

Recreating the Self: A Study of Nancy Prince's *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince* and Carolyn Vine's *Black and Abroad*

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Abstract: The paper is a comparative study of two African-American female travel writers, Nancy Prince's *A Narrative of the Life and Travels of Mrs. Nancy Prince* (1853) and Carolyn Vine's *Black and Abroad* (2010), more than a century apart in time. It is about how and why the gaze of a "black" female traveler is different from that of a black male traveler and a white male/female traveler. Both the narratives reflect the task of recovering and recreating a new and distinctive identity that the black women have been denied so far. The paper garners an interesting read.

Keywords: Black American women, travel gaze, historical/cultural baggage, societal taboos, *home/abroad*.

Travel has been traditionally associated with the male body, especially the white. Travels and thereby the travel texts of the black body have been largely ignored over the centuries. But these marginalized bodies, whether as active or passive travelers, have been on the move ever since the concept of travel came to the fore. The repressed female subject has largely been a site of silence and immobility rather than one of meaning production. Study of the black female travelers is a genus that has received a steep rise in the recent decades. A female traveler, gazing at different places and people therein has a variety of marked specificities of her own and several differences than that of a male travelers' gaze. As such, a black female traveler's gaze, given the history of the race to which it belongs, and its own particular gendered quandaries, creates an array of interesting images of the world around, which makes their texts a reasonably remarkable read. The aim of the paper is to make a comparative study of two black female travel writers belonging to two different centuries, Nancy Prince (19th century) and Carolyn Vines (20th-21st centuries).

Nancy Prince: Described by a contemporary as "a colored woman of prominence", Nancy Prince Gardner arose from humble origins. Often cited as a reformer and abolitionist, she was born in Newburyport, Massachusetts, in 1799. Nancy lived in dire poverty serving as a domestic servant till she got married to Nero Prince in 1824, the black sailor and traveler. With the marriage, Nancy shifts to a new place, the Tzarist Russia, the something 'other'. Most part of her narrative includes her experiences in Russia, the people she met and the *difference/s* therein. Being a *black* slave woman until her marriage and drowned in the toil of household work to support her mother and siblings, Russia was a welcome change to her. It was the land of the King and Queen, of pomp

and pleasure, and most importantly, a place where the differences between the white and the black folks were not known. It was a land which was neither involved in the Atlantic Slave trade nor connected to the geographic boundary of the Atlantic Ocean.

“...as I entered, the emperor stepped forward with great politeness and condescension, and asked several questions...Empress Elizabeth stood in her dignity, and received me in the same manner...They presented me with a watch,&c.” (Prince, 23).

“...there were no prejudice against color...” (Prince, 23).

The numerous rituals and festivals that Russians celebrate catch Prince's fancy and she dedicates several pages describing the Imperial burial rites, the numerous holidays and the great holiday on 1st of May. Most importantly, the fact that here she becomes a part of these general festivities with dignity, unlike her life at home where she was a black servant, lets her paint her gaze at this aspect of the Russian life with a little added admiration and gaiety. She also talks short about the plague that visited the country in 1814, but notes that dreadful diseases like this and many more are unknown or little known in Russia highlighting the general health and hygiene of the country. St. Petersburg is described by Prince at length. The architecture, street planning, market, cathedrals, the frozen market and gardens such as the famous Taberisey Garden are vividly sketched so that the city comes out alive from the pages. The long imperial history of Russia definitely had facilitated Prince to write of its architectural creations, but a place which treated Prince as a human, may be for the first time in her life, must have also looked pretty to her eyes, and so the elaborate descriptions. Prince, thus, exemplifies the subject-object binary with her watchful eyes at the Russian life and culture and the subsequent write-up. In the theoretical world, Said presents the Orient as the 'other'. In his book *Orientalism* (1995), the 'other' is essentially someone, who is unknown or little known, who is strange and is to be studied. In short, the gaze of the Occident, the subject, falls at the Orient, the object. Thus, the relation between the Occident, one who produces, and the Orient, one that gets produced, is that of power, because, knowledge is power, as has been said by Said. Said's theory of *Orientalism*, thus, has an important place in travel theory as travelers creates and dismantles the worlds that they traverse with their multi-layered gazes. But this power relation, and the subject-object division often gets disrupted and blurred due to the shifting of the subject-object frontiers. Moreover, in the case of a black traveler, whether male or female, the power equation is complex, as blacks have been traditionally gazed at, never been thought eligible for gazing at others. However, it is well known that any objective the description is in fact, a matter of conjecture. Hayden White argues that all forms of historical writings use narrative strategies to interpret and deliver facts. Similarly, no narrative can be made up of unadulterated facts. Every narrative is delivered through someone's point of view, and every viewpoint is, as has been mentioned already, shaped by the socio-cultural, historical, educational and gendered background of the subject and her/his ideological leanings. The fact that Nancy Prince was a black woman cannot be

ignored. Moreover, she herself had been a slave most part of her life. The emancipation from slavery had been a difficult and tricky task. Her color of the skin had made her life at 'home' and her journey abroad (especially her missionary journey) a hazardous task. The missionaries had a preset notion of themselves as different from the 'other' in that the latter was a heathen unlike civilized Christians like them. But again, in the case of Prince, we see a similar touch of differentiating the 'other' brethren from herself.

Thus it may be hoped that they are not the stupid set of being they have been called; here surely *we see industry*...I told them we had heard in America that you are lazy, and that emancipation has been of no benefit to you; I wish to inform myself of the truth respecting you, and give a true account on my return. (Prince, P.50)

Prince, thus, like any travel writer acts here somewhat as an observer who is fashioned against a series of 'others' who are denied the power of representing themselves. Because, she being an African-American, has both the elements drifting inside her in concert, the binding towards her ancestral land and her newfound Americanism. But her unfailing motive is to better the condition of women, children and the black brethren in general who have been wronged all through the years of slavery and colonialism, and in that struggle she seems to be a very part of the persecution in its lopsidedness that the blacks have to undergo at the hands of white. Towards the end in her journey back to New York, she and her fellow blacks are deprived of their original place in the ship and relegated cunningly to some unhygienic and dark part of the ship. Thus, Nancy Prince is an African-American woman who moves in the social ladder with her marriage and the change of place/country.

In a capitalist society, security means more than the protection from physical attack or from legislative disenfranchisement. Security includes the ability to provide for one's self monetarily. And it was this overriding need for financial security that impelled Nancy Prince to expose herself to the public. Prince writes: "My object [in publishing my narrative] is not a vain desire to appear before the public; but, by the sale, I hope to obtain means to supply my necessities...so long as I can support myself by my own endeavors." (Prince, 3). Moreover, writing is also a strong way to assert one's independence from the shackles of domination of any kind. As Helen Cixous writes, "It is by writing, from and toward women and by taking up the challenge of speech which is reserved in and by the symbolic, that is, in a place other than silence. Women should break out of the snare of silence." (Cixous, 108-131). Nancy Prince, thus, narrates herself to be a strong willed, physically tough woman, who traverses the harsh racially divided and guided American society, to come out as a woman of significance and of worth to the world, both black and white.

Carolyn Vines: Carolyn Vines hails from Indianapolis, USA. She, the author of *Black and Abroad* (2010), encourages black women searching for meaningful relationships to reject the limitations and identities imposed upon them by society. In spite of a childhood which is typical of a black, poor child in America, with a poor mother to take care of the entire family, she offers inspiration to all black women regardless of age as she

grew up. Carolyn had a childhood much like Nancy Prince with a mother and many siblings in a hard economic environment and a brutal racist society. *Black and Abroad* describes how after moving from New Orleans Carolyn finds herself in the land of windmills, wooden shoes and endless gray skies. As she moves away from the remnants of her tragic childhood and America's obsession with race, she is plunged into the depths of homesickness and depression. She travels through motherhood and a career change, and her determination is put to the test. On the way to self-discovery, she ends up finding love, soul sisters and is inspired to travel beyond the limits imposed upon her by race. In an interview, "Limitations on black female sexuality," stated Ms. Vines, "arguably the most intimate marker of identity, are subliminal and blatant. The media and entertainment industry are examples of the former. They have told us that we're either too matronly or too loud and sassy to be in a legitimate relationship. The black community at large has threatened aggression (stares, comments, violence) or ostracism if our sexuality is disloyal to black men and we choose to date outside the race." Carolyn's gaze at the world is thus fashioned largely by the experiences of her deprived childhood and the occasional color discriminations she had to face throughout. Moreover, the death of her brother, her mother's delirium, the hypocritical American black and white layered society and her mother's teachings on color also played substantial parts in making Carolyn gaze at the world, as she did, which will be studied in this paper.

The book opens with her anxiety about who will do her hair in Holland, a country predominantly of the whites, unlike America which is a country where she finds a black parlor in every almost every street? So, the first page sets the premise of the book, the life of Carolyn, vis-à-vis a black Woman, in a principally white world; and her fights against every odd set for her by her own race as well as by the whites to frame a new identity of her own. Initially Carolyn's mind was full of revolting race-based questions as her "white" boyfriend announced both of their moving off to Holland. All her life she had struggled to carve out a place for herself in the racist American society, where a black female's state is still more deplorable than a black male. Bruce Lee's movie, *Chinese Connection*, made her adhere herself to his character in the movie in her childhood, as Lee's character portrayed the same feeling of powerlessness in one's own country. And now all of a sudden she is asked to transfer her entire setup to a far-off country in Europe. She knows that black American women had never had the luxury of moving around the world, with their partners as in her case, because they had to look into several complex situations back at home and at the place of their visit. But Carolyn understood her dependency on her White male partner, despite her mothers' constant counsel on not to rely on any male, especially white, and to build oneself strong enough to face every anomaly and be self-reliant. She thus, ends up in Holland with Vinz where again, in the first six months, she felt powerless and even started doubting the stout black persona that her mother had tried instilling her throughout. The subject, Carolyn, becomes powerless amidst the objects of her gaze.

Initially, Carolyn was very upset with Vinz's bringing her to the "god

forsaken" country. Gazing at the country with the American economic standards, she found it a strange, uncomfortable country. At a Vinz's friends' place, she was horrified as she had been taken out of her wits by a toilet flush. She was frantically searching for a button or a knob that the Americans gently press for flushing out, but she could not find one even after bending on all four! Later she felt like a foolish child when she was shown the dangling handles at the top of the cubicle tank, which was to be pulled! Travelers have been generally the observers, those armored with a powerful gaze. But, as has been mentioned before in this paper, in the post-modern era, this subject-object boundary is often blurred to the extent that the observer often finds the self being dismantled and recreated by the gaze of his/her object of gaze. The traveler, initially the subject, looks at the natives/residents, the objects, of the places visited. But at some point of time, the subject, i.e., the traveler, realizes that he is being gazed at by his object of gaze, and thus, turning him into an object. In the post-colonial era, this fragmentary and dual aspect of the traveler becomes more evident. Carolyn exemplifies this two-way traffic of gaze more than once in the text. Sometimes she faced awkward situations when, in a gathering or party, Vinz got up to get a drink and she was left all by herself beside the *natives*. "Whenever he got up to refill our glasses or chat with his friend, I freaked out. I pretended to be looking urgently for anything in my purse or utterly fascinated with the books in the book case..." (P.391). She felt their looks, which were almost always harmless, pierced past her body. She felt losing her wits when she found herself answering their queries in the absence of Vinz and a hold over the native tongue.

A gaze is equipped and filtered by its respective culture. Carolyn took the Spanish to be very rude when a passer-by hardly ever responded to her friendly 'hi'. On the other hand, it was not the custom of a Spanish to greet a stranger that easily. And so, Carolyn found, on many occasions, the Spanish dumping the Americans as overtly friendly, which was looked as utterly meaningless and even fake at times. But nevertheless, eventually Carolyn found the Spanish to be a warm set of people, except that they were not very famous for their kindness to strangers. Nor did Carolyn find these people to be law-friendly, "...they failed to obey the basic rules of engagement: they cycled through red lights, made turns without signaling, and threatened to run down poor, unsuspecting pedestrians making the mistake of using the crosswalk...I'd seen women transporting newborns on their chests wrapped up in cloth carriers..." (P.825). But on the part of the Spanish, it was just that they were easy-going! But, nevertheless, if not home, Carolyn found that during the first year, Holland had ceased to be a foreign country to her. There were basically two problems that made her stay uncomfortable during the first six months. Firstly, not knowing the native language created trouble for her in social gatherings or while otherwise communicating with the natives, especially when Vinz was not around her. Secondly, and most importantly, the deep rooted cynicism inside her about the racial hitch and all the pessimisms associated with it, didn't allow her to open up at once and befriend the people, let alone try to understand them from their

viewpoint. To start with, she was not sure about her relationship with Vinz in the long run. Hollywood films had even racialised love. They had always portrayed black woman to be unworthy of a healthy relation, in short, they were considered to be fit only to have in bed for a while. Gazing at their relation keeping that point in mind, Carolyn had some misgivings about Vinz's long-term intentions. And when it came to the society at large, Carolyn had the lens of the American society on to gaze through. Holland, unlike America, is predominantly a white country. Being a black, she was very alarmed at first on having come to such a place. She felt powerless in Holland, and felt all her mother's teachings going in vain. Loaded with the painful, disturbing memories of racial discrimination and the resulting discomforts back at home, Carolyn put herself on guard in Holland, which was not all required. But eventually she realized that the people in Holland didn't divide people on color. In fact, she started liking the International flavor of the country. About herself, when people came to know that she is from America, they took more interest in her and engaged her in all sorts of interesting, inquisitive conversations. In her work place also at the Leiden University, she was given her own work space. People embraced her not only as Vinz's girlfriend, but also as Carolyn (though she was sometimes referred to as a bloody American!). "I was feeling more welcome after one year in Holland than I'd felt during most of my life in America" (P. 836).

Thus, Carolyn is a black American woman who had a disturbing childhood being a black first of all, and then due to the absence of a strong father figure. Her mother's teachings had a profound impact on her, which at times proved handy for her, but mostly they made her look at the world with a lens of cynicism on. "How many times had my mother informed me: "Carolyn, you're poor, black and a girl, she'd say slamming the fist of one hand into the palm of the other as she said those last three words..." (P. 487). She pressed Carolyn to be not just like the whites, but even better than them. Her mother faced discrimination by whites at work place, and at home she was taught to do the same against black. Her mother was preparing her to live in the "white man's world". Further, Carolyn was annoyed with her black male brethren. They had some sort of double standards like those of the whites. A black female was almost a social outcast had she the nerves to socialize with a white man. Black men gave dirty looks to a black woman doing this, and would wait for the white man to skate away and then single out the woman to punish; at least this is what happened to Carolyn once. Black males would often pass dirty looks at her, and then even expected her to be with them, even socially, leaving a white male. Carolyn wondered if the black men doubted her heterosexuality for having being in the company of white males, and not black! Because, not being in black male company meant something was wrong with the girl. For a black woman in America, there were only two options: stay with a black man or stay single. And if one marries a white male, then she is treated as a "sell out", or literally treated as a traitor. Born and brought up amidst such a barbed ambience, Carolyn's initial gaze at Holland was skeptical. And coming from a better off economy also influenced her gaze at the country which had still to

cover up some strands in her view. In the case of Paris, the history of Paris becoming a home to black American authors who didn't get their due recognition back at home was known by her and which guided her gaze at that city.

Key Terms explained and Conclusion: Two black women, two centuries apart, wrote their respective travel memoirs, identical, yet varied. Both of them had a personal history which was troubled like that of the entire black race of the American nation at some point or another. Being black, and more so a female, deprived them of some of the basic needs of life and the social support system, both emotional and economic. Eventually, male presence in their lives brought stability to some degree. In Prince's case it was a black male having a position in the Russian court, and in Carolyn's, it was a white male hailing from Holland. Subsequently, moving off to Russia, temporarily, and Holland, permanently, in their respective cases, made them realize that they had more to their personalities than the stereotypical attributes attached to them since their birth in America. They were not the identity less black women who had to either work as a slave in the drudgery of different households or worry about doing the hair every other day to go with the white society. In their new-found *home* they were treated at par with the whites, their endowment recognized and their self duly given respect. Making sense of the upheaval of industrialization, urbanization, Woman's rights, and abolition, women's early-nineteenth-century travel writing provided readers with a means to understand their rapidly changing world. The female traveler, Nancy Prince in this case, and her travel text constituted just such frameworks and metaphors, which made and challenged the epistemologies of early-nineteenth-century America. Carolyn Vines, on the other hand, treats her text as a *memoir of identity*. It's a narrative of a black woman, who realizes towards the end of her book that identity, the way one sees oneself, is not confined to race and nationality. However, both the narratives do the task of representing and reconstructing the identities denied developing on the lines of a buildingroman, a resurrection of the displaced self.

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