A Brief Study of Modern Literature of Travel

Chapter - I

INTRODUCTION

DEFINITION AND GENERAL CHARACTERISTICS

A highly fascinating subject, a mirror of the mind of the modern Englishman, a psychological study of a wandering tribe of writers, a subject that depicts fully the character and moral rhythm of the nation, and which shows prose style at its best, has been completely neglected merely because travel smacks of geography, of countries and continents, places and regions, oceans, islands and mountains. A very fine branch of English prose—modern literature of travel has grown, developed, blossomed fully, and is already declining, but no notice of it has been taken, and there is not a single book on the subject which should have paid homage to these dreamers and wanderers, and should have appreciated these excellent pieces of literature. In some cases one really feels delighted like Keats on first opening Chapman's Homer, and discovering new realms of mind, men and lands. The literature of travel tells the story of the psychological expansion of England; the writers have set up a new empire of literature that extends to all oceans and islands and continents; and like the island of Ariel and Caliban these lands of dreams have a perpetual spring, yet they have all climates, horizons, manners.

"But the painter, the novelist, the poet, the philosopher roam through the world, live the life of the nations, settle among them, drink in the charm, the atmosphere, the colour, the moral suggestions of the soil, the sky and the men. Never before have the wandering intellectuals, rich or poor, some times living by the labour of their hands, tramps of roads, of cities, and of harbours, who leave England, to come back some day or never, and mingle with their work the flavour of foreign countries, been more numerous". 1

1. Leqouis and Cazamian - History of English Literature. London -1937, Pt 1372,
A writer and traveller like Lafcadio Hearn stands for a psychological thirsting for variety, newness and mystery; his advent marks the stage when the cup of industrialisation was filled and men longed for a new philtre. The restlessness that culminated in Kipling and other writers of the Empire was at first a cultural dis-satisfaction. Reason and Economics gave plenty but no peace, and favours of the heart had no remedy in the west; Hearn found it in the Kokoro (heart) of Japan.

A grand avenue leads to the court of a temple, and from the court a flight of steps fully fifty feet wide, massive, mossed, and magnificently balustraded leads to a walled terrace. The same makes one think of the approach to some Italian Pleasure garden of Decameron's days. But reaching the terrace you find only a gate opening into a cemetery. Did the Buddhist Landscape gardener wish to tell us that all pomp and power and beauty lead only to such silence at last? 1.

The modern English literature of travel, one of the branches of modern prose richest in original beauty, is probably the most extensive in the world, and hence even a brief study may attain to a greater mass than desired, but brevity has to be kept in view to show its development coherently and harmoniously. The object of the study is to survey the rise and development of this new type of literature of travel, different from the travel accounts of sailors, warriors, and explorers of the past; they wrote travel books but not literature of travel. Kinglake enunciated the principles of this new literature when he expressed fears about the irregular form of this soothsayer, he did not know that he was ushering in the modern literature of travel in which the personality of the author and his imagination count more than the facts and figures concerning foreign lands.

My notion of dwelling precisely upon those matters which happened to interest me and upon none other would be of course intolerable in a regular book of travels. If I had been passing through countries not previously explored, it would have been sadly perverse to withhold careful descriptions of admirable objects merely because my own feelings of interest in them may have happened to flag; but where the countries one visits have been thoroughly and ably described and even artistically illustrated by others, one is fully at liberty to say as little, though not quite as much as one chooses. 1.

This habit of referring the whole external world to his own sensations compels the modern writer of travel books to describe objects not as they are, but as they appear to him; it is his vision of men and lands that he presents; the facts are seen, moulded imaginatively, and shaped artistically by a truly poetical mind. These travellers and tramps talk from lofty heights, the surface of life does not concern them; they are prophets and seers in their own way.

"We have choice to live in the shadow and shine of outer life, where visions fade, or to live with all the beauty we have ever known, where it is reasurred in the heart. Choosing the former we at last perish with the world, but choosing the latter we ourselves receive immortality in the here and now". 2.

"When a star passes a star once in the thousand years, or perhaps once in the forever and does not meet again, what a tale has each to tell. So with tramps and wanderers, when two meet upon the road what a tale of life is due from one to the other. Many tramps have I met in this world". 3.

The Modern literature of travel voices beautifully a hidden love of escapism; it is not the Elizabethan love of adventure and hardship, but a love of travel for the sake of travel.

"The lovely dawn; the lovely pure wide mornings, in the mid sea, so golden, aired and delighted with the sea, like sequins shaking, and the sky far far above unfathomably clear. How glad to be on a ship, what a golden hour for the heart of a man. Ah if one could sail for ever, on a small quiet lovely ship, from land to land, and isle to isle, and saunter through the spaces of the lonely world". 4.

1. Kinglake-Evatathan
These modern travellers despise facts, mere collection of data, and the boring erudition of research scholars.

"I do not care where the battle was fought or the queen slept, nor out of what window the poet looked; but a landscape rich in these vague associations gives me a deep pleasure and I could cry out at the lovely thickness of life, as different now from ordinary existence, as plum pudding from porridge!"

A traveller is a mystic, and a visionary, and the book of travel is his gospel; man travels on this earth only a few times, and clouds of mystery cover his lonely ways on the road of life.

"He can live his life many times over, and his memory is not merely of the passing of time but of lovely scenes and incident of stirring delight and surprise, ready to awake at call. In a sense other than that in which Sir Thomas Browne used the words, he can truly feel there is all Africa and her prodigies in us! ....... I am one of many times, many worlds, and many beings."

A true book of travel reflects the free spirit of a happy wanderer looking at life like Hazlitt, with no ties with the world; it has more sunshine and free air than other books; the birds sing, and the streams flow, but the "gentlemen" sits and meditates and is happy.

"Oh it is great to shake off the trammels of the world and of the public opinion, to lose our importunate tormenting everlasting personal identity in the elements of nature, and become the creature of the moment, clear of all ties, to hold the universe only by a dish of sweet breads, and to owe nothing but the score of the evening.........and no longer seeking for applause and meeting with contempt, to be known by no other title than the gentleman in the parlour.........But I had no sooner read these words than it occurred to me that here was an admirable name for a book of travel and I made up mind to write it."

That in a way is the true spirit of the modern traveller and modern travel books, and Stevenson expresses it best; he journeys but does not want to reach; he demands his "bed in the bush with stars to see."

"The untainted Kosmos may abide
I pass a wilful stranger
My mistress still the open road
And the bright eye of danger" 1.

In Stevenson the moods of travel and vision are deeply related and he indulges in both moods freely; seeing and travelling are constantly present in his books and they blend and modify each other in the most intimate way.

"But we are travellers in that John Bunyan calls the wilderness of the world - all too travellers with a donkey, and the best that we find in our travels is an honest friend. He is a fortunate voyager who finds many. We travel indeed to find them". 2.

A Book of travel is as much a piece of inspiration as any other work of art, and without this touch of genius and fine madness it becomes a dull travel account of a log book; the gods preside over the birth of such a book.

"Now there is another thing book writers do in their prefaces which is to introduce a mass of nincompoops of whom no one ever heard and to say "my thanks are due to such and such". If I omit this believe me it is but on account of the multitude and splendour of those who have attended at the production of this volume. For the stories in it are copied straight from the best authors of Renaissance, the music was written by the masters of the 18th century, the Latin is Erasmus's own, indeed there is scarcely a word that is mine. I must also mention the Nine Muses, the Three Graces, Bacchus, the Maenads, the Panthers, the Fauns; and I owe very hearty thanks to Apollo". 3.

The literature of travel is a veritable gallery - giving simple and deeply etched pictures of men and fine crowded frescoes of nations: study of individual and national character is best made through these books.

In Spain it is the men that are the poems, the pictures, and the buildings. Men are its philosophies; they lived, these Spaniards of the golden age; felt and did; they did not think. Life was what they sought and found, life its turmoil, its fervour and its variety. 1.

"Yet all this time they never searched the bed, my wife was lying in bed all the while; obviously there might have been half a dozen set-machine guns under the mattress, not to mention a library of Trotskyist documents under the pillow. Yet the detectives made no move to touch the bed, never even looked underneath it. I cannot believe this is a regular feature of the Gou routine. One must remember that the police were almost entirely under the communists, and these men were probably communist party members themselves. But they were also Spaniards, and to turn a woman out of bed was a little too much for them". 2.

The range and scope of travel books is so wide that not only the human world but the world of animals and plants too is beautifully depicted; this earthiness of style, this primitive charm of real life, this picture of cruel and brutal struggle gives a strange power and force to prose.

"Fisi the hyena, hermaphroditic, self eating, devourer of the dead, killer of the calving cows, hanger, potential eater of the face at night while you slept, sad voyager, camp follower, stinking foul, with jaws that crack the bones that lion bares, belly dragging, looking back, mongrel dog, little weaner, and then the horrid circle starting". 3.

The modern travel literature is capable of giving as good a picture of life as poetry or drama; and the travel writer is doing as good a duty as any other writer.

"Humanity requires a coherent picture of itself, and its world, a picture in which the conflicting variety of detail can be related to the unity of overall pattern, and the picture must be redrawn in every age". 4.

The literature of travel has importance in more fields than generally imagined, it reveals secrets unknown to the historian and the sociologist,

"Again and again I have found that one glance at a landscape with the living eye reveals the answer to riddles that cannot be read from a lifelong study of maps and monographs. I had always been unable to grasp the causes of the power of Assyria. How had this country, which occupies so small a patch on the map, found the power to subjugate the whole of the 'fertile crescent' and Egypt, and Elam as well. True, Assyria exhausted herself by the effort, but how had she ever mastered the strength to succeed at all". 1.

The modern travel literature like all good literature has a bearing on the philosophy and practice of living this life; it is a silent, wise and gentle teacher giving secrets, hints, and mysteries of existence.

"It is best to lay our plans widely in youth, for then the land is cheap, and it is but too easy to contract our views afterwards. Youths so laid out, with abroad avenues and parks, that they may make handsome and liberal old men". 2.

The modern travel books are, some of them the finest specimens of narrative and descriptive prose; style can be cultivated without any bondage of form, regard for tradition, fear of the public or the prevailing literary fashions.

"But if you like language for its own sake; if it amuses you to string words together in the order that most pleases you, so as to produce at least a semblance of beauty, the essay or the book of travel gives you an opportunity. Here prose may be cultivated for its own sake.

Your style can flow like a broad placid river, and the reader is borne along on its bosom with security; he need fear no shoals, no adverse currents, rapids, or rock strewn gorges. The danger of course is that he will be lulled to sleep, and so not observe the pleasant sights, along the bank with which you have sought to divert him". 3.

The subject has great literary significance. Culture has crossed its banks like the Nile, and has inundated many deserts and sand dunes; it is a study of Hume's dictum that change of soil gives new vigour to culture and literature; it is a demonstration of Toynbee's principle of 'exodus and return', how things move out of the place of origin and return from foreign lands with greater beauty and strength. This great branch of modern literature has risen, has blossomed fully, and is already declining.

This study is a brief account of the main trends of this literature, its growth and full development; it does not presume to cover all travel books, because without literary beauty, personal touch, and imagination travel books enter the domain of Geography, exploration, and mountaineering, and cease to be our concern. It is a brief study of this altogether neglected branch of modern prose.

2. **THE SCOPE OF THE STUDY**

The scope of this brief study of modern literature of travel extends mainly to the important literary books of written travel mainly since the last decade of the 19th Century; and the authors are considered only so far as their books of travel are concerned. A study of the original books, the method, form, style, and language of the authors as revealed in these books, their attitudes, philosophies, and outlook on life, their narrative and descriptive powers, their capacity to understand people and nations, and their skill in portraying them, their comparative profundity and shallowness - is given in these pages. Life - history of the authors, the story of publication and of different editions, minor changes and alterations in the texts of the different editions, relations with the contemporary critics, and their general comments - are most often ignored. Time and place are given proper importance; there is no effort to manipulate material, and show the rise and fall of different systems and 'isms' when such a thing does not exist. All good books of travel - by good is meant fairly good pieces of literature - about all the different lands written since the last decade of the 19th century - and having all the characteristics of a modern book of travel are included in this study; sometimes even artistically defective but well-known books have to be included to show that the judgements about these books given in the past by some critics are open to doubt. Quotations are most often given from the original books; critics and critical books are quoted very rarely, and that too only to supply details of some other connected facts which have a direct bearing on the books in hand. A large number of other books of travel cannot be given a place in this brief study because they have little or not
literary or historical significance. Sometimes even popular authors are completely ignored because they write novels, stories, and thrillers, and no regular books of travel: most of the Safari books about Africa, journals of sailors going to the Arctic and the Antarctic, accounts of mountain expeditions, and other adventure stories and hairbreadth escapes cannot be included in this study except where their defects and literary blemishes come under discussion for purposes of comparison. It may be said that this study is an appreciation of all the fine modern books of travel written in English. No time has been wasted to collect useless references to unknown books and authors, and footnotes have not been used as show windows to make a display of articles not really available, brevity has all along been kept in view.

3. PLAN OF WORK:

The nature of the subject demands that place and time must be given due consideration; the books of travel about Latin America cannot be mixed up with the books about China or India; hence different chapters have been formed to deal with books concerning different geographical regions. At the same time a regular development of literature during the last hundred years must be traced in a chronological order. The present arrangement combines both these considerations. It is not possible to arrange books only according to decades or eras or schools of writers because somehow Geography makes its influence on literature of travel. When Kinglake and Gertrude Bell were writing literary masterpieces about Asia-Africa was still a dark continent, and only dull books of exploration were being written; Latin America was invaded by literary men only in the late thirties; and the Polar regions are still waiting for a new
Stevenson to go and travel with a new Modestine; not a single
good book of literature has as yet come from the Poles. There
are regions within regions; books of travel about Asia are
arranged in a certain order: Arabia and all the ancient Persian
lands come first, then come India, Tibet and Burma; China and
Japan a come next; all Russia — European as well as Asiatic is
included in the section about Europe and U.S.A. which are
considered together for cultural reasons.

Then there is a further division — the books written up to
1920 form the first part; books written between 1920 and 1940
form the second part, and the books written after 1940 form the
third part. This arbitrary division into periods works out
successfully; the two ways stand as barriers between the old
and the new.

4. THE DIFFERENT CHAPTERS:

The First Chapter is Introductory.

The Second Chapter deals with the literature of travel about
Asia written up to 1920; it is a study of the great pioneers;
they include the great empire builders, administrators, soldiers
and scholars. It is the age of the psychological expansion of
India; they are confident of their supremacy, and their impe-
rialism gives them calm confidence, faith, patronisation
of foreign people, and admiration of their art and architecture.
It is the age of giants; Kingslake, Doughty, Gertrude Bell, Sir
Francis Young, husband march across continents; they are heroic
figures; their prose work has power, force, dignity and
originality. Kipling is a representative figure of this age, but
his aggressiveness shows some inner doubts. Lafcadio Hearn
represents the doubts in the heart of industrial Europe, he goes
to Japan to gather faith from the Nōwaka fields.
The Third Chapter gives a discussion of travel books about Asia written between 1920 and 1940; it is the period of glory and abundance in the literature of travel; the books of travel become deeper and profounder; if the pioneers reveal the face of Asia these new writers reveal the very heart and soul of these lands. Great literary figures - E. M. Forster, Somerset Maugham, Aldous Huxley, T.E. Lawrence loom large on the Asian horizon; mystics, soldiers, administrators and journalists come pouring in. Thus there is a rich variety of books, and the level of prose, is also uneven. There are fine wizards of prose like E.M. Forster, and there are dull hacks too. Literature of travel touches the peak, and these heights are never regained by the new writers working after the Second Great War.

The Fourth Chapter covers the literature of travel about Asia written since 1940. It is a new world, the world of aeroplanes, and new political creeds; the new travellers study not men but problems; they do not travel simply for the sake of pleasure, and those who do, do not possess sufficient literary skill to describe their delightful experiences. The British empire in Asia has already disappeared; it inspires no great deeds and no great thoughts; it is definitely a period of decline.

The Fifth Chapter deals with the literature of travel about Europe and U.S.A. written up to 1920. Stevenson, Thoreau and Mark Twain are the three great influences moulding the new travel literature; they stand between the old and the new. Stevenson in particular is a symbol of the new age; his adventurous spirit and his fine style, his great care for every word and syllable - make him an ideal example for others to follow. Stephen Graham and W.H. Davies follow in his footsteps; both
are queer creatures; the former travels as a poor peasant in Russia, the latter wanders as a beggar in U.S.A. and England; both of them are superb masters of prose. Mark Twain laughs his way through Europe, and along the Mississippi; his humour is original, and his satire is highly sympathetic; Hilaire Belloc coins a new type of humour which combines French delicacy with English generosity of heart. Arnold Bennett's satire is bitter, and he looks at life through the smoke of the Five Districts. Kipling is fiercely bitter; he hits with cruel ferocity, but his mastery of language is dazzling. Thoreau represents the group of thinkers and philosophers, they travel to seek wisdom; depth and sincerity, philosophic agony marks the work of Thoreau. This search for values is continued by the new writers, even humorous writers give beautiful passages containing deep thoughts and lofty reflections. A new development during this period is that of journalistic literature; travellers go to collect material in a spirit of inquiry; new books about England describing particular localities and special areas also make their appearance. The Sixth Chapter concerns the literature of travel about Europe and U.S.A. written between 1920 and 1940; it is the period of full blossoming and rich harvest; new and various trends appear during these years. D.H. Lawrence represents the new restless age of European intellectual crisis; men travel in search of happiness and new values of life. Dreiser applies the new scientific method of full analysis and concentrated study to a single city or a single location. J.B. Priestley uses the journalistic method for writing the literature of travel; Orwell brings a new idealistic sincerity and literary austerity to the study of real life, with a special interest in political ideals and military adventure. Walter Stark goes roaming among the gypsies with the old spirit of George Borrow; Hemingway invents a new primitive powerful earthy style to create the real earthy effect of the basic passions of life, love and death; a new vigour is added to modern prose; its simpli-
city and directness rids it of its burden of romantic associations. Rebecca West makes a classic out of her journalistic report *Black Lamb and Grey Falcon*. Ramsay Macdonald gives an excellent example of how politicians can be great writers of travel books because they see life in all its bearings; Massingham, E.V. Lucas and others specialise in local colour.

The Seventh Chapter gives an account of the literature of travel about Europe and U.S.A. written after 1940; it is certainly a period of decline; the old romantic tradition is dead; there is more travel but less literature. There is none who can stand a comparison with the old giants. Most of the new travel writers are tourists, photographers, reporters, political leaders, lecturers, pleasure seeker and other drifters. Russia is behind the iron curtain, no Stephen Graham can wander thither, and mix with the common populace. The few tolerably satisfactory books that appear are either about Greece or about U.S.A.

The Eighth Chapter deals with the literature of travel about seas and islands. Melville is undoubtedly the greatest writer in this sphere; his mystic symbolism, his gargantuan imagination, his amazing narrative and descriptive powers make him one of the great wizards of the sea. Conrad follows him closely; he describes the force and sublimity of the sea with great power; he describes the force and sublimity of the sea with great power; he describes his personal experiences in the form of many tales; this admirer of Marryat, and Cooper outdoes the Anglo Saxon writers in the imaginative grasp of the sea. R.L. Stevenson, Rupert Brooke, Frederick O'Brien, and Somerset Maugham sail to the islands in a boat of romantic origin; the beauty of the South Sea Islands in-a-boat-of-row and the Pacific Ocean finds the finest description in their work. Jack London cruises in the 'Snark' with great pomp, and gives his own version of the life and death struggle story of these islands; his primitivism adds a new strength to these soft narratives of dreamers. James Norman Hall and James Michener stand for the period of decline.
The Ninth Chapter contains an account of modern literature of travel about Latin America. It is surprising that Latin America has not attracted many eminent writers, poets and travellers; it is probably a result of the bad political conditions and the difficulties of language; in recent times Spanish literature originating in the colonies and provinces, and even independent states with Spanish cultural background - has not been good enough to attract foreign readers. Except N.M. Hudson no English writer has looked at these lands, with love and sentiment; he alone understands the heart of Brazil, and Argentina; but he is not a true traveller; he is a naturalist giving superb studies of life in the most charming prose. Lord Bryce knows more than others do; and Theodore Roosevelt is a good traveller but a poor writer. Aldous Huxley, Graham Greene, Evelyn Waugh and Peter Fleming who go there in the thirties take things seriously; they mock, laugh, and ridicule every thing Latin American.

The Tenth Chapter deals with the modern literature of travel about Africa. The books written up to 1920 deal mostly with exploratio and adventure; in spite of the great appeal of this dark continent the number of good books of travel is very small; in fact Africa has not yet become a subject of study for literary men. Africa and her forests are too big for the average writer; the imagination staggers the body fails, and the heart of darkness continues to be dark. Stanley and Mary Kingsley appeal to the imagination of every reader, but none could write worse prose than that boldest of women Mary Henrieta Kingsley. Only Hamilton Fyfe, and the novelist Francis Brett Young write acceptable prose. The years between 1920 and 1940 find princes and poets wandering to these lands. Evelyn Waugh laughs his way through Abyssinia; Graham Greene makes a journey without maps; it is a strange journey - both inward and out, and he reaches from where he starts. Hemingway alone writes about the real Africa;
Inspite of what the critics may say there is nothing that can
comparison with The Green Hills of Africa. The books written after
1940 again show a decline; soldiers give accounts of war adventures
in Africa; scientists study the continent with the object of
making it less inclement. Africa is still waiting for a fuller
understanding, and a better description.

The Eleventh Chapter has two parts: I. A note on the travel books
about the Polar regions and Iceland— and II. A note on journalism
and travel. The Poles have no doubt challenged the spirit of
man. Polar expeditions have been led by great heroes, men of
courage and practical imagination; but considered as works of literature
most of their accounts are just sailors' log books; beauty of
appeal lies in their deeds and not in their words. Even Auden and
MacNeice write dull and frozen letters from Iceland. Pierre
Berton shows what good literature about these cold regions may
be written some time in future.

Books by journalists move on an uncertain margin; a
book like Journey to Red China by Payne must be included in the
true literature of travel; books like John Gunther's 'Insides' are
books of journalism, but they have enough beauty to justify inclusion
in this study; Maurice Baring, Edgar Snow, Louis Fischer and John
Gunther must be given a place of honour in any history of books
of travel written by journalists.

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