Mindscape: A Journal of English & Cultural Studies
ISSN (P) 2961-189X
eJournal Site :
- Peer-Reviewed, Open Access Journal
- Index in NepJOL
- Permanantly Archived in Portico

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Research Article

From Wildflowers to Yetis: Exploring Aesthetic, Mystery, and Self in Kincaid's and Chatwin's Himalayan Narratives

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Doi: 10.3126/mjecs.v3i1.89921

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Abstract

Traveling to the Himalayas transcends the mere act of conquering towering peaks and navigating rugged terrain; it unfolds as a profound journey into the intertwined mysteries of nature-wildflowers, mythic creatures such as yetis-and, importantly, a transformative odyssey of self-discovery. This study critically examines Jamaica Kincaid's Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya alongside Bruce Chatwin's On Yeti Tracks, focusing on how their narratives weave together the sublime and the enigmatic. Through comparative textual analysis, the article reveals the dual nature of the Himalayan journey as both an aesthetic immersion enriched by abundant flora and majestic landscapes, and as a mystical realm inhabited by folklore and myth. Both authors illustrate how their encounters with the Himalayas provoke a deep reevaluation of self and nature, shedding light on human curiosity, wonder, vulnerability, and transformation. For Kincaid and Chatwin, the Himalayan walk emerges not merely as a physical expedition but as a profound quest blending beauty and mystery in the search for identity.

Keywords: Aesthetic, Mystery, Self-discovery, Transformation, Yetis

Introduction

The Himalayas, the world's mightiest mountain range, carry a name derived from the Sanskrit words *hima* (snow) and *alaya* (abode), meaning "the abode of snow." This etymology not only describes their physical form but also signifies their symbolic resonance as realms of awe and mystery. As Harka Gurung notes in *Peaks and Pinnacles: Mountaineering in Nepal*, the Himalayas' "immense size dominating the sky evokes awe and wonder" and represent "the last frontier of human habitation" imbued with mythic significance-home to elemental forces like Mahadeva (Hindu Shiva) and tantric Padma Sambhava (133). Gurung's insight reveals the Himalayas' compelling duality: they exist simultaneously as a formidable natural power demanding respect and a sacred landscape enriched by religious and mythological narratives. This dual nature situates the

Himalayas as more than mere topography; they are deeply inscribed within the cultural, spiritual, and aesthetic consciousness of those who experience them.

Pratapaditya Pal, in *Himalayas: An Aesthetic Adventure*, further emphasizes the mountains as populated by "spirits and semi-divine beings, peacefully and wrathful celestials, and deities" (16), suggesting a landscape where the sacred permeates the natural world. The landscape carries sacred caves, glacial lakes, and thermal springs that infuse local legends, rituals, songs, and everyday life with mysticism and meaning. The Himalayas thus function as a liminal space where nature and spirituality converge, shaping both place and perception.

Within this context, Jamaica Kincaid and Bruce Chatwin offer two distinct yet interwoven Himalayan narratives. Kincaid's *Among Flowers: A Walk in the Himalaya* foregrounds the tangible-botanical exploration coupled with introspective solitude-inviting readers into a meditative encounter with the natural world. Conversely, Chatwin's *On Yeti Tracks* ventures into the intangible realm of folklore, probing the elusive legend of the Yeti and its place within Himalayan cultural imagination. This article critically examines how both authors navigate the tension between the Himalayas' aesthetic grandeur and its shrouded mysteries, revealing how the interweaving of natural beauty and myth challenges and reshapes travelers' understandings of self and environment.

Kincaid's narrative is deeply rooted in botanical aesthetics, where her collection of seeds becomes a potent metaphor for personal transformation. As she traverses the Himalayan foothills, her botanical quest paradoxically serves as an escape from material concerns, a deliberate embrace of solitude, and a confrontation with the unfamiliar. She elucidates her motivation:

> This account of a walk I took while gathering seeds of flowering plants in the foothills of the Himalaya can have its origins in my love of the garden, my childhood fascination with botany and geography, my enjoyment of isolation, of imagining myself entirely alone in the world with everything unfamiliar, or the familiar made strange, my appreciation for feeling fear yet not allowing it to deter me, my interest in distant things I have no desire to possess. (2)

Kincaid articulates a profound and complex relationship between nature and selfhood that transcends mere collection or observation. The Himalayas become a transformative realm where detachment from possession opens pathways to redefining one's identity. The aesthetic magnificence of the mountains heavily informs her experience, as she describes the landscape with vivid immediacy: "... hills ended in sharp, pointed peaks closely clustered, covered in what appeared to be everlasting and inviting green" (6). This portrayal captures the density and vitality of the terrain, evoking a timeless and almost mythical presence that situates nature as both comforting and otherworldly.

Kincaid's journey begins at Tumlingtar, progressing through Khandbari and crossing the Arun River before she ascends into the foothills. Along the route, she and her companions camp in various sites, discovering wild seeds such as beans, legumes, and codonopsis. These encounters introduce her to a diverse assembly of people-some reminiscent of Australians, others of Africans-moving towards Makalu or Everest. Every aspect appears fresh, animated by new species, cultures, and landscapes. Kincaid's enthusiasm is palpable when she notes, "We were going to look for flowers-or rather, the seeds of flowers. Walking around the village, I saw small gardens cultivating squash, corn, marigolds, and dahlias" (14). The simplicity of rural Himalayan life impresses her deeply, reinforcing the intimate link between human existence and natural cycles. As she ascends further, the mountain landscapes grow more awe-inspiring, underscoring nature's emotional and aesthetic impact. Roger Scruton explains in *Beauty: A Very Short Introduction* that beauty affects us in myriad ways-it can be "consoling, disturbing, sacred, profane; exhilarating, appealing, inspiring, chilling. It can affect us in countless ways" (xi). Kincaid's observations align with this complexity, especially as she witnesses the interplay of clouds with Mount Makalu's towering presence, "... the sky overhead was that magical blue, free of clouds and clear, though in the distance, a thick

milk-white substance-clouds-continued to conceal Makalu from my sight" (15). This dynamic of concealment and revelation conjures the mystery pervasive in the Himalayan sublime, a tension between clarity and veiling that captivates and heightens aesthetic experience.

As her journey unfolds, Kincaid grows increasingly attuned to nature's transformative influence. She recognizes the uniqueness of each step as a continuously renewing sensation, reflecting, "A mile or so on, I would round a bend, and unless I came this way again, I would have missed the chance to see a natural wonder of the world, a wonder I had not known before. It was then I felt a new sensation, one I had never experienced before" (15*).* This insight foregrounds the ephemerality of natural beauty and the imperative of mindful presence to fully apprehend it.

Interestingly, her intense engagement with the world around her causes a temporary detachment from everyday realities, immersing her in a realm that feels simultaneously foreign and enchanting. Yet this immersion triggers recollections of her personal life, capturing the paradoxical dynamic of being both "elsewhere" and grounded. "It was something like fear, but I was not truly afraid; it was something like alienation, but I didn't feel separated from the immediate world around me or my friends, Dan, Sue, and Bleddyn. I had left home less than a week earlier, and I had two children" (15). Kincaid's reflection emphasizes how sublime natural beauty can elevate yet simultaneously re-anchor the self, oscillating between transcendence and connection to personal identity and relational ties.

Throughout the trek, Kincaid remains keenly aware of her sensory environment-the shifting arrangement of rocks and boulders, rapid weather changes, and the auditory landscape. She recounts a particularly evocative encounter with a yak caravan:

> ... the sound of a caravan of yaks approaching me again. This happened twice more, and in a way, these encounters were a marvelous distraction. The herds consisted of about seven yaks each, and every yak was adorned with bells and strings of wool dyed red or white. (25)

Her detailed attention to sound, color, and movement emphasizes the multi-sensory immersion of her experience. The recurring presence of the yaks takes on a rhythmic, almost meditative quality, suggesting that the Himalayan journey cultivates not just visual appreciation but also a deeper emotional transformation.

As Kincaid reaches the mountain pass, her connection to the landscape intensifies into something ineffable, challenging her linguistic expression, "It was so unexpected, so pure, so genuine, yet not so much that I felt I would dissolve" (25*).* This concise statement encapsulates the paradox of the sublime-an experience both intensely concrete and surreal, in which the observer feels profoundly present yet fleetingly insubstantial. She associates departing the Himalayan journey with finishing a great book:

> Leaving the pass was like finishing a great book, which had provided every kind of satisfaction found in such a book, except that with such a book, you can immediately begin again on page one, creating the feeling of not having read it before, even though, in reality, you have. (26)

This analogy beautifully articulates the layered and renewing nature of her experience. Much like returning to a complex text, each engagement with the Himalayas unfolds fresh perspectives. The landscape's infinite variations continuously offer new discoveries, rendering every moment unique, and irreplaceable.

At Topke Gola, Kincaid finds herself immersed in a realm that straddles the boundary between the dreamlike and the sacred. The presence of a monastery, a fountain, and a sacred lake suffuses the place with a serene and reverent atmosphere, offering a stark yet harmonious contrast to the physical challenges of the journey. This part of her trek reveals how spiritual and natural

elements intertwine to create layers of meaning that transcend mere geography. Kincaid captures this duality as she describes the descent with a poignant mixture of fear and awe: "The walk down was dangerous, each step felt like a risk of disaster, a jumble of rocks and boulders, but in this part of the world, the usual was always true. And then I noticed something new..." (27). This statement highlights the inherent paradox of the Himalayas-simultaneously harsh and familiar, unpredictable yet governed by a pattern that invites trust. The landscape's relentlessness coexists with moments of surprising revelation, demonstrating how the mountain environment continuously unveils new aspects that reshape the traveler's perception.

Kincaid's reflection extends to the timelessness perceptible in nature, emphasizing phenomena that endure beyond human attention or intervention. She writes, "The water falling out of the mountain, down into an abyss I would never see again, for example. And it seemed to fall forever, unchanging, whether I could see or hear it or not" (33). This evokes the sublime notion of nature's permanence and indifference to humanity, a presence vast and invariant against the fleetingness of human life. Through this, she not only acknowledges the Himalayas' physical grandeur but also their metaphysical dimension-existing as a dynamic force beyond human immediacy or control.

Describing the Himalayan panorama, Kincaid evokes imagery that transcends conventional description by capturing a sense of grandeur that borders on the ineffable: "A wide view of green, forest-covered mountains reaching up to touch the endless, clear blue sky, with the mountains themselves stretching down into a valley too deep to see the bottom" (35). The impression here is one of boundlessness-the visual convergence of earth and sky producing an illusion of infinity. The depth of the valley and the vastness of the terrain gesture toward a world extending beyond human grasp, framing the Himalayas as a liminal space where physical magnitude borders on the mystical, inviting contemplation of both nature's beauty and its inscrutable depths.

While Kincaid's engagement centers on the tangible natural world-flora and landscape-Bruce Chatwin's *On Yeti Tracks* turns attention toward the intangible, focusing on Himalayan folklore and, most notably, the enduring mystery of the Yeti. Chatwin journeys through the Everest region known as Khumbu Himal, describing the two primary routes for travelers-either a strenuous week-long trek over high passes or a flight to Lukla. The region's cultural richness is vividly conveyed through its abundance of myths featuring creatures such as dragons, snowmen, and others of the supernatural realm. Among these, the Yeti holds a particularly powerful place in local belief systems as a liminal figure between human and animal. Jonathan Chester, in *The Himalayan Experience*, elaborates:

> The Yeti, also called the abominable snowman, is probably the most famous of Himalayan creatures, but there is still no scientific evidence that it exists. It is said to live between 2,000 meters (6,560 feet) and 3,500 meters (11,480 feet) in the thick forests of the eastern Himalayas. Temple and monastery paintings show two types: one looks like a large monkey, the other resembles a bear. The smaller Yeti is said to feed on humans, the larger ones on yaks. (99*)*

Chester's account reveals how the Yeti legend comprises a nuanced folklore ecosystem, with distinct forms conceptualized and depicted in local art and narrative tradition. This bifurcation illustrates the depth and specificity of Himalayan mythmaking beyond simplistic monstrous archetypes.

Sir Edmund Hillary's memoir *View from the Summit* further details the enduring faith that the Sherpas and monks place in the Yeti. Hillary recounts a remarkable encounter shared by the Sherpa Sen Tenzing, who, while descending alone from Tenboche Monastery, "suddenly saw a hairy Yeti coming up the path toward him" (246). This anecdote underscores the creature's cultural resonance, embodying a presence firmly woven into Sherpa cosmology and spirituality, irrespective of Western skepticism. Hillary himself reflects on the ambivalence surrounding the Yeti, "I had always been somewhat doubtful about the Yeti. There was plenty of unexplained evidence-footprints in the

snow; a scalp kept in Khumjung Monastery; a bony hand at Pangboche Monastery; stories from monks and Sherpas living in remote places" (242). This admission situates the Yeti as a figure both enigmatic and emblematic of the Himalayan cultural fabric, significant in collective imagination regardless of empirical validation.

Similarly, Nepali scholars Ganesh Gurung and Ujwal Gurung examine the enduring intrigue around the Yeti in their article "Yeti died in Dhampus Pass, Near Dhaulagiri Mountain," noting, "The story has always stuck with us, especially the name Yeti, which made us curious about this mysterious and elusive mythical creature said to live in the Dhaulagiri range. While trekking, we constantly looked for footprints or local stories about the Yeti" (10). This scholarly perspective highlights the dialectic between curiosity and skepticism that animates both local and outsider engagements with the legend, marking the Yeti as a cultural icon that mediates encounters with the unknown.

Chatwin's own narrative weaves this tension of awe and doubt as he traces the Yeti's supposed trail, journeying from Lukla through Phakhding, Namche, Thame, Khumjung, and finally Gokyo. His path is more than geographic; it engages an interior landscape fraught with wonder and uncertainty. The journey is suffused with Buddhist spiritual markers-prayer flags fluttering in the wind, stone slabs inscribed with sacred mantras-connecting the physical terrain with metaphysical dimensions. Chatwin notes, "Every half mile or so, we passed a wall made of stone slabs, each carved with the mantra Om mani padme hum -'Om! Jewel in the Lotus! Hum!'" (273). He discovers that "Hum" signifies both the cosmic height and depth of the universe, and that circumambulating these prayer walls clockwise is believed to invoke good fortune. Such details illuminate how spiritual belief permeates the landscape, imparting meaning to the mountains beyond their physical grandeur.

Chatwin offers evocative comparisons that deepen this spiritual-historical aura: Namche is likened to an ancient Greek theater's seating, underscoring its natural amphitheatrical setting, while Thame Monastery reveals a rich repository of myth and ritual. Here, Chatwin first hears accounts of the Yeti, with his Sherpa guide Sangye Dorje distinguishing two types, ". . . there are two kinds of Yeti: the mih-teh, which kills people, and the dzu-teh, which kills only animals" (276). Dorje further suggests that the Yeti transcends folklore to embody "some kind of god" (276), a figure both feared and revered. A story of a woman reportedly attacked by the Yeti situates the creature within lived experience rather than mere myth. Additionally, a monk paints a vivid, almost cinematic depiction, *"*Bigger than a man," the monk said, "with terrible yellow eyes, arms almost touching the ground, red hair growing upwards from the waist, and a white crest on top." (276). At Khumjung Gompa, Chatwin encounters a purported Yeti scalp, symbolically charged as an artifact that bridges myth and material culture.

Throughout his journey, Chatwin's descriptions evoke a landscape both majestic and contemplative. The route, lined with *gompas*-Buddhist monasteries-enhances the atmosphere of solemnity and introspection. Observing yaks grazing against the stark mountain skyline, he notes, "We were walking to Gokyo along a steep trail on the side of Khumbu Ylha. Yaks grazed up to the skyline, and among them were wild goats with reddish hair blowing in the wind" (279). This sensory tableau underscores the Himalayas' dramatic contrasts: untamed wilderness inhabited by domesticated animals, the convergence of wildness and culture, beauty and isolation. For Chatwin, the mountains become a paradoxical realm where exquisite natural beauty coexists with eerie solitude and where myth and reality blur, fueling the traveler's quest for meaning in the unknown.

While local belief invests the Yeti with spiritual and cultural significance, Chatwin situates this legend within a broader history of mythical "wild men." He references Pliny the Elder's *Natural History* (VII,9), which describes a "race of 'wild men' living in the mountains of Imaeus (the Eastern Himalayas), moving with astonishing speed and having huge feet that are turned backward" (279). The resemblance of these ancient accounts to contemporary Sherpa

descriptions hints at a persistent human fascination with liminal creatures dwelling on the edge of civilization and wilderness.

Despite numerous purported encounters-including photographs of yeti footprints by mountaineers Eric Shipton and Sir John Hunt and accounts of eerie screams-scientific evidence remains elusive. Chatwin acknowledges this while emphasizing the cultural resilience of the legend. He even entertains psychological explanations for sightings, remarking, "I believed that those most likely to 'see' Yetis were simple-minded or mentally ill; religious ascetics or impoverished people (both prone to protein deficiency); or those at high altitude suffering from reduced oxygen to the brain. Perhaps the Yeti is a mountain hallucination" (280). This skeptical stance does not diminish the legend's power to captivate, but rather frames it as a complex intersection of cultural belief, physiological vulnerability, and psychological projection. Throughout their expedition, Chatwin and his companions balance earnest investigation with humor, blending the mysterious and the mundane in their encounter with the Himalayan mythos.

Beyond the legend, Chatwin's writing captures the sublime grandeur of the Himalayas themselves. He recounts a scene where, "The sky was almost cloudless; a thin gray mist rose up the valley from India, and in the opposite direction, a few fluffy clouds drifted in from Tibet" (282). In this awe-inspiring setting, the group discovers unusual tracks-footprints "about fifteen inches long, wider at the toes than the heel, and some showed the imprint of a giant big toe" (281)-adding a tantalizingly ambiguous link to the Yeti myth. Yet, Chatwin remains cautious, viewing artifacts such as the "Yeti scalp" at Pangboche Gompa as culturally significant relics rather than empirical proof. These ceremonial objects, displayed alongside masks, embody the ways in which the legend permeates local identity and ritual life.

The persistence of Yeti stories, despite lacking scientific validation, speaks to their lasting enchantment, reflecting a duality of terror and fascination central to the philosophical concept of the sublime. As Brady explains in *The Sublime in Modern Philosophy: Aesthetics, Ethics, and Nature*, "Burke's sublime places the strongest emphasis on terror and fear, and this degree of focus remains unmatched in later discussion" (41). Burke's articulation of the sublime as an oscillation between dread and exhilaration resonates deeply with the Yeti legend-an emblem of the wild unknown that simultaneously horrifies and entices. Chatwin's journey thus epitomizes this dynamic, capturing how the allure of the unfathomable continually fuels human wonder and inquiry.

Aesthetics, Mystery, and Self-Discovery in the Himalayas

The Himalayas have captivated human imagination for centuries, inspiring awe, respect, and wonder. Robert H. Bates observes in *Mystery, Beauty, and Danger* that "Mountains have always meant different things to different people, and for more reasons than the obvious diversity of the human intellect and emotions" (1). This insight recognizes the plurality of perceptions these high peaks evoke, shaped by culture, experience, and individual disposition. For Jamaica Kincaid and Bruce Chatwin, however, the Himalayas surpass their function as a breathtaking backdrop, instead manifesting as spaces for profound self-reflection, renewal, and exploration. The region's rich biodiversity - its vibrant flora and fauna - enhances the grandeur of the mountains, crafting an immersive environment that invites contemplative engagement beyond mere admiration. Both authors approach the Himalayas as landscapes simultaneously captivating and alien, confronting and expanding their understanding of the world and themselves.

Kincaid's experience is marked by a deep awe at the scale and vitality of the natural world she encounters. Her vivid description of rhododendrons exemplifies this wonder:

> … the abundance of color and bloom, plus how easily they often grow, makes them taken for granted to the point of neglect. To see them now, a rhododendron with a trunk as thick as a pine, thirty feet tall, and leaves almost as long as my forearm, was as magical as seeing

> Mount Makalu from a distance. I walked in complete wonder because I was in a forest filled with these plants-rhododendrons with peeling bark, along with maple and bamboo. (21)

This encounter with monumental botanical life is not only an aesthetic experience but a catalyst for transformation. The "magical" quality of the scene signals how the Himalayas' aesthetic dimension actively reshapes the self, echoing Julie Miles Lewis's reflections in *Moving Mountains*, where she notes, "Climbing my first mountain gave me a new outlook on life and a new career. I was a different person at the summit than I was at base camp. My belief in what I could do grew with every step I took" (128). Kincaid captures a similar evolution, *"*Every step I took seemed to open up new views, new paths, and when I looked back at where I had come from, I didn't recognize it" (23). Her metaphor of altered perspective illustrates the Himalayas as a crucible of identity, where physical progress parallels internal redefinition and self-renewal.

Similar to Kincaid's botanical journey, Chatwin views travel as a mode of self-discovery. Declaring that "A person's real home is not a house but the road, and life itself is a journey to be walked on foot" (273), he underscores movement as fundamental to uncovering new facets of identity and consciousness. For Kincaid, the mountains' magnificence temporarily detaches her from quotidian concerns, offering a space ripe for cognitive expansion and renewal. Travel, whether through plains or mountain passes, broadens perspective and cultivates transformation. Lewis affirms this principle, stating, "Travel has a way of giving you a new perspective on many things; it can help you find more of yourself and inspire personal and professional change" (220). Even simple acts of walking become opportunities for profound change, reflecting Kincaid's emphasis on the Himalayas' singular vitality, "Each day felt new and separate, not connected to the day before . . ." (21). This highlights the unique temporal and experiential character of the mountains, where every moment unfolds as a fresh chance for insight and growth.

Yet, beyond their aesthetic grandeur and potential for self-discovery, the Himalayas also evoke profound mystery. Bruce Barcott's exhortation in *The Measure of a Mountain* to "Burn your books, put on your shoes, climb mountains, explore deserts to gain for yourselves some ideas of the things in nature" (134) points to the mountains' power to engage not only the intellect but also imagination and spirit. Their landscapes, embedded with local myths and enigmatic features, exert a magnetic pull on explorers and writers. Chatwin's quest for the elusive Yeti epitomizes this allure. Though scientific evidence is lacking, his claim of glimpsing mysterious tracks through binoculars signals the enduring fascination the Himalayas inspire. Kincaid's ambivalent response to the mountains further reveals their psychological complexity, "It was something like fear, but I wasn't really afraid; it was something like feeling apart . . ." (15). Her description conveys the tension between attraction and unease that the environment provokes.

For both authors, trekking through these mountains entails navigating the liminal space between reality and imagination, between the explicable and the unknowable. The Himalayas emerge not merely as physical terrains but as psychological and spiritual arenas where beauty, mystery, and self-discovery intersect-reshaping travelers and, in turn, prompting readers to reconsider their own engagements with nature and selfhood.

Conclusion

For centuries, mountains have symbolized the convergence of beauty, mystery, and spiritual insight-a tradition continued by contemporary travelers like Jamaica Kincaid and Bruce Chatwin, who engage the Himalayas as profound spaces for inspiration, transformation, and deeper understanding. While each author illuminate distinct facets-the serene botanical grandeur for Kincaid and the enigmatic folklore for Chatwin-their narratives collectively portray the Himalayas as more than physical landscapes; they function as liminal realms where material reality intersects with spiritual inquiry and mythic resonance.

This duality of awe and enigma defines the Himalayas' enduring power. The figure of the Yeti encapsulates the tension between belief and skepticism, embodying humanity's intrinsic attraction to the unknown. The mountain journey thus unfolds as a rite of passage, where the external vastness parallels inward journeys marked by wonder, vulnerability, and heightened self-awareness. Kincaid's botanical quest transcends scientific pursuit, becoming a deeply personal voyage of renewal, while Chatwin's search for mythic truths highlights the interplay of cultural memory and imagination.

Both authors' experiences demonstrate how the Himalayas provoke expansion not only of physical horizons but of perceptual and existential boundaries, nurturing moments of reflection and transformation. Each day in these mountains presents a unique opportunity to encounter both the external majesty of nature and the internal depths of self-exploration-revealing that the true grandeur of the Himalayas lies as much within the traveler as in the landscape itself.

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