
RESEARCH ARTICLE

Between Visibility and Silencing: Gendered Epistemologies in Colonial and Postcolonial Travel Narratives

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the gendered epistemologies embedded in colonial and postcolonial travel narratives, highlighting how women are simultaneously hyper-visible and epistemically silenced. While women frequently appear in travel writing through detailed descriptions of dress, domestic labour, and social roles, they are rarely granted narrative agency or credibility, functioning as objects rather than producers of knowledge. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory and Miranda Fricker's concept of epistemic injustice, the study frames women's representation as a structural question of knowledge production, authority, and exclusion, rather than merely a matter of stereotype or distortion. Using a qualitative, theory-driven approach, the article analyses canonical texts such as Mary Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa* (1897) and Isabella Bird's *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (1880), alongside postcolonial and feminist travel writings. Key insights include: (1) women's visibility is systematically decoupled from epistemic authority; (2) travel writing operates through a masculinized epistemology, privileging observation, mobility, and interpretive mastery; and (3) postcolonial and feminist rewritings reclaim voice, reflexivity, and epistemic agency, challenging traditional hierarchies of knowledge. By situating women's marginalization within broader structures of power and representation, the study contributes to debates in literary, gender, and postcolonial studies, offering a conceptual framework for understanding the politics and ethics of knowledge production in travel literature.

KEYWORDS

Travel writing, Gendered epistemology, Postcolonial literature, Feminist epistemology, Epistemic injustice.

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I. Introduction

Travel writing has long functioned as a central discursive site for producing and circulating cultural knowledge about non-European spaces. Far from being a transparent record of encounter, the genre historically operates at the intersection of literature, anthropology, geography, and imperial administration, shaping what Foucault (1980) calls regimes of truth. Through narrative authority, descriptive practices, and claims to experiential authenticity, travel texts have played a formative role in constructing Western epistemologies of difference, normalizing asymmetrical relations of power while presenting them as natural and observational (Said, 1978; Pratt, 1992; Hulme & Youngs, 2002).

Within this epistemic economy, women occupy a structurally paradoxical position. They are frequently hyper-visible in travel narratives, represented through dress, bodily comportment, domestic labour, sexual morality, and ritual participation, but are rarely granted narrative agency or epistemic authority. Women appear as objects of observation rather than subjects of knowledge, intelligible only through the traveller's interpretive frameworks, while being excluded from producing or validating meaning. While feminist criticism has long highlighted stereotyping and objectification, the epistemological consequences of this asymmetry remain under-theorized.

This article contends that colonial and postcolonial travel narratives operate through gendered epistemologies that rely on women's visibility while simultaneously denying them epistemic authority. Drawing on postcolonial feminist theory and feminist epistemology, particularly the concept of epistemic injustice (Fricker, 2007), this study reframes women's representation as a structural question of knowledge production, credibility, and authority. Rather than asking solely how women are depicted, it interrogates who is authorized to know, who is rendered knowable, and whose perspectives are systematically excluded from the narrative economy of truth.

To address this question, the article undertakes a theoretically driven analysis of canonical colonial travel narratives, such as Mary Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa* (1897) and Isabella Bird's *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (1880), alongside postcolonial and feminist reconfigurations of the genre. This approach demonstrates that women's marginalization is not incidental but constitutive of travel writing's epistemic logic. In doing so, the study contributes to literary studies, gender studies, and postcolonial criticism, offering a conceptual framework to interrogate epistemic power, narrative voice, and the politics of representation.

II. Methodological Framework and Analytical Approach

This study adopts a qualitative, theory-driven methodology situated at the intersection of critical discourse analysis, feminist narratology, and postcolonial epistemology. Rather than conducting an exhaustive survey of travel literature, it employs a selective and strategic engagement with canonical texts, prioritizing analytical depth over corpus breadth. This approach aligns with contemporary literary and cultural studies, where theoretical coherence and interpretive rigor are valued over sheer quantity. The analysis focuses on narrative voice, focalization, descriptive strategies, and the distribution of speech within travel texts. These narratological features are examined in relation to broader epistemic questions concerning credibility, authority, and knowledge production. Feminist epistemology provides the conceptual tools to interrogate how gendered assumptions shape who is recognized as a credible knower, while postcolonial theory situates these processes within the historical context of imperial domination and representation.

Canonical texts analysed include Mary Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa* (1897) and Isabella Bird's *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* (1880), as well as selected postcolonial rewritings by women travel writers, which foreground situated knowledge, reflexivity, and embodied experience. This combination allows for a comparative approach that traces the persistence of gendered epistemologies across historical periods while highlighting possibilities for epistemic disruption.

Travel narratives are treated as discursive artifacts rather than transparent reflections of historical reality. A constructivist orientation frames these texts as sites where literary form, power, and epistemology intersect, avoiding empiricist readings that assume objective reportage. By combining theoretical rigor with close textual analysis, the methodology enables a sustained interrogation of the gendered conditions under which knowledge is produced, circulated, and legitimized in travel writing.

III. Travel Writing as a Knowledge-Producing Discourse

Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes travel writing not merely as a literary genre but as a powerful epistemic practice through which knowledge about the world is produced, authorized, and circulated. Historically embedded within imperial expansion, travel narratives functioned as mediating texts between metropolitan centres and colonized peripheries, translating encounters into intelligible and governable forms of knowledge. In this sense, travel writing participates in what Said (1978) identified as the cultural machinery of empire, where representation and power are inseparable.

Critics such as Hulme (1986) and Pratt (1992) emphasize that travel narratives do not passively record experience but actively organize it through narrative conventions privileging observation, classification, and interpretive mastery. Pratt's concept of the "contact zone" is particularly instructive, highlighting asymmetrical power relations that structure cross-cultural encounters. In these zones, the traveller's perspective is elevated as authoritative, while local epistemologies are fragmented, translated, or marginalized. Knowledge emerges not as a dialogic exchange but as a unilateral extraction.

While postcolonial criticism has persuasively exposed racialized and imperial dimensions of this epistemic asymmetry, gender has often been treated as a secondary category of analysis. When women appear in travel narratives, they are frequently mobilized as illustrative figures, markers of cultural difference, morality, or social organization, rather than as epistemic participants. Feminist scholars such as Mills (1991) and Blunt (1994) demonstrate that travel writing is deeply gendered in its representational economy, but the epistemological stakes of this gendering require further theorization.

This article argues that travel writing is underpinned by a masculinized epistemology that equates mobility, vision, and mastery with authority. Drawing on feminist epistemology, particularly the work of Lorraine Code (1991) and Nancy Tuana (2006), the analysis foregrounds the gendered assumptions that shape who is recognized as a credible knower. Knowledge in travel writing is not simply gendered in content but in its conditions of production: the observing subject is implicitly male, while women are positioned as objects through which knowledge is generated rather than contributors to it.

The consequences are profound. By privileging observation over interaction and description over dialogue, travel narratives institutionalize a hierarchy of knowing that systematically marginalizes women's experiential and interpretive knowledge. Women become central to the production of cultural meaning while remaining excluded from epistemic authority. Understanding travel

writing as a knowledge-producing discourse thus requires sustained attention to its gendered epistemological foundations, which this study examines through the combined lenses of postcolonial theory and feminist epistemology.

VI. Gender, Voice, and Epistemic Injustice

To conceptualise the systematic marginalisation of women's knowledge in travel narratives, this article draws on Miranda Fricker's (2007) theory of epistemic injustice¹. Fricker distinguishes between testimonial injustice, which occurs when a speaker's credibility is unfairly deflated due to prejudice, and hermeneutical injustice, which arises when social groups lack the interpretive resources to make sense of their experiences. Both forms are highly relevant to the analysis of travel writing.

In colonial travel narratives, women are rarely positioned as credible speakers. Even when their words are reported, they are filtered through the traveller's voice, translated into the traveller's language, or framed as anecdotal rather than authoritative. This systematic deflation of credibility constitutes a form of testimonial injustice grounded in gendered and colonial prejudices. Women's experiential knowledge, of domestic life, social relations, or cultural practices, is rendered epistemically inferior to the traveller's observational knowledge.

This dynamic resonates strongly with Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak's (1988) critique of subalternity. Spivak² famously argues that the subaltern cannot speak, not because she is silent, but because the structures of representation prevent her speech from being recognised as meaningful or authoritative. In travel writing, women often occupy a subaltern position within a doubly oppressive framework: they are marginalised as colonial subjects and as gendered figures within a masculinist epistemology.

Moreover, the narrative conventions of travel writing exacerbate this epistemic exclusion. The emphasis on first-person observation, empirical description, and interpretive mastery privileges the traveller's gaze while foreclosing dialogic or polyphonic modes of knowledge production. As a result, women are incorporated into the narrative as objects of knowledge rather than as epistemic agents, reinforcing a hierarchy in which seeing is equated with knowing and mobility with authority.

Scholarly approaches to travel writing have increasingly moved beyond genre classification to emphasise its role in the circulation of power and knowledge. Influenced by Said's (1978) foundational critique of Orientalism, critics have demonstrated that travel narratives participate in systems of representation that naturalise imperial hierarchies and epistemological asymmetries. Mary Louise Pratt's concept of the "contact zone" is particularly influential in this regard, foregrounding the asymmetrical relations of power that structure encounters between travellers and local populations (Pratt, 1992).

However, while postcolonial criticism has extensively examined race, empire, and alterity in travel writing, gender has often remained a secondary analytical category or has been treated descriptively rather than epistemologically. When women appear in travel narratives, they are frequently framed as ethnographic specimens, aestheticized bodies, or moral benchmarks against which cultures are judged (Mills, 1991; Blunt, 1994). Such representations, this article contends, are not merely ideological but epistemic: they determine who can be known, how knowledge is produced, and whose perspectives are rendered credible³.

V. Visibility Without Authority: Narrative Strategies of Inclusion and Exclusion

A recurring feature of travel writing is the detailed attention paid to women's bodies, domestic spaces, and social roles. These descriptions often function as metonymic representations of entire cultures, positioning women as symbols of tradition, moral order, or cultural stagnation⁴. Yet this representational visibility does not confer narrative authority. Instead, it reinforces a division between the knowing subject (the traveller) and the known object (the woman).

Narrative strategies such as focalization, descriptive excess, and ethnographic framing play a key role in producing gendered epistemic hierarchies. By prioritizing observation over interaction and description over dialogue, travel narratives maintain the traveller's epistemic supremacy while rendering women intelligible only within pre-existing interpretive frameworks. For example, Isabella Bird's descriptions of Japanese women in *Unbeaten Tracks in Japan* often focus on domestic labour and dress, framing them as cultural exemplars rather than participants in knowledge production⁵.

Similarly, Mary Kingsley's *Travels in West Africa* repeatedly foregrounds women's bodily comportment and social customs, treating them as data points for imperial interpretation rather than as autonomous agents. These strategies exemplify a broader pattern in

¹ For an extended discussion of epistemic injustice and its relevance to gendered knowledge hierarchies, see Fricker (2007, Ch. 2–3).

² Spivak's framework has been applied to travel literature by Hulme (1986) and Yeğenoğlu (1998) to analyze the silencing of female voices.

³ For further examples of epistemic marginalization in travel narratives, see Blunt (1994, pp. 12–38) and Kuehn & Smethurst (2009).

⁴ Yeğenoğlu (1998, pp. 74–91) discusses metonymic representations of women in colonial texts and their symbolic function.

⁵ Bird (1880, pp. 102–115) provides numerous examples of women described in domestic and ritual contexts without narrative agency.

colonial travel writing: women are central to the construction of cultural knowledge but systematically excluded from the authority to interpret or convey that knowledge.

By examining these strategies, we see that visibility and authority are deliberately decoupled. Women are made highly observable, yet the epistemic conditions of the text deny them credibility and voice. This observation underscores the central argument of the article: gendered epistemologies are not incidental but constitutive of the knowledge structures in travel writing.

VI. Postcolonial Revisions and Epistemic Reconfiguration

Postcolonial and feminist rewritings of travel literature have sought to challenge gendered epistemic hierarchies by reclaiming voice, authority, and mobility. Women travel writers, in particular, destabilize the masculinist foundations of the genre by foregrounding situated knowledge, reflexivity, and embodied experience. While these texts do not fully escape the constraints of travel writing, they open alternative modes of knowing that resist objectification and epistemic erasure. For example, Janice Kuehn and Penny Smethurst (2009) document how women travel writers deliberately interrogate their own positionality, acknowledging the limitations and biases inherent in observation-based knowledge. Similarly, postcolonial female authors often shift the narrative perspective to include local women's voices, emphasizing dialogic and polyphonic modes of knowledge production⁶. Such strategies reconfigure epistemic authority, making women participants rather than passive objects in the creation of cultural knowledge. Placing colonial and postcolonial texts in dialogue highlights both the persistence of gendered epistemologies and the possibilities for disruption. The comparative approach shows that epistemic injustice is historically embedded, yet contemporary efforts demonstrate that travel writing can incorporate reflexivity, intersubjectivity, and ethical representation. By reclaiming narrative agency, women writers challenge the traditional association of mobility, vision, and observation with epistemic authority. Ultimately, these postcolonial revisions illustrate that travel writing is not a monolithic epistemic space. Rather, it is a contested site where power, gender, and knowledge intersect, and where the boundaries of authority and credibility can be negotiated. This section underscores the article's broader argument: gendered epistemologies are neither inevitable nor immutable, but socially and historically constructed, and they can be actively contested through literary practice.

VII . Conclusion

This article has argued that women's representation in travel narratives must be understood not merely as a question of visibility or stereotype, but as a fundamentally epistemic issue. Travel writing systematically produces women as objects of knowledge while excluding them from epistemic authority, reinforcing gendered and imperial hierarchies of knowing. By mobilizing postcolonial feminist theory and Fricker's (2007) concept of epistemic injustice, the study demonstrates that the marginalization of women is structurally embedded in the genre rather than incidental.

Colonial travel narratives establish a masculinized epistemology that equates mobility, vision, and observation with authority, while postcolonial and feminist rewritings illustrate that these hierarchies can be contested. Women writers' use of reflexivity, situated knowledge, and polyphonic narrative strategies reconfigures the conditions of knowledge production, offering alternative epistemic models that challenge objectification and exclusion.

By comparing colonial and postcolonial texts, this article underscores the historical persistence and contestation of gendered epistemologies. It also highlights the importance of inclusive approaches to literary analysis, where the voices and knowledge of women, colonial, postcolonial, and indigenous, are recognized as legitimate contributors to cultural understanding. Such an approach has broader implications: it calls for a reconsideration of who is authorized to know, how knowledge is produced, and the ethical responsibilities of writers, critics, and educators.

Future research might further explore intersectional dimensions, race, class, ethnicity, and sexuality, within travel writing, examining how multiple axes of identity interact to shape epistemic authority. Additionally, scholars could investigate non-Western travel narratives and women's counter-narratives to further enrich our understanding of the politics of knowledge across cultures.

In conclusion, travel writing is not simply a literary genre; it is a dynamic site of epistemic negotiation, where power, gender, and knowledge intersect. Recognizing the structural conditions that historically silenced women and exploring how contemporary writers reclaim voice and authority offers a pathway toward more equitable, reflexive, and inclusive epistemologies in literature and beyond.

⁶ Some postcolonial texts incorporate local women's perspectives directly, challenging the unilateral knowledge production typical of colonial travel writing (Hulme, 1986, pp. 44–56).

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