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## The Rhetoric of Aestheticization in Women's Travel Writing: A Study of Emma Roberts

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### Abstract:

Women's travel writing in colonial India has been very influential in providing valuable information on the colonized countries. British women came to India in the early nineteenth century for various reasons- as social reformers, missionaries, travelers, journalists and also in various roles such as wives, daughters, and sisters of administrators etc. These women have created a picture of India in accordance with the already packaged stories and beliefs about India, which at times is quite contrary to the real picture. However, a traveler's/writer's perception of a new place is obviously different from that of the inhabitant's. The women travelers/travel writers in colonial India have been invariably portrayed as innocent tourists, who have no role to play in the colonizing mission of their male counterparts. But a close reading of their writings reveals quite a different picture. To that extent, this paper is an attempt to look into the stories created and represented in women's travel writing in colonial India through the rhetorical mode of aestheticization. The texts chosen for analysis are- Emma Roberts' *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan* (1835) and *Hindostan: Its Landscapes, Palaces, Temples and Tombs* (1972).

**Keywords:** Aestheticization, Women's Travel Writing, Colonial India, Colonization.

### Introduction

Aestheticization of landscape is an essential feature to be found in almost every form of colonial writing including travel writing, botanical treatises, and also topographical illustrations and personal letters. Through such aestheticizing processes, a picture of a landscape is projected as simultaneously paradisiacal and in need of British intervention and management. Travel writing gratifies the curiosity or delight in knowing the 'other'. Through their diaries, letters, journals etc., women travel writers spread pictures of India's people, geography, cultures, and religions to which they have easy access in comparison to men. Women travel writers depicts colonized lands as needing to be cleared to make it productive. The aim of this paper is to examine what could be called the 'rhetoric of aestheticization' employed by western women travel writers in travel writing in the colonial period, that is, to study how the travel writers engage themselves as reporters in the project of empire in the guise of the picturesque tourist. The texts chosen for analysis are- Emma Roberts' *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan* (1835) and *Hindostan: Its Landscapes, Palaces, Temples and Tombs* (1972). Emma Roberts accompanied her sister and brother-in-law, Captain Robert Adair McNaghten (of the 61<sup>st</sup> Bengal Infantry) to India in 1928.

The paper argues that the rhetoric of aestheticization facilitates the accumulation and production of knowledge about the colonized lands. The travel writers seek to present the features of an unknown land, but ends up representing the fertile landscapes waiting to be colonized. It is assumed that women travel writers' engagement with aesthetic appreciation is part of the stimulus to satisfy the curiosity of the readers back at home. It would be

interesting to examine the motives behind the observations of the women travelers. Moreover, how the western writers construct the reality of the colonized is an important question to ask. It is also important to see how the surveying mode/viewing position, in reality, serves to emphasize only the productive potentials of the colonized lands. The rhetoric of aestheticization is part of an imperialist agenda, allowing writers to participate in colonial knowledge production (as Bernard Cohn and others have already discussed).

The rhetoric of aesthetics plays a significant role in colonial travel narratives as most of the travelers in the colonial period take recourse to aestheticization of landscape in their writings. Aesthetics offer the English travelers a tool for representing diverse sights and incidents. Consequently, travelers describe the landscape of colonies as empty, decaying in the lack of proper guidance and control, which can only be improved through British intervention and maintenance. Critics have most often raised questions on the imperialist connotation of such aestheticization in travel accounts. According to Elizabeth Bohls, “Women’s relation to aesthetics in eighteenth-century Britain was an equivocal one. They were not wholly excluded from aesthetic reception or production; while they did not write treatises, they did publish picturesque tours” (Bohls, 2). Pramod K. Nayar also states: “Aesthetics furnishes a descriptive vocabulary that enables the English traveler to cast India in ways that call for particular kinds of colonial or imperial responses” (Nayar, 1). Travel writing whether by men or women thus produces aesthetic descriptions of other countries, which in turn, facilitates the grand project of colonization. Further, it would be pertinent to cite David Spurr in this context. As he says: “The colonizing imagination takes for granted that the land and its resources belong to those who are best able to exploit them according to the value of a Western commercial system” (Spurr, 31). It follows that the colonizers persistently claim the colonized lands as their own with the pretence of excellent management and control. The colonized landscape is most often depicted as empty as well as mostly undeveloped to a great extent and an image is created that only the ruling race has the means to exploit those resources with the help of modern technologies. The colonial imaginary produces images of colonized people living in proximity with nature, and thus relegate them to a more ‘primitive’ stage of existence. In the process of describing aesthetic scenes, the travelers at times erase the natives from those lands. As Bohls has shown, in many nineteenth century landscape paintings, workers were carefully erased or positioned as decorative foils to the planned landscape (Bohls, 1995).

However, critics like Bernard Cohn in *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge* (1997) discusses the formation and circulation of knowledge in colonial India and how these have served the purpose of knowing and governing India. In the words of Cohn: “The survey as an investigative modality encompasses a wide range of practices, from the mapping of India to collecting botanical specimens, to the recording of architectural and archaeological sites of historic significance, or the most measuring of a peasant’s fields. In the context of colonial India, the concept of the ‘survey’ came to cover any systematic and official investigation of the natural and social features of the Indian Empire” (Cohn, 7). As such, the most important project for the travel writers, both men and women, is to gather knowledge on every aspect of India.

In fact, travelers/travel writers see the traveling country with eyes that are blurred by misconceptions, misinformation, and stereotypes. Colonial discourse claims the territory surveyed as the colonizer’s own and under the covert mask of reform and improvement erases its own signs of appropriation. As a result, the presented picture is that of a land in need of restoration, of a land full of natural abundance that awaits proper supervision. Women who travelled within India provided much factual information to be utilized for

empire building. Through their letters, diaries, memoirs, stories, novels, poems, paintings, and travel writings women have often provided invaluable information about the empire and added to the fascination of the West with the specters and picturesqueness of the East.

From the beginning of their colonial rule in India, the British viewed the country and its people as subjugated by political regimes that are despotic and inefficient. Moreover, the construct of unprotected natives also flourish in many travel narratives. However, the colonizer's claim of protection from tyrannous native rulers is also a policy. British women are also implicated in the rise and in the downfall of British rule in India in part through the influence of their writings about day-to-day experiences of Indian cultures, history and people upon the ideals of domesticity, nationhood, and empire. Emma Roberts too supports the empire in her narrative, occasionally pointing out the loopholes of native rule, protection of the natives and also the unwise use of resources in the colonized countries. As she says:

Both the present and former rulers of Oude have manifested a strong partiality for European fashions and European manufactures, but their love of novelty has not been productive of any national improvement; they have thought of nothing beyond some idle gratification or indulgence, and their minds have not expanded, or their views become more enlightened, by constant intercourse with the people who possess so much knowledge, both moral and political (*Scenes*, vol. 1, 143-44).

Roberts' criticism of native rule is evident in the passage and she asserts that only constant communication with the British will improve the views of the native rulers and also will bring enlightenment. In her opinion, only the British possess moral as well as political knowledge and they can promote improvement of India. Again, talking of the rich potentials of Oudh, Roberts offers an interesting remark. As she says: "...the land when properly cultivated, is exceedingly productive, affording rich crops of every sort of grain, cotton, sugar, indigo, opium, and all the most valuable products of Hindustan. The gifts of Heaven have, however, been neutralized by the ruinous policy of an oppressive government" (*Scenes*, vol. 1, 129-130). The above remark presents an orientalist description of a weak and primitive people, unfit for self-government and emphasized the need of a paternalistic government as the most appropriate form for a weak race. Roberts' attempt to justify the empire is significant here. She blames the rulers of Oudh for their negligence in the progress of their national improvement. She hopes that only through constant interaction with the British, these nations can attain prosperity. Roberts admits that she penned down her experiences in India as they appeared to her; but a close probe into her narrative proves that she writes not as an individual traveler but as representative of the ruling race. Further, referring to the turbulence prevalent in the kingdom of Oudh during the colonial period, Roberts states: "The fate of the kingdom of Oude seems now verging to a crisis, and, in all probability, a short period will decide whether it is to continue under the mismanagement of its present rulers, or be placed entirely under the control of the British government" (*Scenes*, vol.1, 129). Here also Roberts justifies the empire and projects a picture of indigenous government as mismanagement and chaotic and the British rule is viewed as the legitimate rule in the country.

Roberts occasionally emphasizes that natives fail to appreciate the picturesque beauty of the land and only those with a more refined taste can appreciate such picturesque beauties. As she states:

They did not appear to regard with any deep feeling of admiration those splendid prospects so eagerly sought by the lovers of the picturesque...they seemed to take little interest in scenery which threw us into raptures. Contrast is

perhaps necessary for enjoyment of any kind, and it was impossible to make them comprehend the motives that induce Englishmen to wander through strange lands for the mere purpose of seeing the country, and admiring the prospects (*Hindostan*, 14).

The passage renders the native as incapable of sensing the sublime aspects of nature; the Englishmen have the most refined tastes and superior sense of appreciating beauties, which motivates them to wander through unknown lands only for admiring the prospects. Her remark reveals the hidden motive of many travel writers, that is, to help in the European mission of expansion of unknown territories in the guise of tourists/ travelers. Again in her book *Hindostan*, Roberts describes the natives of Mohuna in the following terms:

The people seemed a quite harmless race, happy in the enjoyment of the few necessaries which formed the sum total of their wants. The natives of these districts are good-natured and obliging, and may be easily managed by kindness, by those who endeavour rather to humour than to force them out of their prejudices (13).

Roberts' description offers a picture of child-like natives, happily living amidst nature; she reinforces their submissiveness that they can be easily dominated and it will help the ruling race to expand their territories to those regions.

In fact, in the colonial context, the viewer observes the colonized landscape in a way what Mary Louise Pratt calls 'master of all I survey' (Pratt, 1992). Pratt shows how a traveler or colonial officer in their descriptions clears the landscape of people and surveys its potential for colonial appropriation. The travelers to India come with preconceived notions, half hoping to encounter the strange and bizarre as well as the land of fabulous wealth according to the already packaged stories and beliefs about India. Occasionally, in her narrative, Roberts also draws attention to the multitudinous scopes of earning fortune in India. For instance, she describes the gradual change taking place in Monghyr as: "In the changes which are now taking place in British India, Monghyr will, in all probability, be made to rival Sheffield or Birmingham in its manufactures; and it is rather extraordinary that no European cutler or gunsmith has yet been tempted to open a shop in this place" (*Scenes*, vol. 2, 70). In the passage, Roberts compares the progress of Monghyr with that of Birmingham. Her ironical remark is noticeable here; and she expresses concern for the profit to be gained from shops of cutler and guns. Again, Roberts draws attention to another important aspect:

The establishment of manufactures in India would afford the best method of employing British capital, for natives of respectability, though not objecting to the occupation of merchants, and willing to sell every article that may be consigned to them, consider it to be *infra dig* to superintend the mechanical part... the excellence of the workmanship of those employed in the service of Europeans, show how easily they can be trained to any mechanical employment when under the superintendence of scientific persons (*Scenes*, vol. 2, 71).

The underlying implication is that India has many resources for advancement but it lacks proper guidance and capital. As such Roberts reinforces the fact that only the British can improve such advancement as they have superior knowledge and expertise than the natives; she emphasizes how the natives are becoming experts in mechanical works under the supervision of the Europeans.

Another recurrent theme to be found in most of the travel narratives is the descriptions of fertile landscapes which lie unconquered and also unappreciated. Roberts professes her aim

to provide a guidebook/advice manual for the young men who come to India in search of fortune, but ends up describing the prospects of acquiring the land and the capitalist future by exploiting its resources. The descriptions present India as a land of fertile and 'virgin' promises. In similar terms, Roberts talks about the fertility of the land pointing to its rich potential of earning profit. As she states:

Agriculture, as well as manufactures, flourishes in the neighbourhood of Monghyr; grain of all kinds, sugar, and indigo are in great abundance, and the country is celebrated for its opium...cotton plantations abound ...cocos are not supposed to grow luxuriantly except in the vicinity of the coast; but their cultivation in many inland situations in India shows that a little care alone is necessary for their introduction into the most remote parts of Hindostan (*Scenes*, vol. 2, 90-91).

The reference here is how to accumulate riches by exploiting the Indian landscapes, pointing to the abundance of various crops. Roberts' surveying stance seems to claim the land for the colonial power as she assesses it in relation to its potential for exploitation. She clearly points to the fact that only through British control and guidance, this part of India have the potentials for advancement. Again, describing the village of Naree in *Hindostan* (1972), Roberts offers a very significant remark:

There can be no doubt that the occupation of the Himalaya by the British, and the gradual introduction of a more scientific method of cultivating the native products of the country, together with the development of its numerous resources, will tend greatly to improve the condition of the native inhabitants. Their poverty is wholly the effect of ignorance, for though there are a great many natural disadvantages, against which the husbandman must contend, yet a superior degree of skill, and a better acquaintance with the principles of agriculture, would speedily counterbalance these drawbacks, and render the soil quite equal to the support of a much larger population, while its exports might be very materially increased (*Hindostan*, 53).

Here also Roberts emphasizes the rich potential of the land in terms of agriculture. She associates the poverty of the inhabitants with their lack of proper education as well as facilities and also draws attention to the fact that British intervention can only counterbalance the many drawbacks; while interestingly she talks about the increase of exports also. The passage reveals the colonial policy of exploiting these lands for material gain. Roberts seems to be a spokesperson of the empire as she points to the various sites and spheres of Indian life that needs improvement as well as supervision.

Travel narratives also provide pictures of exotic things glimpsed in the colonized countries. What is not easily understood is deemed exotic or conversely simplified in the writer's own terms as quaint. Underlying all such acts is the consciousness of difference along with a desire to capture or sublimate the essence of foreign cultures. Roberts also describes unfamiliar things in terms of the exotic in her texts. For instance, while describing the houses and surroundings in the province of Etawah, she notes:

The bungalows of Etawah, though not in their primitive state, — for upon the first occupation in these remote jungles, doors and windows were not considered necessary, a jaump, or frame of bamboo covered with grass answering the purpose of both — are still sufficiently rude to startle persons who have acquired their notions of India from descriptions of the City of Palaces (*Scenes*, vol. 2, 199).

The image of an undeveloped country is obvious in the passage; as only a frame of bamboo answers the purpose of doors and windows. Roberts also expresses her wonder at such arrangements and remarks that such a picture will startle the new comers, who come to India influenced by the stories of the 'City of Palaces'. It should be noted that in colonial India, people used bamboos in windows, but those also gave protection; but these appears rude and gives an exotic appeal to the foreigner.

Again, while describing Monghyr, Roberts mentions: "...and both the ghaut, when vessels are passing up and down, and the bazaars, present a very lively scene, from the variety of the commodities and the gay costumes of the people" (*Scenes*, vol. 2, 70). Roberts finds the scene animating, as to her, the costumes of the natives lend such exotic features to the scene. In addition, she professes the most enthralling desire of the travelers, that is, to encounter exotic things in the foreign lands. As she says:

Wells and tanks are frequent, but we seldom see fountains as we have imaged in our minds, from the description given in the Arabian Tales, of artificial cascades watering the gardens of Damascus, wooing the traveler by their bubbling melody to refresh his parched lips, and bathe his burning brow (*Hindustan*, 56).

Roberts' ironical tone is significant here. She brings up the temptation of most of the travelers to see bizarre scenes in the unknown land as found in the Arabian Tales and expresses her unhappiness in failing to see those features of an exotic landscape. Interestingly, Roberts' critique of those romantic travelers is also evident in the passage.

Throughout the text, Roberts renounces the near vision which shows only dirt and squalor, the Black Town, or the Anglo-Indian graveyard. The 'gorgeousness of the picture' of Lucknow, for instance, 'when visited in detail...is obscured by...dirt, filth and squalid poverty' (*Scenes*, vol. 2, 135). Although a dedicated follower of picturesque beauty, her attempt to distance herself from the Indians is noticeable. Besides, she also mentions the public quarrels engaged in by the women: "The Hindostanee vocabulary is peculiarly rich in terms of abuse; native Indian women, it is said, excel the females of every other country in volubility of utterance, and in the strength and number of the opprobrious epithets which they shower down upon those who raise their ire" (*Scenes*, Vol. 2, 115). In the text, Roberts offers a long comment to show the negative impact of such utterances upon the European children. She also points out how these native women influences others with such abusive words and utterances. Roberts' critique of native women is significant here as she follows the stereotyping projection of Indian women as debased. Roberts simply puts it down to lack of education and etiquette among Indian women and discusses how young European children learn abusive words from their ayas.

## Conclusion

Aestheticization provides a means to legitimize colonial rule and establish authority over human subjects. In fact, the aesthetic ideology enables the scenic appeal of landscape to be translated into a material reality. Travel writers justify their accounts in terms of a need for the British public to know more about the Eastern Empire or they stress the value of first-hand experiences of India; as such they often emphasize the richness and diversity of the physical environment. This is mostly true in case of nineteenth century women travel writers. While on the one hand, the writers portray themselves as objective as well as innocent observers, on the other hand, they play the role of the colonizers, very cleverly drawing attention to the potential of enhancing the interests of British Empire in the lesser known territories of India. It appears that the knowledge produced by women travelers is implicated

within the process of imperialist expansion and is also intended for satisfying the curiosity of a readership back home. The claim that women travel writers does not have any role in the colonial mission is never true; rather they prove to be quite beneficial for accumulating knowledge on the colonized countries.

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