

Black Gaze at a Coloured Nation: A Study of Martin Luther King Jr.'s *My Trip to the Land of Gandhi* (1959)

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Abstract: This paper aims at studying the layer of Americanism in the gaze of the African-Americans when they visit a place other than their present homeland, i.e. America. Often lived experiences of the “blacks” are erased by the formation of the prototypical white gaze which becomes evident when those “black” bodies leave their soil and visit a new place and its people. The whiteness or Americanism in the gazes of African-Americans is not physical but cultural and to examine this argument, this paper attempts to study Martin Luther King, Jr.'s *My Trip to the Land of Gandhi* (1959).

Keywords: Gaze, black/coloured, first world, third world, “home”, “away”, “orient”.

The concept of *gaze* or point of view is a politically loaded one. In the light of this theory, studying the gaze of a *black* person traveling across the world and penning down her/his views of the people and places is a conscious and dubious task. It is contended here that the contributions made by the African-American travel writers to create or revise the frames of gazing or seeing out at the world arises from and results in a politics of gazing and several ideological moorings, which, in turn, is predicated on attempts to form a *layering of gazes*. The act of gazing thus turns out to be a fuller activity amidst the “subject” and “object” and the selected text serve as a “meta-theory”, apparatus to study the theory of *gaze* and in particular one gaze, The American. The African-Americans have had a very long, tortuous and complicated history. Their history was a hugely mobile one too, in the sense that they moved from one continent to another, as a result of which today their race hold the names of two continents configured adjacently i.e. African-American. Living in America for more than two centuries made this race accept the soil of America, its customs, religion and essence to be their own, sometimes to such an extent that their Americanism or patriotism surpassed that of the white Americans, or those residing in the continent since a time much before their (then Africans and the now African-Americans) arrival. But the call of the African soil makes them keep coming back to their roots too. As a result of which, African-Americans, or thereby any such mixed race carries a *mixed* feeling of patriotism or inclination towards the *home soil* and the *root soil* at the same time. African-American life in the United States has been outlined by migrations, forced and free. A forced migration from Africa, the transatlantic slave trade, carried black people to the American continent. A second forced migration, the internal slave trade, transported them from the Atlantic coast to the interior of the American South. A third migration, this time set off largely, but not

always, by black Americans, carried black people from the rural South to the urban North in America. At the end of the twentieth century and the beginning of the twenty-first, African-American life is again being altered by another migration, this time a global one, as people of African descent from all parts of the world enter the United States. New societies, new peoples, and new communities usually originate in acts of migration. Ones decide to move from one place to another, they choose a new destination and sever their ties with their traditional community or society as they set out in search of new opportunities, new challenges, new lives, and new life worlds. Most societies in human history have a migration narrative in their stories of origin. All communities in American society trace their origins in the United States to one or more migration experiences. America, after all, is "a nation of immigrants."

The numerous inter-continental and intra-country journeys and migrations not only relocated, shaped and reshaped the African people, but over time brought major changes in their sentimental affiliations along with the nationalistic affiliation. Migration, whether forced or free, brings about a change in the migrated subject leading to her/him get acclimatized to the new society, culture and politics over some time, which might amount to a generation or two or even more. In such a case, the African-Americans are no exception. With a history which initiated itself with the advent of the 16th century, this phenomenal transformation had to occur to the new-found race. After being "dumped" in the Americas, started the vicious slavery chain followed by the Jim Crow days and the subsequent Civil Rights movement. Numerous changes and developments, some welcome, whereas a few unwelcome, inundated the African-American journey so far. The most important change, perhaps, by far has been the mental affiliation of the Africans with the new soil.

Martin Luther King, Jr.: During a short visit to the United States in 1956, Nehru said he wished he had met King. Indian representatives followed up, as did former U.S. Ambassador to India Chester Bowles, to bring about a journey to India for King. "While the Montgomery boycott was going on, India's Gandhi was the guiding light of our technique of nonviolent social change. So as soon as our victory over bus segregation was won, some of my friends said: 'Why don't you go to India and see for yourself what the Mahatma, whom you so admire has wrought?' " (King, 231). One could, however, say that the scene had been laid years before, when King, as a teenage student at Morehouse College in Atlanta, Georgia, first read the writings of Gandhi which became one of the greatest influences on King's life. According to King, Lawrence Reddick (King's biographer and his accompany during the trip) had told him at the outset of India trip "...my truest test would come when the people who knew Gandhi looked me over and passed judgement upon me and the Montgomery movement." (King, 232). He described the ensuing, so-called hurricane tour as "one of the most concentrated and eye-opening experiences of our lives." (king, 232). King arrives in India with an awareness of the privileged mobility that he enjoys as a first world traveler in a third world nation. But he carries an ambiguity in his

mobility as a first world traveler in that his travel to India and the subsequent travelogue exhibits a cultural insiderness that redefines his mobility as a 'different' (being Black) First World citizen in a Third World context and setting. King's trip was funded by The Christopher Reynolds Foundation, the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, and the Montgomery Improvement Association. Moreover, he had received an official invitation from The Gandhi Memorial Trust of India for a visit to the country. King displays a kind of cosmopolitanism in that his trip to the third world was funded by the first world. As such, King was not simply a black, but a privileged American and on a trip which was monetarily well secured. His gaze was more affiliated to his socio-economic and national affiliations (American and a first world citizen). The gaze that King carried while on his trip to India reflected a hybridity which sprang out of the his mixed closet, an amalgam of his roots, his new found nationality and the popular space that he carved out for himself in the global arena. The aim of putting his self to a Gandhi-test in the land of Gandhi himself was also in his mind. So, his travel had a certain agenda, we can say, one that was political and personal at the same time.

Martin Luther King, Jr. can be termed a cosmopolitan person/leader, one who embraces multicultural demographics. He comes to India as a comrade of the Indian masses, one who, perhaps, stands on the same ground with the latter on the basis of skin color, a history of colonialism (if King's root in Africa is considered) and racial discrimination (if King's American root is considered). He says, "We were looked upon as brothers with the color of our skins as something of an asset. But the strongest bond of fraternity was the common cause of minority and colonial peoples in America, Africa and Asia struggling to throw off racialism and imperialism". (King, 233). It seems King could very well discern his privileged, celebrated status on his arrival to India. He might be one fighting for equality in his own country, but the fact that his country is a first world country, makes all the difference in his and the world view, and thus on coming to a third world nation which too is fighting against immediate post-colonial predicaments, he involuntarily becomes an *asset*. King starts by articulating that he had wanted to visit India since a long time, as even as a child the entire "Orient" held a strange fascination for him. He seems to be displaying what Mary Louise Pratt terms antecedent literarios, or prior/earlier literary productions. His employing of the term "Orient" portrays the fact that he comes as one completely from America, the first world nation, and nowhere near to being an Oriental country, whereas his root, as a matter of fact, lies in an Oriental country. Further, he specifies what he intends to find and spot in India- elephants, tigers, temples, snake charmers and all the storybook characters. Now the problem lies in the fact that does an Oriental country consists of only these? Rudyard Kipling's *The Jungle Book* had painted a typical canvas for the Oriental countries, and King's beginning sentences seems to reiterate that very scenario and essence. King differs from his colonial counterparts in travelogues in that at times he carefully undermines the authority of the First World Traveler. The colonial travelers had a sense of cultural authority implicit in their

writings. They were the “all knowing” subjects set out to study the “objects”. In King's case, he comes as one who wants to pass the “Gandhi Test”, as has been previously mentioned in the paper. Lawrence Reddick had titled King's biography, *Crusader Without Violence*, and now on his august advise, King comes to India to see whether the people from the land of the one who has been his greatest inspirer, applauds him on equal grounds or not. So, he is prepared to be an “object” at times as well instead of being the subject throughout. On the other hand, we get to see another facet of King as he portrays himself fully aware of his celebrated status on his world tours, and while in India, his narrative often holds a mirror to this fact. The narrative says, “Occasionally I would take a morning walk in the large cities, and out of the most unexpected places someone would emerge and ask: “Are you Martin Luther King?” ” (King, 232). While the original draft had phrased it differently, which read, “Our pictures were in the newspapers very often and we were recognized by crowds at the circus and by pilots on the planes.” On another occasion he writes, “Even while riding planes, more than once pilots came into the cabin from the cockpit requesting our signatures.” (King, 233). However, both ways of phrasing depicts conscious writing and gazing on his part. His essay exhibits a 'hybridity' as he seems to be simultaneously 'invoking and subverting' the legacy of the colonial travel narrative.

King praised Gandhi and his ways, the Indian press and its accomplishments and said that the trip had a profound impact on him, personally. Then, as if, all of a sudden he plunged into gazing at India from the point of a first worlder, an American. He starts with, “India is a vast country with vast problems...Everywhere we saw crowded humanity-on the roads, in the city streets and squares, even in the villages.” (King, 234-35). He moves on to describe the traditional attires of Indian males and females which he says paint a “colorful and picturesque” canvas. Now, the phrase “colorful and picturesque” is typically associated with describing Oriental life, which we can find in writings right from the colonial age to the google age. A couple of lines from his draft deleted in the printed essay shows how he judged India from the standards of a developed America. He had jotted, “The people have a way of squatting, resting comfortably (it seemed) on their haunches. Many of the homes do not have chairs and most of the cities have very few park or street benches.” (King, 235). The tone seems not at all appreciative and with an American/white gaze, he is stereotyping the India scenario like the colonial travelers. As has been mentioned previously in this paper, King says that he comes to the land of his greatest inspirer where people treat him as their comrade, but at many places we find him using tones that sound patronizing and demeaning. He writes,

...Jobless men roam the city streets...Great ills flow from the poverty of India but strangely there is little crime...They are poor, jammed together and half starved but they do not take out on each other. They are kindly people...We saw but one fist fight in India during our stay.” (King, 235)

The above paragraph were followed by two paragraphs in the draft, but deleted from the final essay. Those paragraphs included sentences like, "...great consideration to human life but little regard to labor and time...Five persons may be sent to bring down a package that one could carry. Human muscles there do many jobs that our machines do here. Nobody seems to be in a hurry...arrangements and appointments come off according to schedule. Begging is widespread...what can you do when an old haggard woman or a little crippled urchin comes up and motions you that she is hungry?" in the above lines, King portrays irony in that he at the same time glorifies and demeans India. He venerates India's culture of considering human life's value but sees it also through the glasses of a first worlder when he sort of compares Western and Indian (Eastern) ways and marks that Indians don't value time and labor, unlike Americans or the west where utmost consideration is for time and labor which they consider as the real asset. Discussing India's *Bhoodan* movement, he seems impressed but while mentioning about the famous *Bhoodanist* sainted Vinoba Bhave, he says the later is a highly sensitive intellectual but does not fail to mention that he was trained in American colleges. This is followed by a long discussion of the *Bhoodan* movement and the ideal, "self-sufficient village". Such ideas sound "strange and archaic" to Western ears, he says, but praises the effort which has brought about considerable positive results. Suddenly again he turns towards showing the pitfalls of the five-year plans and alarming unemployment that it might bring in the next fifteen years. The overall gaze through which King looks at India is one of patronizing. In spite of being a black and originally an African, he was at present a celebrated Hero from America, a country much ahead of India in terms of development. He depicts India's vulnerability and suggests she needs help from countries like America. King is aware of the legacy of colonial movements and is not able to overshadow it much, and instead sets out to convert what is a clear First World to Third World expedition into a personal and/or political one. King is aware that his position while in India and the monetary back-up comes as a result of his racial, socio-economic and nationalistic affiliations. Aware of being an American-celebrated-black-political persona he tries to veer away as far as possible from the fact, leaving alone the racial part.

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