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TRAVEL WRITING

Different journeys and destinations

SOMA BASU

Other Routes opens a world of alternative traditions to European travel writing. Other Routes: 1500 Years of African and Asian Travel Writing, edited by Tabish Khair, Martin Leer, Justin D. Edwards and Hanna Ziadeh, Signal Books, 2006, p.421, £14.99.



TABISH KHAIR: Fresh initiatives.

TABISH KHAIR'S latest anthology grew out of a casual lunchtime discussion with two of the other editors. "We started talking of Asian and African travel texts, and we listed almost 20 between the three of us. Later, research took us to a hundred, and yet we were nowhere close to exhausting the sources," he says.

Also, as an associate professor of English at the University of Aarhus, Denmark, Khair asked his students to name famous travel writers from before 1900. They named about 10, of which only one — Ibn Battutah — was not European.

Making obscure texts visible

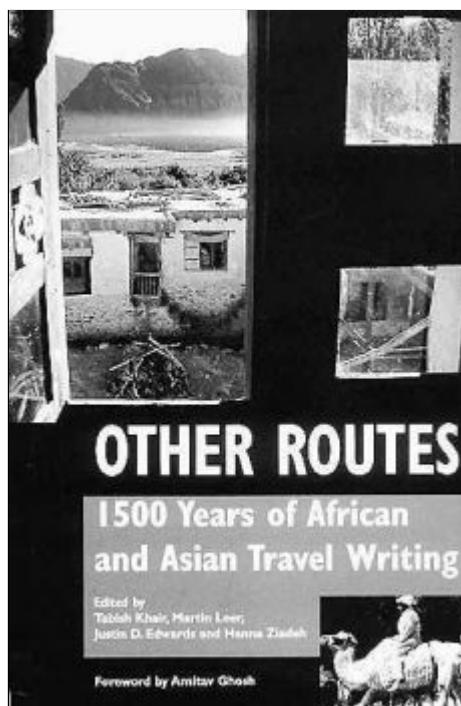
This made the writer in Tabish determined to compile texts of Asian and African travel writers. "We were surprised by how many half-discovered and untranslated travel texts by Asians and Africans were lying around. I felt, and my co-editors agreed, that we had to do this, even if critics poke a few holes in our selection later. At least, we reasoned, it will set the ball rolling. We took these texts out of obscure research areas and made them more visible. We have even made some texts available for the first time in English," he says.

And that is how **Other Routes: 1500 Years of African and Asian Travel Writing** came about after meticulous research by a team of four editors. Besides Khair, Martin Leer and Justin Edwards, both associate professors of English at University of Copenhagen and Hanna Ziadeh, a senior researcher at the Danish-Egyptian Dialogue Institute in Cairo, were driven by months of painstaking, passionate and obsessive research and historical underpinnings to traverse continents through the eyes, minds and souls of travel writers.

An important aspect of the book is that it requires no illustration to paint a picture that stays in mind. The wonderful reference material rests entirely on literary antecedents of little-known travel writers of the past. A past that stretches from the Fifth to the 19th Century and comes from the world beyond Europe. As noted litterateur Amitav Ghosh writes in his foreword : "What sets apart the narratives in this volume is that the writers who feature in it are not seized by a compulsion to fit what they see into familiar narratives — thus their meticulousness in noting details and noticing the unfamiliar. This collection is timely and necessary. It reminds us of the spirit in which we undertake our most instructive and pleasurable journeys."

Alternative traditions

Truly, **Other Routes** opens the reader to a world of alternative traditions to European travel writing. The editors have expanded the concept of travel writing to include spiritual journeys written in poetry. The detailed introductory essay by Khair sets these accounts in their historical and discursive contexts. It provides the first published typology of Asian and African travel writing. The collection, using an array of cultural and literary sources, establishes the emergence of new writings that show travel has "always been a human occupation crossing time and culture".



Human movement in the past was predominantly seen as a European characteristic. No wonder, Europeans and their descendants appeared to have travelled, discovered and settled whereas it appears Africans and Asians simply stayed at home. The justification of an anthology like this, according to Khair, is that Non-European people travelled too. But travel and travel writing were — and are — about the gaze of power. This explains how the movements of some non-Europeans were effectively frozen under that narrative gaze, finding

perhaps an occasional mention in the margins of the texts of European travellers. In spite of Asian and African travellers actually leaving behind accounts of their experiences and thoughts, erudite scholars are quite often unaware of them resulting in neglect, writes Khair in his essay.

Dubbing the anthology "interventionist", the authors feel the extensive textual and cartographic evidence of vast parts of the world navigated and traversed by Asians and Africans "before, during and after the Europeans set out on their post-Enlightenment voyages", has always been "overlooked". The contours of the world have been mapped by Asian and African travellers too, contributing vitally to contemporary spatial definitions. Without underestimating European perceptions, this anthology can then be seen in the light of the almost total erasure of these non-European travel accounts.

Not perfect

The selection of the texts was influenced at times by extraneous factors like space, availability and reproducibility. "We do not claim we have included the best or the most significant travel texts but have taken a fair many important - and at times invisible - texts. There must be much we have left out from sheer ignorance."

The fascinating travel accounts in the anthology take the reader everywhere except to Australia and the Polar regions. The travel texts chronicled in the book are of five types — accounts of pilgrimages, travel-based studies, autobiographies, literary essays and travel accounts. The collection moves across vast regions to places of learning and pilgrimage or to particular centres of religio-cultural significance (the early Chinese travellers to India in the fifth, sixth and seventh centuries' the Hajj pilgrimage of Ibn Jubayr in the 12th Century; Blyden's Africanist-Christian pilgrimage to the Holy Land in the 19th Century). These pilgrimage accounts can also taper into other genres: for instance, while Ibn Battutah set out to go to Mecca (which he did), he ended up travelling across 50 countries and writing a travel book in a narrow generic sense rather than an account of a pilgrimage.

Diverse narratives

The accounts also include narratives of shipwreck and capture, slavery and freedom, monsoon and deserts, (homo/heterosexual) love and enmity, meditation and confusion, visits to famous cities and treks across unknown mountains, crowds of people and attacks by lions. The extracts are arranged in sections with clearly written introductions that situate the writing. The interested and curious reader will never feel abandoned in the ancient manuscripts. Rather, the passions and evasions of the seeker exalt you. They range from the influential medieval travel-geography of Al-Idrisi in the 11th Century; a global history, including an autobiographical travel section, written by a Syrian scholar-prince in the 13th Century; Ibn Majid's nautical treatise, and the Turkish corsair Piri Reis's cartographic-travel poetry. Also included are extracts from Babur's travel-autobiography and Leo Africanus's travel-study of Africa. Shorter accounts, such as the description of a Viking funeral by a merchant from Baghdad in 922 AD, form another group of texts.

Site of contention

Finally there is travel writing, such as that of Basho in the 17th Century or Dean Mahomed in the 18th, which belongs to a distinctive literary genre. There is even one contemporary bestseller: Olaudah Equiano's 18th Century account of his travels as a "slave", kidnapped from his African village at the age of 11, shipped through the arduous "Middle Passage" of the Atlantic Ocean and sold to a planter in the New World.

The idea is to help travel writing recover the academic attention of scholars and intellectuals.

Since travel and travel writing remain sites of discursive contention, the authors want the debate to fan and not settle in the pages of their anthology. The anthology definitely offers the memories of people on forgotten routes who can actually be traced parallel to the hegemonic realities of European colonisation. It is worth exploring because it is about life and journey, a testament to a time possessed by astounding energy when words had more meaning.

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