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Rosemary Raza, In their own words: British women writers and India 1740-1857 (Review)

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Abstract
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signs that Buddhists held "Protestant" views, and therefore we may challenge Obeyesekere's theory that Protestant Buddhism emerged as a new and reactionary tradition during the late colonial period. In fact, many of Buddhism's so-called Protestant traits may have existed before the British period of colonialism.

As Harris states in the introduction, she argues "for an interactive and reciprocal relationship between Westerner and Eastern Buddhist, and for a radical multiplicity" (4). She succeeds in revealing the multiplicity of Western interpretations of Buddhism, the interaction and reciprocity between these writers and their Sri Lankan informants, however, is less evident. The decision to use arbitrary aspects of Buddhism through which to read the British writers against each other makes it difficult to determine why each writer wrote as they did. It is not apparent in Harris' work what the intentions in writing were for the individuals who decided to discuss Buddhism, and there is no sense of any writer's work as a whole. This selectivity is partly due to the large span of time which Harris covers. Also, her admitted neglect of non-English language sources, among which Sinhala language materials would have been essential, makes it difficult to offer a strong argument for how these writers interacted dialogically with their informants. Nevertheless, Harris' work does contribute a great deal to a renewed engagement with nineteenth-century depictions and interpretations of Sri Lankan Buddhism by British colonials, and the sheer volume of writers accounted for offers a wealth of information to scholars interested in reassessing the British encounters with Buddhism during the colonial era.

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"How do British women fare when we look at their own record of their lives, activities, and roles in India in the early colonial period?", asks Rosemary Raza at the start of the "Conclusion" to In Their Own Words: British Women Writers and India 1740-1857. The answer, which she has spent the previous eight chapters articulating, is that it is complex, nuanced, and shows "that [these] women no more than men present a monolithic face to the world". British women, she argues, "experienced India in varying ways, dependent on their personal inclination, as well as the reason for their presence there" (225). At the heart of Raza's book is thus a desire to challenge what she sees as a flawed perception of "the mensahibs of British India [who] have been accorded an unenviable reputation over the last century, vilified only too often as the 'spoilers' of the Raj" (xi). Raza brings together a total of ninety primary texts, which she analyses in varying detail and with mixed success. All are published texts and reasonably easy to access, an aspect central to Raza's thesis, focusing on works placed in a well-worn web of circulation of colonial knowledge production.

Raza paints with meticulous detail a densely complicated picture of the women brought, in one way or another, to India by British colonialism. Some travelled as the spouses of colonial administrators, others as missionaries, many more as single women in search of a husband. Raza at one point refers to India as "the great matrimonial mast of the East" (31). Focusing on female narratives, ranging from letters to travel accounts, novels to life writing, Raza explores the relationship between perceptions of India from within and from without and the role these women played in that process. As she asserts, in some cases the writers never set foot in India and not all the writers set out to record their experiences of India, either. Frequently, these were women whose life in Britain had been socially active and intellectually stimulating and for whom the shift to India meant endless boredom. Thus, in almost all instances the writing is marked by a strong autobiographical quality, with all that entails.

Much of the work under examination sprung almost seamlessly from mountains of private correspondence sent by British women from India to relatives in Britain. Initially conceived
as private communications with family and friends, these narratives were soon co-opted to feed a growing curiosity about "the Orient", as the writers themselves put it. Raza cites the case of "Elizabeth Harvard's letters describing her voyage to India [which] were, as her husband later noted in his tribute to her missionary life, 'so much an object of request among her numerous friends, that they have either been worn out by frequent perusal, or have wandered beyond the reach of recovery'" (5). Importantly, while much of the writing retained an interesting gaze—that of the outsider, at once "naturally" curious and ignorant—it also fed directly into the kind of misconception for which the mensahibs came to attract such bad press. While Raza rarely criticises the women whose work she explores—the whole study at times acquires a rather oddly celebratory overtone—even she cannot overlook the nature of the reportage on India. Although intent on redressing the "damaged reputation" the British mensahibs have enjoyed for some time, even Raza recognises that however empirical—auto-biographical—the knowledge they drew on, the vast majority of these women wrote as British citizens.

This basic reality is especially evident in her chapter on the writings of evangelical women in India, where Raza finally shows herself fully aware of the social and political frameworks that inflect the works she reads. The fact is that such writings were in one way or another part and parcel of larger discursive forces that produced and were produced by colonial modes of action and power relations. However unintentionally, the works show how India and Indians became the real text on whom British women unleashed their benevolence, cruelty, or cultural misconceptions. Although Raza can see it when discussing the narratives of evangelical women, sent out to India as part of highly driven missionary enterprises, she overlooks the extent to which all British women in India were intrinsic to the colonial mission. A case in point, which the authors discusses but then suggests has been over-done by feminist and postcolonial critical critics—presumably also by colonial critics—is that of the white British women who employed Indian wet nurses to suckle their children. To note, as she does, that upper-class Indian women also availed themselves of the services of badly paid wet nurses hardly accounts for the fact that among British women even those unable to pay for domestic help in Britain now could enjoy full-time surrogate mothers for their children.

While the author argues that British women have been misjudged by critics bent on reading their work through skewed theoretical approaches, her work shows quite conclusively how instrumental the writings of these women were in the invention of India. To put it so blatantly is not to denigrate them, merely to recognise the human and social dimensions of the writing. Indeed, one of the most rewarding aspects of the work is the way it exposes the finely nuanced array of views that even the most dogmatic missionary women could entertain. If racism there was, and no doubt there was, it was tempered by a curiosity, say, a suspicion that these people whom one saw through such reductive parameters were in fact far more complex manifestations of oneself than might at first appear. "Depicting India", the work's penultimate chapter, along with the next one, "British Women and Colonial Authority", offers perhaps the most obvious sources of such contradictory thinking and behaviour, but Raza's numerous examples throughout the study show it to be quite prevalent in the body of writing she examines. Raza demonstrates also that as the divisions between British and Indian sections of society developed and solidified, the role played by the British women in Indian and their writing gained in relevance.

Ironically, then, for all her insistence that British women in India have been badly served by critical readings of their work, Raza's own study much too often shows that these were indeed rather unappealing individuals. Despite the odd exceptions, among whom the Eden sisters, Emily (1797-1869) and Fanny (1801-49) stand out, along with Marianne Postans (fl. 1839-44), Helen Douglas MacKenzie (fl. 1853), Emma Roberts (1791-1840), Lady Amelia FitzClarence Falkland (1807-58), and Jermina Kindersley (1741-1809), the vast majority of the women Raza includes in her work do an excellent job of proving the thesis that the Raj women were actually a rather obstreperous, selfish, and unpleasant lot. Yet, to summarise
the work in this way would also be unfair. Although there is much that might have been done differently, *In Their Own Words* is a valuable work of historical and literary scholarship.

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In 1927, the American journalist Katherine Mayo (1867-1940) published a text entitled *Mother India*, a scathing critique of the “social ills” that plagued women in the Indian subcontinent, exposing their “depraved sexuality” and their unhygienic intimate practices, and ultimately arguing that Indians were unfit for self-government. The text was quickly translated into several languages and had an immense impact on discussions of empire in the United States, Britain, and India, as well as in China, Germany, and other extra-imperial contexts. It inspired cultural production (a play entitled *Mother India* enjoyed a brief run in New York) as well as its categorisation as a crucial text of social commentary on par with *Uncle Tom’s Cabin* (1852) or *Origins of the Species* (1859) (2).

In *Specters of Mother India*, Mrinalini Sinha traces the impact of this text at the time of its publication and in the years following. She persuasively argues that *Mother India* was a global public “event”, contextualised primarily as a commentary on late British imperial changes in governance and on the nationalist-imperialist discursive focus on “social values”, but also resonant as a commentary on the persistent influence of the United States in late imperial affairs. In so doing, she rescues the event from either an imperialist or nationalist reading of it, and reframes it within the context of an empire and a colony very much in transition. This work offers a rigorous and refreshing reading of history that will set the standard for feminist and transnational studies of the interwar period, especially in the South Asian context.

Sinha begins with an account of the book *Mother India* in the context of both interwar imperial politics in India and the evolution of women’s involvement—both actively and discursively—as subjects and agents of Indian nationalism. She artfully sketches the different concerns of both imperial and domestic politics in India between the Government of India Acts of 1919 and 1935, a period which she characterises as being a transitional moment in the “social formation” of an Indian identity. As political reforms further reified differences between religious and social groups, the collectively-organised political and cultural involvement of women around certain issues introduced a distinctly political category of Indian womanhood that transcended the boundaries of community.

The effectiveness of this evolution is felt powerfully in the tenacity of Indian feminists like Cornelia Sorabji (1866-1954) to mount an Indian “feminist” response to Mayo. Sinha frames this discontinuity between Mayo’s representation and the reality of the Indian response to it by considering the U.S. and the imperial expectations for Mayo’s work as she understood them: namely, the evaluation of the British colonial intervention in India and prospects for the success of self-government of Indians. Mayo’s presentation of the fundamental “illness” of Indian culture, gauged from her exposé of the practices of public health and sexuality, argued that Indians, due to the backwardness of their social relations and the unsanitary management of their intimate lives, were decidedly incapable of self-government. Mayo’s conclusions were ultimately contentious: while British officials read her critique as an attack on their success in India, and Indian reformers lambasted her for her exclusion of successful social reforms, U.S. missionaries and reformers questioned her facts (gleaned mostly from British officials), and ultimately distanced themselves from Mayo and her mission. Nevertheless, the extent and nature of the response, Sinha argues, points to the growing importance of U.S. opinion and involvement in new areas of the British imperial project in the interwar period.