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COLONIAL GAZES AND MYTHIC LANDSCAPES: A CRITICAL STUDY OF EUROPEAN TRAVELOGUES ON KASHMIR

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ABSTRACT

Travel writing, particularly from the colonial period, has significantly influenced the ways in which places like Kashmir are imagined and understood. European travelogues on Kashmir are not just descriptive texts; they are a form of cultural production that participates in the broader discourse of colonial power, representing the region through a Western, often exoticized lens. These travelogues, while seemingly concerned with documenting landscapes and cultures, are deeply ideological, reflecting the colonial desire to construct and control the "other." This article situates European travel narratives on Kashmir within postcolonial and critical theoretical frameworks, exploring how these texts construct space, identity, and knowledge, and how these constructions perpetuate particular visions of the world.

Keywords: Kashmir, Colonial Gazes, Mythic Landscapes

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1. INTRODUCTION

The genre of the travelogue has long been viewed as a neutral form of exploration and documentation. However, as scholars like Mary Louise Pratt (1992) and Edward Said (1978) have argued, travel writing is a key instrument in the construction of colonial knowledge and power. Travelogues are not innocent accounts of foreign lands but are deeply imbricated in imperialist projects, serving to represent non-Western spaces in ways that align with colonial ideologies.

Travel writing, as a genre, occupies a unique space within literary and historical narratives, where fact and fiction, observation and imagination, converge to create a representation of the "other." Far from being neutral or objective, travelogues are a form of cultural production that actively shapes the understanding of foreign places and peoples. Historically, travelogues have been implicated in the broader projects of imperialism and colonialism, functioning as a textual extension of empire. They are often seen as reflective of colonial desires, assumptions, and power dynamics, constructing the "other" in ways that legitimize and perpetuate Western dominance. This critical perspective on travel writing necessitates an engagement with its political, cultural, and ideological underpinnings, particularly when examining regions like Kashmir that have been subject to persistent colonial and postcolonial discourses.

In the context of Kashmir, European travelogues from the 17th to the 19th centuries have played a pivotal role in shaping the Western imagination of the region. These texts often depict Kashmir as an idyllic "paradise on earth," a feminized, passive landscape that exists to be consumed and controlled by the Western gaze. This construction of Kashmir, while aesthetically alluring, effectively erases the political agency and complex histories of its people, reducing the region to a picturesque backdrop devoid of socio-political realities.

The theoretical approach to travel writing must engage with the idea of representation as a form of control. As Stuart Hall's (1997) constructionist theory of representation suggests, meaning is not inherent in the world but is constructed through language, discourse, and cultural practices. Travelogues, particularly those produced in the colonial era, are prime examples of how meaning is constructed through the selective presentation of certain images, while others are marginalized or omitted. In this case, Kashmir is represented not as a contested political space but as a romantic, serene landscape, ideal for Western consumption.

Travel writing on Kashmir aligns with what Pratt describes as "contact zones," spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in asymmetrical power relations. The European traveller, as the dominant figure, engages with the local landscape and people from a position of superiority, often determining the terms of representation. The resulting travelogues thus reflect not only the traveller's perceptions but also the ideological frameworks of the colonial powers they represent.

This can be seen clearly in the works of François Bernier and Walter Lawrence. Bernier, who travelled to Kashmir in the mid-17th century, described the valley as a terrestrial paradise, a landscape that offers the Western traveller an escape from the chaotic and "uncivilized" world outside. Lawrence's *The Valley of Kashmir* (1895), though more detailed in its socio-political observations, still presents Kashmir through a colonial lens, romanticizing the landscape while casting its people in stereotypes of laziness and deceit.

The representation of Kashmir as a feminized space also invites a gendered reading of these travelogues. As scholars like Anne McClintock (1995) have shown, colonial discourse often constructs the land as female, ripe for conquest and possession. Kashmir, in these European narratives, is not only a geographical entity but also a metaphorical woman, inviting the Western male gaze to conquer and control. This gendered dimension of travel writing reinforces the colonial logic of domination, where both land and people are subject to the power of the colonizer.

Travelogues also contribute to what Homi K. Bhabha (1994) calls the "ambivalence of colonial discourse." While they celebrate the beauty and mystique of Kashmir, they simultaneously depict its people as the "other," inferior and in need of governance. This ambivalence is central to the functioning of colonial power, where admiration for the land coexists with a desire to dominate its inhabitants. Travel writers often walk this line, praising the landscape while critiquing or dismissing the local population, thus reinforcing the ideological justification for colonial rule.

From a theoretical perspective, travel writing also engages with the Foucauldian notion of power/knowledge. As Michel Foucault (1980) argues, knowledge is never neutral; it is always tied to power. The production of knowledge about Kashmir through these travelogues is a form of control, a way of inscribing the region into Western narratives of discovery, exploration, and domination. By controlling the narrative, European writers were able to shape global perceptions of Kashmir in ways that served their colonial interests.

In contemporary scholarship, revisiting these travelogues allows us to deconstruct the hegemonic narratives that continue to influence the perception of Kashmir. These texts are not just historical documents but active agents in the ongoing construction of Kashmir's identity on the global stage. By analyzing travel writing through postcolonial theory, we can uncover the layers of ideology that underpin these narratives and challenge the simplistic and exoticized representations of Kashmir that still persist in the global imagination. This version integrates more complex theoretical concepts into the discussion of travel writing and uses a postcolonial lens to critique the genre's role in shaping the colonial understanding of Kashmir. Let me know how you'd like to proceed with the next sections.

2. FRANÇOIS BERNIER: CONSTRUCTING KASHMIR AS A TERRESTRIAL PARADISE

François Bernier, a French physician and traveller, is one of the earliest European figures to document Kashmir, with his travels occurring in the mid-17th century during the Mughal Empire's reign. His work, *Travels in the Mogul Empire*, published in 1670, is often considered one of the foundational European texts on Kashmir. Bernier's account is significant not only because of its early timing but also because of the way it embeds Kashmir within the broader Orientalist framework, which Edward Said (1978) later critiqued in his seminal work *Orientalism*.

Bernier's narrative is marked by a sense of wonder and awe at the natural beauty of Kashmir, which he famously described as a "terrestrial paradise." This image, now deeply ingrained in both Eastern and Western imaginations of Kashmir, owes much to Bernier's vivid and romanticized descriptions. He refers to the valley's lush meadows, flowing rivers, and towering mountains as if they were straight out of a biblical Eden. For Bernier, Kashmir represents an escape from the harsh realities of the world outside its borders, a place where nature's bounty seems untouched by time or strife. This idealized representation is reflective of the "imperial gaze," where non-European lands are constructed as spaces of untouched beauty, awaiting Western discovery and admiration.

However, Bernier's portrayal of Kashmir is more than just aesthetic; it is deeply ideological. By describing the region as an idyllic paradise, Bernier participates in the broader colonial discourse of constructing the East as an exotic, feminized "other" that stands in contrast to the rational, masculine West. His account aligns with what Mary Louise Pratt (1992) terms the "anti-conquest" narrative, where European travellers express wonder and admiration for the lands they explore, all while implicitly reinforcing their cultural superiority. In Bernier's case, his admiration for Kashmir's landscape is tempered by his subtle disdain for its people, whom he describes as superstitious, lazy, and untrustworthy. This dichotomy—praising the land while critiquing its inhabitants—serves to justify the notion that Kashmir, though beautiful, requires European guidance and control.

One of the key myths perpetuated by Bernier is the idea of Kashmir as a land of ancient origin, steeped in legend and mythology. He refers to local stories about the formation of the valley, particularly the tale of the sage Kashyapa who drained the Satisar lake, thus giving birth to Kashmir. Bernier's account aligns this myth with Western biblical narratives, comparing Kashmir to the Garden of Eden and suggesting that it might even be the site of the biblical paradise. This act of conflating local mythology with Western religious traditions serves to legitimize European interest in the region, framing it as a place of universal, rather than purely local, significance.

Bernier's influence on subsequent European travellers cannot be overstated. His depiction of Kashmir as a paradise on earth became a template for future travel writers, both European and later Indian, who continued to foreground the valley's natural beauty while marginalizing its political and social complexities. His travelogue not only shaped Western perceptions of Kashmir but also contributed to the colonial project of appropriating the region's identity, reducing it to an object of desire for the West.

3. ALDOUS HUXLEY: A DISENCHANTED VIEW OF KASHMIR

In contrast to Bernier's romanticized vision, Aldous Huxley's account of Kashmir, found in his 1926 travelogue *Jesting Pilate: The Diary of a Journey*, presents a more critical and cynical perspective. Huxley, a British writer and intellectual known for his works on dystopia and human nature, travelled to Kashmir in the early 20th century, at a time when the British Empire was at its zenith. His visit to Kashmir forms part of his broader travels across the colonial world, where he critically examines not only the places he visits but also the role of the British Empire in those regions.

Huxley's approach to Kashmir is markedly different from Bernier's. While he acknowledges the natural beauty of the region, he is far less enchanted by it. His descriptions of the landscape are tinged with disappointment and disillusionment. For instance, he compares the famous Mughal gardens of Srinagar unfavourably to the gardens of Europe, describing them as "disappointingly inferior" and lacking the grandeur and sophistication of Western horticultural achievements. His tone is one of bemused detachment, as though the Kashmir he encounters does not live up to the mythic paradise he had been led to expect.

This sense of disenchantment extends to Huxley's observations of the people of Kashmir. Much like Bernier, Huxley's travelogue perpetuates stereotypes about Kashmiris, portraying them as lazy and deceitful. In one passage, he comments on the widespread poverty in the region, noting that it is cheaper to use men as beasts of burden than to employ animals. He cynically remarks that Kashmiris, despite their abject conditions, seem "quite happy," a statement laced with colonial condescension. Huxley's narrative suggests that the people of Kashmir, like many other colonized populations, are somehow accustomed to their suffering, and thus unworthy of deeper sympathy or political engagement.

What distinguishes Huxley's account from Bernier's is his explicit critique of the colonial project. While Bernier's travelogue subtly reinforces the need for European intervention in Kashmir, Huxley's writings are more self-aware and critical of the British Empire's role in perpetuating inequality and exploitation. However, even in his critique, Huxley remains trapped within the colonial framework. He views Kashmir through a Eurocentric lens, comparing it constantly

to European standards and finding it wanting. His disappointment in Kashmir's failure to live up to the Western ideal reveals the deep-seated assumptions that still govern his worldview.

Huxley's travelogue also engages with the broader theme of alienation. In *Jesting Pilate*, he frequently reflects on the absurdity and futility of the British presence in India and its territories. His disillusionment with Kashmir mirrors his larger disillusionment with empire, as he questions the moral and ethical basis of British colonialism. Yet, despite his critical stance, Huxley's portrayal of Kashmir is still embedded within the structures of power and dominance that characterize colonial discourse. His travelogue, like those before him, contributes to the exoticization and marginalization of Kashmir, even as it seeks to critique the empire.

4. COMPARISON AND CRITICAL PERSPECTIVE

Both Bernier and Huxley, despite their different historical and ideological contexts, participate in the broader colonial project of representing Kashmir through a European lens. Bernier's travelogue is more aligned with early Orientalist writings, where Kashmir is constructed as a paradise, an object of European desire, and a space ripe for Western control. His narrative reflects the early stages of European engagement with the East, where travel writing served to both document and legitimize colonial interests.

Huxley's account, on the other hand, reflects a more modern, disillusioned perspective on colonialism. His travelogue is less about admiration and more about critique, yet it remains grounded in the same Eurocentric assumptions that shaped Bernier's writings. Both writers, despite their differing attitudes, contribute to the ongoing construction of Kashmir as an exotic "other," a place defined by its beauty and its difference from the West.

The critical perspective on these travelogues highlights how deeply embedded they are in the ideological frameworks of colonialism. Travel writing, far from being an innocent genre, serves as a vehicle for the production of knowledge that reinforces power structures. By framing Kashmir as a place of beauty but devoid of political agency, Bernier and Huxley contribute to the silencing of Kashmir's historical and social realities, perpetuating the myth of the region as a passive, feminized landscape.

5. THOMAS MOORE: ROMANTICIZING KASHMIR IN VERSE

While Thomas Moore is primarily known as a poet rather than a traditional travel writer, his 1817 narrative poem *Lalla Rookh* profoundly influenced how Kashmir was perceived in the European imagination. Moore never visited Kashmir, yet his poem set the region firmly within the Romantic tradition, portraying it as an exotic, mythical paradise.

In *Lalla Rookh*, Kashmir is depicted as a land of unparalleled beauty, filled with rose-covered valleys, crystal-clear rivers, and serene mountains. Moore draws heavily on Orientalist tropes, where the East is seen as a mysterious, sensual, and feminized space. Kashmir in *Lalla Rookh* becomes a literary dreamscape, a site of romance and escape. Moore's work helped to solidify the notion of Kashmir as a "fairyland" in the Western imagination, where the natural landscape is foregrounded and the local population is largely invisible.

The critical issue with Moore's portrayal lies in the fact that it perpetuates the construction of Kashmir as a passive, idyllic space available for Western desire and consumption. His work aligns with what Edward Said (1978) describes as Orientalism: the Western practice of defining the East as the "other," a place of fantasy that is inferior to the rational, developed West. Moore's poem, though fictional, has had real-world consequences in how Kashmir continues to be imagined, both in literary and political contexts. By romanticizing Kashmir, Moore's work set the stage for subsequent travellers who would reinforce the image of the region as a paradise, obscuring its political realities.

6. WILLIAM MOORCROFT: THE COLONIAL MISSIONARY AND EXPLORER

William Moorcroft, a British veterinarian and explorer, visited Kashmir in the early 19th century during his travels through the Himalayan provinces. His travelogue, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Punjab* (1819–1825), co-authored with George Trebeck, presents a detailed account of Kashmir's natural resources, trade routes, and social structures.

Moorcroft's travelogue is particularly significant because it reflects the intersection of colonial interests and scientific exploration. His mission to Kashmir was not merely one of observation but also of assessing the region's

economic and strategic potential for the British Empire. His detailed descriptions of Kashmir's agriculture, crafts, and geography were meant to serve the British colonial administration, which sought to extend its influence over the region.

Moorcroft, like many colonial travellers, viewed Kashmir through the lens of Western superiority. While he admired the ingenuity of Kashmir's craftspeople, particularly in the production of Pashmina shawls, his overall portrayal of the people was negative. Moorcroft described the Kashmiris as "selfish, superstitious, ignorant, and dishonest," attributing their character to centuries of oppressive rule. This narrative served to justify British intervention in the region, implying that the Kashmiris were incapable of governing themselves and needed the guiding hand of a more "civilized" power.

Moorcroft's travelogue also contributes to the idea of Kashmir as a valuable resource for the British Empire. His focus on the region's agricultural and artisanal potential demonstrates the economic motivations behind colonial interest in Kashmir. While his account is less romanticized than those of other travellers, it nevertheless participates in the broader project of colonial domination, where the land and its resources are catalogued for imperial benefit.

7. WALTER R. LAWRENCE: THE DEFINITIVE COLONIAL ACCOUNT

Walter R. Lawrence, a British settlement officer, produced one of the most influential accounts of Kashmir in his 1895 book *The Valley of Kashmir*. Unlike many earlier travel writers, Lawrence spent an extended period in Kashmir, conducting a detailed survey of the region's land, people, and economy. His travelogue, considered one of the most comprehensive accounts of Kashmir during the British colonial period, is often praised for its detail and sympathy toward the Kashmiri people.

However, despite its apparent objectivity, *The Valley of Kashmir* must be read critically, particularly in light of its colonial context. Lawrence's work reflects the attitudes of the British Raj, where the primary aim was to gather information that would help in the administration and control of the region. His descriptions of Kashmir's natural beauty are interspersed with practical concerns about land reform, agriculture, and taxation, all of which were part of the British effort to consolidate their rule over the region.

Lawrence's portrayal of the Kashmiri people, though more sympathetic than that of Moorcroft, still echoes colonial stereotypes. He describes the Kashmiris as "cunning" and prone to deceit, yet he also acknowledges that these traits were the result of generations of oppressive rule, first by the Mughals, then the Afghans, and finally the Dogras. His account, while more nuanced than those of his predecessors, still operates within a colonial framework where the people of Kashmir are seen as passive subjects of history, shaped by the forces of empire rather than as active agents in their own right.

Lawrence's travelogue also perpetuates the myth of Kashmir as a "Happy Valley," a term that was popularized by W. Wakefield's 1879 travel book *The Happy Valley: Sketches of Kashmir and the Kashmiris*. This idyllic image, reinforced by Lawrence's descriptions of the valley's natural beauty, helped to solidify the perception of Kashmir as a peaceful, serene place—a narrative that stood in stark contrast to the political realities of the region, which was often marked by violence and upheaval under foreign rule.

8. EMILY EDEN: GENDER AND THE COLONIAL GAZE

Emily Eden, a British aristocrat and the sister of Governor-General Lord Auckland, visited Kashmir in 1838 and recorded her experiences in the form of letters, which were later published as *Up the Country* (1866). Eden's account offers a rare perspective, as travel writing from women during this period was relatively uncommon. Her writings provide valuable insights into how gender influenced the colonial gaze.

Eden's portrayal of Kashmir is heavily influenced by her status as a woman of the British aristocracy. Like other travel writers, she marvels at the beauty of the region, comparing its landscapes to the idyllic gardens of Europe. However, Eden's narrative is also shaped by her gendered experience of travel. She focuses on the domestic and social lives of the people she encounters, offering detailed descriptions of Kashmiri women, their clothing, and their homes. These observations, while more intimate than those of her male counterparts, still reflect the exoticizing tendencies of colonial discourse, where the East is constructed as a site of difference, particularly in relation to gender and sexuality.

Eden's travelogue, like those of other European writers, reinforces the feminization of Kashmir. The land is portrayed as a beautiful, passive space, waiting to be admired and controlled by the male colonial gaze. Her account aligns with Anne McClintock's (1995) argument that colonial discourse often genders the land as female, ripe for

conquest and domination. Even as Eden offers a female perspective, her narrative remains embedded within the structures of colonial power, where Kashmir is an object of desire for the British Empire.

The travelogues of François Bernier, Aldous Huxley, Thomas Moore, William Moorcroft, Walter Lawrence, and Emily Eden each contribute to a broader colonial discourse that has shaped the representation of Kashmir. Whether through romanticization, scientific exploration, or administrative surveys, these travel writers played a key role in constructing Kashmir as a feminized, exotic, and passive space. Their writings, while often admiring of the region's natural beauty, simultaneously marginalized its people and political realities, reinforcing the colonial binaries of the "civilized" West versus the "mysterious" East.

Critically examining these travelogues reveals how deeply intertwined they are with the ideologies of empire. They reflect not only the personal experiences of the travellers but also the larger colonial projects of knowledge production and control. These narratives have had lasting impacts, contributing to the enduring myths that surround Kashmir in both Western and South Asian imaginations.

In revisiting these travelogues through a postcolonial lens, we can better understand how travel writing has been complicit in the construction of Kashmir's identity as an object of desire, and how these representations continue to influence contemporary political and cultural discourses surrounding the region.

CONFLICT OF INTERESTS

None.

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