



Food, Photography and Cartography in the Travel Memoirs of Ondaatje and Shopsin

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Abstract

Travel writing first evolved with Pausanius, a Greek geographer from the 2nd century AD (Pretzler). In the literary genre known as "Youji Wenxue," authors such as Fan Chengda and Xu Xiake weaved geographical and topographical information into their writing while using narrative and prose. During the Song dynasty, Su Dongpo, a government official and poet, wrote about the Yangzi gorges and other remote southern places in China. In the Asian subcontinent, Sake Dean Mahomed published his travel book in 1794, *The Travels of Dean Mahomed*, which presented for the first time the idea of England from an Indian immigrant's point of view and altered the "Orientalist" outlook of early Western travel writings about the East. Graham Huggan expounds on how travel memoirs "supply their audience with the wonders, thrills and scandals of other times and other places."

This paper analyzes and compares both postcolonial and postmodern travel writing about the Asian subcontinent countries of India and Sri Lanka. The postmodern travel memoirs *Running with the Family* (Michael Ondaatje) and *Mumbai New York Scranton: A Memoir* (Tamara Shopsin) are analyzed using three critical travel writing elements including food, photography, and cartography. These elements are often neglected in scholarly research. The research here will show how these critical elements support postmodern travel and memoir writing while challenging Orientalism.

Keywords

travel writing, memoirs, India, Sri Lanka, Orientalism

Introduction

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This paper analyzes and compares both postcolonial and postmodern travel writing about the Asian subcontinent countries of India and Sri Lanka. The postmodern travel memoirs *Running with the Family* (Michael Ondaatje) and *Mumbai New York Scranton: A Memoir* (Tamara Shopsin) are analyzed using three critical travel writing elements including food, photography, and cartography. These elements are often neglected in scholarly research. The research here will show how these critical elements support postmodern travel and memoir writing while challenging Orientalism.

Critical Elements of Travel and Memoir Writing

Food

“Food often serves as a powerful signifier both of cultural self-definition and of cultural difference” (Thompson 181). Moreover, the nexus of food and identity are a powerful means to both delineate and transmit culture (Dursteler 144). Food descriptions can be found in early Ottoman travel literature, 17th century French travel accounts and 19th century travel writings of the Balkans by British writers. In Madhur Jaffrey’s *Climbing the Mango Trees* (2005), a childhood memoir of India that “rewrites the dislocation of diaspora and migration into a rooted sense of place”, she is representing her “culinary otherness” (Black 1). Food is often associated with ethnicity as “gastronomic metaphors are often invoked as metonyms for culture” Overall, food is a critical element in memoirs and travel writing as it establishes cultural identity.

Photography

In regards to the use of photographs in memoir writing, S. Leigh Matthews comments “Hinze notes that photographs ‘constitute a major component’ in many works of life writing, providing a sort of visual gallery whose pictures ‘dramatize’ descriptions of people and places” (353). The nineteenth century travel writer and photographer, Lady Annie Brassey, challenged the norms of Orientalism by representing the Middle East in non-traditional ways by not photographing sphinxes and peasant women drawing water. She chose other representations and featured them in *A Voyage in the Sunbeam, our Home on the Ocean for Eleven Months* (Micklewright). While Pierre Bourdieu’s hierarchy of expression questions the cultural legitimacy of photography, compared to literature, in the genre of family memoir writing, photography has a legitimate place.

Cartography

Originally, the world was unmapped. Through exploration and travel, the earth became knowable and discovery became an integral part of the travel process as it also became a pivotal motif in travel writing (Leon 5). According to Susan Bassnett, “The history of travel writing is linked to the history of mapping and surveying. Nor was mapping restricted to geographical features: the process of mapping the natural world, of labeling flora and fauna, ran parallel to the process of mapping territories” (231). Moreover, Pedri proffered “Once maps are understood to be narratives conditioned by the cartographer’s agency, it becomes possible to see in them the pictorial marks of the author’s identity” (43).

The Asian Subcontinent

India

In the mid-eighteenth century, British writers began a long tradition of writing about their experiences in India. John Keay provides an Orientalist’s view of India from two centuries ago:

Two hundred years ago India was the land of the fabulous and fantastic, the ‘Exotic East.’ Travelers returned with tales of marble palaces with gilded domes, of kings who weighed themselves in gold, and of dusky maidens dripping with pearls and rubies. Before this sumptuous backdrop passed elephants, tigers and unicorns, snake charmers and sword swallows, peddlers of reincarnation and magic, long haired ascetics on beds of nails, widows

leaping into the pyre. It was like some glorious and glittering circus-spectacular, exciting, but a little unreal. (13)

Conversely, a non-Orientalist view of India comes from the French naval officer and writer, Pierre Loti, who in 1899 and 1900 visited India and in 1903 wrote *L'Inde (sans les anglais) (India (without the English))*. While in India, Loti avoids anything about the effects of British imperialism and colonization while providing his own preconceptions of what India should be like (Turberfield 114).

After obtaining independence in 1947, we began to see written expressions of India that exposed a different Indian identity. Other postcolonial writers include the Scottish writer William Dalrymple and his book *City of Djinnns* (1994). Having lived in Delhi for six years, Dalrymple writes about India, from India. Dalrymple comments on his writing style: “When I wrote *City of Djinnns* I was interested in Delhi, not in following some tradition of English travel writing that may or may not be Orientalist” (Dalrymple & Joshi 16). Dalrymple’s book uses his established style of historical digressions, coupled with contemporary events and several anecdotes. Some historians have claimed it is a novel masquerading as a travel book (Kaul).

Sri Lanka

“It was in the year 1845 that the spirit of wandering allured me toward Ceylon; little did I imagine that I should eventually become a settler”, said Samuel Baker, an English explorer and Orientalist, in his 1855 book *Eight Years' Wanderings in Ceylon* (1). During the British colonial period, Sri Lanka was visited by explorers, missionaries, pilgrims and merchants. They have been replaced with artists, journalists and novelists seeking inspiration and content for their writing.

In the 1950’s, the Australian artist and diarist, Donald Friend, spent five and a half years in Sri Lanka, living with other expatriate creative types. In addition to finding an island paradise of serendipity, he experienced the rise of Sinhala-Buddhist nationalism and the riots that erupted in 1958. He wrote about them in his book, *The Diaries of Donald Friend, Volume 3* (Perera 84). Despite Friend’s voice as having Orientalist qualities, he is cognizant that many of Sri Lanka’s modern problems derive from many centuries of colonial domination (Perera 87). Additionally, Friend openly describes his homosexual diversions with local young men in his diary (Aldrich 137). This is another example of an expatriate writer who embedded himself into the country’s culture for several years. Let us look at some of the critical elements found in Tamara Shopsin’s postmodern travel memoir.

Shopsin's India in *Mumbai New York Scranton: A Memoir*

When Tamara Shopsin first arrives at the Mumbai airport, she says, “The air smells like burning garbage” (1). Nearly a century before, in “The Edge of the East”, Kipling said, “It is at Bombay that the smell of All Asia boards the ship miles offshore, and holds the passengers nose till he is clear of Asia again” (38). In over one hundred years, some things never change in Mumbai. Kipling’s quote is very post-colonial whereas Shopsin’s is more modern and simple.

Food

The food described by Shopsin in the India portion of her book (1 – 139) is, like her writing - simple and not fancy. Most of the food and meals that Shopsin shares in India with her husband, Jason, are basic snacks, cookies, oranges, coffee, juice, bottled water, idli and vegetarian plates. This seems unusual considering that Shopsin is a cook in her father’s restaurant in lower Manhattan and grew up in a house full of “foodies.”

When Shopsin first arrives in Mumbai, she says “Jason brought me oranges. I eat them all right away” (5). Later, they have lunch at a place that only serves “veg meals” which she describes as “rice served with a bunch of condiments and a few heavily sauced stewed vegetables” (8). While walking on the street, they drink coconut water from the shell and the vendor cuts it up for them and hand them “the shell holding the loose tender meat” (13). As she travels through India, Shopsin’s food choices are very simple and economical.

For breakfast, Shopsin eats *idli*, “a white steamed UFO of fermented lentils” with coconut chutney as it is “fluffy and easy on the stomach” (16). In Ernakulum, Shopsin gets “something mushy steamed in a banana leaf” that “comes with a bread called appam” (25). She loves the appam so much that she includes an illustration of it in the book along with dosa and idli (Shopsin 25). Idli is “a fermented mixture of rice and black gram dhal which is then steamed” while appam is “a pancake soaked in sweetened or coconut milk” (Achaya 80).

Shopsin describes the coffee from room service in their hotel: “Coffee in India always comes piping hot and premixed with milk and sugar. This is good because we can’t drink cold milk, but bad because it is always too sweet” (28). Interestingly, they are often drinking coffee in pseudo-Starbucks cafes like Café Coffee Day (90, 102), even though India is a tea-drinking culture.

While in a hotel courtyard restaurant, a heavy rainstorm breaks out and Shopsin and her husband turn to her bag full of snacks that include “cashews, oranges, and two grunt bars

(aka energy bars)” that they wash down with “two sodas in glass bottles” (29). She expounds on her husband’s “get it while you can” rule for traveling:

“If you like something, you have it as many times as you can. No guilt for not trying something else. I think it originated in Texas when he was trying to justify eating BBQ for every meal. We enact the rule. I order appam with coconut chutney and Jason gets the veg meal”. (40)

At breakfast the following morning, “the idli at our hotel is the best so far” (45). At dinner that night, Shopsin is craving salad, but because the lettuce is washed with tap water, it is unsafe. Jason suggests she try “a side of boiled vegetables” which he deems as safe.

Other than drinking “lychee spritzers” in Ooty (54) and eating “mutter paneer”, a North Indian dish of peas and paneer in tomato sauce (115), appam, and idli, they are mostly eating snacks and drinking coffee. Shopsin and her husband do not drink alcohol while in India.

They visit a restaurant called Annalakshimi where they have “the best meal we’ve had in India” (105). Unfortunately, Shopsin does not bother to describe the meal for her readers. At the end of the trip, at a café in Mumbai, Shopsin has tea that is “boiled ginger with honey but it’s tasty” (126). For one of their last food experiences in India, they eat roasted mini-peanuts from a street vendor. Shopsin adds “Peanuts taste better hot and from a paper cone” (127). Overall, much like her writing style, Shopsin’s food is simple and not pretentious and often consists of coffee, fruits and snacks. Seldom does Shopsin and her husband eat in a traditional restaurant.

Photography

“There are 62 photos in the book by my husband Jason Fulford. I tried to pick photos that informed the text rather than illustrated it” (tamarashopsin.com/mumbaifaq). Most of the photographs are of India. Shopsin seems to favor peculiar signs such as a sign that reads “Use me” and that she captions as “Trash can plea” (66), a sign that reads “Architecture” and is captioned “Reentry” (123). All the photographs in India that include people are of men. There are no photographs of women in India. There is a snapshot of Shopsin and her sister, Minda, when they were babies, which is used twice in the book (151, 159).

A lot of random objects such as a golf ball-shaped motorcycle helmet on the head of a rider in Mumbai that is captioned “Traffic” (19), a mobile made of switch plates captioned “Switchplates” (86) and their laptop with the newly purchased USB keyboard captioned “Jury rig” (137). Also, she likes interior shots of their hotel rooms including “The Grand

Hotel” (4), “Before the storm” (26) and “The cove” (41). Shopsin does include some traditional architecture photos such as “Mumbai Central” (12), “Ernakulam” (24) and “Monkey House” (75). There are very few photographs of New York City and Scranton, Pennsylvania in the book. There is one photograph of Shopsin on the last page of the book (278). Overall, these are not the kind of photographs found in traditional travelogues. However, they tend to be representative of Shopsin’s minimalist style of writing and postmodern voice. Even though her husband is a professional photographer, the images have a “snapshot” simplicity and candidness to them.

Cartography

Unfortunately, in line with her minimalist style, Shopsin does not include any maps or surveys in her travel memoir. This would have been helpful to the reader as Shopsin and her husband visit several obscure locations in India, other than Mumbai, such as Mamallapuram and Ootacamund.

Ondaatje’s Sri Lanka in *Running in the Family*

“In Sri Lanka a well-told lie is worth a thousand facts” (Ondaatje 206)

Food

Cuisine, food and drink references are found throughout Ondaatje’s family memoir. Ondaatje begins his journey from Canada to Sri Lanka with “dancing, balancing a wine glass on my forehead and falling to the floor twisting round and getting up without letting the glass tip, a trick which seemed only possible when drunk and relaxed—I knew I was already running” (22). Once in Sri Lanka, Ondaatje is treated at the Jaffna home of his Aunt Phyllis to “this lazy courtesy of meals, tea, her best brandy in the evenings for my bad stomach” (25). They sit in wicker chairs on the porch and drink “ice cold palmyrah” toddies with “juice drained from the flower of a coconut that smells like rubber” (26). This is followed by a lunch of “crab curry” with rice that he eats with his hands, followed by “fresh pineapple” (26). These are indigenous Sri Lankan specialties. In this passage, Ondaatje is using his sharing of drinks and a meal with his family as a link to his emotional and familial memories of his childhood in Sri Lanka. Barbara Frey Waxman adds that food is associated with “cultural identity, ethnic community, family, and cross cultural experiences” (363).

Alcohol is prevalent throughout the book as Mervyn Ondaatje suffers from a form of alcoholism known as “dipsomania” (58). His father drank “gin” and “methylated spirits” (58). In fact, “most Ondaatjes liked liquor, sometimes to excess” (57). Champagne seems to

be the preferred drink of the Ondaatje family. This reflects their privileged status and European roots. When Mervyn's family arrives at Cambridge, he offers them champagne (32), which is later mentioned in connection with Percy Lewis de Soysa (50). After the horse races in Ambalangoda, oysters, wine and champagne were consumed (51). At Michael's grandfather's funeral, "imported champagne was drunk surreptitiously from teacups" by the women mourners (57).

In 1932, during Mervyn and Doris's honeymoon, "a bottle of beer cost one rupee" (37). Francis de Saram, a close friend of Mervyn, "lived on gin, tonic-water and canned meat" (46). The olive was introduced to Ceylon by Dr. William Charles Ondaatje, who was the Director of the Botanical Gardens (67). An odd ritual of eating a "thalgoya tongue" as the meat of a "banana sandwich" is described in the book (74). Spices such as cardamons, pepper, ginger, mustard oil, tamarind and cinnamon are referred to as "a perfumed sea" (81). "Coconut" and "rice" are found in the poem "High Flowers" (87). Food references are random and obscure in *Running in the Family*, but sensually and visually add to Ondaatje's writing style.

Photography

There are eight photographs in *Running in the Family*. Most of them are family photographs of the Ondaatje family. At least two of them are historical photographs of old Ceylon. At the beginning of the "Asian Rumours" chapter on page 19, there is an old panoramic photograph of Ceylon. On page 39 there are two portrait photographs of Ondaatje's parents before they were married. One is of Mervyn Ondaatje, Michael's father, in a suit and tie looking very handsome and the other is of Doris Gratiaen Ondaatje, wearing a fashionable white dress while holding a parasol.

The fourth photograph in the book, on page 61 at the beginning of the chapter "Don't Talk to Me About Matisse", is of Ceylonese people in the 1947 Nuwara Eliya flood and is courtesy of Dr. Wickrema Weerasooriya (Ondaatje 207). On page 103, at the beginning of the chapter "Eclipse Plumage", is a photograph of the family in traditional dress. The photo is taken outdoors with palm trees in the background. On page 131, at the beginning of "The Prodigal", is a photograph of an old train locomotive racing through the mountains of Sri Lanka near Sensation Rock. The vista of the valley is in the background and the photo is credited to Cave's *Book of Ceylon* (207).

In the chapter "Photograph" (Ondaatje 161 – 2), Ondaatje describes "the photograph I have been waiting for all of my life" (161). He gives a detailed description of "the only

photograph I have found of the two of them together” (162). The comical photograph of the newly married couple appears on page 163. At the beginning of “The Ceylon Cactus and Succulent Society” shows a photograph of a young Michael Ondaatje and his siblings. (Ondaatje 183). Unlike Shopsin’s photos, the photos Ondaatje’s book are more familial.

Cartography and Maps

Maps are a critical element in *Running in the Family*, as Ondaatje devotes an entire chapter to them, which gives an interesting history of Ceylon/Sri Lanka and his family. On quiet afternoons in Toronto, Michael “spread maps onto the floor and searched out possible routes to Ceylon” (Ondaatje 22). Maps are later described in the book by Ondaatje in the chapter “Tabula Asiae”:

On my brother’s wall in Toronto there are false maps. Old portraits of Ceylon. The results of sightings, glances from trading vessels, the theories of sextant. The shapes differ so much they seem to be translations – by Ptolemy, Mercator, Francois Valentyn, Mortier and Heydt – growing from mythic shapes into eventual accuracy. Amoeba, then stout rectangle, and then the island as we know it now, a pendant off the ear of India. Around it, a blue-combed ocean busy with dolphin and sea-horse, cherub and compass. (63)

Ondaatje adds further that “the maps reveal rumours of topography, the routes for invasion and trade, and the dark mad minds of traveller’s tales” (64).

An actual map of Sri Lanka appears in the book on page eight in the frontispiece (Fig. 1). It is a simple map depicting all the cities, towns, rivers, national parks, lakes and mountains in Sri Lanka. The map is unaccredited but does provide the reader the lay of the land in Sri Lanka. Although the map is simple, it serves its purpose of identifying the key places in the memoir and reinforces the imagery Ondaatje uses to describe Sri Lanka.

Conclusion

Although neither writer is a gastronome, the food commonalities between the travel memoirs of both Ondaatje and Shopsin assist in creating an identity of both India and Sri Lanka. These are not food memoirs in the vein of Madhur Jaffray’s *Climbing the Mango Trees* or Nigel Slater’s *Toast*. Neither work features any sort of *haute cuisine* or fine dining but features examples of common dishes and foods indigenous to both India and Sri Lanka. While alcohol is prevalent in *Running in the Family*, it does not appear in the India segment of Shopsin’s work.

Moreover, photographs are used cleverly in both memoirs, allowing readers to form more of a connection with the country's identity and the people that appear in each memoir. However, Shopsin has nearly eight times more photographs than Ondaatje. In this comparison, Ondaatje is the minimalist, not Shopsin. Also, Ondaatje's photos feel more historical than Shopsin's memoir. It is worth noting that in many of his works, Ondaatje skillfully uses photography. Reviewing the critical elements of travel writing, in regards to cartography, only Ondaatje's book includes a map. Moreover, Ondaatje discusses the geography of his native land of Sri Lanka. The map in Ondaatje's memoir conveys "a tale of the exploration, management, and exploitation of land and, remarkably, identity" (Pedri 54). Personally, I felt that Shopsin's travel memoir could have used a map for readers to better identify some of the smaller cities near Mumbai that they visited and create a closer identity to the lesser known cities in India that she toured. Perhaps her rationalization for not including a map was that it does not flow well with her minimalist style of writing? Both writers offer creative and unique travel memoirs of the Asian subcontinent in a postmodern style that avoid the "Orientalist pattern of in seeing the Orient as incapable of defining itself" (Said 300).

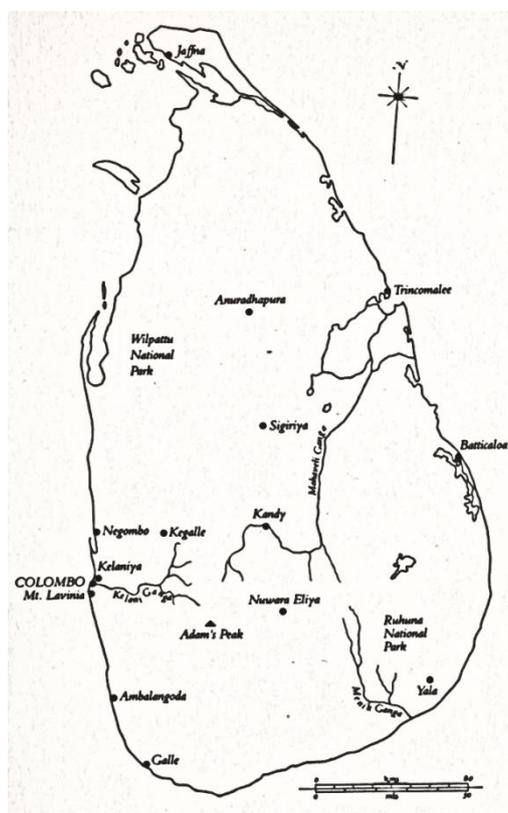


Fig. 1. Map of Sri Lanka, *Running in the Family* (1982)

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