

Virtual Museums, Ekphrasis and Art Apps: Relationship Between Literature and Travel in Focus

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Abstract *The pandemic forced the people to become incarcerated in their homes. During these difficult times people were forced to bide their times by reading and watching TV or computer screen. The books people read during these times inspired the people to mark the destinations people wanted to visit once the pandemic was over. The paper explores the relationship between literature and travel. On the one hand, travel is boosted by the books. The destinations described in the books get a booster dose and become popular in very short time. On the other hand, the books also burden the readers with the prejudices and biases. Travel help in correcting the opinions by bringing people face to face with reality. In the times of pandemic virtual museums, galleries and travel apps have also become extremely popular. These virtual galleries and museums also act like books because they can be approached from the comfort of homes. However, these virtual galleries and apps bring people in contact with the artefacts; these cannot correct people's opinions.*

Keywords: *Virtual Museums, Travel, Literature, Travel Apps, Virtual Tour*

INTRODUCTION

Literature and travel are both interconnected and complement each other. However, in the COVID times literature has found readers, the travelling activities of the general population were severally curbed. The people who read different books during the pandemic found new vigour to visit the places they came to know from the books they read while sitting incarcerated during the pandemic. However, reading literature in isolation can also burden the readers with stereotypes and false notions about the residents of different areas. In such cases, travel comes to the rescue. The stereotypes formed by literature are shattered by travel and tourism. Literature shows the world from the point of view of the writer which is burdened with his/her prejudices and biases, while travel opens the world in front of the traveller in its true colours. This paper studies how literature and

travel are interconnected and how travel helps in broadening the horizons of the travellers, and how literature gives ideas to the people to explore new destinations they come to know about from the books.

Pamuk (2009) in his delightful book *The Naïve and the Sentimental Novelist* compares the experience of reading a novel to being in the presence of a landscape painting. Pamuk observes that there is 'attention to visual detail' and the reader's imagination responds by realizing it be a corresponding visualization.

The term ekphrasis has that ephemeral appeal to it which may make one assume it to be related to something evanescent. However, this seemingly ethereal word stands for an activity or exercise that emphasised concrete imagery and descriptions, ideally aimed at clarity adequate enough to evoke verisimilitude or the vision of the object

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to a blind eye, a listener distant in time or an absent person that were well-nigh close to the original image. Ekphrasis as defined by Merriam-Webster dictionary is 'a literary description of or commentary on a visual work of art.' The main aim of ekphrasis is to bring the work of art to life to the listener or the viewer. The listener/viewer is able to understand the finer nuances of the artwork through ekphrasis. Ekphrasis expands the meaning of an art work for the common audience who do not have any knowledge about the technical/artistic and historic aspect of the artwork. When Homer sings of the Trojan war great details about the antagonistic armies, their generals and their expression, postures, movements; even the ships, armours and shields of the generals are visible through the verbal imagery of the epic poem; details that can move the imagination of a contemporary reader and transport him/her to the battle scene itself. Homer's composition is supremely ekphrastic and it does make us travel in time but it also makes us want to travel in space: perhaps to palpably experience something of the antiquity or at least to witness Greece for ourselves in those grand ruins. That Auden wrote *The Shield of Achilles* another ekphrastic poem to counter the war-mongering of Homeric epics in his own times is another story. As the nymph Thetis waits for Hephaestus, the lame god of smiths to forge a shield for her son Achilles, she looks over his shoulder expecting him to depict glorious scenes from city life or battlefield, but is dismayed to find a desolate and dreary landscape with remnants of life in the form of 'urchins' who consider violence as axiomatic:

She looked over his shoulder
For vines and olive trees,
Marble well-governed cities
And ships upon untamed seas,
But there on the shining metal
His hands had put instead
An artificial wilderness
And a sky like lead (Auden Stanza 1).

Thus, Auden's imagined episode completely subverts the discourse employed by earlier poets to eulogize war. In Auden's rendering that is more about contemporary Western world, Greece turns into one vast 'Wasteland' much like that perceived in Eliot's poetry undercutting war narratives and claims to grandeur that later heroic poetry continues to endorse.

According to *Wikipedia*, a popular web encyclopaedia, the Greek word for 'description' is 'ekphrasis.' The term refers to a specific rhetorical exercise conducted by Greek scholars in response to art work wherein the scholars frequently offered 'a vivid, often dramatic, verbal description of a visual work of art, either real or imagined. In ancient times, it referred to a description of anything, person, or experience' (Wikipedia). Another exposition endorsed by

Poetry Foundation, a reliable repository of canonized works of literature in reference to certain poetic texts adds the following detail:

An ekphrastic poem is a vivid description of a scene or, more commonly, a work of art. Through the imaginative act of narrating and reflecting on the "action" of a painting or sculpture, the poet may amplify and expand its meaning.

It is worthwhile to begin this academic exploration with the fascinating figure of JS Mill, statesman and historian opposed civil liberties for the colonized which he so vehemently advocated for his own countrymen. It is ironic that Mill who wrote a notable book *The History of British India* in 1817 and was on the rolls of the East India Company never visited the country. His dismissive attitude towards India and his belief in their inefficacy or inferiority was created solely on the basis of documentary evidence gathered from European writers and American compatriots. Most people with an inclination for literature or in possession of literary tastes are already armchair travellers; they are also armchair critics like JS Mill. Stereotypes are a way of handling possible encounters with exotic or alien communities. However, travel offers that strong possibility which may challenge stereotypes and reveal unknown facets about a geographical region and its inhabitants. Therefore, reading must be endorsed, supported or even counteracted by tour and travel.

TOUR VERSUS TRAVEL: PSEUDO-SYNONYMS

Tour is more elite, fashionable and definitely has the educative ring to it- it is almost something that would ensure that a privileged European learns enough of its manners, mores to be comfortably-entrenched in the civil society and witness as much of the monuments and landscapes to be conscious of the stated or assumed civilizational supremacy. On the other hand, travel is more about adventure, career and risks and knowledge about the world comes as a by-product. Miguel de Cervantes's Don Quixote realized that the medieval world had transformed into the modern world only when he sallied forth to actually emulate knights-errant of romance and wander through the countryside. Of course, Don Quixote himself is a character constructed by Cervantes but undeniably travel is an essential part of education. It is an eye-opener. In modern times, the knight is replaced by the almost psychopathic figure of the flâneur- wandering through the city mazes. This figure has been interpreted variously: 'Drawing on Fournel, and on his analysis of the poetry of Baudelaire, Walter Benjamin described the flâneur as the essential figure of the modern urban spectator, an amateur detective and investigator of the city. More than this, his flâneur was a sign of the alienation of the city and of capitalism' (Flâneur. Wikipedia).

In tourism management literature many scholars (Kamra & Chand, 2002; Holloway et al., 2006; Chand, 2006; Smith, 1995) stated that both tour and travel are very closely related concepts and offer unique experience of tourism activities during travel and stay at a particular destination. So where do literature and works of art stand vis-à-vis travel experience? Romances and landscape paintings - what of them? These are subjective renderings of an individual experience available to a viewer who may or may not have had the fortune to witness or view the original.

As Ishmael, Herman Melville's narrator in *Moby-Dick* gets ready for exciting adventure ahead, the details of the eager sailor's situation are rendered thus:

I stuffed a shirt or two into my old carpet-bag, tucked it under my arm, and started for Cape Horn and the Pacific. Quitting the good city of old Manhatto, I duly arrived in New Bedford. It was a Saturday night in December. Much was I disappointed upon learning that the little packet for Nantucket had already sailed, and that no way of reaching that place would offer, till the following Monday.

As most young candidates for the pains and penalties of whaling stop at this same New Bedford, thence to embark on their voyage, it may as well be related that I, for one, had no idea of so doing. For my mind was made up to sail in no other than a Nantucket craft, because there was a fine, boisterous something about everything connected with that famous old island, which amazingly pleased me. Besides though New Bedford has of late been gradually monopolising the business of whaling, and though in this matter poor old Nantucket is now much behind her, yet Nantucket was her great original—the Tyre of this Carthage;—the place where the first dead American whale was stranded. Where else but from Nantucket did those aboriginal whalers, the Red-Men, first sally out in canoes to give chase to the Leviathan? And where but from Nantucket, too, did that first adventurous little sloop put forth, partly laden with imported cobblestones—so goes the story—to throw at the whales, in order to discover when they were nigh enough to risk a harpoon from the bowsprit? (6)

Melville connects travel not just to physical prowess but the attempt of man to transcend his limitations- sometimes interpreted as 'transgression' calling for punishment but always leading to a discovery- on a worldly level of wealth, of colonies and on a spiritual level of the tragi-comedy of human existence. Travel ties the 'aboriginal whalers, The Red-Men' to the White-Settlers of Nantucket. The invocation of Carthage, the old colony of Tyre connects the Phoenician sailor with the American of the New World. Thereby, taking in its sweeping strides- the biblical and the aboriginal, the 'barbaric' and the 'civilized', the native and the settler -all become vivid scenes in a vibrant travel panorama.

Art work is not superior or inferior but a version of reality. Most aesthetes understand the fact. Though their literary appetites may be satisfied with reading literature, a great travelogue may whet their appetites and they may crave for real journey, voyage or cruise to the place described. Unfortunately, this does not happen when the travel literature or media presents rather unflattering images of a country.

If one were to read Hitler's *Mein Kampf*, regardless of wherever they are situated in the racial spectrum they will tend to dislike Jews and Slavs and consider Germans somehow superior to them just by mere identification with the author, but if they were to read Dostoevsky's *Crime and Punishment*, chances are they would regard Germans as the most obnoxious type, worse than Poles.

Svidrigailov, suitor to Dunya, Raskolnikov's sister, blending in the charm and evil of heroes of Gothic tales laughingly remarks:

...Ha, ha! By the way, do you remember, Rodion Romanovitch, how a few years ago, in those days of beneficent publicity, a nobleman, I've forgotten his name, was put to shame everywhere, in all the papers, for having thrashed a German woman in the railway train. You remember? It was in those days, that very year I believe, the 'disgraceful action of the Age' took place (you know, 'The Egyptian Nights,' that public reading, you remember? The dark eyes, you know! Ah, the golden days of our youth, where are they?). Well, as for the gentleman who thrashed the German, I feel no sympathy with him, because after all what need is there for sympathy? But I must say that there are sometimes such provoking 'Germans' that I don't believe there is a progressive who could quite answer for himself. No one looked at the subject from that point of view then, but that's the truly humane point of view, I assure you. (505)

Of course, there are many instances when the xenophobia and hatred for Germans surfaces in Dostoevsky. Focus on stray encounters with German prostitutes or harridans in St Petersburg creates sinisterly permanent images of German depravity for Dostoevsky's readers- of course, these characters share nothing in common with Angela Merkel, the last German Chancellor who gave shelter to Syrian refugees while European and Eurasian nations closed their doors to them. Travel may be forced, like mass exodus of refugees from the times before the Bible, biblical times and afterwards till the present day.

Pitifully, numerous authors in their ideological and psychological investigations mostly conclude not just that they are superior but that other races are inferior. True or untrue: most of us first discover a country through the literature about it and seldom may be able to visit an alien land for a more intimate or individual experience. The

Third world countries riddled by poverty and crime cannot compete with their privileged counterpart's even years after imperialism has ended due to lingering issues beyond the rubric of this study. Thus, JS Mill- like smug approach is inevitable. However, In a world torn by divisions and divided by ethnicities and cultural identities; tourism seems to be a unifying force. A person who travels to other places develop an understanding, a sympathy that is otherwise missing. Travelling to different places in the world opens the minds of the people. Travelling helps in shedding ethnocentric biases which were nurtured over the centuries and transmitted to progeny by the human ancestors. One of the basic traits of mankind is eulogize one's own nation, culture and achievements. This escalated notion of self is often achieved by denigrating the others, degrading the others. This degrading of others often leads to stereotyping if others. According to Gordon W. Allport prejudice is "thinking ill of others without sufficient warrant" (6), while Walter Lippman calls stereotypes as "pictures in our heads" (7). These pictures are often difficult to erase as they are regularly fostered by different sources, most importantly by man's own egotism.

Tourism helps a person in getting rid of these stereotypes and prejudices. Tourism allows people to mingle with one another and fosters an understanding that is otherwise difficult to reach. Tourism is defined as:

Tourism is deemed to include any activity concerned with the temporary short term movement of people to destinations outside the places where they normally live and work, and their activities during the stay and destination. (Vanhove 2)

Tourism is generally undertaken in search of recreation, to take a break from the ordinary routine that has seeped into the lives of people; to break the ennui and hence rejuvenating oneself and getting prepared for another period of same routine. The benefits that arrive with these short stays outside the native place are additional benefits. But what are the factors that affect a person's choice of visiting one particular outside his hometown? Literature and media are surely the prime factors that affect the choice. This paper concentrates on the impact of literature and media as the factors that affect the flow of tourists to one particular place and how travel helps the travellers in shedding the biases that have been fostered by reading books (in some cases).

TRAVELOGUES: HUMANITY'S SHARED HEIRLOOM

India, for instance was the preferred destination of the ancients. In fact, the discovery of Americas by Columbus was an accident that happened only because of Europe's preoccupation of India. The travellers' tales about India's

riches spread by word of mouth throughout the Europe and Africa. India was also the subject of many books. These books added to the fantastic images of India that inspired people across the world to visit India. One of the most important works was written by Ctesias who was born "sometime after the middle of the fifth century B.C.E." (Nicolas, Introduction 10). In his book *Indica* he presented a fantastic account of India which was coloured by his imagination. It is important to understand that Ctesias himself never visited India, so whatever he wrote about Indian was from the accounts of travellers, the figurines on the artefacts and the books. All these sources combined in Ctesias fertile mind and he created fantastic beings. Consider the description of a beast martichora:

There lives in India a beast called the martichora which has a human face, is the size of a lion, and is red like Cinnabar. It has three rows of teeth, human ears, and light blue eyes like a man's. It has a tail like a land scorpion on which there is a stinger more than a cubit long. (48)

The Indians, of course, know that a beast called 'martichora' did not exist, but has the fantastic description like this must have inspired a lot of Europeans to visit India.

The Indian epics like the *Ramayana* and the *Mahabharat* are also full of ekphrastic details about the landscape of the different parts of the country. The poet in the *Ramayana* gives vivid details about the city of Ayodhya, Lanka and about the forests of Panchvati region. Similarly, The *Mahabharat* provides details about different places associated with the Pandavas and Krishna. There were various questions about the existence of Krishna till the lost city of Dwarka was discovered. All the places described and discussed in these two books have been discovered on the basis of details and are the thriving centres of religious pilgrimage. Another example of development of a centre of religious tourism can be seen in the form of Hemkunt Sahab, an important pilgrimage centre for the Sikhs. The place was searched by Havildar Mohan Singh in remote Himalayan region in Uttarakhand on the basis of ekphrastic details in *Bachitra Natak*, an autobiography by Guru Gobind Singh. Similarly, Bhai Veer Singh's books on the Sikh History have popularised many destinations associated with Sikh history.

In the modern times, Kalki's five-volume historical novel *Ponniyin Selvan* foregrounded the history of the Cholas and brought the places associated to them in limelight. All the places associated with the Cholas and the temples constructed by them are major tourist destinations in Tamil Nadu and surrounding areas.

Tourists leave their homes and comfortable territories to visit places they have never seen only because they are motivated by a few factors. If we try to understand the motivating factors then literature has to be assigned primary role. It is important to note that many of the great writers have been

great travellers also. D.H. Lawrence for instance was born in England, but he wrote an important political novel about Mexico in 1926 and wrote many books about Australia and other countries. Similar is the case of Mark Twain who was a traveller as well as a writer. India has its own travel writer in Rahul Sankrityayan who spent almost forty-five years in travels away from his home. He is responsible for establishing travel literature in India.

Literature affects tourists in many other ways. For instance, there are some places that are associated with great writers. Stratford on Avon, for instance with Shakespeare. According to Discover England Report “Stratford-Upon-Avon attracts 123,000 visitors annually” (www.visitbritain.org). The obvious attractions in this small sleepy town are the places associated with Shakespeare. Similar is the case with Dublin which is associated with the towering figure of modern literature. Dublin was foregrounded by Joyce in his most famous work *Ulysses*. The city still offers the tours to the famous places mentioned by the master novelist. The writers are often associated with the cities they were born in, or lived in. These cities still attract tourists who want to get the feeling of being with the literary masters.

Shakespeare alone has motivated many tourists and even the creation of tourist spots. He immortalized Kronborg castle in Sweden as “Hamlet’s Castle” (hamlettours.com) and “the Alabama Shakespeare festival attracts more than 300,000 visitors each year from over 60 countries and is the only one of approximately 35 Shakespeare festival across the USA” (Robinson & Anderson 29).

However, the second motivation is even greater. It is of the places that are associated with the characters created by the literary masters. Dublin for instance celebrates “Bloomsday on June 16, the very same date that Dedalus set out into Dublin in 1904” and allows tourists to follow the footsteps of “Leopold Bloom on his day long journey through the streets of Dublin” (Fitzgerald). Leopold Bloom is a character in James Joyce’s masterpiece *Ulysses*. The people who have read *Ulysses* surely develop a strong desire to visit the place. Literature creates verbal images and inspires the tourists. A literary work can bring a tourist destination into limelight and sometimes even thrust tourist attractions on place:

The small Texan frontier village of Seguin a dramatic increase in tourist activity after the 1994 publication of Janice Woods Windle’s *True Women*. As Hilty reports “visitors can relive history as they visit gravesites of heroines, the author’s childhood home, the Guadeloupe River, other homes, hotels, museums, churches and parks. A tour of these bites has been mapped out for visitors. (Robinson & Anderson 29)

Literature can be called virtual tourism because it allows a person to transcend the geographical boundaries and enjoy the vicarious pleasures. One of the greatest examples is that

of Shakespeare. Shakespeare wrote about different countries in his play. His *Macbeth* is based in Scotland, *Hamlet* in Denmark. *The Merchant of Venice* and *Othello* in Italy. There is evidence that Shakespeare visited any of these countries, yet he was able to write accurately about all the places after reading from secondary sources. His *Macbeth*, for instance, is based on Holinshed’s *Chronicles*. Shakespeare was one of the early beneficiaries of the virtual tourism. He visited all the places through the writings of others.

Virtual Tours and Art Apps

Of course, due to the pandemic, there have been global bans eased only by stringent norms of quarantine- the Travel industry has to re-orient itself economically to handle the situation as well as by upgrading their hygiene quotient to an altogether new level. While the real world is trying to relocate the equilibrium, the digital world has taken the frontstage.

Museums, libraries, theatre groups have gone online. Apps that create an interface between connoisseurs and artwork or travellers and destinations have become popular. Live theatre performances are streamed for free as a psychological aid to the humanity feeling the ‘disconnect’ and isolation. Being at home has taken a new meaning, so has going out- the digital media is straddling the divide and making it more tolerable for many who are avid travellers or theatre aficionados.

Similarly, the *Google Art and Culture* app has tried to bridge the great divide between East and West, orient and occident, us and them by creating a platform where artwork from diverse artists, art movements, nationalities, times and ethnicities is showcased.

You could enjoy the spectacle of well-curated rich tradition of sarees from India and the timeline of European dresses both vying for your attention. Similarly, there is the ekphrasis of the Tower of Babel as well as the Birth of Venus to be viewed at leisure. The zoom feature allows you to view these from close-up and the ekphrastic descriptions of fringes and backgrounds are revealing.

In many cases, the digital experience is richer and more knowledge-enhancing than the real experience though nothing can be compared to the impact of a painting or sculpture in its surroundings.

During Corona pandemic, *Google Art and Culture* has become that wonderful platform which allows any lay art lover to create art work out of their own pictures, compare Amrita Pritam to Frieda Kahlo, Raja Ravi Verma to Botticelli and even understand how ‘The Massacre of the Innocents’ of Pieter Brueghel the Elder in its snowy coldness and vital exuberance of the Dutch landscape was a spatial rendering of two distant events in time, two very different ethnicities

sharing the same plight of threatened generation and genocide- a visual telling of two narratives superimposed by the Flemish Master painter- Herod's men and the men of Spanish sergeant whose iron-hand crushed the people of Netherlands both being depicted in the same figure. The different renderings of this same painting and even Auden's invocation of the same in 'Musee des Beau Arts' just adding to the rich intertext.

VIRTUAL EXPERIENCE IN INDIA

India is one of the most prosperous nations as far as sculptures, art and craft, and monuments are concerned. The artistic wealth of India has amazed the world throughout the ages. In India also many online platforms allow the visitors to study and watch the sculptures, paintings and monuments. The online platform p4panorama.com offers a virtual tour of UNESCO World Heritage Sight of Ellora Caves situated near Chatrapati Shambhaji Nagar (Aurangabad) in Maharashtra. Visiting these caves physically enthralls the visitors and gives them a sense of satisfaction and importance. The visitors take the photographs of the sculptures personally and feel proud for visiting personally and more importantly by showing them to their friends and relatives.

At the same time travelling physically allows the travellers to mingle with local people, observe local customs and enjoy local cuisine. This allows a traveller to develop an understanding about the local people without the influence of anything else. The actual travel allows the person to get freed from the limitations laid on him by the readings of the books. A bad experience of the writer of a book can be generalized by him/her and this generalised bad experience also traps the reader. However, travel loosens the grips of these vicarious bad experiences and makes the traveller more understanding, more accommodating, more liberal and more tolerant.

On the other hand, virtual tour is not at all a substitute for physical tours, but virtual tours offers an opportunity to study the sculptures and works of art and not just view them. A physical tour allows the visitors to have a look at the sculptures, but a virtual tour allows them to study them and pay greater attention to the details missed during the physical tour. Moreover, the study can be done at your own pace from the comfort of your home without felling heat or cold and without suffering from thirst or getting disturbed by rain.

The case can be understood from the particular example of visiting Cave No. 16 (Kailasha Temple). A person can devote one whole day in visiting this particular cave. This is one of the most famous caves in the Ellora caves. In one devotes one whole day to this cave only, then the person needs to spend more time, energy and money, which is not possible

for every individual. Virtual tour is a boon for such people who do not have extra time and money. One can spend time in his comfort zone and visit the temple from his home.

CONCLUSION

Therefore, as the most unwarranted year of the millennium arrives, it spells much good and greater adventure for art, aesthetes and artists in literal as well as metaphorical sense. Above all, it has made us rethink the value of art- not just in pragmatic terms but in terms of the soothing balm that humanity requires in times of crisis. At the same time the pandemic has made us realise the importance of travel and tourism as corrector of our opinions and making us better human beings. The books, though considered reservoirs of knowledge are also breeders of prejudices, travels liberates us from these prejudices and makes world a peaceful place to live in.

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Resources

<https://artsandculture.google.com/>

https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/The_History_of_British_India
<https://www.shakespearesglobe.com/watch/love-in-isolation-2020/>
<https://www.britishmuseum.org/>

<https://www.poetryfoundation.org/learn/glossary-terms/ekphrasis>
<https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Ekphrasis>
<https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/ekphrasis>

EXHIBITS

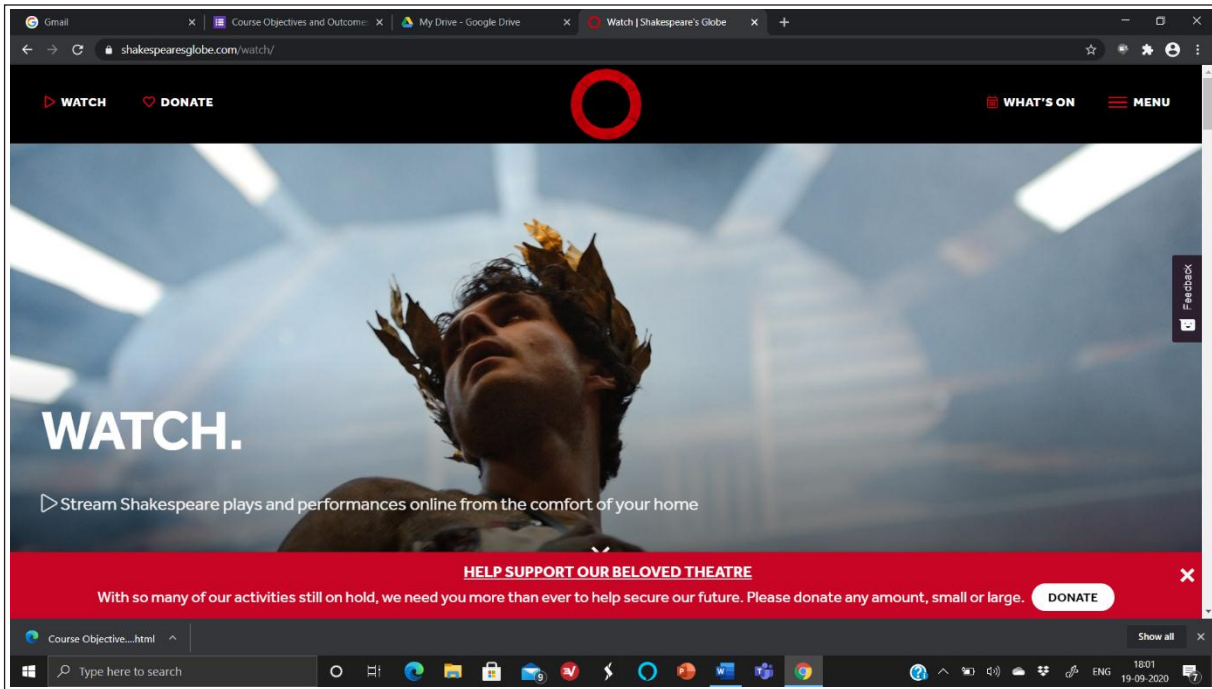


Exhibit 1: Screenshot of Globe Theatre Initiative

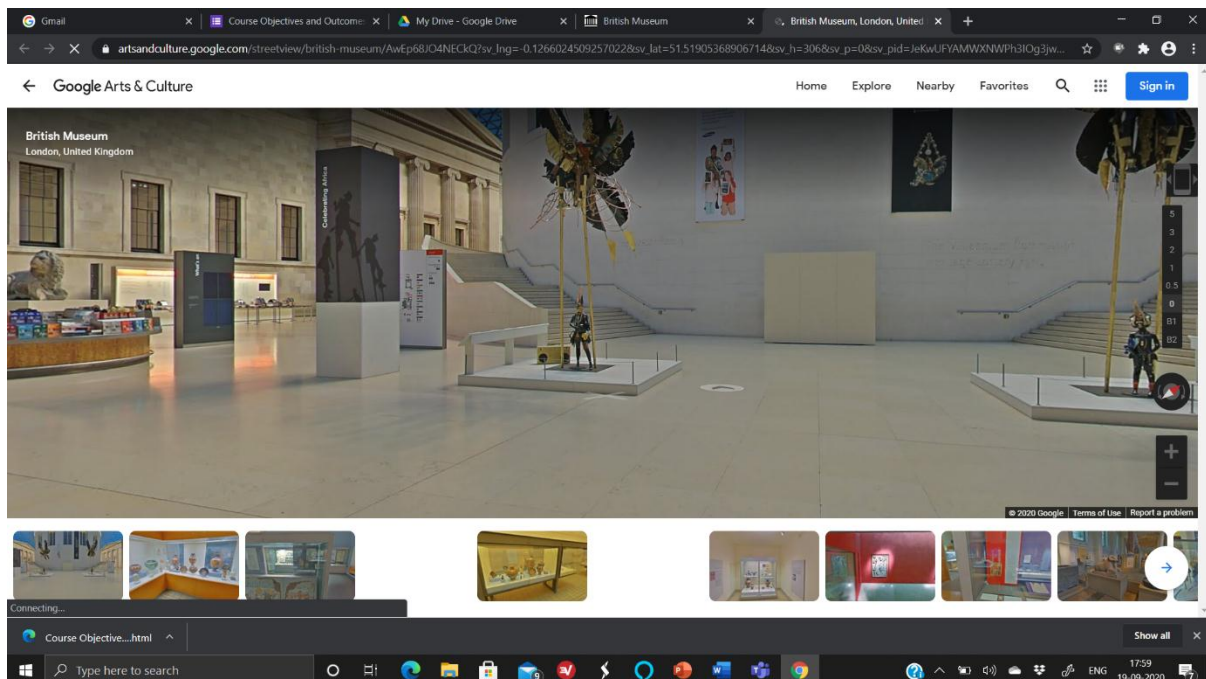


Exhibit 2: Screenshot of 'Augmented Reality' Gallery View of Exhibition from British Museum

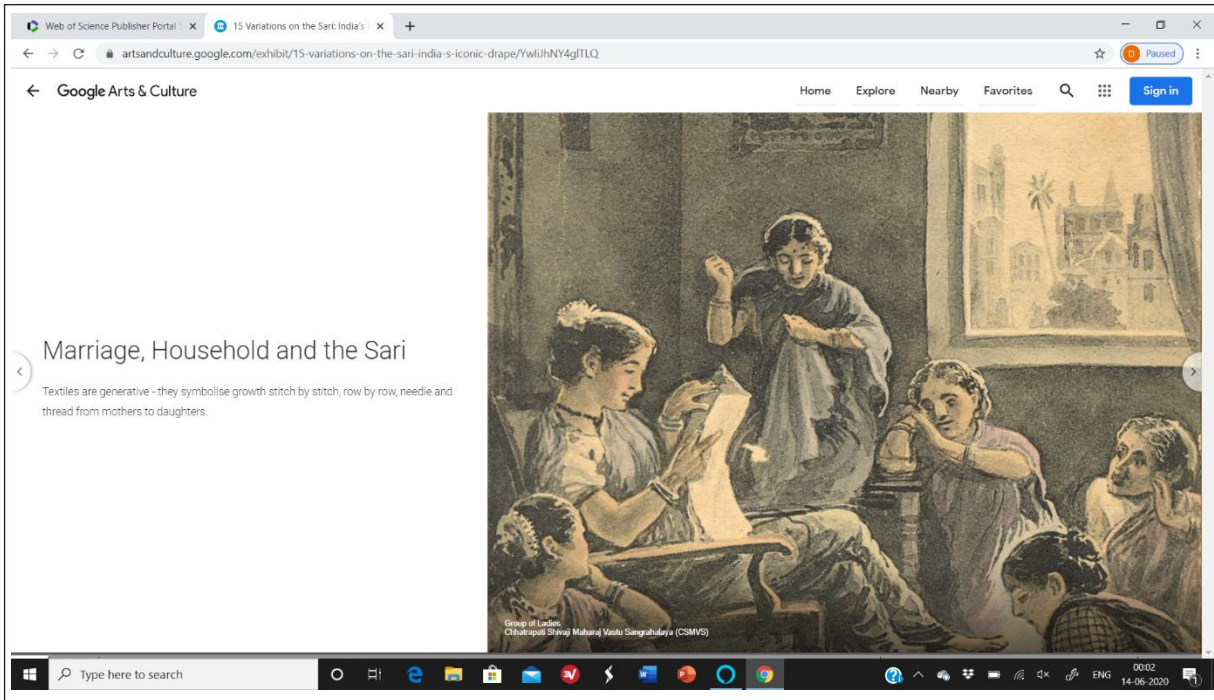


Exhibit 3: Screenshot of Exhibition on Sarees held by Google Art and Culture (exhibition Also Allows Zooming into Different Patent Saree Samples)

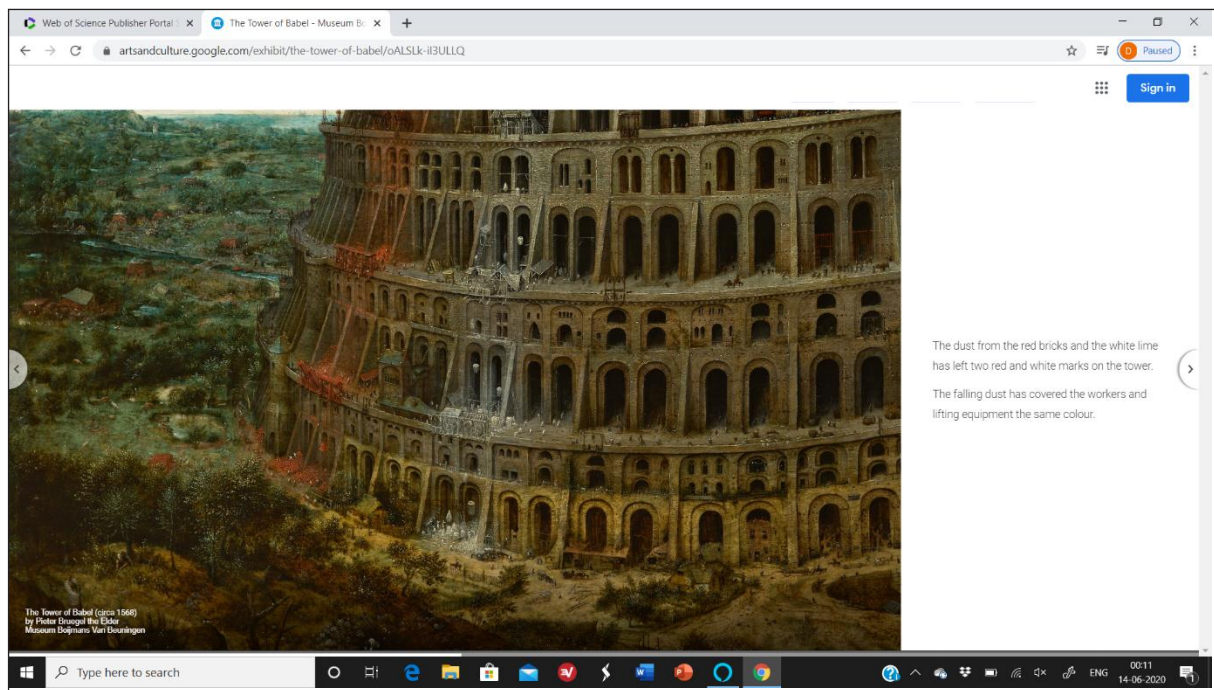


Exhibit 4: Zoom and 'Ekphrasis' Features Demonstrated in this Screenshot of 'The Tower of Babel' from in Google Art and Culture App.

Other Resources:

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2701/2701-h/2701-h.htm>

<http://www.gutenberg.org/files/2554/2554-h/2554-h.htm>