Flânerie in female solo travel: an analysis of blogposts from Shivya Nath's the *Shooting Star*

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Abstract
Contemporary travelogues have spilled over to social media through travel blogs. This paper explores the lens of *flânerie* to examine blogposts of the immensely popular *The Shooting Star* run by Shivya Nath, a proponent of Indian female solo travel. Concerns of risks associated with safety, sexual gaze and harassment often inhibit women from loitering. Such perceptible risks increase furthermore in the case of solo female travellers. The paper argues that travelogues of this blog construct travel experiences, motivations and obstacles through hybrid positions offered by *flânerie*. The study concludes that this construct is an important tool while negotiating public spaces which contributes towards narratives of subversive reading of gender writing in travelogues.

Keywords: *flânerie*, India, solo female traveller, travel blogs

Introduction

The tourism industry is shifting its focus towards female travellers. This thrust is the consequence of increased financial independence amongst women. Earlier, travelogues were regarded as a masculine genre since it conformed to masculine ideals of valour and sexuality (Bird, 2016). Now, with an upsurge of female travel, there is a massive increase in travelogues written by women. Many of them have created unconventional careers as social media influencers by combining their passion of travel and publishing their travelogues in the digital realm. Indian female travellers contribute towards an increase of female travellers from Asia (Zhou, 2010). This can be attributed to the expanding population of single women combined with rising individualism (cited in Brown, 2018). This paper explores the discourses in the travelogue of Shivya Nath's *The Shooting Star*, which has persistently featured amongst the top travel blogs of India. Her travelogues have also been featured in various national and international publications. Besides this, her experiences have also been documented into a best-selling travel book. What makes it more interesting is the fact that she endorses solo travel for females which is an unconventional phenomenon in the case of India. Just like other travelogues, mobility is the vital component in all her blogs. This is enabled by her *habitus* which allows her to pursue her passion of travel and transform it to a rewarding career option. After giving up her mundane job, she now travels full-time while earning through freelance blogging, social media consultancy and as a travel influencer.

This article contributes to the representation, experiences, voice and agency of the female solo traveller through the construct of *flânerie*. Strolling, gazing and reflecting on their loitering through reflective written works or photographs constitute the key elements of *flânerie*. Early

studies discuss the impossibility of *flâneuse* as a social category since strolling negates the concept of time and space, both of which were not available to women. With more women gaining employment and relatively free of societal choices, the feminization of *flâneur* has become a possibility. This category comprises of the educated and financially independent females who can explore this lifestyle. There are few women travellers who take up temporary jobs in different locations which would render them available for *flânerie*. It also represents a method of constructing texts which would provide reading of a city (Featherstone, 1998, p. 910). Blogging about a city is a way of producing texts which captures the essence of a city. New modes of commutations have presented discrepancies to the concept of the *flâneuse*. The absence of strolling and idling due to the postmodern life has marked a shift in the concept of the *flâneuse*. This tension can be resolved by tapping into the essence of the act of strolling/idling. The rationale following this is observing, participating, noting and classifying the city through scopophilia (Featherstone, p.913). Another means available for the possibility of *flâneuse* is by engaging with it as a full-time profession (Richards, 2010). This is the case with travel journalists and writers. This transformation was a perfect match as commercialization of press required more reports relatable to the common public while providing a means of survival for the observing *flâneuse*. The unfeasibility of the construct of the *flâneuse* has been cited on the grounds that a female in a public space cannot be devoid of male gaze. Scholars have retorted that it cannot be determined that the male construct, *flâneur*, rendered himself invisible. Moreover, since their articles in newspapers were appreciated, they had an audience whom they catered to as they flitted between attachment and detachment. (Featherstone, p. 916).

Thus, as a solo female traveller, Shivya in *The Shooting Star* performs *flânerie* as she observes the city, slow travels and writes about it in her blogs. An analysis of her blogs reveals the narratives of empowerment and change.

Self-empowerment through solo travel

Indian females faced restrictions in mobility during the pre-colonial and post-colonial India. 'Respectable' femininity was associated with fulfilling domestic and societal obligations. Thus, the ideals of Indian femininity adhered to nationalist discourse which confined Indian women within the safety of her home. In doing so, it also separated her from Western modernity and the public. This discourse also contributed in eradicating women's agency and mobility. Women could not disregard this perception related to female solo travel due to the stigma associated with it. This was contrary to male travels which were considered vital for economic or nationalistic concerns.

As mentioned above, travelling deviates from the conformity of the domesticity expected from women. Thus, this aberrance forms the identity of female travellers. Even so, she is expected to travel along familiar routes and in the company of friends, family or acquaintances. Solo female travellers, therefore, often face stigma or are treated with wonder. Shivya also writes about the diverse reactions which she encountered for her choice of solo travel:

> If I had a dime for each time someone asked me what it was like to travel alone, as a woman, or called me brave for travelling far and wide, as a woman, I'd be a millionaire. The one thing definitely more challenging about travelling solo as a woman, is that people look at you with concern, pity even, for being without a man to carry your things, or find your way around. Having circled the edges of being a feminist, I've now strongly started to feel that this relentless victimization, more than anything else, is the root cause of so

> many challenges faced by women. We put women on a separate pedestal whenever possible. Separate queues for women, separate compartments for women, and absurdly, even separate banks for women! These pedestals clearly imply that women are neither as strong nor as safe as men, and gradually become self-fulfilling prophecies – because as women, we unquestioningly accept that we are the victims, and it leads men to subconsciously assume either a protectionist or a predatory stance. (Nath, The Shooting Star, 2013)

By rejecting the victim narrative of a solo female traveller, she opens up the possibility of an alternative narrative of empowerment. It has been asserted that women who travel solo "transgress gender norms" which, in turn, enable other women to employ "a form of gender power" (Ghose, 1998, p. 133). Mobility in other societies also offers the possibility of increased sense of freedom to some women while it may be restrictive in other cases. The rationale for travel has socio-cultural connotation which arises due to the desire to break away from the responsibilities of a quotidian life (Cohen, 1973). This was also one of the travel motives enlisted by Shivya along with the desire to experience complete freedom (Nath, The Shooting Star, 2015). Solo travelling differs from mass tourism since they have the liberty to pursue unchartered paths and participate in activities which they find interesting. In addition to her rejection of norms on traditional feminine mobility, she also subverts the trope of gender conformity by rejecting gendered expectations of settling down, actualized by permanent job, marriage and children. As mentioned above, the purpose of travelling for female is restrictive. This is more so in the case of female solo travels. The opposition faced by their families is the biggest deterrent. Nath's blogs inspire female travellers to go solo and advise them on how to convince Indian parents, absolve themselves of societal pressure and judgment and how to deal with loneliness, thus encouraging more readers to pursue their passion of travelling:

> Back in 2011, I decided to travel alone for a reason – I wanted to test the boundaries of my comfort zone and let my dreams fly, without anyone who had known me in my regular life, judging them. I wanted to be anonymous, build new relationships, experience a way of life different from mine, introspect in the mountains and well, just be…That first solo trip was full of so many firsts – watching a lunar eclipse amid a million shooting stars, sleeping in a monastery, stopping cars for a ride with my thumb, riding a makeshift ropeway from one mountain to another, chugging chhang (a local brew) late in the night…But it was a journey as much within – as every solo trip since has been – it made me realise that I can be solely responsible for myself, revel in my own company, learn as much from fleeting encounters as deep relationships, trust my gut yet put my faith in strangers, feel utterly free in my mind and soul. And for that feeling, I urge you to travel solo at least once in your life. (Nath, 2013)

This narrative of self-empowerment through an independent life, building new networks, taking risks and embarking on adventures and uncharted territories is validated through an enhanced knowledge about the self and the other. She also romanticizes solo travel through her gaze on exotic visuals.

Conquering one's fears

Concerns around the safety of women solo travellers acts as the biggest deterrent in their choices. Objectionable male advances, gaze, harassment and violence are the kinds of problems women

travellers encounter. She dispels the threat of masculine aggression by positioning it as a lack of understanding towards the travel objectives of the female traveller.

> I've met enough men – young, old, married, whatever – along the way, who assume that I'm just longing for male company. It used to anger me earlier, but the more I observe and talk to them, the more I realize that most of them are not aggressive or threatening; they genuinely think they're doing the right thing by offering their compliments or company. (Nath, The Shooting Star, 2016)

In her blogpost which enumerates tips to assure safety, she emphasizes practical measures like pre-planning and researching well about the location, arriving at a new place during daytime and not changing locations during night, packing less baggage and keeping a self-defense weapon within easy reach at all times. While addressing gendered issues of security, she adheres to conventional feminine measures such as dressing modestly, dissuading unwanted attention and trusting one's instincts. Her use of technology is apparent as she utilizes it to lodge with well-reviewed hosts who watches out for their guests and guides them for local expeditions. Most of the list of precautions for solo female travellers remains unchanged as the onus of staying safe lies with the women themselves. However, the mode of addressing these issues is through the discourse of self-empowerment. In this, firstly, the obstacles are depicted as minor barriers which can be conquered through wit, common sense and positivity. While mobility ensures freedom to the female traveller which contributes towards self-improvement and self-care, she has to negotiate it within certain conventions of femininity. Moreover, she writes of her scary experiences as didactic which has been instrumental in navigating her fears and identifying reliable people. Hence, these narratives also reflect how females could assert and develop themselves by conquering their fears and managing the risks associated with solo travel.

Responsible Tourism

Tourism, in recent years, has received a backlash on account of its contribution towards environmental degradation. Hence, Shivya urges her readers to make conscious travel choices which contribute towards the economy of local communities and ecologically viable choices and empowers the financially weaker segments of local population. Her mode of exploration is slow travel which is produces less carbon emissions and also engages with the locals by volunteering. Discourses on environment and the economy have brought forth concepts such as sustainable tourism which puts the prerogative on the latter. In the contemporary framework of neoliberalism, it promotes environment consciousness amongst the tourists (Bauer, 2005). The collaboration of environment and economy has also initiated capitalist ventures which are ethical (Barry, 2004) and green (Kahn, 2010). The blog has a mixed approach to promote sustainable tourism. On the one hand, it promotes traditional lifestyle as eco-friendly and authentic. This includes consuming food sourced locally, reducing use of plastic items, commuting through mechanical ways of transportation like kayaks or slow travelling through land. While on the other hand, it promotes veganism, which she construes as expensive but worth the extravagance. It points towards the translation of ethical and environment-friendly products to opening of new niche markets which promote consumerism. Apart from non-consumption of unethical products, she collaborates with brands which align with her goals of travel. Her effort to reduce carbon footprint and sensitize readers on damaging effects of tourism on fragile ecosystems propels travel towards making sustainable choices. Moreover, she urges people to visit offbeat places or visit popular destinations in off-season which would avoid crowding whilst supporting local

business throughout the year. This interprets leisure travel as unavoidable and necessary which should be propagated through sustainable tourism.

Offbeat destinations

Shivya Nath's blogs aims to uncover authentic experiences which differ from the touristy list. The travel itineraries in her blogs offer an alternative experience to the reader, one which closely resembles that of a local. This enables her to experience "deeper relationship with a place, its people, its food, and the memories" (Nath, The Shooting Star, 2015). She does this by highlighting the mundane yet different lifestyle and extreme experiences offered by the region. According to her, travel itineraries should reflect the interests of the traveller. Thus, it is not imperative to visit historical monuments to appreciate the local culture. It can also be observed from a local café serving authentic cuisine. Many of her posts describe in vivid detail where she went 'native'. This entails various requirements -- from learning the local language to getting a local job, living amongst the indigenous population and befriending them to eating the local cuisine.

> Travelling to Denmark and looking for alternative things to do in Copenhagen? I tried to explore Copenhagen beyond the usual sightseeing and travel advice, and put together this list of the best things to do in Copenhagen. I hope my Copenhagen travel tips – featuring all the fun things to do in Copenhagen and how to explore the city like a local – will make you love the city too! (Nath, The Shooting Star, 2018)

Thus, she provides itineraries of lesser explored but more enriching visual treats. Like a local in Copenhagen, she explores the city on a bicycle. Yet, she harnesses mobile applications for lodging and eating options, given that she follows a vegan lifestyle, which allows her to connect with authentic experiences and safe locals who have enabled this mode of travel.

Hybridity of Gender

As a travel consultant, she is in a position to influence the (potential) hosts. While assuming authority in travelogue is generally associated with masculinity, the author of these blogs is mindful of the limitations on the basis of her gender. While feasting with a middle-class Indian family, she faces the dilemma to join the men who were served food by the women or help the females. As an Indian herself, she is accustomed to such patriarchal practice. But she dissociates herself from this act by expressing her outrage to her readers. Her access to the gendered space of the kitchen or the dining table displays the choice she exercises to assert herself where the head of the household, a male, exerted dominance on everyone, including herself. The status accorded by her profession offers an advantage to address the issue from a hybrid position:

> After a brief conversation with a friend, I decided to take a stand and bring up the issue with the family – but with tourism as the focus. I talked about meal times as the crux of a genuine homestay experience, when the whole family comes together as one and discusses the day's affairs. I talked of inequality in certain Indian traditions and how that's unacceptable to visitors from outside. I tried to sow a seed in the mind of the somewhat irked elder that in order to bring responsible tourism to his beautiful village, something must change. (Nath, 2016)

Hence, she combines patriarchal capitalism to further gender equality in one aspect. She also encourages her readers to support community based or women-led enterprises and homestays which would aid their empowerment.

Conclusion

Travel of solo female travellers offer a unique perspective of the self and the society. This is primarily due to their quest for independence and adventure, which does not conform to normative ideals of femininity. Additionally, travel also offers the scope to subvert gender norms. The normative construct of gender is disrupted in travel writing by accommodating various nuances of gendered writing, voice and authority (Bird, 2016). This is observable more in the case of a female blogger performing *flânerie*. Her mode of travel, with a focus on 'real' experiences, is vastly different from the travel itineraries which prescribe tourist attractions within a stipulated timeframe. Thus, Shivya's disengagement from patriarchal practices in India and other parts of the world is evident by validating it through differing discourses of feminism and neoliberalism. This structural mobility allows her to follow her travel goals of sustainable tourism within these parameters. It also enables her to contribute to a culture of change by rejecting patriarchal and unethical travel practices. The role of technology in *flânerie* and solo female travel cannot be undermined. As pointed above, many of her blogs reveal the potential of technology to empower women by making them self-reliant and protecting them from danger. She also prescribes feminine norms to ensure safety though this does not address many of the gendered risks solo female travellers face. Her blogs also try to resolve the restraints placed by Indian families and society on the solo female travellers by suggesting a mildly aggressive attitude. She also employs a gendered language of aesthetics through environmentalism, responsible tourism and urging readers to support women or community-based travel enterprises by describing their resilience and optimism. In describing the beauty of surreal landscapes, she employs tropes of scopophilia. By adopting hybrid location for negotiation and subverting normative gender tropes of solo travel and expectations from females, she opens up new possibilities of gender performance in travelogues. By focusing on Indian female travelogues through *flânerie*, and occupying various gendered positions in the travelogue can be discerned as broadening the norms of women's travel writing.

Acknowledgement

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