



The Digital Nomadic Lens: Reclaiming Identity and Gender in 21st-Century Indian Travel Writing

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Abstract:

The paper offers a detailed investigation of the development of travel writing through a span of 150 years, from the 19th-century satirical reviews to the 21st-century contemporary Indian authorship. It shows that travel writing acts as a “cultural mirror,” revealing the changing beliefs and attitudes about self, society and the imperialist world order. Juxtaposing the traditional Western travel literature of Mark Twain, John Steinbeck and Paul Theroux with the Indian contemporary standpoints of Bishwanath Ghosh and Shiva Nath, it argues for a major generic shift as travel writing has moved from outward, traditionally Eurocentric, cultural observation to inward, self-reflexive, gendered, globally engaged cultural critique. Building on Edward Said's theory of Orientalism and theories of globalisation and mobility this investigation demonstrates that 19th-century works often ambivalently challenged and confirmed colonial stereotypes via satire whereas the 20th century moved the genre towards personal nostalgia and national introspection. Finally the study contends that 21st-century Indian travel writing reclaims the genre through a focus on local “ordinary” spaces and the power of solo female travel. The inclusion of digital nomadism and real-time storytelling shows how the genre has been democratised and become interactive and participatory linking local and global. The research suggests travel writing is a live, evolving genre still reflecting the ways in which communities understand their place in a rapidly interconnected world.

Keywords: Digital Nomadic Lens

1. Introduction

Travel writing is not just a cataloguing of new locations. It is a refined artistic confluence of history, culture and literature, showing how journeys define the self and the “other”. More than a chronicle of movement, travel accounts are a “cultural mirror” that embodies the time, the moral trends and the inner life of the author. Each account exposes a fragment of the writer's homeland, of their prepossessions and their sensibility. The development of the genre offers an in-depth understanding of the shifting manners of cross-cultural interaction in a rapidly and homogenising interconnected world.

The genre has changed sharply in the last one hundred and fifty years. During the 1800s, travel books grew fuller as they left behind bare inventories of places plus turned into narratives that carried voice, jokes and opinion. Mark Twain's *'The Innocents Abroad'* shows the shift plainly, because its comedy but also ridicule challenged Europe's old authority and shaped a separate American self-image. Writers of the time also handled the power relations Edward Said later called Orientalism. Western authors portrayed the East as exotic or primitive in order to reinforce colonial rule.

As the 20th century moved on, travel writing turned its gaze inward. John Steinbeck, besides Paul Theroux, treated the act of travel as a mirror for self-examination and as a way to ask what it meant to be both an individual plus a citizen. Steinbeck looked back with longing at an America he saw vanishing, while Theroux later Bruce Chatwin or William Dalrymple stretched the view across continents. They traced the lines of a planet that was shrinking through fast new links, weaving together legend, past events and the writer's own thoughts. The stories stopped aiming chiefly at outside cultures but also began to probe the writer's own mind and the way societies shape identity.

In the 21st century, the genre has become more mixed than ever, especially in recent Indian travel books. People who once appeared only as subjects in Western accounts now speak for themselves. They write about everyday life at home, about what it means to be a woman or a man there and about the ways phones plus the internet let them move and tell their tales. Writers like Bishwanath Ghosh, besides Shiva Nath, use travel books to claim freedom, to challenge old labels, but also to show how technology invents new ways of telling a journey. The paper claims that travel writing is still alive and continues to evolve, transforming from light mockery into stories that confront questions of who we are in a world that is constantly shrinking.

2. Theoretical Framework: From Orientalism to Globalisation

The evolution of the travel writing genre can best be understood by understanding Edward Said's Orientalism theory, which asserts that the West has historically viewed, defined, and researched the East as an inferior, exotic, or fundamentally different area to the West. According to Said, the Western worldview was not an unintentional result of ignorance but rather a systematic idea used by the West to create and maintain control of Eastern societies and enable Western colonial activity. Using the Orientalism concept, travel writers of the 19th century [during the period of Western colonialism] frequently wrote about Eastern societies, including a great many different cultures, in overly simplified forms as inferior to the West to justify and facilitate the ongoing colonial relationship. Therefore, early 19th-century travel writers created representations of Eastern societies as "Other" in order to maintain the authority of the Western traveller over the people of the East.

Globalisation and Mobility theory are both needed to understand how the genre has evolved since the end of the 20th century into the 21st century, as compared to Colonialism. Globalisation theory demonstrates how, as the rate of growth of global movements of people, products, and ideas increases, the distance that these global flows can travel will continue to increase. In addition, Mobility studies describe how, through the act of travel, we are both transformed while also transforming the places we travel to. By combining these two concepts, we can understand why contemporary travel writing often depicts a continuous narrative of travel rather than the linear, colonial descriptions of travel.

The travelogues of India reviewed in this research take place in "contact zones" as defined by Cultural Studies: social areas where cultures collide, interact, and inhabit. The idea of Hybridity is essential to these zones, being the mixing and blending of cultural components and the development of hybrid/non-binary identities. Through this theoretical framework, we can see how contemporary authors portray their experiences when engaging with two different cultures that are neither completely local nor entirely global.

Moreover, Gender Studies gives us an important perspective on how race, gender, and cultural background affects our overall travel experiences as individuals or in groups of people like families or

friends. This includes all the different ways our society allows us or does not allow us to travel, and how society views someone as they travel from one place to another. As a form of modern-day expression of independence and challenging traditional views on gender roles, especially for contemporary Indian female authors, travel writings typically demonstrate how cultural definitions of travel have been affected by globalisation and technology developments over time.

The Local and the Ordinary: Reclaiming the Indian Space

'Chai, Chai', a 2009 publication by Bishwanath Ghosh, indicates a major transition from the concept of 'the exotic' to emphasising the importance of local culture. Ghosh's narrative focus has returned the Indian scenic view from that of an exoticized view by foreign travellers to the place of everyday life with the importance of cultural identity. Ghosh has identified the railway station as a vibrant point of contact between culture and history, whereby people come together to gather at tea stalls and form social relationships. Ghosh's examination of the everyday elements of Indian life sheds light on how contemporary India is negotiating its relationship between traditional values and contemporary influences, and the effect of globalisation.

Ghosh's work reflects the divisions of class and the struggle between old and new ways of life; he illustrates through his observation of street vendors and community members the diversity of languages, foods and cultural celebrations that exist throughout India. Ghosh's use of humour and observation is evident in this work, but unlike 19th-century authors, he uses humour and observation to connect on a very personal level with each individual he encounters and not as a means to critique where they live or how they live. In this way, Ghosh's travel writing about India is no longer about wandering away from home into a fantasy land but rather, getting to know and understand the people and cultural aspects that define their culture and homeland.

3. Gender, Empowerment, and the Solo Traveller

Where Ghosh delves into the physical and social contexts of India, Shivya Nath uses her book *'The Shooting Star'*, published in 2018, to define and examine the psychological and gendered dimensions of travel. *'The Shooting Star'* is a foundational piece in many ways for learning how solo travelling in the twenty first century is empowering to marginalised groups. By examining the "hardships and fears" that a woman may define through her experience of forming independent and autonomous travel choices, Nath takes what could be considered only a travel piece and shows how her journey can also define who she is personally as well as professionally. In her work, Nath illustrates through a combination of travel and storytelling how moving from location to location requires strength, adaptability, and personal growth.

Nath's approach to travel writing differs significantly from most others in this genre because instead of focusing merely on the experiences of a single individual traveling to another part of the world, Nath views her travel experiences through the prism of the empowerment and issues of women in broader global perspectives, and she often connects the changes in women's individual experiences with changes in modern travel conditions. She uses travel as an opportunity for women to discover their inner strengths as well as to discover new things about themselves, amidst a deep seated cultural pressure to conform to traditional societal norms. As such, travel narratives become not only a form of self-expression but also serve as a medium for individuals to discuss complex and evolving definitions of identity in a highly interconnected society.

4. The Digital Frontier: Digital Nomadism and Real-Time Narrative

The use of Digital Technology is the most significant aspect of 21st-century travel Writing. When we consider the vast and diverse array of travel writing throughout history, we see that travel writing of the past was typically produced in print form. In contrast to this, Nath and other travel writers of the 21st Century are now writing on the internet, and are utilising social media in addition to Traditional media. Digital Nomadism is at the core of this turn in travel writing styles and forms; writers now are able to create content for their work from anywhere in the world, while travelling between cities and countries. This means that instead of merely creating written content about where they are, and sharing that after they have returned home, the experience of the reader is one in which they can experience a piece of travelling content, in real time.

1. Writers are now able to document and express their experiences in digital space as they happen, combining their personal story with social and international thought. Authors and readers can easily interact through online media, allowing for the sharing of ideas and transforming who is the audience for the travel experience from an individual to a community. Digital technology has enabled travel writers to connect with readers around the world, while still conveying the rich detail of their own experiences. As a result of this duality, travel writing has evolved from being merely humorous or personal reflections to being a sophisticated and socially conscious vehicle for expressing the complexities of our lives in the context of digital culture.

5. Conclusion: The Evolving Mirror

Overall, the findings of this study indicate that travel writing has experienced a drastic transformation from a more traditional model of publishing to a model that incorporates elements of cultural commentary and satire to evolve into a 21st-century genre that is nimble and acutely aware of societal realities. Over the course of nearly one hundred and fifty years, the genre has developed beyond the Eurocentric, satirical trip narratives of the 1800s to include narratives written by contemporary Indian authors that focus on issues related to identity, gender, and globalisation. Bishwanath Ghosh and Shivya Nath specifically serve as examples of contemporary Indian authors who have been instrumental in effecting this change, moving away from the "external observation" format that was characteristic of 19th-century authors and creating a more comprehensive, "inner reflection and global awareness" format. Their books are therefore essential social reflections of how identity and gender have been shaped in a world that is rapidly changing as a result of globalisation.

The writers in question reclaim their narrative away from the colonial gaze and embrace the possibilities of digital innovation as evidence that travel writing is more than merely a record of travel and journeys. Instead, it serves to creatively and critically explore our sense of place, how we view ourselves and how we interact with the world as a whole during a time of globalisation. Ghosh, for example, reclaims Indian landscapes, focusing on "the ordinary" lives of railways and small towns; he provides an insider perspective away from the exoticized views of the past. Simultaneously, Nath uses the internet to document the act of solo female travel, and the act of travel itself becomes a powerful medium for women to be independent and express themselves. This change to travel writing is democratising in nature; previously, the voices that were previously the subjects of travelogues written by the West are now the voices of the people telling their own cultural stories.

The incorporation of technology and the rise of digital nomadism have completely changed how authors in this realm create their writing. Blogs and social networks allow for instant sharing of stories rather than waiting a year or so after returning home. Thus, travel writers now combine their memories with social issues in greater depth while also connecting their personal development to broader global and cultural influences. Travel writing continues to expand and develop with time, creating new ways of interpreting our shared experiences across different geographies, histories, and cultures, ranging from the satirical writing of Mark Twain through the fragmented mythologies seen in many late-20th-century works.

Ultimately, this change establishes a direct link between the historical modes of travel writing and how these types of writing have evolved and expanded into the more socially conscious modes of travel writing in use today. The progression of these different styles also illustrates how both voice and technology will continue to evolve through the 21st century but still meet the same overall purpose as originally intended, to examine the intersection of travel, identity, and culture. As travel writing continues to adapt, including the potential for the future inclusion of both ecocritical and diasporic perspectives, it will continue to be a prominent means of exploring the different ways that individuals express their identity within a rapidly evolving context. This research has shown that this genre is still a vibrant and living form of creative writing, which integrates both the localised aspect of identity with the globalised aspect of travel.

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