

Through Colour-tinted Lenses: Eurocentrism in James Cameron's *An Indian Summer: A Personal Experience of India*

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Abstract

William Graham Sumner (1950), who popularised the term 'ethnocentrism', defined it as a belief that one's culture is superior to others and the use of a frame of reference derived from one's own culture to judge the attributes of another culture, often in disparaging terms. Eurocentrism is a subtype which looks from the perspective of a European. Eurocentrism goes beyond ethnocentrism, which assumes superiority at the expense of other cultures, having an alienating and marginalising effect. Every culture has its ways and means of sustaining strategies and propagating formulae. When one culture comes in contact with the other, the apparent cultural shock experienced by the author transforms its form and spills over the papers. An Indian Summer: A Personal Experience of India (1974) is, in many parts, a perfect example of this. It is a part-travelogue, part memoir of journalist James Cameron. His observations about India enhance it and sketches about cities, people and personalities. This travelogue touches on some of the critical aspects of Indian society. However, much of it is complicated by the author's bias towards Indian systems. This paper looks at the European gaze of the author towards India. Further, it explores the representative politics of a country by an outsider. Finally, it will comment on the texts' Eurocentric aspects and analyse whether they align with reality.

Keywords: India, Representations, Travelogue, Society.

Introduction

James Cameron's *An Indian Summer: A Personal Experience of India* (1974) is a remarkable account of information about the politics, people, and diversity of cultures of one of the world's most fascinating countries, India. Cameron visited India twice as a foreign correspondent in the latter half of the 1920s and the early 1970s. By 1971, while travelling to the heart of India, he was blissfully married to his third wife, an Indian woman, Moni, to whom the book is dedicated. This book was published in 1974, after his adventurous stint in India. It starts and ends with a ghastly car accident on the borders of present-day Bangladesh, which for him is a near-to-death experience.

James Cameron's book *An Indian Summer: A Personal Experience of India* (1974) echoes Eurocentric perceptions in a biting satirical tone. Between the two genres of memoir and travelogue, the book briefly overviews his periodical stints in India as a foreign correspondent. In this brief book, Cameron's portrayal of India and

his selection of sources reveal more about the West's perception of India than about India itself. Cameron does not get stuck in the rose-tinted recollection of the British Raj; instead, he perhaps unintentionally produces a narrative dominated by Orientalist ethos. One can argue that Cameron intended to portray India through the eyes of an outsider. However, his selection of sources and arguments echoes Eurocentric ideology that reinforces such binaries as East and West, savage and civilised. This paper argues that Cameron's book provides the reader with the fixation on the European orientalist perspective of India that merits Whiteman's burden in civilising India. Cameron does this by excluding local and eastern sources, selecting European parallels that promote colonial binaries and attributing the current state of affairs to poor self-governance and fervent conservatism. He looks at the concepts of Karma and Dharma as "age-old and barbaric philosophy" and "maintained the debased Indian victims in the gutter... and this is why India remains basically a country of the hungry and the poor" (38).

"Eurocentrism Strikes in Strange Ways and in Unusual Ways" (1989) is a work by a social psychologist, Helmes, who looked at the psychological influence of Eurocentrism in social situations. In "Varieties of Nostalgia in Contemporary Travel Writing" (2017), Holland brings in the concept of Colonial Nostalgia, where the colonisers claim credit for the good they have gifted and absolve from the bad they have done. Sundberg has variously defined it as an attitude, conceptual apparatus, or a set of empirical beliefs that frame Europe as the primary engine and architect of world history, the bearer of universal values and reason and, therefore, a model of progress and development. In Eurocentric narratives, the superiority of Europe is evident in its achievements in economic and political systems, technology and the high quality of life enjoyed by its societies. Eurocentrism is intimately tied to and constituted in the violence and asymmetry of colonial and imperial encounters. It is what makes this violence not only possible but also acceptable or justifiable. Samir Amin (1985) is an Egyptian economist who defined Eurocentrism as a cultural expression of ongoing capitalist world expansion. He equates Eurocentrism with development and proposes a Western mode of life, economy and culture as a model to be adopted by the rest of the world as the only solution to the challenges of our Times. In "Eurocentrism and Modernity" (1993), Dussel equates modernity with Eurocentrism, though he did not bring in the concept of colonisation or imperialism. In "Eurocentrism and its Avatars: The Dilemma of Social Science" (1997), Wallerstein is worried about the distortions in representation in different disciplines of social sciences like history, anthropology, sociology, etc. In *The Perennial Western Tourism Representations of India that Refuse to Die* (2009), Ranjan Bandopadhyay makes an extreme and extensive study of tourist brochures and travel magazines from the West and also the images published to see how India is pursued and associated in the Western world. In brief, Eurocentrism in literature can be the narrative that looks at any society from European standards.

Eurocentric Notions in the Text

Cameron's exclusion of Eastern sources centres on European presence in India as a validation of its significance. He quoted philosophers like Simon Weil and authors like Rudyard Kipling and Molly Panter-Downes' who wrote *Ooty Preserved*. The book offers brief sketches of 'unkempt' cities and a lengthier account of history, mannerisms and customs. This is reflected in statements like this: "Calcutta's wretchedness has gone not only past redemption but beyond description"(154). He adds, "To a European, and especially to a stranger exposed to it for the first time, this mass industry of organised misery must be a seriously disturbing experience"(155). These kinds of statements suggest the idea that India itself is a terrain to be secured and altered for the accommodation of Europeans.

By erasing local and Eastern narratives and perspectives, Cameron leaves the reader with the European perception of India in relation to European-ness. The consequence of this perception is indifference towards the indigenous and local population's personal histories, views and claims. This book is imbued with a proprietary air that seeks to subordinate the customs and mannerisms of Indians as beneath Europeans. The institution of marriage is depicted quite humorously, saying that marriage would result in aligning oneself to an 'uncountable regiment of relatives' (27)

...when you marry into an Indian family you abruptly acquire a daunting number of relatives.

Indian families not only embrace all the available generations in a mutual unity of dependence, the definition of relative extends like the circles of a pebble dropped in a pool, to cousins, aunts, second cousins twice removed, and all the ancillary relationships they have accumulated through marriage, farther and farther out until the bonds of consanguinity are barely discernible at all (27).

Even in the most mundane observations, the author spared no opportunity in which they could reinforce their culture as the benchmark of civilisation. He rants at the idea of public defecation in Bombay for three pages and ridicules the municipal boards, tourist boards, etc. To add emphasis, he uses V. S. Naipaul's infamous anaphoric expression from *An Area of Darkness*, 'Indians defecate everywhere... they defecate by the railway tracks, they defecate on the beaches, they defecate on the mountains...' (14). Indian culture is portrayed as peculiar and deviating from the Western conception of rationality. The travelogue portrays the people of India as two-dimensional beings who are not so many people as props in the backdrop of a place for European intellect to display its powers. In addition, Cameron finds the importance of communal ties over profit gain as a peculiarity reflecting his biases stemming from a liberal individualist profit-driven society. This is clear when he says, "A stroll with Aja took three times longer than with anyone else, so constantly was he hailed and drawn into conversation with some reputable citizen or, more likely, some former law-breaker whom he had sent to jail and whose family he had supported and protected thereafter" (39).

The author puts all the European standards and mannerisms in mind and tries to adapt to India rather than actually looking at the socio-economic, cultural and demographic situation at the ground level. He talks of mannerisms, of speaking in public places like conversations on trains. He degrades the Godmen into good mind readers for the supernatural powers that the Godmen may possess. He complains about Indian railways, saying that they are way too slow mechanised bullock carts, but he should know the terrain as well. He takes a ride from Kannur to Runnymede in a mail express and comes to this conclusion. He also praises the railway but forgets the colonial enterprise behind connecting places. Railways can be built without colonising. It is a British private enterprise at Indian public risk.

Cameron's comparative rhetoric is part of a pattern wherein every observation almost follows a European example for contrast. He contrasts the Indian concept of 'the atman - a portmanteau concept that means, I suppose, the 'soul'' with the Freudian definition of self, divided into Id, Ego, and Superego (130). He finds parallels to places as well, saying, "it (Ooty) began to look exactly like a sort of Sussex" (61). Although both are incomparable, he puts BBC World Service on a higher pedestal than All India Radio. He says, "All-India Radio was not much of a help", but "The BBC world service was a refreshment" (51).

There are also some positive aspects in the book about India. He acknowledges the diversity that is there in India and says Indian society should have given the world so much but has given so little. Towards the end, he finds solace in Buddhist principles, which teach harmonious and peaceful living. Personalities are portrayed in a positive light. He recollects the Jallianwala Bagh incident and is extremely surprised how 'Indians can never forgive us.' He lacks compassion throughout

his lifetime, and when he experiences compassion with his wife Moni and his Indian friends, he says, “India has everything it wants and for a moment everything I want too”. He praises Indian architecture and finally says, “...representations of Taj Mahal travel the world on picture postcards, but accurate photographs of the carvings of Khajuraho would be seized by customs.” He stands in solidarity with Indian peasants who had to pay exorbitant taxes to the government.

At times, Cameron conceives of Indians as unintelligible, and when he contends that “In Calcutta, most people are debris, and only too clearly know they will never be anything else” (154). He attributes this to a lack of proper education and created a caricature where he confidently remarks,

India is a country of beggars; nowhere but in Calcutta is there beggary of such a ubiquitous, various, ever-present and inescapable kind. From the moment you walk into the public ways until the moment you lock your bedroom door, the beggars are with you, around you, almost inside you; they are like flies in the Sinai desert, seemingly part of the atmosphere (154).

He says, “here the beards will be cut otherwise, the saris tied differently, the languages incomprehensible to each other three hundred miles apart” (107), and branded South Indian languages as ‘dauntingly difficult’. This claim, which portrays one of the oldest countries in the world as ahistorical and devoid of sciences and poetry, contradicts the history of India itself. Such remarks offer exciting insight into the biases they might unintentionally or intentionally overlook. For example, Cameron says, “The Taj Mahal is the despot Shah Jehan’s monument to a wife who died after bearing fifteen children in fifteen years” (140). When everyone romanticises the Taj Mahal, he takes a different stand.

Cameron notes his observation of institutions with the natural scepticism of a European traveller. This is evident when he says bureaucracy is “only to fulfil the Indian need to record, write down, file away, and forget” (157). Like any other ‘outsider’, India is primarily dealt with in terms of poverty, densely populated cities, slums, languages and many more. He comments on south Indian languages as ‘dauntingly difficult’ and fears that “life will be too short to learn to come to terms with Tamil” (41).

Cameron’s book is stocked with reactionary narratives that have laid much of the groundwork for justifying colonialism or Whiteman’s Burden. The same authoritative tone that was used to position the people of India as inferior to European cultures and mannerisms is used to diagnose India’s political elements and justify European interventionism. Also notable is Cameron’s lack of analysis and explanation for the root of this conservatism. He came down heavily on Swamijis, Godmen, and he went on to such an extent to see everyone who resembles a Swamiji as a beggar. However, when he was taken to his wife’s Guru, he was baffled at his accuracy of questions and the symbolic, analogical answers.

Additionally, Karma, Dharma and Maya are important to Indian systems. As it was said, “If there would not have been a God, we would have invented him.” If not on religious terms, India needs God, concepts of Dharma, and Karma on sociological terms. India is such a vast country to satisfy every individual. So, to make people live, the concepts of Dharma and Karma should keep floating in society. This is how the culture and religion are sustained, and this is also seen in Christianity with concepts of hellfire, eternity, etc. Such assertions are one part of a broader pattern of the travelogues that employ the time-old tradition of European travel writing to exacerbate the necessity to intervene, even at the cost of their observations in its self-willed blindness to the needs of the native population. He shares some Pro Empire sentiments. He feels very happy to see the names of roads after many viceroys but sad for not commemorating the Prime Minister who surrendered the Raj, Clement Atlee, by neither naming a street, statue or stamp.

The title *An Indian Summer* is in itself quite Eurocentric. It hints at the scorching sun in India, which is quite unbearable, unpleasant and harsh. In contrast, a European summer would be

comparatively more pleasant than an Indian summer. Traces of colonial nostalgia (Holland 2016), where colonisers might absolve themselves of the consequences of the present (Holland 143), is evident when he states, “Part of India remembers its image of Britain while British has already forgotten India” (48). It is true because wounds heal, but scars remain.

Ideas such as these came to percolate in the public imagination of Europeans and, in turn, helped to construct the necessity of an inherently colonial mission civilisatrice. Cameron’s book perpetuates the notion that the central state of affairs is the fault of poor self-governance and increasing religiosity alone. While Cameron’s argument is not without merit, it overpasses the many complex factors that weave together to make India look what it is. What it does instead is justify the authority of European intervention as a prerequisite for proper self-governance and prosperity, which is a profoundly problematic narrative. He can thereby be seen as crafting a technique that would strategically place India as the primary cause of this chaos. Beyond that, the author has paid no heed to the changing demographic compositions of the nation over time.

The consequence of such a selective historical representation through the European gaze is that it produces a body of knowledge whereby the dominant voice and authority on India is a European one instead of a local one. The author promotes the dichotomies between civilised and savage without attempting to understand the complexity and significance of the institutions being criticised. Everything is observed in its proximity to Europe, with Europe being the qualitative criteria of civilisation. Selecting accounts that portray India through the realm of the European gaze, Cameron fails to acknowledge indigenous views and claims the impact of the European powers. The exclusion of local sources in favour of European ones and the lack of an analytical approach to confront the biases and presuppositions of these Europeans make his perspective of India seem ostensibly indisputable. The travelogue is imbued with an air of superiority and perpetuates sweeping generalisations and stereotypes of Indians. This collection of uncontested knowledge gained through European travel literature demonstrates the differences between European and Eastern and civilised and savage. This knowledge has subordinated much of the Middle East and the global South and justified European colonialism. The consequences of this superficial presentation in post-independent times are detrimental to the image branding of India on different international platforms.

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