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Othering of Nepalis in Palin's *Travel Narrative*

Dr. Toya Nath Upadhyay[1], Central Department of English, Kathmandu
toya771@gmail.com
Prakash Sharma[2]**,** Asst. Prof. of English**,** Dhaulagiri Multiple Campus, Baglung
sharmaprakash166@gmail.com

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Abstract:
Even decades after the formal decolonization and the emergence of the globalization, the white mentality of some Western travel writers still persists through the projection of common stereotypes upon the non-white people. Michael Palin's travel text, Himalaya (2004) exemplifies such texts, in which he resorts to mick-taking to express the sense of Western superiority. For example, he analogizes the Nepali priest to a plumber, and the king to a hotel receptionist. This paper reads the "Nepal" section from his Himalaya and analyzes how it depicts the Nepali people, its culture and geography. For analysis, it employs the critical insights of Edward Said, Mary Louis Pratt, Debbie Lisle, and others. Key terms such as Said's colonial discourse and associated terms like othering and stereotypes; Pratt's seeing-man, and Lisle's colonial and cosmopolitan visions will also be used. Finally, the paper concludes that Palin's travel text continues the othering stereotypes and power relations under the disguise of mick-taking.

Keywords: colonial discourse, mick-taking, othering, tourist gaze

Introduction

Himalayas have always remained the objects of fascination for the Westerners as long as they have heard about them. Driven by the same fascination, Michael Palin, a British travel writer and television broadcaster, makes a six-month long adventure along the Himalayan range in Asia. Beginning on the 13th May, 2003, he visits Nepal, Bhutan, Bangladesh, Pakistan, Tibet, China, and India. He encapsulates his experiences about the people, their cultures, languages, and landscapes in his best seller travel book, *Himalaya.* In addition, he produces documentaries and broadcasts on TV in series. The destinations he records become

the sites of what John Urry defined as "mediatized gaze" since he popularizes them through the media presentation among the Western audience (151). All his travels, as Petra Glover views, "have been broadcast in the UK and overseas. All of his journeys can be purchased on DVD and as an accompanying book, and some are also books. In addition, his official website provides an overview of each journey" (113). Through the book, DVD and website data, he mediatizes the travelled destinations, their peoples and cultures as commodities for the Western audience.

Despite being a best seller travel book, there is not significant research done on *Himalaya* yet (though there are some on its visual version). However, there are many reviews posted by readers on Internet sites like goodreads, Amazon, and personal blogs, which are mostly about the praise of the book. This paper reads from the alternative perspective to examine how Palin's mick-taking style implicates the othering stereotypes. He takes the mick of the people he encounters in a subtle way that the persons being mick-taken are unaware of it. They become the source of the fun, that subsequently attracts the Western audience. In that matter, despite the democratization of travel writing, in which the authors deliberately attempt, as Debbie Lisle argues, to pursue "a cosmopolitan vision through bemusement, tolerance and understanding" (24), Palin upholds the traditional British identity as a white male which subsequently constructs discourse of othering in his travel narrative. In the aftermath of decolonization, he fails to showcase himself as a neutral reporter and instead maintains the colonial conventions of binary of "us" and "them" between the West and the non-West. Being a cultural insider from the Himalayas, I am particularly interested in his travels in Nepal only with a hope of making the analysis authentic.

Methods and Materials

The Palestine-American postcolonial thinker Edward Said commenced the critical readings of the various texts of the West written during the colonial era about the Orient as colonial discourse, which he termed as Orientalism. In his seminal book, *Orientalism*, he argues that these texts created a binary between the West and the non-West by assisting significantly in the construction of asymmetric relationship that put the West in the higher rung of the ladder as supposedly superior and civilized while depicting the non-West as mysterious, exotic, uncivilized, primitive and inferior. He holds that these texts operated in the form of colonial discourses "as a Western style for dominating, structuring, and having an authority over the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively" (3). Among various texts in different genres, Said depicted that travel narratives were one that assisted colonization: "From travelers' tales . . . colonies were created" (117). After him, other postcolonial thinkers have also viewed the travelers' tales as colonial discourses.

Postcolonial scholars primarily observe the involvement of Western texts as

colonial discourse in the othering process of the non-West. For example, Homi K Bhabha argues, colonial discourse othered the non-Western people constructing them as "degenerated types in the colonized on the basis of racial origin" (101). John McLeod holds that the colonial discourses were "used as fundamental weapons of colonial power to keep colonized peoples subservient to colonial rule" (17). Patrick Williams and Laura Chrisman maintain that "the variety of textual forms in which the West produced and codified knowledge about non-metropolitan areas and cultures, especially those under colonial control" (5). Indeed, Western texts of the colonial era tremendously othered the non-West by creating, what Foucault termed, "a regime of truth" (131) for the colonial mission. Through such falsely created truth, the West intended to maintain colonial mission intact in the non-West.

Besides colonial travel texts, scholars have also found contemporary travel texts being involved in the othering process. For example, Mary Louise Pratt views that "travel books by Europeans about non-European parts of the world went (and go) about creating the 'domestic subject' of Euroimperialism" (4); Mary Bell Campbell holds, "The journals, letters, histories and tracts . . . played a large part . . . to establish the basis for a 'justified' Christian imperialism" (166), and Debbie Lisle maintains "The travel writer—no matter what his/her background or ethnicity—identifies difference, places it in a value-laden hierarchy, and judges accordingly" (115). Lisle argues that contemporary travelers employ two kinds of visions: "colonial and cosmopolitan" in which the former "mimicks the privileged position" of earlier travel narrators and the later attempts to embrace "the harmonizing effects of globalization" (5). Similarly, as John Urry observes contemporary travelers have also involved in the "tourist gaze" which makes "an obvious intrusion into people's life" and constructs a sense of "difference" (9). Kelly Caton and Carla Santos reiterate the othering idea of Urry that tourism-related mass media products like books "tend to construct non-Western people and cultures as other to the Western self" (192). Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan aver that the contemporary travel writers produce "cultural otherness" for "profitable business" (65). Carl Thompson discusses that travel writing employs the trope of othering to show how one culture is "not only different but also inferior" to another culture (134). After all, Western travel writing, which was once instrumental in colonization process, is still involved in the construction of othering stereotypes of the non-West.

Othering Stereotypes

Out of tourist gaze, Michael Palin's *Himalaya* mediates Nepal, its people and cultures for the Western audience. He resorts to mick-making style that makes fun at the Nepalis. By doing so, it maintains, as Lisle depicts, a "colonial vision" of Western superiority through which he secures "a privileged position" for "categorizing, critiquing and passing judgement on less-civilized areas of the world" (3). Palin occupies a privileged tourist position and sheds a tourist gaze by taking the mick of

the Nepali king, people, culture, politics, and so on.

With his privileged position, Palin begins his Nepal journey in company with Pratima Pandey who is from a well to do family and has received education abroad: "a formidable, energetic, Gordonstouun-educated Nepali" (105). As this is the time of the greatest Hindu festival, Dashain, Palin takes an opportunity to participate in the celebration of the festival. However, instead of thoroughly participating in the celebration and enjoying it, he enjoys note-taking of all ongoing activities. He states, "I am desperately trying to get all this down in my notebook" (105). The celebration is begun by the family priest who has come up modestly dressed. Palin presents the priest as a plumber: "when the music starts and the family priest, an unassuming, modestly dressed figure, who looks as if he might have come to fix the plumbing, steps forward" (105). Here, obviously, Palin gets involved in trivializing the priest whom he analogizes with a plumber. Priests have high value in the society in Nepal. Palin then records the celebrating activities of the family members.

Further in the afternoon, Pratima, while going to the Royal Palace to receive *tika* from the King Gyanendra (the last king of Nepal) offers a favor to Palin to accompany her. Filled with excitement and curiosity, he follows her and observes every event of celebration minutely. But surprisingly, he happens to belittle the King comparing him disparagingly with a hotel receptionist. He writes, "The King takes his place behind a red, padded leather desk, which makes him look a bit like a hotel receptionist" (107). Palin further compares the King with the Dalai Lama and comments that the King loses the gravitas and jollity that the Lama has because of his boring job. Without understanding the King's such kind of usual expression, Palin notes, "Having so recently seen the Dalai Lama work a line, I know that it is possible to combine gravitas and jollity, but King Gyanendra maintains one expression throughout that is a sort of jowly glumness, as if being a ruler of Nepal is absolutely the worst job in the world" (107). What is the need of comparing the King with Dalai Lama, and remark that the King is bored with the ruling job? Although, possibly there could be some nervousness due to the Maoists guerrillas, the King certainly would not have felt that bored out of his rule.

With a sense a British master, Palin observes the recruiting process that takes place in Lekhani village of Baglung District. The history of Nepali youths joining the British Army, as well as the Indian, goes as back as to 1815 AD. About 3500 Nepalese, whom the British people call as the Gurkhas, were working in the British Army at the time Palin visited and some 230 were to be recruited that year. In an invitation of Lt. Colonel Adrian Griffith, the Gurkha Chief of Staff in Nepal, Palin attends the recruiting process. In the posture of a master, he satisfactorily observes the youths accomplishing different exercising events required for the selection. His photograph taken by his friend during the recruiting process clearly defines how glorious he feels. He enjoys, as Sharp argued, a "voyeuristic gaze" assuming the

traveler's superiority (203). Palin upholds the colonial stereotypes associated with the Gurkhas. He identifies them as "'tough', 'hardy' and 'indomitable' mercenaries' . . . fierce and faithful servants of the Crown" (110). For the British traveler, the tough, hardy and indomitable youths, especially of the Mongoloid origin, of the hilly areas of Nepal are still a truly capable bunch of people to work as the obedient slaves to the British Crown. Through these stereotypes, Palin continues the othering attitudes upon the Nepali youths. As a media celebrity, it would have been better if he had spoken against the system of recruiting the Nepali youths in the British Army.

Like with the youths, Palin continues the existing stereotypes associated with the Sherpas and highlights his privileged position. He romanticizes them as hardy, strong, ever smiling and faithful people but dismisses them as simply 'porters,' a derogatory word, which the Sherpas do not entertain much. They like to be called as guides or co-climbers. Palin appreciates the Sherpas of his team for organizing "transport" (111) perfectly. He valorizes Nawang Dorjee, one of the Sherpa guides, as the "nicest person in the world" for his service of tea and hot water for washing (112). Although, his discourse may not build empire as in the colonial period, it still reveals the vestiges of what Lisle terms, "a colonial vision" (5), or Gilroy recognizes "a post-imperial melancholia" (98). As a tourist, Palin enjoys his privileged position as a master over the Sherpas who are sincerely at his service.

Palin's text also continues colonial vision by classifying the Nepali people on the basis of the type of nose. The colonial policy of "divide and rule" of the British gets exposed here. The Gurkha Chief of Staff, Adrian Griffith tells him about the Long Noses and Flat Noses. Palin notes: "Nepal, he says, has a fundamental ethnic division between the Indo-Aryan with origin in the south and the Mongolian who originates from the north. Sherpas think themselves as Flat Noses and superior to the Long Noses, who in turn think of themselves as more and intellectual than the Flat Noses" (112). Although this perception might be true to some extent at individual level, but not at macro-level. Such kind of discrimination is rare to be found among the mass people. This kind of textual representation can shape the mind of the Western audience accordingly.

With his privileged tourist position, Palin constructs romantic gaze at the Nepali landscape for the Western consumption. He enjoys the stillness of the landscape as "Check the view. Yes, everything's still there. The Himalayas, the rocky slopes, the wooded spurs, the village without roads or streets" (112). He further expresses his joy to see "idyllic" scene (120); "inarticulate wonder" (123); and "majestic scenery" (126). During the colonial period, travelers aestheticized the natural beauty and profusion of the non-West that attracted the colonizers to occupy and possess those lands. Contemporarily, although without any intention of occupying the lands as before, tourists advertise, market and consume the lands through romantic gaze, as Urry contends: "romantic gazes are endlessly used in

marketing and advertising tourist sites, especially within the 'west'" (150). Palin's narrative advertises these sites for the Western people.

Palin ends his Nepal journey by persisting his privileged position. He has the renowned Nepali journalist, Kundan Mani Dixit to guide him across the Katmandu valley. Kundan is the editor of English weekly, *Nepali Times*. He is "an urban, elegant figure" (130). In his company, Palin collects the historical and legendary information about the Kathmandu valley, its people, culture, politics and all. He visits various historical sites like Krishna Temple, Taleju Temple, Patan Durbar Square, Sun Dhoka (Golden Gateway), Nyatapola Temple and others. Similarly, with Pratima, Palin visits the Pashupati Nath Temple and observes the death ceremony of a dead Hindu man. After all, out of his tourist gaze, Palin not only enjoys historical sites himself but mediates them also for the Western audience. In this sense, to borrow the term of Pratt, Palin acts as a "seeing-man" (7) in "monarch-of-all-survey" (201) position.

Palin's travel experiences have been documented in the book and also presented via the TV broadcasts. The double mode adds, as Glover comments: "the program's positive effect on destination image and demonstrates that not only the content itself but also the way in which the series is presented contribute to positive attitudes towards the places shown" (113).

Actually, through the double mode as such, Palin's traveled destinations are romanticized for the British audience.

Palin's discourse engages vestiges of colonial vision and involves in the process of othering. As Sharma highlights, Palin participates in invoking cultural stereotypes for the Western media audience. Sharma notes, "Under the guise of a liberal subject position, *Himalaya with Michael Palin* [TV series] in fact invoke cultural stereotypes to commodify local authenticities, ideologies and identities, keeping in mind the interest and expectations of the media audience who are interested in viewing a different other, not a similar self" (16). Indeed, as Sharma points out Palin's discourse gets involved in invoking the interest of the Western audience by representing the Nepali people and culture as something to gaze at.

Finally, the colonial legacy of travel writing continues with Palin's *Himalaya*. It becomes a medium through which the writer addresses the Western audience. In another words, as Sugnet underlines, it becomes a tool for the writer to "arrogate to [himself] . . . the rights of representation, judgement and mobility that [are] effects of empire" (72). Palin, despite attempting to be cosmopolitan keeps deploying "exoticizing tropes and practices [that reproduce] the elitist and exploitative" subject position (Lindsay 32) and "colonial vision [that] mimicks the previous sensibility of the Empire" (Lisle 5). Palin cannot come out of the trap of colonial vision. Levin argues "much about contemporary travel narratives continues to affirm Edward Said's view that they celebrate, if not the triumph of empire, then the status of the so-called developing world as a cipher and playground for the West" (142). As Levin

points out, Palin's discourse does not affirm the triumph of empire but celebrates his destination, that is Nepal, as a cipher and playground for the Western audience.

Conclusion

The study has discussed that Michael Palin's *Himalaya* has operated as a colonial discourse by involving in the process of othering through mick-taking. It has invoked cultural misrepresentations of the Nepali people, culture and politics in the contemporary context of mass tourism. Being myself a cultural insider of Nepal, my study has limited its analysis to the author's journey in Nepal only and discovered that Palin has taken up the privileged position of the Western tourist and has trivialized the Nepali youths, priest and the king by mick-taking. Although, outwardly, he does not look to be judgmental as he simply intends to create humor but in fact the humor trivializes the travelees. He idealizes the youths of the hill and the Sherpas as hardy, strong, indomitable and faithful, and puts them in the position of them as slaves and helpers. He is happy to see them as such. He does not speak anything of the transformation of their position. He trivializes the king and the priest by comparing them with a hotel receptionist and a plumber respectively. He accuses the Nepali government (which is run by the Long Nosed King) of treating the Flat Nosed (Mongolian) people unequally that has forced the hill people work that way. Palin continues the colonial "divide and rule" policy of the British. Moreover, by accompanying the book with TV series, Palin has 'mediated' the Nepali people, culture and places for the consumption of the Western audience. After all, under the guise of a liberal subject position or a cosmopolitan position, he has celebrated the cultural diversity but reproduced the moral superiority of the West simultaneously. Thus, Palin's *Himalaya* continues colonial traditions and maintains asymmetric relationships between the West and the non-West through othering strategies.

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