



An Introduction to Travel Writing

One of the vital literary genres is no doubt travel writing. Travel literature is as old as man's existence on this earth. The voyager tells stories about his experiences of the journey he had, to his fellow mates. His experiences are interwoven with details of the places he visited and the journey. He narrates them as first person. Each one of us is a traveller and we all travel in different scales and we all have a story to tell. The prose narration of travels includes discussion of works that some may regard as genres in their own right such as ethnographies, maritime narratives, memoirs, road and aviation literature, travel journalism and war reporting.

The prose narration of travels includes:

whatever else travel writing is, it is certainly different from writing a novel: fiction requires close concentration and intense imagining a leap of faith, magic almost. But a travel book, I discovered, was more the work of my left hand, and it was a deliberate act- like the act of travel itself. It took health and strength and confidence. (Theroux Paul : The Tao of Travel)

Why do we travel is best answerable when Pico Iyer says, "Why do we travel, initially to loose ourselves and next to discover ourselves" One explores the fathomless riches of the unknown world through travelling. Travelling opens our horizons which were otherwise closed due to the limited perspective that we had. It keeps us busy in seeking more and more knowledge of 'NOWHERES'. Many travellers head to NOWHERES only to discover their inner true self. ***"When something human is recorded, good travel writing happens"***.

Travel writing as a literary genre is the encounter and observation of a traveller, where he records his straightforward report of individual impression of his travel transmitting the cultural values. What he sees he details it to the others. As Andrea Loselle remarks in 'Translations of the Orient' ***"Of all the genres, travel writing is the most chameleon-like because it can assume almost any number of styles from poetry to autobiography to a report destined for political and economic use"***. Travel writing holds its significance in the present scenario. Travelling is becoming fast and rapid growing field in today's era of science and technology. This non-fictional genre represents society and its documentation as observed by the writer or the narrator. Travel narratives contain a lot many descriptions of the adventures, exploration, conquest compiled in a non-fictional pattern by the travel writer. How is then travel writing a literary genre? Travel writing – a literary form is the amalgamation of different genres which may comprise of a plethora of literary writing – private diary, the essay, the short story, the prose poem, the sketches, pictorial presentations, talks and discussion at the dinner table or a tea-table. Travel writers use fictional technique of plot, characterization and dialogues to tell their stories but Hulme adamantly remarks,

“Travel writing is certainly literature ,but it is never fiction”. Writers choose their own way of defining travel writing. Holland and Hulan refer to it as ***‘this most hybrid and unassimilable of literary genres.’*** While for Jan Borm, ***“it is not a genre, but a collective term for a variety of texts both predominantly fictional and non-fictional , whose main theme is travel.”***

Carl Thomson defines travel as a genre in this manner:

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 travellers own country or region, or even just their immediate locality.

A negotiation happens to be between all and alterity. But then one wonders about the parameters of journey- what all can be included as a travel? Is it a long distance travelling to explore a new place called as travelling? Do a visit to your neighbor called a travel ? Are voyages by sea-farers called a travel? These questions are not invalid, they definitely have satisfactory answers of -What then is travel? Travel writing cannot fit into one single mode of writing , their limits are fuzzy and not fixed. It has a very loose generic label and readily comprises of diverse range of material embroidered together.

As Jonathan Raban notes, ***“As a literary form, travel writing is a notoriously raffish open house where different genres are likely to end up in the same bed. It accommodates the private diary, the essay, the short story, the prose poem, the rough note and polished table talk with indiscriminate hospitality”***.

The richest literature that exist today is New Travel Writing which is actually a fusion of biography, memoir and fiction. This new genre has risen as the travel writers have become more literary and less literal. The characteristics of new travel writing is ***“not what we see but how we see”*** Travelling and story telling go hand in hand .These fundamentals of human existence involve stages like seeing, feeling, understanding, believing, receiving and narrating it to others.

Individuals travel beyond their own societies to satisfy their human instinct – curiosity about the world beyond theirs. But it wasn't only curiosity that nurtures their desire of exploring the new world. Since time immemorial trade, commerce, opportunities, pilgrimage, migration, economic opportunities could be amongst the many reasons which lured them for a foreign travel. After the invention of writing maintaining records of foreign travels became possible. In the ancient times rulers sought relevant information about their realms through travel accounts which held especially strong appeal to them. Some of the travellers were Herodotus, Anatolia, Zhang Qian, Ptolemy, Strabo who gathered information and reported on travels in Egypt , Persian Wars, Central Asia and Bactria, Mediterranean world respectively. IbnBatuta returned to his final destination- his home place Morocco after his visits to Central Asia, China, sub-saharan Africa. Mediterranean Europe. Some pilgrims like Faxian, Xuanzang, Yijing travelled to India to study with Buddhist teachers, collect holy texts and visit the places of pilgrimage and their experiences were recorded as written record. Among the Christian travellers one name which is a landmark in the history of travel accounts is of Marco Polo of which his sojourn in China and his travelling is best depicted. A travel writer decides his own boundary to carry out his travel writing experiments. A travelogue is the

outcome of a travel writer's own journey through a place spiritually and intellectually affected by the writer's personality.

To Paul Theroux travel never occurred to him and transformation was an unspoken wish but he believed in the importance of elsewhere and wanted to be at the place elsewhere. All travels have the human characteristics : the desire to move, to fulfill the curiosity to explore the unknown, to make friends, to enjoy nature, to become a daredevil at times, to face challenges and consequences and so on. A traveller is a loner and he has moments of solitude to share. Travellers write travel literature as they are avid readers and passionate travellers.

Philip Larkin remarks in 'The Importance of Elsewhere' –

These are my customs and establishments

It would be much more serious to refuse.

Here no elsewhere underwrites my existence.

Some travellers are called travellers not because they go 'elsewhere' or 'nowhere' but its when they travel in their heads exploring whole new continents and worlds within opening new channels, not of trade but of thought.

References :-

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