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# Women Travel Writers in Colonial India: Gendered Contradictions of the Colonial Gaze

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### Abstract

This paper examines six British women travel writers who documented their experiences of colonial India between the late eighteenth and mid-nineteenth centuries: Eliza Fay, Maria Graham (Lady Callcott), Honoria Lawrence, Fanny Parkes, Emma Roberts, and Emily Eden. Their letters, journals, and travel accounts emerged from within British imperial structures, yet their gendered positions- often as dependents of East India Company officials- produced a distinctive way of encountering India. Drawing on Edward Said's concept of Orientalism, Sara Mills's analysis of women's travel writing, and Mary Louise Pratt's notion of the "contact zone," this paper argues that these writers generated a complex, contradictory colonial gaze. Their privileged access to domestic and semi-private Indian spaces enabled them to record women's lives, religious rituals, and scenes rarely visible in male-authored accounts. Yet their narratives repeatedly reinscribe assumptions of British cultural superiority and racial hierarchy.

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## 1. Introduction

British women who journeyed to India during the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries occupied a paradoxical position within the colonial enterprise. As members of the ruling minority, they inhabited cantonments and civil stations under the protection of the East India Company and, subsequently, the Crown. Simultaneously, they remained constrained by gendered expectations of modesty, domestic duty, and dependence on male relatives. Their letters and journals often originated as private documents intended for friends or family in Britain, yet many evolved into published travel books that profoundly shaped metropolitan perceptions of India (Mills 5).

Eliza Fay, Maria Graham, Honoria Lawrence, Fanny Parkes, Emma Roberts, and Emily Eden wrote from different regions and decades, yet their accounts share recurring preoccupations: the shock of climate and disease, fascination with religious festivals and bazaars, negotiations involved in managing households with Indian servants, and curiosity-sometimes sympathetic, sometimes condescending- about the lives of Indian women. These writers were not neutral

observers. Edward Said's *Orientalism* reminds us that European representations of the "East" are structured by power: "Orientalism can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient-dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it" (Said 3). Travel accounts form part of this institutional apparatus, helping to construct India as a knowable, governable space.

Yet, as Sara Mills argues, women travel writers occupy "a problematic position" in colonial discourse, since they "are themselves marginalized by patriarchal structures, yet participate in the marginalization of colonized peoples" (Mills 5). Their writing frequently displays uncertainty, self-doubt, and emotional vulnerability rather than the authoritative tone adopted by many male travelers (Mills 47). This combination of authority and insecurity produces a particularly compelling version of the colonial gaze- one inflected by domestic concerns, personal relationships, and everyday interactions that complicate simplistic narratives of domination.

This paper focuses on six women writing specifically about India in the late eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, exploring

how their texts demonstrate both continuity and change in British representations of India, and how gender shapes what they see and how they describe it.

## 2. British Women's Imperial Travel Writing Beyond India

Although this study concentrates on six British women whose travels in India directly illuminate the colonial encounter on the subcontinent, they also belong to a broader tradition of British women's imperial and Orientalist travel writing. Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters* (1763), with its famous descriptions of Ottoman harems, established an early model of the female observer entering gender-segregated "Eastern" interiors and reporting them to a European audience. Frances Trollope's *Domestic Manners of the Americans* (1832), though focused on the United States, writes from a position that combines national superiority with gendered constraint, illustrating how women could simultaneously reinforce and question British identity abroad. Later in the nineteenth century, Mabel Bent, who traveled and published with her husband while photographing and collecting in the Eastern Mediterranean and Africa, demonstrates how women participated in late-Victorian cultures of exploration, documentation, and acquisition. Against this wider backdrop, the six authors chosen for study, represent a specific regional pattern: British women using travel narratives to articulate, complicate, and sometimes gently unsettle the imperial gaze.

## 3. Orientalism, the Contact Zone, and the Gendered Gaze

Said's work provides the central starting point for understanding how British women writers contributed to colonial discourse. He emphasizes that Western writing on the Orient "is not an airy European fantasy about the Orient, but a created body of theory and practice" that supports imperial domination (Said 6). Travel narratives about India fed metropolitan imaginations, shaping assumptions about Indian religions, social customs, and political structures.

Mary Louise Pratt offers the concept of the "contact zone" to describe colonial spaces where cultures "meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power" (Pratt 4). India, for British women travelers, was such a zone: their homes, verandas, and visits to *zenanas* were everyday spaces wherein unequal cultural encounters played out. Pratt also points to "transculturation," the process by which subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted by a dominant culture (Pratt 6). In the case of British women, we might think of transculturation in terms of how they adopt and adapt elements of Indian dress, food, or ritual while maintaining their sense of Britishness.

Sara Mills's work is especially useful for reading women's travel writing. She notes that these texts "do not simply mirror male texts with a different authorial name"; rather, they often "disrupt dominant colonial discourses" by foregrounding domestic life, bodily discomfort, and emotional responses (Mills 8). At the same time, she warns that moments of sympathy or self-critique do not erase the underlying structures of racism and imperial hierarchy. Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, a postcolonial feminist, states that Western women's representations of "third world women" often reduce them to passive victims needing rescue (Spivak 294). These theoretical tools: Orientalism, the contact zone, transculturation, and gendered discourse provide the

analytical framework for examining the six writers discussed below.

## 4. Eliza Fay and Maria Graham: Early Company Encounters

Eliza Fay's *Original Letters from India* (1817) offers one of the earliest accounts of India by an Englishwoman. Traveling in 1779 with her husband, she encountered shipwreck, robbery, and eventual imprisonment by Hyder Ali at Calicut. Fay's anger at these experiences shapes her descriptions of Indian people. Recounting her captivity, she conveys both hostility and vulnerability. Mills observes that women travelers frequently "highlight their own lack of control in colonial situations," which complicates the image of the dominant European subject (Mills 47).

Maria Graham's *Journal of a Residence in India* (1812) reflects a different kind of experience. She lived in India in the early nineteenth century, accompanying her naval-officer husband, and her narrative records a longer, more settled stay. Graham describes the routines of colonial life—visits, dinners, church, and excursions, with careful attention to landscape and society. Graham also treats India as an object of study. She explains Indian social customs, religious practices, and political arrangements for a British readership, positioning herself as a knowledgeable interpreter. Her *Journal* participates in "the production of colonial knowledge that underwrote British rule, even as it occasionally voices unease with imperial practices" (Burton 82). Fay and Graham together mark a transition from crisis-driven observation to more systematic, "residential" description in early nineteenth-century women's writing on India.

## 5. Honoria Lawrence: Frontier Domesticity and Pre-Mutiny Anxiety

Honoria Lawrence's *Journal of My Life in India* (1936) extends this tradition into the troubled decades preceding the 1857 uprising. As the wife of Sir Henry Lawrence, a key figure in Britain's Punjab campaigns, she accompanied him and lived in various military outposts during the 1830s and 1840s, in the regions central to British expansion and conflict. Her journal mixes scenes of family life with reflections on local politics and the conduct of Indian soldiers.

## 6. Fanny Parkes and Emma Roberts: Picturesque India and Ethnographic Detail

Fanny Parkes's *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque* (1850) offers one of the most extensive nineteenth-century British women's accounts of India. Her memoirs were rediscovered and edited by William Dalrymple and got published as *Begums, Thugs & Englishmen. The Journals of Fanny Parkes* (2002). Having lived in north India for more than twenty years, she traveled widely, often without her husband, and recorded her experiences in minute detail. Her stated aim is to share with readers in Britain the beauties and curiosities of India and she adopts the language of the picturesque throughout (Parkes). Her memoirs mention and describe the various festivals like "*Durga Pooja, Eed, Diwali*". She had opportunities to partake in the festivals. For instance, she writes about her experience around Diwali festivities. She writes: "We went to a nach at the house of a wealthy Baboo during the festival of the Doorga Pooja or Dasera, held in honour of the goddess Doorga" (Parkes 34): "We drove to the Parade-ground, to view the celebration of the Ram Leela festival." (Parkes 108). Parkes translates lived experience into aesthetic terms, aligning with Pratt's

observation that European travelers often turned colonized landscapes into “scenic” spectacles for metropolitan consumption (Pratt 60).

Parkes’s detailed insight gives her work value as a document of everyday life in early nineteenth-century north India. Her access to the local women led her to observe the stark realities of the ethnicities. “My having been married some thirty or forty years, and never having taken another wife, surprises the Muslims very much, and the ladies all look upon me as a pattern: they do not admire a system of having three or four rivals, however well pleased the gentlemen may be with the custom” (Parkes 231).

Emma Roberts, a contemporary of Parkes, also produced descriptive accounts of India. In *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan* (1835), she offers sketches of Indian scenery, society, and manners aimed at British readers curious about the empire. Roberts often adopts an instructive tone, explaining Indian customs in a way that assumes her audience’s ignorance. In one chapter she remarks, “Bejapore is celebrated for its tamarind trees; the groves which have arisen amidst the once populous streets and thoroughfares of this extensive capital, have not, as at Goar and Mandoo, completely usurped the soil, or become the agent of desolation...” (Roberts 276).

Like Parkes, Roberts uses the vocabulary of the picturesque to frame Indian life. She sometimes expresses cautious admiration for Indian art and architecture. “The city consists of two parts, both surrounded by a wall, that comprizing the citadel, being much more strongly fortified than the remaining portion.” (Roberts 266) Yet such praise still keeps India at a distance, transforming its people and buildings into images for aesthetic appreciation. Roberts stabilizes India in the British imagination as a place of scenic beauty and moral contrast, thus reinforcing colonial hierarchies even while enriching British knowledge of the region (Mills 98).

The records of Parkes and Roberts demonstrate how women travel writers contributed to the visual and textual mapping of India, turning it into a landscape to be looked at, described, and judged.

### 7. Emily Eden: Social Observation

Emily Eden’s *Up the Country* (1866) brings a more overtly ironic voice to women’s writing on India. As the sister of Lord Auckland, Governor-General of India, she accompanied him on his 1838 tour from Calcutta toward the north-west frontier. Her letters to her sister, later published, offer sharp commentary on both British and Indian society. She also criticizes aspects of colonial social life. Nevertheless, Eden does not entirely escape Orientalist habits.

### 8. Comparative Patterns: A Gendered Colonial Gaze

Viewed together, the writings of Fay, Graham, Lawrence, Parkes, Roberts, and Eden reveal recurring patterns in how British women perceived and represented colonial India. All six display curiosity about Indian people and customs; several show moments of empathy or admiration; yet all remain anchored in the belief that British culture and religion are ultimately superior.

Fay and Graham represent early Company-era encounters, with Fay’s narrative dominated by danger and personal grievance, and Graham’s by more reflective “residence” and description. Lawrence’s journal moves these themes to the frontier, combining domestic scenes with growing anxiety about mutiny. Parkes and Roberts together embody the picturesque and ethnographic impulse, turning Indian

landscapes and lives into vivid scenes for British consumption, while occasionally condemning practices like child marriage. Eden, finally, brings irony to the form, critiquing both British pomp and her own discomfort, yet still positioning Indian courts as theatrical and other.

From a postcolonial perspective, these texts illustrate what Robert J. C. Young calls the “contradictory” nature of colonial discourse, in which “admiration, fear, contempt, and desire are constantly mixed” (Young 27). The women writers considered here neither simply support nor entirely subvert empire. Their gendered position allows them to notice aspects of Indian life that male officers often ignore, but their narratives nonetheless work within the broader framework of Orientalist representation.

### Conclusion

Women’s travel writing in colonial India occupies a complicated space in English literary and cultural history. The six writers examined, Eliza Fay, Maria Graham, Honoria Lawrence, Fanny Parkes, Emma Roberts, and Emily Eden, offer detailed, often vivid accounts of Indian landscapes, households, festivals, and personalities. Their texts are valuable as historical documents, preserving information about daily life and cross-cultural encounters; they are also revealing as literary artifacts shaped by both curiosity and prejudice. Applying concepts from Said, Pratt, Mills, and postcolonial feminism helps illuminate the contradictions in these works. The same writer may, in one passage, recognize common humanity in Indian women in domestic spheres, and in another, describe Indian servants or soldiers as untrustworthy and dangerous. Sympathy coexists with stereotyping; admiration with a conviction of British superiority. Rather than resolving these tensions, the texts hold them together. Women’s travel writing in colonial India occupies a complicated space in English literary and cultural history. Close attention to such travel narratives expands our understanding of how empire was imagined and experienced. These six women, writing from within the constraints and privileges of their position, produced accounts that continue to challenge us to think critically about gender, power, and representation in the colonial archive. Their memoirs restate that they neither fully identified with empire’s goals nor sympathized with Indian resistance. Straddling both worlds, they produced uniquely conflicted visions. Their gaze was colonial but never uniform, imperial but never absolute.

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