Travel Writing Reimagined: Postcolonial Memoirs as Acts of Cultural Resistance

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Abstract
This paper examines the emergence of postcolonial memoirs as a transformative force within travel writing, arguing that these texts function as sophisticated acts of cultural resistance against the genre's colonial legacy. Through analysis of key theoretical frameworks and contemporary works—including Noreen Masud's *A Flat Place*, Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land*, and Jamal Mahjoub's *Travelling with Djinns*—the paper demonstrates how postcolonial travel writers dismantle the conventional distinctions between home and abroad, self and other, coloniser and colonised. It explores four primary strategies of resistance: the reclamation of narrative authority through counter-discourse, the construction of alternative cartographies that challenge imperial geography, the politics of "dwelling in travel" as a mode of transcultural identity formation, and the critical examination of postcolonial mobility's limitations. The paper concludes by considering the implications of this literary reimagining for both the future of travel writing and broader discourses of cultural encounter in an ostensibly globalised world.

Keywords: postcolonial memoir, travel writing, cultural resistance, decolonisation, narrative authority, transcultural identity

1. Introduction

Travel writing has long occupied an ambiguous position in literary studies—celebrated for its capacity to transport readers across geographical and cultural boundaries, yet increasingly scrutinised for its historical entanglement with European imperialism. As Carl Thompson observes, the genre played a significant role not only in "providing practical information to empire-builders" but also in "justifying empire ideologically" through rhetorical strategies that systematically 'Othered' diverse peoples and cultures worldwide . From the sensationalist accounts of African exploration to the ethnographic surveys of Asian civilisations, colonial-era travel narratives frequently deployed tropes of primitivism, savagery, and bestiality that constituted an important mode of what has come to be termed "colonial discourse" .

Yet if travel writing has been complicit in the project of empire, it has also emerged as a vital site of postcolonial resistance. The question posed by recent scholarship—and by this paper—is whether the genre can be decolonised, or whether it remains, as some critics have argued, inherently phallocentric and Eurocentric . The answer, this paper contends, lies in the transformative potential of postcolonial memoirs: works that appropriate the conventions of travel writing while fundamentally reimagining its political and ethical possibilities. These texts do not simply invert colonial hierarchies but enact what we might term "cultural resistance"—a mode of writing that challenges dominant narratives, reclaims representational authority, and articulates alternative ways of encountering the world.

This paper advances three interconnected arguments. First, that postcolonial memoirs represent a distinctive subgenre of travel

writing characterised by the deliberate blurring of boundaries between observer and observed, traveller and native, past and present. Second, that these texts employ specific narrative strategies—including counter-discourse, alternative cartography, and what James Clifford terms "dwelling in travel"—to resist and reconfigure colonial paradigms. Third, that this literary reimagining carries significant implications for how we understand cultural encounter, mobility, and belonging in the contemporary world.

2. The Colonial Legacy and Its Discontents

2.1 Travel Writing as Colonial Discourse

The entanglement of travel writing with European imperialism is neither incidental nor superficial. Throughout the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, as European powers extended their reach across the globe, travel accounts served multiple functions in the colonial project. They provided practical intelligence about terrain, resources, and indigenous populations; they generated public interest and support for imperial adventures; and perhaps most insidiously, they produced and circulated representations of non-European peoples that naturalised colonial hierarchies.

The rhetorical strategies deployed in these accounts have been extensively documented by postcolonial critics. Non-European cultures were consistently represented through what Thompson identifies as "tropes of primitivism, savagery and bestiality" . Indigenous peoples appeared as timeless, unchanging, and fundamentally different from the dynamic, historical Europeans who described them. Landscapes were depicted as empty, waiting to be discovered and cultivated by those with the vision and enterprise to do so. The travel writer positioned himself—and the gendered pronoun is deliberate—as the active agent of knowledge, while those he encountered were reduced to objects of description.

As Natalya Din-Kariuki and Guido van Meersbergen note, the academic study of travel writing has itself been shaped by this colonial legacy. The categories, methods, and parameters that have long defined the field reflect "a Eurocentric legacy rooted in the colonial past" . To decolonise travel writing, therefore, requires not merely the inclusion of new voices but a fundamental rethinking of the assumptions that have structured both the genre and its criticism.

2.2 The Persistence of Neo-Colonial Discourse

One might hope that the formal end of colonial rule would have rendered such representational strategies obsolete. Yet as Thompson cautions, the tropes of colonial-era travel writing continue to circulate in mainstream Western travel accounts, "albeit usually in less sensationalist forms" . Contemporary travel writing, he suggests, arguably functions as a form of "neo-colonial discourse" that works to justify current global inequalities and to reassure Western readers of their culture's moral superiority.

This persistence is not accidental. The narrative structures of travel writing—the journey out, the encounter with difference, the return home—carry embedded assumptions about agency, knowledge, and authority that derive from colonial paradigms. The traveller from the metropolitan centre who ventures into the (postcolonial) periphery and returns to tell the tale reproduces, at a formal level, the power dynamics of empire. The challenge for postcolonial writers is not simply to offer different content but to transform the narrative structures through which travel is represented.

3. Postcolonial Memoirs: Theoretical Frameworks

3.1 Defining the Genre

The postcolonial memoir occupies a complex generic position, intersecting with travel writing, autobiography, and what has been

termed "place writing" . Unlike conventional travel narratives, which typically focus on the external journey and the places visited, postcolonial memoirs emphasise the interior dimensions of travel—memory, trauma, identity—and the ways in which these shape and are shaped by movement through space.

Noreen Masud's *A Flat Place* (2023) exemplifies this generic hybridity. As a literary scholar of British-Pakistani heritage, Masud explores "flat places" in Britain—the Fens, Orford Ness, the Lancashire coast—while simultaneously articulating these landscapes with the flat places of her native Pakistan. The work engages with what Patrick Holland terms "within-the-country travel" , but it also constitutes a form of "interior travel" through which Masud addresses issues of trauma, memory, and mobility conditioned by gender and race. The flat places she traverses become both physical locations and psychic landscapes, sites where personal and colonial histories converge.

Jopi Nyman's foundational study, *Displacement, Memory, and Travel in Contemporary Migrant Writing*, provides valuable theoretical resources for understanding such texts. Nyman examines how contemporary cultural representations address "transforming identities in the era of increasing global mobility," paying particular attention to the ways in which "cultural encounters are experienced affectively and discursively in migrant literature" . His framework emphasises the inseparability of displacement, memory, and travel in postcolonial life writing, suggesting that these texts do not simply describe movement but actively construct new forms of identity and belonging.

3.2 Key Theoretical Concepts

Several theoretical concepts are essential for understanding postcolonial memoirs as acts of cultural resistance. The first is "counter-discourse"—the strategic appropriation and subversion of dominant narrative forms. Postcolonial travel writers do not simply reject the conventions of colonial travel writing; they inhabit them, transform them, and turn them to new purposes. This strategy enables them to critique colonial representations while simultaneously claiming the authority to represent themselves and their worlds.

The second concept is "alternative cartography"—the practice of mapping space differently from the imperial cartographers who divided the world into colonial possessions. Postcolonial memoirs often trace routes that defy colonial geography: journeys that move between metropole and periphery in both directions, that connect colonised spaces with each other, that follow the paths of migrants rather than explorers. These alternative mappings challenge the spatial assumptions on which colonial power was built.

The third concept, drawn from James Clifford's work, is "dwelling in travel." Clifford argues that certain ethnographers and travel writers blur the boundaries between home and abroad by establishing "roots become routes" toward collective and cosmopolitan identities . To dwell in travel is to find a home in movement itself, to resist the settled certainties of both metropolitan and native identities, and to embrace the transformative possibilities of cultural encounter. For postcolonial writers, this concept offers a way of thinking about identity that is neither rooted in fixed origins nor dissolved into rootless cosmopolitanism, but rather constituted through the ongoing negotiation of different places and cultures.

4. Strategies of Cultural Resistance

4.1 Reclaiming Narrative Authority

The most fundamental act of resistance performed by postcolonial memoirs is the reclamation of narrative authority. Colonial

travel writing systematically denied voice and agency to those it described; indigenous peoples appeared as objects of description rather than subjects of their own stories. Postcolonial memoirs reverse this dynamic, positioning the formerly colonised as the narrating "I" who observes, interprets, and represents both their own cultures and the metropolitan spaces they traverse.

This reclamation operates at multiple levels. At the most basic level, it means that postcolonial writers tell their own stories rather than having stories told about them. But more significantly, it involves the assertion of interpretive authority—the claim that the postcolonial traveller's perspective on both colonised and metropolitan spaces carries validity equal to or greater than that of the Western observer. When Masud reads the British landscape through the lens of her Pakistani childhood, she claims the right to interpret Britain itself from a position that is simultaneously inside and outside, familiar and strange.

Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land* offers a particularly sophisticated example of this strategy. The text interweaves Ghosh's ethnographic fieldwork in contemporary Egyptian villages with the reconstructed history of a twelfth-century Jewish merchant and his Indian slave, Bomma. As Tammy Vernerey demonstrates, Ghosh "dismantles distinctions between home and abroad in order to generate a critical dialogue between Egypt's recollected cosmopolitan past and that of its increasingly sectarian and neocolonial present" . The slave Bomma, who "first stepped upon the stage of modern history in 1942" through the chance discovery of a medieval document, becomes a figure for the suppressed histories that postcolonial writing recovers and centres . Ghosh's narrative strategy—cutting insistently between past and present, between Egypt and India, between scholarly reconstruction and personal encounter—enacts a form of historical consciousness that resists the linear, progressive temporality of colonial modernity.

4.2 Alternative Cartographies

Postcolonial memoirs also resist colonial paradigms through the construction of alternative cartographies. These are not merely different maps but fundamentally different ways of imagining space and our relationship to it. Where colonial cartography divided the world into discrete territories, postcolonial writing emphasises connection, circulation, and mutual implication.

Masud's exploration of Britain's flat places exemplifies this alternative mapping. By articulating the Fens with the landscapes of Pakistan, she creates a geography that refuses the separation of metropole and colony. British space becomes legible only through reference to colonial space; the two are revealed as historically and experientially intertwined. This is not the discovery of exotic difference but the tracing of connections that colonial discourse worked to obscure.

Similarly, the postcolonial memoirs studied by Nyman—works by authors including Abdulrazak Gurnah, Caryl Phillips, and Jamal Mahjoub—"show how postcolonial studies can be applied to the study of cultural encounters" . These texts map what Nyman terms "transnational spaces, identities, and memories," tracing routes that connect Africa, the Caribbean, Europe, and North America in patterns that defy the simple binary of East and West, North and South . The journeys they describe are rarely linear; they double back, circle, and intersect, reflecting the complex itineraries of postcolonial lives.

4.3 Dwelling in Travel

The concept of "dwelling in travel" offers a particularly fruitful lens for understanding postcolonial memoirs. Clifford developed this concept to describe ethnographers who "blur

the boundaries between ethnography and travel writing" by establishing "roots become routes" . For postcolonial writers, this blurring is not a methodological choice but an existential condition. Their identities are constituted through movement; home is not a fixed point of origin but something that must be continually reconstructed across space and time.

Ghosh's text provides the exemplary instance of dwelling in travel. His ethnographic fieldwork in Egyptian villages is not a temporary sojourn from which he will return to a stable home; it becomes a way of life, a mode of being that transforms his understanding of both Egypt and India. As Vernerey puts it, Ghosh chooses "to 'dwell' in travel, to find a home in other cultures," and this choice enables him to learn from those cultures, to chronicle "critical dialogues" between them, and to foster large-scale "critiques of cultural dominance" . The result is not the loss of identity but its expansion: a vision of "transcultural identity" that emerges from sustained engagement with unfamiliar "geographical and historical trajectories" .

This dwelling in travel carries political as well as personal implications. By refusing the settled identities that colonial discourse assigned to coloniser and colonised, native and stranger, postcolonial writers challenge the categories on which imperial power depended. They demonstrate that identity is not a fixed essence but an ongoing negotiation, and that this negotiation takes place not only in the spaces between cultures but in the very process of moving through them.

4.4 The Politics of Memory

Memory plays a crucial role in postcolonial memoirs' acts of cultural resistance. Colonial discourse systematically suppressed or distorted the memories of colonised peoples, imposing its own narratives of the past. Postcolonial writing responds by recovering suppressed memories, articulating alternative histories, and demonstrating the continuing presence of the colonial past in the postcolonial present.

The collection *Re/membering Place* explores precisely these dynamics across a range of postcolonial contexts. As its editors explain, the contributors consider "re/membering" as "a process of reconstruction which entails the recreation of memory, be it individual or collective, the re-appropriation of the past and of collective myths, the reshaping of identity" . This process operates through various forms of storytelling—fiction, autobiography, travel narrative, memoir, historiography—that "serve to fill in the blanks of historical discourse, to give voice to a forgotten community, revisit historiography and question the canon of Western culture" .

In postcolonial memoirs, memory is not simply a private faculty but a political resource. The memories that these texts recover are often traumatic—memories of displacement, violence, loss—but their recovery is itself an act of resistance. To remember what colonial discourse sought to erase is to assert the continuing existence and agency of colonised peoples. Moreover, as the concept of "re/membering" suggests, this process is also about reconstituting community, putting back together what colonialism fragmented.

Emma Parker's study of white life writers from the former British Empire—Penelope Lively, J.G. Ballard, Doris Lessing, and Janet Frame—offers a complementary perspective on the politics of memory. Parker examines how these writers remembered their colonial childhoods across multiple autobiographical texts, revealing "how empire and its aftermath seeped into everyday life" and "that imperialism functioned as part of a given world both during and after colonial rule" . While these writers occupy a different position

from postcolonial subjects, their work demonstrates the inescapability of colonial memory and the complex work of coming to terms with it.

5. Case Studies in Postcolonial Travel Memoir

5.1 Noreen Masud's *A Flat Place*

Noreen Masud's *A Flat Place* (2023) offers a compelling instance of postcolonial travel memoir as cultural resistance. The text operates at the intersection of travel writing, postcolonial memoir, and place writing, using Masud's exploration of Britain's flat landscapes to address questions of trauma, memory, and identity .

What makes Masud's work particularly significant is its double articulation of landscape. As Jaine Chemmachery notes, the flat places Masud traverses in Britain "may be articulated with the flat places of her native Pakistan" . This articulation is not merely metaphorical; it reflects a way of seeing shaped by Masud's British-Pakistani heritage and by the histories of connection and disconnection between the two countries. The Fens become legible through the Punjab, and vice versa. Neither landscape can be understood in isolation; each carries traces of the other.

This double vision enables Masud to resist both the colonial gaze that would exoticise Pakistani landscapes and the metropolitan gaze that would naturalise British ones. She sees Britain from a perspective that is simultaneously insider and outsider, familiar and strange. And she sees Pakistan through the lens of her British education and experience, refusing the authenticity that would fix her as simply "native." The flat places she explores become sites where multiple histories and identities converge, demanding a form of attention that resists easy resolution.

Chemmachery poses the critical question: despite its postcolonial perspective, does Masud's endeavour remain "problematic," as some critics have argued about texts drawing from travel writing? Or does her text "offer new ways of encountering the world" ? The answer, this paper suggests, lies in Masud's transformation of the genre. By foregrounding the interior dimensions of travel, by articulating British and Pakistani spaces, and by insisting on the inseparability of personal and colonial histories, she creates a form of travel writing that escapes the imperial legacy while remaining engaged with its consequences.

5.2 Amitav Ghosh's *In An Antique Land*

Ghosh's *In An Antique Land* (1992) has become a canonical text in discussions of postcolonial travel writing. Its generic complexity—part ethnography, part history, part memoir—exemplifies the hybridity that characterises postcolonial approaches to the genre.

The text's central strategy, as Vernerey demonstrates, is the dismantling of boundaries between home and abroad, self and other, coloniser and colonised. Ghosh's travels in Egypt are not framed as a journey from a stable home into exotic difference; instead, he finds himself implicated in the lives and histories of those he encounters, just as they are implicated in his. The twelfth-century slave Bomma, whose story Ghosh reconstructs from fragments, becomes a figure for the suppressed connections that colonial modernity worked to erase—connections between India and the Middle East, between slaves and merchants, between past and present.

Ghosh's dialectical method—cutting between contemporary encounters and medieval history, between Egypt and India—produces what Vernerey calls "a unique experience with history" . Present-day discourses of development and progress are "brushed against the grain" by a recollected history of

cosmopolitanism that reveals the violence underlying modernisation. The effect, Vernerey argues, is to "impoverish the discourse of progress" and to "encourage reader resistance to a blind faith in progress and development" . Ghosh's text thus functions as cultural resistance not only through its content but through its form, creating new ways of experiencing time, space, and historical connection.

5.3 Jamal Mahjoub's *Travelling with Djinns*

Jamal Mahjoub's *Travelling with Djinns* (2003) extends the project of postcolonial travel writing in new directions, engaging specifically with questions of masculinity, citizenship, and belonging in contemporary Europe. As Yomi Olusegun-Joseph argues, the novel "unpacks new ways of presenting postcolonial mobility by focusing on the challenges of subjectivity and sexual profiling in Europe, especially bordering on marginalised masculinity" .

This focus on masculinity is significant. Much postcolonial criticism has attended to questions of gender, but masculinity has often remained unexamined—treated either as the unmarked norm or as simply equivalent to patriarchal power. Mahjoub's novel complicates this picture by exploring how postcolonial migrants experience masculinity as a site of vulnerability and marginalisation rather than privilege. The protagonist's journey through Europe becomes an exploration of what it means to be a man in spaces where his identity is constantly questioned, where his authority is undermined, and where his very presence is framed as problematic.

Olusegun-Joseph situates this exploration within a critique of Afropolitanism—the celebratory discourse of African cosmopolitanism that "tends to present an unproblematic and straightforward idea of the European integration and citizenship of migrant/diasporic Africans" . Mahjoub's novel, by contrast, reveals the ongoing challenges of "cultural citizenship" and "European (non-)belonging" that Afropolitan discourse tends to elide. The protagonist's mobility, far from being liberating, exposes him to new forms of scrutiny and exclusion. His journey becomes not a celebration of hybrid identity but an investigation of its limits.

This critical dimension is essential for understanding postcolonial memoirs as acts of cultural resistance. Resistance is not simply about asserting alternative identities; it is also about interrogating the conditions under which identities are formed and recognised. Mahjoub's novel resists both the colonial narratives that would fix the African migrant as primitive outsider and the Afropolitan narratives that would celebrate him as cosmopolitan insider without attending to the continuing structures of exclusion that shape his experience.

6. Challenges and Limitations

6.1 The Problem of Audience

For all their transformative potential, postcolonial memoirs face significant challenges. One of the most pressing is the problem of audience. These texts are often written in European languages, published by metropolitan presses, and read primarily by Western or Western-educated audiences. This raises difficult questions about co-optation: do postcolonial memoirs simply provide metropolitan readers with exoticised accounts of otherness in new forms? Do they become commodities in a global marketplace that consumes difference without being fundamentally challenged by it?

These questions have no easy answers. Postcolonial writers are acutely aware of the conditions under which their work circulates, and many address these conditions explicitly within their texts. Ghosh's meditation on the slave Bomma—whose history emerges only through the chance survival of a document in a

European archive—can be read as a meditation on the contingencies and inequalities that shape whose stories get told and heard. Mahjoub's critique of Afropolitanism similarly engages with the politics of literary reception, questioning whether the celebration of migrant writing might itself become a form of containment.

6.2 The Risk of Neo-Orientalism

A related challenge is the risk of what might be termed neo-Orientalism: the reproduction of colonial representational strategies in new forms. Postcolonial writers who describe their "native" cultures for metropolitan audiences may find themselves, however unwillingly, occupying the position of the native informant, providing the exotic difference that metropolitan readers desire.

The most sophisticated postcolonial memoirs address this risk through formal strategies that complicate the position of the narrator and the reader. By refusing to offer easy access to other cultures, by emphasising their own partial and situated perspectives, by insisting on the irreducible complexity of the worlds they describe, they resist the reduction of otherness to consumable difference. Masud's articulation of British and Pakistani landscapes, for example, prevents either from functioning as simply exotic; each becomes a lens through which the other is defamiliarised and rethought.

6.3 Institutional Constraints

Postcolonial memoirs also operate within institutional constraints that shape their production and reception. University presses, academic journals, and funding bodies have their own priorities and criteria, which may not always align with the transformative ambitions of postcolonial writing. The very frameworks of postcolonial studies, as Din-Kariuki and van Meersbergen note, carry their own Eurocentric legacies that require ongoing critique .

Yet these constraints are not absolute. The existence of journals like *Studies in Travel Writing*, which published the special issue on "Travel Studies and the Decolonial Turn" from which Din-Kariuki and van Meersbergen's introduction comes, demonstrates the emergence of institutional spaces committed to rethinking the field. The open-access publication of works like Eva-Maria Müller's *Rewriting Alpine Orientalism* suggests new possibilities for circulating critical work beyond traditional gatekeepers. The challenge is to continue expanding these spaces while remaining attentive to the inequalities that persist.

7. Conclusion: Toward a Decolonised Travel Writing

This paper has argued that postcolonial memoirs represent a significant transformation of travel writing, enacting sophisticated acts of cultural resistance against the genre's colonial legacy. Through strategies of counter-discourse, alternative cartography, dwelling in travel, and the politics of memory, these texts challenge the narrative structures and representational conventions that have long shaped how travel is written and read.

The question posed at the outset—can travel writing be decolonised?—receives a qualified affirmative. Yes, if decolonisation means the proliferation of voices and perspectives that were systematically excluded from the genre. Yes, if it means the development of narrative forms that resist the colonial gaze and its neo-colonial afterlives. Yes, if it means the creation of texts that enable readers to encounter the world differently, to recognise connections that imperial discourse worked to obscure, and to imagine forms of identity and belonging that exceed the categories of nation, race, and culture.

But the qualification is important. Decolonisation is not an achievement but an ongoing process, a continuous interrogation of

the assumptions and structures that shape how we think and write. Postcolonial memoirs contribute to this process, but they do not complete it. The challenge for writers and readers alike is to remain attentive to the ways in which colonial legacies persist, even in texts that seek to resist them, and to continue the work of imagining and creating more just ways of encountering the world and each other.

The future of travel writing, if it has one, lies in this direction: not in the return to some prelapsarian form of innocent encounter, but in the ongoing critical engagement with the histories that have shaped both travellers and the places they travel through. Postcolonial memoirs offer models for such engagement—models that are neither naive about the genre's complicities nor despairing of its possibilities. They demonstrate that travel writing, transformed, can become a medium for cultural resistance, for historical reparation, and for the imagination of alternative futures.

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