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Travel Writing as Political Revelation: Intercultural Negotiation and Borderland Politics in Peter Matthiessen, Vikram Seth, and Tiziano Terzani

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Travel writing has conventionally been associated with documenting landscapes, cultures, and personal experiences. However, travelogues often function as significant sites where cultural encounters intersect with political realities. This paper examines Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*, Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet*, and Tiziano Terzani's *A Fortune Teller Told Me* to demonstrate how travel writing transcends geographical description and becomes a medium for political revelation. Drawing upon Edward Said's concept of representation and Homi Bhabha's notion of the interstitial space, the study argues that these travel narratives expose hidden structures of power operating within Asian borderlands and culturally contested regions. Through analyses of state surveillance, minority identities, bureaucratic control, nationalism, and transnational cultural encounters, the paper reveals how travel writers negotiate complex intersections of culture and politics. The study ultimately positions travel writing as a critical literary practice that uncovers the tensions between human mobility, political authority, and cultural belonging.

Keywords: Travel Writing, Intercultural Negotiation, Political Revelation, Borderlands, Representation, Identity.

A travelogue is like chasing a firefly; it glimmers with mystery, guides us through the unseen, and trusts us to follow until the story finds its light. Travelogues often celebrate spiritual quests and personal explorations of unknown terrain; they also frequently serve as vehicles for political engagement or cultural commentary. While they have traditionally offered readers vivid depictions of sublime landscapes and unfamiliar terrains, their potential to illuminate intercultural relations and political realities has often been underappreciated. Though travel writers may appear to adopt a neutral stance, their narratives frequently reveal encounters with histories, ideologies, and culturally fraught spaces that are never ideologically neutral. The paper explores how three notable travel narratives, i.e., Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*, Vikram Seth's *From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet*, and Tiziano Terzani's *A Fortune Teller Told Me*, serve as instruments for intercultural and political revelation, unveiling unspoken truths beneath the surface of personal journeys.

Mary Louise Pratt defines "contact zones" as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of domination and subordination" (Pratt, 2003, p. 7). The Himalayan region depicted in *The Snow Leopard* functions as such a contact zone, bringing together Western travellers, Tibetan Buddhist traditions, local communities, and the political realities of a contested borderland. As Matthiessen journeys through this culturally and politically layered landscape, his encounters extend beyond geographical exploration to become acts of intercultural engagement. The journey facilitates a personal transformation, allowing him to confront grief and seek enlightenment through Zen Buddhist philosophy and the sublime power of nature. However, behind the meditative gaze lies a selective aestheticisation of Eastern spirituality.

Matthiessen (1978) notes, "Since the usurpation of Tibet by the Chinese, the Land of Dolpo, all but unknown to Westerners even today, was said to be the last enclave of pure Tibetan culture left on

earth" (p. 4). Although this observation acknowledges the Chinese occupation of Tibet, the political implications of that occupation remain largely secondary to the narrative's spiritual concerns. The region is presented primarily as a repository of cultural authenticity and spiritual wisdom, reflecting the traveller's search for personal meaning. In this sense, the narrative can be read as part of a broader tradition of spiritualized Orientalism, in which the East becomes a site for Western introspection. Nevertheless, occasional references to political conflict complicate this spiritual framing and reveal the unresolved tension between aesthetic contemplation and political consciousness that runs throughout the travelogue.

While the writer expresses appreciation for Tibetan culture, he remains silent about the Chinese occupation of Tibet, which might be a tacit acknowledgement of the complexity and the tension inherent in the region. However, his writings can be seen as a spiritual framing that obscures the complexities of the political landscape he navigates. His narrative contributes to a long tradition of spiritualized Orientalism, creating a stage for Western introspection on the spirituality of the East and Eastern Geographies. Nonetheless, the travelogue, with occasional references to political conflict, disrupts the myth of a non-political pilgrimage to one of the most political pilgrimage sites, revealing the unresolved tension between aesthetic contemplation and political consciousness.

Debble Lisle observes that "Travel writing is no exception: it organises the world through a number of prevailing discourses, and sediments that world into a seemingly incontrovertible reality" (Lisle, 2006, p. 12). Her argument suggests that travel narratives are never neutral descriptions of places; rather, they actively participate in the production of cultural and political meanings. This insight is particularly relevant to Matthiessen's account, in which the Himalayan landscape is shaped by discourses of spirituality, cultural authenticity, and personal transformation. Similarly, Edward Said reminds us that "In any instance of at least written language, there is no such thing as a delivered presence, but a re-presence, or a representation" (Said, 1979, p. 21). From Said's perspective, travel writers do not simply discover and record reality but inevitably represent it through pre-existing cul-

tural frameworks and assumptions. Through Said's framework, Matthiessen's account may be read as reproducing certain pre-existing representations of Tibet, foregrounding spiritual authenticity while giving comparatively limited attention to the broader political complexities of the region.

Matthiessen (1978) describes his encounter with state surveillance: "Here at Beni Bazaar, the police are suspicious and aggressive, checking us out with exaggerated care; our permit for Dolpo is uncommon. But at last, the papers are returned, and we leave this place as soon as possible" (p. 32). The “aggressive and suspicious behaviour of the police” indicates distrust and heightened security, especially toward external travellers with unusual plans to visit Dolpo, a remote region near the Tibetan border. This situation reflects Nepal's strategic position between India and China and highlights concerns surrounding the regulation of movement in a politically sensitive border region. The unusual scrutiny directed towards travellers underscores the operation of surveillance, permit control, bureaucratic oversight, and state authority in managing access to remote frontier spaces.

In the above scenario, the underlying hidden border tensions between South Asia and East Asia become visible. The heightened sensitivity toward travellers, particularly those venturing into remote zones, evokes deep-seated fears of external influence and the historical background of regional disputes. Matthiessen, as a Western observer, becomes, intentionally or unintentionally, part of these internal tensions. His discomfort is evident in the lines that suggest he wants to leave the place as soon as possible. Thus, the travelogue moves beyond a simple description of the landscape to reveal some of the geopolitical frictions affecting the area. As Matthiessen (1978) notes,

> As Buddhists, they know that the doing matters more than the attainment or reward, that to serve in this selfless way is to be free. Because of their belief in karma-the principle of cause and effect that permeates Buddhism and Hinduism (and Christianity, for that matter: as ye sow, so shall ye reap)-they are tolerant and unjudgmental, knowing that bad acts will receive their due without the intervention of the victim (Matthiessen, 1978, p.34).

The quote reflects on the Sherpas, practitioners of Tibetan Buddhism, which draws on Eastern spiritual traditions, and the border area may thus be seen as a spiritual intersection that enlivens both Buddhist and Hindu beliefs. *In From Heaven Lake: Travels Through Sinkiang and Tibet*, Vikram Seth, a young Indian student journeying across China and Tibet, offers a more grounded, firsthand perspective. Here, Seth presents a hybrid identity: An Easterner, a Cambridge intellectual, and a passport-carrying Indian. This dual identity allows him to navigate these spaces with a more pragmatic perspective, combining cultural intimacy with critical distance. The writer's ability to connect with the everyday experiences of the landscapes he visits is particularly noteworthy.

Seth (1990) remarks, "They are Muslim in culture and religion; cultures based on the Orthodox Church or on Confucianism are equally alien to them. The script of the Uighur language is Arabic... But China is a multinational state, and sixty per cent of its area is peopled by the six per cent of its minorities. Beijing is not unalive to the reality of minority disaffection and the need to appease or crush it" (p. 3). Seth discusses how Muslims reside in China and how the Uyghur script resembles Arabic due to shared linguistic roots. China is populated by various minority groups, and the state presents itself as a country of many ethnicities. Seth highlights how China's State apparatus manages ethnic minorities through assimilation and control, revealing the fragility of unity in a so-called multinational state. Seth recounts an encounter with a Uighur shopkeeper:

> The old man readjusts his spectacles, catches hold of my wrist tightly and peers at the writing. Urdu and Uighur share the Arabic script; as he reads it his face lights up. 'Ah, Hindustan! Hindustan!' This is followed by a smiling salvo of Uighur. He hands me three yuan in change. 'But the cap costs three yuan,' I say, handing him back the extra yuan, and raising three fingers. He refuses to take it, and I refuse to do him out of a yuan" (Seth, 1990, p.27).

This scene highlights the old man's curiosity and recognition of the narrator through the familiar script. Upon seeing the writing, the man feels a deep connection symbolising a cultural bond. The encoun-

ter suggests the possibility of warmth and cultural affinity despite political divisions. The moment illustrates how shared elements such as language, script, and cultural familiarity can create a sense of kinship and understanding even in politically sensitive, conflict-ridden border regions. Despite the region being under strict Chinese authority in Xinjiang and with India-China relations remaining tense, the human bond often transcends politics. The episode suggests that gestures of warmth and hospitality can transcend political boundaries and foster a sense of cultural affinity between travellers and local communities.

Seth (1990) observes, "Protests are over-ruled with a smile. What is ironic is that the same obstructive bureaucrat who drove you to tears of frustration about an obscure regulation or a minor detail on a form may in his private life be so hospitable and generous as to bring you to tears of gratitude" (p. 140). Through these lines, Seth portrays the dual nature of bureaucratic or authoritarian officials, especially in conflict-sensitive areas like Western China, such as Xinjiang and Tibet. He observes the irony that officials who uphold restrictive, often frustrating policies can also be warm, generous, and deeply humane, so much so that their kindness moves writers to tears of gratitude. The tension between the impersonal rigidity of the state apparatus and the personal warmth of individuals within that apparatus is striking.

Youngs and Hulme (2002) observe that "throughout the early modern period travel was limited by both physical constraints and governmental regulations" (p. 20). The writer highlights that limited travel was not simply a matter of personal unwillingness but rather a result of harsh material and political conditions. Mobility was restricted not by individuals but by external, institutional forces. An Indian traveller, often frustrated by layers of permits, restrictions, and the cold indifference from various state officials, might experience a numbingly repetitive pattern throughout the journey. Yet, amid that, such warm gestures catch him off guard, inspiring hope and a desire to continue exploring and understanding the spirits of diverse regions. These moments prompt him to analyse the deeper realities rather than react with anger toward the officials. As the area was inhabited by Tibetans, Uighurs, and Han Chinese living in remote regions, the locals often displayed friendliness and curiosity towards Indian travellers,

particularly regarding cultural differences. Conversely, bureaucrats were bound by the machinery of the Chinese state. Their attitudes often reflected mechanisms of control, compelling people at times to act in strict accordance with the state apparatus's laws. For travellers, this meant enduring surveillance, control, and restrictions in politically sensitive zones. Such experiences caused Seth to grapple with his journey from China to India, his homeland. At times, permit issues were dismissed over minor matters, while at other times, officials' negligence made the journey exhausting.

The contrast between repressive officials, kind officials, and welcoming locals highlights the layered nature of intercultural tensions. Bureaucracies often maintain geographical and ideological divides under the pretext of protecting national interests, yet compassion can persist amid political strife. During such conflicts, native populations are often put at risk, as officials act as instruments of the state policy. Secrets are often tightly guarded in politically sensitive or conflict-prone areas. Travellers entering politically sensitive regions often face increased bureaucratic scrutiny. Such surveillance reflects the state's efforts to regulate mobility and maintain authority within contested or strategically significant borderlands. Consequently, travel becomes an encounter not only with cultural differences but also with institutional mechanisms of control.

A Fortune Teller Told Me by Tiziano Terzani begins with the author dismissing a warning from a Hong Kong fortune teller advising him not to fly for a year. He then embarks on a year-long journey by land and sea, travelling through several Asian countries. The journey begins with a whimsical decision to reject Western modernity, speed, and technology, in favour of a slow-paced voyage. By engaging deeply with native communities and living among them, the travelogue offers a refreshing perspective. The journey seeks an authentic Asia, untouched by globalisation and Western influence.

Terzani's journey was adventurous, beginning with uncertainty arising from a fortune teller's prediction and continuing through the political and cultural encounters he encountered across Asia. "Today's Indonesia is an empire held together and dominated by the Javanese,

who hold the key positions in the army and the civil administration ... Hence the occupation of Timor, the Portuguese territory in the middle of the archipelago, and the repression of the local independence movement" (Terzani, 1997, p. 212). Here, Indonesia is portrayed as a nation where the Javanese majority dominates a vast and ethnically diverse archipelago. The idea of Indonesia as a federation of equal regions appears untenable, making it seem more like an internally colonized space where one group enforces power over others. The ruling elite imposes state cohesion over diverse islands, languages, and cultures. A genuinely diverse state would require some form of autonomy to maintain unity; however, when the regime resorts to violent suppression in the name of national integrity, it far exceeds democratic norms. The annexation of East Timor constitutes an act of territorial consolidation carried out without regard for the region's cultural identity or the sentiments of its people. Timor thus becomes a site of military occupation, violent repression, and gross human rights violations. Terzani reflects on his experience of travel and cultural encounter:

> I thought of Singapore, which I had left barely a few days before and which already seemed so far away, as if on another planet. To me this world was beautiful—a world of cardboard boxes tied with string, bundles, embraces, pushing and shoving, problems solved between people and not between computers, with lots of superfluous words and gestures, but with more feelings, fewer laws, fewer rules; a world where a director-patriot-philosopher-murderer at a kiosk on the harbor-front generously offers drinks to all his friends, to his assistants, to a woman who has missed her ship for Jakarta, and to me, a foreigner" (Terzani, 1997, p. 213).

Terzani contrasts the technologically advanced, orderly, and efficient world of Singapore with the messy, emotional, and communal life of the place he currently inhabits. One world values efficiency, order, and regulation, while the other cherishes emotion, spontaneity, and community. This imagery captures the vibrant everyday life of many Asian countries, which may appear chaotic to global observers. Yet, for Terzani, there is beauty and warmth in this human 'messiness', as something original and authentic. Here, problems are solved through heart-to-heart and mind-to-mind interaction, not through digi-

tal systems. While the Western technological world promotes efficiency, this space prioritises emotional connection. The informal hospitality described, which transcends social hierarchies and national boundaries, reveals a profound sense of inclusion and shared humanity. Terzani observes that:

> Though its original purpose had been to finance the Farewell, Bukma, dictatorship and to provide an umbilical cord linking Burma with the neighbouring countries that shared its goals—China and Thailand—by now the road lived by a logic of its own, and served all sorts of people for all sorts of traffic. Communist ex-guerrillas, recently converted to opium cultivation, use it to move consignments of drugs; the Wa, former headhunters, to smuggle cars, jade and antiques; Thai gangsters to top up their supply of prostitutes with young Burmese girls (Terzani, 1997, p.52).

The scenario described focuses on a road originally constructed as a political instrument to support the Burmese dictatorship and to strengthen connections with neighbouring states such as China and Thailand. Designed to serve strategic and ideological interests, the road initially functioned as an extension of state power. However, as Terzani's account suggests, its role gradually expanded beyond its original purpose. The route facilitated a variety of activities, including informal trade, smuggling, and cross-border movements involving diverse groups. In this way, the road illustrates how infrastructure created for political objectives can acquire new functions and become embedded within broader economic and social networks. Through this observation, the travelogue reveals the complex intersections of state authority, regional politics, and transnational flows that shape everyday life in the borderlands.

Bhabha (2004) writes, "It is in the emergence of the interstices—the overlap and displacement of domains of difference—that the intersubjective and collective experiences of nationness, community interest, or cultural value are negotiated" (p. 2). Bhabha's concept of the interstice is particularly relevant to travel writing, as journeys across borders and contested regions often bring travellers into spaces where cultural, political, and social differences intersect. Such spaces

are not fixed but are continuously shaped through processes of negotiation and exchange. In this context, the road described by Terzani may be understood as an interstitial space that facilitates encounters among diverse political actors, ethnic groups, and economic networks. Originally conceived as an instrument of state power, it gradually acquires meanings and functions that extend beyond official political objectives. The road thus becomes a site where authority, identity, and cultural difference are constantly renegotiated, illustrating the fluid and hybrid nature of borderland spaces.

However, the current reality reveals a different trajectory. Former Communist factions now engage profit-driven systems, revising their original ideological missions. These groups have contributed to the commodification of local cultures and traditions. Moreover, under the guise of tourism, they are complicit in organised crime, including the trafficking of young Burmese girls. In this male-dominated economy of exchange, women's bodies become commodified and exploited. The lines from Terzani's work encapsulate how once-geopolitical strategies have transformed into channels for unregulated illicit trade, cultural degradation and profound human suffering.

Travel writing, often seen as a reflective account of landscapes, journeys, and personal quests, is much more than a mere aesthetic or observational exercise. Through the works of Peter Matthiessen, Vikram Seth, and Tiziano Terzani, this paper demonstrates the wide-ranging and powerful lenses through which the deeper currents of intercultural negotiation and the political dynamics of Asia are revealed. Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*, although framed as a spiritual pursuit, inadvertently uncovers geopolitical anxieties, surveillance at sensitive borders, and the fragility of Tibetan identity under Chinese rule. Seth's *From Heaven Lake* combines the perspective of an Indian traveller with sharp observations of minority disaffection, cultural alienation, and the tensions between state bureaucracy and personal warmth within authoritarian regimes. Terzani's *A Fortune Teller Told Me* offers a nuanced critique of postcolonial Asia, exposing the contradictions of national unity, military authoritarianism, and the transformation of political infrastructure into transnational zones of hybrid power.

Each of the narratives examines politically sensitive geographies, such as the borderland between Tibet and China, the ethnic divisions of Xinjiang, Indonesia's contested identity, and Burma's militarised routes where culture, ideology, and power collide. These interstitial spaces, drawing on Homi Bhabha's theory, become sites of negotiation where identity, nationalism, and resistance are both formed and challenged. According to Said's theory, travellers' encounters with foreign cultures are often mediated by prior cultural assumptions and representational conventions. Travelogue, therefore, ceases to be a neutral or detached genre; it becomes a deeply ethical or political practice. It navigates representations, challenges colonial and orientalist legacies, and reveals the lived tensions of those inhabiting marginal spaces. In sum, travel writing is not only about subjective encounters and cultural observations, but also about decoding the unseen by uncovering the fault lines of history, power, and identity. These travelogues demonstrate that travel writing functions not merely as a record of movement but as a literary mode capable of revealing hidden political structures and facilitating intercultural understanding across contested spaces.

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