

Narrating Lives and Landscapes: A Comparative Study of Ajit Harisinghani's *The Living Road* and William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives*

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Abstract

This paper presents a comparative study of Ajit Harisinghani's *The Living Road* and William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives*, focusing on the interrelationship between human lives and landscapes in contemporary travel writing. While Harisinghani's travelogue captures an experiential journey through Bhutan, Dalrymple's narrative presents a series of life histories drawn from diverse cultural and geographical contexts in India. Despite their differences in structure and focus, both texts foreground the intimate connection between people and the spaces they inhabit. The study argues that travel writing functions as a narrative medium through which lives and landscapes are co-constructed, revealing the cultural, spiritual, and social dimensions of place. Through comparative analysis, the paper highlights how both authors transform individual experiences into broader reflections on identity and cultural continuity.

Keywords: Travel writing, landscape, life narratives, identity, Ajit Harisinghani, William Dalrymple

Introduction

Travel writing has gradually moved beyond its earlier focus on describing landscapes as static and distant spaces, shifting instead toward narratives that foreground human experience within those environments. Contemporary travelogues increasingly explore how landscapes are lived, felt, and shaped through everyday interactions, emphasizing the mutual relationship between people and place. Rather than treating geography as a mere backdrop, modern travel writing presents it as an active force that influences identity, culture, and social life. At the same time, individual stories, memories, practices, and lived experiences contribute to the meaning of those landscapes, transforming them into culturally and emotionally significant spaces. In this approach, travel writing becomes less about mapping territory and more about understanding how lives unfold within particular environments, revealing the interconnectedness of space and human experience.

This shift is clearly reflected in *The Living Road* by Ajit Harisinghani and *Nine Lives* by William Dalrymple, which offer distinct yet complementary approaches to representing this relationship. Harisinghani's travelogue follows a continuous journey through Bhutan, emphasizing sensory engagement, movement, and direct interaction with landscapes and communities. His narrative captures how space is experienced in motion, where meaning emerges through immersion and observation. In contrast, Dalrymple structures his text around nine individual life stories, each rooted in a specific cultural and geographical context within India. Through these narratives, landscapes are understood through the lives of those who inhabit them, revealing how identity, belief, and tradition are shaped by place. By bringing these two works together, this paper examines how both authors move beyond conventional travel writing, placing human experience at the centre and demonstrating that landscapes and lives are deeply interconnected in the construction of meaning.

Travel Writing and the Human Landscape

Traditional travel writing often places emphasis on geographical description, treating landscapes as fixed, external settings that the traveller observes from a distance. In such narratives, place tends to function as a backdrop, something to be described, mapped, or admired while human presence remains secondary. However, contemporary travel writing moves away from this static approach, instead highlighting the dynamic and

interdependent relationship between people and place. Landscapes are no longer passive environments but active spaces shaped by cultural practices, historical memory, and everyday lived experience. This shift reflects a deeper understanding that space is not simply physical but also social and cultural, carrying layers of meaning that emerge through human interaction.

This perspective is clearly evident in *The Living Road* by Ajit Harisinghani and *Nine Lives* by William Dalrymple, both of which present landscapes as lived and meaningful spaces rather than distant scenery. In Harisinghani's narrative, Bhutanese landscapes are experienced through movement, interaction, and observation, revealing how cultural practices and daily life are deeply embedded in the environment. Similarly, Dalrymple's work foregrounds individual life stories, showing how people's identities, beliefs, and traditions are closely tied to the spaces they inhabit. In both texts, individuals become carriers of cultural meaning, and landscapes emerge as sites shaped by human presence and experience. This reciprocal relationship underscores a key feature of contemporary travel writing: the recognition that understanding place requires attention to the lives that give it meaning, just as understanding human experience involves engagement with the spaces in which it unfolds.

Landscapes as Lived Experience in *The Living Road*

In *The Living Road*, Ajit Harisinghani presents Bhutan as a landscape where culture, spirituality, and everyday life are deeply interconnected, forming a cohesive and lived reality rather than separate domains. The narrative is shaped by continuous movement, where each place is encountered through direct interaction, observation, and sensory engagement. Instead of presenting locations as static or isolated, Harisinghani allows them to unfold gradually as part of an ongoing journey. This movement creates a sense of discovery, where understanding emerges through experience rather than prior knowledge. The traveller does not merely pass through space but becomes part of it, engaging with its rhythms, textures, and social life. In this way, the narrative transforms landscape into a dynamic field of meaning, where every encounter contributes to a deeper awareness of place.

The road itself functions as a powerful central metaphor, symbolizing both the physical act of travel and the experiential process of engagement and transformation. As the traveller moves through mountains, valleys, and villages, the landscape appears as a living entity shaped by human presence and cultural practice. Harisinghani's descriptions reveal how everyday life is embedded within the natural environment: temples are situated within the landscape, rituals are performed in harmony with surroundings, and community life unfolds in close relation to nature. This interconnectedness reflects a balanced relationship between humans and their environment, where culture is not imposed upon space but grows organically from it. Through this approach, the narrative emphasizes that landscapes are not merely seen but lived, and that understanding a place involves recognizing the cultural and spiritual meanings that are woven into its physical form.

Life Narratives in *Nine Lives*

William Dalrymple's *Nine Lives* adopts a distinctly different narrative approach from conventional travelogues by focusing on individual life stories rather than a single, continuous journey. Each chapter centres on a particular figure: a Jain nun, a temple dancer, a Sufi musician, among others whose life is deeply rooted in a specific cultural and geographical setting. Instead of moving linearly across space, the narrative moves across lives, using personal stories as entry points into broader cultural worlds. This structure shifts attention from the traveller's movement to the lived experiences of individuals, allowing the reader to engage with culture through intimate, grounded narratives. The emphasis is not on the traveller observing from the outside, but on listening to voices that speak from within their own traditions and environments.

Through these life stories, Dalrymple demonstrates how identity is shaped by the landscapes people inhabit, where geography, culture, and spirituality are closely intertwined. The environment is not just a backdrop but

an active force that influences beliefs, practices, and ways of life, providing the framework within which identities are formed and sustained. By presenting multiple, distinct narratives, the text highlights the diversity and complexity of Indian society, revealing a rich mosaic of experiences rather than a single, unified perspective. The fragmented structure divided into separate yet interconnected life stories mirrors this plurality, reflecting the varied and layered nature of cultural life. In doing so, *Nine Lives* expands the scope of travel writing, showing that understanding a place involves engaging with the lives that give it meaning, and that these lives, in turn, are deeply shaped by the spaces they inhabit.

Interconnection of Lives and Landscapes

A key point of convergence between *The Living Road* by Ajit Harisinghani and *Nine Lives* by William Dalrymple lies in their shared emphasis on the deep interconnection between lives and landscapes. In both texts, place is not treated as a passive backdrop but as an active force that shapes human experience, identity, and cultural expression. Landscapes are presented as lived spaces, infused with meaning through everyday practices, beliefs, and histories. This approach challenges the traditional view of geography as static, instead highlighting how environments and human lives are mutually constitutive. The narratives suggest that space gains significance through human presence, while human experience is equally shaped by the cultural and physical contexts of that space.

In *The Living Road*, this connection is explored through the traveller's movement and engagement, where interaction with people and environments allows the landscape to unfold as a dynamic and meaningful entity. In contrast, *Nine Lives* reveals this relationship through individual life stories, where each person embodies the cultural, spiritual, and social essence of their surroundings. Despite these differences in narrative form, both texts arrive at a similar insight: that understanding a place requires attention to the lives that inhabit it, just as understanding individuals requires recognition of the spaces that shape them. Identity, in both works, is shown to be deeply rooted in cultural and geographical contexts, emerging from the continuous interaction between people and the landscapes they inhabit.

Narrative Structure and Perspective

The narrative structures of *The Living Road* by Ajit Harisinghani and *Nine Lives* by William Dalrymple closely reflect their thematic concerns, shaping how the reader engages with space, culture, and experience. Harisinghani's travelogue follows a continuous journey, creating a sense of movement, progression, and unfolding discovery. As the traveller moves through different landscapes, the narrative develops in a fluid and sequential manner, allowing the reader to experience places as they are encountered in time. This structure mirrors the physical act of travel, where each stage builds upon the previous one, and meaning emerges gradually through accumulated experiences. The continuity of the journey reinforces the idea of immersion, drawing the reader into a sustained engagement with landscape and culture as part of an evolving process.

In contrast, Dalrymple's episodic structure emphasizes diversity, plurality, and the multiplicity of cultural experience. Each chapter in *Nine Lives* presents a distinct life story, functioning independently while also contributing to a broader mosaic of Indian cultural life. This fragmented structure allows for a range of perspectives, highlighting the richness and complexity of different traditions, beliefs, and social contexts. Despite these structural differences, both authors rely on a first-person narrative voice that foregrounds subjectivity and interpretation. The traveller or narrator becomes a mediator, guiding the reader through unfamiliar spaces and experiences while shaping their understanding through personal perception. This shared use of subjectivity reinforces the idea that travel writing is not a neutral representation of reality but a constructed narrative, where the author's voice plays a central role in connecting the reader to the world being portrayed.

Cultural and Spiritual Dimensions

Both texts engage deeply with the cultural and spiritual dimensions of landscape, presenting space as something more than a physical environment. In *The Living Road*, Ajit Harisinghani portrays spirituality as an integral part of everyday life, woven seamlessly into the rhythms of the landscape. Rituals, beliefs, and practices are not separate from the environment but are closely tied to it, creating a sense of harmony between people and place. Temples, prayer flags, and community traditions emerge naturally within the terrain, reflecting a worldview in which the natural and the spiritual coexist. This embedded spirituality gives the landscape a lived significance, where meaning arises through continuous interaction between humans and their surroundings. The traveller's experience of place, therefore, becomes not only sensory but also reflective, shaped by an awareness of the cultural and spiritual values that define the environment.

In *Nine Lives*, William Dalrymple approaches spirituality through individual life stories, where religious and cultural traditions form the core of identity. Each narrative presents a distinct engagement with spiritual practice, whether through devotion, ritual performance, or cultural inheritance, highlighting the diversity of belief systems across India. Here, the landscape is not just a setting but a framework that supports and sustains these spiritual lives, providing context and meaning to individual experiences. By focusing on lived religious practices, Dalrymple reveals how spirituality is both personal and collective, shaped by geography, history, and community. Together, these representations emphasize that landscapes carry symbolic and cultural meanings that extend far beyond their material form. They become spaces of belief, memory, and identity, demonstrating that to understand a place fully, one must also engage with its spiritual and cultural dimensions.

Conclusion

This comparative study demonstrates that *The Living Road* by Ajit Harisinghani and *Nine Lives* by William Dalrymple offer complementary perspectives on the relationship between lives and landscapes in contemporary travel writing. Harisinghani's narrative unfolds as an immersive journey through Bhutan, where meaning emerges through movement, sensory engagement, and interaction with people and environment. In contrast, Dalrymple constructs a mosaic of individual lives across India, using personal stories to reveal how identity, belief, and culture are rooted in specific geographical contexts. Despite their differing narrative forms, both texts shift the focus away from mere description of place toward the lived experiences that give those places meaning, highlighting the inseparable connection between human life and landscape.

Both works move beyond traditional travel writing by foregrounding human experience and cultural interpretation, showing that landscapes are not passive settings but lived spaces shaped by memory, practice, and identity. At the same time, they reveal that individual lives are deeply embedded in the cultural and geographical contexts they inhabit, reinforcing the idea that understanding place requires attention to human experience. Ultimately, this study underscores the importance of narrative in capturing the complex interplay between people and place. Through their distinct yet complementary approaches, both authors contribute to a richer and more nuanced understanding of contemporary travel writing, demonstrating how it can engage with the depth and diversity of human experience.

References:

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