

# FROM TRACKS TO TRADITIONS: A CRITICAL STUDY OF MONISHA RAJESH'S TRAVEL MEMOIR *AROUND THE WORLD IN 80 TRAINS*

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## ASBTRACT

*Around the World in 80 Trains* by Monisha Rajesh is a modern travel memoir that uses international railroad trips to examine the intersections of movement, memory, and cultural identity. Monisha redefines travel narratives through the viewpoint of a British-Indian woman navigating multicultural landscapes. In contrast to traditional travel writing that frequently centers the Western male traveler as the primary spectator, Monisha's memoir foregrounds a gendered and cross-cultural viewpoint in which trains are used as symbols for tradition, transportation, community, and remembrance. This article makes the case that Monisha's story broadens the genre by examining how travel reconnects people with their past, dispels prejudices, and combines global customs with individual identity. In a world that is increasingly interconnected, Monisha's interactions with a variety of people, places, and histories highlight the importance of cultural continuity, human resilience, and the transforming power of travel.

## KEY WORDS:

Travel memoir, cultural memory, reflective nostalgia, globalization, Identity.

Throughout history, travel writers have chronicled the world from the perspectives of adventurers, colonists, and explorers. This genre is revisited in Monisha Rajesh's book with a novel twist. She travels to comprehend interconnected civilizations rather than to "discover" far-off places. Her trains go through Siberia, North Korea, Europe, India, and America, transforming railroad tracks into narrative threads that link customs, societies, and historical periods. Train travel is about the journey, not the destination.

Monisha takes a participatory rather than an observing attitude to travel. She highlights the relational aspects of culture by erasing the distinction between locals and tourists. Echoing Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the "contact zone," her story questions Western travel assumptions and presents travel as an experience impacted by empathy, inquiry, and cultural respect. Monisha's diasporic identity is an important part of her story. Her cultural memory is broken, hybrid, and changing as a British-Indian lady. Travel turns into an internal trip that aids in the reconciliation of various layers. Mary Louise Pratt introduces the concept of the "contact zone" in her critical work *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992). Contact zones are "social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 4).

Railroad rails are transformed into lived cultural experiences (traditions) by Monisha Rajesh, who serves as the connecting figure. She creates cultural narratives by interpreting what she sees and hears when traveling by train

through her involvement, observations, and conversations. Railways reveal the rhythm of everyday life. Monisha, other passengers are also crucial in tracking customs. They incorporate their customs with the moving train environment by sharing food, storytelling, language, and daily routines. The actual train serves as a hub where movement and memory combine, and where tradition helps modern travel practices can be observed while the train is in motion.

Trains make you notice the world rather than rush through it. Each carriage carries a different culture and the different people's lives. Movement creates the connection between different kinds of cultures. Travel by train allows you to belong, even briefly know about other people's traditions.

To travel around the continents Europe, Russia, Mongolia, China, Vietnam, Thailand, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, Canada, and America. Monisha chooses tracks as a means to connect with traditions and learn about others' cultures. Monisha revisits locations and customs that arouse memories, nostalgia, and a sense of belonging, much like. She is reminded of her early years, her ancestry, and the disconnect between lived experience and cultural memory while traveling throughout Asia. This idea is closely associated with Aleida Assmann, especially from *Cultural Memory and Western Civilization* (2011).

Memory is not a fixed entity but a dynamic cultural process.

It is shaped by selection, interpretation, and repetition.

The boundary between memory and history is increasingly unstable,

As both interact in the construction of cultural meaning (Assmann 36).

Every interaction she has, whether with families on Russian trains or monks in Tibet, makes her consider the diversity of identities. According to Monisha's book, traveling is an act of self-reconstruction. She moves inward more and outward more.

Trains are emblems of continuity, tradition, and community in Monisha's story. Railroads represent cultural ecosystems rather than mere transportation. They become traditional archives where cuisine, language, and customs meet within these moving communities where strangers exchange tales of grief, memory, and aspirations. Trains act as bearers of memory, bridging historical boundaries and symbolizing resilience in everyday life, particularly in areas affected by conflict or political unrest.

Monisha's ethical perspective is one of her writing's strongest points. She does not exoticize other civilizations; rather, she emphasizes people's voices like the fear of a North Korean guide, the humor of a Tibetan monk, the familiarity of an Indian passenger, and the warmth of a Siberian family.

This quote highlights the author's critical awareness of media bias on both sides, acknowledging that while North Korea carefully curates its national image, Western media also simplifies the country into stereotypes, and frames the journey as a conscious decision to witness a controlled, performative reality rather than uncover hidden truths. In her words:

“While North Korea spins stories, the Western media is just as guilty of indulging its own agenda, painting North Korea as one-dimensional robots serving their great leader. I was under no illusion that ten days in North Korea would uncover anything more than a stage-managed performance, but I wanted a front row seat at the show. The country had just lifted a four-month travel ban, imposed over fears of the Ebola virus, so now was as good a time to visit as any”(Rajesh 173).

Her story revolves around these human interactions. Travel turns into a cooperative act of cultural exchange. She observes, listens, and learns rather than consuming cultures. Monisha's ethical approach aligns with postcolonial literary viewpoints by challenging colonial patterns of travel writing.

In Monisha's narrative, movement and memory are closely related. Every train ride becomes a storehouse of tales drawn both from her own past and from the lives of other passengers. Just as other travelers gather mementos, she gathers bits of her lived experiences.

Monisha demonstrates how memories are cultural containers, much like in *Station Eleven*, where artifacts maintain culture. Her memories of her childhood, family, and India merge with her current experiences to form an ongoing narrative about herself. According to the memoir, cultural memory travels with people and crosses boundaries in the same way as trains do.

Raymond Williams' theory of "structures of feeling" refers to cultural norms that influence day-to-day existence, illustrating how cultural meanings are continuously produced and felt in motion. In his words, "We are talking about characteristic elements of impulse, restraint, and tone; specifically affective elements of consciousness and relationships: not feeling against thought, but thought as felt and feeling as thought"(Williams 132).

Monisha's voyage highlights the conflict between modernization and tradition. High-speed trains are a sign of technological advancement in nations like the United States and China, but they also raise concerns about cultural homogeneity. She observes local history being erased by urbanization, the commodification of cultures by tourism, and human interaction being replaced with technology.

Monisha discovers that customs endure through people, cuisine, language, rituals, and storytelling in spite of these shifts. Even in a more globalized society, culture changes rather than vanishes, in which people look for purpose in cultural continuity rather than yearning for an idealized past. Rajesh frames storytelling as a living, evolving practice: "Stories passed between passengers felt more important than borders, stitching together past and present in ways no museum ever could" (Rajesh 9).

The quote beautifully captures the experience of nostalgia as described by cultural theorist Svetlana Boym, through her concept of "reflective nostalgia" in *The Future of Nostalgia* (2001), like this:

Nostalgia is a longing for a home that no longer exists or has never existed.

It is a sentiment of loss and displacement,

But it is also a romance with one's own fantasy.

Nostalgia inevitably reappears in times of rapid change and historical upheaval (Boym 13).

Monisha's emotional depth sets her apart from many other modern travel writers. She writes on vulnerability, fear, joy, and reconnection in addition to places. The emotional labour of travel is revealed through her connection with her fiancé, the uncertainty of unknown settings, and moments of beauty or horror. The memoir is elevated into a philosophical and personal journey by this change from exterior observation to introspection.

"Our stories go deep into the land, like the roots of a tree."

This quote reflects the author's growing disillusionment with organized religion, showing how repeated encounters with exploitation and blind faith led to a rational, personal rejection of religious belief in favour of intellectual freedom and self-awareness. This like:

“Time and again, I encountered so – called ‘godmen’ exploiting the poor and vulnerable, priests extracting money for nothing, and blind faith leading to disappointment. By the end of my journey, I concluded that the existence of a god went against all logic and reasoning and that I had no need for any kind of religion. Feeding freer and more awake than ever before, I found myself unable to ever pray or consider god again”(Rajesh 7).

According to her story, travel helps people become more empathetic and culturally knowledgeable. *Around the World in 80 Trains* by Monisha Rajesh is a reflection on identity, cultural memory, and tradition in a globalized society rather than merely presenting a chronicle of travels around the world. Monisha creates a story through her railroad trips in which meetings become cultural bridges, movement becomes meaning, and rails become traditions.

Her memoir proposes a more inclusive, sympathetic, and culturally aware method of traveling the world, challenging Eurocentric travel patterns. Monisha shows that traveling is not merely about reaching a destination, but it is about getting to know people.

In her writing, trains come to represent connections, not just across continents but also between people, memories, histories, and customs. Her research confirms that travel may be an effective instrument for self-discovery and cultural learning when it is done with humility and openness.

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