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REVIEW ARTICLE

Humour and Cross-Cultural Understanding in the Travelogues of Syed Mujtaba Ali and Eric Newby

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ABSTRACT

This study considers local depictions in Syed Mujtaba Ali's (1904-1974) *Deshe Bideshe (In a Land Far from Home)* (1948) and Eric Newby's (1919-2006) *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* (1958) employing an analysis that focuses on humour and the process of othering. This study primarily focuses on the humour styles of the Bengali witticism of Ali and the British sarcasm of Newby (1958), analysing the cultural differences and similarities between the two writers in their depiction of their stories. Ali's affectionate humour highlights the warmth and quirks of the Afghan people, while Newby's (1958) dry wit and self-deprecating humour expose cultural misunderstandings and the challenges of cross-cultural contact. The primary technique employed for data collection in this study's qualitative research strategy was thematic analysis. Both authors examine universal facets of the human condition that transcended cultural differences in these lighthearted exchanges, providing insightful commentary on travel, exploration, and cross-cultural contact.

Contribution/Originality: This study shows how humour crosses boundaries in cultural interactions by contrasting Ali's (1948) warm Bengali wit with Newby's (1958) caustic British cynicism. Though they vary, both provide thoughts on travel, adventure, and common humanity and illustrate comedy as a means of bridging cultural gaps.

1. Introduction

Travel writing often plays a significant role in crafting perceptions of the 'other' from the travel writer's perspective. As travel writing expert, Thompson (2011) opines that travel writing, from the early voyager narratives along the lines of *The Travels of Marco Polo* (1300) to contemporary memoirs, constitutes a testimony of experience, the account of

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the customs and everyday existence of peoples in foreign places, and the prejudices and perceptions of the writer. As Pratt (1922) states, a prominent concept in travel literature is 'othering,' whereby travellers often unconsciously assert the otherness or exoticness of the individuals they encounter relative to themselves. Also, Hutcheon (1994) states that humour, in particular, is an especially effective device in travel writing, as it enables authors to convey their impressions with wit, self-awareness, and sometimes irony

A memoir-centric title from the early postcolonial period, Ali's (1948) *Deshe Bideshe* recounts time spent in Afghanistan in the early 20th century, specifically the author's experiences in Kabul in the 1920s. Ali (1948), a scholar and polyglot, shares his observations with a lens of warmth and curiosity, deploying humour to illustrate endearing and baffling elements of Afghan life. As Banerjee (2023) states, his strong sense of humour is influenced by Bengali literary traditions of humour that are playful, ironic, and affectionate satire. In its starkness compared with its nearest relative, Newby's (1958) *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*, the book is a tale of two friends climbing through the ragged valleys of Afghanistan. As a British traveller, Newby's (1958) tone is frequently salted with dry wit, self-deprecating jibes, and an ironic perspective on the nonsense of travel. Ali (1948), an academic who had settled in Afghanistan for a year and a half, and Newby (1958), an amateur adventurer, are in over their heads and end up at the mercy of circumstances that become the subject of their humour.

Deshe Bideshe and *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* use humour as a narrative strategy whereby the authors hook in with the readers. Ali's (1948) sense of humour is affectionate and inclusive, often portraying Afghan people as unique and entirely relatable. His witticisms reveal similarities between people, allowing his portraiture of the 'other' to be more nuanced and less clearly outlined. By contrast, Newby's (1958) humour relies on sarcasm, irony, and self-deprecation, often depicting himself as a hapless outsider ill-equipped to adjust to the people and terrain surrounding him. This comic self-positioning adds a tingling humility to his observations and simultaneously confirms British distance from the culture he is investigating.

The process of 'othering' in each work is multifaceted. Whereas Ali (1948) and Newby (1958) are outsiders in Afghanistan, Ali's fluent local language ability and cultural understanding enable him to portray life with intimacy and respect. Newby (1958), as stated by Holland and Huggan (2000), by contrast, repeatedly points out his cultural misadventures, letting comedy arise from the friction between expectation and experience. Despite such differences, both writers use humour to alleviate cultural tensions and make the 'other' more accessible to their audiences.

1.1. Research Objective

This study juxtaposes the humour of Ali (1948) (Bengali witticism) and Newby's (1958) (British sarcasm) explorations of how comic impulses can function as bridges and barriers in cross-cultural encounters. While Ali's love is warm and humorous, Newby's (1958) dry and self-deprecating tone exposes the disadvantages of cultural misunderstanding. Despite their differences, the two authors provide deep insight into these ideas of travel, exploration, and shared human nature that exist beyond culture and place. This analysis will show that humour is not an ornament of literature but a means of knowing and describing cultural differences.

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2. Literature Review

However, the reputation of Ali's (1948) *Deshe Bideshe* is not without its blemishes, some of them due, ironically enough, to the book's fandom: heaving praise for the book's affection and humour toward Afghan culture while being unable to reconcile that praise with the book's positive portrayal of the men who also populate it. One criticism you often hear is that Afghan society may come across as idealised. However, as Dey (2021) points out, while Ali avoids some of the clichés of exoticism typical in Western travel writing, he does simplistically exoticise the Afghan people, producing a portrayal of them with an essential set of qualities that simply underpins Ali's humanist agenda for his narrative. This makes it sound like Ali brushes over much more pressing political and social issues in Afghanistan, such as tensions between ethnic groups and the socio-economic issues that were emerging in Afghanistan in the 20th century. Nevertheless, Shibli (2017) argues that Ali has a more legitimate and better-informed perspective of Afghanistan in light of his link to the country and his in-depth understanding of Afghan culture. His inside mastery provides a more nuanced glimpse of Afghan life that escapes the simplistic "othering" found in much Western travel writing.

According to Jarvis (2023), Newby's (1958) *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* has been lauded for its humour and self-deprecation, but its depiction of Afghanistan is criticised. As opined by Hill (2012), one of the major critiques of Newby's (1958) work is that it belittles the seriousness of the lives of the Afghan people, instead concentrating on the author's comical predicaments relating to mountaineering. Although Newby's (1958) wit and humour make the book a fun read, at times, this obscures how serious the socio-political context of Afghanistan, particularly in the 1950s, when the country was repeatedly at risk of becoming a Cold War pawn, was. Critics, like Bassetti (2021), claim Newby's (1958) light gaze detracts from the country's serious problems. Another major criticism revolves around Newby's (1958) somewhat cliché-approach to Afghan culture. As per Holland and Huggan (2000) while he does try to write about the Afghan people with dignity, his emphasis on the "exotic" features of Afghan life — the harsh beauty of the landscape, the nomadic ways of life, and the "prettiness" of Afghan hospitality — has been criticised by some as a re-iteration of the imperial nostalgia. By conveying Afghanistan as all bewilderment and comedy to an outsider, Newby (1958) may unwittingly assist in objectifying the Afghan people themselves, framing them as things to be understood via a traveller's perspective. Moreover, new questions about the book's subtle sense of Western superiority find their way into Newby's (1958) travel writing despite his efforts to position himself as humble and self-effacing in a "foreign" yet culturally "alien" space. Fowler (2007) discusses Newby's (1958) account, revealing his travels and attractions to the Afghan people, which inclines to 'Medievalising'. This Western-oriented outlook is almost ubiquitous in travel literature, whether or not authors profess to be sympathetic or nonjudgmental.

2.1. Theoretical Framework

In travel writing, as Hutcheon (1994) asserted, humour can entertain, provide social critique and reinforce or subvert self-reflection while simultaneously enlivening cross-cultural understandings. To Bergson (1911), using humour—satire, irony, self-deprecation, ego-deflation and gentle wit assists travellers in making sense of new cultures, connecting the alien to the familiar. Humour helps bridge cultural gaps by turning the discomfort of cultural misfit back into humour, providing deeper psychological cultural understandings. In travel writing, the 'othering' of cultures can

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often be further obscured by humour; while humour of an elitist tone may compound class and cultural divides, as claimed by Martin (2007), humour has also been shown capable of bridging or collapsing cultural divides. Ali (1948) and Newby (1958) represent two distinct uses of humour to generate cultural intimacy or reveal the absurdities that have attended cross-cultural miscommunications. In the end, humour in travel writing is a narrative mechanic that helps us understand different cultures and allows us to move beyond ethnocentrism, revealing the nuances that characterise the meetings of different worlds.

3. Methodology

Ali (1948) and Newby (1958) wield humour as a tool to bridge cultural divides, yet their portrayals of Afghanistan differ drastically. Ali's (1948) warm and shrewd sense of humour paints Afghanistan as a profoundly human and approachable society, in which cultural differences are traversed with compassion. Yet, as Hossain (2023) opines, Ali's idealisation of Afghan life, especially the simplicity and hospitality of its people, may render the more complex and, at times, troubling realities of the time obscure. Instead, Newby (1958) provides a more personal, humour-drenched account that conveys his cultural disorientation and incompetence in the presence of Afghan customs. While, for example, critics such as Lisle (2006) commend the ability of Newby (1958) to make readers laugh, they raise the question whether his focus on the absurdity of his situation leads to a lesser engagement with Afghan culture. Newby's (1958) book plays into and reinforces "exotic" stereotypes of Afghanistan, whereas Ali's (1948) work provides a more rounded and nuanced view of the people.

Both these works have nevertheless shaped Western perceptions of Afghanistan. *Deshe Bideshe* offers a more humanistic, insider's eye to the country, while *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* is a classic mid-20th-century Western travel book, loaded with humour and the writer's limited cultural perspective.

4. Findings and Discussion

5.1. The 'Doubt' of Syed Mujtaba Ali in *Deshe Bideshe*

Ali's (1948) *Deshe Bideshe* is a delightful and evocative travelogue about his journey and days in Afghanistan in the 1920s. The book, written in Bengali, is full of Ali's (1948) trademark humour — witty, endearing, and sometimes self-mocking. As Ghosh (2020) states, in contrast to colonial-era travel writing that exoticises foreign cultures, Ali's humour humanises the people he meets; the book gestures toward the commonalities between cultures instead of playing up their differences. His blend of Bengali witticism, playful irony, and observational humour allows him to represent Afghan society with warmth and appreciation rather than detachment or condescension. Ali's (1948) style has deep roots in the Bengali literary tradition, which appreciates quiet irony, playfulness, and affectionate ribbing. Writing about Bengali short stories, Manjapra (2020) states that Bengali humour rarely tends toward the cruel or derisive and usually seeks to showcase quirks and idiosyncrasies endearingly, seeking a sharp observational wit. In *Deshe Bideshe*, Ali (1948) offers this approach to his interactions with Afghans, sharing his experiences with a mixture of mirth and admiration. Another facet of Ali's (1948) humour is his ability to poke fun at himself, which makes his story more relatable and engaging. In contrast to many Western travel writers who cast themselves as superior observers of foreign cultures, Ali frequently depicts himself as an outsider

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attempting (and sometimes failing) to grapple with Afghan customs. This self-deprecating humour helps him leap over cultural differences rather than reinforcing them. He often jokes about his challenges with the locals' culinary practices, understanding that there will be misunderstandings in tastes when travelling.

4.2. Humour: Representations of Afghan People

Ali's (1948) depictions of Afghan people are imbued with warmth and gentle amusement. His comedy is not built on caricature but on pointed, loving depictions of life in daily excess. He sees comedy in their foibles, habits, and ways of perceiving the world, but always in a way that highlights their humanity, never reducing them to simple curiosities. For example, Ali (1948) narrates:

> He said, *'Certainly. The light is dazzling my eyes. I could have driven faster without it.' I remembered that the boatmen in our country did not like to have lamps in front of their boats either. Even though the Kabul valley was flat, there were some crossroads. I would close my eyes at each turn. I conveyed this to Sardarji. All my fears were gone with his answer, 'I close them too.' After hearing that information, I closed my eyes forever, like Gandhari.* (Ali, 1948, p. 81).

This very excerpt humorously emphasises the elements of trust, vulnerability, and surrender. The 'shutting eyes' theme, literally or metaphorically, forms a deeper part of the narrator's transformation journey. This journey transforms a state of being afraid and isolated into a state of comfort in embracing the human condition. It shows how people reunite with one another and how one knowingly lets go of the pending chaos and the earthly domain. Comparing himself to Gandhari, the blindfolded queen of the epic Mahabharata, Ali (1948) playfully dramatises resigning to the chaotic driving culture and gives into his anxiety that the reader can laugh about.

Ali's (1948) humour confirms, among other things, the pride and hospitality of his Afghan people, who show unwavering love and consideration, even in the face of personal financial hardship. Their piety, often displayed in lavish, sumptuous careers of hospitality in rank, aristocratic society, where honour is paramount to affection, and hearts break, but their owners remain unscathed. In one instance, Ali was served dinner by Abdur Rahman, his aide, at his home on the first day of his arrival in Kabul. Despite consuming an ostentatiously large amount of food, Abdur Rahman thought that Ali didn't like his cooking, so Ali ate very little. The real humour is not making fun of Abdur Rahman but revealing the subtle contradictions within expressions of care. Though Ali was eating in his own home, the concern on Abdur Rahman's part — that Ali ate too little, and therefore disliked the food — is a certain, if slightly frantic, chivalrous diligence. As narrated by Ali (1948), this earnestness reveals the patience and kindness often embedded in Afghan hospitality, even in a domestic and hierarchical situation. Ali's comedy is never based on caricature, but unfolds from a close-handed depiction of everyday excess and devotion. He captures the humour in people's quirks, habits, perceptions — not out of scorn but as an homage to the human spirit that animates them. Portraying characters such as Abdur Rahman, Ali (1948) reveals not absurdity, but a certain noble overcommitment: a degree of earnestness that, despite the occasional overreach, signifies a real sense of duty and care. His humour, therefore, places humanity in relief without exoticising it—highlighting the layered dignity underlying the most exaggerated acts of service.

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4.3. Focusing on Human Connection and Cultural Appreciation

Unlike the colonial bookshelf of travel writing, which frequently described non-European societies as primitive or exotic, Ali's humour creates a sense of solidarity, not separation. The humour he employs aligns with some contemporary theories of travel writing, like Pratt (1992), that seek cross-cultural empathy instead of 'othering'. A culture so different from his, yet through his anecdotes, one can see that human nature remains the same, no matter what part of the world he or she is from. Additionally, Ali's (1948) humour also conveys his deep regard for Afghan culture. He is not just a passive observer; he acts, learns, and interacts with the people around him. This deep engagement enables him to find his humour in what they have in common, not just in what separates them. His accounts of Afghan life are shot through with admiration for their resilience, hospitality, and sense of honour, which he considers impressive and charming. For example, Ali (1948) playfully illustrates the Pathan people's overflowing hospitality. Although Ali (1948) tries to pay for his share of the food at every location, someone always intervenes and pays for it all. The Pathans want to take care of him, explaining the tradition of hospitality even to sold visitors for the first time to their land. And when the narrator demurs, they persist in their kindness. The eldest, Sardarji, jokes that if you do not want Pathan's hospitality, don't speak to the Pathan, which is undoable! The Pathans, who have little material wealth, say that hospitality is about sharing from the heart – not what is inside it, but what flows out, and that whether you have a lot or a little, you can share.

Afghan hospitality, as exemplified by the vivid encounter above, is a deeply ingrained cultural virtue born not from abundance but from a patriarchal moral code based on the ideas of honour and care. It goes beyond wealth or status — a sense of direction, a sense of purpose, offering food, kindness and generosity at a point where none is needed. This is a social instinct, that of one of your own, and even in poverty, you make sure that a stranger is treated, which is a hallmark of Afghan social structure. In Afghanistan, hospitality is not a transaction; it is an act of dignity and a gesture of welcome that builds bridges and forges unexpected kinship between strangers. Ali's memoir is replete with joyous episodes in which his humour comes to the fore in his interactions with Afghan locals. These anecdotes illustrate his keen observational skills and ability to find humour in life's minutiae. In one particular episode filled with laughs, Ali (1948) humorously recounts a tense but playful exchange with a tonga (a two-wheeled carriage drawn by a horse) driver in Kabul. Throughout the trip, the driver feigns ignorance of the narrator's patchwork Farsi, only to demonstrate his cunning in negotiating a fair. In reply, the narrator adopts overzealous politeness and mock-absurdity: Yes, yes, there you go, sir, I'm probably well overpaying you, he says, causing the driver to chuckle and quote religious verses about honour and honesty. The narrative continues to be more histrionic as the protagonist delivers an increasingly confusing explanation to the driver. In the end, Professor Bogdanov steps in to end the dispute. The driver looks at the narrator suspiciously and asks where he's from, as if to defend himself, *"Who said that Bengalis were inferior?"* (Ali, 1948, p 83) he recounts the incident hilariously as any Bengali should.

This passage is a textbook example of Ali's (1948) gentle, self-deprecating humour that never ridicules but instead relishes the foibles of cross-cultural encounters. The tonga driver feigns ignorance of Ali's rudimentary Farsi, and, during fare negotiation, Ali pretends the same and theatrically lauds the driver's honesty while also gradually reducing the money he hands to him.

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Instead of mocking, Ali repurposes that moment into a collective performance, emphasising distinctly Afghan modes of expression, poetic speech, and religious allusions. His style respects others, allowing their personality to come through. Even the riotous nod to Bengali pride at the end comes with a dose of irony, a self-mockery of unwarranted egotism, including his own. In truth, Ali's (1948) humour does not discover superiority — it is far more attentive to human interaction, with wit, modesty, and mutual respect.

Humour is a core ingredient of Ali's storytelling in *Deshe Bideshe*, turning his lens on Afghanistan into a portrayal of warmth, connection, and cultural appreciation. His Bengali sharpness, self-deprecating wit, and tasting observations enable him to transcend cultural differences in an enlightening manner rather than a contrasting way.

4.4. Humour in Newby's(1958) *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush*

Newby's (1958) *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* is an excellent classic of British travel literature. It is hilarious, quietly adventurous, thought-provoking, and highly engaging. Horrell (2016) regarded as one of the best books about mountaineering ever written, and certainly one of the funniest, was written by a complete novice, who had never climbed in his life, when he decided to tackle a remote peak in Afghanistan that had never been climbed before.

4.5. British and Self-Deprecating Humour

One of the characteristic elements of Newby's (1958) humour is his use of self-deprecation, to Barr (2018) which is a staple of British comic tradition. Unlike travel writers who present their expertise and competence as explorers, Newby (1958) regularly depicts himself as an amateur who is often out of his depth and ill-equipped for the rigors of his voyage. This self-effacing humour gives him room to critique himself and the imperialist attitudes baked into traditional British travel writing. Right away, Newby (1958) paints his journey as an impetuous, if slightly reckless, venture. With no mountaineering background, he and a fellow climber, Hugh Carless, undertake an ambitious expedition to scale Mir Samir, a remote peak in Afghanistan's Kush. Instead of depicting themselves as heroic adventurers, they become the butt of their jokes, revealing their incompetency and unpreparedness. This plays with the notion of the 'heroic explorer' and adds relatability and subversion to such a tale. Newby (1958) amusingly recounts his enthusiasm for training for the expedition by going on a mountaineering course in Wales, as if that experience made him sore and tired, but still inadequate to climb the mountain. As Newby (1958) states humourously, *"It seemed impossible. In a daze we followed him over a rough wall and into the bracken. A flock of mountain sheep watched us go, making noises that sounded suspiciously like laughter"* (Newby, 1958, p. 33). Then, there is the rather stark way in which his self-deprecating tone is reinforced when he describes their arrival in Afghanistan, where they are greeted as naive outsiders. This quality of humour makes the readers sympathise with Newby (1958) rather than regard him as some superior Western eye-witness. For instance, at one point, Newby (1958) humourously states:

> *' Do many young men come from the city to hunt? '*
> *' They would not come to our mountain,' said Abdul Ghiyas ; in spite of his misfortunes on Mir Samir he still seemed proud of his connexion with it.*
> *'The mountain needs men of hard flesh.'*

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> *I shuddered, thinking of our efforts to climb Legation Hill four days before.* (Newby, 1958, p. 105)

This passage clearly shows Newby's (1958) self-deprecating humour at its best, as he contemplates his physical restrictions. When Abdul Ghiyas tells Newby that only men of "hard flesh" can go climbing in the mountains, Newby (1958) jokingly juxtaposes that with his condition around excursions into hilly territory. Only four days before, Newby 1958) and Carless had tried to do training at Legation Hill, an experience anything but pleasant. Newby's (1958) knack for self-deprecation, rather than chest thumping about his skills, will endear him to readers, and his humorous perception of self will prove an essential factor in how he relates to the Afghan people and audience alike.

4.6. Representations of Cultural Misconceptions and Travel Adversities

Newby's (1958) humour comes mainly from the many common cultural misunderstandings and practical difficulties he encounters. His encounters with the locals are laced with confusion, miscommunication, and accidental comedy. However, Newby's (1958) humour mostly pokes fun at himself and his expectations. But to some extent, some of his humours complies colonial-era travel writers who glum on to such moments to portray non-European cultures as inscrutable or backward. For example, Newby (1958) narrates:

> *Now that we were near our destination, Ghulam Naabi began to identify the scenes of the various mishaps that had overtaken him and Hugh on the road when they were last there in 1952. As we screeched round a particularly nasty bend with a steep drop to some waterlogged fields below, it seemed likely that at least one of the disasters would be re-enacted. 'Here I was overset in a lorry with Carless Sahib.' 'You never told me that,' I said to Hugh. 'It was nothing. The driver lost his head. Ghulam Naabi was a bit shaken, that's all.' Another mile. We ground up a really steep piece covered with loose stones. ' Here we had a puncture.' A little farther and we reached a place where the radiator had boiled over. It seemed impossible that such a short distance could encompass so many misfortunes.* (Newby, 1958, p. 100)

This cut represents the superiority theory of humour, poking fun at all the roads in the past 6 years that have been precisely the same. The funny, however, is based on a nuanced critique of this stagnation that Newby (1958) provides. Newby (1958) suggests that the same kinds of "mishaps" will probably happen again because these "systems" are not improving to solve the problem. This creates a sense of superiority in the reader, who can overcome the situation's absurdity. The humour is bolstered by the narrator's dry, almost ironic voice, which adds to the scathing critique of the stagnant system.

Additionally, Newby (1958) humorously intersperses accounts of his experience in a local garage in Meshad on the way to Afghanistan. Newby (1958) stops at the garage and describes the workshop as a complete mess. Disassembled engines in the garage still need to be repaired, and there are what you might call "trophies of failure" on the walls. Cluster of vehicle skeleton in the area among the abandoned engine parts, and the atmosphere is fascinating and frightening. Newby (1958) compares this grim tableau with the archaic beasts on display in a Natural History Museum: he admires them while feeling appalled by such blatant chaos and neglect.

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The comedy in the excerpt comes from the disparity between Newby's (1958) expectations and the reality of the workshop. It is a workshop where engines are disassembled and never rebuilt. Newby (1958) compares the atmosphere of the workshop to the part of the Natural History Museum that focuses on prehistoric and monster-like creatures, implying the workers and the work itself are beneath her. This comparison suggests that the failure and chaos of the living creatures, rather than the ghostly display of extinct animals within this museum, fascinate and horrify the narrative voice. This makes the situation humorous due to the superiority felt over the chaos and seemingly ridiculous level of failure.

Newby (1958) manages to evoke the extraordinary and almost nauseating hospitality of Afghan villagers, who dispense their generosity with an incomprehensible bounty. In a culture where feeding and providing for the guests is not only a responsibility but also a religious task and value, guests become a victim of overzealous hospitality, Newby (1958) writes:

> *They had brought with them an earthenware pot containing boiled and watered milk, some qaimac in a wooden bowl, the thick yellowish crust that forms on cream, and some bread to mop it up. Our drivers tucked in with gusto. For us it was no time to be stand-offish, it was vanishing down their gullets far too quickly for that; we joined them. The dugh was cool, slightly sour and very refreshing; the qaimac, mopped up with bread that was still hot from the oven, was delicious*. (Newby, 1958, p. 137).

It was a pointed expression of this Afghan style of hospitality—almost too generous, too welcoming. Newby (1958) also conveys the beauty of this ritual, despite an initial feeling of discomfort about being overwhelmed by a meal that was so rich and abundant. The irony is not the excess itself but the inevitable succumbing to it, as guests submit to the feast -- and hosts submit to guests -- forging a bridge of camaraderie and kinship in the act of unmitigated devotion.

4.7. Irony as a Tool to Reverse the Representation of Inter-Cultural Encounters

Irony is key to Newby's (1958) account of his Afghan journey, letting him show the contradictions and absurdities of both British and Afghan cultural vantage points. His ironic voice tends to interrogate the assumptions behind travel and exploration, subtly critiquing the premise that Western travellers should be regarded as formidably better observers of a foreign world, which concurs with the opinion of Hutcheon (1994). As stated by Holland and Huggan (2000), this recognition of his shortcomings makes his cultural findings less patronising than you would find in Britain's (colonially-based) travel literature. To exemplify, Newby (1958) relates a risible incident in which officials at the British embassy in Kabul decide that he and Hugh need to be given an official "climbing companion" – for some reason, a local Olympic cyclist – to join them on the mountain. The humour arises from a huge mismatch between what's expected and what actually occurs: they anticipate a seasoned mountaineer or even a friendly assistant and instead receive a reluctant, inexperienced newcomer forced upon them at the behest of diplomatic protocol. Newby (1958) calls attention to this bureaucratic absurdity by contrast: Hugh, driven by his Foreign Office instincts, makes rejecting the companion seem a question of "Anglo-Afghan relations" – a deathly serious one at that – speaking of his "moral responsibility" to take the man who is "virtually given to us on a plate by Protocol". But the reality of what's at stake is laughably small – the guy needs some

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decent climbing boots. Newby (1958) exploit this incompetence to come up with a retort regarding boot size when the they respond something than *"If Protocol gave the companion it should "give him back by Protocol"* (Newby, 1958, p. 77). Using dry, official means to remedy a boot shortage brings to life the incongruity theory of humour, as a formal bureaucratic protocol collides with the absurd. Ultimately, when "in the whole of Kabul" there is no boot that fits the man, Hugh issues formal regrets (thanking the Olympic Committee even) and the hapless cyclist is diplomatically sent on his way. The humour of the scene is in the suitably serious protocol of the embassy clashing against the stark silliness of the situation. It is characteristic of how Newby (1958) uses juxtaposition and understatement to turn the bureaucratic blunder into an erudite and accessible farce of errors.

A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush stood apart from the usual British travel writing of the time through Newby's (1958) humour, as he replaced the heroic, imperialist travelogue with something more self-deprecating, ironic, and engaging. His British sarcasm, tempered by a genuine love for Afghan culture, allows him to show the comedy and salt of cultural misunderstandings and travel difficulty.

It is pertinent to mention that colonial historiography and travel writing have been operating under various forms of unequal binary oppositions – where the West emerges as rational, developed and superior, and the non-West emerges as irrational, primordial and inferior for a long time. Ali (2016) notes in her reading of British colonial discourse on Malaya that representations like these were crafted as part of a significant linguistic intervention into the territory to manage the population and maintain imperial power. These binaries go beyond a reductive lens of colonial administrations but can be read into cultural texts, like travel literature. Seen in this light, Newby's (1958) *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* offers an ironic, often self-deprecating account of the same, engaging with and at the same time questioning this tradition. Using irony and humour, Newby (1958) disrupts the romanticised tropes of imperial exploration and exposes the awkwardness, discomfort and cultural absurdities that undermine the idea of Western superiority. His performance as a British diplomat maintaining European decorum in the Afghan jungle becomes a cynical joke about the colonial preoccupation with control and civility in foreign terrain. Newby's (1958) work thus operates as much as a product of colonial legacy as a parody of it, naively echoing the very misconceptions Ali (2016) attempts to dispel in the study of Malayan colonial narratives. All these acts of surveying and shaping and denying are acts of travel writing not as a neutral observation but as a space where power, identity, and cultural perception are contested, and as pointed out in Hutcheon (1994), an engine of irony whereby authority is questioned, and colonial mythologies untwisted.

4.8. Comparison of Humour Types and Commonalities: Uniting Cultures through Humour

Both authors create bonds between themselves and their readers and between differing cultures. This humour makes their encounters with Afghan society appear more human, easing foreign sights, sounds, and traditions into their audiences' minds. Both writers use humour to show cultural misunderstanding and personal failure, allowing readers to identify with their experiences. In line with Holland and Huggan (2000) rather than framing themselves as superior observers, they emphasise their limitations, making their narratives relatable and entertaining. Ali's (1948) self-awareness, his struggles to get the language right, and Newby's (1958) grotesquely exaggerated weaknesses in his

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mountaineering skills only make them likable and relatable to their readers, promoting shared human fallibility.

Humour helps both writers perambulate through potentially awkward Hortense encounters. Ali's (1948) funny stories about Afghan hospitality enable him to present cultural differences affectionately without being confrontational. As Rocke (2015) states that this very usage of humour for the sake of 'melting ice' is pretty much doable and fruitful. Newby (1958), by contrast, says Cocking (2011), makes sarcasm a tool to cushion the complex realities of his trip, such as bureaucratic ineffectualness, physical exhaustion, and so on, poking fun at the maddening situations instead of overtly becoming frustrated himself. Both writers stave off the patronising tone of many colonial travelogues by turning the comedic lens on themselves. Ali (1948) frequently jokes about his misconceptions about Afghan culture, and Newby (1958) casts himself as the ill-equipped adventurer rather than the authoritative explorer says Thompson (2011). This self-deprecation prevents their humour from sliding into condescension while ensuring their portraits of Afghan society are respectful and layered.

4.9. Difference: Affectionate Bengali Wit vs. Arid British Sarcasm

Both authors deploy humour as an instrument for cross-cultural connection, yet they do so in distinct ways, unsurprisingly, given their respective cultural and literary lineages. Chaudhuri (2022) writes that Ali's (1948) humour strongly influences Bengali literary traditions, whose roots lie in playfulness, linguistic dexterity, and affectionate satire. Ali's depiction of Afghans is characterised by empathy. Additionally, Hossain (2023) opines that it is enriched with clever analogies and connections between languages, cultures, and faiths, which contribute to a nuanced description of their habits, personalities, and traditions. His polyglot ability and understanding of Afghan customs also allow him to connect more deeply with local culture, making his humour more about common experience and less about a distant observer.

On the other hand, Newby's (1958) sense of humour is Brit-to-Brit classical, the art of understatement, irony, and self-mockery. His sarcastic remarks underline the ridiculousness of his predicament, ill-equipped for a strenuous hike through the Hindu Kush. His wit is often more aloof, more British, and reserved. If Ali often takes pleasure in cultural differences, Newby's (1958) wit is more likely to highlight the frustrations and oddities of travel. As Jarvis (2023) says that Holland and Huggan (2000) provide a harsher interpretation of the same phenomenon, suggesting that "[s]elf-parody offers self-protection" to Newby (1958), camouflaging his privilege while giving him a "license to perform" his "idealized, thoroughly class-bound idea of Englishness". However judged, the incongruity of Newby's (1958) comic persona, in a geographical context recalling Britain's participation in the Great Game of nineteenth-century diplomatic warfare, both underlines and disguises the increasingly anachronistic character of his quest by turning heroic failure into farce".

If Ali's (1948) wisecracks create intimacy with the locals he encounters, Newby's (1958) inflexions sometimes highlight a rift, underscoring the difficulties of cultural adjustment rather than successful assimilation.

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4.10. The Role of Humour in Contact with 'Other'

In *Deshe Bideshe*, Ali (1948) uses humour to bridge cultural gaps and creates an affectionate behind-the-scenes look at 1920s Afghanistan. To Ghosh (2020), Ali (1948) writes in a friendly and upbeat voice, and with humorous stories and vivid character sketches, he paints Afghans with empathy and dignity. Moreover, Ghosh (2020) adds that this refuge in the warm comedy makes it all the easier to engage with the 'Other': Ali undermines colonial representations by introducing his readers to Afghan people as individuals with complex stories, rather than exotic sights. On the other hand, Newby's (1958) *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* has a very different, dry, ironic sense of humour, which is very self-effacing. Newby (1958) is very able to take the piss out of himself – in an affectionate way – as a bungling Englishman in 1950s Afghanistan. This self-deprecatory mode of storytelling characterises a mid 20th century movement in travel narrative more broadly- towards self-irony and humour as a "*flexible expression of the rhetoric of anti-conquest*" (Jarvis, 2023, p.1). Newby's (1958) humor makes fun of Afghan culture, but does so as a modest outsider without the detrimental down-looking on the natives, lampooning himself instead of the locals. Ali's (1948) warm, affectionate humour differs from Newby's (1958) more ironic, self-deprecating humour: Ali's (1948) jokes reinforce a tone of cross-cultural friendship and intimacy, whereas Newby's (1958) sardonic humour signals his status as a naïve visitor. Both writers use humour to wend their way through cross-cultural contact, ticking ethnography off the list and humanising their Afghan counterparts, while contemplating their own position in the cultural spectrum.

Ali (1948) and Newby's (1958) humour reflects their different narrative styles and cultural perspectives. Moreover, while Ali's affectionate humour speaks to the connection inherent in artistic appreciation, Newby's (1958) dry sarcasm underscores the absurdities and difficulties of cross-cultural encounters. Nonetheless, both authors adeptly wield humour to entice readers, alleviate cultural stress points, and share profound observations on the human condition.

5. Broader Implications and Universal Themes

The humour in Ali's (1948) and Newby's (1958) travel writing navigates shared human experiences in different cultures as a criticism of colonial ways of thinking and encourages cross-cultural understanding. Ali's (1948) comic sensibility in *Deshe Bideshe* focuses on the commonplace nature of the human condition but suggests a critique of colonial structures. *A Short Walk in the Hindu Kush* is another of those accounts where the author's self-deprecating humour disputes the Western view of superiority, recognising cross-cultural experience as more egalitarian and complex in the negotiation of adaptation. By relying on humour, both authors ask us to think with empathy and curiosity and to realise that cultural differences are found within people, not between them, resulting, as per Elaref (2023), in an expanded vision of travel writing that moves beyond exoticism and cultural divides.

This aspect of Ali (1948) and Newby's (1958) travel narratives uses humour to bridge the cultural gap, criticise colonial attitudes, and create intercultural appreciation. Their unique comedic approaches humanise the people and places they meet, showing how humour in travel writing can foster shared humanity and subvert stereotypes.

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6. Conclusion

Ali's (1948) and Newby's (1958) travelogues show how humour is vital for transcending cultural differences and fostering cross-cultural understanding. Ali's (1948) playful Bengali wit and Newby's (1958) self-deprecating British sarcasm are different in style, but both use humour to take on prejudice, critique colonial attitudes, and encourage empathy. Their narratives show that humour makes many things about the foreign experience more relatable and how the people behind those foreign experiences become humanised, ultimately enriching the reader's understanding of other cultures. By using humour, both writers implicitly prove that laughter can be a great way to bridge the divide and break down the barriers of cultural alienation.

Ethics Approval and Consent to Participate

Not applicable

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