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**WILLIAM DALRYMPLE: A TRAVEL WRITER**  
**(Based on the book 'The Age of Kali: Indian Travels and Encounters')**

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**ABSTRACT**

Travel literature plays a significant role in literature in the present scenario. Travel literature as a genre developed from 16<sup>th</sup> century. It gained wide recognition from 18<sup>th</sup> century onwards. This article 'William Dalrymple: A Travel Writer' is divided into six parts including Introduction and conclusion. It explains the significance of travel literature briefly in 'Introduction' and then explains about the importance of travel literature in India. Slowly, the article penetrates into the subject taking William Dalrymple as an example of travel writer giving brief interpretation about his book 'The Age of Kali'. This article also speaks few draw backs in Dalrymple's narration and concludes.

Key words: Travel literature, The Age of Kali, a panorama of Indian Sub continent, Dark corner.

**Introduction**

Travel literature, a genre that records the movement of human beings from one place to another, collecting the significant portion of the resources that attracted their eye and providing it either in the form of fiction and non-fiction. It completely depends on the wit, power of observation and character of the traveler for its success. In the past centuries, the traveler tended to be an adventurer or a connoisseur of art, landscape or strange customs who may also have been a writer of merit. They used to record the places, people and occurrences of a particular region that they visited. Jennifer Speake, in the introduction of his book 'Literature of Travel and Exploration' defined the theme of the travel writing as:

'The theme of travel runs through all the great literatures of the world- predictably so, since the metaphor of life as a journey is a powerful one that resonates across time and across cultures. In the European Tradition there is the archetypal myth of Ulysses sailing out beyond the known world, beyond the pillars of Hercules, or there is Dante journeying through Hell and up Mount Purgatory into the extraterrestrial realms of Paradise. Great epic poems in many languages recount crusading journeys, knightly quests, fantastical voyages, journeys by sea and on land, journeys that conclude with a homecoming or that go on without end.' Jennifer 2003

Travel writing is an ancient impulse. People have been sharing their views ever since they started moving from one place to another place. The earliest wall paintings present the pre-historic predecessors of Bill Bryson and Paul Theroux recounting their adventures in the larger world. 'History of the Persian Wars' by

Herodotus is considered as the first travel book. It has vivid depictions of cities, people and fights in 440BC. From 16<sup>th</sup> century onwards writers of non-fictional travel writers tried to develop various techniques and approaches to raise the standards of authenticity and reliability. They tried various stylistic forms to achieve the desired qualities. But they failed in doing so. The methods once looked very standard turned arbitrary and ridiculous. It compelled travel writers constantly experimenting with various techniques that match with developing conventions and also to increase the credibility of the readers. This resulted in a number of methods, many of which are mutually competitive and incompatible.

In the first half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century, travel literature was developed as a genre and has been dominated by the 'Grand Tours' literature and in the second half of that century, accounts of Non-European voyages especially those of the Pacific became popular. This was partly due to the popular accounts of South-sea voyages. The popularity of travel narratives in 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries created interest to search for more forms and concepts. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, travel writing evolved into its own as a flourishing independent genre with the emergency of extraordinary travel writers such as Patrick Wilfred, Eric Newby, Colin Thubron, John Morris, William Dalrymple etc.

**Travel literature in India:** Travel literature plays a significant role even in India. We can trace back to the period of Mauryas. Among Mauryas, Chandragupta and Ashoka were two important rulers. During their period, an ambassador from Greece visited India. They went round the entire country and left important records on India. Greek ambassador and ethnographer Megasthenes left a valuable record 'Indica'. Megasthenes was born in Asia and became an ambassador of Seleucus I of Syria to the court of Chandragupta. The exact date of his visit is uncertain. Many attribute his visit before 288BC. The spread of Buddhism opened gates to Chinese travel writers. They visited India in big numbers to collect religious books and also to visit the holy places of Buddha. Works of Fa-hien (5<sup>th</sup> century AD) and Hsueh-Tsang (7<sup>th</sup> century AD) are important travel accounts. In the year 1017 AD, Alberuni accompanied Sultan Mahmud and did a careful study of the social institutions of India. His memoirs are a treasure of historical evidence. Marco Polo arrived on the Coromandel Coast of India in the year 1292. He entered the kingdom of the Tamil Pandya near modern day Tanjore.

The French historian, M. Taine, said that literature is the creation of three factors: the race, the milieu, the moment. This need not be accepted as a total truth, for the individual too has his own part to play in literary creation. But the sociological theory has its uses. As regards Indo-Anglian literature, the 'race' is the mixed Indian race, a resultant invasion, conquests, and occupations extending over a period of four or five thousand years; the 'milieu', the variegated Indian subcontinent, comprising extremes of every kind, heir to a geography and culture heritage all its own; and the 'moment' the meeting of the west and India.

We often talk of the Western 'impact on India, and picture the west and India clashing, destroying and creating. But there was no single entity, and really meant sundry Portuguese, Dutch, British and French – with a few Danes, Germans and Italians thrown in – who came in different waves, as merchants, as missionaries, as soldiers, as adventurers or administrators and often worked at cross purposes. Travel and historical writings have gained importance day by day. Our India and the neighboring places drew attention of the foreigners. Some writers have chosen these places in order to bring into light the hidden treasure and some have chosen it, to point out the interior and exterior faults of the countries and some writers have given importance to the history of foreign countries and balanced their statements according to the situation. Most of them are fiction writers.

A third eye knows how to appreciate or criticize the situations. Travel writers are such. They visit the places and leave the records on interesting events, incidents etc. Though it is too difficult to say that their information is accurate, at least the native people understand what the foreigners are thinking and making interpretations on them. There are writers who visited India even in this 20<sup>th</sup> century. One such writer is William Dalrymple. Basically, he is a travel writer. His approach towards history is different. He used some of the unrecognized events in history and exposed that historical source as a fiction with his new and innovative thoughts.

**William Dalrymple, A travel writer:** William Dalrymple is a travel writer who came up with good exposure to new and noble ideas. He is one of Britain's most successful travel writer, whose highly entertaining books elegantly combine scholarship, story-telling, trans-cultural investigations and romance.

Dalrymple was born on 20<sup>th</sup> March in the year 1965 in Scotland. He is an award winning historian and travel writer. His area of interest includes the history of India, Pakistan, Afganisthan, the Middle East, Mughal rule, the Muslim World, Hinduism, Buddhism and Jains. Most of his books have won literary prizes. His books are travel and historical accounts. His books have been translated into 30 languages. He is a regular contributor to 'The New York', 'Review of Books', The Guardian, 'The New Statesman', and The New Yorker'. He has also written many articles for Time Magazine. He wrote an essay 'Business as usual for the India Charges Ahead'. It was a special issue commemorating 60 years of Indian Independence. To bring accuracy to his writings, he juxtaposed the literary and non-literary sources and to provide meticulous material with no single error, he reached to the places that were referred in the sources. He enquired the people of that area and provided direct word and eye witness. One of the books that analyze and interpret the present society is 'The Age of Kali'.

'The Age of kali' is a panorama of the Indian subcontinent, poised between chaos, westernization and imperial tradition. It is one of the best sources of travel literature. This book contains six chapters with sub-divisions. Altogether, it has nineteen essays. 'The Age of Kali' the title itself signifies that the Kali is the ruler of this age who is known for all social evils. To give the book a symbolic significance, in the very introduction Dalrymple clearly explains from where he had chosen the title.

"The book's title is a reference to the concept in ancient Hindu cosmology that time is divided into four great epochs. Each age is named after one of the four throws, from best to worst, in a traditional Indian game of dice; accordingly, each successive age represents a period of increasing moral and social deterioration" Dalrymple 1998 XI page

Dalrymple's composition in The Age of Kali is based on the real incidents that happened in India, Srilanka and Pakistan. To generate enthusiasm among his readers and to provide first hand information, he placed a map of the Indian subcontinent in the beginning of the text book. The first chapter contains four essays depicting the various events that happened in those places and the chapter's title is the title of the book itself. The essay starts with the brief description of Bihar, two thousand years ago.

" It was under a boo tree near the Bihari capital of Patna that the Buddha received enlightenment." Dalrymple1998 :3

Dalrymple says sarcastically that Bihar today known for violence, corruption and endemic caste warfare. To support his statement, Dalrymple produced in his book the real incidents that had happened in Bihar. The first was a tale of life in the Bihar civil service. In October 1994, a young graduate was recruited in Civil Service. He was energetic and idealistic. In an interview to Doordarshan, he explained a series of measures intended to be implemented in Gopalganj, a remote place in Bihar to stop violence, corruption and crimes. Two months later while he was going alone, he was shot dead.

"According to statements collected by the police, Singh 'exhorted his followers to lynch the upstart official', whereupon the mourners surrounded Krishnaiah's car, and one of Singh's henchmen fired three shots at him. Krishnaiah was badly wounded but still alive. So, encouraged by Singh, the mourners pulled him from his car and slowly stoned him to death." -Dalrymple 1998 : 5

The above mentioned was one of the real incident that Dalrymple had placed in his book. Another brutal incident that happened in Bihar was the Barra Massacre. Dalrymple travelled to Barra in order to know about the incident exactly. Dalrymple met Ashok Singh, one of the two male survivors of the massacre. Ashok described the incident that had happened. It was between the Savarna Liberation Front, the Bhumihar Militia and Harijans. The entire village was fired and blasted with dynamites. Heads of innocent people were chopped. Only few escaped from the atrocity.

Dalrymple covered many such incidents. He travelled personally to that area and enquired about it. He wrote postscript for each of his essays:

"During polling, despite the deployment of whole regiments of the Indian Army, violence in Bihar reached spectacular new levels, with mortars and landmines being deployed to assist the ballot stuffing manoeuvres, prompting the memorable Statesman headline". Dalrymple 1998 :25

From Bihar, Dalrymple moved to Avadh, then to Gwalior. His second chapter is about Rajasthan Caste wars. Dalrymple gave a vivid description about the caste wars that happened in Rajasthan and also about the practices that are practiced in the remote areas of Rajasthan. The third chapter is titled 'The New India'. It has two sub-divisions. This chapter gives information about the two popular Bombay portraits- Baba Sehgal and Shobha De. In this chapter, Dalrymple puts before us about the India before 1970's and after 1980's. Dalrymple wondered about the subtle change that had taken place in India.

"But around 1989, in the last few months of Rajiv Gandhi's government, a subtle change took place. Quite suddenly there seemed to be a lot of money around. Economic deregulation and free-market reforms in the years that followed led to a massive boom on the Bombay stock market; inflation fell to single figures; Western investment began flowing in. The typical middle-class family, which in the seventies had been working hard to buy its first fridge, and in the eighties its first car, suddenly found itself comfortable enough to relax and spend its cash on consumer fripperies like televisions, books, art and clothes". Dalrymple 1998: 137

In one of the essays in the third chapter, Dalrymple gave a vivid description of the people and the society in Bombay. In the third chapter second essay, he focused on Bangalore and the Miss World competition that held in Bangalore. Many societies protested the competition. They did Dharnas to stop Miss World Competition. Despite of many Dharnas, Miss World competition had happened in Bangalore. Dalrymple was the direct witness to those protests. He stayed in Bangalore and observed all the events that took place in Bangalore. The greatness of Dalrymple lies in producing the event as it is with no changes in the delivered matter.

From Bangalore, Dalrymple in his forth chapter named 'The South' covered Kerala, Hyderabad and Madhurai. He elucidated the greatness of Madhura Meenakshi Devi in Madhurai, Parashakti in Kerala and the significance of charminar in Hyderabad. For clear interpretation, he took the help of Mir Moazam, an intelligent eighty-four-year old man who had spent most of his life in Nizam government and his grandfather was also the Deputy Prime Minister in the Nizam's government. With this forth chapter, he concluded his oeuvre on India and reconnected it with his composition on 'On the Indian Ocean' and then on Pakistan. These two chapters reveal Dalrymple's meticulous nature and his dexterity in handling the situations.

Dalrymple had given title to his fifth chapter "On the Indian Ocean". Dalrymple divided this chapter into three essays- 'At Donna Georgina's', 'Up the Tiger Path', 'The Sorcerer's Grave'. The most interesting essay is 'On the Tiger Path'. It is about the Tamil Tigers under the leadership of Vellupillai Prabhakaran who formed a small group and founded the Liberation Tigers of Tamil Eelam (LTTE) in 1975. Their goal was to fight for an independent Tamil State. Initially it was small, but soon the LTTE established itself as among the most fanatical and ruthless terrorist forces operating anywhere in the world. Dalrymple, while he was explaining about LTTE, he briefly narrated the story of Anuradhapura. To step in such dangerous place is very risky to life. Knowingly, Dalrymple risked his life and approached LTTE group. Dalrymple's keen observation is great and amazing. He described in his book, the way he travelled into the jungle where LTTE resides.

"North of Anuradhapura, you leave Singhalese territory. You move into the Tamile zone, into Eelam. No public transport passes between the two communities: that is where George comes in." Dalrymple 1998 :242 .

The sixth chapter of the book "The Age of Kali" is on Pakistan. It consists of four chapters – Imran Khan: Out for a Duck, On the Frontier, Blood on the Tracks and Benazir Bhutto: Mills & Boon in Karachi. Before Independence, Pakistan is the part of India. Once India was bifurcated, Pakistan was given a separate state. From then onwards, India and Pakistan are shown as separate states. Pakistan has its history that to be covered separately. Without neglecting it, Dalrymple touched the neighbouring countries of India, observed them keenly and interviewed them personally. In the essay "Imran Khan: Out for a Duck", Dalrymple said personally:

"Interviewed Imran Khan twice: Once in 1989, when he was still a bachelor-play boy and captain of the Pakistan cricket team; then again seven years later, after his marriage, when he had entered politics to campaign against corruption in Pakistani public life" Dalrymple 1998: 281.

Dalrymple had taken personal interest to know about Imran Khan. He followed him and gathered the information. Dalrymple had done dual work, while he was working on the biography of Imran Khan, he observed the corruption and lawlessness that prevailed in Pakistan under Benazir Bhutto. Dalrymple mentioned in his book that in 1995, Transparency International, a Berlin- based corruption-monitoring organization, named Pakistan as the most corrupt country in Asia and the second most corrupt in the world. On being asked, Imran Khan answered Dalrymple:

"The level of corruption is so great it has put off all foreign investors; even overseas Pakistanis don't send their money here anymore. In the 1960s Pakistan's exports were neck and neck with those of Hong Kong. Now our exports are worth barely a tenth of theirs." Dalrymple 1998: 308

Dalrymple in his oeuvre covered about the party that Imran Khan started to fight against corruption. He wrote in his essay that a bomb had exploded in Imran Khan's cancer hospital on the day he had announced of his planning to stand for election. Dalrymple in his Postscript revealed that Imran was not assassinated but he had not even won a single seat in the election. Dalrymple ended his composition with an opinion that corruption was considered as much a part of everyday political life but a slight change had taken place with Imran Khan's step in politics.

'On the Frontier' is one of the essays in the last chapter. It is about the partition of India and about the violence that occurred in Pakistan during the division of the subcontinent. Most of the people migrated from Pakistan to India. Suppressed religious hatred unleashed during partition. Millions of people lost their lives in the riots and massacres. Dalrymple opined that it was on the railways that much of worst had taken place. Dalrymple described the situation in his book as if he was there in the massacre.

"Thousands of Hindus and Sikhs fought their way to the station to flee to India. At the same time train after train began arriving from South of the border carrying hundreds of thousands of Muslims to their homeland. The station became a battle ground". Dalrymple 1998

The partition of India was the most unfortunate that India faced. Dalrymple sympathetically says that partition was not just the stuff of history but it left unhealed wounds which are still poisoning relation between Hindu and Muslim, India and Pakistan. Dalrymple completed his travel writing with his compositions on Benazir Bhutto and on her political allegations.

**Dark side of the sub-continent:** The essays that make up 'The Age of Kali' form a medley of images that are grim, gloomy, disappointing and deadly. It focuses on many unattractive aspects of India and its neighbouring countries. Many of the stories or events that are covered in the work are from different journals of different times, newspapers and some are based on enquires. This book mostly belongs to the age of transition i.e between 1950 – 2000. A balanced and a genuine appreciation was missing in this book. It is not suggestible to the reader who would like to travel first time India or other neighbouring countries as it covers only one corner of the society. Dalrymple focused on the evils that plagued the subcontinent- like sati, corruption, disparity, political break down and many more. One of the reviewers of the book commented –

'In this relevant and political travelogue, it's hard to tell whether Dalrymple is playing devil's advocate in order to provoke the passions of his interview subjects, or if he can just be, at times, pigheadedly judgemental and narrow-minded.' Robert Reidon 2006

Just as the coin has two sides, every concept or society or topic has two sides. Dalrymple focused his attention on the subcontinent. Instead, if he had focused on his country; he would have observed the dark corner of his society. So it is ridiculous to cover only on dark corner leaving the bright corner of the society. 'Sati' was the age long tradition that was practiced in India in all places till the middle of 1800's. Many social reformers went against the tradition and it was abolished in many of the places in India. Only in some of the remote areas it is visible. 'Untouchability' was the word used before independence. Today's generation is different. They play with technology not with age old practices that are forbidden. Science and technology play a major role in this generation not the evil practices that were practiced before. Equal opportunity and equal

chances are provided to every citizen in India. One of the fundamental right 'Right to Equality' speaks about it. A person who has patriotic feeling gets disappointed on reading this book.

**Conclusion:** The book 'The Age of Kali' epitomizes Dalrymple's impressions about the subcontinent during his ten year travel in the subcontinent. Though the book covers myriad deteriorating conditions in the subcontinent, it opened the eyes of the readers in the subcontinent about the weakness that lie in them and that to be corrected. This book is an example of travel literature and also a book of journalism as it is the compendium of numerous reviews and articles gathered from newspapers and the authors own interaction with important people of the day. A third eye can judge or assess a person or the society exactly as he is not having a partial look towards the situations. The book 'The Age of Kali' concentrates on negative aspects of the society. Indeed it is disappointing to the readers who love their country but it cautioned them that they have to strengthen themselves to put an end to the derogatory remarks.

Dalrymple achieves unity in his travel cum historical work in two ways- one by his presence as a narrator in each interview he holds and in each situation. His narration is first person narrative. The second way he achieved unity is confining his historical discourse mainly to the Indian States and the neighbouring countries of India. This geographical unity has been achieved inspite of his narratives relating to states spreading right from Kashmir to Kanyakumari and the neighbouring states.

The careful study of 'The Age of Kali' arises an honest doubt in one's mind whether Dalrymple is a travel writer or historical writer. He is a travel cum historical writer. He adopts the tourist's ways to unravel history. He moved from place to place to study about the place, people, culture and its tradition. He captured the interesting, hidden and unrevealed facts in the places for his books and used story telling method and other interactive methods to make his narration vivid and true. Not only the book 'The Age of Kali' but also his other books like 'White Mughals', 'The Last Mughal', 'City of Djinn's', 'Return to Afghansithan' and the recent book 'Kohinoor: The Story of the World Infamous Diamond' possess the same characteristics. He travelled to places where the historical incidents had occurred. Not satisfied with this, he had interactions with those who had knowledge of the past incident and also with those who are participants in the present day history. He makes careful use of language in his books as language is always fluid and that it may not always be present the historical facts in the desired way.

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