

“raped, outraged, ravaged”: race, desire, and sex in the Indian empire

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Venus in India is unique amongst pornographic literature of the long nineteenth century for being located almost exclusively in the Indian subcontinent. As men, goods, and services streamed across trade routes and expanded the frontiers of British dominion, there was a concomitant layering to the fluid, trans-cultural economy of British desire. It is this consuming anxiety generated by protracted and direct contact with the racialized other which this paper evaluates. The infrastructural and institutional paraphernalia of the British Raj act as active determinants in the nexus of desire and intercourse in this text. The narrator, a military man happily and faithfully married by his own estimation, laughs “at the idea that there existed, or could exist, a woman in India, who could raise even a ghost of desire in me”. However, it is within the carefully racialized confines of British India that desire is generated and finds recurrent realisation in the text. Accordingly, in considering the various gradations of desire as they operate and frame the action and logic of *Venus in India*, this paper will not just consider how the forbidden and the taboo work closely to inform each other, but also how the spectre of interracial desire serves as an agent of both political and libidinal titillation.

Keywords: Victorian pornography; South Asian pornography; *Venus in India*; empire and rape; interracial sex; sexuality and gender; desire; imperial masculinity

The emergence of the pornographic through the long nineteenth century has been persuasively linked to the tenuous consolidation of bourgeois selfhoods along racial and sexed axes on one hand (Stoler 1995) (Arondekar 2009) and to the steady surge of a mass culture premised on the erotic, the sensational, and the obscene on the other (Marcus 2009) (Gamer 1999). There is also an ample body of scholarship on desire (Burton 1998), gender (Sinha 1995) (Levine 2004), and

hybridity (Randall 2000) (Caplan 2001) in and during the Raj, of even the Raj—the space of empire—itself as desire (Burton 1995). Work on dissident sexual practices and sexualities (Holden and Ruppel 2003) emergent from imperial as well as hybrid alterities of the self (Krishnaswamy 1998) has brought to fore the fragmentations and fusions which occurred in tandem with each other as consequences of direct and indirect British rule in South Asia. Much of the work on British writings on India concerns itself with these tensions (Franklin 2006) (Malhotra 2012): from Philip Meadows Taylor to Maud Diver¹, a few motifs and themes may well be discerned in the unfolding narrative of literary imaginations of the Indian subcontinent (Nayar 2008).

The nature, space, and effect of Victorian pornography, then, are necessarily products of these intersections of race, desire, and sex. Even as the fear of growing miscegenation propelled the East India Company to finally allow entry to British women in its dominions, the gradual domestication of the quotidian of British rule—Company and Crown—made the memsahib one of the much-maligned mainstays of imperial hagiographies of the age. The pervasive presence of British women within the sphere of a predominantly masculine imperial polity brought attendant anxieties on not just rape but also miscegenation, not simply the violation of imperial white bodies but also the spoliation of imperial selfhood through the specter of mixed blood offspring. Working with these ubiquitous anxieties prevalent as much in the socio-cultural determination of British selfhoods as in the spatialities of imperial policy, this paper will seek to loop together lust and anxiety as they become apparent upon a close reading of *Venus in India, or Love Adventures in Hindustan*. Published by the notorious Auguste Brancart in 1889, *Venus in India* may well be considered a watershed in South Asian pornography: it seems, for one, to be the first true

pornographic text in English on India, but more importantly it also displays a heightened awareness of the racial and geopolitical realities of the Indian subcontinent missing in earlier writings of the kind. These are active determinants in the nexus of desire and intercourse operating in this text: the action of the text, i.e., is premised crucially on its location in British India, enmeshed as it is in an intricate network of imperial infrastructure and racially inflected processes of selfhood. Accordingly, this paper will read the various gradations of desire as they frame the action and logic of *Venus in India* against its spatial configurations to better understand not just the localisation of desire as a geo-racial anomaly but also the spectre of interracial desire serving as an agent of both political and libidinal titillation. In other words, it is only through the outrage of ravishment and subsequent retribution that the fragile peace of empire and its libidinal economy can be maintained in *Venus in India*.

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Most histories of pornography agree in coupling its emergence to industrialisation and the concomitant structural changes in British society from the early nineteenth century. Industrialisation had a closely symbiotic relationship with overseas trade and expansionism: these were responsible in equal measure for not only professionalising the rapidly expanding urban bourgeois class but also giving cogent shape to a distinct working class identity (Abrams and Greenblatt 2000). The regimentation of class and gender identities in close synergy with the demands of manufacturing, trade, conquest, and governance brought a surge in socio-economic unrest, which manifested itself routinely as crises of and in religion, remittance, and respectability. Even as successive phases of reform saw suffrage become available to greater

sections of the adult male population, the position of Victorian women became increasingly restricted in terms of the avenues of self-expression available to them. Exponential urbanisation and the emergence of medicinal sciences made this expedient: the growth of a masculine, industrialised urbanity closed welded to overseas imperial interests made it necessary that the divorce of sexuality from the quotidian be enforced through segregation and suppression of biological needs and processes. As Steven Marcus postulates:

By a variety of social means which correspond to the psychological processes of isolation, distancing, denial, and even repression, a separate and insulated sphere in which sexuality was to be confined was brought into existence...the growth of pornography was one of the results of these processes (Marcus 2009, 283).

A prime agent of these processes, as Marcus and many others assert, was the written word. Indeed, one of the more significant revolutions in nineteenth century England was in letters, a steady rise in literacy levels accompanied by a phenomenal growth in publishing. As the variety and quantity of books, journals, magazines, periodicals, broadsheets, and penny dreadfuls in circulation increased steadily through the course of the century, so did the volume and tenor of complaints that much of this disparate literature was risqué and obscene (Randall 2000, 56).²

Yet, the popularity of such literature seems directly related to the discordant anxieties which informed the constitution of British bourgeois identity at this stage in history. An industrialised, globalising culture, Victorian England had considerable domestic and foreign stress on the markers and events which dialogically framed its identity: the Mutiny of 1857, for example,

brought realignments in notions of Britishness (Attridge 2003, 143), just as the crystallisation of the public school culture gave firm shape to gendered notions of duty and valour (McDermott 2008, 375). Class hierarchies could no longer be upheld by the immanent fact of birth or inheritance, gender roles and norms were constantly unsettled by the racialisation of sexuality. In colonies such as India, the manifold risks to the cultivation of bourgeois selfhood arose as much from within the ranks of titular Britishness as from the proximity to colonised subjects and the geospatial conditions—climate, foodstuffs, even housing design—of colonial governance. Therefore, a wide and influential range of conduct literature, household manuals, and medical treatises prescribed specific rules of bodily behaviour and moral hygiene only because it had it became apparent that:

...what sustained racial membership [to the hegemonic class] was a middle-class morality, nationalist sentiments, bourgeois sensibilities, normalized sexuality, and a carefully circumscribed “milieu” in school and home (Stoler 1995, 105)

In this dynamic context of tenuous self-fashioning involving minute and constant negotiation, the sensational and titillating framed in racial and class terms enabled both the creation of this milieu as well as the displacement of anxieties attendant on what it meant to be British. Hence, though the pornographic as impulse is trans-historical and its origins seem allied to the fortunes of the novel (Marcus 2009, 282), its genesis as a distinct genre of cultural production is rooted to heated contestations over obscenity which guided considerable civil and legal energy through the long nineteenth century. The Obscene Publications Act of 1857, Hicklin’s Test of 1868, and many campaigns of the Society for the Suppression of Vice through the mid-century, the obscene

was tenaciously identified as a category of writing which depraved and corrupted the minds of readers. These attempts to curtail the effect and impact of the obscene acted as an originary moment for pornography as well. They created space and scope for pornography to be identified as a specific kind of writing, lending it a “specific cultural status producing specific social and legal conflicts” (Gamer 1999, 1045).

Imagined in this sense, less as a formulaic set of practices and more as bundle of “perceived readerly effects” (Gamer 1999, 1046), the pornographic seems much more open to localised, contextual analyses. Much of this has been undertaken in recent years, with *Porn Studies* having set the trend for detailed study of both effect and affect of the pornographic in our times. Unsurprisingly, this volume—and many others in its wake—is devoted almost wholly to the cinematic and the virtual, with just one essay on the comic.³ Nonetheless, an important set of tools and hypothesis emerge from these studies: for one, Linda Williams’ notion of on/scenity as a feature of the “tension between the speakable and the unspeakable” (Williams 2004, 4) may helpfully facilitate critique of the graphically visual in the written. It is also useful to situate on/scenity as a defining characteristic of cinematic pornographic along with Williams’ proposition in *Hard Core* to treat pornography:

...as the visual (and sometimes aural) representation of living, moving bodies engaged in explicit, usually unfaked, sexual acts with a primary intent of arousing viewers (Williams 1989, 30).

Taking into account the palpable synergy between this intent and its readerly effects, it is possible to think of pornography as a genre of cultural production which graphically visualises hitherto hidden sexual desires and practices for mass consumption. Hence, even as pornography is the “coincidence of sexual phantasy, genre, and culture in an erotic organization of visibility” (Brown 1981, qtd in Williams 1989), the meanings it generates can variously explode and implode overlapping regimes of sexual, racial, and class relationships which constitute the dynamic basis of individual and social selfhood.

Thus, in the context of Victorian society, “pornography became the prescribed discourse of transgression” even as “the imagined space of the colony...[became] an imagined breeding ground for a spectrum of imagined sexual vices” (Arondekar 2009, 105). The racialized other—individuals and civilisations—in Victorian pornography acts as the site of a phobic fetishization which facilitates in contemporary pornography the cultivation of “desire across racial borders” (Williams 2004, 277). Read alongside theorisations on the racialization of bourgeois sexuality (Stoler 1995) and on the materiality of pornography within colonial modes of production (Arondekar 2009), the recurrence of the interracial in Victorian pornography as both desire and disgust also allows for a critical layering of JanMohamed’s proposition that “the preservation of white patriarchy and the preservation of its self-image require that it deny a “scientific-discursive” knowledge of its sexual violation of the racial border” (JanMohamed 1995, 102). In other words, the proliferation of racialized colonial others in Victorian pornography as both tangible bodies and materials and as discursive knowledge domains contingent for bourgeois selfhood graphically vocalised the “peculiar silence” (JanMohamed 1995, 104) which distinguished racialized sexuality from bourgeois sexuality.

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Significantly, it is important to remember that the master/slave—white/black—dynamic which constitutes this silence in much contemporary interracial pornography does not fully hold in the South Asian context. The networks of patronage, alliance, and coercion which constituted British rule in India were far from simple slavery. The governance paradigm of the East India Company has been persuasively described as a military fiscalism, its sovereignty the form of a garrison state (Bayly 1998). The military infrastructure created by the Company throughout its dominions—cantonments, arsenals, roads, communications networks—was strengthened by the Crown. The transfer to direct governance by the British Crown also saw a bolstering of the civic machinery, so that both the quantum of British soldiers and of British administrators in India increased drastically after the Mutiny of 1857. The spread of railways, the creation of military and civil stations outside Indian towns, all of this contributed to the appearance of a networked infrastructure which formed the bedrock of British rule in the subcontinent.

Though the velveteen glove of British legitimacy in India cloaked an iron fist of a beleaguered militarism, to think of Company and Crown rule as simply military fiscalism is to ignore the civilisational current of moral and racial superiority which informed British perceptions of their mandate to rule. The British believed they alone were fit to rule the diverse cacophony of India, divinely ordained to bring to it the fruits of civilisation, order, and culture (Cohn 1987). Their military apparatus served to safeguard their interests, commercial and territorial, but the rationale for rule lay in notions of an inherent, racial pre-eminence. Unlike, say, the British in the

Caribbean, or the British—and later their descendants—in America, the British in India had to repeatedly justify to themselves and to their subjects the just necessity of their rule. The moral and ethical code which thus emerged was framed by acute concerns on opinion, “that an image of British moral and racial superiority always be preserved in their Indian subjects’ eyes” (Sramek 2011, 2) so that the high opinion of the justice of British rule be publicly maintained.

Combining these two related interpretations of British rule through the long nineteenth century provides a helpful framework to locate the fraught question of desire in and of the subcontinent. British women, it is well-known, were not allowed within Company dominions in India till the 1830s, when the consolidation of the Company’s administrative reach and the growing embarrassment of mixed-blood, Anglo-Indian progeny forced relaxation in these restrictions. By this time, however, an elaborate, networked infrastructure of desire and its fulfilment was in place throughout the Company’s dominions. Gravely concerned about the rising incidence of venereal diseases amongst its rank and file and the economic, political, and moral consequences of the spread of such diseases, the Company instituted a medico-military apparatus to regulate sex work in and around its cantonments (Wald 2014). This resulted, on the one hand, in the creation of regularised *lal bazaars* within the jurisdictional limits of each major cantonment for soldiers to satisfy their sexual needs within women certified healthy by army surgeons. On the other hand, it led to a conceptual narrowing of hegemonic views on Indian womanhood: there were respectable women, and there were prostitutes. The clubbing of different groups of women—courtesans, temple dancing girls, nautch girls, etc.—practicing different occupations under the homogenised label of prostitute inevitably led to the sexualisation of not just Indian women but also of India, as the space of their operation.

Crucially, while this sexualisation of race and space reinforced emergent notions of an aggressive, venturesome British masculinity, it effeminised Indian men as deviant, devious, and prone to sexual excess. From medicine to history, this discourse of effeminacy found expression across various registers of colonial governance: it was in increasing currency as the nineteenth century progressed, and may well be considered an ideologeme enabling “the racialized construction of “femininity-in-masculinity” as a pathological condition” (Krishnaswamy 1998, 19). As first the Company and then the Crown imposed greater control on their vast dominions, brought them under the more tangibly cohesive rule of a networked infrastructure and effected spatial reorganisation on racial lines, the hybrid alterity of Indians’ sexuality became a moot point of colonial discourse. As suggested above, Indian women became either hapless victims in need of the benevolent paternalism of British rule or hyper-sexed prostitutes preying on the virile masculinity of British men in the line of duty. Similarly, Indian men became either untrustworthy and—especially after the Mutiny—dangerously predatory or obsequiously passive and regressive (Krishnaswamy 1998). Consequently, India, as the site of these hybrid alterities, became crystallised in nineteenth century British thinking as the site of deviance, a diseased land generative of debauchery and disease as a miasmatic force debilitating to the moral and physical sinew of British rule (Wald 2014).

That these beliefs complemented the enduring Orientalist notion of India as an ancient civilisation with a rich legacy of past achievements is apparent in the manner in which India’s romanticised antiquity was also seen as a mark of its essential weakness, of Indians’ inability to exercise restraint in matters public and private (Krishnaswamy 1998). This pathological

sexualisation of Indians and India bolstered these popularly held beliefs: from history to fiction, from science to commerce, the means whereby the British gained familiarity with the subcontinent bolstered these layered though inter-connected perceptions of it as passive yet dangerous, in a state of historical stasis yet fallen from the grace of moral and sexual discipline. These perceptions, as they found articulation in a diverse body of literature, have been commented upon by a considerable body of scholarship: as have the contours of desire, romantic and sexual, which foundationally informed British conceptions of their position in and relation to the subcontinent. However, even as Victorian England was all of this, it was also a deeply hybrid and anxious culture wherein hegemonic ideas of propriety and conduct were relentlessly undermined by a vibrant counter-culture of the hedonistic pursuit of pleasure. The dangers of India, tangibly and otherwise, lay in its pleasures: in the suspension of the normative, in reversals of the codes and hierarchies which bound British society. If India was an unpredictable source of profound anxiety in colonial governance, it was also the seed of unadulterated pleasure in colonial writing and fiction.

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The convergence of these tropes and anxieties in pornographic fiction is what this paper is vitally interested in. If the beginnings of the genre are to be located as a set of readerly effects within the larger framework of obscenity (Gamer 1999), then tangential confluences of the Gothic and the Romantic may well be taken as the genesis of Oriental pornography. *The Lustful Turk*, published anonymously in 1828, seems to be one of the earliest instances of the racialized sexualisation of the Orient in English fiction. Following the well-established epistolary convention of novels of

the age, it narrates through the course of eighteen letters over a period of two years the machinations of the Dey of Algiers in acquiring white, Christian, European women as slaves for his harem. Along with the neighbouring Barbary states Tripoli and Tunisia, Algiers had for long been an active centre of maritime piracy affecting English, European, and American trade interests in the Mediterranean and the eastern Atlantic. Its economy was largely dependent on the fruits of this privateering: trade in slaves and goods as well as protection extracted as tribute from shipping and national interests.⁴ The Dey of Algiers was known for his large slaveholdings as well as considerable harem by the conclusion of the Napoleonic Wars: these were composed, in part, of Christians who were routinely enslaved and ransomed for exorbitant sums, much to the outrage of the English, the French, and the Americans.⁵

The action of *The Lustful Turk* plays out against this tense backdrop of enslavement of white European Christians by black Turkic Muslims. However, it plays to prevalent fears of rape and miscegenation by performing a reversal of anxiety: the horror of desire for and intercourse with the racial and religious other is replaced by an eager anxiety to partake and please. Both Emily Barlow and Sylvia Carey begin with revulsion at the prospect of being the Dey's slaves, but both succumb almost immediately to the delights of the flesh which he initiates them in as a man much experienced in women. Tears, supplications, and shrieks get supplanted by joy, sighs, and blushes: the Dey schools his white slaves into absolute, outright enjoyment of the body, enslaving them fully to his virile, unrestrained sexuality. What emerges, therefore, is a pornotopia of sorts: the Dey arranges his pleasures as a devious, predatory animal, procuring women with great care and effort; his English slaves respond to his attentions with an animal-like regression into 'nature', their trappings of race, class, and religion falling with keen pursuit

of sex. Lust, effectively, is the preserve of not just ‘the Turk’ but also the English women, who are changed for life with these ravishments into seekers of priapic delights.

These reversals in the moral and racial order of British society are significant: they give insights into the sublimation of anxiety effected as an inevitable consequence of the transculturation following overseas expansion of British trade and territorialism. These encounters—as colonial as commercial—modified “both the centre and the periphery, in some ways reversing their roles and polarities” (Franklin 2006, 18). *The Lustful Turk* is a quaint if typical eruption in the incipient annals of early pornography: it is rare in performing a total implosion of the polarities which constituted the bedrock of nascent medico-moral discourses on race, religion, and sexuality. As British involvement in India deepened and as the metropole became more familiar with its Indian dominions, these discourses ossified into the basic tenets of imperial governance and selfhood even as they simultaneously became targets for defiance and subversion. That, significantly, much of this is apparent as subterranean currents of cross-cultural desire in a wide gamut of nineteenth century English writing on India indicates not just the strength of this resentment but also the capacity of writing to safely articulate and contain these longings. In other words, it was not just the pornographic but also the romantic-as-erotic which dramatised the keen consequences of the pathological sexualisation of race and space in the nineteenth century.

Importantly, this may also help explain the relative lack of the pornographic on India. English writing on India more often than not took the form of romance, for the conventions of travel writing as well as the expectations of the reading public made it expedient to present it as such. From Gibbes to Kipling and beyond, this literature has been the attention of recent scholarship

for the erotic hybridity which informs its plot (Krishnaswamy 1998) (Franklin 2006): interracial desire and sex, rape, and homosexuality, all of these find mention in some form or the other in this canon of writing. Till at least the Mutiny, general public and political interest in India also seems to have been low except at rare occasions when renewal of the Company's charter catalysed the demand for missionary activity (Marshall 2006). After the Mutiny, a broad base of anecdotal, historical, and fictional writing emerged on Indian depredations and British sacrifices during the tumult of 1857–58: these turned the vexed question of interracial relationship from being an acceptable containment device for desire in, say, the times of *Hartly House, Calcutta* (1789) to an abomination accommodated only by death by the time of *On the Face of the Waters* (1896). The anxiety of miscegenation and rape raised itself with shrill regularity throughout the Victorian period, such as during the controversy surrounding the Ilbert Bill in 1883–84, and thus necessitated not as much a peculiar silencing (JanMohamed 1995) as a kind of literary on/scenity which graphically articulated the possibility of interracial sex but maintained it still as an unbreakable taboo.

Therefore, even as the obscenely erotic—emanantly pornographic—flourished in England through the nineteenth century, its themes and locations remained more or less English. A prime indicator of the trend of the pornographic through much of the century is Henry Spencer Ashbee's *Index Librorum Prohibitorum: Being Notes Bio-Biblio-Icono-graphical and Critical, on Curious and Uncommon Books*. Published under the pseudonym of Pisanus Fraxi in 1877, it is the first authoritative catalogue “devoted to writings of a pornographic or sexual character” (Marcus 2009, 35) in the English language. True to its title, it lists not just bibliographical and biographical details of the books and authors being listed but also provides extracts to

substantiate its critical assessment of them as meritorious or otherwise. Amongst these many hundreds of entries organised alphabetically, only four pertain to India. These are *Annotations on the Sacred Writings of the Hindus*, by Edward Sellon; *History of the Sect of Maharajas*, by Karsandas Mulji; *Kama-Shashtra, or The Hindu Art of Love*; and *The Ups and Downs of Life: A Fragment*, by Edward Sellon. Notably, none of these purport to be fictional texts, and except Sellon's autobiography the other three are all presented as treatises: indeed, except *The Ups and Downs of Life* the other three answer more to the charge of obscene in the Victorian sense of the term than the pornographic. The publication in 1889 of *Venus in India*, hence, is a landmark in these terms: it seems to be the first fictional pornographic text in English located entirely in India, with a plot and characterisation emergent almost exclusively from this spatial alignment.

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If the narrative form of *The Lustful Turk* followed the established epistolary conventions of its time, then *Venus in India* is written in the form of an adventure travelogue, the preferred choice of Victorian travellers, traders, and administrators (Korte 2000). Its subtitle, *Love Adventures in Hindustan*, is immediately indicative of the reorientation of this familiar form to an unfamiliar content: the text is an account of not as much the regular travels and adventures in exotic India as of love-as-adventure—as a quest in its own right—in Hindustan. Through its title the text aligns itself to the set of readerly effects which framed the pornographic as a distinct set of writing within the much larger literary market in Victorian England: as a perusal of Ashbee's voluminous catalogues indicates, a considerable number of obscene and forbidden books devoted themselves to worship and obedience of Venus. Venus and love, in this sense, act as metaphors

for the unrestrained pursuit of sex, the reification of an entire range of relationships, emotions, and experiences into seamless, feckless consumption of bodies. In other words, even as these texts mirror the literary conventions of their more respectable counterparts—such as romance, adventure, travel—they also modify their moral, sexual, and racial underpinnings to generate a wholly different set of readerly effects.

Venus in India does precisely this. It purports to be an experiential, autobiographical account of Captain Charles Devereaux⁶, an officer in the British Indian Army, of his years in India, and as such is presented as many memoirs of the time were. The narration begins just as “war in Afghanistan appeared to be coming to a close”, which makes it likely to be 1880, and continues across the length and breadth of what Devereaux refers to as northern India for another two years. The experiences which it recounts, however, are devoted wholly to his pursuit of women and sexual gratification through the course of the years he spends serving his regiment in India. The narrative is divided into two volumes, though the second one hints towards a third and concludes with an abruptness which lends the text the appearance of a fragment than a rounded plot in the traditional sense. Nonetheless, this fragmentariness seems significant in informing the action and affect of the text: pornography works often as a sexualised fragment overturning the established, familiar mores and codes of daily life. The subversions it enacts threaten the entire social order by presenting themselves as hidden truths, but these remain localised and contextual: it is ultimately the order of things, so to say, which frames the functioning of the pornographic, making it an aberrant taboo by virtue of implicit comparison.

In *Venus in India* too the narrative as it unfolds takes the form of an anecdotal revelation, the intensely personal musings of a man on incidents and entanglements long past. Its effect is to sexualise completely not just relationships amongst the British in India but also their engagement with and understanding of the natives subject to them: i.e., the prudent, rational, civilising self-image of the Raj appears supplanted with a libidinal empire which thrives solely on constant and continuous sexual gratification. Immediately upon his arrival in Bombay, Devereaux obtains some French novels to occupy himself on the long journey to Cherat, his destination at the North-West Frontier. Amongst these is a copy of Theophile Gautier's *Mademoiselle de Maupin*, which is described as a "masterpiece of drawing-room erotic literature" (Devereaux 1889). While reading it ardently through the long and tiresome rail journey to Jhelum excites all those passions which Devereaux believed he faithfully left behind in England with his wife⁷, narrating these as recollection enacts a crucial function of the pornographic: it differentiates aesthetically veiled depictions of sex from graphically visible portrayals as an aggregate of heaving, moving, panting organs. Furthermore, when Devereaux assures the reader that he will not fail in executing that "minute painting [which] was what was wanted to complete the rapturous sensations raised by that marvellous romance" (Devereaux 1889), he not only bridges the distance between Gautier's text and his own as a matter only of convention, of the degree to which passion is voiced and not of passion itself, but also appropriates for himself the position of a tenuous normality: what he experiences and narrates is the norm, only writers shy from complete verisimilitude.

That the truth of Devereaux's narration may well be general and not just specific to him alone is suggested all through the text. His lapse from the moral high ground of a faithful husband occurs

as soon as he steps onto India: he purchases the corrupting French novels on Indian soil, to pass the tedium of an Indian rail journey. In Allahabad, en route to Jhelum, he is “tempted” by an Indian with the offer of a “very pretty little half-caste” (Devereaux 1889). Upon his arrival at the cantonment town of Nowshera, he is told by J.C., an officer returning from the Afghan frontier, that “the entire British Army was just simply raging for women!” (Devereaux 1889). His servant Soubratie, a native engaged at Lahore, has no qualms in using Mrs Soubratie to satisfy officers’ and soldier’s sexual needs—though at a premium. Such a premium—albeit at a princely one of five hundred pounds—was also demanded by Mrs Searles, the estranged wife of Major Searles of the Nowshera cantonment, in offering her services to a select coterie in the forests off Ranikhet.⁸ In the hill sanatorium of Cherat, too, wives of soldiers still to return from the front are “only too glad to be fucked” (Devereaux 1889) as they chaff at being sequestered from the rest of the cantonment, and pine “for the longed-for prick, and the accompanying rupees” (Devereaux 1889).

It is India, therefore, and the peculiar circumstances of the Indian empire which produce such pervasive moral and sexual latitude: “the elsewhere of empire”, as Arondekar suggests, “is meant to generate and sanction untrammelled libidinal responses” (Arondekar 2009, 120). India had been consistently considered debilitating to European constitutions, by the British as well as their colonial rivals, the French and the Portuguese. The subcontinent’s climate and foods were known to effect “long-term transformation of firangi bodies” (Harris 2015, 24), to necessitate an Indianisation of their morals and habits as a key prerequisite of survival. For the British, deeper involvement in India and a higher stake in its governance brought similar fears of acclimatisation, of going native. An identitarian, reformist code of conduct emerged by the turn

of the eighteenth century to ensure Britishness remained as untouched as possible from the contexts of rule. Hence, for example, even though European soldiers⁹ were considered necessary for the maintenance of British supremacy in India, they were often viewed by their superior officers as low class and therefore necessarily degraded and infantile (Wald 2014): it was important to not just keep them sexually satisfied but also regulate the avenues of sex so as to control the incidence of venereal diseases, in whose treatment considerable cost had to be expended. Since “regulated drink and sex were the only things consistently on offer for the men’s leisure activities” (Walk 2014, 58), the prevalent medico-moral order found it expedient to institutionalise regulated prostitution through the establishment of *lal bazaars*. India, Hindustan, became not just the trope of erotic, Oriental fantasies: it was an actively sexualised space reinforcing the potent myth of an aggressively masculine imperialism.

This is apparent throughout *Venus in India*. The action of the text is framed consistently by the networked infrastructure of the Raj, detailed description of which also “turns the pornographic narrative into a proximate anthropology” (Arondekar 2009, 120). Devereaux has to obtain warrants to proceed upcountry on arrival in Bombay: he travels by train, ferry, and dak gharry, and stays in a public bungalow in Nowshera. Public here is only the British passing through, with a host of Indians managing day to day operations under the supervision of khansamahs, native major-domo. Ekkhas and ponies¹⁰ needed for the climb up to Cherat have all been requisitioned by the returning troops, and it due to this disruption of ordinary lines of military transport that Devereaux is able to have a week of almost uninterrupted sex with Lizzie Wilson. Similarly, his impending arrival to Cherat is signalled by the Station Staff Officer by heliograph, a vital link in military communication in mountainous areas. Cherat itself is a military sanatorium, emerging in

the wake of the Afghan wars to allow European soldiers of the British Indian Army to recuperate from their exertions in the field. The eventual march back to the plains is again through various halting stages till Rawalpindi, whence the regiment takes a train to Fackabad, their final destination in Bengal. In each of these stages Colonel Selwyn employs Mrs Soubratie for his pleasure—as he does eventually in Fackabad, where Devereaux’s bungalow in the cantonment is arranged to be just behind his for whenever he feels “cunt hungry” (Devereaux 1889).

Significantly, Indians more than India are considered responsible for the relentless licentiousness of the British in the subcontinent. Their polluting influence seems to emerge from a civilisational depravity, the very essence of what it means to be India so to say. The men appear to be effeminate and unscrupulous, as evidenced in Soubratie’s prostituting his wife/female companion¹¹ for extra income. The women come across as predatory nymphs, beautiful but cavernously libidinal: with ayahs like Sugdaya at hand “children [the Selwyn girls—Fanny, Amy, and Mabel] learn about things which girls sixteen and seventeen know nothing of at home” (Devereaux 1889), making them thus dissolute women as they move to adulthood.¹² This insidious abandonment to sexual profligacy emerges as a hallmark of Indians: Sugdaya, as Devereaux recalls towards the closure of Vol 2, not only corrupts the Selwyn girls but also acts as a “born procuress...in finding me sweet cunts, besides her own, during the next three or four years” (Devereaux 1889).¹³ Unsurprisingly, as hyper-sexualised beings Indians often appear reified, are represented only as the sum total of their sexual organs. Mrs Soubratie, for instance, is described repeatedly in terms of the consumptive commodity value of her insatiable sexuality: “brown skin and somewhat mellow charms...bubbies otherwise fine and plump”, “active and diligent grotto”, “succulent and very active cunt”, and “fine, fat, brown cunt”.¹⁴

Crucially, the plot hinges on this pathological sexualisation of the so-called natives of the subcontinent. Soon as Colonel Selwyn departs for Peshawar to take his pleasure among the twelve young women selected to be the regiment's prostitutes, Afghan tribesmen in the locality of Cherat conspire to rape Fanny, Amy, and Mabel, "the only fuckable girls in Cherat" (Devereaux 1889), as revenge for some of the English soldiers collectively taking the virginites of two Afghan girls in the neighbouring countryside. They are aided in this by the girls' ayah, a local woman with Afghan blood contracted by Mrs Selwyn in Peshawar: apart from her racial enmity, this woman also had a personal axe to grind because "Mrs. Selwyn made a mortal enemy of her by boxing her ears for either some impertinence or slackness of duty" (Devereaux 1889). With her active connivance, two Afghans secretly enter the Selwyn's quarters, kill most of the servants, drug Mrs Selwyn and the younger children, and proceed to rape Fanny and Amy. Providentially, however, the narrator arrives in time to prevent their ravishment, and manages to kill one of the Afghans at considerable danger to himself. Though both girls are penetrated, Fanny's virginity is saved by her menses and Amy's by the Afghan's sodomising her: "buggered she had been, but not ravished" (Devereaux 1889).

This distinction is significant, for even in an avowedly aberrant text like *Venus in India* some societal strictures of natural and obscene operate: "Victorian pornography", in this case, "solidifies and struggles with already established prohibitions and prejudices concerning race and gender" (Arondekar 2009, 102). English men using, raping, native women for sexual satisfaction is acceptable and even necessary, but the acute fear of English women being raped and the horror of miscegenation threaten to unhinge the libidinal order of the text. Even as the

narrative gives vivid expression to the forbidden in terms of adultery and paedophilia, a tension still remains in racial terms of what can and cannot be said: its on/scenity, so to say, rests on a polar duality between the wholesome virility of the English men and women on one hand and the perverse sexuality of the natives on the other. That the Afghans are guided by a primitive sense of honour is suggested in their mutilating and burning alive the two girls who had sex with the English soldiers for money. That they are not man enough to extract their revenge openly but conspire to do so covertly is apparent in their being guided by the ayah in executing their plan. That their sexuality is either aggressively unnatural or not masculine enough is apparent in one of them preferring anal over vaginal sex in Amy's case and the other not being able to break through Fanny's hymen.

Therefore, the readerly effect of this central sequence is to obsessively reinforce the sexual hierarchies and fears which constituted not just the gendering but also the functioning of the Raj. The attempted rape shocks the narrator for "the incredible insolence which could have animated a native, in time of peace and in our own borders, to commit such a crime" (Devereaux 1889); the possibility that Fanny may have been impregnated appears to be a "terrible catastrophe", made unbearable by the thought that "within those so lately virgin portals were lodged the accursed spawn of a loathsome Afghan!" (Devereaux 1889). Though the narrator manages to kill the Afghan who penetrated Amy, the entire cantonment is "ready to kill every Afghan that comes in" (Devereaux 1889). Traumatized by this incident, Colonel Selwyn is unable to come to terms with it: racked on one hand by the "lust" which brought his departure to Peshawar, he is also unable "to think a daughter of his could be buggered, therefore [believes] she had not been buggered" (Devereaux 1889). The truly obscene, the forbidden at the cusp of imagination, lies in

reversal of the penetrative schema: not white men on brown women, but brown men on white women.

*

In other words, *Venus in India* articulates the ongoing negotiation between the obscene and the permissible framing Victorian imaginations of India: it parleys across this border even as it remains bound by the stereotypes which create it (Williams 2004). These borders segregated the sexualised spaces of the Indian empire: they sought to police the aggressive, unnatural effeminacy of Indian sexuality, to contain an acute anxiety for the honour and chastity of English women. Exacerbated by the Mutiny, the spectre of this historical taboo of interracial sex presented itself numerous in fiction and manifested itself publicly in the pathologically sexual sequestering of the British from their native subjects in India. By actualising it, by articulating it graphically, *Venus in India* provides an affective challenge which threatens to catapult it from the obscenely erotic to the luridly horrific.

Thus, unlike in its Orientalist predecessor *The Lustful Turk* or in many of its latter-day successors in the twentieth and the twenty-first centuries, desire in *Venus in India* is complexly graded. It emerges due to the peculiar conditions of British rule in India, due to the corrupting influence of India and Indians on British health and morality. It is in direct consequence of the racialized constitution of British bourgeois selves (Arondekar 2009), and is hierarchically arranged in racially sexed terms of speakable and unspeakable, permissible and taboo. Though the text titillates with a vision of English womanhood being sacrificed at the altar of native excess, it

nonetheless reinforces its racially sexualised order by not allowing its violation: the offending Afghan is killed, and Devereaux gains the vital opportunity for realising his own desire for the Selwyn sisters. While this may well appear a pornotopia, *Venus in India* is far from being indifferent to place (Marcus 268): it is keenly conscious of its cultural and racial contexts and reaffirms many of the race, class, and gender hierarchies of Victorian England, of the Britain's empire in India. What emerges, hence, is a curious calibration of the pornographic itself, of the subservience of desire constituted as uncontrollable and transgressive to racial and sexual anxiety: the boundaries it frankly subverts are also the borders it strives to uphold.

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¹ To say nothing of Rudyard Kipling, the blue-eyed boy beloved of critics across the academe.

² Such tirades have a long history in the annals of English literature and criticism, but by the middle of the nineteenth century they seem to have acquired an urgency and vehemence akin to zeal.

³ Indeed, though this is far from the case, this pervasive scholarly trend seems to unwittingly imply that pornographic writing seems to have completely died out.

⁴ Cf. Treaty of Peace and Friendship between the United States of America and the Bey and Subjects of Tripoli of Barbary, ratified 1796.

⁵ This widespread sense of national—even civilisational—outrage seems to have informed the rhetoric behind such incidents as the Bombardment of Algiers (1816) and the Second Barbary War (1815).

⁶ The authorial question in *Venus in India* is necessarily vexed: Charles Devereaux appears to be a pseudonym, and what is known satisfactorily is only the publisher's identity.

⁷ “But for the burning pictures of love and passion, drawn in the wonderful prose poem, perhaps I might have escaped from the nets in which love entangled me” (Devereaux 1889).

⁸ Victim as much of her husband's violence as well as his inclination for anal sex, a habit inculcated amongst boys during service in Persia, Mrs Searles presents a liminal example of the fallen memsahib. Sodomised by her husband, she is the object of pity; a beautiful woman herself, her establishment at Ranikhet is supported by the *crème de la crème* of colonial society, including the Viceroy; yet, as a woman who can be bought, she is, as Mrs Selwyn angrily exclaims, “a disgrace to sex” and to the reputation, amongst natives, of the British as a people. Mrs Selwyn's keen concern for conduct and example, particularly amongst the so-called gentle classes, neatly allows for extension of Sramek's thesis in *Gender, Morality, and Race in Company India* to the latter half of British rule as well.

⁹ Often the literature itself—primary and secondary—seems to enact this racial implosion of disparate identities as English, British, Scottish, and Irish as simply ‘European’.

¹⁰ Devereaux's detailed description of the *ekkha* in Vol 2 is yet another indication of the text's deep involvement with the networks of imperial and racial power in British India. He refers to it as “a two-wheeled conveyance much used in Northern India”, goes on to describe its structure and design, and declares that though “it can go almost anywhere” it is nonetheless “not a kind of carriage which I can recommend as forming one of the comforts of Indian travel”.

¹¹ Devereaux doubts if they are actually married: “a capable man he was, and one who had an eye to business, for whether he was married or not I do not know, but he brought a very fine young native woman with him” (Devereaux 1889).

¹² “Mabel was a lascivious little girl, a grand poke. Like Lizzie Wilson her mission in life is to fuck. The dear reader will not be surprised to hear that she joined that select number of fair women, who, nominally “kept” by wealthy lovers take delight in relieving the pains of numerous adorers...To her was the glory of

having the first to give palpable proof of the ecstasies of fucking to no less a personage than one of the Royal Princes” (Devereaux 1889).

¹³ But for this small aside, Arondekar’s thesis that the pornographic in *Venus in India* is “at once transgressive and deeply self-regulatory” (Arondekar 2009, 106) would hold: Devereaux does have a racially determined moral code which guides his sexual entanglements, but this does not preclude sex with native women. Therefore, *Venus in India* is only selectively self-regulatory of the limitations of bourgeois sexuality in the racialized domain of British India: its transgressions rather than its self-regulations make it uniquely pornographic for its context.

¹⁴ This is, of course, one of the central distinguishing marks of pornography, but in *Venus in India* it is a mark reserved specially for Indians. The Selwyn sisters are also often referred to in terms of their “delicious cunts”, and Devereaux does not shy from referring to himself as just a prick, but as a rule characterization of the British endows them a range of emotions and motives beyond sexual organs and sex as well.