

## TOUGH TRAVEL: THE SUFFERINGS OF RECENT WESTERN WOMEN TRAVEL WRITERS WHEN CONFRONTED WITH THE EAST

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### **Abstract**

*Confessional and romantic travel discourses belong to a tradition that dates back centuries, but until the post-war period, serious women travel writers have tended to play down the details of their private lives in print, in favour of a focus on the people or country visited. Whether the current validation of women's personal experience above all other discourses in women's travel writing is the best solution to the problem of writing about the 'contemporary Orient' is debatable: 'sharing' with us details of the author's private life has now become an obligatory part of*

*women's travel writing. Writers such as Robyn Davidson in India or Sara Wheeler in Bangladesh engage with a discourse of "tough travel" in which the focus is on the suffering and hardship of the traveller at the hands of the target culture, rather than an engagement with that culture or an attempt to describe it objectively. We are witnessing a new form of Orientalism, in which the writer expects the reader back home to feel sympathy for their culture shock and homesickness, rather than inquire into the nature of life in other parts of the world, or question the value of the travel writing project.*

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An understanding of travel writing as a series of re-writings and interconnecting discursive codes will enable us to read other travel texts in the context of a literary tradition which is still learning from its ancestors and redefining its contemporary codes through the interplay between individual writer/traveller and the intertextual nature of all written discourses. It is interesting to contrast Robyn Davidson's *Desert Places* (1996), describing a journey with a group of Indian nomads, with Sara Wheeler's essay in *Amazonian*, "Requiem: Bangladesh" (1998). Both writers set off with illusions and implicit prejudices about what they expect to find in the East, and both have to admit failure and even disgust with the experience.

Written two years after the Antarctic journey described in *Terra Incognita* (1996) which she can't "leave behind", Sara Wheeler wants to find "the polar opposite" of that destination. Bangladesh is "tucked neatly into the crotch of Asia" and seems to fit the bill because of its overpopulation, heat, and reverse of pristine beauty: "when I thought of Bangladesh I saw the rotting corpses of children floating in the sewers of Dhaka" (Wheeler, 1998: all quotes p. 232). Despite this apocalyptic and unpleasant image Wheeler doesn't hesitate in her search for some cathartic break from her polar experience: "I decided to put it all behind me and, triumphant, bought an air ticket to Dhaka. Fuck the ice" (ibid.). The style

is deliberately colloquial, aggressive, and again, intensely focused on the writer's personal need, not on the situation in the country she decides to visit. Wheeler acknowledges this but does not see it as a problem: for her, as she argued in the introduction to the book, it doesn't matter where you go, it is how your subjectivity engages with the experience that is important. However the trip turns out to be the reverse of her Antarctic trip only in the sense that she hates everything about Bangladesh, even before she gets there:

So now it was particularly galling that my heart wouldn't follow my plans. My fantasy life had always been realized by travel; I had grown to rely on it. This time, it wasn't happening. The trip to Bangladesh, so thoughtfully conceived, wasn't turning out to be an expression of my inner life at all (ibid.).

This is travel as emotional solipsism, and the discourse is, by the end of the twentieth century, firmly rooted in women's travel writing. Wheeler, far from feeling the need to justify such blatant ignorance of the problems of travelling in the third world (which will subsequently prove to be too much for her), revels in the detail of her personal desire to use one of the poorest countries on the planet as an exotic backdrop for the supposedly fascinating development in print of her inner life. On the same lines, given that travel writing is now more about pseudo-autobiography than about

foreign countries, she 'shares' with us her anxieties about her boyfriend: "I was still blaming everything on Antarctica, but I was beginning to wonder how much he had to do with it" (ibid.). With what, we are not told; but the journey is presented as the solution to these interior problems.

The essay is a litany of the same complaints heard in other post-colonial western travel writers such as Dervla Murphy, Sylvia Kennedy or Ffiona Campbell<sup>1</sup>. Sara Wheeler is surprised that after a term of beginner's Bengali classes she is unable to communicate; she thought everyone would speak English as it had been a colony like India and no one does: "I was annoyed to find such a nasty little colonial assumption lurking under my cosy liberal carapace" (233) This reminds us of Robyn Davidson's admission that she discovers her true, none-too-liberal feelings when things get tough: "Lately, battalions of judgements had been arriving unbidden from some less evolved self and nothing I could do would fend them off" (Davidson, 1997: 124). Both writers assume they have a clear liberal, post-colonial conscience, but their texts reveal the superficial nature of this position when confronted with the reality of a non-western culture. There are the occasional, almost obligatory, attempts at politically correct travel writing, such as when Wheeler contrasts the

desperate attempts of poor Bangladeshis to earn money with the slimming clinics and joggers in the rich areas. However, most of her writing concerns the inconvenience and unpleasantness of travel from her point of view. We are given few glimpses of Bangladesh, and none from the point of view of its native inhabitants, but plenty of confessional description of Wheeler's unhappiness, discomfort and phone calls to her boyfriend:

I felt as if I were a prisoner inside my own head instead of a free spirit in a foreign land [...] I was confused to find myself the victim of homesickness and disembodied anxieties. I had so many preconceptions about what I was able to do - about my adaptability, resilience and independence; was I losing the markers and maps of my own moods? (Wheeler, 1998: 234).

Again we hear the language of travel as a metaphor for an interior state; there is self-criticism, not of the questionable assumptions of her journey and writing, but of her status as an independent, fearless traveller. The real interest of the article, for Wheeler, emerges in a phone call home when it is revealed that she is probably pregnant; the rest of the journey is structured around her reaction to this news, which fits into the now thriving tradition of women travel writers such as Mary Morris or Ffiona Campbell, whose private life is foregrounded and problematised more than the journey

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<sup>1</sup> e.g. Murphy 1976, 1977; Kennedy 1992 and Campbell 1994. (See *Works Cited*).

itself. There is a kind of ironic post-feminist voice in her lack of identification with all the pregnant women she suddenly notices:

I felt no sense of identification, no uplifting emotion about the universality of motherhood. I didn't feel anything at all [...] I was lonely. Yes, that was it [...] The inner landscape was more alien than the one outside the window, and I was afraid that what lay ahead was the most foreign territory of all (236).

Evidently what is being privileged here is a woman-centred discourse which can be defended to some extent as a reaction to the male-dominated history of publication, authorship, and textual concerns that has excluded female issues and distorted the concerns and voices of travel writing over the centuries. We have come a long way from the discursive norms which prevented earlier travellers writing about the physical and psychological problems and peculiarities of womanhood in travel texts: Mary Kingsley, Gertrude Bell, Freya Stark and their contemporaries do not discuss their pregnancy scares, periods, fear of menopause, lovers, depressions, homesickness and self-doubts in their travel writing in the way that is common currency among modern writers like Campbell, Wheeler, Davidson, Morris etc. Perhaps they wanted to and were restrained by the masculine discursive conventions of the day. It was enough of a challenge to the

public to accept that women travelled alone, let alone to have personal details flaunted in print. However there is a sense in which one set of conventions has simply been replaced by another: now, for a woman traveller, a personal identity crisis over her sexuality or motherhood or liberal convictions is *de rigueur*; the idea of "tough travel" in which the writer suffers the horrors of poverty almost at first hand is prevalent (always with traveller's cheques and return ticket in hand); and the travel writing project becomes a series of arbitrarily chosen destinations about which the writer knows nothing, learns little, and presents through a series of impressionistic encounters on a brief, aimless trip which serve not to enlighten the reader about the region visited, but about the writer's personal life.

The "tough travel" discourse alternates with the focus on her interior life in Wheeler's account of Bangladesh. It is a kind of shock tactic to remind us that this is not just a holiday, but an encounter with a kind of hyper-reality which reflects on the writer's ability to deal with the horrors of daily life in the third world. This can be read as a kind of feminism, in that we are given details that are not "lady-like", and which often deliberately focus on the sufferings of women:

When the train stopped, blind beggars groped along to the open windows. I fell asleep in the middle of the day and was woken by a

shiny elbow stump prodding at my cheek. The amputee was carrying a tin bowl in her mouth (236).

This kind of detail is intercut with brief accounts of Bangladeshi history and culture, of the kind that can be culled from a “Lonely Planet” guide book, and descriptions of ‘feudal’ farming systems, local corruption, child labour and natural disasters, but the real focus to which the text repeatedly returns is the list of inconveniences to the writer: the erratic train services, language problems, incessant crowds of people staring or following the white woman, the food, the hotels (“leprous with corrosion and smelt of mouldy vegetables”: 240) etc. There are some throwbacks to earlier conventions: a servant addresses her as “sir”, she renames local people she meets with joke names such as “Mephistopheles”, her mode of travel consists of a first class cabin on a boat trip, certain vocabulary items are translated arbitrarily, to give an effect of local colour, local myths are cited. But the main trend is to indulge in the most recent version of travel writing: self-obsession, self-pity, and an underlying sense of pointlessness about the whole project:

Most of my companions ignored me, but occasionally, I suspect out of boredom, they turned their attention to the strange habits of foreigners, further subdivisions of the species apparently being

considered unnecessary. I was trapped among a small crowd (246).

This is a strange reversion of Orientalist writing, in which the traveller, who has made no attempt to get to know any Bangladeshis or gain more than the most superficial understanding of their society, complains that she is treated as an objectified ‘species’ and not as an individual.

As Edward Said suspected<sup>2</sup>, modern Orientalism may have taken new forms, “a personal twist”, a more refined presentation of the Other arising from personal encounter rather than scientific study, but beneath the surface impression of a post-colonialist interest in other cultures, what we find repeatedly in the work of Western women travel writers in the latter part of the twentieth century is an obsession with self which has found ideological justification in the contemporary discourse of feminism, and less actual interest in the Other than can be found in earlier travel writing, including the period of high colonialism.

In the desire to concentrate on the ‘inner journey’ and gain status and credibility by focusing on the writer’s unique status as a sensitive individual, somewhere along the line the foreign country is reduced to an exotic or hostile backdrop to the drama of the personal life of the author. Changes in

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<sup>2</sup> Said, 1978.

social experience of travel, of media access to foreign places, the enormous growth of tourism and the growing market for products aimed at a female readership have all combined to produce a style of travel writing which is unsure of its role alongside “Lonely Planet” guidebooks, National Geographic television programmes and photo-journalism, documentary footage from investigative journalism, and amateur holiday videos and photographs. If tourism, one of the largest industries in the world, has blurred forever the distinction between traveller and tourist, broken down class barriers and brought the foreign into the domestic (and brought the domestic to the foreign) then the role of the travel writer as a special envoy who travels into the unknown is a threatened one.

One way of justifying the continued existence of the genre is by specialising in terms of audience focus-group, as the increase in publications by women suggests; another is for individuals within that group to concentrate on some aspect of the journey that sets them apart from the tourist hordes: either the particular form of the journey (by bicycle, kayak, microlight; with child; on foot, on camel); its length (Robyn Davidson in *Tracks* walks from the centre to the coast of Australia); with an ideologically loaded destination (the Soviet Union for Americans; India for the British); or by focusing on some aspect of the individual author that is of necessity unique - such as the effect of

the journey on their love-life, dreams, alcohol intake, motherhood (fertility is an important issue in the travel writing in both texts discussed here).

*Desert Places* by Robyn Davidson recounts the experiences of the author when she travelled with a group of nomads known variously as the Rabari or the Raiki in northern India. Initially the project follows the pattern of much women’s travel writing in the post-colonial period: the writer signs a contract to provide articles for a magazine<sup>3</sup> in return for financial support; she is allocated a professional photographer; she knows little about where she is going because she has deliberately chosen a tribe and an area which is almost undocumented, and by its very nature as nomadic, cannot be pinned down. Despite the lack of information available, she is inspired to travel with them because of the avowedly romantic image evoked in her by the idea of the nomadic life:

A wish was forming. It took the shape of an image. I was building a little cooking fire in the shelter of soft, pink dunes, far away from anything but a world of sand. It was twilight, the lyrical hour. The nomads were gathering beside me by the fire. There was fluency and lightness between us. We had walked a long way together. The

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<sup>3</sup>National Geographic, the same magazine which sponsored her previous book, *Tracks* (1980).

image exalted the spirit with its spareness and its repose (Davidson 1997: 3).

She does not speak any useful languages and has no experience of tribal nomadic life. Thus far her journey resembles many others, going back to that undertaken by Mary Kingsley<sup>4</sup> in her desire to enter the life of a completely alien and unknown social system alone, and reminding us of journeys by Ella Maillart, Alexandra David-Neel and Isabella Bird<sup>5</sup> in the way she is searching for a people who offer a more primitive and therefore supposedly more 'genuine' or 'authentic' alternative lifestyle. Her romantic view of desert life as an escape from twentieth century civilisation echoes the enchantment felt by Gertrude Bell<sup>6</sup> and the young Freya Stark in Iraq<sup>7</sup>. Similarly, among more recent travel writers, Davidson can be compared to Christina Dodwell<sup>8</sup> or Dervla Murphy, in her choice of eccentric destination and mode of transport (in this case, camel), but also with Ffyna Campbell in her expensive back-up (or escape route) system of Landrover and male support.

However, despite conforming to the general tradition of destination and style of journey identified as common

to the twentieth century travel writer, Desert Places is not simply another account of the Western woman's intrepid spirit triumphing over hardship and cultural difference to reaffirm the bonds between her and her third-world sisters. Although these ideas are there in the first part of the book, in fact the journey turns out to be a personal nightmare and an admitted failure in terms of her aim of studying the Raika.

For a long time I could not see how to write about my experiences. They were nothing but a series of disconnected events, without shape, without meaning. I had passed through India as a knife does through ice and it had closed behind me at every step. How does one write about failure? (1997: 275).

Part of the problem, both with the journey itself and with the form of travel writing attempted, is caused by Davidson's tendency to romanticise the nomadic Other, when the reality she experiences is anything other than romantic. For her, the Rabari represent a return to a more authentic past which was lost with the advent of agriculturalism; the nomads are a special people who embody an alternative path for mankind which echoes in our collective memory. She writes "Rabaris were the keepers of the original way - nomadism" (ibid: 57); "This century [...] is witnessing the end of traditional nomadism, a description of reality that has been with us since our beginnings - our oldest memory of

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<sup>4</sup> See Kingsley, 1897 / 1993.

<sup>5</sup> See Robinson, 1990 and 1995.

<sup>6</sup> See Winstone, 1978 and Bell, 1907.

<sup>7</sup> See Stark, 1938.

<sup>8</sup> See Dodwell, 1989.

being” (5). As a people without a homeland, even within the social structure of the East the Rabari remain Other. To the Western reader or traveller, they are thus doubly “othered”, and as such an object of anthropological and historical interest.

At the same time, Davidson chooses to identify herself with this romanticised nomadic tradition because she has (voluntarily) moved between various First World countries and no longer feels particularly identified with any of them.

There are new kinds of nomads, not people who are at home everywhere, but who are at home nowhere. I was one of them. After the first abandonment of the place of my birth I had lived in England, in America, lost count of the countries I had visited and had several times returned to Australia only to leave again. Somewhere in the midst of that tremendous restlessness I had lost the sense of a gravitational centre, a place with which to compare elsewhere. I now felt as much an anthropologist (mystified, alien, lonely) at a dinner party with my peers, as I did with a family of Aborigines eating witchetty grubs in a creek bed (1997: 5).

Thus the author situates herself as a person without cultural identity who has more in common with simple native peoples existing in unadulterated natural conditions, than she has with

her Western peers. She actively desires identification with the nomad tribe before she has even met them, and is keen to reject the life of ‘civilisation’ she has access to in the West.<sup>9</sup> In this she shares the sense of exile, as a floating, unattached individual no longer defined by national identity, with many academics, writers and travellers at the end of the twentieth century for whom travel writing provides a way of commenting on the state of the post-colonial world. But as Amit Chaudhuri writes in his review of *Desert Places*:

Time and again, Davidson, in her account of her life with the Rabari, returns to the subject of herself. There is nothing intrinsically wrong in this: the problem is that Davidson, like so many Western travel writers, relinquishes the specificity, the particularity, of her own - Australian - background and identity for the archetypal persona of the ‘Western’ visitor to India. Does an unequivocal, homogeneous entity called the ‘West’ really exist?<sup>10</sup>

The focus of the book is suggested in the quotation from Robert Frost’s poem of the same name which identifies the ‘desert places’ as interior, existential states, not foreign

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<sup>9</sup> In this respect her attitude can be compared with that of Mary Morris, in her search for Jewish roots and her claim to be Russian: see Morris 1992.

<sup>10</sup> *London Review of Books*, Vol. 19, No. 18. September 18 1997, pp.19-20.



landscapes. But apart from her ultimate frustration with her companions, we learn little about Davidson's interior journey and less about the minds of the Rabari. Amit Chaudhuri points out the fundamental flaw in the project:

It is not difficult to imagine what it would be like for a middle-class Australian woman were she to find herself for days on end with a group of nomads; and there is very little in the book to subvert our expectations. It is more difficult, perhaps, to imagine what it is to be a Rabari, sleeping among five thousand sheep and drinking Guinea-worm-infested water; but Davidson, constrained by her ignorance of their language, and their ignorance of hers, offers few insights on this subject. From time to time she laments that her journey has provided her with no 'illumination'; yet it is not illumination one seeks in this account, but something more humble, a small-scale but sustained going-out-of-oneself into other people's lives. To me, the idea that living in the most trying conditions with a group of strangers, and getting infected with the same diseases and sores as they have, will lead to a greater knowledge of oneself, or others, or a culture is simply wrong-headed.<sup>11</sup>

This is a fundamental critique of the travel writing project as undertaken by Davidson (and others). In trying to cover in a single book the metaphysical ground of the interior existential journey, at the same time as dealing with the socially and politically correct agendas of feminism, environmentalism and 'multiculturalism', the danger is that the writer falls between the two and fails to provide either an insight into how the alien culture affects her self-definition, or an objective account of how the alien culture constructs the world.

The actual relationships developed with the women she meets hardly move beyond bemused incomprehension on both sides, breaking at times into direct hostility on the part of the Rabari women towards someone who spends months with a small group and is unable to learn even their names:

They had welcomed me into the warmth of their communion; now I was out in the cold watching them through a window. They would see me peeping at them and turn away as if to say, Why are you looking at us? Go away! What had begun with good will was atrophying for the want of a language to nourish it. I had imagined I could understand, through a kind of pre-lingual sign language, quite complex interactions, as if I could just manage to stay afloat on an ocean of incomprehension. The truth was I was going under. There were more

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<sup>11</sup> *Op. cit.*

than forty people on the dang. Jaiva said disparagingly, 'We can remember all our sheep. How come you can't remember our names?' (134).

Almost all the emotionally charged, epiphanic moments which punctuate a text otherwise full of negative experiences, culminating in a kind of insane hysteria towards India and Indians, are to do with Davidson's temporary sense of belonging to a family, though we are also aware that this is a privilege she pays for in rupees:

At last the price was fixed - two thousand rupees a month. I must provide my own food and buy my goat milk from them. They would provide camel, saddle and gear. Narendra proclaimed, 'From now on Pala bhai's family is your family', and everyone stood up and shook hands and ordered tea in celebration. (92)

However the reality of 'family' life with the Rabari leads to the darker side of this theme developing as an obsession with her loneliness, boredom and gradual recognition that she is an outsider who is only accepted in so far as she proves useful to the tribe. The jeep she has bought and hardly uses is her greatest asset in the eyes of the exhausted Rabari, who cannot understand why anyone would choose to walk when they could ride:

I drove the women into the nearby village for provisions, which completely turned their heads. On the way back my sisters sat in the front with me, heaping scorn on mere pedestrians. Parma, thinking I couldn't understand her, announced, 'This is our taxi and Ratti ben [*Davidson*] is our driver' (148).

Davidson resents the way her jeep is used for tribal business when Phagu, the leader, uses it to save time scouting the land ahead, and she interprets their behaviour, on one of the few occasions on which she inadvertently contributes something useful to the long-suffering Rabari tribe, as a clever trick to exploit her:

It was not the recce I resented, it was his manipulation of me [...] By the time we got back it was dark. The whole community welcomed me home with prashad and high praise but I was too fed up with them to be conned out of my mood and went straight to my tent. In my notes I wrote 'I am their milking cow' (163).

The solitariness of Western life, the alienation of cities, the breakdown of the family: these are the classic tropes motivating romantic travel writing, often juxtaposed with the glorification of the close physical and relational solidarity evident in poorer societies whose members stick together in ways that have been forgotten in the consumerist, divisive West. Yet

Davidson discovers the hard way that such solidarity among the poor and dispossessed cannot be bought or created during a short trip; on the contrary, it only serves as a contrast with her own lack of identity and direction. Her doubts about the value of the journey are a recurrent *leitmotiv* in the text:

But was it really useful, I asked myself, to travel with a bunch of nomads no one has ever heard of? So what if the Rabari will be extinct within fifty years? Who in the world will give a damn? [...] And so what if nomadism was about to go out, phut, like a candle, the whole world over? The culture of the millennium had bigger things to worry about. But I'd committed myself and there was no turning back (35).

If Davidson herself questions her motives, the Rabari are completely bemused by what seems to them complete insanity:

Men would come and sit with me, polite as ever, and gradually get round to asking, 'You have lakhs and lakhs of rupees, and you have a jeep. Why do you want to live with poor people? Why do you want to walk?' I never found a suitable reply to this but it did indicate how far from enviable they saw their own lives and how incomprehensible they found mine (48).

The very meaninglessness of the trip is used as a justification for continuing what has become not only an artificial but also a masochistic exercise: "There was a deeper motive for the prolonging of self-punishment: the quest for meaning, of which, so far, this curious journey had remained void" (182).

When I woke each morning it was to dread. I must face them. I must sit and eat with them. Sometimes they smiled at me or laughed but I could not read their faces. They looked at me sideways and thought their own thoughts. They had no inkling what torture it was to be unable to speak, unable to order the world in any way, exposed and wretched in a place where even the sky was strange. My other life was unimaginable to them and so therefore was the degree of stress - solitary confinement and sleep deprivation combined (136).

This is cultural solipsism taken to new extremes, using the discourse of confessional literature as a way to claim the sympathy of the Western armchair traveller. Far from understanding them, as she intended, she uses the imagery of a prisoner in a third-world gaol to attack the Rabari for failing to appreciate her sufferings. Colonialism has left a heritage that the white female visitor to India cannot ignore, yet evidently feels uncomfortable with - though it does not stop her exploiting its benefits when convenient: Davidson makes a joke about being referred to as

‘Memsahib’ by her various servants, but accepts the role of mistress; she resents being stared at for her whiteness, but accepts the privileges of queue-jumping in doctors’ waiting rooms and access to exclusive hotels. There is even a ‘Livingstone / Stanley’ joke, as though she were an explorer.

In an interview with Robyn Davidson on Australian radio, the author focuses on an epiphanic moment in her trip when the apparently beautiful, picture postcard image of the nomadic life is contrasted with her awareness of the image’s falsity:

Of course, what I know by that point is the truth of that picture which is that the little Rabari men are starving and the ribbon of water is full of malarial parasites and the Aravali Mountains are being deforested and there is junk in the streams and there are hideous, kitsch hotels where middle-class people can stay and not see.<sup>12</sup>

This makes good postmodern, pro-green, pro-minority-culture journalism, but it is difficult not to agree with Annette Kobak’s comment that the book “does not quite escape an aura of bad faith”<sup>13</sup> when we realise that Davidson herself was only too happy to stay in such hotels, and that her own participation in the culture of

consumerism and environmental destruction is embodied in her purchase of an unnecessary jeep.

In classic Orientalist discursive tradition, Davidson presents the Rabari as not only geographically and culturally alien to Western culture, but also temporally alien through references to the *Arabian Nights* (4); to Sinbad (87); to parts of India that “would have looked just like this centuries ago” (13); “This was the finest embroidery I had seen anywhere and aeons of wandering were coded in its patterns” (84); “I was a tourist in pre-industrial time” (162); “I would be - had already been, without realizing it - a traveller in medieval time” (237). This is, of course, one of the most obvious tropes of Orientalist thinking identified by Said as a way of fixing the East permanently in the past, in opposition to Western modernity, progress etc

Despite Davidson’s romantic view of the timelessness and picturesqueness of nomadic life, she finds that the Rabari would be only too happy to move into the twentieth century and enjoy some of its comforts, and are only barred from doing so by their extreme poverty. Equally, the reality of twentieth century ‘development’ impinges on their lives in a way she had not anticipated, affecting nomadic routes and customs. It is to the author’s credit that her honest doubts about the nature and value of her project eventually come to be foregrounded in the text. However the extreme level of

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<sup>12</sup> ABC Charting Australia 108, broadcast 28 April 1996.

<sup>13</sup> Kobak, *op.cit.*

anger, complaint, insult, frustration and unhappiness revealed in the detailed account of the journey raises difficult questions about the role of travel writing not just in the case of this book but in general, given the specific situation of the Western traveller in the world at the end of the twentieth century.

The nihilism of the book suggests we have reached the point at which any form of travel into a third-world country, however much the author wraps it up in terms of pseudo-anthropology, pseudo-international sisterhood or pseudo-environmental concern is getting too close to an unjustifiable mixture of cheap tourism, voyeurism, exploitation and game-playing in the face of other people's poverty and misery. Kobak writes, "The whole very western enterprise of a lone traveler alighting amid some remote group of people and making a living by writing about them is getting ethically trickier"<sup>14</sup>. Davidson describes her anger (both with herself and with the whole of India) thus:

The anger chewed me up. I could not sleep at night with it. There was nowhere to dump it. Everything I had done here was fraudulent and absurd. I knew nothing about the Rabaris and, even if I did, it would mean nothing to them, make no difference to them. I had understood nothing of where I was. And I

would perpetuate the fraudulence by producing yet another bit of noise for a culture drowning in noise - an article for a glossy magazine with beautiful photos of beautiful India, beautiful noble Rabari, so that people could sit in comfort in their homes or doctors' waiting-rooms and not see (272).

Yet despite this insight the demands of the career travel writer triumph: it is true that the colour photographs (taken by the long-suffering professional photographer assigned to the job by the magazine sponsoring the trip, Dilip Mehta) are included in the paperback edition, and give it precisely the feel of a National Geographic article rather than an individual's experience of travel; they contrast remarkably with the bitterness and realism of the text. Davidson realises the journey "is reduced to kitsch" (273) because by the end she, like Mehta, is commuting between the first and third worlds as she stays in air-conditioned hotels and is driven to the Rabari in her jeep for photo-shoots that provide a "visual reconstruction" (263) of the proposed walk.

Her final justification for the generally negative experience of the trip is to resort to the myth of India as the ultimate spiritual cleanser, satisfying her desire for self-annihilation in the face of timeless nature, offering travel as a short-term escape from reality - we are back in the discourse of romantic, Orientalist constructions of the

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<sup>14</sup> Kobak, *op. cit.*

‘mysterious East’, in which the reality of the experience, however negative, must not be allowed to override the perpetuation of the myth of the Other. The transcendental ‘moments’ sketched by Davidson as a riposte to her growing

doubts are the necessary poetic mythologising of a professional writer who cannot admit that she has reached the end of the road.

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