

India and women's poetry of the 1830s: Femininity and the picturesque in the poetry of Emma Roberts and Letitia Elizabeth Landon

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Abstract

This analysis of women's writing on colonial India studies their work against the accounts of the picturesque and its function in colonial writing on India established by Sara Suleri and Nigel Leask. Roberts and Landon both work within this tradition, but ultimately find it inadequate to contain their explorations of domestic as well as colonial femininity. At this point, they supplement the poetic with other forms: prose versions, epigraphs or endnotes. These have the effect of drawing attention to and disrupting the 'screen effect' of the picturesque and explore those 'more shattering aspects of [India's] difference' (Suleri), which it was normally the woman writer's function to alleviate.

India in 1830s literature

Roberts and Landon, like other writers working in the 1830s, may be situated within two related traditions of literary representations of India. One derives from Byron, Southey and Moore in particular, and sees India as the location of luxury, passion and romance. Landon was frequently compared to Byron during her life, and her work engages with Byronic themes and poetics.¹ Roberts's Indian writing is studded with echoes of his and Moore's work, from 'The Giaour' – 'Lord Byron tells us that the colder climes are cold in blood' – to 'Lalla Rookh', brought to her mind in the palace of Agra, and again in the King of Delhi's audience chamber.² Landon's Indian poems make full use of the common currency of this Orientalist tradition: India in her work is an illusion, created from a glimpse of a pipal tree, the placing of a song in the mouth of a 'Hindoo' girl, a female subject identified as the 'Nizam's Daughter'. Writing often to accompany illustrations of Indian themes for the annuals and scrap-books, she relied on the pictures to bring India to the reader's mind. She had never seen it, but the vast majority of her readers had never seen it either, and were versed in the same cultural code as she was: a 'Hindoo girl' came to the reader already laden with the cultural connotations of beauty, devotion, love and pity, so that the writer could take this knowledge for granted, and

[1] See Adriana Craciun, *Fatal Women of Romanticism* (forthcoming).

[2] Emma Roberts (1837) *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan* 2nd edn (London: WH Allen), vol 1, p. 79; vol 2, pp. 83, 216.

focus on the expression of a suitably romantic yearning: ‘every flower reveals / The dreaming of my lonely hours, / The hope my spirit feels’.³

Roberts belongs to the second strand of writing on India: the work of writers living there, both drawing on their own experience of India and influenced by their ties to the metropolitan tradition which shapes what they see as well as how they describe it. Unlike Landon, she saw India at first-hand, but her observations of her Indian scenes are continually refracted through her memories of the Orient already familiar to her in literature. As she stands by the fort of Agra, she meditates:

Perhaps Lord Byron himself, when he stood upon the Bridge of Sighs,
 ...scarcely experienced more overwhelming sensations than the humble
 writer of this paper, when gazing, for the first time, upon the golden crescent
 of the Moslems, blazing high in the fair blue heavens... . The delights of my
 childhood rushed to my soul; these magic tales, from which, rather than
 from the veritable pages of history, I had gathered my knowledge of eastern
 arts and arms, arose in all their original vividness. I felt that I was indeed in
 the land of genii....⁴

In this sense, the image of India Roberts shared with Landon and with every other British writer – the ‘land of genii’, of magic, of escapism – existed in her mind before ever she encountered it; the loories and lotuses and fireflies of her poetry decorate a scene already present.⁵ Where she differs from her contemporaries is in her membership of a group of amateur and professional writers who published in the newspapers of Anglo-India. For several years, until her return to England in 1832, she wrote for these journals and eventually edited one, the *Oriental Literary Observer*, printed in Calcutta. She was in some ways an Anglo-Indian equivalent of Landon (whose involvement with the London *Literary Gazette* went far beyond the writing of its poetry columns), and was

[3] L. E. Landon (1839) The Hindoo Girl's Song, *The Works of L.E. Landon* (Philadelphia: Carey and Hart), vol 2, p. 304.

[4] Roberts, *Scenes and Characteristics*, vol 2, p 80.

[5] Other writers' work displays a similar process of 'recognition', as in Maria Jane Jewsbury's response to Ceylon: 'thy spicy-wooded vales, / Thy dusky sons, and jewels bright./ But image forth the far-famed tales - / But seem a new Arabian Night.' Jewsbury, Oceanides IX. The Eden of the Sea (1833), *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets*, eds. Isobel Armstrong and Joseph Bristow with Cath Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996), pp. 230-232.

equally conscious of her status as a woman writer. *Oriental Scenes*, her book of poems first published in Calcutta, was dedicated to Lady William Bentinck, the wife of the governor-general. In that dedication, Roberts writes of her book as ‘the first production of the kind, emanating from a female pen, which has issued from the Calcutta Press’, and hopes that it may ‘stimulate my country women in India to cultivate those intellectual pursuits which have raised so many female writers to eminence at home’. Enrolling herself thus within the community of women writers, she goes on to locate her work as firmly in another tradition, that of the picturesque: ‘should the perusal of “The Oriental Sketches” incite more gifted pens to the illustration of the scenery of this sunny land, I shall feel highly gratified in having pointed out a mine of rich materials to their notice.’⁶ Her preface, then, is the guide to two main aspects of her work: first, she sets out to provide her readers with a version of India focusing on landscape and scenery, and in so doing produces a view mediated through the conventions of the picturesque. Secondly, she, like Landon, uses Indian settings and characters to explore versions and problems of femininity, and interactions between male and female roles, in the process Isobel Armstrong describes as ‘testing out the account of the feminine experienced in western culture by going outside its prescriptions’.⁷

Women writers and the feminine picturesque

Recent critical work on the picturesque in travel-writing has emphasised its connections to the writers’ experience and representation of colonial ‘difference’ and otherness. Sara Suleri describes it as a means by which ‘all subcontinental threats could be temporarily converted into watercolors and thereby domesticated’; Nigel Leask, taking a slightly different approach, points to the picturesque as a ‘painterly “screen effect” [used] as an existential formula for viewing territory where unseen horrors might lurk.’⁸ The picturesque, in this critical view, makes India safe by allowing the reader sight only of those unthreatening elements that can be accommodated within a familiar aesthetic

[6] Emma Roberts (1830) *Oriental Scenes, Dramatic Sketches and Tales, with Other Poems* (Calcutta), pp. iii-iv. The second edition, published in London in 1832, omits the non-Indian ‘Dramatic Sketches and Tales’ and ‘Miscellaneous Poems’, and includes 11 more poems on Indian topics, most of which had already appeared in the Calcutta papers since 1830.

[7] Isobel Armstrong (1993) *Victorian Poetry: Poetry, Poetics and Politics* (London: Routledge), p. 325.

[8] Sara Suleri (1992) *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: University of Chicago), p. 75; Nigel Leask (2002) *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing, 1770-1840* (Oxford, OUP), p. 169.

setting. Its influence on British observers in India is undoubted: individual responses to features of landscape, architecture or people are formulated in terms of a painterly imperative. Captain Pogson, whose *History of the Boondelas* provided Roberts with some of her Indian lore, is typical in his account of a waterfall: having described rocks, vines, lilies and flowering shrubs, he continues, ‘But I must not attempt to describe scenery which would require the pen of a Radcliffe, or the pencil of a Claude.’⁹ The telling reference to Radcliffe is echoed by Roberts herself, in an account of a night ‘as dark as a romance-writer of the Radcliffe school could desire...’;¹⁰ it betrays one of the basic impulses of the picturesque mode of representation, to fit a wholly alien India into the already-domesticated ‘other’ of the Gothic. Encrusted with ruins, set with flowing rivers and blanketed in luxuriant flowers, the land of heat, disease and incomprehensible strangers is safely transformed into an artist’s playground.

An extreme version of this kind of picturesque pervades Emma Roberts’s poetry, to the extent that examples may be chosen almost at random:

The heavens are cloudless, and the sunny plain
 Rich with its fertile tracts of sugar-cane,
 Its fleecy crops of cotton, corn, and oil,
 And all the myriad plants that gem the soil,
 Yielding their precious juice in costly dyes
 Bright as the rain-bow tints of their own skies,
 Smile in the golden light – a wide expanse
 Of varied landscape where the sun-beams glance
 O’er dotting mango topes, and snow white mhuts,
 Which peep besides the peasants’ straw-thatched huts.
 Beyond, in eastern splendour beaming bright
 The city stands upon a wooded height;
 Its tall pagodas and its broad *Serais*,
 Shining, like pearls amid the noon-tide, blaze;
 While from each terrace shooting up afar

[9] Captain Pogson (1828) *A History of the Boondelas* (Calcutta), pp. 173-4.

[10] Roberts, *Scenes and Characteristics*, vol 1, p. 166.

Gleams the proud mosque, and pinnacled minar...¹¹

Here, India is viewed first as a source of wealth (in cotton and indigo) for its colonizers, then as a canvas for pleasantly exotic elements of a still-life, where people are represented only by their ‘straw-thatched huts’. The city is set in the background, so that its ‘tall pagodas’, mosques and minars may be admired as they shine in the sun, while the intervening distance renders invisible its inhabitants. (Roberts was well aware of the need to censor the images of living people: describing a scene in Delhi, she remarks that ‘to enter into details might destroy the illusion; for, mingled with mounted retainers, richly clothed, and armed with glittering helmets, polished spears, and shields knobbed with silver, crowds of wild-looking half-clad wretches on foot are to be seen, ... adding nothing to the splendour of the cavalcade.’¹²) More generally, India in her poetry is a land of slow decay: poems like ‘A Scene in the Doaab’ or ‘Nour Juffeir Khan’ describe the ‘crumbling mosque’ and ‘ruined fort’ that are all that remains of Muslim power. Even in her poem on the ‘Taaje Mahal’, it’s notable that this enduring achievement – ‘Untouched by time, unscathed by war, / Lonely and bright as eve’s first star’ – is itself a reminder of death. Roberts ensures that this does not go unnoticed: ‘Those circling suns have seen the ray / Of Moslem glory fade away. / And where the crescent reared on high / Its blaze of golden blazonry... / The warriors of the western world / The red cross banner have unfurled’. Nigel Leask remarks that such ‘melancholy contemplation’ of ruins ‘signals ... the triumph of British liberty over oriental despotism’;¹³ Roberts not only signals this, but celebrates it, in lines reminiscent of a football chant: ‘And strangers from a foreign strand / Rule unopposed the conquered land.’

Even in this mode of colonial triumph, the ‘screen’ of the picturesque cannot wholly contain those elements of India most threatening to its British residents. More than the heat or the scorpions, the fear of death haunted Anglo-Indians, with good reason: Roberts saw her sister die within three years of their arrival in India, and ten years later died there herself. In the idyllic portraits of her landscapes, intimations of mortality can be seen through the painterly veil. The opening lines of ‘The Bramin’, for instance, appear to struggle to contain such intrusive themes, in this scene of ‘lovely solitude’, the

[11] Roberts, *The Land Storm*, *Oriental Scenes* (1830).

[12] Roberts, *Scenes and Characteristics*, vol 2, pp. 218-9.

[13] Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing*, p. 174.

cliff, ‘Rich with embowering trees, and garlanded / With mantling creepers, towers above the skiff / Moored where the Ganges’ sacred waters spread / Their wastes below...’. The ‘creepers’ have vaguely menacing connotations, and while the ‘wastes’ of the Ganges literally signify only the expanse of its waters, the word also brings to mind the river’s prevalent associations with death and the ‘waste’ of humanity, the corpses forming its cargo. Such nervous images come to the fore where the work becomes double-voiced, the poem itself overlaid with another presentation of the same material in notes or epigraphs (this trope is discussed in more detail below). The association of beauty and decay is most forcefully made by Roberts herself in the notes to another poem, ‘The Dying Hindoo’, when she writes: ‘Strangers, attracted by some superb lotus floating down the stream, are disgusted by the sight of a dead body rapidly descending with the tide, the ghastly head appearing above the surface of the water.’ The image in the poem is aestheticized in comparison, and thus loses most of its shock value: ‘The red crown of the lotus wreath / Upon the molten silver blushes, / And a dark, lifeless form beneath / With the stream’s headlong current rushes’. Once recognized, however, the trope of the half-concealed corpse persists in other poems also, such as ‘Night on the Ganges’: ‘With snowy vases crowned, the lily springs / In queen-like beauty by the river’s brink; / And o’er the wave the broad-leaved lotus flings / Its roseate flowers in many a knotted link.’ Where the picturesque utterly fails to contain the threat of India, the resulting imagery can be gruesomely powerful. ‘Indian Graves’ describes the burial-grounds of Anglo-Indians, and contrasts Muslim graves – ‘quiet mansions of the dead’ – with the resting-place of Roberts’s countrymen:

...those crowded charnels where
 A sickening taint infects the air,
 And o’er each dark and loathsome grave
 Earth’s rankest weeds delight to wave
 Where from the branches of the trees,
 The vulture snuffs the plague fraught breeze
 And where the prowling jackalls lurk
 Mid whitening bones and ruins gray,
 And hastning to their filthy work,

With the first fall of parting day.¹⁴

Because they are neither ‘other’ nor unfamiliar, the graves of the British dead cannot be aestheticized, and though the poem also fantasizes about burial in England, where ‘daisies lend their silvery shrouds’, it ends by relinquishing all hope of this return; the speaker, without the intervening veil of the picturesque, is compelled to consider the landscape in which she is likely to find her last home.

Such open tears in the fabric of the picturesque are unusual in Roberts’s writing; for the most part, her poetry works to blend India and its residents into a harmonious whole. Indian people appear most commonly as ‘the throng’. Gathered together in an impersonal mass, they veer from spirituality to violent emotion. The throng assembled to make flowery offerings and sing ‘snatches of sweet song’ in ‘The North-Wester’ greet the arrival of a storm with ‘yells, and shrieks of wild despair’; in ‘The Moosulman’s Grave’, they are abstracted into a single voice – ‘From countless lips is breathed the graceful prayer’ – and later generalized to all ‘India’s dark-browed natives’ who ‘dearly prize / The silken treasures of their forest bowers; / They love to plait their fragrant rosaries, / and heap each holy shrine with wreaths of flowers.’ The spectators at a *sati*, in ‘The Rajah’s Obsequies, ‘throng, like clust’ring bees / Swarming around the almond trees’ – an disturbing image of voraciousness. Patient worshippers or irrationally violent in their reactions, they anticipate the depiction of Indians as ‘swarming howling wretches’ in the later ‘Mutiny’ poems, like Christina Rossetti’s ‘In the Round Tower at Jhansi’.¹⁵

Roberts’s individual Indian characters, although in their own ways as stereotyped as ‘the throng’, are sharply divided along gender lines. The men, with the exception of named protagonists of the narrative poems such as ‘Nour Juffeir Khan’, are idle, dying or dead. The ‘idle *golier*’ looking around with ‘careless eye’ from his ‘flower-wreathed prow’ is the only man shown to engage in any purposeful activity, and even he appears less than committed to his work.¹⁶ The protagonists of ‘The Dying Hindoo’, ‘The Moosulman’s

[14] Emma Roberts (1831) Indian Graves, *Oriental Literary Observer* 16 January; this text also appears in the second edition of *Oriental Scenes* (1832).

[15] Christina Rossetti (1857) In the Round Tower at Jhansi, *Poems and Prose: Christina Rossetti*, ed. Jan Marsh (London: Dent, 1994), p. 57.

[16] Roberts, The North-Wester, *Oriental Scenes* (1830).

Grave’, ‘The Rajah’s Obsequies’ are dying or dead; those male figures who appear briefly in the poems are most often religious figures whose pursuits are as spiritual as they are desultory. ‘The Bramin’ decks his ‘holy shrine’ with flowers while his ‘thoughts above the world’s dark confines soar’; the ‘wandering *fakeer* of ‘The Moosulman’s Grave’ ‘feeds the lamp with palm-nut’s fragrant oil / ... And plucks the fairy offsprings of the soil’. Less than industrious, they are also less than masculine, carrying out tasks – tending flowers, thinking spiritual thoughts – stereotypically associated with women. Inderpal Grewal, in her discussion of nineteenth-century travel narratives, accounts for depictions of *female* figures, discovered ‘in poses either erotic or idle’, by the explanation that their placing within a ‘beautiful landscape’ suggested that the land could be properly cultivated only by ‘the hardworking English’.¹⁷ Roberts’s male figures play the same role; their weakness or absence leave the field open (literally) to British dominance. For Robert, figures of masculine strength and achievement may be celebrated, but only in the past tense: ‘No more upon the lofty walls / In troops the well-armed vassals stand; / No more within its stately halls / A gallant chieftain holds command.’¹⁸ The ruins that replace them, and the ruined or degenerate masculinity of India’s inhabitants, are, like the picturesquely empty landscape, a signal that Indian power is gone, and a justification for the exertion of British strength and control.

Indian women, who carry none of the ideological baggage of masculinity, are given more varied treatment in Roberts’s work, most particularly when she constructs around them a discourse of femininity trapped or hindered by a male-dominated world. As elements of the Indian landscape, they are subject to a colonizer’s (implicitly male) gaze, something which involves Roberts, as she constructs their portraits, in the politics as well as the aesthetics of interracial desire. A scene which appears more than once is the vignette of Indian women drawing water from the river: ‘Her graceful *ghurrah* filling there, / Stoops to the brink his dark-eyed maid’.¹⁹ Suleri quotes a similarly ‘sentimental erotic’ depiction by a British man: ‘Nothing can be more picturesque, and to our fancies most thoroughly oriental, than the moment, when “the daughters of the men of the city come out to draw water.”’ Their graceful robes and fine straight figures, with the various

[17] Inderpal Grewal (1996) *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, and the Cultures of Travel* (London: Leicester UP), pp. 44-5.

[18] Roberts, Nour Juffeir Khan, *Oriental Scenes* (1830).

positions in which they are arranged, make the most interesting picture possible...'.²⁰ Such a woman, according to Suleri, becomes 'a figure over which the colonizer can exercise an appreciation of the aesthetic dividends of power'.²¹ As a woman herself, Roberts enjoys a less straightforward access to the dividends of power; her image of the colonized woman is mediated through the gaze of an Indian man, the 'dying Hindoo' whose 'dark-eyed maid' she was. In a similar technique, her descriptions of Indian women (of which there are surprisingly few) focus on jewels, flowers, evocative images of light, to the entire omission of any mention of their 'figures', or of any other physical attribute. 'Like some fair lotus bending deep / Beneath the wave its roseate bells; / Like those pure lily buds that keep / Their virgin court mid forest-cells'²²: so ornamented as to be invisible, Roberts's Indian women are sexless, enabling her in her poetry to ameliorate the 'anxiety about creolization'²³ evident in her prose accounts. Once freed from this anxiety by the creation of sexually unthreatening female figures, she is also liberated from the colonial gaze (which curtails the agency of the viewer as much, though in a different way, as it disempowers its object), and starts to use her images of Indian women to explore, not the 'otherness' of the colonized, but the nature of the feminine self.

Roberts shares with Landon, and with Felicia Hemans and Maria Jane Jewsbury as well, a preoccupation with definitions and circumscriptions of femininity which finds metaphorical expression in their accounts of the trials of women outside the 'home' of English bourgeois marriage. For Jewsbury, Roberts and Landon, this trope is explored in its most extreme form in their literal depictions of *sati* or widow-burning (see below), but Roberts also makes it a concern in others of her poems. Some of her female figures do embody contemporary English domestic ideals of romantic love and companionate marriage, simply transferred into an Indian setting. ('And she – oh! in this earthly sphere, / Or heaven's wide realm, no dream of bliss / Is half so precious and so dear, / So

[19] Roberts, *The Dying Hindoo*, *Oriental Scenes* (1830).

[20] Captain Thomas Skinner (1832) *Excursions in India; Including a Walk over the Himalaya Mountains, to the Sources of the Jumna and the Ganges* (London), vol 2, pp. 212-3; quoted in Suleri, *Rhetoric of English India*, p. 92.

[21] Suleri, *Rhetoric of English India*, p. 92.

[22] Roberts, Nour Juffeir Khan, *Oriental Scenes* (1830).

[23] Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing*, p. 222.

cherished as her infant's kiss, / And that loved husband's fondness shewn / For her bright form, and her's alone! / Her woman's heart on earth has found / Its own domestic paradise...'.²⁴) Others, however, find themselves trapped or threatened by predatory masculinity, a motif in her poetry that echoes the 'obsessive theme of female imprisonment' Leask identifies in her travel writing.²⁵ These metaphors of male power and aggression are clearly evident in 'A Legend of Colgong', as the heroine tries to escape a 'band of men':

Unconscious why, Malvati fled
Her young heart knew no cause for dread,
For she had passed the tangled brake
The giant serpent's dark abode,
Stood on the margin of the lake,
To see the tiger quaff its flood
had ventured from some leafy screen,
To gaze, while on the plain below,
The savage combat raged between,
The madly furious buffalo,
And his uncouth unwieldy foe,
The huge rhinoceros, with shock,
And fierce assault and stunning blow,
Up tearing earth, and tree, and rock,
The mortal conflict's deadly strife,
Yielding alone with yielding life.
But flying now, she sought the wood...²⁶

Her instinctive terror of men is validated by succeeding events (they plan to sacrifice her by throwing her to the Ganges), and by the outcome of the plot, when she and her lover, a youth 'too lovely far for mortal birth', live together 'far from human ken / In the deep bosom of that wood, / A lonely spot where cruel men, / Can ne'er with savage step intrude...'. Malvati, a widowed child-bride, is indeed an example of what might be called, to adapt Spivak's well-known formulation, a brown woman in need of saving

[24] Roberts, Nour Juffeir Khan, *Oriental Scenes* (1830).

[25] Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing*, p. 222.

from brown men.²⁷ Her saviour, however, is not an Englishman, but a goddess, Malvati's 'deity / She never hoped to worship more'; the 'suttee romance'²⁸ of so many British accounts of *sati* is replaced by a version where femininity is its own salvation.

A similar resistance to ideas of feminine sacrifice, or self-sacrifice, is evident in 'The Rajah's Obsequies', Roberts's more conventional *sati* poem. In writing this, she was adding to a large body of literature: most of her contemporaries used this theme in one form or another. Their works fall into two main categories, mirroring the broader discourse on *sati* described by Lata Mani, in which 'women are represented in two mutually exclusive ways; as heroines able to withstand the raging blaze of the funeral pyre or else as pathetic victims coerced against their will into the flames.'²⁹ It may be a co-incidence that women writers tended to choose the first version, as in Landon's 'Bayadere', where the woman's devotion in choosing to die with her love is rewarded by her possession of him, and the brief mention of the 'burning' pile is quickly succeeded by the promise that 'Thy love and thy faith have won for thee / The breath of immortality.'³⁰ Her later work, 'Immolation of a Hindoo Widow', takes a similar line; the end is once again the widow's apotheosis, where the barely-mentioned fire is replaced by the image of 'perfect union' between husband and wife: 'let the bride ascend, / And lay her head upon her husband's heart'.³¹ Maria Jane Jewsbury, in her 'Song of the Hindoo Women', also concentrates on glorious sacrifice to the exclusion of anything approaching the heat of a fire. The prophetic future tense with which the poem ends permits the reader to remain untroubled by any representation of the widow's suffering: 'scatter with a tearless eye / Thy flowers upon each passer by ; - / While shouts of triumph to thy fame, / Shall mingle with the mounting flame / That bears thee

[26] Emma Roberts (1831) A Legend of Colgong, *Oriental Literary Observer* 2 January; the text appears also in the second edition of *Oriental Scenes* (1832).

[27] 'White men are saving brown women from brown men'. See G.C. Spivak, Can the Subaltern Speak?, in *Marxism and the Interpretation of Culture* eds. Cary Nelson and Lawrence Grossberg (Basingstoke: Macmillan, 1988), pp. 296-7. The essay has been widely reproduced.

[28] The phrase is taken from Margery Sabin (1991) The Suttee Romance, *Raritan*, 11, 2, 1-24.

[29] Lata Mani (1998) *Contentious Traditions: The Debate on Sati in Colonial India* (Berkeley: University of California Press), p. 162.

[30] Landon, The Bayadere, *Works*, vol 2, pp. 28-32.

[31] Landon, Immolation of a Hindoo Widow, *Works*, vol 2, pp. 299-300. This text was later included as 'A Suttee' in Landon (1839) *The Zenana and Minor Poems*, ed. Emma Roberts (London: Fisher).

as a chariot bright, To Vishnoo's thousand halls of light'.³² The funeral pyre enables these women to transcend their lives. Rather than suffering a miserable end, they attain the highest goal of domestic romance, achieving eternal bliss by joyfully surrendering themselves.

Men, on the other hand, appear to have preferred the 'pathetic victim' version of the tale: Richardson's evocation of a 'failing Martyr' inveigled into self-sacrifice by the 'Brahmin's guile' is typical of many others.³³ The most egregious example of this is the Oxford Prize Poem, 'The Suttee' published by Roberts herself during her stint as editor of the *Oriental Literary Observer*. The author, Percy Ashworth, follows an absolutely conventional sati narrative with a meditation on its relevance to the domestic romance:

And such is woman's love! whose magic pow'r
Can chance the gloomiest to the brightest hour;
Can smooth the deep lines care has learn'd to plow,
And chase the cloud of anguish from the brow.
It droops not, - parts not with the parting breath,
But smiles a proud defiance unto death!
Yes! if in woman's soul, despite of all,
Degrading creeds, and custom's blinding thrall,
Though bound by superstition's galling chains,
Feeling so noble, so divine remains!
Exalted by a purer faith, refin'd
By better thoughts, with fairer hopes entwin'd;
Oh! where the brighter star to cheer our gloom,
Make heav'n of earth, and triumph o'er tomb!³⁴

The grammar is perhaps unclear, but the burden unmistakable: the widow's burning is both a sign of her own and her people's enslavement to degrading creeds and customs,

[32] Maria Jane Jewsbury (1825) Song of the Hindoo Women, While Accompanying a Widow to the Funeral Pile of Her Husband, *Nineteenth-Century Women Poets*, eds. Isobel Armstrong and Joseph Bristow with Cath Sharrock (Oxford: Clarendon, 1996), pp. 218-220.

[33] D.L.R. [David Lester Richardson] (1829) The Suttee, *Bengal Hurkaru*, 16 November; quoted in Mani, *Contentious Traditions*, p. 175.

[34] Percy Ashworth (1831) The Suttee, *Oriental Literary Observer* 4 December.

and a sign of the value of women's service in making easy the lives of men – the sati victim neatly co-opted into both a patriarchal and a colonizing narrative.

Roberts, in 'The Rajah's Obsequies', succeeds in combining both traditions of representation of the *sati* woman, by writing of two women; unusually, she also gives each woman a narrative in which she explains her actions. One appears at first to be firmly in the mould of Landon's self-sacrificing protagonists, claiming the 'privilege divine' to give her life in order to bring him the gift of 'a pure and bright eternity'. The reader's final glimpse of her combines female heroism and the image of the drugged victim of the eyewitness accounts cited by Mani:³⁵ despite her 'sweet seraphic smile', the narrator observes, 'In some blest trance she seems to be, / Or day's delicious reverie.' The agency she claimed in her song gives place here to a drugged stillness, as she awaits her death. The second woman's song departs from the models offered in earlier depictions of sati: Mitala speaks in the language of British indignation at Hindu practices, calling the Brahmins 'accursed priests' and the rite of sati 'unholy'; but she speaks also in the language of feminist indignation at masculine oppression:

I, from my earliest infancy, have bowed
A helpless slave to lordly man's controul,
No hope of liberty, no choice allowed,
Unheeded all the struggles of my soul;
Compelled by brutal force to link my fate
With one who best deserved my scorn and hate.³⁶

She explains her actions, not as willing self-sacrifice, nor as deluded acquiescence, but as a deliberate choice to avoid a miserable existence: 'Better it is to *die*, than inly pine, / And feel the soul, the towering spirit, droop / Beneath the cruel toil, the years of pain, / The lost, degraded widow must sustain.' Above all, she expresses resentment of her weakness, and the will to that power held by men – 'could these weak arms wield a soldier's brand, / Could these too fragile limbs sustain the fight, / Even to the death...'. Extraordinary as this outburst seems in the context of contemporary representations, it immediately brings to mind the question: how much does Mitala speak for Roberts herself? Felicity Nussbaum suggests in the context of her analysis of late eighteenth-

[35] See Mani, *Contentious Traditions*, pp. 158-190.

[36] Roberts, 'The Rajah's Obsequies', *Oriental Scenes* (1830).

century women's representations of *sati* that, while 'the stories of the Indian woman and the Englishwoman may not be coequal or possess an identity, they are complexly bound together within systems of oppression.'³⁷ Roberts was not married, and her account of the life of an unmarried Anglo-Indian woman shows her all too aware of the powerlessness associated with being single, as well as the 'sort of compulsion sometimes used to effect the consent of a lady'.³⁸ Lata Mani's description of widows' explanations for why they chose *sati* emphasises 'fear and uncertainty of what lay ahead of them [because of] the vulnerable social and economic status of widows'.³⁹ Roberts's account of why a woman might choose to marry despite herself carries an echo of this: 'their parents or friends have no means of providing for them except by a matrimonial establishment; they feel that they are burthens upon families who can ill afford to support them, and they do not consider themselves at liberty to refuse an offer, although the person proposing may not be particularly agreeable to them'.⁴⁰ In the contained, exotic imagery of an Indian woman's death, Roberts may have found a way of interrogating and resenting her own entanglement in the web of power controlled by men.

Landon's literary 'India'

The India of Landon's poems appears often to be an intensified version of Roberts's creation: less materially present, more stylized, its inhabitants more static and soulful, its landscapes more ornate. This is partly owing to the context in which they were published, as accompaniments to the engravings contained in such lavish publications as *Fisher's Drawing Room Scrap Book*, in which most of her work discussed in this article first appeared.⁴¹ These illustrations, and the notes written by Landon to connect them to her poems, seem to contain most of what is 'Indian' about the works, leaving Landon in

[37] Felicity A. Nussbaum (1995) *Torrid Zones: Maternity, Sexuality and Empire in Eighteenth-Century Narratives* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins), p. 191.

[38] Emma Roberts (1835) *Bengal Brides and Bridal Candidates*, *Women's Writing 1778-1838*, ed. Fiona Robertson (Oxford: Oxford World's Classics, 2001), pp. 532-534. This is an extract reprinted from the first edition of *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan*.

[39] Mani, *Contentious Traditions*, p. 180.

[40] Roberts, *Bengal Brides*, p. 532.

the poetry to concentrate on her most characteristic topic, the exploration of a state of mind. In 'Fishing Boats in the Monsoon', for example, there is only one material element of the landscape highlighted, 'The peepul tree beside our door, / How dark its branches wave; / They seem as they were drooping o'er / Its usual haunt, the grave.'⁴² This is Roberts's evocation of a landscape of decline taken to an extreme, but here the mournful *pipal* tree stands as a metaphor, not for India's degeneration, but for the speaker's expression of her own melancholy as she persistently fears the worst for her fisherman. 'India', insofar as it is to be found in the poem at all, is a largely irrelevant location.

Others of Landon's poems appear to show her re-visiting Roberts's themes and vignettes of India, and again recasting them as abstract meditations. The landscape of 'Shuhur, Jeypore', her poem about an British burial-ground in India, is realized to a much lesser degree than Roberts's 'Indian Graves' (see above). The only material detail here is the 'dark branches' drooping over a grave, while the particularity of Roberts's images of 'crowded charnels' and 'rank weeds' over 'each dark and loathsome grave' is vitiated by multiplication: in Landon's vision, 'the earth / Is cover'd with a thousand English graves'.⁴³ For Roberts's evocation of a concrete, albeit stylized, home (characterized by British birds and flowers) and a decoratively luxuriant India, Landon substitutes a further level of abstraction: 'native ground' and 'native air' versus 'the wealth of worlds beyond the wave'. The most authentic location of the poem is nowhere near 'India', it is in the implied domestic romance disrupted by the colonial enterprise: 'for this, the household band is broken up, / The hearth made desolate – and sunder'd hearts / Left to forget or break'.

[41] I am indebted for information about Landon's publishing to Glenn Dibert-Himes and Cynthia Lawford (1997) *Index to the Poetry of Letitia Elizabeth Landon* *Letitia Elizabeth Landon: Selected Writings*, eds. Jerome J. McGann and Daniel Riess (Peterborough, Ontario: Broadview), pp. 387-506.

[42] Landon, *Works*, vol 2, p. 305.

[43] Landon, Shuhur, Jeypore, *Works*, vol 2, p. 277. Landon's note to this poem remarks that, 'Every traveller alludes to the melancholy appearance of European burying-grounds; without mourners or memorial, and almost without the common decencies of sepulture'; this general reference disguises, I think, a specific reliance on Roberts's work, with which she was familiar: her notes to 'The Zenana'

A similar relation of abstraction may be discovered in Landon's 'Indian' women, compared to Roberts's portraits. These are rarely given physical descriptions, even of Roberts's stylized variety; instead, they appear as implied speaker of the poems, where they express the romantic, yearning, waiting, hoping, despairing emotions characteristic of Landon's work. The speaker of 'Fishing Boats' waits for her lover's return; the 'Hindoo Mother' mourns her child; the 'Hindoo Girl' floats her coconut shell down the river and waits to see if her dreams of love will be fulfilled ('every flower reveals / The dreaming of my lonely hours, / The hope my spirit feels'⁴⁴). 'The Nizam's Daughter' is a study in stasis concealing a well of emotion:

...the large black eyes, like night,
 Have passion and have power;
 Within their sleepy depths is light,
 For some wild waking hour.
 A world of sad and tender dreams
 'Neath those long lashes sleep,
 'A native pensiveness that seems
 Too still and sweet to weep'

The poem concludes by validating this over other forms of femininity: such women grow 'more delicate and dear. / And love, thus made a thing apart, / Must seem the more divine, / When the sweet temple of the heart / Is a thrice veiled shrine.'⁴⁵ Evoking the potent image of the Indian woman of the zenana, object of one man's gaze alone, the poem locates feminine desirability in her capacity for being exclusively possessed.⁴⁶ 'Scene in Kattiawar' offers a similar view. The opening stanzas, with their charge of energy and violence, describe a man's bandit lifestyle:

I have a steed, to leave behind
 The wild bird, and the wilder wind:
 I have a sword, which does not know
 How to waste a second blow:

acknowledge 'Miss Roberts, to whose "Oriental Scenes" I am indebted for so much information...'
 (*Works*, vol 2, p. 269).

[44] Landon, *Works*, volume 2, pp. 305, 299, 304.

[45] Landon, 'The Nizam's Daughter', *Works*, vol 2, pp. 288-289.

[46] Given Landon's experiences of scandal blighting her reputation throughout her career, such a portrait is clearly open to at least the possibility of being read as an ironically personal reflection.

I have a matchlock, whose red breath
 Bears the lightning's sudden death;
 I have a foot of fiery flight,
 I have an eye that cleaves the night.
 I win my portion in the land
 By my high heart and strong right hand.

In the last stanza, a woman appears – the high point of the list of his prizes – a ‘sweet captive’ who ‘loves her lot’, and who is happy in her fetters: ‘Let her but wish for shawls or pearls, / To bind her brow, to braid her curls...’.⁴⁷ Whether dreaming of a man, or living for him, or mourning for him, Landon’s ‘Indian’ female figures, like Roberts’s, explore the ‘captivity’ of women’s economic and emotional dependence on men.

The failure of the picturesque

Roberts’s habit of approaching her material twice over, once through poetry and once through prose, brings out in sharp relief the contrast between the version of India offered in the different genres. The ‘Oriental scenes’ she describes in her poetry are at once more stylized and less concrete than those of her prose works – as might be expected, given the ornately ‘poetic’ voice she inherited from Thomas Moore in particular – but they are also more Orientalist in the Saidean sense. Fiona Robertson writes of her that she is ‘unwilling to use instances of native or foreign idiosyncrasy to validate the home team’.⁴⁸ This is clearly true of the travel-writing that is Robertson’s topic, where Roberts examines with an equally wry clarity the activities of Anglo-Indian residents and those of their Indian servants. In the poetry, however, the response to instances of Indian ‘otherness’ is overwhelmingly conventional. ‘The Rajah’s Obsequies’, for instance, resolves its complex mediation on the woman’s role with an instance of colonial piety worthy of Percy Ashworth: a Hindu widow looking forward to the time when ‘all the hundred thrones of Hindostan / Before the west’s pale warriors shall bow’. At other times, examples of Indian behaviour are presented as unproblematically and stereotypically romantic: the picture of the ‘Hindoo Girl’ mourning her husband includes the lines:

A gurrah hangs upon the boughs above,

[47] Landon, Scene in Kattiawar, *Works*, vol 2, p. 284.

[48] Fiona Robertson (2001) *Women’s Writing 1778-1838* (Oxford: Oxford World’s Classics), p. 529.

Brought from the distant river's sedge-crowned brink,
 In the fond fancy that her spirit love,
 Will stoop o'er Ganges' holy wave to drink...

The prose account of the same scene is far less indulgent, continuing with the caustic observation that nobody had thought to take this custom to its logical extent by putting a slice of bread-and-butter on a grave, so that the occupant might eat.⁴⁹ Poetry, at least in Roberts's version of it, has no space for sarcasm.

The same argument can be made with regard to Landon's work, where the contrast between her source material and her poetic recasting is if anything more vivid. A parallel text to Roberts's 'Hindoo Girl' is her poem entitled 'The Hindoo Mother', a portrait of a mother waiting by the river-bank for the waves to wash away the dead body of her child. It is entirely static: nothing refers to the physical or emotional quality of the mother's loss; instead, the poem dwells on her 'dreaming of the future years' of what her son might have become, and her grief is expressed in the conventional imagery of the 'light...vanish'd from her day' and his 'sunny smile' gone from her house. She is silent throughout – she sees, she dreams, but the poem explicitly writes out the possibility of her speech: 'No more will her sweet voice be heard'. As is her custom, however, Landon includes with this poem a substantial endnote, containing in this case her source material, a long quotation from an 'interesting description' by 'Mrs Belnos'.⁵⁰ This has no more claim to intrinsic realism or authenticity than Landon's poem – Belnos's work is a series of captions to a book of illustrations, the original scene, if it ever existed, already aestheticized – but it does include exactly what Landon omits, the mother's lament. Rich in the physical detail of loss that Landon's poem eschews, it conveys a sense of the materiality of the child's existence and the excess of his mother's grief: 'The infant continually called me mah, mah, (mother, mother;) the infant used to say mah, let me sit upon thy lap! my child his father never stayed at home since he was born... but bore him continually in his arms for men to admire. ... O! my life, say mah again, my child! ... My arms and my lap feel empty, who will fill them again?' Landon's deliberate choice to silence her emotion is even more apparent on looking at the rest of Belnos's caption

[49] Roberts, *Scenes and Characteristics*, vol 1, p. 202.

[50] S.C.B. [ie. S.C. Belnos] *Twenty four plates illustrative of Hindoo and European Manners in Bengal* (London: Smith and Elder Cornhill, n.d.).

(which doesn't feature in Landon's note): here, the woman's 'female neighbour passing by chance' tries to comfort her, telling her it is pointless to weep. 'This address however instead of moderating her lamentations, induces her to burst forth afresh with greater vehemence, sometimes by ...rolling like a maniac on the ground till two or three neighbours or relatives drag her home by force.'⁵¹ The caption thus re-integrates the woman into her community, while Landon's extract from it insists on her solitude, and the poem leaves out even the words of her lament, flattening still further the affect of the original. McGann and Riess refer to something like this effect, writing that Landon's focus on 'secondary and evacuated worlds' leaves her 'atmospheres ... as thin as her cartoon characters' (28). While this accurately describes her poetry, it does not account for her persistence in including with her 'Indian' poems their accompanying notes. As well as source material, these often contain elements of commentary, sometimes echoing Roberts's sardonic voice. The meditation on the woman's nervous dread and fear of loss as she awaits news of her sea-faring lover ('Fishing Boats in the Monsoon') is preceded by a guide-book-style observation that the 'western coasts of India abound with a great variety of fish, of excellent quality'. In 'Ruins about the Taj Mahal', the poem's evocation of the loss and grief behind Nour Jahan's building of a fabulous tomb to memorialize his wife ('they pass away / The dearest and the fairest') is revisited in the note's account of masculine possessiveness and the transience of goldfish: 'Ponds of gold and silver fish are the common ornaments of a great man's ground in India. They are covered after sunset with a gauze frame, to protect them from their various nightly enemies. Notwithstanding the care taken for their preservation, they often become the prey of the kingfisher.' Such prose accompaniments to her work supply the material details, the 'atmosphere' lacking in her poetry. More to the point for this discussion, the dissonance between prose and verse has the immediate effect of foregrounding and drawing attention to the very literary technique of the picturesque. The screen is still present between the reader and the subject-matter, but Landon's use of the doubled voice ensures that the reader is immediately aware of the artifice with which it is created.

The poems of Roberts and of Landon seem, often, to embody an extreme form of the picturesque. Sara Suleri remarks on the prevalence of heat and insects in 'typical Anglo-Indian women's writing': complaints about these topics are a 'safe way of recording

[51] Ibid.

colonial claustrophobia' without encroaching on men's 'political terrain'. Roberts's work sees even these two enemies are banished: in poems whose characteristic setting is the evening, 'sunlight and scorpions' (Suleri's phrase) become 'golden light' ('Land Storm'), 'balmy air', and gem-like 'fire-flies' ('The North-Wester). The most common descriptor used in these poems is the word 'bright': it appears in every one of Roberts's poems discussed in this article (up to 16 times in a single work, 'The Legend of Colgong'), and in many of the others' as well. It is *the* quintessentially picturesque term, and is used to create an effect while actually describing as little material reality as possible – 'bright' objects reflect light, but are not necessarily themselves plainly visible:

She grew in beauty like the light
Of that rich clime where all is bright,
Insect and bird on rainbow wing,
In the sun's radiance glittering,
Where giant flowers of heavenly birth,
Shed stars upon the jewelled earth,
Strewed with such gleaming hoards as pave
The bed of that ethereal wave,
Lit by more pure celestial beams,
Than those which gild the world below,
The golden fount whose hallowed streams
Through Heaven's own realms of brightness flow.⁵²

In these lines, as so often in this poetry, the impression of light drowns out any other, and with material presence goes also human feeling. The picturesque, then, fulfils the purpose Nigel Leask defines for it, screening out 'the poverty, famine, and squalor which often met the eyes of Europeans travelling in colonial India'⁵³ However, both Roberts and Landon write their poetry in a complex and shifting relationship with this picturesque 'screen'. Roberts's notes, and her prose versions, highlight those grotesque or incongruous elements of her personal observations that her poetry leaves out (like the view of corpses floating in the Ganges cited above) – and thereby, of course, draw to the reader's attention her credentials as an authentic voice on India. Landon's notes, unlike Roberts's, are studiously impersonal; they point towards stories, bits of folklore,

[52] Roberts, *The Legend of Colgong*.

[53] Leask, *Curiosity and the Aesthetics of Travel Writing*, p. 169.

newspaper articles, pictures: they offer a poetic voice in dialogue with the textual substance of literary 'India' to create the process of representation of which her poems are but one, deliberately attenuated, version. Both writers consciously use the 'painterly screen' to create a safely flat and distanced image for their readers, but sometimes the screen is drawn away; the writers interpolate a different kind of narrative, sentimental or sensational, which pulls their readers closer to the scene, inviting them to participate, albeit vicariously, in the shock of discovering a corpse beneath a lotus wreath, or the physical misery of the woman rolling on the ground in the excess of her grief. The most striking example of this is Landon's poem 'Scene in Bundelkhund'. Here, the stereotypically picturesque opening – the 'purple shadow' of evening, the 'wind amid the reeds' – gives way to a vehement rejection of this poetic: the narrative voice exclaims 'Dreams – dreams indeed!', and continues in an erratic, disturbed metre to delineate a mourning woman quite unlike any other. 'Her eye is fix'd in terrible despair, / Her lip is white with pain, and, spectre-like, / Her shape is worn with famine – on her arm / Rests a dead child – she does not weep for it. / Two more are at her side, she'd weep for them, / But that she is too desperate to weep'. No longer 'other', she personifies the 'fierce and cruel nature' Landon ascribes to all humanity, and manifests it in the most shocking form possible: 'There is death / Within these wolfish eyes. Not for herself!' The poem describes, in the words of Landon's note, the effects of famine in Bundelkhund, where, 'Mothers have been seen to devour the dead bodies of their own children!' Interrupted by exclamation marks and metrical irregularities, rising to the typographical crescendo of the last line's capitals, 'AND SUCH IS HUMAN NATURE, AND OUR OWN', the poem marks the limits of the picturesque, where it is cast aside as being finally inadequate to Landon's intended effect, not of distance or 'othering', but of the union in horror of poet, reader and subject. In these extreme states of degradation or starvation, in Roberts's graveyard or Landon's famine-stricken land, that death against which the picturesque is always a defence approaches unstoppably near, and the painterly screen of an aestheticized India disintegrates before it.

