Anti Imperialistic attitude in Heinrich Harrer’s Seven years in Tibet: A classic travelogue with a difference.

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ABSTRACT:

It is a common perception that European travellers travel to the east with a mission to civilize, christianise, colonise and plunder the so called ‘savages’. They come with these ulterior motives and subjugate the innocent people of this part of the world. The seven years in Tibet, a moving and heart touching travelogue by Heinrich Harrer, a German explorer, projects a different picture of an European traveller. The paper will focus light on the anti-imperialistic attitude and true love of an European for Tibetans, one of the peace loving and pious races of the eastern world. For seven years (1944-1950), Harrer learned the language and acquired a greater understanding of the Tibetans than any westerner had ever before achieved. He became the friend and tutor of the young Dalai Lama and finally accompanied him to India when he fled the Red of incredible courage and self reliance set against the backdrop of a mysterious and magnificent culture.

1. The Traveler:

Heinrich Harrer, a great explorer, geographer, sportsman and mountaineer from Austria, is a brilliant author and a man of great humanity for whom passion and talent for adventure are one. All his books reflect his personal encounter with new challenges in remote parts of the world. His books like the white spider, lost Lhasa, I came from the Stone Age, are all real accounts of the author as a traveler with love for adventure and exploration.

Seven years in Tibet, written in German and translated into English in 1953 by Richard Greaves, is an unparalleled moving tale of forbidden free Tibet.

Sunday time comments: this is an absorbing and remarkable travel tale that also gives unparalleled accounts of the life and customs for an inaccessible region.

The Plot:

Heinrich Harrer, already a famous mountaineer and Olympic Ski champion, was climbing in the Himalayas when the second world war erupted in Europe. An Asutrian national, he was imprisoned by the British India with an almost super human effort, he succeeded in escaping from the Internment camp in Dehradun and fled into Tibet and the forbidden city of Lhasa, and became the first westerner to lay eyes on this holiest of places.

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For seven years (1944-1950), Harrer learnt the language and acquired a greater understanding of the Tibetans than any westerner had ever before achieved. He became the friend and tutor of the young Dalai Lama and finally accompanied him to India when he fled the Red of incredible courage and self reliance set against the backdrop of a mysterious and magnificent culture.

Fiction finds no place in the book to romanticize it, but no doubt it is an attractive travelogue about Tibet—the dreamland for the explorers and adventurers.

**Escape, Exploration and Discovery:**

The travel of Harrer begins with the escape from his family to conquer Nanga Parbat and ends with the escape from Tibet, during Chinese aggression in 1950. He has escaped several times from the birbed wire Internment camp at Dehradun, from different places and bandits (Khampas) of Tibet.

Even the god king Dalai Lama IV flees from Tibet along with his well wishers to India during the invasion of China.

‘Escape’ leads to adventure, exploration and discovery, as the escapist never travels in broad daylight or in inhabited locality.

Harrer has encountered beasts, bandits (Khampas), high peaks and mountains, snow storms and many natural and unnatural hurdles in his long difficult night march to Lhasa, which has taken seventy days of hard struggle to reach the destination.

His march was unbearable and full of challenges. He describes:

“It may have been a little after midnight, when I ran into a bear standing on his hind legs in the middle of my path, growing at me” (p-24)\(^1\)

His suffering was endless. He describes his plight very pathetically:

“One morning I could not get up. Besides suffering frightful pain, I was chilled by the thought that I would not be able to go on”. (P-33)\(^2\)

This adventurous journey to Lhasa led to tremendous explorations and discoveries. The beautiful high peaks, lovely mountains covered by snow; (Gosainthang and Lapachikang, 26000 feet) the mesmerizing holy city of Lhasa have brought immense pleasure to the traveler and readers.

**Anti colonial attitude: motive explained:**

European travellers travel to the east with a mission to civilize, christianise, colonise and plunder the so called ‘savages’. They come with these ulterior motives and subjugate the innocent people of this part of the world.

Heinrich Harrer, although, a German, does not have these ill motives of the Europeans for Tibetans.

He travels to Tibet to experience adventure, to explore the unexplored forbidden country for foreigners, to know the people and to find a shelter in Tibet for its neutrality during the second world war.

He clearly defines his motives in different places of the book:

“We had come to understand the nature and mentality of the Tibetans....... (p-193)\(^3\)

Harrer also clarifies that he has no political ambitions and he states that he is a benefactor of Tibetans. He has not come to conquer them. Travelogue under study deviates from the
traditional approaches to Europeans to Easterners. Heinrich Harrer, although a Nazi from Germany, comes not to conquer or colonise the people of Tibet, but to explore the ‘forbidden country’ and its natural beauty of highest peaks and valleys. He is an adventurer, explorer, a mountaineer, and a traveler in real sense. He has clarified his motives in the different places of the book.

“The time we had spent in this peaceful corner of the world had had a formative effect on our characters. We had come to understand the nature and mentality of the Tibetans and our knowledge of the language had progressed far beyond the stage of merely making ourselves understood.” (p-193) 4

“At one time, they looked on Aufschnaite and me as thorns in their flesh, but when they saw that we had no political ambitions and that we fitted ourselves into the customs of the land and carried out undertakings from which they too profited, they with their opposition to us”. (p-180) 5

No Racial Supremacy: Love for Tibetans

Harrer never underestimates the Tibetans, their culture and religion. Rather, he has a lot of regards for the precious antique civilization of Tibet. He does not treat Tibetans as inferior to Europeans rather he respects them for spirituality and simplicity.

He is grateful to Tibetans for their warm reception of guests and their hospitality. He describes them as great people who are devoted and respectful to their guests. His appreciation for them is not at all superficial:

“It would be true to say that in no country in the world are travelers treated with greater attention and hospitality”. 5

In another place of the text his gratefulness is clearly seen. He is indebted to the Tibetans for their love, care and regards. Harrer desires to help his hosts and wants to repay by doing different benevolent works.

“..... And more than anything we desired to make ourselves useful to Government and thus in some measure repay their hospitality”. (p-191) 6

The beautiful and sacred land of Tibet has conquered the European traveller. Harrer is happy to lose identity as a European and this speaks of his immense love for this great land. He mourns when he leaves the country and this differentiates this travelogue from others.

“Aufschnaite and I knew that our hour has come and that we had lost our second home”. (p240) 7

Unbiased portrayal of Tibetan life:

Although, his love for Tibetans is of no question, he describes the life and culture of them without any favour and prejudice. But he does not laugh at their habits, custom or culture.

He describes the bathing habits of the people of kyirong district:

“Men and Women tumbled naked into the pool and any signs of prudishness, provoked roars and laughter”. (p-59) 8

He writes about horrific punishment prevalent in the Tibetan society without any hesitation or criticism. As an European he does not blame the custom.
“He was convicted of the offence, and what we would think an inhuman sentence was carried out. His hands were publicly cut off and he was then sewn up in a wet yak skin. After this had been allowed to dry, he was thrown to precipice.”(p60)”

By describing such incident, he does not underestimate their culture, although he does not like the punishment.

**Advocates for the great cause of Tibetans:**

Heinrich Harrer's travelogue is a rare kind of travelogue, as it advocates for the great cause of Tibetans. The book pleads for the freedom of the innocent people of Tibet from unauthorised occupation of Imperialist China. It appeals the world community to save the invaluable antique civilization of thousand years old, from the inhuman Chinese.

At the end of the book he exposes his inner feelings for the divine land of Gods:

“My heartfelt wish is that this book may create some understanding for a people whose will to live in peace and freedom has won so little sympathy from an indifferent world”. (p-288)

Harrer is a lover of the Tibetans and their culture. He does not feel homesick when he is with them. The separation from them gives unbearable pain to Harrer as he has no arrogance of being a European. And this is how he would always feel about Tibet:

“Wherever I live, I shall feel homesick for Tibet. I often think I can still hear the wild cries of geese and cranes and the beating of their wings as they fly over Lhasa in the clear cold moonlight.”

Harrer is a different kind of European. He does not hate Tibetans and their culture, but he is in deep love with them. He finds the Tibetans in agony and distress. He is one among the Tibetans. He confesses it:

“I left with a heavy heart, but could not remain longer. I felt deep anxiety about the fate of the young king”. (p- 287)

Tibet always remains in the heart of Harrer even after his departure in 1950 due to Chinese aggression. He appeals the world not to turn deaf to the cause and suffering of the great Tibetans. He advocates for their cause through this book and the cinema version of the book. He stirs the hearts of the people to protect the age old civilization of Tibetans. The book ends in emotional outbursts of the traveller.

“I follow all that happens in Tibet with the deepest interest, for part of my being indissolubly linked with that dear country. Wherever, I live, I shall feel homesick for Tibet. I often think I can still hear the wild cries of geese and cranes and the beating of their wings as they fly over Lhasa in the clear cold moonlight. My heartfelt wish is that this book may create some understanding for a people whose will to live in peace and freedom has won so little sympathy from an indifferent world.” (p-288)
This extract from the book speaks a lot about the travelogue. It is not a traditional travelogue.

It deserves truly the classical status in travel literature.

This is the beauty and specialty of this travelogue. The conqueror is conquered by the simplicity, love and rich culture of the people of one of the holiest places of world. His description of the innocent people, the beautiful hilly country and rich cultural heritage makes most of the people the fans of the people of Tibet.

He appeals the world community to save these innocent pious people from the tyranny of the imperialist China.

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