IJCRT.ORG ISSN : 2320-2882

INTERNATIONAL JOURNAL OF CREATIVE RESEARCH THOUGHTS (IJCRT)

An International Open Access, Peer-reviewed, Refereed Journal

Wanderlust And Wanderlearning: The Philosophies Of Travel In Transit

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Abstract: This paper attempts to explore the philosophies underlying the concept of travel over the centuries and their interpretation in literature and thought across different cultures; however, the focus of this paper is not on travel writing. Human beings travel for a wide variety of reasons, ranging from economic betterment, escape from political persecution, better academic and professional prospects, tourism and pilgrimage etc. Globalisation and technological advances in last hundred years have accelerated this process manifold. However, this is a well-established trope in the literature of most cultures, and travel has been represented in range of ways in ancient legends and texts as well as texts written in recent years.

Keywords: travel, wandering, philosophy of travel, travel in ancient world, The Odyssey

Human beings must have travelled from the moment they came into existence as bipeds, as the gift of mobility was something they were born with and would have used without much thought.[i] They must have travelled to forage for food; run to save their lives from wild animals and save themselves from inclement weather.[ii] But as human communities evolved and this species distinguished itself from all the others by using its intellect, all human activities were coloured by the ability to use reason. When we can use our faculties to reflect on all aspects of life, then it can be assumed that the travelling that human beings have done since the dawn of time must also have a philosophy inherent to it. Human beings travel for a variety of reasons, as do birds and animals; so, one could say that the primary cause that makes these living beings capable of moving voluntarily is the search for food and security. We are aware of the fact that birds and animals migrate to greener pastures with the change of seasons. So do human beings, metaphorically – it could be to escape political or religious persecution in their native lands or for other reasons – to countries where they can flourish, not just survive.

Consequently, people have travelled across the seven seas for trade, for conquest, for survival to escape natural or man-made disasters or for religious reasons like going on pilgrimages. Nowadays, in the age of globalisation, we are witnessing mass migrations across the globe which could be for political or professional reasons; or as is very often the case in India, for study and permanent residence in countries like the US, UK, Canada and Australia. There are other kinds of travel too. For instance, tourism implies travel to a destination for a short visit that could be for business or recreation. There is also a species of travelling that we do every day - the daily commute to school, college or workplace, socialising, shopping centres etc.

Its ubiquity is reflected in the universality of the travel motif in literatures across the world, which deserves a close attention. Wanderlust, an oft-used term, can be interpreted as an instinctive, unthinking desire to travel that is generally associated with the human need to wander, walk, stroll, ramble or roam. However, as thinking, rational beings, most of us act with certain consciousness and volition. Travel therefore is inspired by many philosophies and reasons. At this point it makes sense to firstly define what philosophy means; American Philosophical Association provides a basic definition of philosophy as "a reasoned pursuit of fundamental truths, a quest for understanding, a study of principles of conduct."[iii] So, one can say that it is a systematic engagement with asking questions about the most crucial aspects of life with the intention to know more about them. It is pertinent to begin a discussion on the philosophy of travel with a reference to Homer's *Odyssey*,[iv] which is one of the oldest extant books written in the world. Written almost three thousand years ago, it is about a Greek hero's travels, as he tries to reach his home in the island of Ithaca after winning the battle of Troy. Odysseus' travels across the known world are not just to geographical spaces (including the Underworld/Hell, known as Hades in Greek mythology); his is also a psychological expedition, an exploration of the hidden recesses of the human psyche (Monga, p. 7), that leads to self-knowledge. Thereafter, the term odyssey continues to be used frequently not only in literature but also in everyday life; just the way the journey motif is often used as a metaphor to describe human life from birth to death. However, it is noteworthy that the wanderings that are recounted with such gusto in classical literature are by heroes, while women like Odysseus' wife, Penelope, are expected to wait chastely at home for their adventurous husband's return; thereby framing travel as a gendered activity. Patriarchal societies project venturing outside to be a masculine act and circumscribe women to the confines of the domestic spaces.

The trope of travel, therefore, has dominated literatures of different societies for centuries. The wandering hero is a recurrent motif in literatures across the world; viz. the Babylonian myth of Gilgamesh and the travels of Lord Rama across the Indian subcontinent to conquer Sri Lanka. In the famous Roman epic, Aeneas, the hero of Virgil's *Aeneid*, travels across the Mediterranean Sea to find a new homeland in Italy for himself and his followers after losing Troy. Similarly, medieval English texts like Sir Thomas Malory's *Le Morte D'Arthur* focussed on the chivalrous knights in shining armour belonging to King Arthur's court wandering around in the quest of the Holy Grail while occasionally rescuing damsels in distress. Correspondingly, we could refer to the mad rambles of Don Quixote in the eponymous Spanish classic as another famous example of the primacy of the travel motif in literature of all ages and societies. The perambulations of James Joyce's Ulysses or Virginia Woolf's characters in *Mrs. Dalloway* also gave a radical twist to the idea of travel at the beginning of the 20th century.

In this paper however, we will talk more about the motivations for travel rather than the actual act of travelling or travel theory by taking a look at the philosophy that underlies it. While one could literally describe Philosophy as "love of knowledge or wisdom;" it could also be defined as a set of what Josef Conrad, the Polish English writer, calls, "deliberate beliefs,"[v] that underpin all our actions. In this context, the quotation ascribed to Socrates who is supposed to have stated that "an unexamined life is not worth living," is apt as it suggests that human beings have the capacity to think, analyse and assess what happens around them, come to conclusions and use them to guide their lives and actions. We will therefore glance over the underlying motivations, the philosophy or philosophies that drive the human instinct to travel.

To begin with, let us focus on the philosophy of travel articulated by that archetypal traveller, Odysseus, by referring to a few lines from Alfred Tennyson's 19th century poem 'Ulysses,' which is the Latin name of Odysseus, in which the poet imagines Odysseus as saying, "I cannot rest from travel: I will drink / Life to the lees…." Odysseus/Ulysses expands his statement further, "I am become a name; For always roaming with a hungry heart / Much have I seen and known; cities of men / And manners, climates, councils, governments…" and a few lines later, "I am a part of all that I have met;" and then, "And this gray spirit yearning in desire / To follow knowledge like a sinking star, / Beyond the utmost bound of human thought."[vi] This belief voiced by Ulysses/Odysseus, as imagined by a 19th century English poet, articulates a philosophy of travel that seems to be pertinent for our discussion. In these lines, Ulysses claims that he can't rest from travel because he has an insatiable desire to constantly move and experience unknown places and people and that this craving is never satisfied, Ulysses feels that he is a part of all that he has met, which could suggest that he has internalised the experience of travelling to a place and it has become a part of his internal landscape. He seems

to assert that he is a sum of all that he has experienced in his travels; that his travels have shaped his personality. The desire to know more about the places he visits and the people he meets is not the only motivation that drives him to ceaselessly roam around the world. Travel is seen as a way of life in which experiencing the unfamiliar and learning are inextricably tied together. Odysseus travels to slake his thirst for adventure and knowledge; he doesn't want to stay in one place, not even his home, because for him that feels like intellectual stagnation. He travels for its own sake. He is truly an example of wanderlust, and he wanders obsessively seeking knowledge or learning. This is a trait he shares with another well-known literary archetype – Coleridge's Ancient Mariner, who is also driven by a compulsion to wander.

This philosophy seems to dominate the travels, that are much easier and comfortable now than in the past, of many contemporary travellers today who travel primarily for the sake of travelling and to expand their mental and cultural horizons. For such travellers, of which there are many, as we can see on the social media sites, travel seems to be almost a mystical experience, the way it was for Odysseus thousands of years ago. These trips sometimes result in a blog or a book and earn the travellers some money, which may be a corollary motivation behind the travels.

But there are other kinds of travellers who don't necessarily wander around for knowledge. In ancient times, Alexander, for instance, and his marauding army travelled all over the face of the known world to conquer it. His wanderings stopped only with his death. In his case, travel would be incidental to the primary aim of world conquest; that was his philosophy. Similarly, Lord Ram travelled across the Vindhyas down to Sri Lanka during his *vanavasa* ostensibly for the purpose of rescuing his abducted wife, Sita, from the demon king, Ravana; but conquest too was a part of that arduous expedition. The quest motif therefore is deeply embedded in classical literature of most ancient civilisations.

Whether it is the adventures of Gilgamesh or the seekers of the Holy Grail, travel was the recurrent theme of much of medieval literature; travels were also driven by faith and religious beliefs. For the knights of the Round Table, the search for the Holy Grail was an expression of their faith. This was a spiritual mission that formed the basis of the actions of these questing knights. In history too, we have the examples of the Chinese monks, Fa Hsien and Hsuan Tsang, who undertook the hazardous journey to India more than a thousand years ago as a part of their holy expedition to traverse the land where Buddha had lived and to collect religious texts from here as a testament to their faith.

Thus, travel as a spiritual quest had always been a very important idea for the ancients, when travel was a perilous venture. With practically no facilities, comforts, and the ever-present danger of attack from hostile forces, pilgrims used to travel not only across their own countries, but often to other countries. For instance, in the Bible, we learn about the Magi, the three Wise Men, who travelled to Bethlehem from somewhere in the east. In India, we have had the well-established tradition of *sadhus* travelling to remote holy places seeking oneness with the divine and spiritual knowledge or solace. *Sadhus* actually chose to formally abandon domesticity and their households for the specific purpose of roaming like rootless wanderers seeking union with God. The underlying philosophy behind the *sadhus*' pilgrimages is obviously different from the travel for pleasure or even knowledge undertaken by most mortals; it is a profoundly metaphysical choice that has impact on every aspect of the individual's life, not for a short duration, but forever. It implies an abandonment of the material world, where wandering becomes a means of attaining a union with one's God. However, a vast majority of people going on pilgrimages have a different intention behind their travels in comparison to the *sadhu*, although their aim of attaining spiritual knowledge is the same as the *sadhu* to some extent. In the past, Indians would proceed on pilgrimages only after their worldly responsibilities were taken care of; a stage known as *Vanaprastha*. The reason was that the pilgrim's destinations were faraway and risky to travel to. It was believed that at this stage of life, one was willing to risk one's physical well-being for the sake of the spiritual.

To go back to the more common philosophies of travel, we can trace the recurrence of travel for adventure and knowledge motif in the gruelling journeys that lasted over years undertaken by travellers like Al-Beruni who came from Uzbekistan in the 11th century; Ibn Battuta who came from Morocco in the 14th century and the Frenchman François Bernier (17th century). At this point, we should also mention Christopher Columbus and Vasco da Gama, who set out on their travels with the specific purpose of finding the sea route to

India, although Columbus ended up in South America and these voyages went on to lay the foundations of European imperialism. The philosophy behind such expensive expeditions that were funded by the royal courts of Europe was a mix of commerce, politics, a spirit of adventure and a curiosity to know more about the world.

A somewhat similar belief must have impelled the ancient merchants who carted their goods over continents, as testified by the remains of articles from India that have been found in the excavated remains of the city of Pompeii in Italy. Driven by a spirit of adventure and desire to make inordinate amounts of money, traders travelled across the known world by ships, oxcarts, horse carriages, camels, caravans and on foot, traversing difficult terrains and suffering all kinds of hardships. But most of these were travels in transit, apart from migrations.

The philosophy of travels in transit has a different approach that springs from the perspective of the traveller, who is generally an outsider observing, assessing and commenting on the places that are visited; people who are encountered and the experiences that leave an imprint on the mind and emotions of the traveller. But unlike the travellers of earlier times, the contemporary tourist is generally someone who travels for recreation and fun and really doesn't engage at a profound level with the people and places he/ she encounters during travels. The perspective is that of someone looking at the place and people as an outsider for a short duration. The tourist, depending on the underlying intention, can be a receptive or a critical observer. Such travellers may be curious about these new cultures, places and experiences and may want to learn about them or even adopt them. But most often, tourists' focus is not so much on the people or places as on fulfilling their purpose, which is enjoyment that can be derived from various experiences or for business. So, when one travels for tourism, the traveller is likely to be a detached observer of the places and people, unless they have a direct impact on his or her life. Thus, the attitude or philosophy of the traveller in transit is likely to be quite different towards places and people met during the travel in comparison to those who may be travelling to that place with the intention of staying there. This difference can be presented in binaries like insider/outsider and detached or engaged traveller.

This attitude of detachment is quite evident when we make our daily trek to the place of work and back. For instance, many of us while travelling on the over-ground metro lines in Delhi, looking down at the crowded, traffic jammed roads below feel a smug sense of superiority at the frustrated blasting of horns and the mess below us. We feel little concern for the congestion, noise and chaos of the roads, as we are not the victims of that chaos. Even when we sympathise with the people on the roads, it is a detached and mild concern. That is applicable to the visits we make to the markets or the short trips across the cities where we live. The reason is that it is a transitory experience that leaves little impact on our lives and minds; it is experienced at that moment and forgotten.

This detached observer with the perspective of the insider or outsider takes on an interesting colouring when we analyse the figure of the Flâneur - a type of traveller who became note-worthy in Europe at the end of the 19th century and beginning of the 20th century. Baudelaire, a very famous French writer, identified the flâneur in his essay *The Painter of Modern Life* (1863) as the dilettante observer. The flâneur is the man of leisure, the idler, the urban explorer, the connoisseur of the street. This figure gets prominently featured in contemporary literature as well as paintings. [vii] Baudelaire explains, "For the perfect flâneur, for the passionate spectator, it is an immense joy to set up house in the heart of the multitude, amid the ebb and flow of movement, in the midst of the fugitive and the infinite. To be away from home and yet to feel oneself everywhere at home; to see the world, to be at the centre of the world, and yet to remain hidden from the world—impartial natures which the tongue can but clumsily define. The spectator is a prince who everywhere rejoices in his incognito. The lover of life makes the whole world his family."[viii] One could say that this attitude is taken to its logical extreme by the contemporary couch surfer / virtual traveller, who travels the world vicariously by watching programmes made by those who have actually been to those places.

Similarly, another article in *The Guardian*, the British newspaper, describes the *flâneur* "(as) a figure of privilege and leisure, with the time and money to amble around the city at will. He is both stimulated and agitated by the buzz and hum of the city, the crowd; he is both part of and separate from the urban spectacle, both actor and observer. ... For Woolf, who had the idea for *To the Lighthouse* one afternoon while walking in

Tavistock Square, there was a clear connection between walking and creativity." In a letter, she wrote: "I cannot get my sense of unity and coherency and all that makes me wish to write the Lighthouse etc. unless I am perpetually stimulated." This comes from engaging with the world, from "plung[ing] into London, between tea and dinner, and walk[ing] and walk[ing], reviving my fires, in the city, in some wretched slum, where I peep in at the doors of public houses." The very first words spoken by Virginia Woolf's 'Mrs. Dalloway' say it all: "I love walking in London,'… said Mrs. Dalloway." Mrs. Dalloway is the flâneuse incarnate, as indicated by her surname: "a woman who likes to dally along the way." Woolf used the streets as research. What she saw there prompted her to wonder about people and their lives. The trick of capturing what they feel pushed her forward in her literary project – how to represent "life itself" on the page….Rather than wandering aimlessly, like her male counterpart, the female flâneur has an element of transgression: she goes where she's not supposed to.[ix] So, a flâneur could be described as someone who, unlike a tourist, travels opportunistically at every step to revise his schedule (or his destination) so he can imbibe things based on new information obtained.[x]

Be it travel for a reason, business, leisure, pilgrimage, the daily commute, or an amble around the nearby park, travel is an integral part of human existence. Most ordinary human beings partake in its diverse range just like legendary or literary figures like Gilgamesh, Hercules, Odysseus, the knights errant, Don Quixote or Ulysses Bloom. The sheer range of this activity lends complexity and nuances to the experience that has been written about and expanded upon by the great thinkers and writers of all cultures and regions. This paper barely scratches the surface of this intensely personal, yet universal, human experience by exploring the context and philosophies that underlie it.

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