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Research Article

New Nomads and Van Life: Exploring the Concepts of Identity and Mobility

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Abstract

Benedict Anderson's *Imagined Communities* argues that the 'nation' is a cultural construct rather than a tangible entity. Despite its emotional significance and socio-political importance, the concept of the 'nation' remains an imagined phenomenon. This framework offers a lens to examine the lives of new nomads. New nomads, a growing subculture in America, travel in vehicles, engaging in seasonal or digital work while embracing a lifestyle of mobility and adventure. Works like Foster Huntington's *Van Life: Your Home on the Road* offers personal narratives of van dwelling, which challenge traditional structures, including the concept of the 'nation,' revealing their inherent fluidity.

Keywords: New nomads, Subculture, Fluidity, Dynamism, Nationalism

1. Introduction

Benedict Anderson in his *Imagined Communities* points out how 'nation' is a cultural phenomenon, as opposed to something concrete. Though 'nation' and 'nationalism' hold great importance and emotional significance to many, 'nation' is still a construct. The literature narrating the life of new nomads can be studied based on this idea explained by Anderson.

New nomads are people who travel from place to place in their vehicles, doing seasonal jobs or digital jobs and live a life of travel and adventure. This is now a new popular subculture in America. There are several non-fictional works written on the life of new nomads. One such work is *Van Life: Your Home on the Road* by Foster Huntington. The writer himself is a van dweller, and narrates his own life as a nomad in this work. Works like this question several existing structures including the concept of 'nation' and reveals their fluidity.

2. New nomads and the Possibility of a New Sub culture

A new lifestyle is evolving in the world, with travel, adventure, and experience as its driving factors. The trend of living in houses on wheels that carry you to places and cultures you wish to explore has existed for some time. Now it is evolving as a major lifestyle in many parts of the world and especially in the United States. The new nomads are modern wanderers who are motivated enough to transcend traditional notions of settled living. They travel and explore diverse landscapes, utilizing local

work opportunities at places they reach or doing digital jobs. These people value experiences over possessions and relish in their freedom of a dynamic life. There are several works written by and about nomads. There are many American non-fiction writings, often written by new nomads, narrating about their life on vans. The paper analyses such a work, *Van Life: Your Home on the Road* by Foster Huntington, a new nomad writer.

Van Life contains autobiographical elements, as the author talks about his own life on van. But it is also like an interview collection, where the author has added interviews that he had with several new nomads from various parts of the United States as well as across the world. Photographs collected from these new nomads, occupy more than half portion of the work. The intention of the writer seems to be to give a clear picture of what is it like to live in a van and enjoy the freedom it offers. United States is turning out as a centre of this new lifestyle, gaining great popularity among people, who love adventure as well as those who finds it difficult to afford a permanent settlement. To these people, life on vans or new nomadism offers an escape route to a different life. When said this, the impact that this lifestyle will have on several existing structures also needs to be addressed.

New nomadism takes out of the picture the idea of a permanent home. This is not a simple change. A man's identity is defined by so many factors; his name, job, family, home, nation etc. While talking about home or family, the idea of having it in a building comes naturally along with it. Remember children drawing houses- a house with walls, windows and roof. The mountain beyond, blazing sun with its rays, a river that flows by, garden filled with trees and flowers. Father, Mother, and children (sometimes grandparents too) standing in the front courtyard. This has been the concept of home ingrained in our minds. Can these deeply rooted ideas be changed easily? The answer is yes, that is, if the situations demand it. After all, all the formerly mentioned concepts, such as identity, home, nation etc. came into being due to the demands of the situation. They are susceptible to changes, as they do not possess any essential elements within them. They were all products of history and culture, and therefore prone to changes.

Benedict Anderson in his work "Imagined Communities: Reflections on the Origin and Spread of Nationalism" defines nation as "an imagined political community – and imagined as both inherently limited and sovereign" [1]. He adds another idea of Ernst Gellner: "Nationalism is not the awakening of nations to self-consciousness. It invents nations where they do not exist" [2]. He clearly says that nation is a human construct. Just like the nation is an imagined concept, so are other concepts like identity, home, belonging and state. Though the concept of nation is deeply ingrained in the human psyche, and therefore believed to be unshakable, new nomads are clearly questioning the concept of 'state,' which is part of nation. One reason why nation evolved as a superior structure is because of the feeling of solidarity and oneness that it provides to the people. Anderson goes on: "the nation is always conceived as a deep, horizontal comradeship" [1]. This fraternal feeling is important for any community

to flourish. The new nomads are now clearly emerging as a community, though they are wandering folks. The digital platforms provide them the arena to maintain this fraternity and comradeship.

Anderson in another part of his essay mentions about how nation emerged as the “gauge and emblem of freedom – freedom from a divinely-ordained, hierarchical realm” [1]. Freedom has been a triggering factor in the emergence of nation. In *Van Life* Huntington shares his thoughts and expectations he had about van life: “my thoughts were consumed with exploring the never-ending dirt roads of the West and Mexico. I fantasized about exploring remote sections of Baja, sleeping under the red woods in Northern California, and carving through snowy roads in the mountains of Wyoming” [3]. Huntington’s thoughts bring to the mind the famous revolutionary and Civil Rights activist Martin Luther King’s desire for the bells of freedom to ring from every corner of America: “let freedom ring from the prodigious hilltops of New Hampshire. Let freedom ring from the mighty mountains of New York. Let freedom ring from the heightening Alleghenies of Pennsylvania.... From every mountainside, let freedom ring”(King). The new nomads also enjoy a similar freedom in their life. Huntington continues, “with a van or any vehicle that you chose to spend time in, it has the potential to fulfil both, that is, a place to call home and the ability to take that home where you please” [3]. He shares how travelling on his van provides him visceral feelings of excitement, exploration, and independence.

Any person, community or structure is shaped by the needs and demands of the environment. Anderson says, “human lives are full of combinations of necessity and chance” [1]. Many people across the world today are finding it difficult to have their ends meet in a fast-moving world. The economic conditions are not always favourable to the majority. In the United States, so many people find it difficult to pay their rent or afford a house with the income earned from their jobs. For such people especially, life on vans offers an alternate way of survival. Evolution and existence have always been based on adaptability. This new way of living can be regarded as a way of adapting according to the demands of the environment, here especially the economic environment.

New nomadic life is one based on minimalism. Cyrus Bay Sutton, a van dweller and filmmaker whom Huntington interviews says about the economic benefits of van dwelling. “There was no security deposit. No rent. My only expenses were food and gas in my tank, because I bought the van outright. All this allowed me to save money and get work done” [3]. Van life has so many factors that attract people, especially the middle class, who forms the majority anywhere in the world. Therefore, it is no wonder, this lifestyle is becoming popular with a potential to develop as a major subculture, not only in the United States but all over the world. Such a development will put under question all the structures formerly mentioned, including the structure called ‘nation.’ This lifestyle has already started diminishing the ideas of a permanent place and a permanent state. Since they are always travelling, anywhere the new nomads reach at, is their place and any state they travel through also becomes theirs,

until they travel out of it. As already indicated in the earlier part of the paper, though they are always travelling, new nomads are also arranging themselves as a community.

Anderson talks about several factors that contribute to the building of a nation, such as shared experiences, culture, writings etc that bind people together. New nomads may be wanderers. But they are constantly keeping in touch with others who share their lifestyle for help, guidance, companionship. Their experiences on road are similar, and this similarity brings them together as a group. To form a group or a community, people need not always be in each other's sight. In a nation, the people do not know everyone personally. In a country like India, where there are more differences than similarities among the people, nation is still a strong structure. In the same way, new nomads are also a community, especially with media playing a vital role in connecting them. The RVers depend more on social media platforms such as Instagram, Facebook, blog and so on to stay connected, help and guide each other, arrange occasional in-person meetings and to attract more people to this lifestyle. They make vlogs, post blogs, and let their life and experiences known to the outer public.

3. Conclusion

Many new nomads now travelling across their country aspire to take their lives in vans beyond the national borders. Someday in the future that could become possible, and it need not necessarily be a distant one. At that time, current structures may become archaic and be replaced by new ones, for as long as humanity exists, we cannot expect to completely do away with structures.

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