

# ENGLISH WRITING AND INDIA, 1600–1920

COLONIZING AESTHETICS

PRAMOD K. NAYAR

Routledge Research in Postcolonial Literatures

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# English Writing and India, 1600–1920

This book explores the formations and configurations of British colonial discourse on India through a reading of prose narratives of the 1600–1920 period.

Arguing that colonial discourse often relied on aesthetic devices in order to describe and assert a degree of narrative control over Indian landscape, Pramod Nayar demonstrates how aesthetics furnished both a vocabulary and representational modes for the British to construct particular images of India. Aesthetics helped not only to describe the landscape, but also to discursively ‘prepare’ it for colonial projects and intervention. Aesthetics was thus a crucial anterior moment in the rhetoric of colonial India – it narrated, and it colonized.

Looking specifically at the aesthetic modes of the marvellous, the monstrous, the sublime, the picturesque and the luxuriant, Nayar marks the shift in the rhetoric – from the exploration narratives in the proto-colonial age of mercantile exploration to that of the ‘shikar’ memoirs of the late nineteenth and early twentieth century’s extreme exotic. *English Writing and India* provides an important new study of colonial aesthetics, even as it extends current scholarship on the modes of early British representations of new lands and cultures.

**Pramod K. Nayar** teaches at the University of Hyderabad, India. His recent publications in literary and cultural studies include *The Great Uprising: India, 1857* (2007), *The Penguin 1857 Reader* (2007), *Reading Culture: Theory, Praxis, Politics* (2006) and *Virtual Worlds: Culture and Politics in the Age of Cybertechnology* (2004).

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# Introduction

## Aesthetic negotiations

This book is on the aesthetics of colonial discourse, with specific reference to English writings on India. It moves across non-fictional genres as diverse as official reports, travel accounts, memoirs and letters from the early moments of England's 'encounter' with India in the seventeenth century to the 1920s. Aesthetics, this book argues, furnishes a descriptive vocabulary that enables the English traveller to cast India in ways that call for particular kinds of colonial or imperial responses.

If discourse, in Hayden White's (1978: 2) terms, 'constitutes the objects that it pretends only to describe realistically and to analyze objectively', colonial discourse constructs subjects in order to dominate. Colonial discourse is, in Peter Hulme's (1992: 2) succinct formulation, 'an ensemble of linguistically based practices unified by their common deployment in the management of colonial relationships'. Colonial discourse is not simply a set of linguistic devices. On the contrary, they 'actually do much of the crucially important work of colonialism' (Greenblatt 1993: xvi). *Colonizing Aesthetics* explores how different aesthetic approaches in colonial discourse construct particular images of India as a preliminary to English 'interpretation', governance and alteration. The informing assumption therefore is that aesthetic modes and their narrative structures act as contexts for and narrative methods of colonial 'action', often suggesting a rhetorical-textual control over India.

Travel in foreign and alien spaces was often accompanied by writing that explained and documented the new. In fact, as Mary Fuller (1995: 2–7) has shown, travel and writing have always gone together. The vast corpus of English writings on India is an archive of travel, documentation and assorted colonial ideologies. This book is interested in the languages of description, particularly of Indian landscape, in English writings, and demonstrates how these languages adapted aesthetic and literary conventions of the time. Representations of the landscape have always encoded political interests and power relations (Barrell 1985; Birmingham 1986; Helgerson 1986; Fulford 1996, among others). In the case of European travellers in Asia and Africa, as Mary Pratt's (1992) work has shown, the rhetoric of landscape description and mapping was clearly of imperial intent. This book argues that colonial narrative and its concomitant ideology were mediated by and facilitated through aesthetics.

Early modern travel literature has been variously seen as attempts to define

England (and Europe's) sense of nationhood, the problems of the body politic and the identity of an emergent bourgeois (Helgerson 1992; Hadfield 1998; Lim 1998; Linton 1998; Scanlan 1999). The exploration and trading voyages might have been driven primarily by the needs of capital investment rather than political aims during a time of cultural and national xenophobia (Canny 1998; Harris 1998, 2004). Thus the early encounters with the Orient and India may not have been overtly colonial in nature. However, critics have argued for the existence of a colonial and Orientalist imaginary in early modern Europe (Raman 2002; Barbour 2003). There is, in Jyotsna Singh's (1996) terms, a 'colonizing imagination' through which the stage is set for empire later in the eighteenth century (Singh 1996: 2–3, 28). This book aligns itself with such an interpretation: seventeenth-century England, I believe, was informed by colonial or imperial fantasies. The troping of India in certain ways seem to suggest a proto-colonial imaginary, where texts by Edward Terry or John Ovington encode the desire for empire and function as 'allegories of desire' (Scanlan 1999).

India was always central to European 'fantasy' and imagining of the other or new worlds. By the end of the seventeenth century, sixteen major separate accounts appeared on the Mughal empire. Ten more reported extensively on it and other parts of Asia (see Lach and Van Kley 1990). English newspapers regularly carried advertisements for voyages or travelogues, globes, and maps of 'new' areas being 'discovered', suggesting an avid readership for travel news and writing.<sup>1</sup> The English 'encounter' with India starting from the last decades of the sixteenth century generated a massive imperial archive: Richmond Barbour (2003: 8) informs us that in the British Library's India Office, East India Company material occupies nine miles of shelving (see also Richards 1993).

The many genres of English writings on India that this book deals with create a vast 'network of intertextual relations', as Kate Teltscher (1997: 3) in her field-defining work puts it. Faced with radical difference and the incomprehensible, the English traveller sought a degree of assurance through rhetorical control. Teltscher (1997: 14–15) thus discerns an 'editorial struggle' in early English writings about India, a struggle that suggests anxiety, vulnerability and uncertainty (see also Leask 2002: 16). While Teltscher (1997) is correct in pointing to the search for narrative control, she pays less attention to one particular device used to attain this control: aesthetics. Indeed, except for a few select studies, the aesthetics of pre-colonial and colonial India has not been scrutinized with any degree of rigour.<sup>2</sup>

Gerhard Stilz (2002: 85) has persuasively demonstrated that aesthetics 'informed colonial travellers overseas with the perceptions and discursive strategies of coping with alien realities'. Aesthetics and rhetoric invent paradigms for viewing the world and serve serious epistemological purposes. Travel narratives themselves are a literary phenomenon, as K.K. Dyson (1978: 2) has argued, and employ aesthetic devices in the narrative. In the colonial travel narrative the descriptive vocabulary not only facilitated an *immediate* rhetorical control over Indian space, but also functioned as a ground-clearing device for an avowedly colonial discourse of the *later* years of British occupation of India. Aesthetics is here

a colonial 'project'. It is 'a socially transformative endeavour that is localized, politicized and partial, yet also engendered by longer historical developments and ways of narrating them', but also with an interest in creating something new (Thomas 1994: 105). Further, aesthetics understood as 'projects' are 'willed' by the English 'agent', even though it may not be apparent to them. 'Projects' presuppose a 'particular imagination of the social situation . . . and a diagnosis of what is lacking, that can be rectified by intervention' (Thomas 1994: 106). Aesthetics thus had an interventionary and transformative role in the colonial narrative of travel. It permeated discursive formations of the Other, subjects, spaces and the empire in English colonial writings on India. It was, in other words, a colonizing aesthetics.

My purpose in this book is to show how particular aesthetic modes trope India in specific ways in order to demonstrate English control and power over it. The various tropings of India were *transformative* in nature, proposing particular roles for the English in India. In the early, mercantile age it helps English rhetorical or narrative control over Indian variety and vastness. The later aesthetics of the picturesque and the sublime map a colonial shift from a primitive, poor and desolate India to an altered and 'improved', 'Englished' one.

Aesthetics provided the English traveller with the vocabulary to describe varied phenomena and events. Monsoons and agriculture, people, architecture, religious beliefs, processions and gatherings, marketplaces, literature and history – all these and more could be captured within images that drew upon the age's dominant aesthetic conventions and vocabulary. What is intriguing is that the languages of description were extraordinarily homogenizing. Thomas Metcalf (2005: 173–74) argues, correctly, that the colonial aesthetic distanced the British from India, ordering Indian elements in new ways 'with scant regard for the contexts in which they were rooted'. It is indeed startling to see cities as diverse as Calcutta and Madras being inscribed within a descriptive vocabulary that uses the same tropes for all of them. This 'ordering', where the descriptive vocabulary of the English homogenized India, is what I call a colonizing aesthetics.

As the obverse of such a colonizing aesthetics, it is fascinating to see travellers of different class or social backgrounds appropriate similar rhetorical strategies to describe India. Thus chaplain Terry and physician John Fryer, traveller-spy George Forster and mercenary George Thomas all seem to borrow from a ready database of tropes and aesthetic devices. Part of the explanation of such a commonality of devices might be attributed to a common readership and review system. Instructions were issued to travellers – on what to see, what to record and how to record them. Albertus Meierius' *Certain Briefe and Speciall Instructions for Gentlemen, Merchants, Students, Souldiers, Marriners* appeared in 1589. Francis Bacon's 'Of Travel' appeared in 1625. Robert, Earl of Essex, Philip Sidney and William Davidson published *Profitable Instructions* in 1633. The *Philosophical Transactions* of the Royal Society issued 'inquiries' for travellers in 1666–67. Josiah Tucker's instructions for travellers were published in 1757. Further, the numerous writings on the Grand Tour and their vocabulary, landscape descriptions and aesthetic perspectives may have provided models for English people seeking to write travel

narratives about India. There was a huge amount of informed interest in the travelogue in general and the 'Eastern' travelogue in particular, as evidenced by the dozens of reviews in *Monthly Review*, *Critical Review*, *Gentleman's Magazine*, the *Philosophical Transactions* and other periodicals.<sup>3</sup> All of these factors put together may have determined the form, language and ideology of the travel account. India was therefore narrated in ways that would appeal to and obtain the approval of informed readers back in England.

The intention is not to posit a lineage of aesthetics in the colonial encounter, or to draw a one-to-one correspondence of British aesthetic negotiations with India and the European history of ideas. Aesthetic and rhetorical constructions of India demonstrate 'attachments' to the English conceptual systems, but are not necessarily confined to them.<sup>4</sup> The 'moments' or 'moves' I identify in a narrative are not always clear cut, sequential or deriving from one another, even though, admittedly, the book's organization suggests a fixed schema of aesthetic categories. Narratives are as fractured as the experiences, and every travel account uses multiple forms – autobiography, history-writing, chorography – within the same narrative. However, it is possible to locate dominant aesthetic modes within a narrative, and the modes themselves within specific socio-political contexts. Thus, for instance, the sublime becomes a dominant mode during the period of transition – 1750–1820 – when the East India Company was transforming itself from a trading company into a political power. The picturesque, similarly, furnished the colonial missionary with a usable aesthetic device to map the anterior moments of conversion and evangelical colonialism in the 1790–1850 period. While it would be foolhardy to draw exact contextual 'sources' of these modes, the evidence of tropes circulating across genres and narratives suggests a widely prevalent 'system'.

I have drawn upon varied and multiple sources in order to explore and identify a particular aesthetic mode as 'dominant'. I have used travel literature – a problematic and amorphous genre that includes and adapts the conventions from autobiographies, guidebooks and memoirs – along with government administrative reports, historical accounts, letters and discursive writings from British India.<sup>5</sup> I have also used a vast amount of periodical literature, with the assumption that commentaries and reviews best reflect the circulation of these tropes of India in the public domain and the reception of the colonial travel narrative in England. The aim here is to explore the aesthetics of colonial discourse as it cuts across and permeates multiple genres, and to see the intertextual nature of colonial tropes in the languages of description. For this purpose I have quoted extensively – more to prove than to illustrate.

This study moves across the 1600–1920 period. It maps the aesthetic conventions and their attendant languages in English writings from very different historical and political contexts, starting with the early traders and factors to the period of high imperialism and evangelical colonialism. It explores five principal aesthetic modes from this period: the marvellous, the monstrous, the sublime, the picturesque and the luxuriant. In the case of the last two modes, I have focused on

specific genres: the missionary narrative and the sporting memoir as best illustrating the specific aesthetic mode.

The early encounters with India revealed to English people a landscape of vastness, plenty and prosperity. Seeking trading privileges and negotiating with the natives to set up 'factories' and places of residence, the English also faced the task of comprehending variety, quantity, difference and vastness. The marvellous aesthetic, explored in Chapter 1, enables the early English people to negotiate with such a landscape. The key 'project' in this first moment is the exploration and explanation of Indian difference through specific strategies of description and narration. Narratives during this period posit and describe a land of variety, novelty and difficulty – before demonstrating how the English could obtain a degree of control over this material. The 'project' of the marvellous aesthetic renders India 'difficult' in order to highlight the English people's triumph. Using versions of the marvellous such as the theological-moral and the scientific, the English transform an India of enviable plenty into a landscape of wicked excesses, an India of vast, ungovernable variety into a catalogue.

Even as the marvellous generates its rhetoric of plenty and excess preliminary to an iconoclastic rejection of the same, the first century of English travellers encountered the Indian monstrous. The monstrous, as Chapter 2 demonstrates, is a category that folds into the grotesque to domesticate the frightening as or into the ludic. Taking recourse to corporeal, moral and theological discourses, the monstrous aesthetic with its 'fashion monsters', the 'aesthetic' of idleness and 'erotic beasts' shifts the grotesque from individual instances to the larger community and contexts. The monstrous was a part of the project to dehumanize Indian space, to locate Indian culture as radically different and flawed. With these two proto-colonial aesthetic modes the English mapped India as different, inhuman, chaotic, varied and dark. As anterior moments of the colonial phase (1750 and after), these two aesthetic modes of the marvellous and the monstrous play crucial roles in setting up the grounds for intervention and transformation.

With the East India Company assuming political power after the 1750s, a different aesthetic 'project' becomes visible, as I argue in Chapter 3. The sublime aesthetic mode of the 1750–1820 period, driven by a newly acquired confidence, mapped an India of borderless, desolate and wasted lands. Within this 'negative sublime' of emptiness, the aesthetic of the sublime locates English and colonial spaces of amenity. The aesthetics of the sublime is the first clearly imperial aesthetic, where the 'improvement' of desolate Indian lands has been achieved under the aegis of English rule. The 'imperial sublime', as I have termed it, reveals the full transformative power of the aesthetic 'project' within colonialism.

Missionary writings on India in the 1790–1850 period, as Chapter 4 demonstrates, employed its own brand of aesthetics. The colonial evangelical 'project' of 'improvement' and 'cultivation' of Christian natives is admirably served by the aesthetics of the picturesque. Locating paganism within the beauty of the Indian landscape, the missionary picturesque treats India as a site of Christian georgic labour by the missionary. The 'aesthetics of poverty' leads into a transformative aesthetic that proposes a unification of Indian variety into a garden of Christian

faith, a *Concordia discors*, a movement transformation from the primitive picturesque to a Christian one.

In the latter half of the nineteenth century the Indian landscape was well mapped and documented. Searching for a truly adventurous space, which I term the 'extreme exotic' in Chapter 5, the English sportsman (and, in at least a few cases, sportswoman) sought the jungles. The hunting expedition narrates the Indian wilds through the aesthetic of the luxuriant, an aesthetic that combines beauty with danger. Moving from a passive picturesque through the encounter with wild animals – narrated through an aesthetics of risk – the English *shikari* transforms the landscape into a triumphal space. In the wake of the turbulent events of 1857, the luxuriant enables a colonial 'project' of empowerment, triumphal conquest and control. The sporting luxuriant also, like the earlier aesthetic modes, transforms India and colonizes it.

These are not mutually exclusive moments in the aesthetics of colonial writing. Aesthetic 'projects' in the English–India encounter overlap and fold into each other. Versions of the sublime are visible in the seventeenth-century writings of John Ovington and others. The picturesque stretches from the last decades of the eighteenth century till the later decades of the nineteenth. The sense of an Indian luxuriant can be detected in the military memoirs of the 1750–1850 period. What I have tried to do is to locate a dominant aesthetic mode in any given 'age' via a reading of the descriptive vocabulary of the colonial narrative.

My intention is not to draw a genealogy for any particular aesthetic mode, but rather to show how any aesthetic, in the context of English writings on India, served proto-colonial and colonial purposes of knowledge-gathering, categorizing, transformation and rhetorical control. More often than not, aesthetics enables a self-portrait of the English in control, with a full sense of intention and purpose. The colonial discursive construction of India that grants particular roles for colonial governance and power is, I believe, served well by aesthetic modes. How it is done is what this book sets out to demonstrate.



# 1 Marvellous difficulty, 1600–1720

Thomas Herbert's 1634 travelogue, *A Relation of Some Years Travel into Afrique, Asia, Indies*, declares:

This journal was taken in danger, which admits of no curiosity, and craves but the same favourable light for approbation, it was drawn by. Many storms it has endured for company, but more hot days, which have sun-burnt my lines, as well as my face. And though I am on shore, yet I fear, the sea is not yet calm, for each book, sent into the world, is like a bark put to sea, and is as liable to censures as the bark is to foul weather.

(Herbert 1634: unpaginated Preface)

Immediately afterwards, opening his main narrative, Herbert writes:

But I was on my way to many countries, and travellers have enough to do with variety, in men and manners, which make up a library to themselves, besides the situations and present beings of cities and territories, seeming better than to labour in uncertain stories, which not only perplex the hearers, but beget incredulity, often times amongst the credulous.

(Herbert 1634: 2)

The two Herbert passages present a catalogue of the rhetorical devices and tropes used to describe India and Asia in the 1600–1720 period: difficulty, variety, wonder and the need to organize the new sights.

Merchants, 'factors', ambassadors, chaplains and surgeons travelled out to India seeking employment and profits. In some cases they were entrusted with tasks by the English government (Sir Thomas Roe, for instance, was the ambassador from James I to Jahangir, the Mughal emperor). East India Company (EIC) travellers of this period were not, in the strict sense of the term, 'colonial', but they do exhibit a 'colonizing imagination' (Singh 1996: 2–3, 2b).<sup>1</sup> The early English travellers confronted a radically different topography, climate, fauna and flora, diseases, cultures and belief systems. Their travelogues, cast as exploration narratives, often take recourse to a trope of 'discovery' in order to deal with the