

Extended Abstract

Mountains and Marginality in Early European Thought

Until the early modern period, mountains occupied a marginal position in European cultural imagination. Classical aesthetic theory, derived largely from Greek philosophical traditions, defined beauty through symmetry, proportion, and order. Landscapes characterized by irregularity, chaos, or asymmetry were therefore considered aesthetically inferior or even threatening. Mountains—rugged, inaccessible, and unpredictable—did not conform to classical ideals of harmony. Consequently, mountains were frequently associated with danger and supernatural forces. Early European travelers and writers often described mountainous regions as gloomy and inhospitable environments inhabited by demons, dragons, or witches. Within this cultural framework, mountains represented wilderness rather than sacred space. Although certain peaks appeared in biblical or classical narratives—such as Mount Sinai or Mount Olympus—mountains did not occupy a central or pervasive role within European religious symbolism. This perception began to change gradually during the Renaissance and early modern period. One important factor was the expansion of European aesthetic sensibilities. Encounters with artistic traditions from Asia—particularly Chinese and Indian art—exposed European audiences to visual compositions that valued asymmetry, irregularity, and dramatic natural forms. Such influences broadened European conceptions of beauty and opened space for appreciating previously neglected landscapes.

Marjorie Hope Nicolson's influential work *Mountain Gloom and Mountain Glory* provides another explanation for this shift. Nicolson argues that changing perceptions of mountains were linked to the historical development of the "aesthetics of infinite". In medieval Christian thought, infinity was primarily associated with God. The divine represented boundless power and transcendence. During the Renaissance and the scientific revolution, however, new astronomical discoveries expanded humanity's understanding of the cosmos. Observations made possible by instruments such as the telescope revealed the vastness of the universe and the seemingly limitless scale of the heavens. As knowledge of the cosmos expanded, the experience of infinity began to migrate from theology to the natural world. The sublime—once associated primarily with divine transcendence—became linked to cosmic immensity and natural grandeur. Gradually, this experience of infinity descended from the heavens to the earth itself. Among terrestrial landscapes, mountains appeared to embody the closest approximation to infinity. Their immense height, dramatic verticality, and overwhelming scale evoked sensations of awe, terror, and transcendence. This emerging aesthetic category was famously theorized by Edmund Burke and then Immanuel Kant, who described the sublime as arising from encounters with vastness, obscurity, power, and danger. Mountain landscapes contained all of these elements. As a result, mountains increasingly became central symbols within the aesthetic experience of the sublime.

By the late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, Romanticism intensified this fascination with mountainous landscapes. Romantic writers and travelers celebrated mountains as spaces of emotional intensity, spiritual reflection, and imaginative freedom. Authors such as Rousseau, Wordsworth, Coleridge, Shelley, and Byron frequently invoked mountains as places where individuals could encounter the overwhelming forces of nature and confront the limits of human understanding. Within this Romantic framework, mountains were transformed from feared wildernesses into elevated spaces of contemplation and transcendence. The Alps in particular underwent what historians have described as a cultural sacralization. Crosses were erected on mountain summits, religious ceremonies were conducted at high altitudes, and churches and shrines appeared within alpine environments. Journeys into mountainous regions increasingly resembled pilgrimages in which aesthetic and spiritual experiences converged. At the same time, the nineteenth century witnessed the emergence of organized mountaineering. The so-called “Golden Age of Alpinism” between the 1850s and 1860s saw the first ascents of numerous Alpine peaks, including the Matterhorn. Railways and tourism infrastructure soon followed, making mountain travel more accessible to larger numbers of visitors. As exploration expanded, however, the Alps gradually lost their aura of mystery. Their summits were mapped, climbed, and incorporated into the expanding networks of European tourism.

The Himalayan Frontier and Colonial Exploration

With the Alps increasingly familiar, European explorers turned their attention to other mountainous regions of the world, particularly the Himalayas. To many climbers and travelers, the Himalayas represented the final frontier of sublime landscapes—vast, mysterious, and seemingly untouched. Yet unlike the Alps, the Himalayas had never been culturally marginal landscapes. For millennia they had occupied a central place within South Asian religious and cultural traditions. In regions such as the Kashmir Valley, mountains have also shaped everyday social and cultural life. Communities living in Himalayan environments have historically developed deep relationships with their surrounding landscapes. Mountain environments influence patterns of settlement, agriculture, seasonal migration, and local cosmologies. In this sense, mountains function not only as sacred sites but as lived environments that shape cultural memory and social identity.

In contrast to the European rediscovery of mountains during the Romantic period, the mountains surrounding the Kashmir Valley have long occupied a central place within local cultural and religious traditions. The valley itself lies within a ring of high mountain ranges, including the Himalayas, Pir Panjal, and Karakoram systems. These mountains have historically shaped not only the physical geography of the region but also its cultural imagination, social organization, and spiritual life. For the inhabitants of Kashmir Valley, mountains are not distant objects of aesthetic contemplation but integral components of everyday existence.

Within Hindu traditions associated with Kashmir, mountains have often been understood as sites of divine presence. The broader Himalayan region is considered the sacred abode of Shiva, the lower Himalayas often called as Shivaliks meaning “the tresses of Shiva” and several important pilgrimage sites that are located in the mountainous terrain surrounding the valley. One of the most prominent examples is the annual pilgrimage to Amarnath Cave, located high in the Himalayas, where a naturally forming ice stalagmite is revered as a manifestation of Shiva. Pilgrims undertake arduous journeys through mountain passes to reach the shrine, reinforcing the association between mountainous landscapes and spiritual purification. Other sacred peaks, lakes, and meadows scattered across the region similarly form part of a religious geography that connects natural landscapes to divine presence. Mountains also play a significant role in the Sufi traditions that have historically shaped Kashmiri Islam. Sufi saints frequently established shrines and meditation sites in elevated or secluded landscapes, where mountains provided both physical isolation and symbolic proximity to the divine. Several important shrines associated with Kashmiri saints are located on hilltops overlooking the valley. These sites function not only as places of worship but also as cultural landmarks that structure local patterns of pilgrimage, devotion, and collective memory.

Beyond their religious significance, mountains have historically structured the economic and social life of Kashmiri communities. Mountain passes have long served as routes connecting Kashmir to Central Asia, Ladakh, and the plains of northern India. Seasonal migration patterns, pastoral practices, and agricultural rhythms have all been shaped by the surrounding high-altitude environment. For pastoral communities such as the Gujjars and Bakarwals, the mountains function as seasonal grazing landscapes through which families move with their livestock during different times of the year. These migratory cycles create intimate relationships between communities and the mountainous terrain.

When European explorers arrived in the Himalayas during the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, they therefore encountered landscapes already embedded within complex cultural traditions. Some colonial figures, such as Francis Younghusband, expressed spiritual reverence toward the mountains and occasionally acknowledged indigenous perspectives. Nevertheless, European exploration often retained the language of conquest, framing Himalayan peaks as objects to be “summitted” or “conquered” through national expeditions. Romantic ideals of exploration thus became intertwined with imperial ambition.

The Romantic rediscovery of mountains did not remain confined to aesthetics. It also shaped the intellectual framework through which European explorers, surveyors, and colonial administrators approached mountainous landscapes. The Himalayas were increasingly represented through the language of sublime wilderness, heroic exploration, and imperial conquest. These representations were not merely descriptive; they contributed to the production of geographical knowledge through surveys, cartography, and imperial mapping projects. Surveying expeditions, cartographic mapping, and geographical documentation transformed previously unfamiliar

terrain into legible and governable space. Mountains that had long existed as culturally embedded landscapes within local societies were increasingly interpreted through the frameworks of modern geography and imperial administration. In this sense, the aesthetic fascination with mountains became entangled with colonial power. During the nineteenth century, this entanglement was further intensified by the geopolitical rivalry known as the Great Game between the British Empire and the Russian Empire, which unfolded largely across the mountainous regions of Central and South Asia. The Himalayas, along with adjacent ranges such as the Pamirs and the Karakoram, became strategic spaces where imperial powers sought to map routes, establish influence, and secure frontier defenses. Exploration, surveying, and mountaineering therefore served not only scientific or aesthetic purposes but also strategic ones. The same mountains that inspired Romantic awe were gradually transformed into measurable terrain, mapped frontiers, and strategic boundaries within a broader imperial contest for control over Asian highlands. In the Himalayan world, this intellectual transformation ultimately contributed to the geopolitical reconfiguration of mountains into militarized borders, most visibly in the partitioned landscape of Kashmir. The Line of Control can be understood as what might be described as a **cartographic scar of modernity**. The boundary represents the moment at which mountains—once integrated within regional cultural landscapes—were inscribed with the geopolitical divisions produced by colonial withdrawal and postcolonial state formation. A line drawn on a map during the turbulent process of partition translated directly onto the physical terrain of the Himalayas, transforming the landscape itself into a site of ongoing political conflict.

The political upheaval of the Partition of India in 1947 created new national borders across South Asia. The former princely state of Jammu and Kashmir was divided between India and Pakistan, and the Line of Control now cuts through rugged Himalayan terrain. This geopolitical restructuring fundamentally altered the cultural meaning of the mountains. Landscapes that had long served as spaces of pilgrimage, habitation, and exploration became militarized borderlands. Military installations and surveillance posts now occupy high-altitude terrain, and artillery exchanges periodically occur along the border. Thousands of soldiers and civilians have died in conflicts associated with the region. Communities living near the Line of Control experience displacement, restricted mobility, and the constant possibility of violence. In this context, mountains once associated with spiritual transcendence and aesthetic wonder have become landscapes marked by trauma and political division. The same peaks that Romantic travelers once celebrated as sites of sublime beauty now function as fortified frontiers separating nation-states.

The historical trajectory from the aesthetic rediscovery of mountains in Europe to the militarized borderlands of Kashmir demonstrates how landscapes acquire layered and evolving meanings. Mountains are not merely passive features of geography. They function as cultural and political actors whose significance shifts as societies reinterpret them through changing aesthetic frameworks, religious traditions, and political conflicts. In Kashmir today, the mountains stand as

reminders of both ancient sacred traditions and contemporary geopolitical tensions. They remain landscapes where beauty, memory, spirituality, and violence coexist—testimony to the complex ways in which natural environments become embedded within human history