International Journal for Multidisciplinary Research (IJFMR)
E-ISSN: 2582-2160 ● Website: www.ijfmr.com ● Email: editor@ijfmr.com

Exploring World Travel Literature History and Evolution of Travel Writings

Ms. Km Tinkal Gupta

Phd Research Scholar, English, Raja Mahendra Pratap Singh University, Aligarh

Abstract

One of the great and very adaptive forms of **World literature travel literature** which includes not only true travel accounts but also studies of culture, history, and ideology. Travel writing has been in a constant state of change in response to global human movement of people, power, and ideas, from prehistoric pilgrimages and medieval explorations to colonial reports and postcolonial responses. This paper looks at the literary, cultural, and political value of travel writings as they developed through time across cultures. In terms of reflecting cross-cultural exchange and human curiosity. We see how travel narratives evolved from simple facts to that of ethnographic and spiritual study.

Keywords: prehistoric pilgrimages, postcolonial, Ideology, culture and ethnographic.

Introduction

Travel literature is a large category of creative writing which instead of giving out practical travel tips does in fact present landscapes, cultures, and the play between people and nature as it also reports the author's own growth, experience, and transformation through travel. It includes a variety of genres like memoirs, reportage, essays and at times poetry which it uses to also put in play elements of anthropology and journalism to give a very in depth and personal account of a place from the point of view of the individual traveler. What we see in the very first 'travel narratives' which are before the medieval early modern period are the written (and oral which came before them) records of movement across space for trade, pilgrimage, diplomacy, exploration or out of pure curiosity. These texts are hybrid part geography, part ethnography, part narrative; they preserve observations about landscapes, peoples, customs, material culture, and political events while reflecting the author's world view. While we research the travel history, we will find that the roots of travel writing are found in classical antiquity.

Lionel Casson in his Travel in the Ancient World (1974) observed ancient travel writing within the **economic, political, and social fabric** of antiquity. "From the earliest merchants of Mesopotamia to the periegetes of Greece, travel was an act of expansion—of trade, power, and knowledge. Ancient travel literature reflects the movement of civilization itself." (Casson, 1974).

Herodotus's Histories (5thBC) written for Greek and Roman Mediterranean ethnographic curiosity and narrative detail that combine historical narrative with descriptions of foreign people. "Of all men, the Egyptians are the most religious; for they have set up innumerable temples and statues to the god." (Herodotus, Histories, II.37), shows the traveler as a moral observer who interprets cultural practices through his own lens.

"In Egypt, the priests told me that the sun, instead of rising as with us, sometimes rises where it now sets, and sets where it now rises. Yet the river flows from south to north, contrary to all other rivers, and is swollen not by rain but by the melting of snow, though no snow falls in Egypt. Of such things I report what I have learned; I am not obliged to believe them all alike."
(Herodotus, Histories, Book II.)
This is one of the earliest examples of **travel ethnography**—Herodotus records natural phenomena, myths, and customs, while questioning their veracity. This passage exhibits the empirical curiosity that defines ancient travel writing. "The Ethiopians are said to be the tallest and most handsome of all men; their customs differ greatly from those of others, and particularly in this, that they choose the tallest and strongest of all their countrymen for their king." (Histories, Book III). Herodotus merges geography, anthropology, and storytelling—turning travel into a **cross-cultural study** long before anthropology exist.
In "Herodotus and the Invention of History", **Mary Beard**a Cambridge Classicist in her essay argues about Herodotus' ideas "Herodotus' curiosity about other people's is not a sign of credulity but of cultural imagination; he writes not to report facts but to explore the limits of human understanding." (Beard, 2002).
The works like **The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea** (1st CE, by some anonymous Greek merchant or sailor) written for **Red Sea / Indian Ocean Traditions** were practical sailing guides or coast-wise descriptions used by merchants and sailors that evidence an interconnected maritime trade network and provide practical information about ports, goods, and sailing.
"After Barygaza there is the coast of the land of Ariaca, reaching to the great river Sinus, where ships come from the regions beyond. The merchants bring wheat, rice, sesame oil, cotton cloth, muslins, and cane sugar; and they receive in return wine, coral, and thin clothing from Egypt. Beyond lies the land of the pirates, where navigation is perilous, but beyond that again is Muziris, a great city of trade, abounding in ships that come from Arabia and from Egypt."
(Periplus of the Erythraean Sea, §§ 48–56)
This quote vividly records the **economic networks and maritime routes** that linked the ancient world. The Periplus transforms travel into a practical geography of global exchange. "They sail with the Etesian winds, and their ships return before the setting of Arcturus, bringing with them pearls, ivory, silk, and tortoise-shell, and all manner of precious things."(Periplus, § 57). This establishes the fact during the era ancient travel history conforms the commercial experiences of trade and the nature of cross culture merging observations and also transformation of human experiences.
Moreover, Geographical Compendia and Topographies by **Strabo, Pausanias, and Pliny** consist Systematic descriptions of regions and cities. **Pausanias** in **2nd c. CE** produced a topographical Description of Greece combining antiquarian detail and local lore; **Strabo and Pliny** offered encyclopedic geographical works.
Strabo's Geographica (1st century BCE) combined description with analysis,

> "Our task is to describe the inhabited world, both in its parts and as a whole; to inquire into the differences between lands and peoples, their climates and customs, and the manner in which nature and political institutions combine to shape their lives. Geography is the eye of history, for without knowledge of places, deeds cannot be understood." (Strabo, Geographica, Book I.)Strabo connects **space with civilization** and **geography with history**, which influenced all later travel narratives.

"The men of India live differently from all others. Some dwell in cities, some wander without home, living under the open sky, subsisting on fruits and herbs; and there are among them philosophers who spend their lives in contemplation, despising wealth and pleasure." — Geographica, Book XV. Which shows early cross-cultural observation and moral reflection the **didactic purpose** of travel literature.

Pausanias in his **Description of Greece (2nd century CE)** writes,

> "The city of Athens has so many wonders that no man could tell them all. For its temples are not only of great size but adorned with the works of the greatest artists. There is the Parthenon, dedicated to Athena, where the goddess stands of gold and ivory, holding in her hand a Victory of four cubits. Around her shield are the battle scenes of gods and giants, wrought with such skill that they seem to live and move before the beholder." (Pausanias, Description of Greece, Book I).

Pausanias presents **travel as an act of cultural preservation**. His meticulous description transforms the journey into an archive of art and civilization."I have wandered through many lands, and in none have I seen sanctuaries so sacred, or offerings so splendid, as in Delphi; for here, even the silence seems divine, and the mountains stand like guardians of a god." (Description of Greece, Book X). This evokes the **spiritual and aesthetic sensibility** of ancient travel—an experience that blends geography with sacred awe.

The above cited texts were based on firsthand observation, oral testimony, earlier texts, and practical topographical knowledge written for the purpose of Practical guidance for merchants, mariners, pilgrims' that helped in Ethnographic and historical record-keeping (Herodotus, Pausanias), religious legitimization and doctrinal testimony (pilgrim narratives), Political intelligence and diplomacy (envoy reports, embassy letters), and for Intellectual curiosity and cataloguing the world — often for metropolitan audiences eager for knowledge of distant realms. This is notable that Ancient travel texts survived via medieval copies, papyri fragments, and translations consequently there is a problem of reliability.

During **the medieval era (5th–15th century)** the goal and tone of travel writing changed a lot. The stories people told about traveling during this time were affected by things like going on pilgrimages their beliefs, trading and fighting in crusades. This is different from people like **Herodotus, Pausanias, Pliny** or **Strabo** who travelled a time ago. They mostly travelled because they were curious wanted to learn about cultures or wanted to explore their empires. Travel became a way to talk about things and not just about moving from one place to another. It showed what people believed in whether they were Muslim or Christian. When people travelled in the Middle Ages, they were not just looking at things they were also trying to be closer to God make their faith stronger and understand how the world works by looking at the things around them. Traveling was a way to learn about life and the world and to find salvation. The medieval travel stories were about using what people saw and experienced to understand the world in a bigger way and to find their place, in it.

As **Mary B. Campbell** observes, "The medieval traveler does not discover the world; he re-discovers belief through the act of encountering difference."

The earliest and most influential medieval travel texts were **Christian pilgrimage accounts**, especially to the Holy Land. One of the earliest known examples is the **"Itinerarium Egeriae" (c. 381–384 CE)**, written by a Spanish nun, Egeria (or Etheria). In her detailed letters she writes about both of her devotion and ethnographic precision:

> "And when we came to Mount Sinai, where the Law was given, we ascended by many winding paths, and the ascent was long and painful. Yet the sisters sang psalms as they went, saying, 'We lift up our eyes unto the hills. When we reached the summit, the presbyter showed us the place where the glory of the Lord had appeared to Moses." (Egeria's Travels to the Holy Land.)

Fusion of geography and spirituality is common in travel literature. This is where space is considered sacred and the landscape is seen as a message.

Another genre is Pilgrimage Narratives having First-person accounts of sacred journeys (Christian, Buddhist, Islamic). In **South and East Asia** Buddhist pilgrim accounts of Chinese travelers **Faxian, 5th c.; Xuanzang, 7th c.** documented religious sites and social conditions in India and Central Asia; these texts are crucial sources for historians of religion and material culture. **Fa-Hien** in his **Record of the Buddhist Kingdoms (5th century CE)** writes

> "Crossing the great desert, there is neither bird above nor beast below. The road is marked by bones of men and beasts who have perished, yet we pressed on in faith, seeking the Law. When we came at last to the kingdom of Shan-shan, the people were gentle and the monks numerous; they had many copies of the Scriptures and honored the Three Jewels." (Fa-Hien, Record of the Buddhist Kingdoms**).**

Fa-Hien's tone fuses **pilgrimage and peril**—travel as spiritual endurance. This is among the earliest examples of travel writing as a form of **religious testimony**. "In Central India there are more than ten thousand monks; the king reveres the Law and builds monasteries wherever he can. The people are kind and honest, and life passes in peace; there is neither execution nor imprisonment." — Fa-Hien.

This exhibits the fact that travel literature in Asia combined moral admiration and cultural reportage.

Xuanzang's Great Tang Records on the Western Regions (7th century CE) notes**,**

> "In the kingdom of Magadha stands the great monastery of Nalanda, where ten thousand monks study day and night. They debate with precision, quote the Scriptures with clarity, and their fame extends across the five Indies. The king himself provides for their needs, and no man enters the gates without a pure mind."
> (Xuanzang, Great Tang Records, Book X).

Demonstrates **cultural and intellectual mapping**—Xuanzang's travel writing turns geography into an account of India's scholastic and spiritual life.

Further he writes "from here we passed southward through forests where the cries of strange birds filled the air, and came to a land where the people worship the sun and the moon. Their language is different, yet their hearts are sincere. "Xuanzang, Book VII .Xuanzangs' highlights **poetic ethnography** of early Asian travelers, where observation meets reverence.

The rise of the **Crusades** in 11th c, travel writing became part chronicling, part propaganda. **Fulcher of Chartres** and **William of Tyre** documented the First Crusade not only as military history but as a sacred mission. Missionary travelers like **John of Plano ,Carpini** and **William of Rubruck**, who journeyed to the Mongol courts in the 13th century, combined observation with diplomacy. Rubruck's Itinerarium (1253–55) remains one of the most precise ethnographic accounts of Central Asia before Marco Polo:

> "The Tartars have neither walls nor fixed abodes; they move with their herds wherever pasture is to be found. Their houses are carts covered with felt, and they live as if the

> whole world were their home. They are a people without idols, and their speech is swift and full of laughter."

William of Rubruck, Itinerarium1253–55.This anticipates modern ethnography, blending **scientific curiosity with religious purpose**, revealing how travel became a tool of cross-cultural understanding.

Marco Polo from Venice, a city-state that was a major maritime power in the 13th century. He was a Venetian merchant and explorer known for his 24-year journey along the Silk Road and his book The Travels of Marco Polo, documented his experiences in Asia. His Il Milione (c. 1298) expanded the European imagination beyond its known limits. Polo's account of his 24-year journey across Asia under the Mongol Empire merges mercantile detail with marvel and wonder:

> "The Great Khan has his palace roofed with gold, and the walls are of silver, adorned with dragons and beasts of every kind. In his empire, pearls are as plentiful as stones, and silk is worn by peasants. Yet among all his riches, the Khan esteems most the wisdom of his astrologers, who read the stars and guide his armies."(The Travels of Marco Polo).

His writing shifts travel literature toward **global awareness**, constructing Asia not as myth but as a system of civilizations, economies, and philosophies. It inspired later explorers such as **Columbus**, who reportedly carried a copy of Polo's book on his voyages.

Parallel to Christian pilgrimage and crusader journeys flourished the **Islamic tradition of Rihla (travel writing)**. The most illustrious of these is **Ibn Battuta (1304–1368)**, who traveled over 75,000 miles across Africa, the Middle East, India, and China. His Rihla synthesised **faith, observation, and cosmopolitanism**:

"The traveler must be patient, for every step is a lesson. From Damascus to Delhi, from the deserts of Arabia to the shores of China, I have found the same truth: the world is vast, yet the hearts of men are one." — Ibn Battuta, The Travels.Islamic travel writing like Ibn Battuta's presents the world as a network of faith, trade, and cultural coexistence—an early model of **global interconnection** centuries before colonialism.

It should be mentioned that not all medieval travel was literal. Works such as **Dante Alighieri's "Divine Comedy"** (1320) transformed travel into a moral allegory: Dante's journey through Hell, Purgatory, and Heaven mirrors the pilgrim's quest for spiritual enlightenment, turning **travel into a metaphor for human salvation and self-discovery**. "Midway upon the journey of our life, I found myself within a dark wood, for the straightway was lost." — Inferno, Canto I**.**

In Islamic travelogues **Ibn Battuta's Rihla (14th c.)** stretched across Africa, the Middle East, and Asia is an example blending legal, religious, commercial and anecdotal materials. **Ibn Battuta** traveled across the Islamic world and beyond, producing a cosmopolitan, wide-ranging narrative that mixes jurisprudence, courtly observation, and local customs.

Ibn Battuta – Rihla (14th century CE) defines **travel as a spiritual and narrative journey**—a bridge between experience and storytelling. 1"When I set out from Tangier, I was alone and without companion; my only aim was to visit the sacred House and the tomb of the Prophet. Yet the road led me beyond my intention, and the lands I saw were more than I had ever dreamed. I have journeyed through the realms of kings and the tents of shepherds, over deserts and seas, through safety and peril alike, and in every place I have found the mercy of God." — (Ibn Battuta, Rihla) .

"The wonders of India are beyond reckoning. I saw a tree so large that a thousand men could stand in its shade; and I saw cities where the people speak a hundred tongues, yet live in peace. The sea is full of ships and strange creatures, and the sky burns with the color of saffron at dusk." — Rihla.

This is a poetic example of **imaginative geography**, turning observation into mythic vision—an enduring trait of ancient and medieval travel writing.

Thus, Medieval travel writing stands at the crossroads of **faith and fact**, **vision and observation**. Whether through the sacred footsteps of **Egeria**, the diplomacy of **Rubruck**, the mercantile realism of Marco Polo, or the cosmopolitan reflections of Ibn Battuta, the medieval traveler sought both **God and knowledge**. These texts bridge the ancient curiosity of Herodotus and the modern sensibility of Dalrymple, proving that travel writing is never merely about movement—it is about the perpetual human need to **understand the world and one's place within it**.

In the early modern period, travel literature became the textual instrument of empire. The voyages of **Columbus, Magellan,** and **Drake** were not mere discoveries but acts of inscription—the world was rewritten through European perception. Travel narratives merged with imperial propaganda, offering descriptive, ethnographic, and economic data to justify colonization. Medieval travelers like **Marco Polo** and **Sir John Mandeville** used to write about wonders, myths, and cosmographies that combined faith and fantasy. The Renaissance and the Age of Discovery displaced this theological cosmology with empirical curiosity. The focus moved from mirabilia to veritas—from the miraculous to the measurable.

Richard Hakluyt's editorial prefaces invoked divine and patriotic duty, declaring English exploration as a "manifest destiny of trade and conversion." Stephen Greenblatt, in Marvelous Possessions, argues that the act of describing the "new world" was an act of appropriation: "To possess a place, one must first represent it" (Greenblatt 6). So Early modern travel literature functioned as a textual colonization of space, trying to establish epistemic authority through the traveler's gaze. The narrator acted as both explorer and ethnographer. this is what Mary Louise Pratt calls the "seeing-man," whose perspective organizes and hierarchies' difference (Pratt 7). **Hakluyt's Principal Navigations** (1598–1600) compiling eyewitness accounts that claimed authenticity and national utility. As Mary B. Campbell notes, "the Renaissance traveler became a conduit of verification rather than vision" (Campbell 121). Travel thus became a mode of knowing, mapping, and mastering—a literary as well as political enterprise.

In his **Journal of the First Voyage (1492), Columbus** repeatedly equates description with ownership. He says "I discovered many islands inhabited by many people, and I took possession of them all for our most fortunate King, by proclamation made and with the royal standard unfurled, and no one objected." his quote shows that **narrative declaration functions as a legal act**. The formulaic language— "took possession," "royal standard unfurled"—shows how travel writing operates as an extension of imperial law. The people encountered are shown as passive and voiceless, meanwhile the land is transformed into a textual commodity. Thus, Columbus's travel narrative shows a tradition in which **writing precedes and legitimizes conquest**, reinforcing Greenblatt's claim that representation is the first act of possession.

In contrast, medieval travel writing used to privilege marvel over verification. **Mandeville** writes "In many countries are folk of diverse shapes and some have heads like dogs, and some have no heads and their eyes are in their shoulders." This quote exemplifies what later Renaissance travelers would reject as fantasy. The emphasis is not on accuracy but on moral and theological symbolism. This kind of writings constructs the world as spiritually meaningful rather than empirically knowable. therefore, this transition from Mandeville to Hakluyt marks a **paradigm shift from allegory to evidence**, from faith-based cosmography to proto-scientific observation.

Hakluyt explicitly politicizes travel writing. In the preface to **The Principal Navigations**, he argues "The reading of histories of foreign countries stirreth men's minds to noble and worthy enterprises… and openeth unto us the secrets of navigation, trade, and empire." Here, travel writing is openly framed as a tool of expansion. Hakluyt transforms individual journeys into a **collective national archive**, converting movement into policy. In His work he tried to establish travel literature as a systematic, state-sponsored discourse.

Consequently, this reveals how travel writing evolves from **mythic narration to empirical documentation**, and finally to **imperial knowledge production**. This tradition forms the backdrop against which modern and postcolonial travel writers—especially William Dalrymple—writes against authority, replacing possession with historical empathy and ethical inquiry.

In the eighteenth-century travel became an epistemological genre. Enlightenment rationality filled the travelogue with a scientific ethos. **Captain James Cook'**s voyages and **Joseph Banks**'s writings exemplify the blend of adventure and taxonomy. Then Travel became observation, producing what Foucault calls a "regime of knowledge"—the systematic ordering of flora, fauna, and human societies. Travel was no longer an incidental narrative of movement instead became a systematic mode of knowledge production. Captain James Cook's voyages show this transformation because in his **Journals**, he repeatedly defines travel as disciplined observation, "I had every opportunity to observe the Genius, Temper, Disposition and Number of the Natives, and to remark upon the nature of the country, its produce, and the manner in which it is cultivated."

This emphasis on observation shows how travel writing became align to scientific inquiry. Human societies were reduced to "temper" and "disposition," but landscapes were evaluated for productivity. Cook's narrative shows neutrality, and enacts what Michel Foucault called a "regime of knowledge," wherein observation functions as a form of power. Classification, measurement, and description convert the unknown into the governable.

In his travel writings **Joseph Bank was** describing the natural world, records flora and fauna with exhaustive precision, transforming landscapes into scientific specimens.

Simultaneously, the Grand Tour emerged as a form of aristocratic self-fashioning when British travelers like **Tobias Smollett, Laurence Sterne**, and **Lady Mary Wortley Montagu** went to travel for moral and aesthetic education. Where **Tobias Smollett's Travels through France and Italy** treats travel as moral judgment, **Laurence Sterne's A Sentimental Journey** foregrounds subjectivity and emotion. Sterne writes "I pity the man who can travel from Dan to Beersheba and say, 'Tis all barren". This how travel becomes an inward, affective experience rather than mere geographical movement, anticipating Romantic subjectivity.

Lady Mary Wortley Montagu in her **Turkish Embassy Letters (1763)** observes, "I see no reason why the Turkish women should be blamed for hiding their faces, since it gives them entire liberty of following their inclinations without danger of discovery." Here Montagu challenges male Orientalist fantasies by granting Ottoman women agency and privacy so even after her sympathetic account she remains framed through a European gaze.

Travel literature thus became a hybrid discourse that shows both Enlightenment empiricism and Romantic subjectivity. That also mirrored the dialectic between reason and imagination, objectivity and self-reflection.

The Romantic period marks an epistemological shift in travel writing from Enlightenment empiricism to inward vision. Travel ceased to be merely a means of cataloguing landscapes or peoples and became a mode of **self-fashioning**, an aesthetic and emotional pilgrimage.

Movement through space is frequently used as a moral and spiritual teaching tool in **William Wordsworth's The Prelude**. Wordsworth describes how external grandeur destroys logical mastery while recalling his Alpine crossing:

> "The immeasurable height Of woods decaying, never to be decayed, The stationary blasts of waterfalls, And in the narrow rent at every turn Winds thwarting winds, bewildered and forlorn" (The Prelude, Book VI)

Here, nature is a force that overwhelms the perceiving subject rather than an object to be possessed. Traveling turns into an encounter with the sublime, leading to humility and increased awareness. According to Jonathan Bate, Romantic travel writing promotes "a poetics of dwelling rather than domination, where movement through nature generates ethical awareness" (Romantic Ecology).

Samuel Taylor Coleridge shows his inwardization of travel by considering imagination as the true vehicle of movement. In Biographia Literaria, Coleridge gives more importance to mental voyage over physical journey. He argues that perception itself shapes reality. Moreover, his Rime of the Ancient Mariner, though maritime, is less a travel narrative than a psychological ordeal, where wandering becomes penance and spiritual trial. The mariner's endless movement reflects what Romantic travel repeatedly reflects in their work—the soul in exile from harmony.

In writings **Lord Byron** radicalizes Romantic travel by fusing geography with alienation, exile, and political despair. His Childe Harold's Pilgrimage alters the Grand Tour into a meditation on history and selfhood:

> "I have not loved the world, nor the world me; I have not flattered its rank breath, nor bowed To its idolatries a patient knee" (Childe Harold, Canto III)

Disillusioned traveler of Byron is moving not toward enlightenment but away from belonging. He says "I live not in myself, but I become\Portion of that around me" (Canto IV). Signals a Romantic ontology in which identity dissolves into landscape and memory. Travel becomes a form of existential dispersal. James Buzard notes that Romantic travel writing "recasts mobility as a crisis of selfhood rather than a triumph of knowledge" (The Beaten Track, 58).

However, Romantic travel is not untouched from imperial affairs. Its fascination with the East converts colonial spaces into aesthetic spectacles. Byron's Oriental tales—The Giaour, The Corsair, Lara—construct the East as sensual, timeless, and tragic, less a lived geography than a poetic projection. Edward Said says about this, "Romantic Orientalism was not a flight from history but a highly structured way of seeing that converted the East into an imaginative possession" (Orientalism, 157).

The picturesque gaze gives the Orient static and consumable, making imperial desire through beauty rather than conquest. Romantic travel writing thus participates in what Mary Louise Pratt calls the "anti-conquest narrative"—a posture of admiration that nonetheless sustains asymmetrical power.

Meanwhile, women Romantic travelers introduced **gendered subjectivity** into travel discourse. Mary Shelley's Rambles in Germany and Italy (1844) rewords travel as emotional survival after loss. After the deaths of her husband P.B.Shelley and her children, she writes, "I travel to calm sorrow, to escape memory, and yet memory follows me like a shadow, mingling itself with every scene." So here, travel is not discovery but endurance. Space becomes internalized, and movement shows psychological negotiation rather than mastery.

Anna Jameson's Diary of an Ennuyée doesn't tell a story of triumphant adventure. Instead, her travel is filled with tired reflection and doubt. She writes, "I am weary of seeing merely to say that I have seen. I would rather feel one place deeply than pass lightly over a hundred." For Jameson, travel isn't about collecting new places. It's about emotional depth, a clear challenge to the more typical, masculine stories of conquest and discovery.

Lady Hester Stanhope further disrupted the conventions of Romantic travel, by occupying traditionally masculine spaces of Eastern travel. Her journeys in the Levant withstand both domestic femininity and imperial docility, presenting travel as autonomy and self-exile.

Similarly, Lady Hester Stanhope disrupted the conventions of Romantic travel. By journeying extensively and independently through the Levant, she occupied spaces traditionally reserved for male travelers. Her travels defied contemporary expectations of both feminine domesticity and compliant tourism, reframing travel instead as a radical form of autonomy and self-chosen exile.

In this way, Romantic travel writing is full of contradictions. At once it appears as emancipator and complicit, introspective yet imperial. It alters travel into an aesthetic and emotional experience, giving more importance to imagination over empiricism, while simultaneously participating in the symbolic appropriation of colonial space. This Romantic legacy profoundly shapes later travel writing, providing the emotional and philosophical framework to Victorian, modernist and postcolonial travel narratives.

19th Century transformed Travel writing from an individual pursuit into something closer to a national duty. By the time Victoria took the throne in 1837, Britain's global reach had expanded to the point where travelogues weren't just popular reading—they were instruments of policy, tools of commerce, and, as Mary Louise Pratt would argue, essential technologies of colonial surveillance. The genre became what Sara Mills calls "a discursive map of empire," a way of making the world legible to British readers while simultaneously justifying its appropriation. What makes Victorian travel writing so rich for analysis is that it's never simply one thing. These texts contain adventure stories and scientific reports, spiritual autobiographies and commercial prospectuses. They have—genuine curiosity versus cultural arrogance, moments of genuine connection undercut by assumptions of racial superiority, critiques of colonial exploitation that somehow never question the rightness of colonial presence. The Victorian travel writers include **Richard Burton, David Livingstone,** and **Mary Kingsley** who made travel a rhetoric of knowledge and duty.

In **Burton's Personal Narrative of a Pilgrimage to Al-Madinah and Meccah (1855)** he went to incredible lengths to understand Islamic culture—disguising himself, mastering the language, and following every custom. He famously wrote about how he prayed in mosques and lived as they did. "I spoke their language, wore their dress, conformed to their customs, and prayed in their mosques; yet all the while I remained what I was—a stranger among them". This confession shows the limits of Victorian ethnography. For Burton and many Victorians, getting close to another culture didn't break down barriers. It just made the hierarchy more sophisticated. His deep curiosity was tied to a sense of surveillance; what he learned wasn't for connection, but for a subtler kind of control. This narrative posture is what scholar Mary Louise Pratt calls the "anti-conquest." It is a stance where a traveler presents themselves as a humble, objective observer, all the while quietly reinforcing the power structures of empire (Pratt 37). Thus the Victorian travel writings looks, as Sara Mills argues, "a discursive map of empire," a kind of written blueprint that made European expansion seem logical, even righteous, by framing it as simple, objective fact (Mills 81). The writer's gaze itself became a tool, quietly teaching readers to see the world through a hierarchy where Europe was naturally at the top.

In **David Livingstone**'s **Missionary Travels and Researches in South Africa (1857** narrative voice is straightforward, practical, suffused with Scottish Presbyterian earnestness. But that plain style is itself an ideological strategy.

his famous triad that he quoted—"Christianity, commerce, and civilization"—Livingstone genuinely believed these three forces would work together to uplift Africa. The slave trade, he argued, could only be defeated by "legitimate commerce"—the exchange of African raw materials for European manufactured goods. Mission stations would become trading posts; trading posts would become centers of civilization; civilization would prepare the way for the Gospel. It was a coherent vision, and Livingstone pursued it with extraordinary courage and endurance.

Mary Kingsley's Travels in West Africa (1897) gives us a different angle on Victorian travel writing—and has attracted significant feminist and postcolonial criticism for good reason. On the surface, Kingsley seems to disrupt the imperial paradigm. She travelled alone through regions where European women simply didn't go. She traded with local people, learned from them, and developed genuine respect for African cultures—particularly for what she called "fetish," the complex spiritual practices that missionaries dismissed as primitive superstition. Her critique of missionary arrogance is sharp and funny: she had little patience for men who'd spent decades in Africa without learning a single local language or understanding the first thing about how African societies actually worked.

she quoted about Africans not being "degraded because he is different; he is only misunderstood." It's a remarkable statement for a Victorian woman to make. And yet, as Sara Mills argues in her influential reading, Kingsley's critique is aimed at improving colonialism, not ending it. She thought missionaries were counterproductive. She thought administrators should learn from local practices. She never questioned whether Europeans should be in Africa at all.

This creates what Debbie Lisle would call a "postcolonial ambivalence" in Kingsley's text. She aligns herself with Africans against the worst abuses of colonial power, but she remains embedded in colonial structures. Her travels were funded by trading—she bought and sold goods with the very people she was studying. Her scientific collections (she discovered several new species of fish) fed the same taxonomic machinery that, as Pratt argues, turned living cultures into specimens for European classification.

There's also the question of Kingsley's self-presentation. She famously called her journey a "lark" and downplayed her achievements in ways that frustrated later feminist critics trying to recover her as a proto-feminist heroine. Mills suggests this self-deprecation reflects the constraints on Victorian women writers—they couldn't claim authority directly, so they developed indirect strategies: humour, irony, the pose of the charming amateur. Kingsley's "lark" is a survival strategy, a way of doing serious ethnographic work without appearing to threaten masculine prerogatives.

But Frances Bartkowski, writing more recently, complicates this reading. Comparing Kingsley to Zora Neale Hurston, she suggests that women travel writers developed what might be called a "model of seduction rather than conquest"—a relational, dialogic mode of engagement that contrasts with the linear, goal-directed narratives of male explorers. Kingsley doesn't conquer; she converses. She doesn't claim mastery; she accumulates relationships. The model has its limits—it's still a form of imperial presence—but it's not simply the same as Burton's surveillance or Livingstone's civilizing mission.

Charles Darwin in **Voyage of the Beagle (1839)** represents a distinctive mode of Victorian travel writing that complicates the imperial paradigm. Darwin wasn't a missionary, an explorer in the heroic Mold, or a trader. He was a gentleman naturalist, traveling as a supernumerary on a Royal Navy surveying expedition. His purposes were scientific, not commercial or evangelical. And yet his writing is

saturated with imperial assumptions—sometimes explicitly, sometimes in ways that only become visible through critical analysis.

Consider his response to Tierra del Fuego, which Paul Turner quotes in the Oxford History of English Literature: "One's mind hurries back over past centuries, and then asks, could our progenitors have been men like these? —men, whose very signs and expressions are less intelligible to us than those of the domesticated animals". This is classic Victorian racial thinking—the Fuegians represent an earlier stage of human development, a living fossil that proves the progress of civilization. But notice the ambivalence: they're also "progenitors," ancestors. The disgust is mixed with a kind of recognition.

Or consider his account of a runaway slave who killed herself to avoid recapture: "In a Roman matron this would have been called the noble love of freedom: in a poor negress it is mere brutal obstinacy". The irony is savage—and clearly intentional. Darwin is exposing the racist double standard, showing how the same act is interpreted differently depending on who performs it. He's capable of seeing through imperial ideology even as he remains embedded in it.

Tom Chaffin's recent biography emphasizes how much of Darwin's voyage was spent on land—three years out of five—and how deeply he engaged with local peoples and cultures. He rode with gauchos in Argentina, observed slavery in Brazil, climbed mountains in Chile. The Voyage is not just a scientific report but a travel narrative in the fullest sense, full of observation, reflection, and what you might call ethnographic curiosity.

From a theoretical perspective, Darwin's writing exemplifies what Pratt calls "anti-conquest"—the pose of the innocent, objective observer whose gaze is purely scientific, not political . But that gaze was never innocent. The specimens Darwin collected, the observations he recorded, the classifications he developed—all fed into a European knowledge system that was inseparable from imperial power. When Darwin marveled at the "wild luxuriance" of tropical forests, he was also, indirectly, marveling at resources that would soon be extracted, environments that would soon be transformed.

What ties these four writers together—beyond their Victorian context—is their shared location within what Pratt calls the "contact zone": the space of colonial encounter where peoples meet, clash, and grapple with each other . Each navigates that zone differently. Burton performs intimacy while maintaining distance. Livingstone preaches partnership while assuming hierarchy. Kingsley critiques exploitation while benefiting from presence. Darwin observes scientifically while participating, unwittingly, in the great project of imperial knowledge-making.

Thus Victorian travel writing "oscillates between documentation and dream, science and story" captures this beautifully. The task now is to show, through sustained attention to individual texts, how that oscillation works—and what it reveals about the Victorian imagination in all its ambition, its blindness, and its occasional, surprising insight.

In Modern period after World War I Journeys appear **discontinuous, episodic, and psychologically fragmented**, reflecting the shattered worldview. travel writing rejects linear, confident narratives of exploration. Travel mirrors the broken modern consciousness rather than geographical discovery.

D. H. Lawrence's Sea and Sardinia (1921) he talks about journeys to south in search of a pre-industrial vitality, Lawrence writes, "The world is a great machine, and we are all parts of it, reduced to functions. The more we become civilized, the more we lose the dark, living roots that once held us to the earth. We travel not to know, but to escape—from systems, from order, from the terrible clarity of modern life." (Lawrence, Sea and Sardinia, 1921).

This quote shows the modernist traveler's paradox: movement arises from dissatisfaction rather than curiosity. As **Raymond Williams** notes, modernist travel writing "registers not the recovery of lost community but the impossibility of its return" (Williams, The Politics of Modernism, 64). Sardinia functions less as a destination than as a mirror reflecting modern alienation.

E. M. Forster's A Passage to India (1924), though a novel, operates as one of the most profound modernist travel texts. The Britishers used to think that they understand India's culture and are successfully administrating it. This epistemological confidence collapses in the Marabar Caves episode,

> "The caves are readily described." A circular room with a diameter of roughly twenty feet is reached by a tunnel that is eight feet long, five feet high, and three feet wide. Nothing, nothing attaches to them, and their reputation—for they have one—does not depend upon human speech. An echo begins in some indescribable way to undermine the hold on life, and seems to rise from the depths of the earth itself." (Forster, A Passage to India, ch. XIV).

The echo—reducing all sound to the meaningless "boum"—obliterates rational explanation. India resists interpretation; the colonial traveler confronts the failure of knowledge itself. Forster thus exposes the limits of imperial epistemology, replacing authority with uncertainty. As **James Clifford** observes, modern travel writing reflects a shift in which "travel is no longer the heroic movement from the center outward, but a continuous negotiation of displacement, translation, and difference" (Clifford, Routes, 19). Other interwar writers such as **Robert Byron, Freya Stark,** and **Graham Greene** talk uncertainty.

Freya Stark writes about her Middle Eastern journeys, "I wanted not geography, but moments of being—those rare instants when the mind and the world seem briefly to correspond, before breaking apart again." (Stark, The Valleys of the Assassins, 1934). She emphasised solitude and introspection over authority. Her travel writing replaces the imperial gaze with vulnerability and self-awareness.

Travel is transformed into a historical elegy in **Robert Byron's 1937 novel The Road to Oxiana.** Here he reflects on Islamic architecture amid political decay,

> "Everywhere one is conscious of a civilization that has reached extraordinary perfection and then been abandoned. These buildings are not ruins in the romantic sense; they are remains of an order that once possessed coherence, beauty, and belief, now standing in mute contrast to the disorder of the present." (Byron, The Road to Oxiana, 1937).

Byron's journey mourns the erosion of cultural depth under modernity. Travel becomes an act of preservation rather than conquest.

In **Graham Greene**'s **Journey without Maps (1936)**, Africa appears as psychological and spiritual trial rather than adventure. Here travel narratives push modernist travel toward moral unease. "I traveled not to find maps, but to lose them—to enter a region.

Post-1945 travel literature **Second World War**, the **collapse of European empires**, mark a shift from imperial confidence to **self-conscious, fragmented, and ethically aware narratives**. post-war travel texts interrogate **identity, power, and representation**. As Edward Said observes, travel writing is deeply implicated in **"structures of power and knowledge"**, and post-1945 writers begin to question these very structures and is marked by epistemological uncertainty. **"The traveler is no longer a master of landscapes but a witness to their historical wounds."**

V. S. Naipaul like a diasporic subject write in **India: A Wounded Civilization (1977)** as insider and outsider.

> "India had been wounded, not merely by foreign rule but by a deeper historical exhaustion. The confidence of an ancient civilization had been broken, and in its place there was mimicry, confusion, and a longing for forms that no longer carried meaning. One felt everywhere a retreat from responsibility into myth, ritual, and the consolations of the past." (Naipaul, India: A Wounded Civilization, 1977)

Naipaul's travel narrative shows both critique and nostalgia, His authority derives not from imperial confidence but from displacement. As **Paul Gilroy** theorizes, such writing enacts **"postcolonial melancholia,"** a condition in which the afterlives of empire generate unresolved grief rather than closure (Gilroy, Postcolonial Melancholia, 90).

Paul Theroux's writing destabilizes the genre's moral ground. In **The Great Railway Bazaar (1975), Theroux** shows exhaustion, irony, and disenchantment but not discovery, "Travel in the modern world is not about revelation but about endurance. The places blur, the people repeat themselves, and the journey becomes a test of patience rather than curiosity." (Theroux, The Great Railway Bazaar, 1975). Theroux's traveler does not shows romanticization; yet critics have noted that his ironic detachment sometimes reproduces asymmetrical judgments. His work exemplifies what Debbie Lisle calls the "postcolonial ambivalence of contemporary travel writing," where critique of empire coexists with lingering privilege (Lisle, The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing, 42).

Bruce Chatwin's **In Patagonia (1977)** highlights a blending of travel, fiction, memory, and myth. "I had a theory that the world was a series of fragments, and that travel was not about completing the picture but about moving among these fragments, knowing they would never quite join." (Chatwin, In Patagonia, 1977). Chatwin's travel writing abandons empirical coherence, generates stories rather than knowledge. Travel becomes narrative assemblage rather than geographic certainty.

Simultaneously, **non-Western travel writing** emerges as a powerful counter-discourse, reversing the colonial gaze. **R. K. Narayan**'s travel essays present India not as spectacle but as lived familiarity. "I travel not to interpret India, but to recognize it—to see again what daily life makes invisible." (Narayan, My Dateless Diary, 1960). Here, travel is stripped of exoticism. It becomes an act of recognition rather than explanation.

Amitav Ghosh's In an Antique Land (1992) writings blurs boundaries between history, anthropology, and memoir. Rejecting the authority of the Western traveler, Ghosh writes, "This book is not a journey in the conventional sense. It is an attempt to write a history without borders, to follow the movements of people whose lives were shaped by travel long before Europe named the world." (Ghosh, In an Antique Land, 1992). Ghosh's narrative dismantles Eurocentric historiography, replacing it with what James Clifford calls "travel as translation rather than conquest" (Clifford, Routes, 44). Movement becomes dialogic, grounded in reciprocity and archival humility.

Dalrymple's In Xanadu (1989), City of Djinns (1993), and **The Last Mughal (2006)** reconstruct Indian history through travel, juxtaposing past grandeur with postcolonial decay. His method exemplifies what Clifford calls "travel as cultural translation"—a dialogue between movement and memory.

Dalrymple's texts combine archival research with embodied travel, producing what might be termed historiographic travelogue. He revisits colonial archives not as authority but as interrogation. As **Tim Youngs** observes, "contemporary travel writers inherit both the burden and the possibility of the imperial archive" (The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing 202). Dalrymple's works in this regard are of a different tone they are of re-discovery which is in fact an ethical reengagement with India's past

which is multi layered. In the case of recent travel writing which does in fact look at post-colonial issues memory is put forth as a travel itself. The act of going back to the sites of former empire Delhi, Kabul, and Cairo is in reality a attempt at remembering what was left behind. Dalrymple's travel which takes in ruins, palaces, and archives brings to life the complex past of empire. His travel writing becomes a repository of empathy which **Elleke Boehmer** terms as "post imperial remembering". Travel today is of the known which it reinterprets instead of the unknown; it questions belonging, history and identity. As globalization today blends geographical borders, travel literature grows into a discourse of cultural exchange rather than conquest.

William Dalrymple's works embody this culmination: He goes out to learn not to assert dominance, to remember not to name. In his stories the colonial archive is a mirror which presents the violence as well as the vibrancy of cross-cultural exchange. Today travel literature is less a field of exploration and more a study of coexistence it maps the moral landscapes of our inter connected world. Also post 1945 travel does not seek in to the past for knowledge, classification or discovery; instead, it is a practice of remembrance, translation and moral debate. The traveller goes through histories rather than geographies, into the incomplete stories of empire. In this transformed genre, travel writing functions not as a record of movement, but as a critical meditation on belonging, loss, and cultural coexistence.

Conclusion

Focused here on the development of travel writing as an exploration of Indian culture, history, and socio-political consciousness since its classical and Romantic roots, through Modernist disenchantment to postcolonial reinitializaton (and drawing particularly from William Dalrymple's body work), this paper digs into more than 30 years (1992-2023) of travel literature by a single author. This study shows Travel writing is an ideologically bound genre, tightly dependent upon historical, political and epistemological functionality which evolves in accordance with prevailing trends. How travel literature from the Romantic inward turn to Modernist fragmentation and postcolonial ethical self-reflexivity Travel writing is always negotiating with the questions of power and perception and representation.

Easily the key finding of this research, and posted here as yet another teaser for one of Dalrympale's works, is that postcolonial travel writing—especially for someone like Dalrymple—is an unequivocal departure from the imperial logic of possession. In contrast to colonial travel writing which intended to classify and coerce, Dalrymple redeploys his travelogues as historiographic and dialogic texts that emphasize palimpsests, cultural memory, and indigenous voices. Rather than eschewing exoticism, his engagement with India situates travel as an act of listening, history recovery and cultural humility. It also demonstrates that Dalrymple inherits elements of Romantic aesthetic sensibility and Modernist self-doubt, but transcends both through a postcolonial ethics of encounter.

This research is particularly interesting in current times as it questions how mobility, identity and cultural difference are described in a world that has become more globalised but at the same time probably politically less coherent. In an era when travel is mediated by tourism, digitality and neo-imperial power structures this work demonstrates that travel writing constitutes a critical literary practice that challenges the cultural stereotypes and historical amnesia. It illustrates how travel narratives that operate responsibly can build understanding rather than vindicate power asymmetries.

This work holds relevance across a range of interdisciplinary fields including postcolonial studies, cultural history, anthropology and global literature. This positioning of Dalrymple in a wider literary genealogy helps to rethink travel writing out of its marginal genre position and into a serious intellectual

and ethical discourse, adding nuance to the field. Future studies might continue this investigation through the analysis of digital travel writing, eco-writing, indigenous travel narratives or even comparative analyses between such South Asian and African postcolonial travel writing. Research along these lines would shed light in new ways on how travel writing continues to function as a reflective mode responsive to the global realities of today.

References

1. Beard, Mary. "Herodotus and the Invention of History." **The Cambridge Companion to Herodotus**, edited by Carolyn Dewald and John Marincola, Cambridge UP, 2006, pp. 1–18.
2. Banks, Joseph. The Endeavour Journal of Joseph Banks. Edited by J. C. Beaglehole, Hakluyt Society, 1962.
3. Bate, Jonathan. Romantic Ecology: Wordsworth and the Environmental Tradition. Routledge, 1991.
4. Battuta, Ibn. The Travels of Ibn Battuta. Translated by H. A. R. Gibb, Hakluyt Society, 1958.
5. Beaglehole, J. C., editor. The Journals of Captain James Cook. Cambridge UP, 1955.
6. Boehmer, Elleke. Colonial and Postcolonial Literature. Oxford UP, 2005.
7. Byron, Lord. Childe Harold's Pilgrimage. Edited by Jerome J. McGann, Oxford UP, 1986.
8. Byron, Robert. The Road to Oxiana. Oxford UP, 1937.
9. Campbell, Mary B. The Witness and the Other World: Exotic European Travel Writing, 400–1600. Cornell UP, 1988.
10. Casson, Lionel. Travel in the Ancient World. George Allen & Unwin, 1974.
11. Chatwin, Bruce. In Patagonia. Penguin, 1977.
12. Clifford, James. Routes: Travel and Translation in the Late Twentieth Century. Harvard UP, 1997.
13. Coleridge, Samuel Taylor. Biographia Literaria. Edited by James Engell and W. Jackson Bate, Princeton UP, 1983.
14. Columbus, Christopher. The Journal of the First Voyage. Translated by Cecil Jane, Penguin Classics, 1988.
15. Dante, Alighieri. The Divine Comedy: Inferno. Translated by Allen Mandelbaum, Bantam, 1982.
16. Darwin, Charles. The Voyage of the Beagle. Penguin Classics, 1989.
17. Dalrymple, William. City of Djinns. Penguin, 1993. ---. In Xanadu. Vintage, 1989. ---. The Last Mughal. Bloomsbury, 2006. Egeria. Egeria's Travels. Translated by John Wilkinson, SPCK, 1999.
18. Fa-Hien. A Record of the Buddhist Kingdoms. Translated by James Legge, Dover, 1965.
19. Forster, E. M. A Passage to India. Penguin Classics, 2005.
20. Foucault, Michel. The Order of Things. Vintage, 1973.
21. Ghosh, Amitav. In an Antique Land. Vintage, 1992.
22. Gilroy, Paul. Postcolonial Melancholia. Columbia UP, 2005.
23. Greenblatt, Stephen. Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World. U of Chicago P, 1991.
24. Hakluyt, Richard. The Principal Navigations, Voyages, Traffiques and Discoveries of the English Nation. 1598–1600. Penguin, 1972.
25. Herodotus. The Histories. Translated by Aubrey de Sélincourt, Penguin Classics, 2003.
26. Jameson, Anna. Diary of an Ennuyée. Oxford UP, 1985.
27. Kingsley, Mary. Travels in West Africa. Penguin Classics, 2005.
28. Lawrence, D. H. Sea and Sardinia. Penguin Classics, 1997.

29. Lisle, Debbie. The Global Politics of Contemporary Travel Writing. Cambridge UP, 2006.
30. Mandeville, John. The Travels of Sir John Mandeville. Translated by C. W. R. D. Moseley, Penguin Classics, 1983.
31. Mills, Sara. Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism. Routledge, 1991.
32. Montagu, Lady Mary Wortley. Turkish Embassy Letters. Penguin Classics, 1994.
33. Naipaul, V. S. India: A Wounded Civilization. Vintage, 1977.
34. Narayan, R. K. My Dateless Diary. Viking, 1960.
35. Pausanias. Description of Greece. Translated by W. H. S. Jones, Harvard UP, 1918.
36. Periplus of the Erythraean Sea. Translated by Wilfred H. Schoff, Longmans, 1912.
37. Pratt, Mary Louise. Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation. Routledge, 1992.
38. Rubruck, William of. The Mission of Friar William of Rubruck. Translated by Peter Jackson, Hakluyt Society, 1990.
39. Said, Edward W. Orientalism. Vintage, 1978.
40. Shelley, Mary. Rambles in Germany and Italy. Penguin Classics, 1987.
41. Sterne, Laurence. A Sentimental Journey. Oxford UP, 2003.
42. Strabo. Geographica. Translated by H. L. Jones, Harvard UP, 1924.
43. Theroux, Paul. The Great Railway Bazaar. Penguin, 1975.
44. Williams, Raymond. The Politics of Modernism. Verso, 1989.
45. Wordsworth, William. The Prelude. Edited by Jonathan Wordsworth et al., Norton, 1979.
46. Xuanzang. Great Tang Records on the Western Regions. Translated by Samuel Beal, Munshiram Manoharlal, 1983.
47. Youngs, Tim. The Cambridge Introduction to Travel Writing. Cambridge UP, 2013.