

## Passages, Journeys, and Returns: A Poetics for South Asian Travel Writing<sup>1</sup>

Chelva Kanaganayakam

A significant but somewhat less-known essay titled “Going Home” by Zulfikar Ghose appeared in 1991. The occasion for the essay is in itself an interesting one. Born in Bombay, raised in Sialkot and England, settled in the States, this author was going back to Pakistan, twenty years after leaving India. The ironies inherent in the notion of going home are obviously intentional. He is going back to a home that is defined not by colonial divisions of power, or by geopolitical situations, but by a sense of belonging to a way of life, to a landscape, to a subjective need.

The essay remains a classic example of postcolonial Indian or South Asian travel writing. Here is the diasporic author, after a period of voluntary exile, returning to a land that has been the subject of his fiction and poetry, but one that needs validation through a personal journey. The process is not so much of discovery as re-discovery, of actualizing memory. There are moments when the diction and the observations in the essay remind us of the conventional contours of travel writing from the West, which appropriate and transform what is perceived into a vision of the exotic. Among others, Edward Said, Mary Louise Pratt, Graham Huggan, Patrick Holland, James Clifford, and Tim Youngs have reminded us about the pivotal role of travel literature in shaping the construction of other worlds.<sup>2</sup> As Huggan puts it, “[c]learly travel writing at its worst has helped support an imperialist perception by which the exciting ‘otherness’ of foreign, for the most part non-European, peoples and places is pressed into the service of rejuvenating a humdrum domestic culture” (38-39). Ghose does not indulge in the exotic, has no reason to, but the manner in which he moves from metonymy to metaphor, from perceived reality to symbolic value, is suggestive of an older genre. Here is a description of a Punjabi village woman:

The simpler Punjabi clothes disguise and obscure the female form but cannot suppress the suggestion of her beauty as she walks with a slightly swaying gait that sends minute undulations over her agitated flesh, transforming her, the peasant woman who is a sentimental and partial image in my mind, into a symbol for the land. (17)

An everyday scene is thus transformed, within the framework of travel literature, into a symbolic moment. Such descriptions lend themselves very easily to a feminist critique, but are meaningful in relation to his entire corpus.

Against this Romantic sensibility, there is also the modernist, more pragmatic perception of the traveller who sees the corruption, the ruthless exercise of power, the ignorance, and the fanaticism. Ghose is appalled by the casualness with which corruption takes place around him. Here again, one sees the echoes of a Western tradition that looked for and emphasized the negative in India as a kind of self-justificatory attempt at colonial power. Ghose has no such agenda, but his sensibility is clearly appalled by the lack of fairness he perceives around him. He writes, for instance, about a blatant disregard for policy at the airport. And this is countered by an awareness of generosity, of resilience, and courage: “But one thing had not changed in twenty-eight, or perhaps even in two thousand years: the Pakistani psyche remains open-hearted, good-humoured, and generous” (22).

So far, the essay remains conventional, to some extent predictable. But there is also another dimension to the essay that makes it strikingly different. Says Ghose:

At the Peshawar Museum I was struck by the power of the incomplete statue of the fasting Buddha to fix the itinerant self in a timeless and bodiless space. The missing parts of the statue appear to have a vital presence: the starved, absent organs—shrunk, withered, annihilated—throb bloodily in the imagination; that which is not there startles the mind with the certainty of its being; it is an image of amazing contradictions, and illustrates the essential ambiguity of all perception: reality can be composed of absent things, the unseen blazes in our minds with a shocking vividness. (15)

This is a moment at which the traveller and the author merge, and what is seen is not the present but a palimpsest of layers that are no longer visible, but whose presence must be acknowledged for both personal and collective identity. The boundary between the real and the fictive blur at this moment, and travel literature becomes an act of fiction. It is not an accident that Ghose locates this observation in a museum. The history of museums in colonial times is a fascinating one, and as Ashis Nandy points out, “the museum grew to symbolize not merely mastery over past times and past cultures at home, but also over the diverse pasts and cultures of distant lands” (4). Ghose destabilizes this paradigm, suggests a shift from the diachronic to the synchronic as a way of establishing a complex and plural identity. Ghose’s approach suggests the inherent possibilities of travel writing in postcolonial contexts where decolonization has meant both remembering and forgetting. If, in general terms, travel writing is about seeing, postcolonial travel writing can also be about forgetting.

Ghose’s essay belongs to a larger body of writing that one might identify as postcolonial writing from and about India and South Asia. The corpus is broad and unwieldy, but its very formlessness must be seen as part of its strength. As Michael Kowalewski has quite rightly pointed out, “travel writing borrows freely from the memoir, journalism, letters, guide books, confessional narrative, and most important, fiction” (7). Within a South Asian context, the contours are difficult to define, for historical reasons. Those who migrated centuries ago from India to, say, Sri Lanka, and those who left during British rule to various parts of the world, including Singapore, Malaysia,

South Africa, Tanzania, and the Fiji islands, when they record their experiences, they contribute to the corpus of travel literature about South Asia. The phenomenon of indenture associated with the Caribbean also belongs to this body of work, although the content of the writing might not deal directly with South Asia. All the authors from these countries and regions have contributed much, about themselves, about their relation to the West, and about the sense of exile from and belonging to India or South Asia. Satendra Nandan writing about Fiji and K.S. Maniam writing about Malaysia must be seen as constitutive elements of travel writing about South Asia.<sup>3</sup> All these are part of a rich collection of travel literature about which much needs to be done by way of scholarly research. In addition, as we move to more recent times, there are the works of those who left India in the 1960s or more recently, such as Bharati Mukherjee, Salman Rushdie, Suniti Namjoshi, Amitava Kumar, and Pico Iyer, and those who have returned to stay, such as Vikram Seth and Allan Sealy. There are also those who never really left for any length of time, such as R.K. Narayan, who have important things to say about the lands they saw and admired. The list is thus a formidable one.

There is no easy way to establish a typology that would encapsulate all this writing. As Ralph Pordzik quite rightly points out, “travel writing is a broad and ever-shifting genre, with a complex history that has yet to be studied” (12). There is clearly the influence of the West, and the tradition of travel writing about which much work has been done. At the risk of simplification one might say that a substantial part of this writing, intentionally or otherwise, helped to shape the perception of India. One thinks of the work of the Orientalists, of Richard Burton and Edward Lane, and the assertion is not far-fetched, although generalizations often obscure more nuanced readings of this genre. However, postcolonial writers such as Amitav Ghosh and Vikram Seth, who inherited these traditions, have also been able to “write back” to right the balance. As Huggan maintains, “Ghosh and Seth produce, in their different ways, counter-Orientalist travel narratives which challenge narrowly ethnocentric Western views of a ‘mythicized’ East” (51). In other words, the notion that postcolonial travel writing recapitulates the stances of postcolonial fiction and poetry is not far-fetched. Resistance and recuperation are germane to this genre as well.

In general terms, it has been maintained that the genre of travel writing belongs largely to the West, although the notion of a journey is equally prevalent elsewhere. Nandy puts this in a light-hearted manner: “You can go to heaven and come back, host or fight a god or demon with impunity, speak to a tree or birds in the course of a single day, and resume your normal social life in the morning” (8). Certainly literary histories in India do not often draw attention to this genre, and while there is considerable evidence to the constant movement within India and to neighbouring lands, the genre itself has not flourished. At the same time, it is possible to see in the creative literature constant references to travel, both literal and mythical. The two epics—the *Mahabharata* and the *Ramayana*—are themselves about travel and

about exile. To shift for a moment to literary history in Tamil, there is evidence, even in the earliest Cankam poetry (circa 1-3 CE), of the need to move to other landscapes, and the anguish associated with such movements. In a social and economic structure defined by the land and the landscape, forced movement from one to the other becomes a journey of exile. There is also, for example, a mode of writing, titled “Aatruppadaï” which literally means guiding someone who needs to go somewhere else. This genre needs to be contextualized carefully, but the fact is that it did exist, and its purpose was to guide others to unfamiliar destinations. The famous epic *Silappadikaram* (circa 4<sup>th</sup> century CE) is at least partially about the movement from the village to the city, and the disastrous events that take place in unfamiliar surroundings. The text anticipates all the more recent writings that have dichotomized the village and the city and explored in detail the process of self-discovery that entails. Again to quote Nandy: “While for Victorian England a journey might have been primarily the frame through which others could be seen, for South Asians it has been mainly the frame through which the self can be confronted” (9). In these forms of writing, a kind of secular travel writing gets built into the literature, creating in the process a complex form.

In the early examples of secular Cankam literature, the notion of home is not simply where one lives, but where the land, the landscape, the economy, the rituals—in short, a whole way of life—are interconnected. Moving away from these surroundings involves multiple forms of transformation. The manner in which this occurs is necessarily complex, and there is a real need to see this process in relation to travel writing.

It would not be far-fetched to advance the hypothesis that, within Tamil literary history, as these secular works gave way to religious literature, travel writing took on a new dimension. Bhakti (devotional) literature is about sights and about sites, and the saints. In the process of writing about particular deities in specific places, it was facilitating movement from one place to another, within the framework of pilgrimages. It is important to remember that the Bhakti period was a time of transition, of the breakdown of the old order, increasing urbanization, and consolidation of power by the Pallavas and Pandyas. There was much greater mobility for the purposes of trade. At the same time, the establishment of sacred sites served as a way of directing and containing mobility, of ensuring that the unfamiliarity of other sites was framed by a common world view. In that sense, the notion of pilgrimage embraced both the strangeness of unfamiliar places and the comfort of a common world view. According to a well-known religious poem, it did not matter where you were from, the God of Chidambaram greeted you, when you went there, with the familiarity of a friend. This duality of the familiar and the strange has had considerable staying power, and its implications for the ways in which postcolonial travel writing from the region has been shaped by its sense of unity needs to be investigated in much greater detail. Kenneth Parker’s admonition is an important one when he says that “there is the need, at all times, to emphasize the specificities of the geographical

spaces, as well as of historical moments, in which so-called cultural encounters take place” (18).

Bhakti is of course a broad field, but pilgrimage is certainly a significant aspect of it. Pilgrimage involves difference within a shared ontology. Within the ontology of Bhakti, travelling to an unfamiliar place involves a sense of home, even if one is not at home. This tradition has persisted in colonial and postcolonial times both as travel writing that is overtly religious and writing that is secular. The manner in which this has manifested itself in both English and in Indian languages remains an under-theorized area.<sup>4</sup>

The fact that postcolonial writers have tried to move beyond the ways in which travel narrative has been shaped by the West is clear even in works such as Amitav Ghosh’s *In an Antique Land*. Again, as Huggan observes, “Ghosh sketches a history of travel that pre-dates European intervention, a history peopled by pilgrims, scholars, and, above all, itinerant merchants; and one that traces the knowledge they acquired back to a non-European source” (50). But there is also a sense in which the indigenous tradition has fostered a sense of unity, a desire to frame the notion of travel in ways that allow for shared beliefs. If one were to grant that, say, Suniti Namjoshi’s *Conversations of Cow* (1985) shares some of the characteristics of travel writing, then it is also possible to assert that in the midst of all the alienation and despair of encountering the unfamiliar, there is also a comfort in a shared sense of belief, a common mythology. In a memorable essay titled “Canada and Me: Finding Ourselves,” the author M.G. Vassanji speaks of his many travels and identities, but also says at one point: “I came across moments of self-discovery in the films of Satyajit Ray, in the Bengali language I did not understand, that astounded me” (28). It is possible to contend that whereas Western travel narratives have been conditioned by the ideology of colonial power, postcolonial South Asian travel literature has been shaped by a sense of shared belief.

There is a further aspect to travel narratives that relate to postcolonial South Asia which is of some relevance. Where travel literature in the conventional sense co-exists with fiction or poetry, one perceives a cross-current that is of considerable interest. Here again, one only needs to go back to, say, E.M. Forster to perceive the challenge posed by this duality. Compare, for example, *A Passage to India* (1924) with the memoir “Kanaya,” which is included in *The Hill of Devi* (1953; 1983) written probably around the same time. The novel is about transcending borders and barriers, of being able to establish human relations on the basis of equality, fairness, of mutual respect. It is a novel about—to use a more contemporary term—cosmopolitanism, about movement across cultures. “Kanaya” is far more personal. Whether it is more factual is difficult to ascertain, but it definitely speaks about what it means to live in exile, about the overpowering drive of sexuality, of wilful misunderstanding, and the pain of alienation and ridicule. To read the novel and the memoir together is to understand how they differ, and how they connect. The memoir also enables us to see why the middle section of the novel might have been written in such terms. Forster’s own accounts were

shaped by his particular circumstances, but the example reveals the need to expand the scope of travel writing.

There is a postcolonial parallel to this in the work of Michael Ondaatje, between his travel narrative *Running in the Family* (1982), and the novel *Anil's Ghost* (2000). Almost two decades separate the two, but both works are about the 1980s, a crucial period in Sri Lankan history. The first is ostensibly factual, written out of a compelling urge to return "home" to discover one's sense of history and identity. There is a certain arbitrariness about the sequence of events in the narration, but the anecdotes are intended to be true. The "return" to Sri Lanka is also a quest for history and identity. Almost twenty years later he writes a novel, again about a character who has lived abroad for a long period of time and now feels a compulsion to return. This too has the feel of a travel narrative, but now the preoccupation is with the political scene, with ethnic violence, and with the dilemma of making choices. How does one differentiate between the two? If one is more factual and the other more imaginative, that too might well be a false dichotomy. *Running in the Family* has a memorable description of the aunt Lalla who, after a feisty and spontaneous life, chooses to die in the most flamboyant manner. One day, during a period of continuous rain and consequent floods, Lalla steps out of her house, and floats away, until she hits a tree and dies. Michael Ondaatje's brother, Christopher Ondaatje, in his travel narrative, *The Man-Eater of Punanai* (1992), takes the younger brother to task for falsifying the death of the aunt. He provides, as it were, the "correct" version, of an aunt who had taken too much alcohol, and died in her sleep. "In my brother's book, Lalla dies when she is carried off in the great Nuwara Eliya flood. It is a marvellous piece of literature and true to her zany character, but in fact she died of alcohol poisoning" (50). And yet the question persists: which was the right version—not as fact but as truth? Michael Ondaatje himself says in his work, that he needed to get things right. Because if you don't get it right, then you will get it wrong. But what exactly is right is not clear.

On the other hand, how does the novel connect as travel writing? The novel is about movement, inside and outside the country. It is about encountering other people, places, and events, and trying to come to terms with them. And very much along the lines of travel narratives, here too the character Anil is both an outsider and insider whose encounter with the Other is also an encounter with the self. This is Ondaatje's attempt to rewrite the earlier narrative, from a different perspective, in the guise of fiction. While the relation between fiction and travel writing has been acknowledged, there is, in postcolonial literature, a particularly interesting intersection. Here again, the politics of decolonization has a great deal to do with the one masking the other.

The point is that for postcolonial Indian and South Asian authors the challenges and possibilities are different. In one form or shape, diaspora has been a defining presence. The condition of diasporiCity<sup>5</sup>, varied as it is, might well explain not only the many facets of travel literature, but also the ways in which the genre itself has evolved in the last several decades. What we have is more than a "younger generation

of writers who seek to avoid falling into the trap of reproducing the clichés fashioned in the ear of tourist expansion” (Pordzik 11). There is a constant struggle with form, with genre, and with language. As Michel Butor puts it, the struggle is “to preserve the ancient language, to re-actualize it, to refresh it” (59). There is also the struggle to meet the expectations of a varied readership, to be true to one’s convictions, to make the writing meaningful.

Particularly in the context of the diaspora, the emphasis has been on writing in English. The travel narratives we discuss, the works of V.S. Naipaul or Salman Rushdie, for example, are written in English. In a postcolonial context, the foregrounding of such literature is a familiar one. We do not often recognize that there is also a substantial body of writing in other languages—vernaculars, for want of a better term—that must be taken into account. One does not wish to dichotomize the two, but there are significant differences between the two, in relation to language, class, readership, and so forth. To write in a local language about departure and return poses a very different set of challenges. It is possible to even assert that indigenous traditions of travel narrative find their way more readily into vernacular literatures. For vernacular writers, diaspora tends to be, from the beginning, a journey to the unknown, and that constitutes a crucial difference in the ways their writing emerges.

Equally important, diaspora has a darker side that one often fails to recognize. The narratives of diaspora are often found in statements that take the form of refugee claims, statements given to various authorities, including the police, about forms of violence, domestic abuse, alienation, and pain. In his essay on cross-border approaches to travel writing, Tim Youngs makes the valid observation that “such groups do not generally tell their stories in literary form for public consumption. Their stories are rarely heard by those who readily tell stories about them, and when they are they are usually told orally and transcribed by others” (175). Interviews conducted by researchers about the struggles at home and outside, about the trauma of seeing familiar markers fall away, giving way to new standards and values, are part of this archive. Even fact-finding missions about the political scene belong to this corpus. All these are important documents, and they constitute an important aspect of the totality of contemporary travel literature. We do not have an easy way of accessing, collecting, or retrieving them, but they are, nonetheless, very significant. Any attempt to formulate a comprehensive poetics for travel writing must also accommodate these diverse writings that articulate a myriad stories of despair, loneliness, hope, and success.

Ralph Pordzik is absolutely right when he says that

travel writing has always been and is still so varied that it is not possible to appropriate it as a single form. In fact, its heterogeneity and openness to multiple points of view is what appears to make out its specific potential, its particular “chance” as narrative mode consigned to the margins of an accepted canon of literary forms. (3)

For postcolonial India and South Asia, the area is a fertile one with immense potential to reveal aspects of experience that have not found adequate expression. We need to open up the field to recognize what the West and the East have to offer by way of literary tradition, and we must adopt a comparative mode that jettisons the artificial boundaries of languages. South Asia has been fortunate in fostering multiple forms of travel, of departure and arrival, and all these tell us a great deal about traditions, changes, and continuities. In short, we need to explore the possibility of a new poetics for postcolonial South Asian travel writing.

## Notes

1. This is the text of the plenary address that Chelva Kanaganayakam gave at the “International Conference on Travel Literature and India” held on February 20-21, 2007 at Satyawati College, University of Delhi. Publication of this paper is made possible by the kind contribution of the conference organizer, Nivedita Misra, who had requested a copy of the plenary text for possible publication.

2. All these critics have, from very different perspectives, offered useful insights into the multiplicity of travel writing. For complete citations, see works cited at the end.

3. *Requiem for a Rainbow* (2001) by Satendra Nandan and *The Return* (1981) by K.S. Maniam are examples of travel writings about Fiji and Malaysia respectively, although in relation to a general typology one would consider them writings about South Asia.

4. One of the things that South Asians do when they go and settle elsewhere is build temples. The temples facilitate movement and travel, and the temple defamiliarizes the alien. This in turn continues a form of writing that began with the Bhakti movement.

5. I was introduced to this term by Professor R. Cheran, who teaches sociology at the University of Windsor.

## Works Cited

- Butor, Michel. “Travel and Writing.” *Temperamental Journeys*. Ed. Michael Kowalewski. Athens and London: U of Georgia P, 1992. 53-70. Print.
- Clifford, James. *Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century*. Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1997. Print.
- Forster, E.M. *The Hill of Devi and Other Indian Writings*. 1953. London: Edward Arnold, 1983. Print.
- Ghose, Zulfikar. “Going Home.” *The Toronto South Asian Review* 1991: 15-22. Print.

- Huggan, Graham. "Counter-Travel Writing and Post-Coloniality." *Being/S in Transit: Travelling, Migration, Dislocation*. Ed. Liselotte Glage. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000. 37-60. Print.
- Huggan, Graham and Patrick Holland. *Tourists with Typewriters: Critical Reflections on Contemporary Travel Writing*. Ann Arbor: U of Michigan P, 1998. Print.
- Kowalewski, Michael. "Introduction: The Modern Literature of Travel." *Temperamental Journeys*. Ed. Michael Kowalewski. Athens and London: U of Georgia P, 1992. 1-16. Print.
- Maniam, K.S. *The Return*. Kuala Lumpur: Heinemann, 1981. Print.
- Namjoshi, Suniti. *The Conversations of Cow*. London: Women's P, 1985. Print.
- Nandan, Satendra. *Requiem for a Rainbow*. Canberra: Pacific Indian, 2001. Print.
- Nandy, Ashis. *An Ambiguous Journey to the City: The Village and Other Odd Ruins of the Self in the Indian Imagination*. New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2001. Print.
- Ondaatje, Christopher. *The Man-Eater of Punanai: A Journey of Discovery to the Jungles of Old Ceylon*. Toronto: HarperCollins, 1992. Print.
- Ondaatje, Michael. *Anil's Ghost*. Toronto: Vintage, 2000. Print.
- . *Running in the Family*. Toronto: McClelland and Stewart, 1982.
- Parker, Kenneth. "To Travel ... Hopefully?/!." *Being/S in Transit: Travelling, Migration, Dislocation*. Ed. Liselotte Glage. Amsterdam: Rodopi, 2000. 13-36. Print.
- Pordzik, Ralph. *The Wonder of Travel: Fiction, Tourism, and the Social Construction of the Nostalgic*. Heidelberg: Universitätsverlag, 2005. Print.
- Pratt, Mary Louise. *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*. London: Routledge, 1992. Print.
- Said, Edward W. *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage, 1979. Print.
- Vassanji, M.G. "Canada and Me: Finding Ourselves." *Passages: Welcome Home to Canada*. Doubleday, 2002. 14-33. Print.
- Youngs, Tim. *Travellers in Africa: British Travelogues, 1850-1900*. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1994. Print.
- . "Where Are We Going? Cross-Border Approaches to Travel Writing." *Perspectives on Travel Writing*. Eds. Glenn Hooper and Tim Youngs. Hants, UK: Ashgate, 2004. 167-80. Print.