

Department of English
Punjabi University, Patiala

National Seminar on
TRAVEL WRITING AS LITERATURE AND HISTORY

The Department of English, Punjabi University, Patiala is pleased to invite you to the National Seminar on **Travel Writing as Literature and History** being held on March 23 and 24, 2017.

Exploration, enquiry and adventure are some of the attributes frequently associated with travel and the genre of travel writing. To travel is, indeed, to make a journey, a movement through space. Typically, this movement is from the known to the unknown or relatively the less known, from self to the other(s), from zones of comfort and safety to realms which may not only be foreign or alien but pose discomfort or danger also. Once again, the exploration or journey is undertaken to satisfy some kind of wanderlust, look for specific information or data, study a region for its economic and touristic potentials or simply to comprehend and appreciate another culture, a different way of life in its own milieu, its indigenous specificity and rich diversity. In a different vein, but significant all the same, the journey motif offers an opportunity to the travelling self to delve into the hitherto unexplored layers of their consciousness and thus re-cast their sensibility and moorings in ways novel and challenging. Thus, these multifarious motivations and journeys together constitute many types and shades of travel; this, in turn, goes a long way in establishing travel writing as a constellation of many genres and sub-genres, namely, picaresque adventure, spiritual quest, ecological parable, memoir, scientific-exploration treatise, historical narrative, travel guidebooks and travelogues etc. Not surprisingly, while surveying travel writing in late twentieth century, Patrick Holland and Graham Huggan regard it to be a 'hybrid genre that straddles categories and disciplines' (*Tourists With Typewriters*, 1998).

Viewed historically, Western travel writing harks back to antiquity. This long history also arises primarily because of the fact that human beings, in all times and climes, have loved to narrate stories about journeys undertaken by themselves or their ancestors. Works such as *Epic of Gilgamesh* (c. 1000 BCE), Homer's *Odyssey* (c. 600 BCE) and the Biblical books of *Genesis* and *Exodus* (5th century BCE) have offered amazing blends of travel themes, older oral traditions and spiritual epiphanies in varied measures. Indeed, travel writing has traversed long journeys through the Classical era from Herodotus, Strabo and Aetheria to *Travels of Marco Polo*, *Travels of Sir John Mandeville* (c.1356) and Ibn Battutah's *Travels* (c.1355) in the Medieval era.

Situating itself tantalizingly between fact and fiction, self and other, epistemological and autobiographical modes, travel writing has long borne upon itself the onus of reporting regions, histories, cultures and people in all their native colours and complexities. This made travel writers adopt a number of rhetorical strategies and tropes in their narratives, primarily intending to convert 'travel experience' into 'travel text' (Thompson 2011). These tropes have included first-person eye-witness seeing, attaching 'unknown entities to known reference points', rendering 'the incommensurable commensurable' (Pagden 1993), objectivist-empirical viewpoint, factual representation and rendering the other(s) through 'synecdoche' (Thompson 2011). Through all these narrative strategems, the subjective element, to a greater or lesser degree, will inevitably run. Further, the subjective will unavoidably be ideological too. Thus, the lens which the travelling-seeing self brings to describing and narrating the other(s) cannot be left out of any serious study of the genre of travel writing. This, obviously, means how terrains, histories, cultures, myths, excavations and enchantments of others (foreign as well as local/national) are presented, will go a long way in structuring the other, the narratorial self and the character and longevity of the travel narratives. In this regard, the 'autobiographical, emotionally tangled mode' and the 'semi-ethnographic, distanced, analytical mode' (Nixon 1992) -- the two major strains of 20th century travel writing stand equally open to critical enquiry and analytical penetrations.

Seen from a critical vantage point, then, travel writing perhaps would still take longer to absolve itself entirely of the taint of having contributed towards territorial and cultural expansions of the European and British colonial regimes. From mid 19th to early 20th century, a

host of scientists, anthropologists, nature-lovers and literary aspirants produced scientific treatises and literary narratives marked by huberistic, ethnocentric assumptions. These, in turn, directly or indirectly fed into the Western colonial discourse. Prominent among these works is, for instance, Henry Morton Stanley's bestselling *Through the Dark Continent* (1878) wherein European and American intellectual acumen and politico-cultural supremacy constantly underpin observations and perceptions about Africa and Africans. Apart from this, a number of other travel books of late 20th century do also variously exhibit imperialist nostalgia, implicit imperialist presuppositions or self-styled cosmopolitanism towards the non-West and the non-European. A case in point is Peter Biddlecombe's *French Lessons in Africa* (1993) or even Robert Kaplan's *Balkan Ghosts: A Journey through History*. All such texts need to be thoroughly examined and these investigations would obviously bring the genre of travel writing into the purview of postcolonial studies. Besides, interpretive investigations need also encompass issues such as late 20th century travel writing often resorting to packaging the world for easy Western consumption; how sizable chunks of travel blogging and writing also cater to the demands of the tourism industry and tourist gaze; how voyages, expeditions and explorations, till a short while ago, were regarded solely male preserves; and how travel writings by women have been somewhat meagre and marginalized.

Be that as it may, it is undeniable that travel writing has always been and continues to be a rich, many-splendoured area of study. Travels continue to hold us in thrall just as travel writings continue to provide us ever-burgeoning food for thought, curiosity, freedom and endless stimulation.

Some of the sub-areas for Papers/Presentations are:

- Travel Narratives -- Minefields of Information and Assumptions
- Travel Writing through the Ages
- Travels and Writing of History
- Travels Outer and Inner -- A Coalescence
- The Problematics of Travel Narratives as Representations
- Travel Writing and the Colonial Discourse
- Travel Narratives or Life Writing
- The Picaresque and the Autobiographical in Travel Writing
- 19th and 20th century Travel Writings by Women
- Travel Writing as Postcolonial Discourse
- Tourism and Travel Narratives
- Travel Narratives as Ecological Texts

Submission of Abstracts: By 10th March, 2017.

Submission of Papers: By 17th March, 2017.

Registration Fee: Rs. 1000/- (Rs. 500 for Research Scholars)

All submissions must be made through email to pup.english@gmail.com

Lodging and hospitality shall be provided by the University to all outstation resource persons and, subject to availability, to paper presenters. In view of financial constraints, it may not be possible to reimburse travel expenses to all paper presenters.

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