



BOOK REVIEW:

*EDUCATING SEETA: ANGLO-INDIAN ROMANCE AS POLITICAL
ALLEGORY*

Rajarshi Mitra

Kapila, Shuchi. *Educating Seeta: The Anglo-Indian Family Romance and the Poetics of Indirect Rule*. Columbus: The Ohio State University Press, 2010.

Divided into two parts, Shuchi Kapila's well-researched monograph explores the literary-political dynamics of interracial marriage and colonial domesticity in nineteenth century Anglo-Indian¹ romance. The first part of Kapila's monograph considers letters by William Linnaeus Gardner (1772 – 1835), and popular novels by Bithia Mary Croker (1848 – 1920). The second part explores the inscription of colonial indirect rule in fictional and non-fictional writings of British writers from nineteenth century India with a chapter on Philip Meadows Taylor's (1808 – 1876) political negotiations with the Queen of Shorapur. Kapila provides detailed historical background in separate chapters at the beginning of each part, which helps in weaving connections between the political and the private domains in colonial India.

Her monograph remains a timely study of the potential of Anglo-Indian romance as a rule-defying genre, subversive and utopian in turns. Romance, by its very nature, dwells in realms of fantasy and speculation, and suggests "utopian resolutions of insurmountable class, caste, familial, or religious antagonisms" (19). The utopian tendencies in Anglo-Indian romances, with their focus on mixed race relationships, tend to resolve racial confrontations in "the tropes of domestic fiction" creating a "fantasy of liberal colonial rule in nineteenth century British India" (2). Utopian

¹ In eighteenth and nineteenth century colonial India the term "Anglo-Indian", as Kapila explains in a footnote, referred to British community in India. After the census of 1911, the Government of British India reserved the term exclusively for "Eurasians" – persons of mixed European and Asian descent (135).

possibilities camouflage subversion as these romances question rigid racial boundaries and relationships, though within the confrontational parameters set by the colonial society. The romance narratives often end in a narrative failure when the Asian wives of “paternalistic” Europeans die indicating, according to Kapila, how socially un-viable interracial relationships could be.

To prove this narrative failure, Kapila moves between literary and non-literary colonial discourses and shows how a time-worn genre such as romance can still provoke debates. Her non-literary sources – William Linnaeus Gardner’s letters in chapter one and documents on the East India Company’s legal battles with the royal widows of native states in chapter three – anticipate issues concerning Anglo-Indian domesticity available in the novels of Bithia Mary Croker and Philip Meadows Taylor. In the conclusion to her book, she takes into consideration recent debates in India on movies and texts related to interracial romance. To highlight the still prevalent cultural influence of romance, she refers to accusations of misrepresentation in William Dalrymple’s *White Mughals* – a story of interracial romance in early nineteenth century Hyderabad – and in *Jodha Akbar* (2010: 128 – 134), a Bollywood blockbuster movie about Mughal king Akbar’s romance with a Hindu lady.

In her introduction, Kapila acknowledges the contribution of Feminist scholarship in decoding the thematic fascination of Anglo-Indian romances for interracial relationships between paternalistic white men and submissive Indian women (13). She mentions her indebtedness to a host of Postcolonial and Feminist scholars, from Gayatri Spivak to Parama Roy, Sara Suleri and Siraj Ahmed, who have pointed out a constant conceptual and linguistic traffic between the private and political spheres in nineteenth century British culture. In everyday debates on divorce laws and good governance, the nineteenth century manifested latent masculine fear over stereotypes like unruly women. Rani of Jhansi, for example, becomes a “double or counterpoint to Queen Victoria” articulating British fear about “an unruly woman on throne” (9). Kapila further borrows from theories of literary romance and colonial cultural studies on British experience in India. She borrows her concept of romance as a political allegory from two articles by Doris Sommer on nineteenth-century Latin American fiction, where Sommer draws parallels between desire for an ideal nation and romantic desire (9-10). Postcolonial and Feminist scholarship come to Kapila’s

aid largely in establishing her claim that colonial interracial romances represent Indian women as “educable, docile, devoted and loyal, in other words, an ideal colonial subject” (2).

In her introduction to part one, she historicises her argument by detailing the East India Company’s changing attitudes to interracial marriages in early colonial India. Contemporary debates on interracial relationships map how cultural syncretism in the late eighteenth century was gradually transformed into a recognizable pattern of racial boundary-making. The romances produced in this era mark the attitudes of the age – opinions on interracial marriages sway between paternalistic approval and social un-viability. The Englishmen’s romance with their Indian bibis serves, according to Kapila, “as a dramatic and Gothic foil to the rather pallid love between an Englishman and English woman” (32). In most of these romances, a heroic white man rescues a distressed Indian woman, whom the narrative either kills or transforms into a docile colonial subject. Kapila identifies four broad (and overlapping) forms of Anglo-Indian romance writing. The first, and the commonest is the rescue narrative where a paternalistic Englishman rescues a young native woman. The second kind is “in high Orientalist mode” which attempts to match representatives of two glorious civilizations – a melancholy exoticized Hindu lady and a firm but kind-hearted Englishman. The third form of interracial romance presents interracial affairs as scandals. An Englishman is seen as a man who has swayed from the righteous path, and through various conflicts he either mends his ways or dissipates himself. The fourth form, which Kapila emphasizes as unique, focuses on the imposition of specific conditions of indirect rule on the households of widowed queens of Indian states. Meadows Taylor’s *Educating Seeta* belongs to this final category.

The first chapter of the book presents an interesting variant of the rescue narrative. Here, Kapila analyses the letters of Colonel William Linneaus Gardner concerning his anxieties and feelings about his mixed household and career. A contemporary of William Kirpatrick, Gardner, who later became the zamindar of Khasgaunge in Uttar Pradesh, records in his letters several nuances of an Englishman’s indigenization and a Muslim woman’s “unexpected sharing of domestic power with an Englishman”

(50). Colonel Gardner's romance with the Empire, instead of making him a good ruler, absorbed him into "the land that he made his home" (51).

Bithia Mary Croker's novels, which occupy the second chapter of the book, present a colonial domestic ideology which enacts both "the fascination and the fear of domestic hybrid spaces" (53). Published in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, Croker's novels explore Victorian ideologies of gender, nation and class in the colonies. Taboos on interracial marriages and fear of miscegenation turn her narratives about interracial love into narratives of scandal. Scared of being usurped by a Eurasian or an Indian woman, Croker's memsahibs, who appear as English women with precarious fortunes, jealously guard their newfound domestic power in India. Croker's romances critique Victorian domestic novels by letting non-European women become "insistently part of English life abroad" (52). However, in novels like *Old Madras*, which is analysed in detail in the second chapter, Croker neither provides a straightforward rejection of India nor upholds English domestic space as an absolute ideal. Though her Englishmen who go native are harshly punished, Croker does not allow readers to withdraw their sympathy for the nativized (therefore, fallen) Englishmen.

In part one of her monograph Kapila's analysis conforms to a familiar Postcolonial trend of analysing representations of oriental characters as docile subjects in colonial texts. Part two presents a more original engagement with colonial culture. Here, Kapila draws our attention to the dynamics of conflict between the colonial officers and the Indian ruling class. She forges a connection between the British policy of indirect rule and Anglo-Indian romances, where, she argues, a "poetics of indirect rule" dominates. If British indirect rule was about social and political influences, then Anglo-Indian romances reflect European intervention in Indian domestic sphere and vice versa. Besides a historical background on indirect rule in British India, Chapter three provides a more topical context to her argument that Philip Meadows Taylor's letters about his dealings with Rani of Berar mock romantic notions of chivalry. They further provide a frank record of an Indian queen's resistance to the Empire's narrative of romance. Taylor rewrites this history of resistance in his fictional work *Seeta* – part domestic novel, part political allegory – where he could create a desirable oriental in the eponymous heroine Seeta: an educable Indian woman.

Well-argued and lucidly written, Kapila's monograph stands as a valuable contribution to colonial cultural studies of nineteenth century India. Her study of romance as a way to understand colonial culture further displays how actively women participated in writing and narrating popular discourses on colonialism. Her work extends several familiar themes in Postcolonial Studies including Homi Bhabha's concept of hybridity and the third space. In fact, she acknowledges early in her introduction her indebtedness to historian Robert Young's observation that "miscegenation and hybridity are the foundational narratives of most Victorian and modern fiction" (7).

Rajarshi Mitra is an Assistant Professor of English at Indian Institute of Information Technology Guwahati in Assam, India. He holds a PhD in English from the EFL University at Hyderabad, India and an M Phil from the University of Hyderabad, India. For his M Phil and PhD, he researched hunting and natural history narratives from the colonial era. His present research interest is in British colonial experience during the Romantic period. He can be contacted at mitrarajarshi24@gmail.com