

**THE WRITING OF HISTORY IN THE TRAVEL NARRATIVES OF
MICHAEL WOOD: BLURRING THE BOUNDARIES?**

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**A dissertation submitted in partial fulfillment
of the requirements for the Degree of
Master of Philosophy**



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DECLARATION

I hereby declare that the dissertation entitled **“The Writing of History in the Travel Narratives of Michael Wood: Blurring the Boundaries?”** supervised by Professor Sachidananda Mohanty, is my original work in the department of English, University of Hyderabad, and has not been submitted for a degree or diploma or for publication elsewhere.



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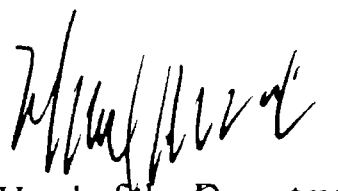
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CERTIFICATE

This is to certify that Ms. DEEPA ONKAR worked under my supervision for the degree of Master of Philosophy in English. Her dissertation entitled “**The Writing of History in the Travel Narratives of Michael Wood: Blurring the Boundaries ?**” is her own work at the University of Hyderabad, and has not been submitted for a degree or diploma elsewhere.


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ABBREVIATIONS

The Smile of Murugan: A South Indian Journey:- The Smile of Murugan.

In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great:- Alexander.

Hindoo Holiday: An Indian Journal:- Hindoo Holiday.

The Hill of Devi: Being Letters from Dewas State Senior:- The Hill of Devi.

INTRODUCTION

In an essay entitled "The Anthropologist as Hero"¹, Susan Sontag remarks that all serious thought struggles with a feeling of homelessness. The traveller is one who lives with this deliberate denial of roots, however temporarily, ceaselessly venturing out of familiar circumstances. Travel throws an individual's thought processes out of its habitual seeking of comfort, forcing the observer into a position of self-examination and introspection. The position of travel narratives on the fringes of literary and cultural studies itself seems to suggest homelessness. However, travel narratives are important sites of cultural encounter and provide opportunities for the understanding of the ideological framework from which a writer observes a culture other than his own.

This dissertation, taking the example of Michael Wood, is concerned with travel narratives as vehicles of narrative, which deserve literary and cultural interpretation, rather than being passively read as 'popular' literature. Popular literatures such as travel narratives need to be read not as mere distractions from 'great' literature; rather as sites

where the writing of history and the interpretation of culture have been carried out. It is thus important to get an idea of how 'culture' itself has been defined. James Clifford traces out the beginnings of the concept of a 'cultural self' in 1900, and found that it was shaped by the European bourgeois ideal of individual identity. By the turn of the century, the term took on more pluralistic overtones, implying discrete and meaningful ways of life. Bakhtin, however, is cautious that there can be no integrated cultural worlds, a 'culture' is an "open ended, creative dialogue of sub-cultures, of insiders and outsiders, of diverse factions". Any attempt to unify a culture is to exercise power, which Stephen Greenblatt terms as 'blockage' of the inherent instability of culture.'

Each writer arrives at a definition of culture from the broader activity of examining it. Greenblatt's definition is arrived at after he makes a detailed analysis of the strategies of representation of culture in the voyages of discovery to the so-called 'New World' was, according to him, continually mediated by representations, often confused with the native 'representatives'.' The difference between

destroying a brutish idol and a 'brutish' human could thus be easily blurred. One of the aims of this dissertation is to ask if such a blurring occurs in the case of travel narratives on India. The travel narratives taken into account in this dissertation are all first-person accounts. A question related to the first is if the relationship between the representation and the narrator is constructed positively or negatively. For, travel narratives differ from the great expansionist voyages in at least one significant way; a traveller's activities are mainly observation and recording, however strongly these may be linked with possession. The next main issue of this dissertation is how Michael Wood approaches the history of the cultural areas that he travels through. The sense of the past is perceived in different ways through different cultures; how does Wood write about these varied perceptions in relation to his own?

One of the important issues of in contemporary debate is the extent to which cultural and ideological factors determine the travel writer's perceptions. In the context of travel literature, a related question is the extent to which an ideology like imperialism

would influence or control the travel writer's perception of a 'native' reality. It is my contention throughout the thesis that the travel writer is not a puppet even while being influenced by ideological factors.

The first chapter deals with the how empire is produced through travel narratives by British writers, on India. It aims to historicize The Smile of Murugan: A South Indian Journey⁵ by comparing the strategies of representation in mainly British travel narratives on India, through a period of around fifty years. The theoretical perspectives taken are those of Edward Said's Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient⁶ and Stephen Greenblatt's Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World. It examines the differing ways in which the narratives become those of power and desire, and whether at all the interaction may be interpreted in simplistic terms of power and domination. It also introduces terms like 'transculturation', contact zones and 'hybridity', and to assess how these terms are inter-linked and defined by each other. The scope of this dissertation is interdisciplinary, touching on the methods of anthropology, without becoming involved in methods

such as 'data collection'. The first chapter also explicitly introduces the notion that the travel writer is in a position to reconcile cultural differences; the chapter suggests that a writer like Michael Wood strives towards this.

The second chapter takes the example of Michael Wood's version of the tale of Alexander the Great as an example of the writing of history through travel narratives. To travel in the footsteps of Alexander the Great is a many-sided and complex process, for it deals with many layers of history. His method of writing history is examined through his strategy of using the Greek and Latin sources as guidelines in the telling of the tale. How does it affect the writing of a 'popular' version? How does it deal with oral versions and local points of view? The chapter has been divided into two sections, one that examines the written version, and another that examines the 'visual' text of the television series Footsteps of Alexander the Great, produced by the BBC. The chapter deals with popular culture and its role in the 'production' of history. The inclusion of a 'television text' associated, as it is with mass culture, moves this dissertation from the realm of

literary into cultural studies. The section engages in examining the voice of the media in the articulation of difference. How is the 'native' presented as the victim of the archetypal conqueror Alexander? How does the 'native' cope with the past that has always been ravaged and is now dominated and captured by the gaze of the television camera?

Visual messages can be a powerful means by which a message such as nostalgic identity can be transmitted. Marshall McLuhan's theory that electronic media are but extensions of the senses proves just how potent the influence of mass media can be. The exercise is also helpful in exploring how popular culture has the ability to subvert established narratives like the story of Alexander. The question of popular culture thus gets addressed at two levels. The first is that travel narratives, as popular literature need to be read as containing ideologies no less worthy of examination than those of anonymized literature. The other is to examine the phenomenon of popular culture itself and television as a special case.

Antony Easthope, however, thinks that the section of the mass media interested in commercialization

imposes it with a certain materialistic end. Easthope argues persuasively for the re-examination of traditionalist notions of what is worthy of being considered 'literary'. He considers different perspectives of what constitutes popular culture including those of Hoggart and Williams. According to him, Hoggart's conclusion that popular culture is the expression of the working classes is a 'culturalist' view in the sense that it is the result of constraints ultimately determined by economic power.¹ How identities are developed through popular culture is an issue this dissertation seeks to address.

The third chapter addresses one of Michael Wood's main concerns, the loss of the sense of the mythical in the face of scientific and material progress. Wood's observations are clearly affiliated with those of Carl Jung who in the book *Modern Man in Search of a Soul*, sees the unconscious and the productions of dreams as potent sites where the 'spiritual' crisis of 'modern man' may be addressed. The conscious mind associated with rational scientific progress should shrug off its sense of history and become 'unhistorical'. It is imperative according to Jung

that each civilisation and culture takes the realm of the unconscious seriously:

Each culture gave birth to its destructive opposite, but no culture or civilisation before our own was ever forced to take these psychic undercurrents in deadly earnest. Psychic life always found expression in a metaphysical system of some sort. But the modern, conscious man despite his strenuous and dogged efforts to do so, can no longer refrain from acknowledging the might of the psychic forces. This distinguishes our time from all others. We can no longer deny that the dark stirrings of the unconscious are effective powers...¹²

Since Jung believed that the 'Indian mind' was in touch with the unconscious and therefore devoid of history, he privileges this mode. He goes against the eighteenth century British historians who put forth the theory that the 'Indian' sense of time was entirely cyclic caught up in endless repetitions. The twentieth century historian Arnold Toynbee too condemned this 'Indian' sense of time that it gave rise to a philosophy of despair. But Wood departs from them in an important way he does not valorize progress at the expense of the mythical. The mythical is according to Michael Wood a creator of group identity. M.H. Abrams entry for 'myth' in his Glossary of Literary Terms seems to tally with Wood's idea.

... a myth is one story in a mythology—a system of hereditary stories which were once believed to be true by a particular cultural group and which served to explain ...why the world is as it and things happen as they do, to provide a rationale for social customs and observances, and to establish the sanctions for the rules by which people conduct their lives.¹⁵

Wood does not interrogate the unselfconscious unity of communities achieved through these archaic modes, in fact he sees them as valuable, to be preserved. Chapter three deals with the way the myths of different cultures are dealt with by examining Wood's approach to the mythology of his own culture in *In Search of England*. By considering the religion and history of different cultures, Michael Wood moves into a realm of cultural travel. Travel is not limited to moving from place to place, rather histories and cultures are visited. The extent to which Wood is influenced by other cultures is also gauged in this chapter.

Cultural travel can involve moving through different pasts and different layers of history with ease. It is beyond the scope of this dissertation to deal exhaustively with the cultures and histories of places as diverse as Tamil Nadu, Greece, Egypt, Persia

and England. A study such as this, however, is relevant because cultural identities can no longer be considered 'safe' and stable. Therefore, the possibility for the travel writer to occupy the space of an 'insider', increases. The texts examined in this dissertation provide a ground for this; the approach to history reveals a lot about the national identity of the writer.

The traveller is free to choose that aspect of history that specifically interests him; the compulsions of movement do not allow for a very deep study. The traveller typically moves swiftly from the past to the present relying on fleeting impressions. Although layers of history maybe discerned without much movement, increased mobility in the modern world has made it easy and tempting for the traveller to prefer broad sweeps of time and space rather than the small, specific and local.

Notes

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- ¹ Susan Sontag, "The Anthropologist as hero" Against Interpretation and Other Essays (New York: Dell, 1978).
- ² James Clifford, The Predicament of Culture: Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art (Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1988) 38.
- ³ Stephen Greenblatt, Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World (Oxford: OxfordUP, 1991).
- ⁴ Ibid. 51.
- ⁵ Michael Wood, The Smile of Murugan: A South Indian Journey (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1996).
- ⁶ Edward Said, Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1993).
- ⁷ Greenblatt, 98.
- ⁸ In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great Narr. Michael Wood. Writ. Michael Wood. Dir. David Wallace. Prod. Rebecca Dobbs. BBC Worldwide Ltd.
- ⁹ Marshall McLuhan, Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man (London and New York: Routledge, 1978).
- ¹⁰ Anthony Easthope, Literary into Cultural Studies (London and New York: Routledge 1991).
- ¹¹ Carl Jung, Modern Man in Search of a Soul (London: Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1961).
- ¹² Ibid: 121.
- ¹³ Carl Jung, Psychology and the East (London: Ark 1978).
- ¹⁴ Arnold Toynbee "The Nature of Historical Thought" A Study of History. (London: Oxford University Press, 1951).
- ¹⁵ M. H. Abrams A Glossary of Literary Terms (Bangalore: Prism 1993) 122.

CHAPTER I

REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIA THROUGH TRAVEL NARRATIVES

"It's no place to put a nunnery." No place to put a nunnery. It sounded odd and uncouth, and he said it again on the terrace when she asked him why the Brothers had left it so soon. "It's an impossible place for a nunnery."
This time she answered blandly: "Difficult, but not impossible Mr. Dean."

In Rumer Godden's novel Black Narcissus¹ the above conversation takes place between Sister Clodagh and Mr. Dean, the enigmatic and insolent man the sisters go to for assistance. Mr. Dean's remark dogs the entire novel; soon after Sister Clodagh and her sorority come to an old palace in Darjeeling, strange events begin to happen: the beauty of the place revokes for sister Clodagh memories of a past love affair that comes dangerously close to be replaying itself with Mr. Dean, Sister Ruth's pernicious envy of her eventually leads to her own destruction. The novel's underlying themes of sexual jealousy and the isolation of the nuns from the natives seem to hint at the dark strains of unease that the British felt in India.

While novels on the theme of the encounter of the British with India are many, travel narratives exploring the nature of the encounter are fewer and lesser known.

This chapter aims to examine various travel narratives, beginning from the time of E.M. Forster, on the entity called India. The aim is to examine Michael Wood's representation of India in The Smile of Murugan. Appeals to the past are often made to examine the present; this analysis examines various representations of India, to evaluate changes that have occurred from a colonial to a postcolonial circumstance. Consistency is one of the issues under examination - a comparative study reveals common themes as well as major breakthroughs, if any.

Before beginning an analysis of the travel narratives themselves, I give here a layout of the different theoretical perspectives on travel writing and the East-West encounter. Postcolonial perspectives on travel writing by Europeans maintain that the question of travel becomes inseparable from that of power and desire. Questions of power and dominance form the nexus of much of postcolonial criticism; one of the aims of this chapter is to uncover the shifting nature of this power; how different historical contexts produced varieties of power.

During the Renaissance, the voyages of discovery engaged most confidently in capturing and possessing 'new' lands. Stephen Greenblatt analyzes the voyages of 'discovery' undertaken by Columbus and the nature and

psychology of possession that was implicit in these voyages. He uses the example of Mandeville's Travels as a means of understanding Columbus, possibly in the construction of a radical other - the former's descriptions of people beyond the Holy Land are 'horrifically different from himself.' While Mandeville seems to display some form of tolerance to these other people, he does this by distancing himself - this is what Greenblatt calls 'theoretical curiosity'.² A much more potent form of Mandeville's inquisitiveness is Columbus's drive to possession. Greenblatt traces this to the philosophical and religious ethos of the time - wonder, especially in perceptions of nature, was adverse to the beneficial authority of the Christian God. It therefore stood for all that defied appropriation; and was thus possibly a spur to possession. For Columbus, it was linked to heroic enterprise; as Greenblatt puts it, "wonder tries to fill up the emptiness at the maimed rite of possession."³ Wonder entices him to the act of naming, and naming to possession.

This was a new step in the history of travel narratives; in the past Mandeville's Travels had attempted distorted descriptions of new peoples but had never attempted to capture them. Mandeville, writes Greenblatt, used strategies that stressed both similarities and

differences of other cultures, but manipulated them by distorting the *logic* of a particular custom. Mandeville is thus constructed by Greenblatt as the archetypal mendacious traveller, using his own experiences to create a monstrous land beyond the Holy Land to which he belonged. While Greenblatt does take into consideration the fact that natives were ignored or tortured, there is not the consideration of the how natives absorbed the dominant cultures.

Mary Louise Pratt, in her book Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation⁴ introduces the term *transculturation*, which describes how dominant cultures are absorbed by subordinate groups. What she calls contact-zones, are determined by the extent to which transculturation takes place, travel narratives afford an individualized version of this. Pratt asserts that every travel narrative has a "heteroglossic" dimension. This defines a way of seeing not simply through the senses, but through interaction with the natives, or what she calls 'travelees'. This interaction is usually a negative one, of the dominance of the traveler over the 'travelee'. Auto-representation of the 'travelee' becomes marginal. Local meanings and histories are rendered meaningless unless they have a utilitarian purpose.⁵

Pratt's context is also that of the expansionist voyages that led to the discovery of the Americas, the theme she explores is the representation of the Americas in terms of the marvelous and the monstrous. One example is the case of Alexander von Humboldt, whose thirty-volume voyage sought to reinvent popular imaginings of America and through it, the entire planet. The book aims at examining various strategies of representations adopted by European travel writers in the process of economic expansion.

An important section in the book is entitled "The White Man's lament", about the post-colonial traveller adventurer; the monarch-of-all-I-survey attitude is reenacted from the hotel balconies of underdeveloped cities. In her words,

"The impulse of these postcolonial metropolitan writers is to condemn what they see, trivialize it, and dissociate themselves entirely from it."⁶ This is the voice of tourism, with its made to order capsules of places, to be ticked off on a mental diary of tours that one has accomplished.

Greenblatt and Pratt's analyses give us examples of how the 'new-world' was constructed in the context of the Renaissance. They are also examples of how texts can be read and the motives of writers uncovered. They give us an idea of what the aims of travel could be, but of course

these aims differ from the motives that were part of the planning and ideology of whole nations. Travel writing thus has these attributes, of spanning across writings of people with differing motives, from expansion to a personal journal or memoir. Pratt and Greenblatt reveal that representations by westerners could be unhesitatingly dominating; they are useful to us to that extent. Said's Orientalism gives us a framework specifically dealing with the East-West encounter. One of Said's main points in the Introduction is that a European or American writer carries the weight of his conditioning at every moment of writing. 'Natural' writing is virtually impossible, the hiatus that exists between perception and expression, is interrupted by the politics of power.⁷

Representation aside, the main intellectual issue raised by Orientalism is whether or not human reality can be divided into different cultures, races, histories, traditions and societies and survive the consequences humanly. Said asks if it is possible to "study other cultures and peoples from a libertarian or non-repressive and non-manipulative perspective."⁸ The enquiry in this chapter engages with this question too.

I am especially interested in the section entitled 'Pilgrims and Pilgrimages', as Said explains here the

motives travellers of the West had in going eastward. According to him, most pilgrimages were attempts to relive Judeo-Christian or Graeco-Roman religious feeling. Moreover, it was a territorial imperative; for the British India was a possession, images of which were often constructed from fragments of texts or, simply, a figment of the imagination.⁹

The study I propose to carry out here is that of mainly British travel narratives on India. It is a chronological study, beginning with The Hill of Devi: Being Letters from Dewas State Senior¹⁰ by E.M. Forster, and ending with The Smile of Murugan, by Michael Wood. The obvious limitation of such a study is that since the time gaps between these various texts are very many, an analysis of their representations may not present the complete picture of trends. There is also the risk of oversimplification, that the texts chosen are representative of their time.

A representation is essentially an interpretation of people and places. In the early history of interpreting travel texts, James Clifford points out that a certain 'experiential authority' passed muster in order to write about it. This rather naïve intuition has now given way to interpreting cultural 'texts' - a process through which

"unwritten behaviour, speech, belief, ritual, come to be marked as a corpus, a potentially meaningful ensemble. In the moment of textualization, this meaningful corpus assumes a more or less stable relation to a context."¹¹

A writer like Greenblatt, to invoke him once again, interrogates this stability of contexts; they are to him a flux of events and experiences. Only by a process of brute imposition can stable contexts be discerned; in the context of this chapter this imposition is the gaze of the colonizer. Greenblatt asks what the nature of interceding elements are that constitute a 'blockage' that brings this about - some examples he gives are guilt, anxiety and pleasure. Obviously, other than the unabashed looking of the colonizer, other forces operate. The texts examined in this section shall be analysed for these other influences; the constrictions and impositions effected by them. Voyage was not the circumstance of these writings, rather, they were exiles of duty that the British undertook to improve the lot of the Indians. When these texts were written, India was on the brink of political independence; it had been shaped mostly by colonialism and European expansionism. But these were not integrating 'forces' that shaped India in any absolute sense, they were defining moments in the life of the nation and it is useful to bear

this in mind.¹² Partha Chatterjee thinks that anti-colonial nationalism was what shaped this identity, as was colonial enlightenment.

Anti-colonial nationalism abstracted certain characteristics of the colonialist mentality such as material advancement and progress, even as the 'inner' realm of family and 'spirituality' were shielded from the outsider.¹³ From without, colonial enlightenment sought to query the exclusiveness of Christianity; it brought to light the validity of other religions. It even went to the extent of idealizing the Oriental philosopher and statesman.¹⁴ It would not be inaccurate to say that a text like The Hill of Devi is an example of one with such a motive. A collection of letters written to an unknown recipient in England, it is an interesting example of how abroad, India was represented to an audience at home. In this sense, these letters become a definition of national identity, even though 'culture' is one of the main dealings of the text. It reveals a close first person account of interaction on a personal level; the narration is what Wayne C. Booth calls a combination of "scene" and "summary". "Scenes" are "shown" in the description of a meal - the positions that people occupy on the floor, what each person eats, and how the various dishes are arranged

on the plate; a summary is "told" in descriptions of daily routine.¹⁵ Whether it is "showing" or "telling", the writer, in the beginning, revels in the novelty of new experiences. After the initial phase, the letters begin to make forays into details of everyday living. Forster reveals an open-mindedness to religion and is particularly curious about concepts such as Salvation, Heaven, Hell, God and the discursive aspects of religion. In the old palace of his host, he experiences the 'numinous' and a 'feeling of liberation.' Is this merely enthusiasm for the new, or is it genuine mysticism? Forster observes that a mixture of fatuousness and speculation runs through religion. While there is this awareness of fatuity, curiously, there is also the appreciation of the aesthetic. "The expressions of most people were beautiful that day."¹⁶ It is this ambivalence that makes it difficult to pin down the writer's actual opinion. One thing that emerges clearly is Forster's appreciation of the strength of people's religious belief albeit with a touch of theoretical curiosity. His final position of exteriority, however is obvious when he says: "There is no dignity, no taste, no form and though I am dressed as a Hindoo, I shall never become one."¹⁷

Yet the ritualistic aspect of the religion is narrated with increasing frequency - the birth of a baby, the extraordinary rites that accompany it, the Dassera festival, Gokulashtami. The endless meaninglessness of these rites does not prevent the writer from writing about them, and the spectacle that is offered. Besides, Forster's understanding of the religion is not free of stereotyping-Devi, the dominating hill for him is the terrifying aspect of the Goddess and he attributes to it a timeless quality.

Forster moved in the cosseted circles of aristocracy; he develops an intense fondness for the ruler. There is hardly any contact with the "common person" - the salaaming servants fade away into the background. The people Forster really comes into contact with are the Prince, scholars and other Englishmen. Aspects of life such as worship, music, and drama simply go on around him and he observes, holding himself aloof.

It may be concluded that while Forster is not brute-orientalist, he does display characteristics of Pratt's seeing-man, observing as the scenery reveals itself to him.

Another writer who comes to India on 'holiday' like Forster, is J.R.Ackerley. The circumstances are similar- his main purpose is as companion to a prince. At the

outset of Hindoo Holiday¹⁸ he is bewildered at the lack of coherence about him:

In that muddled land, I am told... there is no uniformity; racial, religious, and caste distinctions have severed one man from another and language, dress, and custom and superstition vary from place to place.

Like Forster, he, too records details of life about him - the dress, and food habits of the "natives". Ackerly is fascinated by the taboos that surround him - the first of these encounters is his ban from having tea with his host. The title itself suggests that he sees life in "India" as "Hindoo", that he in fact equates the two. Like Forster again, he is curious about the various ideas of mainstream Hinduism. Apart from interludes of information, however, there is nothing to suggest the author's interest in the nature of religious belief. The various tableaux staging myths from the epics, apart from spectacle are instances of comic relief from the mechanical tropes of superstitious enactments of ritual.

Interestingly, Ackerley inhabits a nearly all-male world. The only women he meets and converses with are some Anglo-Indian women, this is of no consequence to the plot of the text. The "native" woman he meets is the sister of Narayan, a valet; he merely catches a glimpse of her. Even

the female characters of the staged episodes of the epics and myths, are in fact men in feminine costumes. Ackerley's encounters with the Indian male are in many instances homoerotic. The voyeuristic gaze falls on the bone structure, the skin colour and grace of movement- as Said suggests it seems to be a sojourn of indulgence in private fantasies suppressed at home - the Victorians emphasized a dominating masculinity. Victorian stereotypes of the "natives" are present: langour, sensitivity, fatalism. These in addition to the Victorian temperament which involved a rigid code of conduct results in a mutual isolation between him and the "native" who is also caught up in an elaborate system of taboos, codes, and strictures.

'Culture' for writers of this time was, then, relatively fixed, stable and enduring entity, rooted in the idea that it was a single, evolutionary process towards the aim of individual liberation. Whether or not differing ways of life are meaningful is never explicitly stated, such a sensibility has to be searched for.

II

The first section of this chapter dealt with what may be called expansionist interaction between the British and the Indians. Forster's travel is reminiscent of the exile

of duty that the British undertook in order to be in India. Paul Fussell provides a useful framework of categories: exploration, travel and tourism.¹⁹ Imperialistic expansion had echoes of Renaissance exploration at least in the element of discovery involved. Difference was stable; there were no signs of change, at least temporarily. But Francis Hutchins' phrase, 'the illusion of permanence'²⁰ is apt, in later phases, difference is no longer an exotic otherness. The traveller, according to Fussell, mediates between the two extremes of exploration and tourism.

In this section I intend to explore how the touristic gaze operates in travel writing on India and how the rhetoric of self-other relations came about. The traveller vacillates between the two extremes of exploration and tourism; but the difference between a traveller and a tourist may be found in their differing motives. The tourist travels to increase his social status, to temporarily become one of a class superior to his own.²¹ But is the tourist gaze more pervasive than this? The texts I have chosen for this section are Theroux and V.S. Naipaul. The texts are: The Great Railway Bazaar: By Train through Asia²² (I have chosen those sections devoted to India) and An Area of Darkness²³ respectively. These writers are of origin other than Indian I choose them in part because a

heterogeneous mix of writers makes for a filtered image of India; choosing all writers from the same background, say British, makes for a monochromatic image. It also helps define a British gaze, if such a thing exists.

In Theroux's writing, it is obvious from the beginning that 'tourist angst', a white male upper middle class license operates. The traveller distances himself from what he sees, and his state of mind is one of aimlessness. Theroux wanders into the Frontier Mail, and the first person he meets is a young European drug addict. He is quick to link his derelict state to the decadence of the land; both are in a state of decay. Theroux says that he is unable to discern anything about rural life, except that he is required to keep a distance. His tourist imagination is thrown out of its habitual vacancy when it meets in a railway station, instead of the placelessness of places, (Fussell's phrase) the tumult of village life. He is particularly disgusted by the sight of people defecating, and contemptuously labels India the "turd world."²⁴ This image of defecation in public is the ultimate symbol of loss of self-respect and poverty, as it indeed is. But what is missing is a sense of introspection, that the colonial impact was at least a partial cause of the Indian condition. Decay, filth and dirt become an obsession for

many writers of this phase. Scatological imagery is to be found in Naipaul too, many of his conclusions are an emotional reaction to filth. Levi- Strauss gives it a domestic status, by the sheer fact that it has been trampled upon, exuded and excreted by so many.²⁵

Naipaul is an especially interesting writer since his origins are Indian, the India he resurrects in his imagination through objects of the past - brass vessels, straw mats, string beds cannot quite contain a complex society that he encounters. The eye is shocked by the chaos it meets and a series of stereotypes are spewed forth: insecurity, heat, disease, terror. Naipaul's central metaphor is that of darkness, one of the main vehicles of this is the caste system.

It is in his critique of the caste system that Naipaul is most successful, but even here it is a homogenized vision, in the sense that Naipaul is unable to discern the complex reactions of the 'lower-castes'; to him they are just another cog in an outdated wheel. The only semblance of survival that Naipaul discerns is in the mimicry of the colonial - and this too, according to him, is a pretense, lightly worn so as to make room for an alien aristocracy.

While Naipaul rubs shoulders with people from different classes, there is no attempt to describe the

daily concerns of these people, still less to empathize. People are described in terms of their economic position, the six- hundred rupee-a-month man and the twelve-hundred - rupee-a-month man. People become non-persons, the poorer and more oppressed the person, the greater the lack of emotion in Naipaul's tone.

There is often a tendency to form hasty conclusions without concrete support, the travel book becomes a space in which personal opinion is aired - for example, the Indian's lack of a sense of interiors is linked to his "history" - luxury for Indians is contrived and strenuous; incidentally this is a history that the writer is confident of knowing.

But the trope that he returns to again and again is filth. Colour by contrast becomes a stimulus to observe the exotic: rugs, carpets, and shawls. Kashmir, the 'medieval city' is surrounded by wonders which he can vent his artistically trained mind upon, but which, according to him, are lost upon the Indian mind. This is the crux of Naipaul's thesis - that Indians lack a sense of history: "In Kashmir, conversion to Islam could take place because that mind was without a sense of history "... should another conversion now occur, in a hundred years, there would be no memory of Islam."²⁶ His most disturbing conclusion is that

Indian interpretations of history are as painful as the history itself - the absence of growth and development is a history whose only lesson is that life goes on. Naipaul's idea of history is rooted in the western rational of progress. This coincides with the idea of civilization in the nineteenth century, which makes distinctions between 'advanced' and 'primitive' societies, as though, to use the definition of the Encyclopedia Britannica, "it were a unilinear development of the past, with 'lesser' peoples at different stages of that development."²⁷ Naipaul's is an uneasy hybridity that he himself does not apprehend. His anxious search for his roots concludes in fantasy - the landscape of the Himalayas are apt ground for the legends that surround it. While filth is a mockery of what civilization ought to be, Naipaul perhaps naively, attributes a pristine purity to the landscape there: "Out of the shadow of the valley the broad pyramidal slope of Amarnath burst upon us, rock-strewn, quivering white in sunlight; and the cave to which it led rose black and still... it dwarfed the pilgrims seething at its mouth."²⁸

The words 'burst' and 'quivering' suggest states of mind taken momentarily out of habitual patterns of thought, as they do life and energy. 'White', 'black' and 'sunlight' form a group of contrasts, as do 'quivering' and 'still';

'rose' suggests size, as opposed to 'dwarfed.' The passage is packed with suggestions of energy and life, as well as stillness and grandeur. Naipaul's mind lapses for an instant, stilled for a moment by the immensity of it.

This landscape is suitable ground for an ancient religion. But, it acquires picture-postcard predictability on the appearance of a tigerskin-clad trident-holding sadhu. Naipaul does not exploit his intellectual alienation - his isolation is something he cannot learn from. He is eager to return, reclaiming the Himalayas is last act before he leaves for home. His excursions are not merely touristic, but his attempts to write a history are devoid of participation. These writers bear the marks of tourism because there is an easy return to a home; they become mere *flaneurs*, observing from a safe distance.

III

The previous section reminds us to come back to certain basic questions that arise in any cross-cultural encounter, some of these have been raised by James Clifford:

Who has the authority to speak for a group's identity or authenticity? What are the essential elements in and boundaries of a culture? How do self and other clash and converse in the encounters of ethnography, travel, modern interethnic relations? What narratives of development, loss, and innovation can account for

the present range of local oppositional movements?²⁹

These questions were asked in the context of modern interpretive ethnography, which interrogated subjective entities such as intuition and experience. Also, the main agency that was interrogated was colonialism. Ethnographic accounts exist, however, of European encounter with the east, which try to show that not all of these encounters were those of radical 'othering'. In his book Travel and Ethnography in the Renaissance: South India through European eyes 1250-1625,³⁰ Joan Pau-Rubies argues that European interaction with India in the Renaissance was not simply that of domination, the interaction was based on a complex set of impulses and motives; European curiosity was whetted by the presence of political unity and centralized institutions. A variety of travel genres were created due to the differing motives - one that included geographic, economic and ethnographic information, and another, for historical knowledge.³¹

It is my intention in this chapter to use some of Rubies' approaches so that a dialectic may be set up between this point of view and another which opposes

it. While Rubies' context is that of the Renaissance, some of the questions on travel are relevant even at the present moment. Rubies writes of the presence of inter-subjective elements, that is, of a dialogue based on contrasting and negotiating the values of different traditions. While the white writer is limited to what his cultural background allows him to see, he is not necessarily completely isolated. Rubies takes the example of Marco Polo - he is un-isolated because he is willing to exchange stories and participate in local traditions. Marco Polo in fact places religious beliefs as part of a general ethnographic language, to him it was an important cultural marker. Culture is a series of 'language-games' which the travel writer has to decode in order to 'interpret' or understand. Rubies argues that while Marco Polo does talk about such wonders as dog-headed men, such tales may have been borrowed from popular collections of stories. Certain themes seem to engage Marco Polo's attention - religious and magical practices, but this does not prevent him from understanding according to his profession - that of a merchant-traveller. He seemed to have believed in the logic that people from different lands followed

different customs. Polo saw the east in the company of non-christians; this possibly made him observe other cultures without the will to impose.³²

Rubies seems to focus on those travellers who were interested in religion. He takes the example of Jesuit missionaries, for whom, during the waning of the Vijayanagar kingdom, the problem of an idolatrous urban civilisation was significant. Interest in India deepened in order to understand the religious dimension; secularism had to be made room for. The case of Roberto de Nobili is particularly interesting; he chose to orientalize himself and speak to Hindus about religion on their own terms. While examples are many, one of the book's central points is that learning about other cultures implies a dissolving of strong centres of observation. The travellers were convinced that empirical observation and participation were possible; these were the defining characteristics of the genre. The book says that there was no one uniform image of India - narratives differed not only due to the profession and personal backgrounds of the writer; a series of social contexts and historical reasons shaped the narrative.

The Smile of Murugan is a book that sees Indian religion as an alternative to the spirit of rational skepticism of the West. What surprises the writer is the

enthusiasm with which people engage in their religion- as a still significant centre of life. The driving force of the book is not the geographic, political or economic aspects of Tamil life but to record the religious practices and history of the land. Like Forster there is an exteriority, however uplifting the sight 'of others' devotion is. But for Wood there is a reining in of the self, due to the satiation of the senses: the smell of incense, *ghee*, flowers, and the sight of the flame and the sound of cymbals clashing in a temple. Inter-subjective elements are implicitly present; the fact that the *oduvars* sing the *tevaram* is compared to the recitation of Beowulf in present day England.

India for Michael Wood is the holy land, it easily acquires a mythical character, but unlike Naipaul's image, it is not one that is idolatrous or superstitious. Naipaul constructs a hierarchy of civilisations, Michael Wood seeks a self understanding by examining an alien culture. The narrative voice is restrained, in his own words, that of an interested outsider. But the even objectivity is broken encountering *trance* - the narrative becomes tense and wary, the frenzied movements are an intrusion on controlled observation.

This kind of observation finds security in the observation of ritual - the ossified rituals of a two thousand years old tradition that adheres to rules that sustain a system of belief.

It is interesting to ask at this point, given the antiquity of the religion, what the nature of transculturation has been. Michael Wood does not see the painful hybridity that Theroux or Naipaul see, he insists that modernity is accepted on its own terms. This is a change from a writer like Forster, who constructs the other in terms of a limiting inherited past.

For Wood, the pulchritude of the mother Goddess and the magnificence of the dance of destruction of a great god obscure the clash of self and other. The boundaries seem to become fluid as he accesses with ease the home of the mediating figure of Mala, a woman in small town Chidambaram. Mala's interaction with Michael Wood preserves all the decorum that behooves a married Indian woman as she guides him through the pilgrimage through Tamil Nadu - explaining various customs of food, religious belief, ritualistic practice and so on. It is by no means an ordinary event that the conservatism of a middle class mainstream Hindu family gives a married woman the agency to interact with a white man, given the system of domination

and control that such a position is acted upon with. There are times when the boundaries dissolve at the religious level too. In seeing different gods and goddesses, of south India, Michael Wood sees in them the archetypes of gods and goddesses of his own culture - Minakshi is thus Demeter, Isis or Ishtar. The familiar is encountered in a strange milieu, in a sense, but in another, the strange is no longer, in a word, strange:

It felt like meeting someone once known but long forgotten. Aphrodite, Artemis, Athena, Demeter, Nut, Isis, Ishtar. We know their names and attributes but we meet them only in their residue of their aura, in books, paintings, symbols... But to meet her living incarnation, was, to say the least, exciting...there is an archaic, irrepressible current in Indian life which has never been done away with by the westernization or modernization of our own times."³³

Michael Wood's tendency here is to see Tamil culture as a traditionalized, ancient other of modern western man. He sees religion as a continuum unto modern times there is an easy marriage of the two. The gaps in the continuum are not examined closely - the heterogeneous layers of caste and its social implications are glossed over. In this sense, it is not a political travelogue; it is a critique of modernity, of its refusal to admit of 'imaginal' worlds.

What Evelyn Waugh calls the quintessential travel book, not simply full of dramatic incidents but full of the

frustrations of daily life, are absent in Michael Wood, he prefers to make them centres of humour.³⁴ The dramatic is the driving force of the book, discoveries of the ineluctable kind fill it.

Personal opinions are possible in the space of a travel book, on subjects that may not have been studied with a specialist's eye. Aldous Huxley's *Beyond the Mexique Bay*³⁵ refers constantly to painting - landscape is bound in this static frame, perhaps to be examined the more closely. V.S. Naipaul calls Delhi a city of ruins- the architecture is a symbol of the grandiose aims that the British could not fulfill in India. Theroux in Simla sees the beauty of colonial architecture but rues the absence of scandal. When Michael Wood goes to Madurai, he describes the enclaves there in terms of light and shade: lamps and fires, brass and silver glinting, shafts of sunlight. Again, it is a description of minute detail - noises, smells and light. He recalls the reactions of older generations of writers; Francis Yeats Brown, for instance. There is self-consciousness about being British, and perhaps a twinge of white guilt as well. Wood's critique of British opinions is supported by his erudition. In this he is similar to William Dalrymple in his book At the Court of the Fish-Eyed Goddess: Travels through the Indian Subcontinent.³⁶

Dalrymple's travels through south India are similar to Wood's in many ways; the description of ritual, trance and worship. But while Woods speculations are at times uncannily accurate, Dalrymple at times veers off the mark; it is difficult to imagine an arrogant Buddha at Gandhara. Dalrymple, too, is introspective of his 'phirangee' origins, he honestly admits that India thrilled, frightened and excited him. Dalrymple's narrative is dominated by interviews with the political *glitterati* of the subcontinent - Benazir Bhutto, the Rajmata of Gwalior and Prabhakaran of the LTTE. Preoccupation with the politics of the country blocks any sense of history that the writer might have had. The strength of the interview mode is that it makes for reciprocity. Dalrymple and Wood belong to a generation of writers who seek to distance themselves from their colonial pasts, who seek to project themselves as self-effacing outsiders. Erudition proves to be a hindrance to this specious silence on the squalour, poverty and misery to be found in every street corner.

Travel narratives of the post-colonial period seems condemned to oscillate between invectives on filth and eulogies on an ancient histories. There seems to be no travel book which examines the Indian condition today, which looks at life in India in the context of a past

colonial dominance, without attempting to romanticise its ancient past. Touristic elements are to be found in all these narratives; the very return to a 'home' suggests this. The shift from the imperialistic gaze to tourist's is blurred, it is difficult to say when the shift occurred. However, the later narratives such as those just analysed seem to display a greater sensitivity to their subject.

Notes

- ¹ Rumer Godden, Black Narcissus (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1950) 32.
- ² Stephen Greenblatt, Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World (London: Oxford U P, 1983) 47.
- ³ Ibid. 58.
- ⁴ Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes : Travel Writing and Transculturation (London: Routledge, 1989).
- ⁵ Ibid. 68, 152.
- ⁶ Ibid: 174.
- ⁷ Edward Said, Orientalism: Western Conceptions of the Orient (London: Penguin, 1993)
- ⁸ Ibid.. 23.
- ⁹ Ibid. 117.
- ¹⁰ E. M. Forster , The Hill Of Devi: Being Letters from Dewas State Senior (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1953).
- ¹¹ James Clifford, The Predicament of Culture Twentieth Century Ethnography, Literature and Art (Massachussets: Harvard U P 1988) 8.
- ¹² Francis Hutchins, The Illusion of Permanence : British Imperialism in India (New Jersey: Princeton University Press 1967) 23.
- ¹³ Partha Chaterjee., The Nation and its Fragments : Colonial and post Colonial Histories (Delhi: OUP 1997) 6- 7 .
- ¹⁴ Hutchins : 47.
- ¹⁵ Wayne C Booth , The Rhetoric of Fiction (London : U of Chicago 1973) 52.
- ¹⁶ Forster : 38
- ¹⁷ Ibid :20.
- ¹⁸ J R Ackerly , Hindoo Holiday : An Indian Journal (Hammondsworth: Penguin 1932) 2.
- ¹⁹ Paul Fussell , Abroad : British Literary Travelling between the Wars (Oxford. OUP ,1982) 37
- ²⁰ Title, Hutchins 1967.
- ²¹ Fussell 1982: 49.
- ²² Paul Theroux, The Great Railway Bazaar: By Train through Asia (Hammondsworth: Penguin, 1966).
- ²³ V.S.Naipaul, An Area of Darkness (London : Penguin, 1964).
- ²⁴ Theroux 1966 : 79.
- ²⁵ Claude Levi-Strauss, " Calcutta" Tristes Tropiques (Hammondsworth · Penguin, 1959) 64 .
- ²⁶ Naipaul 1964:70.
- ²⁷ Encyclopedia Britannica Inc " Civilisation and Cultural Evolution" Vol 4, 1984 : 657,
- ²⁸ Naipaul, 1964 : 168.
- ²⁹ Clifford ,1988:8.

³⁰ Joan- Pau Rubies, Travel Writing and Ethnography: South India through European Eyes 1250-1625 (Cambridge; CUP, 2000).

³¹ Ibid. 12.

³² Ibid. 83.

³³ Wood, 1996: 162-63.

³⁴ Fussell, 1982 : 83.

³⁵ Aldous Huxley, Beyond the Mexique Bay (New York: Harper and Brothers, 1934).

³⁶ William Dalrymple, At the Court of the Fish-Eyed Goddess: Travels through the Indian Subcontinent.(New Delhi: HarperCollins 1999).

CHAPTER II

ALEXANDER THE GREAT: HISTORY VERSUS LEGEND

The previous chapter dealt with the ideological preconceptions with which India has been represented - the encounter of the West with the East in the specific British-Indian context. In the book In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great¹ one of the themes Michael Wood seeks to examine is the meeting of East and West and the eastern responses to this encounter. In writing this book, Wood has used various sources - mostly of historians of around the Alexandrian age. One of his main sources is the Greek writer Arrian, the other being the Latin biographer Curtius. One of the aims of this chapter is to examine how Michael Wood uses his sources; I have limited a detailed analysis to the case of Arrian. One of the questions raised in this chapter is whether there are 'real Alexander text' or are there only 'Alexander texts.' This chapter is not an exercise in assessing the *historical* merits of either Wood's nor Arrian's texts; the various wars that Alexander fought, whose descriptions form the bulk of the narrative shall not be examined in either case in terms of authenticity or how it affected Alexander's career. These are topics perhaps best left for the student of military

history. Nor is it aimed at assessing the literary merits of either text.

Rather, it is an exercise in comparing the intentions and assumptions of the two writers and as to how their specific historical contexts produced a text such as Alexander. The dominant ideologies of the time are reflected in the writing of the times; this shall be the focus of my examination, including the portrayal of Alexander. What images of the individual, Alexander, are generated through the writing? At this point, it is instructive to consider various images and readings of Alexander the great that have been generated through the ages. I draw upon the article "Alexander the Great and the Popular"² by Diana Spencer. She says that even at an early stage, the ambiguities of Alexander's personality were obvious. In Latin versions, the portrayal of excess is linked to his orientalised, as also in Greek versions, as we shall see a little later. Going eastward came to be linked with the mythic and the unknowable. The Romance tradition developed the significance of portents, monstrous creatures and barbarous people to the extreme. In the Middle Ages, it was its many narrative possibilities that made it popular - the mystical, the philosophical and the moralistic. Writers of the Renaissance and the Romantics

emphasized the individualism of Alexander. Thus the potentialities of the tale are immense, as it works on many cultural levels, and fulfils many audience expectations.

To go on to the Greek sources, I begin by considering the case of Arrian. By the year 2 BC, Greek literature rapidly declined - this was the end of the Alexandrian age. Around three centuries later, (AD 117), there was a Greek renaissance, of which Arrian was a part. The writing of this time was deliberately archaizing, trying to emulate the style of three or four hundred years ago; to the writers of this age, it was the best idiom. Arrian's writing is thus inspired by a 'classical age'; already, there is the memory, an image of a past, perhaps a nostalgia that is at work.

It is not surprising, then, that one of the first points which captures the attention of the reader is Arrian's *emotional commitment* to his topic. It is obvious from a reading that this was intended to be his masterpiece - intended to achieve fame. Arrian shows a fervent desire for the story to be better known - that amounts to the desire to popularize. Other narratives of Alexander existed at this point of time with differing thrusts - Callisthenes' (Alexander's friend and Aristotle's nephew account had a 'heroic' touch. A pupil of the philosopher

Diogenes wrote an account that had a definite Cynic flavour. Arrian's own account was influenced by the Stoic philosopher Epictetus, as for example, the high moral standards by which he assess Alexander. Thus, Alexander though portrayed as a man of great ambition, also has the rectitude to repent for his great crimes³.

Arrian's writing was from an entirely Greek point of view - the Greeks considered anybody other than themselves to be 'barbarians'; the word derives from the sound 'bar-bar' which people of any other kind were supposed to make. The Greeks divided humans into Hellenes and barbarians, the difference being that barbarians were slaves and "we Hellenes, free men."⁴ Aristotle is said to have inspired Alexander with a love of things Greek, especially of Homer. Arrian's sources are mainly Greek - Aristobulus and Ptolemy. E.M. Errington's article 'Bias in Ptolemy's History of Alexander'⁵ is an important source which proves how Ptolemy cannot be regarded as an entirely reliable source. In fact, since Arrian drew heavily on Ptolemy, the latter's weaknesses reflect on the former's accounts of Alexander. The first point that Errington makes is that Ptolemy's unwillingness to allow too much success to Alexander's nobles emphasizes his loyalist point of view. Ptolemy himself was active under Alexander, and his silence

about other generals could be to exaggerate his own importance. Ptolemy's silence in another account, of the battle of Malli, is clearly reflected in Arrian: there is no mention of Aristonus, one of the main generals who fought to protect Alexander's body (Curtius gives a detailed account of this).

Perhaps one of the most dramatic incidents of Alexander's life was the death of Clitus. While Alexander was indulging in deprecating his father Phillip's conquests, Clitus stood up for him. Alexander tried to kill him and according to Arrian, was restrained by 'some of his drinking companions'. According to another source which Arrian cites, (that of Aristobulus) Ptolemy rushed Clitus away before any damage could be done, but Clitus rushed back providing Alexander the opportunity. Ptolemy suppresses his own role in the incident, showing that he did not want the fact that he was involved in the incident to be known.⁶

Arrian's tendency to follow the campaigns strictly from Alexander's point of view rather than give a well-rounded picture of the war has been criticised by P.A. Brunt in the essay 'Persian Accounts Of Alexander the Great'.⁷ According to Brunt, Arrian does not tell of the plans of Darius, nor that the war had begun in Philip's

reign, nor of its causes. Brunt puts these silences down to Arrian's need to conceal the extent of opposition to his hero in Greece.⁸ Arrian's narrative begins dramatically - Alexander has already ascended the throne and is about to launch an attack on areas bordering Macedonia. Through his military operations Alexander emerges as a shrewd and merciless warrior, and Arrian no doubt sees these as admirable qualities. According to Arrian, Alexander won all the wars waged, with ease. It is important to note that Arrian sees these victories as instances of courage. The quality of *pothos*, or a maniacal drive for success is not mentioned. It is surprising that nowhere is Alexander's intelligence or wit considered to be of advantage to him - it is as though courage and ambition are the only admirable attributes.

Michael Wood's narrative begins with the historical context - of the years before Alexander's birth. It is obvious that the fact that Wood writes in the modern period allows him more access to materials (Wood's text can also be seen as historiography of Alexander as it evolved relating to Alexander. Michael Wood traces the context of the years before Alexander's birth - the enmity that existed between the Persians and the Macedonians. Alexander's birth, his early years in a hard drinking hard

driving atmosphere, his relationship with his mother and the subsequent warmth of his relationships with older women are delineated with an objectivity that is possible only in a modern historian. What is interesting in Michael Wood's approach is that he traces out the various images that history has had of him - in the middle ages as the "perfect knight" and the philosopher king - and more interestingly, for us, in the latter days of the British empire, a benevolent empire builder of their own kind- "dreaming of the unity of mankind under one rule, irrespective of race, creed or colour"⁹. This leads us to the question of whether or not Wood shows an awareness of ideas on race, colonialism and orientalism. Is Michael Wood then writing history that is post-colonial? If Naipaul displays an over-eagerness to espouse Englishness, does Michael Wood's claim that he views history from the point of view of the vanquished indicate a hybrid voice? If so, what exactly constitutes this hybridity? Is the writing of the Alexander tale a move towards re-inforcing a western as opposed to an eastern identity? For, to travel in Alexander's footsteps is to follow one of the most determined conquerors ever. Wood's point of view however, runs counter to Arrian's because it insists on pointing out Alexander's drive for

power and success. This is what validates his stance of writing history from the point of view of the oppressed.

To travel in Alexander's footsteps is perhaps different from writing the story of Alexander - for it is to relate the past to the present. It means to meet the remains of Alexander's conquests - in terms of people- for there was mixing of races - ruins, and historical sites. Besides, it represents the opening up of the east and west for the first time; and

... behind it, like a wrack of a receding tide, it has left strange and glittering debris: lost cities, blue-eyed Indians, exotic treasures, ancient manuscripts, and a harvest of amazing stories, songs, poems, myths and legends.¹⁰

To meet people and ask for their opinions of the story is to write it once again through the sieve of many layers of historical memory. Through his travels in the western world, it is Wood who relates tales and legends connected with Alexander. In these, Wood attempts to portray the strength of Alexander's belief in prophecies and miracles. It is only when he enters the eastern world, that local and oral points of view are heard. According to Wood, local legends of Iran are divided over Alexander. He is both loathsome and Shah of Shahs. In Firdowsi's tenth century epic, he is the hero, the rightful Shah appointed by

Darius. On the other hand, he is, in many religious folk plays, portrayed as a villain.

As part of the larger concern with orientalism in this dissertation, I will examine Alexander's own response to the orient and specifically how Arrian narrates this when compared to Michael Wood. The most striking example is that of their respective portrayals of Darius III. In the opinion of Arrian:

In military matters he was the feeblest and most incompetent of men; in other spheres his conduct appears to have been moderate and decent- though the truth may well be that, as his accession to the throne coincided with the declaration of war by Macedonia and Greece, he had no opportunity to play the tyrant. In the circumstances, being himself in greater peril than his subjects, he could hardly have treated them with the usual cruelty of the Oriental despot, even if he wished to do so.¹¹

It is thus obvious that Arrian had an orientalist attitude, one that stereotyped the Persian king in a particular way - for the common Greek view was that Darius was an effeminate coward. According to Brunt, Arrian's picture is a reflection of Ptolemy's. Curtius' account, however, reflects the attempts made by Alexander himself to transform the image of Darius. He had once treated him as enemy, but later punished his murderers and posed as his legitimate heir.

Arrian never questions the fact that for Alexander, to conquer, was to conquer the world. This was part of the mysterious allure of the east, and attitudes to India that we shall deal with later. Plutarch, however, called him the most handsome and tallest man in all of Asia. The historian Diodorus Siculus drew on a Persian source, which says that Darius was an extremely brave man, who even outwitted Alexander and his army on one occasion. Arrian, on another occasion regrets that Alexander's emulation

... of eastern extravagance, splendour and the fashion of the barbaric kings of treating their subjects as inferiors, regrettable too was the assumptions of Persian dress in place of what Macedonians have worn from time immemorial, and the unblushing exchange of his familiar headgear, so long victoriously worn, for the pointed bonnet of the Persians.¹²

Alexander, in fact, seems to have adopted many Persian customs but mostly for reasons of political strategy. His adoption of the process of *proskynesis*, the practice of prostrating oneself before the feet of the king, was adopted by him to satisfy his egoistic needs, and also to emphasize the fact that he was divine. For the Greeks, it was sacrilege; they did not worship a human who was alive. Alexander also used Persians in his administration, but it was the Greeks who controlled the army and the treasury. Natives were used to gain local knowledge and expertise.

Alexander married Roxanne, a Persian princess. A mass wedding took place at Susa, where members of his court married Persian women. However, contrary to what logic would demand, no Greek woman was married to a Persian nobleman.¹³

Arrian attempts to gloss over the less attractive side of Alexander. He even reveals a skepticism towards others' accounts of his misdeeds, as that of Callisthenes' who was dragged about in chains wherever the army went, and his health deteriorated until he died.

According to Wood, Alexander treated the religion of the Egyptians with respect, and was enthroned Pharaoh at Thebes. Alexander was eager to visit the shrine of Ammon to prove to himself and to the world that he was the son of Zeus-Ammon. It is this belief in himself as possessed of divinity, along with his alcoholism and superstition and excessive reliance on portents and omens that is made out to be the main cause of his downfall. According to Arrian, however, it was a device that Alexander used to impress his subjects. It is interesting to note that Arrian too seems to believe in these omens and portents. There are parts in which Arrian is extremely hesitant- as in the issue of the Gordian knot- he does not give a reason as to why and how

Alexander undid it. Here, Wood seems to think that it was part of Alexander's strategy in order to see himself as king of the world.

Michael Wood meets in many instances people for whom Alexander was the 'two-horned one.' or 'Alexander the accursed': the Zoroastrians considered him evil because he burnt down an entire library of Avestan texts. For Alexander himself, to conquer Asia and therefore India was to conquer the entire world. It is somewhat surprising that Arrian glosses over the conquest of Gandhara, for it is here that the encounter of East and West first took place, along with the mixing and intermingling of races. William Dalrymple speaks of an "astounding religion which worshipped a Buddha dressed in Greek toga".¹⁴ Dalrymple marvels at the hybridity of the Gandharan world – the names of the rulers were all modeled on Greek 'originals'. He exclaims:

They brought East and West together at the time when the British, the only other Europeans who ever succeeded in ruling the area, were still running through pre-historic fogs dressed in bearskins.¹⁵

Michael Wood stumbles upon a small town, Nyasa, whose inhabitants claim to be descendants of the followers of Dionysus, the Greek god of ecstasy. Since Alexander

believed himself to be descended from that god, the inhabitants of the town were spared. While Arrian is skeptical of this theory, Wood notes that in fact the worship of the Indo-European sky-god, the making of wine and the burial of the dead in coffins are just as the ancient Greeks did. Wood attributes this exoneration by Alexander of the inhabitants of Nyasa to his belief that he was divine, in turn part of the belief system of his world:

In the myths Perseus and Heracles (Hercules) sons of Zeus were his ancestors. Alexander was descendent in the male line from Heracles and Perseus, and through his mother, Achilles. His world did not distinguish between myth and history, and such claims were probably believed. For Alexander, Heracles Perseus and Achilles were real persons and his actual ancestors. Hence on his journey he would try to rival Heracles and Perseus... we can only speculate that such ideas lodged easily in Alexander's boyhood mind ...¹⁶

The fact that Wood often uses Arrian and does not limit this use to specifically military matters suggests that he does consider him a valuable source. This is despite the fact that he often uses other sources to counter him – as in narration of the Tyrian siege. Using the example of Curtius, he says that only the foreign

ambassadors were spared, while Arrian is silent on this matter.

Wood sees something of a tragic hero in Alexander; in the mould of Achilles or even Hamlet in his brooding fits of melancholy, his bouts of aggression and his drive for revenge.

Wood's account is clearly a popularisation of the tale, though not in Richard Hoggart's sense of undermining the senses. Nor does it show an excessive interest in Alexander's personal life.¹⁷ What it does is to make ancient accounts of the tale accessible. Wood makes the past available when a living witness is absent. This is one of the most valuable aspects of Wood's account. Wood's analysis can be termed historicist, with its emphasis on the historiography of Alexander, as in conceding that belief-systems have to be interpreted keeping in mind the context of the times in which they existed.¹⁸ It is this fact that lends stability to the narrative throughout.

II

In this section I will deal with the television series, In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great¹⁹ produced by the BBC in four episodes of one hour each. The series may be interpreted much as a written text is, since many of the responses to television and books are similar.²⁰ Visual

descriptions may be translated to verbal ones; the parts that I will analyse in detail will therefore be described verbally. However, since vision is the dominant mode of perception, the effects of visual perception need to be considered separately. John Berger, in his book Ways of Seeing²¹ uses the example of oil painting to show how vision has become a dominant mode of perception in modern society. The words used to say something about a painting, alters the way it is viewed. The 'voice over' of a television series performs this role, of interrupting the viewer's own thoughts and leading them to its own. Visual communication is highly participatory; according to Berger:

Our vision is continually active, continually moving, continually holding things in a circle around itself, constituting what is present to us as we are.

Soon after we can see, we are aware that we can also be seen. The eye of the other combines with our own eye to make it credible that we are part of the visible world.²²

In a medium such as television however, the impact could be much more powerful. For instance, it is easy to assume that the content of the medium is separate from the medium itself. Marshall McLuhan uses the example of electric light to show that, it is a medium that lacks a content; it is considered to have no message. Television, on the other hand, is its own

message because it involves a combination of tactile and kinetic facilities in order to make sense to the viewer. Further, this is the basis of participation for the viewer. The more central point in McLuhan's book is that the media are extensions of the senses – the radio of the ear, the book and television of the eye. The senses have the capacity to extend themselves beyond their normal capacities and create a reality that is separate from themselves. Television, then, while ostensibly informing from the outside, does so from the inside.²³

The main aim of this section is to examine the production as a popular account of history. In this version, the number of modes of travel used become visible; foot, car, bus, army truck, landrover, rickshaw, train, donkey, and helicopter on land and over water; straw bales, raft and catamaran. The zeal with which Michael Wood uses these different modes of transport forms a significant part of the appeal of the series.

Be that as it may, the title scene shows Michael Wood gaunt and unshaven, leading a troupe of camels across a desert plain, garlanded and wearing a bandana. I shall focus on the episode "Across the Hindu Kush" dealing with

Wood's entry into Afghanistan; this is where the series reaches its climax.

Michael Wood is seen walking through a street in modern-day Kabul, while the 'voice over', which is Wood's own, describes it as a city devastated by war. The street is lined by broken down huts and houses, a few ragged children play around. As Wood descends a flight of darkened stairs, the end of it shows a Gandhara-style Buddha statue with its head cut off. Wood remarks ironically that a rich civilization, of the meeting of east and west, has vanished. Wood often handles objects from the past— they become objects that revoke nostalgia for the past. The desire for lifeless traces and inert things may be seen to be a kind of tourism of objects, very much as what happens in the nostalgia films that Fredric Jameson speaks of. The 'glossy fetish' of the screen is itself consumed, having been transformed into a commodity.²⁴

Through Afghanistan, the sense of danger, though not talked about, is present through visual signs that form a back-drop to Wood's narrative — of gun-toting security men who drive with him, and glimpses of soldiers perched atop cannons. The viewer is thus always aware of the dangers that Michael Wood is made to undergo, in a way a grim reminder of Alexander's own war-fraught campaigns.

The landscape of the region forms an ironic contrast to this atmosphere of understated danger. Spectacular scenes of mountains, blue skies and gushing rivers are offered, verging on glossiness. Colour separates objects from one another, giving each object a unique place on screen. Glossiness, however, characterises the entire shot, "transferring ... the elegant gleam of clean glass to the ensemble of jumbled objects ... which are arranged together as a single object of consumption by the camera lens."²⁵ Indeed, the pollution of the rivers is never focussed upon, as green meadow, blue sky and sparkling stream form an ensemble of glossiness.

While landscape representation may be glossed over, it is not very simple to do the same to cultural aspects. The locals of the area are not English speaking; the translator mediates between Wood and the locals. As Alexander did, Wood also uses the help of local guides. Even as the camera focuses on the natives, it is Wood who becomes the object of their curiosity.

What sort of audience is aimed at in such a production? While the rapt attention that television viewers have is testimony to the hypnotic power of television, audiences are not necessarily entirely passive recipients of the messages transmitted. The option of

choosing what they want to see is always available. The ambiguity of the audience of this particular series however, is bound to strike the viewer. While it does not add significantly to the knowledge of the specialist, it presupposes a level of familiarity with history that may not be available to lay-viewers. What it does is to project Alexander from the point of view of non-western cultures, which may not have been made available to the west. This is one of the strengths of the programme.

Wood himself becomes the object of the locals' curiosity, even as the camera focuses on him as the main personality of the shot. The natives become objects to be commented upon, their racial origins and history traced and talked about without including their points of view except when needed. Further, cultural difference is emphasized- as when he enters India. Wood comments that Alexander had heard of its strange customs. This is accompanied by scenes of elephants, snake charmers, and a tattooed boy playing the flute. Again, when he enters the Afghan border, a sacrifice of a goat is one of the first scenes shown. Perhaps Wood seeks to project these sights to emphasize the 'barbaric' tendencies of Alexander's time. Equally, the landscape is presented in its inaccessibility, vastness, and grandeur.

Part of the motive of conquest is to discover new sights; possession, as we have seen in the first chapter, comes after an object has been grasped visually. So to see the sights which were part of conquest revokes that sense in a powerful way because the same sensations are generated by association. The camera is used to this effect – as Walter Benjamin says, the viewer's identification with the actor (in this case the presenter) is actually an identification with the camera.²⁶

One of the reasons why television has failed in the realm of solving political problems is that it rejects the sharp personalities, preferring the projection of processes rather than complete products. If the context is shifted to that of history, it could be seen as a finished product or a continuing process, influencing the present. Alexander is presented to project the personality as king, statesman, or warrior, and with an acute sense of the historiography of the subject. The legendary status that Wood gives to Alexander adds to this sense. The last scenes are anti-climactic; Wood ascends a rickety ladder leaning against the wall of the fort that Alexander attacked. As he reaches the top, crowds of people standing below applaud.

The main achievement of the series is to deliver a narrative of history – the story of Alexander the Great, to

a lay audience. The series also does not compromise on historical evidence and reliance on historiography.

Notes

¹ Michael Wood, In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great (London: Viking, 1997).

² Diana Spencer, "Alexander the Great and the Popular" OU Classics Conference January 1996
<www.isidore.com.>

³ J.R. Hamilton, "Introduction". Arrian: The Campaigns of Alexander . (ed.) E. V. Rieu
(London: Penguin 1971) 16-17.

⁴ H.D.F Kitto, The Greeks (London: Pelican, 1956) 9

⁵ E.M Errington "Bias in Ptolemy's accounts of Alexander." Classical Quarterly, 19
(Oxford: Clarendon, 1969).

⁶ Ibid: 142.

⁷ P.A. Brunt, "Persian Accounts of Alexander the Great." Classical Quarterly, 12.
(Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1962).

⁸ Ibid:, 72.

⁹ Wood, 1997:9

¹⁰ Ibid: 11.

¹¹ (ed.) E.V. Rieu Arrian :The Campaigns of Alexander (London: Penguin, 1972) 101.

¹² Ibid:123.

¹³ Ian Worthington "How Great was Alexander the Great?"<<[http www.isidore.com](http://www.isidore.com).>>

¹⁴ William Dalrymple At the Court of the Fish-Eyed Goddess: Travels through the Indian Subcontinent
(New Delhi: HarperCollins, 1999) 91.

¹⁵ Ibid.:95.

¹⁶ Wood, 1997 : 73.

¹⁷ Richard Hoggart The Uses of Literacy. (Hammondsworth: Penguin 1943).

¹⁸ Paul Hamilton Historicism. (London: Routledge, 1987) 19.

¹⁹ In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great . Narr. Michael Wood. Writ. Michael Wood. Dir. David
Wallace. Prod. Rebecca Dobbs. BBC Worldwide Ltd ,1997.

²⁰ Nicholas Abercrombie, Television and Society (Massachussets: Blackwell,1996).

²¹ John Berger, Ways of Seeing (London: Penguin; London: BBC ,1973).

²² Ibid. 10.

²³ Marshall McLuhan ,Understanding Media : The Extensions of Man (London :Routledge, 1978).

²⁴ Fredric Jameson “ Magic Realism in Film” Critical Inquiry 12 (2000) 198.

²⁵ Ibid: 203.

²⁶ Walter Benjamin , Illuminations (London: Jonathan Cape,1954).

CHAPTER III
MYTH AND HISTORY

Why has not England a great mythology? Our folklore has never advanced beyond daintiness, and the great melodies of our countryside have all issued through the pipes of Greece. Deep and true as the native imagination can be, it seems to have failed here. It has stopped with the witches and the fairies. It cannot vivify one fraction of a summer field, or give names to a half a dozen stars.¹

The true picture of the past flits by. The past can be seized only as an image which flashes up at the instant when it can be recognized and is never seen again by the present as one of its own concerns threatens to disappear.²

Walter Benjamin, in an essay entitled "The Story teller" identifies two types of story tellers - the native master craftsman and the traveller. The traveller, it would seem, is almost expected to return with tales of adventure, intrigue, danger and mystery. Indeed, it is one of the activities a traveller seems to revel in, collecting local fare, comparing it with his own stock of fables, myths, legends, and so on. We have seen how, in fact, this process becomes a part of creating difference, its strategies aimed at possessing and controlling the other. On the one hand, a writer such as Forster observes "Hindu" manners and customs at least in a text like The Hill of Devi³ from a distinctly

imperialistic standpoint and thus seeks to distance himself. A definite identity is attributed to the colonial different from the imperial observer. On the other hand, it seems from Greenblatt's writings on Columbus that the native was a seamless entity, whose identity could be created by the colonizer⁴.

When an academic historian goes visiting, especially one who is self-conscious about his own identity, there is an attempt to look at his own history in a new light, and to see how his own national identity has been created and shaped. How does identity change due to this revisiting? On what terms does Michael Wood readdress his own identity? And, how closely is that identity linked to the writing of history? Is history, as Althusser points out, made up of differentiated compounds? What is the relationship of the concept to the real in history? If modernism was defined in terms of the progressive, where can the West be placed in a postmodern circumstance?⁵

In this chapter, the aim is to analyze if the West can be placed outside postmodernism, or, as Robert Young warns, if it tries to disencumber itself out of the problem of its relation to other cultures. In other words, my task is to examine how Michael Wood approaches the body of myth of his own culture, with that of another.

Is there a way of writing history that is not homogenizing, unifying? Rather, can Michael Wood's writing of history be considered part of a process that is not hierarchical? What is the role of a colonizing past in the rewriting of this history? Does the history and myth of England of dark ages have any relation to the myth and history of the ancient Tamils? How is the writing of history, linked to the process of creating national identity? Michael Wood sees national identity as basically one that is wounded, rather, created from the wounds of the past. In this process, such wounds become myths, handed down to serve as warnings or exemplars in life. National identity is the facing up to disasters and the achievements of a shared past. This shared past is nothing short of a collective mythology, structured very much as myths are.

For the English, this sense of a shared past consists of the memory of the Norman Conquest, which has been one of the greatest sources of myth. For an English person, the "conquest" could mean only one date - 1066, even though it was only in the thirteenth century that the myth began to take root. Wood analyses, using various historical source, whether or not the myth is a fact, or plain myth. He speculates if the myth has been handed down through a folk memory:

Something, which has struck me forcibly during a lifetime of travelling through other cultures, especially in Asia is the tenacious presence of oral traditions. A *prima facie* case, one would think, that the tale of the Norman Yoke ... might perhaps also be the product of an oral tradition transmitted over the centuries when English was not the official or literary language: a tradition of a real event.⁶

Wood traces how the myth has influenced a sense of Englishness through the centuries; in the thirteenth century, for example, a constant theme is the subjugation of England, and the painful humiliating ethnic divisions brought about by language. It was in the fourteenth century that there was a revival of English vernacular literature. He however, sees the myth as taking the place of the actual wound of the Norman Conquest. A myth, in usual usage, is used in the sense of something false or in the sense of folklore, legend, or fable. Mircea Eliade observes that this need not be the case; myth could also mean a truth, which takes on profound value because of the sacredness invested to it. His distinction between "true stories" and "false stories" is significant: both are "histories" in the sense that they relate to a distant past, and are not part of everyday existence. Eliade's conception of myth is cosmogonic - in the sense that it breaks back to a primordial "beginning"; and that myth shapes the

existential fabric of man's being⁷. The characteristic feature of nationalism, however is that it is devoid of an overt sense of sacredness even though symbols of the sacred might be *associated* with it. The Normans are considered the conquerors of the Anglo-Saxons, it is the latter's rebellion against them that may be seen as a kind of nationalism. Wood is not blind to the tyrannies of the Anglo-Saxon kings:

... late Anglo-Saxon government was at times ferociously oppressive, inflicting blinding, mutilation and branding as punishment, and sending out government snoopers... the beliefs of the old seventeenth century radicals about the old English past was not entirely ridiculous. It is true that the English tradition of representation was derived from pre-Conquest institutions, in particular the shire, hundred and parish, and they did use the vernacular; the law was English. But most particularly, of course, the idea of English and of allegiance to the English state derived from before 1066⁸

England itself is thus seen in terms of the colonizer and the colonized, and Wood sides with the Anglo-Saxons, seeing English as the language of the "lower classes" as against the foreign Norman influences. Wood's exploration is not about how the so-called Norman Yoke came to lead to the mythical sense of nation, rather, it is an exploration of the sense of Englishness extant *before* the Norman Conquest created by Saxon rule. The figures of Robin Hood, King Arthur and Alfred the Great are seen as saviour

figures which were created to salvage an Anglo-Saxon identity. Using "hard evidence" such as historical documents and manuscripts, Wood traces out the possible existence of King Arthur. He asks, "... why did the British and the English need him?"⁹. Arthur had been appropriated by the English from the Welsh, and by the thirteenth century, had become a pan-British hero. What emerges for Wood, through his investigations as to whether Arthur existed or not, whether the search for hard evidence might lead to real conclusions is that

Critics of ...(a) textual approach to Arthur are wrong to suggest that the power of the myth is diminished by exposing the nature of the historical sources. For what is at stake with the sources is the interpretation of *history* of the fifth and the sixth centuries, not the *myth* of Arthur... Whether indeed he existed at all is irrelevant to the myth. For we are dealing here with ...an imaginal world, in which the figure of Arthur remains as it always will, a symbol of British history.¹⁰

What is significant to him is not the truth or falseness of the character. It was because this sense of identity was wounded, he says, that the sense of nationalism was created. A definite historical memory is transformed into a myth.

What is Wood's philosophical approach to the question of myth? It would seem that his intention is to establish which school his particular approach belongs to and to

examine various approaches to the area. Mircea Eliade's construction of myth is cosmogonic, i.e., breaking back to primordial "beginnings" - if man and the world exist it is because Supernatural Beings exercised creative powers in these beginnings. Myth is also in Eliade's view, a narration of 'sacred history', taking place in a distant and fabulous past. Modern man considers himself to be constituted of history, as against archaic man who does not have a sense of history. While history includes the element of logical action, the language of myth does not instigate debate. Paul Ricoeur problematizes the representation of time in history, as this forms the backdrop to the debate between myth and history. To him, the opposition between cyclical time and historical time is not so important as that between "the time of the Gods and the time of men". Ricoeur cites the example of early Greek historiography as making a decisive contribution in this distinction. It is historiography that introduces an element of consistency to the time of men ¹¹.

For Joseph Campbell, the first function of mythology is "to reconcile waking consciousness to the mystery of the universe". Campbell sees an active "social" element in mythology and assigns to it various functions. Apart from the one mentioned above, the others are the enforcement of

a moral order - the shaping of the individual to the requirements of his historically conditioned social group. Campbell considers that myth has a primary role to play in the rise and fall of civilizations- the cogency of the body of myths is a function of its stability. Its most crucial part is to integrate the individual, seeking a balance between himself, his culture, the universe and the "ultimate mystery". Myth is thus assigned a decisive role, one that regenerates society. Creative mythology - archetypal, natural, elementary is what redeems, as opposed to social, historical or ethnic ideas. Creative mythology, as distinct from "oriental" and "occidental mythology", is the yoke, which brings together East and West: the unity of man lies in his spiritual history. The ultimate aim of oriental mythology is not to establish as substantial any of its deities, but to transcend it in order to establish identity with a larger transcendental being. Occidental or Greek mythology, on the other hand, consists of no divines who successfully claim to dictate terms of belief; mythology is crafted by poets and philosophers, and therefore remains fluid to that extent¹². Wood's travel narrative on Tamil Nadu, seen in the light of the reconciliation of opposites of "oriental" and "occidental"

mythologies, shows clearly the evidence of what maybe called his 'hybrid' voice.

Akin to Campbell's body of thought is that of Henreich Zimmer, whose book The King and the Corpse: Tales of the Soul's Conquest of Evil¹³ attempts to find archetypal figures from legends of diverse origins: Irish, Celtic, Indian. The "messages" of these tales have a basic underlying theme - they exhort the reader to follow the unconscious. In a footnote to one of these tales, he says:

Ages and attitudes of man that are long gone by still survive in the deeper unconscious layers of our soul. The spiritual heritage of archaic man...has vanished to a large extent from the surface of the tangible and conscious realm, yet survives and remains ever present in the subterranean layers of the unconscious¹⁴

Zimmer's vision is woven through the four sections of the book. I shall take up here the case of "Four Romances", which deals with the Arthurian romances - the tale of Gawain and the Green Knight, Sir Lancelot, Owain, and Balin. Zimmer links the legend of Sir Gawain to the Buddhist legend of temptation; just as Buddha is tempted by women and strives to conquer desire, so is Gawain. The tales are both interpreted as the testing of the hero by the personifications of life and death. The women that Gawain meets are "mothers", who belong to "our universal

treasure store of archetypal symbolic images"¹⁵. The examples are many - Merlin is the archetypal wise man seen in the Chinese Lao- Tzu, and Gawain is Ulysses.

The role of the unconscious remains undiminished; the myths of India especially, resist intellectualization. They are intuitive, and represent a "collective wisdom of the ages"¹⁶. It is their anonymity that is stressed, even as agelessness and timelessness are considered primary attributes.

The fact that the unconscious is the *sine qua non* of civilization is undoubtedly derived from the ruminations of Carl Jung. In Psychology and the East¹⁷ Jung explores the 'esoteric' books of the Chinese and the Tibetans, but what is of interest to me here is the chapter entitled 'What India can teach us.' In it he makes a detailed analysis of the "Indian" way of thinking, that the Indian

does not think, at least what we call 'think'. He rather perceives the thought. He resembles the primitive in this respect. I do not say that he is primitive, but that the process of his thinking reminds me of the primitive way of thought production. The primitive's reasoning is mainly an unconscious function, and he perceives its results. We should expect such a peculiarity with any civilization, which has enjoyed an almost unbroken continuity from primitive times.¹⁸

The 'western' mind, on the other hand, has been split asunder due to 'domestication', into the conscious and unconscious. This primitive quality is desired, for it is in touch with the unconscious. Western rationality is constructed as uncivilized, barbaric, self-destructive. The white man can only dream of the dream like aboriginal state that the Indians are in possession of. The Indian is introverted, dreaming, whole, the westerner extraverted, fragmented. The perception of this is accompanied by guilt. The positive side of this is European culture's awareness that it can no longer be viewed as the dominant and unquestioned centre of the world.

If the spooling out of archetypes may be the token of Jungian analysis, Wood's analysis of myth does precisely this. Thus in at Madurai, the sight of the goddess Minakshi fascinates him enough to exclaim:

... to meet her *living* incarnation was, to say the least, exciting. (*italics mine*)... There is an archaic, irrepressible current in Indian life, which has never been done away with by the westernization or modernization of our own times¹⁹.

Wood emphasizes the living aspect of the archaic in India. Imaginal worlds are easily accessible, unlike in the west where it is suppressed due to modernization. The atmosphere in the temple Wood constructs in order to

emphasize how it can awaken this interest. In terms of darkness and light, the interior of the temple is described by using contrasts - the dark narrow corridor leading to the 'womb chamber', lit by hanging oil-lamps, the effect of limitless space and darkness engulfing the idol. The idol to him, is a vestige of the imaginal world, a key to the mental image that lies beyond. The effect, he says, is a suspension of 'reality', to be transported into a land of dreams. The entire effect is intoxicating in the extreme, driving the senses inwards, edging them to a different threshold of perception.

Part of the living tradition is the oral tradition of the Tamil saints, whose hymns are sung today by the so-called *oduvars*; the irony of Wood's enquiry is that he asks if the tale of the Norman Yoke has been transmitted orally; Wood asks if this is true of the myth of the Norman Yoke. Englishness is constructed in terms of a 'folk'; the stronger boundaries of 'nation' giving way to more fluid delineation. A nation is constructed with an *official* view in mind, the local and the oral is less official, less anxious to present itself to a public. The categories of difference become clearer the more they are examined. Madurai is constructed with the goddess as its signpost; there is fecundity about it. Experiences that are found

there are immediate, resisting intellectualization. The timeless quality that Jung refers to may be translated in terms of this immediacy; myths are set in a realm that is not human. By contrast, the myth of England is constructed as *political*. It is thus directly connected with history. The Norman Yoke is a distinct historical event that gained a mythological status with the passage of time; according to Wood it was used against the church for economic reasons when the church levied taxes that were too heavy for to pay, it was easy to construct the clergy as oppressive outsiders. Gods and Goddesses do not occupy the myth of England, they are all too real and therefore more difficult to romanticize. The nature of English myths is political according to Wood, because the Anglo-Saxons are not native to Britain. They came to the Islands during the so-called Dark Ages, and their mythology was borrowed from the native Celts. Due to Christian conversions, they lost touch with a body of myth. Their own mythology had to be invented. And unlike in India, the invention of sacredness was concentrated in one place. Glastonbury's claims to fame are many, it is the burial place of Joseph of Arimathea, it is the site of the tomb of king Arthur, the resting place of the holy Grail, and a site Christ himself visited. Wood avers that these contribute to a sense of 'Englishness.'

The mythical and the religious are conceived of as basic to identity formation. But this past is not an ancient one, even its myth is related to people, places and events that are relatively recent and which therefore loom large in memory. Wood traces the fabrication of myths at the risk of appearing unfashionable, to one man, Dunstan, a priest at the Church. It became the cult centre of Christianity as the founding place of Christianity in Europe - the inspiration of the poem *Jerusalem* by Blake. Present day Glastonbury is contrived as a place of touristic packaging of religion and mysticism conjured up by the quirks of technology. Vegetarian cafés, aromatherapy, tarot reading and so on, are to be found here. Wood sees this as a desperate endeavour to conjure up a sense of the magical. The south Indian pilgrimage sites do not have to invent a mysticism, they are the continuing evidence of a civilization that has its roots in pre-historic times. The authentic is to be found in Tamil religion, in antiquity, in what Benedict Anderson called "the hoariness of the past."²⁰

In In Search of England Glastonbury is constructed in sombre terms; the scenes and landscapes there have the austerity of a Constable painting - marshy swamps, the sun setting through gathering thunderclouds - when compared

with the colour and feisty of say, Rameswaram. The reader never loses track of the fact that politics played a significant role here by 1066, the year of the Norman Conquest, Glastonbury had become one of the richest sites in England. Its later fame also had political and economic motives, supported by a vast romantic and pseudo-historic literature. Wood sketches its history with an insider's intrepidity - its humble beginnings, its flamboyant growth and its gruesome end with the hanging of Richard Whitting, the chief priest, and two monks.

While the sense of place coincides with the sense of the mythical, both are linked, if tenuously with the writing of history. To write history by following in the footsteps of historians is a recurrent motif. In Alexander, Wood uses the historians Arrian, Curtius and Strabo to glean information but always departs from their point of view to formulate an independent opinion.

How does he use the evidence of other historians to deconstruct the myth of Arthur? The three sources that Wood cites are Nennius' *History of the Britons*, *Gododin*, a poem composed in the Cumbrian area in the sixth century and *On the Ruin of Britain* by Gildas. This last is a unique source because the author was one of the few of the time who had a knowledge of both Latin and Welsh. It is not exactly a

history, but a political tract that makes a scathing attack on the rules of the time. It makes mention of a certain Ambrosius who led a war against the Saxons. It makes no mention of Arthur. It is from Nennius' *History* that a great deal of information has been gathered. In it, Arthur is built up as a figure who was victorious in all his campaigns and Christian in his repentance. Written in the ninth century, it proves that Arthur was already famous by that time.

Michael Wood concludes that in a way Arthur still lives through literature (Mallory, Chretien de Troyes and Tennyson) and myth. He concludes on a sentimental note- as for Alexander the Great - quoting the epithet that Mallory uses: "once and future king."²¹ It is the continuity of the myth that is given importance, not the story itself. But the initial enquiry of why the English 'need' him is a rhetorical question for the question contains the answer that the English do need the myth. It is obvious then that Wood identifies two types of identity - the mythical or the sacred and the historical or national. Like Ernest Renan, he maintains that a nation has a soul, a spiritual principle - a wound cannot exist without this.²² Homi Bhabha, on the other hand asks if it is possible to reconcile the nation's modernity with its past. The

'archaic ambivalence' that he talks about nation is associated may well refer to the body of myths that every modern nation is associated with. Michael Wood does not seek a reconciliation of myth and modernity, progress is the despoiler of a pristine past.

Perhaps the most incisive critique of nationalism has been performed by Eric Hobsbawm, in the essay "The Invention of Tradition."²³ Like Bhabha's idea of mimesis, Hobsbawm's notion of nation is that it is a set of practices that are repeated over time, ritualistic in nature. Ancient materials are usually used in this construction; besides folksongs, legend and folklore are institutionalized. The forces that bind a nation are abstract- patriotism, duty to the flag, loyalty and so on.

The new tradition of a nation has not filled more than a small part of the space left by old traditions²⁴. Michael Wood would agree to this in the case of England, but not with Tamil Nadu; this is a place where there is an unbroken line of old rituals and practices. It is only in the case of England, where the past becomes less relevant that spaces for the old become less.

In conclusion, it may be said that Wood's writing of history is historicist, giving importance to the historical context in the interpretation of texts. It may even be said

to veer towards the new-historicist in the importance placed on anecdotes, conversations with people and to local knowledge. Said's vision would, however, see the finding of archetypes in myths as homogenising. Wood seeks to foist a hybridity in the writing of history, but divisions of race and nation run too deep for the unconscious to be considered in this light.

In a sense, Wood's method of writing of history is not new. In the nineteenth century, Vico discovered a mythological or poetic source of civilization. Only by an exercise in poetic comprehension could modern society be comprehended. Wood's analysis may be superseded by Foucault, for whom the notion of a 'counter-memory', a transformation of history into a totally different form of time is needed, in order to legitimize it⁵. In a sense it is an impossible question that Foucault poses, a conundrum that has no solution except to push the individual to teeter on the edge of the unknown.

Notes

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- ² Walter Benjamin, Illuminations (London : Jonathan Cape, 1970)230.
- ³ Forster, 1929.
- ⁴ Stephen Greenblatt Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World (Oxford : Oxford UP, 1991)
- ⁵ Robert Young White Mythologies (London: Routledge 1995) 58.
- ⁶ Michael Wood In Search of England (London: Penguin; London: BBC, 1999) 14
- ⁷ Mircea Eliade Myth and Reality (New York : Harper and Row 1963) 55.
- ⁸ Wood 1999: 12-13.
- ⁹ Ibid .24.
- ¹⁰ Ibid. 42 .
- ¹¹ Paul Ricoeur, "Myth and History" Encyclopedia of Myth and Religion Vol.10 (ed) Mircea Eliade (New York : Macmillan,1987) 273-281 .
- ¹² Joseph Campbell Creative Mythology (Hammondsworth: Penguin ,1977).
- ¹³ Henreich Zimmer The King and the Corpse: Tales of the Soul's conquest of Evil (Princeton: Princeton U P ,1956)310.
- ¹⁴ Ibid. 81.
- ¹⁵ Ibid.
- ¹⁶ Henreich Zimmer, Myths and Symbols of Indian Art and Civilization (New York: Bollingen Foundation)40.
- ¹⁷ Carl Jung, Psychology and the East (Ark: London, 1978)
- ¹⁸ Ibid: 99.
- ¹⁹ Michael Wood, The Smile of Murugan: A South Indian Journey (Hammondsworth Penguin 1996)161-162 .
- ²⁰ Bill Ashcroft et al "Nationalism" The Post-Colonial Studies Reader (London: Penguin, 1991)

²¹ Wood 1999: 42.

²² Ernest Renan “What is a Nation?” Nation and Narration (Routledge: London,1991).

²³ Eric Hobsbawm “Introduction: The Invention of Tradition” The Invention of Tradition. Eric Hobsbawm and Terence Ranger. (eds) (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press,1983).

²⁴ Ibid, 27.

²⁵ Paul Hamilton Historicism (London :Routledge,1988) 112.

CONCLUSION

In this concluding chapter I shall examine the implications that cultural travel has in defining the question of the identity of the writer, and attempt to see how cultural representation is shaped by this identity. Preconceptions about a culture that a writer has can often be deduced by examining the ideologies of representation which the writer carries, that may be consciously affected or unwittingly inherited. The concepts of "culture" and "civilisations" overlap in many ways; culture is often taken as an index of civilisation. The more cultured a civilisation is the more "advanced" it is considered. In the case of Michael Wood, the main activity is the interpretation of culture; I will examine various approaches to the concept of civilisation that help identify the "schools of thought" that his own approach might be associated with. All of Wood's works that have been examined in this dissertation are permeated with a sense of history; how that history has been defined in terms of civilisation will also be now examined. The cultures that Wood travels through are, in broad terms, Greek, Egyptian, Persian, Indian and his own native English.

With his focus on south India, Michael Wood is different from most other writers who travel to India; their

focus is mainly on the north. Wood attempts to construct Dravidian civilisation as having its roots in prehistory; Aryan appropriations of customs and rituals were due to later invasions. The Dravidians (who he calls the original Indians) were preceded only by the tribes of the Deccan and the Nilgiris. Wood's evidences are from mesolithic cave paintings who he says represents the god Shiva, and a settlement of people before 1000 BCE who worshipped a male deity carrying the emblems of the spear and the cock, just as present day Murugan does. Civilisation is thus built up as having religious and ritualistic roots, and Tamil civilisation is constructed as one in which these practices continue to the present. This is one of Wood's most unique and valuable contributions.

Wood's interpretation of Tamil culture is sometimes idiosyncratic as when he sees its roots in climatic conditions and landscape:

Tamil civilisation arose in a climate of fierce extremes, in particular the enervating annual cycle of autumn monsoons and scorching summer heat. The blessings of nature are super abundant but they are also unpredictable and can be taken away with terrifying violence...the effect of living with such extremes is to be seen in the Tamil thought world; in their myths and beliefs, in their attitudes towards love and sex, nature and society.¹

Myth is thus linked to the landscape and it is also the creator of identity as religious belief is the foundation of

civilisation. It may be concluded from the works of Michael Wood dealt with in this dissertation that one of Wood's main enquiries is about the place of what may be termed as 'arational' agencies such as myth in the creation of identity and its relationship with the idea of progress. While Wood is sceptical of notions of "sacred time", he is clearly ill at ease with the notion of history as the mere chronicling of events. There is also an intense curiosity about the sacred aspects of a culture.

The detached role of the interested outsider often gives way to a highly charged involvement; the very engagement and belief that intensely curious gaze on processes of religious significance indicates a need to participate in those processes. Progress and modernisation in their pejorative senses are antitheses of this belief, which is variously described by Wood as 'the sense of the magical'² and 'imaginal worlds'³ and so on, preserved in Tamil civilisation but lost in the western world.

Wood seems to imply that myth provides an access to the imaginal worlds, though not in the literal cosmogonic sense of Mircea Eliade. By stating that this sense is more alive in contemporary Tamil culture, Wood attributes to that culture a purity that is absent in western culture. But an idealise picture can only consist of images that the writer is already predisposed to - in this case of woman-worship,

lush landscapes, and a people single-mindedly devoted to their own religion.

The writer thus is involved in cultural representation which while not in the mould of the grand narratives of empire, seeks a hybrid identity by shifting the forces of authority to the cultural other. Hybridity has been defined by Homi Bhabha as the colonial subject's way of dealing with oppression, but in the context of post-coloniality, it may also be said to be the condition of the writer who has a coloniser's history. As has been noted in the first chapter, the sojourns of other traveller-historians of the past have been recorded as ignorant orientalist commentary. The validity of the hybridity is sought in the incredibly beautiful and splendid past.

What is Wood's approach to Greek civilization? Martin Bernal draws attention to two models of Greek history -the "Aryan" and the "ancient". The first model viewed Greece as essentially European or Aryan; the second viewed it as on the periphery of Egyptian culture. According to the latter, Greek culture grew as a result of colonisation of the Greeks by the Egyptians. The Aryan model developed only in the first half of the nineteenth century; Greeks were seen as a mixture of the Indo-European speaking Hellenes and their indigenous "Aegean" subjects, which was the result of an invasion from the north. Bernal traces out various actors

responsible for the downfall of the Egyptian model of civilisation—and its replacement by Greece. Of these, one is the notion of "progress" – the idea that civilisations marched on, improving through time. In the eighteenth century Europe, the idea was that Egypt was at the bottom of the rungs, and Greece at the top.⁴ When Michael Wood writes about the encounter of Alexander with Egypt, he is at pains to explain that Alexander saw Egypt as a strategically important point in the conquest of Asia. According to Wood, his other main purpose was also to seek out his birth and genesis to the god Ammon, and to consult the oracle of Siwa about this. If Hellenomania is the exaltation of anything Greek through a combination of racism, Christianity and the idea of progress, Michael Wood's outlook does not fit in with it.⁵ But it certainly does with the choice of India as one of the great civilisations of the East:

Taxila would become one of the centres of Hellenic cultures in India, and the great meeting place of the East and West in grammar, poetry, art and philosophy. The Greek language would be spoken there for 500 years. Alexander's arrival is the symbolic beginning of one of the great exchanges of culture between two of the most original and creative civilisations.⁶

Wood's enthusiasm for India ties in with German and British Romanticism, which looked upon Sanskrit as the true ancestor of European languages. Wood's point of departure, as already noted, is the primacy of the Dravidian rather

than the Aryan civilisation. Also, the Romantic tendency was to see folksong and language as the core of civilisation—hence the harking back to oral tradition in the creation of an English national identity. These were considered more powerful as they communicated feeling rather than reason. Another Romantic 'feature' is the longing for a pure past, as well the smallness of the place — Tamil Nadu is seen with a certain picturesque prettiness — green fields, waving palm fronds and rising *gopuras*.

Through a writer's cultural travel, the reader is in a position to judge how a writer changes and grows as a result of these travels. Michael Wood's travels show evidence of observing 'Asiatic peoples'; the emphasis on oral cultures, folklore, and in general a preference for cultures that are less influenced by technological progress. Moving from place to place, Wood seeks out connections between them, (as the finding of Sikendermalai in Tamil Nadu) and unearthing the myths and legends around them. The privileging of one model over another does not prevent a certain romanticization, as a writer cannot be wholly free of a set of inherited cultural assumptions. But if, as Benedict Anderson says, that the nation or any other community is imagined, and that the print industry facilitates this imagination, then print has a tremendous power in influencing identities.⁷ Writing about other

cultures might jog the deeply rooted cultural assumptions into a space that allows for plurality. Wood does not attempt to alter his own identity, but seeks to construct hybrid cultures. In conclusion it might be said that the hybrid voice, the writing of history from the point of view of the oppressed, and the deliberate attempts to view culture as an insider, all contribute towards a blurring of boundaries.

Notes

¹ Michael Wood, The Smile of Murugan: A South Indian Journey(Hammondsworth : Penguin 1996) 57.

² Michael Wood, In Search of England (London: Penguin and London: BBC 1999).

³ Wood, 1996:54

⁴ Martin Bernal, Black Athena: The Afroasiatic roots of Classical Civilization (London: Vintage, 1991).

⁵ Ibid.286.

⁶ Michael Wood, In the Footsteps of Alexander the Great (London : Viking 1997)183.

⁷ Benedict Anderson, Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism.
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