

Gender and Women Travel Writing: A Study

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Abstract

This era is engaged in (re)discovery, (re)emancipation, (re)freedom and most importantly in the (re)discourse. Women and women affairs are throughout engaged in discourse, counter-discourse and (re)discourse from the centuries. Woman as an entity is the first frontier to be dominated by male chauvinism and patriarchy. But instances of revolt for liberation and freedom are common in history from the very beginning. Although crushed and demolished, woman struggled a long way with her qualitative approach. The emotions, feelings, and morality have always been nurtured in their rational and reasonable attitude towards nature, life and philosophy. They presumed to be more sophisticated in the handling of day-to-day matters. It has also been acknowledged that nature understands a woman better than various other creations of nature and that is why a woman is selected for the most important business of the universe, the rearing, nurturing and upbringing of the mankind. Not only this, but women also proved herself in almost all the fields and dimensions of life. She is no more a caged bird, instead; she liberates herself and also becomes a liberating force behind other related issues. The present study aims at studying women travel writers of the century and further probes the discussion of major fashion related to expressions of women travels as a guiding force behind their empowerment. The study deals with the travel approach and various other travel writing theories as new and elongated dimensions of women empowerment.

Key Words: Travel Writing, Women, Gender

After the Renaissance i.e. from 16th century onwards women travel writings have come into consideration but it remains a relatively neglected aspect in literature as women were not recognized as a properly liberated and progressive entity. These accounts of personal travels though widely read and enjoyed by the public but were not fully accepted and did not belong to the category of review and reprint. With the development of literature, women writers and women characters by these writers are specifically changing and gradually developing and transforming. The position of women has always been changing at different times and climb. From Chaucer to Spencer, they developed from Wife of Bath's to Gloriana. Shakespeare presents the lifelike characters of Portia, Desdemona, Cleopatra, and Lady Macbeth; they have a different attitude towards life and philosophy of life. Women have emerged in a positive role further in the Romantic and Victorian age also. However, women in her entire positivity remain 'angel in the house' throughout the centuries. She confined to the home and was the matter of privacy, has nothing to do with the outside world, without any social, political, and economic choices. One of the most isolated, restricted, abused, untrusted being in almost every society, women confronted in every age, in every society. From 'Witch Craft' to 'Sati Pratha', from 'dowry killings' to 'honour killings', she revolted and now declares herself to be one of the most authentic creations of the universe.

The present era is cosmopolitan and infused with globalization. The spatial movement has proved to be the most important notion of this age. People are engaged in movement from one place to another due to some reason or the other. There are different purposes and the various reasons behind the displacement and deportation of masses in which exile, migration, diaspora, thrust for knowledge, know the unknown are some of the few reasons. In the present era, the degree of mobility has increased because of which there is a boom in the travel and tourist industry and so in travel writing also. Throughout the globe, there is spatial

mobility of ideas, goods, and peoples and the remote areas have now become easily accessible. It becomes possible only because of cheaper travels and unparalleled expansion of transportation throughout the globe. Another reason for globalization is the worldwide acceptance of travel writings and the issues raised by them.

Travel Writing is attempted by both male and female writers altogether. However, from the early stage of the evolution of travel writings, it has been essentially a male domain. Women were thoroughly underrepresented. E. Leed suggested that travel is ‘genderised’ and is ‘gendered activity’. Travelling is not at all associated with women as it is considered to be masculine, brave, and courageous which are supposed to be the attributes of man. Clifford says that “travel exercises gender-based discrimination”, as good travel is always gallant, informative, systematic, daring, and ennobling that is something associated with men. He is further suggestive of the fact that women travel only ‘as companions’ or ‘as exceptions’ (13). They escorted their male companions. Their feminine legacy obstructed them to write travel writing since travelling is restricted to women. Travel texts are androcentric in nature and travel genre is an “androcentric genre” (Wolff 227).

However, in the millennial century, there have emerged various female travellers and travel writers like Mary Kingsley, Shanta Rama Rao, Pandita Ramabai, Isabella Bird, Lady Hester Stanhope and Susan Montague who share their self-reflexive travel experiences. Commenting on this genre as male centric, Billie Melman, a critic of travel writing states, “This is a distinctly masculine bond and indeed the travel epic purports to be a masculine genre” (Melman 117). Susan Bassnett gives a view contrasting that of Melman and says, “The travel text as ethnography or social commentary transcends gender boundaries and increasingly in the 20th century, male and female travellers have written self-reflexive texts that defy easy categorization as autobiography, memoir, or travel account” (Bassnett 225).

Travelling is not an easy task and travelling alone as a woman is more troublesome and hazardous because of social taboos and her physical vulnerability. Woman is double marginalised and never gets the strength to showcase herself because travelling, from the very beginning, is considered to be a faculty of man. Travel and travel writing are prefilled with dominant mythology related with man. Like other forms of literature, travel literature also suffers from an acute gender imbalance. A few instances are travel writers like Eric Leed who in the *The Mind of the Traveller*, talks about male travellers only, Paul Fussel in his book *Abroad* and Denis Porter in *Haunted Journeys* mention hardly a single woman travel writer. In Homer's *Odyssey*, Ulysses wanders while Penelope, his wife, was at waiting position. However, Karen Lawrence in his book *Penelope's Voyages* (1994) sees British women travel writers as reinventing an Odyssean tradition that legitimates the male explorers. Lawrence positively counters that orthodox attitude which sees women at rest and established women as a weaver by stressing upon the Penelope's role as a weaver "who both makes and undoes the cloth that mimes the progress of the navigator."

Historically, travel writing has been used by women to cut across gender conventions. They knitted themselves in and out of the established places and social roles, women travel writers have fashioned a space in which to explore their own identities. They have used travel writing so far to liberate themselves at least temporarily, from the constraints placed upon them by their own people and societies. They struggle hard during their travels because they have serious disadvantages as a woman. According to Mary Morris, "Flights and evasion, the need to escape domestic constraints and routine, to get away and at the same time to conquer – this form of flight from the home more typical of the male experience" (xv) and "others are biological for women traveller-writers cannot help but be aware of their physical

vulnerability—the fear of rape, for example, whether crossing the Sahara or just crossing the city street at night, most dramatically affects the ways women move through the world.

During their travels, women travellers are engaged in inventing a new identity for themselves as they find the sharp difference between their lives at home and life on the road. They can find an escape through travel and develop an ability to break free the constraints of contemporary society. Travelling and travel writing offered women a space to redefine themselves, assuming a different persona and becoming someone who did not exist at home. Women's travel writing in the late 20th century tends to focus more on the relationship between the individual and the societies through which she travels. Questions on ecology, global poverty and health issues, and the future of the mother earth occupy writers such as Dervla Murphy. Powerful and unique voices emerged during the 1990's as Sara Wheeler's *Terra Incognita: Travels in Antartica* (1997) represented another strand of women's travel writing that has grown in importance in the 20th century. The journey sometimes planned and at others random, leads to greater self-awareness and takes the reader simultaneously on that journey. The works of Gertrude Bell and Freya Stark, reflect personal, social and political changes. The trips recounted by them are both inner and outer journeys, towards greater self-awareness as well as greater knowledge gained through experience. Sara Wheeler's book goes a little further and recounts a journey not only in terms of time and place, but in terms of gender relation. Sonia Melchett's book *Passionate Quests 1991* is based on the interviews with five women travellers. They are Clare Francis, Dervla Murphy, Christian Dodwell, Monica Kristenson and Elain Brook. The book discusses the reasons why women travellers leave behind social conventionality and prescribed lifestyle. They like to travel alone without any companions and like to explore the loneliest and remotest places on the globe. To travel, they established seemingly impossible aim. Melchett further observes that women travellers

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not only travel at different and far of places in their own way and self-contained style but there are lot more ideas and things which they share commonly. She is of the view that travel in modern times expands the canvas of imagination for women as also increases their power of physical strength and endurance. Women travellers risk sufferings, ill health, weariness and sometimes even death during their travels. When they overcome these difficulties and survive, they validate life. They attain liberty on their own and free themselves from the suppression of existence. During their travels, women encountered different societies and cultures which improve and shape their gender identity. Gradually travel writing has emerged as a popular genre, widely read and accepted by the readers of all time and age. It provides women a special identity and helps her to become a public voice. Travelling, for women, is a tool to escape oppression and domestic hardships. Women become independent and trespass the boundaries of ignorance. Carl Thompson says that travelling is used by women to gain authority on a body of knowledge controlled by educated men. Not only they overcome their own mental and physical insecurities but they also learn to address various social and political issues. They started seeing their personal problems in the light of societal problems as a whole. They liberate and emancipate themselves from the complex societal and cultural knit.

Travel writings by women proved to be significant when they encapsulate various cultural interactions, inspirations, movements and ideas. These writings by women travellers provide better understanding about the places in the world and also give an insight about the growth and development of modern global world. Travel writings by women travellers become an important document covering national and international concerns as they bother about the impact of individual actions on society and community at large. Travel and travel writing have provided women broader outlook to explore social models, new and innovative

ways of lifestyles, and also offer them with immense space for their personal development and independence.

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