

# Liquid Belonging: Mobility Precarity, and Self in Contemporary Indian Travel Writing

Ms. Sameena Thomas<sup>1</sup>, Dr. Linet Sebastian<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>*Research Scholar and Assistant Professor, Department. of English St. Joseph's College (Autonomous) Irinjalakuda Affiliated to the University of Calicut*

<sup>2</sup>*Research Guide and Assistant Professor, Department. of English St. Joseph's College (Autonomous) Irinjalakuda Affiliated to the University of Calicut*

**Abstract**—The paper applies Zygmunt Bauman's concept of liquid modernity, in travel narratives to examine the fluidity and the uncertainty of the present age, arguing that modern travel narratives do not simply describe geographic journeys, but reflect and refract on the fluid, precarious and consumeristic condition of liquid modern life. To exemplify this, two of the Indian travel narratives are analysed in the chapter: Shivya Nath's *The Shooting Star* and Pallavi Aiyar's *Orienteering: An Indian in Japan*. Both authors use travel/mobility not just as a physical/geographical act, but as a means of constructing an uncertain and fragmented identity. This constructed identity is responsible for their own biography, which precisely fulfils the kind of liquid self-identification Bauman describes. Through the close textual reading and discourse analysis of the texts, the paper explores how travel writing facilitates the existential dilemma of liquidity in a world where the self is constantly in a state of flux

**Index Terms**—Liquid Modernity, Zygmunt Bauman, Mobility, Identity Construction, Fragmented Belonging, Social Theory, Travel Writing Scholarship

## I. INTRODUCTION

Mobility has become one of the defining features of contemporary life. The increase in the accessibility of transportation networks, the internet, remote work technologies, and hyper-globalised supply chains permits the individuals to transport and work simultaneously without any geographical restraints. This enables recurrent international travel, strong long-distance relationships and active diasporic communities, transforming the existing cultural and social structures. Individuals are no longer restricted to permanent geographies, solid social structures or

fixed social roles. They occupy a world that is defined by fluidity, uncertainty and transience, metamorphosing the ways of experiencing identity, space and belonging. This condition of existence is conceptualised by Zygmunt Bauman, as 'Liquid Modernity', a framework that concentrates on the shift from solid social structures of existence to a liquified one. The concept of mobility plays a significant role in this context. It restructures the construction of identities, relationships and belongingness in the lives of individuals. Identity and relationship become a constantly evolving endeavour in response to altering circumstances where stability is no longer assured.

Travel writing, as a literary genre has undergone a radical transformation when compared to its state of origin of exploration and documentation of faraway places. Contemporary travel narratives forefront experience of movements, and participate in the discourses related to identity, relationship, displacement and belonging. It remains as a potential site for observing these transformations, reflecting extensive circumstances of Bauman's Liquid Modernity, where everything in terms of solid identity and existence is ruptured. This paper intends to examine how contemporary Indian travel writing contains these dynamics, through the close textual analysis of two substantial works: *The Shooting Star* by Shivya Nath and *Orienteering: An Indian in Japan* by Pallavi Aiyar.

Though these two texts are grounded in the acts of movement, they signify dissimilar approaches to mobility and identity construction. Nath's narrative

records her intentional exit from a secure corporate job in replacement for the life of a digital nomad, whereas Aiyar's narrative for her choice of residing in Japan due to her husband's diplomatic posting. So, by bringing these two texts together, the paper investigates how travel writing can perform as a potential site to appreciate the concept of liquid belonging. It also contests that contemporary travel narratives become a site for existential practice, actively involving in the construction of fluid, fragmented, and continuously evolving identities, endeavouring to produce their sense of self in a constantly transforming world.

Contrary to the traditional concepts of belonging, which are rooted in stability and institutional solidity, Bauman's concept of liquid belonging is characterised by instability, institutional fluidity, multiplicity and transience. Under the evolving circumstances of globalisation, neoliberal capitalism and technological advancement, the traditional bedrocks like prolonged employment, permanent communities and persistent social roles get disappeared. Thus, individuals have to form temporary connections that are constantly negotiated in reaction to changing circumstances. This state of existence is identified by Bauman as permanent uncertainty. He also emphasises that this shift from solidity to liquidity does not indicate that the structures are absent; rather, structures experience continuous reconfiguration, subject to rapid changes. This state of continuous fluidity forms the basis against which contemporary practices of mobility and identity must be understood.

As traditional structures such as fixed communities, prolonged employment, and permanent identities dissolve, identity construction for individuals becomes an ongoing project. Individuals are forced to construct their own life's paths and meanings constantly, negotiating constantly to find a place for themselves in this rapidly changing world. Though this provides greater liberation for individuals, it equally produces anxiety because of the renegotiations they have to undergo in order to occupy a place for themselves in this constantly changing world. Consequently, mobility and consumerism appear as quick fixes generating a cycle of temporary satisfactions and new desires, and also a constant sense of precarity prevails. Precarity here has both material and psychological

implications; the lack of institutional supports leads to owning one's life through risks, the lack of permanent communal ties precludes collective support systems, and constant renegotiations facilitate both fragmentation and liberation. Thus, individuals are forced to adapt to a fluid and fragmented identity through the process of destabilisation, reconstitution and temporary associations.

While travel writing in its early stages documented journeys and recorded landscapes, people and culture, contemporary travel writing mostly engages with the meaning of the movement and self in a globalised world. It forefronts the subjective experience, reflects the emotions and represents the identity of the traveller. This production of a sense of self gives opportunity for the writers to contemplate on their changing identities in response to rapidly changing environments, which further helps in realising one's identity as liquid, temporary and constantly reshaped. Thus, travel writing as a literary genre emphasised through movement is capable of embodying fluidity of identity, precarity and temporariness, which are the central tenets of Bauman's liquid modernity.

In order to establish this argument, as mentioned in the beginning, this paper analyses two contemporary travel narratives by Indian women, *The Shooting Star* by Shivya Nath and *Orienteering: An Indian in Japan* by Pallavi Aiyar. Shivya Nath's *The Shooting Star* is a collection of journeys she explored to the different parts of the world. She leaves her corporate job at the age of twenty-three, sells her possessions and begins her journey as a digital nomad as she fails to find meaning in a routine life and material success. In the book, she gives an account of her visits to places like Guatemala, Ecuador, Costa Rica, Nicaragua, Panama, Ladakh, and several other places. Rather than just romanticising travel, she reflects on people, environment, fears, loneliness, vulnerability, social judgement, harassment, uncertainty and moments of transformation.

Pallavi Aiyar's *Orienteering: An Indian in Japan*, on the other hand, is an account of her adaptive journey as an Indian outsider in Japan. Pallavi, because of her familial commitments, has to move with her family to Tokyo in Japan. She arrives with both curiosity and prejudices. Throughout the book, she explores

Japanese social norms, language, civic responsibility, food culture, daily rituals and aesthetics with enthusiasm. She reflects on the racial prejudices, gender constraints and emotional restraints of Japanese society, but through a critical lens.

While both these texts are written on the common ground of movement of the female figures through unfamiliar places, they exhibit sharp differences in engaging with the concepts of mobility, precarity, and self-construction. But together, they are extremely capable of engaging in the dialogues on liquid modernity.

The first and foremost difference between the two texts lies in terms of the choice and nature of mobility. Shivya Nath, who quits her stable corporate job to embrace a nomadic life, chooses a voluntary mobility, whereas Pallavi Aiyar, who out of her personal commitments extends her residence to Japan, chooses a structured mobility. Nath's mobility is subjective, open-ended, and fluid, and Aiyar's mobility is embedded due to her personal and professional necessities. Here, Nath's mobility is strongly related to Bauman's concept of a tourist in liquid modernity, and Pallavi's to the constant renegotiations required for a fluid existence in a globalized world.

The next significant aspect of liquid modernity we can trace in these works is the notion of precarity. Nath, in her narrative *The Shooting Star*, due to her decision to quit the corporate job and travel around the world, becomes deprived of a stable income and has to undergo constant negotiations and resilience when she gets exposed to new cultures and experiences. On the other hand, in *Orienteering: An Indian in Japan*, due to demanding professional migration and extended residency in Japan, Aiyar has to confront social, cultural, and linguistic barriers in her everyday life. In this way, both texts together contribute to the economic, social, cultural, and ontological precarities that highlight the nature of uncertainties mentioned by Bauman in liquid modernity.

In terms of identity construction, the texts take different approaches but align with the nature of the liquid self. Nath refashions her identity through constant journeys, fighting societal constraints, encountering novel experiences, and contemplating

herself and her choices. In contrast, Aiyar's identity is reshaped more by her engagement with the unfamiliar people and culture of Japan, emphasizing her Indianness and underscoring the ability of the human self to be reshaped through distinctions and comparisons. This complicates the idea of a liquid self by signifying the fact that identity is further constructed by the social and cultural factors.

The texts also articulate the notion of sense of belonging in distinct ways. In *The Shooting Star*, Nath exhibits rootlessness by renouncing the idea of a permanent home. Her state of disconnection is a result of her constant engagements and experiences with the outer world and absence of a permanent home. This sometimes also creates emotional conflicts due to the feelings of dislocation. In *Orienteering: An Indian in Japan*, Aiyar develops a different sense of belonging, which is partial belonging. Her identity as an Indian in a foreign land makes her belonging partial, providing circumstances of both inclusion and exclusion. She creates significant connections with Japanese people and culture but resists complete integration. These differences in the texts are actually a reflection of diverse responses to the concept of liquid belonging; one accepts while the other negotiates constantly through fluid identity and fashions their own ways of belonging.

Prior to concluding, this paper also intends to draw attention to the gender dimensions incorporated in the texts. Nath's narrative resists patriarchal customs, contests traditional notions of women's roles and proclaims agency through positioning mobility as a tool for liberation. Alternatively, Aiyar's narrative, though less focused on the dimensions of gender, also signals the intersectional nuances of gender, society, language, culture and professional expectancies. Together, these narratives contribute to the interrelationship between gendered constraints, mobility and identity, highlighting the significance of such intersectional factors while analysing the genre of travel writing and the concept of liquid modernity.

The paper has examined contemporary Indian travel writing through the conceptual framework of Zygmunt Bauman's liquid modernity and through the comparative analysis of Shivya Nath's *The Shooting Star* and Pallavi Aiyar's *Orienteering: An Indian in Japan*

in the broader framework of globalisation, mobility, precarity and identity, validating travel writing as a potential genre to comprehend the formation of liquid self and liquid existence in contemporary culture. It also proves that the formation of a liquid self and condition of liquid existence are not unidimensional conditions but complex and multidimensional ones. This further signifies the cultural and theoretical relevance of the genre.

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