



English Penetration Across the Indian Interior Caused a Change in its Depiction in the Literature of British India: A Study into the Portrayal of Landscape in ‘Tea and Sugar’, *Confessions of a Thug*, *Kim*, *Untouchable* and *Midnight’s Children*

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Focusing on the Indian landscape, this essay will explore how its depiction in literature of British India changed between the colonial conquest and Indian Independence. Broadly, it will argue that, synonymous with English advance, indigenous spaces were converted; from disordered to controlled and highly detailed. To do so, the essay will principally draw upon Mary Louise Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes: Travel writing and Transculturation* to consider the impact of a development in what she terms the ‘European “planetary consciousness”’.¹ As continental exploration improved, Pratt explains, indigenous landscapes were depicted through ‘European-based patterns of...unity and order’²: species encountered were classified, removing the perception of chaos. This was delivered through the dual development of natural history and led to a realignment of the distant land with the western perspective. During her study, Pratt refers to England as the ‘imperial metropole’³ and the Indian continent as the ‘periphery’,⁴ terms this essay will use throughout its commentary. Similarly, it will draw upon her terms ‘contact zone’⁵ with reference to locations where eastern and western cultures meet and ‘colonial frontier’⁶ to describe a Euro-centered perspective on interactions with the east. The essay will also utilise a model by Bruno Latour, described in Nigel Leask’s *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing, 1770-1840: From an Antique Land*, which interprets ‘exploration as a Cycle of Accumulation’.⁷ The model maps European aspirations to ‘stab[ilize]’⁸ representations of the periphery through returning ‘mobiles’,⁹ in the form of artifacts or maps, back to the metropolitan center. A survey, conducted first, will consider the relationship between English infiltration and the conversion of indigenous land in *Tea and Sugar*, *Confessions of a Thug*, *Untouchable* and *Midnight’s Children*. ‘Tea and Sugar’ and *Confessions of a Thug* display an English curiosity in the Indian interior and penetration across it. Written by English authors, they are Euro-centered, the voice of Amir colonially ventriloquized to mask an English perspective. *Untouchable* and *Midnight’s Children*, in contrast, are Indian-centered and form a response to English texts. Here a reversal of the opening theme of English progression and productivity are depicted, the curiosity paradigm inverted as those on the periphery take interest in the imperial metropole. To follow, a detailed discussion on *Kim* will explore the conversion of the interior into an ordered and detailed space which is connected to a desire to map and specify. It will also consider a growing alignment between the English and Indian perspective and will thus build on the depictions found in ‘Tea and Sugar’ and *Confessions*.

To begin with ‘Tea and Sugar’, written during the Indian conquest. This poem marks a transition from the imperial metropole to periphery: Snare, sea-bound, ‘takes the parting view’ (54)¹⁰ of England, the west, here, affiliated with the sea. The focus upon ‘fertile fields, [which] extend, far and wide’ (58)¹¹ then equates the east with a vast, rural and generative landscape. Considered with the phrase ‘we get gold from dirt’ (29),¹² the interior offers a productive and profitable prospect of financial gain. This is enhanced through ‘India’s spoils returned’ (42),¹³ suggestive of a desire to transport ‘mobiles’, in reference to the ‘Cycle of Accumulation’, back to the imperial metropole. As these take the form of ‘gold and...gems’ (80),¹⁴ an opportunity for wealth is implied. To extend, the

¹ Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 15.

² *Ibid.*, p. 31.

³ *Ibid.*, p. 4.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 8.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ Nigel Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing, 1770-1840: From an Antique Land* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2002), p. 18.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 20.

⁹ *Ibid.*, 21.

¹⁰ Timothy Touchstone, ‘Tea and Sugar’ in *The Poetry of British India, 1780-1905*, ed. by Máire Ní Fhlathúin (London: Pickering & Chatto, 2011).

¹¹ *Ibid.*

¹² *Ibid.*

¹³ *Ibid.*

¹⁴ *Ibid.*

landscape appears a virginal space; it is unpeopled and void of human settlements. Thus presented is the opportunity for development and transformation as its flat, empty expanses suggest extensive penetrability. A desire to move across the continent, therefore, appears synonymous with a potential for productivity and development. Where they have advanced, the English are presented as being in control; Snare declares 'this fertile country's mine' (62)¹⁵ and an ability to make the 'Indians yield' (69),¹⁶ the contact zone displayed as a binary of eastern subservience and western domination. However, issued on the shoreline and in 'Hindustan's plains' (71),¹⁷ found in the north, their infiltration across, and thus control of, the interior appears limited. An affiliation with water is therefore symbolic of limited access and control. This depiction of limited access is enhanced through a lack of precision in description of the landscape; referring to the interior, natives reside 'in the deep' (4),¹⁸ the image vague. This contrasts the detail given of England, exemplified through the individual naming of characters: 'Sir Rupee' (30).¹⁹

Turning to *Confessions of a Thug*, written in 1839, though connection to the sea is maintained, improved access to the interior is implied. Displayed, is a development in knowledge and a growing ability to control indigenous spaces. This is exemplified in the mention of a 'camp of the army'²⁰ in Secunderabad; whilst the city's central location implies continental penetration, the English camp is allied with 'a vast sheet of blue water'.²¹ As a result, the image of west-as-sea-fearers is conserved, reducing conceptions of advance in land. However, the descriptions of Secunderabad and neighboring Hyderabad are highly detailed, suggesting a growth of knowledge: the surrounding landscape, rather than a unified plain, is heterogeneous, containing 'rocky hills'²² and a 'forest of trees'.²³ Moreover, movement into Hyderabad leads to a modification of assumptions about its interior: 'I thought...it was composed...of gardens',²⁴ echoing formal gardens found back in the imperial metropole, then 'I entered [to find] streets...so thickly peopled'.²⁵ Thus, transition across the interior has led to clarity and a deeper English understanding.

This specificity of detail works to contrast the ambiguity of rural landscapes, assimilated with indigenous India. These spaces, to which the English have little access, controlled by bands of thugs, are described through a set of vague characteristics, such as dense with 'jungle',²⁶ which lack detail. Furthermore, these areas are predominantly travelled to at night: 'it was scarcely light enough to see',²⁷ cloaking discrete elements in darkness, again providing limited detail. Where they are provided, however, they refer to brutal murders: 'a ravine...eight bodies were lying'.²⁸ Of greatest salience is the threatening nature of indigenous land, where the natural environment is autonomous, concealing unlawful activities and ensuring that penetration is arduous. These spaces contrast those assimilated with the English, referring back to Secunderabad, land is saturated in light and beauty: English tents 'glittered in the bright sun'²⁹ which provides a stark distinction to the indigenous landscape and clear division is portrayed. However, where at the novel's opening 'jungle...extended...in every direction',³⁰ towards its close, the Thug's traverse 'cultivated ground from first to last',³¹ a transformation occurring as a result of the English. Apparent is a reformulation of the indigenous landscape, where growth is regulated and ordered, as a result of increased penetration of the English across the interior. The combined focus of these texts is therefore advance of the colonial frontier across the interior and the corresponding growth of knowledge, cultivation and ordering of the land.

Contrastingly, *Untouchable* and *Midnight's Children*, written in 1935 and 1981, refer to India around the time of independence and offer a response to colonialism. Where the Euro-centered texts explored a progression across the interior, these Indian-centered novels express an interior which has been infiltrated and deserted by the English. Conveyed is a loss of productivity, reversing images of

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Meadows Taylor, *Confessions of a Thug* (New Delhi: Rupa, 2001), p. 150.

²¹ Ibid.

²² Ibid., p. 151.

²³ Ibid.

²⁴ Ibid.

²⁵ Ibid.

²⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

²⁷ Ibid., p. 54.

²⁸ Ibid., p. 43.

²⁹ Ibid., p. 150.

³⁰ Ibid., p. 8.

³¹ Ibid., p. 462.

earlier texts. Within both texts, the English are aligned with the Indian interior symbolised through an inversion of the west-as-sea-fearers paradigm. This implies complete continental infiltration. *Untouchable* locates a 'pool'³² in the rural landscape surrounding Bulashah, therefore associating it, to contrast the lake in *Confessions of a Thug*, with the indigenous land and the colonised, rather than the English. A similar shift is found in *Midnight's Children*: Tai, symbolic of indigenous India: 'I have watched the mountains being born',³³ is a boatman, his job to 'ferry'³⁴ the English. Thus the tropes of English maritime navigation are inverted. Moreover, the lake, described as dangerous, 'three English women [having been] drowned',³⁵ is characterised through images applied to indigenous landscapes in *Confessions of a Thug*. This reversal again aligns India with water. In contrast, the English are affiliated with dry land. This is exemplified in Methwold's Estate, built upon English stereotypes: 'mansions [with] gabled roofs'³⁶ and 'Buckingham Villa'.³⁷ Home to Indians, 'we are entering my [Saleem's] kingdom now',³⁸ synergy between the Indian and English modes of life is implied. Where, in earlier texts, English affiliation with water symbolised reduced access, detachment through an inversion of the paradigm in *Untouchable* and *Midnight's Children* assumes infiltration across the interior.

To extend, coupled with this image of infiltration, *Untouchable* conveys one of stagnation, a contrast to the anticipative images of progression of earlier texts. Similarly, whilst there is evidence of English inhabitation their physical bodies are withdrawn, exemplified in the empty music costumes: 'uniforms in the band shop'.³⁹ A reversal of depictions of an advancing colonial frontier, discussed in relation to Euro-centered texts, is therefore evident. To explain, Anand describes a plain scene, echoing those in earlier texts. However, rather than fertile, the 'wide expanse [is] empty except for the interminable thread of men...[and]rubbish-heaps',⁴⁰ the interior therefore described through images of decomposition and disharmony. This is again implied in his depiction of 'decaying, rotten vegetables',⁴¹ attention thus drawn to waste rather than product. Moreover, towards the novel's close, a glimpse of the 'Grand Trunk Road'⁴² is revealed, implying an opportunity for travel and transportation of goods. However, a lack of mobility is indicated: 'the pavements were crowded with beggars',⁴³ its subjects unable to prosper from the land. Where travel and infiltration was synonymous with an ability to cultivate and prosper in earlier texts, a reversal is identified with stagnation, poverty and neglect.

Correspondingly, in his initial advance through the plain, Bakha experiences a 'sensation of being a giant...commanding a full view of everything',⁴⁴ he walks 'full of the spirit of adventure'.⁴⁵ Here then, the voice of the coloniser is echoed. This connotes an inversion of the curiosity paradigm, the Indian expressing interest in the imperial metropole. This is further suggested in *Untouchable* through a shift in focus from the rural and indigenous to the urban land. To explain, mentioned only briefly, indigenous India is marginalised in the narrative, its autonomy conveyed in earlier texts reduced: 'tremulous line of foliage'.⁴⁶ Moreover, though rarely mentioned in its physical state, nature is used to describe states of mind and body 'face as brown as...wheat'.⁴⁷ Mapped on to the human form, its existence is internalised, its physical power thus reduced. Contrastingly, 'unaroused'⁴⁸ by the indigenous landscape, Bakha's attention is 'absorbed in the spectacle of the town of Bulashah'.⁴⁹ Containing English tropes, this settlement is taken to symbolise the imperial metropole: mention of 'mango orchards'⁵⁰ surrounding Bulashah implies a devotion to cultivation whilst the awe and wonder surrounding the English 'solar topee'⁵¹ signifies a transportation of English 'mobiles' into the

³² Mulk Raj Anand, *Untouchable* (London: Penguin Classics, 2014), p. 81.

³³ Salman Rushdie, *Midnight's Children* (London: Vintage Books, 2008), p. 13.

³⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 11.

³⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

³⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 125.

³⁷ *Ibid.*

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

³⁹ Anand, *Untouchable*, p. 45.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 104.

⁴¹ *Ibid.*, p. 44.

⁴² *Ibid.*, p. 118.

⁴³ *Ibid.*

⁴⁴ *Ibid.*, p.104.

⁴⁵ *Ibid.*

⁴⁶ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁴⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 74.

⁴⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 81.

⁴⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁵⁰ *Ibid.*

⁵¹ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

periphery, inverting the direction of transition mapped by the 'Cycle of accumulation'. This again symbolises a re-centering of the curiosity paradigm. These two texts therefore convey a reversal of images found within 'Tea and Sugar' and *Confessions of a Thug*.

Turning now to a detailed study of *Kim*, written in 1901. Like *Confessions of a Thug*, *Kim* conveys a dual representation of the landscape. Where the interior is flat, penetration occurs with ease. Here the land is heavily influenced by the English, mapped and ordered, with focus placed on agriculture and commerce. However, where it is mountainous, the land is largely unknown, its description as a 'jungle of peaks'⁵² echoing images in *Confessions of a Thug*. The land thus presents many obstacles for diffusion by the English. This space signifies what remains of indigenous India and it is into this area that the European's strive to progress.

To focus first upon depictions of the plains, *Kim* draws attention to the advancement of the colonial frontier through the flat land and its subsequent cultivation. This is signified in the initial collision between the English and Kim's trajectory. A scene located on a 'broad tract of grazing-ground',⁵³ the soldiers appear from 'far across the plain'⁵⁴ and 'spread over the flat earth'.⁵⁵ They do so without interruption or interrogation by the Indians, Kim an observing bystander: 'Kim stared with all his eyes'.⁵⁶ Whilst Kim is of Irish heritage, brought up in India, his perspective towards the beginning of the is aligned with the Indian. The English are thus conveyed as navigating smoothly over the flat interior, their appearance one of domination and control. Furthermore, the land is described as vacant, rather than intruding, the English are described as acting opportunistically. To this, they exploit the space for their own gain, converting it into a camp. Their movement through the plains is therefore synonymous with manipulation to benefit themselves. Coincidentally, this land is classified as a 'grazing ground',⁵⁷ suggesting productive potential, a focus which is continued throughout the novel: opportunity for financial gain is assumed through mention of a land able to produce 'three and even four crops a year'⁵⁸ along with a 'well-to-do cultivator'.⁵⁹ These level plains are therefore affiliated with fertility and productivity. It thus implies a relationship between penetration and the corresponding ability to prosper from the land.

Of greatest salience within *Kim*, however, is an alliance between the English and the act of mapping and ordering the interior. As a result, infiltration appears to convert the landscape into a coherent and disciplined space. Corresponding growth of the English knowledge base is also apparent. To focus first upon the regimentation of the land, whilst spaces heavily populated by the Indians are often described through scenes of disorganisation and irregularity, filled with the people of 'many colour[s]',⁶⁰ for example, those affiliated with the English are compartmentalised and ordered. Returning to the aforementioned plain, the 'tents'⁶¹ used by the regiment's camp confine living areas. As such, they divide and segment the blank space, conveying a significant contrast. Previously described as 'mysterious'⁶² and 'wild',⁶³ Colonel Creighton's request for Kim to map the city of Bikanir sees the deliverance of order. As a result, the land of the colonised is portrayed as disordered, requiring a systemisation which is brought about by the English. This outlook echoes that prescribed by the development of natural history: these cartographic actions provide an ordered image of the interior which can then be transported, to refer again to the 'Cycle of Accumulation', back to the imperial metropole. To exemplify, Kim's map is preserved within 'E23's second Seistan survey'⁶⁴ thus forms a 'mobile' which can be transported. In summary, the action of the English, once they've infiltrated, appears to confine and define the land in order to impose clarity and understanding.

In addition, alongside the ordering of the Indian land, *Kim* also exhibits a rigorous collection and documentation of discrete species and individuals within it: artifacts are extracted, classified and contained. Signified is a heightened specification and thus knowledge of life within the interior. To explain, the collection and containment of fragments from the interior is hinted at through the presence of the Lahore museum, manned by an English curator. When inside, the curator '[draws] forth a...book and a scrap of paper'⁶⁵ in which he collects notes about the Lama. Through this,

⁵² Rudyard Kipling, *Kim* (London: Penguin, 2012), p. 252.

⁵³ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁵⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 86.

⁵⁶ *Ibid.*

⁵⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 85.

⁵⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 47.

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 29.

⁶⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 15.

⁶¹ *Ibid.*, p. 88.

⁶² *Ibid.*, p. 184.

⁶³ *Ibid.*

⁶⁴ *Ibid.*

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*, p. 7.

referring to the 'Cycle of Accumulation', the Lama's physical existence is transcribed into an object of greater stability. It thus becomes easier to transport the information back to the imperial metropole. Furthermore, the curator exhibits knowledge of the Lama's lamasery: 'bought out a...book of photos and showed [the lama] the very place'.⁶⁶ Here the curator shows affiliation with the Lama and the knowledge of the coloniser is presented as drawing level with that of the colonised. Beyond this, the curator also offers his glasses to the Lama in the hope that they 'help [him] to [his] River'.⁶⁷ He thus inserts clarity into the interior gaze of the Indian. Thus, where the Lama provides information to deepen the English knowledge base, the curator, in turn, supports the Lama to develop his own understanding, connoting interaction between the imperial metropole and the periphery. Where the Indian knowledge of the interior was far superior during the early stages of colonialism, *Kim* exemplifies that, through greater infiltration, English knowledge has been gained; alignment of the English with the periphery is suggested.

Correspondingly, *Kim* traces a shift in the Indian perspective: through the Indian absorption of English practices, Indian alignment with the regimented outlook of the colonisers is implied. To exemplify, at the opening of the novel, Kim lacked awareness of 'what bounds meant',⁶⁸ at its close, however, items held in his view 'slid[e] into proper proportion',⁶⁹ having mastered the English-taught skills of mathematics and map-making. Thus his outlook upon the world is one of dimension, relation, and order, echoing that of the English. This signifies alignment between the perspective of the imperial metropole and the periphery. To extend, Kim's own movements and knowledge growth throughout the novel is synonymous with that of the English. At the novel's opening, Kim talks of the north as alien, containing 'all those strange places in the hills'.⁷⁰ This echoes the distanced intrigue of the European gaze. As mentioned earlier, the mountains form the only contact zone in the novel in which the indigenous landscape remains autonomous. Here an abundance of flora and fauna is described; 'deodar-forests...birch, ilex [and] rhodoendron'⁷¹ and the houses are adapted to fit the environment: 'jammed into a corner between cliffs'.⁷² In comparison, the houses of Simla, heavily populated by the English, are 'built over the sheer hillside'.⁷³ This signifies English control over the natural land. However, whilst limited access to the mountains is suggested, Kim's ability to penetrate the mountains towards the novel's close is therefore conative of the colonial frontier's advance into new territory. This is further implied through mention of English 'pay[ing] the coolies who made new roads in the hills'.⁷⁴ Infiltration is therefore occurring on two levels: to expand the English knowledge base and, in turn, to enable the native population to obtain greater understanding of the interior.

In conclusion, this study has explored the relationship between English infiltration across the Indian interior and its depiction in the Literature of British India. It has suggested a connection between English advance and the conversion of indigenous land into an ordered and detailed space, where progression is synonymous with a growth in the English knowledge base. Where the earlier texts focused on productivity and advance, *Untouchable* and *Midnight's Children* appear to invert images, presenting a significant change in Euro and Indian-centered perspectives. The English, across the period, are depicted as becoming detached from their sea-fearer image whilst, in turn, the natives appear to learn more about their own country and align themselves with the English perspectives of order and control.

⁶⁶ Ibid., p. 8.

⁶⁷ Ibid., p. 13.

⁶⁸ Ibid., p. 108.

⁶⁹ Ibid., p. 305.

⁷⁰ Ibid., p. 18.

⁷¹ Ibid., p. 249.

⁷² Ibid., p. 250.

⁷³ Ibid., p. 164.

⁷⁴ Ibid., p. 240.

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