
Travel Writing as a Cultural Document

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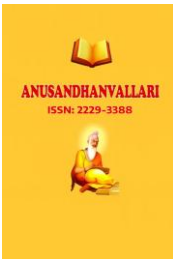
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Is a travelogue in the times of Discovery Channel, National Geographic and internet, the best to know a place or a culture? Are our holy places and National monuments not the places which are sustaining culture and civilization and too well known to be discovered through a travelogue? All these questions are very pertinent in the times when travel is becoming a luxury for a class. Of course, economic affluence demands best possible hospitality, comfort and happiness in return when a traveler is *off the routine*. But traveling is not merely a physical journey rather it involves a great thinking and planning. Wandering for pleasure brings joy of seeing a different scape but a travel with an aim broadens the mind.

Travel has a way of stretching the mind. The stretch comes not from travel's immediate rewards, the inevitable myriad new sights, smells and sounds, but with experiencing firsthand how others do differently what we believed to be the right and only way. (Andras 159)

Travel has been one of the most regular and oldest activities in various forms and purposes. But travel writing as a literary genre has never been counted in the league of canon till the 20th Century. In the 20th century, academicians and travel industry brought travelogue into currency and gradually made it both culturally popular and commercial attractive. And today, travel writing is formally given space in the study of canons in academia. Starting from writing diaries or sending letter back home while travelling, travelogue has got its formal shape in the hands of such committed traveler writers. Such writers not only put their experiences on paper but they have developed a particular style of narration which has become a kind of its own and have also tried to assess this form of writing by looking it through different critical theories of literature. Moreover, travel brings cultures together. A traveler actually goes to the site, meets and many time stays with local people for a period of time. Observation of day-to-day experiences makes the traveler rich as he gains insights into culture, values, rituals, and life on an unknown land in general. These records can be a useful material for succeeding generations for study of a culture.

When in 1922 the novelist E.M. Forster set out to write a guidebook to the Egyptian city of Alexandria, his most memorable advice was "to wander aimlessly about." In that one famous phrase, he was admitting that the subjective means more than the objective. Now that nearly everyone has been nearly everywhere, it might be thought that travel writers have lost their purpose. In a way they have. Today there is no empirical information about a country that a travel book gives which cannot be collected more accurately elsewhere. But what a travel writer can do is to interpret the complexity of the globalized world, portrays a hybrid human being that exists in different part of the world, gives a first-person account of how that person seems, interpreting reality in a literary form in the same way novelists try. What travel books can offer which Google or Encyclopedia Britannica or the novel cannot: one is going there and presenting and going deeper than the journalists, one is spending time and learning. Only the most spectacularly perilous journey is nowadays worth writing a book about, and a public almost surfeited with TV travelogues rarely needs to be told what foreign parts look like. But the real travel writers are not really writing about travel at all. They are recording the effects of places or movements upon their own particular temperaments—recording the *experience* rather than the event, as they might make literary use of a love affair, an enigma or a tragedy.



A wanderer is tempted to jot down his experiences while on the move and a serious traveler converts those miscellaneous notes into proper writing. It is not invention that one will find in the pages of travel writing, but something subtler: the alliance of knowledge and sensation, nature and intellect, sight and interpretation, instinct and logic. It is more real than fiction, but more genuine than mere fact, too. Writers are certainly not telling us what we shall see or feel ourselves, if ever we go to the parts they write about, and it is no good complaining that our own responses were different, if we happen to have been there already. For they are other minds that we are traveling with, other sensibilities, and as any philosopher knows, the truth about anything is nobody's monopoly—not least, the truth about a place.

Travelogues as Cultural Document:

Robert Louis Stevenson rightly says, “There is no foreign land: it is only the traveler that is foreign” (Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing: 1). Traveling leaves an indelible impression on the readers' minds as it razes all cultural barriers. This exercise of being on the other land brings two different ways of life nearer. Many a time observation and its presentation to the world provide voice to those who have never been noticed on the map of the world. As Ilija Trojanow rightly says in his PEN interview, “Travel writing must involve a journey which overcomes the ego, a journey where you become an instrument to capture testimonies and voices of ‘the other’ – voices that usually are not heard.”

There is an intersection of different cultures for a traveler at a different and foreign land. This vantage point generates dialogue between two diverse cultures. Rumination and concerns noted and shared through such writings may bring larger thought of betterment of the country and natural assets. Travel writer thus not only records or makes documentation but he also offers his opinions gleaned out of his experiences of journey. Travel is a cultural comparison, an intercultural perception, a dynamic act of cultural translation and cultural construction, which is entangled in time and space. The resulting travel literature is, therefore, an interface of two cultures, one editing the other. In this process, the traveller's own country may equally be the object of his or her investigation.

Riverine Travelogues

In this sense, travelogues and tourist guides are important as the picturesque presentation of any place helps readers to decide the image of any land. Rivers being life force have been the primary sites for living beings for journey. Exploration and wandering have become the added elements for travel which interest different types of travelers. Journey on and around the rivers of India was taken by various local and foreign travelers with a view to gain insights into what constitutes the dynamics of one of the most ancient societies – India.

The Ganga has always flared the imagination of the West. Foreign travelers like Eric Newby and Ilija Trojanow have taken up their journey to visit the river as it is and how the life is lived on its banks but Dennison Berwick and Julian Crandall Hollick have come to India with the specific curiosity that how a river can be venerated and if Indians revere it so much how they can pollute her without giving it a thought. During their travel around the river through different modes and stay with local people, they realized that the river is the element which keeps life together. Indians regard the river as sacred and secular both at the same time. They also observed that the functional relationship with the river lead same people to profane the Ganga by polluting it on the name of rituals. These travelers remarked that the nature of relationship with the river, determines the behavior, attitude and dealing with the river.

All these foreign travelers could not consider the Ganga to be a goddess but most certainly they agreed to the grandeur of the river and its vital importance in the lives of the living beings. They have tried to trace the social, political, religious and ecological issues related to the rivers and how they are integral part in the lives of the people. Along with the harshness of the daily reality, these travelers have tried to focus on the bond between an individual, the society and culture and the river being the connecting thread. They also took pain to fill the gap between their religious belief and actual dealing with the river by explaining them the danger that a river is facing. Even after their sincere efforts, they could not provide any concrete solutions but they became famous and commercially successful writers after their documentation of their journey around the Ganga, an ancient river.

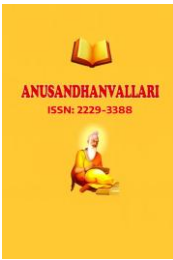
Travelogues as Tools to Extend Scope of English Studies

The idea that the travel book has had its day is true neither in the sense of having nothing more to offer, nor in the sense of sales. It is still a form of literature which people turn to. It is a very popular form still, because it is a form which has the ability to reinvent itself for each period. During the colonial period it sometimes, though not always, was doing colonial work, now it is doing a different job for a different audience in a different period of time. It seems to be a universal form, like poetry, but unlike the novel, has existed at all periods of history in all or most cultures. "For me travelling is the instrument, inspiration and theme of writing, because it touches the right manner of living, because like literature, it is cathartic," says Ilija Trojanow (2007).

Travel writing has become a commercially acclaimed genre of the time. Travel guide, coffee table books, columns in magazines and journals are the activities being carried out under the disguise of *travel writing*. Evidence of a travel writing canon and of its importance to the marketing of travel books as both supplementary to and an alternative form of travel can be seen in the recent establishment of the "Picador Travel Classics". This is a series that partly announces the classic status – the canonicity – of its volumes through their hardback covers, their introductions, and their numbering – they are intended to form a library. Ian Pearson is unsure whether classic travel writing is literary privilege or salvage mission, its primary function being to "preserve" the "truly great journeys" in books, even while the "serendipitous adventure is becoming harder and harder to achieve as the juggernaut of massive tourism levels the planet". But whether they are mandarins of a superior order or merely last-ditch rescuers, the mainly British, postwar "club" members all find themselves represented in this Classic series – an attempt of canonizing the genre in English. So English language forms the canon and decides the future success of any work of art and literary genre.

It is felt and observed that limitations arise in the travel narratives in describing a foreign culture due to various reasons. One of the important reasons among them is the use of language. Language poses a barrier in representing the culture of a foreign place as the writer will not be able to relate completely his/her personal experiences with the real-life experiences of the indigenous people that he/she had experienced in the places that were visited. Linguistic barrier occurs in the travel narratives in the geographical description of the places, physical description of the people and the manners in which cultural practices are described. The unawareness of the native language of the people of the foreign place that the writer/traveler visits create a barrier in mingling with the people. The 'other' culture/the culture of the foreign place, is often represented to the best of the writer's knowledge and belief even though he/she does not have a hold on the new language. This can create gaps in the narrative. Hence language is an important requisite in the encounter of a foreign culture.

The importance of language in the understanding of culture is emphasized by Jurgen Habermas, in *Cultural Analysis*: "Language provides a key to the analysis of culture. Even though the individual attributes unique personal meanings to objects and events, language must be used to express these meanings to anyone else." Linguistic



constrains makes the writer fail in understanding a foreign culture that he/she comes across. This makes the narrative unreliable as it creates only a vague image of the people/places that are being represented in the minds of the readers. These gaps have to be sealed from the travel narratives. The positive feature of learning the language of a foreign place is that the writer/traveler could be able to understand the culture of the people that he/she visits. Hence understanding a new language minimizes the effort that has to be taken to understand the culture of the people of the new place.

However, it is important to note that translated versions of travel writings are much popular and saleable than in the regional languages. Most of the best works from world languages are translated into English which increases acceptance and extends the scope of its readership. Notable travelogues on the Ganga are written in English out of which a few are even translated from German and other foreign languages into English. These books have made writers quite famous and their experiences reached the lives on the Ganga to the world. The world has got newer perception of India but a land of snake charmers. Since colonial times, foreignness has fascinated the local minds. The *Englishness* of the writers even brought attention of the Indian readers. The language that was used earlier to make slaves became instrumental in exploring one's own land through a foreigner's lens. This is how a traveler himself enriches his self and brings two different cultures on the same page. English being internationally accepted language plays decisive role in making a travel writing an effective cultural document. Thus, it also conveys that in a modern world, travel is meant not only for pleasure or knowledge but it also cements the fractured relations of the civilizations and brings cultures together with the hope of making planet a better place for living together.

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