

India as a Cultural Mosaic: A Study of William Dalrymple's Travel Works

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Abstract

It is said that learning from books is only one part of education, travelling is another. Travelling serves a number of purposes from exploring places, cultures, histories, legends, myths to self-discovery and familiarization with people, races, communities and societies. India, a country of remarkable diversities in terms of ancient traditions, artistic heritage and magnificent landscapes continues to fascinate travelers from all over the world. Our country is rich in wide range of Travel literature. Over the years, Travel Writing has emerged as an important genre of Literature, playing a significant role in the socio-political life of the world community. William Dalrymple, is an established Scottish born historian and travel writer. This research paper aims to explore further history and culture of India through the selected travel writings of William Dalrymple looking into conquests and defeats, invasions and subjugations, divisions and assimilations, cultural aspects etc which made India what it is today and also critically analyze as to how does the vision of the foreign culture influence and shape the discourse of travel narratives.

KEYWORDS: - Travel, history, culture, travel literature

Introduction

The philosopher saint Augustine has rightly said: "the world is a book, and those who do not travel read only a page." Travel Literature allows us to imaginatively visit places and times where we encounter cultures that we would otherwise never experience. Such literary travel can be profoundly enriching and rejuvenating as it seeks to communicate information about newly discovered lands or those which are little known to the reader. Having the element of romance, adventure, mystery, history, fantasy, disillusionment, fascination and culture, most of the travel writings share the common basis of mirroring the reality filtered through the writer's extra-ordinary powers of observation and honest response to his/her surroundings irrespective of the time and place where they are set. Travelogues at the hands of artistically creative and imaginative people offer platform for differentiating, editing, harmonizing and recognizing different cultures, through their keen power of observation, quickness of response, serious understanding and appreciation of the otherness. The travels ranging from those to beautiful natural landscapes to culturally, historically or religiously important destinations provide writers as well as the persons they meet and interact with a platform for forming, revising and correcting impressions and perceptions for the better understanding of self as well as others.

The travel writings of William Dalrymple prove to be fertile grounds for exploring different socio-political, historical and cultural aspects of India. William Dalrymple, winner of Thomas Cook Travel Book Award in 1994 is an established Scottish born historian and travel writer. Dalrymple visited India in 1984 and from that time he decided that he never wanted to leave. It was the ruins in and around India's capital- Delhi that fascinated him the most. His work *City of Djinnns: A Year in Delhi* marked the beginning of his fascination with Mughal History. This book is part travelogue and part memoir. The author spent nearly an year in Delhi discovering its history and archaeological riches. By exploring the old famous monuments, Dalrymple uncovers the unseen or neglected aspects of the city, which is ancient as well modern at the same time. He opens up about the culture, history, the whites who colonized India, Mughal History, the British Raj and also uncovers the history of rulers and conquerors as well as bloodshed and conquests. The Mutiny of 1857, partition massacres in 1947 and the riots after Indira Gandhi's assassination in 1984 all these things come alive in this book. The author travels back to the partition time and the riots of 1984. The author meets different people and observes that the scars are still healing up. He is astonished to find that people in Delhi have witnessed the most ugly face of violence and hatred. Still they are not willing to leave the city. Delhi and its people have adapted to the ups and downs very well.

Delhi was unique and it still holds that uniqueness, this quality is scattered all around the city, there were human ruins too. All the different ages of man were represented in the people of the city. Different millennia co-existed side by side. Minds set in different ages walked the same pavements, drank the same water, lived in the same surroundings and returned to the same dust. Some people in earlier times used to say that there were seven dead cities of Delhi and that the current one was the eighth while others counted it was either fifteen or twenty-one. But all the people specially the older generation agreed that the crumbling ruins of these towns were without number. And because of this uniqueness and mystic quality, Delhi became the city of djinns for William Dalrymple. Delhi was destined to appear in a new incarnation century after century. In this work, Dalrymple plots his own journey mostly from his childhood of shifting through the endless layers of Delhi's historical culture and historiography. In this process he discovers that in the everyday structures lies dormant splendid stories and great figures.

William Dalrymple landed up in this city when he was a newly married young man and was accompanied by his artist wife Olivia Fraser. In the very prologue to the book Dalrymple celebrates the unique characteristic of this city, the quality of rising back to life from its own ashes like a phoenix. Delhi has been visualized as a city which refuses to get annihilated and redefines itself after each phase of destruction. This book explores the backward journey in the history and culture of Delhi, a journey into the Orient with tales of Sufi's, Djinnns and mystics, decadent emperors with their harems and courtesans, beautiful Oriental women and fights of partridges. Delhi has been shown as a land of heat and dust, a land which has been improved and civilized by the British Raj. Dalrymple and his wife arrived in the City of Djinnns in 1989 . Their landlady, the formidable MrsPuri and her husband are like so many others in Delhi, they were the refugees of the Partition, number of Sikhs expelled from their home in Lahore during the upheavals of 1947. The terrors of those times have left MrPuri shattered but MrsPuri has

rebuilt the family's life and fortune with high willpower, discipline and strong determination. The Puris are the first of many vividly drawn characters who inhabit this city of djinns. Mr. and Mrs. Puri, Balwinder (the taxi driver), his father Punjab Singh and his brothers were the people who give firsthand account of their harrowing experiences of those turbulent times. It is at this juncture that Dalrymple makes reference to Trilokpuri massacre. The author also studied the accounts of various travelers who wrote about the then society, the state of music, culture and art, the clandestine diplomacy inside the courtrooms, the culture of different religions including different families and the history beneath. Based upon the letters that they wrote back home, various British civil servants like Metcalf, Lutyens, Fraser, etc have been pictured and their distinct approaches towards India and Indians has been well illustrated. Dalrymple records that since independence Delhi has undergone a sea change, Lutyen styled English bungalows with jamun and ashuphal trees have given way to high rise buildings and exposure to the western goods and comforts has also brought about the change in morality. He writes about the sinister strain in the attitudes of people who have become less tolerant towards each other's faith and beliefs. The author also discusses about the warmth and hospitality of Indian people he encountered during his visit to different places. This work also engages itself with the history and architecture of numerous building in and around Delhi. He particularly mentioned the tomb of Safdurjung, the last great Mughal structure of the seventeenth century. The glory and the ruin of the Mughal era were recounted in the same breadth, the ruins which were accelerated by the plundering of Nadir Shah. Decay and decadence is portrayed through the architectural ruin of this tomb. He also explored the history of the luxuriant Shah Jahan period, where a bloody battle for succession broke out between his two sons Dara Shikoh and Aurangzeb. It was also a period where the Mughals were at the zenith of glory, power and wealth. Yet, the author observes that this outward refinement in art and etiquette was a cover for some of the most torturous and heinous of crimes committed. From modern history, he goes back to the British Raj, and extensively covers the period which saw a rapid change in the British attitude towards the natives and all this happened within a period span of a century. The Whites who came either as part of the East India Company or as scholars or as travellers, were reverential to the Mughals. They assimilated the Orient culture and married Indian women. But as the power of the East India company grew gradually and the British conclusively established their rule in most of our nation, the equations drastically altered, and the natives were all rejected and ignored.

Dalrymple beautifully further adds another dimension to these stories and makes them much more interesting by introducing some modern day aspects, by introducing existing but long forgotten ruin or a living person who is directly related for example we get to know about Dr Jaffrey who serves as an expert on PuraniDilli, the Haxby sisters who were among the unfortunate Anglo Indians (Anglo-Indians, in fact, suffered the worst blow, as they found no acceptance on either side) and a visit to an Office of the Railways Board reveals a tykhana built for William Fraser. Travelling deeper into Delhi's history, the author also gives vivid portrayals of Ibn Battuta, the famous Moroccan traveller, who wrote about his journeys and Tughluk Khan, one of the most barbaric rulers of the 14th century. Through this work, the author throws a good deal of light on many important events that shaped the City which are mostly unknown to people. The Execution of elder Brother Dara Shikoh by Aurangzeb, the sibling Rivalry between

sisters Jahanara and Roshanara the latter being in close Proximity to Aurangzeb. The sexual allusions between Emperor Shahjahan and his daughter Jahanara. The Years spent by Ibn Battuta, the Moroccan Traveler in Tughlaks Delhi, the painful journey of Delhi inhabitants to Daluatabad. The conditions of Anglo-Indians and the lost cemeteries, tombs and fortresses etc. Dalrymple proceeds in a way by which he can capture the imagination of his readers. Dalrymple scratches the surface and then peels off layer after layer delving deep into the multilayered city. He supplants history and culture with lures which actively work to reconstruct the opinions about the British, the Mughals and the cultural aspects of the society. Dalrymple, in this work portrayed and explored the history and culture of a city disjointed in time, a city whose different ages lay suspended side by side, a city of djinns.

His another equally renowned work, *Nine Lives: In Search of the Sacred in Modern India* is a collection of nine stories of different people with the individual devotion in each of them which together summons up a whole world and sometimes ends with devastating twists. These stories show the ever-going struggle of the old and the fast changing face of New India, the diversity from North to South and East to West, highlighting very subtly and convincingly that somewhere at the root of it all the individuals struggle about the things that exist in our society, the beliefs and hopes that make their journey through life worth taking. This work reveals that India is still rich in religious experience, its spiritual quest are still very much part of the wrap and weft of daily life. As Dalrymple moves through India's "sacred topography," he assembles the biographies of nine people whose lives intersect with the divine. The subjects of these *Nine Lives* seek transcendence and divine communion in different ways. He travels through the length and breadth of the country to find the last remnants of mystic India. Given that westerners have always imagined ours to be a land of sadhus and snake charmers, it would be easy to conclude that this is perhaps primarily an attempt at selling exotica.

This book opens with the story of Prasannamati Mataji, a middle class woman who embraced the life of a *muni* or Jain ascetic as a young teen. As she describes it, "This wandering life, with no material possessions, unlocks our souls. There is a wonderful sense of lightness, living each day as it comes, with no sense of ownership, no weight, no burden." Personal religious practice in India can take a multitude of forms, some of them are really surprising for everyone. Religion can also serve to exalt, to bring hope to people. In the second chapter, Dalrymple speaks about Hari Das, one of the member of a group of *theyyam* dancers, costumed and dancing frenetically in the hopes of briefly incarnating a God. These Dalit people spend three months of the year as Gods and the rest of the time as jail wardens, construction workers, laborers and waiters. For them, *theyyam* serves as "a tool and a weapon to resist and fight back against an unjust social system as much as a religious revelation." This is perhaps the only context in which Dalits can assert some kind of superiority and power over the Brahmins in that very caste conscious part of our southwestern India. Other religious roles have become distinctly devalued, such as the devadasi. Devadasis were originally the "temple women" who were married to a god or goddess, serving a king or prince or brahmin. Now they are mostly prostitutes, although they still regard their vocation as a sacred one. Rani Bai was one of those Devdasi who was sold into the sex trade by her parents. Both her daughters did the

same because of financial necessity and unfortunately both of them died of AIDS in their teens only. The third chapter takes place at a West Bengal festival around the time of winter solstice, when thousands of Bauls, or wandering minstrels including a blind singer named Kanai, the protagonist gather to sing and dance. These people seek to channel the mysteries of sexuality and the sexual urge which is according to them the most powerful emotional force in the human body, as a way of reaching and revealing the divinity of the inner self. Chapter four is about a man named Mohan Bhopa and his wife Batasi which are two of the last singers of the Rajasthani medieval poem *The Epic of Pabuji*. Many hundred years old, this 4,000 line poem which describes about the epic story of a semi-divine warrior and incarnate god, Pabu, who died while protecting a goddess's magnificent herds against demonic rustlers. This whole process takes place five nights or more to recite in full, the telling of this great poem still considered as a divine ritual. The caste of wandering bhopas of which Mohan and Batasi are the part preserves these stories, they travel from community to community to recite them for the audiences while also serving as shaman, healer, exorcist and a mediator between people and the gods. In Chapter five, Dalrymple visits a Sindh in northwestern part of India, near Pakistan border and Indus river which is a home to all sorts of Hindu-Muslim syncretism. Sufis are still common there, mystics who believe in personal experiences of the divine. Lal Peri, the main protagonist is a fiftyish woman from Bihar in eastern India, who made her way to the west and became a devotee of the patron saint of the shrine at Sehwan Sharif. However shrines like Sehwan Sharif are now endangered by the rise of reformers and fundamentalists. The chapter six features the story of Passang, he was one of the monks who protected the Dalai Lama when he left Tibet for Dharamsala in 1959, he was a Tibetan monk who twice deliberately made the choice to take up arms and fight against the Chinese men when they invaded Tibet in around 1950 and later in the Indian army against Pakistan in the war which ultimately led to the creation of the country, Bangladesh. In between and afterward, he renewed his monastic vows and tried to engage in other good works. Chapter seven tells about Srikanda Stpathy, the latest in a long family line, stretching over 700 years of idol makers (God and Goddess). Even today he uses the ancient lost-wax method for casting bronze statues of a complex host of Gods and other idols. If properly and carefully prepared, such idols are thought to contain some sort of *jivan*, the life of the god depicted. They are considered to be divine. In The eight chapter, the author has tried to tackle the tantric system of Hinduism. The practice of blood sacrifices, Kali worship, Shamshan Sadhna etc has been carefully explored by the author and he has described these practices without raising any questions because he just wanted to observe and believe their beliefs. According to the author, All paths lead to God if followed with true faith. The last of the tales is also the most beautiful and satisfying. The path of bhakti, love and sanyas that the baul singers of east India have adopted is probably the most enduring. The bauls find happiness in being together, living together and singing their songs without any need of specific gods because they believe that God resides in every individual. These wanderers can spend their lives roaming around the country and tell about the generosity of the Indian system. Likewise each story revolves a central character who becomes a worthy narrator to explain the central theme of the story devoted a particular facet of the Indian cultural mosaic.

William Dalrymple has used the short story format to describe the multi-hued, many faceted and much misunderstood but magical mosaic that constitutes India. The

differences of language, food, culture history and religions encountered everywhere only reinforced the feeling of unity of our people by the way we Indians accommodate the differences and happily live with each other in all circumstances. Dalrymple's study of the people and beliefs of India ranks with the very finest travel writings. The writer's innings with India are long and colorful and affectionate which makes him one of the finest Indian travel writers.

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