

## How Travel Writing Evolved through centuries

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### **Abstract:**

Travel writing is one of the most contemporary and interesting genres of literature that appeal to readers around the world. We live in an age of travel literature, travelogues, travel blogs and travel memoirs. This paper traces the evolution of travel writing through centuries, from ancient mythical accounts to popular, personal documentation, to transformative and real-life narratives of the contemporary digital age. The paper highlights how with a shift towards seamless, accessible and convenient journeys, travelling became convenient, easy to be documented, digital and real-time. In fact, as the world became more precisely mapped, travel writing transitioned from providing purely geographic information to offering subjective, personal growth narratives. This research paper maps the development of travel writing across major eras: the Ancient/Medieval era, the Age of Exploration, the 18th century, the 19th-century tourist surge, and the 20th and 21st-century digital landscape. Travel writing has changed radically over time and continues to evolve in the age of global tourism, climate consciousness, and digital storytelling,

**Key Words** – travel writing, journeys, travel accounts, diaries

### **Introduction:**

Travel writing is a form of creative, non-fiction genre where the writer through meaningful stories can turn actual travel experiences into lived moments for the reader. Travel writing reflects the author's unique perspective thereby transporting the readers through personal experiences into a world that incorporates vivid, sensory details capturing aspects such as colour, texture, scent, emotions and moments, to enhance the effect of a travel journey. Travel writing begun since the time humanity started moving beyond its immediate surroundings. The very purpose of travel embarked upon with mapping the unknown, gratifying curiosity, or in search of spirituality. Travel writing has evolved through the ages from objective exploration to personal, subjective experiences, exploring how digital technologies including Artificial Intelligence (AI), have gradually been redefining the traveller-reader relationship as well as the documentation of journeys. Let us begin by tracing the history and evolution of travel writing.

**Ancient and Medieval Periods**

In ancient times, travel writing was confined to being religious in nature. Pilgrims in those days would record their journeys to sacred places. One of the earliest known examples ‘The Periplus of the Erythraean Sea’, is a Greek travelogue and an eye witness account of travel to India and Africa via the Red Sea and Indian Ocean in the 1st century. The Erythraean Sea was a waterbody situated between the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula whereas the Periplus was a kind of a traveller’s diary containing the first information about the inhabitants of the coast of East Africa.

In the thirteenth-century the travel accounts of Marco Polo and that of Ibn Battuta in the fourteenth-century depict the dangers of travel in those times and ways to overcome them. In 1298, Marco Polo narrated stories of his travel to his cellmate, Rustichello da Pisa while both were prisoners of the Genova Republic. Marco Polo’s ‘**Travels**’ leave for the readers a detailed chronicle of his travel experience, with a clear picture of the geography of the East, customs, paper money, Asian plants and exotic animals. Ibn Battuta, dictated an account of his travels to a Moroccan scribe, Ibn Juzayy in 1354-1355. This is the only source of Ibn Battuta’s travel journeys titled in English ‘**A Masterpiece to those who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Travelling**’, or simply referred to as ‘**The Travels**’(Rihla). However, the twenty-nine years that Battuta travelled, there is no indication that he made travel notes during his journeys. Ibn Battuta had to rely completely on his memory when he dictated his travel account to Ibn Juzayy. Nevertheless, ‘**Rihla**’ provides a significant account of the 14<sup>th</sup> century world. Both Polo and Battuta give an interesting account of how travellers, viewed the world in the later medieval period. ‘For both men, the world was a truly marvellous and sometimes miraculous place, where fact and fantasy intermingled in a way we find in witnesses comprehensible today.’ Even though their account may not have been reliable always, we must not forget that they were not writing history in the true sense of the term. Their works received appreciation from modern scholars for their practical information.

**The Age of Exploration**

It was the 13th-century Italian explorer Marco Polo who inspired Christopher Columbus in his aspiration to explore Asia. Columbus, an Italian explorer and navigator sailed in search of a westward route to India, China, Japan and the Spice islands. Christopher Columbus's voyages between 1492 and 1504 introduced Europeans to the ‘New World’ bringing a transformation in European travel writing. His travel writing **Journal of the First Voyage (Diario)** is a diary and logbook that records Christopher Columbus’s day to day journey of the 1492 voyage. His 1493 **Letters on the First Voyage** was considered a "best-seller" in those days.

Walter Raleigh and Henry Hudson, initiated another wave of travel-related writings leading to a new genre known as ‘voyages and travels’ writing. A masterpiece of early travel literature is Sir Walter Raleigh’s, ‘**The Discovery of Guiana**’ (1596) covers themes of

Renaissance exploration, the New World, and the culture and politics of early modern Europe. Raleigh's travel account gives an insight into a period of global transformation.

The middle of the 16<sup>th</sup> century witnessed the discovery of the printing press. Travel writing took a new direction with the rise of the printing press and the publication of first-hand travel accounts of new discoveries in far-off lands. The printing press made books affordable bringing forth the expansion of maps, diaries, personal journals and discovery reports that enabled further expeditions. A number of writers such as Thomas Coryat, Fynes Morison, and William Lithgow recounted the experience of their travel in print. Surprisingly, most of the writers were men as women in those days, hardly had opportunities to travel.

### **The Long Eighteenth Century, 1660–1837**

The expansion of the print culture brought with it new technologies and an increasing number of new expeditions, travel writing became widely popular in the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Travel writings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century known as the 'books of travels', was a unique genre popularised by maritime diaries, subjective reflection, scientific observation, grand tours and voyages. Travel writings of the 18<sup>th</sup> century generally could be categorised into:

**The Grand Tour:** This was a passage for aristocratic travellers to visit places like France and Italy to study art, architecture and classical ruins.

**Domestic Tours:** These referred to journeys within Britain (Scotland, Wales, the Lake District) that became popular with middle-class travellers.

**Exotic Voyages and Scientific Exploration:** These included maritime expeditions, such as those by Captain James Cook, that combined maritime navigation with natural history.

William Dampier's '**New Voyage Round the World**', published in 1697 in collaboration with the Royal Society was one of the most important travel narratives of the first half of the eighteenth century. The maritime journal of the British explorer, James Cook, penned down a detailed handwritten account of his first Pacific voyage (1768-1771). It came to be known as James Cook's diary which became immensely popular. Travel writing greatly impacted early novels such as Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) and Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726). These travel books of literature borrowed the tradition of travelogues to create powerful cultural myths of adventure and colonisation thereby blurring the line between fact and fiction. The 18<sup>th</sup> century saw travel writing evolve from functional reports to sophisticated literary works that built the foundation for modern travel writing.

### **The Nineteenth Century**

Travel writing in the 19<sup>th</sup> century was a booming, diverse genre driven by the industrial revolution, imperial expansion, technological advances like railways, and the rise of leisure tourism. Driven by the Industrial Revolution, imperial expansion, the rise of modern tourism, travel writing surfaced as one of the most popular forms of print culture. The 19th century was the "Golden Age" of travel writing, moving from dry scientific accounts to personal narratives. Charles Darwin wrote a fascinating account of his ground breaking sea voyage 'The Voyage of the Beagle' in the 19th century. At only twenty-two years of age, Darwin set off on a voyage of a lifetime. On December 27, 1831, the HMS

Beagle sailed out of Devonport. Darwin maintained a day-to-day record of activities in the form of a diary, on board the ship. His extraordinary writings presented him as a naturalist making outstanding observations on geology, natural history, people, places, and events. The intellectual observations made on this five-year voyage led to the most controversial book of the Victorian Age: **'On the Origin of Species'**. Alongside true stories of travel and factual journeys imaginary travel stories started to appear. Charles Dickens in his travel books, **'American Notes for General Circulation'** (1842) **'Pictures from Italy'** (1846) takes the reader through his journeys in Italy, America, France, and London, with a peek into nineteenth century European and American culture. In his collection of essays **'The Uncommercial Traveller'** (1860) Dickens pens down his personal views of London and other locales observations while walking or traveling. Other famous authors of the time, who wrote travel stories where: Hans Christian Andersen, Charles Dickens and Mark Twain. Mark Twain wrote **The Innocents Abroad** (1869) where he included humour and irony. Authors such as Robert Louis Stevenson used a narrative style focussing on the traveller's experience in *Travels with a Donkey in the Cévennes*.

#### **The Twentieth and Twenty-first Century**

The twentieth century travel writing started shifting from the objective colonial perspectives of the Victorian era towards a more personal and experimental forms. From a mere observer, the writer became the central character of his travel story. In their writings, travel writers began to integrate their humour, emotions to their travel journey. Some of the writings that extended from the mid-to-the late 20th-century periodically examined the legacies of colonialism. Authors like V. S. Naipaul and Caryl Phillips used travel as a means to search identity, association, and the relationships between the coloniser and the colonised. Naipaul's reinvented the travel narrative as a tool for sociopolitical commentary in his non-fiction works *'The Middle Passage'*(1962), *'An Area of Darkness'*(1964), *'India: A Wounded Civilisation'*(1977). The travelogues of William Dalrymple another notable travel writer and historian, focusses primarily on India, the Middle East, and the intersection of history with modern-day journeys. His early work defined a style that blends personal adventure with deep historical research, with notable travel books including *'In Xanadu'* (1989), *'City of Djinn'* (1993), and *'From the Holy Mountain'* (1997).

The mid-1990s witnessed the emergence of a revolutionary digital form of travelogue in the form of travel blogs. These were personal digital diaries that shared real-time illustrated travel experiences. The first recognised travel blog was published in 1994 by Jeff Greenwald. Greenwald recounted his nine-month journey in the form of a travel blog, using early internet connectivity. By the late 1990s, digital platforms such as *Travelpod* (1997) and *Blogger* (1999), that popularised the concept of weblogs (blogs) were introduced. These digital diaries transformed travel writing from a traditional, formal, book-based genre to a new, immediate online mode of storytelling, setting the stage for the influencer-led travel content of the 21st century.

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Travel writing in the 21st century, transitioned into a universal, multi-channel digital experience. Modern travel writing is now segmented into specified areas of interest, such as solo travel, eco-tourism, digital nomadism, or budget backpacking. Digital travel writing that happens in real-time replaced the retrospective travel writing of the 19th-century. Travel narratives now got broken into "micro-stories" through Instagram, Twitter/X, or TikTok, that present raw, unedited glimpses of travel. Travel writing is now an immersive experience that combines text, high-quality photos, videos, and GPS data.

### **The Future of Travel Writing**

We have come a long way from the times when travel writing meant scribbling notes in a notebook from some faraway places. However, travel stories and travel experiences have transformed through centuries. The contrast lies in how travel stories have been captured, composed, and shared in different ages. Right now, living in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, most people may not even realise how Artificial intelligence is seamlessly gliding into the genre of travel writing. While AI assists in summarising travel experiences and drones capture bird's-eye views of remote landscapes, digital diaries never fail to record each and every travel moment. With the advent of AI, the craft of travel writing that once used to be individualistic based on personal observation has now turned collaborative. The question that crosses our mind is how much of the voice still belongs to the travel writer. Under the influence of advanced technology and AI, travel writing may one day become more than perfect, cinematic, eye-catching, but detached. Nevertheless, on a personal note, travel writing must maintain its uniqueness, its gritty, imperfect details, the awkward moments, the pauses, the silences, that shape real journeys and make travel stories feel alive.

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