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ENCOUNTERING FOREIGN FOODWAYS ; A STUDY OF PAUL THEROUX'S SELECTED TRAVEL NARRATIVES

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ABSTRACT

Paul Theroux is an American writer who uses trains as main mode of transport to travel to foreign lands. Among many other things availability of food is something that concerns him. Railway journey is never complete with the food served/consumed on board. Having a pantry on the train is integral while Theroux making decision on boarding it. Food is of central importance in linking the traveler to a foreign culture. Fresh opportunities may be represented by the inclusion of regional food elements into the consumption pattern of a traveller. Experiences of this course of experiment rely on how various aspects of self are contextualized in specific spatial locations. This paper aims to analyze the foodways which looks at the intersection of food with culture and history of localities, as represented in Paul Theroux's selected travel writings such as *The Old Patagonian Express* (LSZV), *The last Train to Zona Verde* (OPE), *The Ghost Train to Eastern Star* (GTES).

Keywords- Food in literature, Travelogues, Food mobility, Food culture.

Travelling to a new country often results in a range of social and cultural encounters and one among them is the cuisine experience. Food is of central importance in linking the traveler to a foreign culture. Fresh opportunities may be represented by the inclusion of regional food elements into the consumption pattern of a traveler. The experiences of this course of gastronomic experiment rely on how various aspects of self are contextualized in specific spatial locations. The Merriam-Webster Dictionary defines Foodways as "the eating habits and culinary practices of a people, region, or historical period". The folklorist Jay Anderson explains foodways as "the whole interrelated system of food conceptualization and evaluation, procurement, preservation, preparation, consumption, and nutrition shared by all the

members of a particular society" (qtd. in John T Edge, 97). This paper aims to analyze the foodways that encountered by Paul Theroux in selected travel writings such as *The Old Patagonian Express* (LSZV), *The last Train to Zona Verde* (OPE), *The Ghost Train to Eastern Star* (GTES).

In his book *The Philosophy of Food*, (2012), David M. Kaplan talks about different aspects about the 'nature of food'. A few of them are: "food as nutrition" - which organisms consume "to sustain, grow, and repair vital life processes"; "food as culture" - it refers to the implication of food and its preparation in its social and cultural context, such as categories of "good and bad", "legal and illegal", "appropriate and inappropriate foods", "ritualistic and symbolic foods"; "food as spirituality" - "(f)ood is central

to religious traditions"; "food as desideratum" –as an "object of hunger and desire"; and "food as an aesthetic object" -it "has taste and appeals to the senses" and "food is artful"(3). The first section of this paper intends to trace the instances that project the definitions of 'nature of food' as suggested by Kaplan.

Theroux conducts his trips mainly to developing or under developed nations. Therefore availability of safe and familiar food is a challenge that he faces on his way. At many instances he has to consume what is available. For example, when he is stranded across Angolan border while crossing it on a car, he was approached by an old native woman with a bucket of three pieces of chicken. Theroux describes- "it was more a bucket of flies than a bucket of chicken" (223, LTZV). At first he ignores the seller. Later when hunger whips him, he glimpses at the bucket. She asks, "which one?", the question that speaks volumes of present situation in Africa. "It was the sort of choice you were faced with in Africa", Theroux ponders. He buys one leg piece with "the fewest flies on it" (224). But he never mentions how it tastes. He, being eaten that pieces of foul food against the setting- "the extravagant splashes of a florid sunset" – doesn't feel it "so stark" (224). His senses were numbed by his biological craving. Here, the food becomes a window into other, challenging the sociocultural boundaries. Here he consumes food for preserving his vitality.

Paul Theroux is an American writer who uses trains as main mode of transport to travel to foreign lands. Among many other things availability of food is something that concerns him. Railway journey is never complete with the food served/consumed on board. Having a pantry on the train is integral while Theroux making decision on boarding it. At times Theroux has to board trains that don't have pantry. Then he has to carry provisions to keep him full. He prepares for the upcoming journey by stocking food before he embarks on Mexican trains.

Theroux constantly sees the association between food and culture at many instances. Often food objects are associated with particular social locations. In studying what kinds of food appear

across various trains we can trace the economic and cultural circuits that are in play during the moment of cultural production. Thirty years after his first visit to Asia, Theroux climbs on Euronight, the express to Bucharest and he finds a dining car in it. He says:

(j)ust at the point in my life when I'd imagined that all travel was a homogenized and bland experience of plastic food and interchangeable railway cars and waiters in fast food caps, I stumble into the dining car of the Eurostar to Romania and find three drunken conductors and a man (who turned out to be the chef) in a greasy sweater with a torn bandage unraveling on his hand, all of them playing backgammon in the bad light, drinking beer and smoking. (GTES, 28)

The working atmosphere of a dining car of an international train is largely influenced by the current economic and cultural milieu of the parent nation. When Theroux received dinner on the Euronight, he gets to reflect at the social condition of Hungary and Romania:

(w)hen the plate as put before me I marveled at the man serving me: his sticky glasses, his drooping cigarette, his dirty sweater and bandaged hand. The fired potatoes were coated with cheese. I picked at it, grateful for the reassurance that in this corner of the world nothing had changed in decades. And the next time someone praised the Hungarian economy or talked optimistically of Romania's imminent entry into the European Union, I could reflect on the revelation of this disgusting meal (29)

In this passage, it is understood, how Theroux looks at the food and the way it is served to make assumptions about the culture. Food, then, does not "simply come from places"; it also "make[s] places as symbolic constructs" (Cook & Crang, 140).

In Trans- Siberian express, Theroux meets a "knob-nosed waiter-chef...an underpaid slob who ran the unpopular dining car with his wife" (GTES, 458, 459). Hardly any passengers visit the dining car.

The passengers have an alternate source of provision. A mini market on the platforms with old women selling “dumplings filled with cabbage and potato, fried fish, hard-boiled eggs, bottles of water and squares of chocolate” (GTES, 457) is a temporary set up being built for the train’s arrival. There are many instances in which Theroux is seen to buy food from the local stations. This allows the traveler to be in direct contact with the culture he is passing through.

What adds to the attraction of food as an object of study is to see how its consumption is constructed differently in different societies. A Finnish sociologist Jukka Gronow studies the origins of champagne culture in Stalin’s Soviet Union in the 1930s:

In food culture in particular, but also in many other areas of consumption, industrially mass-produced, relatively cheap copies of formerly expensive luxury products came to play an important part in the everyday lives of Soviet citizens, now, thanks to the Communist Party and its great leader, Comrade Stalin, every worker could live like an aristocrat(14).

Theroux’s experience in Trans-Siberian express on a ‘seven nights and days’ journey across Russia, testifies Gronow’s inference. Theroux says, “when I roamed around the train, all I saw were people drinking beer or vodka or else sleeping it off. For a Russian, a train journey of this length was a bender, and because of this, most of them were incoherent” (GTES, 460).

“It was undoubtedly the Muslim character of the train that had eliminated beer from the dining car”(OPE, 81) Theroux deplores in the Night Mail to Meshed. Meshed, the holy city, is the northeast region of Iran. Theroux tells that “the most fervent Muslims take the night mail, and everywhere on it are Persians in the postures of devotion, murmuring prayers to get to Heaven” (81). The religious aura is even reflected on the menu in the dining car. Thus spiritual side of food consumption is also explored in his texts.

The visual appearance of food often makes Theroux excited. “Food as an aesthetic object” appeals to Theroux’s senses. In Pan American Express, Theroux enjoys a sumptuous dinner- “five courses: home-made noodle soup, sausage and polenta, veal cutlets, ham salad and dessert” (OPE, 366). By satiating his senses and appetite, food play a significant role in maintaining Theroux’s disposition.

“Food as desideratum” –as an “object of hunger and desire” is what we see across Africa where Theroux intends to see “the hungry lurking man or boy, waiting to take his leftovers, or someone else’s, and eat them with his dirty fingers”(LTZV,16). In India, he has a different gruesome picture to offer. He meets an old lady with three children with them- “a small girl of about ten, a boy of about fourteen and an older skinny girl, perhaps sixteen”(GTES, 198). Being a pimp, the old lady sees a potential customer in Theroux, lingers with him and leads him to a tea shop. The small girl wants ice cream, the boy a samosa and the older girl was happy with a tea. Paul pays them 200 rupees and leaves. A few days later he ponders about them- how hungry they’d been, how they’d sucked at the tea and eaten with their head down, in a concentrated and famished way, wit animal delight”(199). It’s an ironical situation where the vulnerable people are made to satisfy other’s hunger while all they want is food.

These episodes establish that food as an effective vehicle for storytelling. Theroux utilizes it well in his travelogues. Theroux illustrates how food is at once connected to the worlds of economics, ecology and culture”(Kaplan, 2).

As we have just seen, food is an integral part of all of Theroux’s journeys. In train food can affect the mood of the passengers. For example in OPE we see the passengers are delighted to be compensated with a free meal offered in the dining car for the delayed arrival- “(t)he news spread through the train and, as if proof of Amtrak’s good intentions, a free meal was announced in the dining car: soup, fried chicken and vanilla ice cream. This vindicated the no longer bereaved lady from Flagstaff...” (OPE, 33).

Often Dining cars in a train or sharing food in a compartment become a site for negotiating ideas of localization, regional expression, and authenticity between the cooks, travelers. This is often evident in Theroux's dining episodes like the following ones.

I went to the dining car, and there I found Fernando, who was drinking beer with his friend Victor and a third man - either drunk or naturally surly - whose name I did not catch. They invited me to join them and they asked me the usual South American questions: Where was I from? Where had I been? Was I a Catholic? What did I think of their country? (OPE, 350).

Dinner was served at ten o'clock - four courses, including a fat steak, for two dollars. It was the sort of dining car where the waiters and stewards were dressed more formally than the people eating. All the tables were full, a well-fed noisy crowd of mock-Europeans. Two men had joined Oswaldo and me, and after a decent pause and some wine, one of them began talking about his reason for going to Buenos Aires: his father had just had a heart attack. (372)

Anthropologist James Clifford's (1997) uses the idea of a geo-spatial chronotope, a motel lobby to illustrate how a place is constructed as a site for meaning-making and cultural encounter. Here it's a dining car, where passengers from different culture come together for the comfort of food.

The local food purchased at the stations along the journey and eaten at ones leisure in one's own compartment or on the platform itself can be contrasted to the formal or official food being sold in the dining cars on the train. "Food becomes a social event within the train compartments just as much as it is an event within the space of the restaurant car, notes Gibson(12). Theroux meets a "chin-bearded old man in traditional Turkmen dress" named Selim (GTES,123) on a night train from Ashgabat to Mary(across Turkey). The illiterate man with the help of a student, a co-traveller acquaints

with Theroux and shares his history. After a while Theroux asks if others share the bag of food he has. The men in the compartment agree with a request from Selim, "Ask the American if we can say a prayer". He says he "thanked Allah for the food" also "thanked the friend who brought the food and gave it to us" and "wished the friend blessings on his journey"(126). Theroux was the first American that Selim meets in his life. Food here becomes the medium that builds relationships among fellow passengers on the

train, often strangers who are seated in close proximity in the compartments. "Eating this food is thus associated with sociality and conviviality" (Warde & Martens, 204-207), in contrast to the individualized meals served and eaten in the restaurant car. This incident also indicates that food is "the easiest and most pleasant way to cross . . . [cultural] boundaries" (van den Berghe, 393).

Discussing food in the Academic realm was not considered appropriate till late. It was considered as a topic lacking serious worth, something that has to be remained within the private world. When culture studies emerged as a powerful academic discipline, focusing on inconspicuous things, food studies gained momentum among scholars. Paul Theroux is not a food writer nor do his journeys seek for gastronomic adventures. But his travelogues definitely document the cultural variations of cuisine that he comes across the world. It either generates desire or disgust. The stories that are built around food appeal to the readers' senses. Harris, Lyon and McLaughlin begin their book *The Meaning of food* thus: "...everything about eating including what we consume, how we acquire it, who prepares it and who's at the table – is a form of communication rich with meaning. Our attitudes, practices and rituals around food are a window onto our most basic beliefs about the world and ourselves" (VIII-IX). Depiction of foodways in Theroux's texts are significant for it imparts deep meanings to his understand of particular place and its culture and more importantly it also throws light on the writer's attitude toward his experience.

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