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Representation of Nepali Society in Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*

Tribhuvan University

Representation of Nepali Society in Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*

A Thesis

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for the Degree of Masters in Arts in English

By

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Letter of Recommendation

Mr. Nabraj Ghimire has completed his thesis entitled “Representation of Nepali Society in Peter Matthiessen’s *The Snow Leopard*” under my supervision. He carried out his research from 2071/1/10 B.S. to 2072/03/04 B.S. I hereby recommend his thesis be submitted for viva voce.

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Letter of Approval

The thesis entitled “Representation of Nepali Society in Peter Matthiessen’s *The Snow Leopard*” Submitted to the Central Department of English, T.U. by Nabraj Ghimire has been approved by the undersigned members of the Research committee.

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Nabraj Ghimire

Abstract

This project considers Mattheissen's views of his journey in the light of Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, which raises important questions about how Westerners view other cultures. Much of the writing of *The Snow Leopard* is a bit of Western muscle that pictures Nepal, Nepali porters, guides and their cultural tendencies. On surface, the book seems a travel narrative enriched with Buddhist mystique but when we closely gaze by which Mattheissen describes Nepali society, the country folk, Sherpa porters travelling with him we find him in a difficult position. The book is filled with wilder language where no voice is given to Asians; he draws on ancient types viewing orient as a historical and apolitical. Not only have these but it seem, he is reducing all Nepalese into a type using oriental tropes. He has projected him as a spiritual seeker and a mystic but he demonstrates colonial aggression to fellow travel staffs and he tries to become expert of Buddhism not knowing enough by which we can argue that Mattheissen is working on classical vein of Orientalism. The representation of Nepali society in Peter Mattheissen's *The Snow Leopard* is ideological and political. The indeterminate position of him as a travel writer and a western Zen practitioner makes him a critical reader of other culture

Contents

	Page No.
Acknowledgements	
Abstract	
I: Colonial Legacy in Matthiessen's <i>The Snow Leopard</i>	7
II: Politics of Mysticizing in <i>The Snow Leopard</i>	24
III. Representation of Nepali Society as 'the Other'	41
Works Cited	43

I. Colonial Legacy in Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard*

Written primarily by Westerners, the literature of mountaineering has tended to reproduce an orientalist image of Nepal as 'unmodern' and inhabited by isolated and autonomous ethnic groups. As Sherry Ortner, in the introduction to her book *Life and Death on Mount Everest*, asserts Himalayan expeditions began in the early twentieth century during a period in which climbers saw the 'romanticism' and 'adventure' of mountaineering as a challenge to the materialism, pragmatism and boredom of Western modernity (Ortner 4). In *Orientalism* (1978), Edward Said argues that "the travel writings of famous authors such as Richard Burton and Gurtare Falubart was central to the approach of orientalism" (12). And in this research, the researcher particularly interested in how Peter Matthiessen's travel writing reinforces colonial legacy by engaging with wider intellectual and cultural debate about representation.

The Snow Leopard (1978) is a book by Peter Matthiessen based on his 1973's journey in Nepal Himalayas. *The Snow Leopard* is a highly personal account of an expedition in the Himalayas and of a spiritual journey following the death of his second wife Deborah. On the surface, the book seems a travel narrative enriched with Buddhist mystique but when we closely look at the gaze by which Matthiessen describes Nepali society, the country folk, Sherpa porters travelling with him we find him in a difficult position. The book is filled of wilder language where no voice is given to Asians; he draws on ancient types viewing Orient as historical and apolitical. Not only these but we seen him reducing all Nepalese into a type using Oriental tropes. He has projected him as a spiritual seeker and a mystic but he demonstrates colonial aggression to fellow travel staffs and he tries to become expert of Buddhism

not knowing enough by which we can argue that Matthiessen is working on classical vein of Orientalism. The representation of Nepali society in Peter Matthiessen's *The Snow Leopard* is ideological and political. The indeterminate position of him as a travel writer and a western Zen practitioner makes him a sensitive reader of other culture.

Now that "Orientalism" has become an academic buzz word, it may be useful to recall its former meanings. From the mid-eighteenth to the late-twentieth century, the term was applied to the study of the languages, literatures, and cultures of the Orient. In his 1978 book *Orientalism*, Edward Said acknowledges this ordinary meaning and adds two others: "a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and (most of the time) 'the Occident' "and "a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient" (2). It is with the third sort of Orientalism that Said chiefly is concerned. "Orientalism" in this sense is a discourse about the Orient as the "other" of Europe, which confirms Europe's dominant position. Said studies the works of scholars who instantiate this discourse but he is less concerned with particular individuals than with the body of European discursive practices in regard to "the Orient" that generate a self-affirming account of what it is (essentially inferior to Europe, and so on)" (3). One of his more controversial contentions is that all European orientalists of the colonial period were consciously or unconsciously complicit in the aims of European colonialism. At one point in his presentation, Said does distinguish between what he calls latent orientalism, "an almost unconscious positivity" of ideas about the Orient, and manifest orientalism, "the various stated views about Oriental society, languages, literatures, history, sociology, and so forth" (206). This allows him to acknowledge the possibility of varying expressions of

Orientalism while retaining his core concept. For, he asserts, "whatever change occurs in knowledge of the Orient is found almost exclusively in manifest Orientalism; the unanimity, stability, and durability of latent orientalism is more or less constant" (206).

One of the most interesting issues raised by increasing global travel is the ethics of cross-cultural travel. Do travel and travel writing perpetuate exploitative, hierarchical, or unjust relationships of power, or do they suggest alternative ways of encountering other cultures. The researcher here considers Mattheissen's views of his journey in the light of Edward Said's critique of Orientalism, which raises important questions about how Westerners view other cultures. In general, the travel writing from colonial times survives on elements like an exotic location, weirdness, brutality, comedy, beauty etc and these elements can be found in the writings of travelers, traders and colonial bureaucrats which serves to demean the non western cultures described often as savage and weak, dishonest, lazy etc. Clearly the role of the travel to inform, educate and entertain can be seen focus out to valorizing their self and imperial purpose. In 1973 the American writer Peter Mattheissen joins a two month long trek to the Dolpo region of Nepal with geologist George Schiller whose narrative outcome is the book *Snow Leopard* published in 1979 AD. That book is a well written travelogue on the superficial level and the words, metaphors and attitude are widespread throughout the book the western empires used to talk about their colonial enterprises. Orientalism will be a tool to spotlight the features by which Mattheissen have represented Nepali society.

As mostly the nature of travel writing is ethnographic, the writings can have different motives of writers. There is no single answer why people travel. Australian travel writer, John Borthwick depicts the journey as "the creation myth of each

individual, who in travelling and writing, affirms their existence or being and the essential marginality of that experience” (82).

American writer David Plante talking about one of the most celebrated contemporary travellers, Bruce Chatwin, said, “I think Bruce was an English innocent longing for strange experiences, with the hope that the strangeness, like a secret disclosed, might contain a revelation” (cited in Borthwick 81). And it was Susan Sontag who posited the spiritual and intellectual malaise of Western society as being at the heart of what takes the traveller to exotic places.

Most serious thought in our time struggles with the feeling of homelessness. They felt unreliability of human experience brought about by the inhuman acceleration of historical change has led every sensitive modern mind to the recording of some kind of nausea, of intellectual vertigo. And the only way to cure this spiritual nausea seems to be, at least initially, to exacerbate it. Modern thought is pledged to a kind of Hegelianism: seeking itself in its Other. Europe seeks itself in the exotic - in Asia, in the Middle East among pre-literate peoples, in a mythic America “. . . The Other is experienced as a harsh purification of the self” (Borthwick, 80). In *Snow Leopard* by Matthiessen; the presentation is poetical and mystical but India and Nepal become trivialized through perceiving them as enchanted, exotic lands of “spirituality”, poverty and death. Edward Said, an American Arab intellectual renowned for his book, *Orientalism*, an analysis of the way oriental cultures have been constructed by Western literature, argues that there was (and is) a coherent aim running through much of this literature; to restructure the conceptualization of the East in the interests of Western domination.

In Said’s analysis the Orient became “a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences . . . (and) a tableau of

living queerness” (qtd. in Mills,1991). According to this view, the body of texts analyzed by Said has operated as an ideological prop for European and, more recently, American colonialism (Knight 93).

David Spurr has modified Said’s theory by arguing, not that the colonial literature was ideologically coherent, but that it consistently applied a series of ideological principles to the Colonial context regardless of the writer’s ideology (39). Spurr argues that the colonized world is Debased, trivialized, aestheticised and romanticized but rarely presented as it is. The colonized World as the uncivilized debased “dark void” is a common theme in writing of the colonial era. Perhaps the best example of this is Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* where Kurtz submits to his own destructive desires and “goes native”. Chinua Achebe writing about Conrad’s work comments that the representation of Africa as “a metaphysical minefield devoid of all recognizable humanity, into which Europeans enter at their peril, was and still is the dominant image of Africa in the Western imagination” (qtd. in Spurr 91).

Whether this colonial discourse is seen as ideologically consistent (Said) or a series of ideological principles (Spurr), it implies coherence both within a vast body of literature over a period of more than a hundred years and at the level of text. However, critics of Said argue that the notion of coherence across a diverse spectrum of travel writing is problematic. Sarah Mills (1991), in critiquing Said's theory of Orientalism, argues that a discourse that developed over two millennia cannot be seen as coherent and consistent. Furthermore, she stresses that it is important to understand the contexts in which the texts were written and to distinguish between those written during and after the colonial period. As Mills argues, “the 'meaning of travel texts cannot be deduced from an analysis of the text itself, the writing has to be considered within the discursive frameworks within which it was produced and received” (199).

Writers do not write in a vacuum. Prevailing economic, political and social thinking, as well as personal factors, all impinge on the writing process and conspire against the notion of coherence at any level.

The very nature of writing about another culture entails a “heterogeneous ... discourse, marked by gaps and inconsistencies ... (T) ravel writing is itself ... subject to such a wide range of constraints and motivations that it is almost inevitable that it will not present a unified vision of a country” (Porter, qtd. in Mills 54). Post colonial commentators often criticize Western travel writers for writing and selecting information according to their own cultural framework. This seems unfair. How can they do otherwise? Furthermore, the clash of cultural perspectives is almost inevitable by virtue of the writing process itself. Derrida sees oppositional forces as being at the heart of all writing, “being and nothingness, native and its Other, good and evil, innocence and perversity, consciousness and non-consciousness, liberty and servitude, life and death” (cited in Spurr 93). Writing is a series of distinctions erected across the otherwise empty space of the page (or computer screen). In this sense Derrida maintains that the writer, not just the Western writer, is the “original and ultimate colonizer, conjuring the space of consciousness with the exclusionary and divisive structures of representation” (Spurr 93).

Peter Matthiessen’s *The Snow Leopard* where the author takes a similar trek through the Himalayas. The book is written in diary form, similar to Murphy’s, but the difference is that Matthiessen gives his account depth and breadth by meandering at will through the world of Buddhism and the ecology of the Himalayas, describing the wildlife and vegetation in remarkable detail, and introducing his family life, in particular the recent death of his wife, giving the narrative emotional potency. And this is what brings it alive. Unlike Murphy he does not trek alone, and is dependent on

local Sherpas through two months of difficult trekking. One of the team, Tutken Sherpa, who bears all manner of hardships with calmness and equanimity, has, the author observes, by the end of the journey become the author's spiritual guide. Murphy.

However, sticks far too vigorously to the trail and her own perspective, and the reader is left hoping that she would get lost, or at least lose herself in the experience. By the end of the book we get a sense that the values she started the trek with are still intact. Matthiessen on the other hand has been profoundly changed. Matthiessen seems engaged making his travelogue suitable to western readers than making it a mimetic account describing people and geography. His motive seems to persuade his western readers rather than expressing his self. The analysis of *Snow Leopard* shows it is mediated far from true reflection as Susan Noakes opines on travel literature as, "A primarily rhetorical genre which historically marks it's self as mimetic" (130). In fact Matthiessen seems oriental while describing rural Nepal. David Spurr's surveillance in *Rhetoric of Empire* is useful to see how western define the self and the other through these discourses as Savid Spurr's trope is constituted by three elements: aestheticization, density of meaning and mastery.

The Snow Leopard by Peter Matthiessen is a masterful depiction of the landscapes, peoples, and systems of belief encountered by the author while accompanying his friend GS to the Crystal Mountain; a holy Buddhist land on a field study of the Himalayan blue sheep, or the bharal. GS hopes to gain some insight into the relationship between the bharal and the more common sheep of the United States by examining them during "the rut," or mating season. Matthiessen, however, accepts his invitation in hopes of allowing his oneness with the universe, as prescribed by his doctrine of Buddhism, to grow. What GS sees as a job, Matthiessen sees

as an opportunity to expand his religious experiences and clear his mind of the worries and stresses of everyday life. The journey is described in full from the first day, when the two friends met in Kathmandu to the last, when they begin their return home from the Crystal Mountain and everything in between, without the omission of a single detail, exactly as Matthiessen penned in his beloved daily journal.

On the surface, *The Snow Leopard* seems to be simply a description of one man's thoughts and views throughout his journey through Western Himalayas in Dhaulagiri Region of Nepal, but underneath lies Matthiessen's morals and beliefs intertwined with his struggles and hardships throughout the trip and throughout his life. He meticulously describes events from his past as they relate to his present and the details from his present as they unfold according to his faith. Constantly flashing back to the son he left at home and to the wife, Deborah, that he lost to cancer a few years prior to the adventure, Matthiessen longs to return to his distant family in the United States and to the days when he and his wife were young and, sometimes, in love and happy together. Deborah was the only person with whom the author has ever felt the oneness that he has sought ever since he became a follower of the teachings of the Buddha.

Throughout the novel, the author describes the influence of outsiders upon the mostly isolated, solitary regions of Tibet, hidden deeply in the shelter of mountains upon mountains, estranged from the rest of the world by harsh climates and even harsher terrain. The few who made it into this detached region brought with them the religions of the outside world, but did not, however, leave behind the influences of modern technology. The farther into the mountains Matthiessen and GS travel, the more technologically disadvantaged, but more pious the inhabitants become. This

religious veneration is what Matthiessen, the sentimental Buddhist, hopes to achieve in a world in which he permit himself to become the only person alive.

In almost every few pages throughout *The Snow Leopard* the author describes different aspects, convictions, and traditions of the cultures with which they are interacting, often telling of the folklore of the people and the historical backgrounds of their religions. These creeds are very important to Matthiessen, as he himself is still in many ways searching for his true niche in the religious world, and this journey is a once in a lifetime chance for him to actually see all of the positive and negative aspects of each sect not only on the surface, but also below.

The opportunity for him to finally see inside the belief structures of these various eastern religions, especially the different denominations of Buddhism such as the Tantric sect, which he seems particularly interested in, collimate Matthiessen's need to ruminate over himself throughout his lonesome adventure and discover his true self and his oneness with his universe. His setting and solitude provide the ideal setting for doing so for, according to Rabbi Nachman of Bratzlav:

As the hand held before the eye conceals the greatest mountain, so the little earthly life hides from the glance the enormous lights and mysteries of which the world is full, and he who can draw it away from before his eyes . . . beholds the great shining of the inner worlds. (38)

In the Buddhist faith it is believed by many that the only way to do this is to give up all material possessions and to seek a simple life to ease the clearing of the mind that allows for "removing the hand from before the eye," and this is exactly what Matthiessen is hoping to do.

Just like the bharal, the blue sheep, for which GS is searching the inhabitants of the mountains remain true to their lineages. Both the sheep and the citizens in this

remote land are believed to be the origins or near to the origins of the entire populations of sheep and people throughout the world, who centuries before spread out and diversified, leaving the remaining as their only links to the past. In accordance with their conflicting personalities, GS, who, unlike Matthiessen is only interested in his work and figures, has come here to bring these sheep out of hiding and link the rest of the world's sheep to them, while Matthiessen has trekked so far from home to hide himself and to link his soul with the rest of the world.

During his quest, Matthiessen comes upon numerous trials that test his faith and cause him to contemplate the reason for its happening. With Buddhism, as with many other religions, it is believed in many circumstances that the events that unfold, such as good or bad weather, take place not simply by coincidence but because some higher power recognizes impure motives, or simply because the individual experiencing such troubles did not render enough devotion and respect the particular deity, and is being punished for his insolence. Matthiessen believes that this could be true at certain points throughout the pilgrimage, such as when the weather at Jang Pass turns foul shortly after the party fails to leave an offering at the crude altar built to the god of the locals at the opening of the pass.

While still a student at Yale in 1951, Peter Matthiessen had his first short story published in the prestigious *Atlantic Monthly* magazine. Later that year he moved to Paris where he became a joint founder and co-owner of the *Paris Review*. There he introduced the long interviews with writers that became the trademark of the seminal journal. Matthiessen published his first novel, *Race Rock*, in 1954 and has gone on to write seven more. His fiction can be intellectually tough and dauntingly technical as well as passionately engaged with characters and worlds at the margins of the western mindset such as rainforests, oceans and swamps. He is described in the American

Dictionary of Literary Biography as "a shaman of literature", while Don DeLillo more straightforwardly claims him as "one of our best writers". Most recently Matthiessen completed, after 20 years, an ambitious and long-anticipated trilogy set in the Florida Everglades.

But for all its achievement Matthiessen suspects that this won't be his artistic legacy. In the introduction of the book he says, "Even though I thought of myself and still think of myself as a fiction writer, I have been pushed so far into a pigeonhole I now doubt I will ever get out" (iv). He is referring to his reputation as a writer about the natural world; a reputation launched with the 1959 publication of his groundbreaking environmental state of the nation book, *Wildlife in America*, and sealed with his 1978 bestseller and National Book Award winner, *The Snow Leopard*.

Whatever Matthiessen's assessment of the value of his non-fiction, it is undeniable that his writing on the natural world has been extraordinarily influential in literary terms as well as in terms of practical impact. It is difficult now to imagine the low level of interest in the environment in late 1950s America. Environmental activity had been in decline since the 1880s when a surge of interest saw the founding of the American national parks and the saving of the bison. Matthiessen's book of natural history as reportage came closely after Rachel Carson's influential investigations into the effects of pesticides on the food chain and led to a renewed national interest in environmentalism and the birth of the modern American conservation movement.

The late palaeontologist Stephen Jay Gould called Matthiessen "our greatest modern nature writer in the lyrical tradition" (17). By the time he published *The Snow Leopard* - his meditation on the wildlife and landscape of the Himalayas as well as on his own life and Buddhism - Matthiessen had written about wildlife in east Africa, stone-age tribesmen of New Guinea, South America, the north American Arctic, Asia

and Australia. In all he has written 18 works of non-fiction and the anthropologist Hugh Brody, talking about the attractions of this work, says, "What is remarkable about Peter is the combination of astonishing energy with a very strong engagement with the people he spends time with. He's unusual in that many people who have a huge energy for travel tend to write about the travel and not the people. In that sense he has a real anthropological acuity" (106).

Matthiessen's most recent book, *The Birds of Heaven*, sees him again travelling the world, this time in search of the 15 remaining species of crane. His journeys through Mongolia, Siberia, Australia and Europe culminate with the extraordinary work undertaken by the American "craniac" community to re-establish migratory routes from Wisconsin to Florida using microlights to lead the birds south.

Matthiessen says he had a dual purpose in writing about cranes. "They are beautiful and heraldic and people are moved by them. But they are also, like tigers, an umbrella species. If you protect them you protect many other creatures as well and the wetlands and clean air and so on" (14). The book ends in cautious optimism.

"Whether we are doing enough or doing it fast enough is another matter," he explains, "but the Doctor Doom approach doesn't really work. People get disheartened and think there is nothing that can be done. In fact there is always something that can be done" (21).

Dr George Archibald, a world authority on cranes, calls Matthiessen:

A philosophical guru for people who care about the environment. He can put into words what the rest of us are feeling but can't quite express. And he is as concerned with the exploitation of people as with the exploitation of the environment. (42)

Matthiessen, now 75, describes himself as "an activist by nature" (83). In the 1960s he became an ally of the migrant farm workers' leader César Chávez; he has championed the embattled Long Island striped bass fishermen and the rights of Native Americans and is today an unrepentant supporter of Ralph Nader, the consumer champion who was a presidential candidate in the 2000 US election. "A lot of my friends are still very pissed off at me for that. They say I helped elect George W Bush but I didn't. I tried to get some kind of Green party going in America. And if Gore couldn't win New York state, "where I live, he couldn't win anywhere."

Looking at Matthiessen today - an artist, a Buddhist, an environmental activist and a defender of native American rights - it is perhaps surprising to learn that his roots are in the heart of the American establishment. He was born and brought up as part of the east coast aristocracy in south-west Connecticut. His father was a wealthy architect who was later awarded the OBE by the British government for developing a defense system for commercial shipping during the Second World War.

As an adolescent, Matthiessen began to rebel against the privileged world around him and aged 15 he had his name removed from the Social Register. His brother, with whom he secretly kept a collection of poisonous copperhead snakes in homemade glass cages, later followed suit. "I was so fortunate to grow up before television," Matthiessen says, "My brother and I spent most of our time outside overturning rocks, listening to birds and catching snakes. When our mother found out about the copperheads she told us to kill them but in fact we just let them go."

He says that from the age of 10 he became "obsessed" with birds, and he took ornithology, zoology and marine biology courses at college alongside his work as an English major. Although he argued bitterly with his father as a teenager, in fact Peter and his brother inspired their father to take an interest in nature and in later life he

became an executive of the Audubon Society, the conservation organization named after the 19th-century painter and naturalist John James Audubon. In his 90s he was still leading school parties to observe the wildlife at a bird refuge in Florida. There was something of a literary tradition in the Matthiessen family - his father's cousin, FO Matthiessen, was a famous critic and authority on Henry James - and Peter began to write when he was about 15. After serving in the navy from 1944-46 he went to Yale and when the Atlantic Monthly published his story, "Sadie", he acquired an agent. By the time he went to study in Paris in 1951 he was already writing his first novel.

At the Sorbonne Matthiessen met Patsy Southgate, a student from Smith College. They married and had two children, Luke who is now 49, and runs a clinic for drug and alcohol addiction, and Sarah, 46, who is now a nurse having worked in television. Matthiessen recalls that he and his friend, the writer Terry Southern, were "broke together" in Paris and entered an Observer writing competition that was won by Muriel Spark. Tired of flogging their work round "awful literary magazines" Matthiessen suggested starting a new one, "that would publish fiction by young writers like ourselves." Working with the writer Harold Humes and the editor they brought in, George Plimpton, they produced the first issue of the Paris Review in the summer of 1953. It featured fiction from Southern and Matthiessen, poems by Robert Bly and George Steiner, a letter from William Styron and a remarkable interview with EM Forster. The magazine went on to publish early fiction by Jack Kerouac, Philip Roth and Samuel Beckett.

Plimpton confesses that as editor he later turned down one of Matthiessen's stories, something he has regretted ever since. "Don DeLillo later picked it up and called it one of the great American short stories and it won an O Henry award, "he

says, "But in that first edition Peter contributed a story as well as an article about the French novelist and playwright Henry de Montherlant but used the pen-name Pierre Conrad because he didn't want it to look like he'd written the whole thing. His real ambition was to be a novelist and I don't think he wanted very much to be a magazine editor. He was working very hard on *Race Rock* and he left pretty soon to go back to New York.

Matthiessen returned to New York in 1954 and *Race Rock*, about a native American, was published the same year. His second novel, *Partisans*, followed in 1955. Matthiessen and Patsy separated soon after, by which time he was working as a commercial fisherman on Long Island, chartering his boat to tourists in the summer and writing in the winter when the weather made going to sea impossible. He had turned to fishing because, even though his novels had been well received, he couldn't make a living from fiction.

In conversation with the editor of *Paris Review* Matthiessen digs his literary carrier saying "And as I had picked up a very wide, if not very deep, knowledge of the natural world, when I then failed as a fisherman I realized that I could write about nature" (34). He travelled across America looking for indigenous, and often threatened, natural habitats. The genesis of *Wildlife in America* came via a commission for three articles on the subject from *Sports Illustrated* magazine. "So I looked for a book I could loot but I couldn't find it because there wasn't one. In the end I had so much research I thought it might as well be put to use so I wrote the book." (Matthiessen 57).

Matthiessen's third novel, *Raditzer*, about the son of a wealthy family going to sea to find himself, was published in 1960, by which time he had caught the attention of William Shawn, legendary editor of the *New Yorker*. "Mr Shawn had liked my

work and he said I had covered America and so many other people had written about Europe, but I should go to the many other wildernesses in the world." Matthiessen chronicled his journeys down the Amazon in *The Cloud Forest* (1961) and to New Guinea the following year with *Under the Mountain Wall*.

His South American travels for the *New Yorker* in the late 1950s proved important. "I just got hooked on the feeling down there, the sense of menace in the jungle," he says, "The Cloud Forest was serialised in the *New Yorker* but I knew that I would also do a novel" (45). *At Play in the Fields of the Lord*, set in the Brazilian rainforest among missionaries and tribesmen and hallucinogenic compounds, was published in 1965. Like much of his work it is concerned with traditional peoples and the result of their interaction with modernity. Its publication proved to be the culmination of a period of dramatic personal political and cultural development for Matthiessen.

In 1963 he married Deborah Love, a poet and writer who went on to write an account of their time together on the remote Irish island of Annaghkeen. They had one son, Alex, who is an environmentalist and currently the river keeper for the Hudson river, and an adopted daughter, Rue, who is a writer.

As the 60s progressed Matthiessen became active in the movement against the Vietnam war and began to work closely with César Chávez after writing a profile of him for the *New Yorker*. His first campaign was against crop growers' indiscriminate use of insecticide. "These guys would play rough but we got on immediately and I think César is the greatest man I ever met because he was willing to put so much on the line."

His work with Chávez led to an interest in Native American life and in the *Spirit of Crazy Horse*, the paperback edition was halted after an FBI agent and the

governor of South Dakota launched libel suits. The cases were eventually dismissed, but Leonard Peltier's most recent bid for parole was turned down only last month and Matthiessen remains bitter about the continuing role played by the FBI. "It is a dreadful organisation. J Edgar Hoover made it like that and it has got worse."

In parallel to his political awakening Matthiessen embarked on a journey of spiritual discovery. He says his Buddhism evolved "fairly naturally after my drug experiences. What I wanted was that way of seeing but without the chemicals. "He was led by his wife Deborah, "who suffered from very bad drug trips from LSD and finally she was so scared she stopped taking it. In 1969 she told me about Buddhism and I got interested" (23).

Deborah died of cancer in 1972. Eight years later Matthiessen married Maria Eckhart, who had been a model before working as a personal assistant to the chief executive of the American cosmetics company Clinique. He became a monk in 1981 and a Zen teacher in 1990. He is now a Zen master, a Roshi, "Zen is really just a reminder to stay alive and to be awake," he says:

We tend to daydream all the time, speculating about the future and dwelling on the past. Zen practice is about appreciating your life in this moment. If you are truly aware of five minutes a day then you are doing pretty well. We are beset by both the future and the past and there is no reality apart from the here and now. (127)

He says he was aware that in *The Snow Leopard* he was pulling together all the strands of his life. "I knew if I couldn't write a good book out of this experience I may as well pack it in. I went into that journey in 1973 on the wings of many years of Zen training and in the wake of the death of my wife. That trip was a memorial to her but I'm still dealing with its success and with the expectations it has placed upon me."

II: Politics of Mysticizing in *The Snow Leopard*

The Snow Leopard was one of the standout books of Peter Matthiessen's career. Published in 1978 to wide acclaim, it was twice awarded the National Book Award. Matthiessen's dive into Buddhist lore in the book is fascinating and, it is also troubling. On September 28, 1973, Matthiessen sets out from Pokhara, Nepal for a two-month trek in the mountains, accompanied by the cranky field biologist George Schaller. They plan to observe the blue sheep's fall rut and, if they're lucky, glimpse the very rare snow leopard. In truth, though, Matthiessen and Schaller, like hordes of explorers before them, are searching for more than the elusive cat: a nebulous native authenticity, an encounter with pure life, whether in wilderness or in "the country folk," as Matthiessen calls them.

When Matthiessen turns his gaze on some of these country folk—the Sherpa porters traveling with him—the book's difficulties begin. He repeatedly projects apprehensions and urges onto them. He imagines that they wish him hurt or dead and fantasizes about holding them by their pigtails, beating them into bloody submission. In the most minimalist sense, travel would translate as the movement between geographical locations and cultural experiences. But, if we go beyond by looking at how this movement operates psychically, metaphorically and politically, we would notice that in narratives relationship between self, home, nation, travel and encounter is both varied and complicated. Narratives of travel and exploration are, more often than not, concerned with the construction of an Other. In his seminal work on European writings about the Other, Edward Said shows how discourses of Orientalism have dominated works that write on a different country or evoke different cultures, and have made us aware of the ideological features of the writing process.

Much of the pleasure of reading a travel account comes from the enjoyment we take in imagining scenes through the evocation of what Edward Said has called "second-order knowledge" (*Orientalism* 52) through representations that fulfill our desire to know the "other". Intimately but to remain unknown and un-examined ourselves. The idea has been most influentially explored by Mary Louise Pratt, who argued in her landmark study *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Trans-culturation* (Pratt 19) that the purportedly objective and assuredly objectifying eye of the tourist functions as an ideological apparatus of empire. The imperial eye at its most penetrating is the disembodied organ of an unmarked white, male body that is always subject and never object.

Much of the writing of *The Snow Leopard* is a bit of Western muscle that pictures Nepal, Nepali porters, guides and their cultural tendencies. The porters are fellow Buddhists who, by Matthiessen's own account, do their tasks well, with hospitality and good cheer. Yet he dubs one in particular a "red-faced devil," a "yellow-eyed" "evil monk," a "sorcerer" (86). The rest are "childlike" or "unsophisticated." Matthiessen reveals himself as part of a long tradition of Orientalist writers who see themselves as gods, saviors, and knowledge bearers.

Much of the first half of the journey crosscuts between Matthiessen's anguish over the passing of his wife Deborah nine months or so before and his selective recounting of Buddhist history. We learn in this personal travel book that Matthiessen's wife, Deborah, has died six months before the trip this makes Matthiessen deal with the worldly place of suffering and also assess his own private suffering. Matthiessen looks filled by a sense of loss, "since the encounter with the crawling child I look at the paradise askance" (24). Matthiessen comes over his grief looking at the world full of suffering all around him. When he is in the nature he feels emptiness but as he

approach a village death and suffering appeared as he describes about a mountain village as:

at the mountain village called Sivang to the beat of tom - toms the buffalo is slowly killed for Durga Puja and its fresh blood drunk while children stand in the rain, these mountain children's have big belly of malnutrition and though they seem no less content of the other children of the valleys and do not sing out to a one of the blood drinkers has the loveliest face of any child I have ever seen" (38).

Peter Matthiessen is a seeker in the western tradition with different goals. He speaks of his goals in different terms like "I would like to reach the crystal monastery, I would like to see a snow leopard, but if I do not that is alright, too. In this movement there are birds. (94)

He makes large claims about Buddhism: "Dharma is the great wheel of Universal Law set in motion by Sakyamuni Buddha." (103). A zealous new convert, Matthiessen is open to learning from a variety of traditions and peoples, a quality he maintained throughout his career. Against the pain of his loss, he takes comfort and encouragement in local stories about grief and dying:

Mila[repa] discovers the decayed corpse of his mother, no more than a mound of dirt and rags in her fallen hut; shaken by grief and horror, he remembers the instruction of his guru . . . to embrace all that he most fears And so he makes a headrest of the sad remains of the erstwhile White Garland. (92)

At times the waves of grief even seem to recede, and he is grateful, "As if awakened from a bad dream of the past, I found myself forgiven, not just by [Deborah] but by myself, and this forgiveness strikes me still as the greatest blessing of my life" (34).

Gradually Matthiessen leaps into a mode of retelling that incorporates, as Jung would say, his shadow. His thoughts get more elastic, the mountain landscape at one moment bending around the horn of a sheep, as if he is tripping or observing the world through a wide-angle lens. But then his awestruck visions and mini-kenshos are balanced by the recognition that Zen is a discipline, and its perceptions, like everything in this world, fleeting, “To strive for permanence in what I think I have perceived is to miss the point” (87).

Matthiessen draws on an ancient type, but it comes from his own culture: the Westerner who views the Oriental as a historical and apolitical. As Matthiessen veers into mysticism, the tenor begins to change. First, via Western sources he recalls from days past:

Hamsun and Hesse, with the authority of failure, warned of the fatal spell of the mystical search—so did Kierkegaard, who declared that too much ‘possibility’ led to the madhouse. But when I came upon these cautionary words, I already had what Kierkegaard called ‘the sickness of infinitude, wandering from one path to another with no real recognition that I was embarked upon a search. (26)

His mystical search triggers flashbacks; the language gets wilder. “My head is the sorcerer’s skull cup full of blood, and were I to turn, my eyes would see straight to the heart of chaos, the mutilation, bloody gore, and pain that is seen darkly in the bright eye of this lizard” (34). Matthiessen can find no satisfactory outlet for his newfound grief and lifelong restlessness, so, as with Hamlet, much of what he sees and touches becomes his objective correlative, a repository for emotional detritus.

Soon, he and Schaller, referred to in the text by his initials, begin to see signs of the snow leopard—prints, and the unabashedly scatological, “‘Isn’t that something?’ GS says, ‘To be so delighted with a pile of crap?’” (88).

But Matthiessen accepts his Zen teacher’s advice—“expect nothing”: “If the snow leopard should manifest itself, then I am ready to see the snow leopard.” (126). The very search is inverted, so that it is the animal watching them, “That the snow leopard *is*, that it is here, that its frosty eyes watch us from the mountain—that is enough” (127).

A boy escorts him through a village he must cross; it is an act of hospitality, yet Matthiessen perceives a threat. “One day this boy and others will destroy [the] forest, and their steep fields will erode in rain, and the thin soil will wash away into the torrents, clogging the river channels farther down so that monsoon floods will spread across the land” (187), he writes. Matthiessen has a plainspoken recommendation, and the degree to which his advice was taken is largely to his credit:

In Asia more than all the places on earth, it is crucial to establish wildlife sanctuaries at once, before the last animals are overwhelmed. As GS has written, ‘Man is modifying the world so drastically that most animals cannot adapt to the new conditions. In the Himalaya as elsewhere there is a great dying, one infinitely sadder than the Pleistocene extinctions, for man now has the knowledge and the need to save these remnants of his past. (221)

The environmental message of the book is its most lastingly urgent plea, and it is deftly woven into the personal grief and the Buddhist history. But it is told almost entirely without Asian voices, even though the Sherpa porters, more than any characters in the live action of the book, fascinate Matthiessen in a very peculiar way,

“As GS says, ‘When the going gets rough, they take care of you first.’ Yet their dignity is unassailable, for the service is rendered for its own sake—it is the task, not the employer, that is served” (223).

This is a Buddhist way of saying they are good at their jobs. Perhaps to establish his expertise in observing people, Matthiessen adds, “The generous and open outlook of the sherpas, a kind of merry defenselessness, is by no means common, even among unsophisticated peoples; I have never encountered it before except among the Eskimos. He wonders “if this sense of life is not a common heritage from the far past” (28).

Matthiessen is onto something, but he has it backwards. He is drawing on an ancient type, but it comes to him from his own culture’s recent past: the Westerner who views the Oriental as ahistorical and apolitical. Therefore, not environmentalists. They are all spirit, as if from another time. On a well-worn trail he writes:

These resting places are everywhere along the trading routes, some of them so ancient that the great trees have long since died, leaving two round holes in a stonework oval platform. Like the tea houses and the broad stepping stones that are built into the hills, the rest walls impart a blessedness to this landscape, as if we had wandered into a lost country of the golden age. (30)

Just where Matthiessen finds humanity and community, a travelers’ commons of sorts, a kind of universal politics, he begins to push the travelers, the porters, the Asians back into a type. It is hinted at here with that un-contextualized phrase “the golden age,” suggesting a magic that Western writers have long located in the icons and architectures of the East.

The Sherpa who most fascinates him is Tukten, “a wiry small man with Mongol eyes and outsized ears and a disconcerting smile” (234). Matthiessen is perplexed by his own fascination. “I wonder why this Tukten is a porter,” (234), he writes. “Tukten radiates that inner quiet, which is often associated with spiritual attainment, but perhaps his attainment is a dark one” (235). Matthiessen takes this projection very far. Matthiesians spiritual quest we can say in western term and antiquest mirriored by the search for the Tukten at the end. He comes for gain but with the acceptance of the loss and pain the journey is complete. the message Peter Matthiessen brought in the snow leopard is that quest doesn’t necessarily have to involve dangerous treks but he learns from Thukten that our quest can be found in life itself among its day to day events both painful and pleasurable that make up the eternal now:

More often than I like, I feel that gaze of his, as if he were here to watch over me . . . the gaze is open, calm, benign, without judgment of any kind, and yet, confronted with it, as with a mirror, I am aware of all that is hollow in myself, all that is greedy, angry, and unwise. (235)

Matthiessen again is onto something. Something is making him think these thoughts of cultural guilt, but it is not Tukten’s dark magic. It is something much closer to home, and we find it buried within his words if we look hard enough. Instead of acknowledging his cultural and historical inheritance—his responsibility, as the Vietnam War rages to the southeast and the carpet bombing of Cambodia is well under way, he pairs Tukten with the animals, as if in a mythical rather than historical or political age. One day I will ask this yellow-eyed Tukten if, in some other incarnation, he has not been a snow leopard, or an old blue sheep on the slopes of Shey; he would be at no loss for an answer.

Matthiessen is caught between not knowing enough about the particular case, a porter named Tukten, with whom he can hardly speak, and the body of knowledge he derives from the past, if not the golden age of Western incursions into Asia and the Middle East. Matthiessen the snow leopard is on one very explicit level scientific travel journal in the tradition of Humboldt and Darwin. The region chosen for travel is extremely remote, politically unstable, hostile and unforgiving. In the great tradition of European expeditions they employ porter and Sherpa who will steal and complain and desert the travelers in the worst place. Apart from the traditional 19th century book of adventure filled with blizzards , impassable cliffs , daunted porters he fills his narrative with mysticism to address the taste of western readers to represent the Nepali society.

“What can our evil monk be doing now?” he asks. He can’t trust his own eyes, since dark powers must be at work. “Whatever this man is—wanderer or evil monk, or saint or sorcerer—he seems touched by what Tibetans call the ‘crazy wisdom’: he is free” (221). Matthiessen both wants Tukten’s magic power and fears it. The strangest thing is that he can’t give a single example of it, except that he broke a walking stick and was then almost attacked by a dog. He recounts the occasion as though Tukten had mesmerized him.

In these bits of *The Snow Leopard*, Matthiessen is working in the classic Orientalist vein, offering a Rudyard Kipling for the new American century—Kipling who urged that Europeans and their descendents take up the white man’s burden on behalf of “new-caught, sullen peoples, half devil and half child.” A month into the trek, Matthiessen writes in frustration, “These Red-faced Devils have us at their mercy, and all know it” (28). This echoes Conrad’s “red-eyed devils,” and that is probably where it comes from. But Matthiessen goes further, since Conrad was

arguably describing imperialist impulses themselves as the “devils,” while Matthiessen is referring to the people helping him find the snow leopard.

Matthiessen imagines he is at the mercy of the red-faced devils in other paranoid moments as well, “Each time we strip off boots and pants, the Ring-mos [other porters] cheer in simple-hearted hope that the strangers will crack their skulls on the slick rocks or fall into the frigid water” (187). Some hunch tells Matthiessen that because he is Western, he should be in control. In the absence of that control, he projects violent motives onto the locals with whom he can hardly speak.

To say simply that Orientalism was a rationalization of colonial rule is to ignore the extent to which colonial rule was justified in advance by Orientalism, rather than after the fact as Said writes. Said further says, “From the beginning of Western speculation about the Orient, the one thing the orient could not do was to represent itself” (113). Said adds, Knowledge of subject races or Orientals is what makes their management easy and profitable; knowledge gives power, more power requires more knowledge, and so on in an increasingly profitable dialectic of information and control. These are the tropes Matthiessen is working with, too, even if he is doing so to an ostensibly different end.

And while Said’s *Orientalism* was published only the same year as *The Snow Leopard*, we nevertheless see signs all over the book that Matthiessen knew better than to exoticize the East, to build the reader’s pleasure around a false and harmful centuries-old Western projection. For instance, Matthiessen obviously knows the work of the Tibetan teacher Chögyam Trungpa, whom he cites twice in *The Snow Leopard*. When asked about Tibetan Buddhism in the West, Matthiessen tells the Lama at Nepal’s Crystal Mountain Monastery about Chögyam, who “teaches in Vermont and Colorado.” One of Chögyam’s main efforts during this period was to

push against lazy, popularized, and exotic images of Buddhism in the West. In his 1937 *Cutting Through Spiritual Materialism*, which a student in Matthiessen's position would surely have read, Chögyam denounces "the exotic" as an illegitimate expression of Buddhism and equates it with the work of the ego. Again and again in his works he contrasts Western Buddhists' attraction to the exotic with the real work of the dharma.

But even discounting Chögyam's lessons, since he was a notorious drunk who turned off and finally lost many of his students, there was embedded throughout the culture—from the Civil Rights movement to worldwide postcolonial uprisings to the multiculturalism movement taking place in universities—enough to teach Matthiessen better than to write about "red-faced" monks or his vicarious fantasies of yanking them by their pony tails and beating them bloody.

If Matthiessen wanted the uglier feelings in his book to indicate the size of his grief—if that is why this book was written—imagine how much better it would have been had he regarded the pain of other peoples beside his own, had he understood that racism is institutionalized first through language, had he taken more seriously the history of all those human subjects under the boot of the imperial methods he recounts so breezily.

Despite all the problems, the Nepalese are a happy people. Matthiessen writes, "These simple and uneducated men comport themselves with the wise calm of monks, and their well being is in no way inseparable from their religion" (84). Happiness is a universal human pursuit and should be an important issue for the humanities. The book repeatedly touches on anthropology. The link between the Tibetans, the Bhotias (people of Tibetan extraction) and the American Indians is interesting. In fact this link has been noticed by many workers. There is a strong similarity.

In *Snow Leopard* Matthiessen quite deliberately uses the narrative to set up an East/West dialogue. He finds in Buddhism a philosophy in which man and nature might be reconciled – an ideal which is demonstrably not realized in Nepal, “One day that boy and others will destroy the forest and their sheep fields will erode in the rain, and the thin soil will wash away into the torrents” (31). The romantic continues to idealize nature, but the scientist and realist see the writing on the wall – primitive, unspoilt nature is in retreat.

Matthiessen questions his own motives for the journey:

Why was I going? What did I hope to find? ... To say I was interested in blue sheep or snow leopards, or even in remote lamaseries, was no answer ... to say I was making a pilgrimage seemed fatuous and vague ... so I admitted that I did not know. (121-2)

The mostly silent Schaller is set up as the rationalist foil against whom the romantic and eastern-leaning Matthiessen explores the “alternative” concepts of Buddhism. Escape through an alternative spiritual centre is what Eric Cohen labels the “existential mode” of touristic experience, which is common among disillusioned westerners in the twentieth century. But although Matthiessen is, like romantic travellers before and since, on a personal quest, he turns it into a culture clash – a struggle between different value systems and ways of seeing, the outcome of which might impact on the future of nature. Schaller points to a fundamental difference - an incompatibility between eastern and western thinking, “GS refuses to believe that the Western mind can truly absorb nonlinear Eastern perceptions” (63). Nevertheless, in his willingness to embrace eastern ways of thinking to see nature afresh he is still influenced by western epistemes and aesthetic models. The east/west dualism he formulates is itself an example of the use of western rationalism. Even as he instructs

readers in Buddhist approaches to nature, he frames his own representations through western aesthetic and scientific models. This is an observation, not a criticism, as it is hard to see how he could have organised things differently, coming to eastern landscapes and eastern thought through a western tradition of nature. We can sense that his conversion to Buddhism is authentic, and yet we can also sense that he is writing to a western audience and expressing himself through western modes of thought and feeling. Matthiessen begins the journey as a romantic, finding delight in the landscape despite the human suffering on display:

In the heat and stench and shriek of Varanasi, where in fiery sunrise swallows fly like departing spirits over the vast silent river, one delights in the smile of a blind girl being led, of a Hindu gentleman in white turban gazing benignly at the bus driver who reviles him, of a flute-playing beggar boy, of a slow old woman pouring holy water from the Ganga, the River, onto a stone elephant daubed red. (22)

The romanticized image of blind youth, poverty and tottering old age is transformed in the traveler's eye through spiritual associations with the natural setting. Nature somehow alleviates the social realities and reframes them, and in his romantic reverie, Matthiessen returns to the idea of the "happy savage" – "one understands why" "village life has been celebrated as the natural, happy domain of man by many thinkers from Lao-tzu to Gandhi" (24). Matthiessen writes on caste system that was more strictly at practice when he made the journey but the problem is that the western equate the Eastern cast system somehow like their class but it is much different. He comments about it as:

But this is not a paradise that has escaped the ravages of time. Even in this remote region, modernity casts its long shadow: nature is under

threat from erosion and people are suffering; the mood switches as the hardships of the journey cause him to take a less rosy view of the idyll since the encounter with the crawling child, I look at paradise askance. (33)

The picturesque is another western model of nature that Matthiessen adapts to eastern thought, “I am struck by the yin-yang of these rivers – the one slope white, right down to the water, and the other dark, yet with a snow patch on the dark side and a dark rock on the white, each side containing the seed of its own opposite” (155).

This image of the “balance of cosmic principles” is not, however, divined from nature. As with the picturesque, it results from the projection of an idea onto the landscape. Finding balance and harmony in the framed image he perceives in nature follows picturesque technique –not a different (eastern) way of seeing, but a different aesthetic model projected onto the landscape with alternative religious and philosophical associations. An interesting cross-over between eastern and western thought is through the idea of “enlightenment. For Sakyamani in the fifth century B.C., this is attained when the “transparent radiance of a stilled mind opens out in prajna, or transcendent knowing”; this leads to the experience of “true nature”, his “Buddha-nature” at one with the nature of the “universe” (27). This form of enlightenment corresponds loosely with German Romanticism in intuiting knowledge through nature, but opposes the scientific rationalism of the Enlightenment in the West. Western modernity demands restlessness, linearity and progress, all of which are quite at odds with the “stillness” at the heart of the eastern form of enlightenment Matthiessen presents. Even in Romantic travel writing, stillness is rarer than restlessness and the urge to keep moving. If we think of Byron and D.H. Lawrence, the idea of a still centre is remote, and Matthiessen himself is never really still – the

journey commands that he keeps moving, and with this motion, his mind is visited by a continuous series of conflicting images. He sees through a western aesthetic of romanticism when he reports:

this landscape is hallucinatory – gorges and waterfalls, the pines and clouds that come and go, fire-coloured dwellings painted with odd flowers and bizarre designs, the cloud-mirrors of the rice paddies in steps down the steep mountainside, a flock of vermilion minivets, blown through a windtossed tumult of bamboo. (44)

Distant peaks dissolving into the clouds and sky is a stock image of the romantic quest for the liminal, the edge of consciousness, the fluidity in forms of nature that mirror the desire for dissolution of self. But, as with the picturesque earlier, the landscape here is also marked out with non-western elements: exotic birds, bamboo and rice paddies, the latter performing the same role as the lake-as-mirror in the romantic sublime. The question here is whether eastern landscapes are appropriated by western romanticism or whether the ideas behind western romanticism are being skewed through eastern forms of thinking such as Buddhism. Matthiessen is sometimes aware he is translating eastern landscapes into aestheticised western patterns of thought. Below Rohagon he finds a copse which, as a composite picture, evokes the woods of home, but in detail, the woods differ enough to produce for him a dreamlike quality, “The wildwood brings on a mild nostalgia, not for home or place, but for lost innocence – the paradise lost that, as Proust said, is the only paradise.” (127). He begins with a general image of familiarity in the unfamiliar, an idea which underlies all representations of alterity in travel writing, then proceeds to association with the western idea of the uncanny, that in turn produces the reverie grounded in western literature and a western concept of sacred time: from paradise to loss, from

the golden age to the fall. But the chain of association does not end here, because Matthiessen is, as ever, keen to interlace eastern and western thought, so the image of the lost time of childhood induced by the wildwood is reinterpreted through Milarepa as loss of “presencing” rather than a particular time, loss of the state of total immersion in the present: “this is the paradise of children, that they are at rest in the present” (127). Matthiessen’s search for stillness in nature as mirror to his own quest for inner calm is thwarted by various reminders of time and being. One of these is transience, the brief candle of being flickering in the darkness of eternity, reminder of impermanence and imminent crossing into the ultimate stillness of non-being. It shows again how the present cannot be grasped except in fitful hallucinatory moments. As in the Venerable Bede’s example of man’s sojourn on earth spanning no more than a swallow’s brief flight through one window of the meeting hall and out the other, Matthiessen too sees transience in the quickness of a bird, “With the first sun rays we come down into still forest of gnarled birch and dark stiff firs. Through light filtered by the straying lichens, a silver bird flies to a cedar, fanning crimsoned wings on the sunny bark. Then it is gone, leaving behind a vague longing, a sad emptiness” (77).

This is the emptiness that follows the failure to grasp the present while at the same time reflecting on life’s brief span. But the emptiness he experiences on the icy slopes of Kang La is reminiscent of the romantic sublime. Matthiessen relates the powerful void to a space of transcendence, an immensity in which nature and mind interfuse:

No wind, no cloud, no track, no bird, only the crystal crescents
between peaks, the ringing mountains of rock that, freed from the
talons of ice and snow, thrust an implacable being into the blue. In the

early light, the rock shadows on the snow are sharp; in the tension between light and dark is the power of the universe. (162)

But Matthiessen interposes eastern thought when he describes, “This stillness to which all returns, this is reality” (162). Here he is thinking of Milarepa again and the “pearly radiance of Emptiness, the Uncreated, without beginning, therefore without end” which is the stillness meditation works towards, because this void is where “one’s own true nature is reborn” (91). Matthiessen connects Buddhist meditation with the romantic sublime, finding in each the powerful void in which the “true nature of the self” might be glimpsed, “Snow mountains, more than sea or sky, serve as a mirror to one’s own true being, utterly still, utterly clear, a void, an Emptiness without life or sound that carries in Itself all life, all sound” (162). The paradoxical everything in nothing, yet the ultimate stillness seems beyond reach, or beyond apprehension – the unrepresentable which takes us back to the sublime. As for the early Christian pilgrim to the Holy Lands, whose spiritual journey can only be fulfilled in the next world, consciousness and ego obscure the threshold to paradise, “as long as I remain an “I” who is conscious of the void and stands apart from it, there will remain a snow mist on the mirror” (162). From romantic and quasi-religious meditation, Matthiessen comes to a realisation of the hyper-materiality of nature, “Truth is near, in the reality of what I sit on – rocks”, and so an idea that has evaded him in the Heart Sutra, “form is emptiness, and emptiness is form”, is suddenly revealed to him, “The mountains have no “meaning”, they are meaning; the mountains are” (195). Rocks become the concrete signified-referent, an idea further semiotically-charged in the landscapes of Nepal and Tibet where rocks are frequently painted with lotus flowers, Buddhist symbols and the mantra “om mani padme hum” carved directly into the river rock” (138). The mantra short-circuits any problems of representation by connecting

language directly to nature in rock-carvings and “meaning-less” signifiers. By contrast, where romanticism aspires to transcendence, it is brought back to earth by words, as Shelley famously admits, “The wingèd words on which my soul would pierce Into the heights of Love’s rare Universe, Are chains of lead around its flight of fire - I pant, I sink, I tremble, I expire! (Shelley, Epipsychidion) But it seems Matthiessen also falters as he travels from the space of meditation to the site of writing, “The sun is round. I ring with life, and the mountains ring, and when I can hear it, there is a ringing that we share. I understand this not in my mind but in my heart, knowing how meaningless it is to try to capture what cannot be expressed, knowing that mere words will remain” (196).

The Snow Leopard seems to stand for something more – a psychic connection to his wife perhaps, but also the unseen persistence of wilderness nature. It is part of the primitive that continues to exist by evading empirical scrutiny. When they come closest to seeing the snow leopard on the Crystal Monastery, Schaller surprises Matthiessen by saying “maybe it’s better if there are some things that we don’t see” (223), and later, when he leaves the Crystal Monastery, Matthiessen (in conversation with himself) agrees, “Have you seen the snow? No! Isn’t that wonderful?” (225). The Lama at the Crystal Monastery has taught Matthiessen to find joy in what is, so there is no disappointment in not seeing – this might be a Buddhist approach to the non-appearance of the snow leopard. From an environmentalist perspective it is also better that the snow leopard remains unseen – it might just enable him/her to survive.

III. Representation of Nepali Society as 'the Other'

In *The Snow Leopard* the position of Peter Matthiessen is not merely of a visitor gazing upon an alien landscape. He is deeply involved both politically and personally in the process of representation. His cultural critique is steeped in personal politics to secure a position to his western readers. The representation of Nepali society is made complex because of writer's spiritual quest. He not only presents sensory detail of sights, tastes, smells, sounds and textures of the journey but provides comments that suits for his audience he was writing book for. Writer goes for quest when he is in distressful situation of losing his wife to find peace by meditation and self reflection, concentrating on meaning and purpose of life of but he fails to become objective in reflecting his experience.

In the ending of the journey, the writer seems exhausted and uplifted at the same time. Matthiessen is on a pilgrimage to heal him through hardships on the holy places regarded by Nepalese. He quotes what hardships means in Tibetan tradition but he treats the locals with the western ego and His very notion of porters is negative as he further describes porter as local men of uncertain occupation and unsteady fast habit, notorious for giving trouble. As a western intellectual he should have spoken against cast system that divides humans into different strata based on birth but he uses the wilder language to tell about his porters who he dislikes. Matthiessen as a outsider knows the caste system and hierarchies in practices through Sherpa porters and writes if he has good knowledge about the systems and practices which are age old. He addresses the iron smith people with "Dirty Kamis". The very attitude of the writer to Nepali people is based on utilitarianism; which reflects the imperial motive of division.

One of the main differences here is limited knowledge of the Eastern culture of Matthiessen and his personality that shaped his western culture. The local people he employed as team members were much more familiar with the environment of the Dhaulagiri Mountains than the American leader of the climb. Since they were from Tibetan plateau of Nepal and the surrounding area, the Sherpa's followed Hinduism and Buddhism. They had an appreciation and understanding of nature that very few Westerners could have. As a result, they were sometimes hesitant to continue through the more dangerous parts of the trek and several quit along the way. The Americans, who knew less about the mountain than the Sherpa, refused to quit and often put their lives in danger by disregarding the warnings of the native people. From the book we can know how much trouble the travel staffs made on risk of their own life for the length and magnitude of the expedition.

Matthiessen's tone in general is hectoring. Travel change and teach new things about other people and about self. *Snow Leopard* is written as if he knew it all before, the name of every bird, everything about the unique Buddhist traditions there, and also it seems that every animal, prayer stone, person and even every mountain was there just for him. Possibly this is quite an honest portrayal of our inner lives but it feels a little self absorbed. It is Tukten who have shown him the real people, the real place that he was walking. Matthiessen's description of the landscape and the interaction with the natives is over evocative and condescending.

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