
Silencing the Center(s) in American Travel Writing: From Washington Irving to *Globe Trekker*

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Travel writing often involves a central paradox. For a variety of reasons, travellers often make secret or leave out much of what they see and experience, and concentrate only on the most bizarre, exceptional or picturesque, that is, not on the things that best describe a region, country or territory but on those that may be most appealing or attractive to themselves or to potential readers (or those that best fit the latter's notions of what a place should look like). The writer thus tries to be faithful only to what s/he or his readers want, expect or are likely to enjoy. S/he wants to amuse, impress or astonish them rather than stimulate their critical powers or let them arrive at conclusions of their own about the places or cultures under scrutiny. When it comes to American travel writers, and in such an insecurity-ridden culture as that of the United States, we should also take into account that they have often tried to tell their readers exactly what the latter needed to be told so as to be able to view themselves in a certain way, by means of contrast and negative self-definition. Comparing such diverse texts as Washington Irving's *The Alhambra* and an episode of the *Globe Trekker* show about Southern Spain,¹ common strategies employed in centralizing margins and marginalizing center(s) will be discussed and ultimately related to the need for self-definition which Americans have invariably felt ever since they constituted themselves as a nation.²

Taking for granted that, as Holland and Huggan argue, "travel writing frequently provides an effective alibi for the perpetuation and reinstallment of ethnocentrically superior attitudes to 'other' cultures, peoples, and places," but that, nevertheless, "[a]n in-depth study of contemporary travel writing as a popular phenomenon remains to be undertaken" (viii; authors' emphasis),³ a number of concepts originating in postcolonial theory will be employed in this approach to two instances of popular travel "writing." The postcolonial will

be viewed, along with Edward Said, as a "de-exoticising category that demands an analysis of the material conditions surrounding textual production and representation" (qtd. in Huggan 19). It is now generally understood that travel writing "belongs to a wider structure of representation within which cultural affiliations and links – culture itself – can be analyzed, questioned, and reassessed" (Holland/Huggan viii-ix). Travel writing is acknowledged to have some say both in the construction of the places travelled in, through representing them in particular ways, and also of the "traveller" society itself. According to Susan L. Robertson, editor of a collection of seminal critical reflections on travel and travel writing, *Defining Travel. Diverse Visions*, "the position of spectator is double sided, for both the visitor and the visited view each other and contribute to the construction of new identities" (xviii). It is my contention, however, that, at least in the case of Americans, travel discourses have often played a more important role in shaping or defining who they are than in defining who the other(s) might have been. The two narratives under analysis here "create" a Spain that gives back to Americans an image of themselves as a cosmopolitan, well-travelled society, capable of observing distantly without involving itself too much in the distinctly inferior practices being investigated, a society which does things in vastly superior ways, hard-working, probably not so picturesque or capable of enjoyment, but all in all better situated within the path of modernity and progress.

Washington Irving's *The Alhambra* (1832) is probably best known for its collection of folk tales set in or connected in some way with the famed Moorish monument (and probably because of that it has been invariably translated into Spanish as *Cuentos de la Alhambra*). However, it is also an outstanding example of American 19th century travel writing. Irving spent several months in Granada, where he

obtained permission to be lodged in the Alhambra, undoubtedly collecting material for his book. I will, however, concentrate not on Irving's stay in that city or what came of it but rather on the journey that took him there, which he describes at length in the opening section of the book. Though shorter routes from Madrid existed, Irving decided instead to take one that would lead him from Seville through the Guadalquivir valley, the Sevillian campiña, the Antequera plains, the hills around Archidona and part of Sierra Morena. It was certainly a longer route but one that would allow the writer and voyager to have a tasteful of picturesque Andalusia, as a preparation for what he hoped to encounter in Granada. It was a voyage which allowed him also to wallow in an atmosphere of story-telling. Following in the footsteps of Dumas, Gautier or Chateaubriand and having such distinguished continuators in his own country as Longfellow or Hemingway, Washington Irving remains however the prototype of the Romantic traveller. Always alive to the presence of Moorish footprints in the places he visits and in the customs he observes, it is, as far as he is concerned, as if the Moors had just left Spain (instead of having done so, in some places, almost four centuries before!).

After the European Enlightenment had popularized an image of Spain as invariably connected with obsolete religious practices and superstitions, Romantic travellers were then to try to disseminate an altogether different view of Spain as picturesque, charming and mistakenly depreciated by earlier voyagers. Oddly, the Romantic approach differed from the Enlightened one more in the final judgment than in the analysis leading up to it. It was pretty much the same Spain, although now celebrated instead of deplored. Where the Enlightenment had, in dismay, only spotted old-fashioned values and practices, the Romantics also spotted them, but were just glad to have done so. In which other European country would one find so much charm? Certainly not in the far duller United States, Washington Irving would contend, bent as his country was upon wholesale industrialization and territorial expansion (except, that is,

in the small villages of New York's Dutch country, chosen by him as the setting of such tales as "The Legend of Sleepy Hollow").⁴ Esther Ortas summarizes in the following way what 19th century travellers sought in Spain:

[E]l viajero extranjero esperaba encontrar en España un universo radicalmente opuesto al de la realidad diaria de su país de origen, donde lo cotidiano sorprendiera y pudiera hallarse lo primitivo, la magia de lo árabe, la sobriedad de lo medieval cristiano y la leyenda de las catedrales góticas. La confluencia de todos estos elementos alimentó la imaginación del viajero que hizo de España un espacio poético, pictórico, literaturizado y ensoñado. Nuestro país se ofrecía a los extranjeros como un lugar en el cual el visitante podía toparse a cada paso con grados de singularidad y pintoresquismo capaces de arrancar de su interior el hastío de lo conocido. (60)

Though the tales included in *The Alhambra* do not allow Irving to comment at all on Spanish reality in the first half of the nineteenth century (being all of them set in a distant past), the introductory non-fiction some 30-page travel narrative does. Not interested at all in sound social analysis, Irving becomes a detached observer of Spanish (or Andalusian) reality and he provides us with interesting descriptions of what he encounters. They are interesting, that is, only because of what they reveal about Irving and about travel writing as a whole. First of all, it is not by mere chance that Irving happened to alight on Andalusia of all places. This was the most backward region of Spain, and though all of the country, for different historical circumstances, was only a shadow of what it had been three centuries before, historians have often contended that the invariable traits which Romantic travellers attached to 19th century Spain are not at all fair. As shown by the most famous British traveller in Spain, Richard Ford, some regions of the country were making considerable social and economic headway (Ortas 68-9). Andalusia, the land chosen by Irving, was not among them. But even while not having chosen a representative part of Spain for his travel piece, Irving often preferred the more general word Spain instead of Andalusia to refer to the land he was travelling in. His view of Spain as largely synonymous with Andalusia, and in particular 19th century Andalusia, has been, however, far from

occasional. It is not a coincidence that the music, dancing and costumes that foreigners have always regarded and still regard as typically Spanish are rather “typical” only of that region. Anyway, in choosing Andalusia as the setting of his narrative of a Spanish journey, Irving was using as central an ec-centric or marginal part of Spain and thereby ignoring much more central aspects of such a country.

But even within Andalusia there was a centralization of margins and simultaneous marginalization of centers, observable, for instance, in Irving’s exaggerated stress on Andalusia’s Moorish heritage and his virtual neglect of what the centuries after the Moors left brought to the region. Then, for Irving, Andalusia is a land of bandoleros, contrabandistas, trabucos, ventas... He is very fond of using the original Spanish words, untranslated even in cases where there was an exact and handy translation, probably to preserve some of the exoticism and picturesqueness he was determined to supply his readers with.⁵ About Andalusia, even if he again refers to it as simply Spain, he affirms:

[W]hat a country is it for a traveller, where the most miserable inn is as full of adventure as an enchanted castle, and every meal is in itself an achievement! Let others repine at the lack of turnpike roads and sumptuous hotels, and all the elaborate comforts of a country cultivated and civilised into tameness and commonplace; but give me the rude mountain scramble; the roving, half-hazard, wayfaring the half wild, yet frank and hospitable manners, which impart such a true game-flavour to dear old Romantic Spain! (11)

This is one of the few passages where it is possible to gain a glimpse of real Spain, obviously not that of the enchanted castle but that of the lack of turnpike roads and sumptuous hotels. But it would be well to notice that, however truthful such an assertion probably was, Irving’s treatment of it was light and cheerful, stressing the inevitable charm of it all. A frequent strategy for displacing centers to semantic margins is to insist on charm where there is basically discomfort, backwardness and a material impossibility of much needed improvement. It is what many modern tourists do when they refuse to see the poverty and suffering in countries whose beaches they greatly enjoy; or when, even if they acknowledge them, they try

to make such central characteristics relatively unimportant (or marginal).

The Spaniard who guides and makes the necessary preparations for the comfort of Irving’s group is described as a simpleton. They call him Sancho (inadvertently attaching to Irving the role of a Quixote who never sees through his own Romantic delusions). The writer’s attitude to him is invariably patronizing. So is his attitude to most of the natives. He describes the commander who dines with them at Arahal as “a lively, talking, laughing *Andaluz*, who . . . recounted his exploits in love and war with much pomp of phrase, vehemence of gesticulation, and mysterious rolling of the eye” and his offer of protection against bandits is met by Irving’s assuring him “that with the protection of our redoubtable squire, Sancho, we were not afraid of all the *ladrones* of Andalusia” (14), further mocking Sancho’s prowess. Later on, Irving states that Spaniards are naturally proud but they are easily won “caballeroing” them, i.e. treating them respectfully and courteously, and offering them cigars. He warns his reader, though: “Care, however, must be taken never to offer him a present with an air of superiority or condescension: he is too much of a *caballero* to receive favors at the cost of his dignity” (17).

Sancho, Irving’s “squire”, has heard of Don Quixote, but does not know him as a fictional character. When he reveals his ignorance before Irving, his look is “inquiring” (17), probably out of a wish to be pronounced wrong if he is. Irving and the others just laugh and never set him right, probably because doing so would amount to eliminating that ignorance which, in Irving’s opinion, makes Spaniards so charming. According to Patricia Craig, editor of *The Oxford Book of Travel Stories*, “[t]hose in search of change, in one sense, are sometimes prone to resent it, in another – if it entails any diminution of the picturesque, or increase in standardization” and then goes on to quote Thackeray as sardonically complaining that now “[w]e can buy Harvey sauce, and cayenne pepper, and Morison’s Pills, in every city in the world” (ix). But pronouncing an ignorant people just charming is again to ignore the much more central implications and consequences of ignorance and centralizing any marginal charm

it could possess. In the opinion of Holland and Huggan, this strategy is a usual way to depoliticize or dehistoricize those constructed as “exotic” cultures, whose aesthetically valuable exoticism should be maintained at whatever cost (219). Irving is quite fond of Sancho even if he is not considered capable of ever rising to the former’s own level of civilization and sophistication. He is delighted with him as he is, as an “other” who, through his enforced ignorance, remains manageable, domesticated and inferior. The treatment of this “character” on the part of Irving could certainly lead us to a wider discussion of othering practices extending as far back as the treatment of the black slaves in North America and well beyond Irving’s time to the colonization of Africa by the European powers. Since Irving is a Romantic traveller and did not possess an imperial agenda, Sancho’s ignorance is one that simply makes him a charming “other” and eases the considerable burden of trying to come to terms with cultural difference. Once made into a picturesquely ignorant other, what (else!) is there to understand about Sancho (or Spain, for that matter)?

Arriving at Arahall, Irving and his company decide to stay overnight. After supper, a “true Spanish festivity” (15; emphasis added) ensued, to the tunes of a guitar and some castanets. Irving is exhilarated by the Flamenco singing and fandango dancing. Undoubtedly, it was just a show intended for the foreigners to order “wine and refreshment circulate freely among the company” (14), which they duly did, apparently not realizing that such a treat was probably the object of the whole show. It would be an example of the strategy that Mary Louise Pratt refers to as “autoethnographic expression” and which she defines as that discursive or cultural practice by “othered” people which tends to confirm the views of the “othering” civilization (7).⁶ In this particular instance, the Spaniards organize the whole show, thereby autoethnographing themselves, because they guess it is just what Irving and his group expect. But autoethnography does not invariably denote self-abasement or a self-deluded belief in the truthfulness of such a performance of one’s alleged cultural identity. Sometimes, like here,

it is the only means left for those who have nothing else to make a living other than marketing themselves and specific aspects of their culture.⁷

During the whole revelling scene, Irving is however intrigued by the presence of an alguacil who, “in a short black cloak . . . took no notice of anything going on, but sat in a corner diligently writing by the dim light of a huge copper lamp” (15). Obviously, he is not a foreigner and does not participate in shows only designed for foreigners, in much the same way modern residents of Spanish towns where tablados flamencos exist, rarely or never visit them. Being a government official, the alguacil does not need to autoethnograph himself, as the poorer peasants about him do. Anyway, the sight of that alguacil, though marginal within the narrative (next morning, Irving will energetically proceed in his pursuit of margins: “The following morning was bright and balmy, as a May morning ought to be, according to the poets,” 15) is a silent witness to that other Spain or Andalusia that Washington Irving was not interested at all in showing his readers (even if it was doggedly thrown in his way).

Globe Trekker (released in video as the *Pilot Guides*) is a more than 12-year-old very popular travel show, inspired by the similarly popular *Lonely Planet* travelbooks, which young and not so young backpackers have been using for decades. Though produced in Britain, it is extremely popular in the United States, as attested to by the fact that most of its presenters (or “travellers”) are by now American. One of the episodes (shot in 1999) of the *Globe Trekker* show is about Southern Spain. Though over 180 years have passed since Irving’s expedition, the show simply follows in Irving’s footsteps.⁸ The opening sequence takes us to the Costa del Sol and shows us congested roads, tourists and high-rise apartment buildings. The hostess, Christina Chang, is then kind enough to take us out of all that and into the “real” Spain. And where does she take us? To a quaint village where the natives (except women who are menstruating, that is) are whitewashing their houses. Notwithstanding the serious mistakes committed while trying to unearth the “real” Spain, such as the mention that the Civil War

was one between Fascists and Communists or that Seville and Triana are two separate towns yet “very close” to each other, it is similarly obvious that tourism and the implacable destruction of our coastal landscapes, their replacement by hotels and apartment buildings and the consequent traffic jams created by the owners of the apartments trying to get to them is a much more central phenomenon of present-day Spain than the whitewashing of houses. Similarly, Christina Chang tells us that only two unspoiled coastal areas remain in Southern Spain, which is probably true. Curiously enough, the show takes us to them both and ignores all of the spoiled ones. But such an insistence on margins clearly calls into question the show’s stated aim of showing us the “true” Spain.

According to Holland and Huggan,

[t]he travel literature industry . . . has been quick to cash in on Westerners’ growing fear of homogenization, promoting its products as a thrilling alternative to the sanitized spectacles of mass tourism; as evidence that the world is still heterogeneous, unfathomable, bewildering; as proof that the spirit of adventure can hold off the threat of exhaustion. (2)

Washington Irving had already declared that the path he employed to make it to Granada and the kind of voyage chosen was “the *true* way to travel in Spain” (11; emphasis is added), apparently deploring other less adventurous forms of travel as less faithful to the spirit of true travelling. Similarly, at the beginning of the *Globe Trekker* show on “Southern Spain,” Christina Chang mentions explicitly that she is going to leave “tourism” behind (and the dullness of its standardized outlook) and do some real “travelling.”⁹ However, what the rest of the show offers us is just more “tourism.” The distinction between tourists and travellers has often been used to stimulate in some “travellers” (often for marketing purposes and whether it is true or not)¹⁰ the sense that they are not tourists, that they are actually non-exploitative and open-minded visitors, that they do not just seek pleasure or entertainment but want to know about the “real” nature of the places visited, are in fact after “Culture.” In this particular instance the problem is complicated by the fact that the *Globe Trekker* episode, in leaving “tourism” behind (high-rise apartment buildings

and congested roads included) and in going in search of women whitewashing houses in order to “purify” them is certainly just, as Irving did, centralizing margins and marginalizing centers. In other words, what is labelled “tourism” here and dismissed as false is much closer to what Spain really is than what Christina Chang’s travelling reveals (she later spends upwards of 6-7 minutes visiting an exhibit of creepy torturing tools employed by the Spanish Inquisition six centuries ago,¹¹ and then a similar number of minutes to delve into the “experiences” of foreign surfers in Tarifa, including their problems with the police when the latter try to enforce regulations prohibiting free camping¹²). Whether this can be considered or not to deceive viewers would be a controversial issue. If we are to believe Erik Cohen, most tourists do not look at all for authenticity either in their travelling or their reading about travel and hence, for them, “the simulated constitutes a viable experience” (30).¹³ That is, they accept the pretence as the real, even if some of them may suspect the deceit all along.

The sequences shot in Seville, a city that is immediately defined, as Irving did, with the adjective “Romantic”, constitute another case in point.¹⁴ Mostly focusing on singing and dancing, not one single street or quarter not specifically oriented to massive tourism is shown.¹⁵ Calle Betis, the Santa Cruz quarter, night clubs for tourists – contemporary equivalents to Irving’s “ventas” – and odd tapas (though I have lived in Seville for over 20 years, I have never tasted bull’s testicles or seen anyone taste them), the *Globe Trekker* experience of Seville is a mere catalogue of tourist attractions, in spite of its insistence on being a truthful account of real Spain. Oddly enough, this travel show (and its source of inspiration, the *Lonely Planet Guides*) are reputed to be different from other shows and other guides in their attempt at focusing upon things off the beaten track of mass tourism and providing “imagined access to the cultural other through the process of consumption” (Huggan 19).

In Seville, plenty of attention is devoted to the

Holy Week processions. The hostess cares to be very serious about it all, giving her viewers to understand that such rituals are of deep religious and spiritual significance for the “natives” and ignoring the more than obvious secularization which has surrounded them for decades. Probably doing so would be admitting that a global trend such as wholesale secularization has reached Spain and doing so would amount to erasing the “othering” potential of such a thing as the Holy Week. Similarly, a scene showing a fanatic hailing cries of “guapa, guapa” to the Macarena virgin allows us a glimpse of an unexpected (and certainly unwelcomed) Spain. Behind the man there is a tattoo studio, one of the most famous in the city. Like Irving’s black-cloaked alguacil, it stands there as a silent (or rather muted) testimony to an altogether different Spain, in which, Thackeray would complain, you can also get a tattoo. But for present-day Sevillians, getting a tattoo, as part of a global fashion, is a more common and central experience in their lives than eating bull’s testicles or whitewashing a house.¹⁶ The tattoo studio is however visually marginalized by the cameras of the *Globe Trekker* show.

Christina Chang’s conclusion in the final minute is disconcerting. Confessing that she had come to Spain to “chill out” on nice beaches (wasn’t she a traveller in search of truthfulness?) she “complains” that she has not been even able to take a proper siesta because Spain is “one big fiesta”.¹⁷ It will not be me who will deny an aspect of the Spanish character which is immediately observable by anyone visiting our country. Nonetheless, it has an exaggerated stress in this show, particularly after we have become part of one of the most spectacular economic booms of the late twentieth century.

This latter aspect is, more than marginalized, simply ignored in a show so obviously bent upon showing us the “real” Spain but so much participating in the strategies of marginalization of centers and centralization of margins that 19th century travellers like Washington Irving had already employed.

In the absence of a well-defined image of who they are, the difficulties of coming to terms with what they imagine themselves to be and fearing not to be exactly what they think they should be, Americans have always been great travellers, probably in search of those things that made them different, singular, unique: that made them a real nation. But such a uniqueness is, at least partly, derived, as I hope to have demonstrated, from a centralization of margins and considerable marginalization (or outright exclusion) of the centers of those countries with which their own one was being compared. Irving would not even think of living permanently in Spain and the *Globe Trekker* presenters stress every step of the way how alien they feel to the countries they visit (even if they invariably have great fun in them all). In the words of Tzvetan Todorov, they posit “the lure of difference while protecting its practitioners from close involvement” (qtd. Huggan 22). Whitewashing houses and backward roads are all very well for a few days or weeks but, Americans are to infer, their own country offers much more modern ways of painting houses and far better roads, even if devoid of Romantic charm.¹⁸ Not to discourage potential visitors to Southern Spain, passing references to Spain’s having an efficient railway network and modern roads are not absent. Not too much is made of that, though, in order to preserve the picturesqueness that may lure visitors into taking the chance.

NOTES

1. The fruitful relationship between tourism and literary texts is beginning to be seriously explored. See, for instance, Andersen and Robinson.

2. For an in-depth analysis of the way in which Americans have partly built their own national identity through travelling abroad (and writing about it), see Caesar.

3. Holland and Huggan also complain that an assessment is lacking of “the role of the ‘nonfictional’ guidebook and of the various multimedia advertising vehicles that serve the global tourist trade” (ix), an example of which would be the *Globe Trekker* show.

4. All the American Romantics faced the soullessness of their America but their responses were diverse: transcending material reality in search of an oversoul (Emerson, Thoreau) or of a white whale lurking in an unfathomable sea (Melville), the beauties of American landscapes in the canvases of the Hudson River School painters or the Moorish glamour and picturesqueness of a country where capitalism had not been even heard of.

5. See Franklin for a perceptive analysis of the way in which the preservation of New World names in the writings of European travellers and colonizers in the early days of the European presence in America frequently attested to the shortcomings and inadequacy of Old World mental, cultural and linguistic patterns in coming to terms with New World reality. Of course, Irving's use of such terms in the original serves entirely different functions.

6. Probably it is the same strategy observable in Sancho's calling himself Sancho all of the time he is with Irving. As a matter of fact, we never get to know what his real name has been.

7. The Junta de Andalucía (or Andalusian regional authority) is the most important autoethnographing institution in present-day Andalusia. Delighted with such marginalization and stereotyping of Andalusia, it recently decided to foster tourism in the provinces of Seville, Málaga and Granada by means of the creation of a Ruta de Washington Irving. The brochures for such a route never for a second question Irving's view of 19th century Andalusia. See <www.legadoandalusi.es/legado/contenido/rutas/washington.html>. But already in the 19th century intellectuals like Mesonero Romanos had denounced such a distorted view of Spain as that entailed in most Romantic renderings of it.

8. Although the show is clearly about Andalusia, the final segment is about the Moros y Cristianos celebrations in Alcoy (Alicante). It probably serves as a further link with Irving's celebration of the Moorish presence in Spain in *The Alhambra*.

9. The final credits express the show's thanks to the Spanish Tourist Board, the Jaén Tourist Board, the Cádiz Tourist Board, the Costa del Sol Tourist Board and the Costa Blanca Tourist Board. Hadn't tourism already been left behind at the beginning?

10. See Buzard and also MacCannell.

11. Not without reason, and probably having to do with the liberal/trendy bend of the show and the currently fashionable nature of gender studies, witchcraft is connected with the fear of women who were sexually liberated. All other political implications are ignored, however.

12. Chang will employ "native" informants again in Sierra Nevada, where a group of young foreigners tell her that there you can party until 10 am if you want and that Spain is actually no more than one big party. To be fair, at other moments she is accompanied by some local man (her own Sancho), who offers her an insider's view and eases the sense of cultural alienation she might otherwise experience (and pass on to her viewers).

13. Jonathan Culler, in *Framing the Sign. Criticism and Its Institutions*, makes a similar claim.

14. Irving had variously referred to the "romantic mountains of Andalusia" (5) and to the "Romantic struggle for the conquest of Granada" (9), thereby trying to invest bloody warfare with a Romantic aura. Later on, sitting on the summit of a hill from which he commands a wide landscape, he affirms that the views are full of "romantic associations," meaning the site of a famous battle or a rock from which two lovers once committed suicide (19).

15. The Granada segment is not very different in character, focusing as it does on the Alhambra and its legends (Irving again), the hostess learning to dance some Flamenco (in a "school" obviously conceived exclusively for foreign tourists) and a gypsy celebration in the Sacromonte quarter. In Almería she only visits the Mini Hollywood (old westerns were shot there), which Chang needs to admit is now mostly an attraction for tourists.

16. Probably to insist on difference, whether it really exists any longer or not, is the only strategy left for travel writing if it is to survive in a global world of growing standardization. But what will be left for travellers to write about after the whole world has assumed the same patterns of conduct and is already eating the same food, listening to the same music and wearing the same clothes?

17. It has also been a never-ceasing flow of activities such as horseback riding, windsurfing, snowboarding and whatnot.

18. In order not to discourage potential visitors to Southern Spain, passing references to Spain's having an efficient railway network and modern roads are not absent. Not too much is made of that, however.

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English July: An Indian Scholar's Travelogue

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When I landed in Manchester on 5 July 2008 it was past seven in the evening and by the time I emerged from the airport it was an hour after that. My friends and hosts Lety Alterno and Yann Bezin, who had been waiting for me, waved a placard bearing my name but it was not necessary. We could easily recognize each other. Lety said I had not changed one bit since she saw me last, five years ago. My first experience in the UK was that I felt sandwiched between the warmth of these two angels and the bitter cold of Manchester. But the warmth of friendship finally gained the upper hand and I began to feel comfortable.

After the long flight I needed to rest and the best thing I could do to rest was to sleep like a child through my first night in Manchester. The next day in the morning I was woken up by the singing of a bird which I guessed was a nightingale. I recalled that the 'self-same song' I heard in Turin (Italy) too in the summer of 2001. Nightingales are known to sing at dawn, and sing rather assertively if they stray into urban areas. I was later told that singing birds are frequent visitors to Stalybridge, the Manchester suburb where I was staying with my friends, because of the proximity of the Peak District National Park. Bird songs can be heard, and enjoyed, in Greater Manchester among other things because of the silence that prevails at all times. Lety feels that the silence is 'killing,' meaning that it is unbearable even for a European like her.

My trip to the UK was occasioned by the 20th European Conference on Modern South Asian Studies (ECMSAS) held at the University of Manchester and facilitated by a bursary awarded by the Academic Committee of the conference. At the ECMSAS I presented a paper titled "Subaltern Subjectivity and Resistance: Dalit Social History in Postcolonial Indian Fiction in English," as part of Panel 13, named "History and the South Asian Novel Written in English" and convened by Nicole Weickgenannt. My paper was received very well. It generated much interesting discussion. A Danish participant got so keenly interested that she sought time and had a long discussion with me after the session closed. If you are interested in a report on Panel 13 please visit my friend and fellow participant Christopher Rollason's blog: <<http://christopherrollason.spaces.live.com/blog/cns!459178C2F5215F32!998>>. Apart from the conference I also participated, as a commentator, in a seminar offered by Chris for the researchers and graduate students of the University of Manchester.

So much for the academic part.

I made several forays into Manchester city prior to, during, and after the conference travelling mostly by the ubiquitous Magic Bus. Manchester is a city rich in history, past and present. Walking through the streets of Manchester will give one the feeling of wading through the pages of history. Every stone in Manchester has a story to tell – a story of blood, sweat and tears. The city also struck a responsive chord in me. Its cotton mills were once fed by the raw material produced in India. India's commercial capital Mumbai was till recently known as the Manchester of India. My ancestors operated handlooms and power looms to scrape a living. There are thus many ways I could relate myself to Manchester. I therefore made it a point to see as much of the city as was possible – its historical sites, institutions of cultural and commercial importance and so on. They included Manchester Cathedral, Chetham's Library where Karl Marx and Frederick Engels used to discuss and formulate ideas that would later change the course of the world, Manchester Art Gallery, Whitworth Art Gallery, Printworks Centre, the John Rylands Library, and the Town Hall at which a reception was hosted for the conference delegates on 8 July 2008, addressed by the Lord Mayor of Manchester, Councillor Mavis Smitheman, and Professor Graham Ward, Head of the School of Arts, Histories and Cultures of the University of Manchester.

Aside: After visiting Manchester Cathedral I was walking towards Chetham's Library, and to my surprise a decently dressed English man in his thirties approached me and begged for a 50 pence coin because he said he had no money to travel by tram to his place. His outstretched hand already had a few coins in it. Instinctually I moved a little away. I then took out a pound coin from my pocket and placing it in his hand I took a 50 pence coin away from it. But he wouldn't settle for this deal: he managed to persuade me to part with the 50 pence coin as well. All along I was sure that he would not dare harm me even if I declined to give him anything because we were being watched by CCTV cameras operated in that area by the City Council. But it was annoying to be pestered by polite beggars in a rich country like the UK.

It was not historical sites and cultural institutions all the time. I also took time out to shop at the Trafford Centre, Decathlon (sports super store), Manchester Arndale (Europe's largest city-centre shopping mall) and several smaller shops including the Pound Empire for good measure. Lety and Yann were my constant companions and they frequently doubled as tour guides. For example, they took turns to explain the significance of the New Orleans themed area of the Trafford Centre beginning with Colin Spofforth's 'Spirit of New Orleans' jazz band images that welcome visitors to the area with their sweet but 'unheard' melodies.

While I was inside Decathlon looking up the rows of sports shoes on display an impatient British woman who felt I blocked her way, said, "Excuse me" so emphatically that she probably meant, 'if you don't move immediately and make way for me I will push you aside.' I heard this phrase being used in different contexts by British men and women and depending on the situation it meant anything from 'please move, but I am prepared to wait if you can't immediately' to 'if you don't move within a fraction of a second I might hit you.'

Now excuse me, but I would like to include more such asides in my narrative for your reading pleasure. On the way back from the Trafford Centre we could see the Beetham

Tower rising above all the other city centre buildings, on Deansgate at the intersection of Great Bridgewater Street and Liverpool Road. This building is a 47-storey skyscraper, the tallest in Manchester, housing the Hilton Hotel on the first 23 floors and residential apartments on the 25th and the other floors above it. The Beetham Tower serves for a visitor the same purpose as the pole star a sailor. You can keep this tower in view and walk/drive towards it. You will for sure reach the centre of the city. Maybe it is for this reason that it is impossible to get lost in Manchester.

As the Beetham Tower loomed large on the horizon I took several snaps of it through the windscreen because Yann was in no mood to stop the car. He was in a hurry to take me to Old Trafford the permanent home of Manchester United. My heart ached to see ManU's star player Wayne Rooney in flesh and blood but it was not possible to meet any of the sports stars, nor visit the Museum and Tour Centre at the North Stand; however, it was nice just to be there. Manchester United, together with Deportivo La Coruña and Associazione Calcio Milan, have been my favourite football teams. With the visit to the ManU stadium I have kind of completed my football pilgrimage to the three places – Manchester, A Coruña (La Coruña) in Galicia (Spain) and Milan (Italy) – at various times since 2001.



The ManU Stadium at Old Trafford

The clock on the high wall to the right of the Munich Tunnel at the South Stand of the ManU stadium had 'Feb 6th, 1958' and 'Munich' written respectively above and below the dial. This was the day on which at 3.04 eight Manchester United players (Captain Roger Byrne, Mark Jones, Eddie Colman, Tommy Taylor, Liam 'Billy' Whelan, Duncan Edwards, David Pegg and Geoff Bent) were killed in an air crash near the Munich airport in 1958. This clock commemorates the lives so tragically lost but, contrary to popular belief, it is not set forever at 3.04. I discovered that it ticks on like any other clock perhaps to suggest that ManU has moved on in life putting the tragedy behind it.

Once Manchester was 'done' I went visiting several cities and towns of historical importance in northern England. They included Chester, Leeds and York. The trip to Chester was rendered most pleasant by the company of my dear friend Chris. When I have Chris for company it is literary issues that invariably come up for discussion, since he has an abiding interest in Indian Fiction in English. Chester is about an hour by train from Manchester. Our train started its journey at Manchester Picadilly and soon reached the

next station Newton-le-Willows. I kept looking out the window even as the pleasant conversation with Chris continued. The shifting rural landscape fascinated me with its endless expanse of greenery. The train hurtled along, calling at Earlestown, Warrington Bank Quay, Runcorn East, Frodsham, Helsby and finally at Chester. I specially noted that Helsby's train station was designed like a church. But otherwise the architectural design of the British train stations does not greatly differ from that of Indian stations.

Chester is a nice English town where there are extraordinary galleried arcades, called the Rows, and well preserved vintage buildings, some of them dating back to the 17th century, along the Eastgate street. They are overlooked by the second most photographed clock in the world after Big Ben, the Eastgate Clock. The Cathedral (in which William Makepeace Thackeray – not the novelist but his uncle and doctor – was buried) and the Town Hall facing it are both architectural marvels. Near the Chester Visitor Centre is the Roman amphitheatre, the largest such theatre in Britain, which, if meditated upon, can transport you to the ancient Roman times, while the River Dee, which divides the older and modern parts of Chester, brings back to memory several descriptions of it in English literature. Chester seems to have had a strong Roman connection as York did with the Vikings. Everything in Chester had something to appeal to us. It was gratifying to see so much and make so many discoveries in a matter of hours. But we did miss the town crier's noon time proclamation and welcome address at the Cross. By the time we reached Chester it was already past noon! We would have certainly loved to see town crier ringing his bell to welcome visitors and his colourful costumes being teased by sudden gusts of summer wind.

On the way to Chester Visitor Centre, while walking along St. John Street, we found a signboard near the entrance of a bar which said: "You can park your husband here while you go shopping." Somebody had a sense of humour after all.

A few days later, it was journey by train to York. York is more of a tourist city than Manchester. It has all the trappings of a tourist's paradise – open top buses, tour guides speaking into their handheld microphones, package tour groups of various nationalities milling around monuments, and yes the heavy entrance fees one has to pay at museums, monuments and even churches. My first stop at York was the National Railway Museum adjacent to the train station. But later I did not keep to any particular order. Although a tour guide invited me to join a group she was leading I politely declined her offer, preferring to explore the city on my own and on foot. Walking helped me see more of the city, and more closely at that, than I would have otherwise. Among the medieval monuments I visited were York Minster (the largest cathedral in northern Europe), the Shambles (the best preserved medieval street in the whole of Europe) and Clifford's Tower. Interestingly, York Minster has an Indian connection, as many other cultural institutions in the UK do. At this cathedral is a tablet on the wall to the right of the entrance which commemorates the officers and men who were killed during the Indian Mutiny of 1857. All these soldiers were from the Yorkshire County. Clifford's Tower was a mute witness, on the night of 16 March 1190, to the mass suicide and massacre of a large number of Jews in what was perhaps the most notorious incident of anti-semitism in medieval England. From the top of Clifford's Tower I could take a bird's-eye view of the city of York, together with the great wall enclosure and the River Ouse. The Ouse reminds me of the city cruise without which

a trip to York would not be complete. At the Lendal Bridge Yorkboat sailing point I stopped and weighed my options but finally decided in favour of skipping the cruise because the time at my disposal was very little and I wanted to do as much of the city as possible within a single day. Among the museums and galleries I managed to visit were: York Art Gallery, the Yorkshire Museum, Jorvik and the York Castle Museum, apart of course from the National Railway Museum.

I was walking to my table holding a cup of coffee at the small café at the National Railway Museum. A little coffee spilt on the floor and I did not respond to it. A British woman who was obviously surprised at my indifference, said 'Oops' for me and I smiled back at her. We then had coffee together. In the UK you are not allowed to forget your manners!

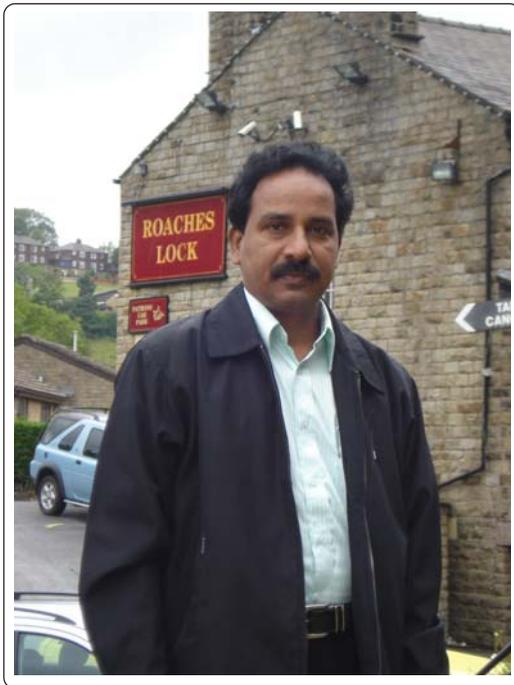
While on board the TransPennine Express which took me from Stalybridge to York I could hear a number of passengers loudly speaking into their cell phones and in most cases guess who they were speaking to – a business associate, a family member or a colleague at office. It looks like reticence is no longer characteristic of the English people. Technology has finally obliged them to speak, and speak rather loudly, in public.

While on my way back from York to Manchester I heard, on board the train again, a couple of young English girls animatedly talking about the boyfriend of one of them. I was two seats away but I could hear them rather well. It is a pity that the English people can't keep their secrets any longer. The English language betrays them: when they speak the whole world understands! While a Japanese couple sitting next to me spoke endlessly, in Japanese of course, and I could make absolutely no sense of what they were talking about!

And, to go by the behaviour of the nice girl who sold refreshments on board the train pushing her trolley, the ticket examiner who invariably addressed every man as 'Sir' and the behaviour of the barmaids, receptionists, money changers, sales girls at different commercial establishments and indeed everybody who deals with public, I could understand that corporatization and globalization have finally defeated colour and racial prejudices. Polite and quality service is assured irrespective of the colour and nationality of the customer. 'Service with a smile' is the modern corporate mantra for success.

I have read about the English countryside in countless poems and novels and greatly longed to see for myself what kind of beauty might have inspired Wordsworth and Keats to write so longingly about nature. An excursion into the rural areas was not possible, for whatever reason, during my previous trips to European countries including the UK. Here then was the chance. The extended stay in Greater Manchester and the proximity of the Peak District and Saddleworth Moor, but most importantly the kindness of Lety and Yann, made it possible for me to explore the English countryside. It started with a long walk in the Peak District, some 25 km away from Stalybridge. Our walk was restricted to High Peak in the Hope Woodlands Moor area and it lasted about two hours. Although the hoarding at the entrance promised that it might be possible to see the red grouse, golden plover, curlew, and, luck favouring, even a merlin or short-eared owl that inspired myths and legends in the past, unfortunately for us we could see none of these birds. While walking up the High Peak and back to the place where we parked the car Lety taught me

a valuable lesson — which is to greet everybody along the way with a ‘Hi’ or ‘Good Morning.’ And when we did greet fellow walkers and bicycle riders this way they warmly reciprocated! It was nice to establish instantaneous rapport with perfect strangers. After the long walk we had a picnic at a small but idyllic village called Broadbottom where there are remnants of a cotton mill dating back to the early 19th century. It was called Broad Mills and the site of the mill has been since declared a heritage site. Two things struck me most at this village: a festival of scarecrows was held here a week or so previously and scarecrows of various shapes, sizes and designs were to be seen at housefronts, alongside walls and across railings; the other interesting thing was what looked like a community farm where people can grow their own vegetables and flowers! What a great idea, especially when vegetable prices in India are skyrocketing and pesticides have been ruining people’s health. Helped by a kindly villager we went looking round the Broad Mill heritage site. Our trek started at the Leat & Pond near the Lymefield Visitor Centre and we walked along the bank of the River Etherow looking at what was left of the Gas Holder, Engine House, Water Wheel and Old Mill Complex. We then crossed the Warrasfold Bridge and went all the way up to Warhust Fold Farm where sheep grazed unmindful of us the three curious onlookers. The Etherow fascinated the adventurous Yann so much that he walked down the steep slope leading to the riverbed and scooped some water up in his hands and slowly let it slip through his fingers. We caught him on camera as he did so for him to cherish the moment later.



**Rajeshwar at the Roaches Lock Inn,
Mossley, Lancashire**

As we were resting on a bench on the bank of the Etherow a walker greeted us and we fell into talking about each other. It seems his wife is a yoga teacher and she has been in India for a number of years. He himself works for the same university, MMU (Manchester Metropolitan University), as Yann does. The conclusion was that it’s a

small world after all! Everybody is related to everybody else one way or the other.

During a leisurely saunter through the various Saddleworth villages – Delph, Diggle, Dobcross, Denshaw, Greenfield, and Uppermill – we entered the Ebenezer Congregational Church at Uppermill where the 80th birthday of a woman had just been celebrated. The man in charge of the ceremonies, who wore a pleasant smile on his lips, welcomed us and wanted to know to which Christian denomination we belonged. Lety introduced herself as a Roman Catholic while I identified myself as a Hindu. Continuing to smile, he welcomed me again and related at length the history and importance of the church. We thanked him and walked down the street to look at an old cotton mill which has since been converted into an apartment house. Incidentally, I am told it is normal for people in the UK to live in houses dating back to the 19th century (and even beyond). A hundred-year-old house, by British standards, is perhaps a recently built house!

Thus my visit to the UK this time round has been a greatly fulfilling experience — it was a complete experience of English life with a long walk in the Peak District, a picnic at the village of Broadbottom (as aforementioned), carefree wanderings in the country, watching a county cricket match (although from a distance), restaurants, cinema nights, art galleries, museums, sightseeing, shopping at enormous malls, late-night TV viewing and discussions with friends on matters of mutual interest. It was indeed a sumptuous feast of English life! A special mention should also be made here of the Lal Qila restaurant where the lavish conference dinner was hosted by the organizers. This restaurant and many other business establishments in this area, Rusholme, are owned by Indian or subcontinental settlers. Perhaps it is for this reason that the street is called Manchester’s Curry Mile. The restaurants of the Curry Mile have a speciality – the ‘salesmen’ of these restaurants trail passers-by and persuade them to eat at their restaurants and even promise to return the money if they are not satisfied with the food!

In the final analysis the UK left four lasting impressions on me:

(1) Everything here has the feel of having already been ‘settled and done with.’ Everything that could be done has already been done. The roads are perfect, the transport system is flawless, people are law-abiding and so on. With rare exceptions, it is difficult to improve on the systems, institutions and practices any further. In my considered opinion the UK would have been economically as advanced, its infrastructure as perfect and its institutions as strong even if it has never been a colonial power. There is something about the people, as there is to an extent about all other western European peoples, which would have ensured the achievement of these marvels – colonialism or no colonialism.

The UK situation invites an inevitable comparison with that which prevails in India. In India everything, values included, is perpetually in the making. The roads are constantly being laid or widened, new buildings are going up all the time and buildings older than fifty years are being pulled down and new ones replacing them. The urban landscape of India changes so rapidly that if you are visiting a spot in an Indian city or town after fifteen years chances are that you might not recognize it.

(2) It is however uncomfortable to be reminded a dozen times a day that you are watched by CCTV cameras – while walking along the streets or entering establishments of various kinds. For example, the signboard at the entrance/exit of every TransPennine train compartment says, “Smile, you are on CC camera.” Those who have read George Orwell’s

Nineteen Eighty-Four would know what it is like to be watched 24/7. But these are dangerous times and the threat to peace is real. The CCTV cameras might make us feel uncomfortable but they also assure us that the law-abiding citizens would never have to worry. It is only the law-breakers who need to be worried.

(3) The English obsession with weather is legendary. We have all read about it in books and seen it in films. But weather is a real everyday concern here and it needs to be addressed seriously. If proper precautions are not taken while going out, one might as well freeze to death, or at least contract pneumonia. Even to walk across the street to the nearest grocery it is important to check how many layers of clothing one has put on. While still on weather, in England even a distance of 100 km to the north or south of a point makes a big difference in terms of temperature. Manchester, located about 300 km to the north of London, was infinitely colder in July than London during my previous UK trip in September 2004. When it rains, and it rains all the time, it is much worse. English weather always reminds me of what happened to Ralph Touchett in Henry James' *The Portrait of a Lady*. This friendly and highly promising young man was caught in a cold storm and he never recovered from the ailment that it brought on. The closest I came to having a similar experience was when my two friends and I were walking around midnight towards the car in the parking lot, a distance of about a couple of furlongs, from a CineWorld cinema hall in Ashton-under-Lyne in the borough of Tameside after watching *Adulthood*, directed by Noel Clarke and starring Scarlett Alice Johnson and Adam Deacon. It was drizzling and it was bitterly cold. We did not guess while leaving home the turn the weather would take and so we were inadequately dressed. By the time we were inside the car and the heater was turned on our limbs went almost numb with cold and our teeth involuntarily chattered.

(4) Foreigners, and indeed the English people themselves, need to have considerably high levels of physical energy and stamina to withstand the strain of the brisk pace of the English life, and of course, the unpredictable English weather. Those who are short on these qualities should think twice before applying for a UK visa.

The return journey, full two weeks later, lasted two days and it had its exciting moments as well. The Emirates onboard service was excellent, but I had difficulty sleeping on the plane. The long break in Dubai was more than welcome, because I could go into the city of Dubai and experience life and weather there. Back in India, I felt like Ulysses in Tennyson's poem of that name, on his return home to Ithaca. India's heat, dust, noise, open drains and chaotic traffic made me feel utterly uncomfortable. Everything looked very different for a month, but only for a month. Soon it was life as usual again.