

Travel, Sustainability and Women: An Environmental Study of The Shooting Star by Shivya Nath

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ABSTRACT

The Shooting Star by Shivya Nath is a travel memoir which does not merely document the travel narratives by a female traveller but also reflects on the looming environmental issues which have been threatening our planet in perilous ways, mainly due to the impetuous lifestyle of human beings. Climate change and high carbon emissions have been the issues of concern at both local and global levels. The travel and tourism industry has been in notoriety because of increased pollution, natural habitat loss, and greenhouse gas emissions from air travel, to name a few. Shivya Nath, in her memoir, advocates the need for conscious travel while advocating the need of travel for women, both environment and women being the subjects of exploitation. This paper exhibits a relationship between sustainability and women by employing the theories of ecofeminism.

KEYWORDS: Travel, Women, Sustainability, Environment, Ecofeminism.

INTRODUCTION

Travel is a complex concept which is generally seen under the lens of a leisurely activity to break free from the hiatus of an inert lifestyle. Though travel can sometimes also be a result of varied circumstances, but in general, it is studied in heuristic sense, to bring into ideation other peoples' cultures and to know beyond what one already does. One of the essential aspects of human existence is travel. Even stating that the modern, developed world we live in today came to be as a result of man's propensity for travel, would not be an exaggeration. Travel literature has emerged as a significant genre with increasing human attention towards travelling as a source of entertainment. Travel memoirs have been gaining significance at a higher pace. These memoirs provide a sense of connection to their readers and provide insights into aspects of travelling like identity, adventure, environment and cultural exploration.

The increasing interest of people around the globe in travelling is bound to be followed by an increase in the consumption of natural resources, thus leading to a negative impact on the environment. The idea of travel is mostly connected to recreation, ignoring completely the effect of said travel on the very environment that makes it possible for humans to travel. The importance of the environment for humans is unquestionable. Yet, the environment has failed to gain enough attention of humans who have been surviving every moment while consuming its resources, to the extent that the consumption of resources has exceeded much beyond the permissible sustainable levels. Notorious industrialisation, urbanisation and imprudent capitalistic lifestyle are the major factors of environmental exploitation. Veritably, popular culture has been promoting the traditional activity of travelling in rather unconventional ways. These unconventional ways have undoubtedly been proving fatal to natural habitats and the environment. The special cognizance being lately accorded to protection of environment is due to unwary lifestyle and travel practices. The travel and tourism companies have been promoting travel in unsustainable ways resulting in high carbon footprints. Luxury travel is a newfound trend of travel of the twenty-first century, which is taking a heavy toll on environmental resources, directly affecting the quality of air, potable water and drastically reducing the green covers. "Amongst the least contested issues regarding the impact of tourism concerns its contribution to environmental degradation. A 2018 study estimated that, including tourist food, hotel, shopping, and travel, tourism accounted for 8 per

cent of total global greenhouse emissions” (Dunne).

Adopting and constantly upgrading technology in order to serve convenient travel behaviours is a major catalyst for environmental degradation. Social media platforms have been promoting travel by locating environmentally rich places as hidden, offbeat, pristine and undiscovered, only to be made viral virtually, hence resulting in soaring percentages of mass tourism each year. Shivya Nath echoes this dismay in her memoir *The Shooting Star*, “I had impulsively left Leh, the capital of Ladakh, disappointed by the erosion of its traditional life caused by the allure of mass tourism (Nath 177).

Though ecotourism businesses have been under pressure to display sustainability certificates to beat the competition and attract environment-conscious travellers, but their claims of being sustainable have often turned out to be a sham. “The extremely luxurious Al Maha desert resort in Dubai, for example, won awards for water conservation and waste management, which took no account that it was located, as one study noted, ‘within an ocean of unsustainable practices’” (Jones 17).

There are innumerable examples in literature that focus on the need for preserving the environment. American transcendentalists like Emerson and Thoreau and Romantic poets like Wordsworth and Coleridge have composed their best works advocating the benefits of nature and arguing for the need to preserve it. As Thoreau puts it, “I wish to speak a word for Nature, for absolute freedom and wildness, as contrasted with a freedom and culture merely civil, -to regard man as an inhabitant, or a part and parcel of Nature, rather than a member of society” (Thoreau 1). In America, environmental movements began in the nineteenth century, when the obvious effects of industrialisation began to ring a warning bell about the deterioration in the quality of air and water. There was also an early awareness of potential ecological damage from tourism. In 1799, the British poet William Wordsworth made critical comments on the idea of tourists in his poem “The Brothers”. Wordsworth was concerned that over-visitation by tourists to areas of natural beauty such as the Lake District of northern England would transform the landscape and destroy the experience of the place and its natural features (Wordsworth).

Women’s participation has been central to the issue of sustainable development, protection, and conservation of the environment. Some of the greatest environmental movements like Chipko Movement, Green Belt Movement and Navdanya Movement have been initiated by women. Nature and women are seen as neglected victims of patriarchal exploitative structures. They share the commonality of being life-nurturing and life-sustaining, thus making it important for both to be recognized as the source of survival and life on Earth.

ECOFEMINISM AS A CONCEPT

The term ‘ecofeminism’ was coined by French feminist Francoise d’Eaubonne in 1974. It was the same time when environmental movements by women had gained momentum and women’s movements had finally started taking a structured shape to come into useful consideration. Works by women authors like Ester Boserup’s *Woman’s Role in Economic Development* were a major catalyst in establishing a connection between women and the environment. Major environmental movements had begun by women in different parts of the world, inspiring more women to join hands to spread awareness towards the environment. As women gained more freedom to travel towards the end of the twentieth century, they started gaining insights into the travel industry and recognizing how the environment was threatened by the lifestyle choices of both inhabitants and tourists. Vandana Shiva was a major activist, of Indian origin, who played an important role in the global ecofeminist movement. She suggested the engagement of women in productive and sustainable agricultural practices in her books and essays. Shiva, in her book *Ecofeminism*, equates exploitation of nature by men to exploitation of women by men. “We see the devastation of the earth and her beings by the corporate warriors, as feminist concerns. It is the same masculinist mentality which would deny us our right to our own bodies and our own sexuality, and which depends on multiple systems of dominance and state power to have its way” (Shiva and Mies 14).

Shivya Nath, in an interview with *Passion Passport* points out the dire need of being a responsible traveller amidst the acute climate crisis- “I’ve gone back to places I’d fallen in love with, only to find them ruined by mass tourism, chaotic construction, the plastic menace, a strain on local resources, and other pitfalls of tourism. That gradually led me down the path of sustainability; first, re-evaluating my own travel footprint, then writing about responsible travel choices as a more immersive way to experience the world” (Nath). Shivya Nath’s efforts to voice her concerns towards injustice happening to environment can be seen parallel to Erin Brockovich’s effort to bring to light injustices of humans towards environment through the case established by her against Pacific Gas and Electric Company in Hinkley in 1993. Despite having a lack of education in law, Brockovich had managed to build the case against the company regarding groundwater contamination with hexavalent chromium which was responsible for inducing cancer among water consumers. Women’s participation in environmental struggle has been considerable and made an actual difference in improving the conditions at a global and individual level. Despite that, their participation is considered trivial and largely ignored, while male participation is conspicuously highlighted.

RESISTANCE AND OPPRESSION OF WOMEN TRAVELLERS BY MALE COUNTERPARTS OF SOCIETY

Women have been victim of inevitable patriarchal forces which operate at visible as well as subtle levels. This oppression has operated in women’s lives in all spheres, including the activity of travelling. Women can travel for multiple reasons like men, some of them being heuristic development, leisurely indulgence, or cultural erudition. There exist some documented memoirs of women from centuries ago, who travelled around the world, transcending their local boundaries, thus implying their transcendence of patriarchal values imposed on them. As a matter of fact, some women even disguised as men to conceal their female identity in order to travel around the globe- Pope Joan and Lady Hester Stanhope being prominent examples. Travelling has always been looked upon as a masculine activity in society, lending credence to the idea that the rough terrains and difficult roads cannot be explored by women. Perhaps, society has been unfortunately successful at ignoring the close connection of women to nature. Society also ignores that women can always contribute in the productive sustainability of nature. The categorisation of travel as a masculine activity has been a result of forces which has its roots in the belief that men are stronger than women.

The fluidity and viscosity of the female body is contrasted with the linearity and solidity of the male body; while the latter results in a vision of the world that creates and controls a set of power relations, the former is less tangible, more flexible, and infinitely varied. Traditional mapping is therefore perceived as an inherently male act, since the intention is to circumscribe, define, and hence control the world. For feminists, an alternative mapping consists of tracing patterns from the most banal and trivial everyday events so as to create a completely different set of identifiable structures outside patriarchal control. (Bassnett 230)

Shivya Nath, in her memoir *The Shooting Star*, establishes the fact that it becomes outright questionable if women try to defy patriarchal norms, even in the twenty-first century. She mentions how her colleague questions her decision of quitting her corporate job and embarking on a solo travel spree. “I would notice Genetu regarding me with fascination, just as I had regarded him on that first day we had met. And almost anticipate the question on his lips: *how can you travel alone?* In my inebriated state, I’d whisper: *would you ask me the same question if I were a man?*” (70). It is important to understand that when patriarchal voices of society create resistance towards women’s mobility, they also act as resistors to sustainable consciousness, thus acting as resistors to save mother Earth. When Shivya decided to adopt the lifestyle of a traveller and quit her corporate job, which would later result in awakening within her the desire to promote sustainable lifestyle, her family, especially her mother, a woman herself, left no stone unturned in influencing her decision of leaving her so called safe hometown.

My anger compelled my folks to coerce me emotionally. On two consecutive nights, my mother knocked on my door in the middle of the night, the lines of worry etched on her forehead, and pleaded with me not to go to Spiti. Just as I was falling asleep, she spoke of young girls sexually assaulted across the country and of

passengers who had fallen to their death on dangerous mountain roads. (27)

Nath, in her memoir, *The Shooting Star*, reflects on her childhood which was largely dictated by patriarchal ways of upbringing by society. She recalls how she and her elder brother, though brought up in the same household, were raised differently. “Our upbringing had felt the same to me while growing up, but the subtle, nearly imperceptible differences of our gender began to manifest itself only in retrospect” (70). Nath asserts that even their bicycle routes were mapped separately for the sake of so called safety. Her identity was seen only under the reflection of her brother’s identity, but never individually or independently. Her educational decisions were also defined keeping her within safe proximity of family, hence never considering the possibility of letting her cross borders of her hometown. She also points out the fact that her brother was easily granted the choice of crossing domestic as well as international borders without any sense of scepticism, but Nath crossing even domestic borders was out of question. She does not merely point to the gender differences lingering in the ways of her family but establishes the fact that these imperceptible differences are common to all families, affecting the growth perspectives of nations. These patriarchal values fail to evaluate possibilities of a better global economy and a much wider sustainability consciousness, if women too were granted the freedom to break free from shackles of these male centred societal cultures and were allowed to function independently. Though women receive strong resistance from male patriarchs of society, but women’s freedom can anticipate sustainability of environment in direct ways due to the close bond they share with nature.

IMPORTANCE OF FEMALE TRAVEL MEMOIRS IN ADVOCATING NATURE PRESERVATION

The activity of travelling usually involves the element of adventure, traversing the unknown and capacity to adapt to unpredictability of all kinds. It is a well-known fact that women from earlier generations never had physical mobility to their disposal as male patriarchy defined norms for women. This led to the fact that most travel narratives came from male authors who had full physical mobility at their disposal. Even if women managed to transcend the rules laid down by men and managed to travel, their travel narratives were somehow marginalised and considered insubstantial. By as late as the 1970s, women travellers’ accounts had been ignored and forgotten. It was only after the 1970s that a conscious revival of women travel writings was brought into consideration. These women travellers included Freya Stark, Gertrude Bell and Rosita Forbes among the most substantial ones. This revival aimed at reminding literary readers the achievements of women travellers, thus implying women as capable of traversing the rough and difficult roads of previously unexplored outside world.

The memoirs by women travellers differed a lot in substance than their male counterparts. Men travelled during the latter part of twentieth century to validate their masculinity and pose as the risk-taking hero who traversed dangerous places and became explorers of unknown lands. Women, on the other hand, travelled to leave behind the traditional household culture and explore the abstract beauty of outside world. Their travels involved internal journeys of their souls while undertaking physical journeys on the outside. These sorts of travel gave way to women finally coming close to nature, the place that they share their common characteristics with- nurturing and sustenance. Earlier to this, both women and environment were largely ignored, conquered, or violated by patriarchs of society. It was after this time that women got in close connection to nature and the concept of ecofeminism was born. This was the phase when it was realized that both male and female are essential to the economy and society for growth and development. Though earlier men were seen as the only essential elements to boost economy, women too had now joined hands and emphasized the importance of preserving nature.

Shivya Nath, in her memoir, *The Shooting Star* expostulates capitalism as the root cause of deterioration of environment. She argues that with the passing years, the capitalist market-based economy has been posing dangerous threat to natural resources. The exploitation and ultimate exhaustion of natural resources due to the growing needs of travellers has been proving fatal to environment and its inhabitants. She advocates the style of travelling which is slow and sustainable. She suggests that tourists switch to a more immersive exploration

and experience of local cultures while traveling instead of shallowly hopping from touristy place to touristy place merely to check off their superficial bucket lists. Nath, in her memoir mentions, “Gradually, I began to experiment with this novel way of travelling in India- meaningful, more immersed in the local life, mindful of my impact on the ecology- on my travels outside the country” (54). She emphasizes on how she switches to rather unconventional style of travelling, which indulges in enriching experiences through interaction with locals and their cultures. This also enables the traveller to have a lesser carbon footprint, thus not exploiting the environmental resources.

When one works for the corporate lifestyle and tries to ace the corporate ladder, as was the case of Shivya Nath in her memoir, one is automatically the part of capitalist ways of society. But, unfortunately, with emerging trends of capitalist tourism, one is an equal contributor to capitalism even when one decides to break free from the corporate lifestyle and take a vacation. Shivya Nath advocates minimalist tourism which involves authentic local experiences instead of a hurried switching of places. Such travel will encourage simple living conditions during the travel and stays, thus cutting down the consumption of natural resources in large amounts. She propounds travelling as a medium of forging deeper relationships with the place, its people and food, savouring the cultural intricacies of the travel destinations. Such indulgence in cultural practices of any place by the tourists will not only enrich their experience of the place but also accelerate a heuristic development within them. She also suggests delving into eco-friendly ideations like organic farming, sustainable food practices, simple lifestyle, veganism and adopting usage of renewable sources of energy for regular lifestyle practices.

Literature is the best tool to proclaim the cataclysmic repercussions of ecological damage. Any literature produced during a certain literary system tends to sustain the culture of its age. Nature as a subject permeates English literature throughout time and space. Its style of representation has evolved along with synchronic changes in nature. There is a shift from anthropocentrism to ecocentrism. Travel memoirs by women chronicle the ecophobia of humankind due to reckless adoption of modernism, ultimately leading to ecocide. Current environmental conditions demand comprehensive coverage of ecocriticism and ecofeminism within literature. In parallel, memoirs by women travellers, especially the ones advocating environmental protection, demand great attention. It is highly crucial to establish the considerable importance of both- access to safe outside world to travel for women, and the travel literature produced by them be given due importance for protection of environment, thus accelerating growth of economy and society.

CONCLUSION

Environment is the veritable source of life on planet Earth. Each resource of this planet extends to nurture life of its inhabitants. Similarly, women are also the sustainers and nurturers of life. While men advocate the commercial and financial aspects of life, it is women who find themselves directly in close connection to nature. When considering travel, men are often seen as conquerors and explorers of landscapes. Their perspective on travel is often framed in an authoritarian manner, reflecting a masculine and heroic exploration narrative. But, when females travel, they consider the type of travel which benefits them internally while also being mindful of the environment. This trajectory leads to the crucial difference between travel narratives produced by men and women. Narratives by women have the natural undertones of communication with environment and suggestions of sustainable travelling. *The Shooting Star* by Shivya Nath is a direct pronouncement of both the standpoints- women should be offered equal freedom of mobility as exercised by men and that it is a high time to undertake sustainable travel. Women have been doubly marginalised in the sense of travelling. There is an urgent and essential need of twenty-first century that women be extended complete mobility as men to be able to undertake travel under benign conditions. In her memoir, Nath makes a direct case for women's mobility so that they can contribute to the economy by promoting sustainable travel.

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