

Eternally on a Journey: Nabaneeta Dev Sen's *On a Truck Alone, to McMahan*

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ABSTRACT

This paper explores the complex and uncertain position that women's travel narratives occupy within the conventions of travel writing. As writers of journeyworks, women have to insistently engage in discursive struggles alongside the struggle of occupying and traversing spaces not readily hospitable to their presence. The study focuses on Nabaneeta Dev Sen's travelogue *On a Truck Alone, to McMahan* and analyses how her writing constantly challenges and reworks representational and spatial constrictions that frame women's mobility and freedom.

Keywords: *Women's travel writing; travelogue; representation; mobility; resistance; transgression.*

Despite the much-remarked upon global resurgence of travel writing since the 1980s, writing by women travellers still comprises a startlingly small number of texts. The practice of travel writing has largely belonged to men. Mary Louise Pratt observes, "While women writers were authorised to produce novels, their access to travel writing seems to have remained even more limited than their access to travel itself" (Pratt, 1992). Due to the gendered nature of the travel genre, women's travel narratives occupy, within the conventions of travel writing, a complicated, ambiguous, uncertain space, both ideologically and in literary-critical terms. As writers of journeyworks, women have to insistently engage in discursive struggles alongside the struggle of occupying and traversing spaces not readily hospitable to their presence.

It would not be erroneous to assert that travel writing as a genre still remains largely a masculine pursuit. It is therefore worthwhile to explore how and in what ways women writers claim this ostensible 'male form' for themselves. This claim extends beyond literary process and involves traversing socio-cultural, geographical spaces that do not easily accommodate women as free-moving agents.

In this paper, I study Nabaneeta Dev Sen's travelogue *On a Truck Alone, to McMahan*, originally written in Bangla, published in 1984. The work was translated into English by Arunava Sinha in 2018. In the corpus of Bengali literature, travel writing holds a significant place. I read Dev Sen in the context of Bengali travel tradition and argue that she claims the form by challenging its male-centric conventions through subversive humour and creating a space for a feminist travelling self.

In the late 18th and 19th century, caste proscriptions on travel began to decline among the urban, educated, upper-class Bengalis. Though travel within set pilgrimage and trade routes was immensely popular, travel for pleasure and education was typically a modern phenomenon. Shutakriti Dutta (2020) attributes the development of travel writing in Bengal as a form to the advent of print capitalism, growth of periodical press, and beginnings of nationalism. However, despite its popularity, travel writing remained a male, upper caste, elite pursuit. Pilgrimage was the only form of sanctioned mobility for upper-caste women in Bengal. However, Shutakriti Dutta argues that with "the advent of railways and the opening of the Suez Canal, by the mid-nineteenth century women, usually from educated upper middle-class families, were travelling for entirely secular reasons..." (Dutta, 2020, p.16). In the late 19th century, travel accounts by women began to appear in journals and periodicals like *Probasi*, *Tattwabodhini*, and *Bharti*. These

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accounts were the earliest attempts at forging a travelling and literary identity by women travellers. Despite the surge and interest in travel writing by women in the 19th century, through the 20th century till the contemporary, the form continues to be male-centric. The gendered division of spaces structured by patriarchal norms and conventions keep women's mobilities restrictive. Added to this, the continuance of caste and class exclusions affect the way women move and negotiate social and cultural spaces. Women travelling unaccompanied or solo raises issues of safety, social acceptability, conventional barriers. The necessary autonomy required for mobility is still not available to most women, despite significant changes brought about by women's rights movements. Most women travel writers examine and subvert the socially sanctioned and restrictive protocols of mobility, and expose the gendered structuring of public spaces that deny women both easy access and acceptance.

While a great deal has been written about white women travel writers, especially with reference to colonialism, the area remains unmapped when it comes to Indian women travel writers. The purpose of rediscovering colonial women travel writers was part of a larger project of reclaiming the Victorian period for women's history. My intention here is not to make a grand generalisation about women's writing or history but to understand how women experience the public and private space in contemporary India, and how these experiences are articulated in the travel form in specific instances. Since generically travel writing involves an actual interface of the writer with the public world, this form, more than any other, both discursively and experientially, embodies the crucial processes whereby history, cultural practices and gender roles get constructed and enacted.

In the preface to *On a Truck Alone to McMahon*, Nabaneeta Dev Sen declares her restlessness, positioning herself in a liminal space between the private and public spheres—home and world—belonging fully to neither. She remains “eternally on a journey.” The narrative moves beyond an account of her expedition to Tawang. It is an extended exposition on her identity as a female traveller navigating spaces and circumstances traditionally forbidden to women. Dev Sen's journey is both literal and representational as she transgresses gender expectations, negotiating routes and conventions that constrict women's mobility and autonomy in public spaces. In the preface she discloses: “For as long as I remember I've been told that I'm wild, uncivilized, eccentric, savage” (Dev Sen, 2020, p x). Evidently, Dev Sen does not fit into the socially acceptable role of a 'respectable' woman and is regarded as disruptive of gender normativity. Accepting this descriptor as a badge of honour, Dev Sen aligns herself with “wild animals”. Discarding the hierarchy between humans and animals, Dev Sen compares herself with the creatures of the wild. She reminds the reader that even the most domesticated are essentially wild, and when adversity strikes even the human who moves in packs in the civilized world, “they wander into the forest when they cannot find their homes. Alone. Reckless” (x).

The book is an account of Dev Sen's whimsical and sudden desire to travel to Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh after attending a literary conference in Jorhat, Assam. Right from the beginning, Dev Sen anticipates the responses that she is likely to elicit, deliberately amplifying her subversiveness and 'untamed' persona. Refusing to be demurely quiet or self-effacing, Dev Sen enjoys the bewilderment she arouses in friends and strangers. At the airport, she concludes, that “Ashutosh babu must have been telling himself, ‘This woman is the root of all trouble. Chatters on and on.’” (3). Humorously confessing her oddity, Dev Sen accepts that she is perpetually distracted and gets into sticky situations all the time. In her reading of Nabaneeta Dev Sen's foreign travels in *Bidesh Yatra*, Swaralipi Nandi argues that Dev Sen uses the device of self-deprecating humour, to critique meta-narratives of the West, because as a female narrator in a genre that is predominantly both male and Western, she attempts to subvert the power equation through the limited agency she has available” (Nandi, 2014p.7). She goes on to suggest that Dev Sen plays on her marginality as a middle-class woman from vernacular background to subversive effect.

In *On a Truck Alone*, she uses self-deprecating humour to expose patriarchal obsessions and taboos, breaking every single of those normative conventions. Her travelling persona and her thirst for adventure are contiguous to her academic and creative work. As a feminist critic, her academic projects involve literary translations of women poets and writers and radical feminist readings of medieval texts. Her interest in other bhasha literatures reflects her openness that she believes is distinctly lacking in the insular Bengali literary establishment. The mobility of ideas across cultures and languages that she seeks and advocates is an indispensable part of interest in travel as practice. Dev Sen constantly signposts her journey by referring to women writers, artists, thinkers who have not taken the well-trodden path.

A chance conversation sparks Dev Sen's interest and sudden decision to travel along the Lhasa- Tawang road. Tawang in Arunachal Pradesh, known for its shatteringly beautiful landscape and its rich Buddhist heritage, also borders Tibet which continues to be a strategic military outpost between India and China. Dev Sen's spontaneous decision to travel to Tawang without requisite travel preparations shock and bewilder her concerned friends. She recalls a conversation with a philosopher friend Rita Gupta who had told her about the rich archival treasures in the monasteries in Tawang.

Undeterred by the prospect of a difficult journey, Dev Sen decides not to let go of the opportunity to visit Tawang. It is her decision to travel solo in a terrain known for its discomforts and danger that create a crisis in her friends who try to dissuade her from travelling. Dev Sen reminds the reader and her friends that Kamala Devi Chattopadhyay, the radical social reformer, theatre activist, was marooned in Tawang when her three-day visit turned into a long stay.

Desperate to ascribe some profound reason for her wild travel plans, she is repeatedly asked if this journey was important for research or to write a book. Her friends and strangers find it unfathomable that Dev Sen's desire to travel is only driven by curiosity. It is evident in the dissuasions and discouragements she encounters that a woman travelling to a difficult terrain prompted only by inquisitiveness is socially unacceptable or a sign of reckless insanity. Heroic travels of adventure and exploration are emphatically masculine pursuits, and in the south-Asian tradition, such travels are rarely undertaken by women.

Matters become more serious when Dev Sen realises that she does not have the necessary permits, clothing or a regular mode of transport to travel. Dev Sen's indomitable spirit, however, is not snuffed out by such minor details. Her friends' solicitousness is generously acknowledged, but not heeded by the traveller. The work describes the preparatory exercises for the journey with hilarity and records Dev Sen's growing enthusiasm as challenges mount. Dev Sen recounts the patronizing protectiveness of her friends and contrasts it with the open acceptance of her young nephew. He says, "Do you think you two are mashi's guardians? She is an adult. She can be a chief guest at a festival, but can't go to Tawang?" (37). The nephew's invective elicits the explicit objections the family has against Dev Sen's prospective travel that so far were obscured in the language of concern. "You can be the most accomplished and knowledgeable person in the world...but all by yourself, amongst tribals and the military...not advisable. A woman after all" (38). Dev Sen continually confronts these patronizing homilies and entrenched patriarchal prejudices against women's agency. With strategic deployment of subversive humour, role reversal, and sharp irony, she exposes the normative discourse that constrict women's mobility and autonomy. Articulating the tacit but invariably implied, she says with deep irony- "It's not good for women to be whimsical. It's not good for women to be obstinate. It's not good for woman to be bold. Of course, if it were a man now..." (41). She exposes how canonical Bengali fiction and travel writing establishes and reinforces a conservative representation of womanhood. She asks if in Bengali literature- "Is there even a single woman with wanderlust? Someone who wanders around but isn't a minstrel. Not a sage, but still restless. A working woman from a middle-class family...Someone who is driven by a nomadic spirit... Yet we see such men in books all the time" (44). She is critical of the gender politics of the greatest luminaries of the Bengali literary world and shows how despite their literary radicalism, their attitudes to women do not veer far from the traditional. She positions her transgressive journey as one without a literary precedent. Nabaneeta's travel writing attempts to fill this gap in the literary and social imagination of her linguistic community. Though written in an easy anecdotal vein- with a bumbling, clumsy, middle-aged traveller, a mother of two, with a respectable job- at the centre of the work is a refusal to please the traditional reader. By refusing to ascribe any deep significance to her travel adventure that could legitimise her decision apart from plain curiosity and as a free-spirited woman, Dev Sen is constructing a new subjectivity for women in the Bengali travel genre.

Sidonie Smith in *Moving Lives* (2001) discusses how women travel writers negotiate masculine traditions of travel writing through the optics of mobility and by examining travel as an embodied experience. By reading travel narratives by women, who in the twentieth century undertake journeys of quest and exploration, she focuses on the modality and technology of travel. Within the framework of mobility, Smith examines how technologies and modes of mobility – (travel by foot, rail, air, and so forth) affect the performance of gender and travelling subjectivities. When Dev Sen decides to travel on a truck to Tawang, accompanied by the driver and a doctor, she assumes a space that is clearly denied to women. The truck is manifestly a masculine mode of transport that is not organised to have a woman traveller. While Dev Sen adjusts and makes space for herself in that cramped freight truck, her male travel companions look distinctly uncomfortable. As she continues her journey, she records their reactions with wry humour. When she persuades the doctor to allow her to spend a night at his home, blissfully uninhibited, Dev Sen reads the doctor's shock and through humorous role reversal, she assures the doctor that his 'honour' is safe with her. She says, "Who'd have thought that the mere existence of an innocent creature like me could prove so sinister to someone" (95). She remarks that the reluctance and anxiety actually should have been hers, as she is the woman. These apprehensions, were embedded on a woman's body- not biologically but sociologically (123). She begins to tease the doctor, playing upon his anxieties. The concern for a woman's honour that gird all restrictions on women's mobility is subversively undercut in the work by exposing the absurdity of such claims when gender positions are reversed. Ultimately, she falls asleep snugly as does the doctor- "Never mind that there was a woman formidable as a rogue elephant in the room" (124).

In the subsequent chapters, as Dev Sen travels through the landscape, visits monasteries, and absorbs the untouched beauty of the place, she writes about the presence of women in the borderland – Anis (female monks), engineers,

administrative officers. A land known for its military operations, political disturbances, considered inhospitable to solo women travellers, turns out to be marked with the presence of formidable women. The Lhasa – Tawang Road itself was constructed in 10 days under the supervision of a woman. She was a twenty-six-year-old Chinese woman, an army engineer. The Road, an engineering feat, was built with local material and had stood the test of time. She also realises that the warm welcome she receives from the locals was because of the stellar work done by a lady officer. Bahadur tells her that people assumed that Dev Sen had been appointed in the lady DC's post.

Dev Sen records the archaeological, architectural, cultural and political aspects of the place, reminding the reader of its vanishing and preserved traditions as well as its violent history. The decades long conflict between India and China continues to leave its traces on the land. In an interesting conversation, Dev Sen asks about the Indo-China war – “Didn't you say that they made blood flow like a river?” (198). She is told that the Chinese didn't kill civilians. And that they didn't trouble a single woman (199). Dev Sen is aware that such defence of the Chinese and the Japanese (Second World War) would be considered incendiary and seditious. She says, “But even if that was the case, we can't say. It. We will be called anti-nationals...” (199). As Dev Sen readies for her journey back on a truck, again, she carries with her a puppy whom she names Bumla Tawang. On her way to Dirang, she learns that 'Dirang' is named after a river and literally means two birds. She goes into a reverie and thinks, “Don't I have two birds like these within me”? (202) One like a torrent and the other like a pool. One tethered and the other unmoored. Dev Sen allows these internal paradoxes and contradictions to remain in play. It is by refusing to be tied down to singular definitions as a writer and a woman traveller that she offers a radical vision of women's agency and freedom.

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