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Representations of India in the Female Gaze: Four Women Travellers

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Abstract

This paper will explore the question of how recent Western women travel writers represent India, while comparing this post-colonial gaze with that of writers during the colonial past. We will consider the work of two female writers from each period and discuss how their view of the country shows their personal sense of alienation, both within the foreign culture they encounter and, as women, with regard to their own culture. The writers are Fanny Parkes: *Begums, Thugs and White Mughals: The Journals of Fanny Parkes*, 1850 and Emily Eden: *Up the Country: Letters from India*, 1866; contrasted with Dervla Murphy: *On a Shoestring to Coorg*, 1976 and Robyn Davidson: *Desert Places*, 1996.

[**Keywords:** Women's travel writing, India, Colonialism, Post-colonialism, alienation, gaze]

Within the general theoretical outlook of Said's Orientalism, we shall consider to what extent these writers actually challenge many of the preconceptions readers today have of writers of a specific historical and cultural moment. The particular situation of the woman writer, both in the period before female emancipation and in the post-war context of popular feminism, also influences the way Western women approach the East, and India in particular, in terms of their reasons for travel, their desire to become part of another culture, their sense of identity when travelling, and their attitude towards their native society. The idea of the special importance of the "interior journey" has dominated recent women's travel writing, at the expense of an objective approach to the country visited. Similarly, Holland and Huggan have commented on the importance of travel writing due to its "defamiliarizing capacities" (1998 viii) and this ability to consider a foreign culture from an alienated

perspective is one of the great merits of the genre.

Carl Thompson argues that women's travel writing in the colonial period had a different focus from that of men's:

[T]here is a greater tendency for women travellers to concern themselves with domestic details, and with the minutiae of everyday living arrangements [...] This narrative focus is often closely bound up with a keen interest in the conditions of life for women in the cultures that they visit, an interest which can embrace topics ranging from the fashions adopted by foreign women through to the social roles they must perform and their legal and political status (Thompson 186).

Thompson goes on to affirm that "Many women travel writers in the imperial era take up a more conspicuously humanitarian position than their male counterparts,

evincing in their travelogues a greater concern with the plight of native peoples, and especially with the plight of native women” (ibid: 193), though he points out that this did not necessarily imply any opposition to empire, as this concern often went no further than criticism of native practices that went against Western values, such as suttee or polygamy, rather than questioning the nature of the colonial project and its negative effects on local people.

Tim Youngs and Glenn Hooper also touch on the “defamiliarizing” capacity of travel writing when they refer to the concept of “othering” in quoting Trinh T. Minh-ha who has argued “Identity is largely constituted through the process of othering” (in Robertson 15), and go on to clarify, “It is a process that can evolve within societies, but which is especially evident transculturally, at the point of contact, when our sense of Self is most under threat, frequently in need of reassurance, and likeliest to resort to binary modes of discourse as a form of defence” (Youngs & Hooper 5). We can see examples of this process of Othering in the context of foreign women in India in all the texts referred to below.

Any discussion in the 21st century that deals with foreign, especially British, historical views of India inevitably begins with reference to the Orientalist discourse of Edward Said, whose writings transformed the debate about how Westerners view the East. Said was very aware of the importance of India in the British colonial project:

(B)y the late 19th century India had become the greatest, most durable, and most profitable of all British, perhaps even European, colonial possessions. From the time the first British expedition arrived there in 1608 until the last British viceroy departed in 1947, India had a massive influence on British life, in commerce and trade, industry and politics, ideology and

war, culture and the life of the imagination (Said, 1993: 160).

Elleke Boehmer is another valuable voice on historical perspectives of views of India: she writes

(U)p till the end of the nineteenth century and into the twentieth, perspectives on other lands continued to be directed through prisms of inherited tropes: Utopia, or the lawless wilderness; the Noble Savage or the unregenerate Primitive; the Garden of Eden or the Holy City; and Britannica as regnant over all. The interlinked symbolic codes of imperial writing created a textual environment which, while interactive, was also self-repeating, and often self-enclosed. The enclosedness mirrored the insularity of the arguments legitimating Empire (Boehmer 45).

The present paper looks at two moments in the history of Western accounts of India. Firstly in 1839, Emily Eden, the sister of the Governor-General, Lord Auckland, and Fanny Parkes, the wife of a minor official, offer two contrasting versions of their experiences travelling under the auspices of the East India Company. Secondly, in the second half of the 20th century, Dervla Murphy, with her small daughter, and Robyn Davidson, with camels and nomads, travelled in India independently, looking for the authentic experience of travel off the beaten path.

Emily Eden

Emily Eden was a British aristocrat, born in London in 1797 to the first Baron Auckland, an influential politician and diplomat. She moved in the highest social and political circles in Whig circles, but never married: her deepest commitment was to her brother, George, and went with him to India for a six year period from March 1836 to March 1842, accompanied also by her sister Fanny. She wrote hundreds of letters home, to another sister, Mary

Drummond, in the form of a journal of her travels. The letters mainly describe Lord Auckland's two-and-a-half year tour of the "Upper Provinces" with his entourage of his sisters and thousands of people, 850 camels and 140 elephants: from Calcutta to Simla via Delhi, on to Lahore and back to Calcutta, beginning in October 1837. The journal was published under the title *Up the Country* in 1866.

The motivation for travel to India for women in the 19th century in general was simple: they were dependent on a man and had no choice. Emily Eden would far rather have remained in the English countryside she loved, but duty to the Empire called and she could not abandon her beloved, unmarried brother who needed a Burra Lady Sahib to accompany him in the social demands of his position. In October, 1834, Emily wrote:

I always said it was too bad to be true, which is a dangerous assertion to make in most cases; it only hastens the catastrophe. [...] Botany Bay would be a joke to it. *There* is a decent climate to begin with, and the fun of a little felony first. But to be sent to Calcutta for no cause at all! (Dunbar 11)

Emily never got over the shock of leaving her comfortable life in England, and found it hard to adapt. In particular, she hated camp life which consisted of 2 years in tents with a procession of 12,000 people. "I thought I never had seen such squalid, melancholy discomfort" (ibid: 22). She makes no attempt to learn local languages and customs, and describes her time in India as "banishment" (284) and a "waste of four good years" (325).

We tend to assume nowadays that colonial power was unquestioned by its participants, but Emily was her aware of the surreal contradictions, if not downright evils, of colonialism, and the fragile nature of the minority Christian power. On a Sunday, stopping in Goofrein and listening to the

Church of England service celebrated in a large tent, she writes,

It was odd and rather awful to think that sixty Christians should be worshipping God in this desert, which is not their home, and that 12,000 false worshippers should be standing round under the orders of these few Christians on every point, except the only one that is of any importance; the idolators too, being in their own land, and with millions within reach, who all despise and detest our faith (35).

Later in the journal, on the same theme she comments, "I sometimes wonder they do not cut all our heads off, and say nothing more about it" (294). She deals with her sense of unreality with daydreams of home or bursts of black humour: at a boring evening's entertainment she comments sarcastically: "Luckily the band plays all through dinner, and drowns the conversation (71)", and in a British cemetery: "It may give Lady A.D. pleasure to know that Sir R.'s first wife is dead and buried – at least she is buried – under a remarkably shabby tomb" (90). She shows sympathy with the Delhi kings, trapped in the Red Fort without power: "Delhi is a very suggestive and moralising place – such stupendous remains of power and wealth passed and passing away – and somehow I feel that we horrid English have just 'gone and done it', merchandised it, revenueed it, and spoiled it all. I am not very fond of Englishmen out of their own country" (98).

We are given occasional glimpses of how the English appear to the local people. In Lahore, for example, where she wants to do some sketching (her favourite pastime) but is prevented by the enormous crowds, she writes about how people laugh at her skin colour and clothing:

It is not an uncivil crowd, all things considered – we merely threw them one and all into genuine fits of laughter; but X., who understands their language, says

they did not say anything meant for impertinence, only they had never seen a European woman before, and ‘what an odd thing it was to be so white!’ And then my Leghorn bonnet was a great subject of wonder and dispute (229).

Despite her problems adapting to India, and her lack of communication with local people, the British stiff upper lip and sense of duty to the nation win out, and Emily keeps her thoughts to herself in order to fulfil her role as the Burra Lady Sahib until she finally gets back to England.

Fanny Parkes

Fanny Parkes came from a very different social class from the Eden sisters, but coincided with them in India in 1838. Her husband was a junior officer in charge of ice-making in Allahabad, although Fanny did not find herself restricted to traveling with him: she frequently took off on her own to explore, learnt some Hindustani, and wrote an account of her travels which was published as *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque* in 1850 and re-edited as *Begums, Thugs and White Mughals: The Journals of Fanny Parkes*, by William Dalrymple in 2002. Fanny Parkes met the Edens in Calcutta in December 1836. Fanny Eden mentions her condescendingly in her *Journals* (also republished as *Tigers, Durbars and Kings: Fanny Eden’s Indian Journals, 1837-1838*). She writes, with all the hauteur of the aristocrat looking down on her social inferior,

We are rather oppressed just now by a lady, Mrs Parkes, who insists on belonging to our camp. She has a husband who always goes mad in the cold season, so she says it is her duty to herself to leave him and travel about. She has been a beauty and has remains of it, and is abundantly fat and lively. At Benares, where we fell in with her she informed us she was an

Independent Woman (quoted in Parkes: Introduction).

William Dalrymple suggests she is “a woman whom they [the Eden sisters] would like instinctively to look down upon, but who is clearly having more fun – and getting to know India much better – than they are” (Parkes: vii). Later, she acts as interpreter for their visit to the Baiza Bai, and describes the meeting in a way that gives us some idea of the luxurious excess and stately protocol involved in such a meeting:

December 8th: The Gaja Raja Sahib went on an elephant in state to bring the Misses Eden to call on the Baiza Bai. They arrived with Lord Auckland in all due form; his Lordship and Appa Sahib sat in the outer room, and conversed with her Highness through the parda. I introduced the Misses Eden to the Baiza Bai and her granddaughter, with whom they appeared pleased and interested. Twenty two trays, containing pairs of shawls, pieces of cloth of gold, fine Dacca muslin and jewels were presented to the Governor-General; and fifteen trays, filled in a similar manner, to each of the Misses Eden. They bowed to the presents when they were laid before them, after which the trays were carried off and placed in the treasury for the benefit of the Government (Parkes 301).

Mrs Parkes genuinely fell in love with India, and stayed from 1832 to 1839. From the very beginning, everything is seen as a delight:

On arriving in Calcutta, I was charmed with the climate; the weather was delicious, and nothing could exceed the kindness we experienced from our friends. I thought India a most delightful country, and could I have gathered around me the dear ones I had left in England, my happiness would have been complete (15).

Later, she continues to rhapsodize about the charms of the country: “How much there is to delight the eye in this bright, this beautiful world! Roaming about with a good tent and a

good Arab, one might be happy for ever in India [...] Oh! The pleasure of vagabondising over India!” (311). Another example of her enthusiasm comes with her visit to Agra in January 1835: “I have seen the Taj Mahal; but how shall describe its loveliness? Its unearthly style of beauty! It is not its magnitude, but its elegance, its proportions, its exquisite workmanship, and the extreme delicacy of the whole, that render it the admiration of the world” (187). Parkes showed great respect and appreciation for the Islamic culture she encountered in India.

Her lack of social status enabled her to travel freely and widely, mix with Indians of all castes, and make her own judgements. We learn little about her private life, but a great deal about her love of horses, and her penetration into the secret world of Muslim and Hindu women in their closed-off lives, since, inspired by her reading of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu, she gained entry to the zenanas, the harems. She learnt the language of her servants so as to be able to communicate: “It appeared curious to be surrounded by servants, who, with the exception of the tailor, could not speak one word of English; and I was forced to learn to speak Hindustani” (16) and to play the sitar despite being laughed at: “My friends laugh at me when I play on the sitar, and ask, “Why do you not put a peacock’s feather at the end of it?” (141). She gradually becomes more Indianised: “I study the customs and superstitions of the Hindus so eagerly that my friends laugh and say, “We expect some day to see you at pooja in the river!” (126) and identifies herself as Indian: “What would the people at home think of being up at five o’clock, and in church by six o’clock! [...] To us Indians accustomed to early rising, it is no fatigue” (137). Parkes is fascinated by local wildlife and collects examples: “Killed a scorpion in my bathing-room, a good fat old fellow; prepared him with arsenical soap, and added him to the collection of curiosities in my museum” (p.38). “I caught a small

venomous whip-snake in my dressing room today and put it into the bottle of horrors” (140). “The low sandbanks in the river swarm with crocodile; ten are basking on a bank to the left of our boat [...] What a monster there is very near us, and such a winsome wee one by its side! I want a baby crocodile very much for my cabinet” (117). The usual aspects of life in a foreign country that are supposed to horrify genteel English women do not inspire fear in her, but rather scientific interest and enthusiasm.

Fanny Parkes, perhaps due to her unorthodox marital situation, makes connections between the situations of married women in England “the white slaves” (256) and India: “It is the same the world over; [...] a woman is a slave from her birth; and the more I see of life, the more I pity the condition of the women” (284). She is scandalised by the news that the Governor-General is selling off Mughal treasures: “If this be true, is it not shameful? The present king might as well sell the chapel of Henry VII in Westminster Abbey... By what authority does any Governor-General offer the Taj for sale? Has he any right to molest the dead?” (128) Even the way she compares Mughal culture with British culture as being equally valuable is exceptional for the age she lived in, and once again reflects her open-mindedness and ability to take a cosmopolitan perspective when traveling. In another section of her journal, Fanny Parkes is disgusted by the lack of respect shown for the Taj by the English who hold a party there: “Can you imagine anything so detestable? European ladies and gentlemen have the band to play on the marble terrace, and dance quadrilles in front of the tomb!” (193). In general her work is full of praise for Indian clothes, the grace of the women, the many details of Indian life that leave her feeling England is a grey, cold, dismal place that she has grown away from.

Dervla Murphy

Dervla Murphy has been writing about her travels since 1964. This Irish writer, who is fond of travelling by bicycle, with a donkey, and with her young daughter, is an anti-tourist snob: most of her work comments on her dislike of the “beaten track” of tourism, and her scorn for travellers who carry modern rucksacks or soft toilet paper with them. Her first travel account, *Full Tilt: Dunkirk to Delhi by Bicycle* (1965) describes her first journey to India. *On a Shoestring to Coorg* (1976) opens by reminding us how little she likes the country:

Far from having fallen in love with India during my previous visit I had been repelled by some aspects of Hindu life, irritated by others, uneasily baffled by most and consciously attracted by very few [...] Nor had I forgotten the grim details of everyday Indian life - the dehumanizing poverty, the often deliberately maimed beggars, the prevaricating petty officials, the heat, the flies, the dust, the stinks, the pilfering (Murphy 3).

Her justification for the trip is that “we are more attracted by complexities and evasions, secrets and subtleties, enigmas and paradoxes, unpredictability and apparent chaos than by simplicity, straightforwardness, dependability and apparent order” (ibid: 3). This is late twentieth century Orientalism: the unquestioning division of the world into the binary oppositions of East and West, Us and Them; “their Chaos” and “our Order”. Murphy sees India as a challenge “that I, like countless other Europeans, had run away from. However, unlike the impregnably self-assured Victorian imperialists I could not convince myself that a failure to appreciate India was a mark of virtue”(3). Despite her avowed intentions to come to terms with India, contradictions arise between her stated values - anti-materialism, authenticity of culture, anti-tourism - and her actual experiences.

Her initial response on leaving Bombay airport is disgust at “scenes of poverty, filth and squalor which make exaggeration impossible” (8). In the slums of Bombay she focuses on her own sensitive reactions, rather than concern for the locals: “Yet I was not overcome by that nauseated depression which similar scenes induced ten years ago. Perhaps I am no longer quite sure that India’s dire poverty is worse than the dire affluence through which we had been driving twelve hours earlier in London” (p.8). Murphy’s work is marked by her frequent rejection of society, her inability to communicate with local people, and her preference for communing with nature while travelling. Her attitude to colonialism is ambiguous, and she refers to the subject frequently and nostalgically: e.g. quoting a local: “We old people don't mind remembering that the British built all our roads [...] Imperialism there has to be. It is part of the evolution of mankind. It is a necessary evil.” Murphy is surprised not by his political views but that an Indian capable is of Western thought processes: “for such a historical approach is rather un-Indian” (53).

Her goal is “freedom from the abominable effects of industrialisation, the consumer society and the internal combustion engine” (41), yet spends her time moving by bus or car from tourist haven to expatriate comfort: “According to Tim [her expat host], the place was a wilderness when the Fosters took over; now it is a thriving example of what can be done in India with not much money but a great deal of thought and hard work” (62). While breakfasting on bacon and eggs, along with other European guests, Murphy is aware of the presence of the locals but is in another world:

Files of almost black-skinned men and women servants passed to and fro, their bare feet noiseless on the dewy grass, their ornaments tinkling and flashing, their eyes respectfully averted from the sahibs and mem-sahibs, who were putting away more good food in fifteen minutes than the

average Indian can lay hands on in a month (63).

As she watches daughter Rachel “boss” the local children around, she thinks that is the way the relation between whites and blacks will always be: the children never seem to resent the domineering white child. Plainly the British control of their Indian Empire was based on something more than Might, though I honestly don't know whether I believe that ‘something’ to have been a defect in the Indian character, or a virtue in the British, or a combination of virtues and vices on both sides that just happened to make possible the domination of millions by thousands (64).

Murphy uses an Orientalist trick of putting words in the mouths of local people that are presented as direct speech but are in fact composite arguments that suit her own agenda. For example, on the delicate subject of caste, she uses phrases like “Most educated Indians are now hypersensitive on caste issues” (205) without explaining how she can substantiate this generalisation, and goes on to invent the thoughts of “most” Indians:

Often an Indian will [...] accuse a foreigner of over-simplifying and misinterpreting caste, and will then himself add fuel to the fire of misinterpretation by asking defensively ‘Don’t you have your caste system? But you call it class! Where do you send your children to school? Who would you like them to marry? Who do you invite to have meals in your house? What part of town do you live in?’ (205)

This is a tricky technique, as it superficially offers an insight into Indian attitudes to the English, while in fact being nothing more than a convenient generalisation that is not backed up by being the words of an actual individual. It is suggestive of the way Murphy avoids contact with ordinary Indians, preferring the company of expatriates who do little to question her pre-existing views or make her aware of the complexity of the question of Otherness and its representation.

Robyn Davidson

Desert Places by Robyn Davidson (first published 1996; edition referred to, 1997) describes a journey made by the Australian writer, with nomads (the Rabari or Raiki) and their camels in north-west India. The justification given is her romantic image of the nomadic life, about which she knows nothing:

A wish was forming. It took the shape of an image. I was building a little cooking fire in the shelter of soft, pink dunes, far away from anything but a world of sand. It was twilight, the lyrical hour. The nomads were gathering beside me by the fire. There was fluency and lightness between us (Davidson, 1997: 3).

Like Murphy, she is looking for an alternative reality superior to Western culture; an escape from materialism and industrialization. Similarly, the book reveals many contradictions in this project. Despite its romantic intentions, *Desert Places* is not an account of a Western woman's intrepid spirit triumphing over hardship and cultural difference to reaffirm the bonds between her and her third-world sisters. Although this is her aim, the journey turns out to be a personal nightmare and an admitted failure: “I had passed through India as a knife does through ice and it had closed behind me at every step. How does one write about failure?” (275).

Davidson represents herself as a new kind of nomad, whose ‘desert places’ are interior, existential states, as much as foreign landscapes. But we learn little about Davidson’s interior journey and less about the minds of the Rabari. Amit Chaudhuri points out the fundamental flaw in the project:

It is not difficult to imagine what it would be like for a middle-class Australian woman were she to find herself for days on end with a group of nomads; and there is very little in the book to subvert our expectations. It is more difficult, perhaps, to imagine what it is to be a Rabari, sleeping among five thousand sheep

and drinking Guinea-worm-infested water; but Davidson, constrained by her ignorance of their language, and their ignorance of hers, offers few insights on this subject. From time to time she laments that her journey has provided her with no 'illumination'; yet it is not illumination one seeks in this account, but something more humble, a small-scale but sustained going-out-of-oneself into other people's lives. To me, the idea that living in the most trying conditions with a group of strangers, and getting infected with the same diseases and sores as they have, will lead to a greater knowledge of oneself, or others, or a culture is simply wrong-headed (Chaudhuri, *London Review of Books*. Vol.19, No. 18, Sept. 18 1997: 20).

This is a fundamental critique of Davidson's travel writing project. In trying to cover the interior existential journey, while dealing with the politically correct agendas of feminism and environmentalism, the writer falls between the two discourses and fails to provide either an insight into how a different culture affects her self-definition, or an objective account of how it constructs its world.

One of the main themes throughout the book is Davidson's attempt to find acceptance within a 'family', or sisterhood, to become an insider, to be, as she puts it, "allow[ed] inside the frame" (279). This episode is similar to one in Davidson's famous account of her travels across the Australian bush with camels in *Tracks*: during her stay at an Aboriginal camp Davidson is shocked and disappointed when, after being shown a dance by some Aboriginal women, she is asked for money: "I felt it as a symbolic defeat. A final summing up of how I could never enter their reality, would always be a whitefella tourist on the outside looking in" (1980: 148). In the same way, in India, the actual relationships developed with the Rabari women she meets hardly move beyond bemused incomprehension on both sides, breaking at times into direct hostility:

They had welcomed me into the warmth of their communion; now I was out in the cold watching them through a window. [...] The truth was I was going under. There were more than forty people on the dang. Jaiva said disparagingly, 'We can remember all our sheep. How come you can't remember our names?' (134).

Davidson is offended that they are too ready to reject their traditional ways and 'exploit' her as a free taxi-service. "In my notes I wrote 'I am their milking cow'" (163), when she wants them to offer her the 'genuine' nomadic experience (as long as she can get off the camel and into a jeep and a hotel whenever the reality of poverty becomes too painful or boring). If Davidson herself questions her motives, the Rabari are completely bemused by what seems to them complete insanity:

Men would come and sit with me, polite as ever, and gradually get round to asking, 'You have lakhs and lakhs of rupees, and you have a jeep. Why do you want to live with poor people? Why do you want to walk?' I never found a suitable reply to this but it did indicate how far from enviable they saw their own lives and how incomprehensible they found mine (48).

There is little room left for an objective study of their lives and concerns. In the last phase, she stays in a Western hotel, wears earplugs, and drives out with the photographer to the tribe for photo-shoots that reconstruct the journey.

The clash of expectations on the part of Davidson and her tribal hosts is at times unconsciously funny: she cannot believe the women will take the bus to Pushkar, and they cannot believe that anyone would walk if there is an alternative (25). She shows no awareness of how the whole tribe's efforts in putting up with her deserve to be rewarded with something more than being photographed for a book they will never read. It is to the author's credit that her doubts about the nature and value of her project are

eventually foregrounded. However the level of anger, complaint, insult, and unhappiness revealed in the text raises difficult questions about the role of travel writing by Westerners in the East in general.

Conclusion

In conclusion, by juxtaposing these four texts, I hope to indicate something of the richness and variety of work on India by Westerners, in particular by Western women. At the same time, I want to point out that not all work in the colonial period was homogeneous and pro-British. The question of class, of social status, is a complicating factor in the way individual travellers approached the foreign culture. There is a great contrast between the experience of the freedom of travel and contact with local people achieved by Mrs Fanny Parkes, who made no claims to aristocratic status, but enjoyed being able to move in all levels of British and Indian society, and the restrictions and negative attitudes of the women at the highest levels of the Raj such as Emily Eden. We should be wary of assuming that all British travellers in India in the 19th century merely accepted the standard imperial view of life in the subcontinent, without having the capacity to question attitudes and form their own opinions.

In contrast, much work in the post-colonial period does little to challenge the old binary ways of perceiving the Other, through a gaze which perpetuates the binary oppositions still current in travel writing. Despite the historical differences encountered when traveling in independent India, there is still a strong tendency to present the country merely as an exotic backdrop to the travellers' own concerns, rather than as a complex and ever-changing culture. Both Dervla Murphy and Robyn Davidson fall into the trap of idealizing a romantic dreamscape in which economic progress is seen as the enemy (until it comes to their own needs for comfort and security), as they travel in search of a lost paradise of

simplicity and anti-materialism, which many modern Indians are probably only too keen to move beyond. Travel writing still falls into the trap of assuming that a brief, superficial stay in the country, with no attempt to learn languages or get to know individuals, is sufficient to be able to pronounce generalizations about the local culture which offer little more than traditional Orientalist tropes of difference. Finally, late twentieth century travel writing by women as considered here offers few new insights into a reading of travel which is presented as an interior journey in which the author has a responsibility to be self-critical and show some humility as she moves through a foreign landscape.

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