

Travel Literature: Searching for Cultural impressions

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Abstract

Usually after travelling to a place a traveller is consumed by an inexplicable experience which he wants to share with others and when that is done by a writer through an eloquent language it becomes travel writing. The writer represents his keen and minute observation skills about people, their language, their appearances, places, history, ethnicity, society, traditions and culture. Travel narratives bring together facts, fiction, history, and autobiography, generally overlapping with no defined boundaries. Writers explore foreign lands, sometimes out of pleasure and sometimes as an official journey, based on cross-cultural and transnational visits. The purpose is, often, to encourage diversity in international diversity, innovating literary tradition, and of course, to bring an access to the usually lesser known and visited places by many.

Travel writing is a genre which transfers writers' cultural sensitivity to the readers. They usually traverse many complicated and disturbing terrains. This paper aims to study and analyse such literary writings by selected writers. The purpose is also to understand the extent of intercultural exchange through travel literature. One of the selected writings in this paper shall be of an Indian journalist turned writer, Samanth Subramanian's nonfiction, *Following Fish: Travels Around The Indian Coast (2010)*.

Keywords: travel, literature, experience, writers, sensitivity, culture.

The most indispensable part, or one should say, habit of a man's life is travelling. Travelling is sometimes, for purpose or pleasure, locally or going abroad, is always. Life will be monotonous and stagnant in the absence of travelling. In the hustle and bustle of fast moving life, one wants to, sometimes, escape and move to the peaceful lap of nature. Science and technology has made this possible. Within no time people can reach to unimaginable places and explore many unknown, and sometimes, never visited places. People find travelling a pleasure seeking task. Many have given a black and white form to their travel experiences. They have contributed in presenting what they have seen, felt and known, for those who want to know more through reading.

The travel writing is usually written in third person narrative style that also adds objectivity to it. There are different forms of travel writing that includes short stories, essays, autobiographies, and biographies, journalistic writing like newspaper articles, magazine write

ups, blogs, etc. When a narrator wishes to give a detailed and longer narrative of his or her experiences of visiting to a particular place, he or she prefers to write a book on it. Thus travel books or travelogues are written in different styles, ranging from the documentary to the fictional one. It is written by authors including journalists, migrants, pilgrims, missionaries, adventurers, travellers, military officers, explorers, and scientists.

Travel writing is a hybrid form of literature which brings together every genre and has complex relationship with other genres. In an article Akhilesh Kumar quotes Raban's statement, 'travel writing is a notoriously raffish open house where different genres are likely to end up in the same bed...' (Raban 253-254).

So, Literature is all powerful and can make any area visited a history. It can make persons, places and culture universally known and immortal. It can even promote tourism. The more one reads about a place, more he or she is attracted to it and wants to visit it.

Furthermore, culture is indispensably visible in every representation made by travel writers. It is because culture is society and its way of life. Definitions of culture abound and range from being very complex to simple. One can define it 'as a set of values and beliefs or a cluster of learned able as well as liveable' (Keesing 1974). Culture is a unique characteristic of a social group; the values and norms shared by its members set it apart from other social groups and is influenced by conscious beliefs. Bodley throws light on three basic components of culture, namely: what people think, what they do, and the material products they produce. So, 'culture can be treated as the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from other' (Hofstede 1984). Travel, culture and nature writing amalgamates in many of the works written by Sally Carrighar, Gerald Durrell, Amitav Ghosh, Samanth Subramanian, and Marryam H. Rashi, all of them, no doubt, have different aims for travelling and writing.

This paper aims at exploring Samanth Subramanian's *Following Fish: Travels Around the Indian Coast* (2010). This nonfiction has been awarded with Shakti Bhatt First Book Prize and nominated for Andre Simon Book Award. Samanth Subramanian was haunted by the experience of a grey-as-death steamed fish he had at a dinner when he was quite young and staying in Indonesia with his family. Much later in life, Subramanian returns to fish again. Although born in a family of strict vegetarians, Subramanian decides to explore every idea of fish as food, be its related to culture, livelihood, sport, history, society or even religion.

Following Fish shows how diasporic displacement brings with it enlightenment and cosmopolitan culture. It is an attempt to capture different cultural identities through the people he meets in different chapters who represent different cultures and follow certain area specific traditions.

Being a journalist, Subramanian has written for a wide range of publications. His writing gravitates towards long form narrative which is crisp and clear. This book is set along and inspired by Indian coastline, which has been comparatively neglected in literary representation. It involves right from how the process of catching fish goes on, to the making and to the cultures that influence this category of "sea food". During his travels he has not only tried eating in the best of restaurants but even gone to the shacks to taste the Hilsa, not only woken up at ungodly hours in early mornings to reach the fish market, but has swallowed the murrel live that is debated to cure asthma. He has gone through the streets where the Koli people live in search of a Mumbai that was very different before it became the city we see today.

In over nine essays, Subramanian visits coastal states across India and tells extraordinary stories about people's relationship with fish. 'Subramanian's work adds to a cultural and material reading of India's coastline' (Jayagopalan 260). Written in a witty manner, this book is the best nonfiction narrative exploring the less visited area of India in the context of travel. In the 'Introduction', Subramanian states what actually the book is. For him it is:

Not a how-to-travel book but a travelogue- a record of my journeys, my experiences and observations, my conversations with the people I met, and my investigations into subjects that I happened to find incredibly fascinating... plain, old-fashioned journalism, disabuser of notions, destroyer of preconceptions, discoverer of the relative, shifting nature of truth. (F F xiii)

Food and spices form an important part of culture representing different places. Samanth Subramanian and Marryam H. Reshhi both have travelled a lot to various parts of India. Subramanian travelled in search of fish and its related flavours, species and traditions, and Reshii, on the other hand, concentrates more on all sorts of spices and ingredients which make food palatable for human beings.

One can differentiate and identify the places by understanding the use of spices in the food. Subramanian writes in *Following Fish*, 'In Goa, for instance, the use of cinnamon and garlic and wine in food caught on from the Portuguese. But in the coastal areas around Tuticorin, they still use salt, tamarind and coconut more dominantly- the ingredients they were using even before the Portuguese arrived' (56).

Subramanian writes about fishing community when he travels and talks to Father Jerosin Kattar, the rector and Parish priest of the church of Our Lady of the Snows in Manapadu, on the southern coast of Tamilnadu. He states, in 'On the earlobe that changed history' in *Following Fish*, 'the fishing community is conditioned by its work and its situation- they're like tribal people....they have changed very little in six hundred years'. Further he adds, 'many of the fishermen talk loudly, because they are used to shouting over the sound of the wind and waves. But that can be misunderstood as shouting' (48). So, ones professional habits change ones unprofessional life to a great extent, and others should not always misunderstand.

In the chapter 'On swallowing a live fish', Subramanian enlightens the readers with the famous 'fish treatment' of Hyderabad, which involves 'the wilful ingestion of a live murrel fingerling that had been stuff to its gills with an unknown medicine' (21). He writes about the strong belief of people in it and its historical background as explained by the Bathini Goud family. He calls it 'faith healing'.

He writes about the sale of fish in the Howrah fish market, Diamond harbour and Kolaghat, known for hilsa. It is believed that 'a Bengali fish stall wouldn't be a Bengali fish stall without hilsa' (14), and Subramanian is amused to hear a passerby saying, 'without eating hilsa, my mood for the day is not right at all' (15). Moving in the same vein, Subramanian writes about *Sorshe ilish* a special traditional way of cooking hilsa, particular to Bengal. Exploring more on Bengali culture, Subramanian quotes here another condition of being a Bengali, 'A true Bengali can take a mouthful of hilsa, and sort meat from bone in his mouth, swallowing the meat and storing the bones to one side, to be extricated later. If you can't do that, you're not a real Bengali' (6).

So *Following Fish* is abundant in portraying cultural glimpses of Bengal and Goa, especially the facts and perceptions concerned with the fish. Subramanian even writes to the

extent of sharing the recipes of cooking hilsa. On the very first page of *Following Fish*, Subramanian guides the reader about visiting Bengal in winter season only. He has heard that ‘the weather behaves itself and moves into a Goldilocks state- not hot but not too cold, not humid but not too dry (1).

One of the Goan tells Subramanian, ‘fishing is in our blood’ (111) and ‘Goa’s is an economy of idleness- not an economy made up of idle people, but an economy that relies on the human desire to idle’ (*Ibid*). While talking about all this, he cannot help sharing here about the effects of climate imbalance on the fish. He writes, ‘The Ganga doesn’t have as many fish now either. The silting and the pollution, you see. The fish come into the river, and they begin to die. And the fish you do catch, they’re smaller now. They’re not as good to eat either’ (13). He is also concerned about the ecology. He shares that ‘massive trawlers scrape the bottom of the seabed to pluck every possible fish into their holds, wrecking the ocean’s ecology and scooping in worthless fry before the small fish can mature into adults’ (103). This is quite thought provoking for the reader.

One of the visitors whom Subramanian meets in Goa is worried about Goa becoming ‘a fish-starved’ state. One can understand why the visitor’s is so worried. He states:

People have to realize, within themselves, what they stand to lose. I don’t want to even imagine a world where my son will not see a single Salmon in the river’, and he can very well guess the reason behind it, ‘and it’s all just the classic case of greed’. (114)

His observations are eye opening and alarming when ‘he talked about rules broken with impunity or tripped up by corruption, of surreptitious fishing even during the two-month closed season, about the pernicious stake nets, banned everywhere else in the world, but here they’re put up even in the breeding areas of the river, so that it all the fry are caught’ (*Ibid*). One of the fierce looking environmentalist, Claude Alvares, confesses that the tourism industry has damaged the Goan beaches and the fishing trade.

About changing cultural values, Subramanyam writes, ‘a Goa where fifteen years ago, if somebody found a long bag a lost bag or wallet, they’d put up an advertisement in the newspaper, and the money would all be there where it was claimed. There were no such advertisements in the newspapers anymore’ (*Ibid*). He also adds, ‘Earlier we’d go inland to fish, and you know, we’d catch one fish and have a good time and come away,’ but ‘Now, you see kids in these four-wheel drives camping out there, with loud music and bright lights, and they’ll catch as many fish as they can’ (115). Another proclaimed travel-based Indian writer, Amitav Ghosh’s writings reverberate with his sense of concern for the environment, especially *The Hungry Tide*, which is about the aspects of Sundarbans and the details of the *Oracella*, a dolphin species found in the sea of Bay of Bengal. In his *The Great Derangement: Climate Change and the Unthinkable*, he confesses, ‘Climate change is like death, no one wants to talk about it’.

Thus, it can be said that travelling, writing and knowing more about different cultures go hand in hand. Subramanian has depicted a proper and realistic picture combining various cultures in India. He has encouraged readers to understand culture while travelling from one place to other. He has focused his travelling on the coastal line of India visiting Calcutta, Goa, Tamilnadu, Mumbai, etc., exactly following the fish, its recipes, its species, its uses, its commerce related use. At the same time, he has shown a writer’s sensitivity towards the world around him, alarming the readers to pay more attention and care for Mother Nature and

ecological biodiversity. He has, especially, addressed those who are tourists, not to be so selfish and let coming generations also enjoy the same nature they are doing.

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