

Nature's Wit in Motion: Eco-Consciousness in Bryson's 'The Lost Continent'

SONAM

Department of English, Bhagat Phool Singh Mahila Vishwavidyalaya, Sonapat, India

E-mail: sonamverma0207@gmail.com

ABSTRACT

Travelling is an art form – a fascinating one, indeed. The human history and civilisation can be perceived as a collection of travel narratives to different places. Since antiquity, man has travelled to explore places, culture, life and his own self. This paper aims to assess Bill Bryson's travelogue, 'The Lost Continent' from the ecocritical point of view. The objectives are to examine the various ways through which ecological concerns are expressed by the author in his journey through the 38 states of USA. The author's writing style including the frequent use of wit and humour to highlight the astronomically-increasing ecological crisis makes the narrative engaging and his concerns valid. To study these objectives, this paper uses the research methodology of eco-consciousness which not only aims at creating environmental awareness among people but also considers the socio-political implications of human activities on nature and mankind.

Key words: Eco-consciousness, Ecological crisis, Mankind, Nature, Travelogues

INTRODUCTION

A travelogue is written or spoken account of one's experiences on a journey to an unfamiliar place. The origin of travel writing can be traced back to the existence of human civilisation. Humans have travelled for food, shelter, safety, security, privacy, sanitation, leisure and much more. However, since the dark middle ages a new trend has emerged in travel writings that they are produced with a specific purpose which is not only necessary for human survival but also maintains the status quo of 'the powerful'. In the dark ages, the purpose behind travel writings was exploration that consecutively expanded over the years to cater to the religious, economic and colonial interests of the Empires. Travelogues can take many forms including books, blogs, memoirs, short stories, articles, essays, dairies or journals, autobiographies etc. In the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, travel writing manifested itself in various forms of literature such as diaspora, exile, migration, excursion and exploration. The famous travel narratives over the centuries include Mandeville's 'The Travels of Sir John Mandeville' (1900), Homer's 'Iliad' (800 BCE), Valmiki's 'Ramayana' (200 B.C.E.), Swift's 'Gulliver's Travels' (1900), Stevenson's 'Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes' (1879), Sankrityayan's 'From Volga to Ganga' (1942), Dalrymple's 'The City of Djinn's' (1993) and many more.

Fussell (1980) in his book 'Abroad: British Literary Travelling between Wars' provides a very convenient distinction between an explorer, a traveller and a tourist. He suggests that an explorer looks for the unperceived; a traveller looks for the perceived and identified with a sense of excitement as the explorer; and a tourist looks for the perceived, well-mapped and charted things prepared for him by 'the powerful' for their economic and political interests. "It is between these two poles that the traveller mediates, retaining all he can of the excitement or the unpredictable attaching to exploration and fusing that with the pleasure of 'knowing where one is' belonging to tourism" (Fussell 1980).

In relation to this argument, Mohanty (2003) in the introduction to his book 'Travel Writing and the Empire' suggests that "the epic journeys of Dante and Virgil... the great Middle Eastern narratives of the Arabian Nights and Sinbad the Sailor, the travels of the spiritual pilgrim in the East, the time travellers of H.G. Wells, or the scientific adventures of Jules Verne's fantasy world – all underlie the universal desire for travel" i.e., be it an explorer, a traveller or a tourist, all of them express this deep, ceaseless urge for travel and exploration not only of the external phenomena but also internal and personal exploration of the self. The purpose of this paper is to analyse the travelogue 'The Lost Continent' (Bryson 1990) with a primary focus on the author's journey of self-

growth and his eco-conscious reflections in the book rather than the disturbing use of travel motif for cultural appropriation.

NATURE AND HUMANS

The travelogues of Bill Bryson are not only about physical journey of the author touching upon the historical and geographical facts but also about a journey of personal development, growth and self-improvement that a person goes through psychologically, mentally, emotionally and spiritually to become a better version of oneself. Research in the field of environmental psychology and other related disciplines has found that spending time in nature is directly proportional to the various aspects of our wellbeing. Bratman et al. (2019) in their paper titled "Nature and mental health: An ecosystem service perspective" have presented evidence that our presence in nature as compared to the urban areas lead to lower levels of mental distress and higher levels of happiness, contentment, improved social interactions, positive effect and a sense of meaning and purpose in life. Ergo, nature conservation and preservation is a prerequisite for the survival of mankind. To bring this idea into action, there is a necessity to create eco-consciousness among people on a wider scale.

Eco-consciousness or ecological consciousness is our awareness within the ecosystem to recognize the ever-changing and dynamic relationship with environment (Lings 2002, Panov 2013). Eco-consciousness is achieved at various stages beginning from an individual level, expanding to family, community, society, nation and the entire human civilization. It also involves a commitment on our part to maintain the ecological order and balance in the nature. Ecological consciousness aims at a counter-intuitive approach to our present activities which address the anthropocentric belief in order to attain sustainable development goals. Eco-consciousness balances the extreme polarization between anthropocentrism and eco-centrism. It is not only about getting better education and knowledge about the contemporary need to resolve ecological crisis but a way of thinking that calls for a better and radically different perspective on, experience of, interaction with, and relationship to the natural

environment. Bryson's approach is one classic example of this act of balance since he appreciates the advancements of science and technology keeping man at the centre but at the same time, criticizes his greed to exploit the natural phenomena and his over dependence on science and technology for the same, while acknowledging the importance of preserving nature to sustain our biosphere, keeping ecology at the center, too.

Search of "the perfect town"

Bryson's 'The Lost Continent' reflects upon the journey of the author through 38 states of the USA and a quest to find "the perfect town", Amalgam. Having lived in the UK for over a decade, when Bryson came back to the USA, he found the continent as doubly lost – lost to capitalism since its physical outlook changed excessively in the past few years and lost to him since he felt like a foreigner in his own hometown. Having written the book in a nostalgic tone, after the recent death of his father, Bryson found himself unable to locate the places of his childhood memories in those re-built towns, despite having travelled 14,000 miles in search of "the perfect town".

Here, 'Nature's Wit in Motion' has dual meaning; firstly, it stands for the author, Bill Bryson, who traverses through 38 states of USA on a quest, exploring the cultural and ecological nuances. On a personal level, he is on a quest to find a memoryscape in the form of "the perfect town", a place uncontaminated by the rapid urbanisation. On a spiritual level, Bryson is able to see nature as a phenomenon complete in itself, in all its hues and colours, shades and moods, ever evolving and ever rejuvenating itself despite its merciless onslaught at the hands of greedy humans. Bryson's search is not for a place devoid of shopping malls, parking lots, factories and drive-in churches but for a place that is not filled with such things from end to end. The perfect town, "amalgam" is not only a blend of all the small towns that he saw in his childhood and fiction but also a perfect blend of the countryside harmony and scientific industry. Secondly, it recapitulates the idea of dynamism in the ever-changing relationship between humans and nature. The relationship between mankind and nature is in a constant flux where both the entities must

complement one another. In other words, just as nature provides us with the vitalities for survival, well-being and quality of life; humans too, instead of creating 'protected' areas, must contribute towards the preservation of nature than destroying the natural resources.

In this travelogue, Bryson's "perfect town" is lost forever. It is largely because of the excessive consumption of the natural resources with open spaces depleting rapidly. Larkin (1974) shares similar sentiments in his poem, "Going Going". Just as

"I thought it would last my time -
The sense that, beyond the town,
There would always be fields and farms"
(Larkin 1974; pp. 21)

Bryson, Larkin also laments the fact that the immense beauty of English countryside is disappearing at an accelerated pace in the contemporary modern times. Both, Bryson and Larkin criticize the cornucopian thinking asserting that the earth's resources are finite and prone to perish soon if we don't adopt an alternate and a better way of thinking to conduct ourselves, thus fostering the need to develop eco-consciousness among mankind on a larger scale.

Throughout his journey, Bryson deliberately avoids the tourist destinations and factual insights into the history, geography and culture of the places, to explore the true essence of American culture and lifestyle. Nevertheless, literature cannot exist in vacuum and socio-political and cultural aspects of a text help us understand it better. During 1980 to 1990s, there was rapid urbanisation, capitalism, commodification, greed and corruption in America as a result of which small towns in the USA were engulfed by the metropolitan cities. This disappearance of small towns became the primary concern of Bryson since he could not find that one perfect town where human values and social interaction among the community were stronger than the rapidly spreading capitalist values. The author ruminates, "Generally – Americans revere the past only as long as there is some money in it somewhere" (Bryson 1990).

Coined by Elias Burton Holmes in 1903, the term 'travelogue' is purportedly a blend of 'travel' and 'logue', abstracted from monologue (Anonymous

2014) Thus, while reading a travelogue, the readers gain insights not only about the journey and experiences of the traveller but also into the personality of the author. Through the study of Bryson's 'The Lost Continent' the readers also comprehend the unique travel ego that the author possesses. Bryson is a well-read scholar who critically analyses each and every aspect of the American way of life and the cultural loss that it is facing in present times. For instance, on his visit to Auburn University, known for its prestigious scholarships including the Hardy scholarship, the author is astounded to know that most of the youngsters, they haven't even heard of Thomas Hardy and that the university does not have a decent bookstore for its students. He laments the increasing number of shopping malls, parking lots, gas stations, motels etc. that has replaced the gardens, mountains, valleys and other outdoor recreational areas. Bryson asserts, "Far from mollifying the ugliness, it only intensified it, reminding you what had been thrown away for the sake of drive-thru burgers and cheap gasoline" (Bryson 1990).

In the modern era, man has blurred the boundaries between need and greed. Schumacher (1973) has quoted Gandhi's words: "Earth provides enough to satisfy every man's need, but not for every man's greed". Gandhian philosophy on environment advocates that humanity and the entire ecosystem will be able to sustain only if humans take as much as they immediately need rather than filling up their storage homes, starving 'the less powerful'. In other words, humans must stop acting as thieves and start being a member of the ecosystem. The deep urge to accumulate more and more for oneself has caused severe implications for the others, 'the have-nots'. Evidently, a traveller faces certain predicaments while travelling to a foreign place such as inability to understand the foreign culture, loss of self-identity and the feeling of otherness. Nonetheless, the USA has changed so much during 1980s that the author experienced similar issues, while travelled to his 'native' country. Yet the core competence of a writer lies in surmounting these challenges and presenting his ideas in a beautiful and sublime manner just as Bryson did in this work. He addresses the ecological concerns that need immediate attention while at the same time maintaining a light-hearted tone to engage

his readers to his arguments. 'The Lost Continent' can be viewed as a tool for spreading eco-consciousness among people, not only in the USA but worldwide.

Having travelled 14,000 miles, Bryson's act of going back to his hometown, Des Moines suggests that returning to our roots is one very reasonable solution to the ecological crisis. In a similar vein of thought was expressed by Eliot (1959) in his 'Little Gidding'. Exploration is a necessary act which as an

"We shall not cease from exploration and the end of all our exploring will be to arrive where we started and know the place for the first time." (Eliot 1959; pp. 154)

advanced species, humans must commit to. However, in the process of exploration one must remember the purpose of their journey and that reason must take into account everyone's needs and desires. Just as Shelley (1959) in his work 'A Defence of Poetry' and Nietzsche (1935) in his work 'Thus Spoke Zarathustra' have drawn similarities between a poet and a prophet, Pascal (1670) in his work 'Pensées' has drawn parallels between a traveller and a meditator. Travelling can be seen as a form of meditation since it also provides us a sense of calmness, tranquillity and peace of mind. However, the question that Bryson raises is that despite being aware of the contemporary ecological issues, why the intellectuals of the nation dot on destroying these natural life-rejuvenating places. The price that mankind is paying for these luxuries is the loss of mental wellbeing, peace and solace.

IMPACT OF CAPITALISM ON NATURE

Capitalism has affected the nature so extensively that people had to officially restrict all sort of human activities even in the city parks in Beaufort. There is a strange compartmentalisation observed by the author in various towns of America that it doesn't allow any human activities inside the reserved areas but one can witness unrestrained human interruptions

into nature led only by our greed. Bryson suggests that commodification has destroyed harmony and integrity among people to an extent that they have become "officially unwelcoming" to others. He uses colloquial language, slangs, wit and humour throughout the book to keep his audience engaging. Even though written in a nostalgic tone, Bryson's writing style is an indirect attack of the American lifestyle that highlights the serious ecological concerns in a subtle and humorous way. Bryson proclaims, "I read once that it takes 75,000 trees to produce one issue of the Sunday New York Times – and it's well worth every trembling leaf. So what if our grandchildren have no oxygen to breathe?" (Bryson 1990)

The use of pronouns such as 'our' sets a conversational tone in the book. It establishes the fact that our actions against or for nature will have a synergistic effect on everyone being a part of the ecosystem. Moreover, the use of informal tone and friendly demeanour is pertinent as it makes the reader more inclusive and engaging in the thoughts and opinions of the author. Bryson's travelogues have a remarkable quality of putting up serious questions, on the American way of life and the direction in which it is going, in a witty and humorous manner. Nonetheless, there are instances where the author seems to be quiet disappointed that he's unable to veil his emotional turmoil behind his sense of humour. "Forgive me. I don't mean to get upset. But you are taking my world away from me, piece by little piece, and sometimes it just pisses me off. Sorry" (Bryson 1990).

Humans have a natural tendency to succumb to their native language, the language that they are most connected to, in order to express their deepest feelings. The frequent use of informal register and colloquial style in Bryson's writings is a strong indicative of his emotional attachment with the places that he visited as a child and his disappointment towards the rapid commodification and commercialisation of every possible thing. "America has never quite grasped that you can live in a place, without making it ugly, that beauty doesn't have to be confined behind the fences, as if a national park were a sort of zoo for nature" (Bryson 1990).

CONCLUSION

Bryson's 'The Lost Continent' questions the contemporary American culture which, swayed by the philosophy of anthropocentrism and cornucopian thinking, overlooks the Mother Nature. His journey stirs up concerns, relevant to America as well as on the global level, for the long term repercussions that humans would have to face if they, driven by greed, continue to squander natural resources. He criticizes the idea of creating conservational and recreational areas for not only 'protecting' nature but also for an escape into 'tamed' nature from the commotion of the city life. Bryson's solution to this ecological crisis as going back to the roots doesn't mean that we shift towards the culture that humans followed in the Palaeolithic age. Rather, this study reinforces Bryson's balanced approach where we must not see scientific and technological developments as the ultimate enemy of nature. Being the utmost intellectual species of all, humans should look for innovations that promote harmony between humans and non-humans.

Conflict of interest: Author declares no conflict of interest.

REFERENCES

- Anonymous. 2014. Travelogue. Academic Dictionaries and Encyclopedias. <https://etymology.en-academic.com/35461/travelogue>.
- Bratman, G.N., Anderson, C.B., Berman, M.G., Cochran, B., De Vries, S., Flanders, J., Folke, C., Frumkin, H., Gross, J.J., Hartig, T., Kahn Jr, P.H., Kuo, M., Lawler, J.J., Levin, P.S., Lindahl, T., Meyer-Lindenberg, A., Mitchell, R., Ouyang, Z., Roe, J., Scarlett, L., Smith, J.R., van den Bosch, M., Wheeler, B.W., White, M.P., Zheng, H., and Daily, G.C. 2019. Nature and mental health: An ecosystem service perspective, *Science Advances*. 5, (7), eaax0903. <https://doi.org/10.1126/sciadv.eaax0903>.
- Bryson, B. 1990. *The Lost Continent: Travels in Small-Town America*. Harper Collins, New York. 324 pages. <https://archive.org/details/lostcontinent00bill/page/n5/mode/2up>
- Dalrymple, W. 1993. *City of Djinn: A Year in Delhi*. Penguin Books, London. 373 pages. https://archive.org/details/cityofdjinns2000penguinusainc..compressed_201910
- Eliot, T.S. 1959. *Four Quarters: Little Gidding*. Faber and Faber, London. <https://archive.org/details/fourquartets0000elio/page/6/mode/2up>
- Fussell, P. 1980. *Abroad: British Literary Travelling between Wars*. Oxford University Press, New York. 258 pages. https://archive.org/details/abroadbritishlit00fuss_0/page/n5/mode/2up
- Homer. 800 BCE. *The Iliad* (in Greek). Translated by Rieu, E.V. 2003. Penguin Publishing Group, London. 560 pages.
- Larkin, P. 1974. *High Windows*. Faber and Faber, Boston/London. 52 pages. <https://archive.org/details/highwindows0000lark/page/n51/mode/2up>
- Lingis, A. 2002. Ecological consciousness. *Discourse*, 24(2), 3-17. <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41389641>
- Mandeville, J. 1900. *The Travels of Sir John Mandeville*. Macmillan, London. 418 pages. <https://archive.org/details/travelsofsirjohn00manduoft/mode/2up>
- Mohanty, S. 2003. *Travel Writing and the Empire*. Katha, New Delhi. https://archive.org/details/travelwritingemp0000unse_o3o6/page/n5/mode/2up
- Nietzsche, F.W. 1935. *Thus Spoke Zarathustra*. The Modern Library, New York. 408 pages. <https://archive.org/details/thusspokezarathu00nietuoft/page/n5/mode/2up>
- Panov, V.I. 2013. Ecological thinking, consciousness, responsibility. *Procedia - Social and Behavioral Sciences*, 86, 379-383. <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.sbspro.2013.08.583>
- Pascal, B. 1670. *Pensees*. Ernest Flammarion, Paris. (in French). 368 pages. <https://archive.org/details/pensesedde167000pasc/page/10/mode/2up>
- Sankrityayan, R. 1942. *Volga to Ganga*. (in Hindi). Translated by Kiernan, V. 1946. Rahula Publication, Mussoorie, India. 266 pages. <https://archive.org/details/VolgaToGanga-English/page/n3/mode/2up>
- Schumacher, E.F. 1973. *Small is Beautiful: A Study of Economics as if People Mattered*. Blond & Briggs Ltd, London. 260 pages. <https://archive.org/details/smallisbeautiful0000schu/page/n5/mode/2up>
- Shelley, P.B. 1904. *A Defence of Poetry*. Bobbs-Merrill Company, Indianapolis, USA. 108 pages. <https://archive.org/details/defenceofpoetry012235mbp/page/n9/mode/2up>
- Stevenson, R.L. 1897. *Travels with a Donkey in the Cevennes*. Roberts Bros, Boston. 270 pages. <https://archive.org/details/travelswithdonke07stev>
- Swift, J. 1900. *Gulliver's Travels*. Hazell Watson & Viney Limited, Aylesbury, Bucks, England. 321 pages. https://archive.org/details/gulliverstravels0000unse_c9f3/page/316/mode/2up
- Valmiki. 200 BCE. *Ramayana* (in Sanskrit). Translated by Griffith, R.T.H. 2008. Project Gutenberg. <https://www.gutenberg.org/ebooks/24869>

Received: 26th June 2024

Accepted: 24th July 2024