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THE HIMALAYAN OTHER: ORIENTALISM, EXOTICISM, AND THE CONSTRUCTION OF NEPAL IN WESTERN TRAVEL WRITING

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ABSTRACT

Western travel writing has played a significant role in constructing cultural images of Nepal and the Himalayas for international audiences. Particularly since Nepal's opening to sustained foreign tourism in the mid-twentieth century, travellers, writers, mountaineers, journalists, and cultural observers have produced narratives that frequently represent the country through images of remoteness, mystery, spirituality, exoticism, danger, authenticity, and timelessness. Although such narratives have contributed to Nepal's international visibility and tourism appeal, they have also participated in processes of cultural simplification and Othering. This article examines the construction of Nepal as the "Himalayan Other" in Western travel writing through the theoretical perspectives of Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, Mary Louise Pratt's notion of the contact zone, Stuart Hall's theory of representation, and John Urry's concept of the tourist gaze. The study employs qualitative textual and discourse analysis of selected Western travel narratives alongside relevant scholarship on tourism, representation, and Himalayan studies. It argues that Western travel writing frequently transforms Nepal from a historically complex and internally diverse society into an imagined space of authenticity, spirituality, remoteness, and difference. Three interconnected representational mechanisms are identified: spatial exoticisation, temporal distancing, and cultural essentialisation. At the same time, the article challenges a purely binary understanding of traveller and travelled-to by examining Nepalese agency, local negotiation, tourism entrepreneurship, and the possibility of a counter-gaze. The article further argues that contemporary travel writing requires a movement from a unilateral traveller's gaze toward dialogic representation that recognises local voices, historical agency, and cultural complexity. By bringing postcolonial literary criticism into dialogue with tourism and Himalayan studies, this article contributes to a more critical understanding of how travel writing constructs, circulates, and contests representations of Nepal and the Himalayas.

Keywords: Nepal, Himalayas, Travel Writing, Orientalism, Exoticism, Othering, Tourist Gaze, Representation, Postcolonialism, Cultural Identity, Tourism

1 INTRODUCTION

Travel writing occupies a distinctive position at the intersection of literature, autobiography, cultural observation, geography, journalism, and ethnography. Travellers do not merely move through geographical spaces; they interpret them. Individual encounters with landscapes, communities, cultural practices, and historical sites are transformed into narratives that subsequently circulate among readers who may never visit the places described. Travel writing has

therefore played an important role in determining how distant societies become culturally knowable and how particular places acquire meaning within the global imagination.

Nepal provides a particularly productive case for examining this representational process. For international audiences, the country has frequently been encountered through narratives of the Himalayas, the Kathmandu Valley, trekking routes, monasteries, temples, villages, mountaineering expeditions, and encounters with local communities. Such accounts have contributed significantly to Nepal's international visibility. At the same time, they have often relied upon a recurring vocabulary of remoteness, mystery, spirituality, authenticity, simplicity, danger, and exotic difference.

The central concern of this article is not whether Western travellers have described Nepal accurately or inaccurately in every individual instance. Such a binary approach would be inadequate for literary and postcolonial analysis. The more significant question is how recurring representational conventions transform Nepal into a particular cultural object. Why does Nepal repeatedly appear as a place outside ordinary modern time? Why does the Himalayan landscape so often become a symbol of spiritual escape? Why are particular Nepalese identities repeatedly associated with authenticity, simplicity, endurance, or mystical wisdom? And why do other dimensions of Nepalese society—urban modernity, political transformation, intellectual life, technological change, class mobility, gender relations, migration, and contemporary cultural production—receive comparatively less attention?

These questions suggest that travel writing is not simply a record of movement. It is a cultural practice of selection, interpretation, and representation.

This article argues that Western travel writing has contributed to the construction of Nepal as a “Himalayan Other” through three interconnected processes: spatial exoticisation, temporal distancing, and cultural essentialisation. Spatial exoticisation represents Nepal as geographically remote and culturally exceptional; temporal distancing positions it as belonging to an earlier, slower, or supposedly more authentic historical moment; and cultural essentialisation reduces complex and changing identities to apparently stable cultural characteristics.

However, the article also avoids reducing the relationship between traveller and travelled-to to a simple opposition between powerful observer and passive subject. Tourism encounters are sites of negotiation, appropriation, resistance, adaptation, and counter-gaze. Research on tourism in the Nepal Himalaya demonstrates that hosts and visitors may construct images of one another, producing shifting relationships between observer and observed (Guneratne; Lim, “Of Reverie and Emplacement”). The article therefore combines postcolonial critique with an examination of local agency.

2 TRAVEL WRITING AS CULTURAL PRODUCTION

Travel writing is frequently presented as a genre of personal experience: the traveller sees, experiences, records, and remembers. Yet the act of writing transforms individual experience into a cultural text. The traveller must select what to observe, what to describe, whom to name, which landscape to photograph, which conversations to reproduce, and which cultural practices to interpret.

A journey lasting several weeks may contain thousands of encounters, yet only a small proportion becomes part of the published narrative. This process of selection gives travel writing considerable representational power. The resulting narrative may ultimately become more influential than the traveller's actual experience because readers encounter the destination primarily through the textual and visual representations produced by the traveller.

Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the contact zone provides a productive framework for understanding this process. Pratt describes the contact zone as a social space in which cultures meet, interact, negotiate, and frequently confront relations of unequal power (*Imperial Eyes*). Travel writing emerges from precisely such encounters. Travellers and local communities do not necessarily enter these encounters with equal linguistic, economic, technological, cultural, or publishing resources. The traveller may possess greater access to international publishing networks and representational authority, while the local subject may become the object of description without having equivalent control over the final narrative.

This asymmetry does not mean that every travel narrative is consciously imperialist. Rather, the genre inherits historical conventions through which the traveller is positioned as an authoritative observer. The underlying structure can be summarised as follows: I went there; I saw them; therefore, I can tell their story.

Postcolonial criticism invites us to question the authority contained within this apparently uncomplicated structure. It asks who has the right to represent whom, under what conditions, through which categories, and with what consequences.

2.1 Edward Said, Orientalism, and the Travel Narrative

Edward Said's *Orientalism* provides one of the most influential theoretical frameworks for examining Western representations of non-Western cultures. Said demonstrates that representations of the East are embedded in systems of knowledge and power through which the Orient becomes an object to be described, classified, interpreted, and represented by Western institutions, scholars, writers, and travellers.

Travel writing is especially relevant to this framework because the traveller occupies the position of the mobile observer. The traveller moves through the represented space, while the local subject frequently remains within the landscape being described. This asymmetry can generate what may be termed mobile authority: the authority of an outsider who temporarily enters a place, interprets it, and subsequently leaves with a narrative that continues to circulate after departure.

In the Nepalese context, travellers may describe mountains, villages, religious practices, ethnic communities, architecture, food, poverty, hospitality, or political conditions. Such representations may appear personal and experiential, yet they can simultaneously reproduce broader cultural assumptions about Asia and the Himalayas.

Applying Said directly to Nepal, however, requires historical caution. Nepal was not formally incorporated into the British colonial empire in the manner of India and therefore cannot simply be equated with societies subjected to direct colonial administration. Nevertheless, the absence of formal colonial rule does not eliminate the relevance of postcolonial analysis. Nepal was incorporated into Western systems of exploration, mountaineering, anthropology, tourism, travel, knowledge production, and representation.

The critical issue, therefore, is not formal colonial administration alone but the persistence of representational asymmetry.

3 CONSTRUCTING THE HIMALAYAN OTHER

The concept of the Other is central to postcolonial theory. Difference in itself is not necessarily Othering. Othering occurs when difference is transformed into a defining cultural category and placed within a hierarchical system of representation.

Western travel writing about Nepal has frequently constructed the Himalayan Other through recurring oppositions:

- Modern/traditional;
- Urban/rural;
- Rational/spiritual;
- Developed/underdeveloped;
- Ordinary/exotic;
- Modernity/authenticity; and
- West/east.

These binaries are rarely articulated in such explicit terms. Instead, they emerge through narrative contrasts. A traveller accustomed to a technologically advanced urban environment encounters a village with limited infrastructure and interprets it as evidence of simplicity. A traveller from a predominantly secular institutional context encounters a monastery and interprets it as evidence of spiritual depth. A Western reader encounters a mountain community and may consequently associate it with authenticity and cultural purity.

The problem is not that such observations are necessarily false. Rather, they become problematic when isolated observations are generalised into representations of an entire society.

- A village becomes “Nepal.”
- A monastery becomes “Nepali spirituality.”
- A mountain becomes “the Nepalese experience.”
- A trekking guide becomes “the Himalayan people.”
- The complexity of the nation disappears behind the sign.

A postcolonial analysis therefore asks not only whether a representation is positive or negative, but whether it allows the represented subject sufficient historical, social, and cultural complexity.

3.1 Spatial Exoticisation

The first major mechanism of Othering identified in this article is spatial exoticisation.

Nepal is frequently represented as distant, remote, inaccessible, mysterious, and geographically dramatic. The Himalayas intensify this process because mountains already possess powerful symbolic meanings within Western literary and cultural traditions.

Physical distance can consequently be transformed into cultural distance. Nepal is not merely geographically far away; it is represented as being far from ordinary Western experience.

This transformation of geography into culture is central to exoticism. The farther away a place appears, the easier it may become to imagine it as extraordinary, untouched, or fundamentally different.

Tourism scholarship demonstrates the significance of such imagined geographies. Mark Liechty's historical analysis of tourism in Nepal situates the development of tourism within broader Western searches for cultural and spiritual alternatives to modernity ("Building the Road to Kathmandu"). The Himalayas consequently became more than a geographical landscape: they became an imagined alternative to Western modernity.

This process is important because it converts physical space into cultural symbolism. Mountains cease to be merely geological formations and become signs of purity, spirituality, adventure, endurance, and escape.

3.2 Temporal Distancing

The second mechanism is temporal distancing.

Western travel narratives frequently represent Nepal as though different historical periods coexist within the same geographical space. Kathmandu may be described as ancient; a village may appear timeless; traditional practices may be treated as surviving remnants of an earlier civilisation; and the Himalayan landscape may be imagined as untouched by historical change.

Such representations may appear romantic, but they have significant theoretical consequences.

When Nepal is positioned in the past, the West implicitly occupies the present. The representational binary becomes:

West = modern present

Nepal = authentic past

This constitutes a form of temporal Othering.

The problem is not that Nepal possesses ancient cultural traditions. It unquestionably does. The problem arises when cultural continuity is mistaken for historical stagnation.

Nepalese society has continuously negotiated tradition within contemporary institutions, markets, technologies, migration networks, educational systems, political structures, and global economic relations. Representing Nepal as "timeless" therefore risks converting cultural continuity into historical absence.

Temporal distancing also creates an asymmetrical conception of modernity: modernity becomes something that belongs elsewhere, while Nepal becomes valuable precisely because it appears to resist it.

4 CULTURAL ESSENTIALISATION

The third mechanism is cultural essentialisation.

Essentialisation occurs when complex, changing, and internally diverse characteristics are represented as fixed qualities of a people or community. In Western travel narratives, the "Nepali" may become synonymous with hospitality, the "Sherpa" with mountain endurance, the "Himalayan villager" with simplicity, and the "monk" with spiritual wisdom.

Such representations may appear complimentary, yet positive stereotypes can also constrain cultural complexity.

A person cannot be reduced to a single cultural function.

Sherpa communities, for example, are not merely figures within Western mountaineering narratives. They possess distinctive histories, social structures, economic transformations, political interests, and diverse contemporary identities. The same principle applies to the many ethnic, linguistic, religious, regional, and social communities that constitute Nepal.

A postcolonial approach therefore asks not only whether representation is derogatory but whether it permits represented subjects to appear as complex, historically situated, and internally diverse human agents.

4.1 Exoticism and the Search for Authenticity

The desire for authenticity is central to modern tourism. Tourists frequently seek places perceived as less commercial, less modern, and more culturally “real.” This desire is inherently paradoxical because tourism itself can transform the places that are being sought as authentic.

As tourism expands, local economies adapt. Hotels emerge, restaurants modify menus, guides develop professional identities, cultural performances may be reorganised, and traditional objects can become commodities.

The tourist therefore participates in producing the cultural landscape that he or she seeks to discover.

Nepal's tourism history illustrates this contradiction. Liechty demonstrates how tourism developed within a broader Western search for spiritual and cultural alternatives to modernity. The tourist consequently does not simply consume Nepal as a pre-existing cultural reality. The tourist gaze participates in producing a particular version of Nepal.

Authenticity is therefore not simply discovered; it is negotiated, performed, marketed, consumed, and sometimes strategically reconstructed.

4.2 The Tourist Gaze

John Urry's concept of the tourist gaze provides an important extension of Said's theory. Tourists learn how to look. A destination is not simply seen; it is recognised through culturally produced signs (Urry; Urry and Larsen).

In Nepal, these signs may include:

- Mount everest;
- Prayer flags;
- Monasteries;
- Temples;
- Trekking trails;
- Traditional architecture;
- Rural villages;
- Mountain communities;
- Colourful festivals; and
- Religious ceremonies.

These signs can become shorthand for the nation. Yet Nepal contains far more than these internationally recognisable images.

The tourist gaze therefore produces selective visibility: some forms of Nepal become highly visible while others remain comparatively invisible.

This is especially significant because tourism imagery can influence understandings of national identity. Research on tourism and ethnic representation in Nepal demonstrates how particular communities and landscapes may become disproportionately visible within tourism discourse (Guneratne).

The problem, therefore, is not exclusively Western representation of Nepal. There may also be internal hierarchies of representation within Nepal. A critical approach to Himalayan studies must consequently examine both external and internal processes of cultural selection.

4.3 Travel Writing and the Imperial Eye

The concept of the imperial eye is useful for analysing the representational authority embedded in travel writing. The imperial eye does not necessarily require direct colonial administration. Rather, it refers to a position from which the observer possesses the authority to classify, interpret, and narrate the observed world (Pratt).

A Nepalese subject may consequently be represented as:

- Primitive;
- Poor;
- Mystical;
- Colourful;
- Simple;
- Resilient;
- Traditional; or
- Authentic.

These labels may appear descriptive, but they organise cultural difference into recognisable categories.

A particularly revealing example is Jamaica Kincaid's *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya*. S. R. R. Bhat, through a critical discourse analysis of the narrative, argues that Kincaid's text reproduces forms of Othering through strategies including nomination, surveillance, negation, debasement, and binary rhetoric (Bhat).

The case is theoretically important because it demonstrates that representational Othering does not necessarily depend upon an author's explicit imperial ideology.

A writer may oppose imperialism at the level of political belief while nevertheless reproducing representational conventions inherited from metropolitan discourse.

This suggests that the study of travel writing must examine not only authorial intention but also the broader discursive structures within which individual narratives are produced.

5 THE PROBLEM OF THE “UNTOUCHED” HIMALAYA

Among the most powerful terms in Himalayan travel discourse is “untouched.”

The word suggests purity, remoteness, and cultural authenticity. At the same time, however, it implies absence: an “untouched” place appears to exist outside modern history.

Himalayan communities have never existed outside history. They have participated in trade, migration, religious exchange, agriculture, political institutions, regional networks, education, and economic transformation for centuries.

The representation of an “untouched” Himalaya therefore risks erasing historical agency. Mountains become scenery rather than lived environments, while people become cultural symbols rather than historical subjects.

This is why the language of authenticity requires critical examination. To call a place “untouched” is not simply to describe its physical appearance; it is to position that place within a particular historical imagination.

5.1 The Himalayan Landscape as Cultural Commodity

The landscape of Nepal is not merely represented; it is also commodified.

A mountain can become a tourism product. A trekking route can become a brand. A village can be marketed as an “authentic experience.” A monastery can become part of a cultural itinerary. A local festival can be transformed into a tourism spectacle.

Cultural commodification does not automatically signify exploitation. Local communities may use tourism strategically to generate income, develop infrastructure, strengthen cultural visibility, and expand economic opportunities.

Francis K. G. Lim's study of hotels in the Nepal Himalaya demonstrates how tourism infrastructure can mediate social domains and embed particular ideas of development in everyday life while simultaneously generating new power relations and forms of contestation (“Hotels as Sites of Power”).

The hotel, in this sense, is not merely a building. It becomes a site where global tourism, local aspirations, development ideologies, class relations, and cultural identities intersect.

Tourism thus creates a complex field in which global representations and local interests interact.

5.2 From Gaze to Counter-Gaze

A purely Said-inspired analysis may emphasise the representational power of the traveller. Contemporary tourism research, however, requires a more reciprocal model.

Lim demonstrates that hosts also possess images of tourists and their societies. The concept of the counter-gaze is therefore useful because it highlights the capacity of local communities to observe, interpret, evaluate, and respond to visitors ("Of Reverie and Emplacement").

The traveller observes the host, but the host also observes the traveller.

The tourist may consider Nepal exotic, while a Nepalese guide may consider the tourist's behaviour culturally unusual. The traveller interprets the village, while villagers interpret the traveller's dress, language, behaviour, expectations, and consumption practices.

The encounter is therefore reciprocal, although it is not necessarily equal.

The concept of the counter-gaze destabilises the conventional subject-object relationship and opens space for a more dialogic understanding of tourism encounters.

5.3 Local Agency and Cultural Negotiation

Local people do not simply accept external representations; they negotiate them.

A trekking guide may understand what foreign tourists expect and strategically modify the presentation of local culture. A hotel owner may combine traditional architectural elements with modern facilities. A cultural performer may adapt a ritual for tourism while maintaining community meanings. A local entrepreneur may transform an externally imagined cultural identity into an economic resource.

Such practices should not automatically be interpreted as cultural loss. They may represent forms of strategic agency.

The postcolonial subject is therefore not merely a victim of representation. The subject can appropriate, negotiate, redirect, and even commodify the gaze.

This does not eliminate unequal power relations. Rather, it complicates them.

Agency and structural inequality can coexist.

6 THE POLITICS OF REPRESENTATION

Representation has political consequences because visibility is unevenly distributed.

If Nepal is represented primarily as mountains, the Himalayas become the country's dominant international identity. If Nepal is represented primarily through spiritual imagery, political and social realities may become secondary. If particular Himalayan ethnic communities dominate tourism imagery, other regions and communities may become marginal within both international and national imaginaries.

The politics of representation therefore concerns both presence and absence.

- What appears?
- What disappears?
- Who speaks?
- Who is spoken about?
- Who becomes the authentic representative?
- Who remains invisible?

These questions should guide future scholarship on Nepalese travel writing and tourism discourse.

Representation should consequently be understood not as a neutral mirror of reality but as a process through which cultural meanings are selected, organised, circulated, and contested (Hall).

7 TOWARD A DIALOGIC TRAVEL WRITING

The alternative to Orientalist travel writing is not to prohibit outsiders from writing about Nepal. Such a solution would be neither intellectually productive nor necessary. Cross-cultural encounters can generate valuable knowledge and meaningful forms of cultural exchange.

The challenge is to transform the mode of representation.

A more dialogic travel narrative should:

- Acknowledge the traveller's positionality;
- Recognise the limits of outsider knowledge;
- Incorporate local voices;
- Avoid treating cultural identities as fixed;
- Distinguish personal experience from general cultural claims;
- Recognise Nepal's historical, political, and social complexity;
- Represent modernity alongside tradition;
- Foreground local agency;
- Avoid reducing the Himalayas to scenery; and
- Treat cultural encounter as reciprocal.

Such an approach would not eliminate difference. Instead, it would allow difference to exist without automatically converting it into hierarchy.

Dialogic travel writing therefore does not require the disappearance of the traveller's perspective. It requires the traveller to recognise that his or her perspective is situated, partial, and relational.

7.1 Rethinking the Himalayan Other

The concept of the Himalayan Other remains analytically useful, but it should not itself become another fixed category. The Himalayan Other is historically produced, and its meanings change according to broader global cultural and political conditions.

In nineteenth-century discourse, the Himalayas could represent mystery, danger, remoteness, and the sublime. In twentieth-century travel writing, they could become a spiritual refuge. During the countercultural era, Nepal could be imagined as an alternative to Western consumer society. In contemporary tourism, the Himalayas may represent adventure, wellness, authenticity, environmental purity, or personal transformation.

The cultural meaning of Nepal therefore changes with historical circumstances.

This is where the concept of neo-Orientalism becomes useful. The older Orientalist distinction between a supposedly superior West and an inferior East may be transformed into a more subtle distinction between an overdeveloped, stressful, materially successful West and an authentic, spiritual, natural, and culturally rich East.

The apparent hierarchy may therefore be reversed while its structural logic remains similar.

The West becomes materially powerful but spiritually deficient.

The East becomes materially poorer but spiritually rich.

Both positions are reductive.

Both can deny historical and cultural complexity.

Neo-Orientalism is thus not necessarily a simple continuation of negative stereotypes. It may also operate through positive exoticisation, in which the Other is romanticised precisely because it is imagined as possessing qualities supposedly lost by the modern West.

7.2 Methodological Implications and Future Research

The study of Himalayan travel writing would benefit from a more interdisciplinary methodology.

Literary close reading remains essential because narrative structure, metaphor, description, naming, imagery, symbolism, and point of view reveal how representation operates. However, textual analysis should be supplemented by insights from:

- Tourism studies;
- Discourse analysis;
- Visual culture studies;
- Anthropology;
- Media studies;
- Cultural geography;
- Postcolonial theory; and
- Digital humanities.

A future research project could construct a corpus of Western travel narratives about Nepal from different historical periods and analyse recurring representational terms such as “mystical,” “untouched,” “primitive,” “authentic,” “spiritual,” “remote,” and “timeless.”

Corpus-based analysis could identify changes in representational vocabulary over time and determine whether older Orientalist stereotypes have disappeared, transformed, or been reproduced through new forms of tourism discourse.

Future research could also compare Western travel narratives with Nepalese travel writing, journalism, documentary film, social media, tourism campaigns, and other forms of digital self-representation. Such comparative research would move the field beyond a critique of representation toward a fuller study of representational circulation.

This approach would make it possible to examine not only who represents Nepal but also how representations travel between tourists, local communities, tourism industries, governments, media institutions, digital platforms, and international audiences.

8 CONCLUSION

Western travel writing has contributed significantly to the construction of Nepal within the global imagination. Through narratives of mountains, spirituality, remoteness, adventure, authenticity, and cultural difference, travel writers have helped transform Nepal into a distinctive cultural landscape.

The problem is not that these representations are necessarily false. Rather, their repetition can produce reduction.

- Nepal becomes the Himalayas.
- The Himalayas become spirituality.
- Spirituality becomes authenticity.
- Authenticity becomes timelessness.

And timelessness becomes a defining image of a modern and historically complex society.

This chain of representation produces what this article conceptualises as the Himalayan Other.

Said's theory of Orientalism helps reveal the relationship between representation and power; Pratt's contact-zone framework explains the interactive and often unequal nature of travel encounters; Hall's theory of representation demonstrates that cultural meaning is produced rather than simply reflected; and Urry's concept of the tourist gaze reveals how destinations become objects of selective visual and cultural consumption.

Nepal-specific research further complicates this model by demonstrating local negotiation, counter-gaze, tourism entrepreneurship, and competing forms of national representation (Guneratne; Lim, “Hotels as Sites of Power”; Lim, “Of Reverie and Emplacement”).

The future of Nepalese travel-writing studies should therefore move beyond the simple opposition between the Western traveller and the Nepalese subject. The more productive question is how different actors participate in constructing, contesting, negotiating, appropriating, and circulating images of Nepal.

A postcolonial approach must ultimately restore historical and cultural complexity to the Himalayan landscape.

Nepal is not merely an exotic destination. It is a modern nation with ancient histories, contemporary struggles, diverse communities, global connections, political transformations, cultural creativity, and rapidly changing social realities.

The Himalayas are not merely scenery. They are lived environments, cultural landscapes, economic spaces, and historical worlds.

And Nepalese people are not simply objects of the tourist gaze. They are observers, narrators, interpreters, entrepreneurs, writers, artists, scholars, citizens, and producers of their own cultural meanings.

The movement from representation to self-representation is therefore central to the decolonisation of Himalayan discourse.

The challenge for contemporary travel writing is not to stop travelling, observing, or writing. It is to learn how to represent without reducing, encounter without possessing, describe without essentialising, and engage with difference without converting difference into hierarchy.

Such a transformation can provide the foundation for a more ethical, dialogic, and genuinely postcolonial understanding of Nepal and the Himalayas.

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