






Representation of India in Travel Writings by Latin American Women in the 20th Century
INTERACTIVE ARTICLE COVER






About the Journal

Journal DOI	https://dx.doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha
Journal Home	www.rupkatha.com 
Indexed by	Scopus  Web of Science: Emerging Sources Citation Index (ESCI)  DOAJ 
Journal Metrics	CiteScore 2020: 0.2 SJR 2020: 0.162 SNIP 2020: 0.193 JCI 2020: 0.50

About the Issue

Issue	Volume 14, Number 3, 2022
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Issue DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n3
TOC	https://rupkatha.com/v14n3.php 

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Title	Representation of India in Travel Writings by Latin American Women in the 20th Century	
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Author ID	None	
Funding	No funding received. Published free of any charge.	
Article DOI	https://doi.org/10.21659/rupkatha.v14n3.08	Pages: 1-8
Abstract	https://rupkatha.com/v14n308 	
Full-text PDF	https://rupkatha.com/V14/n3/v14n308.pdf 	
Article History	First Published: 07 October 2022	
Article Impact	Check Dynamic Impact 	
Copyright	Aesthetics Media Services 	
Licensing	Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 	

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Representation of India in Travel Writings by Latin American Women in the 20th Century

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Abstract

This paper examines the representation of India in the works of Latin American women writers in the 20th Century. With the advent of Modernism in Latin America in the late 19th Century as a turn-of-the-century movement, Latin American intellectuals started engaging with India such as Rubén Darío in *Azul* (1888). However, it was Gabriela Mistral, a Nobel laureate from Chile, who although never travelled to India, may be considered the first Latin American woman writer who engaged with India through the appreciation of Tagore in her literary repertoire. Furthermore, in the 20th Century Cecília Meireles, one of the most famous Modernist poets from Brazil visited India in 1953 upon being invited by Jawaharlal Nehru. She noted in her diary that as paradoxical as it sounds, it is much easier to understand India if one knows Brazil. She drew similarities between the fundamental issues of the two countries then. She wrote the anthology *Poemas Escritos Na Índia* (1961). Another important performance artist is Josefina Báez who would combine yoga and her lived experience in the three spaces of New York, La Romana in the Dominican Republic and India to produce zany dance dramas like *Dominicanish* (2001). She uses the classical dance form of *Kuchipudi* originating in the south of India to restructure her Dominican cultural identity in New York. Another contemporary Mexican writer, Margo Glantz, wrote her work *Coronada de Moscas* (2012), which is a travelogue based on her three sojourns in India accompanied with photographs by Alina López Cámara. The paper analyses the works by the above-mentioned Latin American intellectuals vis-à-vis representation of India in them and focuses on what it is to travel to India and write on it for Latin American women in the 20th Century. This has been done using the theoretical perspective of bell hooks (*Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 1984) and Mary Louise Pratt (*Imperial Eyes*, 1992).

Keywords: India, travel writings, Latin America, women, 20th century

Introduction

Early travel accounts across cultures are mostly found to be written by men or, at the least, these accounts are fascinating tales of adventures undertaken by men (Bassnett, 2006, p. 225). Its first traces in literature can arguably be found in epic poems and chivalric novels in the Medieval Period. This trend continued during Early Modern Europe and these narratives sang praises of the knight-errant who would wander to salvage a damsel in distress to prove their chivalric virtues. Following the tales of adventures of such knights in texts such as *El Cantar de Mio Cid*, *Amadis de Gaula*, *La Chanson de Roland* etc., it is interesting to note that in the late 15th Century during the

Spanish Renaissance at its peak, anthropocentric in its approach as a matter of fact, that showed immense belief in grandeur and the classical, Christopher Columbus' arrival to the New World (*Nuevo Mundo*) in 1492 was represented quite heroically. This representation almost validates the myth of a male heroic explorer. Many Spanish *conquistadores* would follow suit and travel to the New World, what we now refer to as Latin America. The 16th Century *conquistador* of Mexico Hernán Cortés represents the Old World/colonial order and the Nahua woman Malintzin, more known as *La Malinche* would become his consort represents the New World/colonized territory. Drawing from the trope of Cortés and *La Malinche*, we could deduce in the context of Spanish Colonialism that the Old World represents the traveller-male who is set to conquer and the New World represents the destination-female who is waiting to be rescued by him to become his consort or to be "civilised". Nevertheless, it took a *Cervantes* to satirise the myth of a male heroic explorer in the masterpiece *Don Quixote de la Mancha* (Part-I in 1605 and Part II in 1615) when renaissance ideals were fading away and baroque sensibilities started to gain ground in Spain.

After Spain's defeat in the Spanish-American War (1898) when most of the Latin American countries gained independence by the late 19th Century, Spain lost all its territories and as a corollary, Spanish Colonialism in the New World came to an end. It came to be known as the Disaster of '98 in Spain among the intellectuals who saw the government restoration process in Spain as a period of crisis. This led to the creation of the sensibilities of regenerationism and the group of intellectuals such as Pío Baroja, Miguel de Unamuno, Azorín etc. who formed the Generation of '98 in Spain that believed in cultural and aesthetic renewal. It also associated itself with modernism. In turn, in the newly independent countries in Latin America, with the advent of modernism as a turn-of-the-century movement, many intellectuals started to look up to the East in search of inspiration as a result of being fed up with the mundane depiction of reality through the prevalent western epistemology in late 19th Century. Rubén Darío, although never travelled to India, included images from the land in his work *Azul* (1888), yet his ideas were still inspired by the European sensibilities of those times such as parnassianism, symbolism etc. Following the path shown by Rubén Darío, it was in the 20th Century that many Latin American intellectuals travelled to British India and then to independent India in the second half of the century such as Octavio Paz, Severo Sarduy, Julio Barrenechea, Miguel Serrano etc. who wrote extensively about its people and culture. Needless to say, the majority of these texts represent the Latin American male gaze. The present study identifies a knowledge gap in this field and attempts to study the female gaze of Latin American writers who travelled to India in the 20th Century (and 21st Century), wrote about it, and examined critically the aesthetic, moral, cultural and philosophical values of India. It is interesting to study the texts by Latin American women on India as Latin America locates itself on the periphery of the West that was once treated as the destination-female under the colonial order by Europe. Moreover, travel writings primarily began under the European expansionist projects to represent and codify the "rest of the world" (Pratt, 1992, p. 4), most certainly, it initially established the binaries of West and East, Occident and Orient etc. Therefore, it would be compelling to read the "codes" that Latin American women writers have created to represent India which may be seen as an agency to subvert the colonial as well as the patriarchal order prevalent in travel writings, thus undoing the already established binaries.

Four Latin American authors' contributions to this trajectory in the context of the 20th and 21st centuries would be traced in the present article, namely Gabriela Mistral, Cecilia Meireles, Josefina

Báez and Margo Glantz. Nevertheless, the study will primarily focus on the works of two contemporary Latin American women writers, Josefina Báez and Margo Glantz who have visited India in recent times.

The paper analyses the works written by the above-mentioned Latin American intellectuals vis-à-vis representation of India in their works and focuses on what is it to travel to India and write on it for Latin American women in the 20th Century. This has been examined through the theoretical perspective of bell hooks (*Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center*, 1984) and Mary Louise Pratt (*Imperial Eyes*, 1992). The present study attempts to critically respond to the two following fundamental questions.

1. What are the themes/reflections of travel writings by the Latin American women on India in the 20th Century?
2. How are their writings different or similar to their male counterparts' accounts on India?

Theoretical Framework

Mary Louise Pratt in her celebrated work *Imperial Eyes Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992) analyses the impact of early nineteenth-century feminism on travel writing. She also studies and deduces travel writing in the mid-twentieth century. According to her, "Travel writing in the 1960s is juxtaposed with tourist propaganda on the one hand and *testimonio* and oral history on the other" (p. 5). It is fascinating to note that travel writing primarily represents the other, however, the *testimonio* is a first-person narrative to tell one's personal history that is quintessentially a Latin American literary genre. In the context of the twentieth century, she mentions, "In the last decades of the twentieth century, processes of decolonization opened the meaning-making powers to empire to scrutiny, as part of a large scale effort to decolonize knowledge, history, and human relations" (p. 3).

To understand the process of decolonization and subversion of the colonial order, and as a corollary, of the patriarchal order in the present times, we study the term presented by Pratt called "*contact zone*". *Contact zone*, according to her, "invokes space and time where subjects previously separated by geography and history are co-present, the point at which their trajectories now intersect" (p. 8). We look at these contact zones between Latin America and India where they intersect in terms of their colonial pasts and their current struggles. While reading the texts on India by the above-mentioned Latin American women writers, the attempt is also to critically study their works on India by understanding intersections of gender through bell hooks' *Feminist Theory: From Margin to Center* (1984). bell hooks has proposed in her work that a black woman's struggle is distinct as she is at the intersection of not just gender but also race. We find the ideas by hooks relevant for the present study as Latin America locates itself at the periphery of the West and travel writings by Latin American women are even lesser researched. Nevertheless, the Latin American female writer that we have taken up for study here has her unique observation and relationship with India.

India through the eyes of four Latin American women writers

Gabriela Mistral (1889-1957), the first Latin American Nobel Laureate, never visited India but she mentioned the Indian Nobel laureate Rabindra Nath Tagore in her work "*Lecturas para mujeres*"

(1924). She wrote *Lecturas para mujeres* in Mexico and the book was meant especially for girl school students. Mistral was a poet as well as a teacher; a teacher in a rural school. In this literary work, she calls upon all the women of Latin America to write like Ruskin, like Tagore to create literature for the home that is laden with humanity. In her own words, Mistral commented, "it is high time to initiate among us the formation of a serious women's literature" (Mistral, 1924). She wrote

Ya es tiempo de iniciar entre nosotros la formación de una literatura femenina, seria. A las excelentes maestras que empieza a tener nuestra América corresponde ir de creando la literatura del hogar, no aquella sensiblería y de belleza inferior que algunos tienen por tal, sino una literatura con sentido humano. La han hecho hasta hoy, aunque parezca absurdo, sólo los hombres: un Ruskin, en Inglaterra; un Tagore en la India; para no citar más. (Mistral, 1924, p.10-11)

It is time to initiate among us the formation of serious feminine literature. It is up to the excellent women teachers that our America is beginning to have to go about creating the literature of the home, not that sentimental and of inferior beauty that some consider as such, but a literature with a human sense. It has been done until today, although it seems absurd, only by men: a Ruskin, in England; a Tagore in India; not to mention more. (Mistral, 1924, p.10-11)ⁱ

According to Bhattacharya (2016), such type of fragmented reading of Tagore may be attributed to the limited access of Mistral to the English translation and not reading the original works in Bengali. Mistral included ten poems by Tagore in this literary piece and recommended all his works to her readers. Bhattacharya (2016) informs that among the ten poems which were included in this volume, six were taken from *The Crescent Moon (La luna nueva)*, three from *Fruit Gatherings (La cosecha)*, and one from *The Gardener (El jardinero)*. One of the peculiarities of these selected poems was that they all dealt with love, and most of these were on maternal love. In her first masterpiece *Desolación*, published in 1922, she included a section called '*Comentarios a poemas de Rabindranath Tagore*' and this book contained Mistral's responses to three poems of Gitanjali, (poem nos. 6, 95 and 102) (Bhattacharya, 2016).

Later she was contacted by other Indian important figures like Dilip Kumar Ray (in 1949), and Kewal Motwani (in 1947) among others. In a way, Mistral can be considered one of the first women Latin-American writers who despite not visiting India was somehow successful to create a significant positive image of India in Latin America.

Pratt has discussed Mistral's *Poema de Chile* (1967) where she has observed that it is a work of imaginary travel that is marked with "return and rediscovery, in which the poet returns to her homeland after a long absence, as a ghost" (p. 230). Mistral's modernism is varied from Rubén Darío's in the sense that it seeks return and rediscovery. Although Mistral never travelled to India nor did she write much about it, the inspirations she drew from India, especially from Tagore seem to take her back to her homeland.

Furthermore, in the 20th Century Cecília Meireles (1901-1964), one of the most famous modernist poets from Brazil, visited India in 1953 upon invitation by Jawaharlal Nehru, the erstwhile Prime Minister of the Republic of India. During her sojourn in the country, which lasted a little more than

two months, she visited approximately fifteen cities and during this stay, the University of Delhi awarded her a *doctorate Honoris Causa*, thus also marking the deep relationship between the writer and the country (Jesus Fernandez, 2019). She observed and noted in her diary that as paradoxical as it sounded, it was much easier to understand India if one knew Brazil. She drew similarities between the issues that the two countries were dealing with then. She wrote the anthology *Poemas Escritos na Índia* in 1961.

The creation of a personal Orient within Cecília Meireles had been undergoing since her childhood, as she has manifested this in various chronicles like "*Meus Orientes*" and different interviews (Jesus Fernandez, 2019). These creations were nourished by songs and stories that she heard from her grandmother about the Orient. She revealed this to Pedro Bloch in one of the interviews published in *Revista Manchete*ⁱⁱ

Foi ela quem me chamou a atenção para a Índia, o Oriente: "Cata, cata, que é viagem da Índia", dizia ela, em linguagem náutica, creio, quando tinha pressa de algo, Chá-da-Índia, narrativas, passado, tudo me levava, ao mesmo tempo à Índia (Meireles, 1964)

It was she who drew my attention to India, the Orient: "Cata, cata, that is the journey from India", she would say, in nautical language, I believe, when I was in a hurry for something, Indian tea, narratives, the past, everything took me, at the same time, to India

This training allowed her to master Oriental Literature, translate authors such as Tagore, and write several works on the subject. In a way, Cecília Meireles carries with her a vast knowledge of Indian culture before setting out for India. Another important aspect of the East of Cecília Meireles is that it does not fit into the patterns of exoticism traced by Edward Said, as seen in the vision of European authors of the early twentieth century, who recreate an exotic and subaltern East. She mentioned this in her interview.

Na Índia foi onde me senti mais dentro de meu mundo interior. As canções de Tagore, que tanta gente canta como folclore, tudo na Índia me dá uma sensação de levitar. Note que não visitei ali nem templos nem faquires. Não é exótico. E o espírito, compreende? (Meireles, 1964)

India was where I felt most inside my inner world. The songs of Tagore, which so many people sing like folklore, everything in India gives me a feeling of levitation. Please note that I visited neither temples nor fakirs there. It's not exotic. It's the spirit, do you understand?

Meireles' India is varied from her modernist counterparts as it is a personal India that she carried along with herself and that remained with her since her childhood. Unlike the Orientalists, she did not visit the temples or met the fakirs but she tried to understand its spirit by roaming through its bazaars and bylanes. She is the traveller-observer who sees these spaces as contact zones (Pratt, p. 7) and tries to understand the issues that both countries were dealing with at that time, especially the process of nation building after a long colonial rule.

The performance artist Josefina Báez (1960-) combines yoga, a classical Indian dance form of *Kuchipudi* and her lived experience in the three spaces of New York, La Romana in the Dominican Republic and India to produce a new form of expression in the dance-drama like *Dominicanish* that is later published as a text in 2001. She uses the classical dance form of Kuchipudi originating

in the south of India to restructure her Dominican cultural identity in New York. *Dominicanish* reminds us of Báez's Afro-American identity and it appears to be a *bildungsroman* that Báez performs to her readers/audience through this text. She is aware of her liminal space and she uses the stage to perform her coming-of-age story. The language that she expresses herself in the text stems from the collision and fusion of Spanish and English through which she talks about the struggles of a little migrant girl until she becomes an adult in Washington Heights originally hailing from the Dominican Republic. The continuously changing language of *Dominicanish* challenges and redefines the established meanings of identity, gender and belonging. Báez says and performs, "Home is where theatre is" (*Dominicanish*, 2001, p. 37) and "Here I am chewing English and spitting Spanish" (p. 49). Báez asserts her afro identity and says in the same text, "Discos del alma con afro. Con afro black is beautiful. Black is a color. Black is my color" (p. 26). It is also interesting to note that she says, "take take take off every safety pin in your way / unleash this starched sari / let its prints and colors play/ **wild ragas** / foreplaying to the juciest kalankhan / foreplaying in the juciest dulce de leche" (p. 37).

Josefina Báez, through her performance in *Dominicanish*, challenges the white supremacist patriarchy, as she is aware of the intersections she is placed at. (hooks, 1984, pp. 14-15). Her text not just speaks and performs the struggles of an individual but also the collective that she represents; black-latina-migrant. India helps her understand the liminal space she is in as no homogenisation is possible in the context of India.

Margo Glantz is a Mexican writer, essayist, literary critic and academic and she wrote a travel book titled *Coronada de moscas* (2012) in which she assembles fragments of the three trips she has made to India. She remarked that it is an "assemblage work", which starts with an immediate and crude aspect. She mentioned in an interview that her interest in India is not through yoga or ashram but the vitality of India that is extraordinary, immediate and perfect. Glantz's relationship with India is ambivalent. It oscillates between fascination and horror. She attributed her visit to India due to its wonderfulness but at the same time horrendousness. She mentioned that in India everything is interwoven in such a precise way. She also highlighted the diversity and the strong smell, which is common in every part. Reflecting on the history of India as a British colony, she pointed out the mutual heritage exchange between the colony and colonizers.

On the question of gender differences and conditions of women in India, Glantz commented that the beauty of Indian women is enormous and praised the way they wear their dresses. The women sitting and choosing their wedding dresses is a marvel. However, at the same time, she is highly critical of the conservative Indian socio-cultural setup when she talks about widows and their treatment within and outside families. She criticized the dowry system due to which even now women were mistreated or killed. She even mentioned in one of her interviews women are more liberated in China than in India.

Glantz travels and writes about her journeys in the articles published in the newspaper *la Jornada*. She pointed out that her book *Coronada de moscas* is different from the previous works like that of Octavio Paz in which she has found a way to say something new. She travels as a true traveller and is not bound to any prejudices, always trying to find new eyes to describe and appreciate the reality that requires other dimensions to be narrated. The title of the book has been taken from Peruvian poet Blanca Varela's *Tenera Acosada por Tábanos* and refers not only to flies found in

this country but also to the tourist guides, who, according to her, follow one like flies. The book ends with the fine photographs of her daughter Alina López Cámara. These images enrich the reading experiences of the readers and complement the textual descriptions. In an interview with writer and journalist Julio Patán, the author stressed that the photographs by Alina in the book are independent and presented their vision without touching and illustrating the book.

Conclusion

One finds very few travel writings on India documented by Latin American women. One out of the four authors that this paper has attempted to examine i.e. Gabriela Mistral did not travel to India, however, she drew inspiration from Tagore's works. Her engagement with India is very unique and varied from her contemporary modernist male writers as she seeks to return and rediscovery as a Chilean for which she refers to Tagore's poems. The Brazilian poet Cecília Meireles carried India along with her since her childhood and her India is very personal. The codes that she deciphers in the bazaars of India are the codes of this grand culture, nevertheless, they act as a contact zone for Meireles. She attempts to understand the issues that both the new nations were dealing with at the same time after a long colonial rule.

Contemporary Latin American women travel writers, such as Josefina Báez and Margo Glantz, have seen India through an individual's lens. On the one hand, for Báez it provides her more space to perform her coming-of-age story while devising almost a new language that is also representative of her community that lives at the intersections of gender, nationality, race etc. On the other hand, Glantz underscores striking as well as underwhelming aspects of what she witnessed in India during her sojourn.

All the aforementioned four Latin American women writers have their unique ways to engage with India. They have mainly represented motifs for this land according to their spatial as well as temporal requirements, however, they represent their unique perspective seen through a woman's eyes. They are self-aware and they are aware of their surroundings. They travel and write about India, especially Báez and Glantz, not with the purpose to represent but in an attempt to decolonise themselves from their colonial past. This experience brings them closer to India and they find themselves placed in a contact zone where India and Latin America are located next to each other and they converse and engage with each other in a dialogue. The works of Báez and Glantz are a testimony to this dialogue that is inclusive and not exclusive.

Notes

ⁱ All the translations in the text have been done by the authors.

ⁱⁱ Interview published in Machete magazine, n° 630, May 16, 1964.

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