# Rosemary Raza, *In Their Own Words: British Women Writers and India 1740-1857*

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Since the early 1990s, increased academic attention has been paid to British women's writing on colonial India, which presents new, alternative perspectives, different from men's, on the history of the British imperial project in India. Interest in women's writing from before the establishment of the Raj in 1857 was already developing, and some modern editions and detailed analyses of women's writing have been published over the past decade. Until the publication of Rosemary Raza's *In Their Own Words*, however, only a dozen or so British women writers active in early colonial India had received substantial recognition, and the overall picture of women writers was not clear. In this work, Raza has unearthed a wide range of long-neglected women writers and through their writing has illustrated many little known aspects of life in the early colonial period. Raza's work is a landmark in studies of the colonial relations between India and Britain.

Raza's book is distinguished by her descriptive narrative blended with numerous quotations, anecdotes and stories extracted from a variety of writing by about eighty women writers, most of whom had spent some time in India. Their writing, which Raza had first described in her doctoral thesis entitled 'British Women Writers on India between the Eighteenth Century and 1857' (Oxford University, 1998), was all eventually published, even though it was initially in the form of private letters or diaries. Raza values published material for the influence it exerts as a public voice and the authority it establishes in the public sphere (xiii-xiv). Much of these women's writing was published only posthumously, although the more fortunate women established literary reputations during their lifetime.

Raza's numerous references to her sources are, according to the topic of each chapter, scattered throughout the book, but all are listed in the extensive bibliography of primary sources, which includes about one hundred and fifty publications. In addition, the 'Biographical Index' provides proper biographical profiles of eighty-four women writers, most of whom are mentioned in the main body of the text; such completeness may reflect Raza's work for the *Oxford Dictionary of National Biography* (2004), mainly on the subject of Anglo-Indian women writers.

In publishing this informative book, Raza forthrightly explains her academic stance: 'In looking at the content of their [women writers'] work, I have followed the traditional approach of the historian – seeking to build a picture from as wide a range of evidence as possible' (xiv). She is acutely aware of the significance of offering historical facts and information on forgotten women writers and revealing

hidden dimensions of early colonial life in order to open new areas of historical and literary study. She has not discussed how British women were involved in the political, historical and cultural affairs of India, because doing so would require a certain theoretical perspective which leads to the tendency of selecting 'material to suit the conclusions required' (xiv). This statement suggests that Raza wishes to distance herself from most research on women's travel writing, which often views the texts in feminist and postcolonial terms. She acknowledges the significance of Sara Mills's argument against the notion that women travellers played only a peripheral role (xxviii-xxix); however, she does not pay any special attention to more recent arguments on nineteenth-century Anglo-Indian women's travel writing, such as those by Indira Ghose and Nigel Leask. In Raza's view, women's writing is not limited to travel writing but includes 'missionary endeavour, advice to newcomers to India, memorials to husbands, history, translation, children's literature, novels, plays, poetry, and contributions to newspapers and periodicals' (xiii). Her aim is to provide the reader with a descriptive picture of the colonial life in which British women were actively engaged as residents rather than travellers. Thus, each chapter is filled with illustrative episodes written by Anglo-Indian women, and most of the notes at the end are references for primary sources. The extensive bibliography of secondary sources includes a wide variety of books on Indian life, culture and society, many published between the late nineteenth and mid twentieth centuries; this clearly illustrates Raza's fact-oriented stance.

Of the large number of writers covered in the book, the ones Raza repeatedly cites are those who have attracted scholarly attention over the years: Eliza Clemons, the wife of an East India Company officer (*fl.* 1841); the Honourable Emily Eden, a sister of the Governor-General of India (1797-1869); Maria Graham, the wife of a Royal Navy officer (1785-1842); Jemima Kindersley, the wife of an East India Company officer (1741-1809); Lady Honoria Lawrence, the wife of a British Army soldier-administrator (1808-54); Helen Catherine Mackenzie, a veteran's wife (1819-1910); Julia Charlotte Maitland, the wife of a Madras civil servant (1808-64); Fanny Parks, the wife of an East India Company civil servant (1794-1875); Marianne Postans, the wife of an East India Company officer (1811-97); Emma Roberts, a sister-in-law of a Bengal Infantry captain (1791-1840); and Mary Martha Sherwood, the wife of a British Army officer (1775-1851). Having previously published a selection of Postans's works, Raza refers, as might be expected, to Postans more often than to any other writer. As is indicated in this list, the majority of the writers she covers are the memsahibs who produced their works between the late eighteenth and mid nineteenth centuries. However, Raza also values the roles played by missionary wives of working- or lower middle-class backgrounds and clarifies the effects of their activities and publications on Indian society; these women greatly contributed to improvements in educational and medical conditions despite most being excluded

from the national committees of missionary societies.

*In Their Own Words* is divided into eight chapters, each of which features an important facet of life in India and illustrates British women's activities and observations as well as their roles and significance in colonial society. After the Introduction, which includes a census of the British population in India, the first chapter, 'The Published Word', introduces the various types of writers and their works and, hence, provides an overview of the British women writers following Jane Smart, who was born around 1705 and published a letter to her son in 1743. The dominant genre in the eighteenth century was letter writing, which is a good medium for relating one's own personal and domestic experiences and was also popular in the British literary climate of the time; starting in the early nineteenth century, other public literary forms were produced, ranging from instructive and journalistic writing intended for the British readership as well as fiction and poetry to religious and educational writing aimed at an Indian audience. Pointing out '[t]he ability of women to synthesize material in a popular manner' (10), Raza suggests that women's writing is a domain in which both private and public spheres are closely related and has the advantage of expanding readership more effectively than men's. Having thus clarified her stance on women's writing, in the second chapter, 'The Growing Anglo-Indian Family', Raza delineates the circumstances in which British women in India found themselves, focusing on the realities of courtship, marriage, child rearing and education. Through their writing, the domestic lives of British women are vividly depicted, and some particular features of Indian life are presented: for example, marriageable women were valuable in Anglo-Indian society because only a limited number of British women were allowed to immigrate from Britain before 1833, when the East India Company ceased their immigration controls and women of different social classes flooded into the country.

The next two chapters continue to describe the lives of British women, mainly those of the socially privileged ruling classes. The third chapter, 'Moulding Society', illustrates the functions British women served in Anglo-Indian society and also their engagement with Indian people. The social framework into which Anglo-Indian women were incorporated is thus presented, and their value in the hierarchical society of the time is clarified. Raza points out the privileges British women enjoyed in the colonial space as members simultaneously of the weaker sex and the ruling class. The fourth chapter, 'The Outward Show', describes the more mundane details of women's domestic lives: how they ate, how they dressed and how they spent their leisure time. As a whole, Anglo-Indians maintained the British lifestyle, which was controlled largely by women's tastes. British women, who persisted in dressing in the British style, also served to demonstrate the presence of colonizers in colonial society. In the next chapter, 'Beyond Domesticity: The Challenge of India', in contrast, Raza explores the wide variety of ways in which British women were engaged in society,

drawing on the experiences of women workers, Eurasians and missionary women as well as the memsahibs, including those with evangelical leanings. This, the longest chapter, in particular 'draws together information about the growth of women's social and missionary work, highlighting their contribution to reform and the development of careers for women' (xv). Raza depicts their educational and civilizing engagements with the indigenous Indians with reference to the activities of a dozen missionary women, many of whom are not mentioned in other works, including, for example, a recent book on missionary writing by Anna Johnston.

The chapters up to this point provide descriptions of particular aspects of British women's lives, both within and outside the family. Bringing these facets together, the sixth chapter, 'Crossing Boundaries', presents colonial complications in terms of the relationships between Anglo-Indians and native Indians. The focus is on how Anglo-Indians dealt with the famous *zenana* system. The private lives of affluent Muslim and Hindu women in the *zenana* were strictly concealed, and even their menfolk could neither enter the space nor perceive the realities inside. Such inaccessibility is described in a well-known quotation by Fanny Parks: 'I have now been nearly four years in India, and have never beheld any women but those in attendance as servants in European families, the low caste wives of petty shopkeepers, and *nach* women' (153). However, privileged British women, including Parks, were sometimes able to form intimate friendships with *zenana* women and were in turn able to function as reporters revealing the mysteries of the *zenana*. Missionary women had to face further difficulties in meeting *zenana* women, mainly Hindus, because of their strict caste system.

British women also had the advantage of mixing socially with Indian men. Together with their husbands, women of high rank in particular had private and official opportunities to enjoy a variety of entertainments with Indian men (81-83, 159-66). According to Raza, Anglo-Indian social interchange tended to occur in domestic areas, that is, at dinner parties and dance parties, and was largely facilitated by British women; their domestic engagement supported the extension of their roles into a more public sphere. The relationship between British women and Indian men reflects both that Indian men were not on an equal footing with British men and the seclusion and reserved nature of Indian women. British women were able to introduce novel ideas and ways of thinking to Indian men, which sometimes brought about breakthroughs in Indian domestic life. In turn, British women had opportunities to gain insights into the realities of Indian life which remained inaccessible to British men even when they married Indian women. British women, as junior colonizers, inhabited a unique domain and functioned as intermediaries between the male colonizers and the colonized.

After thus clarifying women's advantageous position, Raza moves on to a more literary and cultural examination in the seventh chapter, 'Depicting India'. She

describes how these women brought about transformations both in the general public image of India and in the appreciation of the country. Women's texts, varying in terms of chronology, geography and the writers' social status, sometimes offered observations that contrasted with those provided by men's writing. Accordingly, the value of feminine sentiment is suggested, and the effect of their aesthetic sense on their notion of Indian people is explored towards the end of the chapter. This examination should encourage women's texts to be analyzed on the basis of the concept of the 'female picturesque', a significant theoretical standpoint in Anglo-Indian studies, although Raza herself does not employ the word 'picturesque'.

The eighth chapter, 'British Women and Colonial Authority', which is followed by a short conclusion, illustrates the attitudes of British women writers towards British rule in India, including their thoughts on the military administration and the conduct of officers. The writers mentioned here include Emily Eden, 'a disengaged spectator' (209); the satirical Elizabeth Hamilton (1756/8-1816), who had no experience of living in India; the Emma Roberts of 'liberal common sense' (210); Marianne Postans, who believed in the civilizing mission of the British; Fanny Parks, an Indian sympathizer called a 'Pakka (thoroughgoing) Hindostani' (211); and Helen Mackenzie, a staunch critic of the military regime with evangelical inclinations. The diversity of these women's comments and opinions reveals their considerable interest in the public and political conditions in which they found themselves.

Raza's aim here is to inform the reader of how women expressed themselves in terms of the different dimensions of the imperial project, which generated political conflict up to the Indian Mutiny of 1857. She neither locates women writers according to their political cause nor analyzes their writing in terms of the power relationship between the colonizers and colonized or between men and women. The frequent references to Emma Roberts, for example, are scattered through the chapter, and her message is not summarized as a whole. The quoted texts and the explanation of the episodes demonstrate, however, her critical stance towards the Anglo-Indians, which is in line with Ghose's short observation of Roberts (Ghose 128-30). In contrast, Leask's analysis of Roberts with reference to the female picturesque shows that her appreciation of India entails the achievement of picturesque distance from India and the Indians and reveals her complex and ambiguous views. Leask notes her acute awareness of the dangers of creolization and cultural hybridization by pointing out that she condemns creole girls of mixed race in particular and also recommends Anglo-Indians to educate their children in the homeland to protect them from Indian influence (222-23). Positioning Anglo-Indian women writers, entangled as they were in issues of both gender and colonialism, in the imperial context is thus problematic. Raza's fact-oriented approach implies difficulties in how these women's writing should be read, because the selection of passages exerts a vital influence upon the reader's understanding of unfamiliar writers. The world of women writers presented by Raza

certainly includes specifics that encourage further analytical and theoretical studies of the texts through historical, cultural or literary approaches.

The difficulty in clarifying the relationship between women writers and British authority is also indicated in Raza's examination of missionary women. She does not thoroughly describe their opinions on British rule; she briefly states that they had 'the freedom to criticize and debate government performance and policy' because missionary undertakings 'were not always supported by government' and remarks on their fair appreciation of Indians and Britons (208). The activities of missionary women, mainly missionaries' wives, and their fulfillment of both their domestic and social roles in colonial India are described in the fifth chapter. From the postcolonial perspective, however, foreign missions, a pursuit of the lower and middle classes, effectively connected the colonies and the colonial authority and enhanced the power of these classes through the imperial project. Missionary women acted as role-models with proper domestic and moral qualities and reflected the assumed piety and delicacy of women in general, although they were officially regarded as only secondary and their enterprises were rarely recorded in official documents (Johnston 20-21, 25-28, 44-51). In India, missionary women were indispensable for penetrating the *zenana* and converting *zenana* women. Therefore, their domestic traits can be contextualized in a more public space and their roles are considered to have been further entangled in colonial, gender and missionary politics.

As seen in the case of missionary wives, women's involvement in educational undertakings and social work was essentially an expansion of their domestic occupation, a concept closely related with the rise of the middle class during the Industrial Revolution. The importance of their civilizing work is also illustrated pointedly by abundant accounts of philanthropic memsahibs, such as Honoria Lawrence, Helen Mackenzie and Mary Sherwood, with evangelical inclinations under the growing influence of evangelicalism from the 1790s onwards. Other memsahibs, in contrast, benefiting from the *zenana* system, publicly reported their private observations of the lives of Indian men and women. Raza appears to imply that Anglo-Indian women were more deeply involved in the public sphere than the British women who stayed in Britain; on the periphery of British imperial concerns, British women exercised active functions, taking advantage of their domestic roles.

*In Their Own Words* is filled with different women's voices; Raza clarifies which groups of British women were involved with which groups of Indian men and women, paying attention to geographical factors and depicting an intricate, multi-layered society. There were enormous differences in social participation between privileged and missionary women. Early missionary women worked mostly in the south, where polytheistic Hindus outnumbered monotheistic Muslims. In contrast, the wives of the officers, soldiers and civilians were mainly in contact with Muslims in the north; the experiences and observations recounted in these wives' writing vary

according to the positions of their husbands. Raza also makes frequent comments on the situation of Eurasians. Eurasian women were valuable as marriage partners for British men, especially in the days when the number of British women living in India was limited, while Eurasian men were not allowed to become East India Company officers or soldiers and had to accept unfavourable social positions. Issues of Eurasians were closely related to the question of gender. By focusing on Anglo-Indian women writers, Raza succeeds in depicting the relationships between Britons and Indians in colonial society, through which issues of class, race and gender were intricately interwoven. The reader could simply enjoy the abundance of descriptions and the sense of familiarity with British women who lived in India about two centuries ago. This is Raza's aim – to bring the reader close to this body of unfamiliar women writers. The book may not be a systematic arrangement of historical and literary sources, but the layered and intricate presentation of women's voices is a physical display of women's writing 'in their own words'.

## Works Cited

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