Lapis Lazuli
An International Literary Journal

UGC APPROVED, BLIND PEER-REVIEWED
ISSN 2249-4529

WWW.PINTERSOCIETY.COM
VOL.7 / NO.1/ SPRING 2017

# Subjectivizing the 'scientific' Travelogue: Eighteenth Century Travel Writing

**Pooja Kukreja**

**ABSTRACT:**

The early eighteenth century presents itself as the age of rationality, stability and empiricism. It was the beginning of the proliferation of empirical writing that reached its heyday in the late eighteenth century. The Royal Society encouraged travelers, sent out voyages, and guided travelers and travel writers to embrace the scientific spirit. The "scientific" age inspired Englishmen to travel and write about their expeditions, making non-fiction travel writing immensely popular during the time. This paper attempts to discuss how the subjectivism of the traveler meddled with the 'scientific' spirit of the day, making the 'I' of the traveler the focal point of the travelogue.

**KEYWORDS:**

travel writing, travelogue, Royal Society, Grand Tour, empiricism, Enlightenment, voyages, scientific, eighteenth century, subjectivity

> The use of traveling is to regulate imagination by reality, and instead of thinking how things may be, to see them as they are.
>
> - Samuel Johnson, Letter XXII. To Mrs. Thrale.

Travel in the contemporary theory has come to be associated with displacement, diasporic identities and national boundaries. The shift in the concept of travel from a literal journey to a metaphoric principle took place around the turn of the eighteenth century. Samuel Johnson employs a utilitarian approach to travel by upholding reality over imagination while William Blake conceives travel as an imaginative journey of the mind. Johnson's age was intensely preoccupied with travel and travelogues, both fictional and non-fictional, to the extent that *Critical Review* had published in 1797:

> This may be called the Age of Peregrination; for we have reason to believe, that the desire of seeing foreign countries never before so diffusively operated; and, though only a small proportion of the great number of travelers commit their observations to the press, we are abundantly supplied with narratives of tours.

 ISSN 2249-4529

The profusion of journals, periodicals and pamphlets in the eighteenth century Britain affirms the epistemological concerns of the intellectual milieu. The sailors, missionaries and merchants embarked on voyages of discovery and inspired other Englishmen to undertake such expeditions. With the scientific developments of the age and the improvement of the road networks and inns, traveling had become easier and cheaper and the epistemological curiosity led many a traveler to foreign lands. With the availability of books and periodicals travel writing had become quite fashionable and led to almost every writer writing fictional or nonfiction travelogues. The Royal Society encouraged travelers, sent out voyages and guided travelers and travel writers to embrace the scientific spirit. The "scientific" age inspired Englishmen to travel and write about their expeditions, making non-fiction travel writing immensely popular during the time. Of his *Travels Through France and Italy* Tobias Smollett wrote, "Containing Observations on Character, Customs, Religion, Government, Police, Commerce, Arts, and Antiquities. With a particular Description of the Town, Territory, and Climate of Nice: To which is added, A Register of the Weather, kept during a Residence of Eighteen Months in that City" (*Travel Writing: 1700 – 1830*, 29). Smollett is keen on providing detailed descriptions of the city concordant with the conventions of travel writing of his age.

In the late seventeenth and early eighteenth century the Grand Tour of Europe was an essential part of the education of the English gentleman. The purpose of the Grand Tour of Europe was to polish the traveler and it had become a ritual for the

refined Englishman in the eighteenth century. Lovelace in Samuel Richardson's novel *Clarissa or, the History of a Young Lady* (1748) has made the Grand Tour of Europe and becomes a source of information for other potential travelers. The Grand Tour had become a ritual that upheld the classical ideals of the "Augustan" age and was an essential part of the classical education of a polished English gentleman. The traveler drew analogies between the British Empire and the Roman Empire making Rome and Naples popular destinations in the Grand Tour of the Continent. The irony, however, is that the critique of the motive for travel can be cited from within the social milieu. In 1731, *The Gentleman's Magazine* reported, "Our travelers are commonly taken from the school, or the university, at 17 or 18 years of age, either because the youth hates his studies, or has a rambling head; and is sent abroad before he has made any progress in learning, or knows the constitution of his own country" (*Travel Writing: 1700 – 1830*, 13). The excesses of travelers can be found in all eighteenth century travel accounts.

The wealthy travelers moved with an entourage which consisted of servants, artists and tutors. They brought back artifacts and even prisoners and wrote about their journeys to gain attention and to proclaim their "quest for knowledge". Travel writing in the eighteenth century often serves as a celebratory proclamation of knowledge and understanding. It assumed ritualistic contours as traveling to foreign lands after the completion of university studies to experience the classical ideas and ideals became a norm for the rich. Joseph Addison in *Remarks on Several Parts of Italy* reflects upon Italy with the classical antiquity as the reference point. He draws comparisons between what

 ISSN 2249-4529

he sees as a traveler in Italy and what he has read about the Roman Empire in the home country. The far-fetched comparisons evince that the traveler's pre-conceived notions and his inclinations influence his travels and his writings. The subject has already traveled in mind through classical antiquity and arrived at modern Italy to denigrate one in terms of the other. The factual descriptions are interrupted as the traveler's subjectivity impinges upon his ruminations. Casey Blanton in her book *Travel Writing: The Self and the World* has identified two types of travel accounts:

> Throughout the eighteenth century these two types of travel accounts - the scientific and the sentimental - not only constitute the chief paradigms by which the foreign world is represented in writing but, more importantly for the genre, also find ways to impinge on one another. (13)

The scientific spirit of the traveler's account is invaded by the traveler's subjective experience and one finds ample examples of subjective travel writing that gives precedence to the traveler rather than the destination of travel. There are no precepts that govern travel accounts as scientific documents; even in the early eighteenth century they can be as idiosyncratically subjective and sentimental as any artistic work. As literature these accounts can be interrogated from various approaches.

The work of the women travel writers in the eighteenth century has often been overlooked. The home country was traditionally a female space while the exploration of unknown spaces of the outside world was the forte of men. There are, nevertheless,

many women who traveled and wrote about their travels. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu is considered to be the most important woman travel writer of the early eighteenth century. It was not until the 1790s that Ann Radcliffe and Mary Wollstonecraft traveled and committed their travel experiences to writing. Even though Montagu travels in order to accompany her husband, an ambassador at Constantinople, she provides an account of the Muslim Orient and the cultural differences of civilizations through her letters. She writes about the customs of Turkish women whose beauty she appreciates aesthetically; "I was charmed with their civility and beauty" (*Travel Knowledge* 100) and distances herself from male travel writers: "Thus you see dear sister the manners of mankind do not differ so widely, as our voyage writers would make us believe" (103). Elizabeth Bohls asserts that Montagu employs the language of aesthetics as it was the only language available to women writers, and speculates that Montagu's "aesthetic approach may have been part of a conscious search for an alternative mode of travel" (*Women Travel Writers* 25) and "she attempts to de-eroticize and de-exoticize them [Turkish women], neutralizing Orientalist stereotypes" (28).

The accounts of women travelers support the argument that the presumed scientific spirit of the eighteenth century is invaded by the sentimental as the women foreground their experiences in lieu of the destination of travel. Susan Pickford, through the essay "The Page as Private / Public Space in Mariana Starke's Travel Writings on Italy" resurrects another woman travel writer of the late eighteenth century who claimed her authorship in the public sphere and understood the demands of the

 ISSN 2249-4529

commercial marketplace. Starks employs the form of the letter to scribe her experience as a traveler. The women travel writers chose the epistolary form as they could not transgress the gender boundaries of the time and the travelogue was a male-dominated sphere of writing. Like other women travel writers Mary Wollstonecraft employed the epistolary form for her travel accounts. *Letters Written in Sweden, Norway, and Denmark* is a travel memoir dominated by her dejection over her lover's betrayal of her. It is also her reinforcement of subjective experience. Elsewhere she has argued,

> The observations of taste, which depend in a great degree on the organization of individuals, cannot, like more stubborn knowledge, be conveyed from one understanding to another, with precision and clearness; on the contrary, sentiments which are lively, in proportion to the sensibility of the person who feels them, are ever evanescent, and almost incommunicable.

Travel voyages and travel writing are inextricably linked to the idea of modernity. The map of the world, from a Euro-centric point of view, was developing as newer lands were being "discovered" by the travelers. The voyagers rejected the traditional ideas of authority and medievalism and ventured to explore hitherto unknown spaces. It is in the interstitial spaces of travel writing that one discovers that many travelers were merely following the norm by embarking upon voyages and

writing about them. Inspired by the voyagers and discoverers, the eighteenth century Englishman often traveled merely to theorize. The long descriptive accounts are more opinionated than what the scientist-writer may assume. They often foreground their own experiences and observations of various expeditions. What they present as truth and knowledge are their own ruminations upon various objects and concepts that appeal to their Enlightenment *sensibility*. Taste and opinion, manners and morals were the order of the day and the travelers proclaimed to follow the precepts of their age yet their travel accounts subjectivize their experiences. It is his subjective experience of the sojourn upon which the knowledge of the traveler is based. Cartesian subjectivism invalidates the traveler's claims to pure truth and knowledge. The cultural relativism of the travelogue incapacitates its claims to veracity.

The accounts of travelers are significantly different from each other as their travels feed upon their idiosyncrasies. James Boswell and Samuel Johnson undertook a journey to the Hebrides together. They recount the same journey that they took together in vastly different terms. Boswell's *The Journal of a Tour to the Hebrides* serves as prefatory document for his biography of Johnson. He employs the extraneous form of a travel account to recount his conversations with Johnson who is the focal point of Boswell's description. Johnson, on the other hand, authored *A Journey to the Western Islands of Scotland* with an understanding of the eighteenth century travel writing and the scientific proclivity of the age. Johnson's *A Journey* conforms to the eighteenth century perception of "scientific" travel writing while Boswell's *A Journal* problematizes

 ISSN 2249-4529

it. The traveler's subjectivity is inseparable from his views and opinions. Also, Johnson's account was appreciated by Englishmen while the Scots were annoyed by it. The reception of travel writing is contingent upon the geographical, and, consequently ideological, location of the reader. The sub-text of Johnson's *A Journey* extracts different responses from the English and the Scottish readers. While the English readers read objectivity in the (sub)-text of Johnson's work, the Scottish readers deduce Johnson's autobiographical anti-Scottish attitude from it. The autobiographical tenor of Johnson's *A Journey* lies in his description of his observations and experiences of the tour of the Western Islands.

The travel book as an autobiographical account had its own predicaments in the eighteenth century. In the essay "Literary Responses to the Eighteenth Century Voyages" Charles L. Batten Jr. writes, "If a traveler relates too much about himself, he leaves himself open to charges that he is egotistical; if he relates too little about himself, he leaves himself open to charges that he never visited the countries he described" (133). Nevertheless, the traveler's experience and his observations and reflections are always already tainted by his subjectivity. Batten's scholarship primarily analyses the form of the eighteenth century travel accounts in their own terms: "In form, eighteenth-century voyages and travels are neither *Bildunsromanen* nor picaresque novels. They lack psychological development and sustained narrative interest." (132-133) Batten in the book *Pleasurable Instruction: Form and Convention in the Eighteenth Century Travel Literature* argues that the accounts of the eighteenth century travelers were governed by

the forms and conventions of travel writing of the time and must not be evaluated by modern paradigms. There was a shift in the British travel writing from factual descriptions to poetic descriptions from the first half to the second half of the century. However, even in the "scientific" half of the century travel accounts are governed by the idiosyncrasies and gender of the traveler, and the norms of the marketplace.

The curiosity of eighteenth century readers ensured the popularity of travel writing. The traveler ostensibly led by his curiosity ventured into foreign lands while the reader gratified his curiosity by reading the travelers' accounts. During the Enlightenment the reading public had increased manifold and there was no formal division between different disciplines such as literature and social science. With the growth of print culture, the eighteenth century became an age of dissemination of ideas. The readers consumed writing of all kinds to increase knowledge and satiate their curiosity. The readers of travel literature enjoyed real travel accounts as well as fictional travelogues and "travel lies".[1] Often there were significant editorial interventions in order to ensure the profitability of the publication. The readers wanted to know about foreign customs, people and geographical regions. The coffee-houses were the meeting places where people discussed books, travels, science, and politics and so on. The circulation of ideas was dependent on the print media as well as coffee-house conversations. A lot of the conversations, however, were based upon rumors and hearsay. Apart from the subjectivism that meddled with the "scientific" spirit of the

[1] Percy G. Adams, Travelers and Travel Liars: 1660-1800.

 ISSN 2249-4529

day, it is known that many travelers stretched the veracity of their travel accounts. The Critical Review also acknowledged these "lying travelers" who exploited the opportune moment of the popularity of non-fiction travel writing as a genre.

It cannot be denied, however, that the travelers brought back fascinating tales from far away lands. The tales of travelers served to exoticize the other and travel writing became the ideological machinery of European imperialism. The trope of the exotic other recurs in European travel writing. The knowledge of the "Orient" gained from travelers' tales was maneuvered to colonize it. Thus the nexus of knowledge and power led to the consolidation of colonial power in the eighteenth century. However it is noteworthy that even in the eighteenth century the ideas of the Orient and the Occident are not monoliths and not all travel writers subscribed to them. For instance Lady Mary Wortley Montagu does not exoticize the Turkish women; her experience of her Turkish travels is an aesthetic one. She accepts cultural difference and does not judge the Turkish customs from a Euro-centric point of view. Travel writing in the eighteenth century is a diverse body. With Mungo Park's *Travels in the Interior Districts of Africa* travel writing moves from scientific objectivity to imperialist discourse. The travelers' accounts helped England forge a sense of national and cultural identity. The difference between the self and the other helped define one in terms of the other.

The eighteenth century traveler seeks a Lockean experience in his travels by reflecting upon the climate, flora, fauna, human nature and topography "scientifically" in keeping with the scientific proclivity of the age. In the essay "Essay Concerning Human Understanding" John Locke argues that the human mind assembles knowledge through experience. Locke's empiricist epistemology was one of the most influential concepts of the eighteenth century. The eighteenth century travel writing has been preoccupied with the epistemological study of human nature and how human nature varies from one country to another. In *Emile* Jean-Jacques Rousseau contends,

> I have been reading books of travel all my life, but I never found two that gave me the same idea of the same nation. On comparing my own scanty observations with what I have read, I have decided to abandon the travelers and I regret the time wasted in trying to learn from their books; for I am quite convinced that for that sort of study, seeing not reading is required.

The subjective experience of the traveler is the chief component of travel books that claim scientificity. The traveler gains an epistemological understanding of the countries he visits based on his own experience. The reader, on the other hand, may be duped with travel lies.

In contemporary travel theory, the subjectivities of the traveler as well as the reader play a crucial role in determining the import of the travelogue. The individuality and subjective experience take precedence over the factual details and scientific study

the travelogue purports. The choice of what is to be described and how should it be described makes the subjectivity of the traveler the guiding light of the travel account. Two different travel writers may assume two diametrically opposite positions to relate the same journey that they undertook together. The readers from different geographical (and ideological) locations may interpret the travel account in vastly different terms. The gendered subjectivity of a woman travel writer ascertains the language of her travel discourse. One cannot disprove, however, that all important writers of the eighteenth century engaged with travel in one way or another. Jonathan Swift wrote *Gulliver's Travels* to discredit the traveler's claims to knowledge and objectivity while Laurence Sterne straddled the line between the novel and the travel book. The individuality of the writer is inseparable from his version of the scientific truth. The "I" of the traveler is the focal point of the journey, its narration and publication as he commits his individuality and subjectivity to writing. Even in contemporary travel, the tourist with a camera projects his experience of the object through the images he captures. The eye behind the camera and the "I" of the traveler participate in cultural discourse to express their individuality.

**WORKS CITED:**

Batten, Charles L., Jr. *Pleasurable Instruction: Form and Convention in the Eighteenth-Century Travel Literature*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1978.

Batten, Charles L., Jr. "Literary Responses to the Eighteenth Century Voyages". *Background to Discovery: Pacific Exploration from Dampier to Cook*. Ed. Derek Howse. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1990.

Blanton, Casey. *Travel Writing: The Self and the World*. London: Routledge, 1995.

Bohls, Elizabeth. "Age of Peregrination: Travel Writing and the Eighteenth Century Novel". *A Companion to the Eighteenth Century English Novel and Culture*. Ed. Paula R. Backscheider and Catherine Ingrassia. Malden, MA: Blackwell, 2009.

Bohls, Elizabeth A., and Ian Duncan, eds. *Travel Writing, 1700 – 1830: An Anthology*. Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2005.

Bohls, Elizabeth A. *Women Travel Writers and the Language of Aesthetics, 1716 – 1818*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Kamps, Ivo, and Jyotsna G. Singh, eds. *Travel Knowledge: European "Discoveries" in the Early Modern Period*. New York: Palgrave, 2001.

Clark, Steve, ed. *Travel Writing and Empire: Postcolonial Theory in Transit*. London: Zed Press, 1999.

Hulme, Peter, and Tim Youngs. *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002.

Hooper, Glenn, and Tim Youngs, eds. *Perspectives on Travel Writing*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2004.

Kinsley, Zoe. *Women Writing the Home Tour, 1682 – 1812*. Aldershot: Ashgate, 2005.

Korte, Barbara. *English Travel writing: from Pilgrimages to Postcolonial Explorations*. Tr. Catherine Matthias. New York: Palgrave, 2000.

Kuehn, Julia, and Paul Smethurst. *Travel Writing, Form, and Empire: The Poetics and Politics of Mobility*. New York: Routledge, 2009.

Lamb, Susan. *Bringing Travel Home to England: Tourism, Gender, and Imaginative Literature in the Eighteenth Century*. Cranbury (NJ): Rosemont Publishing and Printing Corp., 2009.

Leask, Nigel. *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing, 1770-1840: 'From an Antique Land'*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2002.

Mead, William Edward. *The Grand Tour in the Eighteenth Century*. New York: Benjamin Blom, 1972.

Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge, 1992.

Suranyi, Anna. *The Genius of the English Nation: Travel Writing and National Identity in Early Modern England*. Cranbury (NJ): Rosemont Publishing and Printing Corp., 2008.

Withers, Charles W. J. *Placing the Enlightenment: Thinking Geographically about the Age of Reason*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2007.

Zilcosky, John, ed. *Writing Travel: the Poetics and Politics of the Modern Journey*. Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2008.