



RESEARCH ARTICLE

Travel and Transcendence: Spiritual Awakening in Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*

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Abstract

This study explored spiritual awakening and sublime feeling in Peter Matthiessen's novel *The Snow Leopard*. It chronicled a transformative journey through the Western Himalayas of Nepal, undertaken with a team of porters and biologist George Schaller (GS). Ostensibly a scientific expedition to observe the elusive snow leopard, the journey evolves into a spiritual quest, catalyzed by the narrator's grief over his wife's death. This study engaged with the framework of travel narrative to explore how physical movement serves as a means of psychological release and spiritual transformation. It employed a qualitative textual analysis approach, emphasizing themes of travel to nature and spiritual transcendence critical theory developed by Michael Cronin and R.W. Emerson. Both of them take travel and nature as the transcendental means for the spiritual awakening. In the novel, the narrator undergoes an internal metamorphosis as the travelers navigate the snow-laden mountains, interact with the region's people, and encounter Hindu and Buddhist sacred spaces. The wilderness becomes a medium for detachment from personal sorrow and worldly desires, guiding him toward transcendental peace. The novel ultimately exemplifies a journey from the known to the unknown, the physical to the spiritual, and personal suffering to profound enlightenment.

Keywords: enlightenment, transcendence, travel writing, spiritual awakening

Background

The Eastern travel writing is often infused with the idea of pilgrimage as a means for knowledge creation and self-transformation. Travel endows the traveler with factual information, enlightened

knowledge, and transcendental peace through familiarity with the common people, animals, and plants. This process of knowledge transformation through travel began in ancient eastern times and continues to evolve globally.

This study argues that Matthiessen's

novel *The Snow Leopard* examines how Matthiessen and George Scaller get spiritual awakening and self-transformation through travel. The novel incorporates the principles of the Eastern tradition of travel writing. Along with the physical journey, the traveling generates the vibration of journey within, "a true pilgrimage, a journey to the heart" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.13). It is a path for gaining enlightenment. Emerson (1836) asserts the implication of travel in the lap of countryside, "Nature always wears the colors of the spirit" (p.4). Travel is the process that contains suffering to lead to enlightenment. Travel calls for non-attachment to worldly desires, gaining maximum knowledge from the current moment, and leading to complete inner transformation. During the dusk, the traveler Matthiessen attains spiritual exaltation seeing "the snow cone of *Machhapuchare* glistened like a spire of a higher kingdom" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.16). The journey is more important than finding the leopard because the process is the karma, and the leopard is the ultimate bliss. This is closely related to the concept of *niskam karma*. Matthiessen narrates during the journey "beyond the Karnali River, the Tibetan Plateau rises to *Kailas*, the holy Mount Sumeru...home of Shiva and the center of the world" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.177). Visiting sacred places like *Kailas*, *Kaligandaki*, *Ganga*, and *Yamuna* supports a spiritual journey for self-transformation. Travel is important for its exposure to wildlife, landscapes, and the snowcapped Himalayas. Matthiessen and George Scaller's search for the snow leopard intrinsically motivates them to undergo naturally sacred places and long for peace and self-discovery. This study analyses *The Snow Leopard* primarily through the theoretical lenses of travel and nature offered by Michael Cronin and R.W. Emerson. It binds this with the process of spiritual engagement. The analysis infers that travel in the East fosters' transcendence and spiritual well-being because this region is saturated with holiness.

Travel Writing: Information and Insights

Travel Writing in the West and the East

Travel writing inscribed in written form disseminates information and dives into the depth of joy. Due to its miscellaneous significance, travel writing has emerged as a genre of writing that has had tremendous support for tourism and development in the world. The documentation for travel writing commenced in the 5th century BC. Cronin (2022) explains, "For the vast majority of Europeans, the principal source of knowledge about lands beyond their own was travel accounts" (p.11). Travel bestowed information for the Westerners. Stubbs and Mylne (2024) describe travel writing as an invaluable academic genre that instills the value of exploration to go beyond one's native land and to witness foreign lands: "The first recognized work of travel writing is said to be Herodotus' History of Persian Wars from 440 BC, which chronicled his travels, encounters, and observations in foreign land" (p.25). Pratt (1992) supported this thought, noting that "search for commercially exploitable resources, markets, and lands to colonize just as navigational mapping is linked with the search for trade routes" (p.30). However, Thompson (2016) claims, for ages, travel writing was "once viewed dismissively in the academy" (p. xvi) and came into focus recently as a burgeoning academic genre of writing. This gap was filled during the medieval age with scientific and technological innovation.

The invention of the printing press and the search for commercial routes contributed to the revival of travel writing in the West. Mylne (2024) historicizes the revival of travel writing to printing technology. They recount "travel writing can be traced to the emergence of commerce and movable print technology in Europe in the 15th and 16th centuries" (p.25). The search for new business routes motivated people to travel and get new areas for expedition. Along with this, the printing press supported the

circulation of the information to motivate other travelers. However, the first and the second world wars caused a hindrance to the growth of travel writing. The wars were a dark age for travel that in turn led to the disappearance of travel writing.

Stubbs and Mylne (2024) report "1918-1919 influenza caused a massive disruption for the genre before it appeared in the golden era" (p. 26). The massive disease disrupted travel, which had its immediate toll on the production and output of travel writing. The First World War poses a major impediment to the growth of travel, tours, and travel writing. However, after the war, it revives. In the words of Stubbs and Mylne (2024), "People emerged from the isolation of war curious to see, hear, and experience what this new world was like" (p.27). The revival of travel writing emerges after the world war. Evidently, travel writing flourishes during peace and stability but suffers in a time of humanitarian crisis and unrest. Therefore, peace and security directly influence the rise, evolution, and proliferation of the travel writing genre.

Thus, there are many crucial factors responsible for the development of travel writing. As mentioned above, peace, stability, and rest are the aspects that motivate people to visit open space that in turn supports travel writing. The decade from 1920 to 1930 is known as a golden age for the proliferation of travel writing. "This golden era of travel writing in the 1920s and 1930s was characterized by a new inquisitiveness" (Stubbs and Mylne, 2024, p.27). The longing for newness through travel led it to be a part of writing culture. Traveling and writing simultaneously move in travel literature.

Features, advantages, and benefits of travel form some key themes of Francis Bacon's essay *Of Travels*. In it, Bacon highlights the value of the journey, inspiring people to travel. Cronin (2022) cites Bacon's essay as a lesson giving logical documentation for travel writing.

Francis Bacon in his essay *Of Travels* (1601) argues, "Travel is the younger sort, is a part of education, in the elder, a part of experience" (p.8). For young people, travel imparts education, whereas for the elders, it is a means of knowledge, wisdom, and self-transformation. Bacon, through his essays, advocated for the use of diaries to record the experiences of travel.

For Stubbs and Mylne (2024), travel writing is regarded as an undignified form of expression as, "Travel writing is often maligned as a cheap form of non-fiction placed at the lower end of literary hierarchy" (p.2). Uncertainty and death are the frequently encountered events that continue to haunt travelers, "dark tourism, thana tourism: real or symbolic encounters with death" (Stubbs and Mylne, 2024, p.3). Therefore, travel writing supports the expansion of knowledge and information that in turn transforms people from darkness to enlightenment because natural landscapes function as a catalyst for the transformation.

Cronin (2022) holds, "For the vast majority of Europeans, the principal source of knowledge about lands beyond their own was travel accounts" (p. 11). Traveling supports the knowledge foundation and awakening. Travel affords a rewarding experience for transcendental knowledge. For Cronin (2022), "The travel narrative can gesture towards an emergent trans-verbal subjectivity" (p.30). Burton (2014) discusses the value of travel narrative, "Travel narratives' cultural ambitions, literary strategies, and political contexts have altered significantly over the last hundred years" (p.2). Travel narrative is akin to political and literary strategies precisely because it can alter the visions and the perspectives of the society. The description of local details linking with the spiritual tone marks the sustainability of travel writing. Burton (2014) maintains that travel writing is a versatile genre. He holds, "Like novels, travel narratives artfully combine local details with exoticism, realism with stuff of romance" (p.12). The amalgamation

of reality and exoticism supports the artistic development of writing convention.

In the Hindu tradition and culture of hospitality, guests are elevated to a divine plane. The old Hindu adage *Atithi devo Bhabha* (Guests are equivalent to God) embodies a reverence and treatment afforded to a guest. The *sadhu* and *sanyasi* supported travel tradition, acknowledging travelers as enlightened beings. The *Rishis* journeyed from one location to another in search of information and knowledge. So, travel is the karma in the eastern travel history. However, the ultimate achievement of physical movement is the psychological transformation. Visiting the new places and people purifies the self through knowledge expansion, wisdom, and support for destiny leads to psychological transformation. Edward Said's *Orientalism*, discusses how the eastern world is othered by the western colonialists. According to him, the east is not a real world but "imaginative geographies" (Thompson, 2016, p. xix), mediated through "prior associations, expectations, and images" (Thompson, 2016, p. xviii). This means that travel writings are replete not with real accounts of a particular location but with the mental projection of that place through different accounts or narratives. Travel is a means of transcendence as Emerson (1836) details the function of travel, "Every hour and region yields its tribute of delight" (p.4). Temporal and physical movement delivers delight.

Cronon and Emerson's travel and nature theory deals with the idea that travel is the source of knowledge and spiritual awakening. The ideas accumulated through travel through the fresh Himalayas, rivers, and villages work as a catalyst to disengage from the existing worn thoughts and move to sublimity. Matthiessen and George Scaller, the two travelers in the novel, chose the Eastern Himalayas as a travel destination because Matthiessen was seeking a place of peace and self-discovery. Shocked with family sorrow, he needs a place for solace, which he finds in the northern part

of Nepal. He gets this spiritual awakening traveling to the eastern region to work out the sorrow, and gets enlightened.

Literature Review

Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* illustrates how natural phenomena like snowcapped Himalayas, rivers, and wildlife provide for the physical and spiritual awakening. Prominent scholars have reviewed *The Snow Leopard* through the lenses of ecocriticism, travel literature, spiritual autobiography, and its connection to Matthiessen's journey, which intertwines with the themes of environmentalism, personal transformation, and spiritual awakening.

Izaguirre (2020) argues that *The Snow Leopard* foreshadows the eventual commercialization of wildlife tourism. She states, "*The Snow Leopard* anticipates the coming commodification and commercialization of wildlife sighting, even of the rarest and most exclusive, and is a celebration of their ability to resist our gaze" (p. 26). This observation underscores that in the modern world, rare wildlife encounters are marketed as luxury experiences, often at the cost of their authenticity. Similarly, zoos exemplify how wild animals are confined and displayed for human entertainment and economic gain. However, the snow leopard, with its elusive nature, resists such commodification, maintaining its mythic aura and symbolizing resistance to human exploitation.

Matthiessen's book is also a travel narrative, chronicling his physical and spiritual journey through Nepal. Turner (1996) discusses the challenges faced by Matthiessen and zoologist George Scaller during their expedition, noting as "on the journey through Nepal, Scaller and Matthiessen encountered many obstacles. Weather was almost always the primary concern. These men began their trek in early fall and had to conclude it before they were trapped by a storm"

(p. 7). Matthiessen's vivid description of *Annapurna*, the *Kali Gandaki River*, and the *Dolpo* region describes the physical demands of the journey. Furthermore, Lyon (1979) observes that Matthiessen's narrative extends beyond a mere travel log and states "as the journal unfolds, it becomes apparent that Matthiessen, who made the trip not long after his wife's death and who had for several years been a student of Buddhism, was making a serious pilgrimage" (p. 62). His journey thus functions as both an exploration of the natural world and a deeply personal, spiritual quest.

Another critical theme in *The Snow Leopard* is the intersection of environmentalism and cultural erosion. As Matthiessen traverses the Himalayas, he reflects on the gradual disappearance of Tibetan culture. He writes, "One day human beings will disappear by grinding out subsistence on high cold plateaus, and the last of an old Tibetan culture will blow away among the stones and ruins" (Matthiessen, 1978, p. 56). This passage explains the fragility of indigenous traditions in the face of modernization. As human settlement expands and landscapes are altered, not only do rare species like the snow leopard face threats, but entire ways of life are at risk of extinction.

The ecological significance of mountains and their inhabitants is another critical perspective in analyzing *The Snow Leopard*. Matthiessen's work is frequently examined through the lens of ecocriticism (Jones, 2020). Han and Zhang (2020) assert that Matthiessen's book is "based on the perspective of ecocriticism, revealing his ecological ideas on natural ecology, social ecology, and spiritual ecology respectively" (p. xx). This suggests that the book is not only a travel memoir but also a meditation on the interdependence of ecosystems, the role of humans within nature, and the spiritual dimensions of environmental consciousness. Moreover, Matthiessen's journey is often regarded as both a travelogue and spiritual autobiography. Raglon (2010) characterizes

it as a "spiritual autobiography" because it encapsulates the writer's self-exploration and transformation, blending his personal experiences with profound literary expression.

Nepal's Crystal Mountain facilitates a healing process, allowing him to confront his grief and extend reverence towards the untouched beauty of the non-Western world (Upadhyay, 2020; Upadhyaya et al., 2025). This perspective suggests that the act of walking through these landscapes is akin to a meditative practice (Kocela, 2023). The transformative power of travel, particularly in a Buddhist context, is noted in studies suggesting that Western Buddhist travel narratives, including Matthiessen's, often depict journeys that lead to profound personal transformation and spiritual insight (Hiro, 2022). Thus, travel is a meditative practice that leads to the travelers' spiritual insight.

Spiritual pilgrimage seeks to reconcile human existence with the natural world (Gatta, 2004). The journey becomes a metaphor for inner exploration, where the external landscapes mirror Matthiessen's internal struggles and aspirations for enlightenment illustrating the spiritual significance of these animals within the local belief systems (Li et al., 2013). This connection between spirituality and conservation reflects a broader ecological ethic that resonates with Matthiessen's narrative, reinforcing the idea that true transcendence can be achieved through a harmonious relationship with nature.

Thompson (2020) discusses how travel can lead to transpersonal development, suggesting that the openness and uncertainty inherent in travel allow individuals to encounter unconscious aspects of themselves, leading to spiritual growth and self-awareness. Moreover, the motivations behind travel can significantly influence the experiences of transcendence. Research by Maghrifani et al. (2024) indicates that individuals often seek self-enhancement and escape through travel, which can

lead to transformative experiences. The protagonist's reflections on life, death, and the interconnectedness of all beings resonate with the notion that travel can evoke a sense of collective transcendence, as discussed by Reynoso and Verduzco (2022), who highlight the importance of shared experiences in fostering a sense of higher purpose. Furthermore, the natural environment plays a crucial role in facilitating transcendence during travel. Williams and Harvey (2001) explore how natural environments can evoke transcendent experiences, suggesting that immersion in nature can lead to a heightened sense of awareness and connection to something greater than oneself.

The Tibetan Buddhist communities often engage in conservation efforts that align with their spiritual values, emphasizing respect for all forms of life, which is crucial for the survival of the snow leopard and its habitat (Taub, 2018). The role of Tibetan Buddhist monasteries in conservation efforts highlights how spiritual practices can foster environmental stewardship, creating a synergy between cultural beliefs and ecological preservation (Li et al., 2013). The snow leopard's habitat is being fragmented, leading to a decline in its population and prey availability (Aryal et al., 2016). The integration of local knowledge and spiritual practices into conservation efforts can enhance the effectiveness of these strategies, fostering a sense of shared responsibility for the environment (Taub, 2018; Vallejo-Borda, 2023; Sun, 2024). The spiritualization of travel enhances the feeling of peace and joy among travelers.

Critics have highlighted *The Snow Leopard* as an example of the commodification of wildlife tourism, a simple journey to the hills, an epitome of cultural loss, and the voice for the natural and social ecology. However, this study asserts that travel in the Himalayan region of Nepal, mostly in the Himalayan snow-capped mountains, creates spiritual transformation,

generating spiritual awakening and a sense of unity with all beings and the world.

Methodology

This study utilizes a qualitative textual analysis approach to explore Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* through the lens of travel narrative, focusing on themes of spiritual transformation and transcendence, as outlined in the framework of travel writing discussed by Cronin (2022) and Emerson (1836) who highlight the value of journeying as a means of acquiring spiritual knowledge and achieving self-awakening.

Travel for Cronin and Emerson is a means of linking the physical to the spiritual. Cronin (2022) asserts that "travel writing is not peripheral but central to human engagement with the environment" (p.3). He further points out, "Travel accounts involved paying close attention to those landscapes to see what they might yield" (p.8). Interaction with nature enhances physical well-being and knowledge as seen in the ideas, "Observing the interaction between trees and fungi in the forest means incessant flow of materials, nutrients, and messages" (p.33). Travel for Cronin (2022) connected to nature is the means for the sublimity, "Travel writing becomes a quest for those places in nature that occasion these feelings of great and the sublime" (p.20). Thus, Cronin links physical travel to the spiritual realization.

Emerson aligns with Cronin's concept that outward movement harmonizes human senses. Emerson (1836) asserts, "The lover of nature is he whose inward and outward senses are still truly adjusted to each other" (p.3). Emerson (1836) further elaborates that the interaction with nature serves as a source of physical and psychological gratification and states, "Human intercourse with heaven and earth, becomes a point of his daily food" (p.4). The reason is the bond between humans and nature. The reason, according to Emerson (1836) is "occult relation between man and the vegetable"

(p.4). This mystical relationship indicates a sense of divine presence as “nature always wears the colors of the spirit” (p.4). For Emerson (1836), there is always spirit in nature saying that “Throughout nature spirit is present” (p.59). Thus, Emerson deals with the transcendental strength of nature endowing spirituality and beauty.

Critics such as Lyon, Turner, Han and Zhang, Raglon, and Izaguirre support the view that travel facilitates spiritual transformation of travel. The methodology centers on a close reading of the primary text to identify key locations, encounters, and experiences that contribute to the narrator's internal metamorphosis, consistent with Lyon (1979), who argues that Matthiessen's narrative transcends a mere travel log to become a serious pilgrimage. Special attention is given to examining how the structure of the travel narrative facilitates psychological release and spiritual awakening, particularly as the narrator journeys through the Himalayas—a point emphasized by Turner (1996), who discusses the physical and spiritual challenges faced during the expedition.

The analysis investigates the interplay between the physical journey—marked by interactions with the natural landscape, cultural encounters, and religious sites—and the narrator's psychological and spiritual development, drawing on ecocritical perspectives such as those provided by Han and Zhang (2020) and Xue et al. (2020), who argue that Matthiessen's work reveals ecological ideas spanning natural, social, and spiritual dimensions.

These findings are contextualized within broader theoretical frameworks of travel writing and spiritual quests, referencing Eastern spiritual traditions, including Raglon's (2010) characterization of the work as a spiritual autobiography. Additionally, the study examines how elements such as the natural environment, local communities, and sacred spaces act as catalysts for the narrator's transformation. This is similar to what Izaguirre (2020)

says: “*The Snow Leopard*” predicts the commercialization of wildlife tourism while celebrating resistance to human exploitation.

Results

Travel as a path for Spiritual Transformation

The Snow Leopard is a means for complete personal and psychological transformation for personal well-being through the detachment from worldly bondage. Four parts of the novel, Westland, Northward, At Crystal Mountain, and The Way Home, centralize on the travel experience of Matthiessen and George Scaller in the northwest part of the Himalayas that supports the detachment from the worldly phase to the otherworldly situation. Traveling through these parts is interconnected to create the spiritual landscape.

The two travelers' journey is the typical representation of pilgrimage for spiritual transformation. The narrator details the journey in the prologue part of the novel, “In late September of 1973, I set out with GS on a journey to the Crystal Mountain, walking west under Annapurna and north along the Kali Gandaki River” (Matthiessen, 1978, p.13). He commences his journey from the Hindu and Buddhist holy places: “I stopped at *Vanarasi*, the holy city on the Ganges, and visited the Buddhist shrines at Bodh Gaya and Saranath” (Matthiessen, 1978, p.14). In Nepal, he joined GS and began the journey from Kathmandu “through the steep gorges of the *Trisuli* river” (Matthiessen, 1978, p.15) to the tourist hub of Nepal, Kaski. His quest is tied to lifting him up to the higher spiritual landscape of enlightenment. For him, “the Himalaya—the *alaya* (abode or home) of *hima* (snow)” (Matthiessen, 1978, p. 23). Lord Shiva, according to the Hindu religion, resided in Kailash Parbat. The narrator's visit to the home of the snow is to lead him away from the worldly desires.

The village life is the source of

knowledge creation and transformation. The simplicity of the village life outburst novel thought, "Village life has been celebrated as the natural domain of man by many thinkers from Lao-tzu to Gandhi" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.24). During the journey, he is prompted to connect the significance of the rural life appropriate for the knowledge creation. In his words, "only thirty miles" journey to the south from the area, Lord Buddha, known as "Gautama, forsook a life of ease to become a holy mediant" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.26). The travel to the natural setting supports the spiritual awakening. He relates the journey with the transformation process, linking with the Eightfold Path of Gautama Buddha, "Right attention to one's understanding, intentions, speech, and actions; right livelihood; effort; mindfulness; and right concentration, by which is meant the unification of the self through sitting yoga" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.27). The locale that he visits infuses the inclination to the spiritual well-being. He links Gautam Buddha with nature, "his buddha nature was no different from the nature of the universe" (Matthiessen, 1978, p. 27). For Buddha, the "bodhi tree or enlightenment tree, the large pipal tree. (Matthiessen, 1978, p.28) appealed to reside in the sacred place to get knowledge, whereas for him, the traveling along the village with a natural groove enlightened him. Walking along the river, he recalls, "Hindus have come up along the river valleys from the great plains of the Ganges" (Matthiessen, 1978, p. 29). The Ganges transform human beings through peace and piety.

The physical locale generates vibration for the inclination to the spiritual well-being. On September 28, "At sunset, the trail arrives at the hill village called *Naudada*" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.30). On the whole afternoon of September 30, their journey "continues up the *Kali Gandaki*, which rushes down from Mustang and Tibet onto the Ganges plain" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.36) The river has the religious importance as

"Fierce *Kali* the black, the female aspect of time and death and devourer of all things, is the consort of the Hindu god of the Himalaya, Great Shiva, the recreator and destroyer" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.37). The travelling along *Kaligandaki* bestows the process for cleansing from ignorance to enlightenment. This river is the source for the black sacred stones: "Kali Gandaki is a famous source of the black sacred stones called *saligrams*, which contain the spiral fossil forms of marine univalves" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.37). Visiting along the river towards the Himalaya, he relates the role of karma in Hindu and Buddhist religions because both religions "believe in *karma*-the principle of cause and effect" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.40). He then links it with art: "Zen Buddhism infused all of Oriental art and culture with the spare clarity of its vision" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.41). Passing through the oak trees "at 9000 feet," he experiences "the happiness of pure and uninterrupted experience, in which body, mind, and nature are the same" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.47). The travelers achieve non-dual unity while climbing across the forest at 9000 feet.

The unification of the human mind with nature is the union of two with one. This is non-duality of *Advait Vedanta*. The internal realization generates meaningfulness in life: "The only meaningful life is a life that strives for the individual realization" (Matthiessen, 1978, p. 50). The snow-capped Dhaulagiri further detaches him from personal call to the call of the transcendence, "The snow cone of Great Dhaulagiri, five miles high rises from the clouds behind and is quickly misted over" (p.53). Some places in the northern part of Nepal bring physical and spiritual purgation; "*Dhorpatan* is a sort of purgatory" (Matthiessen, 1978, p. 61). This is the internalization through personal experience. The higher they visit, the more spiritual they become. "In the *Rig Veda*, an oscillating universe is conceived to be expanding from a center-this is consistent with the Big Bang theory" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.65). This is the scientific connectivity

to the *Veda*. Discouraging about the mystic reality, "The physicist seeks to understand reality, while the mystic is trained to experience it directly" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.66). The visit to the Himalayan region automatically creates a vibration of the Eastern philosophical inclination: "*Maya* is Time, the illusion of ego... the dream that separates us from a true perception of the whole" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.68). This is his ultimate realization that *Maya* is an illusion and linked to the ego. Human beings are transferred only when they are separated from worldly desires and tuned to the harmonious whole. The complete wholeness gives eventual ecstasy.

The traveling through mountains releases trauma and leads to peace "toward Dhaulagiri, the 'White Mountain'" (Matthiessen, 1978, p. 75). The white mountain is the symbol for peace and leads to attaining bliss. Another important place is *Dhorpatan*, which generates sensuous pleasure due to its mesmerizing environmental location: "I was conscious of hallucinating in a dream" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.88). The feeling for reincarnation is the point for change. The dream stage leads from bliss to rebirth, "literally between two existences-a dreamlike hallucination that precedes reincarnation" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.89). Taking the meditation system of the eastern philosophy, he asserts that "Among Hindus and Buddhists, realization is attained through inner stillness through the *samadhi* state of sitting yoga" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.90). Stillness in mind is the result of the peacefulness in psychology. The Himalayan region works as an intellect for change: "The Himalaya is as convoluted as a brain" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.91). The brain receives, processes, and transforms. Himalaya as a brain converts from one to the next phase. Nature, in the form of intelligence, is an agent for transformation. These mountains are the symbols for change. The ultimate mission is to "see a snow leopard" (Matthiessen, 1978, p. 93). Leopard is the symbol for

hope, peace, and transformation. Physical and psychological stillness leads to purity: "The deep, resonant Om is all sound and silence throughout time ... the great stillness of pure being" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.108). Om is an all-encompassing symbol that generates vibration in the body. This vibration releases from impurity to purity of body and spirit. Visualizing *Hanuman*, the mythically important animal as indicated in Hindu mythology, creates freshness and peace that in turn lead to the transformation: "The langur is sacred to all Hindus as the manifestation of the monkey god *Hanuman*" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.110). The longing for the elusive animal snow leopard is the willingness for merging the self with the profound super-soul, "I was interested in blue sheep or snow leopards" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.121). The keen interest in the visit underlies the psychological longing for the spiritual bliss.

The Snow Leopard as a Symbol of Spiritual Quest and Enlightenment

The quest for the leopard moving from one to the next destination is the quest for the transcendental peace. Matthiessen and zoologist George Schaller reach near *Phoksundo* and move toward Jumla. During their trip, they talk of the leopard because even the discourse about fresh snow and the leopard provided them transcendental joy. "The typical snow leopard has pale, frosty eyes and a coat of pale, misty grey...clouded by the depth of rich fur" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.145). The discourse further moves to the mystery of the cat: "The snow leopard is the most mysterious of the great cats of its social system" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.145). Their journey is away from Pokhara: "Pokhara is now two months away, and the nearest wireless is at *Dunahi*" (Matthiessen, 1978, p.148). The physical description of the leopard is to infuse hope for gaining the ultimate object. The journey is the suffering for getting the animal. However, it is the ultimate bliss that derives from the palpable hope for the ultimate point.

The holy mountain Kailash is the meditation point for Shiva, as indicated in Hindu scriptures. This place “beyond the Karnali River, to the north and west, the Tibetan Plateau rises to *Kailas*, the holy Mount Sumeru or Meru, of Hindus and Buddhists, home of Shiva and the center of the world” (Matthiessen, 1978, p.177). This is the center of the world for attaining nirvana for Hindus and Buddhists. Travelers are near Kailash, the symbol of world peace and the point for spiritual transformation, creating spiritual vibration. Therefore, this journey leads to the spiritual vibration for attaining bliss.

The conversion between the narrator and GS moves to the significant but elusive animal, the leopard. “Have you seen the snow leopard? No! Isn't that wonderful?” (Matthiessen, 1978, p.225). The conversation leads to the point that they have not yet seen the animal, but they have the hope to see it. This wonderful animal resides in the delightful Himalayan region. The animal and Himalayan landscape derives spiritual vibration among the travelers that in turn supports the mystical transformation. The snow Himalayan animal is the symbol of wonder and joy for spiritual conversion. “Watching blue ship in the sun and wilderness is pleasant” (Matthiessen, 1978, p.228). The more enigmatic is the geographical landscape: “The landscape is mysterious” (Matthiessen, 1978, p.249). Geographical location supports spiritual vibration. The enigmatic but elusive animal and mesmerizing scene contribute to transcendental bliss.

The quest for the leopard is the longing for the transcendence of bliss for the travelers. The elusive leopard leads to “The prayer walls on the river path are much visited by wolves, but there is no sign of blue ship or of leopard” (Matthiessen, 1978, p. 250). This leopard is the symbol of transcendental peace that is not visible but realized. But their joy doubles through the journey despite the fact that they fail to see the leopard because they feel pleasant to be

in the lap of the Himalaya, joyous animals, and the holy temples and *Gumbhas*. The snow leopard is the symbol of hope, the point for transformation, and the catalyst for change from worldly desire to the state of complete bliss.

The rivers, animals, common people, and snowcapped mountains provide a provision for generating an atmosphere for spiritual inclination. This inclination leads him to get transcendental peace. Therefore, traveling in the northern Himalaya endows peace and transformation. Therefore, there is interconnection among animals, rivers, snow-capped Himalayas, and the transcendental joy. This interdependency is the Yogic philosophy having the Hindu and Buddhist undercurrent.

Discussion

This study infers that spiritual enlightenment is a process that is physically supported and spiritually apprehended as Matthiessen goes through the nature travel meditation. Nature, drenched with the mantras, spiritually enlightened places like crystal mountains, *Kailash*, Kaligandaki, *saligrams*, snow cone, temples, and monasteries of Nepal support self-reflection and enlightenment. The elusive snow leopard symbolizes the process of self-reflection and awakening which in turn symbolize transcendence through travel. Therefore, nature is the living tradition that sets the journey for eventual meaning.

The discussion of *The Snow Leopard* within the context of travel writing and spiritual transformation reveals significant connections between Matthiessen's narrative and broader themes identified in related literature. As Izaguirre (2020); Thompson (2020); and Cronin (2022) note, the novel anticipates the commercialization of wildlife tourism yet maintains a resistance to commodification through the snow leopard's elusive nature. This observation aligns with Matthiessen's portrayal of the journey as more than mere

wildlife observation, supporting Lyon's (1979) interpretation of the narrative as a serious pilgrimage beyond a simple travel log. The intersection of environmentalism and cultural erosion discussed by various scholars finds expression in Matthiessen's reflections on the fragility of Tibetan culture amidst modernization (Izaguirre, 2020).

The ecocritical perspective presented by Han and Zhang (2020) resonates with the novel's exploration of natural, social, and spiritual ecology. Raglon's (2010) characterization of the work as a spiritual autobiography is particularly relevant when examining how the Himalayan landscape facilitates the narrator's psychological transformation. According to these academic points of view, traveling through Nepal's Himalayas leads to deep spiritual awakening by connecting people with transcendental peace and sacred spaces, as well as through interactions with rural life and natural elements. This interconnection between physical journey and spiritual transformation that is echoed throughout the travel writing tradition (Ale et al., 2014). The journey and the quest for the snow leopard in the novel reverberate narrator's spiritual quest.

Conclusion

The Snow Leopard depicts Matthiessen's travel as a journey towards spiritual transformation and self-awakening. Following the death of the wife, the narrator experiences emotional turmoil. To seek release from the psychological and emotional pain, he commences the journey to Nepal, which endows spiritual alteration, cleansing the emotional landscape through his visit to Kali Gandaki, Kailash, *Machhapuchhere Himal*, temples, and ancient monasteries. The travelers' purpose is to identify the elusive and rarely visible animal, the snow leopard. This is the symbol of realized enlightenment. Using travel narrative as a theoretical framework, this study infers that travel is the means for

transcendental peace. The study scrutinizes that their travel is slow but steady, which allows them for internal reflection and spiritual exaltation. The travel acts as a catalytic agent for the spiritual solace. The spiritual awakening occurs through the snow-trenched Himalayas, innocent people of the area, and Hindu temples and Buddha Gumba. The journey leads him out of the box from family pain to the interconnected worldview. The worldview is that the ultimate bliss rests on the transcendental world. This is the epiphany about life and the world. The fresh, snow-covered mountains detach him from the emotional and physical attachment. To release from the bondage of desires and embark on the wilderness, the natural world of snow, plants, and animals acts as changing agents. Therefore, travel in the natural world transforms the internal landscape of the people, which in turn leads to spiritual exaltation. Therefore, transformation from the known to the unknown, physical to the spiritual, and personal to the transcendental is possible through travel. Travel in Nepal's spiritually drenched land disengages from psychological sorrow, immunizes against it, and ultimately leads to awakening. This study is delimited only to a novel from a travel and transcendental perspective. Therefore, further studies on the *Kaligandaki* region, the Himalayas of Nepal, and the diverse locations and cultures of Gandaki province are recommended to elucidate the connection between place and spirituality.

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Availability of Data and Materials

Data are safely stored. They will be made available in special request.

Conflict of Interest

The authors declare that there is no conflict of interest in relation to this manuscript.

Ethical Compliance

This study used the secondary sources of data. We declare that the study was conducted in accordance with accepted ethical standards.

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The manuscript is free from plagiarism and improper use of AI-generated content.

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