

DEBUNKING THE STEREOTYPED AND MYTHCISED IMAGE OF KASHMIR IN COLLECTIVE EUROPEAN IMAGINATION

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Abstract

Travellers from the East and the West have written extensively of their sojourns in Kashmir. In their memoirs, travelogues, and other fictional narratives, Kashmir has largely been used as a backdrop of their personal stories. Kashmiris have been either left out of the picture or, when written about, have been presented in a very stereotypical and derogatory manner. Travelogues written by European travellers and administrative agents of the British Empire abound in the homogeneous and monolithic descriptive representations of Kashmir and Kashmiri society. These writers have made sweeping generalizations which remind the readers of the racist, white supremacist colonial discourse of the nineteenth and early 20th century employed by the colonial masters to justify their civilizing mission. C. E. Tyndale Biscoe, a Christian missionary and educationist spent almost 60 years in Kashmir. The present paper intends to critically explore and analyze the representations of Kashmir and Kashmiris in Biscoe's travelogue, "Kashmir in Sunlight and Shade". He primarily writes about the descriptions of his journey and people whom he met, the culture and traditions which he came across. He describes people from a 'panoramic perspective'. The paper will focus on Biscoe's sweepingly monolithic (re)presentation of Kashmir and its role in shaping the perceptions of the place and its people. Attention will also be paid to the fact that how the cultural misunderstanding of Biscoe led to the distorted representations of the people of Kashmir. This image of Kashmir constructed by Europeans like Biscoe has been an impediment to a profound and genuine understanding of life of a Kashmiri and is still influential today. Proper scrutinizing and analysis of such portrayals will help in debunking the stereotyped and mythcised 'image' of Kashmir and Kashmiris and thereby 'writing back' vis-à-vis highlighting the cultural richness of the place. This paper while using cultural and historiographical theories of research will highlight the need for a re-reading of such texts. The focus will be descriptive and critical with particular emphasis given to the theories of representation.

Key-words: travelogue, representations, descriptions, reflection, missionary, Biscoe, Kashmir

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European Travel writing has been hugely influential in 'producing and circulating' knowledge about 'the rest'. The imaginative geographies conquered by these writers have been crucial to the discursive formation of the Empire. These writers have mostly talked in crude binaries such as the West/Rest, civilised/savage, modernity/primitiveness, enlightenment/darkness, scientific/ superstitious, and so on. In the context of travel and travel writing, the most significant of these were traveler/travellee, observer/observed, and narrator/narrated. Syed Hussein Alatas, Professor of Malay Studies, University of Singapore, in *The Myth of the Lazy Native* gives an insightful account of how the colonial administrators and travellers represented the colonized and created the 'myths' of lazy, dishonest, and fatalistic natives to serve their colonial ideological interests. In his study Alatas remarks,

It appears that their shortcomings originated in five major sources. They are (a) faulty generalization, (b) interpretation of events out of their meaningful context, (c) lack of empathy, (d) prejudice born out of fanaticism, conceit and arrogance, and (e) the unconscious dominance of certain categories of Western colonial capitalist thought. (112)

Biscoe's *Kashmir in Sunlight and Shade* is an attempt to portray the Kashmiri as inferior and English as superior, thereby justifying the presence of civilizing agents in the valley, in which the writer succeeds up to a great extent. The book is divided into various chapters, having different titles and themes, but on close reading of the account it seems one is only reading about the frail qualities in the character of a Kashmiri. A reader is bombarded with the pathetic descriptions of the people of Kashmir. The untidy dresses and unclean faces of the students, along with their 'kangri' seem to be a reoccurring image throughout the book. In addition to this the writer never misses a chance to comment on the character of people of Kashmir; who to him are cowards, lairs, lazy, greedy, unclean, dishonest, etc. Religion is another motif in Biscoe's travelogue. He is seen mocking all religious cults prevalent in Kashmir, be in Hinduism, Buddhism or Islam. He at times

praises Kashmiri Muslims for their fine religious mindedness but the very next moment he criticizes them for being cruel and insensitive. One such instance being his praise for his tonga driver Jehu for being an obedient Mohammedan who offers his prayers on time, he says, 'I wish he was as kind as he is religious for, if so the poor ponies he drives would have an easier time, and there would be fewer broken bones of the sheep and goats etc, from the wheels of his chariot as it hustles along.' (38) Biscoe seems to be confused about the character of this Jehu, talking further about him he says, 'My Jehu was certainly a good-tempered, amusing, hard- and light-hearted scoundrel. I have been driven by many Jehus since that day, but never a one like that first Jehu.' (39)

Biscoe's account is autobiographical in content and is focused on the reforms brought about by Christian Missionary Schools, in the domain of education and health sector in the valley. No doubt the contribution of Christian Missionary Schools, particularly Tyndale Biscoe himself is quite visible even today and appreciable as well. Regardless of that there are superfluous and hyperbolic descriptions of the work done in the field of education. The Christian Missionary Hospital records also appear to be clear exaggerations at times. Kashmir civilizing mission was also a mission of religious dominance. It was the first motive of the missionaries and clergy to preach and convert the people of Kashmir. Biscoe throughout the book hints at salvation and better afterlife and bringing faith to the Holy Trinity. Mr. Biscoe takes pride whenever he mentions someone being a Christian or reverting to Christianity. The move of reverting people to Christianity by making use of their sufferings and pain is clearly highlighted and at the same time criticized by the response of Miss Newman, a nurse working as a missionary in the valley. In her answer to Biscoe she remarks,

Some missionaries are put out with me because I do not start by preaching to patients when they came to the hospital. How would you or I like being preached to when we are in pain? I think it kinder to relieve them of their pain first, then when they are at ease they are ready and willing to listen to what I have to say. (Autobiography 66-67)

In this statement while denying that she wouldn't preach her patients in their time of suffering and agony, but at the same time, establishes the fact that it was asked for and done by other staff members of the hospital. Biscoe himself while talking about the importance of games in the school curriculum says, 'From my desire as a Christian to introduce them (students) to Him (Jesus) who taught all men to love one another and show it by practice and not by talk.' (Sunlight 256) Another such instance being, Biscoe's while thanking God asserts that, 'for to us instead has been given the opportunity of helping some of the weaker peoples of the world, and the Kashmiri among them.' (Sunlight 79) Christian Missionaries in general and Biscoe in particular left no stone unturned to make Kashmiri

students 'Kashmiris in blood and colour but English in taste' [sic]. While talking about the Brahman priests and beliefs, he very proudly boasts of this accomplishment, 'I believe that if one of our boys were asked to-day questions about such matters his replies would be much the same as those of an English boy.' (Autobiography 78)

Biscoe throughout his account, *Kashmir in Sunlight and Shade* comes across as a victim of cultural misunderstanding or unwilling on his part to acknowledge the richness and diversity in the culture and traditions of the valley. An instance of conclusions derived from false premises which were neither based on research nor on sensible observations is, when Biscoe talks about the choice of Muslims choosing their rooftops for prayers – 'as it is their custom to choose vantage points where they can be seen at prayer.' (87) He further reinforces this misunderstood conception about the Muslims to offer prayers, 'for at midday one would see conspicuous places monopolized by men in the attitude of prayer, standing on the top of a wall, or on the roof of their boat, going through the genuflections according to Mohammedan ritual...' (97) There have been quite similar descriptions of Islamic rituals portrayed by Biscoe. Talking about namaz he adds, 'which has to be performed three times a day, at sunrise, at midday and at sunset' and 'The faithful have to offer their nemaz (prayer) five times a day'(97). This demonstrates his naivety in documenting such details that could otherwise have been easily verified, quite similar to his attitude in understanding rather misunderstanding other religious practices.

Mary Louise Pratt in her book *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, as she studies the travel books written by the Europeans about the non European parts of the world, discusses how an "imperial order" was created at "home" and a place was given to them in it (3). She further lays stress on the device of "promontory descriptions" being used for accomplishing particular "meaning-making task" where in "the verbal painter must render momentarily significant what is, especially from a narrative point of view, practically a non-event" (198).

It is quite right to say that this portrayal of the orient was part of a total ideological campaign, which was carried out without any deliberate instruction. It was a collective reaction of a group moved by a common outlook and consciousness of interest. The degradation of the orient brought in its train a similar phenomenon with reference to their activities. It was not only the British, but the Dutch and the Spaniard also upheld the same image of those under their domination. It was the product of an arrogant and ethnocentric mindset. We have seen recurrences of the same kind of stereotyping in other writings of the East by the West, for instance, Careri, writing on the Bisayans remarks,

It is their laziness, that makes them appear less ingenious; and they are so entirely addicted to it, that if in walking they find a thorn run into their foot, they will not stoop to put it out of the way, that another may not tread on it. (qtd in Alatas 52)

An enquiry by Garden W. Allport in his seminal work *The Nature of Prejudice*, seems most relevant to the nonstop image portrayal of a Kashmiri,

Are we not allowed to say that the colonial image of the native did not promote inter-ethnic harmony, that it was a blend of prejudice, that it was an unprovoked insult, that it was a distortion of reality, in short, that it was something which it should not have been? (06)

This rhetorical enquiry seems to answer the question of Biscoe's and other European writers'sweepingly monolithic (re)presentation of Kashmir.

Biscoe like earlier travel writers and colonial agents couldn't come out of making sweeping generalizations and was not able to understand a simple fact that if we generalize about the character of a community on the basis of the action of a few individuals, then we are in for real confusion and distortion. Biscoe and other European missionaries and tourists who degraded the Kashmiris implicitly or explicitly did not ponder over the question of its necessity. In their lack of awareness they did not even attempt to pause and think of the image they had created. Had they done so they would have discovered that the image each helped to create was born out of what was felt to be a colonial necessity?European writers could have built up a more sophisticated justification of their presence and superiority without the element of degradation.The writings of these writers are not convincing, and in addition they present an extremely lopsided view. They have formed a totally misinformed picture of the character of the people of Kashmir.These writers never paused and tried to look at what Brigid Keenan asserts,

Over the centuries, the Kashmiris have had to learn the hard way to survive conquest, oppression and extortion. They have had to survive conquest, oppression and extortion" and in their attempts to order to "blend with the wind" and escape from all sets of confrontations have had to learn to be submissive. The result of which being, "they have been castigated through much of history, by their masters as well as others, as a devious, dishonest and untrustworthy race".(24)

These monolithic images have been circulating among countless minds across the globe thereby, shaping and influencing the perceptions about the place. These stereotypes are inaccurate and have derived conclusions from unsound methods. No doubt it can be assessed that this image of a Kashmiri which was created has been part of a wider and similar image of the orient. The writings about the people of Kashmir may slightly differ from the writings about other Orients, where they have been charged with imitativeness, indolence, laying, cheating, laziness and what not. But the differences are very few and there are lots of similarities in the writings and attitude towards the other. Kashmiris have been ridiculed and made fun of, for almost everything they do or possess. But it is surprising to see that no serious effort has been made to study the roots and implications

of such image-making business of Kashmir and its people. The question is to be raised about the validity of the image-painting and myth-making of the people of Kashmir. A scientific refutation of these misrepresentations and descriptions requires that such writings about Kashmir should be analyzed at a greater depth. Various approaches and methods can be utilized to debunk these sketches of Kashmir and its inhabitants. These writings can be put to test through multiple theoretical frameworks, e.g. An archetypal reading of these travel narratives can be taken up where these texts will be read against each other and also against other writings of the West about the orient. An attempt can also be made to trace out the social/political/religious and historical backgrounds of these writers (European Travellers) and their writings. It is also worth looking into as who the audience for such travel writings was, what were the means by which travel writing reached its audience, what physical forms the writing took (journals, diaries, essays, guidebooks, pictures, and anthologies). How the internal meaning-making in these writings operated through tropes, metaphors, and other figures in the representational practices, and how these were keyed into what Foucault calls the 'order of things'. In one of the aims of analysing relations between travel writing and Kashmir, it is equally important to understand how imperial meaning-making worked, especially the traffic between the signifying practices of travel writing and the 'master structures'.

Besides this 'writing back', there are many other reasons for the proper study of these writings. A critical exploration and analysis of the representations of Kashmir and Kashmiris in these travel accounts will sum up the various portrayals depicted by different writers at different points of time. It will try to establish how the changing socio-political, historical and economic conditions of Kashmir have played a prominent role in shaping the perceptions about Kashmir and Kashmiri natives differently at different points of time. Many people might be of the opinion that times have changed and thereby question the relevance of such observations made decades ago. The reason these portrayals and sketches are important even today can be explained by the apt remark of Walter Lawrence,

Kashmiris possess an individuality and national character which will cling to them wherever they go. I have seen men who returned to Kashmir, whose ancestors left the country two or three generations ago. Their dress and manners had changed, yet they retained unmistakable signs of a Kashmir origin. (Lawrence 282).

Lastly to conclude one can acknowledge that there are evidences which make us to believe that there may have been certain vices which were found in some Kashmiri people, if not all. Whether there has been any serious transformation of such characters and their conduct, needs to be analysed and for such a study, the travel writings of Lawrence, Biscoe, Stacey, Younghusband, and many others will serve as useful points of reference.

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