Tribhuvan University

Rhetoric of Empire in Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air*

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Letter of Recommendation

This thesis entitled “Rhetoric of Empire in Jon Krakauer’s *Into Thin Air*” has been prepared under my supervision by Lawang Tshering Bhutia. I recommend it for evaluation to the research committee.

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This thesis entitled “Rhetoric of Empire in Jon Krakauer’s *Into Thin Air*” submitted by Lawang Tshering Bhutia to the Central Department of English, Kirtipur in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in English has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research Committee.

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Abstract

This study examines the narrative style and contextual elements in Jon Krakauer's memoir Into Thin Air *from a postcolonial perspective, with a special focus on rhetorical strategies adopted by the author to primarily cater to consumers of western media. In my research, I make use of a range of critical vocabulary set forth by David Spurr in his* Rhetoric of Empire *and Mary Louise Pratt in* Imperial Eyes *to explore how the narrator's colonial gaze serves to re-inforce and re-imagine dominant western narratives shaping popular mountaineering literature. The paper discusses the role of key literary devices such as hyperbole, epigraphs and intertextuality in helping the author realize his rhetorical goals. Likewise, drawing on concepts such as contact zone, transculturation, colonial appropriation, idealization and naturalization, I argue that the text is replete with such colonial tropes, especially evident in the author's representation of minority groups and in his frequent usage of a language of purity and idealism. More importantly the author's intention is to present a more extreme, individualistic and truly American version of mountaineering as an alternative to the outdated Victorian ideals of national glory.*

Keywords: mountaineering, Everest, contact zone, imperial gaze, colonial tropes, aestheticization, appropriation, debasement

Jon Krakauer's *Into Thin Air* is a first hand account of the fatal disaster that struck a group of mountaineers on May 10, 1996, while climbing Mount Everest, the highest peak on earth. The tragedy claimed a dozen lives, and received significant attention in the media, and was described as the deadliest season in the history of Everest. At the time of its publication, Krakauer's gripping narrative was widely appreciated, discussed and critiqued by those associated with the tragedy as well as the lay reader. Since then, this

dominant account of the 1996 disaster has been reviewed, analyzed, scrutinized and used as reference by a number of scholars from across a wide range of academic disciplines, notably in the fields of business leadership and decision making (Elmes and Frame 216).

From a historical viewpoint, mountaineering has been glorified, as well as mystified, in literary accounts as a noble and daring endeavor with a power to elevate the human spirit by helping them to transcend both physical and psychological barriers. Adventurous undertakings in the mountains are regularly described using “transcendental language” (Gordon 1) which subsumes all personal motives under a monolithic idea of a higher, romantic calling. It is very common to hear authors in their books on mountaineering speak of a “purity of motives” often linked to “purity of style” (Gordon 2), while others describe the act of mountaineering as an expression of the sublime arising from the “intimate physical contact between climber and mountain” (McNee 9). Krakauer’s detailed narrative too seems to be circumscribed by many of the same ideas and worldviews as the sublime literature of the preceding generations of mountaineers. However, a whole host of questions arise with regards to the role of Krakauer’s book in propagating, as well as challenging, many of the established notions about Everest climbing in light of increasing commercialization of Everest expeditions at the turn of the millenium.

This study aims to examine the text of Krakauer’s book in a formal context as well as, and in relation to, a larger historical context of mountaineering literature, especially the large body of texts surrounding Everest expeditions. There is an attempt to foreground the formal aspects of the text, and use that as a point of entry for analyzing the extent to which the narrative is implicated within a network of colonial discourse. It focuses on the usage of a language of nobility and solidarity - with devices such as hyperbole and pathetic fallacy - that is so often the case with most accounts of

mountaineering expeditions, and how this language provides a discursive framework, and hierarchy, with loosely defined subject positions for the actors to play out on the mountain.

The study does not concentrate so much on the actual events reported in the author's account. Rather, the focus is on the specific narrative structure, rhetorical devices, literary tropes and allusions used by Krakauer to meet certain rhetorical goals implicit in the task of journalistic reporting. These narrative elements have been weighed against the history of imperialist discourse typically observed in mainstream literature on mountaineering and adventure. Therefore, the central argument of this essay is based on a pre-established idea that the representations of mountain climbing by Western media over the centuries have produced a dominant discourse favoring the West's colonial interests. More than the mountain or the act of mountaineering itself, the discussion revolves around how Krakauer's book is a modern example of a "mountaineering adventure narrative" (Bayers 2) helping to reproduce the image of Everest climbing as a purely colonial endeavor.

As Susan Birrell proclaims at the beginning of her intertextual study *Approaching Mt. Everest*:

> My project is not a history of Everest exploration nor a celebration of the exploits of heroic men on the highest peak in the world but a critical analysis that reads the popular narratives of Everest in order to offer a critical analysis of the use of Everest as a cultural symbol throughout the past century. To provide a critical analysis of the meanings that circulate around Mount Everest, I position Everest as a text and focus on the narratives and representations provided primarily by the popular press. (2)

It is common sense that a piece of rock, regardless of how tall it is, cannot by itself elicit the degree of genuine passion and loyalty shown by mountaineers throughout the generations. In fact, the adventurers and explorers themselves were responsible for producing a specific image of Mount Everest in the popular imagination with their writings, photographs and similar other artefacts. But more importantly, in the case of Krakauer's narrative, one needs to ask how such discourses are "activated" in the text and how they are "joined intertextually" (Birrell 13). In particular, there needs to be an informed discussion on the rhetorical strategies adopted by the author in laying out his narrative with a desire to articulate the dominant discourse informing that narrative.

Imperialist discourse in mountaineering literature

Discussions about how dominant narratives of masculinity, whiteness and colonialism have informed mountaineering literature both historically and in contemporary media are at the forefront of all scholarly work related to Himalayan mountaineering, including most critical analyses of Krakauer's *Into Thin Air.*

A study titled *Into Hot Air: A Critical Perspective on Everest* authored by Michael Elmes and Bob Frame primarily deals with the discursive nature of Krakauer's book and points to gaps in the narrative which ignore other "silent accounts" (221). Elmes and Frame compare Krakauer's version of the episode with the idea of myth and spectacle as forwarded by the poststructuralist philosophers Foucault and Barthes, while also proposing that distinctions between the real world of mountains and a culturally constructed web of meanings surrounding expeditions are critical for an authentic discussion to be possible (225-32).

Quoting Chessler to cite reasons for the popularity of Krakauer's book, Elmes and Frame argue that:

> Krakauer's professional journalism and proven climbing abilities distinguished him from the others, especially those using ghost writers. Krakauer's book was also the first to create an appetite for more and was widely promoted by his publisher-sponsored lecture tour across the USA. Krakauer's original article for Outside magazine created a strong market position not just within mountaineering circles; images of climbers waiting on the Hillary Step and on the South Col were critical to bringing the summit closer to armchair travellers and adventurers. Summit teams had mountain radios which could be patched through a satellite phone at Base Camp, and daily reports by several different expedition members were uploaded to expedition and personal websites. (216-17)

This observation shows the significance of Krakauer's book in shaping the popular discourse surrounding mountaineering, and adventure as a whole. It also says a lot about the role of technology in the production, and reproduction, of dominant narratives by Western adventurer authors such as Krakauer.

The main thesis in Peter L Bayers' 2003 book *Imperial Ascent : Mountaineering, Masculinity and Empire* can be summed up in the author's own words thus: "Krakauer's portrayal of the trekker is a way of trying to distance himself from the neocolonialist fantasies of the American trekker, but this does not change the fact that Krakauer himself replicates a neocolonialist relationship on Everest" (138). Bayers' book is a rather insightful analysis of the hypermasculine imperialist subtext in Krakauer's narrative. The present study also draws several key arguments from Bayers because it shares a similar objective of exposing the colonial discourse underpinning Krakauer's book. However, the analysis relies too heavily on common sense interpretations of the author's intentions and pays less attention to the aesthetic and structural aspects, notably the rhetorical strategies that help to encode the narrative's preoccupation with colonialism.

Susan Birrell's predominantly theoretical study of Everest mountaineering accounts reveals many existing tropes and stereotypes which function as unchallenged, naturalized cultural signifiers. She proposes that within the domain of Everest mountaineering, the symbolic value of the mountain itself still endures as an unquestionable universal idea (3).

Cultural and historical studies conducted by Sherry Ortner, Vincenne Adams and Peter Hansen help us understand the social, cultural and political contexts that have governed Himalayan mountaineering, especially with regards to the construction of identities and subject positions and how these are enacted by Western climbers and the Sherpa people (Adams 94-95; Ortner 145-157; Hansen 159-177).

All of these contextual analyses serve as fitting counter-narratives against the normalizing forces of western hegemonic discourse played out on the world's highest mountain. The goal now is to conduct a more focused study of Krakauer's work and locate these discourses of colonialism within the aesthetic make-up of the text. For this purpose, the text has been closely read for the usage of rhetorical devices and colonial tropes as formulated in the works of key postcolonial critics David Spurr and Mary Louise Pratt.

The prominent post-colonial scholar Mary Louise Pratt has developed a framework in her ground-breaking book *Imperial Eyes* that helps to critically analyze travel writing, of which mountaineering literature is a sub-genre, as a product of the Western imperialist project. In the book, she has coined a set of critical terms which enables the reader of this type of literature to articulate the underlying colonial sub-text and to expose the western narrator's privilege over colonized races and landscapes. Pratt speaks of "contact zones" which can be defined as "social spaces where disparate cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in highly asymmetrical relations of

domination and subordination—like colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out across the globe today” (4).

The idea of a contact zone is very useful when considering narratives produced by western travelers that have shaped the discourse surrounding encounters with non-Western cultures and landscapes. In the same vein, mountaineering literature has also been known to preference a vocabulary of colonialism due to the specific circumstances under which it was born and still continues to flourish as a popular genre.

From the very beginning of European colonialism, explorers and administrators in the outposts have sought out literacy as a means of wielding power over the native population they set out to colonize. The nature of such an indirect form of colonialism is very different from military conquest in that the latter usually involves the use of force to control the empire’s wealth and resources. In contrast, indirect colonialism or “anti-conquest” tries to exonerate the colonizer from the guilt of exploitation while using passive “strategies of representation” to appropriate new landscapes through the production of new knowledge (Pratt 53). Pratt defines anti-conquest as “the strategies of representation whereby European bourgeois subjects seek to secure their innocence in the same moment as they assert European hegemony” (7).

Meanwhile, another important postcolonial critic David Spurr has neatly divided the colonial gaze in western journalistic writing into eleven distinct rhetorical tropes which serve to underline the imperialist agenda of authors recording encounters from the contact zone. These tropes include surveillance, appropriation, aestheticization, classification, debasement, negation, affirmation, idealization, insubstantialization, naturalization and eroticization.

The narrative style and content of Krakauer’s book are steeped in the mythologies and constructed meanings of mountaineering discourse. This discourse, in turn, is deeply

rooted in the imperialist tradition established by European bureaucratic states of the colonial era. Through a combination of intertextual references, ethnic/gender stereotypes and colonial tropes, the author succeeds in naturalizing the traditional imperialist attitude towards mountaineering, and also in substituting Eurocentric colonial discourse with his own version of American imperialism.

A critical analysis of the aesthetic elements of the text of *Into Thin Air* raises a number of major themes that provide rhetorical force to the implicit colonial undertones present throughout the narrative. Of the many thematic aspects driving the text's ideological project, there are three major themes that stand out as most relevant with regard to embodying an imperial rhetoric. The first one is the structure of the narrative. The structural elements of the narrative and also its overall trajectory both contribute to the process of recycling and reinforcing colonial tropes which serve the interest of a privileged race over the people and landscapes that are subjected to colonial appropriation. The flow of the narrative does not only function as a means to reveal the actual story, but to reveal it in a certain way. It is a part of a strategy of representation used and re-used by western authors and journalists to shape our understanding of the non-western world. In addition to narrative structure, there is also an abundance of intertextual references in the narrative, most notably in the epigraphs at the beginning of every chapter. These rhetorical tools constantly invoke the colonial discourse and establish the narrator's authority over his version of the story.

The second major theme is representation of nature. One of the major themes that figures prominently in the narrative of *Into Thin Air* is the idealistic representation of the natural environment. Whenever the author describes a natural landscape, he employs a vocabulary full of effusive praise for inanimate objects. But this vivid description of nature is not merely a tool for embellishment. Considering the power structure that

privileges the author, this valorization of the mountain landscape is a strategy for colonial appropriation.

The third major theme that contributes to the narrative's ideological project is the representation of people. Mountaineering discourse or colonial discourse that colors mountaineering literature often portrays people in an asymmetrical relationship of power. Especially when the Western traveler documents their encounters with indigenous peoples in exotic lands, the discourse is all too powerful and it needs to be examined with a careful study of the author's rhetorical choices. In the case of Krakauer's text, the two most important aspects of this theme that emerge are the depiction of Sherpas and the broader question of idealism in mountaineering.

Structure of the Narrative

David Spurr describes how journalistic writing works to establish a sense of order in the unfolding of events by moving the narrative away from a position of chaos and disorder towards a position of stability. In his discussion about the rhetorical trope he calls aestheticization, Spurr maintains that products of mass media such as newspaper articles and travel journals, especially the ones that involve a Western author undertaking an adventurous journey in the Third World, follow a well established narrative form which implicitly tries to demonstrate the West's intellectual and moral superiority over non-Western peoples and events. It is a rhetorical strategy that works at the level of narrative structure, reducing all stories into the same "minor literary aesthetic" (Spurr 48). To explain the precise manner in which aestheticization of a story is carried out, Spurr has proposed that

> an episode or "story" typically begins with a revelation, introducing a dramatic situation and a series of characters. The second stage is devoted to development: the expansion or explication of elements in the original discovery, the chronicling

> of changes that advance the action, the heightening of tension and pathos. The final stage brings about a resolution, as the action plays itself out and stabilizes, while an appropriate response to the action is produced. (44)

Into Thin Air follows a similar trajectory where the “dramatic situation” is introduced in the initial one third of the text, and this later builds up into the main disaster as part of the narrative “development” (Spurr 44). Predictably, the story ends with the author rationalizing about the major contributing factors of the disaster, and also offering solutions to problems identified throughout his own exposition.

In David Spurr's words, journalistic accounts often begin with a "revelation" where the author introduces a "dramatic situation" and "a series of characters" (44). This happens in the first ten chapters of Krakauer's book where he describes most of the key characters in detail and also provides historical references for the reader to put all those characters in context. For instance, the second chapter gives a concise history of the major Everest ascents from Mallory and Irvine's doomed attempt to Hillary and Tenzing's first ascent and the first American ascent in 1963. All of these historical details provide a temporal framework to the author's narrative which is essential for establishing the ethos and logos appeals. The reason these historical events have been mentioned at the very beginning of the exposition is in order to locate the events of 1997 within the discursive framework of Everest climbing. In the absence of such a context, it will have been impossible to establish a logical and emotional connection with a wider audience (13-31).

In the next stage, the narrative presents a chronological sequence of events and action that serve to "heighten the tension and pathos" (Spurr 44). This is indeed how Krakauer's account unfolds, between the description of the main disaster and the introductory passages. Hence, by the time the reader arrives at the main disaster, which is reported in the fifteenth chapter, the preceding chapters will have prepared them for the

denouement as planned by the author. Within this development stage, the author makes a careful selection of both personal and public events to achieve a heightening of tension and pathos. Of course, he could have chosen to merely describe all that happened along the way to the base camp and the summit in a simple chronological order. Instead, these events alternate with either a historical context or a philosophical context on mountaineering, which provides a rationale for the narrative and helps the reader to gradually engage with the story. Finally, the last five chapters describe the details of the aftermath along with the author's expert advice on how such tragedies could be averted in the future. Spurr argues that the overall effect of this aesthetic form is "to homogenize the Western experience of the Third World, to neutralize the disturbing aspects of social reality" (51). He goes on to conclude that "This is the buried ideology that makes possible the popular aesthetic of consumption in travel journalism" (51). Susan Birrell's argument also agrees with Spurr's in that

> Everest tales, like sport narratives, follow a familiar trajectory from anticipation (the preparation and trek to base camp), to challenge (establishing base camp and all the intermediary camps along the way), to climax (the final push to the summit), to denouement (back to base camp and home again). Taken together, they reproduce elements central to mountaineering literature: a cast of dedicated, adventurous, and capable climbers; the documentation of risk and hardship; and the particular struggle that results in some measure of triumph or tragedy. Thus each participates in the dominant and preferred narrative of bravery and perseverance. (13)

In light of these arguments, it is clear to see how Krakauer's text follows a traditional format, a genre almost, of mountaineering literature and hence is guilty of reproducing the ever-present colonial discourse in such forms of writing.

Epigraphs serve as very important rhetorical tools in the text of *Into Thin Air*. The use of epigraphs is one of the more explicit ways in which the author plays with intertextuality, invoking passages from previous classic titles of mountaineering literature to establish his own credibility. Altogether, the author uses twenty epigraphs, hand-picked excerpts from a number of books, to preface his twenty chapters. The epigraphs add a separate dimension to the structure of the narrative and serve numerous functions within the text.

To begin with, epigraphs are very convenient tools to invoke passages from mountaineering books from the past to establish the ethos appeal of the author. This is a technique which enables the text to be in an intertextual conversation with the past literature. As Gerard Genette says in *Paratexts*, "with a great many epigraphs the important thing is simply the name of the author quoted" (159). Accordingly, Krakauer has selected an assortment of legendary authors from a diverse set of genres to enhance the rhetorical appeal of his text. Epigraphs also function as thematic prologues setting the tone of the narrative. For example, in the seventh chapter, the personal motives for mountaineering given by two extremely different types of mountaineers, Walt Unsworth and Earl Denman, in the epigraph signal the long argument about who belongs on the mountain (114-130). Epigraphs give the sense of a continuing tradition of similar literature situating *Into Thin Air* among the classics of mountaineering literature such as Walt Unsworth's *Everest* and Thomas Hornbein's *Everest: The West Ridge*.

But, perhaps the most important function of the epigraph is that it provides justification for risk-taking and adventure, which includes putting one's self in life-threating situations. For example, as the stakes get higher towards the middle of the book in chapter eleven, Krakauer quotes a passage from David Roberts work *"Patey Agonistes" Moments of Doubt*:

> "How much of the appeal of mountaineering lies in . . . its reduction of friendship to smooth interaction (like war), its substitution of an Other (the mountain, the challenge) for the relationship itself? Behind a mystique of adventure, toughness, footloose vagabondage - all much needed antidotes to our culture's built-in comfort and convenience - may lie a kind of adolescent refusal to take seriously aging, the frailty of others, interpersonal responsibility, weakness of all kinds, the slow and unspectacular course of life itself . . . Top climbers . . . can be deeply moved, in fact maudlin; but only for worthy martyred ex-comrades . . . the coldness of competence . . . "If anything goes wrong it will be a fight to the end. If your training is good enough, survival is there; if not nature claims its forfeit." (Krakauer 187)

In this epigraph, Krakauer is trying to defend the act of risk-taking by juxtaposing it with the idea of solitary peace and serenity achieved through such activities that take you away from the humdrum of daily life.

The narrative of *Into Thin Air* is also propped up with some of the most legendary tales in mountaineering history. From the customary tale of Mallory and Irvine's doomed, and controversial, summit attempt to Tenzing and Hillary's iconic first ascent which coincidentally took place around the same time as Queen Elizabeth's coronation as UK's sovereign, and the American first ascent by Hornbein and Unsoeld are the three most repeated stories in the book. These stories provide the necessary backdrop for the author to contextualize his own personal journey to the summit of Everest and the terrible tragedy he witnessed in 1996. Stephen Slemon argues that the “language of triumphalism in climbing Mount Everest is predicated on an allegory of symbolic management for actual colonial relations” (55). Indeed, most if not all of the successful ascents

mythologized in popular Western media have white bourgeoise men at the centre of all their praise with their non-western counterparts relegated to an after thought.

Anti-conquest in the representation of Nature

Humans have always interacted with nature but in the case of outdoor adventure, there is a special emphasis on direct communion with natural landscapes without the need to meet any utilitarian ends. At first glance, such an idealistic enterprise might seem to be completely innocent of any coercive ideologies but historically, the idea of exploration has been used as a means of subjugating other human races and exploiting natural resources to fuel progress. *Into Thin Air* is also a story about close interactions between human beings and their natural environment. However, the stylsitic choices made by the author seem to follow the rhetoric of colonial discourse which is all too pervasive in similar forms of literature. In his narrative, the author makes excessive use of hyperbole and personification to give human like qualities to the natural landscape. He presents nature as being inhospitable and enjoyable at the same time, thus using a sublime aesthetic to glorify inanimate objects like mountains and glaciers. What this nostalgic affinity towards nature does is that it helps to reduce the entire geographical region within a few powerful signifiers that authors of mountaineering literature routinely use in order to justify and valorize the activity of mountain climbing as a noble endeavor.

A key literary device used in the detailed description of nature and the environment by Krakauer is personification. It is frequently used in passages to add an almost lyrical quality while describing the geographical features as well as the flora and fauna of particular areas inside the Everest region. These aesthetic embellishments are rhetorically significant because not only do they evoke pleasant feelings in the reader's imagination but also help the narrator to appropriate a natural landscape by the mere act

of seeing. Of course, the act of description should go hand in hand with the gaze itself for this process of anti-conquest to be consummated.

One of the first clear instances of such an act of "surveillance" (Spurr 13-27) over the Everest region's natural surroundings is presented in the epigraph to Chapter 2 where the author quotes a carefully selected passage from Thomas Hornbein's book *Everest: The West Ridge*, which is a classic of mountaineering literature in its own right. In the quoted passage, Hornbein is found describing a blurred photo of Everest using highly ornate language and giving human like qualities to the mountain. Lines such as "the jagged peaks rose white against a grotesquely blackened and scratched sky" (Krakauer 13) seem to animate the otherwise non-living masses of rock, thus fulfilling the act of anti-conquest by capturing the scene in a language familiar to the Western world.

More lyrical passages by these "seeing-men" or the "monarch of all I survey" (Pratt 201) have been quoted in abundance at strategic points within the narrative. The imagery is further repeated in the same chapter when the author offers his own share of praise on the mountain in a moment of inspiration by saying that "Among connoisseurs of geologic form, Everest is not regarded as a particularly comely peak. Its proportions are too chunky, too broad of beam, too crudely hewn. But what Everest lacks in architectural grace, it makes up for with sheer, overwhelming mass" (Krakauer 15). Here, the author presents geological details of Mount Everest as if he is trying to create an image of a human model. The "aestheticization" of the landscape (Spurr 18) is strongly evident with the generous use of adjectival modifiers to give the readers a sense of what the mountain looks like. However, this description of the mountain is part of a larger colonial schema whereby "the landscape is first aestheticized, then is invested with a density of meaning intended to convey its material and symbolic richness, and finally it is described so as to subordinate it to the power of the speaker" (Pratt 204). This is the underlying sub-text

which runs throughout the otherwise naïve and romantic sounding prose that permeates the whole narrative of *Into Thin Air*.

At several points in the book, the author also goes a step further in personifying the mountain. He describes certain aspects of the Everest landscape using active verbs, like the following passage from chapter five where he is painting a picture of the Khumbu glacier which he comes across during the trek to Everest base camp.

> The route climbed up and down the unsettled rocks of the Khumbu Glacier's lateral moraine for several miles, then dropped down onto the glacier itself. Cinders, coarse gravel, and granite boulders covered much of the ice, but every now and then the trail would cross that glistened like polished onyx. Meltwater sluiced furiously down innumerable surface and subteranean channels, creating a ghostly harmonic rumble that resonated through the body of the glacier. (Krakauer 75)

Unlike the indirect personification of the mountain where he compares it to a human model, the personification in this example uses non-living objects like glaciers, boulders and meltwater in the nominative case. Suddenly, the inanimate world around the author becomes imbued with life. Mountains, glaciers, rocks and streams are no longer objects to be observed but subjects with a mind of their own. In the symbolic Khumbu Glacier of the author's imagination, the routes "climb" up and down then "drop" down onto the glacier, the trail would "cross" the icy surface and meltwater "sluiced" furiously creating channels under the surface of the glacier (Krakauer 75). All of this symbolism constitutes a sublime aesthetic which serves to heighten the rhetorical appeal of the author's description.

The author's rhetorical goal is always to rescue Mount Everest from its more mundane definition as a piece of rock into a glorious frontier for the exploring minds of

the West. This is when nature is regarded as a frontier that needs to be tamed, and only a civilized, rational western mind, such as that of Krakauer, is capable of achieving this mission. But, in order to achieve such an act of appropriation, the simple recording of geological facts about the mountain is not enough; and neither is a purely poetic form of expression without any referent in the real world. What is required is a marriage of the analytical, objective aspects of the mountain and a language that is “filled with drama, struggle, and a certain sensuality” (Pratt 121).

There is frequent usage of hyperbole, and a constant repitition of superlatives. These are not superlatives in the traditional sense, but expressions that claim to offer something larger than life, something extraordinary. Consider again, the following passage from chapter five where the Khumbu glacier is being personified as "a bizarre procession of freestanding ice pinnacles, the largest nearly 100 feet high, known as Phantom Alley. Sculpted by the intense solar rays, glowing like giant shark's teeth out of the surround rubble as far as the eye could see" (Krakauer 75). Here too, the comparison of geological formations to human like qualities is at work. But the more interesting fact is how every feature of the glacier is a gigantic version of itself. The expedition groups are gradually entering a world of extremes; and the horizon is now full of gothic structures like the Phantom Alley guaranteed to inspire awe and terror in the participants of this sublime expedition.

Part of the reason why the author uses such hyperbolic imagery is indeed to convey the actual scale of the scenery; to give the reader a real sense of discovery, of being there. But, in doing so he is also complicit in “situating and rationalizing” the landscape “within the discursive framework of imperial geography” (Bayers 101). Krakauer had initially meant to cover the story of the expedition only as an investigative article for *Outside* magazine since he was on assignment as a journalist on Rob Hall’s

team. He did in fact publish a fairly long article for the magazine before turning the same project into a book. So, when you consider the implied audience of Krakauer's account it becomes clear that the choice of hyperbolic language profusely laden with superlative expressions was both necessary and intentional.

Hyperbole can be used for a variety of rhetorical effects. In the case of Krakauer's text, this literary device serves the function of validating arguments and intensifying the pathetic appeal of certain key passages. Therefore, whenever the author describes a natural landscape, he employs a vocabulary full of effusive praise for inanimate objects and makes them come alive in the reader's imagination. Such hyperbolic passages also help to elevate the activity of mountaineering into a noble realm. This is consistent with Susan Birrell's observation that Mount Everest has actually turned into a powerful cultural signifier with its "mythic meanings of challenge, accomplishment, heroism, and adventure" which is "thoroughly naturalized that it is rarely critically challenged" (Birrell 3).

Perhaps this humanization of the landscape reaches its absolute peak in that section in the fifth chapter where the author recounts his first night at Everest base camp. To start with, the phrase he uses to describe the place – "a motley city of nylon domes" (Krakauer 75) – in itself is a fairly melodramatic euphemism for a desolate corner in the foot of the cold, unforgiving mountain. He then launches into one of the most lyrically charged passages in the book:

> The ad hoc village that would serve as our home for the next six weeks sat at the head of a natural amphitheater delineated by forbidding mountain walls. The escarpments above camp were draped with hanging glaciers, from which calved immense ice avalanches that thundered down at all hours of the day and night. A quarter mile to the east, pinched between the Nuptse Wall and the West Shoulder

> of Everest, the Khumbu Icefall spilled, through a narrow gap in a chaos of frozen shards. The amphitheater opened to the southwest, so it was flooded with sunlight; on clear afternoons when there was no wind it was warm enough to sit comfortably outside in a T-shirt. But the moment the sun dipped behind the conical summit of Pumori . . . the temperature plummeted into the teens. Retiring to my tent at night, I was serenaded by a madrigal of creaks and percussive cracks, a reminder that I was lying on a moving river of ice. (Krakauer 76)

This is arguably the best example of how the author uses symbolism, imagery and hyperbole to evoke feelings of wonder and anticipation in the reader. At this point in the narrative, the author along with the other expedition members has finally arrived at Everest base camp after several days of strenuous trekking. The organization of the prose and a gradual build up towards the final approach to base camp is reminiscent of the "ubiquitous figuration of revelation in the discourse" (Slemon 55). Most vivid descriptions of the mountain in the book have been carried out in a similar way. There is a staggering number of pretentiously ornate expressions such as natural amphitheater or escarpments draped with hanging glaciers along with an excess of hyperbole to suggest how inhospitable the base camp is in reality. But to top it all, the passage ends with a "madrigal of creaks and percussive cracks" produced by Khumbu glacier that "serenaded" the author to sleep (Krakauer 76). This last line again personifies the glacier and imagines that the creaking sounds made by the flow of ice are actually songs played to the author's ears while he goes to sleep.

One interesting passage in chapter four explores a slightly different theme of nostalgia. The passage narrates the first few days of the trek leading up to Everest base camp and how they were some of the most pleasant moments in the entire expedition, considering the final text was published much later than the event itself.

> The first six days of the trek went by in an ambrosial blur. The trail took us past glades of juniper and dwarf birch, blue pine and rhododendron, thundering waterfalls, enchanting boulder gardens, burbling streams. The Valkyrian skyline bristled with peaks that I'd been reading about since I was a child. Because most of our gear was carried by yaks and human porters, my own backpack held little more than a jacket, a few candy bars, and my camera. Unburdened and unhurried, caught up in the simple joy of walking in exotic country, I fell into a kind of trance - but the euphoria seldom lasted for long. Sooner or later I'd remember where I was headed, and the shadow Everest cast across my mind would snap me back to attention. (Krakauer 61)

This passage is representative of the author's initial enthusiasm in embarking on his journey. But, the expressions are also tempered with a sense of nostalgia, where the author seems to suggest that mountaineering is primarily about "the simple joy of walking in exotic country" (Krakauer 61) and not just the competition about who reached the summit first.

There are many more pages devoted to showering praise on the geography of the Everest region, with every paragraph adding more mystery to the constructed image of the mountain. The author's descriptions of nature and natural elements in the text of *Into Thin Air* carry an obvious predilection for a sublime aesthetic. The lyrically charged passages of considerable length are meant to inspire a feeling of awe and terror in the reader. These lucid walk-throughs across the entire landscape of the region help to inscribe the newly discovered landscape within a pre-existing romantic sublime aesthetic. But this aesthetic of the sublime is not without purpose. In fact, it serves more than one function in the narrative. It is actually a rhetorical strategy used in order to reproduce and reinforce the dominant discourse of imperialism.

David Spurr has reasoned in the *Rhetoric of Empire* that journalists from the West impose a degree of surveillance from a position of privilege while reporting scenes and events from foreign lands. Rather than innocently documenting everything that is visible to them, the authors are more interested in encoding the "verbal or photographic image" with meanings that appeal to a Western audience by "entering a familiar web of signification" (Spurr 21). The writer selects only those images and expressions that hold significance for the readers back home who carry an "already established interest" in what the author has to say (Spurr 21). So, essentially the author's motive is dictated in large part by the anticipation of the target audience.

In the context of nature description in *Into Thin Air*, it is evident that the author uses a range of lyrical expressions in order to invoke discourses of imperialism and colonial exploration. But he is essentially trying to cater to an audience for whom colonialism is part of a "familiar web of signification" (Spurr 21). The language that he uses is one of seduction and transgression. For example, when the author is conjuring up wildly creative expressions such as "sphincter-clenching chasm" (Krakauer 102) or "three-dimensional landscape of phantasmal beauty" or "a vertical maze of crystalline blue stalagmites" or "rising like the shoulders of a malevolent god" or "a gargantuan, perilously balanced serac" (103-104) he is inviting his Western readers to a fully immersive experience where they are transported to that strange world of boulders and ice. In this sense, the author's lucid description also turns the other-worldly landscape of Everest into something familiar and beautiful.

In another passage in chapter four, Rai and Tamang porters at a lodge in Lobuje are depicted in this manner, "Scores of Rai and Tamang porters from the low foothills - dressed in thin rags and flip-flops, they were working as load bearers for various expeditions - were bivouacked in caves and under boulders on the surrounding slopes"

(Krakauer 66). This is an instance where native people are described as part of the natural landscape, a rhetorical strategy that naturalizes and negates the people, so that it becomes easier for the author to reach out and claim the landscape as one's own (Spurr 157). This is also one of the few sections in the text of Krakauer's book that openly castigate the environment of the Everest region, thus using the rhetorical strategy of debasement to portray the colonized landscape and its people as backward and inadequate (Spurr 76-91). While describing Lobuje in the same chapter, the author uses a different set of adjectives to present a graphic rendition of the abysmal place:

> The three or four stone toilets in the village were literally overflowing with excrement. The latrines were so abhorrent that most people, Nepalese and Westerners alike, evacuated their bowels outside on the open ground, wherever the urge struck. Huge stinking piles of human feces lay everywhere; it was impossible not to walk in it. The river of snowmelt meandering through the center of the settlement was an open sewer. (Krakauer 65)

Such an orientalist depiction of the village as a barbaric place is indicative of what Spurr calls the "obsessive repudiation of the Other" (79). Spurr further explains how the fear of biological contamination escalates into an "anxiety over the psychological perils of going native" and finally into the "dystopian view of vast social movements that threaten civilization itself" (91). The language in this passage also conveys a similar sense of horror and disgust at the thought of being contaminated by filth and disease.

Once the landscape has been surveiled, the next logical step is for the author to reach out and claim mastery over it. Spurr further argues that journalists from the West display a feeling of inheritance and entitlement when writing about remote and strange terrains (Spurr 28). Similarly, in the context of *Into Thin Air*, there is a sense of inevitability and even necessity in the author's suggestion that Everest was always meant

to be climbed by a group of visionary white men. Everest was always white man's territory starting from the naming of the mountain to the first ascent and its ultimate commercialization in the postmodern era. Just like the “seeing-man” (Pratt 7) or the “monarch of all I survey” (205) in Pratt’s *Imperial Eyes*, the journalist seems to regard all aspects of the colonized region as “belonging rightfully to civilization and mankind” (Spurr 28), and the “promise for westernized development” (Spurr 19). However, in this case, the idea of civilization or westernized development is not seen in terms of physical infrastructure or material wealth, but in terms of intellectual and artistic refinement. The vast geological region on the way up to Mount Everest is skilfully appropriated within a discourse of a sublime aesthetic.

It is also worth noting that the author uses a combination of an objective mode of writing and a more literary or artistic form of expression. Pratt calls this strategy “the esthetic mode of treating subjects of natural history” (121). As part of this rhetorical trope, the “specificity of science” is fused with the “esthetics of the sublime” which results in a type of writing that is characterized by a report of plain, scientific facts but in a language “filled with drama, struggle, and a certain sensuality” (Pratt 121). Krakauer aptly noted that he was in the grip of the “Everest mystique” (Krakauer 110). Here, the author is projecting his own values and meanings onto the mountain, which is far more effective in establishing the “authority of discourse” (Pratt 125) than merely reporting the expedition’s logistical details. Or as Peter Bayers argues in *Imperial Ascent*, the narratives of exploration makes the unknown and mysterious regions of the earth known to the inquiring minds of the West and situates every such region, including Mount Everest, within a discourse of “enlightened imperial geography” (Bayers 101).

On many occasions within the text, the narrator seems to be looking for signs in nature to anticipate the future, or to reconcile with past events. He treats natural elements as the mirror where his hopes and aspirations as well as fears and insecurities might be reflected. Again, one of the first instances of pathetic fallacy has to be the epigraph to chapter four where Krakauer quotes a rather lyrical passage from Thomas Hornbein's *Everest: The West Ridge*:

> Evenings were peaceful, smoke settling in the quiet air to soften the dusk, lights twinkling on the ridge we would camp on tomorrow, clouds dimming the outline of our pass for the day after. Growing excitement lured my thoughts again and again to the West Ridge . . . There was loneliness, too, as the sun set, but only rarely now did doubts return. (Krakauer 51)

This passage from Hornbein tries to portray nature as a mirror to the author's emotions. Clearly, the author is in good spirits because here nature is described as reflecting positive euphoric feelings. The positive feeling continues in chapter twelve when the author finds the air to be "thin, shimmering and crystalline" that created an illusion which made the mountains seem closer (Krakauer 209).

However, similar lyrical passages full of pathetic fallacy are also used to convey a feeling of foreboding and, towards the end of the text, a sense of loss. Consider the moment in chapter twelve when the author has just arrived at Camp Four and goes on to describe it: "If there is a more desolate, inhospitable habitation anywhere on the planet, I hope never to see it" (Krakauer 210). In the same chapter, there are plenty of other examples that give a sense of premonition and foreboding and indicate that, since "something about the day just didn't feel right" (216), an untoward incident was right around the corner. But, this language of foreboding is also a recurring trope throughout the text that maintains the suspense in the story.

The most significant usage of pathetic fallacy, however, is towards the end of the book where the author is searching for meaning in natural and images. In chapter twenty one, during the memorial service at the Mountain Madness encampment, the survivors' emotions are reflected by the juniper incense, the chants of the monk reading Buddhist scripture and the"metallic gray sky" (Krakauer 348). Likewise, back in Kathmandu, in a lyrical episode after he smokes a joint bought from a street peddler, the sounds from the streets outside his room, the premonsoon heat and the hallucinatory figures in his field of vision are all sensations that mirror his survivor's guilt (350).

Colonial appropriation through the representation of People

Popular literature from the west have orientalized indigenous cultures, especially Sherpa and Tibetan traditions while writing about Himalayan mountaineering, to conveniently suit their colonial interests. Himalayan mountaineering is actually a "transcultural" domain where a hybrid culture has developed as a result of decades of interactions among people from different nationalities and cultural backgrounds (Pratt 6). And yet, the literature that describes the vast majority of mountaineering experiences is steeped in a tradition of a coercive imperial power structure. Krakauer's attitude towards people in the book is characterized by anxiety and ambivalence, since the globalized nature of mountaineering acts as a rupture in the dominant discourse of imperialism guiding all narratives on mountain expeditions hitherto produced.

Western accounts only seek to offer a monolithic idea of the enlightened white climber pursuing his dream of self-realization and the symbolic act of self consolidation (Gordon 1). Therefore, while considering the author's treatment of human actors in the text of *Into Thin Air*, there appears to be two general themes both of which can be traced back to the dominant discourse of imperialism.

The first major theme is related to the historically problematic relationship between Western mountaineers and indigenous peoples such as the Sherpas. Although the author tries to address indigenous culture and the Sherpas' own history in relation to Everest, his overall argument implies that this culture is only relevant in so far as it agrees with the Western ideals of adventure and exploration. There are numerous instances in the book where the author uses an apologetic tone to draw emphasis on this ambivalent relationship between Western mountaineers and indigenous Sherpa people. However, in spite of the author's attempt to avoid any politically incorrect statements regarding the Sherpas, his evasive strategy actually helps to further insubstantiate the Sherpas' role and significance in expeditions.

In the initial few paragraphs that introduces the Sherpas to his readers, Krakauer uses a paradoxical strategy to appropriate this mountain people. The measured, cautious tone of the author is evident from the very beginning where he declares his suspicion for the typical "foreigner" who might still regard the Sherpas as an "enigma" rather than viewing them as a people (Krakauer 55). He presents an alternative view of Sherpas which does not bundle them all together under a single rubric of oriental culture. On the contrary, he launches on a short biography of the people highlighting the more mundane and quotidian details about their history, society and economy. He argues that unlike how some "long time visitors" of the Khumbu region are critical of the modern transformation in Sherpa society, these mountain people have actually embraced those changes and moved on with their lives (Krakauer 57). The author's attitude can be summed up in this important paragraph concerning the cultural dilemma facing Sherpa people in a modern world:

> But I didn't hear many Sherpas bemoaning the changes. Hard currency from trekkers and climbers, as well as grants from international relief organizations

> supported by trekkers and climbers, have funded schools and medical clinics, reduced infant mortality, built footbridges, and brought hydroelectric power to Namche and other villages. It seems more than a little patronizing for Westerners to lament the loss of the good old days when life in the Khumbu was so much simpler and more picturesque. Most of the people who live in this rugged country seem to have no desire to be severed from the modern world or the untidy flow of human progress. The last thing Sherpas want is to be preserved as specimens in an anthropological museum. (57-58)

The underlying argument in this passage is that the Sherpas have a choice between assimilating themselves with the forces of modern Western economic and social values or becoming an extinct race only to be displayed in a museum as a preserved specimen. One of the main fallacies in this argument is that it portrays the Sherpas as having only two choices while there could be a number of possibilities. Also, the only choices on offer seem to uphold the primacy of dominant Western values while implying that the indigenous culture and history are somehow inconsequential if not entirely non-existent. This is highly consistent with the colonial trope of negation which "denies any prior claim to a people's historical or cultural existence, in order to open a space for colonial expansion" (Spurr 107). Pratt also speaks of the Western author of travel narratives routinely trying to assimilate indigenous peoples into European or American cultural paradigms so that the "differences that fall outside the paradigms are inaccessible to the discourse or can be expressed only as absences and lacks" (Pratt 44). So, even though Krakauer starts by disapproving of the more blatant version of colonial discourse, he does eventually position the Sherpas against the dominant forces of Western civilization thus undermining and trivialising their indigenous history.

Negation is also evident in the author's dealing with the death of Sherpas during the initial stages of the expedition. Towards the end of the fourth chapter, even before the author has reached Everest base camp, news arrives of the death of one of Rob Hall's Sherpa employees, Tenzing. The young Sherpa boy had fallen into a crevasse because the group he was working with was not using a climbing rope, which according to the author is a "serious violation of mountaineering protocol" (Krakauer 67). However, the author then starts defending Rob Hall's concern for the welfare of the Sherpas under his employment and quotes instances where the leader had actually expressed his criticisms against other such leaders who cared less for their local staff. Krakauer follows this up with another anecdote in which Kami Rita, a "young and cocky and inexperienced" Sherpa had fallen to death in a similar way the previous year (Krakauer 67-70). Even without challenging the truth of these anecdotes, one can easily detect the rhetorical strategy implicit in this particular sequencing of events. It is part of the trope of othering in which both negation and debasement combine to present the colonized people as being "in thrall to atavistic, irrational attitudes" (Thompson 158) such as the utter lack of self discipline and a casual flouting of rules witnessed in the example of the two dead Sherpas. In Carl Thompson's words, this is an indication of the "anachronistic survivals from an earlier, more barbarous era" (158).

As part of the rhetoric of negation and debasement, a lot of the key encounters with Sherpas have been reported using a patronizing, derisive tone. Only at one instance in the fourth chapter does the author show any self-awareness when he relates an example where another trekker at a hotel in Namche bazaar mocks the Sherpani taking their order in pidgin English even after the Sherpani replied in "clear, sparkling English" that "carried a hint of a Canadian accent" (Krakauer 55). Bayers describes this episode as the traveller's "colonialist impulse to experience the 'authentic' colonial encounter with the

backward 'Other'" (137). However, throughout the rest of the text's narrative, Krakauer does not mind choosing a mixture of both proper English and broken English to report the speech of Sherpas during his interactions with them.

In Chapter nine, one of the Sherpa staff is reported as saying , "Somebody has been sauce-making. Make bad luck. Now storm is coming." A few sentences before this, some of the Sherpas even refer to the act of "sauce-making" by "miming the sex act by pumping a finger into the open fist of the other hand" (Krakauer 165). Similar distortion of language is used in both chapters twelve and seventeen while reporting Lopsang Jangbu's speech. In all of these examples, the distortion of grammar and the repetition of a pidgin English that almost sounds like baby talk serve to foreground the intellectual backwardness of the Sherpas. David Spurr elucidates how the colonial trope of negation is enabled by

> the rhetorical tradition in which non-Western peoples are essentially denied the power of language and are represented as mute or incoherent. They are denied a voice in the ordinary idiomatic sense- not permitted to speak- and in a more radical sense- not recognized as capable of speech. Throughout the history of this tradition, the degraded or inadequate condition of language signifies a corresponding degradation in the political and social order of the other. (104)

In line with Spurr's argument, what is more important is Krakauer's interpretation of the Sherpa's speech and not what was actually said during the conversations.

Interestingly, the author sounds much more appreciative when referring to the role of mountaineering in the lives of the Sherpas. He is quick to note that those Sherpas who get trained in mountaineering "enjoy great esteem in their communities" (Krakauer 56). Also, despite comprising one third of all Everest fatalities the Sherpas fight very hard to gain employment in an Everest expedition since it offers an "attractive pay in a nation

mired in grinding poverty" (Krakauer 56-57). Essentially, he is suggesting that mountaineering offers the Sherpas one of the few ways to escape a life of poverty and deprivation. But, as Bayers has observed, "Krakauer's observation that the Sherpas are happy in their Westernization helps to deflect any guilt he may have that an unequal power relationship exists between the 'West' and the 'East'" (136). So, Krakauer's enthusiasm becomes only a pretext to justify the recruitment of Sherpas in Everest expedition teams, which is aptly noted by Bayers when he says that "the subtle discourses of imperialism and colonialism allow for Western mountaineers to unproblematically accept employing Sherpas for expeditions" (Bayers 137).

The foregoing discussion shows us how the trope of negation is complemented with another trope of affirmation wherein a "rational argument for moral and racial superiority" develops into a "fervent invocation of shared ideals" (Spurr 111). In Krakauer's case, this shared ideal is the pursuit of nobility in climbing mountains which admittedly is what provides a sense of fulfillment to the Western individual and much needed employment to the Sherpas. The same rhetoric of colonial affirmation is also used in commending one Sherpa sirdar over another by comparing their personal qualities from a colonial lens.

Here is another episode where Sherpa culture has been depicted in a positive light. In Chapter four when the author's team arrives at a monastery along the trail, they get an audience with the local Rinpoche. The rhetorical trope of idealization is used to glorify the image of the Rinpoche, who becomes the locus of power and agency, and from whom the spirtual mystery is constantly emanating in the form of arcane rituals and ambiguous blessings. The Rinpoche is pictured as a source of wisdom and good fortune:

> Seated cross-legged on a brocade pillow, wrapped in burgundy robes, was a short, rotund man with a shiny pate. He looked very old and very tired. Chhongba

> bowed reverently, spoke briefly to him in the Sherpa tongue, and indicated for us to come forward. The rimpoche then blessed each of us in turn, placing the katas we had purchased around our necks as he did so. After he smiled beatifically and offered us tea. “This kata you should wear to the top of Everest,” Chhongba instructed me in a solemn voice. “It will please God and keep you from harm.” (Krakauer 60)

However, after the ceremony was over, the author is pleasantly surprised to find that the rimpoche had recently traveled to America and was keen enough to share photographs from that trip with the author. The album even had pictures of the rimpoche with hollywood celebrities. Krakauer also shares his fascination for Buddhism when in chapter nine he refers to a “Xi-stone – a sacred Buddhist amulet” which Doug Hansen, one of the casualties from his team had gifted to him (Krakauer 163). There is also a similar respect shown by the author while describing some of the aspects of Buddhism as well as the base camp puja in the same chapter.

One of the main events leading up to the terrible tragedy of May 10 was the conflict surrounding the fixing of ropes above the Balcony. This is where the discourse of purity intersects with a discourse of colonial appropriation. It is not overtly expressed in the text but the author’s pitting Ang Dorje against Lopsang Jangbu ensures that Ang Dorje is appropriated as the model Sherpa, displaying all the good qualities a Western sahib can expect to see in the ideal Sherpa. In earlier sections, Ang Dorje is also described as being a typical beneficiary of Western patronage, an established custom where Western clients end up adopting Sherpa families (Krakauer 134–137) Ang Dorje is portrayed as the good Sherpa who fulfills the expectation of his sahib and does not show anarchic behavior, whereas Lopsang Jangbu is a vain, mutinous ingrate who is repeatedly

seen disobeying the chain of command and giving free rein to his own caprices on the mountain.

In chapter thirteen, after finding that climbing sirdars from both groups had failed to fix ropes above the Balcony, Krakauer notices that "At that point we could easily have gone ahead to install the ropes. But Rob had explicitly forbidden me to go ahead, and Lopsang was still far below, short-roping Pittman, so there was nobody to accompany Ang Dorje" (Krakauer 229). Therefore, he decides to maintain the chain of command and waits with Ang Dorje for someone to set up the fixed line. The tension in the author's tone is palpable. He cannot fully blame the Sherpas for being so careless and childish at such an important point in the expedition, but neither can he remain without offering a detailed narrative about this Sherpa cold war which might have been a major contributing factor in slowing down the entire batch of people climbing that day. The evasive and slightly apologetic tone used in describing the Sherpas indicates the author's anxiety over the local staffs' casual attitude.

Whereas the preceding analysis dealt with more overt forms of colonial encounters between Western mountaineers and indigenous peoples, there is another theme that is raised in Krakauer's book which is equally important but less significant with regards to propagating the dominant discourse of colonialism. This is the theme of elitism in mountaineering which derives from a discourse of purity and idealism (Gordon 1). It is a constantly recurring theme in the narrative that sets the authentic, trained climber against marginally qualified amateur tourists. Nonetheless, the root of this elitism is also in the colonial nature of mountaineering in so far as this colonialism works to classify the climbers in a scale of their authenticity of intention. The amateurs and untrained climbers do not properly embody the true qualities of a classic mountaineer. The worst of the amateurs are rich snobs who climb the mountain for attracting public

attention and not because they are committed to the ideals of outdoor adventure. This produces a tension between the idea of elitism in mountaineering and the financial support required to sponsor major expeditions in a post-colonial context. This contradiction is best expressed in the author's own words in the third chapter which explain the economics of high altitude mountain tourism through the story of Rob Hall's company Adventure Consultants:

> "To continue receiving sponsorship from companies," explains Atkinson, "a climber has to keep upping the ante. The next climb has to be harder and more spectacular than the last. It becomes an ever-tightening spiral; eventually you're not up to the challenge anymore. Rob and Gary understood that sooner or later they wouldn't be up to performing at the cutting edge, or they'd have an unlucky accident and get killed. So they decided to switch direction and get into high-altitude guiding. When you're guiding you don't get to do the climbs you necessarily most want to do; the challenge comes from getting clients up and down, which is a different sort of satisfaction. But it's a more sustainable career than endlessly chasing after sponsorships. There's a limitless supply of clients out there if you offer them a good product." (Krakauer 41)

Here, the author is highlighting the shift from a non-competitive idealistic form of mountaineering to a heavily commercialized, and commodified, version in the case of Mount Everest. This new form of commercialized mountaineering, which developed as a means to sustain the professional climbers financially, is in stark contrast to the idealism described by the author in passages such as this:

> To become a climber was to join a self-contained, rabidly idealistic society, largely unnoticed and surprisingly uncorrupted by the world at large. The culture of ascent was characterized by intense competition and undiluted machismo, but

> for the most part, its constituents were concerned with impressing only one another. Getting to the top of any given mountain was considered much less important than how one got there: prestige was earned by tackling the most unforgiving routes with minimal equipment, in the boldest style imaginable. Nobody was admired more than so-called free soloists: visionaries who ascended alone, without rope or hardware. (Krakauer 23)

This sense of nostalgia is a major driver of Krakauer's narrative. The author longs to return to an idyllic past where climbers were not motivated by money or publicity, but a desire for recognition in the small but exclusive community of adventurers for whom the objective was to progressively try and take on more challenging projects. The focus is on self reliance, independence and a raising of the difficulty level. Within this definition, the difficulty of the routes and the style of climbing become the symbolic frontier, which was a "means of regenerating vitality in response to the 'official' closing of the frontier with the 1890 census" during the U.S. Progressive Era (Bayers 10). It also brings to mind Spurr's colonial trope of idealization which is a "romantic revolt against the utilitarian ideology of the industrial middle class" (Spurr 127). It is a rejection of the mercantile ethos of western capitalism and its replacement by the pure, innocent climber's ethos. However, even as this discourse of purity denounces the impure motives of cheap publicity and conspicuous consumption, it is still complicit in the exploitation of colonized peoples and landscapes.

The duality between Hall and Fischer, which also extends to their respective Sherpa sirdars Ang Dorje and Lopsang, is another instance of how the author uses subtle differences in personality traits to represent vastly opposing attitudes. By choosing to describe Rob Hall and Scott Fischer, the experienced leaders of the two major expedition groups of that season, as diametrically opposed to each other Krakauer sets up a dualism

between the rational, almost scientific, approach of Hall and the flamboyant, impassioned leadership of Fischer. In many ways, the personalities of Hall and Fischer painted in the book are projections of Krakauer's idealism and nostalgia for a more noble form of mountaineering which is all but lost in the context of Mount Everest. This nostalgia for an old school climbing tradition is clearly articulated by the author in chapter twelve in this way:

> In this godforsaken place, I felt disconnected from the climbers around me - emotionally, spiritually, physically - to a degree I hadn't experienced on any previous expedition. We were a team in name only, I'd sadly come to realize. Although in a few hours we would leave camp as a group, we would ascend as individuals, linked to one another by neither rope nor any deep sense of loyalty. Each client was in it for himself or herself, pretty much. And I was no different: I sincerely hoped Doug got to the top, for instance, yet I would do everything in my power to keep pushing on if he turned around. (Krakauer 213)

It is worth noting how Krakauer refers to classic signifiers of authenticity in mountaineering like the rope and the "deep sense of loyalty" among the climbers, which Hansen aptly calls the "brotherhood of the rope" (Hansen 2). Such references to a discourse of purity is made repeatedly in the text of *Into Thin Air*. A prime example of this allusion to idealism is chapter seven of the book, which is entirely dedicated to a discussion about who is fit enough to climb Mount Everest. The author's portrayal of his own expedition team as a "ragtag collection of pretty decent small-town softball players" (Krakauer 120) puts him much lower in the pecking order of qualified climbers and helps him adopt a persona of the "amateur" or the "dilettante" (Thompson 92). Quoting Holland and Huggan in his book *Travel Writing* Carl Thompson suggests that "this narratorial self-fashioning is born of defensiveness and a sense of belatedness; the writers of literary

travelogues are often keenly aware that they are following in the footsteps of true explorers, heroic figures who reported real discoveries and made genuine contributions to knowledge" (Thompson 92).

Even the epigraph to chapter seven quotes Walt Unsworth's passge from the book Everest to portray the adventurer as misunderstood genius. In fact, another aspect of this discourse of purity is also the reproduction and recycling of romantic ideas of faith, determination, endurance and ambition. Krakauer does this by providing justification for his own personal reasons for being on the mountain. For instance, in chapter six, when the author's wife feels concerned about his Everest campaign, he simply brushes it off by saying that he is not going to get killed and by adding, "Don't be melodramatic" (Krakauer 110).

Another form of justification, and validation, for Krakauer is derived from reporting his small contributions at various points during the course of the expedition. In chapter twelve he recounts how he helped the six Sherpas at Camp four put up his tent, and provide them some relief from the exhausting task of pitching tents at eight thousand meters (Krakauer 211). By positioning himself against corruption of the purist philosophy, he always seems to try to uphold the climber's ethics and lend a helping hand to the Sherpas. Another passage from the same chapter reveals some of his strongly held beliefs on self-reliance and personal responsibility where he says that "During my thirty-four-year tenure as a climber, I'd found that the most rewarding aspects of mountaineering derive from the sport's emphasis on self-reliance, on making critical decisions and dealing with the consequences, on personal responsibility" (Krakauer 219). Krakauer shows an obvious disdain for amateur climbers who endanger the lives of more experienced adventurers like the ones leading the two big commercial expeditions, implying that extreme ascents such as Everest should be reserved for serious climbers such as the

author himself. This is most clearly seen in the author's criticism of inauthentic climbers such as Sandy Pittman and Dick Bass. Krakauer does not seem to be at ease with the fact that wealthy hobbyists like Pittman and Bass were able to buy their seat on the highway to Mount Everest, and other high peaks where the expenses are considerably huge, while the writer himself had to rely on a magazine assignment to foot the bill on his behalf. However, Bayers in his book Imperial Ascent argues that Krakauer's frustration stems from the fact that, in effect, he is as guilty as Pittman and Bass in commodifying, and further degrading, the sense of idealism promised by an expedition to Everest (Bayers 135).

Conclusion: A Neocolonialist Relationship

The narrative of *Into Thin Air* is deeply rooted in the discourse of colonialism and imperialism. The intertextual nature of Krakauer's book ensures that these dominant discourses are carefully encoded within the sublime aesthetic of the narrative. David Spurr's framework for rhetorical analysis of Western travel journalism borrowed from his book *Rhetoric of Empire* helps to expose many of the colonial tropes such as surveillance, appropriation and aestheticization at work in the text of *Into Thin Air*. Additionally, Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* provides a solid framework to tackle some of the broader concepts in colonial discourse such as contact zone and anti-conquest.

There is a great emphasis on self-reliance and preparedness in the author's description of an ideal mountaineer. He doubts the authenticity of intention with which most of the expedition members had signed up with their agents. There is also a sense of disappointment, resentment, disdain for the inauthentic mountaineer for representing the more reprehensible side of American or Western culture - i.e. conspicuous consumption, choosing to climb Everest only as a status symbol, for the sign exchange value, while the author seems to be implicated within the same culture he is trying so hard to criticize.

Bayers contends that Krakauer was himself replicating a "neocolonialist relationship" on Everest (Bayers 138). This is because, in the end, despite all the criticism he has levelled at certain people involved during the Everest expedition, he knows, and admits, that a challenge such as climbing the highest mountain comes at a heavy cost.

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