



WOMEN IN TRAVEL LITERATURE: VOICES FROM THE ROAD

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Abstract

Travel literature, once the exclusive domain of male adventurers, has evolved into a genre enriched by diverse female voices that challenge traditional narratives and expand the literary landscape.

This research paper explores the development and impact of women's travel writing, highlighting how it serves as a platform for self-expression, cultural critique, and gender resistance. Through an examination of historical and contemporary works, this study investigates the thematic concerns, stylistic approaches, and socio-political implications of travel narratives authored by women. The paper argues that women's travel writing redefines the act of travel as both a physical journey and a metaphorical exploration of identity and agency.

Introduction

Historically, the realm of travel—particularly adventurous, exploratory travel—has been dominated by men. Male travelers were often celebrated as explorers, conquerors, and intellectuals, while women were expected to remain within domestic spheres. However, over the centuries, women have increasingly stepped into the world of travel and its literary expressions, creating narratives that challenge and complement the male-centric canon. Women's travel literature offers unique perspectives shaped by gendered experiences and often reflects deeper inquiries into identity, culture, and resistance.

Historical Foundations of Women in Travel Writing

The history of women in travel writing dates back centuries, though their contributions were often marginalized or dismissed. Early examples include Egeria, a 4th-century Christian pilgrim who documented her journey to the Holy Land, providing invaluable insights into early Christian

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practices and female piety. Her work, though religious in nature, sets a precedent for later women who would travel not only for spiritual reasons but also for personal, intellectual, and political motives.

In the 18th century, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu broke new ground with her Turkish Embassy Letters, which offered a rare female perspective on the Ottoman Empire. Her access to the private lives of women in the Middle East allowed her to provide ethnographic details that male travelers could not. Montagu's letters challenge orientalist stereotypes and offer a more nuanced understanding of Turkish society.

The 19th century witnessed a surge in women's travel writing, fueled by colonial expansion and the Victorian fascination with exploration. Writers like Isabella Bird and Mary Kingsley traveled extensively across Asia and Africa, respectively. Bird's *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains* showcases her rugged travels in Colorado, challenging contemporary notions of femininity. Mary Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa* provides a scientific and cultural analysis that defies colonial and patriarchal assumptions, emphasizing respect for African societies and criticism of European interventions.

Themes in Women's Travel Writing

1. Gender and Spatial Politics

One of the most prominent themes in women's travel literature is the negotiation of gendered spaces. Unlike male travelers, women often confront social and cultural restrictions that influence their mobility and access. Women writers document the strategies they employ to navigate these barriers, whether through adopting local dress, aligning with male guides, or emphasizing their status as non-threatening observers. For example, Freya Stark's *The Valley of the Assassins* reflects her conscious efforts to blend into Middle Eastern societies, using her linguistic skills and cultural sensitivity to gain access to remote areas. Her writing explores how gender can be both a limitation and an advantage, providing access to spaces and stories closed to male travelers.

2. Travel as Empowerment and Resistance

Travel serves as a form of empowerment for many women writers, offering a means of escape from domestic roles and societal expectations. In the process, travel becomes a mode of resistance against patriarchal norms. This theme is especially evident in modern and postmodern travel writing. Cheryl Strayed's memoir *Wild* exemplifies this idea, as she undertakes a solo hike on the Pacific Crest Trail to recover from personal loss and trauma. Her physical journey mirrors an internal transformation, symbolizing independence and resilience. Similarly, Elizabeth Gilbert's *Eat, Pray, Love* reflects a journey of spiritual and emotional rebirth, though it has also sparked debates about privilege and consumerist spirituality.

3. Intercultural Dialogue and Ethical Travel

Women travel writers often emphasize empathy and ethical engagement with other cultures. Their narratives frequently reject the exoticism and superiority that mark colonial travel accounts.

Instead, they focus on shared experiences, mutual respect, and the complexities of cross-cultural interaction. Dervla Murphy's *Full Tilt: Ireland to India with a Bicycle* demonstrates a commitment to immersive and respectful travel. Murphy often critiques Western imperialism and highlights the humanity of the people she encounters. Her work contrasts sharply with earlier male narratives that objectify foreign lands and peoples.

4. Intersectionality and Diverse Voices

Contemporary women's travel writing increasingly incorporates intersectional perspectives, addressing issues of race, class, sexuality, and nationality. Writers from marginalized backgrounds offer critical insights that challenge mainstream narratives. Bani Amor, a queer, non-binary travel writer, critiques the whiteness and elitism of traditional travel literature. Their work advocates for decolonized and inclusive storytelling. Taran N. Khan's *Shadow City: A Woman Walks Kabul* offers a South Asian female perspective on a city shaped by war and political upheaval. Her narrative blends journalism with memoir, challenging stereotypes about Afghan life and highlighting the resilience of its people.

Case Studies of Influential Women Travel Writers

1. Isabella Bird

Bird's extensive travels and prolific writing made her a significant figure in 19th-century travel literature. Despite suffering from chronic illness, she traveled through the American West, the Middle East, and Asia. Her works, including *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* and *A Lady's Life in the Rocky Mountains*, challenge the notion of passive Victorian femininity.

2. Freya Stark

Stark's contributions to Middle Eastern travel literature are remarkable for their depth and sensitivity. Her linguistic skills and cultural understanding allowed her to engage meaningfully with local populations. She often traveled alone in regions considered dangerous, thereby redefining the limits of female exploration.

3. Cheryl Strayed

As a modern example, Strayed's *Wild* has become a cultural touchstone for women seeking empowerment through solitude and nature. Her candid exploration of grief, addiction, and healing resonates with readers across generations.

4. Dervla Murphy

Murphy's commitment to slow, sustainable travel and her critical stance on Western policies set her apart from many travel writers. Her works blend adventure with political commentary, offering a holistic view of the places she visits.

5. Taran N. Khan

Khan's *Shadow City* adds a postcolonial, feminist lens to travel writing. Her focus on everyday life in Kabul and the stories of Afghan women offers a counter-narrative to media portrayals of the region.

Indian Women Travel Writers: Expanding the Global Road

While much scholarship on travel literature has centered on European and American women, Indian women writers have increasingly contributed to the genre, offering voices shaped by postcolonial realities, cultural diversity, and gendered negotiations within South Asia. Their works enrich the global canon of travel writing by challenging Western frameworks and foregrounding indigenous perspectives.

Early Contributions

During the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, Indian women began to travel abroad for education, political activism, or cultural exchange, recording their impressions in memoirs, essays, and letters. Pandita Ramabai, a pioneering social reformer, wrote extensively about her journeys to England and the United States in works like *The High-Caste Hindu Woman* (1887). Her travel experiences provided a sharp critique of both Indian patriarchy and Western imperial attitudes, situating her as one of the earliest Indian women to combine travel with feminist activism.

Similarly, Sarojini Naidu, though primarily known as a poet and political leader, frequently undertook international journeys, delivering lectures across Europe, Africa, and America. While her speeches and essays were not conventional travelogues, they reflect the role of travel in shaping cross-cultural dialogue and in amplifying an Indian female voice on global platforms.

Contemporary Indian Women Travelers

Modern Indian women writers bring fresh perspectives to travel literature by intertwining personal journeys with broader reflections on identity, globalization, and cultural heritage.

- Monisha Rajesh, in *Around the World in 80 Trains* (2019), blends humor, observation, and political commentary as she journeys across continents by rail. Her perspective as a woman of Indian heritage navigating multiple cultural identities adds layers of complexity to traditional travel narratives.

- Anuradha Roy, though primarily a novelist, incorporates travel into her fiction, using journeys across India and abroad to explore questions of displacement, belonging, and cultural encounter. Her literary style demonstrates how travel writing overlaps with other genres in contemporary Indian literature.

- Arundhathi Subramaniam, a poet and cultural critic, has written essays and reflections that recount spiritual and cultural journeys across India. Her narratives often interrogate the intersections of gender, spirituality, and modernity, echoing themes of empowerment and self-discovery common in global women's travel writing.

Themes and Significance

Indian women's travel writing often reveals unique tensions between tradition and modernity. Many writers grapple with patriarchal expectations at home while navigating stereotypes

abroad. Unlike Western travel writers who often look outward at “exotic” cultures, Indian women writers frequently negotiate dual gazes—reflecting both on their own society and on the global cultures they encounter. This dual positioning generates insights that resist Orientalist frameworks and enrich the genre with plural voices.

Furthermore, their works foreground themes such as migration, diaspora, and spiritual exploration, situating travel not only as physical movement but as a search for belonging and identity in an interconnected world. In this sense, Indian women travel writers extend the feminist potential of travel literature, using the act of movement to contest boundaries of geography, gender, and culture.

Challenges Faced by Women Travel Writers

Women travel writers often face unique challenges, including safety concerns, societal judgment, and limited access to publishing opportunities. Solo female travelers are frequently portrayed as reckless or naive, reflecting deep-seated gender biases. Additionally, writers from marginalized communities face additional barriers, including racial discrimination and cultural stereotyping.

Publishing biases also persist, with male-authored travel narratives often receiving more critical acclaim and visibility. Women writers must navigate these structural inequalities while asserting their voices and stories.

The Digital Age and the Future of Women’s Travel Writing

The advent of digital media has democratized travel writing, enabling more women to share their experiences through blogs, social media, and self-publishing. This shift has diversified the genre, allowing for real-time engagement and community building. However, it also raises concerns about authenticity, commercialization, and the impact of social media on travel ethics.

Nevertheless, digital platforms offer powerful tools for marginalized voices to reach global audiences. Online communities support aspiring women travelers and writers, fostering solidarity and resource-sharing.

Conclusion

Women’s travel literature has evolved from a marginal subset to a vibrant, essential part of the genre. Through their narratives, women travelers challenge dominant discourses, redefine exploration, and advocate for more inclusive, ethical representations of the world. Their voices, once silenced or sidelined, now resonate from the pages of books, digital screens, and the global road itself. As the genre continues to grow, it is imperative to support and amplify these voices, ensuring that the road remains open and inclusive for all.

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