

Afterword by Tanya Jayani Fernando

In 1763, Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's Turkish Embassy Letters were published posthumously. The letters vividly captured Lady Mary's travels to the East, often seeming in no small part influenced by the tales of Scheherazade. After pages chronicling camels and nightingales, rubies and sables, meats, wines and knives "set with diamonds," she writes to her sister "Now do I fancy that you imagine I have entertain'd you all this while with a relation that has (at least) receiv'd many Embellishments from my hand. This is but too like (says you) the Arabian tales; these embroider'd Napkins, and a jewel as large as a Turkey's egg!—You forget, dear Sister, those very tales were writ by an Author of this Country and (excepting the Enchantments) are a real representation of the manners here." ¹

Lady Mary's representations—whether real or not, even though familiar—inspired a multitude of imaginings on the East. They served as raw material for many Orientalist painters, most notably Ingres and his fantasies of the odalisque. The letters also fueled the imagination of Englishwomen travelers and began a genre of travel writing that delineated the East, especially India. Fanny Parks' 1850 journal, with the elaborate title *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque*, during Four-and-Twenty Years in the East, with Revelations of Life in the Zenana, Emily Eden's *Up the Country: Letters from India* (1867), or even E.M. Forster's *Adela Quested* all conjure an India that is expected to a contemporaneous western world. In *A Passage to India*, Forster sensuously writes: "Colour would remain—the pageant of birds in the early morning, brown bodies, white turbans, idols whose flesh was scarlet or blue—and movement would remain as long as there were crowds in the bazaars and bathers in the tanks. Perched up on the seat of a dogcart, [Adela] would see them." ² In this instance, such harmonies or cacophonies of sound, sights, and scents are exotically different, at other times more disconcerting terrifying: the Marabar Cave. What ties them together is the ubiquitous presence of the omniscient western gaze, controlling and creating the evocation of the aesthetic category of the picturesque. It is a picturesque that differs from that conceived for instance by John Constable or J.M.W. Turner when they depict their own England. In many ways, here the picturesque borders on the colonial sublime, both an aesthetic category that reverses the relations of the sublime where the experience overcomes the beholder (for here the experience allows for the overcoming of the other), as well as a discourse through which Empire uses terror to rule the colonies. ³

These brief reflections on earlier images of the East by Englishwomen raise a question for today: how, in a postcolonial world, one can represent the East, represent India? Perhaps more paradoxically how does a western person represent those spaces which their nations once colonized? Yes, an Englishwoman in India.

In *this is that and that is this*, Susan Jahoda, an English artist living in NYC, follows in the footsteps of her countrywomen; she travels to India, and then represents it. But what is this India? We can situate Jahoda's project in the long history of landscape aesthetics. Landscape brings in not only painting, but also travel literature, fiction, photojournalism, etc., and it is a medium—alongside its subcategories of the picturesque and the colonial sublime, as well as the presence of the omniscient gaze—through which empire was represented, especially during the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. ⁴ While many of the genres of landscape aesthetics lost prominence in the twentieth century, photojournalism became, and

continues to be, powerful. One can argue that photojournalism today is the handmaiden not for the imperial project, but a globalization that still allows for the overcoming of the other. *this is that and that* is this depicts Jahoda's travels in India, her encounters with people and situations. Unlike landscape aesthetics there is no evocation of the picturesque and no all-knowing subject; unlike photojournalism, her project refuses to engage in narratives of documentation and truth, rather she does everything to resist them.

Jahoda has always been a trickster figure around her use of photography and in this project it is no different. Through the form of the artist's book, Jahoda plays with the ideas of fiction and truth, photography and language. In musing about the two mediums, Roland Barthes writes: "It is the misfortune (but also perhaps the voluptuous pleasure) of language not to be able to authenticate itself. The noeme of language is perhaps this impotence, or, to put it positively: language is, by nature, fictional; the attempt to render language unfictional requires an enormous apparatus of measurements: we convoke logic, or, lacking that, sworn oath; but the Photograph is indifferent to all intermediaries: it does not invent; it is authentication itself..."⁵ Whether or not Barthes is playing with his reader, Jahoda delightfully embraces language as being fictional and not surprisingly casts doubt on this notion of authenticity in photography. She does this by engaging in the forbidden, the unacceptable: she eavesdrops. She knows she should not be "documenting" these conversations, and she wants to make it obvious, wants her audience to realize this fact: her presence is ethically ambiguous. In photojournalism, we often forget, or want to forget that the photographer should perhaps not be there, has not been allowed in, invited; rather, he is trespassing a visual eavesdropping. But the ironic thing is that often this eavesdropping through its translation as photojournalism and stamped with approval by the Associated Press or Magnum Photos, is understood as documenting a truth, authenticating an event and becomes the harbinger of the ethical.

Jahoda inhabits a space of not-knowing, and keeps her audience in this same space; she wants us to realize how far removed we are from understanding what actually is going on. The endless dots on the pages transcribe the Indian languages that Jahoda hears and does not understand. But the colonial legacy of the erstwhile jewel in the crown seeps into the everyday of India in myriad ways, not least language, with Hinglish or other seamless blends of Indian language and English. The English Jahoda understands and records. Ironically, English becomes the site of confusion for Jahoda, for us. We as viewers / readers start to make assumptions about what these conversations are about, but then we have to stop ourselves as we realize that we cannot really ever know. One of the first conversations that Jahoda presents is Woolfian in sensibility: poetic, nostalgic. "In the marriage season...all bloom at once...the buds will open ...birds of paradise...marigolds... ..orchids...roses and carnations...tulips...perishable—all perishable." Similarly, "Clarissa Dalloway said she would buy the flowers herself" graces Virginia Woolf's novel as first line and ushers in a world of flowers and Englishwomen, garden parties and dresses, and yes, neurasthenia, war, and empire: as Said so perceptively showed us, in these novels written during the time of imperialism, empire always bleeds into the text.⁶

Empire is perhaps not apparent when we take in Jahoda's conversation about the bloom of youth and the fragility of nature but there is something uncanny about these conversations where empire always seeps in from the outside: "married the sister to the same man...the first daughter...head of a woman...dressed in white...blinked...on the television screen...opened her mouth...burst into

flames...take up these issues more seriously." Do our minds automatically take us to the colonial discourse on sati/suttee? Do we become complicit in a discourse that gained momentum during colonialism (because of colonialism?) and rendered Indian women victims of Indian men in order to be saved by the colonial power? 7 Do such stereotypes still threaten to veil us in cultural arrogance?

this is that and that is this represents India and the artist in an historically conscious and self-critical manner. It negates both the omniscient gaze and the evocation of the picturesque/colonial sublime. The question then becomes how are we to view these drawings? Which aesthetic category does Jahoda evoke? Does a postcolonial world demand a new representational technique, a new medium, a new aesthetic category? These are questions for which we might not have an answer, but upon which Jahoda's work insists.

*Notes

1. Robert Halsband, ed. *The Complete Letters of Lady Mary Wortley Montagu*. London: Oxford University Press, 1965, volume 1, p.385.
2. E.M. Forster, *A Passage to India*. London: Penguin Classics, 1985.
3. In *The Rhetoric of English India*, the postcolonial critic, Sara Suleri demonstrates how what she terms the feminine picturesque is the aesthetic category through which Englishwomen traveling in India represented their experiences. While Suleri differentiates between the feminine picturesque and the colonial sublime as gendered categories, what interests me is the zone of contact, the ways in which they are indistinguishable. Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1992.
4. See W.J.T. Mitchell, "Imperial Landscape" in *Landscape and Power*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2002.
5. Roland Barthes, *Camera Lucida: Reflections on Photography*. New York: Hill and Wang, 1982.
6. Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. New York: Vintage Books, 1994.
7. Lata Mani, *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998.