

## Traveling "Back" to India

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## Veiled Strangers: Rabindranath Tagore's America, in Letters and Lectures

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Isn't there any eagerness to know the distant stranger, who sits veiled  
across the ocean?  
Rabindranath Tagore, *The Diary of a Westward Voyage*  
24 September 1924, aboard the S.S. Haruna Maru

### Abstract

The Indian writer Rabindranath Tagore visited the United States several times, though his second trip in 1916-1917 seems to have generated the most excitement. On the verge of American entry into World War I, the Nobel prize-winning writer embarked on an extensive lecture tour critiquing the excesses of nationalism and imperialism. The visit generated a number of remarkable texts, including a series of important letters to family and friends written on the trip and the four long lectures collected and published in 1917 as *Nationalism*. I argue that the lectures on "Nationalism," can and should be read as a form of "reverse Orientalist" travel writing, where Tagore aimed to show Americans how their own political and economic system could be seen as rather similar to the European powers. Tagore uses the lectures to develop a series of metaphors for the modern, instrumentalist deployment of power in the nation-state and the colonial world, against which he posited an ideal of modern man cultivated and "perfected," rather like a work of art.

**Keywords:** countertravel, imperialism, India, nationalism, Rabindranath Tagore, United States

Travel writing as a genre has been critiqued by many postcolonial scholars as an extension of colonial discourse, and theoretical interventions like David Spurr's *Rhetoric of Empire* (1993) and Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan's *Tourists with Typewriters* (2000), have unpacked the politics of certain persistent patterns of distortion and misrecognition with compelling force. First, Holland and Huggan argue that contemporary travel writing is "an effective alibi for the perpetuation or reinstallation of ethnocentrically superior attitudes to 'other' cultures, peoples, and places," (2000: viii) a strong formulation that leaves little room for variations or alternative approaches. For his part, David Spurr meticulously dissects a set of tropes by which Western travel writing has construed the non-West, using examples from eighteenth century Orientalism (Denis Diderot), through even progressive, anti-colonial journalism from the Vietnam War (Susan Sontag). Even though Spurr in particular offers a systematic classificatory framework through which to understand travel writing under conditions of uneven power, neither he nor Holland and Huggan give very much conceptual space to alternative forms of travel writing. Holland and Huggan briefly consider "countertravel writing," and Spurr does end his book with a section on the possibility of a trope of "resistance" (specifically, through deconstructive hybridity), but neither *The Rhetoric of Empire* nor *Tourists with Typewriters* seriously consider how resistant or alternative models of travel writing might complicate their respective fundamental approaches to the topic. In effect, both of these influential works are polemics, and while they do admit to exceptions, the orienting premise remains that travel writing is an extension of colonial discourse.

Alternative modes of travel writing were sometimes authored by British travelers in the later years of the Raj (one thinks of Edward Thompson's *An Indian Day* [1927] or George Orwell's "Shooting an Elephant" [1940]) and in the present, postcolonial moment (William Dalrymple's *City of Djinn*s [2003], for example), but perhaps the body of writing by somewhat lesser-known writers from the colonial world might serve as a more direct challenge. These are writers who reverse the expected West-to-East pattern when they visited Europe and North America and recorded their experiences<sup>1</sup>. These non-Western travel writers shared some of the challenges faced by European and American writers, especially the problem of perceiving the "veiled" truth of the foreign worlds that they were attempting to know, but they avoided, generally, replicating the arrogance and ethno-

centrism that plagued, and continues to plague, much Euro-American travel writing. In place of Spurr's powerfully described tropes of "surveillance," "appropriation," "negation," "eroticization," and so on, in reverse travel writing, one finds much less ideologically loaded tropes: as in Tagore's question above, one sometimes sees a kind of pure curiosity about the Other, which is harder to locate in the by-now familiar ideological paradigm of postcolonial discourse analysis. Reverse travel writing is not devoid of generalizations about the cultural Other being encountered in the West, but some instances of it, which we will explore in depth here, may provide the tools by which the dominant tropes of colonial travel writing can be deconstructed. By considering alternative models of travel writing, one can argue that it is not travel writing *per se* that is problematic, but the disparity of power between the observer and observed that is its frequent premise. When that disparity vanishes, is reversed, or is mitigated and complicated by other factors (such as when a British colonial subject visits the United States rather than Great Britain), travel writing becomes a very different beast.

It might be helpful to briefly rehearse the tradition of reverse travel writing to which I am referring, before moving on to a particularly important, and somewhat overlooked, specific case study with Rabindranath Tagore's letters, essays, and diary entries in America. In the African and Indian diasporas, there are long traditions of "countertravel" writing, beginning with Olaudah Equiano, and continuing through the present day, with books like Tayeb Salih's *Season of Migration to the North* (1967), Aimé Césaire's *Notebook of a Return to the Native Land* (1939), as well as, more recently, Caryl Phillips' *The European Tribe* (2000). With Indian visitors to Britain, the first and most famous "counter-travel writer" might be Dean Mahomet, whose book *The Travels of Dean Mahomet* (1794) is thought to be the first book by an Indian writer published in English<sup>2</sup>. And more recently, contemporary narratives of "arrival," by writers like V. S. Naipaul, Amitav Ghosh, and Jhumpa Lahiri, have formed an important part of the emerging postcolonial literary canon. While the colonial figures are often read "symptomatically," and contemporary postcolonial writers like Ghosh are read with approbation, especially when they adopt a politicized stance that rhymes with that of postcolonial critics, there are a group of intermediate writers (we might think of them as "late colonial writers") that are harder to classify and place, especially when they wrote about Western societies

that were not central to the European imperial project, such as the United States (the United States, of course, had its own imperial trajectory, but what matters for our purposes is Tagore and other Indian visitors did not feel specifically subjugated by that project the way that they did in England).

This article will explore some of Tagore's travel writings in and on America from the 1910s and 1920s, with a particular interest in how the United States fit into his moral critique of the modern world, specifically the ideologies of imperialism, nationalism, and industrialization. As background, it may be helpful to briefly describe the U.S.-India relationship in the later colonial period (1870-1945) in which Tagore lived. The interaction is particularly rich in that the United States was at once politically removed from British colonialism in India, and aligned with it because of the strong cultural affiliations that have existed between England and the United States. American writers could approach India without the specific colonial baggage that marked much of the British experience of India (though not all did – Katherine Mayo's *Mother India* [1927] was a glaring exception), while Indian writers like Dhan Gopal Mukerji could appreciate (and critique) American culture without the sense of historical resentment that was unavoidable for Indians traveling, studying, and living in England during the period. That said, though, there was greater ideological flexibility in the United States in terms of attitudes on empire (and it is not lost on Indian nationalists that President Franklin Roosevelt once pleaded with British Prime Minister Winston Churchill to grant Indian independence); at certain critical moments, however, American and British strategic interests were clearly in line on Indian policy. One example of such alignment might be the rigorous prosecution of Indian revolutionaries in California in the 1910s, after terrorist plots against the British Raj were exposed; interestingly, the same revolutionaries made an attempt on the life of Tagore himself at one point.<sup>3</sup>

Of the Indian writers from the colonial period who wrote about their experiences in the United States, the best known are Pandita Ramabai and Dhan Gopal Mukherji. The former wrote *The Peoples of the United States* (1889) for an Indian readership in Marathi, and her observations remained unknown to Western readers until they were translated many years later. Ramabai's text, recently translated and edited by Meera Kosambi, is remarkable as an outsider's seemingly innocent take on late-nineteenth cen-

tury America (Ramabai arrived in Philadelphia in 1886 after a difficult visit to England). Unsurprisingly given her personal biography, many of Ramabai's observations about the United States seem to be veiled critiques of traditional Indian society, especially its caste hierarchy and treatment of women (both of which had been sources of difficulty for Ramabai prior to her conversion to Christianity).

For his part, Mukerji initially came to the United States in 1910 as a laborer on a merchant vessel, and managed to be admitted to, first, the University of California and then to Stanford. Mukerji started his literary career with several books closely drawn from the Indian religious tradition, but made a breakthrough with his 1923 book *Caste and Outcast*, an account of his experiences both before he left India, as well as after arriving in the United States in the 1910s. In the American sections of the book, Mukerji clearly marks his doubts about America's class and racial barriers. At one point, referring to the growing number of Indian anti-colonial revolutionaries living in California in the early 1910s, Mukerji writes, "Batches of Indian students began to come to America for wisdom and knowledge and the more I saw these men coming, the more I grew convinced that they were coming through a desert to slake their thirst with the waters of a mirage" (2002: 193). Mukerji also comments on what he sees as the West's "vulgarity, its bitter difference, its colossal frauds," without entirely writing off the society that he would come to join: "And yet there was something constructive in both of these civilizations" (2002: 193). In later years, America would treat Mukerji well, for a time at least, and he would prosper as a writer of popular Kipling-esque children's stories.

While Mukerji makes a few critical comments about the flaws in American culture as he found them in *Caste and Outcast*, Rabindranath Tagore in the 1910s and 1920s writes much more harshly and comprehensively about the dangers that he saw in American civilization. Tagore is distinct from both Ramabai (who wrote for a Marathi readership) and Mukerji (who wrote for American readers), in that he wrote for both fellow Indians and a broad array of international readers. Some of his writing in the United States was directed at American audiences, specifically in the form of lectures organized by an American lecture agency. Tagore also wrote a good number of letters and diary entries in that period, in both Bengali and English, which have subsequently given critics insight as to his perceptions of American culture.

Tagore's first visit to the United States began in 1912, on the heels of his momentous trip to England, where he had worked closely with Yeats on the English translation of Tagore's *Gitanjali*, the book that would earn Tagore the Nobel Prize in literature in 1913, and make him a world-wide literary celebrity. According to biographers Dutta and Robinson, Tagore's son Rathindranath was then a student at the University of Illinois in Urbana-Champaign, studying agriculture (at Tagore's direction); also in the United States studying agriculture was Tagore's son-in-law, Nagendranath Gangulee. Tagore had written to both young men prior to arriving in the United States, exhorting them to take the process of cultural translation seriously ("To get on familiar terms with the local people is a part of your education").<sup>4</sup> Upon arriving in the United States, Tagore spent several weeks with his son Rathindranath, and during this period, his most interesting letters regarding his impressions were English-language letters directed to British friends like William Rothenstein, though he also wrote some quite telling letters in Bengali to his daughter Madhurilata Chakravarty (also known as "Bela"). Tagore's first impressions were not terribly positive, as he felt, first, the same alienation from industrialized modernity that he complained of in Europe: "Every time I come to a city like New York or London I discover afresh that in my veins courses the blood of my ancestors who were forest dwellers. The thick solitude of the crowd is oppressive to me" (Tagore 2005: 97).<sup>5</sup>

Over time, though, Tagore's letters begin to mark small differences in the American landscape and weather as well as in the culture of the people he was encountering in his travels to New York, Chicago, and Boston (as well as, of course, Urbana, Illinois). On 19 February 1913, he writes to his daughter about the American "mania" for lectures, "For a long time after arriving in America, I kept quietly to a corner of a room in a small town called Urbana, unavailable to anyone. But the people of this country have a mania for listening to lectures" (Tagore 2005: 109).<sup>6</sup> Though Tagore's tone is ambiguous here, the "mania for listening to lectures" that he ascribes to Americans in particular strikes one as a somewhat affectionate characterization of the American penchant for public debate and discussion. By all accounts, Tagore enjoyed giving these lectures (later, they would be a significant source of income for him as he attempted to raise funds for his new university at Santiniketan); some of the more philosophical lectures were collected in the volume *Sadhana* (1913), and the

lecture on "Race Conflict" Tagore delivered in Rochester was published as an essay in its own right.<sup>7</sup> Other than these letters to friends and family, however, Tagore's first visit to the United States in 1912-1913 would be far less productive than his second trip in 1916-1917, when he delivered influential and controversial lectures on nationalism that continue to be debated among scholars and biographers to the present day.

Tagore delivered the "Nationalism" lectures during an ambitious tour he embarked on in 1916 and 1917, in both the United States and Japan. During his lecture tour, he spoke to audiences in over twenty-five American cities, including New York, San Francisco, Los Angeles, Denver, and Chicago. The lectures Tagore gave in these venues, to audiences often numbering in the hundreds, revealed his profound distrust of American industrialization and his rejection of an instrumentalist approach of individual human beings that he saw taking root in American modernity. Tagore worried that in the modern West, and in the United States in particular, there was a growing tendency to understand human life purely in terms of how it could be *used* – by business interests, by the military for destructive purposes, and by the state government. For Tagore, the various instrumentalist means of exploiting human life fell under the umbrella he called the "nation," which he defined as "that aspect which a whole population receives when organized for a mechanical purpose." Against the "mechanical" concept of nation, Tagore argued that we need to keep in mind a concept of culture as an organic, fluid way of understanding human societies, "Society as such has no ulterior purpose. It is an end in itself. It is a spontaneous self-expression of man as a social being" (Tagore 1917: 19).

Tagore was not a systematic thinker like Marx, Freud, or, for that matter, Mahatma Gandhi, and his arguments about nationalism are perhaps more to be taken as a moral and spiritual framework than as a practical political ideology. Nonetheless, Tagore's focus on the moral aspect of modern experience also makes his philosophy fluid and transferable, which is helpful as we assess the value and relevance of Tagore's thought for us today, ninety years later. Tagore's critique of mechanistic and instrumentalist approaches to human life in his *Nationalism* lectures are at once equally relevant to understanding what may be wrong with the contemporary world and the wrongs of both the British Empire and the Western nations that were involved in the ghastly, unprecedented violence of the First World War. At the time Tagore began his tour, the United States had

not yet entered the war. Woodrow Wilson was running for president, on a non-interventionist plank (though he did reverse his position and enter the war a mere four months after his inauguration). Tagore is directly mindful of the possibility of imminent war – clearly one of the implied objects of Tagore’s critique is the prospect of America joining the dance of European destruction.

For their part, the Americans to whom Tagore spoke were eager listeners, though admittedly the ideology and practice of American capitalism, which he criticized in the lectures, was probably too entrenched for Tagore to make a serious dent in it. The American entry into the war was probably also inevitable (and history now looks upon it favorably), though for his part, Tagore was certainly prescient in condemning modern, mechanized warfare as a whole for its human cost, rather than simply opting to side with one or another party in the conflict. Tagore was also, in 1916-1917, already a Nobel laureate and a worldwide literary star. Admittedly, some American journalists did smirk a bit at Tagore’s approach. The lecture tour he did in 1916-1917 was actually organized by a professional lecture agency associated with his publisher (Macmillan), and Tagore received impressively hefty fees. There was of course an irony in getting paid very well for criticizing materialism, which the *Minneapolis Tribune*, for instance, did not hesitate to note:

Half-way through the tour the Minneapolis Tribune called Tagore “the best business man who ever came to us out of India”: he had managed to scold Americans at \$700 per scold’ while pleading with them ‘at \$700 per plead’. (Dutta and Robinson 1995: 204)

The “scolding” language stings, but Tagore was not scolding Americans for his own benefit. By this point, he had begun planning for his new “world university” at Shantiniketan, and all of the money that he earned went to that cause. Still, the repetition of the lectures and constant traveling did wear on Tagore, and in the spring of 1917 he cut short his tour, and returned to India.

What interests the audience in these lectures is Tagore’s use of certain metaphors to make his moral case about the evils of instrumentalism – the exploitation of human beings – in business, government, and the military. One metaphor that he uses frequently in the lectures is of the mindless,

dehumanizing mechanism of the assembly line, which Tagore uses to argue against British imperialism in the following passage:

This abstract being, the Nation, is ruling India. We have seen in our country some brand of tinned food advertised as entirely made and packed without being touched by hand. This description applies to the governing of India, which is as little touched by the human hand as possible. The governors need not know our language, need not come into personal touch with us except as officials; they can aid or hinder our aspirations from a disdainful distance, they can lead us on a certain path of policy and then pull us back again with the manipulation of office red tape; the newspapers of England, in whose columns London street accidents are recorded with some decency of pathos, need but take the scantiest notice of calamities happening in India over areas of land sometimes larger than the British Isles. (Tagore 1917: 24)

Here, what Tagore laments is the impersonal and inhuman mechanism of authority. It is not authority in principle that he opposes, but the particular form of it that the British seem to have perfected in the style of governance that they deployed in India. Moreover, the indifference of the government is mirrored in the representations of the media. Closer to home, Tagore argues, the British newspapers have “some decency of pathos,” even for minor incidents. Large-scale events in India, such as famines, riots, and generalized suffering, are relegated to the margins. Ninety years later, this is still very much the case.

Tagore uses a slightly different metaphor to expand the argument from the British Empire to modern nation-states in general. For him, the principles of liberalism and democratic governance are not much in evidence in Western governments; rather, there seems to be an obsession with “conflict and conquest,” reminiscent of predatory animals:

The truth is that the spirit of conflict and conquest is at the origin and in the centre of the Western nationalism; its basis is not social cooperation. It has evolved a perfect organization of power but not spiritual idealism. It is like the pack of predatory creatures that must have its victims. With all its heart it cannot bear to see its hunting grounds converted into cultivated fields. In fact, these nations are fighting among

themselves for the extension of their victims and their reserve forests.  
(Tagore 1917: 33)

This particular metaphor, with its contrasting of the predatory behavior of modern nation-states against what Tagore describes as “cultivated fields,” is helpful in situating Tagore’s thinking as a specifically modern, progressive philosophy. Unlike for example Gandhi, Tagore is not directly opposed to modernity per se. (Gandhi wanted freedom for India, but argued strongly against instituting a modern centralized government or continuing the modernization of the Indian subcontinent in the form of modern schools, roads, and railroads.) Rather, Tagore rejects the false veneer of civilization and liberalism with which the modern nation-states cover themselves.

It might be worth briefly noting at this point that Tagore is not merely attacking the Western nations for being overtaken by the “spirit of conflict and conquest” as he calls it. Just a few years earlier, Tagore became deeply disillusioned with militant forms of nationalism as practiced by Indians themselves. He had earlier been a supporter of the nationalist movement known as the “Swadeshi” movement in Bengal that followed the British decision to partition the province in 1905 (before Gandhi entered the picture). The Bengali nationalists resisted the partitioning, leading to riots and bloodshed. Following the riots, Tagore distanced himself from this form of resistance, and in the early 1910s wrote the famous novel *The Home and the World* (1916) expressing his frustrations with Indian nationalist militancy, even when directed against the injustices of British imperial rule.

Against the failure of liberal governance that led to the First World War, Tagore in these lectures on nationalism argues for a primarily moral and spiritual mode of governance organically connected to the people ruled. Tagore introduces yet another metaphor to describe his ideal, which is not necessarily equivalent to an earlier, pre-modern model of governance:

[O]ur former governments were woefully lacking in many of the advantages of modern government. But because those were not the governments by the Nation, their texture was loosely woven, leaving big gaps through which our own life sent its threads and imposed its designs. I am quite sure in those days we had things that were extremely distasteful to us. But we know that when we walk barefooted upon a ground strewn with gravel, gradually our feet come to adjust themselves to the caprices

of the inhospitable earth; while if the tiniest particle of gravel finds its lodgment inside our shoes we can never forget and never forgive its intrusion. And these shoes are the government by the Nation, – it is tight, it regulates our steps with a closed up system, within which our feet have only the slightest liberty to make their own adjustments.  
(Tagore 1917: 36)

To some extent the contrast between going barefoot and wearing shoes that Tagore is drawing is a contrast between what might be thought of as modern and pre-modern ways of life, in which the pre-modern is privileged because exposed feet develop durability that protects them, while enclosed feet are in some sense rendered more vulnerable to injury by the very technology that is supposed to protect them. Concurrently, even as he draws this metaphor, Tagore acknowledges the flaws in the old system. Elsewhere in the same lectures, Tagore makes very clear he is not even remotely interested in going back to the rule of the Mughal Empire, or to the caste-based social hierarchy of traditional Hinduism. The image of society that Tagore is interested in developing is simultaneously organic *and* modern, simultaneously spiritual *and* progressive.

Toward the end of “Nationalism in the West,” the lecture from which I have been primarily quoting, Tagore begins to develop a clearer, more positively defined image of the human society that he would like to see prevail in both Western societies and India. The idea of the human being he favors is, in fact, much more like a work of art than it is a product of pure rationality or abstract intellect:

Our intellect is an ascetic who wears no clothes, takes no food, knows no sleep, has no wishes, feels no love or hatred or pity for human limitations, who only reasons, unmoved through the vicissitudes of life. It burrows to the roots of things, because it has no personal concern with the thing itself. The grammarian walks straight through all poetry and goes to the roots of words without obstruction. Because he is not seeing reality, but law. When he finds the law, he is able to teach people how to master words. This is a power – the power which fulfils some special usefulness, some particular need of man. (Tagore 1917: 47)

Here, I find the particular metaphors that Tagore invokes for the “intellect” especially revealing. Tagore, as is well known, was in some ways a devout Hindu, but he was part of a reform movement known as the Brahmo Samaj, which rejected ritualism and caste, and favored an abstract (rather than idol-oriented) approach to worship. Tagore’s nickname may have been “Gurudev” (Great Teacher), but in his poetry and his prose works he often came out quite strongly against mindless ritualism as well as asceticism – the renunciation of worldly life and family in favor of religious purity (yet another difference between himself and Gandhi, who was in every sense an ascetic. Tagore, by contrast, very much embraced his family life).<sup>8</sup> So, it is in keeping with that opposition to asceticism that Tagore thinks of the intellect as an “ascetic who wears no clothes, takes no food, knows no sleep, has no wishes,” etc. – this kind of religious single-mindedness is deeply abhorrent to him, as troubling as the modern metaphors for industrialization and militarization that he uses elsewhere. The second metaphor in the passage above, of the grammarian, is also worth noting, as it suggests what is really important for Tagore – not the grammarian’s discovery of universal laws, but the perception of reality itself, in all its complexity.

Human beings pursue the discovery of laws governing language not to express what it is they truly have to say, but to use language as an instrument of power.

Another passage from the lecture continues to develop this theme:

Man in his fullness is not powerful, but perfect. Therefore, to turn him into mere power, you have to curtail his soul as much as possible. When we are fully human, we cannot fly at one another’s throats; our instincts of social life, our traditions of moral ideals stand in the way. (Tagore 1917: 50)

This is one of Tagore’s most powerful positive statements about what he believes: “Man in his fullness is not powerful, but perfect.” The most compelling contrast to the mere instrumental use of human life – for the exploitation by business interests, the military, or the nation-state – is the cultivation of the human spirit.

Exactly how to do that is not spelled out in these particular lectures by Tagore, though many of his other writings do explore the theme in various

ways. The closing words of the lecture on nationalism take these ideas to a kind of dramatic crescendo:

And we can still cherish the hope that, when power becomes ashamed to occupy its throne and is ready to make way for love, when the morning comes for cleansing the blood-stained steps of the Nation along the highroad of humanity, we shall be called upon to bring our own vessel of sacred water – the water of worship – to sweeten the history of man into purity, and with its sprinkling make the trampled dust of the centuries blessed with fruitfulness. (Tagore 1917: 61)

The key moment in this passage is the reference to “our own vessel of sacred water” by which we can cleanse the all-too-evident “bloodstains” of the modern nation-state. For Tagore, it is never too late to think of stopping the dance of destruction and dehumanization that surrounds us in the modern world. The human spirit, which Tagore never ceases to admire, retains for him its original fluidity. It is never too late, he suggests, to cleanse it of its ills.

As quoted above, Tagore was accused by some of “scolding” during his lecture tour. Somewhat more charitably, one can say that Tagore’s purpose in lecturing in America was to offer a critique of the direction of American modernity, and despite his misgivings, his letters from the trip and afterward indicated that he deeply enjoyed the chance to present his ideas on the large stage of American intellectual life. Tagore in fact planned to return to the United States in 1918, but the visit had to be canceled after his name was mentioned in connection with a conspiracy trial involving Indian revolutionaries in California.<sup>9</sup> Tagore was outraged at being connected with people with whom he obviously had no actual connection, and went so far as to write a letter of protest to Woodrow Wilson following the incident.<sup>10</sup>

Tagore’s actual third visit to the United States in 1920 was much less eventful than the first two visits, in part because his name was still somewhat compromised by the earlier rumor that he had been involved with an anti-British conspiracy. More importantly, Tagore made the decision to spend most of his time during this trip in New York, raising funds for his “world” university at Santiniketan through meetings with prominent industrialists. Much of his time was thus spent in the company of people he did not much like, and his letters from the autumn and winter of 1920

reflect that disenchantment. One example, which reprises Tagore's earlier theme of alienation from American industrialization, is in the following letter to C. F. Andrews, then residing in India at Tagore's school in Santiniketan: "In this country I live in the dungeon of the Castle of Bigness. My heart is starved. Day and night I dream of Santiniketan, which blossoms like a flower in the atmosphere of the unbounded freedom of simplicity" (Tagore 2003: 271).<sup>11</sup> Another letter to Andrews also develops this metaphor of modern alienation: "All about me is a desert of crowds, a monotony of multitude. [. . .] When we have the banner of an idea to carry against obstacles of indifference, the burden of our personal self should be extremely light. But I am so awkwardly cumbersome with my ineptitude" (Tagore 2003: 274). Intriguingly, it is only when Tagore leaves New York and travels south to Houston that he begins to have a better experience of the United States on this third trip, as we see in the classically Tagorean lyricism of the following letter:

Yet, since coming to Texas, I have felt as it were a sudden coming of Spring into my life through a breach in the ice castle of Winter. It has come to me like a revelation that all these days my soul had been thirsting for the draught of sunshine poured from the beaker of infinite space. The sky has embraced me, and the warmth of its caress thrills me with joy. (Tagore 2003: 282)<sup>12</sup>

The reference to winter and spring is part of the story of Tagore's travel experience in the United States – Tagore often complained about the weather when visiting the West, especially the weather in London, so his escape from a cold New York winter seemed to have appreciably improved his feelings about America. Also important are the references to the Texas "sky" and "infinite space" above: this is the other America, beyond dehumanizing industry, capitalism, and a landscape defined by tall buildings of concrete and steel.

By way of concluding, it might be helpful to briefly discuss Tagore's writings from some of his later trips, particularly the *Diary of a Westward Voyage*, Tagore's personal diary from his sea voyage to Argentina, in 1924. The interest here is in the way Tagore uses the journey as an opportunity to meditate, self-reflexively, on the way that travel forces one to examine the nature of the self:

I have been abroad many a time; at the time of departure I never found it very hard to pull out the anchor of my mind. This time it seems to be clinging to the land with undue force. From this it can be easily surmised that I must be at last approaching old age. Not to want to move is the sign of a miserly heart. When the capital is little, there is reluctance to spend.

And yet I know, once we sail away from land, the tie that holds me back will dissolve of itself. The young traveler will come out on the royal path. This young man had once sung, 'Restless am I, I am wistful for the far beyond!' Has that song already been obliterated in the ebbing wind? Isn't there any eagerness to know the distant stranger, who sits veiled across the ocean? (Tagore 1975: 3-4 24)<sup>13</sup>

For Tagore, travel by ship is not simply an expedient way to move from one place to another. Rather, the experience is one that he found to be philosophically provocative, which forced him out of the bounds of daily routine. Yet, as he aged, he found a growing resistance to repeating the experience (not that it stopped Tagore from continuing to travel; besides Argentina in the 1920s and 1930s, he visited China, the Soviet Union, the United States, the Middle East, and Europe). The romance of the travel experience does not entirely dissipate ("I know, once we sail away from land, the tie that holds me back will dissolve of itself"), but it does become a greater challenge for Tagore as he comes to feel more settled.

The various passages and texts that constitute Tagore's American travel writings are a heterogeneous record of his impressions and experiences. Though he came for the first time as a relatively unknown literary figure visiting his son and son-in-law, both students, by his second trip, Tagore was a known figure and celebrity. As a result, the nature of his relationship to the United States changed, and beginning with Tagore's second visit, he seemed at once more demanding of America (he hoped that donated American dollars would fund his university at Santiniketan) and more beleaguered by the intense demands on his time and intellect. On the other hand, the second visit, which was the occasion of Tagore's "Nationalism" lectures, also helped the writer crystallize certain aspects of his moral philosophy, specifically his critique of the modern ideologies supporting industrialization, the war machine, and the instrumentalization of humanity.



In contrast to European colonial travel writing, where the traveler tended to imprint his own vision of difference in constructing the Other, Tagore traveled to the United States with a mind open to having his worldview be reshaped by his experiences there. At the same time, Tagore was unafraid to make an open critique of the path he saw the United States embarking on, though he was well aware that his views ran contrary to the dominant spirit of the age. Against instrumentalization, Tagore continually asserted a complex, spiritually inflected concept of the individual self in tension with its own dissolution, a concept that was at once influenced by the Hindu tradition and distinctly modern. That concept of the self was for Tagore brought into relief by the experience of travel, which for Tagore (but not Tagore alone) is an experience that both forces the traveler to reach outside of himself to experience the new and at the same time reinforces the situatedness that inevitably accompanies one's experience of cultural difference.

## Notes

1. Holland and Huggan themselves acknowledge this sub-genre, which they refer to as "countertravel writing." See *Tourists with Typewriters* 2000: 47-65.
2. Of course, that narrative is actually set in India, during Mahomet's early life before he came to England, and in some ways, it functions like conventional European travel narratives of Indian culture.
3. This is described in Dutta and Robinson's biography of Tagore (1995: 212).
4. "To get on familiar terms with the local people is a part of your education. To know only agriculture is not enough; you must know America too. Of course if, in the process of knowing America, one begins to lose one's identity and fall into the trap of becoming an Americanised person contemptuous of everything Indian, it is preferable to stay in a locked room" (Tagore to Nagendranath Gangulee, 1907. Cited in Sen 2005: 105).
5. To William Rothenstein, 27 October 1912.
6. To Madhurilata Chakravarty, 19 February 1913.
7. "Race-Conflict" is found in *Collected English Writings of Rabindranath Tagore, vol. 3: Miscellany*.
8. For more on this, see Sen 2005: 101-103.
9. Tagore's biographers, Dutta and Robinson have more on this: "While in Calcutta, preparing to depart, Tagore was shown foreign newspaper reports of the long-running

- and sensational trial of various Indians, Germans and others in San Francisco on charges of conspiracy to foment revolution in India with German money. Tagore was cited as having been supportive during his 1916-17 tour of the USA; it was even suggested that he had tried to enlist the help of Count Okuma, the Japanese prime minister, when he met him in Japan in 1916" (*Selected Letters* 2005: 198).
10. Rabindranath Tagore to Woodrow Wilson, 9 May 1918 (*Selected Letters* 2005: 198-199).
  11. To C. F. Andrews, 13 December 1920.
  12. To C. F. Andrews, 23 February 1921.
  13. September 1924, aboard the S.S. Haruna Maru

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## "The Shadow Class": Immigration and Class in Contemporary South Asian/American Fiction

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### Abstract

This article explores the representation of non-elite immigrants from South Asia to the United States in the fiction of Kiran Desai and Ameena Hussein. The works of these two writers shift the conventional representation of South Asian immigration to the United States as a middle and upper class phenomenon to a representation of the ways that non-elite South Asian immigrant experiences connect with the experiences of immigrants from around the world whose mobility is limited and whose imagined version of their prospective host country is shaped by incomplete and even illusory information.

**Keywords:** class, imagination, immigration, India, mobility, non-elite travel, South Asia, Sri Lanka, United States

**A**rjun Appadurai has argued that imagination has been transformed into a social practice on a larger scale than ever before in today's globalized world. Through his model of global cultural flow consisting of constructed landscapes based on the movement of peoples and capital, Appadurai has emphasized the importance of the imagination within the new global cultural economy with its fundamental disjunctures between economy, culture and politics.<sup>1</sup> Appadurai's emphasis on the mobi-