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The Colonial Gaze: Women in Travel Photography

The long tradition

Europe is privy to a long tradition of representing continents as women. Such a tradition was central to the Eurocentric view point. Cesare Ripa's *Iconologia* published in 1603 depicts allegorical figures of women providing illustrations for the various continents. The four figures (figure no. 1, 2, 3 and 4) viz. *Europa*, *Africa*, *Asia* and *America* illustrate the fixed perceptions of the nature of the "four corners of the world" from the European perspective (*Wikipedia* "Four continents").



Fig. 1



Fig. 2



Fig. 3



Fig. 4

The same correspondence is again evident in the paintings of Peter Paul Rubens, whose superbly executed Renaissance painting *The Four Continents* (figure no. 5) depicts four female figures representing Europe, Africa, Asia and America entwined with four male figures representing the four major river Gods – Danube, Nile, Ganges and Rio de la Plata (*Wikipedia* "The Four Continents").



Fig. 5

Such a representation fitted the ideology of colonialism perfectly. The following engraving (figure no. 6) entitled *America*, ca. 1580 by Theodor Galle after a drawing by Jan van der Straet (ca. 1575) re-presents Amerigo Vespucci "discovering" America.



Fig. 6

“Here a naked woman, crowned with feathers, upraises herself from her hammock to meet the gaze of the armoured and robed man who has just come ashore; she extends her right arm toward him, apparently gesture of wonder – or, perhaps, of apprehension. Standing with his feet firmly planted upon the ground, Vespucci observes the personified and feminized space that will bear his name. This recumbent figure, now discovered and roused from her torpor, is about to be hailed, claimed, and possessed as *America*” (Montrose 180). Vespucci carries with him the markers of civilization, exploration, and conquest: a cruciform staff with a banner bearing the Southern Cross, a navigational astrolabe, and a sword – the symbols of religious, scientific and military superiority. Behind Vespucci, the prows of the ships – symbols of the expansion of European hegemony enter the pictorial space of the New World; on the right, behind America, we find indigenous wildlife emblematic of the American interior – at once natural and strange. Far off – in the distance, but at the centre of the pictorial frame – a group of naked savages, potential subjects of the civilizing process, are preparing a cannibal feast.

“The elements of savagery, deceit, and cannibalism central to the emergent European discourse on the inhabitants of the New World are already in place in this very early example. Of particular significance here is the blending of these basic ingredients of proto-colonialist ideology with a crude and anxious misogynistic fantasy, a powerful conjunction of the savage and the feminine” (Montrose 181). The picture exemplifies the tradition where the continents like Africa and America are presented as female bodies available for “plunder, possession, discovery and conquest” (Loomba 128). The native women and their bodies thus become the spectral space where the promise and the fear of the colonial land can be explored. Thus there is a metaphoric representation of the colonial land as the female body from the early days of colonialism to its very end and beyond.

Colonialism, tourism and the female body

The desire for “plunder, possession, discovery and conquest” (Loomba 128) which shaped the colonial discourse also gives birth to early tourism. The intrinsic connection between tourism and colonialism is formulated by the utilization of technologies of representation, particularly photography. Photography was instrumental in representing, collecting, picturing and observing the colonial terrain, where the indigenous terrain becomes an “object of a representational knowledge ... and the site for reproducing colonial relationships of power” (Hayes 172). Tourism and the photography associated with it allows colonialism to be practiced as it is related with observation, recording, and consuming which produce relationships of power in specific colonial situations.

The representation of the colonised space through the female body serves an important objective – that of engendering the colonised culture as feminine. The Scottish photographer George Washington Wilson, while introducing Samoa before the Western audience proposes: “as our first Samoan view, we beg to introduce to notice a young Samoan princess. We will allow the little beauty, dressed in her costume of tapa or native bark cloth, to speak for herself” (16). The overtone connecting the colonizing gaze with patriarchy, the focus on so called royalty, is helpful in narrating a sexualized and stereotypical representation of colonial discourse. Wilson’s suggestion of the “little beauty” as depicted in the photograph (figure no. 7) to “speak for herself” denies the Samoan woman any voice of her own and reduced to the voyeuristic gaze of the English audience. Her passive silence is instrumental in signifying the dominance of the colonizer’s gaze. The Western viewer beholds the “princess” as well as the land through this gaze of colonial and patriarchal power.



Fig. 7

The same colonial metaphor is equally true for the travellers. The tourist must, therefore, view the colonial land as that of the woman's body, which encapsulates the disembodied gaze and the fetishist desire for the stereotyped other. The knowledge about the colonial land is formulated by a sexual economy; the colonised space is thus transformed into a woman's body and is as exotic and sexually desirable as the latter. Photography plays a pivotal role in shaping this gaze. The women in colonial photography are often commercialized representation of indigenous bodies so that they may be seized by the tourist observers. The sexual gaze translates into a desire for seizure of the colonised terrain. The savage wilderness which the coloniser and the tourist must seize is made more palatable by its assimilation into the bodily image of a woman. "To make the new continent Woman was already to civilize it a bit, casting the stamp of human relations upon what was otherwise unknown and untamed" (Kolodny). The excessive focus of women in tourist literature operates within the power structure that fetishizes the non-Western colonised other in a submissive role already stamped in colonial relationships of power by gender roles.

Travel photography – the militaristic trope:

One of the earliest instances of travel photography is recorded by Alfred Burton, who chronicles his experiences as a photographer in a "Photographer's Diary" during the tour of Wairarapa, a part of New Zealand in 1884. Burton wrote an account of this excursion, which was published in a pamphlet to accompany the advertised catalogue of photographs. In one section of the pamphlet Burton deals with the ideology of photographer's gaze and particularly how it controls the sexual and aesthetic economy of the subject. The photograph is the space of the colonised but must succumb to the colonizer's reality. The representational power of the photograph is thus

challenged as the tourist or the photographer is more of a seduced body than a rational mind. The tourist, who is supposed to be a more civilised observer, and hence naturally superior to the subject, in a way undermines the very authority of representation on which his superiority ultimately rests.

In spite of the fact that the authority of Western representation is at times problematized, the colonial traveller in no way relinquishes his embedded position. The tour in Burton's lexicon is described in militaristic tropes, unfolding an offensive movement. Thus the tour ends up in an invasion, for the stated purpose of "capture" (11).

The force was divided; one body, consisting chiefly of ladies, pulled round to attack the island by a flank movement ... while the larger division pushed on boldly to the front ... Meanwhile the Engineer corps represented by the Photographer-in-chief and a small but effective following of dingy mercenaries – had hovered on the skirts of the column, making a diversion ever and anon as some tempting scene would invite capture. (11-12)

While the men and women take part in "attacking the island" (albeit the women from the flank and the men "boldly to the front"), the camera "hovering on the skirts of the column" play the part of a spying device which can infiltrate the enemy territory. In Burton's words the camera is a loaded weapon with the wild vegetation "falling" to the camera and the valley "covered by (its) fire" (12).

However, "capturing" the panorama is only half the job done, the photographers soon discovered that "good fortune awaited them ... they were confronted by a large body of coolies (female) ... Their disposition was excellent, but after a very brief engagement they were all 'taken'" (12). However, such engagement is never totally innocent. The colonized subject is sexualized as feminine – shown to be weak – so that she may be penetrated and taken. The travel photographer must exert his patriarchal superiority.

The "chieftess of the party", in spite of her alluring beauty was spared of being "looted" (12). The lady, on being approached by the strangers veiled herself with the corner of the robe. But with the photographer-in-chief imitating her action, she laughed at the joke and dropped her garment and "let all who would gaze their fill. After this the whole coffee estate duly captured" (12). The deliberate attempt to "naturalize" the colonised subject (figure no. 8) displays the violence associated with the colonising process, of which the photographer is an active accomplice.



Fig. 8

The woman thus is commoditized and presented as a spoil of war. The photographic gaze on the “naturalised” woman is transformed into the “capturing” of the coffee estate. The representational capture through the lens is thus coterminous with the militaristic capture of the land through violence. The woman in attempting to drape herself and thus be civil accepts the superiority of the colonial traveller’s culture. However, she cannot escape the sexualized gaze of the photographer. He mimics her to point the unnaturalness of her dressing and suggests that the only proper way for the woman to present herself before the tourists is to bare herself before them.

The language of travel advertisement:

The travel advertisement, especially featuring places marked as exotic, used the same metaphor of looking at the commoditized tourist terrain as a desirable female body. The organized tourist industry and the advertisements associated with it prompted a new way of representation. Travel advertising harped on the difference and the promise adventure rather than on familiarity and assured result for success. However, any such difference was bounded by socio-cultural limits; no tourist place could be shown to be too different or too dangerous. The photographers of such advertisements, therefore, had the challenge of making the marketed culture look enticing and that too without a model with whom the viewer-consumer could easily identify. To meet such demands the spectral dimension of a typical advertisement was changed in the tourist advertisements. So instead of the conventional practice of allowing the viewer to change place with the model as is

common in typical commercial advertisements, the viewer was encouraged to commoditise and objectify the native women as part of the travel experience up for grabs of the tourist-consumer.

One of the tourist destinations that was subjected to mass-advertising was Hawai'i. Without any template at hand, the photographers fell back upon earlier visual cultures including commercial tourist souvenirs by Western artists (figure no. 9), to images of Hula dancers (figure no. 10) and finally to romantic narratives of Paul Gauguin's paintings (figure no. 11).

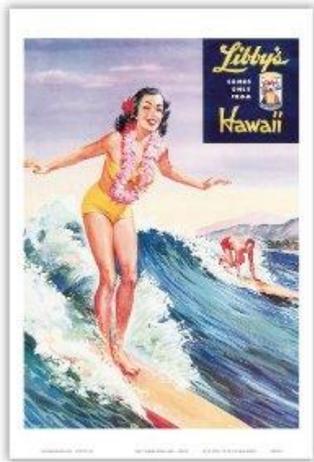


Fig. 9

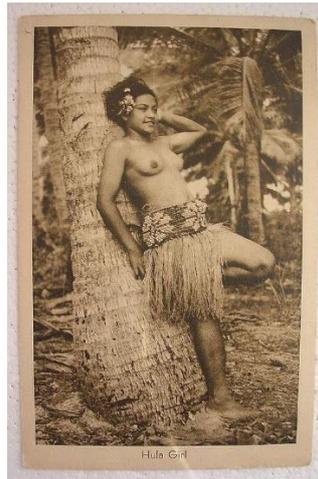


Fig. 10

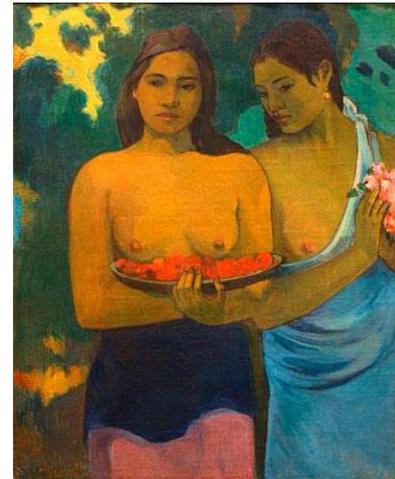


Fig. 11

These images displayed a great interest in depicting the fascinating dresses, the unfamiliar culture and enigmatic customs of the people of Hawai'i. These images were rendered to the Western audience by well-established stylistic practices and allusions. The photographer of the travel advertisement had a ready reckoner at hand in form of such visuals.

One of the cultural themes that is repeated in the works of the early European explorers and later in the art of Paul Gauguin is equating native women with nature. In the advertisement (figure no. 12), a native woman in a floral dress weaves a garland, ready to embrace the tourist; her nimble fingers weave the *lau hala* baskets and mats, offering the visitor fresh coconuts. The fruits, flowers, the hampers round her, the mats on which she sits all work together to reinforce the nature theme with which she is connected. The text entices the potential tourist with the words "Closer than you think ... Lovelier than you dreamed!" – making the connection between the woman and the land of Hawai'i most obvious. The Polynesian woman with her smile, the fruits and flowers all transform Hawai'i into the mythical Eden, where the tourist on a random exploration has every possibility to come across the proverbial Eve depicted in the advertisement.



Fig. 12

The vision of Eden is carried forward in the next advertisement about a cocktail show (figure no. 13). The invitation reads “Return to Paradise” – a paradise symbolised by a maiden in pristine white with an alluring smile and pose decked in flowers. The riot of colours at the back holds promise for uncharted enjoyments.



Fig. 13



Fig. 14

The next advertisement (figure no. 14) is a collage of the exoticness of Hawai’i, including images of Hula dance, fishing, pristine beaches, the fruit bazaar and the procession of the King and chiefs, all knot together in a flowery wreath. However, the image that stands out is that of the native woman in a swimsuit, reclining on a coconut tree, with her garland sitting in the lap of nature, inviting the tourist with her smile. The caption here rightly reads “So excitingly different ...”

Conclusion:

It is interesting to note how the colonial gaze has been instrumental in shaping the long history of portrayal of women in travel photography. The photographer makes best use of the colonial metaphor, whereby the native land is always equated with the native woman. This helps the

colonial process as the colonised land can thereby be portrayed as effeminate and hence ripe for conquest. The woman in the tourist brochure is also a bodily representation of the land she belongs to and adds to the exoticness and enticement of the marketed tourist spot. In both instances they emulate a sense of wonder and fascination while incorporating the sense of romantic primitivism along with biblical and classical traditions that furthers the colonial discourse.

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