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Travelogue as a Literary Genre

V.V.B. Rama Rao, Ph.D.

History and Travelogue

Travel Book, Travel Guide, Travel account and Travel Record all these can all be called travel writing. Some of these have relation more to history than to literature, since history in the past is sometimes culled from the explorer's and traveller's records. They are extremely valuable in spite of their not having high literary values. There is an encyclopedia of Literature of Travel and Exploration. Though these are called books and so literature, what makes a literary work is the unfolding or the revelation of the writer's feelings, personality, imaginativeness and fine turns of expression, to describe some qualities essential for literary compositions.

More than a Monologue

Travelogue, the dictionary says is after monologue, which is narrative with the aid of slides and pictures before an audience. But nowadays all travel writing is included in the term Travelogue. K.M. George, the compiler and editor of the *Encyclopedia of Indian Literature* included several entries from different languages under the head Travelogue. Broadly speaking Travel Essays may be just occasional pieces of writing of an comparatively transitory or ephemeral nature with no just claim to literary value. For example a Travel Guide, which is essential for a tourist has no literary merit in as such. Much of travel-writing is not primarily intended as a literary artifact.

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A Literary Genre?

Travel Accounts or Travel Literature needs to be looked at from the point of view of its purport, the manner of writing and the involvement of the writer's personality to be accorded the status of literature. Literary historians did not seem to be inclined to include travel writing as a genre or form of literature, both in our country and in the West. It is, however, not very easy to draw a clear line of distinction literary travel writing and non-literary writing. But some travelogues easily stand out as remarkable literary achievement.

We can generally agree that travelogue has a high degree of literary merit in conveying personally and informally the information relating to the journey, travel or peregrination involving spatial displacement. Travelogues, then, are primarily written in prose. It is helpful to agree that a travelogue, for our purpose here, is beyond recording observations without feeling or observations that do not arouse any feeling.

Travel Writing and Its Various Linkages

Travel essays could be primarily informative, offering worthwhile information to readers who wish to be travelers or tourists just as a hobby. As travel guides they are purely intended to give information regarding availability of food, facilities for accommodation, food etc indicating distances from various points to destinations, modes available for travel, places not be missed for sight seeing and such basic information.

Journey is a metaphor widely used in all literatures. It is used as a literary device in scriptures, epics and widely read literary artifacts. Travel is used in satire as in Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver Travels* or a means of conveying information in an interesting manner, or Joseph Addison's creation of a Citizen of the World are cases in point. There is a whole genre in English Fiction well received as the Picaresque Novel.

Backgrounds of Authors of Travelogues

Writers who produced travel accounts and travel-writing are from a variety of professions, temperaments, ages and climes. They have been adventurers, explorers, diplomats, scholars, missionaries, professionals like doctors and clergymen or just travel enthusiasts. Travel writings have linkages with History, Exploration and Adventure in its non-literary exposition and in its literary exposition with Autobiography and experience-related personality revelation.

In both the categories, travel, movement, journey and peregrination are involved in different degrees. Travel literature meaning travel writing can be classified in several ways according to its linkage.

A Classification of Travel Literature

The travelogue – meaning literary exposition of travel experience – may conveniently be classified again as

- (a) fantasy described or given as exposition of fact,
- (b) literature of recorded fact and
- (c) literature of artistic presentation of recorded impressions and feeling during travel.

The examples that readily come up to our minds are R.L.Stevenson's *Treasure Island*, of the 19th century, and the reports of foreign travelers to India like Megasthenes's *Indica* (of ancient times) and (c) *Scinde* or the *Unhappy Valley* of Richard Burton of the 18th century.

Fantasy is a very popular literary genre and *Treasure Island* is still a great favourite with school children.. The adventure and the suspense elements take the reader forward with ease as well as urgency to know what happens next. The place is imaginary but the adventures portrayed are fantastic. The introduction of characters, the conflict and the denouement are dramatized before the reader with élan. This novel has a high literary quality. Journalism and travel together yielded travel journalism, a special category wherein journalists travel and produce works with their intrinsic journalistic flair – from the point of a journalist.

Sometimes as in Graham Greenes' *Lawless Roads* or his *Journey without Maps*, the writer's personality and the journalistic presentation of facts are brilliantly presented. These have high literary value again.

Sometimes a tourist group of several individuals gone on a long travel, for example, on a pilgrimage to Kailash Manasarovar, the most important destination for Hindu religious enthusiasts next only Kashi (Varanasi, Banaras) or Rameshwaram.

Travel as a Literary Mode - Universal Feature

Travel as a literary mode and an adjunct in literary writing is evidenced in literatures of almost all languages. Homer's *Odyssey* is an account of the travels of the hero Odysseus. Dante's *Divine Comedy* is an account of a travel through the different regions of hell.

This device is used in our epics and *kavyas* (imaginative literary poetic compositions), in Sanskrit and other *Bhasha* literatures in our country. In the title *Ramayana yana* refers to journey or travel of Rama. *Mahabharat* describes Arjun's pilgrimages, again travels. In *Bhagavatpuranam* Balaram an Vidur takes to travels for self-purification. *Kavyas* too exploit travel motif as in Kalidasa's *Meghsandesh*.

In modern times, in Hindi, Rahul Sankrityayan (1893-1963), the culture icon, wrote several travel books of great literary value. In Malayalam Keshav Menon's *Bilayati vishesham* published in 1930 belongs to the same category. In Gujarati Kaka Saheb Kalelkar wrote *Jeevanleela*, considered a classic and widely translated.

Autobiographies record experiences, impressions revealing feelings, relating to certain incidents in one's own life. Such a work may also contain travel experiences and travel-related information but these may either just be incidental or not of much importance.

Travelogue – The Fully Emerged Literary Genre

Not very long ago, it has been the trend to consider travel writing as peripheral to literary writing. Academics considered this writing as not very valuable to be considered literary. Owing to the emerging trends of travel experience among the different categories of travellers and tourists, travellers with religious considerations like acquiring merit (*teerthayatras*) travels with journalistic motivation, travels for probing, understanding and reading histories with a new point of view, with personal, spiritual and philosophical motives and aspiration, travelogues came in the limelight.

Any systematic and aesthetic analysis of travelogue studies need to view the corpus selected for specified purpose with stress on the 'W's: who produced the discourse, where, when and how it is produced are all matters deserving study. We need to examine 'when' for broadly a travel discourse may belong to many categories, some of which readily could be stated. These categories do not purport to be exhaustive.

Travelogues through the Ages

Ancient writing: Travel Records of foreign travellers in India, Megasthenes, Fahien, Huen Tsang, Al Beruni. etc.

Medieval writing: Travel Records in the medieval times: Marco Polo, Ibn Batuta, Nicolo Conte, Abdur Razak, Dom Manuel, etc.

Pre-Colonial and Colonial writing: Scorer, Tavernier, Captain Basil Hall, Count Herman Keiserling, etc.

Colonial Writing: Robert Burton, Edward Gibbon, Hakluyt, Mark Twain, etc.

Many Splendored Journeys

The characteristics of each of the categories listed above are bound to be different. Tourist places of interest, cultural or religious destinations are spaces where different cultures throng, meet, interact and share information and experience. They are thrown into the company of one another to form and perceptions and exchange ideas and feelings.

The visits and stay at destinations help forming, correcting and revising ideas and perceptions for the better.

To-day's tourists and travellers are a thick medley of migrant, neo-settlers, short -time tourists and religious enthusiasts. Many a travelogue does contain literary merit and artistic excellence.

Travel accounts as literature are widely varied. There is no homogeneity in this form though it is surely a genre. The purpose of writing may vary from writer to writer and from time to time. So too the degree of subjectivity in the writing.. Travelogue in the hands of imaginative-artistic people charter fresh regions (fresh fields and pastures new) clearly demarcating, mediating, reconciling or harmonizing cultures through observation, understanding and mutual appreciation. Widening horizons is precisely the purpose of a travelogue.

A Tool to Understand Our History

A historical study of various travel texts help us to understand our history as well as the personality of the individual travel writers, their attitude towards the life of the people they traveled among, the ways of governance in those periods among various other things. What those writers saw, felt and experienced and the degree of their subjectivity or objectivity in their writing can be studied. We have a huge body exclusively of travel literature to be studied and analyzed distinct from the mere factual details they recorded.

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