

TRAVEL WRITING: SOME CONSIDERATIONS

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Abstract

Travelogue, with a very ancient ancestry, has become a significant component of Postcolonial discourse. Various approaches to the study of Travel writing, and various attempts at its theorization have added to the complexity of the genre. The present paper examines some of them, and tries to establish:

- A. Travel writing is as much about the outer world as about the inner world of the traveller,
- B. Travel writing cannot be studied under the binary approach of fact is fiction for it contains both
- C. that a) and b) are not interconnected and interdependent.

VS Naipaul's Travel writing on India shall be used for illustration.

Key Words:*self, other, negotiation, space, movement*

Travelogue as a genre has a very ancient ancestry. From the very early times of civilization, travel accounts have been a significant mode of self-expression and at the same time, a very reliable source of information of the 'other' land-its people, society culture etc. It is through travel accounts that the disciplines like history, anthropology, sociology and linguistics received their initial impetus to emerge as fully autonomous and respected subjects of academic study.

It is a well-known and well-documented fact that Europe's knowledge of India until the early nineteenth century was based almost completely on travels accounts- Megasthenese Marco Polo, Alberuni, East India company officials etc. The once famous *A History of British India* (1817) by James Mill, which was studied as a textbook by all company officials before coming to India, had its foundation in travel accounts. Even James Todd's *Annual and Antiquities of Rajasthan* (1826, London) and *Travels in Western India*, which are thought to be work of great historical significance, were in a sense travel writing. Thus, travel writing has been an important interpersonal activity with a very deep social, intellectual and political ramifications.

Travel Writing: What Is The Genre About?

Despite its long history and current vogue as a genre, Travel writing has received due attention to it as a serious subject of enquiry only recently. Traditionally, travel accounts were read and studied for the light that it threw on subjects like geography, sociology, anthropology, linguistics, politics and above all history. It was rarely studied in its own right, for its own intrinsic value. It is probably due to the widening scope of post colonialism and postcolonial studies that travel writing has an important field of exploration, and is now recognized as a 'genre' in its own self. But what is this genre about?

Carl Thomson in his influential book *Travel Writing* (2011) provides a tentative definition of travel before latching on to 'travel writing'. According to Thomson:

To travel is to make a journey, a movement through space. (But) to begin any journey or, indeed, simply to set foot beyond one's own front door, is quickly to difference and otherness. All Journeys are in this way a confrontation with, or more optimistically a negotiation of what is sometimes termed as alterity. Thus one definition that we can give of travel is that it is the negotiation between self and other that is brought by movement in space. (9)

The definition or description of travel provided by Thomson, like all such definitions is reductive and begs several further questions. For example can all movements through space be regarded as travel? What of a trip to local tailor? Or a quick visit to one's neighbour? And if some journeys are not to be classed as travel what are the criteria for it? Is there any fundamental difference between the journeys undertaken by tourists, explorers and refugees? If yes, what are they? Nagging questions such as these shall remain with any definition. But it is a fact that travel does involve movement through space and it does involve a kind of interaction between the traveller and the world he visits. Thus, a negotiation between the self and the other form an essential ingredient of any meaningful travel and thereby of any travel writing.

If the above definition of travel is extended to travel writing, all travel writing is at some level a record or product of this encounter [between self and other] and of the negotiation between similarity and difference that it entails (*Travel Writing* 10). This encounter generally takes two forms, direct and indirect. In direct encounter, the traveller narrates the events explicitly with reasonable details whereas the indirect encounter ensures its impact by modifying the narrative in an implicit way. The selection of events to be reported in the travel writing, the length and prominence an event should get, and mode of narrative comic, satirical, elegant and informative etc. are often the outcome of indirect encounter in a travel writing.

In the postcolonial and globalised worlds we are in, the negotiation between self and other has become a vital existential issue which is very difficult to ignore. And, perhaps, it is because of this that travel writing has become so fashionable.

"Travel writing", writes Tim Youngs in the *Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing*, "is the most socially important of literary genres. It records our temporal and special progress. It throws light on how we define ourselves and how we identify others. Its construction of our sense of 'me' and 'you' 'us' and 'them' operates on individual and national levels and in the realms of psychology, society, and economics" (1). Thus the scope of travel writing tends to become so extensive in its reach and impact that it encompasses a bewildering diversity of forms, modes and itineraries. No wonder, Patrick Holland and Graham Haggan consider the genre notoriously refractory to definition. According to Michael Kowalski it has a dauntingly

heterogeneous character, and that it borrows freely from the memoir, Journalism, letters, guidebooks, confessional narrative, and most importantly, fiction (1).

One can, thus safely infer that travel writing as a genre is not easily demarcated. Its theme, content and style have a lot in common with other literary forms. But it is not unlikely for a new genre which has emerged and is in the process of getting established. For we all know that a genre is not merely a descriptive label but a way of making sense of the structure by which we describe our surroundings and perceive meaning in them. As John Frow aptly says: “genres actively generate and shape knowledge of the world, they create effect of reality and truth, authority and plausibility, which are central to the different ways the world is understood” (Genre 2). The fact that John Frow himself neglects travel writing as a genre proves our point that it is an emerging genre and the problem of demarcation of its domain is the problem of an upcoming area of studies.

In his *Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing* Tim Youngs underlines the essence of Travel writing in the following words:

Travel writing consists of predominantly factual, first person priseaccounts of travels that have been undertaken by the author-narrator. It includes discussion of works that some may regard as genres in their own right, such as ethnographies, maritime narratives, memories, road and aviation literature, travel journalism and war reporting but it distinguishes these from other types of narrative in which travel is narrated by a third party or imagined. (3)

The formulation provided by Tim Youngs seems to emphasize a) First person narrative of the external world, that is, the area visited by the traveller / author. b) the factual nature of travel writing. However, it is difficult to accept that Travel writing doesn't go beyond these limits. Travel writings are often found to be portraying not only the external world, the author happens to visit but also, in a subtle way, his mental disposition which determines his point of view to see the world. Similarly, the belief that travel accounts are objective and discuss facts in a disinterested manner is actually a misnomer. More often than not a true travel book has a pronounced personal elements which are not merely functional or practical. Actually these personal elements add to and facilitate the subjective foregrounding of the author's distinctive sensibility and style. And it is because of this subjectivity that a travel writing acquires aesthetic merit and is read for pleasure.

Hence it is understandable that Carl Thomson in his *Travel Writing* classifies the genre under three sub-types:

- a) Reporting the world
- b) Revealing the self
- c) Representing the other

Evidently, the basis of the above classification is the object of description or foregrounding. For instance, journalistic travel writing or the travel accounts by a scientist can be assigned the first category of reporting the world. Such writing aims at having the lowest interference of the subjectivity and personal bias. It also has the predominance of facts over fiction or sentiment.

But in the second and third categories of travel writing the boundary between fact and fiction, and self and other gets blurred. The author, even when depicting the external world, is constantly peeping from behind and often the peeping becomes so prominent that it becomes

representation of the self. Even when the target is the representation of the 'other' it is done with respect to the 'self'. And it is the dialectics of the self and the other that finally shapes up. The form and content of the travel writing, very often the motive behind the portrayal of the other, is consciously or unconsciously pejorative or patronising. This attitude springs from a complex mixture of emotions such as fear, envy, revulsion, incomprehension and a mixed sentiment of love and hate.

The tone and tenor of travel writing is not always the same. It changes as per the traveller's relationship with the area under visit, for instance, the mood of the author on a trip to a 'wonderland' would be very different from that of the traveller on a diasporic trip-- the visit to a place with which the author identifies his roots. Keeping in mind the bewildering variety of travel writing, Paul Fussell introduces a typology on the basis of visitor's attitude to the place visited. Using the terminology of Northrop Frye, Fussell calls travel writing 'displaced romance' and identifies two modes of travel writing:

1) *Picaresque*: In picaresque mode of travel writing the emphasis is simply on relating a sequence of adventures or misadventures without any attempt to establishing a narrative proof and well defined purpose.

2) *Elegiac or pastoral*: In elegiac or pastoral mode of travel writing, the author generally visits a place which has had deep impact on the visitor because of its history or past glory but the present is pitiable. The place sometimes is related to the visitor's ancestral root, and, therefore, has an aura of romance and nostalgia around it. Thus, in such travel writings the emphasis is on seeking out the last vestiges of a vanishing way of life, or a culture perceived as less complex and less stressful than the traveller's own.

One can add a third type to this typology that is splenetic travel writing. The term splenetic has been used as an adjective for V.S. Naipaul in his Travel writing. *The Self and the World* (2002) and I wish to extend this term to a particular mode of travel accounts.

As in the elegiac / pastoral mode, the splenetic mode of travel writing also involves the author's personal attachment which may or may not carry a sentiment of love and admiration. Because of some complex personal bond the author happens to display a mix of fondness, revulsion, fear, disgust, envy, anger, incomprehension all together, as one can find in the travel accounts of India provided by V.S. Naipaul.

V.S. Naipaul, a Trinidad born English author of international repute and a Nobel Laureate, is ancestrally related to India. His grandfather had migrated to the Caribbean islands in the late 19th century as an indentured labour to work on sugarcane plantations. Here it is pertinent to add that though the grandfather of V.S. Naipaul was an Indian his (vs Naipaul's) great grandfather had come to India from Nepal which explains the surname of the family. Thus the Naipaul's family had their roots in India. For V.S. Naipaul the question of 'root' and 'route' is much more complex given his connection with Trinidad, England and India. In other words, his visits to India which have produced three celebrated travel accounts, *An Area of Darkness* (1964), *India : A wounded civilization* (1977) and *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990) are always coloured by his diasporic existence.

His first visit to India produced a very dark and pessimistic view of India as he felt himself dreaming in *An Area of Darkness*. The pessimism of this visit was actually the result of shock that he experienced in India for the real India was very different and unwholesome from the idyllic India he had emotionally imagined.

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Thus, when he was writing about India as a traveller, he was not writing entirely on the basis of his observation and personal experiences. Actually, the India of his imagination was constantly interfering and interacting with the actual encounters. So he was not just recording what India was but also what India appeared to him or what India should have been in his view. Thus, the wall between ‘fact and fiction’ vanishes in a subtle way in Naipaul’s writing on India. Sometimes, Naipaul’s condemnation of Indian society, politics and intellectual discourse is so severe that he is often seen as an imperialistic in his outlook of India, and is often compared with Rudyard Kipling.

The tone and temperament, with slight improvement and greater nuances, continues in his later two works also. No wonder he was called a splenetic travel writer by C. Blanton. But his travel accounts of India do demolish the walls that are often maintained about travel writing-- the walls of objectivity and externality.

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