish their identity. The first half of the twentieth-century witnessed the beginning of the Swadeshi Movement following the partition of Bengal. There was an ardent call to boycott the foreign goods to challenge the benevolence of the so-called masters. The thrust was more and more on self-reliance to establish national identity in the global political market (Sen 2005, 206), but this did not diminish the yearning for the Western scientific knowledge; rather it forced the native people to think that no knowledge could be exclusive of one region. This concept increased agential role assumed by the submissive colonized and pushed them to refute the essential feminine status of the Orientals. Works like "Benoy Kumar Sarkar's *Positive Background to Hindu Sociology* (1914), Brajendranath Seal's *Positive Sciences of the Ancient Hindus* (1915) and a few others provided the foundational discourse to a non-essentialist view of the East and the West" (Sen 2005, 206). During the Swadeshi Movement, the Bengali intellectual class had started positing their perception regarding the need of the unification between the two hemispheres without harming one's identity to make their home secure in the whirlwind of modernization and globalization. In this juncture, Vivekananda, the representative of the entire Bengali middle class travelled to the West with all his cultural and spiritual baggage in search of his own identity. The religious mission provided him with a platform in West which he utilized properly. From top to toe, he appeared to be a very complex man who tried to reconcile two different aspects in his character—a traditional Hindu monk with deep-rooted Indian cultural baggage and the modern man with rational scientific thinking.

Professor M K Dev in his article 'Vivekananda and the Renaissance of Bengal' (2015) has illustrated the impact of Bengal Renaissance behind the formation of some

argumentative educated people like Vivekananda. It further argues why Vivekananda and others travelled to the West and how they viewed the universe beyond their personal socio-cultural boundaries. The present paper also focuses chiefly on Vivekananda as a Hindu ‘Sannyasi’ to the West and attempts to situate him within the concept of the modern travel theory that sees the traveller as a liminal character, hybridized and always on the verge of realization. Vivekananda travelled with a specific objective to spread his religious thoughts in the West no doubt, but later, his wanderings appear to be a struggle of a modern man who is conscious of his liminal status. He seems to prove himself as a global man by reducing the polarities between the East and the West in the process of assimilation and difference.

During Vivekananda’s last journey back to India, Calkins, a Christian missionary observed him as both a mystic and a fashionable modern man:

We were standing on the forward deck. Vivekananda was smoking a short sweet –briar pipe—the one ‘English vice’, he said, which he was fond of. The wash of the sea and the unknown life which would begin on the morrow invited quietness. For a long time no word was spoken. Then, as though he made up his mind I would do India no harm, he laid his hand on my shoulder.
(*Prabuddha Bharata* 1923, 110-11)

The “binary oppositions” (Rolfsen 39, Ashcroft 18-19) in the character of Vivekananda were due to his extensive travel in the last part of the nineteenth-century. He was a typical Hindu monk with a religious mission at the very primary stage of his nomadic life, but later, when he started assimilating the ideas (both cultural and spiritual) of different lands to reconstruct himself, he literally situated himself in the domain of modern cosmopolitan culture to identify himself as a global man. The process of assimilation was not that much easy. He attempted to enter into the whirlwind of globalization, but perhaps was not very successful. Due to his liminal status in the transitional phase of Indian history, he suffered the crisis of complexity of a modern man. The complexity and ambivalence can be observed through his words. He said, “Both attachment and detachment perfectly developed make a man great and happy” (CW 6: 430-31). The forces of attraction and repulsion were there within him and those made him restless throughout his life. He lived in binaries and could not perhaps achieve to club the East and the West together. Travel provided him that opportunity to negotiate both the cultures, but that negotiation perhaps unveiled more difference than a justified conclusion.

Yes, through his writings, he advocated for a compromised and complex ‘Self’ for the sake of the modern world. But, complete assimilation seemed to be impossible:

Above all, in the medley of Aryans, Mongols, and aborigines which it created, it unconsciously led the way to some of the hideous Vâmâchâras. This was especially the reason why this travesty of the teaching of the great Master had to be driven out of India by Shri Shankara and his band of Sannyâsins.(CW4:121)

The paper tries to understand the “bicultural self” (Rolfsen 46) of Vivekananda to prove him as a secular agent during the transitional phase of the nineteenth-century. Although his disciples and admirers may disagree, he lived in the world as a curious traveller and tried to get acquainted with all the cultural elements that he encountered in his short span of life. It is evident that in his spiritual mission he tried to reconcile the polarities of the East and the West by using and manipulating different philosophical discourses. But, when it comes to his travel narratives, his attempts to create a rhetoric of assimilation of the East and the West, the spiritual and the material fails to hide the underlying tension that characterizes his liminal status as a traveller negotiating with the question of ‘otherness’. His tension as a travel writer arose from his attempts to deconstruct the established Orientalist discourse and at the same time realizing his own ambiguities. A close analysis of his writings unveils that he suffered much for his complex identity as a modern man. Catherine Rolfsen commented on how Vivekananda spent the last remaining days of his life in complete isolation by keeping himself completely aloof from the mainstream of the society. Possibly, Vivekananda at certain point compromised his spiritual and religious identity due to his social associations and involvements (56). He once wrote in a letter on 7th April, 1900 that he might have lost his identity as a Sannyasin due to his experience, “Success would have led me astray, and I would have lost sight of the truth that I am a Sannyasin” (CW 8: 513) His anxiety and restlessness had no bound when he uttered that he had perhaps lost everything for the “Mlechhas” (CW 8: 514) Vivekananda did not live a life of hermit and tried to involve in the society as much as he could and in the final statement he explained that the “life is ever expanding, contraction is death”(Vivekananda 1956, 102).

The paper has focussed on Vivekananda both as a modern man—the unguarded traveller and a religious monk with distinct spiritual interests. His travel accounts are

scattered and not organized in sequence. His travel writings are occasional in nature as he was more engaged in his mission to speak for his country and at the same time to raise fund for his project of establishing an institution that would stand for the preachings of Ramkrishna, his Guru. After a considerable study on the available resources, the paper comes to the conclusion that Vivekananda was a complex personality having two distinct traits interwoven within him—his qualities as a traveller and a religious reformer. These two characteristics are completely different no doubt, but ultimately placed him on a different platform. Vivekananda was a conscious traveller who had considerable knowledge of Eastern and Western philosophies and that knowledge can be seen in his observations and interpretations. The sights and sounds of nature are reflected in his travel accounts spontaneously and every natural phenomenon is blended with his deep philosophical understanding. So, the paper, on one hand, has examined Vivekananda as a traveller who is constantly getting amazed by the topography of the new lands, and on the other, a spiritual leader who is engrossed in justifying his own philosophy in the World Parliament.

Finally, the paper examines how Vivekananda proved himself as an engaging personality who was constantly involved in the stream of the human society. He had a clear motive throughout his life to unite the religious consciousness and the material interest of a common man. There was no inconsistency in between these two, rather both are important and must be unified for the personal and social development. He tried to cross the so-called demarcations of the spiritual and material by deconstructing the universal philosophies inherent in Vedanta and re-represent his Hinduism as tolerant which is most important in modern civilization. Through liberal humanistic approach, Vivekananda wished for a strong bonding between Indian religiosity and the Western practicality through equal mutual respect:

I know my mission in life, and no chauvinism about me; I belong as much to India as to the world...Do you mean to say I am born to live and die one of those caste-ridden, superstitious, merciless, hypocritical, atheistic cowards that you find only amongst the educated Hindus? I hate cowardice; I will have nothing to do with cowards or political nonsense. I do not believe in any politics. God and truth are the only politics in the world, everything else is trash. (CW 5: 95-96)

Vivekananda tactfully used his appearance in the Western world as a medium for repulsion and reconciliation, association and difference. As he negotiated the conflicts of the colonial world, he himself appeared as a complex personality who tried to find out a space to mitigate the challenges that had created identity crisis among his countrymen. By doing so, Vivekananda refuted the dichotomous theses of Orientalism and attempted to establish his point of view on a considerably strong ground.

Further, Vivekananda utilized and manipulated the Orientalist theses to get a good audience from the Western society (Rolfson 2005). He was neither a politician nor an innocent traveller who resisted colonial discourse unknowingly; rather he used his status intelligently. It is also a parallel truth that he had to compromise the authenticity of his religious mission due to his engagement in the conditioned reality. According to Mohapatra, “it is Swami who dreamt upon a novel system of spiritualized politics; which could synthesize all that are best in the Western tradition with that of Indian traditional thought”(129).

Being a secular man and a world traveller, Vivekananda cherished to “lead mankind to the place” where ‘Religion’ is not a separating force. It is not fragmented, but unified, keeping the essence of individual identity. He aspired for a world where “there is neither the Vedas, nor the Bible, nor the Koran”; but it is to be done by “harmonizing the Vedas, the Bible and the Koran. Mankind ought to be taught that religions are but the varied expressions of THE RELIGION, which is Oneness, so that each may choose the path that suits him best” (CW 6: 416)

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