



A POLITICAL STUDY OF LAWRENCE DURRELL'S TRAVEL MEMOIR – “THE BITTER LEMONS OF CYPRUS”

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ABSTRACT

“Travelling – it leaves you speechless, then turns you into a story teller” says Ibn Battuta. Travel writing is such a type of story telling. There are some qualities and stereotypes followed in a travel writing. In contrast to those stereotypes Lawrence Durrell's “The bitter lemons of cyprus” published in the year 1957 has got some unique features which makes it a stunning travel memoir comparing it with other memoir. Exploring those features, this article intends to examine it as a political book too, as it also blends with historical facts and cultures.

KEY WORDS: Travel writing, Politics, History, Breaking Stereotype.

Travel writing is an ultimate phenomenon of nourishing the mind with colourful experiences both to the writers as well as readers. There are certain stereotypes which features the travel writings. It maybe an account of one's travel experience from one place to other with a historical background of that particular country or place, or maybe like an advice the writer gives to the readers so as not to make the mistake that he aid and etc. In contrast with all these stereotypes, the book. “Bitter Lemons of cyprus – Life on a mediterranean island” by Lawrence Durrell Published in the year 1957, has got some unique features making it a stunning travel memoir.

The title itself reveals that it is filled with some bitter experiences he had during the stay in cyprus, covering the then political scenario and the culture of that tiny region. A former British official, Lawrence Durrell after his long service decided to return to this tiny island and live his later life there. It was the time when cyprus was crying and protesting to gain its independence. So the natives of cyprus was in suspicion on his arrival as because he was a British official earlier and were not happy on his stay there. So, apart from a travel memoir, it gives an elegant picture of this tiny island. Portraying history.

“This is not a political book, but simply a somewhat impressionistic study of the moods and atmosphere of cyprus during the troubled years 1953 – 56” This is how Lawrence Durrell begins his preface to his book. A foreign native who narrates one experiences he had in another country when that country is in its peak level of political crisis makes the book “Bitter lemons of Cyprus” a breaking stereotype kind of travel writing in the history.

His intention was not to write a political book, which is why he write “This is not a political book” in his preface. But the incidents that he accounts in the book happened during a political crisis, and thus becoming it an account of political scenario of cyprus. And the book won the Duff Cooper prize for 1957, which is a prize awarded for the best work of history, political science and biography. The first few chapters of book were actually entertaining and also has some witty thoughts including, like in the beginning of the chapter two a witty and humorous cypriotic folk is given which entering the reader. It is only after he started working as an information officer for the colonial British government; the story moves from an entertaining way to a more serious description of the political and diplomatic situation of cyprus. But even then Durrell has also mentioned about Enosis in the first chapter itself. Enosis is a movement of Greek communists who live outside Greek. And this movement was prevailed for the unification of Greek and cyprus, and cyprus was then under the control of Britain, so freedom from Britain was also there in their agenda.

“We moved slowly inland now along a road which winds steeply through a green belt of vinecountry, through little whitewashed villages bespattered by the slogan ENOSIS AND ONLY ENOSIS.” And he also says that **“I felt that it was too early for ne to probe the national sentiments of my host and I avoided comment upon this ubiquitous piece of decoration.”**

Since he doesn't know much about the island, tradition, culture and the people he felt he is too early to make a comment on it. But scenario changes later in the book which even leads to his feeling from cyprus without a return.

As you could see many contrast between the first half and second half of the book. He had many friend when he landed on cyprus, which he made through his flunial way of speaking Greek. When you, look at the history of cyprus, Its population is comprised of 70% Greeks and the rests are Turks. This was the condition since 1850's and Lawrence Durrell who speaks Greek fluently needn't have to do anything to create a friend circle, but that circle wasn't there for longer time as after he started working as an information officer for the colonial England in cyprus he

was befriended by many of his Greek speaking friends. And another thing disturbing happened to him was the students whom he taught English, as he was also an English teacher at the beginning of his stay in cyprus, turned against him and joined in protest and revolt for the freedom of cyprus from Britain and unification to Greece. Reading this book, particularly the second half is more like reading a historical encyclopedia of cyprus than reading it as a travel memoir, which is the reason why, I felt it as a unique combination travel, history, autobiography and a dictionary of political science and an encyclopedia of prevailing mixed culture of me then cyprus.

Talking about the mentioned mixed culture of cyprus, there is a use of two characters in the book who were Italians. Giuseppina Semola, in an article called “Lawrence Durrell’s Bitter lemons” says that “As an Italian living in cyprus, I appreciated the use of Italian figures and symbols in bitter lemons, which had a special meaning for me”, from this we can learn one thing that the book also speaks about the other cultures prevailed in cyprus, thus giving an insight to the tiny nation. The two venetian character mentioned by Durrell in his book were caterina cornaro and Marcantonio Bragadino. The significance of the appearance of these two characters makes the book a unique one.

This is not be first travel book written in the background of cyprus. There were many travel accounts written during 1850 – 1950 periods. Apart from those books Durrell’s book as already mentioned have some uniqueness. At the same time he also makes commends about those documents also. “Through them (travel documents published earlier), I caught a glimpse, not only of cyprus which had for so long attracted the attention of travellers live them”. He also made sure to include references of the issues that happens in typical cyprus as like it is mentioned in every other travel books written about cyprus before he visited there. The purpose behind these references maybe to give an impression that this particular book is written on the basis of facts, and a travel book is written on the basis of facts assumed real and truthful experiences of the author.

“Wherever you go becomes a part of you somehow” - Anita Desai.

That is what exactly happens with the case of Lawrence Durrell. His intention of coming to cyprus was to write books, which is revealed in the first chapter itself. When an Italian co-traveler asks why he chose cyprus, Durrell replies that it is because of “Money restrictions”. As living in athens would cost him much more. Coming to cyprus, he started to write book but to keep himself there he needs money, which is why he started working as a English teacher at first, then a magazine reviewer and then as the information officer for the colonial British government. Just like the above quote he became a part of cyprus for the time period he lived there.

He completed his third island book when he was in crypus, which was released in the year 1957 called ‘Justine’. It is finances were too low which is why he had to sacrifice some of his precious time he spent as his writing time, by doing some add jobs. It was like striking the iron while it is hot kind of thing for the British administration as Durrell was an experienced press officer and a diplomatic attach, especially during the trouble time that is going on the island. He

was at first appointed as the editor of cyprus review which was a magazine that follows the policy of communalism.

When he was writing the last chapter of the Bitter lemons of cyprus in 1956, he was forced to leave the island, as the Greek nationalists began watching his movements and his friends of cyprus as meeting them will put their life into risk. His life became very difficult and extremely risk during the last few months of his stay there. And he had to free from there. Durrell after he returned to England wrote the atmospheric tension of cyprus in “The Sunday times”, one of the largest selling British newspaper, where he wrote about his friendship with a cyprus poet, Janis.

“I had several meetings with Janis and we became quite good friends; We needed when we met, but I was careful not to force my company upon him lest his acquaintance with a British official might earn him the unwelcome attentions of the nationalists”. – Durrell “The Sunday times”.

The sole protagonist of “The bitter lemons of cyprus” is enosis. Comparing to other travel accounts about cyprus, Durrell is the only English speaking traveler in cyprus who dedicates most number of pages to describe about the issue rather than being just a traveler. And we could also see his anti-enosis propaganda while he was working as a teacher there. This makes “The bitter lemons of cyprus” a unique travel memoir from other.

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