

Exploring History through Travel in William Dalrymple's *City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi*

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Abstract

William Dalrymple is best known for his travel writing. Most of his works deals with the History of India. The idea of travel and its narratives has always been a fascinating journey. Travel writing accounts history and gives valuable insight into various cultures in person. The reason behind travel can be diverse based on the motives of time and approaches toward literature, history and culture. The close relationship in understanding travel writing develops through travel and space. City of Djinns focuses on the travel and history. Dalrymple stayed for a year in Delhi city for his research. The blend of travel with exposure to the past history and present insights into the culture and live testimony of the people recreates the journey. This paper presents the existing history of past and present, explores a travel perspective in City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi.

Keywords: *Travel, History, Culture, Journey, British Colonizers, Cross-Cultural.*

Introduction

Travelling is the key aspect of human life, and it is connected in everyday life. In travel writing, the author shares their experience through travel. The journey starts with various reasons delves into curiosity and quest for answers. The viewpoint of a traveler focuses on the goal of achieving destinations. Travel and travel writing is an intertwined subject blend with history of western culture. Travel writing emerges recently in the modern contemporary era draws a larger tradition of history. The literary and geographical field in travel is associated with history and culture. Early 20th century travel writers like Norman Douglas, D. H. Lawrence, Mary McCarthy, Graham Green, Eric Newby, Lawrence Durrell, Vikram Seth, Bill Bryson, Amitav Ghosh and so on. Rose Macaulay, William Trevor, V. S. Naipaul and Tom Bissell contributed to the class and contemporary travel fiction. Pico Iyer, Paul Theroux, and William Dalrymple are well known their contemporary non-fiction works. The basic concept of travel writing deals with the setting, point of view, and cultural analysis along with the plot. Travelling unveils the endless view of the world.

Travelling comes with the number of motives with the exploration of site, culture, history, myths, races, communities, society, invasion, partition, and so on. It can be stated as the re-presentation of new world through journey. Travel is an unavoidable activity in life. A person can travel for various reasons either to foreign country or within his own country. Thereby, he learns knowledge and perception about the place, tradition, culture, customs, and history. The clarity of information provides gives detailed insights into various exposure. Travel writers contact new sources of people and place fascinates the reader's curiosity in following the writer's description on travel. The main aspect of travel writing is to understand oneself and others.

About the Author

William Dalrymple was born on 20th March 1965. He is a Scottish Historian and Critic. He is a Delhi based writer, Editor, Art Historian, Curator, Photographer, and Broadcaster. His books have won numerous awards and prizes including Thomas Cook travel book award. His writings mostly based on Indian journeys and even wrote and presented documentary series on his pilgrimage to the

source of the river Ganges in BBC television which won Grierson award in 2002. He was awarded the honourable President's medal by the British academy in 2018 for his outstanding services in humanities and social sciences. He was appointed as the commander of the order by the British Empire in 2023 for his services in literature and the arts.

He won literary prizes for the history and art presented works about India and other countries. His travel books are based upon the journey of India, Middle East and Central Asia. He published books on the current affairs on East India Company and his books were translated into more than forty languages. He is a regular contributor for magazines and wrote articles on Indian subcontinent. His books are *Xanadu: A Quest* (1989), *City of Djinnns: A year in Delhi* (1994), *From the holy mountain: A Journey in the Shadow of Byzantium* (1997), *The Age of Kali* (1998), *White Mughals* (2002), *The Last Mughal* (2006), *Nine lives: In search of the Sacred in Modern India* (2009), *Return of a King: The Battle of Afghanistan* (2012), and *The Anarchy: The Relentless Rise of the East India Company* (2019).

Existing History in the Novel

In the *City of Djinnns*, India was a rich country with prosperity, and it attracts the tourists and colonizers from all over the world. William Dalrymple is a Scottish writer who is interested in India, travels and stays for research in Delhi. He visited India at the age of 17 in 1984 presents the exhilarating journey about Delhi. "From the very beginning I was mesmerized by the great capital, so totally unlike anything I had ever seen before"(City of Djinnns 7). He presents many stories, blend with the city's experiences of past and present. Pir Sadr-Ud-Din, is a priest who narrates about the invaders and their exploitation. The word 'Djinn' means an invisible spirit mentioned in religious holy book "Quran", believes that the magical creature protect the city and its people. The past Delhi varies from present Delhi in all aspects including social, political and economic status. He also discusses about the catastrophic incidents at the time of partition, the degeneration and regeneration of the changes at that time.

City of Djinnns is a personal memoir encompasses with the element of history and travelogue. William Dalrymple

gave a new eye-opening for travel writing. British colonizers develop India according to their intentions and strategies. He discusses about the history of Mahabharata, an epic tale, the history of Mughal Empire and the British colonizers. *City of Djinnns* is arranged in reverse chronological order. The attacks and the conflict reflected on cultural aspects, thus remarks on demolition of the holy places in order to build the tombs and forts. Despite of all the chaos, the Delhi city stands for years, is a sort of great achievement. He presents the positive and negative sides that uncovers the reality of Delhi. The place with abundant people, palaces, landscape, Anglo-Indians, accepting the new developments that discloses the city's perception against the new civilization. The traditional mode with the touch of modernization, cultivate a harmony coincide in the works of William Dalrymple. The predecessors of the Delhi city shared the same living place, met various devastation but still survived to grow day by day. *City of Djinnns* title hopes to destroy the invading armies and rejuvenates like phoenix from rebirth, a revival.

City of Djinnns focuses on the author's journey and his experience in old Delhi. He documents his thoughts upon the historical destruction and advancements. According to his opinion, he suggests Delhi city as one of the most difficult city that he encountered. At first, he was astonished and later investigated in depth. The stories, history, mythology, folklore and the variety of people displays numerous things. Some people were against the new civilizations and captivated by the beauty of layout, palaces and long-hidden stories. The coexistence of the Old Delhi and the New Delhi cultivated with the tradition and modern ways of living. William Dalrymple and his wife Olivia started to live in Delhi together for his research and witnessed the changes of city in one year. The observations on history recreates the past. The majority of people were killed across the Jamuna Bridge in October 1984 at Trilokpuri. Dalrymple described "All the different ages of man were represented in the people of the city. Different millennia co-existed side by side. The mindset in different ages walked the same pavement, drank the same water, returned to the same dust" (COD 9).The social and political life were discussed along with the characteristic of travelogue. William presented the arrangement of story in

reverse chronology and attempted to portray the positive role of the colonizers.

William Dalrymple mocks at the style and street of Delhi city. The colonizers regarded the people of Old Delhi as a degenerate and lazy residents. Due to communal clashes, the cultural and religious conflict lead to the riot. He represents the philosophical world view on caste and religion in India. The chaos conflict of social, political, religion, atheists and different groups travel towards their ambition. Politics generate clash between cultures. Mahabharata's myth place Indraprastha and its representation wonders whether it is true, thus Dalrymple investigates the fact of its existence, arranges for the archaeological team for the proof and evidence. The Mughal Empire period of Shah Jehan is considered as the golden rule. He also talks about the similarity of King Shah Jehan and King Lear's tragedies which is due to the fall in their characters. Hence, he presents the comparison between fictional and real characters in the *City of Djinnns*. The positive and negative side of the colonizers and the rulers were documented vividly.

Dalrymple discussed the problems faced by the eunuchs and Hijras were alienated as a consequence of their gender. He affirms, "Dressed as women, yet they were not women" (COD 169). He visited the hidden areas of Delhi to collect information and remain there to observe the culture and tradition of eunuch and Hijras. Different communities treat eunuchs diversely. Dalrymple is much interested in art and architecture delineates the shapes of lifelead by the people and their Indian Culture. The socio-cultural thoughts made a great impact on the society and tried to bridge the gap between them.

"...it was a labyrinth, a city of palaces, an open gutter, filtered light through a filigree lattice, a landscape of domes, an anarchy, a press of people, a choke of fumes, a whiff of spices" (COD 7-8).

A British official William Fraser, appointed as the Resident Assistant in Delhi married Indian women. He loved ancient Sanskrit text books. He is a philosopher but behaved like a madman. Dalrymple encourages the fusion between East and West admires the viceroy's house. He remarks,

"Only the vanity of the British Empire- an Empire emancipated from democratic constraints, totally self-confident in its own judgement and still, despite everything, assured of its superiority-- could have produced Lutyen's Delhi" (COD 85)

Dalrymple describes the book in different aspects. He rejected plane for his journey, travelled through train with his wife during the summer, to explore the Delhi city together. He gives his perspective on British-Indian relationship, Colonization, Cross-cultural relations, with complex and conflicted past presented in optimistic tone. He doesn't feel tiresome in his exploration on Indian culture, even he is less fluent in Hindi and mostly communicated in English. *City of djinnns* is the blend of History and Travel, creates the illusion of travel when delving into the past history of Delhi. His interpretation of historical narratives in detail shows the autobiographic and subjective features of Travel writing.

Travel and Self-transformation

William Dalrymple successfully completed the journey and his desire in presenting the life of the people in his works is extraordinary. He visits the places, locations and documents the conversation of the people he met, reveals in his research. In historical perspective, he acclaims the tale of his travel. His narrations on the observation of the past and present scenario in detail, traces the history. The entire journey in presenting the characters account is the challenging task in his works. The day-to-day exploration and tracks portrays how he is true to his work as author and his perspectives is considered as a unique voyage. The excerpt of the report from the newspaper shows his knowledge in travel. His travel and interest attempt in planning the route and framework with changing adjustments from time-to-time remarks an unforgettable journey through self by travel.

Conclusion

Travel Writing has reached the new heights in recent years gathered a lot of attention among readers. William Dalrymple chosen travel writing at the age of twenty-two. His first book is the travel genre, and later he explored with the travel books, travelogue and travel narratives with the blend of history, culture and travel. For his second

book, *City of Djinn*s he hang around Delhi for research and documents the experience and exploration of the British rule, Partition and Mughal rule in India. *The City of Djinn*s accounts the life of William Dalrymple and the life in the City. His interest in Delhi and its history remarked him as a Travel Writer. This paper discusses the existing history and the importance of travel writing in detail. The exploration of self through travel is beneficial for the future and scope.

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