

ISSN INTERNATIONAL
STANDARD
SERIAL
NUMBER

IJELLH

Crossref
INDEX COPERNICUS
INTERNATIONAL

**International Journal of English Language,
Literature in Humanities**

Indexed, Peer Reviewed (Refereed) Journal

UGC Approved Journal

ISSN-2321-7065



**Volume 6, Issue 7
July 2018**

www.ijellh.com

Mr. Subhashis Banerjee
Assistant Professor of English:
Government Model College Seppa
(Rajiv Gandhi Central University)
Arunachal Pradesh
India
Email: banerjee.subho7@gmail.com

Politics of Travel: A Post Colonial Discussion on Vivekananda

Abstract:

The paper attempts to locate the travel writings of Vivekananda within the purview of postcolonial studies. Vivekananda had travelled within India as a ‘parivrajaka’ (the travelling monk) from 1888 to 1893 and in May 1893 crossed the ‘kalapani’ to represent India in the Parliament of World’s Religion held in Chicago. This led to many more travels within India and to the West. The places he visited in the West are Canada, America, France, England, Germany and Egypt. He was a traveller who left his impressions, views and observations in the form of letters, diaries and memoirs. A close study of such documents, as well as secondary materials, leads to questions of imperialism, identity, self-other dichotomy, comparative religion, women and acculturation

Keywords: Kalapani, Ambivalence, Dichotomy, Transculturation.

Introduction:

Vivekananda’s developments in life as a traveller and a social critic are disseminated. Through his mission in the West, he tried to represent India in response to Orientalism. Catherine Rolfsen (18) observes how at the beginning of his tour in North America, Vivekananda pointed often to “his main obligation to generate fund for his countrymen” (CW

5: 36), but his arrival in America makes him aware of the harsh and unjust Western opinions of Hinduism and he got the link between effeminate Indianism (as according to the Western perception) and the male-oriented colonialism.

Travel to the West created a passage for Vivekananda to understand the basic differences between the East and the West. He was critically engaged in dialogue with the Western people to establish his point of views on the existing polarities between the two hemispheres of the worlds. Mohapatra, the noted Vivekananda scholar perhaps, touched the main cord of his thinking:

He is a bitter critic of social Europeanization. He developed a synthetic outlook i.e., combination of the best of the East and the West, of materialism and spiritualism, of action and contemplation. It implies the integration of material aspects of life, economic growth, industrial development, scientific progress—all finding their place in the total scheme of life. (119)

To justify his causes, he realized that a powerful presentation of Indian culture and spirituality was indeed very important. Even in his lectures, he intelligently avoided the contemporary blemishes of Indian culture and tried his best to project the pure nature of Indian spirituality. Vivekananda used the concept of 'purity' as a potential tool to refute the Western perception of India as uncivilized. He tactfully moulded the Vedantic scriptures according to the need and compared the East and the West on the basis of their purity—purity of religion, culture and habit. As scientific inventions are the blessings of the material west, the spiritual East is blessed with purity of soul and mind. For a true structure of modern society, the blending of the two cultures was very important. His project in the Western world was both politically motivated and religious to ameliorate the status of subjugated India in the

eyes of the West. Vivekananda's project was vast and spontaneous. His masculine powerful presentations (Rolfson 11, 19) in different lecture series gave him the right platform to restructure the relationship between the East and the West by answering the questions that had been asked to him in U.S.A and in the countries of Europe. He himself addressed his audiences that one should try "to be a man first" then only he/she (since manliness is a quality) will "see how all those things and the rest will follow of themselves after you" (2008, 29). Submissiveness was utterly rejected in the European countries and to receive any help from them, one had to project his superiority in the West. For this reasons, his powerful representation of India can be understood as a defence mechanism against the "thesis of Oriental backwardness, degeneracy and inequality with the West" (Said 1978, 206). He was astonished to see that Western supremacy was based on a vague conception of male centric society and that manliness was too uncouth to compare with the gentle nature of the Indian male (2008, 33). Western masculinity was either projection of power or to behave in a very indisciplined manner (Rolfson 11). Vivekananda observed that, "they freely mix with women, drink wine, and shamelessly dance at a ball, men and women held in each other's arms" (2008, 07). If this was the definition of a masculine society, then, "what good can there be in such nations" (07), Vivekananda remarked. It was his concern that Hinduism was not considered as equal to other religions in the world. His address in the Parliament of Religions was a genuine effort to establish the scientific structure of Hinduism to place it side by side with the other important nine religions of the world. In his parliamentary address on "Hinduism", he wanted to present a valid and convincing Hinduism. Mr. Kapoor says that his approach was to project the pure nature of Hinduism that has not accumulated anything to "diminished its glow" (55). It is also true that Hinduism had many obscure accumulations in terms of religious practices in the society. Rolfson shows how Vivekananda, like many of his contemporaries, excluded such practices while delivering lectures on Indian custom and

religion (20). It was published in an American Daily on August 29, 1893 that "...he was asked about... the throwing themselves in front of the juggernaut car, and said one must not blame the Hindoo people for the car business, for it was the act of fanatics and mostly of lepers"(CW 3: 468). He was intelligent enough to deal with the people of America. When he was asked about the status of the Indian women, Vivekananda explained that, "Hindu religion is unique in its worship of women" (CW 3: 466) and that socially, "they were held in such great esteem that they were kept in seclusion" (CW 3: 468). Now, this is obviously not a true depiction of the condition of women in India, but he knew well that no religion or society in the world is out of such problems and it is better to avoid the problems in a particular moment to achieve a greater cause. He (2008) rather, unequivocally addressed the gathering by saying, "furthermore, understand that India is still living, because she has her own quota yet to give to the general store of the world's civilization" (09). When he was asked about the burning of sati among the Brahmin families of Bengal, he "flatly denied that child widows were abused in society" and disregarded anyone who practiced *sati* as extremist beyond the traditional Hindu ritual (Sil 1997, 70).

Sil's recent work is a harsh attack on Vivekananda and it tries to diminish him as a cunning opportunist man inside the saffron dress of an Indian saint. The paper does not support Sil's argument at all; rather it justifies Vivekananda's approaches in the West to achieve recognition. He worked intelligently and tried to project only the good things of Indian culture by omitting the bad social problems. Even, his acquaintances with the European ladies had a strong motive behind. He tried to get a permanent position as a Guru in the European families by using his charismatic personality and rhetorical power. Vivekananda understood that the caste system in Indian society is a curse for the development of the nation and had also observed that to regain the respectable status of Hinduism; the society had to recover from the inequalities of the caste system. In a lecture he made his point clear:

Caste is a social custom, and all our great preachers have tried to break it down... Caste is simply the outgrowth of the political institutions of India; it is a hereditary trade guild. (CW 5: 311)

Rolfesen describes it as his self-protective policy to deny the notorious social injustices prevalent in the contemporary Indian society to provide a clear picture of his religion and country in the West (21). He never thought twice to criticize his own custom and rituals when he was in India, but his steps in the West were very measured (Raychaudhuri 1998, 12). Vivekananda played both defensive and attacking role in the West to justify his points. He made it clear that European society would not enjoy its privilege all the time. There must be a parity and equilibrium in the global platform. He said that “we have to understand that there are not any good qualities which are the privileged monopoly of one nation only” (Vivekananda 2008, 10). If Western society has the claim of material superiority then, India is equally superior in spirituality with a very scientific social pattern.

Vivekananda had definitely used his ingenuity to avoid the draw backs of Indian society and uttered once “who is a greater ass than the person who washes his own dirty linen in public?” (Letters 80), but his approach was very confident. Sinha (1995) points out Vivekananda’s “deliberation to project the strong masculine character of his religion to the West” (21). Even his appearance supported his motive. The robust body with a typical oriental saffron dress suited him best to catch the notice of the Western gentlemen and women. Vivekananda defended caste system as a progressive measure of the society, as an “institution to provide a niche for everybody according to their level of development as a basis of steady growth into high civilization” (Raychaudhuri 1988, 278). Ashis Nandy attempts to find out how the colonial subjects searched their own tradition of masculinity to

find a suitable answer for the colonizers. In the case of Vivekananda, it can be understood by the '*kshatriya ideal*' (Nandy 24). Even he himself associated with *Kshatriya* identity to justify his masculine attitude (Rolfson 22), though exactly he did not belong to the class (Halbfass 1988, 229). His embodiment of Kshatriya masculinity was not merely self-assertion of Indian identity, but it also showed his complete realization of religiosity. In *Images of Asia* (1958), Harold Isaacs provides comprehensive summary of American observations on Indians. His collection of interviews shows that American concepts of India are typically stereotype and depends on Kipling's eroticized depictions. Definitely this sort of interviews had been conducted during Vivekananda's time, but unfortunately, the thinking did not change much, till the nineteenth-century. His tireless journeys and food habits perhaps deteriorated his health badly at a quite young age (Sil1997, 120-1). This happened due to his extensive travel and other social works, otherwise, he always counselled people to maintain good lifestyle and to take selective diet. He was born in a Bengali Kayastha family, "a caste which was considered amongst the twice-born" 'clean Sudras' (Raychaudhuri 1988, 221), but he always maintained the rules and appearance of the masculine Kshatriya (The royal) caste:

We now mostly need the ideal of a hero with the tremendous spirit of *rajas* thrilling through his veins from head to foot—the hero who will dare and die to know the Truth—the hero whose armour is renunciation, whose sword is wisdom. We want now the spirit of the brave warrior in the battle field of life, and not of the wooing lover who looks upon life as a pleasure-garden! (CW 5: 388)

Later, his acceptance of 'Sannyasi Dharma' rejected all sort of class and caste distinction. Vivekananda was largely indebted to the Vedantic philosophy which was originally advocated

by the Kshatriya royal families against the Vedic Brahminical philosophies (Dhar, 7-8). Vivekananda identified Upanishad's core philosophy as to be strong and encouraged his native people to be brave and strong:

Make your nerves strong. What we want is muscles of iron and steel. We have wept long enough. No more weeping, but stand on your feet and be man. (CW 3: 199)

Another important aspect of him as a traveller is his approach to engulf the relationship between the East and the West. His frequent criticism and comparison on both the cultures are very evident here. Vivekananda, as Inden (1990) observes, was against the hypothesis that only the protective guidance of colonial rules “would provide the way out of India's developmental impasse” (65).

Vivekananda's response to the Western discourse by negating the concept of their superiority was remarkable. He criticized the Europeans by his sharp words:

...the English, only just a little while ago they were savages... the vermin crawled on the ladies' bodices... and they scented themselves to disguise the abominable odor of their persons... Even now, they are barely emerging from barbarism...they are quite savage.” (CW 7: 278)

Raychaudhuri (1988) commented that Vivekananda used to make ironies regarding different lacunas of Western culture. He showed his utter disgust “ranging from their toilet practice to unhygienic food preparation techniques” (305). With his utter disgust, Vivekananda condemned the material base of the European society and showed interest in spirituality

which can attract modern men in general. Vivekananda observed in *The East and the West* that “[To] the English, just and equitable distribution of wealth is of essential interest” (24). Actually, Vivekananda was living in a crucial period of time. He knew well that neither materialism nor pure spirituality could satisfy them. This can be understood in his remark that the “satisfaction of appetites is their true God” and that European Christians are “mere babies in metaphysical and spiritual education” (310). Side by side, it is also true that Vivekananda levied equal harsh criticism for his own cultural defects too, though he rarely uttered any negative word for his country in the West. Dhar and Will have pointed the partial superficiality of Vivekananda’s denunciation of European philosophy and culture. According to them, Vivekananda deliberately overlooked Christian theology and idealism of the West (Dhar 148) in response to cultural imperialism and increasing colonial influence on India. In his dialogue with the West, Vivekananda often got impressed by the overall progress of the Western civilization and appreciated many good things with a poignant criticism for their overemphasis on material culture; devoid of any spiritual base. R. Chattopadhyaya documented Vivekananda’s disgust on the democratic capitalism in the Western society as “composed for the most part of greed, selfishness, and struggle for privilege and power” (270). Vivekananda himself uttered once that “the West is groaning under the tyranny of the Shylocks” (CW3:156). Development of civilization always brings about social changes both in negative and positive means. Vivekananda was aware of the fact and insisted for a good spiritual base for eternal peace. He remarked, “We who are progressing know that the more we progress, the more avenues are opened to pain as well as to pleasure” (John 1962, 37). Vivekananda’s lectures in different corners of the West attracted many Westerners who were searching for mental peace. Nivedita admitted this in her essay “The Modern Despair”. She showed how dissatisfaction and disillusionment destroyed the mental peace of the developed Western society. She depicted a “world marked simultaneously by growing dissatisfaction

and vulgarity of privilege and the growing sadness and pain of the dispossessed” (King, 72).

Vivekananda remarked:

Of the West, the goal is individual independence, the language money making education, the means politics; of India, the goal is Mukti, the language Veda, the means renunciation. (CW 4: 366)

He attacked British colonialism by saying that they have no right to subjugate India by means of spiritual and economic superiority and it was also meaningless to send Christian missionaries to the land where spirituality and religion run through the veins of the people. The involvement of the Western culture in Indian society made Vivekananda very annoyed and he never stepped back to criticize all those elements very harshly, as it is evident in his remarks on Brahma Samaj (Vivekananda 1956, 105). He was against from the very beginning to modernize India according to the Western paradigm, though he was very much acknowledged and benefited from English education and philosophies. Vivekananda was engaged in heated debate with the missionaries (CW 3: 473-4) and advocated that “material well-being is the essential precursor to spirituality” (Raychaudhuri 1988, 252). The inhuman treatment of the missionaries on the native people was a pale picture underneath their projection of social activities in India. They even could not “consider Indians as their equals, or even human beings” (Vivekananda 1956, 88).

Vivekananda’s angle of criticism for the Western world ranges from religion to culture and manner to colour. Though the foundation stone of his critique is based on spirituality, he, in several aspects compared and criticized the European culture. He never felt tired to appreciate his own culture and custom to project the good things of his country. Racism was a prevalent social problem and the Western society viewed the dull skinned Indians as inferior and

termed as ‘nigger’. Vivekananda with his deep knowledge of world history tried to refute such meaningless theories of the white Europeans. He answered that, “Whether black or white, it does not matter; but of all nations of the world, the Hindus are the handsomest and finest in feature” (Vivekananda 2008, 33). The point of comparison and justification is quite unique here. Since, as Vivekananda observed, Indians used to show their bodies due to flowing dressing style and less clothing, they are manlier with prominent muscles, whereas; the Europeans perhaps, tried to “appear beautiful under cover of elaborate dresses and clothes” (33). He also admitted that due to good weather condition in the West, their condition of health is superior to the Indians. They use to live a long life. Even men and women of fifty years look very young in the West. But, that does not really mean that Indians are inferior in hygiene and health. According to Vivekananda, if the physical health of the Europeans is little bit superior to the Indians, the Indians are far superior in mental and spiritual health to them. Both the things are important to maintain a healthy life. Wherever he visited, he enjoyed such debates and triumphantly celebrated his victory. The intellectual ingenuity and superior rhetorical skills helped Vivekananda to refute the degenerating Orientalist theses. He defended:

In our country, people suffer little from diseases of the teeth and hair; in the West, few people have natural, healthy teeth, and baldness is met with everywhere. (34)

The complexity of Vivekananda’s personality can be understood in his ambivalent attitude towards women. It was possibly a fact that he was influenced by his Guru Ramakrishna, who frequently warned his disciples against the glittering illusions of “women and gold” (*Gospel* 438-39), and yet symbolically represented his wife as an embodiment of

Shakti, the replica of the goddess Kali who is the source of all power within and outside (583-84) . In this respect, Vivekananda situated himself in a liminal position and was evidently influenced by the Orientalist essentializations. The impact of his master over him was a normal phenomenon, but perhaps Vivekananda deliberately tried to attribute male powers in the females by separating the sentimental weakness to refute effeminate status of India. Actually, Vivekananda was a product of both essentialization and polarization which typically signify the nineteenth-century imperial discourse. However, it will be very unjust to dismiss his message as an Orientalist production by ignoring his deep Indian roots. Vivekananda tactically used everything in the West to defy Hindu superiority against the colony. The reformulation of Vedanta was neither completely native nor a self-constructed material, but it was the consequence of a complex compromise with the material and religious understandings of his time. He was literally applying his formula to encounter the Western world. Orientalist concept of essentializing facts was not so easy. This has been sometimes used as a tool of power by utilizing different available dichotomies in terms of subordination and religions. It is to be understood that Vivekananda's connection with the Western women was more complex than his essentialized approaches on the effeminate East (Rolfson 11). Theory always differs from practicality and Vivekananda's acceptance in the Western families was very much influenced by the affluent ladies of America and Europe (Sen 42). Vivekananda, during the course of his travel, accepted and rejected things according to the need of the hour for the purpose. His progressive friendship with the fashionable and polished ladies of the West attracted controversy no doubt, but he was so busy with his own purpose that he did not pay any heed to it (R. Chattopadhyaya 1999, 156-57). Vivekananda was so influenced by the Western women that he questioned himself, "Are we to be counted among men? If I can raise a thousand such Madonnas, Incarnations of the Divine Mother, in

our country, before I die, I shall die in peace” (Vivekananda 1956, 141). In this juncture it is worthy to remember the words of Krishnabhabini:

If we can, like the English women, who are struggling to get women members elected to the parliament, shout for our demands, if we can cease to call ourselves feeble and modest and strike at the heart of every Indian, perhaps only then our men will wake up to our misery. (Simonti Sen: 157)

But, very surprisingly, after the completion of his project in the West, he maintained a traditional isolation of men and women at Belur Math throughout his life (Chowdhury 135).

Conclusion:

Vivekananda’s most creative and inspiring hybrid life had well been projected in his spiritual mission. It is a fact that both Nandy and Bhabha neglected the religious aspect of the native self-proclamation in their postcolonial scholarships. Likewise, almost all analyses of Vivekananda based either on available textual fact of his religious vision or instead of his interactive involvement in India’s socio-cultural and political struggles. Vivekananda could hardly overcome this dichotomy as Ashis Nandy once remarks in *The Intimate Enemy* (1983):

Modern scholars, of course, have their obligation to their own disciplines; they cannot afford to grant the convertibility between lifestyles and ideologies. They have to reconcile the self-created ‘contradiction’ between the materialist and the idealist India by unmasking one of the Indian as false. (82)

The paper has no intention to prove Vivekananda's religious or material interests as false by any means. It rather wants to disclose a complex personality, a modern man and an unguarded traveller whose assimilation and difference in every aspect of his life situates him in a crucial position from where India could see her transition from utter negligence to acceptance in the global platform. Many contemporary scholars try to see the East and the West as two incompatible units of the world and Orientalist discourses also somehow accepts the concept. The spiritual and material interests are not to be separated. Vivekananda's germination from

these two interests of human life shows the inseparable link in Vivekananda's divergent thoughts. This is evident from his assertion that "secular and spiritual knowledge... are the same... knowledge in its different stages of gradual development" (CW4:434) and this has been practiced through *jnana yoga*, which Vivekananda viewed as "the use of true reason to realize the absolute spiritual goal of *moksha*" (Rambachan 1987, 280).

Works-Cited

- Bhabha, Homi K. *The Location of Culture*. London: Routledge, 1994. Print.
- Chattopadhyaya, Rajagopal. *Swami Vivekananda in India: A corrective biography*.
Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1999. Print..
- Dhar, Niranjana. *Vedanta and the Bengal Renaissance*. Calcutta: Minerva Associates Pvt.
Ltd, 1977. Print.
- Halbfass, Wilhelm. *India and Europe: An essay in understanding*. Albany: State University
of New York Press, 1988. Print.
- Inden, Ronald. "Orientalist Constructions of India." *Modern Asian Studies* 20 (3): 401-446,
1986. Print.
- , *Imagining India*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1990. Print.
- Kapoor, Satish. *Cultural Contact and Fusion: Swami Vivekananda in the West*. Jalandhar:
ABS Publications, 1987. Print.
- King, Richard. *Orientalism and Religion: Postcolonial theory, India and 'the mystic East'*.
London: Routledge, 1999. Print.
- Mohapatra, Kalpana. *Political Philosophy of Swami Vivekananda*. New Delhi: Northern
Book Centre, 1996. Print.
- Nandy, Ashis. *The Intimate Enemy: Loss and recovery of self under colonialism*. Delhi:
Oxford University Press, 1983. 10. Print.
- Rambachan, Anantanand. "The Place of Reason in the Quest for *Moksha*- Problems in
Vivekananda's Conceptualization of *Jnanayoga*." *Religious Studies* 23 (2): 279-288,
1987. Print.
- Raychaudhuri, Tapan. *Europe Reconsidered: Perceptions of the West in nineteenth century
Bengal*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1988. Print.

- , "Swami Vivekananda's Construction of Hinduism." In *Swami Vivekananda and the Modernization of Hinduism*, ed. William Radice, 1-16. New Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998. Print.
- Rolfson, Catherine. "Resistance, Complicity and Transcendence". Diss. Canada: Queens' University, 2005. Print.
- Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. (25th Anniversary Edition). New York: Vintage Books, 1978. Print.
- , *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994. Print.
- Sil, Narasingha. *Swami Vivekananda: A reassessment*. Selinsgrove: Susquehanna University Press, 1997. Print.
- , "Ramakrishna-Vivekananda Research: Hagiography versus hermeneutics." *Religious Studies Review* 27 (4). 2001. Print.
- Sen, Simonti. *Travels to Europe: Self and Other in Bengali Travel Narratives (1870-1910)*. New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2005. Print.
- Vivekananda. *The Complete Works of Swami Vivekananda* (9 volumes). Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 2012. Print.
- , *Letters of Swami Vivekananda*. Calcutta: Advaita Ashrama, 1956. Print.
- , *The East and The West*. Mayavati: Advaita Ashrama, 2008.38. Print.
- .