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## Importance of travel writing in literature

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### ABSTRACT

*Travel writing as a genre of literature has not been a contemporary happening, as a cursory look at the annals of literary history shows us that from the biblical times till the present day, though the forms and media have changed, the passion of travel writing has remained much in vogue. The paper explores the ways in which travel writing has been an indispensable part of English literature, both in terms of its contribution to its richness as well as an avenue for human's development. Human's psychology is positively impacted through travel and the resultant travel memoirs prepared - discoveries, mysteries, and socio-cultural planes give humans experiences with nature and people inhabiting them, so as to result in various forms of travel writing - travelogues, guides, and stories. These, in turn, inspire others to undertake a similar travel and experience firsthand their "acquired knowledge from travel writings". The paper also explores the ways in which travel accounts of voyage and discovery of new lands led to the development of the genre of travel writing in literature, and how it had positive externalities towards enriching other disciplines as well like history, geography, science etc. In turn, it has also been influenced by the socio-cultural settings, as well as questions of identity in society. The paper also traces the writing styles of Charles Darwin in his masterpiece "Origin of Species" and how that set the path right for the flourishing of the genre further. Charles Dickens, Carl Thompson, James Cook, Lawrence, Henry James are other luminaries who embraced literature through their travel writings. The paper also throws light on the inhibitions and bottlenecks which a traveler has to face while on travel- alienation from the homeland, feeling of otherness among a foreign crowd, loss of self-identity and seclusion from the larger group, inability to comprehend alien culture, religion, customs etc. But overcoming such challenges is the very essence of a hardcore travel writer - the passion to undertake travel against all odds to distant places to feel oneness with nature and hence contribute to humankind's development.*

**Keywords**— *Travelogue, Otherness, Self Identity, Mental Displacement, Travel Documentation*

### 1. INTRODUCTION

"To travel is to make a journey, a movement through space. Possibly this journey is epic in scale, taking the traveller to the other side of the world or across a continent, or up a mountain; possibly, it is more modest in scope, and takes place within the limits of the traveller's own country or region, or even just their immediate locality. Either way, to be any journey or, indeed, simply to set foot beyond one's own front door, is quickly to encounter difference and otherness. All journeys are in this way a confrontation with, or more optimistically a negotiation of, what is sometimes termed alterity or more precisely, since there are no foreign peoples with whom we do not share a common humanity, and probably no environment on the planet for which we do not have some sort of prior reference point, all travel requires us to negotiate a complex and sometimes unsettling interplay between alterity and identity, difference and similarity." (Thompson, 9, emphasis in the original) Carl Thompson in his travel writing had suggested that travel writing is all about a record written by a traveller. It can also be called "creative nonfiction writing".

### 2. TYPES OF TRAVEL WRITING

Travel writing genre can be classified into different types - Travelogue, Travel Stories and Travel Guide, each being distinct from one another. Whereas travelogue is all about the record of what a traveller sees, travel stories are about the narration of the traveller. On the other hand, Travel Guides are specifically meant for people who usually visit a lot of places. Thompson's work "Travel Writing," tries to give us an idea about what exactly travel writing is all about. Over and above everything, Travel writing is also about discoveries, mysteries, adventures encountered on a tour, picnic etc.

Travel writing is all about experiences one has during the course of the journey and writing is one of the outlets of his / her experiences and views in the course of such a travel. Undertaking travel is to free ourselves beyond the shackles and boundaries created for oneself. It is to quickly encounter and embrace differences and otherness, alien to us. By travelling one gets to study and understand cultures, traditions, customs, and religions.

A distinctive feature about travel writing is the feeling of 'otherness', usually when the person travels overseas far away from his homeland. In such an alien land, you get to know about your own identity, appreciate the difference between the habitats. Otherness is not only about the difference one feels towards others, but it also describes an individual who is perceived by a group as not belonging to them. The group sees itself as professing a standard and judges the ones who are not in their league as lacking the essential characteristics which the group has. The other person is always seen as an inferior being and treated accordingly. For instance, it can be a person who is of different gender, race, social class, religion or nationality. A person might consider others to be belonging to a special category, having negative thoughts about anything or anyone. Sometimes a person describes things around him in such a manner that others may not even react to it. A man can consider himself to be a perfect being and feel oneself as belonging to the community. This is like putting himself in the higher level of thoughts while perceiving others to be in the lower level. A person hence feels and sees the difference when it comes to otherness.

Travel writing requires careful observation and inquisitiveness on the part of the writer and seeks to bring the best out of him. It's all about experiences an individual has with the world and the different kinds of people that he meets along. This began from the medieval age, through European Renaissance and has journeyed till contemporary times. All along, travel writing has acquired new characteristics and qualities with the coming of a new age. Every period shows changes both in the form of travel and resultantly, travel writing. The biblical and classical traditions had many traveller tales. Travel was sometimes real and sometimes symbolic in nature. The Exodus from the Bible is about travel, Homer's Odyssey, Virgil's Aeneid all these stands as earliest instances of travellers. Religion and travel stories always are linked because that is where travel began to gain religious pilgrimage. Chaucer's "The Canterbury Tales" is a pilgrimage text during the medieval period, where travel stories are being narrated. Travel often is visualized as a symbol towards the greater goal of salvation according to the Christians in the medieval period. John Bunyan's *The Pilgrim's Progress* (1678) is about Christian pilgrimages journey. In such texts, travel is taken both as a physical and a psychological experience, because travel is considered as part of a spiritual exercise. It is said that travel literature became popular during the Song Dynasty (960-1279) in medieval China, which came to be known as travel record literature. Travel writing has become a focus for study and research across a whole range of disciplines. It is now studied in terms of its history, formal characteristics and problems of representation. The study of travel writing is all about the experiences of an author who records every detail about places and pleasures of travel.' Travel writing is a complex exercise where the writer tries to portray the unknown. The essence of travel literature rests in the way the narrative is built by its author and how he or she translates that into a world where it could be recounted in terms of a narrative'. The journey and its setting are the primary themes and genres in travel books. Thus, travel writing may not constitute accounts of going to different countries, it may even be applicable for accounts of travel done with the same country as well. Travel writing by Carl Thompson provides readers about the history of the present day. Travel writing isn't a new concept, as it had started years ago, where people travelled to different places and explored the world. The study of travel writing was just introduced in the field of literature. During the sixteenth century, travel writing became important and was taken to a larger audience. Travel writing was always a popular form of writing before this genre could even develop on its own. It provides an excellent introduction to the branch of literary studies.

### **3. TRAVEL WRITING AS A MEANS OF DISCOVERING PLACES**

Travelling was also meant to discover and to a certain extent to conquer the places. There came a time when people were very much curious about explorations and voyages to unknown destinations. Travel was necessary during those days, and it was intended to let others know about the different nature and culture of the inhabitants they met. During the ancient times, Romans and Greeks conquered most part of the present-day Europe and the Middle East. There are many classical travel writers like Herodotus, who travelled to Italy, Persia, Egypt, and Danube valley. Looking back at history about discovery, Christopher Columbus's first voyage to America in 1492 ushered in a new age for travel writing. Travel writing or travelogue can be considered as the first literary production of mankind. Homer's Epic, *The Odyssey* is about an adventurous journey of a hero who encounters legends and half real people. It is about a long journey home after the fall of Troy. In the medieval time, it is said that people had very little knowledge about the world around them. During the English Renaissance, the development of trade combined with the expansion of the British Empire. Travel literature then continued during the Romanticism, which according to John Butt and H.V.D. Dyson was based on important geographical discoveries made at that time. Both real lives, as well as fantasy stories, started to appear, though the literature from the former category has been much more prevalent. Travel writing works were made into movies, like "Gulliver's Travels" by Jonathan Swift or "The journey around the world in 80 days".

Travel studies are all about increasing the understanding of and interactions with the rest of the world. Travel stories intended to inform people about the different nature and culture of the aboriginal people they met and the way they approached them. This brings the change in how others have perceived and understood other places, cultures, and societies. It's mostly about self-consciousness and stereotyping. The effects of travel studies do bring inputs about a whole range of themes like history, geography, society, art, identity, and difference; gender and power, elitism and nationalism.

Travel writing humanizes distant places. Most of the travel writing is self-absorption and, at times it is just being generalised when it encounters other cultures. Travel writing is a key source of information about the outside world. It has influenced explorations, development of fields such as science, history, literature etc. Through this genre of writing, travel enthusiasts share their struggles and experience with the audience. As one travels, one starts getting a feeling of otherness, and also a loss of self-identity at the same time. This concept of 'Other' has been explored in terms of gender and culture. Travel writing focuses on people from different nationalities, cultural and societal settings and based on specific characteristics, functions, and phenomena, certain qualities are assigned to them. There is ideological bias behind national stereotypes (Edward Said's *Orientalism* 1978). Edward Said opines that the Orient is an assemblage of mental maps and socio-cultural attributes, constructed and represented through the discourse of Orientalism. There are conventions about the representation of the "other" group.

#### **4. TRAVEL DOCUMENTATION**

Travel writing is all documented in the form of literary texts called travel narratives. During the 18<sup>th</sup> century, travel writing was known as “Book of Travels”. James Cook’s Diaries (1784) reached the status of a modern-day international best-seller. “Along with true stories, imaginary travel stories started to appear.” Most of the travel books contained factual journeys. In the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, many started exploring regions other than continental Europe and indulged in travel documentation in order to serve as a reference to the future explorers. Travel writing thus evolved as an important genre in the field of literature. Dickens, Trollope, D.H Lawrence, Henry James are some of the well-known travel writers. But Charles Darwin has a league of his own - in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, he wrote about science, natural history and travel, all combined into one, through its entourage to Ecuador to study “natural selection of species” and evolved that into the magnum opus “Origin of Species”.

Charles Dickens, Hans Christian Andersen, and Mark Twain were other writers who wrote travel stories. Travel writers do have the feeling of alienation in a new environment, which creates changes in their subject matter. This shows us that along with a physical sense, there is a mental displacement that occurs when a traveller visits a different place or country. They do encounter different cultures, society, traditions, religion. To understand culture isn’t easy for any writer, as to understand it the socio-economic factors have also to be imbibed in order to appreciate the cultural traditions in existence and its evolution over the years. According to Raymond Williams “culture is something that is alive, moving”. Culture talks about the attitudes and behaviour characteristics of a particular group. That is what every travel writer observes whenever they undertake a different visit; they study human behaviour and their lifestyle. According to “Key Concepts in Cultural Theory”, culture entails “recognition that all human beings live in a world that is created by human beings, and which they find meaningful. Culture is so complex in the everyday world that we all encounter that “it affects every bit of world we all live in.”

A culture is an expansive act of human behaviour. It includes ideologies, customs, religious beliefs etc. It focuses on the lifestyle of the groups of people in a community. Studying culture makes the reader understand the travel narratives. Therefore to understand the meaning of the travel narrative, the experience of the writer has an indispensable role to play so that the travel vision can be ‘analysed’ and appropriate narratives can be understood. Culture is related to identity because the culture of any society or community is their identity.

There are difficulties in travel writing, which has been explained by William H. Sherman, travel critic, in “The Cambridge Companion to Travel writing”: “Early modern travel writers were often torn between giving pleasures and providing practical guidance, between logging and narrating, between describing what happened and suggesting what could have happened. These rhetorical challenges, along with the novelty of their experience, left travel writers with acute problems of authenticity and credibility. The myths and stereotypes which could be reproduced in otherwise sober and scholarly accounts led to associations between travel and lying.” Travel narratives always gain credibility when their documentations are closer to facts of the place narrated. Travelling involves a direct encounter of traveller with any foreign civilisation or group of people. Travellers also carry the notion about self- identity, which the native people find it different from their originally held perspective. In order to identify oneself with a community, he/she has to mingle with the community, social culture, economic and political aspects, in which identity plays an important role.

Travel writers are also otherwise considered to be mediators between the reader and text. Many times, travelogue is the prism through which the reader is introduced to the cultures and traditions of a foreign country. As said by Tony Thwaites, “Mediation produces a relationship between parties based on social identity and cultural values”. When we talk of identity, it is connected with particular places, it’s about a place where one feels very comfortable. If it’s a new place it is always associated with a strange feeling or Strangeness, as every travel writer carries the preconceived identity with him. According to Emmanuel Renault, “Identity is a given fact that we will be content with affirming so long as we can define ourselves as being part of a larger and indisputable whole”. Identity formation can be seen as a process of defining one’s own cultural social or political boundaries that are different from others. Identity also defines how an individual has relation with the community that he encounters.

Travel writers also encounter a sense of alienation and separation when they visit alien lands, which is reflected in their writings, as he is away from even when away from native society, religion and culture. Sometimes it is a self-imposed alienation as well. Even not knowing the language of a community in a foreign country makes us feel alienated. Alienation is something that helps an individual understand the society as well as the self.

Travelling is something that is considered to be a hobby while others believe travelling to be their natural calling. Some are even dromomaniac, i.e. passion for travelling, which shows their hunger in exploring new places, and maintain a record about the places that they have visited and maintained a unique diary about the places. It is ingrained in human psychology to have “wanderlust” and make new connections, explore new cultures and places, and through this, they get to learn a lot of new things. Reasons for travelling may vary from love for nature and environment, exploring new avenues, and even in certain cases just for the case for the joy of travelling. Reason whatever may be, travel writers do document their travel, some get them published which later goes on to become guidelines for travel writing to those places.

Travel writing has grown popular over the years, and there are valid reasons why it has become so. With the exponential growth of Information Technology and medium of the Internet, sharing and collaborating has become even easier, and in certain cases even necessary. The information, in textual or pictographic format, triggers the “travel being” in humans. Also, with the development of technology every nook and corner of the world has become accessible with motor able roads. This has also led to the emerging interest in solo travelling and write own memoirs of travel experience through blogging, vlogging etc. The aspect of adventure in travelling makes an individual feel even more inquisitive. From journal type stories to literary works in which the

structure and style are important, all styles of travel writing are in vogue. Some of the most popular travel writers from the 20<sup>th</sup>, right unto 21<sup>st</sup> century are Bill Bryson, Douglas Adams, Bruce Chatwin, Paul Theroux, and Pico Iyer.

## **5. CONCLUSION**

Travel writing hence is considered as a specialised literary genre in its own right, with origins in the 17th century but flourishing as a dedicated hobby by nay in contemporary times. It's a first-hand travel experience to all the places that the authors have been to. Indeed, travel and their reportage by their travellers have become an inspiration for many people for eternity. This is because a mental construct is mapped in the minds of the readers who also begin to have a desire to undertake the travel and write his/her own memoirs, hence the genre of travel writing blossoms further.

When it comes to travel writing it is important for us to have a sense of cultural sensitivity. The reasons for the resurgence of interest in travel writing are to understand cultural studies. There is discourse analysis or rhetorical analysis. It's a non-fiction work of art because it is all about a traveller's experience vis-a-vis his interactions with nature. A traveller gets an idea about different religions, customs, traditions, and languages. On the other hand, the challenges faced by an individual while travelling are feeling of being alienated from homeland since they are away from their own society, a feeling of otherness in a foreign place. All of these are beautifully captured in the melange' of travel writing, which brings forth the intimate relation between humans and the places they visit in an artistic way and become one of the most interesting genres of literature.

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