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NEW SCHOLARSHIP ON VICTORIAN INDIA

By Deborah Denenholz Morse and Virginia Butler

A PLETHORA OF FINE BOOKS on Victorian India have been published in the last decade or so, a number of them in the past three years. These works cover a wide range of postcolonial thought: histories of Indian sub-cultures (Bhavani Raman's *Document Raj*, on scribal culture in the Madras East India company and Davesh Soneji's study of the devadāsī of South India in *Unfinished Gestures*); histories of English dissident subcultures (late Victorian homosexuals and vegetarians, among those documented in Leela Gandhi's *Affective Communities*); Andrea Major's epic *Slavery, Abolitionism, and Empire in India, 1772–1843*, and the erudite and comprehensive Oxford edition, *India and the British Empire*, edited by Douglas Peers and Nandini Gooptu, a magisterial work that begins with recognition of the "remarkable efflorescence over the past generation" (1) in historical studies of colonial India. Recent books also include original literary criticism concerned with the effects of the colonial encounter upon the literature and national identity of both India and England and the introduction of India's English language poetry to contemporary scholars and lay readers, in the important critical anthology edited by Mary Ellis Gibson, *Anglophone Poetry in Colonial India, 1780–1913*.

With *Indian Angles: English Verse in Colonial India from Jones to Tagore*, Gibson turns much needed critical attention to the previously overlooked world of English verse in colonial India. This text is a meticulously researched, elegantly organized, and deeply persuasive exploration of language poetics in India from the eighteenth through twentieth centuries. As Gibson shows, though most histories and historians of Anglo-Indian writing argue that poetry played a key role in the germination of English writing in India, this genre of literature has largely been ignored or reduced to second-tier status below fiction. With this book, Gibson opens the doors (or rather floodgates) to a new world of poetry, and in doing so succeeds in both "adding to the canon of English language poetry written outside of Great Britain and at the same time critiquing that canon" (1). Poetry written in colonial situations, Gibson argues, "can tell us as much or even more than novels can about figuration, multilingual literacies, and histories of nation and nationalism" (3). As she states, English language poetry, education within the English poetic tradition, and the ability to translate and move between the languages of Asia and Britain, were touchstones of the colonial experience. Consequently, English language poetry is a key component of the formation of Indian nationalism and identity. In her attempt to redress the critical blind spot concerning English poetry in India, Gibson draws from a wealth of both pre- and post-Independence writers, writers of British parentage, poets of mixed ethnicity, children of Bengali parents,

and writers in exile. Although the content is largely Bengal-oriented, rather than limiting the scope of Gibson's project, this decision lends the text focus.

The historical originality and enterprise of these volumes by Gibson is equaled by a powerful new work on East Indian slavery, Andrea Major's *Slavery, Abolitionism, and Empire in India, 1772–1843*, which interrogates differences in the colonial discourse about and practice of slavery in the West Indies and in India during the period that saw both the abolition of the English slave trade in 1807 and the emancipation of slaves in the British Empire in 1833. Major – the author of one book and editor of a second volume on the Indian practice of sati – in this study addresses the complications of slave practices that were imbricated with ancient caste systems in India. She discusses both agricultural slaves who had worked on the land "since time immemorial, having been born into immutable 'slave castes,'" (5) and domestic slaves, who were viewed as "intimately connected" and essential to the households of the ruling elite castes upon whom the East India Company depended "for the maintenance of their rule" (5). Major's work "explores how slavery in India was erased within British public discourses on empire at the very moment when the horrors of the transatlantic trade were being seared onto the national conscience" (7). Her book elucidates the politics of governmental responses to slavery in the East Indies, explaining how even the leading exponent of the abolition of slavery in British dominions, Thomas Fowell Buxton, ceded authority on ending slavery to the East India Company, and how the few dissonant voices of prominent statesmen like Daniel O'Connell and Lord Suffield – who thought slavery in the East Indies quite as bad as West Indian slavery – were ignored in the interests of the East India Company. As Major states, "not all slaveries were considered equal" (7). With this book, Major explores an area that even magisterial studies of slavery and the slave trade, such as David Brion Davis's *The Problem of Slavery in the Age of Revolution*, have virtually ignored.

Studies of dissident English sub-cultures as they influenced Indian nationalism is the subject of Leela Gandhi's *Affective Communities: Anticolonial Thought, Fin-De-Siècle Radicalism, and the Politics of Friendship*. Gandhi examines both personal friendships and affined groups resistant to British colonialism – including homosexuals and animal rights activists – within England at the turn into the twentieth century. Gandhi's study ruptures ideas of monolithic English or Western culture, while it documents alliances of resistance to English imperialism within England itself. Gandhi builds upon Elleke Boehmer's pathbreaking *Empire, the National, and the Postcolonial, 1890–1920: Resistance in Interaction*, an earlier revision of imperial historiography that focuses laterally across national anti-imperial resistance movements at the *fin de siècle* and early twentieth century from Ireland to India – and within England itself.

Another important recent work that examines Indian political resistance to English dominion in another vein is Sukanya Banerjee's *Becoming Imperial Citizens: Indians in the Late Victorian Empire*, which takes up the questions of the rights of Indian citizens as they evolved under the aegis of a series of great leaders, who culminate in the figure of Mohandas K. Gandhi. Banerjee thoughtfully explores the political moments at which Indian leaders, in "claiming their perceived rights as subjects of the Crown, simultaneously underwrite themselves as citizens of empire, imperial citizens" (3–4). Sukeshi Kamra's incisive study, *The Indian Periodical Press and the Production of Nationalist Rhetoric*, traces the role of the periodical press in the formation of nationalism from the aftermath of the Mutiny through the first decade of the twentieth century. As Kamra argues: "Preceding the Gandhian

public sphere . . . there was a periodical public sphere . . . [which] developed a rhetorical culture between 1870–1910 that was politically clever – challenging and genuflectional at the same time" (29). Kamra provocatively suggests that "in part . . . *the* drama of early nationalism – of struggle between the periodical press and the government of India – is written in the formidable history of censorship laws that effectively criminalized dissent, but, predictably, produced effects that were beyond the control of the government" (5). A different argument concerning Indian nationalism is beautifully wrought in Vijay Prashad's "The Desi Diaspora" in Oxford's *India and the British Empire*. Prashad traces Indian diaspora from indentured laborers on plantations in Australia, South Africa, and the Caribbean to contemporary economic migrations of Indians to the Gulf states. His eloquently written essay insists throughout upon the connection of diaspora to nationalism: "Gandhi makes little sense without his South African crucible; Indian revolutionary developments make little sense without the Ghadar movement. These are fundamental to the elaboration of Indian anti-colonial nationalism, just as the more recent migrations to North America are integral to the growth of Hindutva nationalism" (333).

One of the most poignant and impressive recent studies is Davesh Soneji's *Unfinished Gestures: Devadāsīs, Memory, and Modernity in South India*, a compassionate exploration of the disenfranchisement of the devadāsī of South India: "Threaded through this book is an account of this particular social, civic, and aesthetic ambiguity, marked by encounters with modernity and voiced through memory" (3). Another beautifully researched and argued study is Bhavani Raman's *Document Raj: Writing and Scribes in Early Colonial South India*, in which Raman examines the colonial encounter by looking at the scribal culture in the district offices of the East India Company in colonial Madras. The subtlety and depth of Raman's analysis of bureaucratic power is suggested by these sentences analyzing the atmosphere of fear and distrust in the East India Company's government offices: "The Company's efforts to institute 'perfect recordation' did little to abate the crisis of trust in the cutcherry and law courts. Anxiety about the duplicity of paper was acute in the very institutions where procedure was supposed to manage writing's risk and make transactions transparent and reliable" (139). Raman's study demonstrates how English rule is undermined by the very bureaucracy it engenders.

Several recent books focus upon Anglo-Indian and Anglophone fiction. Priya Joshi's immensely engaging *In Another Country: Colonialism, Culture, and the English Novel in India* explores the historical influence of the English novel in India and its eventual appropriation beginning in the late nineteenth century by Indians writing Anglophone novels. In her subtle and capacious analysis, Joshi demonstrates the "cultural work performed by the English novel in Indian letters" (xix). I found myself hoping that the epilogue on the "transnational conversation" of Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* (1980) would expand to include later novels, Vikram Seth's *A Suitable Boy* (1993) or Rohinton Mistry's *A Fine Balance* (1995), English novels written by (partly) expatriate Indians. Alan Johnson's strikingly original *Out of Bounds: Anglo-Indian Literature and the Geography of Displacement*, examines the quintessentially Indian spaces from the jungle to the hill station and club as places of acculturation in Anglo-Indian fiction that were so continuously represented in writings by Anglo-Indians that they came to constitute a mythic iconography of the Raj and a memorializing of the British Empire. Suzanne Daly's pathbreaking *The Empire Inside: Indian Commodities in Victorian Domestic Novels* asks compelling questions about how Englishness is "shored up by a particular brand of commodity fetishism" that

turns "goods produced in British India into emblems of English identity" (6), as she analyzes material objects from the Kashmir shawl in *North and South* through plundered diamonds in *The Moonstone* and *The Eustace Diamonds* and tea in *Bleak House*, providing thorough historical backgrounds along the way.

Not surprisingly, much of the new literary criticism is inflected with feminist critique. One of the uniformly excellent essays in Oxford's *India and the British Empire* focuses specifically on gender, Tanaka Sarkar's "Gendering of Public and Private Selves in Colonial Times." Sarkar is interested in "Indian feminism as a modern Indian phenomenon, and not . . . a foreign implant" (288). To this end, she examines the history of women in relation to social reform in modern India, an analysis that includes the influence of Indian caste and English prejudice and law. She concludes: "Individual and collective identities of class, gender, and community, were created and recreated as much through literature, performance, and speeches as they were through experiences of particular forms of life and labour" (310–11). One of the most provocative of feminist studies that preceded Sarkar's work is Sangeeta Ray's *En-Gendering India: Woman and Nation in Colonial and Postcolonial Narratives*. Here Ray focuses upon the often overlooked notion of gender in postcolonial literature by analyzing the ways in which gender politics played a key role in the British subjugation of the Indian subcontinent from the 1857 Sepoy Rebellion to the 1947 partition of India (5). Her text is ambitious in scope, examining the writing of Bankimchandra Chatterjee and Rabindranath Tagore, two preeminent Bengali writers; Flora Annie Steele's *On the Face of the Waters*, Philip Meadows Taylor's *Seeta*, and Harriet Martineau's *British Rule in India*, three uncanonical Victorian texts; and two postcolonial novels, Bapsi Sidhwa's *Cracking India* and Anita Desai's *Clear Light of Day.* In her second chapter, "Woman as 'Suttee': The Construction of India in Three Victorian Narratives," Ray relies on the historical framework of scholars like Antoinette Burton and adds to the debate surrounding the English feminists of the time, who believed they were saving the Hindu woman from herself. With the battle of English sovereignty and morality being waged over the body of the burning Hindu woman, Ray shows how both British and Indian forces seized upon the image of the suttee – and thus the Hindu woman unwillingly became the vessel for the symbolic power of Indian culture itself.

With *Educating Seeta*, Shuchi Kapila presents a new critical perspective on the literary representation of colonial Anglo-Indian familial and romantic relationships by prompting us to reexamine the widely circulated assumptions that cast the Indian woman in a subjugated space against the power of the British Empire and its emissary – the white British officer. Through study of both historical and literary relationships between British men and their Indian companions, Kapila upends preconceived notions of interracial marriage and colonial domestic life. She enlarges the often overlooked holes of the colonial marriage plot and shows how these narratives of union – by employing convenient deaths, avoiding the issue of miscegenation – actually speak to Britain's failed courtship of the Indian lands and people. Ultimately, *Educating Seeta* reveals how the Indian women of the time seize upon the very notions of British chivalric duty that are employed to keep them subdued and transform these codes into a double-edged sword that they are simultaneously struck by yet have the power to wield against their sovereigns. Kapila might fruitfully have examined relationships between Indian men and British women; she therefore skirts the issue of how this regendered romance plot would impact colonial discourses.

In the last decade or so, the scholarly research and writing on Victorian India offers an embarrassment of riches. All scholars interested in this subject will be reading and re-reading this fine scholarship for many years to come.

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