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Rashmi Agrawal
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Govt. V.S.P.A. Sanskrit
College, Kota, Rajasthan,
India

Ascetic pleasure in Bruce Chatwin's in Patagonia

Rashmi Agrawal

Abstract

With an aesthetic effectiveness Chatwin presents an elevated dramatic experience in his writings like *In Patagonia* and *The Songlines*. Chatwin's *In Patagonia* is an amazing amalgamation of historical as well as travel writing. The book is set in Argentina and is a unique form of travel writing as it crosses the boundaries of a strictly fictional work to create an imaginative journey for the readers. There is an exquisite description of actual places as well as symbolic ones. The place is described as situated on the maps between the lush pampas with high plains and semi-arid areas stretching to almost one thousand miles. The book presents a delightful panoramic view with a playfulness portraying the Welsh settlers, and comments on the culture of the region. The paper analyses how the book is structured to mix fiction with non-fiction, history with myth, facts with imagination, truth with lies. The narrative discusses the nomadic life of the inhabitants and their wanderings. Chatwin took a month's long trip to Patagonia, inspired by a piece of skin his grandmother had which she described as a part of a brontosaurus which lived in Patagonia, an area including regions of Chile and Argentina. His journey starts from Buenos Aires and ends at Punta Arenas blending myth and memory. The book is autobiographical as well as fantastical. As an extraordinary artist Bruce Chatwin has carved his name amongst the best travel writers in the literary field.

Keywords: History, myth, structured, autobiographical

Introduction

Chatwin's *In Patagonia* can be described as being more of a portrait rather than simply a novel. The book is fuelled by his personal obsession with fantasy as well as by his love for travelling and adventure. The book arouses an irresistible wonder and pleasure in the readers. It justifies Chatwin's identification with those remarkable writers who have a unique taste for exaggeration. Chatwin occupies himself with describing not what he does as a traveller but retelling various anecdotes which have both real as well as imaginary beings and events.

Though Chatwin describes his journey in the present but the story so oscillates between the past and the present that the writer seems to be himself baffled between the two. The past has been idealized as a golden age and the historical incidents permeate the present incidents throughout the narrative. Present is a vehicle to retell the stories of the past. Patagonians are seen idealizing and pining for the lost glory and majesty of Europe. Chatwin describes all this as a keen observer and as a passive narrator. With the resonating past Chatwin gets more scope to present the reverberations of his imaginative mind. Patagonia has been presented as a marvellous and desirable place where everyone would want to go.

Chatwin's imaginative nature was dominant within him since his childhood and this is well reflected in his work *In Patagonia*. On looking at the hide displayed in his grandmother's living room, he imagines it to be of a dinosaur of the Jurassic era, extinct 140 million years ago. Everyone in the school laughs at him but he dismisses any contradictory rationalism related to the same. This habit of his, continued till his last. In the beginning of the novel he says:

"The brontosaurus drowned in the Flood, being too big for Noah to ship aboard the Ark..... I pictured a shaggy, lumbering creature with claws and fangs and malicious green light in his eyes ^[1].

Charles Darwin was amongst the first western visitors to travel to Patagonia. Chatwin's appeal to go there was more psychological than material or scientific. Patagonia got its nomenclature from Ferdinand Magellan in 1520 during his travel to the to this vast, arid, peninsular place.

Corresponding Author:
Rashmi Agrawal
Assistant Professor,
Department of English,
Govt. V.S.P.A. Sanskrit
College, Kota, Rajasthan,
India

The place is characterised by boundless grey plains with little signs of moving creatures. The very blankness of the place motivates an open minded review. Chatwin reports the people whom he met during his travel as they seem to him in a natural, unshaped manner. The novel is a collage of beautiful snapshots beaded together. In the beginning of the novel Chatwin introduces the ambition behind writing the work as:

“The history of Buenos Aires is written in its telephone directory. Pompey Romanov, Emilio Rommel, Crespina D.Z. de Rose, Ladislao Radziwil, and Elizabeta Marta Callman de Rothschild- five names taken at random from among the Rs told a story of exile, disillusion and anxiety among the lace curtains ^[5]”.

Chatwin presents the tales of the immigrants who came to Patagonia from the west and settled there in the early nineteenth century. The first settlers were the Welsh who aimed to escape the restrictions imposed by the western civilised society on them. Chatwin relates the restlessness of this oppressed class who aimed to find some meaning in their life in the vast landscape of Patagonia. The Welsh community was welcomed by the Argentinian government as Patagonia was almost uninhabited till then. The immigrants believed that it was a land given to them by God and they dreamt of becoming self-sufficient by cultivating the vast boundless plains. However this quest was intangible and proved to be just a myth as Chatwin describes it as:

“Several expeditions set out to find the city. Many single wanderers disappeared on the same quest. An eighteenth century description placed it to the south of latitude 45 degree... a mountain fortress, situated below a volcano Purged above a beautiful lake. There was a river, Rio Diamanté abounding in gold and precious stones”.(110)

Thus, Patagonia has been imagined as an El Dorado, a city almost unreachable and unachievable. Whoever the author met in Patagonia had his own story to relate and these remain scattered throughout the novel in heightened colours. Although Chatwin does all the talking but the readers feel involved and engaged in every anecdote. There are other communities too besides the poor Welsh like the Italian, Scottish, English, Boers and the German. Chatwin learnt about the heritage and history of Patagonia from the farmers who constituted the major workforce of the region. He, however, mixed facts with fiction while retelling them. Chatwin describes many of his lived experiences and minute observations:

“One of the women plucked a wing-feather from a live fowl and twizzled it in her ear.

“It is to take away the human grease”, a young boy informed the European tourist: and the tourist who was collecting this kind of information, patted the boy’s head and gave him a franc ^[6]”.

The book is adorned with display of author’s such a rare knack of observation in a monotonous surrounding. He sings of cowboys and explorers, fossils and hide. While exploring the landscape he sees and hears different stories and pens them down. He illustrates the stories of the robbers and bandits like Butch Cassidy who escaped to Patagonia in their lust for a free life as the law and police system there was not so prompt and well established. Ninety-seven fragments in the book, though appear contradictory, are well inter-woven in a way that most of the stories told by myriad people have to do with their immigration and nomadic life. Chatwin’s visualisation and fresh way of telling stories give

the book a charismatic appeal. He distances himself from the book as if he has no story to tell but only to retell those of others. He wanders sometimes to find the lost cabin of Butch Cassidy and at other times in search of some fantastic monster or fossil. Chatwin had a wanderlust- a passion to look for the unexpected and mysterious, which was the essence of his travel and his works too. His idea was to lose himself in the limitless, borderless geography of Patagonia and its people. This was itself an educational process for him and a kind of self-discovery. He himself describes the ironical achievements of his travel as:

“Well, “I thought “, if there’s no skin, at least there’s load of shit. And then, poking out of a section, I saw some strands of the coarse reddish hair I knew so well. I eased them out, slid them into an envelope and sat down, immensely pleased. I had accomplished the object of this ridiculous journey”. (182)

We find, not a sense of pride in the findings but a sense of culmination and satisfaction as Chatwin sees the piece of dung and hair. When he reaches the cave and sees the remains of mylodon (the giant sloth), he focusses on giving a true account rather than presenting it as a heroic adventure. Most part of the journey that Chatwin undertakes in Patagonia is through a dark wood, a place where survival is difficult. As Chatwin calls it a region where:

“no one would want to drop an atom bomb”.(64)

“with absolute remoteness and foul climate”. (24)

Men in Patagonia are presented as living without a partner and with meagre possessions. Florentino Solis owns only two ponies and two saddles, Simon Rodowitsky, a Russian has nothing but some family photographs, there are Indians who are in a near-naked condition. Women too are either spinsters or widows. Although people- outlaws, refugees, misfits, wanderers and drifters came there considering it a land of endless opportunities but they were faced with incessant struggle and conflict. Chatwin presents their yearning for their native land and friends. Patagonia represented that majestic lonely vastness where anything could happen. The immigrants’ sense of restlessness is presented as they could never forget their origins and tried to build the environment they left by choice. This internal conflict cannot be escaped. Belonging to different nationalities, the people unite on the common soil. Chatwin narrates stories of inhabitants spanning different nations and cultures. He drinks a toast with a German immigrant who raises a German garden in house and is all praise for the German King Ludwig. A Scot family is mentioned who were land owners and fared quite well but had Scotland at the bottom of their hearts. A swede who dressed and acted like his countrymen. However national boundaries are blurred by the universal quality of Patagonia. Though these communities fought amongst themselves for trivial things like cattle stealing but they were friends even in their hatred. Their past and present was knit yet distinct. This opened them to a new kind of kinship and fellowship. Though the Patagonians live in a marginalised condition but there is something to learn from them owing to the majestic individuality of the place. This temporal and spatial delimitation gives the travelogue a unique philosophical and mythical touch.

Chatwin’s *In Patagonia* is a treat to a reader as well as a beholder as his work is a miraculous series of written

snapshots. The incidents he relates are nothing exceptional or really exciting but he portrays them as a witness rather than as an intruder. Without a particular formal pattern he metaphorically presents what he visualises. This asymmetry is aesthetic and creates a new vision of time and space.

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