

Reimagining Nepal and the Himalayas: Postcolonial Representation, Neo-Orientalism and the Politics of Cultural Knowledge in Global Literature and Media

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Abstract: Nepal and the Himalayas have occupied a distinctive position in global literary, cultural and media discourse. Frequently represented through images of mountains, spirituality, remoteness, adventure, ancient tradition and cultural difference, the region has often been transformed from a complex social and historical space into an aesthetic and symbolic object for external consumption. Such representations are not necessarily produced through overt colonial domination. Nepal presents a particularly important case because, unlike many South Asian territories, it was not formally colonised by a European power. Nevertheless, colonial forms of knowledge production, classification, travel writing, visual representation and cultural comparison have contributed to the construction of Nepal and the Himalayas as an exoticised “Other.” This article examines these processes through the conceptual frameworks of Orientalism, postcolonial representation, neo-Orientalism and decolonial knowledge production. It argues that contemporary representations of Nepal frequently reproduce an inherited epistemic structure in which the Himalayas function as a spectacle of difference while Nepali subjects remain insufficiently represented as producers of knowledge about themselves. The article further argues that neo-Orientalism operates not simply through Western discourse but through tourism, global media, documentary cinema, digital platforms and the selective circulation of cultural images. At the same time, contemporary Nepali writers, filmmakers, scholars and cultural producers increasingly challenge such representational regimes by producing counter-narratives centred on locality, agency, plurality, memory and lived experience. The article proposes a shift from the study of Nepal as an object of representation towards Nepal as an active site of knowledge production. Such a shift, it concludes, is essential to decolonising Himalayan studies and developing a more dialogic, historically grounded and ethically responsible understanding of Nepal in global cultural discourse.

Keywords: Nepal; Himalayas; Orientalism; neo-Orientalism; postcolonialism; representation; decoloniality; literature; media; cultural knowledge

Introduction

Representation is never a neutral activity. To represent a geographical region, a community or a culture is also to select, organise and interpret particular forms of knowledge about it. Literature, travel writing, cinema, photography, journalism, tourism advertising and digital media therefore participate in the production of cultural meanings. They do not merely describe places; they help determine how those places become intelligible to audiences elsewhere.

Nepal occupies a particularly revealing position within this politics of representation. Internationally, Nepal is widely associated with Mount Everest, the Himalayas, trekking, Buddhist and Hindu spirituality, Sherpa communities, mountain adventure and an apparently timeless cultural heritage. These associations are not entirely false. Mountains, pilgrimage, tourism, diverse religious traditions and Himalayan communities are undeniably important aspects of Nepal. The problem arises when these selected characteristics become the dominant framework through which the entire nation is imagined.

The resulting representation can reduce Nepal to a picturesque landscape, a spiritual refuge, an adventurous frontier or a repository of ancient traditions. Such representations frequently marginalise the complexity of contemporary Nepali society: its urban transformations, political struggles, caste and ethnic relations, gender relations, economic inequalities, migration, modern education, technological change and debates about national identity.

The critical question, therefore, is not whether representations of Nepal are “true” or “false” in a simplistic sense. Rather, the question is: **Who has historically possessed the authority to represent Nepal, through which cultural forms, for which audiences, and according to which epistemological assumptions?**

This question connects Nepal to the wider intellectual tradition associated with Edward Said's *Orientalism* (1978), which demonstrated how Western representations of the East participated in constructing an imagined Orient in opposition to the West. Orientalism, in this sense, was not simply a collection of inaccurate descriptions. It was a system of knowledge and power through which the “Orient” was produced as culturally different, inferior, mysterious, irrational or timeless.

Nepal complicates this framework because it was never formally colonised by Britain or another European imperial power. A conventional colonial/postcolonial binary is therefore insufficient to explain the politics of Himalayan representation. Yet the absence of direct colonial rule does not imply the absence of coloniality in cultural knowledge production. Travel narratives, ethnographic practices, visual culture and tourism discourse could reproduce distinctions between the modern observer and the traditional observed even without formal territorial colonisation.

Previous scholarship has already demonstrated the relevance of this argument. Shuv Raj Rana Bhat's critical discourse analysis of Jamaica Kincaid's *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya*, for example, identifies processes of nomination, surveillance, negation, debasement and binary rhetoric in the representation of Nepali people, culture and landscape. Puspa Damai's analysis of Eric Valli's *Himalaya* similarly demonstrates how apparently sympathetic representations may reproduce the spectacle of the cultural "Other."

The present article extends this scholarship by placing literary and visual representation within a broader framework of **neo-Orientalism**. The term is used here to describe contemporary forms of cultural representation that may no longer openly employ nineteenth-century imperial stereotypes but nevertheless reproduce structures of exoticisation, cultural essentialism and epistemic asymmetry.

The article advances three central arguments. First, representations of Nepal and the Himalayas are shaped by a long history of external knowledge production in which the region is repeatedly transformed into an object of fascination. Second, contemporary global media and tourism can reproduce Orientalist structures in updated forms, even when the language of representation appears positive or celebratory. Third, the emergence of Nepali counter-narratives provides an important opportunity to move from representation of Nepal towards knowledge produced *from* Nepal.

Research Problem

The central research problem concerns the persistence of representational asymmetry in global constructions of Nepal and the Himalayas.

The dominant international image of Nepal is frequently organised around a small number of recurring cultural signs: mountains, spirituality, simplicity, remoteness, adventure, hospitality, ancient traditions and ethnic authenticity. Such signs are commercially and aesthetically powerful because they make Nepal easily recognisable within global cultural markets. However, recognisability can also produce reduction.

The problem is particularly significant because contemporary representation often appears benevolent. A documentary may celebrate Himalayan communities; a travel narrative may praise Nepali hospitality; a tourism advertisement may portray Nepal as a spiritual paradise. Yet even positive representations may become problematic when they freeze people within predetermined cultural identities.

This creates an important theoretical distinction between **negative Orientalism** and **romantic Orientalism**. The former constructs the Other as backward or inferior; the latter constructs the Other as pure, spiritual, authentic or untouched by modernity. Although apparently opposite, both can deny complexity. In each case, the represented

subject is prevented from appearing as an ordinary, internally diverse and historically changing society.

The research problem can therefore be formulated as follows:

How do contemporary literary and media representations reproduce or challenge neo-Orientalist constructions of Nepal and the Himalayas, and what forms of counter-representation can contribute to the decolonisation of Himalayan cultural knowledge?

Research Questions

This article addresses four interconnected questions:

1. How have Orientalist and postcolonial representational structures shaped global literary and cultural constructions of Nepal and the Himalayas?
2. In what ways do contemporary literature, cinema, tourism discourse and digital media reproduce neo-Orientalist images of Nepal?
3. How do Nepali writers, intellectuals and cultural producers challenge externally imposed representations?
4. What theoretical and methodological shift is required to move Himalayan studies from representation of the Other towards plural and locally grounded knowledge production?

Methodology

This study employs a qualitative, interpretive and interdisciplinary methodology. It combines postcolonial literary criticism, critical discourse analysis, cultural studies and decolonial approaches to knowledge production.

The research does not attempt to statistically measure every representation of Nepal in global media. Instead, it analyses recurring representational patterns across selected literary, cinematic, cultural and media discourses.

The analytical categories include:

- exoticisation;
- cultural essentialism;
- binary opposition;
- the construction of timelessness;
- the picturesque landscape;
- the spiritualisation of the Himalayan subject;
- the tourist gaze;
- ethnographic spectacle;
- the silencing of local agency;
- commodification of cultural identity;

- counter-narrative;
- epistemic agency.

The study draws theoretically on Edward Said, Homi K. Bhabha, Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, Frantz Fanon, Stuart Hall and subsequent postcolonial and decolonial scholarship. The methodological objective is not to declare all foreign representations of Nepal Orientalist. Such a position would itself become reductive. Rather, the study investigates **when, how and under what conditions** representation produces an asymmetrical relationship between observer and observed.

Theoretical Framework

Orientalism and the Production of the Other

Edward Said's *Orientalism* remains foundational for understanding the relationship between representation and power. Said argues that Western knowledge about the East historically participated in constructing the Orient as a conceptual opposite of the West. The significance of Said's argument lies not simply in identifying stereotypes. More fundamentally, he demonstrates that knowledge is connected to authority. When one group repeatedly describes another group, the describer acquires interpretive power. The Orient becomes something that can be classified, described, interpreted and possessed intellectually.

This framework provides a useful starting point for understanding Himalayan representation. Nepal may not have been a conventional European colony, but it has frequently appeared in external discourse as a space to be discovered, interpreted and visually consumed.

The Himalayan landscape becomes a spectacular object, while the people inhabiting that landscape may become secondary to the landscape itself.

Bhabha and the Ambivalence of Representation

Homi K. Bhabha's concept of ambivalence complicates a simple opposition between coloniser and colonised. Colonial discourse requires the Other to be recognisable but never completely identical to the colonising subject.

This insight is particularly relevant to representations of Nepal. The Himalayan subject is often represented as simultaneously familiar and strange: hospitable but mysterious, modern enough to communicate with the tourist but traditional enough to remain culturally exotic.

The result is a form of cultural ambivalence.

The contemporary tourist may wish to experience an authentic Nepal, but that authenticity is often defined in advance by the expectations of the visitor. The local subject is therefore encouraged to perform a version of identity that confirms the outsider's expectations.

Spivak and the Problem of Representation

Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?", introduces another dimension: the politics of voice.

Representation has two meanings: speaking *about* someone and speaking *for* someone. The problem emerges when powerful institutions claim to give voice to marginalised communities while continuing to control the terms through which those communities become visible.

This problem is relevant to documentary cinema, humanitarian media, tourism campaigns and ethnographic narratives. A filmmaker may claim to present an authentic Himalayan community, yet the community's own interpretive authority may remain subordinate to the filmmaker's narrative structure.

Decolonisation therefore requires more than including local people in a text. It requires questioning who controls the narrative.

From Orientalism to Neo-Orientalism

Orientalism in the classical sense is historically associated with imperial knowledge, colonial administration and European representations of Asia and the Middle East. Contemporary cultural production operates under different conditions.

Globalisation, tourism, digital communication and transnational media have transformed the production and circulation of cultural images.

Yet some structural features remain.

Neo-Orientalism can therefore be understood as a contemporary mode of representation in which older structures of cultural differentiation survive in revised forms.

The contemporary Himalayan "Other" does not necessarily appear as inferior. Instead, the Other may appear as:

- spiritually superior;
- environmentally pure;
- culturally authentic;
- untouched by modernity;
- naturally hospitable;
- mysterious;
- timeless;
- closer to nature.

This is important because positive stereotypes can be as limiting as negative ones.

If Nepal is represented only as peaceful, spiritual and traditional, the representation becomes incapable of accommodating conflict, modernity, political disagreement or social transformation.

The Himalayas as Spectacle

The Himalayas occupy an extraordinary position in the global imagination.

The mountain landscape is frequently presented through dramatic images: snow peaks, prayer flags, monasteries, trekking trails, mountain villages and climbers.

These images have considerable cultural and economic power. They shape tourism and contribute to Nepal's international visibility.

Yet the aestheticisation of the Himalayas can transform a lived environment into a spectacle.

The mountain is viewed rather than inhabited.

The village becomes scenery.

The local person becomes a cultural symbol.

The tourist becomes the principal subject of the narrative.

This reversal is significant because the Himalayas are not empty landscapes. They are lived environments containing complex histories, political relationships, economic systems, ecological pressures and cultural differences.

A decolonial approach therefore asks not merely how beautiful the Himalayas appear but **whose lives, labour and histories make that landscape possible.**

Travel Writing and the Tourist Gaze

Travel writing has historically played a major role in constructing cultural difference.

The traveller arrives as observer. The destination becomes the observed.

This asymmetry can become particularly pronounced when the traveller enters a society with expectations shaped by previous texts.

A visitor may arrive in Nepal expecting spirituality, simplicity and cultural authenticity. The journey then becomes an interpretive search for evidence confirming those expectations.

This is what may be called the **anticipatory gaze**.

The traveller does not encounter Nepal without assumptions. Nepal has already been partially constructed through books, films, photographs, advertisements and online platforms.

Jamaica Kincaid's *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* provides a useful case for examining this problem. Existing scholarship has shown how the travel narrative can reproduce processes of Othering despite its author's anti-imperialist positioning.

The lesson is theoretically important: **good intentions do not automatically eliminate Orientalist structures.**

A writer can admire another culture and still represent it through an unequal gaze.

Cinema and Ethnographic Spectacle

Film possesses exceptional power to shape cultural imagination because it combines image, sound, landscape, movement and narrative.

Eric Valli's *Himalaya* illustrates the complexity of this process. Puspa Damai's analysis argues that the film's attempt to foreground geographically remote and marginalised Himalayan people can nevertheless reproduce the ethnographic spectacle of the Other.

This does not mean that the film should simply be dismissed as Orientalist.

Rather, it demonstrates the ambivalence of representation.

A film may make a marginalised community visible while simultaneously transforming that community into an object of visual consumption.

Visibility and agency are therefore not identical.

A community may be highly visible while having limited control over the meaning attached to its visibility.

Tourism and the Commodification of Authenticity

Tourism represents one of the clearest contemporary mechanisms through which cultural identity becomes commodified.

The international tourism industry depends partly upon difference. Tourists travel because places are imagined as offering experiences unavailable in their everyday environments.

Nepal's global tourism image therefore depends on its perceived cultural and geographical distinctiveness.

Mount Everest, trekking, monasteries, festivals, rural villages, traditional architecture and ethnic cultures become marketable signs.

The concept of authenticity becomes especially important.

Tourists frequently seek an “authentic” experience. Yet authenticity is not always a naturally existing cultural condition. It can be produced through tourism itself.

A community may be encouraged to present particular clothing, rituals, food, architecture or performances because these correspond to tourist expectations.

In this sense, tourism can create a feedback loop:

external expectation → local performance → tourist consumption → global representation → renewed expectation.

Neo-Orientalism functions within this loop by repeatedly circulating simplified images of cultural difference.

Digital Media and the New Orientalist Gaze

Digital media has changed the geography of representation.

In the past, a foreign writer or filmmaker possessed substantial control over the global circulation of images. Today, Nepali individuals can produce and circulate their own

narratives through social media, YouTube, podcasts, digital journalism and independent publishing.

This offers significant possibilities for epistemic decentralisation.

Yet digital platforms also introduce new problems.

Algorithms tend to reward visually striking and emotionally immediate content. Mountain landscapes, exotic rituals and picturesque villages can therefore receive greater attention than complex discussions of political economy or social transformation.

The digital economy may thus reproduce older representational patterns through new technological mechanisms.

The issue is not simply who produces content but **what kinds of content become globally visible**.

A Nepali content creator may possess narrative agency while still adapting content to global expectations.

Thus, digital self-representation does not automatically equal decolonisation.

Nepal Beyond the “Shangri-La” Imaginary

One of the most persistent images associated with Nepal is the idea of the Himalayan paradise.

This imaginary presents the country as peaceful, remote, spiritual and relatively untouched by modernity.

The metaphor is attractive because it offers an escape from industrial modernity.

But it is historically problematic.

Nepal is not outside modernity.

It is deeply involved in global capitalism, migration, digital technology, international education, geopolitics, tourism and transnational labour.

Millions of Nepalis participate in global economic networks. Nepali cities have undergone rapid transformation. Youth culture is shaped by global media. Political institutions have changed dramatically over the twentieth and twenty-first centuries.

A representation that freezes Nepal in a premodern Himalayan landscape therefore excludes precisely those developments that define contemporary Nepali experience.

Internal Diversity and the Problem of Cultural Essentialism

Another limitation of dominant representations is their tendency to treat Nepal as culturally homogeneous.

In reality, Nepal contains extraordinary linguistic, ethnic, religious, geographical and social diversity.

The Himalayan region itself cannot be reduced to a single cultural identity.

The experiences of Kathmandu residents, Madhesi communities, hill populations, mountain communities, indigenous nationalities and migrant workers may differ substantially.

Gender, caste, class, ethnicity, religion and geography intersect in producing different experiences of Nepal.

A serious postcolonial study must therefore avoid replacing one stereotype with another.

It is not sufficient to say that “the West misrepresents Nepal.”

The more important task is to examine the **multiple Nepals** produced through different social experiences.

Decolonisation must therefore be plural.

Gender and the Himalayan Representation

Gender adds another important dimension to the politics of representation.

Women in Himalayan narratives may be represented through idealised images of resilience, spirituality, hospitality or traditional domesticity.

Such representations can erase women's individual subjectivity.

The female Himalayan subject may become symbolic rather than historical.

A decolonial feminist approach therefore asks:

Who speaks?

Whose labour is visible?

Whose body becomes part of the landscape?

Who is photographed?

Who remains behind the camera?

These questions are essential because tourism and media often aestheticise women's bodies, clothing and cultural practices while obscuring unequal labour relations.

Caste, Ethnicity and the Internal Other

Postcolonial analysis of Nepal must also address internal hierarchies.

A simplistic application of Said could create a binary between “Western outsider” and “Nepali insider.” Such a binary would ignore internal structures of power.

Nepal's history includes complex relations of caste, ethnicity, class, gender and regional inequality.

Consequently, the “Other” is not produced only through external representation.

Othering also occurs within societies.

This leads to an important theoretical proposition:

Decolonising Nepal's representation requires confronting both external Orientalism and internal hierarchies of representation.

The goal should not be to replace Western authority with a single national authority.

Instead, the objective should be to create a plural epistemic space in which historically marginalised Nepali voices can participate in defining what Nepal means.

Counter-Narratives and Epistemic Agency

Counter-narrative is central to decolonial scholarship.

A counter-narrative does not simply reverse an existing stereotype. It changes the terms of representation.

Instead of asking:

“How does the world see Nepal?”

the counter-narrative asks:

“How do Nepalis understand and represent their own worlds?”

This distinction is fundamental.

Nepali literature provides opportunities for exploring everyday experiences that global tourism narratives often overlook: migration, family, political conflict, memory, urbanisation, caste, gender, poverty, aspiration and cultural transformation.

These narratives destabilise the idea of Nepal as a single cultural object.

The significance of Nepali literature therefore extends beyond national literary studies.

It provides an epistemological resource for challenging externally imposed frameworks.

Decolonising Himalayan Studies

Decolonisation should not be reduced to removing Western scholars or Western theory.

Such an approach would be intellectually counterproductive.

Postcolonial theory itself has provided powerful tools for questioning knowledge and representation.

The challenge is to place global theoretical traditions into dialogue with locally grounded scholarship.

A decolonised Himalayan studies should therefore:

1. recognise Nepali scholars as producers of theory rather than merely sources of local information;
2. foreground Nepali-language and regional texts;
3. engage indigenous and marginalised voices;
4. examine internal structures of power;
5. resist cultural essentialism;
6. distinguish landscape from lived environment;
7. treat local communities as epistemic agents;
8. incorporate interdisciplinary approaches;
9. question commercial representations of authenticity;
10. encourage collaborative knowledge production.

This approach moves beyond the simple opposition between “Western” and “non-Western.”

The objective is epistemic plurality.

Discussion

The preceding analysis demonstrates that representation of Nepal and the Himalayas operates through multiple overlapping systems.

First, there is the **literary system**, through which travel narratives and cultural texts construct geographical and social difference.

Second, there is the **visual system**, through which photography and cinema transform Himalayan landscapes and communities into spectacles.

Third, there is the **commercial system**, through which tourism converts cultural difference into economic value.

Fourth, there is the **digital system**, through which algorithms influence which representations become globally visible.

These systems do not operate independently.

A photograph of a Himalayan village can appear in a travel magazine, become part of a tourism advertisement, circulate on social media and subsequently influence another traveller's expectations.

Representation therefore becomes recursive.

The image produces the expectation, and the expectation encourages another image.

Neo-Orientalism is powerful precisely because it does not require a single controlling institution.

It can operate through dispersed networks of writers, tourists, filmmakers, advertisers, algorithms, cultural institutions and consumers.

At the same time, the same networks create opportunities for resistance.

Nepali writers can publish globally.

Local filmmakers can produce independent documentaries.

Communities can narrate their own histories.

Digital platforms can challenge established media narratives.

The contemporary struggle is therefore not simply between representation and resistance.

It is a struggle over **who possesses the authority to define cultural meaning**.

Towards a New Ethics of Representation

A more responsible representation of Nepal requires an ethical shift.

The first principle should be **contextualisation**.

No image or narrative should be treated as representing an entire culture.

The second should be **plurality**.

Nepal should be represented as internally diverse rather than culturally homogeneous.

The third should be **agency**.

Local subjects should be understood as interpreters of their own experiences rather than merely objects of observation.

The fourth should be **historicity**.

Nepal should not be frozen in an imagined timeless past.

The fifth should be **reflexivity**.

Researchers, writers and filmmakers should examine their own position in relation to the communities they represent.

The sixth should be **dialogue**.

Knowledge about Nepal should emerge through interaction between local and international scholars rather than through one-directional observation.

These principles would contribute to an ethical model of Himalayan cultural representation.

Original Contribution to Knowledge

This article makes four principal contributions.

First: It extends Orientalism beyond formal colonialism

The study demonstrates that the analytical value of Orientalism does not depend exclusively on direct colonial administration. Nepal's experience reveals how cultural and epistemic asymmetries may exist even where formal political colonisation did not occur.

Second: It conceptualises neo-Orientalism as positive as well as negative

The article argues that contemporary Orientalism can operate through romanticisation, spirituality, authenticity and environmental idealisation, not only through negative stereotypes.

Third: It connects representation with commodification

The study links literary and media representation to tourism and digital cultural economies. Himalayan difference becomes not merely an ideological construction but also a commercially valuable cultural resource.

Fourth: It shifts the analytical centre from representation to epistemic agency

Rather than asking only how Nepal is represented by outsiders, the article argues for examining how Nepalis represent, interpret and theorise themselves.

This shift provides a pathway towards a more genuinely decolonial Himalayan studies.

Conclusion

Nepal and the Himalayas occupy a powerful position within global cultural imagination. Their mountains, landscapes, religious traditions, ethnic diversity and historical

complexity have inspired generations of writers, travellers, filmmakers, scholars and tourists.

Yet fascination can become a form of reduction.

When Nepal is repeatedly represented as mysterious, spiritual, timeless, authentic or untouched by modernity, the complexity of its contemporary social reality disappears behind a carefully produced image.

The problem is not that these representations contain no truth. Rather, the problem is that partial truths can become totalising representations.

Orientalism provides a valuable framework for understanding the historical production of such images, while the concept of neo-Orientalism helps explain their persistence under contemporary conditions of tourism, global media and digital culture.

Nepal's position outside formal European colonial rule makes the case particularly significant. It demonstrates that coloniality can operate through cultural knowledge and representation even without direct territorial colonisation.

At the same time, Nepal should not be treated merely as a passive victim of external representation. Nepali writers, scholars, filmmakers, journalists and cultural producers increasingly participate in the production of alternative narratives.

The future of Himalayan representation therefore depends on an epistemic transformation. The question should no longer be merely:

“How is Nepal represented?”

It should also be:

“Who has the authority to represent Nepal, and whose knowledge counts?”

A genuinely decolonial approach does not require rejecting international scholarship, Western theory or cross-cultural exchange. Instead, it requires transforming the relationship among them.

Nepal should be approached not simply as a geographical object to be observed, a cultural spectacle to be consumed, or a theoretical example to be interpreted.

It should be recognised as a **site of knowledge production**.

The Himalayas should likewise be understood not merely as a spectacular landscape but as a lived, contested, historically changing social and cultural environment.

Such a reorientation can produce a more complex understanding of Nepal—one that recognises beauty without romanticisation, difference without exoticisation, tradition without timelessness, and global scholarship without epistemic hierarchy.

Ultimately, reimagining Nepal means moving from **the gaze upon the Himalayas to the voices within the Himalayas**.

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