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The Peacock Dress:
The Language of British Imperialism in India, 1899-1905

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Imperialism exists in tandem with colonialism. Empires seek out colonies for their resources so they can take the wealth in those countries for their own. Rarely do empires admit this, so they require a language with which to reframe their practices. The British Raj in India exemplifies this. A narrative of exploitation is at first hard to discern, because while the British drained India of its resources and broke down its industries, they appreciated Indian art and objects too, to the point of clothing themselves in Indian textiles, as in the case of the titular Peacock dress. But this appreciation was framed through the lens of British imperialist culture and without proper accreditation to the Indians who created those works, which makes it an *appropriation* of Indian craftsmanship, not appreciation. By the time Lord George Curzon (1859-1925) became Viceroy of India in 1899, this imperialist program was well ingrained. But the question remains: what was the language of this program? This paper is meant to examine how the British Raj, rooted in an imperialist language of representation and civilization, used exploitative appropriation of distinct Indian craftsmanship to continue their denigration of Indian industry and culture. Thus, I will first explain how the work of postcolonial theorist Roxanne Doty offers a framework through which to view the imperialistic appropriation of the British Raj.

Then, I will use Curzon's tenure as a case study for this exploration of imperialist language because of how entrenched it had become; Curzon himself epitomizes this, since he had claimed since his days as the British Under-Secretary of State for India that Britain was on a "civilizing mission," a deeply racist perspective. Furthermore, the treatment of the textile industry by both Lord and Lady Curzon shows not only how the British took from India, but how they rationalized it.

How the British spoke, how they consumed culture, even how they defined themselves and those they colonized, all factored into the grander paradigm of imperialism. Without certain narratives about how and why colonialism is, there will be no explanation for how "imperial encounters become missions of deliverance and salvation rather than conquests and exploitations."¹ To define these narratives and the tools which created them, postcolonial theories are useful. Doty's work, *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North-South Relations*, focuses on how international relations are predicated on "representations that are taken as 'truth.'"² It is through these "truths" that Northern, colonizing countries have crafted images of Southern, colonized countries that are imbued not with the reality of the latter, but an imagined Other. These imperial powers were able to construct "realities" that denied the Other agency because of the asymmetry in their encounters.³ For it is the power to define the past and how civilization acts on that past that is "among the most significant instrumentalities of rulership."⁴ But as the Subject (i.e. the British) defined the identities of itself and the Other (i.e.

¹ Roxanne Lynn Doty, *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North-South Relations*. 5th ed. (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011): 11.

² Doty, *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North-South Relations*, 5.

³ Doty, *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North-South Relations*, 3.

⁴ Bernard S. Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*. (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996): 10.

India), it had to face the fact that, while the Subject says that it is different, that difference is in fact founded on fragile definitions.⁵ To demonstrate this, Doty even uses the example of the British Raj:

Britain, for example, could remain a ‘civilized’ country while engaging in barbaric practices only through the continual deferral of the signifier ‘civilized’ itself and the linking of its opposite, ‘uncivilized’... to other non-Western peoples. It was this construction of ‘other’ through a logic of difference that enabled the deferral of the encounter with the thing (that is, civilized) itself.⁶

Thus, we can see how imperialist language progressed in the Raj. The British took brittle, constructed notions of civilization and used them to impose their will on India by affirming them continually through their practices. The whole of British imperialism in India was a performance of British superiority, Indian inferiority, appropriation masquerading as appreciation, civilization, and exploitation. Because the British, from their asymmetric position, had control over the “truth” of India’s representation, they could do this.

In the era of Lord Curzon, the narrative was strictly controlled, particularly because the British Raj was beginning to face unprecedented challenges. In six years of government, he saw a dramatic rise of Indian nationalism amongst the educated class, a famine and plague, a doomed partition that was Curzon’s brain-child, and the overall impression that the heyday of the British in India was coming to a close.⁷ The plan for Lord Curzon was simple: he wanted to “revive British imperialism” in India.⁸ For him and the British aristocracy (particularly those in positions of power within the Raj), losing India, in any context, was not considered an option. If they lost

⁵ Doty, *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North-South Relations*, 12.

⁶ Doty, *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North-South Relations*, 41.

⁷ Lionel Knight, *Britain in India, 1858-1947*. (London: Anthem Press, 2012): 87.

⁸ Knight, *Britain in India, 1858-1947*, 63.

their biggest colony, they would also lose their economic backbone, so “Britain should be ‘determined as long as the sun shines in heaven to hold India... Our national character, our commerce demand it...’”⁹ India was needed to maintain the empire, but how were they going to keep it? For one thing, the British governed by creating “codes of conduct” that culturally distanced them from Indians but blended British and Indian ideas of authority.¹⁰ A concoction of Indian and British practices had been institutionalized since the days of the East India Company’s control over India to ensure the imperialist language of the British could be understood. This only heightened as the British Raj came under stress at the turn of the century. One important practice was an acceptance of the Mughal tradition that clothes are not objects of adornment or mere symbols of power, but “literally *are* authority.”¹¹ This concept extended then to the hybridization of British royal and Indian traditional clothing for official events.¹² Traditional symbols of power and status, like elephants, were also used by the British to assert their preeminence in Indian society (see Photo 1 for an example specific to the Curzons). From this base of Indian culture taken and reapplied through the filter of the British Self, the British tightened their dominion over India using performative acts.

The prevailing Western impression was that the British *needed* to be harsh in India so that they could not only civilize but assert control over their colonies and therefore their empire. A United States Senator in 1899, Augustus Octavius Bacon (1839-1914), offered this explanation, “But only with the sword and gun can millions of the semicivilized be kept in subjection... it was necessary that the English should perpetuate this cruelty, this butchery, if

⁹ Knight, *Britain in India, 1858-1947*, 84.

¹⁰ Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, 111.

¹¹ Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, 114.

¹² Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, 120.

they would maintain their dominion in India.”¹³ Bacon conflates “butchery” with Britain’s civilizing influence, because the language of imperialism convinced him that the Other could be controlled no other way. Thus, to hold onto their dominion and take from India, the British used both exploitation and civilization to frame their actions. This program is exposed by Lord Curzon in 1903 when he explained to British businessmen in India that ““My work lies in administration, yours in exploitation; but both are aspects of the same question and of the same duty.””¹⁴ British imperialism in India was cast as a civilizing mission, so all the exploitation, destruction, and brutality was shown only as in the service of India’s betterment. The British framed themselves as saviors so that they did not have to confront the cognitive dissonance of their own uncivilized actions. Never were fatal failures in India framed as being the responsibility of the British. Lord Curzon offers a stunning example of this. When the British aristocracy in India spoke on the famine and plague that killed millions during Lord Curzon’s rule, they admitted no wrongdoing and instead blamed it on “nature.”¹⁵ Lord Curzon himself blamed it on a lack of rain.¹⁶ Thus, Indians were represented as uncivilized or at best, “semicivilized,” so that the British could explain away the ineptitude of their own rule by deferring responsibility to Indians or acts of nature. However harsh they were, it was only to civilize Indians; whenever they exploited, it was portrayed as forcing India to modernize.

A specific example that can illustrate how this imperialist language was used is the textile industry. In India, textiles were once a booming industry. In the seventeenth century, the light,

¹³ Doty, *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North-South Relations*, 41.

¹⁴ Taru Dalmia and David M. Malone, “Historical Influences on India’s Foreign Policy.” *International Journal* 67. no. 4 (2012), 1029-49: 1036.

¹⁵ John Bradley, *Lady Curzon’s India: Letters of a Vicerine*. (London, UK: Weidenfield and Nicolson. 1985): 59-60.

¹⁶ Knight, *Britain in India, 1858-1947*, 64-5.

soft, durable, and “gorgeously dyed” cotton textiles of India were in high demand.¹⁷ There was worldwide appreciation for Indian textiles, particularly because of their fine craftsmanship.¹⁸ Under British imperialism, that all changed. Not only was the Indian textile industry completely superseded by the massive exports of the British one,¹⁹ but the textile industry was forcibly changed into a cotton industry.²⁰ The Indian National Congress had already begun to promulgate the idea that the textile industry had been drained of its economic prowess and robbed of its fledgling modernity when Lord Curzon came to the fore.²¹ This “drain” theory posited that Indian craftsmanship that had been so lauded was “killed” in favor of acquiring more wealth for Britain and building “a reservoir of cheap raw materials like cotton, tea, indigo, coffee, etc.”²² Indian weavers, whose legacy of handmade craftsmanship was long-standing, were pushed out.²³ Lord Curzon’s blend of exploitation and administration continued the long practice of branding the Indian textile industry as feminine, obsolete, technophobic, and irrational.²⁴ This fit into the grander narrative about India’s inability to civilize and modernize itself. The supposition since the beginning of the textile industry conflict had long been that Britain was ““particularly adapted to the Cultivation, Study, and Improvement of Manufactures,””²⁵ while India was being

¹⁷ Emily M. West, “Labor and the Literary Technologies of Mechanization in the British Cotton Industry.” *Journal for Early Modern Cultural Studies* 17, no. 4 (2017), 49-74: 52.

¹⁸ Kundan Kumar Thakur, “British Colonial Exploitation of India and Globalization.” *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 74 (2013), 405-15: 406.

¹⁹ Dalmia and Malone, “Historical Influences on India’s Foreign Policy,” 1034.

²⁰ West, “Labor and the Literary Technologies of Mechanization in the British Cotton Industry,” 53.

²¹ Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, 147.

²² Thakur, “British Colonial Exploitation of India and Globalization,” 406.

²³ Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, 145.

²⁴ West, “Labor and the Literary Technologies of Mechanization in the British Cotton Industry,” 51.

²⁵ West, “Labor and the Literary Technologies of Mechanization in the British Cotton Industry,” 61.

left behind. The death of Indian artisanal, handmade textiles was seen as “sad but inevitable.”²⁶ But this was all a constructed narrative about India, framed through the prism of a British-stylized, exploited Other. All these grand claims about how Britain was simply better suited to the creation of textiles while Indians, in their backward state, could only produce raw materials like cotton, was all just part of the justification for British imperialism. Britain used its dominance over the Indian cotton industry to assert British power over its colonies and on a global scale.²⁷ Imperialists like Lord Curzon rewrote the narrative to suit their pursuit of resources and subjugation; to do this, they “...thus denied Indian textile workers’ labor, ingenuity, technology, and, ultimately, civility in works that deployed a racializing rhetoric to write the British textile industry’s superiority into being.”²⁸ Indian weavers, embroiderers, and other textile workers were relegated to an inferior Other. These Indian laborers did not control the narrative, so they could not answer the misrepresentation inherent in it. But now, with full view of the imperialist language and its flawed differences, we can see how India was consumed by Britain.

The figure of Lady Mary Curzon (1870-1906) offers a case study of how that consumption worked. Though Lord Curzon was the political epicenter of the British Raj while he was Viceroy, the Vicereine, Lady Curzon, too found herself at the heart of imperialist exploitation. Her presence in the British Raj is just as essential as her husband’s, because she performed, in her person, the divisions of civilized and uncivilized, colonizers and colonized. We can discern this performance through her own words; while in India, she wrote many letters to

²⁶ Thakur, “British Colonial Exploitation of India and Globalization,” 407.

²⁷ West, “Labor and the Literary Technologies of Mechanization in the British Cotton Industry,” 54.

²⁸ West, “Labor and the Literary Technologies of Mechanization in the British Cotton Industry,” 60.

her family in which she described British rule in India. In some respects, she seems to appreciate the history and art of India. As shown in Photo 2, Lady Curzon and her husband often visited sites of historical and cultural import in India. Furthermore, she comments in a late October 1899 letter that “All the other conquerors have beautified Delhi but the British have disfigured existing beauty and invented the most frightful iron and brick monstrosities to stand alongside the splendour and beauty of the past...”²⁹ This seems to suggest regret over the advent of British colonialism, but only a month later, she exclaimed that she was subjected to a procession with a “crowd of Natives, camels, elephants, in every rainbow colour; all Native bands playing a kind of “God save the Queen” and trumpets shrieking royal salutes. It was impossible not to laugh at the grotesque show- the splendour and the squalor and the picturesqueness of it all.”³⁰ Here, Lady Curzon’s disgust is levied on the “Natives” who put on a “grotesque show.” By referring to Indians in the same context as animals, Lady Curzon confirms how the identity of Indians as uncivilized penetrated deep into the British imperialist mindset. Like her imperialist contemporaries, Lady Curzon constructed an Other for India that was beautiful only in contexts that she *allowed* it to be. Otherwise, India was woefully uncivilized, a “grotesque show” that the British presided over.

Lady Curzon’s strict delineation between Indian culture that is admirable and that which is reprehensible reached beyond processions or buildings; it could be found in personal interactions too. In 1899, Lady Curzon wrote about how she and a friend met a Rani, a Hindu queen. The older woman appeared to the Vicereine in magnificent garb, with “two wreaths of silver flowers” in her hair and “60 yards of bright blue gauze wound about and dragging behind

²⁹ Bradley, *Lady Curzon’s India: Letters of a Vicerine*, 46.

³⁰ Bradley, *Lady Curzon’s India: Letters of a Vicerine*, 47.

her.”³¹ She had come because her health was failing, but Lady Curzon reports that she was unceremoniously ushered away, for “The trial of looking grave was terrific, and as soon as she had gone we roared with laughter.”³² The Rani was part of the uncivilized India that had been Othered; in their expression of dominion, the British excluded Indians whom they found to be uncivilized. Lady Curzon only appreciated India (as in its people and culture) insofar as it satisfied her perception of how India should exist. She was at her most content when she found “the India of one’s dreams.”³³ Her words reflect how, for many Europeans, India was “a vast museum, its countryside filled with ruins, its people representing past ages- biblical, classical, and feudal; it was a source of collectibles and curiosities to fill European museums, botanical gardens, zoos, and country houses.”³⁴ India was the product of a bygone era, something to be admired and at the same time controlled. In many ways, the British-European Self did not even see India as alive, but merely as a repository of art and artifacts. People like the Rani whom Lady Curzon met were not worth British sympathy or appreciation; they were represented as exotic in all the wrong ways, as they were the root causes of Britain’s civilizing mission. Only those aspects of Indian culture which met with Lady Curzon’s standards were given due recognition. Others were dismissed as barbaric, unsympathetic, and uncivilized.

One particular incident that demonstrates how Lady Curzon’s views and behavior answer the question of appropriation is the Peacock dress of the 1903 Delhi *darbar* (Photo 3 offers an image of the dress). It was considered the pinnacle of Lady Curzon’s time as a fashion icon of the British Empire; one guest memorably commented, ““You cannot conceive what a dream she

³¹ Bradley, *Lady Curzon’s India: Letters of a Vicerine*, 56.

³² Bradley, *Lady Curzon’s India: Letters of a Vicerine*, 56.

³³ Bradley, *Lady Curzon’s India: Letters of a Vicerine*, 68.

³⁴ Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, 9.

looked.”³⁵ The dress was meant to exalt British imperialism in India, as the *darbar* was not only a celebration of the new British king, but the new emperor of India, Edward VII (1841-1910).³⁶ It was an “occasion for the displaying of empire.”³⁷ It was also a moment to express what Lady Curzon had always said: that India was the “kingdom” of her and her husband.³⁸ The magnificence of their dress for this occasion was informed by the co-opted Indian practice of clothing as an expression of “absolute power” (as was discussed earlier). As such, the Peacock dress is intended to symbolize the British Raj. To express this aim, the dress was made using British and Indian clothing. It was created using Indian metal zardozi embroidery (Photo 4 offers a close-up image of the work), and the dressmaking abilities of the House of Worth in Paris.³⁹ Tellingly, while Worth is credited continuously for the dress, the Indian embroiderers remain nameless. But Lady Curzon saw nothing wrong with that. In fact, her use of Indian embroidery was meant to “give impetus to native industries” while also acting as an “imperial possession.”⁴⁰ The dress highlighted Indian craftsmanship to validate the British imperial project. In this way, it becomes an artifact of the British Raj’s attempts to “represent” India. What Lady Curzon thought was a service was actually an extension of imperialist language. She wore the Peacock dress to epitomize a British imperialist worldview, not to truly embody the culture or practices of those whom she ruled. When Lady Curzon donned her dress of uncredited zardozi embroidery and European silhouette, she engaged in British imperialism’s language, because she was now part of

³⁵ National Trust, “Caring for Lady Mary Curzon’s Peacock Dress.” 2021.

³⁶ Textile Research Centre, “Lady Curzon’s Peacock Dress.” *TRC Leiden*, 2017.

³⁷ Cohn, *Colonialism and Its Forms of Knowledge: The British in India*, 121.

³⁸ Bradley, *Lady Curzon’s India: Letters of a Vicerine*, 18.

³⁹ Textile Research Centre, “Lady Curzon’s Peacock Dress.”

⁴⁰ Nicola J. Thomas, “Embodying Imperial Spectacle: Dressing Lady Curzon, Vicereine of India 1899-1905.” *Cultural Geographies* 14, no. 3 (2007), 369-400: 391-2.

a “systemic play of differences” about British and Indian realities.⁴¹ She may have imagined herself to be proudly combining British and Indian narratives, but her clothing merely affirmed the incongruous vision of civilization that the British advocated. She now personified the language of imperialism. Her appropriation, masked in supposed appreciation and representation, is merely the artistic form of the drain and destruction in India.

The Peacock dress *is* beautiful. Its dark, unrepresented history as an artifact of British imperialism in India does not negate that, but that history should expose how colonialism lives in beautiful things too. Lady Curzon wore a dress overflowing with the language of oppression, exploitation, and appropriation. She thought she was representing Indian industry, but she was just consuming it in a different way. Her status as a colonizing Subject obliterates any chance that she could express the culture of the colonized Other in a way that did not build into an imperialistic language about how India must be civilized while also being reaped of its resources. The glittering designs of the dress hold within themselves the legacy of the Indian textile industry, denied by the British and transformed into a cotton producer. The zardozi work remains unnamed; the weavers who created it are made faceless, people who are merely meant to be administrated and exploited, just as Lord Curzon said to those British businessmen. Throughout the British Raj, a common thread of appropriation in light of exploitation runs. The imperialists wanted the “India of their dreams,” which was Othered, silenced, colonized, and exotic. That was what the British Self craved when it looked upon India, so that is what it used its imperialistic language to create. It fit itself for the role of not reaper or drainer, but civilizer. Imperialists like the Curzons were not representing India at all when they donned its fabrics or used its cultural norms; they were merely representing themselves.

⁴¹ Doty, *Imperial Encounters: The Politics of Representation in North-South Relations*, 6.

Appendixes



Photo 1: John Bradley. *Lady Curzon's India: Letters of a Vicereine*. 1985. "The Curzons en route to the Buddhist temple at Sanchi, 28 November 1899."



Photo 2: John Bradley. *Lady Curzon's India: Letters of a Vicereine*. 1985. "Sikandra: Lord and Lady Curzon at Akbar's Tomb, 9 December 1899."



Photo 3: Textile Research Centre. 2017. “Mary Curzon (1870-1906), wearing the Peacock Dress. Oil painting by William Logsdail, 1909.”



Photo 4: National Trust. 2021. *Caring for Lady Mary Curzon's Peacock Dress*. “Green beetle shells shimmer like emeralds.”

About the author

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