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William Dalrymple as a Travel Writer: Blending Narrative with History

Dr. Punyashil S. Tembhurne

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Associate Professor, HOD, Dept of English, Late N. P. W. College Lakhani Dist. Bhandara (MS)

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Address for correspondence:
Dr. Punyashil S. Tembhurne Associate Professor, HOD, Dept of English, Late N. P. W.College Lakhani Dist. Bhandara (MS)

Abstract

William Dalrymple is a prominent British writer and historian whose works occupy an important position in contemporary travel writing. His writings combine travel experiences, historical research, cultural observation, personal encounters, and literary narration. From his first book, In Xanadu: A Quest, to City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi, Dalrymple demonstrates how travel writing can move beyond a simple description of places and become a means of exploring history, culture, identity, and human relationships. His engagement with India is particularly significant because he examines the country through both the perspective of a traveller and that of a historian. This paper examines Dalrymple's distinctive approach to travel writing, focusing particularly on In Xanadu, City of Djinns, and The Age of Kali. It argues that his travel narratives are characterised by a close relationship between geographical exploration and historical reconstruction.

Keywords: *William Dalrymple, travel writing, history, India, In Xanadu, City of Djinns, cultural encounter*

Introduction

Travel writing is a literary form in which journeys, places, people, cultures, and personal experiences are transformed into narrative. Contemporary travel writing frequently combines autobiography, history, anthropology, journalism, and literary description. William Dalrymple is an important contemporary writer whose works demonstrate this intersection of genres.Born in Scotland, Dalrymple began his literary career with *In Xanadu*, written when he was twenty-two. The book records his journey across Asia towards Xanadu, associated with Kublai Khan. His second major work, *City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi*, emerged from his extended experience of living in Delhi. The book combines contemporary observations with the history of the city. Penguin Random House notes that *City of Djinns* won the 1994 Thomas Cook Travel Book Award and the Sunday Times Young British Writer of the Year Award. Dalrymple's importance as a travel writer lies in his ability to connect the present with the past. His journeys are rarely limited to physical movement. A journey through a city, monument, landscape, or cultural space becomes an opportunity to investigate historical memory and cultural change.

William Dalrymple and the Development of Travel Writing

Dalrymple's first book, *In Xanadu: A Quest*, established many of the characteristics that would become central to his later writing. The book describes his journey across Asia towards Xanadu and combines adventure, observation, humour, historical knowledge, and personal experience. His official website describes the work as a journey across Asia involving villages, cities, unexpected encounters, and historical landscapes.

The book demonstrates that travel writing does not merely record geographical movement. The traveller's experience becomes a framework through which history and culture can be interpreted. Dalrymple's narrative voice gives the journey a personal dimension while his historical interests provide a wider context.

In Xanadu: A Quest as Travel Narrative

In Xanadu is significant because it represents the beginning of Dalrymple's career as a travel writer. The narrative combines adventure with historical investigation. His journey is motivated partly by his interest in Kublai Khan and the legendary Xanadu. One of the important features of the book is the interaction between the traveller and the places through which he moves. The landscape is not presented merely as scenery; it is connected with historical events, legends, people, and cultural memories. The book therefore illustrates Dalrymple's characteristic method: travel becomes a way of discovering history.

City of Djinns: Delhi as History and Living Culture

City of Djinns: A Year in Delhi represents a major development in Dalrymple's travel writing. Rather than simply passing through Delhi, Dalrymple lived in the city and explored its history and contemporary life. The book moves between different periods of Delhi's history and the author's own experiences. Dalrymple's official description explains that he explores the city over the course of a year, uncovering successive layers of its past while presenting stories from both its history and present.This combination of history and contemporary observation makes *City of Djinns* more than a conventional travelogue. Delhi becomes a historical text that can be read through its monuments, communities, memories, and people.

Travel, History and Cultural Encounter

A central characteristic of Dalrymple's writing is his interest in cultural encounters between East and West. His historical works also explore relationships between British and Indian communities.For example, *White Mughals* examines the relationship between James Achilles Kirkpatrick and Khair-un-Nissa in Hyderabad and uses archival research to investigate cultural interaction in late eighteenth-century India.Thus, Dalrymple's travel writing and historical writing are closely connected. His experience of travelling through and living in South Asia contributes to his understanding of its historical and cultural complexity.

Narrative Technique

Dalrymple uses several literary techniques in his travel writing:

1. **First-person narration:** Personal experience provides immediacy to the narrative.
2. **Historical reconstruction:** Present-day places are connected with their historical past.
3. **Description:** Landscapes, cities, architecture, people, and cultural practices are described vividly.
4. **Humour:** Humorous observations make historical and geographical material accessible.
5. **Anecdote:** Individual stories are used to illuminate broader cultural and historical questions.
6. **Interdisciplinary approach:** Travel, history, anthropology, journalism, and memoir frequently intersect.

These techniques enable Dalrymple to address scholarly subjects while maintaining the accessibility of a travel narrative.

Dalrymple as a Cultural Observer

Dalrymple's writing reflects sustained engagement with South Asian society and history. His movement from *In Xanadu* to *City of Djinns* demonstrates an increasing depth of engagement with India. He moved to Delhi in 1989 and spent several years researching *City of Djinns*.

His writing therefore represents a form of travel writing based not only on movement but also on prolonged observation and research.

Critical Perspective

Dalrymple's travel writing has also attracted scholarly criticism. Huma Yaqub's academic article on *City of Djinns* examines the relationship between Dalrymple's travel writing and Western/Orientalist modes of representing India. The article argues that, despite Dalrymple's sympathetic engagement with India, his work can also reproduce certain strategies associated with Western travel writing.This critical perspective is important because travel writing is not completely neutral. The traveller selects what to observe, describe, interpret, and narrate. Therefore, Dalrymple's representation of India can be studied both for its historical and cultural insights and for the perspective from which those representations are produced.

Conclusion

William Dalrymple occupies an important position in contemporary travel writing because he combines the experiences of the traveller with the methods of the historian. His works demonstrate that travel literature can function as a medium for exploring history, culture, memory, identity, and intercultural encounters.

In Xanadu presents travel as adventure and historical exploration, while *City of Djinns* develops a deeper engagement with Delhi by combining personal experience with historical reconstruction. His later historical works continue his interest in the interaction between cultures.Dalrymple's contribution to travel writing therefore lies in his ability to transform journeys into narratives that connect geographical spaces with historical memories.

At the same time, his work should be approached critically by considering the cultural perspective of the traveller and the ways in which India is represented. His writing consequently provides rich material for studying the relationship between travel, history, narrative, and cultural representation.

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Conflicts of interest

The authors declare that there are no conflicts of interest regarding the publication of thesis paper.

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