

Belated Peregrination across Africa, a Study of Paul Theroux's "Dark Star Safari: Overland from Cairo to Cape Town 2002"

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Abstract

In *Dark Star Safari: Overland from Cairo to Cape Town (2002)*, Paul Theroux travels unaccompanied from Egypt to South Africa to explore the continent he left behind when he had resigned from teaching English as a part of Peace Corps in Malawi and Uganda decades back. The journey happens in early 2001 and starts in Egypt. Emphasising the colonial slogan "Cape to Cairo railway", the colonial path is substantially followed by Theroux in the course of the book. In a globalised world Travel narratives retain its relevance by being idiosyncratic. Theroux's narratives are highly personalised. Along with the travel, he also establishes the traveller. Despite his status as a postmodern writer, he has not emancipated from the parental strings of imperialism. This paper analyses a few features of residual imperialism that can be identified in a postmodern yet belated traveller.

KEYWORDS: Travel writing, residual imperialism, belatedness, post modern

"You'll have a terrible time", one diplomat warns Paul Theroux upon knowing his plans to pull along a desolate road to Nairobi instead of taking an aeroplane. But, "(y)ou'll have some great stuff for your book" (130). Apparently, that seems to be the strategy for Theroux's extensive experience of vanishing into the African continent.

In *Dark Star Safari: Overland from Cairo to Cape Town (2002)*, Paul Theroux travels unaccompanied from Egypt to South Africa to explore the continent he left behind when he had resigned from teaching English as a part of Peace Corps in Malawi and Uganda decades back. He remembers Africans being proud and diverse, cultures rich in heritage and tradition, when the countries were at the brim of independence from European colonialism. He returns to Africa to quench his curiosity to learn what has happened when Africa became free.

The journey happens in early 2001 and starts in Egypt. Emphasising the colonial slogan "Cape to Cairo railway", the colonial path is substantially followed by Theroux in the course of the book. He tours the ancient Pharaonic sites and also attends an evening at an Egyptian bar at which Naguib Mahfouz, the Nobel laureate, is in conversation with friends and admirers. As an American, Theroux is envired by questions about the presidents Bill Clinton and George W. Bush as well as the United States' support for Israel. There Theroux nonetheless realizes that, as an American, he is a natural target for these sorts of responses. Wherever he goes, most of the time, he is approached by the information seekers.

Unlike in previous books, Theroux cannot take trains the entire way. But his love for the trains appears as the chapter titles taken from train routes. One of the delights of *Dark Star Safari* is that it gives the reader not only Theroux's petulant, idiosyncratic voice but also the voices of so many others, old and young, male and female, European and African.

On primary reading, Theroux imparts the feeling of a rootless globe trotter with no political inclinations. His blunt opinions and dismissive attitude towards almost everything he comes across, speak of him as a sharp eyed misanthrope. He likes Africa for "being anti-Europe, the anti-West". He

is against Evangelism, charity and welfare programmes offered by the West. As a politically informed iterant, he ponders over cultural repercussions of colonialism. His detachment from the national and cultural context gives an illusionary characteristic of 'postmodern condition'. Nevertheless, despite his 'postmodern' status, he has not emancipated from the parental strings of imperialism. Charles Sugnet observes that "though the traveller no longer represents a literal imperial power and may specifically disclaim such complicity, he still arrogates to himself the rights of representations, judgement, and mobility that were effects of empire"(10). This paper analyses a few features of residual imperialism that can be identified in a postmodern yet belated traveller.

In a globalised world Travel narratives retain its relevance by being idiosyncratic. Theroux's narratives are highly personalised. Along with the travel, he also establishes the traveller. Theroux started his travelling career when he felt emptiness in and around him. In *Memory and Creation*, he writes- "my reading had given me a taste, not for more reading, nor writing, but for seeing the wider, and wilder, world. I had felt small and isolated living in the place where I had grown up. I had read to find out about the world. I knew that it was a way beyond my home town. I wanted to leave" (387).

Theroux always exhibited this desire to disappear, he wants to escape from the "routines". He says, "I was going to Africa for the best reasons- in a spirit of discovery; and for the pettiest- simply to disappear, to light out...All I had to do was remove myself...I wanted to drop out...(t)he greatest justification for travel was not self-improvement but rather performing a vanishing act, disappearing without a trace...Africa is the last great places on earth a person can vanish into"(Dark Star Safari, 4). This induced alienation in terms of space and culture, helps him to be productive. It stimulates his memory, and he writes. He says, "(t)ravel is wonderful it gives access to the past"(64). In the third world, one can have a glimpse of the primeval culture. He mentions about a market in Khartoum which has a medieval setting. By visiting that market, his modern self gets an primordial experience. Later he says, "African cities recapitulate the sort of street life that has vanished from European cities- a motley liveliness that lends colour and vitality to old folk-tales and much of early English literature"(186). This exemplifies how effectively Theroux arouses and projects the exotic elements of the place. Thus he becomes an "ironic purveyor of exoticist mode of cultural representations" (XI) as Huggan rightly describes.

Theroux always begins his Travel text with the "loud proclamation of the shedding of possessions (Youngs, 77)". That is exactly why he comes to Africa: to escape a life infested with e-mail and cell phones - all the pinging, buzzing ways one can be easily located. "I was in such regular touch," he writes, "it was like having a job, a mode of life I hate". He travels light, almost like a native passenger. When he is stuck in Samburu village, he writes,

When I had a few quarts I went into a field and washed my face and dumped the rest on my head, marvelling at the heat of the sun beating on my wet hair. Then I found another log to sit on and went on reading. I felt only mildly inconvenienced, because I had no deadline to meet: no one was expecting me. Most of all I felt privileged that I was now in a Samburu village in the middle of the northern Kenyan desert, living in perfect safety, talking to local people, and observing a way of life..."(Dark Star Safari, 175).

Theroux plunges into each expedition when he feels emptiness in and around him. He grows tired of his familiar surroundings which offer him no topic to write about. Youngs indicates that "Theroux's sense of emptiness and the sense of a lack of cultural reflection are symptomatic of the West's postcolonial condition, coinciding with the supposed halt to official expansion and to its confident ideological influence" (77). While he is on a solo, almost an incognito expedition, he is susceptible to the reception of celebrity hosts. Dark Star Safari's literary status is emphasised by the two visits

Theroux makes to the houses of Gordimer and Mahfouz. But we never see him read them during this journey. The books he brings with him belongs to Westerners - Gustave Flaubert, Joseph Conrad, Graham Robb, Philip Gourevitch—whereas there are Africans who have written about these areas—Meja Mwangi from Kenya, Nuruddin Farah from the Horn of Africa, Mia Couto from Mozambique, Yvonne Vera from Zimbabwe—whom he does not read. This is ironical; for we see him being critical about Africa being excessively helped by the foreigners. The absence of contemporary African writings from the text is conspicuous. Theroux does meet a novelist in Kenya, Wahome Mutahi, but Mutahi's experience as a political prisoner is emphasized over his role as a writer. In this respect, Theroux is contradicting his philosophy of effacement and it showcases the tension between his distaste for the material world and yearning for them.

When Theroux reaches a place called Harar in Ethiopia, Theroux refers to the place's associations with Sir Richard Burton who was the first European to visit. Burton liked Harar for "its remoteness and its wilderness" (*Dark Star Safari*, 96). Theroux tells that Burton found "pleasure in Africa's motley and unexpected satisfactions, its dusty congeniality". And he adds, "(h)is mood I shared, his quest I celebrated...Harar I regarded as one of the great destinations in Africa (f)or its exoticism, its special brand of fanaticism and its remoteness.." (96). At another instance when Theroux visits Sphinx, he juxtaposes the experiences of Mark Twain and Flaubert visiting the same. Mark Twain had seen the photo of Sphinx before he actually saw Sphinx. Yet Flaubert is one of the "last Europeans to see it in this way, afresh." (11). Theroux believes that photography spoils the visual pleasure, inadvertently lamenting his belatedness in arrival in a well known exotic world. It is perhaps an implicit pang of a traveller who sees himself in the lineage of renowned western travellers. This also indicates how much he has been affected by them, for he evidently goes on to share similar sentiments with them.

In *Happy Isles of Oceania* (1992) Theroux talks about the skills of literary writers in modifying a place, improving it or transforming it (323). He acknowledges that the mood of the travellers largely affect the perceptions of the places they visit. Thus eulogizing the powers of author, Theroux chooses not to sound cautious or self-reflexive. For instance, he writes in *Dark Star Safari*:

One day, in an African newspaper I read: "In the year 2005, 75 percent of the people in Africa will be living in urban areas." This was only a few years away. It made me glad I was taking my trip now, because African cities became more awful—more desperate and dangerous—as they grew larger. They did not become denser, they simply sprawled more, became gigantic villages. In such cities, women still lugged water from standpipes and cooked over wood fires and washed clothes in filthy creeks, and people shat in open latrines. "Citified" in Africa meant bigger and dirtier (268).

Reflecting on a prediction that he comes across, Theroux utters a selfish thought- "it made me glad that I was taking my trip now" (268). In conjunction with the fact that he analysis the news in a cynically prerogative way, he delights in his privilege to have come early before the villages disappear in Africa. Reading this attitude in the post colonial context, the glorification of subjective and emotional authorization can be seen as an extension of the colonial or imperial exploitation of the region.

Theroux likes Africa "...for those reasons...for there was nothing of home here. Being in Africa was like being on a dark star" (124). The journey is undertaken in search of authentic cultural impressions. The voyeuristic traveller (he admits that himself) brings forth distinctive cultural forms and practices for the voyeuristic reader.

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