

READING HAMILTON'S *TRANSLATIONS OF THE LETTERS OF A HINDOO RAJAH* AS A HYBRID TEXT

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Abstract

Using insights from the theoretical ideas in Edward Said's *Orientalism*, and Homi K. Bhabha's *Location of Culture*, and *Signs Taken for Wonders*, this article analyzes Elizabeth Hamilton's *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796) to argue that the text embodies the characteristics of Bhabhaian hybridity. Written in a colonial context, although the text contains both colonial and anti-colonial thoughts, it defies the boundaries of both and enters the indeterminate third space of complex cultural exchange between the colonizers and the natives. *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* serves as a site for inter-cultural exploration, and negotiation of meanings and identities. It dismantles the binaries of Saidian orientalism, disrupts race representations and gender performances, depicts mutual influence of the west and the east, grants agency to the colonized, and refuses to provide any resolution at the end. The text also unsettles the boundary of genre and structure by blurring the distinction between the original and translation, the novel and letters, fiction and fact, and the author and translator to occupy the ambivalent space of hybridity.

Key Words: colonial context, dismantle, orientalism, hybridity, third space, cultural negotiation

Written in a colonial context, Elizabeth Hamilton's¹ *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1796) raises interesting debate concerning the relationship between the colonizing country and the colonized. Claire Grogan reads the novel as an "Orientalist study" closely related with Saidian Orientalizing texts that endorse imperialism.² Advancing a similar idea, Mona Narain calls it a text that, despite "its intense criticism of English gender norms," espouses "masculinist imperial venture."³ In contrast, Ann Mellor argues that the text goes beyond the binaries of colonialism and anti-colonialism to embrace Bakhtinian dialogics.⁴ While it might be agreed that the text provides a few moments for both kinds of interpretations, a closer examination reveals that *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* embodies the characteristics of what Homi K. Bhabha calls a "hybrid" text because its ambivalent space not only defies the binaries of Edward Said but also refuses to provide any forthright resolution at the end. The text shows the mutual influence of the colonizer and the colonized while also granting agency to the latter.

Unlike Said, who in *Orientalism*,⁵ looks at the colonial/imperial situation as one of clear-cut oppression of the allegedly inferior colonized by the allegedly superior colonizer, Bhabha views their relationship as that of mutual influence. Challenging the essentialist ideas and the simple binary description of the colonial condition forwarded by Said, Bhabha points to the greater complexity in the relationship because their cultural encounter makes them undergo a process of hybridity, producing something familiar but new--"not quite not white."⁶ The hybrid subject occupies the "third space" of ambivalence,⁷ which is an interdependent relationship formed by compromise and mutual dependence of the two parties. This subject position, which is different from that of the colonizer and the colonized, contests the terms and territories of both.

The space of hybridity enables the colonized subject to "gaze," recognize, mimic and mock its master, leading the former to resist, or to terrorize and control the latter to some extent. According to Bhabha, as a cultural form, mimicry, or "the effect of hybridity," is "at once a mode

¹Elizabeth Hamilton, an essayist, poet, and novelist, was probably born in 1756 in Belfast, Ireland. Daughter of Charles Hamilton and Katherine Mackay, she inherited Irish-Scottish background. Living most of her life in Scotland, she wrote pedagogical works including *Letters on Education* (1796), *Essays on the Human Mind* (1796), and *Letters on the Elementary Principles of Education* (1801). Hamilton also produced important fictional works such as *The Cottagers of Glenburnie* (1808), *Memoirs of Modern Philosophers* (1800), and *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* in 1796. She developed an interest in India from the writings of and conversations with her brother Charles Hamilton, who served East India Company, and lived in India for about fourteen years. She died in England in 1816.

² Claire Grogan, "Crossing Genre, Gender, and Race in Elizabeth Hamilton's *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*," 26.

³ Mona Narain, "Colonial Desires: The Fantasy of Empire and Elizabeth Hamilton's *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*," 595.

⁴ See Ann Mellor's "Romantic Orientalism Begins at Home: Elizabeth Hamilton's *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*," 151-164. Mellor also claims that the text employs multiple viewpoints to arrive at a consensus of "socialist democracy" (164).

⁵ Edward Said, *Orientalism* (1994).

⁶Homi K. Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 92.

⁷ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 90.

of appropriation and of resistance,”⁸ which not only discloses the ambivalence of colonial discourse but also alters its authority.⁹ He argues that Said has overlooked the site of “spectacular resistance” from which the orient interrogates the western discourses, produces ambivalence in the colonial masters, and disrupts the equation of power.¹⁰ In “Signs Taken for Wonders,” Bhabha gives an example of the resistance of the colonized through their demand of the Hindi *Bible* which signifies their use of the power of hybridity to resist baptism and to push the mission of conversion to “an impossible position.”¹¹ Although the natives show willingness to be baptized, they refuse to take the sacrament.

As the hybrid site produces “new forms of knowledge, new modes of differentiation, new sites of power,”¹² and opens space for negotiations of new meanings, and avenues for formation of new identities, the Hindi *Bible* acts as a site of resistance to create new meanings and forge new identities.¹³ Once the English *Bible* is translated into Hindi, it no longer commands its original authenticity and authority. The Hindi *Bible* becomes a work of difference or of repetition and functions as the emblem of colonial hybridity which empowers the colonized rather than the colonizers. It equips the natives with new forms of knowledge, becomes a site of resistance and subverts the power of the rulers.

Hamilton’s *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* presents itself as a good model of a hybrid site, like the Hindi *Bible*, where meanings are contested and negotiated. It traverses both the terrains of the colonizers and the colonized to create new cultural meanings. *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* constitutes of two series of letters—one between Zaarmilla, the Hindu Rajah of Almorah and his friend and brother in law Kisheen Neeay Maandaara, Zimeendar of Cumlore in Rohilcund, and the other between Sheermaal, a widely travelled traditional Hindu Brahmin and Maandaara. The text describes the Rajah’s travel to England and his study of English people, and their society based mainly on the social and cultural differences between India and England. In his letters, Sheermaal, who has visited England before the Rajah, offers his own criticism of the English society. Although the intelligent and elite but occasionally naïve Rajah praises England for her benevolence and love for liberty, his extensive satiric comments on the English society and culture mainly complicates his as well as the author’s point of view, pushing *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* towards its ambivalent position. The novel characterizes itself as a hybrid text in terms of its characters, politics, ideas, voice, genre, structure, gender, and race.

Narain argues that although Hamilton, in *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*, critiques both English and Indian norms of sexuality and gender by identifying them as problematic *masculinist* Imperial venture, she ultimately submits to the values of imperialism.¹⁴ It is Narain’s claim that “the desire to redeem Hastings¹⁵ and his colonial administration” makes Hamilton “subsume her

⁸ Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders,” 1181.

⁹ Bhabha, *Location of Culture*, 88.

¹⁰ Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders,” 1182.

¹¹ Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders,” 1180.

¹² Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders,” 1181.

¹³ Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders,” 1179.

¹⁴ Narain, “Colonial Desires,” 587.

¹⁵ Warren Hastings (1732-1818) was the first Governor General of Bengal, India from 1773 to 1785. Because of controversies of corruption surrounding his administration, he was impeached in 1787, and

ambivalence toward the masculinist Imperial Venture” and ultimately support the Colonial policy.¹⁶ A closer examination of the text, however, reveals that unlike the imperialist writers, who foreground the benevolence of English rulers, early on in in her “Preliminary Dissertation,” Hamilton acknowledges the mercenary motives of the colonizers. She states clearly that “the thirst of conquest and the desire of gain” drew European nations to India (Hamilton 55). Her Irish-Scottish background further impels us to think that she cannot support colonial agenda of the English as she too belongs to a nation suffering the colonial pain inflicted by the English. Additionally, as Julie Straight argues, Hamilton “clearly critiques the British in the Caribbean, as in America, for failing to practice universal benevolence and for destroying liberties that the British professed to cherish” (605).¹⁷ Hamilton certainly had been aware about the British excesses in India as in America and the Caribbean islands, and as an enlightened Scottish citizen, she would not implicate herself in the British imperial project in India. Therefore, *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*, cannot be considered as a colonial or an oriental text created to know and control the east; neither can Hamilton’s admiration of Hastings be regarded as her support for the British imperial rule in India because Hastings occupies an ambiguous place in the colonial history of the subcontinent.¹⁸

Despite working for East India Company, Hastings admired Indian culture. In his preface to Charles Wilkins’s translation of the *Bhagawad Gita* (1785), Hastings writes: “I hesitate not to pronounce the *Geeta* a performance of great originality; of a sublimity of conception, reasoning, and diction, almost unequaled; and a single exception, among all the known religions of mankind, of a theology accurately corresponding with that of the Christian dispensation, and most powerfully illustrating its fundamental doctrines.”¹⁹ After he likens the theology of the *Gita* with Christianity, Hastings goes on to say that the Hindu sacred writings “will survive when the British dominion in India shall have long ceased to exist and when the sources which it once yielded of wealth and power are left to remembrance.”²⁰ Further, Hastings showed respect to Hindu and Muslim laws and, as governor general of India, he began the policy for the British to learn and implement in their practice the native codes of law. His admiration for India and his patronage of oriental writing and culture cannot be easily dubbed as an imperial ruse to rule the Indians as the inferior other. Therefore, it might be appropriate to look at Hastings in the same

later acquitted in 1795. Pamela Perkins and Shannon Russell in their “Introduction” to *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*, rightly point out that one of the reasons Hamilton favors Hastings is that he is a representative of the empire, which she thinks, has rescued Hindu India from the barbaric hands of Muslim invaders (24).

¹⁶Narain, “Colonial Desires,” 595.

¹⁷ Julie Straight, “Promoting Liberty through Universal Benevolence in Elizabeth Hamilton’s *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*,” 605.

¹⁸ Sara Suleri, in *The Rhetoric of English India* (1992), argues that Edmund Burke and others try to make Hastings the scapegoat of all the guilt and evil of colonialism (91).

¹⁹ Warren Hastings, in “Preface” to Charles Wilkins’s *The Bhagvat-Geeta, or Dialogues of Kreesna and Arjoon* (1785), 10.

²⁰ Hastings, “Preface,” 13.

way as Thomas Babington Macaulay²¹ who clearly insulted Indian culture and literature. As Straight claims, one reason for Hamilton's admiration of Hastings lies in her adoration for her beloved brother Charles, who worked under the benefaction of his good friend Hastings.²² Despite her praise of Hastings and his administration, Hamilton's treatment of India is ambivalent. In fact, Hamilton herself accepts Hastings only ambivalently, because while she seems to approve benevolent British rule in India, she cannot but critique its patriarchal norms. Thus, it can be asserted that Hastings' positive influence in India and vice versa qualifies him to occupy the hybrid space of in-betweenness.

Captain Percy, the English captain whom Zaarmilla rescues from injury, can be viewed as another example of the colonizer that becomes hybrid when he comes in contact with the colonized. An Oriental scholar, although he has all admiration for his British culture and believes in the superiority of Christian religion, he nevertheless recognizes the worth of Hindu and Muslim laws and their influence in colonial India. Percy is modeled on Hamilton's brother Charles Hamilton, who like Warren Hastings believed in ruling over India according to oriental codes of justice rather than by importing and imposing the English law. A great admirer of Persian language and literature like Sir William Jones, Charles had translated the Muslim Law Code *Hedaya* into English. Hamilton does not, however, subscribe entirely to Charles' views. Her selective acceptance of the principles of the orientalists such as Sir William Jones and her brother Charles as reflected in her "Preliminary Dissertation" raises her above some of the orientalists' negative views in the representation of India. One example can be taken as the feminization of India wherein Charles, in the spirit of Macaulay, calls the Indians as "soft and effeminate," incapable both of defending their women and providing a strong self-government.²³

Narain's objections that Hamilton feminizes Indian men who prove "unable to defend their women"²⁴ can be countered with the knowledge that Hamilton is producing a subversive text that critiques the male dominated western system of thought and society.²⁵ Moreover, Hamilton perceives the feminine quality not as weakness but as strength. She feminizes India in

²¹ Thomas Babington Macaulay (1800-1859), a British historian and educationist, is notorious for his anti-India policy. In his "Minute on Indian Education of February 1835," he unjustly asserts: "It is, I believe, no exaggeration to say that all the historical information which has been collected from all the books written in the Sanskrit language is less valuable than what may be found in the most paltry abridgement used at preparatory schools in England," (http://www.columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00generallinks/macaulay/txt_minute_education_1835.html)

²² Straight, "Promoting Liberty," 599.

²³ Perkins and Russell, "Introduction," 33.

²⁴Narain, "Colonial Desires," 594.

²⁵BalachandraRajan in "Feminizing the Feminine: Early Women Writers on India," rightly observes that Hamilton "rejects not only the West but the masculine principle which the West embodies, in favor of a feminine alternative" (155). Even when we look at Charles' interest in Indian cultural texts as that of the Orientalists, who wanted to understand and dominate the east, Hamilton cannot be viewed as one of them because she is a woman who critiques male administration both at home and abroad.

terms of spiritual faith, and has nothing to do with the Indians’ “constitutional apathy” or “their mode of living” or “their delicate texture of body.”²⁶ Hamilton does not define effeminacy of India in terms of the physical or mental weakness of India, which makes it subject to colonial England’s masculine power. Unlike Charles, who sees “abatement” of Indian mind because of long “slavish subjection,” Hamilton perceives gentleness of Indians as a mark of their strong character.²⁷ Feminization aside, even Charles views the east favorably. His praise of Indian “classical past,” his advocacy of Hindu codes for ruling India, his love for Sanskrit and Persian language and literature, and the act of translating *Hedaya* may be given some credit toward bestowing an ambivalent status to both Charles and *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*.

Perhaps the most important character in the novel who occupies the in-between space of hybridity is the Hindu Rajah himself. Zaarmilla, a colonized subject, comes in contact with several English men and women in India and England, interacts with them, is influenced by them and in turn is able to draw the attention of his colonial masters. Percy initiates the Rajah towards British customs and manners and becomes instrumental in the production of his hybrid identity. The Hindu prince turns an admirer of the British when he encounters Percy, who as a colonizer, infuses in the Rajah positive doctrine about the colonizers, their society, religion, education and politics.

Influenced by Percy’s talk, Zaarmilla expresses his initial attitude toward the British in the following words: “Benevolent people of England! It is their desire, that all should be partakers of the same blessings of liberty, which they themselves enjoy. It was doubtless with this glorious view, that they sent forth colonies, to enlighten and instruct the vast regions of America” (Hamilton 84). Almost in Oriental voice, the Rajah admires “benevolent” English people and their noble desire to “enlighten and instruct” the colonies so that the colonized are able to enjoy the “blessings of liberty.” The Rajah is particularly surprised when Percy tells him about the freedom enjoyed by women in England: “women are considered in the light of rational beings! Free agents! In short, as a moiety of human species; whose souls are no less precious in the eye of the Omniscient than that of the proud lords of the creation!” (87). The view of women as “rational beings” and “free agents” makes the Rajah desirous of visiting England. But after his correspondence through letters with his friends Maandaara and Sheermaal, and several encounters with the British men and women in India and Britain, the Rajah undergoes a change. The colonizer’s gaze that had made him earlier a staunch admirer of British administration now finds through his own gaze several shortcomings in British culture to critique. It must be noted, however, that his gaze is not a threatening one as observed by Bhabha--it is merely a gaze of mild interrogation and conciliation.

Zaarmilla’s admiration for the benevolence of British colonialists and their love for liberty gives way to skepticism toward British manners particularly when he comes in contact with English women. He does not find them educated and enlightened. Characters such as Mr. Ardent’s wife, the Nabob’s wife and a young fortune hunter (the Nabob’s niece) with their frivolous manners, shallow conversations, and apathetic attitude make Zaarmilla realize that he had made incorrect assessments of the English women earlier. He observes that these ladies possess “cold and artificial” character received from boarding schools (Hamilton 217). They lack human virtue of love toward their fellow beings and are incapable of thoughts. For instance, Bibby, the Nabob’s wife prefers pets to children (185), and his young niece, obsessed with

²⁶ Perkins and Russell, “Introduction,” 34.

²⁷ Qtd in Perkins and Russell, 33.

romance novels, is empty of mind (195). Zaarmilla's further encounter in England with characters such as radical Miss Ardent, her ward Olivia, Lady Grey's pupils and twin sisters Caroline and Julia, and Mr. Axiom, Miss Ardent's lover turn the Rajah into a critic of the British society and manners. He satirizes the British for their snobbery, their *puja* of cards (i.e. excessive devotion to the game of cards), their obsession to fashion, their devotion to *Lackshmi* (goddess of wealth), their newspapers, their novels, their treatment of women, their politics, their education policy and their new philosophy of atheism and so on. Through the Rajah's observation, Hamilton conveys the idea that atheism "undermines social order by seducing society's intellectually weak elements--women and common people--leading them not to revolution but to crime."²⁸

In Zaarmilla's criticism of British society, Hamilton shows a reversed power relation between the colonizer and the colonized because it is Zaarmilla who defines the colonizers rather than being defined by them. He raises "the voice of the subaltern, the colonial outsider," through which "Hamilton makes a very radical interrogation of gender and class politics in England."²⁹ Not only does Zaarmilla occupy the central stage as a narrator in the text, but he also speaks about his country as an equal. On several occasions, he appears to make judgement as a politically educated, spiritually elevated and intellectually superior man. He is not relegated to the position of Said's "inferior non-western other." In his role as a translator and commentator of British societal norms, the Rajah serves as a medium to bridge the gulf between the two people and their cultures.

However, despite his satiric attitude toward the British, Zaarmilla, retains much of his positive outlook toward them. He still feels gratified that he has come in contact with the superior class of people and receives their help and support. He approves of the polite manners of Lady Grey and Charlotte Percy, admires Mr. Denbeigh's ideas of selflessness and public good, and appreciates Dr. Severan's advocacy of feminine delicacy in women. Although he is unable to remove Miss Ardent's prejudice by convincing her about the superiority of *Mahabharata* to *Iliad* and the equal excellence of Calidas and Shakespeare as poets, the Rajah admires her "warmth and energy," intellectual brilliance, her wide-ranging interest in education, politics, and above all her extensive knowledge of history and literature of India (Hamilton 227). Additionally, he has positive opinions concerning the religion of Christ and the Christian *Shaster*, the *Holy Bible*. When he finally returns home, he is like a mimic man who has imitated or is willing to imitate many of the British customs and manners. Thus, his character, more than that of others, embodies the Bhabhaian concept of mimicry or hybridity as he occupies the space of in-betweenness, neither remaining a pure colonized self nor willing fully to assimilate with the colonizers. He is a changed man although the change might be slight; he is "little more than a mirror image of an educated English gentleman."³⁰ His attitude towards the colonial masters at the end can be compared with that of the Indians in Bhabha's "Signs Taken for Wonders" who can accept baptism but not the sacrament. As Susan B. Taylor perceptively puts it, the Rajah's identity calls into question "the premise of difference" between the colonizers and the colonized

²⁸ Gary Kelly, *Women, Writing and Revolution 1790-1827*, 141.

²⁹ Mellor, "Romantic Orientalism," 154.

³⁰ Perkins and Russell, "Introduction," 31.

mentioned in the novel's "Preliminary Dissertation."³¹ He is white but not quite, and expresses "the sameness through difference."³²

If Hamilton admires the British at one point through Zaarmilla, she also presents a bitter critique of British society by the same channel implying her ambivalent position. This is not to say, however, that Hamilton does not critique the Indian society--she does comment on the naivety and effeminacy of the Hindus through Zaarmilla; she also criticizes the system of *sati*³³ in India. However, her critique is qualified in both cases. She admires the Hindu administrative system and thinks that women in Britain suffer no less than a *sati*. Through Sheermal, Hamilton conveys the idea that self-immolating widows in India are better off than the lonely English widows who experience worse experience of sexual exploitation: "Equally ignorant and equally helpless, as the female of Hindostan, their situation is far more destitute and pitiable (Hamilton130). Although Zaarmilla is feminized, he is always associated with gentleness, strength and humanity.³⁴ In contrast, the masculinity of the British is associated with oppression, inhumanity, cruelty, and criminality. This shows that even if Hamilton was trying to create an Orientalizing text, it was not like the ones described by Said, but different because *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* accommodates much more Indian virtues than its vices in comparison to the English. It glorifies the colonial rule in India much less than it questions the very fabric of English society and culture.

In *Orientalism*, Said writes about a discourse created by the rulers to serve imperial and colonial power, which grants no agency to the Orientals. In contrast, however, in *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*, Hamilton provides much space for the Indian characters--Zaarmilla, Maandaara, and Sheermaal--to observe the English society, and comment on important subjects such as politics, education, philosophy, religion, novels, newspapers, slavery, social manners, class system, marriage, and women's position.³⁵ The Indians' voices interact with the voices of the British characters such as the amiable and learned Captain Percy, learned and severe Dr. Severan, sensible and admirable Mr. Denbeigh, skeptical and atheistic Mr. Axiom, energetic and radical Miss Ardent, innocent and rational Charlotte and others to produce a dialogic that best exemplifies a hybrid work of negotiated ideas. These voices together with the voice of the author/editor participate in "Bakhtinian heteroglossia" to create a polyphonic or multivocal work³⁶ very well defying the Saidian Orientalist text with a dominant imperial voice. The text nowhere provides clear signs of oriental or occidental hegemony. Actually, *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*, with its accommodation of both merits and demerits of the east and the west, contests the terms and territories of both.

³¹ Susan B. Taylor, "Feminism and Orientalism in Elizabeth Hamilton's *Translation of a Hindoo Rajah*," 558.

³² Perkins and Russell, "Introduction," 32.

³³ *Sati* is a Hindu practice in which a widow ends her life by burning on the funeral pyre of her husband.

³⁴ Perkins and Russell, "Introduction," 34.

³⁵ In this regard, in "Romantic Orientalism," Mellor observes that Hamilton is "the first novelist in English to narrate her text in part through the voice of a native Hindu, a well-educated and politically independent Rajah (154).

³⁶ Mellor, "Romantic Orientalism," 155.

Treading the third space, the novel frequently deconstructs the orientalist model by exchanging the roles of the colonizer and the colonized. This can be seen most conspicuously when the protagonist Zaarmilla gazes at the British society and passes judgment on its weaknesses in relation to education, manners, indifference to animals, and when the more cynical Sheermaal and his friend Maandaara criticize the British for their lack of religious feeling, for upholding slavery, for the poor condition of their working-class citizens, and for their hypocrisy and so on. Among other things, while Zaarmilla criticizes the boarding school education by saying that it merely imparts “useless accomplishments” (Hamilton 217), Sheermaal censures it as one of “learning a few tricks, such as a monkey might very soon acquire” (127). Sheermaal also castigates “the savage looks of the white barbarians” in upholding slavery (111). It is impossible for him to believe that “the perpetrators of this cruelty [slavery] could be the professors of a religion of mercy” (111). Together they expose the hypocrisy of English claims over the Indians in matters of education, literature, culture, and morality. In Bhabha’s words, the text turns “the gaze of the discriminated back upon the eye of power,” as Zaarmilla and his friends write back to the Empire.³⁷

A deconstructive mode is seen working in the larger operation of the text, too. Although the novel represents Hindus as celebrating their rescue from the cruel Muslim tyrants by the benevolent British, in action however, we find the English Percy being rescued by the Hindu prince Zaarmilla from an attack by the Muslims. Injured Percy is treated by a Muslim further illustrating the fact that it was the Orientals who rescued the Occidentals.³⁸ In fact, Zaarmilla also rescues an old Afghan and his wounded son (Hamilton 80), and Sheermaal too rescues a young Englishman by paying a fine on his behalf for killing his landowner’s partridges (120-122). These acts destabilize the colonial category of the master and the slave, the ruler and the ruled, and the rescuer and the rescued.

Unlike the imperialist writers and the so-called orientalists, Hamilton critiques the imperial agenda of the west by acknowledging its military and mercenary motives when she says in her “Preliminary Dissertation” that the most powerful and enlightened nations of Europe were drawn to India by “the thirst of conquest and the desire of gain” (Hamilton 55). And unlike the orientalists again, she presents the eastern world in a dignified light by emphasizing similarities between the east and the west, for example, by comparing Hindu religion and mythology with those of the classical west. In her “Preliminary Dissertation” Hamilton explains that “the long list of inferior deities. . . exhibits such a striking similitude in their character and offices to the ancient gods of Greece and Rome, that it has led to a conjecture of their being actually the same” (64). She almost identifies Indian deities with those of ancient Greece. Furthermore, Hamilton praises the religion and culture of the Orientals. She calls the Hindus “peaceful children of Brahma” and praises them for their religious tolerance (60). Unlike Macaulay, who degraded Sanskrit language, literature and Hindu thoughts, Hamilton makes a much favorable comment that the Hindu scriptures “are only equaled” by the Gospel (Hamilton 60). Her comments and comparisons such as these speak about the location of *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* beyond the realm of Orientalizing texts.

Hybrid characteristics of the text can also be found in its genre, its structure, its gender

³⁷ Bhabha, “Signs Taken for Wonders,” 1175.

³⁸ In “Promoting Liberty,” Straight rightly observes that “Hamilton portrays Percy not as a liberator of helpless victims, but is a helpless victim himself” (610).

performances, and its representation of race. The first foot-note novel (which gives the author a space to clarify and comment on varieties of subjects) by a female writer, *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*, as Marguerite Regan puts it, “eludes easy generic classification.”³⁹ Claire Grogan labels the text as an “Oriental study” because it does not yield to easy classification either as an “oriental fable,” or an “anti-oriental tale,” or an “oriental satire.”⁴⁰ The text is sometimes termed a novel, or a satire, or a Jacobin or anti-Jacobin fiction, or a quasi-novel. It disrupts the distinction between the novel and letters, and fiction and fact so much so that its fictional nature is debated.⁴¹ Structurally, *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* not only blurs the boundary between the writer, the editor and the translator, but also the author and the character. the original and translation. A fictional work with letters as its main parts, the text also contains a preliminary dissertation in the form of a scholarly essay. Hamilton presents her letters through her role as editor of a translation of the private correspondence between Zaarmilla and Maandaara. While the letters are filtered through the male character, Zaarmilla, and assembled and organized by the elderly Mr. Denbeigh, they are actually created by a female writer.⁴² Additionally, although it bears the title of a Hindu male, the text provides quite a large space to talk about the women of Europe, and despite her occasional efforts to mimic the male voice to write on eastern matters as a male orientalist, ultimately Hamilton’s own female voice sounds in the text, further lending it hybrid qualities.

While the text bestows traditional male attributes on female characters such as Miss Ardent and Miss Julia, it invests feminine qualities in the most important male character, the Hindu Rajah himself. Miss Ardent is shown to be engaged in traditional male pursuits of politics whereas the Rajah is sometimes represented as an effeminate object of the gaze. If on the one hand, the text empowers Miss Ardent by attributing her with male characteristic of radicalism, on the other hand, it grants strength to the character of Miss Olivia and Lady Grey for their traditional feminine qualities and domestic virtues. Furthermore, the text empowers the female author through the male pursuit of writing a scholarly book and engaging herself with colonial politics--considered a male adventure by Said.⁴³ Hamilton’s *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* thus transgress the traditional gender norms, enters a new site for acquisition of knowledge, and negotiates power/authority.

Hamilton also crosses the boundary of race when as a western female she produces a “black baby.” In a letter to her friend Mrs. Gregory, she writes: “I am afraid to inquire what you

³⁹ Marguerite Regan, “Feminism, Vegetarianism, and Colonial Resistance in Eighteenth Century British Novels,” 284.

⁴⁰ Claire Grogan, “Crossing Genre, Gender, and Race,” 21-42.

⁴¹ In “Crossing Genre, Gender, and Race,” Grogan comments that its fictional quality is so effectively veiled that the Monthly Review (Oct. 1796) felt the need to stress the work’s fictional nature to the reader (30).

⁴² Grogan, “Crossing Genre, Gender, and Race,” 35.

⁴³ In her “Revolution, Rebellion and a Rajah from Rohilkhand: Recontextualizing Elizabeth Hamilton’s *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah*,” Sonja Lawrenson expresses a similar view when she says, “By exposing both the cultural and sexual hegemony of English society..., Hamilton’s narrative implicitly queries English patriarchy’s right to exert its authority over either the women or the nations of British empire (144).

will say to my black baby. . . whether my poor Rajah shall sleep in peace on his native mountains, or expose himself to dangers of criticism, by a trip to England” (Hamilton 338-339). She makes it plain that the protagonist Zaarmilla, her brainchild, is her black baby for he is not white British. That is, Hamilton, a white woman gives birth to the black child undermining the conventional racial boundary.⁴⁴ Thus, Hamilton goes beyond the Saidian oriental assumptions of maintaining racial distinctions into the Bhabhaian realm of inter-cultural exploration.

Letters of a Hindoo Rajah, befitting its hybrid nature, accommodates an amalgamation of different ideas in social, educational, and political spheres. It lacks a single, dominant purpose in the discussion of the education and manners, and the political views of British ladies in England. Critics’ opinion is divided with regards to both the author’s stance in these matters. If Mellor believes that Hamilton articulates Mary Wollstonecraft’s “revolutionary feminist arguments”⁴⁵ for women’s education as well as her Jacobin political views, Midgley places her with the anti-Jacobin camp.⁴⁶ Although Hamilton, as an anti-Jacobin conservative, is seen sometimes to support Hanna More’s quiet virtues of domesticity, she also shows concerns about women’s rights and education and endorses Wollstonecraft’s “radical feminist politics.”⁴⁷ While her camping with Hanna More becomes evident by her favorable treatment of refined and cultivated characters such as the Denbeigh sisters, Lady Grey, Miss Caroline and Miss Charlotte (author’s fictionalized self-portrait), her approval of the positive virtues of an educated, atheistic, and revolutionary Miss Ardent associates Hamilton with the Jacobins, too. However, Hamilton does not always treat Amazonian Miss Ardent with sympathy, which indicates that she has reservations with radical politics of Jacobins or the revolutionary ideas of Wollstonecraft. Contrarily, she does not always support Hanna More’s combination of modesty and accomplishments thereby complicating her stance both in politics and contemporary education. For instance, the practical minded Olivia (follower of radical Miss Ardent) and skillful Caroline (pupil of pious Lady Grey) come together to attend an injured old man and save his life. Weak and sentimental Julia (ward of Mrs. Ardent) causes the accident, flees, faints, and proves of no worth (Hamilton 276-277). This act of treating the old man together by the quiet Caroline and spirited Olivia shows that, here as elsewhere, Hamilton is neither in the Jacobin nor in the anti-Jacobin camp--she is both here and there, occupying a third space.

At one place, Hamilton writes: “In those provinces which . . . have fallen under the dominion of Great Britain, it is to be hoped that the long-suffering Hindoos have experienced a happy change” (Hamilton 70). Remarks such as these certainly make her a product of colonial times, but not necessarily an imperialist writer. Although Hamilton seems at times to participate in the so-called male oriental discourse, the text defies such easy categories because of the tensions and contradictions within it. Narain refers to Nigel Leask to claim that Hamilton, like her brother Charles and the British orientalist Sir William Jones, tries to interpret or construct

⁴⁴ In “Crossing Genre, Gender, and Race,” Grogan rightly remarks that Hamilton’s refusal to produce a white baby and her production of a black baby creates “a new racial category” (38).

⁴⁵ Mellor, “Romantic Orientalism,” 157.

⁴⁶ Midgley, in “Feminism and Empire,” is only partially correct when she argues that Hamilton supports the educational agenda and feminine ideal of Hannah More (34).

⁴⁷ Mellor, “Romantic Orientalism,” 156.

Indian society according to their ideal of an indigenous classical past⁴⁸ as the author praises the “mild and auspicious government” of ancient India for “the happiness enjoyed by the Hindoos” at that time (67).⁴⁹ This is only partially right because Hamilton does not confine herself to the glory of ancient India. She not only praises the classical past of India but also its continuity in the present.⁵⁰ Moreover, Charles too acknowledges the wrong aspects of colonialism when he refers to “the guilt of conquest” and “the evil which the acquisition of dominion too often inflicts” in his “Preliminary Discourse by the Transtaor” in *Hedaya* indicating that he too has reservations about imperial ventures.⁵¹

In “Romantic Orientalism,” Mellor argues that *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* “unveils [Hamilton’s] personal vision of utopia: a socialist democracy based on the pre-Pauline teachings of Jesus Christ,”⁵² saturated with Christian values of love, mercy and benevolence, in which no discrimination exists between sex, color, creed, or geo-political space--in which women have equality with men, and the colonized with the colonizers. It is certainly difficult to say whether Hamilton dreamt of a utopia in her private life or not, but the ending of the novel does not guarantee such a vision. The conclusion of the novel suggests that readers can best see it as a hybrid text based on the protagonist’s transformation or the lack of it. According to Kelly, at the end, Zaarmilla “is partly Occidentalized, though since he has not become a Christian the process remains incomplete--a merely secular, temporal and relative enlightenment.”⁵³ Kelly rightly comments on the partial transformation of the Rajah who no longer remains an enthusiastic anglophile as before, but returns to India “a sadder but a wiser man.”⁵⁴ Zaarmilla comes back home with the assurance of Christian hope but neither as a Christian nor as an Englishman—he arrives in India as a mimic man--a hybrid.

Thus, in terms of the discussion of its ideas, voice, race, gender, structure, and characters, we may assert that *Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* cannot be “dismissed as a simplistic propaganda that mindlessly replicates some master discourse.”⁵⁵ It neither conforms to an oriental or an occidental text, embodying a unitary voice and offering a clear-cut resolution. As a cultural site of resistance, the text not only interrogates the western discourses about the east but also questions the very values of the west. It produces ambivalence in the colonial masters and alters

⁴⁸Narain, “Colonial Desires,” 597.

⁴⁹ In *Letters of a Hindoo Raja*, Hamilton, further says that with divine guidance and all protecting and caring parental authority, the native Princes ruled over the “amiable and benevolent” Hindus (57).

⁵⁰Rajan, “Feminizing the Feminine,” 155.

⁵¹ Charles Hamilton, “Preliminary Discourse by the Translator” in *Hedaya, or Guide: A Commentary on the Mussulman Laws*, iii.

⁵² Mellor, “Romantic Orientalism,” 164.

⁵³ Kelly, *Women, Writing and Revolution*, 136.

⁵⁴ Perkins and Russell, “Introduction,” 45.

⁵⁵ Perkins and Russell, “Introduction,” 35.

the authority of power as evidenced by the significant role played by Indian characters in the novel. *Letters of a Hindoo Raja* goes far beyond the orientalist discourse characterized by Edward Said as the site of the appropriation and misrepresentation of the easterner by the westerner to occupy a Bhabhaian hybrid space of cultural negotiation.

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