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## INDEX

Sr. No.	Title of Research Paper	Author(s)	Page No.
1	Rural Development Programmes In India With Reference To Mgnrega	Dr. Prakash G. Kadrekar	1
2	Strategy And Organizational Development	Abdul Majeed	6
3	Impact Of Social Media On National Security	Dr. L. P. Wagh	13
4	Paul Theroux's Perspective On Locale In Travelogue	Dr. Sanjay L. Khandel	23
5	साहित्यिक शैली विज्ञान	डॉ. संगिता दिलीपराव मिसे	29
6	जागतिक मानवी विकास अहवाल आणि भारत	डॉ. अशोक टिपरसे	34
7	संत तुकारामांचा हितोपदेश	मुनेश्वर जमईवार	39
8	चारुता सागर यांच्या कथेतील स्त्री-पुरुष चित्रण	सुरेश भिमराव लेकुळे	44
9	आजची महिला सुरक्षित आहे का ?	डॉ. वनमाला लोंढे	50
10	सहकारी उद्योग समूह आणि जनसंपर्क	डॉ. विवेक विष्णुदास जाधव	53
11	आदिवासी कुटुंबे : प्रकार आणि वैशिष्ट्ये	आर. टी. कुलसंगे	56

## Paul Theroux's Perspective on Locale in Travelogue

Dr. Sanjay L. Khandel  
Dept. of English,  
Dr. H N Sarda College,  
Patur, Dist. Akola (Maharashtra) India

### Research Paper - English

Recently the confluence of globalization, the internet and the popularity of Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, and Love* led to a spate of think pieces mourning the death of the great travel writing tradition. Graeme Wood complained in *Foreign Policy* that the ease of travel had somehow lessened the vitality of travel writing. Inconveniences are disappearing, the bad news for readers is that those inconveniences are the very stuff that concentrates the mind and transmutes narcissism into something approaching insight. Malcolm Jones thinks that the tradition was in decline because the subject matter is literally running out.

It is observed that those traditional travel narratives gradually replaced with Gertrude Bell's *The Desert and the Sown* and Bruce Chatwin's *In Patagonia*, giving birth to a growing trend towards personal writing—the interior journey given as much import as the exterior in books like Cheryl Strayed's *Wild*, Mary Morris' *The River Queen* and *Eat, Pray, Love*. Wood complains that in the modern day the writer goes overseas but brings back news about a tedious inner crisis, leaving undisturbed any insights about the places visited. Jessa Crispin has called this faux travel writing, where the focus of attention is the self and the beautiful locale becomes the backdrop of the real action, which is the

interior psychodrama. Though critics have pinned this style to women—who, it is suggested, are more comfortable framing their travels as memoirs and are inherently more inward-looking—it can also be found in the lengthy first-person travel essays posted by travelers of both genders on websites like Roads and Kingdoms and Nowhere.

By the 1970s, when Theroux himself emerged as one of many writers cataloguing world travel amidst globalization, travel writing began facing criticism from the academy. Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978) castigated historic European travel writers for their representations of the Middle East. The genre was founded by men and women whose freedom to travel and write was inextricably linked to empire and capitalism. David Livingstone's obsession with finding the source of African rivers was motivated by his desire to open the continent to Christianity and European commerce. Constance Sitewell's *Flowers and Elephants* (1927) presented the British Raj in India as dreamy and romantic, when she participated in Britain's formation and administration of modern Iraq. These writings, though full of textured detail, never describe any essential shift in the author's perspective or understanding. Being a fictionist by intuition, Theroux remarks, "The difference between travel writing and fiction is the difference between recording what the eyes see and discovering what the imagination knows."

Theroux's writing often follows a similar trajectory of danger and discovery. He takes trains from London to Japan in *The Great Railway Bazaar*, paddles across atolls in *The Happy Isles of Oceania* and returns to the railroad to travel from Cairo to Cape Town in *Dark Star Safari*. Oftentimes the worse the journey for Theroux, the better for the reader: his foot fungus in Oceania, his pain at having only bushmeat to eat on the way to Angola and his perpetual disgust with cacophonous fellow tourists are the most delightful scenes to read.

In all of his travel narratives, Theroux himself is the solitary wanderer, escaping the tyranny of the ordinary and the usual tourist myths by focusing on improvisation, the timetable of travel itself, and the incidents, images and incongruities that assault him. As in his fiction he proclaims, Being alive is being alone, and this intense and lonely concentration occupies the heart of the journey. As a stylist, Theroux display a caustic and often scornful

Theroux is in its precision and iconoclastic in its tone, fueled by skepticism and irony in its attempt to see the world and its creatures as clearly as possible. He delights in subverting the reasonable assumptions, skewering any politically correct dogma or edict and revealing the arduous and difficult task of life itself, stripped of self-deception and self-delusion. The solitary self becomes a wary observer, trusting only in his senses and his imagination, ever on the alert for the telling conversation or the suggestive incident. Tourism bores him and travel propels him and becomes its own destination. Only in distant, often bleak and barren places—the desert, Tibet, Cape Wrath on the northwestern tip of Scotland, Patagonia—does he come upon a kind of raw beauty and redemption that speaks directly to his own brooding solitude. As long as there is wilderness there is hope, he has written. Theroux has mastered the art of exact observation and cultivated his memory for sights, voices and sensations. As Maude Coffin Pratt, the central character in *Picture Palace*, says of her photography: Art should require no instrument but memory, the pleasurable fear of hunching in a dark room and feeling the day's hot beauty lingering in the house. The drama in Theroux's fiction often arises in the complexity of his characters' sensibilities and in the sexual and spiritual desires they are driven to express.

Theroux novels often revolve around physical violence—revolutions or civil wars in Africa or Asia, terrorism, casual assault—but also involve the violence of suppressed, warped or mistaken desires. Frustrated desires lead to sadism, which leads inexorably to masochism. The colonialist who beats his servant keeps a closetful of chains and whips to be used on himself. Theroux opens these closets in England and America as well as in Malaysia. Maude Coffin Pratt in *Picture Palace* prepares for a 50 year retrospective photography show and reveals the single image that has warped her life—her thwarted incestuous desire for her brothers, who preferred their sister. Alfred Munday of *The Black House* returns from haunted Africa to find a succubus in an English country house.

In *Jungle Lovers* (1971), also set in Malawi, the protagonist, Calvin Mullet, is an American from Massachusetts who has been forced to travel to Africa to earn a living. (These correspondences to Theroux's life are coincidental and the few autobiographical details are insignificant) Mullet and another American, Marais, are both attempting to alter the lives of the people of Malawi, the former through selling insurance and the latter

through revolutions. Neither is able, though, to overcome the inertia of African life the resistance to change the total disregard for the future. Both men are also hampered by their racial difference from the people whose lives they attempt to change. The picture drawn of the blacks is generally unflattering and the narrator's opinion of Africans seems identical to that of Alfred Munday, the anthropologist in *The Black House* (1974) a repeated assertion of empathy for the blacks does not convincingly cover an attitude of paternalism. In *Jungle Lovers* though the British and American settlers are also viewed with ridicule and Theroux seems content to leave the merits of the Americans plans for change open to question.

In the end the government swallows all opposition. The revolution fails and Marais either is killed or simply disappears. The insurance company which had sold only five policies is nationalized. Mira, Calvin's mistress gives birth to a child which may or may not be Calvin's and the insurance salesman dreams of returning with a black wife and son to Massachusetts now that his company no longer has a branch in Malawi. Nothing alters and the foreigners are driven out of the country they planned to change. Both of these men are also writers and Calvin at least leaves some impression on the country although it is by accident. In an attempt to discover why his frustration is so complete. Mullet writes a long story called *The Uninsured*. It is narrated by a black man who is the spokesman for blacks who have suffered from discrimination and other frustrations beyond their control. They are uninsured against what life and history have done to them. Whenever the salesman becomes frustrated, he adds to the story. When the company is nationalized the diatribe is found and published. It becomes a handbook for dissidents and for blacks looking for reasons to hate Asians and whites who have entered their country. Calvin himself is scorned by his black insurance trainee, who has read the pamphlet but who, of course, rejects all suggestions that Calvin wrote it. Marais, too, writes but his journal of the revolution he precipitates is never to be seen. Realizing that he has failed in his goals because he cannot understand the culture of the blacks he wants to lead, he destroys all of his writing and resigns any attempt to create or describe a new order.

Paul Theroux has mellowed between the Pillars of Hercules, even allowing a wry smile at his own image as travel writer basher second only to Evelyn Waugh. Perhaps he

... responsibility as a successful travel writer. This book *The Pillar of Hercules* runs long at 521 pages—reads something like a Ramblers Association brochure and that is no insult as anyone who has tried his hand at compressing accurate information knows. Travel writers can produce books in a variety of ways. If Marco Polo, according to modern theories, could produce his famous travels from the comfortable confines of Genoa, with a few brief excursions to the Black Sea and forget to mention entirely the Great Wall and Tea.

Starting at the Rock of Gibraltar he grumbles his way eastward with normal gibes at the British and moving eastward on leisurely local transport touches on Ebola and epidemics in Corsica in time to meet a fellow writer, Dorothy Carrington, whose new book had just been published. Some island hopping later he reaches the edge of Asia in Turkey, for which he finds an unexpected empathy, perhaps through dislike of the Greeks. After reaching Albania, poor beyond his worst nightmares, Paul takes a breather at home before continuing his tour. He has the original idea of retracing exactly the same journey but from the different view point of a luxury liner. His fellow cruise passengers were almost all American. Though a latent patriotism emerges when Croats criticize American aid, he does find it hard to equate the obese fellow citizens doing the Amazon and Antarctica, stuffed to the gills with plovers eggs, with Albanians starving drearily on the sky line. Soon, a definitive Ph D on Tourism and Revolution will be essential for western survival.

Hidden away amid all the grime and neglect of Syria was Paul Theroux's most interesting find for a writer. In the ruins of Ugarit, once a mighty city, he was able to handle some of the earliest writing tables with alphabet signs now known. One would think some shrine to this patron saint of literacy would be set up and may be copies of the Rosetta Stone and *Just So Stories* recorded there. Perhaps when what he calls the stimulating monotony of writing fails. Paul Theroux will follow the ancient tracks of literacy through the world. He might find knowledge of the Word more exciting than bargained for.

**Conclusion:**

Paul Theroux has achieved international fame and literary accolades for his travel

writings, so do his global travel experiences inform his fictional narratives, which frequently center on characters who find themselves displaced in foreign climes. Some few of Theroux's characters learn about others and themselves in alien lands; most, however, find only confirmation of long-established preconceptions. Many of Theroux's themes are number, but his treatment of even the most serious subjects displays a full range of comedy, from black humor to the lightly acerbic. In fact, Theroux once said that one of his primary aims in writing is to entertain the reader. He most often laughs at preening, postcolonial racists, those with education and power but without humility, compassion, or any real understanding of other cultures. His travel is an integral part of the writing process. Travel is everything, he has said, and My way of travel... is more like a way of life. In his travel writings Theroux has described himself as an unrepentant cavesdropper, a self-description also used by most of his most important fictional characters. Theroux's vividly rendered international settings are both motivation and telling backdrop for his characters.

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