



Virginia Woolf

IMPERIALISM & COLONIALISM IN TRAVEL FICTIONS

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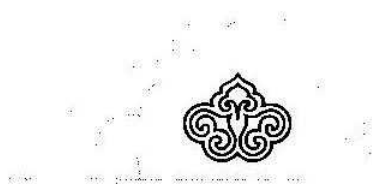


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INTRODUCTION

Reading is a game of mutual observation based on certain rules originating in the vast cultural space through which the reader's mind moves from one sign and code to the next one. Roland Barthes states that "[t]o open a text, to posit the system of its reading" means "not only to ask and to show that it can be interpreted freely; it is especially, and much more radically, to gain acknowledgement that there is no objective or subjective truth of reading," but merely "a ludic truth."¹ Reading is to make the reader's consciousness work at the invitation of the text's signs. Metaphorically speaking, it is an adventure or journey which "calls Desire to order: to derive pleasure, satisfaction," and "gratification"² in a dynamic process. Therefore, each reading is a "veritable production" which is "worth the writing it engenders, to infinity."

Reading is like taking a journey or participating in an exploration which gives the reader the possibility of entering the consciousness of the writer. Such an extraordinary journey paves the way for gratifying the reader's curiosity, for educating him or her to observe the signs through comparison and contrast, and for exciting his or her imagination. Hence reading expands the reader's insight and invites him to make an adventurous journey into the world of odd, weird and unfamiliar objects and places in order to make them familiar. The reader might be an armchair traveller⁴ who continues to travel further and further in the imaginary world of the texts. This literary journey is the beginning of his confrontation with the vast world or the unknown and unmapped country of the writer's consciousness. Such a journey invites the reader to have a dialectical conversation with the text and the writer at the same time. The reader or the armchair traveller is caught up in a dialectical conversation

between his pre-knowledge and the knowledge of the text by means of which he tries to understand the experience of the writer. Through such an understanding, the reader is involved in an inner speaking or an interior dialogue between himself and the text.

This interior dialogue gives the reader an aesthetic experience, a mode of self-realisation which always occurs through understanding something other than the self. The reader's internal journey takes place side by side with his external journey in the literary text. Every one who experiences a *Kunstwerk* incorporates such an experience wholly within himself; it means that he adds something to the totality of his self-knowledge or self-understanding, within which it means something to him. The reader, thus, meets the aesthetic world of the text and encounters a world in the writer's *Kunstwerk*. The work of art is not, however, an alien universe into which the reader is magically transported for a time, but he learns to understand himself in and through it.

Our aim in this book is to read, in a sense to travel in, to analyse, and to decode Virginia Woolf's texts from the vantage point of cultural studies. Some twentieth-century texts, in an evolving practice of modern travel writing, have become progressively cautious of certain localising strategies in the construction and demonstration of different cultures. During this period, a number of writers portray their experiences, cross-cultural contacts and their access to the societies they visited in their factual or fictional travel literature. Furthermore, during a period known as "between the wars," writes David Blanton, the modern travel book as a literary genre is "firmly established"; hence, many books offer travel as a "metaphor."⁵ This 'travel metaphor' or *metaphoric travel* serves both poetry and the novel. It predominantly focuses on the theme of self-discovery or more precisely the search for a shattered and scattered self, which can be seen in modernist literature often expressed in terms of travel, as in Woolf's *travel narratives*. In our book, the term travel narrative is not often always used in its usual sense as a synonym for travel writing or travelogues but as a particular term for travel fiction.⁶

Woolf's texts are typical examples of twentieth-century travel narratives that portray the cultural relations, and that cultural space which leaves no English rule and subject outside its domain. In her texts, the

cultural codes or *codes du savoir* are ethnological and historical codes that precede and predetermine her knowledge and understanding. The cultural codes are certain types of already said, *déjà dit*, “of already-seen,” *déjà vu*, “of already-read,” *déjà lu*, and *déjà vecu* or “of already-done.”⁷ They are codes of knowledge by means of which the writer or reader reads and assesses the norms of every society. For Woolf, “culture is a *field of dispersion*”⁸ of languages and codes; therefore, every observer gazes at the objects and signs differently. She, indeed, foreshadows the plurality of culture or “transculturation”⁹ as “a new enemy which lies in wait for *all* modern societies”¹⁰ and shows how this transculturation creates “the war of meanings”¹¹ and significations.

To understand Woolf’s travel narratives better, the reader must know all the concerns, motives and even those anxieties hidden in the deeper layers or the “mysterious chambers of [her] mind” (*D 2*: 263). Metaphorically speaking, the key point is that life itself is a journey, reading is also a kind of travel and adventure; therefore, an inquiring journey into Woolf’s life can guide every reader to discover the mysteries and, as she recorded on 30 August 1923, the “beautiful cave,” (*D 2*: 263) behind her adventurers’ life. She has gained all her knowledge of the world through travelling, experiencing, observing, reading and writing: “she discovered for herself the pleasure of dipping deep into the treasury of the language to express her exact meaning, partly by writing essays and a diary, but mainly in the form of letters to her family and friends.”¹² Her knowledge of literature is impressive, not merely in English but also in French, which she could read yet not speak fluently. It should be noted that she had great familiarity even with Greek and Latin literature.

Our understanding is that Woolf, as an intellectual adventurer or traveller, acts like an ethnographer, who is concerned with the various signs of culture, and translates them based on her world of understanding. She reads, decodes and deciphers the major sights of Europe such as French impressionist painting, food, language, and music, as well as the cultural signs of the various societies. For her, as for Clifford Geertz, culture is “a context, something within which” the social events, behaviours, institutions, or processes “can be intelligibly—that is, thickly—described.”¹³ In much the same way as an ethnographer reads the cultural codes, Woolf reads the

culture as a “manuscript—foreign, faded, full of ellipses, incoherencies, suspicious emendations, and tendentious commentaries, but written not in conventionalized [sic] graphs of sound but in transient examples of shaped behaviour.”¹⁴ Referring to Woolf’s letters, diaries, essays and travel narratives, we can trace the signs of an ethnography in them that establishes “rapport, select[s] informants, transcribe[es] texts, tak[es] genealogies, map[s] fields, keep[s] a diary, and so on.”¹⁵ Her objective is, accordingly, to enlarge “the universe of human discourse.”¹⁶ Through her cultural analysis, Woolf “guess[es] at meanings, assess[es] the guesses, and draw[s] explanatory conclusions from the better guesses,” rather than “discovering the Continent of Meaning and mapping out its bodiless landscape.”¹⁷

Many fictional elements or genres are used in travel writing such as the “*war memoir, comic novel, quest romance, picaresque romance, pastoral romance*,”¹⁸ as well as biography, autobiography and adventure romance. For instance, romance is a genre which puts emphasis on “adventure” in its very plot and is frequently cast in the form of a “quest for an ideal.”¹⁹ Romance is a term, Paul Fussell states, which designates a crucial element of travel literature. For this reason, he asks, “aren’t travel books really romances in the old sense, with the difference that the adventures are located within an actual, often famous, topography to satisfy an audience which demands it both ways [...]?”²⁰ This “proximity of the travel book to the thoroughly empirical picaresque romance,” which is “contrived from a multitude of adventures in non-causal series,”²¹ might be traced in the travel books of some travel writers. In modern romance, the traveller leaves the “familiar” for the “unfamiliar or unknown,” wanders and encounters the odd and eccentric adventures and eventually returns home safely, which pleases the travel reader and gives him a perfect satisfaction; whereas “a travel book isn’t wholly satisfying unless the traveller returns to his starting point: the action, as in a quest romance, must be completed.”²²

To Norman Douglas, travel writing is a “subject-oriented” genre which means it is dedicated “to render the personal experience of travel.”²³ This definition emphasises the sentimental mode of writing, indeed, its ‘subjectivity’ and ‘personal experience.’ Douglas’s technique, Fussell writes, is “to invite the places visited to convey their associations of earlier

trips and earlier visitants" by mingling "fact, fiction, and semi-fiction in a completely satisfying whole."²⁴ Douglas believes that "imagination" is essential to "travel literature."²⁵ In response to Woolf's statement that "[t]ruth of fact and truth of fiction are incompatible," Douglas states that "[t]ruth blends very well with untruth."²⁶ The hidden point in Woolf's paradoxical statement is that fiction goes beyond the visible facts and portrays all the invisible strata of life and experience. Moreover, in her essays, she demonstrates that "a little fiction mixed with fact can be made to transmit personality very effectively" (*E* 4: 233). Elsewhere, in *A Room of One's Own* (1949), she states "[f]iction must stick to facts, and the truer the facts the better the fiction" (*RO* 24). Indeed, as Nigel Nicolson has pointed out, "relating fact to fancy," Woolf "began to define character by body language, clothes and tone of voice, and landscape by the centuries of toil that had created it."²⁷ Douglas concludes that it is truly difficult to discriminate a travel book from fiction. To defend such an assertion, we can see that in Woolf's novels all places, characters, events and adventures are derived from her diaries, essays and letters which involve records of her real experiences. Similarly, as Elton explains, travel writing is closely connected to diaries, letters, photo albums and memoirs. This close connection paves the way for the women writers to enter into the travel genre. Woolf, for instance, amalgamates her diaries, letters and personal photos of Vita Sackville-West's family with her memoir in her 'quasi-biographical' travel narrative *Orlando* (1928). She is concerned, Elizabeth Cooley writes, not with "creating fictional characters but with discovering and 'recreating' real personalities."²⁸ By portraying this fictional biography or "metabiography," Woolf goes beyond facts, and beyond the "'granite' of Vita's personality"²⁹ as a traveller.

It has been taken for granted that movement in space is necessary for a human being to survive—to search for food, home and a comfortable place. However, travelling as movement in space *and* time has not been seen as an essential feature of human life. Everyone is on the move, and has been so for centuries: 'dwelling-in-travelling.' What is at stake is, indeed, a comparative approach to specific cultures, histories, experiences, and "everyday practices of dwelling and travelling: travelling-in-dwelling, dwelling-in-travelling."³⁰ Woolf's dwelling and travelling give her fictions

particular and unique characteristics. Neither pure history nor complete fiction, neither purely ethnographical writing nor an imaginary work, her travel narratives portray the implausible life of her adventurers, who can only exist in an adventurous world that has been removed from the demands for historical accuracy and verisimilitude. Their demands for verisimilitude depict the extent to which the representation of her imaginary world depends on its resemblance to historical, cultural and political realities. Most of her travel narratives open with an implied historical documentation of English adventurers and travellers in the colonial regions.

One of the significant points the travellers insist on during their expeditions is related to Manfred Pfister's argument, in *The Fatal Gift of Beauty: The Italies of British Travellers*, that the travellers "insist upon autopsy (writing down only what they have seen with their own eyes)."³¹ In much the same way, Woolf writes in her diary on 3 July 1903:

Most Londoners have travelled in Italy—Turkey or Greece—they run to Paris or Scotland almost for the week end—but, judging from my experience, the immediate neighbourhood of London itself is an unexplored land. On their map it might be marked blank like certain districts of Africa. [...] It is time we planned the journey for a year—twelve perhaps will pass before we set about to plan another—but I write today with absolutely first hand knowledge. My information is crammed from no guide book or travellers tales. I have seen what I describe with my own eyes. (PA 172-3, our emphasis)

This is a key point which links her to travellers and confirms that she thinks like a traveller who is in quest of "judging" and experiencing everything with her "own eyes." Moreover, she claims that her "information is crammed from no guide book" or travellers' tales. Considering these statements, Woolf's diaries and letters include passages and descriptions of different places she visited; for this reason, her diaries are far from being a prosaic recording of daily life. Her first writings date from 1897 when she was fourteen and her diaries and letters continued in five and six volumes respectively until her suicide in 1941. For instance, in her diary in Sussex

(1929), Woolf writes:

And lying out here I have seen the sun rise, & the moon shining one night like a slice of looking glass, with all the stars rippling & shining; & one night I had that curious feeling of being very young, travelling abroad, & seeing the leaves from a train window, in Italy—I can't get the feeling right now. All was adventure & excitement. (*D* 3: 256)

She believes that travel creates a series of joyful and cheerful views of scenes and effects which remain in a person's mind for a long time, similar to reading or journeying in fiction, which creates layers of meaning, each of which distancing one from the centre. She dreams of "travelling abroad" which is both "adventure & excitement." She refers to such an excitement while writing a letter to Gerald Brenan: "I want to buy a motor car, that's [sic] all, and wander over the Continent, poking into ruined cities, basking, drinking, writing, like you, in cafés, and talking to Colonels and maiden ladies" (*L* 3: 296).

In a letter to Vanessa Bell in her Italian journeys, she writes, "I should like to go on travelling from town to town all my life, rambling about ruins and watching schooners come in" (*L* 3: 363). Elsewhere, in 1928, she writes in a letter to Vita Sackville-West, travelling "is the way to live, I can assure you. Driving all day; an hour or two for lunch: a few churches perhaps to be seen; one's inn at night: wine, dinner; bed; off again" (*L* 3: 412). Travel, adventure and observation are essential forms of pleasure in her daily life: "[s]till I could have been well content to take my evening's pleasure in observation merely" (*PA* 176). Elsewhere, she writes of a journey in Norfolk: "I go for my usual walk; which has for me the interest of a discovery, because I go, armed with maps into a strange land. Windmills are my landmarks; & one must not mistake the river for a ditch" (*PA* 312). For Woolf, even a usual walk or rambling has the interest of "discovery" of a strange land.

Jan Morris states that Woolf's reports are rarely "descriptions of place, they are records of the effect of place upon a particular sensibility"³²: "let my eye rest first on the smooth turf lit by brilliant flowers, then on the

perfectly satisfying shape of the palace" (PA173-4). A full study of Woolf's diaries, letters, essays and travel narratives demonstrates that the quality of writing varies despite "a particular sensibility." What she wrote, therefore, when she was seventeen is completely different from what she wrote when fifty. There may be a great difference in the style and approach of her writings; however, they are still recognisably 'Woolfian.' This shows the expansion of her horizon of experience or a reversal of consciousness because having an experience means that we change our minds, reorient and reconcile ourselves to a new situation. Such changes are the result of travel or adventure, which paves the way for a traveller or adventurer to observe, then construct and reconstruct his consciousness based on his reciprocal observation and interaction with the *traveller*, i.e. everyone or everything he observes.³³

Woolf enjoys the villages, the countryside and the life of the small towns, because they give her the magic power of a painter who can paint with words, which are like the brushes of painting:

Norfolk is one of the most beautiful of counties. Indeed, let the artifice stand; for so there will be no need to expound it. And truly, it would need a careful & skilful brush to give a picture of this strange, grey green, undulating, dreaming, philosophising & remembering land; where one may walk 10 miles & meet no one; where soft grass paths strike gently over the land; where the roads are many & lonely, & the churches are innumerable, & deserted. [...] [I]t is worth saying that the more you walk here, & become initiated into the domesticities of the place—it is full of them—the more you love it, & know it. (PA 312)

The villages and their landscapes are so beautiful and attractive, and, as she describes, "[i]t is all so picturesque & accidental that to the traveller it seems a pleasant show got up for some benevolent purpose" (PA 315). Elsewhere, when she travels to the village of Netherhampton near Wilton in Wiltshire, where the Stephen family spent their summer holiday in 1903, she writes: "[s]uch genuine country I conceive can never be dull; even though nature here hasn't taken much pains apparently with her material. She has

kept a charm though which is entirely absent in more obviously interesting places" (PA 192). The reflections of such landscapes are obvious in her selection of houses, such as Monk's House and Charleston. She has a great passion for travelling, which refreshes her mind through observing new sights, hearing sounds, and experiencing different sceneries. In *Virginia Woolf*, Nigel Nicolson claims that for Woolf, "it was the journey, not the arrival that mattered, the slower the better."³⁴ In addition, we can refer to Woolf's *Three Guineas* in which she writes: "in fact, as a woman, I have no country. I want no country. As a woman my country is the whole world" (TG 99). These statements open up the various ideas about travelling and the world; simultaneously, they indicate her globalised thought and view.

One of the functions of travel is its effects on the traveller's world of understanding and identity. Richard Wrigley and George Revill argue that travel might actually provide a temporary escape from identity, rather than a consolidation of it. They explain that this idea is emphasised in a discussion of the pleasures of travelling in a prose section of Samuel Rogers's poem *Italy*³⁵ (1822): "travel, and foreign travel more particularly, restores to us in a great degree what we have lost."³⁶ Thus, travel is not only an escape that guides the travellers away from a tedious adult life and returns them to their joyful childhood, but a temporary release from fretfulness. Expounding the values of foreign travel, James Buzard restates Rogers's claim that foreign travel encourages patience in the traveller to see other "scenes and customs" than those at home, adding that through travel "our prejudices leave us, one by one," and then "our benevolence extends itself with our knowledge."³⁷ Elsewhere, Rogers defines travel as just "such a medicine for the travelled mind," a medicine, which is "prescribable to all human beings."³⁸ It may be a "tonic all the more necessary in a utilitarian world," which simultaneously "stultifies the deepest sources of imaginative life."³⁹

Travel, accordingly, motivates the dynamic imaginative impulses and invites us to consider them before returning home. Travel, Buzard points out, promises us a "time or imaginary space out of ordinary life" for the free comprehension of our "otherwise thwarted potential."⁴⁰ Jan Morris argues that Woolf became happy when she was travelling. Hence travel was a real essential remedy to her whose life was full of 'sorrows,' and 'sadness.'⁴¹ In

much the same way, Lillias Campbell Davidson (1889) recommends that “there is perhaps no better medicine than a course of foreign travel,” and she adds, “if you confine yourself to the beaten track, to hotels frequented by English and American travellers, your own language will be enough to trust to.”⁴² In this recommendation, the writer puts an emphasis on foreign travel, since in order to forget the problems of home, it is better for women to leave home and go to a foreign land. Isabella Bird, for instance, shows that for her the true home is in foreign lands and strange places.

Besides the classical forms of travel on foot, horses, camels and caravan, different modern means of transportation such as trains, planes, bicycles, motorcycles and automobiles transport increasing numbers of travellers to their destinations efficiently. One of the conspicuous characteristics in Woolf’s writing is that she links the new technologies of locomotion with the new narratives and with the emergence of new types of identities for women; for instance, she uses many references to trains, planes, cars, buses, boats, ships, motorcycles and leisurely walking in her writings. As a modernist and reformist, Woolf makes these technologies of motion bear exciting meaning in her exploration of the change in social relations. For instance, in her travel narrative *The Voyage Out*, she portrays her protagonist Rachel Vinrace as a young traveller, who journeys by ship or boat and on foot across South America. Woolf, in fact, shows her own voyage out through which, as Sidonie Smith argues, the “compromised identities of young Englishwomen” move beyond the “Edwardian manners.”⁴³ Woolf suggests that these modern technologies saturate the narratives of the twentieth century and the complex meaning of “gendered mobility and mobile gender.”⁴⁴ In “Mr Bennett and Mrs Brown,” Woolf uses the train as both material and metaphor. She presents it, in Smith’s words, “as the literal engine of motion driving the march of an everyday modernity and as the metaphorical engine of transition from one age to the next.”⁴⁵ In the latter case, “the train serves as a vehicle of artistic vision” in which the woman, Mrs Brown, is imagined through another emblematic relationship with “the engine of modernity.”⁴⁶

Jan Morris’s *Travels with Virginia Woolf* (1993) encouraged us to study Woolf’s non-fictional travel accounts and to find the signs of travel in all her texts. Morris is a Welsh travel writer, who directs the reader’s

judgment by means of her analysis of Woolf's writings, which draws on her diaries, private letters, essays, critical notes, and journals spanning forty-three years. The first part of Morris's book is titled 'Home,' which means England: London, Cornwall, Sussex, the Fenlands, the New Forest, the Yorkshire Moors, Wiltshire, Stratford-upon-Avon, and Wells.⁴⁷ The second part is 'Away,' which is abroad and includes Wales, Scotland, Ireland, Germany, the Netherlands (Holland), France, Italy, Spain, Greece and Turkey. The last part of her book includes a selection of random comments on culture, religion, and some settings, which are called 'Exotic.' In her introduction, Morris emphasises that Woolf "never wrote a travel book, she wrote only a few travel essays for magazines."⁴⁸ Morris, however, believes, "Virginia liked the idea of travel, and its mechanics."⁴⁹ These references motivate us to go through Woolf's texts in order to find the signs and traces of travel, ethnography and other related terms in her travel narratives.

Moreover, the purpose of this book is to construe selected passages of Woolf's diaries, letters, essays and non-fictional travel records, and to categorise her travel fictions or narratives under two divisions: the *voyage out* and the *voyage in*. The first one is in the form of 'travel story,' or adventure narrative and the second one is a metaphoric travel in the form of autobiographical and semi-autobiographical travel narratives based on various definitions of the traveller, travel writing, adventurer and ethnographer. Undoubtedly, Woolf cannot be considered a true traveller or travel writer, nor in fact a travel writer at all. No one, however, denies that her writings are influenced by her travels at home and abroad.

We are concerned with showing the elements of travel in her travel narratives on the one hand and the effect of travel—voyages in and voyages out—on her life on the other. Similar to Karen R. Lawrence⁵⁰ in her *Penelope Voyages: Women and Travel in the British Literary Tradition* (1994), we are interested to pave the way for the next generations of readers to study more in Woolf's travel records and accounts to trace the footsteps not of a real, but an exceptional, extraordinary, unknown and 'unexampled' traveller, in her fictional travel writings. Our focal purpose is to invite all lovers of travel or travel writing and travel fictions or every reader of travel fictions to travel metaphorically in Woolf's travel narratives.