



## “A Poor Haji in Search of the Picturesque” or an Imperial Scribe: Fanny Parks’ *Wanderings of a Pilgrim*

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### Abstract

Through a close reading of Fanny Parks’ *Wanderings of a Pilgrim*, this paper seeks to expose the imperialist underpinnings of her travel journal, purportedly presenting an objective picture of India. To achieve this end, the main focus will be on an exploration of the rhetorical strategies and Orientalist tropes deployed by the author to script the Indian milieu in need of British benign tutelage. Unearthing the colonial ideology and Othering strategies informing this travel narrative not only casts doubt on the author’s claim of experiential authority stemming from eye-witness accounts, but unravels the text’s subtle endorsement of the British colonial presence and intervention in India.

**Key words:** Orientalist Tropes; Representation; Othering; Travel Writing; Fanny Parks; Zenana

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### INTRODUCTION

Following permission granted by Queen Elizabeth I, the foundation of the East India Company in 1600 allowed for the deployment of British trade ships to the

East Indies, mainly to the Indian subcontinent. Enjoying imperial patronage, due to high profits and the hospitality of the Mughal court, the company gradually expanded its commercial trading regions in India. Thus, the company’s seemingly innocent trading paved the way for a colonial administration through the acquisition of more territories that came under its control; it culminated in the growth of the British Empire and direct colonial rule of India, referred to as the British Raj in 1858, which lasted for almost a century. To achieve its imperial objectives in the Indian subcontinent, the British administration had to be legitimized repeatedly, both during British East India Company days (1600-1858) and the British Raj (1858-1947). As L. J. Davis (1987, p.63) convincingly argues: “[T]he project of colonizing cannot exist without the help of ideological and linguistic structures. A country must do more than simply steal another country: a series of explanations, representations, and rationalizations must intervene to justify political action”. The textual creation of the Indian subcontinent by generations of diplomats, merchants and travel writers, among others, played a decisive role, both in attracting more commercial trading and in the company’s shift from its trading pursuits to direct rule of the British Raj. In her study “India/Calcutta: city of palaces and dreadful nights”, Kate Teltscher highlights the key role played by travel writing in “promoting the idea of British Rule” as well as in Britain’s “transition from trading partner to ruling power” (2004, p.192).

Postcolonial critics and travel theorists have accentuated the centrality of colonial-era travel writing in the furtherance and perpetuation of imperial agendas in the colonized countries. These narratives have been attracting an increasing amount of critical attention since the publication of Said’s ground-breaking *Orientalism*. Said’s study deftly unravels the ideological underpinnings of Western representations of the Orient and their contribution to the promotion of colonial agendas. The findings of textual analyses of colonial travel narratives

have revealed submerged imperialist ideologies, attitudes and dogmas in the inscription and representation of the colonized milieu. Sara Mills' study (1994, p.30) of Western travel texts from the colonial era finds them to be sites "within which imperialist knowledges are produced". Along similar lines, in the introduction to their compilation *Not So Innocent Abroad: The Politics of Travel and Travel Writing*, Ulrike Brissson and Bernard Schweizer maintain that British travel books of the colonial epoch "have long been recognized for their complicity with colonial rule by their 'Othering' discourses" (2009, p.11). Echoes of these studies are audible in a very recent publication by Carl Thompson in which he finds Victorian travel writing to be "steeped in imperialist attitudes and imagery" and, as such, promoting British cultural and racial superiority (2011, p.137).

However, Fanny Parks' two-volume travel journal, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque, During the Four-and-Twenty Years in the East with Revelations of Life in the Zenana* (henceforth *Wanderings of a Pilgrim*), authored in the colonial era, has not been studied through a postcolonial lens. The critical response to her travel journal has mainly focused on Fanny's love for the Indian people and their culture and has tended to overlook its political implications and contribution to British colonial ends in India. Jane Robinson (1990, p.219), for one, highlights Fanny's identification with the Indian people and her sadness upon leaving India after a residence lasting two decades. Although Nigel Leask's study *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing* (2002) briefly touches upon Fanny's contribution to British imperialist ends, the focus is on the narrative's politics of feminism and Fanny's curiosity-collecting project. Sara Mills' "Knowledge, Gender, and Empire" (1994, p.43) sees Fanny as an "imperial subject" and stresses her travel journal's embeddedness in the tradition of Orientalist scripting of the East. Highly insightful though Mill's examination of Fanny's narrative is, it is allowed very limited space. This study aims to present a thorough textual scrutiny of Fanny's narrative in order to uncover the colonialist imperatives informing her purportedly objective representation of the Indian people and their mores and manners. Although the politics of gender plays a considerable role in the way Fanny maps out the Indian milieu, it is not a subject that I take up in this paper since it has been deftly examined in Mill's and Leask's studies.

## DISCUSSION

*Wanderings of a Pilgrim* is Fanny Parks' (1794-1875) journal of a nearly twenty-four-year journey and residence in the East, mainly in India. In June 1822, Fanny, a British middle-class woman, accompanied her husband on a journey to India as a colonial civilian of the East India Company, for which he held a variety of official appoint-

ments during their long stay there. The long journey and residence included cities such as Calcutta, Bengal, Delhi, Cape Town in Africa due to her husband's bad health, Benares, Allahabad and Cawnpore, among others. The last two cities were their main residence until their departure for home in September, 1845. Leaving her husband to his job, Fanny undertook her so-called 'pilgrimage', riding her beautiful high-caste Arab steeds, camping in tents and navigating on her pinnace, the 'Seagull', the account of which was published in two bulky volumes of almost 1,000 pages in 1850, in London. Employing a journal form presented in seventy-one chapters, it covers, in great detail, almost every single aspect of the Indian milieu and includes its flora and fauna, description of cities, scenery, climate, Hindu deities and rituals, Muslim religious and wedding ceremonies, and life in zenana (ladies' apartments), to name but a few.

From the very opening, Fanny tries to distance her narrative from the dominant power relationship between India and Britain by presenting it as an authentic and innocent account based on eye-witness experience. The term "pilgrim" in the title, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque*, has a religious connotation, and the journal is presented as the outcome of a religious quest, thus distancing itself from the political situation of the time. She furthers the objective nature of her undertaking by calling herself a 'hajji' – an honourable title which is granted to a Muslim pilgrim who has completed a pilgrimage to Mecca. Moreover, she aims to indicate her appreciation of Indian culture by an invocation to the Hindu deity Ganesh at the beginning of the first journal. Furthermore, Fanny employs 'an Oriental' proverb as an epigraph for the first page of introduction in order to grant credibility to her journal's account: "Whatever the wandering traveller says, he does so from having seen that of which he speaks" (1850, Vol. 1, p.vii).

However, her compliance with British colonial imperatives is demonstrated through various stereotypical depictions of the Indian milieu in the journal. Before exploring the text's deployment of Orientalist tropes, I find it useful to touch briefly on another aspect which throws lights on the complicity with British colonial ends. Fanny's inclusion and exclusion of the countries travelled in her published journal betrays the hidden imperialist agendas informing her narrative. It is not by chance that Fanny has chosen to "pass over [her] wanderings in France, Belgium and Germany" in her journal while she does describe her 'wanderings' in Ireland and Cape Town (1850, Vol. 2, p.346). What makes Ireland different from the other three European countries has to do with the fact that, at the time of Fanny's visit, the whole of Ireland was under British direct rule and her writing could help justify the situation and maintain the status quo. The same objectives were pursued in her description of Cape Town

in South Africa, then a British colony. As Mills, drawing on Foucault's notion of discourse, convincingly argues, "'what happened' and 'what was seen to happen' and 'what was written' are entirely dependent on the rules of discursive formations, which allow certain things to be described; hence, there is no question of a 'simple transcription'" (1991, p.85). All the italics in the excerpt from Fanny's journal below are ours; they highlight some key Orientalist images and help expose the underlying colonial ideology and imperatives.

### Scripting Indian Women

A recurrent image throughout the journal is Fanny's scripting of Indian women, given their key role as the metonymy of India and its culture. Indian women are locked in the matrix of oriental constructions based on a huge fund of knowledge in colonial archives. Employing the Orientalist trope of Indian women as selfish, oppressed and objectified, Fanny's journal emphasizes the urgent need for imperial intervention on their behalf. The following examples substantiate the ways in which the Indian woman is constructed as 'other', in keeping with colonial stereotypical discourse:

I fancy the Begam [Colonel Gardener's wife], his mother, would never hear of her son's going to England for education; and to induce a native woman to give way to any reasons that are contrary to her own wishes is quite out of the power of mortal man. A man may induce a European wife to be unselfish and make a sacrifice to comply with his wishes, or for the benefit of her children. *A native woman would only be violent, enraged, and sulky, until the man, tired and weary with the dispute and eternal worry, would give her her own way.* (1850, Vol. 1, p.435)

The self-centred and impossible-to-reason-with native woman is depicted as being in stark contrast to the selfless and angel-in-the-house Victorian British woman ready to make a sacrifice 'for the benefit of her children'. This stereotypical depiction of the Indian wife, stripped of motherly affection and worsened by violent stubbornness, calls for a civilizing mission to put an end to this family hell and 'eternal worry' of the poor husband.

A colonizing end is also pursued in a seemingly innocent comparison that Fanny makes between the happy life of the Indian wife of her British friend Colonel Gardner and that of the Indian wife of despotic Nawab Hakim Menhd: "She [Hakim's wife] is a pretty looking woman, but has none of the style of James Gardner's Begam; she is evidently *in great awe of the Hakim, who rules, I fancy, with a rod of iron*" (1850, Vol. 2, p.20). The need to rescue women from despotic and cruel Indian husbands is further backed up by an account by the magistrate of Allahabad, about a native "*charged with the murder of his wife and daughter*. The man confessed to having *cut their heads off with his sword*; he said he had reason to believe his wife unfaithful, therefore he killed her" (1850, Vol. 2, p.467). Fanny emphasizes this cruel treatment by calling the woman "a frail fair one who fell a

sacrifice to jealousy" (1850, Vol. 2, p.2). This purportedly objective narration reaffirms the colonial dichotomy of the civilized British man and the savage Indian in need of improvement. According to the colonial view, the degree of a society's civilization could be measured according to its approximation to "the idealized British treatment of women", which entitled the British to be "a moral arbiter in such matters" (Mills, 1994, p.41-2).

Moreover, Fanny presents a detailed verbal portrait of the Shah's wife, erotically objectified in the following illustrative passage: "[T]he present king's wives were most superbly dressed, and looked like *creatures of the Arabian tales*. Indeed, one was so beautiful, that I could think of nothing but *Lalla Rookh in her bridal attire*" (1850, Vol. 1, p.88). Fanny devotes three paragraphs to her voyeuristic pursuit, of which the following is chosen:

I never saw any one so lovely, either black or white. *Her features* were perfect; and such *eyes and eyelashes* I never beheld before. She is the favourite queen at present, and has only been married a month or two: her age about fourteen; and such a little creature, with the *smallest hands and feet*, and the *most timid, modest look* imaginable. You would have been charmed with her, she was so graceful and *fawn-like*. *Her dress* was of gold and scarlet brocade, and *her hair* was literally strewed with pearls, which hung down upon *her neck* in long single strings, terminating in large pearls, which mixed with and hung as low as her hair, which was curled on *each side of her head* in long ringlets, like Charles the Second's beauties. (1850, Vol. 1, p.88)

Indira Ghose is right to describe Fanny's gaze when describing Indian women as "voyeuristic" and "erotic" (1998, p.11). The above passage tellingly exemplifies the voyeurism directing Fanny's gaze as she meticulously runs her eye over the objectified Indian woman, covering each and every single feature of her body. Fanny's reference to the *Arabian tales* and *Lalla Rookh*, the famous collections within the colonial archive drawn upon by many Orientalist writers, demonstrates how well read she is in her field. She accentuates the beauty of the king's wife by describing her resemblance to well-known Oriental beauties, such as Scheherazade and Lalla Rookh. As Pramod K. Nayar (2008, p.4) rightly points out, the Indian milieu and its people, in English writing about that country, were "narrated in ways that would appeal to and obtain the approval of informed readers back in England".

### Scripting Zenana

Fanny allots considerable space in her journal to paint a picture of the zenana — Indian harem — for her home audience, as it is regarded as "the very embodiment of the obsession" for the West (Alloula, 1986, p.3). Her mapping of zenana is deeply anchored in the dominant Orientalist discourse of her time and subtly contributes to the British colonial projects in India on three fronts: First, it provides a *tableau vivant* of erotic pleasure, alluring British penetration whose colonizing project in the region is patriarchal. Second, it accentuates the need for British reform in India with its stress on the Indian's moral degradation. Third,

its depiction of a place of intrigue and imprisonment for women necessitates a British “chivalric” mission on their behalf.

Fanny portrays an illustrative picture of the king’s zenana as the locus of lush eroticism: “[A]lthough the King be about seventy, there is no reason why he may not have a *large zenana, wives of all sorts and kinds, ‘the black, the blue, the brown, the fair,’* for purposes of state and show” (1850, Vol. 2, p.136). And since the example of the king could be the epitome of other Indian men, an erotic tableau could be fantasized by British readers about zenana, where Indian men enjoy sexual ownership of a rich variety of wives and concubines. Zenana, Charles Forsdick would argue, becomes “an erotic utopia whose international inhabitants possess exaggerated sexual desires and where sexual encounters are both plural and sequential” (2007, p.441).

The moral degradation of Indian men is also hinted at in the following passage, through the description of a judgment passed on the king, the father of the nation: “The King has five queens, although by Muhammadan law he ought only to have four. His Majesty of Oude *possesses, to a considerable extent, that peculiarly masculine faculty of retaining the passion, and changing the object*” (193; Vol. 1). The king’s insatiable thirst for more women, to the extent that he pays no heed to religious law, depicts him as a mere slave of passion, engaged in a scenario of playing with his toy objects. Implied here is a pressing need for British fatherly intervention and supervision.

Additionally, Fanny maps out the oppressive nature of life in zenana which subscribes to the dominant view, according to which, Indian women “were seen as passive and exploited as well as duplicitous” (Grewal, 1996, p.51). Fanny describes zenana as “a *place of intrigue*, and those who live within four walls *cannot pursue a straight path*: how can it be otherwise, where *so many conflicting passions are called forth?*” (1850, Vol. 1, p.391) This horrific picture is elaborated on in the following story:

If a woman of high rank and consequence has no heir, this farce is often played. The lady appears to expect one; *she is fattened up in the same curious manner in which they fatten their horses*: five or six low caste women, who really expect children about the same time, are secreted in the zenana: when one of them is delivered of a son, the Begam takes it, the *farce of an accouchement is acted*, and the child is produced as the *heir*; the real mamma has 500 rupees (50) given her, and perhaps a *dose of poison to secure her silence*. (1850, Vol. 1, p.392)

Caged within four walls for men’s sexual exploitation and caught within the cruel game of rivalry to be the master’s favourite, women are depicted as committing unimaginable crimes. The above account demonstrates the contribution of Fanny’s travel writing to the image of zenana in the colonial archive, a locus of intrigue and murder where women are in desperate need of Western British men to free them from sexual exploitation and to teach them how to “pursue a

straight path”. James Duncan and Derek Gregory cogently observe that “[t]here is a sense in which all travel writings, as a process of inscription and appropriation, spin webs of colonizing power” (1999, p.3).

### Scripting the Colonized Stripped of Humanity and Voice

Dehumanization, an influential strategy for codifying the Orient to the status of inferior ‘other’, informs the colonizer’s writing about the colonized (Moosavinia, Niazi and Ghaforian, 2011, p.105). Fanny’s journal dehumanizes the colonized through the employment of various techniques; she harshly dehumanizes a group of Indians by narrating an incident about a woman thrown into a deep river at night, thus:

I called to the dandles to assist, *not a man would stir*; they were not six yards from her, and saw her fall into the river. I reprimanded them angrily, to which they coolly answered, “We were eating our dinners, what could we do?” *Natives are apathetic with respect to all things, with the exception of rupees and khdna-ptnd that is, “meat and drink”*. (1850, Vol. 2, p.296)

The Orientalist trope of dehumanization, drawn upon by colonial writers, strips the colonized of their humanity, feelings and sympathy; thereby stereotyping them as savage natives in need of benign British guidance. Said accentuates the dehumanizing side of colonial writing, describing it as, “disregarding, essentializing, denuding [sic] the humanity of another culture, people or geographical region” (1978, p.108).

Fanny also dehumanizes the Orientals in Cape Town by comparing them to monkeys, thus implying that they have much in common in the following sweeping generalization: “I went to the fish market, a square-walled enclosure near the Old Jetty. The scene was curious and animated; *Malays, Hottentots, Bushmen, and queer-looking people of all sorts, ages, and tribes*, dressed out in their gayest colours, and *grinning like so many monkeys*, were all huddled together selling or buying fish (1850, Vol. 2, p.365). To give another example, Fanny calls her male servants “*mem sahiba’s river dogs*”, whom she makes happy by giving “two or three rupees’ worth of sweetmeats, cakes of sugar and ghee made in the bazar; *like great babies*, they are charmed with their meetai, as they call it, and *work away willingly for a mem sahiba who makes presents of sweetmeats and kids*” (1850, Vol. 1, p.335). Infantilising Indian as “great babies” and, by extension, their willingness to serve the British lady could imply the need for British civilizing projects and their desirability to the Indians themselves.

Moreover, the Bojesmans, whom she met in Cape Town, are dehumanized in the journal by not being endowed with human language, hence meaningful voices or communication. Of their language, Fanny writes: “The speech of the Bojesmans is a most remarkable and extraordinary *clack clack* unlike any other language under the sun, *something resembling the striking together of harsh castanets*” (1850, Vol. 2, p.360). Such ethnographic

descriptions have been exploited as a working strategy in Orientalism to depict the oriental as inferior 'other'. Mary Louise Pratt (1992) asserts:

The people to be othered are homogenized into a collective 'they', which is distilled even further into an iconic 'he'... This abstracted 'he/they' is the subject of verbs in a timeless present tense, which characterizes anything 'he' is or does, not as a particular historical event but as an instance of a pre-given custom or trait. (p.64)

### Scripting the Corrupt Indian Court Versus British Chivalric Missions

Reverberating throughout the journal is a dichotomous representation of the corruption and inefficiency of the Indian court, in stark contrast with the fatherly protection and remarkable feats performed by the British representatives for the betterment of India and its people. This binaristic representation is fed by, and in its turn feeds into, the dominant tradition regarding representations of the Orient. As such, it is more of a construction channelled by "the fixed Self/Other dichotomy of the field" than an objective portrayal (Ghaderi, 2008, p.129). Depicting the king as a mere slave of animalistic passion engaging his time in the pursuit of his carnal desires, rather than caring for his people, Fanny implicitly questions his legitimacy to lead the country, which in its turn could justify the British presence: "The King has taken another wife; his taste is certainly curious, she is an *ugly low caste woman*. The old Nawab Hakim Mehndi has the whole power in his hands; *the King amuses himself sitting up all night and sleeping all day*; leaving the *cares of state* to the Hakim" (1850, Vol. 1, p.234). The need for British fatherly protection and presence, on behalf of the Indians, is accentuated by Fanny representing Dwakanath Tagore, the natives' only hope for a protector, as a person for whom erotic pursuits come before the nation's welfare and benefits. Fanny dismisses Tagore's two-year travel to Europe and his visit with the French king thus:

The magnet that attracts the *Wise Man of the East* is the beauty of the *opera-dancers*, and the delight above all others that he has at the opera in Paris, seeing, as he says, three hundred of the most beautiful women in the world all together; *the baboo is rather beside himself on the subject*. (1850, Vol. 2, p.405)

One wonders from where she gets the authority of her judgement as, surely, the above 'decree' could not be based on an 'eye-witness' account. The picture is made even worse by the following scenario, the "brutal punishment" of an innocent man, caused by the minister in whose hands "the cares of state" had been left. It is worth quoting at length for its underlying colonial ends.

I have just heard of an occurrence at *Lucnow*, which is in *true native style*. The Nawab Hukeem Mehndee AH Khan, the present minister, *poisoned the King of Oude's ear against one of his people* by declaring that the man betrayed some state secrets and intrigues; the king accordingly, *without judge or jury*, ordered the man's head to be fixed, and a heavy weight to be fastened on his tongue until the tongue should be so wrenched from the roots that it should ever after hang out of his mouth. This *brutal punishment* was inflicted some two or three

months ago, and the poor creature's life has been preserved by pouring liquids down his throat, as, of course, he is unable to eat at present. They have now *discovered the man is innocent!* but what does it avail him? *His accuser, the Nawab Hukeem Mehndee, is rich; money is power*. (1850, Vol. 1, p.169)

Whereas the text portrays the Indian ruling body as being in no position to lead the country properly, it has nothing but high praise for the British representatives who are pictured as the very metonymy of fatherly protection, chivalry and technological expertise. To cite an example, Mr. Cleveland from the Civil Service "brought the Hill people into subjection, by whom he was stayled the '*Father of their Country*'" (1850, Vol.2, p.401). Elsewhere, Fanny incorporates a letter from a spectator witnessing "the execution of twenty-five Thugs", which reads: "Capt. S has the satisfaction of knowing that by *his endeavours these men have been seized*" (1850, Vol. 1, p.202). The captain's invaluable enterprise is highlighted by Fanny's devoting a ten-page report to thug atrocities, stating that "the extent of murder committed by the Thugs *exceeds belief*" (1850, Vol. 1, p.202).

Moreover, through narrating a sati ceremony in which the poor widow changes her mind and runs away from the funeral pyre, Fanny casts the British magistrate in a chivalric role: "Had not *the magistrate and the English gentlemen* been present, the Hindoos would have *cut her down* when she attempted to quit the fire; or *had she leapt out, would have thrown her in again*" (1850, Vol. 1, p.92). British fatherly protection and the oppressive nature of Hinduism towards Indian women are reinforced when the magistrate tells her: "You are now an *outcast from the Hindoos*, but *I will take charge of you, the Company will protect you, and you shall never want food or clothing*" (1850, Vol. 2, p.272). Bahri (2004, p.200) quotes Spivak's view in this regard as "white men saving brown women from brown men" and contends that the "status of native women was used to justify the colonial project as a civilizing mission".

The other Orientalist trope informing Fanny's journal is Indians' need for British-developed technology and infrastructure. Visiting a fort, Fanny finds it "*perfectly native*. An engineer will perhaps say *it wants the strength of an European fortification*. An admirer of the *picturesque*, it pleases me better than one *more regularly and scientifically built* (1850, Vol. 1, p.360). Fanny, under the guise of "an admirer of the picturesque", implies the need to employ British scientific methods on the Indian fort which, by extension, refers to every aspect of their lives. Moreover, the strength and regularity of British scientific methods, in contrast to the weakness of the 'native' style, is accentuated. To cite another example: "Colonel Everest is making a road *a most scientific affair*" (1850, Vol. 2, p.272). "The manifest justification for the project of colonialism", according to Bhabha (1994, p.83), is provided through the "modern systems and sciences of

government, progressive 'Western' forms of social and economic organization".

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## CONCLUSION

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Textual analysis has revealed that Fanny Parks' *Wanderings of a Pilgrim* is highly embedded in Orientalist discourse through its deployment of various 'Othering' tropes for the inscription of the Indian milieu. Although the writer calls herself "a poor Haji in search of the picturesque", and presents her text as being an objective account of her experience, our reading of the journal suggests that she is more of an imperial scribe legitimating and promoting British intervention in India. Our reading also highlights the great role of travel writing in presenting the British domination in India under the guise of a civilizing mission. This finding underwrites Said's view regarding colonial-era travel writing: "From travelers' tales, and not only from great institutions like the various Indian companies, colonies were created and ethnocentric perspectives secured" (1979, p.117).

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