



A Critical Evaluation of Richard Burton's Travel Writings

**Abstract  
of the Ph.D. Thesis**

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# Title of Ph.D. Thesis: A Critical Evaluation of Richard Burton's Travel Writings

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This thesis interrogates some of Richard Burton's key travel writings. Burton has enjoyed immense popularity as a Victorian traveller. My thesis proposes to shift the focus from the lionized, larger than life figure of the man to his work.

The literature of travel, in the European context, has been inflected with notions of manifest superiority and representative control, besides carrying the significant possibility of fabrication. It is in this context that I wish to situate Richard Burton's writings. This thesis is an attempt to critique Burton's travel writings from a postcolonial perspective. As a postcolonial reader, my endeavor has been to highlight the combative elements present in selected travel texts by Burton. These texts are analysed to highlight the colonial bias they uphold, which is neglected in most Burton scholarship.

As a postcolonial, Muslim reader situated in the context of the Indian subcontinent, I believe my multiple identifications have helped me in a critique of Burton's travel narratives. My thesis begins with an introduction wherein I discuss the features and the emergent definitions of travel writing as a genre. The potential of fabrication and the element of lack of authenticity of travel writing are relevant to the critique of the absence skepticism apparent in Burton scholars who recreate his life taking cue from his travel writings. Close textual readings of seminal travel books by Burton function as a corrective to the ethnocentric bias of European scholars and highlight his imperious imperial attitude which paradoxically co-existed with the ability to accept cultural alterity.

Chapter One explores the first travel account Burton published - *Goa and the Blue Mountains, or Six Months of Sick Leave* (1851). Burton's imperial perspective is highlighted, which at the start of his career was at its peak. Burton's racist depiction of the Portuguese colony of Goa is analysed as a reflection of this colonialist outlook.

Chapter Two is a critique of the multiple travel accounts published by Burton, stemming from his experience in Sindh. The analysis of Burton's first travel book on Sindh exposes the contradictions of Burton's espousal of the civilizational burden of imperialism.

In the third chapter the European practice of disguise in Oriental places is interrogated and the ramifications of racial cross-dressing is analysed. The duality of disguised performance is considered: as the act on the one hand feeds into notions of Western superiority and mastery, yet on the other, creates a window which potentially assists the performer to identify and even empathize with the Oriental other.

The fourth chapter critiques Burton's account of his disguised pilgrimage to Makkah and Madina. In a departure from Eurocentric scholarship on Burton, a corrective is offered to the established belief in his *Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Mecca and Madina* (1855).

The fifth chapter analyses three texts which showcase the rebellious streak in Burton. It explores the more subversive writings of Burton. The provocative writings offer a rigorous critique of ethnocentric attitudes. The texts discussed here reveal the extent of B's relativism.

The conclusory remarks establish the study as veering clear of any homogenous interpretation and analyzing the heterogeneous and even contradictory expressions in Burton's writings to arrive at fresh insights, by eschewing the pitfalls of reductive labeling. The collective ambivalence of Burton's travel writing is attributed an exilic modern consciousness which is the psychic reflection of the lack of stasis in any singular culture or location.