

Mountaineering Stories of Adventurous Women: A Brief Survey

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Abstract

This article looks at the dream and the achievement of adventurous women in the field of mountaineering. It focuses on Everest climbing and the narrations of Lhakpa Phuti Sherpa, a Nepalese mountaineer, Rebecca Stephens, the first British Everest climber, and Lene Gammelgaard, the first Scandinavian woman to summit Mount Everest. The magic of Mount Everest, its beauty, mystery, and majesty lures the women's adventurous souls. They are emotionally and spiritually connected to the mountains because the high peaks are the sources of peace, happiness, and enlightenment to them.

Mountaineering, the art of climbing mountain peaks, is a perilous sport that attracts climbers from all over the world. Despite the challenges, the climbers risk their lives to thin air, frostbite, bone-chilling temperatures, avalanches, and powerful winds. They understand that getting to the top is not always simple, but it is worthwhile because it represents self-conquest, and touch with greater power. In this article, the three women climbers mention their invincible courage and inexhaustible stamina to ascend the steep and rugged snow peak of Mount Everest.

Key Words: Ascent, Bliss, Mountaineering, Mount Everest, Soul,

Introduction

Mountaineering is a sport of attempting to attain, the highest point in mountainous regions, primarily for pleasure. There, people can have an incomparable view, a sense of being closer to nature, which is a magnificent creation of God. Nowadays people are tired of their routine work, so they need some purposeful diversion, hence they go to the mountains for their mental and physical tranquility. Mountains beckon and invite the adventurers and the mountaineers of the world because it preserves within their shining white snow-peaked sanctity- a majestic mystery that needs to be explored, elucidated, and understood. Major HPS Ahluwalia displays similar thinking in, *Faces of Everest* (1982), "Why climb mountains? It is not easy

to answer this question. For me, the mountains are nature at their best and their beauty and majesty pose a constant challenge. Many of us believe that they are a means of communion with God or the creator" (p. 203). As Ahluwalia says the mountaineers' intentions are wide-ranging but many people think that climbing mountains for pleasure is the main purpose of humans since the last century.

Another question arises: why Everest then? For this question Ahluwalia further answers, " Because it is the mightiest. It takes the last ounce of energy- a brutal struggle with rock and ice, which once taken up cannot even when one's life itself is at stake. With the peak climbed, there is joy and a sense of achievement, exaltation, triumph, of a battle won, which is very difficult to describe. 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). Reading Ahluwalia's narration one can gauge that the physical conquest of Everest gives satisfaction, and joy to the climbers.

The high hills, gorges, glaciers, falls, high passes, and overall topography of Mt. Everest, make natural scenery mysterious and enchanting. The canopy cover and picturesque scenery stimulate one to dare oneself and to take the trip to the highest peak in the world. This amazing picture speaks a thousand words:



For observing this wonderful and splendid scenery, every year many males and

women trekkers, travelers as well as mountaineers, visit the various hilly and mountainous regions of Nepal.

The high mountains are awe-inspiring as well as marvelous but climbing them is not a joke because they need great preparation, determination, devotion, and courage. The women climbers' efforts, dreams, and determinations made them bold and assertive. Their love for the mountain and risky adventure is astonishing. In the history of women's climbing, the early eighties were a boom period because, during that time, many women climbers showed their serious endeavor, determination, and ambition to climb the Alpine as well as the mountainous peaks of the world. They were more determined to the world mass of the world, Mount Everest. Among those great giants, Junko Tabei, from Japan, who became the first lady to climb Mount Everest in 1975, Pasang Lamu Sherpa on 1993 April 22 from Nepal, Lhakpa Phuti Sherpa on 2000 May 18 from Nepal, Rebecca Stephen on, 17 May 1993 from Britain, Lene Gammelgaard in 1996, from Denmark.

According to the *Mountaineering in Nepal: Facts And Figures, 2020* published by the government of Nepal, Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation's Department of Tourism, there are 471 women summiteers reached Mt. Everest by December 2019. These women are attracted by the glory of the Himalayas. In addition, they are in search of spiritual and literal elevation, a quest for adventure, seeking to test themselves among the world's most spectacular and challenging peaks and wanting to create a new history in the field of women mountaineering. Among such adventurous women, I have taken Rebecca Stephens, Lene Gammelgaard and Lhakpa Phuti Sherpa and their narrations on Everest climbing.

Statement of Problem

The history of women's mountaineering is not very long. In ancient times, women were not allowed to do whatever they liked but that was the scene of the past. Today they are creating a new history by doing adventurous activities like bungee jumping sailing, rock climbing, and mountaineering. Mountain expedition is one of the most desirable and popular games for both males and females. Although mountaineering is a risky and tough game, many women mountaineers are reaching the peak of the high mountains. Nepal has wonderful high hills and snow-capped mountains. Among many, Mt. Everest, the highest mountain in the world, along with other high Himalayan peaks, has been luring the climbers including males and females. So, this research tries to find out why do women climbers dream to climb high and take risks? What are the objects to lure them? How did they react after ascending

the peak?

Research Objective

The general objective of this research is to study the dream and achievements of the adventurous women. To achieve this objective, the specific objectives have been set which are as follows:

- To find out the reasons for women to climb Mt. Everest
- To identify the different experiences of the adventurous women climbers
- To understand the woman mountaineering history

Research Methodology

This article is based on the experience of the women mountaineers of the world. It shows the aesthetic of the Himalayas region, particularly Mt. Everest and its climbing. For that, I have taken three women climbers and their books on Mt. Everest. They are Rebecca Stephens and her book, *On Top of the World*, Lhakpa Phuti Sherpa and her book, *Forty Years in the Mountains*, and Lene Gammelgaard and her book *Climbing High*. Despite this, it takes the help of available sources like books, journals articles, and related websites on mountain climbing. It is both descriptive as well as analytical.

This article analyzes the aesthetic and the challenges of Mt. Everest's climbing. Aesthetic appreciation is not only conformed to art and literature but also to the outside world. We appreciate the pristine nature, towering mountains, and broad horizon.

Discussion

Historically, women have not been allowed to go out and do what they want to do. Now the situation is different. Today women are not only going outside but also doing challenging activities like hiking, mountaineering, sailing, and bungee jumping. It was only in the 1800s that mountaineering turned into recreation and sport. During that time, most of the climbers were men, but slowly and gradually women started participating in adventurous and stimulating activities. According to *Mountaineering in Nepal: Facts and Figures, 2020*, there are four hundred seventy-one women summiteers of Mt. Everest till December 2019. Among such adventurous women, Rebecca Stephens, Lhakpa Phuti Sherpa, and Lene Gammelgaard got their achievement, keeping their foot at the peak of Mt. Everest and kept the record in the history of women mountaineering.

The women mountaineers are fascinated by the magic of an astonishing peak of

Mt. Everest which lies in the northeast corner of Nepal, on the border with Tibet, half-hidden by its impressive neighboring peaks. It is Mt. Everest, Mt. Sagarmatha, Chomolungma, and also Jomolungma but all mean the highest point of the globe or crown of the world. In Walt Unsworth's *Everest The Mountaineering History* (2000), "Mount Everest for its size is a singularly shy and retiring mountain. It hides away behind other mountains. On the north side, in Tibet, it does indeed stand up proudly and alone, a true monarch among mountains. But it stands in a very sparsely inhabited part of Tibet, and very few people ever go to Tibet. From the Indian side, only its tip appears amongst a mighty array of peaks which being nearer look higher" (p. 2). Flattering and fawning on the hidden beauty of Mt. Everest, Unsworth adds that the high peak, in greatest profusion lies independently attracting the mountaineers of the world.

The mountains are the places of great charm and beauty. They heal the human heart and satisfy the soul. The Nature writer, Ralph Waldo Emerson writes in *Nature* (1836), "Nature satisfies the human soul purely by its loveliness and without any mixture of corporal benefit" (p. 501). Emerson takes nature as a healer which gives eternal calm and enchantment. The images, sounds, and smells of nature can have positive health effects. The interactions with the natural world can lower our stress and well-being. For him, the perception of natural forms is a delight by their beauty. Beauty as an aesthetic is incredible which drags the attention of all creatures. In this regard, the beauty and sublimity of Mt. Everest is amazing and mysterious. Roger Scruton in *Beauty* (2011) defines, "Beauty can be consoling, disturbing, sacred, profane; it can be exhilarating, appealing, inspiring, chilling. It can affect us in an unlimited variety of ways. Yet it is never viewed with indifference: beauty demands to be noticed; it speaks to us directly like the voice of an intimate friend. If there are people who are indifferent to beauty, then it is surely because they do not perceive it" (p. xi). Scruton describes beauty as having magical power which drags the attention of the beholders. The magical beauty and sublimity of Mount Everest is profane, chilling, and inspiring to all.

The British climber, Rebecca Stephen's dream for the mountain started from 1989 when she attended as a journalist in an Anglo- American expedition on Everest's North East Ridge. On 17 May 1993, she became the first British woman to climb Mt. Everest. Her passion and determination were wild. She scaled Mount Blanc, Mt. Kenya, Mt. Kilimanjaro, and other mountains of the world including Mt. Everest. Anyway, she fulfills her dream of climbing through her courage and sheer determination that takes her to fulfill the challenge she has set for herself.

She describes in *On Top Of The World* (1994), "The journey led us through an extraordinary landscape of vastness, emptiness, and wonder. The barren, undulating hills, washed in soft shades of brown, yellow and gold, stood against a distant snowy ribbon of high Himalayan peaks, and an intense, blue sky" (p. 22). As Stephens mentions the aesthetics of the Himalayas are sharp, defined, and fresh. Everest, in her eyes, stands as proud, white, and statuesque, a pyramidal summit above the cloud. There is an undeniable beauty that drags her heart.

For Rebecca, the mountain is not only for travelling, it is a great healer, which heals and satisfies the human thrust. It teaches a person to be persistent, patient, and motivated. It widens the mental horizon of the climbers because they get a chance to meet and feel different experiences. Rebecca Stephens mentions:

For me, those two months were an eye-opening time of discovery and learning. At Base Camp, as I wandered from tent to tent, dropping in for a cup of coffee here, a bite to eat there, I learned that this passion for the mountains was not just the prerogative of the few Englishmen and Americans I happened to be travelling 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)

Stephen's passion and determination lead her to learn and discover many new and exotic things and places that make her bold and assertive in her life.

The women have an unrelenting desire to stand at the peak of Mt. Everest. For them, Everest held a peculiarly special appeal. At the summit, Rebecca Stephens realizes, "The high mountains are a lifeless place: beautiful, but sterile. They are a place to visit, to wonder at to admire and respect, and to seek adventure-but not a place to live. My eyes had grown weary of the stark shades of blue and gray and white; they had been starved of the colours of life...." (p. 189). For Stephens, though the journey is taxing, she tests all her strength, stands at the peak, and looks down on the incredible world.

Similarly, on the afternoon of May 10, 1996, Lene Gammelgaard, a member of Scott Fischer's Mountain Madness expedition, became the first Scandinavian woman to summit Mount Everest. As an adventurous and challenging woman, she wants to be a role model for young girls. She argues in *Climbing High* (1999):

I have always been a seeking soul, driven by some uncontrollable urge to challenge the parameters of my small world. As a young girl I drove my parents crazy—questioning norms, social conformity, gender roles, destiny itself. As I grew to adulthood, I suffered a lot of resistance because of my way of being, doubtless

compounded by the fact that I was a woman. There were many times when I was told I couldn't, shouldn't, do something because I was a woman. I did it anyway. I have never felt I had a choice- it is just who I am. (p. xiii)

Gammelgaard describes her strong determination to challenge and show the world by doing some risky activity. Then she decides to take risk of climbing Mt. Everest. Her dream of climbing the highest mountain in the world came true when she reached the summit. She further writes "I summited Everest (the mountain known to Tibetans as Chomolungma, or Mother Goddess of the World) and was fortunate enough to survive to tell the tale. I have tremendous respect and ---yes---love for this awesome mountain" (p. xii). After reaching the summit, she gets a lesson from the tragedies and knows that nature cannot be controlled. Her attitude changes and she feels she is different than earlier. She again writes, "what I want to share is not the death and tragedy of climbing, but the majestic beauty of the high mountains an incredible experience of pursuing the challenge of Everest.when I come back from a climb I feel renewed -- a better human being, stronger and more capable of living on life's unpredictable terms and conditions"(p. xv). Gammelgaard's realization of a scary and risky journey gives joy and satisfaction in her life. It changes her understanding that mountains and mountaineering show the real capability of a person. She further writes, "The mountains are not like that. They are real, they are dangerous and they are exacting, and they show you precisely what you can and cannot do. Show you who and what you and others are" (p. 163). For Gammelgaard, despite the danger, mountaineering gives an incredible experience, understanding, and freedom in life. She discovers her place and identity in the world.

The same opinions are mentioned by Lhakpa Phuti Sherpa, a Nepalese mountaineer who is good at mountaineering and skiing. According to the *Mountaineering in Nepal: Facts And Figures, 2020* published by the government of Nepal, Ministry of Culture, Tourism and Civil Aviation's Department of Tourism there are many Nepalese women summiteers of Mt. Everest till December 2019. The first Nepalese woman, Ms. Pasang Lhamu Sherpa climbed Mt. Everest on 1993 April 22 through East Ridge but she died while descending from the summit on April 23, 1993. Then Ms. Lhakpa Phuti Sherpa is the second Nepalese woman to successfully summit Mt. Sagarmatha on 2000 May 18 from Southeast Ridge. Lhakpa Phuti Sherpa was born and brought up in the Himalayan region, and is known as a jewel of Solukhumbu, according to www.soluonline.com, written on her cover page. Lhakpa's autobiography, *Forty Years in the Mountains* (2016) is a tale of her success

flecked by untellable struggle. In the author's note, she mentions she is progeny to a Himalayan hamlet. Her ancestors and her birthplace have an integral connection with the Himalayas. She has set her foot on all terrains, from the lowest bases on land to the highest altitudes of the world. This shows her deep intimacy with the Himalayan region as her birthplace where she has spent most of her time.

Mountaineering, for women mountaineers, is not so relaxing because they have their problems. These problems create obstacles on their way. In *Forty Years in the Mountain* (2016), Lhakpa Phuti mentions her memorable problem when she reaches Camp II. She writes, "I menstruated. Acute headache rendered me extremely weak. The pain soon spread to the entire body, and I felt like sleeping all through the day. I was alone in the tent. Several thoughts popped in and out of my mind. The Himalayan Mountains are the holy spots...." (p. 254). She is in a dilemma about where to throw those sinful pieces of the pad. So, again she writes, "How could I leave there a thing that could thwart the piousness of the Himalayas? She feels a deep sense of regret. Anyway, she buried under a stone and prayed, "God absolved me of my sin" (p. 255). In Lhakpa's opinion, the high peaks are the places of Gods and Goddesses and should not be polluted. Mt. Everest is holy and pure so impure persons should not touch it.

All these lady climbers have stimulating experiences on the way to Everest. Lhakpa expresses, "When we reached Camp I, most of the peaks appeared quite stunted. From there, I saw many Himalayan slopes, crevasses, and Khumbu Valley. From Camp III, I had to look down to have a glance at a few high peaks that looked dwarfish now. My heart leaped upon seeing the Himalayan peaks so stunted. I congratulated myself: "I have reached a great height." Oh, what a big number of peaks!" (p. 251). As Lhakpa Phuti says mountains and their peaks are gorgeous, striking, and eye-catching. Beyond that they are also thought-provoking, motivating, and inspiring. But the journey to the Himalayas is not always exciting. It is more challenging and risky. Frequently, Lhakpa remembers the nights, which were quite painful, the legs had turned stiff with cold, and even unable to manage a short nap. To save from altitude sickness, she has to drink water frequently but as a result of it, they have the urge to urinate quite often. For women, urinating everywhere is not easy. So, she writes, "We were supposed to wear thick clothes of four to five types. Taking off the clothes and pulling them back was a painful task every time. Some clothes had fasteners, while others had buttons or strings" (p. 239). The difficulty with clothes becomes even more acute as they reach higher and higher. Despite the hardships, all the women climbers reach their destinations without any injury. Their strong

determination and dedication make them think that they are heading towards the pinnacle to be the first women to climb the highest peak in the world.

Findings

Human beings have the spirit of exploration and adventure as a part of their civilization. To know the unknown is man's quest for conquest. So, to travel the exotic place, climb the unclimbable, and conquer the unconquerable is the essence of human life. For that people are choosing the mountainous regions.

The women mountaineers' dreams and achievements prove that they are ambitious, and determined climbers. Their target is not to share the death and tragedy of climbing but the majestic beauty of the high mountains and the incredible experience of pursuing the challenge. They knew that the world's highest peaks are the excellent teachers. They give extraordinary and deeply rewarding experiences and lessons but there is no escaping the fact that one can even die. It is because ascending Mount Everest is not a joke, it needs great preparation, determination, devotion, and courage. Like the male mountaineers, the women mountaineers climb Mt. Everest for personal challenges, wanting to test themselves on the high mountain and for gaining recognition in the field of mountaineering. They also believe that the mountain journey is the journey to spiritual enlightenment.

One salutes the high-spirited power and bravery of the lady climbers who find the mountainous landscape oddly beautiful where their minds separate beauty from pain. The pain and risk are not too extreme for them because they identify that their journey to Everest is risky but they think they can diminish it by their hard labor, dedication, and dare. They believe that nothing worth in life is attained without taking risks. As Mike McNamee in *Philosophy, Risk and Adventure* (2007) argues:

It is our perpetual yearning to overcome difficulties and dangers, to see the hidden things, to penetrate the regions outside our beaten track- it is the call of the unknown- the longing for the land of Beyond, the driving force deeply rooted in the soul of man which drove the first hunters into new regions- the mainspring perhaps of our greatest actions- of winged human thought knowing no bounds to its freedom. (p. 10)

MacNamee describes human motifs for knowing the unknown and conquering the unconquerable in life. The women climbers also realize that without taking a risk, life is worthless. They find an all-around pure, gleaming white sweep of snow, broken by crevasses, lying dark and silent. This is a great pleasure, satisfaction, and gratification that they achieve despite the difficult hurdles and challenges.

Hence, the women mountaineers' descriptions of hardships and thrills are all factual and vivid. They scramble the snow-capped Mt. Everest for experience, recognition, test themselves, and bring peace and happiness to their mind and heart. They realize that happiness is a reasonable goal of human life and people are seeking happiness by doing different activities. In this sense, Dalai Lama, the spiritual leader of the Tibetan people, states in *The Art of Happiness* (1998), "I believe that the very purpose of our life is to seek happiness. That is clear. Whether one believes in religion or not, whether one believes in this religion or that religion, we all are seeking something better in life. So, I think, the very motion of our life is towards happiness" (p. 3). As Lama says happiness is the ultimate motto of human life. We know that it lies in the joy of achievement and the thrill of creative effort. These women mountaineers dream of something adventurous to bring happiness and satisfaction in their life and with great dedication and devotion, and ultimately they achieve it.

Conclusion

A human is always on a quest that is a motif deeply embedded within human instinct. To grow, evolve, and transform the ordinary into extraordinary, human beings have to come out of their comfort zone and take risks, whether it be sailing the unknown seas, diving into the depths of the earth, or climbing the highest of the mountain peaks. In this regard, travel has a unique way of giving a new perspective on life. It is a quest, not only for anesthetics and adventure, rather it is a search for one's self. It is a passion to explore the unknown, face challenges, and triumph the hazardous and the unfamiliar.

The women mountaineers are attracted by the high Himalayas, beautiful landscapes, glaciers, crevasses, fountains, and overall topography. They find the natural sceneries exotic, gorgeous, and enchanting and by climbing, the women climbers want to give meaning to life. For them, mountain climbing is for experience, knowledge, testing their stamina, and also for recognition. More than that they know living life and struggling in life is like mountaineering. To lead a successful life, like in mountain climbing, a person should have patience, determination, courage, capacity to love, and diligence otherwise he or she will be the victim.

The high mountains are the sources of inspiration, and they lure the climbers and the non-climbers differently because they are meant different to different people. For some, they are the sources of liberation, self-knowledge, and self-transformation but for others, they are believed to be the abode of gods and goddesses. As the women

climbers rise higher and higher, they achieve a higher level of consciousness, by an absolute unison of thought, mind, and heart. To them, Mt. Everest is the sources of peace, happiness, power, and enlightenment.

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