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Writing the Empire, Wearing the Veil: Gender, Power, and the Politics of Travel writing in Eliza Fay's India

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the late eighteenth century travel letters of Eliza Fay, a British woman in colonial India, to unravel the intersection of gender, empire, and knowledge production. Using postcolonial and feminist theories, this paper interrogates how women played a discursive role in the knowledge production. Positioning Eliza's travelogue within the "third space" of colonial encounter, the article analyses her simultaneous complicity and challenges in imperial and gender discourse, revealing how women navigated and contributed to the dynamics of Orientalism and knowledge-making in colonial India. This article asserts that travel writing by women is an essential source for reconstructing histories marginalised in official archives, exposing both the prejudices and anxieties that shaped colonial attitudes toward natives and the roles women played in sustaining and questioning imperial projects. Ultimately, this article represents an attempt to situate travel writing as gendered knowledge production within the frameworks of postcolonial feminism and Foucauldian theories of discourse and power.

1. Introduction

There is an attempt to write the history of the Modern India beyond colonial archives through letters, literature, songs, art and so on.[1] These unconventional and non-official sources many

[1] Obsession with using *A*rchives (capital A emphasis) has roots in nineteenth century Ranke's Positivism that projected *H*istory as an objective narrative of the victors. In the twentieth century, such understanding around the methodology and purpose of history was debated and reformed with emergence of schools like the Annales. This shift away from using official government documents is well explained through Antoinette Burton's 2003 work *Dwelling in the archive: women writing house, home, and history in late colonial India,* where she calls the obsession of historians and scholars still using archives as "archive fever". Such fixation of sources can never help in reconstructing a fuller historical understanding, since in such *A*rchives, many voices such as of women, lower classes and castes are absent. In order to write history from below, to critically evaluate and analyse societies, events and processes, non-conventional sources must be used.

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times reveal social contexts and spaces that are relatively absent from official archives. Travelogues are such unconventional sources, which were rich sources of literature to describe and bring to imagination the world undiscovered and lesser known to the larger public audience. Written mainly for the public, it would entail certain tropes to draw attention and popularity. However, travelogues were not only sources of entertainment and curiosity. They served a greater role in imperial ambitions and designs. This paper shall analyse one such travelogue, written by a woman in the late eighteenth century colonial India.

This article examines how late eighteenth-century travelogues by British women, specifically Eliza Fay, function as gendered instruments of colonial knowledge production. The travel literature written in the eighteenth century had a heavy inclination towards documentation and providing the objective description about their journey and the landscapes they would visit. Marschalk (2022) argues that personal narratives were not appreciated and often the obsession of truth was so bizarre that the readership would enthusiastically search for factual flaws in such travel accounts, which would stain the reputation and career of the author. Travelogue writers were under immense pressure to produce a text which was factually and politically true.[2] This context posed even greater challenges for women travel writers, who had to navigate both political expectations and gendered constraints.

Travel writing like other spaces, literature and knowledge production, had been dominated by men. Furthermore the fixation on objectivity against personal and introspective narratives, reveals an underlying politics of gender as traits like objectivity and rationality have traditionally been aligned with masculinity, while emotional and subjective expression have been culturally associated with femininity. Moreover, travel writing emerged as a predominantly masculine domain shaped by the prototype of the ‘adventurer-hero’. Scholars like Nayar (2002) argue that English travelogues used aesthetic and rhetorical strategies to construct the Indian landscape as a site for the performance of British masculine heroism. The narratives often positioned the traveler as a rational, adventurous, and resourceful hero, reinforcing colonial authority through the trope of the masculine explorer. Furthermore, these travelogues, written like adventure stories, left no room for fear. Emotions like anxiety or fright were suppressed, as they were seen as unmanly; men were expected to be brave heroes, not vulnerable and uncertain.[3]

The cultural dominance of men over travel writing was further reinforced by the greater social freedom and mobility afforded to men, enabling them to undertake journeys that women, constrained by societal norms often could not. As a result, women faced significantly more obstacles in participating and contributing to the travelogue tradition. This context makes the source this article is based on as something different. Written by a woman, who accompanied her husband to Calcutta in the late eighteenth century, Eliza Fay’s travelogue shows how women tried to claim a space in the public sphere, despite the limitations.

[2] Marschalk, L. (2022). Teaching Eliza Fay's Original Letters from India (1817) through Classroom Editing. *ABO: Interactive Journal for Women in the Arts, 1640-1830*, *12*(2).

[3] In an interesting article by Daniel Haines (2024), he explores colonial travel and adventure writing and argued that fear held a legitimate and powerful place in heroic imperial narratives by helping readers to identify with the danger that a narrator had to overcome. His work focuses on deconstructing the masculinist trope of such writings, with the analysis of “fear” in later works. Article has been mentioned in the bibliography.

2. Politics of Travelogues

Travel writing was always deeply political, reflecting and reproducing power through gender and colonial representation of the other—the "orient". Like other forms of colonial literature, such as surveys, cartography, and journals, travelogues contributed to the larger project of knowledge production. This knowledge, gathered and shaped during the colonial period, served to legitimise British rule by supporting the ideologies of the Raj.

One of the most influential scholars who links knowledge production and creation of the "orient" is Edward Said, who identifies the late eighteenth century (same period as the source used here) as a starting point of the process of authorising Orientalism— reinforcing it incessantly, creating epistemologies to justify, support and reproduce by the West.[4] For colonial India, it was a period of transitions, crises: a time when British imperial control was consolidating but not yet fully established. The source referred to narrates the travels of the time period from 1779 till 1815, which were years of anxieties, military conquests against the natives, defeats, successes, of corruption charges, indebtedness of the company. It was a transitioning phase of British colonialism, from a commercial enterprise to an administrative law-making government. Simultaneously, there was a significant rise in corruption allegations against British officials. Indian affairs in Britain were seen with embarrassment.[5] Alongside, the process of knowledge production was in progress, with imperial surveys, census, cartography, and setting up of institutions like the Asiatic Society of Bengal in 1784.

Furthermore, like Said(1978), scholars such as Cohn (1996), Dirks (2001)[6], and Bhabha (2012) emphasise the importance of knowledge production of western colonisers of the Orient. Said theorises that the "Orient" was a created concept, to understand and deduce the eastern powers, in an attempt to **define themselves**. The Orient was the created other of the Occident(west). Simultaneously, such notions helped create other ideologies to help justify the rule of the colonisers; it created the ideological burden for the white man to resolve. Cohn and Dirks extend this idea to British rule in India, showing that colonialism was not just about military conquest, but also cultural control, be it in the creation of knowledge to aid and sustain imperialism or to colonise culture. The British empire was the also the empire of knowledge and of information. Through maps, surveys, census, statistics, anthropology, and botany, these veins of knowledge pumped the heart of British colonialism, to govern its colonies, making knowledge itself a form of imperial power.

Furthermore, the earlier discussed obsession of travel writing with objectivity was given a Foucauldian interpretation by scholars like Indira Ghose and Sara Mills. Ghose (1998), deriving from Mills (1992), argues that Foucault's theory of discourse has demolished the difference between 'truth' and fiction, disintegrating the suffocating classification of genre. The truth claims in travel writing is a rhetorical strategy to construct, through writing, the categorial "Other". The reality of oriental is created, recreated, reinforced and disseminated by these travelogues, feeding into the creation of stereotypes and melding the armour of imperial cultural hegemony.

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[4] Said, E. W. (1979). Introduction. In: *Orientalism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1-28.

[5] Nayar, P. K. (2002).The imperial Sublime: English travel writing and India, 1750–1820. *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, *2*(2), 57-99.

[6] Though Dirks talks about the importance of knowledge production specifically in context of the post 1857 "ethnographic state", his model and analysis of seeing colonialism as a form of cultural project can also be used to understand nature of British Indian colonial state before 1857 as well. Furthermore, such attempts of knowledge production was very evidently existing before mid nineteenth century, in forms of travelogues (such as Fay's) and ethnographic accounts.

The role of travelogues in empire building can be further emphasised by using such Post Structuralist theories, which argue that reality is not a given but rather a created, recreated and produced in discourses. These texts do not describe or reflect a pre-conceived reality, but also are in dialogue to create such realities. If reality is not static and is constantly reproduced through discourses, then spaces are also produced simultaneously. Scholars like Homi Bhabha (2012) argue for a creation of "third space" during colonial periods, where different cultures would interact and as culture, keep transforming themselves.[7] Colonial discourses had a spatial representation and manifestation in the discursive "third space", a space of negotiation of binaries—of the colonised and the colonisers. In this context, women writers also were active participants in the creation and maintenance of the colonial reality and the third space.

While recovering voices and agency from such sources, it is equally important to recognise how women also contributed to empire-building. If travel writing helped creation and reinforcing the orient that helped in colonisation and stabilisation, then men and women were historical agents who fuelled and sustained such processes. Gender cannot be ruled out to understand empire building along with other social realities. To quote Ghose,

> "*...what needs to be looked at in more depth is how notions of gender were bound up with hegemonic ideologies, and how women were both made an instrument of, and were complicitous with, the politics of imperialism*." (Ghose, 1998, p. 4)

In this light, Eliza's travel letters are an interesting source to reconstruct social realities, to understand the process of knowledge production concomitant with '*orientalisation*', and the anxieties of gender relations. What makes it an even special source is the genre of the text. She writes her work when travelogues were still a firmly male-dominated genre and area of knowledge production, which remained until the nineteenth century.[8] Her letters from late eighteenth to early nineteenth century is a bold venture to claim a space in the male-defined domain of travel writing. [9]

The theories above will be contextualised, drawing upon the travelogues of Eliza Fay, who accompanied her husband—an advocate in the Supreme Court of Calcutta. Her letters, written between 1779 and 1815, are compiled in *Original Letters from India*, introduced by E.M. Forster and published in 1925 by the Woolfs. The book includes twenty-three letters from her first visit (1779–1782) and eight from a later journey in 1815. For colonial India, it was a period of transitions and crises— a time when British imperial control was consolidating but not yet fully established. The period of study (1779-1815) was marked by anxieties, military conquests against the natives, defeats, successes, of corruption charges, indebtedness of the company. Meanwhile, Indian affairs in Britain were seen with embarrassment.[10] Set against this backdrop of late eighteenth century India, a time marked by political upheaval and cultural exchange,

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[7] Bhabha, H. K. (2012). Of Mimicry and Man: The Ambivalence of Colonial Discourse. In *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.

[8] Ghosh, I. (1998). *Women Travellers in Colonial India: The Power of the Female Gaze*. Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1.

[9] An interesting article by Falconer (2011) explores women as travellers, arguing that female travellers negotiate the complex subject position and the tension between performing a liberated, risk-taking identity and the realities of gendered constraints within the broader context of shifting feminist identities and debates on empowerment. Though the period of study is from late twentieth century to early twenty-first century, her study can help us explores how these travel narratives contribute to constructing and performing the women's personal development and identity in other periods as well. Her article has been mentioned in the bibliography.

[10] Nayar, P. K. (2002). The imperial Sublime: English travel writing and India, 1750–1820. *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies*, *2*(2), 57-99.

Fay's correspondence reveals not just her personal journey but also the broader implications of colonial attitudes and knowledge production.

By examining her captivity, her interactions with local powers, and her reflections on gender roles, this article will uncover the layers of meaning within Fay's narrative. Out of a total of thirty-one extant letters, this analysis focuses specifically on Letters twelve, fourteen, fifteen, sixteen, and twenty, which are particularly rich in Fay's perspectives on the Indian subcontinent, pertaining to her period of stay between 1779 and 1815. These selected texts provide valuable insight into colonial attitudes and allow for a nuanced consideration of whether such perceptions differed in the case of British women. Before delving into the numerous observations, here is a context to our recounter, Eliza Fay.

3. About Eliza

Eliza Fay, born in 1756, was close to her two sisters, to whom most of her letters are addressed. She was trained in French, some Italian, Portuguese shorthand, and Hindustani. Her letters begin in 1779, when she was twenty-three and newly married to Anthony Fay, an Irishman travelling to Calcutta to practise law. Her first fourteen letters describe her journey through France, Italy, the Alps, Egypt, the Red Sea, and finally to Calicut and Calcutta. The Fays arrived in Calicut in February 1780, but were soon imprisoned by a local Indian force. This event was prominently referenced in the subtitle of the 1817 edition of her letters, likely to attract readers and reinforce colonial depictions of Indians as antagonists. After reaching Calcutta, her life became more stable, attending social events and dining with British elites, until her marriage fell apart. Anthony Fay incurred debts, alienated friends, and fathered an illegitimate child, prompting Eliza to leave him. He returned to England, and she followed in 1782. In 1784, she journeyed back to Calicut, resumed work as a mantua-maker, faced bankruptcy in 1788, and returned to England in 1794. She invested in trade ships like the Minerva and Rosalia, though both ventures failed. Her final voyage to Calcutta was in 1816. She died there on 9 September 1817 at the age of sixty, leaving no will.

While reconstructing, the material context of time and space is necessary to situate the source and rebuild the history around it. Analysis will be drawn from the archives left by Eliza, her letters. In most of her letters, she describes her journey to Calcutta from England. The voice of Eliza, through these letters can be retrieved to a certain extent–in her letters, she does not shy away from expressing her opinions but while reading one must also remember the edits to them.

4. Arrival story[11] and Inversion of Imperial Masculinity

As the subtitle of the 1817 edition suggested, the most interesting part of the letters refer to her imprisonment in Calicut by the indigenous ruler, Hyder Ali. Eliza was travelling in 1770s post-Buxar and Plassey wars, during a time when British power was growing beyond trade into territorial control. This was a period of struggle between the British and Indian rulers. For the nineteenth-century British readership, this incident helped in reinforcing orientalist ideas of Indian rulers as cruel and unjust. But from a historical perspective, it was a moment of political

[11] the usage of the term "arrival story" is borrowed from analysis from anthropology, where the anthropologist often acts as a mediator—an outsider interpreting unfamiliar lives and practices. These stories mark the crossing into a new world, highlighting travel and transformation. In a similar way, Eliza Fay positions herself as an authoritative narrator of late eighteenth-century colonial India. Similarly, Eliza through her letters takes an authoritative story-teller and narrator of late eighteenth century colonial India. To learn more about the politics of "arrival story" , read Mary L. Pratt's Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation.

confrontation and reveals how British captives often responded with white-supremacist anxieties.

Fays and the other eight British were imprisoned in the English factory residence at Calicut. Their arrival in India was in the twilight of the second Anglo-Mysore War, when Hyder Ali of Mysore was preparing to fight the British. In the precipitating matters between the two political figures, Hyder Ali's brother-in-law, who was the Governor of Calicut detained all the British there for fifteen weeks. Shortly after their release, the second Anglo-Mysore war broke out.

The conditions of the captives were not pleasant. The twelfth letter, (dated 12th February 1780, Calicut, written after her release) which is the longest letter, details on the isolation faced by them and the repeated threats to surrender their wealth to the Mysore authorities. They were locked up in the British factory residence in the outskirts of Calicut, constantly under the surveillance of the Mysore troops. However, Eliza cleverly finds a hidden exit, which she uses to take some risky unnoticed strolls. She was more adamant and active in formulating an escape plan than her husband, who was hoping for help to come from official passages. Such details of her cheeky bravery and her wit to find escape routes, had elements of adventure tales of the travel writing, as discussed above.

Where travel narratives became a space of performance and reinforcement of imperial masculinity with the adventurer-hero at the centre, works like that of Fay, show how women also used such tropes and narratives in travel writing. What seems more interesting is an inversion of gender tropes. She casts herself not as a passive observer or sentimental companion, but as an active and resourceful figure who navigates hardship with remarkable resolve. In moments of crisis, it is she who takes decisive action, whether by adamantly resisting surrendering her possessions or by relentlessly seeking a means of escape. In contrast, her husband is portrayed as emotionally overwhelmed, passive, and brooding by the very circumstances she confronts. Eliza subtly but unmistakably suggests that he might not have survived the journey without her intervention and strength.

This inversion of conventional gender roles is significant.[12] Eliza adopts the tropes of bravery and endurance traditionally reserved for male travellers, but in doing so, she reconfigures the gender dynamics of travel writing. Her narrative challenges the assumption that adventure and resilience are inherently masculine qualities, and instead presents a complex portrayal of female agency within a genre historically dominated by men. As discussed earlier, travelogues did not accommodate any feelings or emotions other than that of courage, bravery and success, which were all associated with masculinity. Travel writing played an active role in manufacturing masculinity. What makes Eliza's narrative even more intriguing is her willingness to articulate her emotions, her fear, anxiety, and terror at being caught in captivity. This candid expression of vulnerability is rarely found in the dominant masculinist tradition of travel writing, where such emotions were either suppressed or entirely absent. Fay's account thus occupies a unique space and represents a striking departure from the normative conventions of travel writing of her time by not only challenging the gendered expectations of the genre by positioning herself as the primary agent, but also expressing her moments of vulnerability, anxieties, and fear along with her moments of bravery.

[12] However, this does not mean that 'bravery', and adventure should be equated as a masculine trait but it should be recognised that these traits have been equated to men and should be deconstructed.

5. Creating the Orient

Something quotidian in travel writing is the usage of stereotypes, which played a crucial role in producing and reinforcing Orientalism. Drawing from Marxist, post-structuralists and post-colonialist scholars like Homi Bhabha, one can argue that Orientalism is a dialectical process, which writers like Fay helped in creating, sustaining and reinforcing. In these letters, we see an overwhelming instances of 'orientalisation'[13]. This subsection will examine this process through references from Eliza's work. The method of analysis will also include Ranajit Guha's method of reading primary texts 'against the grain'[14], which encourages close scrutiny of the word usages to question the intentions of the author. Such closely observed words, which fulfil the category of stereotypes will be observed in light of Homi Bhabhi's theories. Using such methodologies, the multilayered political interpretations and realities in her texts will be analysed.

Eliza Fay's captivity strengthened the oriental depiction of the locals. In her twelfth letter, she remarks on the natives using words like "wretches", "barbarians", "fanatics" to describe them.[15] On a simple reading, without any context, one can explain this to colonial white chauvinism, which viewed Asians as orientals, exotic and inferior. However, in this episode, the context adds another layer of nuanced interpretation.

As mentioned earlier, Fay and other British passengers were held captives by the Governor of Mysore. Reading her letters gives details on the turmoil, fear and anxiety faced in such confinement and the process before it. These passengers were aware of the worsening political situation and the native army were ordered to plunder the British passengers. Soon after they were set on a boat towards the shore to be dragged to their confinement.

> *"As if to aggravate our miseries by every species of **insult**, they compelled us to walk above a mile thro' a heavy sand, surrounded by **all the mob of Calicut, who seemed to take pleasure in beholding the distress of white people**, **those constant objects of their envy and detestation**… But here I cannot describe the horror which seized me on finding, we were totally in the power of **wretches**, who, for, aught I knew, intended to strip, and murder us: why else were we sent to an empty house?"* (Fay, 1925, p. 120) [16]

The sad and desperate site of the powerless British in this scene is written in ways to incite sympathy for them. However, the writing style of this passage can unveil some politics of description. The above excerpt includes colonial chauvinist undertones which is evident from the words used by Fay. Her usage of word for the locals who surrounded them was "mob" which gives impression of an disorderly gathering of people.

Similarly, in the same sentence she writes that the aggrieved state of theirs (British) incited "pleasure" for the Calicut folk as the latter were "envious" of the former:

> *"...all the mob of Calicut, who seemed to take **pleasure** in beholding the distress of white people, **those constant objects of their envy and detestation…**"*[17]

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[13] term used in reference to the process of Orientalism.

[14] Guha, Ranajit (1988). Prose of Counter-Insurgency. In: Ranajit Guha and Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak (Eds) *Selected Subaltern Studies*. New York: Oxford University Press.

[15] Fay, Eliza (1925). Letter XII. In: *Original Letters from India (1779–1815)*. EM Forster (ed) London: Hogarth Press, 110-150.

[16] some words from the lines of the primary text quoted are bolded for emphasising words and phrases which helps one to understand the bias of the archive and how reading against the archives can produce strong analysis of the historical context.

[17] bold for emphasis.

A relation of envy and the envious indicates a power relation, where the envious (Calicut 'mob') aspires and is jealous of the British, implying the latter is someway superior and aspirational. Thus, the natives, who were inferior, when viewing this strange rare circumstance of white 'superior' people being dragged in distress, very much against their usual respected treatment, felt "pleasure" at this reversal.

Adding theoretical depth, Linda Colley's analysis of captivity narratives illuminates how such accounts reflect imperial vulnerabilities rarely visible in triumphalist colonial texts. Fay's narrative reveals a reversal of power whereby the once-dominant colonisers are rendered vulnerable and subjected to the scrutiny and potential violence of the colonised (Colley, 2000). Colley emphasises that these moments of captivity expose anxieties about colonial authority and disrupt the clear binaries of coloniser and colonised. Fay's depiction of captivity thus functions not only as an expression of colonial stereotypes but also unveils the fragility and contested nature of British imperial power in India. Her Orientalist portrayals must be read alongside the lived reality of her vulnerable position, of captivity, and as part of a complex dialectic of domination and submission, allegiance and resistance.

A passage before the one quoted above also strengthens the argument of white colonial arrogance,

> "*..but little did I imagine that, any power on this Continent, however independent, would have **dared to treat English subjects with such cruelty**, as we experienced from them."* (Fay, 1925, p. 120)

The usage of the word "dare" brings the essence of challenge, in this context, more of a negative challenge which is set up in an unequal hierarchical relation. The ill-treatment of the British was a reversal and a threat against normalcy where British were masters of Indians. Thus, by the natives ill-treating them would be somewhat of a resistance and violence from below, which is visualised as hostilely daring.

6. Unreliable Natives, Unreliable Narratives

After their release, Eliza in her fourteenth letter written in April 1780 from Madras gives the description of the city. She was impressed by the city, with its buildings and beauty but not with their people.

> *"On your arrival you are **pestered** with Dubashees(translators), and servants of all kinds who crouch to you as if they were already your slaves, but **who will cheat you in every possible way**; though in fact there is no living without one of the former to manage your affairs as a kind of steward, and you may deem yourself very fortunate if you procure one in this land of pillagers, **who will let nobody cheat you but himself.**"* (Fay, 1925, p. 162)

Similar descriptions of unreliable natives, especially servants is mentioned in the sixteenth letter written from Calcutta, her final destination. In August of 1780, she writes,

> *"I am happy to say that our house is a very comfortable one, but we are surrounded by a set of **thieves**. In England, if servants are dishonest we punish them, or turn them away in disgrace, and their fate proves, it may be hoped, a warning to others; but these **wretches have no sense of shame**."* (Fay, 1925, p. 180)[18]

From the above given references we can observe two things. Firstly, Fay clearly distrusted the natives, whether they were servants or shopkeepers. In page 181, she describes the local

[18] bold for emphasis.

Banias(merchants) as deceptive who *"have their profit on every thing that comes into the house."* (Fay, 1925, p. 181) It is clear from such descriptions that Eliza felt like an outsider who was surrounded by people who were trying to cheat her.

Another friction with the domestic workers is noticed in letter fifteen(dated 29th August 1780), where Fay complains regarding the reluctant attitude of servants to work. She writes,

> *"I have commenced house-keeping, and am arranging my establishment, which-is no little trouble in a country* ***where the servants will not do a single thing, but that for which you expressly engage them nor even that willingly****. I just now asked a man to place a small table near me; he began to bawl as loud as he could for the bearers to come and help him. "Why dont you do it yourself" said I? rising as I spoke to assist. Oh I no English. I Bengal man. I* ***no estrong like English; one, two, three Bengal men cannot do like one Englishman.****"* (Fay, 1925, p. 179)[19]

This is particularly intriguing as it seems that the natives are playing along with the stereotypes created by the British of a strong masculine white man against the effeminate weak Bengali man. Such humouring of stereotypes can be interpreted as a way of trying to resist their 'colonial master' by denying the work imposed upon them. PK Nayar's 2020 work on colonial homes theorises such moments of resistance. Deconstructing the separation of private and public spaces, he argues that homes and domestic spaces were political in nature. He specifically talks of the colonial homes of British memsahibs, which was a site of imperial anxiety where management of things, servants and process within the domestic realm was an allegory for the management of the Empire itself.[20]

Victoria Haskins and Samita Sen's recent scholarship on colonial domestic service regulation provides crucial theoretical context for understanding these dynamics. In their 2022 analysis, they argue that domestic spaces were central sites of imperial governmentality, not peripheral to colonial control[21]. Their work reveals that the regulation—or deliberate lack thereof—of domestic service exposed the "precarity and anxieties of colonial control" rather than its strength. Fay's frustrated descriptions of "thieves" and "wretches" who "have no sense of shame" must be understood within this framework of imperial anxiety, where domestic management failures represented broader colonial governance anxieties.

Haskins and Sen's analysis of colonial archives demonstrates that such texts reveal more about colonial rulers' fears than about the colonised themselves. Fay's emphasis on servants' moral defects and unreliability thus functions as what the scholars term "epistemic anxieties, which the colonial attempts to rationalise and contain the very real challenges to imperial authority occurring within domestic spaces. Her comparison between English and Indian systems of punishment ("In England, if servants are dishonest we punish them") reveals the regulatory ambivalence that Haskins and Sen identify as characteristic of colonial domestic management—the simultaneous desire for control and recognition of its impossibility. Furthermore, their work on race as a constitutive category in colonial domestic relations illuminates how Fay's descriptions of servants as racially marked ("Bengal man," "wretches") served to justify differential treatment and expectations. The scholars argue that domestic

[19] bold for emphasis.
[20] Nayar, P. K. (2020). The colonial home: managing objects and servants in British India. *Anglo Saxonica*, *17*(1), 1-9.
[21] Haskins, V., & Sen, S. (2022). Introduction: Regulation and Domestic Service in Colonial Histories. *International Review of Social History*, *67*(1), 1-7.

servants were subaltern gatekeepers of gender, class, and racial distinctions, whose very presence created boundary anxieties for colonial households.

The tropes deployed by Fay of untrustworthy native servants(which can also be extended to her description of locals and merchants), their moral defect and lack of knowledge and strength, all add on to the memsahibs' tussle with native agency, in terms of the latter's intentional incompetence, recalcitrance, indolence and cunningness.[22] This pattern of resistance through "intentional incompetence" aligns with Haskins and Sen's argument that colonial domestic spaces were sites of ongoing negotiation and contestation, where servants exercised agency despite their subordinate positions, ultimately revealing the fragility rather than the strength of colonial domestic authority.

7. Heathens and Hegemony

In the British project of colonisation, religion was also one of the grounds to justify their rule. By portraying Christianity as the better religion in contrast to the any other religion which was seen as superstitious and fanatic, the narrative of a civilising mission was created. This white man's burden was the coping justification of conquest. Written in the colonial period, this travelogue can observe the colonial mentality in Eliza's letters of late 1700s and of the editor's writing in the 1920s.

In the eighteenth end note, such prejudices and stereotypes are further expressed by the editor. In an effort to explain the political struggle of Mysore and the British, the Editor, Mr Forster recounts the population of Mysore as *"largely Moplah–**fanatic** and **turbulent** to-day as in Mrs. Fay's time."*[23](Fay, 1925, p. 277) In the given quote, we can clearly observe the religious bigotry against Moplahs (southern Indian followers of Islam) who are called 'fanatic' and 'turbulent', implying notion of superstitiously blinded, uncertain, wild and unruly people.

Eliza, like other travellers and observers gives us details and her perspectives on local customs and the different ways of organising life. However, attention to detail must be remembered while reading such texts produced during colonial power. The word play used can make us understand the internal proclivity of the writers, who are products of their time. She specifically uses the term "heathens", which is used derogatorily for people following religions other than Christianity who are automatically assumed uncivilised.

She describes the native religious practices as "… ***gross acts of folly and superstition**."* (Fay, 1925, p. 171). In the twentieth letter, she gives description of some local religious practices and clearly shows her disgust and prejudices against them that are understood by the choice of words used:

> *"...none but Hindoos are allowed to enter temples, but I am told the **Idols worshipped there are of the very ugliest forms that imagination can conceive**; and to whom Pope's description of the **heathen deities** may, in other respects, be strictly applied…I **lament** to add to such wretched objects as these, numbers of the **deluded natives** are devoted in the strongest and most absolute manner possible."*[24]

While illustrating the indigenous religious customs, she also criticises it, which comes from a place of power. This is not unique to her letters. Works ranging from official documents of the

[22] Nayar, P. K. (2020). The colonial home: managing objects and servants in British India. *Anglo Saxonica*, *17*(1), 1-9.

[23] used bold for emphasis

[24] Fay, Eliza (1925). Letter XII. In: *Original Letters from India (1779–1815)*. EM Forster (ed) London: Hogarth Press, 200-208. Used bold for emphasis.

state to novels, poems, history writing during the colonial period have this well evident portrayal of Christianity, the religion of Europe and the West are superior because they are 'rational', in contrast to the Oriental East's superstitious practices.

What can we understand from such usages of stereotypes? Can we perceive stereotypes as something beyond cultural differences and hegemony? Homi Bhabha's theories in his 2012 *The Location of Culture,* can help us analyse and understand greater consequences and implications of such tactics of power-play. Bhabha interrogates the function of stereotypes in colonial discourse, not simply as inaccurate images but as necessary tools for justifying conquest and organising colonial power. With Fay's categorisation of natives as treacherous, fanatic, barbaric, she is presenting the natives as degenerate and incapable, justifying a discriminatory and authoritarian forms of political control and governmentality. At the same time, she is exercising her power, as a colonialist in creating and perpetually establishing an image and reality of the natives. A colonial subject is constructed, and this processual discourse is an act of power, in maintaining cultural and racial hierarchies.[25] To quote Bhabha,

> *"…the stereotype, which is its major discursive strategy is a form of knowledge and identification that vacillates between what is always 'in place', already known, and something that must be anxiously repeated … as if the essential duplicity of the Asiatic or the bestial sexual licence of the African that needs no proof, can never really, in discourse, be proved.*" (Bhabha, 2012, p. 66)

8. Embers of Loyalty: Gender and Anxieties

Her twentieth letter is the richest of her opinions about the local customs of East India. She, like other British in eighteenth century Calcutta, was perplexed about the practice of Sati.When British and European travellers first encountered the practice of sati in India, their responses were far from uniform. Initial European writers, like Thomas Bowrey, often convey a sense of horror, shock, and incomprehension at the spectacle of widow immolation—a reaction shaped by their own religious and cultural frameworks. However, even in the earliest accounts, there are also instances where observers perceived sati not simply as an act of "barbaric" violence, but as an intense expression of loyalty, faithfulness, and spiritual devotion.There were some British who fancied Sati as a ritualistic expression of marital fidelity.[26]

The ambivalence towards the practice of sati dwindled by the early nineteenth century, when missionaries and Indian reformers such as Raja Ram Mohan Roy pressed for its abolition, ultimately led to the formal ban of sati in 1829 by Governor-General William Bentinck. However, as scholars like Lata Mani have argued, the discourse surrounding the abolition was not primarily driven by concerns about the female body, agency, or freedom. Rather, the debates were dominated by questions of Indian tradition, cultural authenticity, and religious authority.[27]

Fay, writing in late eighteenth century, reflects an earlier view of sati, where orientalist romantic fantasies were still linked with the ritualistic self-immolation.

> *"…that horrible custom of widows burning themselves with on sati the dead bodies of their husbands; the fact is indubitable…* ***I cannot suppose that the usage originated in the superior tenderness, and ardent attachment of Indian wives towards their spouses****,*

[25] Bhabha, H. K. (2012). The Other Question. In: *The Location of Culture*. Routledge.
[26] Fer, A. (2022). "Horrid Destruction" or Spiritual Devotion? Sati as the British Guide to Marital Fidelity in Early Modern India. In: Fidelity Afire: British Observations & Theatrical Interpretations of Sati, 1650-1830. Masters Thesis, Minnesota State University, Mankato.
[27] Mani, L .(1987). Contentious traditions: The debate on sati in colonial India. *Cultural Critique*, (7), 119-156.

> *since the same tenderness and ardour would doubtless extend to his offspring and prevent them from exposing the innocent survivors to the miseries attendant on an orphan state…"* (Fay, 1925, p. 202)

In the excerpt given above, Fay reflects the shift of views regarding this custom. Earlier glorification narratives where some of British men would view Sati as the epitome of the Indian wife's devotion towards their husband was rebuttled by her (highlighted for emphasis). She, like others, raise concerns regarding the child who would often be left orphaned. This also shows the complex social position of the Indian women torn between the devoted wife and the caring mother. [28]

As a wife, perhaps she felt the comparison to be ridiculing. For a British woman to be compared to a native Indian where the latter was seen to love their husbands more in the performance of such customs threatened the social position of the British women, who left everything in England to accompany their husbands to serve the British Raj. Moreover, position of British wives was further threatened by affairs of husbands with native women, who were seen as easier to 'maintain 'than their British counterparts. The cost of keeping an Indian concubine was relatively modest—typically between £2 and £4 per month, including attendants. In stark contrast, a British wife would entail significantly higher expenses. Her maintenance required the services of dressmakers, hairdressers, ladies 'maids, and other associated costs, which could amount to as much as £300 per year.[29] For British officials in the early years of the East India Company, many of whom were on modest salaries, Indian concubines presented a far more practical and affordable option. Additionally, the scarcity of British women in India at the time further contributed to this preference.

The British women's anxieties towards native women, as seen in Eliza, was a result of historical processes and policies of the Raj. Before the East India Company's territorial ambitions were materialised through military expeditions, there was a different archetypal sagacity of social interactions with the natives. The ideal eighteenth century British company man was one who assimilated with the natives, learned local languages, and customs, and had a family with the native women. Such interracial relations were part of the early eighteenth century empire.[30] However, from the 1760s to 1840s, changes were seen in such interracial relations, which were now seen as socially and morally inappropriate, with questions of interracial inheritance. Such drastic shifts were mainly due to the policies of Cornwallis Lord Wellesley, who were worried about the moral corruption of the British officials, barred Anglo-Indians from civil and military service.[31] Such debates and conundrum regarding the morality and purity of blood of the British deconstructs the hegemonic discernment of the British colonial state as a bold, unmovable and strong force of rule. Instead, as Ann Stoler argues, while reading "along the grains" we can observe the anxious voice of the colonial state, especially in dealing with the question of mixed races.[32]

The sexual anxieties of British women concomitant with the sense of competition and jealousy felt towards the Indian women were consequences of the policy shift started in the 1760s, with

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[28] I am grateful to my dear friend, Ananya Verma for her insightful observation regarding the complex social position of the Indian woman caught between the roles of devoted wife and caring mother within sati discourse.
[29] Ernst, W. (2010). *Mad Tales from the Raj: Colonial Psychiatry in South Asia, 1800-58*. Anthem Press, 6.
[30] Ghosh, D (2006) *Sex and the family in colonial India: The making of empire* (Vol. 13). Cambridge University Press, pp. 1.
[31]Ghosh, D (2006) *Sex and the family in colonial India: The making of empire* (Vol. 13). Cambridge University Press, pp. 11.
[32] Stoler, AL (2002) Colonial archives and the arts of governance. *Archival science*, 2(1): 87-109.

the insecure voice of the British colonial force was projected on and represented by the British women, whose bodies became vessels of producing pure blooded and morally British progenies, for the future of the Empire. Eliza Fay, was one representative of such processes.

In an effort to dismantle the glorified belief of the Indian wife's extreme love and loyalty towards their husbands, she writes,

> *"...I apprehend that as **personal fondness can have no part here at all**, since all matches are made between the parents of the parties...**I cannot avoid smiling when I hear gentlemen bring forward the conduct of the Hindoo women, as a test of superior character** ...The most specious sacrifices are not always the greatest, she who wages war with a naturally petulant temper, who practises a rigid self- denial, endures without complaining the unkindness, infidelity, extrava-gance, meanness or scorn, of the man to whom she has given a tender and confiding heart, and for whose happiness and well being in life all the powers of her mind are engaged; is ten times more of a heroine than the **slave of bigotry and superstition**, who affects to scorn the life demanded of her by the laws of her country or at least that country's custom; and many such we all have in England, and I doubt not in India likewise: so indeed we ought, **have we not religion infinitely more pure than that of India**?"* (Fay, 1925, p. 204)

Fay's view is interesting to analyse and unpack here. From the quoted lines above, it seems like she recognises the existence of patriarchal customs to keep women subservient. However, reading Eliza as a product of her time, it is highly unlikely she is criticising the patriarchal custom and system. Instead, it rather seems that she is abiding by the patriarchal notion of a 'good wife 'and providing arguments for why Christian European wives are better than the Indian wives/concubines. She expresses that if in England, there was a similar custom for women, then even the wives who abhorred their husbands would carry on with such self-destroying practice. Thus, it proved nothing regarding the love and devotion of the wives. Fay continues to shatter the glorified sati performers by calling them *"slave[s] of bigotry and superstition"*. Like many of her other observations, she ends it by again re-imbibing the civilisational narrative of England having a superior religion than the Indians, thus reinstating that this custom and the satis should be not be viewed as something better.

From the above excerpts, we can observe an anxiety to prove British women are better than Indian women. Such reveals anxieties of marriage and social position of the British women. Furthermore, Eliza was neither a neutral nor an anti-patriarchal critic of the practice, rather it was a criticism that stemmed from her own social insecurity of comparison with the Indian satis.

Like many European travellers and women of her time(and beyond), Eliza Fay constructs a contrast between the 'liberated 'European woman and the native Indian woman, whom she portrays as passive, superstitious, and deeply oppressed by tradition and religion (as we can see above). In doing so, she participates in a colonial narrative that not only reinforces cultural superiority but also gendered hierarchies. The Indian woman, in Fay's account, is cast as a silent, veiled figure—choked by orthodoxy and patriarchal custom; while the European woman emerges as rational, mobile, and free. This dichotomy reflects what Chandra Talpade Mohanty critiques as the homogenisation of "Third World women" into a singular, universal category of victimhood: stripped of historical and cultural specificity, and reduced to objects of rescue.[33]

[33] Mohanty, C (1988) Under Western eyes: Feminist scholarship and colonial discourses. *Feminist review*, 30(1):61-88.

As Mohanty argues, all the experiences and diverse patriarchal experiences of the Indian *woman* gets reduced to the Third World *Women*.

Gayatri Spivak's seminal question, "Can the Subaltern Speak?" resonates powerfully here. Fay does not give Indian women voice or subjectivity; instead, she speaks for and about them, reinforcing epistemic violence where the colonised woman is not allowed to articulate her own reality.[34] Sara Mills (2003), in her work on women's travel writing, similarly highlights how colonial female writers, even as oppressed to patriarchal power in their own societies, often replicated the same discursive violence as their male counterparts, positioning themselves as both observers and civilising agents.

Fay's representations, then, are not innocent observations. They are deeply embedded in a colonial logic that uses the figure of the oppressed native woman as a foil to affirm the modernity and moral superiority of the West.

9. Conclusion

Living in the social reality as an oppressor by race and oppressed by gender, Eliza Fay's travel letters offer a rare, revealing glimpse into the contradictions and anxieties that shaped colonial knowledge production in late eighteenth and early nineteenth century India. Fay's depictions of "the Orient," her suspicions and stereotypes of the native population, and her own gendered insecurities exemplify the multilayered processes by which colonial authority was constructed, contested, and internalised. By foregrounding letters and travelogues as alternative archives, this article underscores the necessity of revisiting marginalised voices to better understand the intertwined legacies of colonialism, gender, and power. In centring Fay and her letters, the article advances postcolonial feminist and post structuralist scholarship by illustrating how women's travel writing not only reflected, but also actively shaped the cultural and discursive terrain of colonial India, hence also creating the "white woman's burden".

Women like Eliza Fay challenged the male dominance of travel writing by claiming space in the public sphere through their narratives. A relevant and complex question that arises is whether Eliza Fay writes differently from her male counterparts. Indira Ghose (1998) critically engages with this idea by asking whether there is something inherently distinct in the way women write travel narratives compared to men. She interrogates the notion of a "female gaze" in women's travel writing, ultimately cautioning against such a claim for its potential to reinforce gender essentialism. While agreeing with Ghose's critique and acknowledgement to the danger of essentialising gendered perspectives, one must also remember that it is important to explore the ways in which gender is understood as a socially constructed and lived experience which also shapes narrative expression. If our identities, upbringing, and social conditioning are shaped by political, cultural, and historical factors, then gender, too, plays a role in influencing how and what we write. Consequently, it is plausible that these gendered experiences produce recognisable differences in travel narratives. In the case of Eliza Fay, for instance, one observes a distinct emphasis on emotional states such as fear, vulnerability, and anxiety—elements less commonly foregrounded in the travel writing of her male contemporaries. This does not amount to an essentialist claim about women's writing, but rather, highlights how gendered subjectivity can inform narrative voice and content.

Moreover, through her writings, we can listen to the anxious voice of the colonial state, through the sexual anxieties of British women towards native women.This complexity invites further

[34] Spivak, GC (1988) *Can the Subaltern Speak?*In: C Nelson and L Grossberg (eds) *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture*. Urbana: University of Illinois Press, pp. 271–313.

scholarly inquiry into how such narratives shaped contemporary understandings of race, gender, and power relations in colonial contexts. Ultimately, Eliza Fay's letters serve as a critical primary source that not only enriches our understanding of individual experiences within the colonial framework but also challenges us to reconsider the narratives constructed around imperialism. By reading her accounts“ against the grain” and “along the grain” we can better appreciate the nuances and power of colonial discourse and its lasting implications on historical interpretations of British India, and recover the agency of the historically veiled.

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