

“Eastern splendour beaming bright”: representations of India in women’s poetry of the 1830s.

Máire ní Fhlathúin

The formulaic and sentimental language of women’s poetry of the Romantic period, particularly that published in the literary annuals, has been the focus of critical attention since its first appearance. This attention has been directed most notably at Letitia E. Landon, the writer most associated with the periodical poetry of the 1830s. Thackeray notoriously put her first on his hit-list of hack poets («Miss Landon, Miss Mitford, or my Lady Blessington») when he wrote his sardonic parody of the literary annuals: a bad picture on one page, and «a song upon the opposite page, about water-lily, chilly, stilly, shivering beside a streamlet, plighted, blighted, love-benighted, falsehood sharper than a gimlet, lost affection, recollection, cut connexion, tears in torrents, true-love token, spoken, broken, sighing, dying, girl of Florence; and so on» [THACKERAY 1837, p. 758]. Other contemporary reviewers claimed that Landon’s «glittering language» clothed only «puny and sickly thoughts» [MCGANN & RIESS 1997, p. 302]; and that among her many other poetical sins was an «exceedingly scanty» vocabulary, and a «stock of imagery still more scanty than her vocabulary» [MCGANN & RIESS 1997, p. 313]. What was good in her work, according to these critical readers, could be attributed to others: «Very elegant, flowing verses they are – but all made up of Moore and Byron» [MCGANN & RIESS 1997, p. 299].¹

With the critical distance of hind-sight, it can be argued that the language and the idiom Landon brought to bear on her chosen subjects are not explicable solely or primarily in terms of her own supposed inadequacy as a poet. In the context of her representations of India, she, like her contemporaries both male and female, employed the stock of ideas and images that had formed part of British perceptions of the East since the popularity of Byron and of Thomas Moore made them common currency. In doing so, however, they present this literary inheritance derived from the archive of Orientalism in creative tension with the image of India current in their own time, and with their own perceptions and pre-occupations. By examining Landon’s versions of India,

¹ These reviews originally appeared as follows: ANON (1825): «Review of *The Improvisatrice*», *Westminster Review* 3 April, pp. 537-539; ROEBUCK, J. A. (1827): «The Poetry of L.E.L.», *Westminster Review*, 7 January, pp. 50-67; LOCKHART, J. G. (1824): «Noctes Ambrosianae, no. XVI», *Blackwood’s Magazine*, 16 August, pp. 237-238.

and also some of the Indian poetry of her friend and correspondent Emma Roberts, this essay explores some of the complexities of this relationship.

Landon's role as the «female Byron» (a phrase that came to encompass both her public persona and her poetics) was and is a dominant aspect of her critical reception [CRACIUN 2003, pp. 202-204]. Her poetic links to Thomas Moore are less often considered, but are particularly relevant in considering her «Indian» poetry - a point also true of the work of Emma Roberts (see below). The seminal text here is Moore's popular and widely read *Lalla Rookh* (1817), whose images of a location of exotic and luxurious romance shaped attitudes to, and representations of, India for a generation of writers and artists [ARCHER & LIGHTBOWN 1982, pp. 104-105, 109]. A number of the images of Landon's «Indian» poems can be traced back to *Lalla Rookh*, as she reworks Moore's evocative vignettes of Eastern scenes.

One of these scenes is described in a prose interlude in *Lalla Rookh*, where the travelling company see a «young Hindoo girl», making a little boat of «an earthen dish, adorned with a wreath of flowers» and a lamp, and floating it on the waters of a river. In answer to Lalla Rookh's questions, «one of her attendants, who had lived upon the banks of the Ganges (where this ceremony is so frequent that often, in the dusk of the evening, the river is seen glittering all over with lights, like the Oton-Tala, or Sea of Stars) informed the Princess that it was the usual way, in which the friends of those who had gone on dangerous voyages offered up vows for their safe return. If the lamp sank immediately, the omen was disastrous; but if it went shining down the stream, and continued to burn till entirely out of sight, the return of the beloved object was considered as certain» [MOORE 1862, p. 374].

The scene of the lamps floating on the river was one of *Lalla Rookh's* most effective motifs, reproduced many times both in poems and in works of art,² and Landon adopts it in her poem «The Hindoo Girl's Song» for *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap Book* of 1836:

Float on – float on – my haunted bark,
Above the midnight tide;
Bear softly o'er the waters dark

² Compare, for instance, D.L. Richardson's version in his sonnet «Scene on the Ganges» (1836): «Now hope inspires / Yon Hindoo maid, whose heart true passion sways, / To launch on Gunga's flood the glimmering rays / Of Love's frail lamp [...]» [RICHARDSON 1852, p. 472].

The hopes that with thee glide. [LANDON 1839, p. 304]

Landon's version of the scene makes explicit the anxious yearning that Moore only implies, dwelling on «the dreaming of my lonely hours / The hope my spirit feels». She also replaces the concern for absent friends that motivates *Lalla Rookh's* «Hindoo girl» with a specifically romantic desire; the lamp stands for the «light of love», and if it should be «lost beneath the waters damp / That love must then despair». Within the Oriental framework of Moore's model, then, she develops her characteristic exploration of a troubled female subjectivity, the theme whose centrality to her work is identified, albeit unsympathetically, by Thackeray (and indeed the rhyme of «shining lamp» with «waters damp» would not look out of place in his parody). In this version, the meditation reaches a happy conclusion, as «some kind spirit guards my boat, / For it has gain'd the shore» [LANDON 1839, p. 304]. Another poem in the same issue of *Fisher's* offers a variation on this theme. In «Fishing Boats in the Monsoon», the speaker watches through the night, waiting to discover whether the boat with her fisherman lover will return safe to shore. Again, Landon uses the image of the lamp to stand for her patient, hopeful love, and again, she is unable to resist the insistent rhyme:

Burn yet awhile, my wasting lamp,
Though long the night may be;
The wind is rough, the air is damp,
Yet burn awhile for me [LANDON 1839, p. 305].

Obviously, such reiteration of themes and images does not necessarily constitute poetic weakness, the views of Thackeray and his contemporaries notwithstanding. Current scholarship emphasises the strategies by which such apparent «triteness» can be turned to her advantage [ARMSTRONG 1995, p. 26], and Landon's technique of creating links between works by repetition [STEPHENSON 1995, p. 123]. Nevertheless, the image of India in these poems is apparently derivative, and is expressed in a limited poetic idiom. Among other «Indian» poems appearing alongside them is «The Hindoo Mother», where the woman of the title waits on the shore for the river to rise and bear away the body of her dead child; and «Hindoo Temples and Palace at Madura», whose female protagonist, Avyia, is a writer, but is also of the lowest caste [LANDON, 1839, pp. 299, 313-314]. Landon's imagination animates Avyia's supposed frustration as her creative talent is inhibited by her place in the social order:

How must that youthful cheek have lost its bloom,
How many a dream above
Of early hope and love
Must that young heart have closed on like a tomb. [LANDON, 1839, p. 313]

Again, the effect is to construct a femininity «dreaming» amid intimations of failure and of death.

It is possible to read «India» in these works as a cultural code for this particular type of femininity, rather than as any form of independent entity. Landon, who had never travelled to India, was working from the Orientalist «archive» - or «describ[ing] from the descriptions of others», to return to the critical assessment of the reviewers cited above [MCGANN & RIESS, 1997, p. 311]. Writing often to accompany illustrations of Indian themes for the literary annuals, she relied on the pictures to bring India to the reader's mind, and the imagery derived from Moore and his followers - «peepul trees, doves and champac flowers - as shorthand for the erotic and aesthetic qualities associated with India. These qualities could then be transferred onto her own subject; and here, as so often in her work, that subject is the representation of women's physical and spiritual misery echoed by Thackeray's parody: the freezing, trembling, tearful, broken, sighing, dying woman, victim to her own feelings of love and of loss.

Landon's insistence on the pre-eminence of this female subject becomes clear when her poems are compared to the engravings they are intended to illustrate. The engraving titled «Fishing Boats in the Monsoon», for instance, is precisely as stated - a scene of boats on the water [LANDON 1835, pp. 25-26]. The female subject of Landon's poem is entirely her invention. Another engraving, the «British Residency at Hyderabad», shows a large building, with human figures in the foreground, too small to be visible in any detail. Landon's accompanying poem is called «The Nizam's Daughter», and it focuses on the imagined occupant of a palanquin in a very small corner of the engraving [LANDON 1834, pp. 37-38]. She was given pictures of India's architecture and scenery to work with, and she interpolated her own figures of women.

From this perspective, then, the only attribute of India that is significant for a reading of Landon is its status as «other» to the culture and society she shared with most of her audience. By relocating her explorations of femininity outside metropolitan cultural boundaries, she distances and de-familiarizes her portraits of women's responses to the male-centred roles created for

them [See STEPHENSON p. 83; ARMSTRONG 1993, p. 325.]. This reading of India as subordinate to essentially metropolitan concerns can be taken only so far, however. India may sometimes be England in disguise, and Landon's Indian heroines may be avatars of her persona of the creative woman who finds self-sacrifice an appropriate response to the conditions of her life; but this is but one aspect of her work. It is possible to shed some light on her use of «India» by a comparison of her work with that of one of her contemporaries, Emma Roberts, who also wrote for the annuals. Unlike Landon's writings, her poetry is the product of her direct experience of the country, as well as the product of her reading.

When Roberts arrived in India for the first time, in 1828, she did so with her mind already stocked with images of an exotic East, to the extent that her response to the «reality» of India is frequently expressed in the form of a recollection of those orientalist works she had read before her voyage. Writing of her first sight of the palace in Agra, she conveys the emotional charge of the occasion, not in terms of novelty, but (like Landon) in terms of the literary heritage she can expect her readers to share:

Perhaps Lord Byron himself, when he stood upon the Bridge of Sighs, [...] scarcely experienced more overwhelming sensations than the humble writer of this paper, when gazing, for the first time, upon the golden crescent of the Moslems, blazing high in the fair blue heavens [...]. The delights of my childhood rushed to my soul; these magic tales, from which, rather than from the veritable pages of history, I had gathered my knowledge of eastern arts and arms, arose in all their original vividness. I felt that I was indeed in the land of genii [ROBERTS 1837, II, p. 80].

Moore, also, is one of these literary points of reference - Roberts quotes from and invokes his work several times in her descriptions of Agra and Delhi [ROBERTS 1837, II, pp. 83, 216] - but his influence is more subtly and pervasively visible in her poetry. «The North-Wester», for example, incorporates two allusions to *Lalla Rookh*: the motif of the floating lamps, and also the account of a storm which disturbs a calm landscape, only to pass away and reveal an underlying tranquillity still present:

When the light blossoms, rudely torn
And scatter'd at the whirlwind's will,
Hang floating in the pure air still,

Filling it all with precious balm,
In gratitude for this sweet calm [MOORE 1862, p. 104].

Roberts takes this theme, and the scene of the boats and lamps on the river, and fuses it with her own experience of a storm that «took place in the vicinity of Moorshedabad» in Bengal, in 1828. Her note to «The North-Wester» [ROBERTS 1830, pp. 19-21] specifically invokes the «lamps burning in fairy shallows of cocoa-nut shells, from which the Hindoos of either sex read the augury of their future fortunes». Compared to Landon's poems discussed above, the imagery of «The North-Wester» is richer and more densely allusive; it is also the product of a gaze directed primarily outward, towards the Indian landscape, rather than inward to the psyche of the speaker. The result is a text insistently and specifically India-centred: set-pieces like the account of «the Nizam's regal palace» - surrounded by bamboos, *niem* trees and «the dark *peepul*'s glossy foliage», gleaming in «pearl-like splendour» [ROBERTS 1830, p. 20] - are the main substance of the poem, not the background to an examination of individual subjectivity.

Despite these surface differences, however, the poem is very close in essence to Landon's vision of India in «The Hindoo Girl's Song». As literal representations of Indian scenes, both works share the same structure: the river takes centre stage, human characters are grouped around it; their lamps and boats (standing for human lives and hopes) at the mercy of water and weather. In both works, the peaceful setting is disturbed by a storm - Roberts's «north-wester», the psychic turbulence of Landon's protagonist - and their resolutions are almost identical. The «lamp within the palm nut's fragile boat» still shines, and the river and the boats remain, creating a vision of India enduring and essentially unchanging, the timeless and exotic Orient of British orientalist imagination. Roberts certainly observed more than this of India, but what she chooses to display in her poetry is not far removed from Landon's version.³

This one-dimensional view may be attributed, in part at least, to Roberts's deliberate use of the picturesque mode. Her first collection of poems was prefaced by a decisive claim to be read as participating in this tradition: «should the perusal of "The Oriental Sketches" incite more gifted pens to the illustration of the scenery of this sunny land, I shall feel highly gratified in having pointed out a mine of rich materials to their notice» [ROBERTS 1830, pp. iii-iv.] Recent critical

³ Reading Roberts's closely-observed prose accounts of India, the limited nature of her poetic vision of the country becomes particularly clear. Compare, for instance, the account of picturesque superstition in «The Hindoo Girl» - «A gurrah hangs upon the boughs above, / Brought from the distant river's sedge-crowned brink, / In the fond fancy that her spirit love, / Will stoop o'er Ganges' holy wave to drink [...]» [ROBERTS 1832, pp. 93-95] - with the dismissal of the same belief in a prose version, which culminates in a sardonic expression of surprise that nobody had thought to take this custom to its logical extent by putting a slice of bread-and-butter on a grave, so that the occupant might eat [ROBERTS 1837, vol 1, p. 202].

work on the picturesque in travel-writing has emphasised its role in writers' experience and representation of colonial «difference» and otherness, and particularly as a technique for neutralizing or filtering out those aspects of colonial life perceived by the colonizers as harmful or repulsive. Sara Suleri, for instance, describes the use of the picturesque as a means by which «all subcontinental threats could be temporarily converted into watercolors and thereby domesticated» [SULERI 1992, p. 75]; Nigel Leask, taking a slightly different approach, points to the picturesque as a «painterly “screen effect” [used] as an existential formula for viewing territory where unseen horrors might lurk» [LEASK 2002, p. 169]. The picturesque, in this critical view, makes India safe by representing its sometimes-sinister diversity only as it can be accommodated within a familiar aesthetic setting.

The influence of this mode on British observers in India is immediately apparent, as individual responses to features of landscape, architecture or people are formulated in terms of a painterly imperative. The *History of the Boondelas*, which provided Roberts with some of her Indian lore, is typical in its account of a waterfall: having described rocks, vines, lilies and flowering shrubs, the writer continues, «But I must not attempt to describe scenery which would require the pen of a Radcliffe, or the pencil of a Claude» [POGSON, 1828, pp. 173-4]. Roberts herself echoes the telling reference to Radcliffe in an account of a night «as dark as a romance-writer of the Radcliffe school could desire...» [ROBERTS 1837, p. 166]; it betrays one of the basic impulses of the picturesque mode of representation, to fit a wholly alien India into the already domesticated «other» of the Gothic. Encrusted with ruins, set with flowing rivers and blanketed in luxuriant flowers, the land of heat, disease and incomprehensible strangers is safely transformed into an artist's playground.

An extreme version of this kind of picturesque pervades Roberts's poetry, creating an image of India that displays to best advantage the physical features of the landscape, while any potentially disharmonious elements are screened by distance and the selective commentary of the narrator. In «The Land Storm», the imagery recalls *Lalla Rookh* once more - Moore's vision of a «City of Delight / In Fairy-land, whose streets and towers / Are made of gems and light and flowers!» [MOORE 1862 p. 135] - but there are more material concerns underlying this poem. India is viewed first as a source of wealth, “Rich with its fertile tracts of sugar-cane [...], / And all the myriad plants that gem the soil, / Yielding their precious juice in costly dyes”. It then becomes a canvas for the pleasantly exotic elements of a still life:

Beyond, in eastern splendour beaming bright
The city stands upon a wooded height;

Its tall pagodas and its broad *Serais*,
Shining, like pearls amid the noon-tide, blaze;
While from each terrace shooting up afar
Gleams the proud mosque, and pinnacled minar...[ROBERTS 1830, p. 42]

The city is set, literally, in the background, so that its pagodas, mosques and minars may be admired as they shine in the sun, while the intervening distance renders invisible its inhabitants. The only signs of human occupation in this landscape are the «peasants' straw-thatched huts»; the occupants of these huts, like those of the city, are not seen, or not described [ROBERTS 1830, p. 42]. The result is the familiar portrayal of a colonized land as owner-less, its riches appearing of themselves (crops grow without cultivators; mosques and pagodas appear without builders or worshippers).

Where individual Indian characters make an appearance in Roberts's poetry, their presence does not disturb in any significant way this image of India. Male characters predominantly feature in one of three roles: they are inactive, dying or dead. The «*golier*» [boatman] looking around with «careless eye» from his «flower-wreathed prow» is the only man shown to engage in any purposeful activity, and even he, described as «idle» [ROBERTS 1830, p. 19], appears uncommitted to his work. The protagonists of «The Dying Hindoo», «The Moosulman's Grave», and «The Rajah's Obsequies» are nearly or actually dead.⁴ Those living male characters who make brief appearances are most often religious figures whose pursuits are as spiritual as they are desultory. The «holy Bramin» of the eponymous poem decks his «holy shrine» with flowers while his «thoughts above the world's dark confines soar»; the «wandering *fakeer*» of «The Moosulman's Grave» «feeds the lamp with palm-nut's fragrant oil / ... And plucks the fairy offsprings of the soil / To crown with votive wreaths the altar's height» [ROBERTS 1830, pp 5, 48]. Less than industrious, they are also less than masculine, carrying out tasks – tending flowers, thinking spiritual thoughts – stereotypically associated with women. The weakness, femininity or simple absence of male figures contributes to the characterisation of India as feminine, and as susceptible to British colonial domination - any power it might have once possessed now a thing of the past, as in «The Taaje Mahal»:

Those circling suns have seen the ray

⁴ Poems mentioned without citations are included in ROBERTS 1830.

Of Moslem glory fade away.
And where the crescent reared on high
Its blaze of golden blazonry,
And turbaned monarchs proudly gave
Their laws to each obedient slave
The warriors of the western world
The red cross banner have unfurled [ROBERTS 1830, p. 12].

Nigel Leask identifies a theme of the «melancholy contemplation of Mughal or Hindu ruins» in the work of artists and travellers in India more generally, suggesting that such ruins were regarded as signs of the «triumph of British liberty over oriental despotism» [LEASK 2002, p. 174]. In Roberts's poem, the Taj Mahal itself still stands, but the ruined or degenerate masculinity of India's inhabitants is like the picturesquely empty landscape, a signal that indigenous power is no more, and a justification for the exertion of British control. «Eastern splendour» is still «beaming bright», but its brightness is that of the jewel-box or the paint-box: India is presented as an ornament and a possession, to be consumed as well as admired, its inhabitants ultimately to be saved from their own degeneration by the western «warriors» of the British state.

This account of Roberts's work might also suggest another possible reading of Landon's «Indian» poetry. Landon inscribes her figures of intense, romanticized women onto a landscape of India provided ready-made for her in the picturesque Indian scenes contained in the engravings she illustrated for *Fisher's*.⁵ As well as using India as a «code» for a version of femininity, however, she also uses a passive, static, femininity as a code for a particular vision of India, one that goes beyond the image of the country already present in the engravings. It has been argued that, considering the literary annuals as a whole, the «female image is repeatedly [...] linked to England as a nation» [STEPHENSON 1995, p. 144]. In Landon's work for *Fisher's*, the link between woman and nation is made in two directions: towards England and towards India. The India Landon offers her readers is personified in suffering, waiting women. Throughout the poems discussed in the first section of this essay, masculinity is either absent (the fisherman at sea, the traveller whose return is awaited) or extinguished before its potential

⁵ The Indian engravings Landon illustrated in *Fisher's* for 1834-1835 were primarily from the works of Robert Elliot (1833) and R. M. Grindlay (1826). Grindlay's plates were re-engraved and sometimes given different titles in the process.

has been realized, as the «Hindoo mother» imagines what her child *would have been* - «sabre in his hand; / His pistols gleaming at his waist» - if he had not died [LANDON 1839, p. 299]. Deprived of these masculine objects of devotion, the women exist in a temporary or permanent state of suspension, patient and submissive, at the mercy of the elements - rivers and storms - and also in thrall to their own superstitious beliefs. In this respect, they mirror the stereotypical view of India in decline and in need of reform that was current in the 1820s and 1830s, a view that found its most vivid literary expression in the «sati romance» of widows being saved from their self-sacrificial deaths by the intervention of British officials [SABIN 1991]. Landon's Indian women are also explicitly contrasted with an active, masculine British presence. «Hindoo Temples and Palace at Madura» works through the «magnificent ruins» of India's past, to the present where creative women are frustrated by the social structure in which they live, to the future when «Our sword has swept o'er India; there remains / A nobler conquest far, / The mind's ethereal war, / That but subdues to civilize its plains» [LANDON 1839, p. 314]. In this context, the river - the central image of India in the work of British writers at this time - also takes on a new significance.⁶ Landon recreates it, in «The Ganges», as the sign of a progressive, reforming British state in India, disseminating knowledge and civilization through the land as the river sustains the countryside and the people who depend on it:

Such, O my country! should be thy advancing –
 A glorious progress known
 As is that river's shown
 By the glad sunshine on its waters glancing. [...]

But much awaits, O England! thy redressing;
 Thou has no nobler guide
 Than yon bright river's tide;
 Bear as that bears – where'er thou goest, blessing! [LANDON 1839, pp. 342-343]

Here, Landon retains the dual image that she and Roberts used to characterise India – the image of the ceaseless river, and the light that continues to shine – and remakes it into an image of the river of progress and the light of civilization, elements of the British presence in India that can

⁶ The works of D.L. Richardson, Roberts and Landon's contemporary, show him consistently choosing a river setting to characterize India. See, for example, the 1836 poem «Evening, on the banks of the Ganges» [RICHARDSON 1852, p. 70].

transform the stasis and thwarted longing of India's feminised, colonized state. These «reclaimed» images also reflect a light back onto the debate with which this essay started, over Landon's limited vision, her narrow range of poetic language and her dependence on the «archive» of orientalist representations of India. While these traits are undeniably present in her work, they should not necessarily be ascribed to an individual failure of imagination or vocabulary. Rather, they contribute to a political account of the nature of a feminine subjectivity that can live only through an idealized masculine object; or the nature of a colonized land that can «progress» only through being remade in the image of its colonizers.

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