

Ascending the Heights: Exploring Self-Discovery and Personal Transformation through the Narratives of Mountaineering

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Abstract

This article explores the narratives of mountaineering expeditions on Mount Everest and Mount Annapurna, highlighting the profound journey of self-discovery and personal transformation, experienced by climbers. It delves into how human hubris turns into trepidation and terror, leading climbers to a humbling realization of their insignificance, which ultimately fosters a transformation into a more compassionate, resilient, and wise being. By employing Edmund Burke's concept of the sublime, the article captures the awe, wonder, and fear encountered by mountaineers as they confront the immense challenges of their expeditions. The research employs descriptive and analytical methods to examine the personal narratives of the successful summiteers of Mt. Everest and Mt. Annapurna, documenting their experiences and the resulting revelations of self-discovery and transformation.

Keywords: Self-discovery, mountaineering, conquer, transformation, sublime, adventure

Introduction

Mountaineering is a unique and potent endeavor that presents mountaineers with an opportunity for personal development, enabling them to transcend their immediate circumstances and attain a broader perspective on life. The expansive and unobstructed open spaces inherent in mountainous regions permit them to rise above or move away from the current context, broadening their perspectives, and coming up with new solutions to life's challenges. The absence of a multitude of distractions encountered in everyday life fosters a renewed sense of focus on core priorities. Away from the noise of the city individuals can contemplate life's big questions and experience the restorative power of mother nature.

Simultaneously, trekking and mountaineering are widely acknowledged as integral processes in the pursuit of self-discovery and transformation. Whether undertaken by travelers or dedicated mountaineers, these journeys immerse individuals in captivating landscapes, fostering the development of a unique life perspective, and an ardent quest for self-truth. The aim is to comprehend their identity and purpose, reflecting on who they are, and what they represent- an introspective realization of oneself. In *Mountaineering in the Alps*, Claire Eliane Engel asserts that significant ascents allow individuals an opportunity to uncover their true personalities. She contends, "There is one discovery to be made in each new ascent: that of one's soul. A great ascent enables a man to find his personality, as do few other experiences in life. An exhausting expedition compels him to throw his whole body and mind into action" (p. 291). Engel claims that climbing does have a transformative experience, which offers a profound sense of self-realization and self-discovery. The exploration of uncharted territories emerges as a pathway through which individuals disclose their genuine selves, and acts as a catalyst for a comprehensive shift in the climbers' awareness of their existence within this immeasurable universe.

Statement of Problem

The enduring fascination with Mount Everest and Mount Annapurna has consistently captured the attention and aspirations of adventurers and mountaineers. However, beneath the allure lie potential hazards and dangers. This paradox raises questions about the motivations that drive individuals to undertake such extreme challenges. Hence, there is a need for research on these motivations on how

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the act of ascending mountains contributes to discovery and personal transformation and ultimately, leads the climbers into the realm of the sublime.

Research Objective

The main objective of this study is to unveil the sublime experiences that mountaineers encounter while ascending Mount Everest and Mount Annapurna. The specific objectives of the research are as follows:

- to examine the psychological and emotional journey of mountaineers as they ascend Mount Everest and Mount Annapurna with a focus on identifying key moments of self-discovery and personal transformation.
- to analyze the transformative effect of mountaineering on the individual's sense of identity, resilience, and perspective on life.

Research Methodology

To investigate the profound journeys of self-discovery and transformation undertaken by mountaineers ascending Mount Everest and Mount Annapurna, this study employs a qualitative research design, integrating both descriptive and analytical approaches to explore the intricate tapestry of mountaineering narratives. The selected materials for examination comprise a diverse range of memoirs including Jamling Tenzing Norgay's *Touching My Father's Soul: A Sherpa's Journey to the Top of Everest* (2001), Maurice Herzog's *Annapurna: The First Conquest of an 8,000-meter Peak*, Lene Gammelgaard's *Climbing High: A Woman's Account of Surviving the Everest Tragedy*, Rebecca Stephens's *On Top of the World* and Julie Lewis's *Moving Mountains*. The analytical process will involve a thematic analysis of the selected memoirs to identify recurring themes and motifs related to the mountaineers' experiences of self-discovery and transformation. It studies the ideas of Edmund Burke and his notion of the sublime.

Discussion

Amidst the multitude of towering mountains adorning our planet, Mount Everest is situated within the Himalayan mountain range, straddling the border of Nepal and Tibet. The ascent of Mount Everest entails significant risks, demanding a high degree of fortitude due to adverse weather, avalanches, treacherous ice falls, as well as physical and mental exhaustion. Yet it offers a unique opportunity to witness the majesty and sublimity of nature, leading to profound discoveries and heightened awareness. Major H. P. S. Ahluwalia in *Faces of Everest* articulates:

The physical conquest of a mountain is, I think, only part of the achievement. More than that it is a sense of fulfillment, of satisfaction of that deep urge within every man, which impels him to rise above his environment. It is a part of the eternal quest for adventure, the passion for exploring the hazardous and the unknown. Their experience is not only physical, but it is also intensely emotional and even spiritual. (p. 204)

Ahluwalia claims that the endeavor of ascending Everest entails notable hazards and perils, nevertheless, the ethereal and unparalleled beauty of the summit makes it more alluring. Despite the struggle between man and the forces of nature, the ascent to its peak yields immense joy, bliss, and satisfaction.

Notwithstanding these formidable challenges, mountaineers affirm that the pursuit of mountaineering facilitates self-discovery through the provision of tranquility and solitude in life. Lene Gammelgaard, the first Scandinavian woman to scale Mount Everest, reflects her unyielding approach to Himalayan climbing. She, in *Climbing High: A Woman's Account of Surviving the Everest Tragedy*, observes, "Here, where I discovered the peace in humans, the peace I was seeking on my travels to foreign parts. Where the land itself radiates peace. Where the highest mountains in the world do something unfathomable to us" (p. 37). Gammelgaard asserts that the ascent of the world's highest peaks not only offers serenity but also engenders a profound experience of life.

Moreover, she claims that the endeavor to ascend the world's loftiest peaks aids in the realization and discovery of life's true sense. Gammelgaard articulates:

It seems that all mountaineers who continue to climb try to learn a lesson from the tragedies that take place, but the real lesson, ultimately, is that nature cannot be controlled. And for that lesson, I am truly grateful. I summited Everest and was fortunate enough to survive to tell the tale. I have tremendous respect and yes—love for this awesome mountain. I set out to test myself, and I was privileged that the greatest mountain in the world showed me my true size. (p. xii)

Gammelgaard perceives mountaineering as a means of acquiring a transformative and enriching life experience. She further asserts, "Something in which you got to know your own limitations and learned to accept that there are some things you'll never fully master, but that there is much you can train for, and that experience is the key to greater adventures" (p. 164). To Gammelgaard, the mountains embody authentic entities that impart genuine lessons in survival and success to all individuals.

A similar sentiment is conveyed by Rebecca Stephens, the first British woman who successfully scaled Mount Everest. She, in *On Top of the World* articulates:

For me, those two months were an eye-opening time of discovery and learning... I learned that this passion for the mountains was not just the prerogative of the few Englishmen and Americans I happened to be traveling with but one shared by an elite band of mountaineers from every corner of the world. How wonderful, I thought, to feel so passionate about anything. (p. 24)

Stephens highlights the collaborative nature of mountaineering which breaks the boundaries of nationality and religion, facilitating interaction and idea-sharing among climbers from various backgrounds. She asserts that her two-month journey up the mountain was a period of profound discovery and learning and realizes that her passion for mountaineering is not a privilege to select Englishmen and American climbers but to share an exclusive group of mountaineers from all corners of the globe. Through these interactions, the climbers expand their mental horizons, foster a deeper connection with nature, and cultivate bonds of comradeship. For Stephens, these moments with loved ones from around the world were the most rewarding aspects of her Everest ascent.

The unifying force, common goal, and sharing love in mountaineering create an unbreakable bond and understanding among the climbers. Jamling Tenzing Norgay, a renowned Nepalese mountaineer and son of the first legendary hero of Mount Everest. Norgay highlights the same ideas in *Touching My Father's Soul*. He states, "I shall tell the truth, and the truth is that many differences as arose between the British and Asians were nothing to the bond that held us together. This was the bond of a common goal, a common love, and devotion. The bond of all mountaineers in the world, that makes them brothers" (p. 26). Norgay emphasizes the harmony among mountaineers, and devotion towards the rugged uninhabited terrain, which fosters a sense of warmth, compassion, friendship as well as knowledge. Through this, the individual becomes more amiable, empathetic, and loving towards each other.

The narratives of mountaineers offer valuable insights, as their journeys encompass a myriad of life lessons, that underscore the importance of undertaking risks and confronting challenges to achieve meaningful accomplishments. In their encounters with pain, danger, and terror, mountaineers attain a state of sublimity, a concept articulated by Edmund Burke in *A Philosophical Enquiry into the Origin of Our Ideas of the Sublime and Beautiful*, "Whatever is fitted in any sort to excite the ideas of pain and danger, that is to say, whatever is in any sort terrible, or is conversant about terrible objects, or operates in a manner analogous to terror, is a source of the sublime; that is, it is productive of the strongest emotion which the mind is capable of feeling" (p. 39). Drawing on Burke's perspective, the sublime emerges from the acknowledgment that pain and terror surpass the potency of pleasure, thereby contributing to a heightened emotional experience.

Mountaineering provides an opportunity for individuals to escape from the pressure of modern life and detach themselves from the material world, affording a sense of solace and detachment from worldly concerns. According to the observations of Stephens, mountaineers exhibit a willingness to make substantial sacrifices in various facets of their lives to fulfill their aspirations. She opines, "A good few, I realize, we're prepared to sacrifice everything jobs, time at home with their families, even their lives- in search to fulfill their desires" (p. 24). Stephens asserts that complete detachment from everyday problems brings a sense of transformation, freedom, and consciousness in life.

In the specific domain of mountaineering, the application of detachment plays a crucial role in facilitating climbers' connection with a higher power. Gammelgaard's in *Climbing High* provides an example of how such detachment can lead to a profound spiritual experience. Upon reaching the summit, Gammelgaard experiences an overwhelming surge of emotions, rendering it challenging for her to ascertain whether she is enveloped in euphoria, awe, or disappointment. She articulates her sentiments, stating:

Am I euphoric, overwhelmed, or disappointed? No, I am not disappointed in the Mother Goddess of the Earth. I am proud. Quietly, silently, massively content. And then I am tired. Maybe I'll have to climb up here once again just to enjoy the view or have enough strength left to notice whether there is one. It is too much right now. I just want to get down safely. Christ! I am here! At the top. (p. 172)

Gammelgaard contends that mountaineering allows climbers to detach from their everyday concerns and connect with something greater than themselves. Her feeling of connection with Jesus Christ has given her a deeper sense of meaning and purpose in life. Gammelgaard's narrative demonstrates that the ascent to a mountain summit not only fosters a profound self-understanding but also establishes a connection with a transcendent reality.

In parallel, McNamee's work, *The Mountain World*, presents similar sentiments to Gammelgaard's experiential account, emphasizing the transformative effect that mountains can have on those who climb them. Within McNamee's work, he references an anecdote involving a Buddhist monk who believes in summiting a mountain for personal transformation and heightened consciousness. He elucidates:

If I do not reach the top of this mountain, I will never be able to attain Awakening! After having said these words he moved across the glistening snow and walked on young shoots glimmering like jewels. When he had ascended halfway, all strength left him. He rested for two days and then climbed to the peak. His joy there was complete, like that of a dream: his dizziness portended the Awakening. (p. xiv)

McNamee's account implies that mountains have a powerful transformative influence on those who embark on their ascent. They spread positive vibrations and awaken the human mind with peace and knowledge. Mountains are considered places of mystery, and as climbers ascend higher, they achieve a higher level of consciousness, through an absolute unison of thought, mind, and heart.

In the archives of high-altitude mountaineering, the French mountaineers earned a prominent position after their successful ascent of Mount Annapurna in 1950, the tenth-highest peak in the world. Maurice Herzog and his team created a new epoch in the field of high-altitude mountaineering. In his work *Annapurna: The First Conquest of an 8, 000-meter Peak*, Herzog presents a comprehensive account of his team's expedition to Annapurna. His journey delineates the intricate journey, challenges with sublime experiences, and the achievement associated with the significant mountaineering endeavor. Eric Shipton, in the Foreword to the 1952 Edition of Herzog's work, articulates, "The story of the climbing of Annapurna is a remarkable one; in some respects, it is unique. Those with experience of the problems of high altitude climbing know well how small the chances of reaching the top of a peak of more than 25,000 feet in any given season" (p. vii). Shipton's foreword is a reflective commentary on the content and significance of Herzog's narrative and acknowledges that the narratives of the ascent of Annapurna stand as remarkable.

As they ascend towards the summit, Annapurna reveals her secrets, with the distant presence of the crystal mountain, Dhaulagiri, and the outstretched arms of Nilgiris add to the awe-inspiring landscape. However, the climbers are swiftly confronted by the formidable Sickle-shaped glacier, characterized by vertical walls, jagged ridges, and hanging glaciers. On June 3rd, 1950, the mountaineering team reached the summit at an elevation of 8,075 meters. They have inconceivable, sublime experiences and feel impatient due to the victory. Herzog describes:

"An astonishing happiness welled up in me, but I could not define it. Everything was so new, so utterly unprecedented. It was not in the least like anything I had known in the Alps, where one feels buoyed up by the presence of others—by people of whom one is vaguely aware, or even by the dwellings one can see in the far distance" (p. 143). Herzog depicts a spectrum of extraordinary emotions upon reaching the summit of Mount Annapurna. The conquest of the unconquerable propels Herzog into diverse states of consciousness, ranging from extreme joy to bliss, as he stands atop the highest point on earth. The entire experience unfolds with a sense of novelty, purity, and indefinability. Herzog elaborates, stating, "It was impossible to build a cairn; there were no stones; everything was frozen. Lachenal stamped his feet; he felt them freezing. I felt mine freezing too, but paid little attention. The highest mountain to be climbed by man lay under our feet!" (p. 145). Herzog's extreme joy at having touched the earth's pinnacle is depicted as beyond conceivable bounds. In this climatic moment, the elements of cold and anxiety seem eclipsed by the sublime experience. A vivid and unnatural puzzling scene creates a tremendous impression that Herzog mentions:

This was quite different. An enormous gulf was between me and the world. This was a different universe- withered, desert, lifeless; a fantastic universe where the presence of man was not foreseen, perhaps not desired. We were braving an interdict, overstepping a boundary, and yet we had no fear as we continued upward. I thought of the famous ladder of St. Theresa of Avila. Something clutched at my heart. (p. 143)

Herzog draws a parallel between this achievement and spiritual ascent and the attendant sublimity, invoking the famous ladder of St. Theresa of Avila. He feels a powerful emotional reaction indicating that he is on a quest for spiritual enlightenment, self-discovery, and transformation in life.

Similarly, Julie Miles Lewis, a renowned British motivational speaker, also acknowledges that mountaineering can facilitate personal growth and provide a profound understanding of oneself and the world. In *Moving Mountains*, she states an insightful analysis of mountain climbing as a unique and powerful activity that offers an opportunity for personal growth, allowing individuals to transcend their current context and gain a broader perspective in life. She writes:

Vast open spaces allow you to rise above or move away from your current context, widen your perspective, and come up with new solutions. They are free of the usual multitude of distractions of everyday life and assist in bringing back a sense of focus to what matters most. They offer time and space for deep reflection, self-renewal, and relief from the stress and strains of life in the city. Away from the noise of the city you can contemplate life's big questions and experience the restorative power of Mother Nature. Relaxing into "nothingness" is very powerful. (p. 144)

Lewis argues that mountain climbing gives a release from everyday worries and self-doubts and brings a consequent awareness of a higher reality. It provides vast spaces that allow for deep reflection, self-renewal, and relief from the stresses and strains of modern life.

Furthermore, Lewis emphasizes the importance of embracing life as an adventure and exploring opportunities to discover one's true self. She states, "Life is an adventure---live it! Explore and discover the freedom to be who you truly are, the courage and confidence to believe in your wildest dreams, the wisdom to follow your heart and discover your place in the world" (p. 109). Lewis encourages individuals to have the courage and confidence to take the right path toward reaching their destinations. She views life as an audacious journey toward one's intended path. She distinguishes between outer purpose which concerns achieving goals and objectives in life and inner

purpose focusing on self-discovery and transformation. In his book, Eckhart Tolle, a spiritual teacher, and author of *The Power of Now* elaborates on the outer and inner purposes of life:

The outer purpose is to arrive at your goal or destination, to accomplish what you set out to do, to achieve this or that, which, of course, implies future. . . Your outer journey may contain a million steps; your inner journey only has one: the step you are taking right now. As you become more deeply aware of this step, you realize that it already contains within itself all the other steps as well as the destination. This one step then becomes transformed into an expression of perfection, an act of great beauty and quality. It will have taken you into Being, and the light of Being will shine through it. This is both the purpose and the fulfillment of your inner journey, the journey into yourself. (p. 73)

In this excerpt, Tolle explains the former as just a game that simply gives enjoyment whereas the latter makes a person successful, and gives lasting fulfillment and happiness. Tolle claims that the inner journey involves becoming deeply aware of the present moment and recognizing inner knowledge for self-discovery and self-transformation. The act of mountaineering embodies both outer and inner purposes, where reaching the summit is the outer purpose, and self-discovery and transformation are the inner purposes. Climbing mountain offers individuals the opportunity to gain new insights about themselves and the natural world, ultimately leading to a greater sense of fulfillment in life.

The towering mountains stand as a notable source of inspiration and enlightenment, evoking divergent responses from both climbers and non-climbers alike. While some perceive these majestic peaks as conduits to liberation, self-knowledge, and self-transformation, others consider them as spiritual sanctuaries of divine entities. Over centuries, mountains have been revered as a spiritual abode for the wise. This sentiment finds affirmation in Gregory McNamee's exposition within his book, *The Mountain World*. He contends:

Throughout the ages, we have excellent examples of emperors who have gone to the mountains to pay homage to wise men and seek instruction from great sages. At such times the emperors respected the sages as teachers and honored them without abiding by worldly forms. The imperial authority had no power over the mountain sage, and the emperors knew that the mountains were beyond the mundane world. (p. 105)

McNamee asserts that mountains have been visited by emperors, seeking guidance from the wise men who dwell there. They acknowledge that the mountains transcend the worldly realm and they have no power over the mountain sages. This justifies that the mountain holds a special quality and those who inhabit them possess a special kind of wisdom that is beyond the reach of the mundane world.

The act of mountaineering can engender a profound internal shift, bestowing individuals with newfound strength and a transformed perspective on life. This metamorphosis is characterized by its transmutive, enriching, and enlightening dimensions. Julie Miles Lewis articulates her personal experience of mountaineering and its influence on inner transformation in *Moving Mountain*. She reflects:

On the way down from the mountain I sensed that something very significant had shifted within me: a newfound sense of courage and confidence to step out and make a difference, to leave a positive footprint on the planet through my passion for people and the outdoors in a unique way. It's fair to say that through climbing the mountain I found a new sense of clarity, direction, and purpose for my life and was open to the possibilities ahead. (p. 15)

Lewis's mountaineering experience is interpreted as a transformative event leading to a novel comprehension and orientation in life. The summiting and subsequent descent foster in her a heightened sense of courage and confidence, construed as a form of self-realization. She further proclaims that the summiting experience not only alters one's personality but also reshapes one's broader perspective on life. This process is portrayed as a transmutation that enriches and enlightens the soul.

Lewis's, Gammelgaard's, Stephens's, and Herzog's dedicated, and arduous expeditions culminate in a profound encounter with self-discovery and self-realization. Upon reaching the mountain summit, they enter a state connected to something immeasurable and indestructible. This transformative process enables them to discern their true nature beyond names and forms. Such a realization instills a sense of personal empowerment, reinforcing their belief in the capacity to accomplish exceptional feats. Through this self-discovery and transformative experience, they regain a sense of self-awareness and self-realization, thereby attaining a higher level of consciousness in their lives.

Conclusion

The mountain is widely regarded as a sanctified place wherein individuals engage in a process of self-discovery, encountering life in its raw, and unaltered form. Through the process of mountain climbing, individuals undergo a profound transformation transcending their everyday anxieties and fears and venturing into a distinct realm. The attainment of the peak represents a spiritual connection with the divine that can lead to enlightenment, enabling the climbers to realize the truth about themselves and their existence.

Drawing insights from the personal narratives of Gammelgaard, Stephens, Herzog, and others, it is acknowledged that mountaineering offers invaluable lessons that prepare individuals to navigate the unpredictable and challenging realities of life with great strength and resilience. Moreover, the mountaineering experience appears to yield a profound and enduring fulfillment, connecting something ineffable and indestructible force that transcends their sense of self. This state of self-realization, heightens consciousness and awareness empowering individuals with the courage and confidence to create a positive impact on the world.

Building on this foundation, further research can delve into how climbing narratives address critical issues such as mountain conservation, overcrowding, and the environmental impact of waste left by mountaineers. Additionally, the influence of modern technology on the style of mountaineering is significant, and further studies could investigate how digital media shapes narrative style and thematic concerns of contemporary mountaineering literature.

In the light of these reflections, mountaineering serves as a transformative medium through which individuals transcend the material world, ultimately uncovering the metaphorical 'mountain within themselves'. The endeavor of mountain climbing not only cultivates a novel sense of courage and confidence but also empowers individuals to venture beyond their comfort zones and instigate meaningful transformation in their lives.

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