Conclusion

This study has attempted to construct a mosaic of Central Asia through the medium of travel-writing. In doing this, it has been established that travel has always been an integral part of life in Central Asia from times immemorial to the present. The natives of this largely desert and mountainous region had to constantly engage in movement from one oasis town to another in order to supply all their needs. European interest in Central Asia began in the 13th century; various travellers arrived here, some with their missionary zeal and others with an interest in establishing trade links with the West. Initially, Western travel-writing on Central Asia displayed a tendency to exoticise this land which was so remote from European civilisation and so difficult of access. Most literary recreations of Central Asia served to reinforce this exoticised perception of the land. Notable examples are Coleridge’s poem *Kubla Khan* and Flecker’s collection *The Golden Journey to Samarkand*.

While literary imagination of Central Asia rarely deviated from the traditional exoticism even in the 20th century, travel-writing moved ahead to more practical considerations. This shift from mystification to an
interest in the economic possibilities of the land came about as a result of Imperialism. Various European countries struggled to establish their supremacy over Central Asia in an age when colonialism was the order of the day. Russia and Britain were two of the most avid participants in this power-struggle. The British were anxious lest their prize colony India be snatched from them, while the Russians, by virtue of being geographically nearest to Central Asia, slowly moved southwards. It could be said that in this political and economic tug-of-war (christened the Great Game by Kipling), the Russians were slowly but surely able to establish precedence over the British, in Central Asia. The land came to be absorbed into the Tsarist empire in the late decades of the nineteenth century. The travel-writing of this entire period is characterised by a consuming interest in the geography, economic and political climate of the land, which manifested itself in the form of maps, ethnographic and topographical surveys, economic and political reports and so on.

With the Soviet era came another Imperialist regime; Central Asian peripheries were used by the metropolitan Russia, exploiting their great natural wealth and immense human resources. The descent of the Iron Curtain over all the border lands of the Soviet empire effectively put an
end to the Great Game, or so it seemed. For a period of seventy-odd years the outside world saw almost nothing of Central Asia, except for a handful of long-suffering journalists and others who mostly received an impression of prosperity and progress under the Soviet regime. Very few travellers during this period have perceived the underlying disadvantages of the Sovietization of Central Asia. K.P.S. Menon’s writing gains significance in this context. Coming from a nation whose ideas of development and progress were closely modelled on the Soviet example, his criticism of the entire system and its effects on Central Asia offers a valuable dimension to the perception of this land.

Another traveller whose writing displays an even stronger critique of the Soviet regime in Central Asia is Paul Nazaroff. Although he was a European from the metropolitan culture of Russia, he had an acute awareness of what Edward Said would call ‘erasure’, that is, the Soviet suppression of the native cultures and histories of Central Asia. His opposition to the Bolshevik onslaught resulted in his becoming an alien in his own land, and he was forced to leave his native Tashkent for good. In the 20th century, exilic displacement was generally viewed as an opportunity for creativity and contemplation, by the West. However,
Nazaroff was not privileged by his exile, since it was involuntary and permanent. Despite this disadvantaged position as a fugitive in his own country, Nazaroff's writing is a unique attempt at reinscribing the gaps left in most Western portrayals of Central Asia. His inwardness with Central Asian cultures has led him to present a contrapuntal perception of this much-misunderstood land.

The study has also attempted to trace the development of travel-writing as a genre with specific reference to Central Asia. As Europe produced "the rest of the world" for its consumption, to reinforce its own identity, the genre of travel-writing came to include such diverse elements as economic and political reports, ethnographic surveys, religious tracts, mapping and so on (Pratt, Imperial Eyes 5). This trend is perceptible in 19th and 20th century travel-writing on Central Asia. The momentous changes that the land has undergone in social, cultural, political, economic and religious terms in this period have modified, and are reflected in, the travel-writing of the time. Thus the "worldliness of (travel) texts" on Central Asia has been demonstrated (qtd. in Kaplan, Questions of Travel 114); the study offers a critical overview of a palimpsest of meaning with reference to Central Asia. It ranges from the mainly spiritual quests of the
seventh century, to the more recent economic enterprise and political struggles of the 19th and 20th centuries, culminating in a post-colonial consciousness of the problems faced by ex-Soviet Central Asia.

Towards the twilight of the colonial era, travel-writing was pervaded by a certain world-weariness which sprang from disillusionment with decadent Western civilisations and dismay at their impact on the rest of the world (CCTW 81). An instance of this trend is Peter Matthiessen’s *The Snow Leopard* which encapsulates many of the motifs of post-colonial travel-writing, such as a fervent wish to escape the tawdry present of a sordid metropolis, a fear of past and future horrors and nostalgia for an earlier, lovelier world. The author joins his zoologist friend George Schaller who was bound for the Himalayas in search of the elusive Himalayan blue sheep. Peter Matthiessen has for his goal a glimpse of the near-mythic, rarely-sighted snow leopard, whose habitat overlaps that of the blue sheep. Leaving behind a soured marriage and the death of his estranged wife from cancer, he was trying to come to terms with himself in another part of the world which afforded a purer mode of existence. He does not sight the snow leopard, but the journey and his sojourn in the Himalayas lead him towards a possibility of inner peace.
The West still looks to the East for spiritual solutions to the angst born of a materialistic view of the world. But the true spirituality of the East is not available in a convenient packaged form that the Western traveller is accustomed to. Post-colonial Central Asia is awakening to a sense of its historic and legendary past in which several important religions of the East, including Hinduism, have had a place.

The Soviet superstructure that had dominated this land had seemed invincible. But with its gradual decline in the 1980's and complete dismantling in the 1990's, Central Asia had to confront fresh difficulties. The newly-independent republics now had to struggle with internal and inter-nation conflicts, problems of ethnicity and national identity and floundering economies. In this context, the lure of American dollars, against which most Central Asian currencies are steadily falling in value, has given rise to a new kind of economic Imperialism. As Central Asian countries confront spiralling prices, inflation and a rising level of unemployment, the only hope appears to be offers of monetary help from the outside world. With Soviet collapse, Russia's attitude to Central Asia was largely one of open hostility; even the dissident Alexander
Solzhenitsyn, famous for his opposition to the Soviet regime, was of the opinion that Russia could grow strong only after "it ha(d) shed the onerous burden of the Central Asian underbelly" (Rashid, Jihad 51). The new Great Game, being played this time by Russia, America, Iran, Turkey, Pakistan and China, appears to be a vivid case of history repeating itself in Central Asia.

In the aftermath of Soviet collapse, the predominant type of travel within Central Asia was that of forced displacement: mass deportations of refugees who were now suddenly bereft of their Soviet status and had only a confused sense of ethnic identity. Tourism, one of the most popular types of world travel, has not really caught on to Central Asia; the land appears to be completely out of the 'pleasure periphery' of the 21st century global traveller. The former Khanates of Central Asia which had lent such colour and lustre to this land lost a great deal of their historical importance in the Soviet era of rewriting Central Asian history. But now that the Iron Curtain has been drawn aside, it is not improbable that one day they will form the centre of attraction for tourists from all over the world, thus taking a tentative step towards creating for the different ethnicities of Central Asia a recognized and understood place in world
culture. Independent travellers from Asian countries such as India could go far in showing up the exclusivist tendencies of European travel-writing on Central Asia and present their own view of a land which hosts many different Oriental cultures. In the long run, it appears that Central Asia has withstood the ravages of history as well as European travel-writing with remarkable resilience. The heart of the Asian continent may face an uncertain future, but within the scope of this study, it is clear that this part of the world has played an important role in the shaping of the genre of travel-writing and of human history itself.
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1. **Central Asia as defined by UNESCO.**

2. **The Silk Route.**

3. **India and Central Asia showing the approximate positions of the Russian and Indian frontiers and the intervening lands, in 1838.**

4. **Chinese Turkestan and Adjacent Areas.**

5. **The Main Routes of the Old Silk Road.**