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## TRAVELING THROUGH MUGHAL DELHI IN THE LAST MUGHAL

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**ABSTRACT:** *The Last Mughal* by William Dalrymple is best known for its historical account of the Mughal world's fall during the Revolt of 1857. But the narrative also serves as a spatial tour of Shahjahanabad, or Delhi as it was in the middle of the nineteenth century. Dalrymple creates a hybrid kind of narrative that is similar to travel writing by reconstructing the city using archival material, firsthand observations, and descriptive storytelling. This paper interprets *The Last Mughal* as a travelogue that covers memories, cultures, and geographies. Dalrymple transforms into a traveler and historian, taking readers through the emotional and physical landscapes of a Delhi that has vanished. The analysis shows how Dalrymple's depiction of Mughal fall is influenced by location, movement, and surroundings.

**KEYWORDS:** William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal*, Travel-Writing, Bahadur Shah Zafar, Mughal Delhi, 1857 Revolt

**INTRODUCTION:** Traditionally, travel writing has been linked to both the actual act of traveling and the literary depiction of other places, cultures, and landscapes. Since *The Last Mughal* is a history based on in-depth archival study, it does not initially appear to belong in this genre. However, there is a compelling story of spatial exploration throughout the book. Dalrymple frequently transports the reader to Shahjahanabad's streets, monuments, gardens, marketplaces, and ruins. In addition to reconstructing Delhi as it was in 1857, he shares his personal experiences navigating the city today. Travel writing is nothing new to Dalrymple. Long before he authored *The Last Mughal*, many of his earlier writings, such as *City of Djinns*, *From the Holy Mountain*, and *In Xanadu*, established him as a travel writer. His style is unavoidably shaped by this upbringing. His evocative, sensory, and landscape-based descriptions bring history to life. This essay examines how Dalrymple combines travel narrative with historical narrative to demonstrate that *The Last Mughal* is a travel through Mughal Delhi as well as a record of political events.

### OBJECTIVES OF THE RESEARCH:

1. To analyse how Dalrymple reconstructs the physical, cultural, and emotional landscapes of Shahjahanabad (Old Delhi) through descriptive, spatial, and sensory narrative techniques.



2. To investigate the methods by which Dalrymple blends archival research with the experiential qualities of travel writing, creating a hybrid form of historical travelogue.
3. To explore how movement—across streets, monuments, ruins, and archival spaces—structures the narrative and shapes readers' understanding of Mughal Delhi.
4. To understand the role of Bahadur Shah Zafar, courtly culture, and the everyday life of the city as part of the broader travel experience represented in the text.
5. To evaluate how Dalrymple's temporal shifts between the Delhi of 1857 and the Delhi of today contribute to a form of temporal travel within the narrative.
6. To highlight how the representation of destruction, displacement, and cultural loss after 1857 is conveyed through journey-like descriptions of ruined spaces.

**ANALYSIS:** *The Last Mughal* by William Dalrymple is widely acknowledged as a significant historical reconstruction of the events preceding and following the 1857 revolt. Beneath its historical depth, however, is a story that has the rhythm, curiosity, and sensory detail of a trip. Dalrymple uses the perspective of a traveler who walks, watches, listens, and feels the physical and cultural textures of Shahjahanabad—Delhi as it existed in the middle of the nineteenth century. The text's approach is highly geographical even if it is based on documented data. The Red Fort, Chandni Chowk, mosques, lanes, shrines, parks, and marketplaces are just a few of the places Dalrymple walks the reader through. His reconstruction of Delhi in 1857 turns into a literary adventure in which the reader travels with the historian as he uncovers the city's complex past.

Bahadur Shah Zafar, whom Dalrymple depicts with uncommon familiarity, is at the center of this expedition. He sets the emperor into Delhi's emotional landscape rather than just its administrative framework by highlighting Zafar's poetic and spiritual identity rather than his political authority. "Zafar was a frail and gentle man, more a Sufi poet and mystic than a monarch, a person who found greater solace in his verses than in the affairs of state," encapsulates Dalrymple's emphasis on atmosphere, mood, and personality as a travel writer. This portrayal itself turns into a kind of travel, a journey into the emotional geography of Shahjahanabad's courtly realm, where the city's cultural environment was influenced by poetry, music, and introspection.

Dalrymple's narrative style is similar to that of a tourist who explores a city's places. He does not approach places like the Red Fort, the Sufi shrines, or the crowded artisan neighborhoods as static historical backdrops. Rather, he portrays them as living spaces, replete with human activity, sounds, colors, and fragrances. The city is transformed into a sensory experience by his descriptions of the Fort's courtyards, the Yamuna's riverbed, Chandni Chowk's bazaars, and the poet meetings in the homes of Delhi's literati. In travel writing, when the writer's impressions of the location serve as the primary narrative vehicle, this sensory richness is essential.

When Dalrymple contrasts the Delhi of 1857 with the Delhi he has lived in for decades, the travelogue quality intensifies. One unique travel-writing technique is this temporal oscillation, which alternates between the past and the present. Dalrymple and other writers



frequently participate in what could be referred to as “temporal travel,” in which strolling through a contemporary metropolis simultaneously displays its more ancient facets. Dalrymple repeatedly observes that Old Delhi’s layout still reflects the structure it had under the Mughals, and he constantly stops to highlight what has disappeared, what has remained, and how modernity has changed or eliminated particular areas. The Last Mughal becomes a voyage over both space and time due to the comparison between the contemporary metropolis and its historical equivalent. The traveler’s journey is also reflected in Dalrymple’s interaction with the archives. He views the Persian manuscripts, eyewitness reports, and the “Mutiny Papers” as navigable landscapes, each with its own internal topography and atmosphere. His travels through the archives mirror his travels throughout the city, which turns them into a landscape of memories. The text’s structural framework is formed by this dual voyage through Delhi’s streets and documents. Such parallel trips, in which the external environment and introspective thoughts influence one another, are frequently found in travel writing.

The study of cross-cultural interactions is another aspect of travel writing, and Dalrymple’s Delhi is presented as a city with a high level of cross-cultural contact. He demonstrates the areas, celebrations, marketplaces, and artistic mediums that Hindus and Muslims shared. He draws attention to Sufi customs, classical music, Urdu poetry, and the dynamic composite culture that flourished under Zafar. One of the main goals of travel narratives is to evoke the sense of joining a foreign environment, and these cultural aspects are essential for both historical accuracy and this. By describing the lived texture of Delhi’s heterogeneous society rather than just recounting facts, Dalrymple allows the reader to imagine themselves in the city. Dalrymple’s account of Delhi’s devastation following the British reoccupation in 1857 is the most moving example of the travelogue viewpoint. He leads the reader past desecrated shrines, damaged havelis, deserted homes, and empty neighborhoods. The travel through ruins, a psychologically and physically altered terrain, is reminiscent of traditional travel writing traditions in which authors deal with the aftermath of conflict or the ruins of extinct civilizations. The sense of cultural loss is heightened by Dalrymple’s geographical descriptions and elegiac tone. He takes the reader around a wounded, no longer lively Delhi, a city whose physical devastation reflects the breakdown of its cultural world.

Dalrymple’s work shows that travel writing is a mode of seeing rather than just a genre characterized by physical mobility. Despite being a historical narrative, *The Last Mughal* closely resembles the travelogue tradition due to its descriptive techniques, interaction with the terrain, sensory immersion, and movement through both time and space. Delhi is the protagonist and main subject of the book, not just its setting.

**CONCLUSION:** *The Last Mughal* by William Dalrymple shows that travel writing and historical writing don’t have to be distinct literary genres; instead, they may combine to produce a narrative that is both experientially rich and historically based. Dalrymple turns the events of 1857 into a voyage through location and memory by rebuilding Shahjahanabad’s physical, cultural, and emotional environments. Readers are able to see Mughal Delhi as a



live, dynamic environment rather than as a remote historical setting because to his descriptive movement over streets, monuments, havelis, ruins, and archives. The text's travelogue-style format, which is influenced by chronological shifts, geographical awareness, and sensory detail, makes the city the main character. Dalrymple enhances our comprehension of the era's history by presenting Bahadur Shah Zafar, courtly culture, and daily life in Delhi through the prism of personal experience.

The analysis comes to the conclusion that *The Last Mughal* is a hybrid literary work in which narrative is inextricably linked to movement and history is inextricably linked to location. Dalrymple's approach demonstrates how a historian's interaction with location can uncover levels of significance that are frequently missed by traditional political histories. We can better understand how cities sustain cultural memory and how literary excursions might revive vanished worlds by viewing the book as a travelogue. As a result, *The Last Mughal* serves as both a significant historical reconstruction and a moving tour of Mughal Delhi, demonstrating the ability of travel writing to shed light on the past.

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