DOI: 10.69138/arete-2531-6249-20251010

«A life independent of *her own* life»: Fanny Parkes and her India

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Abstract: «A life independent of *her own* life»: with this curious expression, placed at the end of her travel account *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque* (1850), Fanny Parkes summarized her extraordinary experience in India, her home between 1822 and 1846. As the wife of an East India Company official, she followed her husband, settling in various Indian cities. Yet, in this new environment, she led a separate and largely independent life. Free from domestic duties – the couple never had children – she embarked on a series of explorations, accompanied only by local servants. This essay sets out to examine both the conventional elements and the multiple transgressions in her travelogue, which she personally edited and published, including sketches and drawings produced during her stay in India. As will be shown, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque* is ambivalent and controversial: on the one hand, Parkes often aligned herself with her male counterparts, adopting an objectifying gaze towards the Other; on the other hand, however, she used her text to reflect on gender inequalities, while voicing social and political criticism.

Keywords: *Fanny Parkes, Gender inequalities, India, Objectification, Travel Writing*

1. Introduction

Nowadays, Fanny Parkes (1794–1875)[1] is a rather obscure figure, somehow lost in the complex tapestry of Nineteenth-century British literature. Nevertheless, when *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque* – her only literary endeavour, focused on her 24-year stay in India – was published by Pelham Richardson in 1850, she became an overnight celebrity. Indeed, given the popularity of her account, she succeeded in carving out a space for herself in the literary market as a broadly recognized authority on Indian matters. With its two volumes, 71 meticulously detailed chapters, nearly 1000 pages, comprehensive glossary of frequently used foreign terms (in Sanskrit, Persian, Hindi, and Urdu), 50 appealing illustrations (based on either her own or her friends' drawings)[2], 147 "Oriental proverbs" scattered throughout the text, and well-researched appendix[3], *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque* helped quench the thirst for knowledge of many English armchair travellers. Forming the majority of her audience, in fact, these sedentary readers were eager to explore – albeit only vicariously – distant and heavily exoticized lands, at a time when the 1857 Indian Mutiny[4] – now more appropriately referred to as the First War of Indian Independence – had not yet irreparably affected Britain's relations with India.

This essay sets out to investigate the main themes and motifs of Parkes's narrative where, as will be shown, conflicting tensions are at play, as is often the case in travel literature penned by women. In her dual capacity as a «colonize[r] by race» but «colonized by gender» (Ghose, 1998, p. 5), on the

1 In some secondary sources and scholarly works, her surname appears as "Parks".

2 Some drawings are in black and white; others are in colour.

3 Various items are included in the appendix section, such as excerpts from other travellers' accounts, recipes, medical procedures, and newspaper clippings.

4 Indira Ghose observes that the word "Mutiny" was actually used to downplay and «domesticize the revolt». The uprisings did not involve just the Sepoys (mercenary troops hired by the East India Company), who rebelled because the new gunpowder cartridges for the Enfield rifle were greased with animal fat from pigs and cows – forbidden to Muslims and Hindus, respectively. «[A] coalition of civilian and military forces», exacerbated by the colonizers' predatory practices, actually swept through the country, fighting for independence. I. Ghose, *Women Travellers in Colonial India*, Oxford University Press, Delhi 1998, p. 88.

one hand, she visibly adopted an objectifying gaze towards the Other – similar to that of her male counterparts – aimed at justifying imperialist drives. On the other hand, however, fruitful intercultural contact enabled her not only to transgress the boundaries of the domestic sphere, but also to reflect on and voice criticism of her own gender subordination, while venturing into the realm of social and political commentary from which women were traditionally barred. A brief profile of Parkes's life and mobility within the Indian Subcontinent will prove useful in shedding light on her travelogue.

2. Fanny Parkes, the traveller, in context

Born into a military family, Frances Susanna was the second daughter of Captain William Archer[5]. In 1822, she married Charles Crawford Parkes, four years her junior, and travelled with him to Calcutta; he held the position of assistant to the Collector of Sea Customs. In 1830, the couple moved to Cawnpore, where Charles served as Acting Collector of Customs, before receiving a permanent posting at Allahabad as Collector of Customs (Goldsworthy, 2018, p. 135).

When Parkes settled in India, relations with the local population were not as tense as they would become during the Raj[6]. After 1857, in fact, British women (wives, daughters, fiancées, and sisters, who travelled to the Subcontinent to accompany their male relatives) were transformed into symbolic battlefields. They were constructed as living embodiments of purity, untainted domesticity, and moral integrity, thus equated with the body

5 Some sources, including Sara Suleri (1992, p. 83) and David Arnold (2019, p. 38), mistakenly claim that her father was Major Edward Caulfield Archer, author of *Tours in Upper India and in Parts of the Himalaya Mountains* (1833). In truth, her father had participated in the Revolutionary and Napoleonic Wars (Leask, 2002, p. 231). Fanny's elder sister, Anne, married a military chaplain posted to South India, where she also spent many years (Eaton, 2018, p. 12).

6 Nonetheless, intercultural relations remained far from idyllic; as Indira Ghose and Sara Mills (2001, p. 15) have noted, «a feeling of contempt for Indians» was rapidly creeping in, «epitomized by the growing popularity of the term "nigger"» to indicate the native population.

politic, in need of male protection against the natives' brutal and corrupting forces (Roy, 2012, p. 49). Conversely, at the time when Parkes gathered the materials that would be included in *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque*, no formal segregation was enforced between the British and the Indians, and her travelogue benefits from the intense exchanges she experienced across social strata. Numerous references are also made to cross-cultural conjugal unions, such as the marriage – blessed with many children – between James Gardner (the son of William Linnaeus Gardner[7], a former mercenary soldier who had resumed allegiance to the Crown) and Mulka Humanee Begum, a Mughal princess.

During her stay, Parkes did not behave like a typical *memsahib* – the term for white women in the Subcontinent – who indulged in the luxury of a multitude of servants[8], while languishing in boredom and fastidious isolation. In a letter to Eleanor Grosvenor, Fanny Eden[9] – the sister of George Eden, the first Earl of Auckland and the newly appointed Governor-General of India – provides a portrait of the eccentric traveller that aptly encapsulates her distinctive traits:

> We are rather oppressed just now by a lady, Mrs Parkes, who insists on belonging to our camp... She has a husband who always goes mad in the cold season, so she says it is her duty to herself to leave him and travel about. She has been a beauty and has remains of it, and is abundantly fat and lively. At Benares, where we fell in with her, she informed us she was an independent woman (Robinson, 1990, p. 219).

Regardless of Eden's irreverent tone and caustic remarks about Parkes's faded beauty and alleged plumpness, her own identification as an independent woman sets the tenor of her travelogue. *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of*

7 He himself had also married a Mughal princess. See Dalrymple, 2002, pp. xiii-xiv.

8 In an insightful passage, Parkes (1850, I, p. 26) complains that «it is *impossible* to do with a few servants, you *must* have many».

9 Both Fanny and her sister Emily (who had also accompanied their brother George) were travel writers as well. Emily wrote *Up the Country: Letters Written to Her Sister from the Upper Provinces of India* (1866), while Fanny's journal and letters from India were posthumously released in 1988 as *Tigers, Durbars and Kings: Fanny Eden's Indian Journals*, 1837-1838.

the Picturesque chronicles her many exciting expeditions to all the major cities and sites in India and to the Himalayas, either on horseback or aboard her two-masted pinnace, the *Seagull*, sailing on the river Jumna with her Indian male crew. Among the many enthusiastic sentences in her account, one best exemplifies the pleasures she increasingly felt in «vagabondizing over India» (Parkes, 1850, II, p. 192): «Roaming about with a good tent and a good Arab, one might be happy forever in India» (ibid., p. 191). The conspicuous absence of her husband is another unusual feature of Parkes's narrative. Nigel Leask (2002, p. 231) describes him as «a shadowy figure in the text», while William Dalrymple (2002, p. ix) seemingly validates Fanny Eden's pungent observation by stating that Charles was «a mentally unstable junior official»[10]. The couple was childfree and, most of the time, Parkes travelled either on her own or with a limited number of servants. Her curiosity prompted her to become an avid collector of artifacts and natural specimens – a habit that would prove profitable later on in her life. Given her keen interest in Indian culture and traditions, after years of assiduous application, she managed to master Hindi, Sanskrit, and Urdu. During her stay, she also learnt to play the sitar.

3. A controversial account: between conventionality and transgression

Research efforts devoted to Parkes's text differ significantly in interpreting the traveller's aims and intentions. According to Zerin Alam (2015, p. 7), she was an authentic «Indophile» who underwent a process of «chutnification»[11], borrowing the expression from William Dalrymple (2002, p. xix) who, besides depicting her as a «passionate lover of India» (ibid., p. xviii), goes so far as to invoke the notion of reverse colonization: «the colonizer had been colonized. India had changed and transformed Fanny Parkes» (ibid., p. ix)[12]. Conversely, Farah Ghaderi (2012, p. 47) argues that *Wanderings of a Pilgrim*

10 No mention of Charles's mental illness is ever made throughout the narrative.

11 The term was coined by Salman Rushdie in *Midnight's Children.*

12 Amy Lynn Snook (2010, p. 26) also maintains that, with the passing of time, Parkes became progressively «Indianized», as her lifestyle and travelogue clearly testify.

in Search of the Picturesque «is highly embedded in Orientalist discourse», an opinion echoed by Sara Suleri (1992, ePub 39%), who emphasizes the writer's «colonial gaze»[13]. Other scholars, such as Indira Ghose and Sara Mills (2001, p. 5), and Tanvi Lal (2016, p. 22), have underlined Parkes's ambiguity, her problematic mixture of genuine appreciation of everything local and her homogenizing and aestheticizing portrayals of colonial subjects which, as Johanna Goldsworthy has elucidated (2018, p. 140), «continu[e] to fuel debate».

Unquestionably, a wide array of conventional features may be detected in her travelogue, starting from its dedication and skillfully crafted title. The two volumes of the account are addressed to Parkes's late mother who, apparently, persuaded her to write notes and letters that were later collected and published at her friends' request. As the writer (1850, I, i) clarifies,

> if any of the friends, whose kind partiality has induced them to urge [the narrative's] publication, should think that I have dwelt too much on myself, on my own thoughts, feelings, and adventures, let them remember that this journal was written for the affectionate eye of her to whom nothing could be so gratifying as the slightest incident connected with her beloved and absent child.

The self-effacing, confessional, and domestic tone of her disclaimer coupled with the deliberately exhibited amateurish nature of her narrative – never intended to be worthy of serious consideration – reflect Parkes's negotiation of her authorial position within the framework of the separate sphere doctrine, which she had twice violated: by travelling and by immortalizing her experiences. As for the title, the choice of *wanderings* suggests frivolity and a lack of direction, or even of meaningful purpose in her exploration of the foreign territory; the term *pilgrim* reassuringly inscribes the traveller within the precincts of religious tourism[14]. The

13 The overlap between the travelling I and the travelling eye, as well as her intention of «making India visible to Western eyes» (Arnold, 2019, p. 39) is also noted by David Arnold.

14 Some transgressive elements, however, are embedded in the use of the term pilgrim: firstly, the implication that India is a shrine, a sacred space; secondly, Parkes (1850, I, p. 133) defines herself as a «a poor hàjī in search of the picturesque», using the word that identifies

category of the *picturesque* is strategically exploited to resume control over a potentially destabilizing and disturbing scenario, and is therefore transformed into a «colonial tool» (Lal, 2016, p. 22). *Picturesque* India is thus disempowered and almost frozen into «an aesthetic tableau» (Ghose and Mills, 2001, p. 8), to be impatiently (and voyeuristically) consumed by readers back home[15]: «No country can furnish more or so many picturesque scenes as India» (Parkes, 1850, I, p. 291). Suspended in a time vacuum, the *Orient* is dehistoricized, stripped of both its glorious past and any possibility of future development, locked in an ever-lasting present where colonizers are entrusted with a dual mission: to enforce order and perform a sanitizing function – on various occasions, Parkes administers medicine to the native population[16]. The local people, in fact, are viewed as «great babies» (Parkes, 1850, I, p. 335), unfit for self-rule and in need of superior guidance. Even ailments and diseases are romanticized and framed as picturesque, thereby emptied of their undermining potential. Even though the traveller often laments the exhausting effect of the tropical heat[17], she appears immune to more severe and life-threatening conditions. On the other hand, she offers thorough – yet clinical, detached, and unsympathetic – descriptions of exotic illnesses that afflict the Indians, transforming them into bizarre and «deplorable objects» (ibid., p. 26) of morbid fascination, and effectively

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a pilgrim who has been to Mecca, and therefore displaying both cultural knowledge and a syncretic attitude.

15 Jyoti P. Sharma (2010, p. 138) underscores that the picturesque was originally born «out of a sense of nostalgia for the old world order, a desire to return to a pre-industrial state of being, ironically in an age of rapidly industrializing Britain». By objectifying the scrutinized subject, the picturesque fostered «a sense of detachment between the powerful observer and the focus of his attention» (ibid).

16 See, for instance, Parkes, 1850, I, p. 281. Apparently, no serious illnesses – such as cholera – can affect the Europeans (ibid., p. 283).

17 Comparing the wholesome West to the debilitating East, Parkes (1850, I, p. 273) writes: «O! Western shore! On which I have passed so many happy days; what would I not give for your breezes to carry away this vile Indian languor and rebrace my nerves?». Years later, she again contrasts the healthy and invigorating British environment with the enfeebling Indian setting: «During the heat of the rains, shut up in the house, one's mind and body feel equally enervated. I long for a bracing sea breeze, and a healthy walk through the green lanes of England; the lovely wild flowers – their beauty haunts me» (Parkes, 1850, II, p. 57).

reducing them to the rank of animals[18]. The case of elephantiasis serves as a striking example: «The elephantiasis is very common amongst the natives, it causes one or both legs to swell to an enormous size, making the leg at the ankle as large as it is above the knee; there are some deplorable objects of this sort, with legs like those of the elephant – whence the name» (ibid.).

In its broader sense, the category of the picturesque also enables the female traveller to partake in the colonial venture, as «seeing, writing, depicting» (Arnold, 2019, p. 45) – and collecting, one might be tempted to add – were also effective means of appropriating, domesticating, and commodifying the new territory and its inhabitants. Although Parkes bemoans not being involved in more dynamic and thrill-seeking pursuits – such as hunting in the wild – on account of her gender, she feels relieved at the thought that, with her pencil, she can still capture her prey: «I have a pencil instead of a gun, and believe it affords me satisfaction equal, if not greater than the sportsman derives from his Manton» (Parkes, 1850, II, p. 191). Her sketches and ethnographic mission as a collector, therefore, contribute to expanding the knowledge necessary to strengthen the foundations of the nascent empire, while also reinforcing her persona as an active agent of colonial authority. Hence, she carves miniature replicas of Indian temples and buildings in soap-stone, to the instruction and amazement of her acquaintances (ibid., I, p. 343); she purchases broken idols that tickle her fancy (ibid., II, p. 417); and, initially at pains to prove her expertise in Indian mythology – in her narrative, she relates the story of the elephant-headed god (ibid., I, pp. viii–x) – she acquires a large, white marble statue of Ganesh, painted and gilt, whose drawing dominates the frontispiece of her travelogue and whom she invokes in the Introduction as a source of inspiration. Incidentally, she seeks the blessings

18 Grotesque monstrosity and animal-like metamorphic degradation are recurring features of the picturesque in portrayals of the local inhabitants. During the festival of Chŭrŭk Pooja, for instance, Voiragee mendicants are viewed as «the most remarkable objects» (Parkes, 1850, I, p. 27): «One man had held up both arms over his head until they had withered and were immoveable, the nails of the clenched fists had penetrated through the back of the hands, and came out on the other side like the claws of a bird» (ibid.). By turning even the most hideous creatures into picturesque objects, the writer forcefully erases the fear often associated with intercultural encounters.

not of the actual god, but of her own commodified version[19]. Furthermore, enacting a form of cultural projection onto the alien and unfamiliar[20], she equates Ganesh with the Penates of ancient Rome; in the words of Sara Mills (1991, p. 89), the Other is conveniently «consigned to another time sphere which is not the present». Besides accumulating relics, antiquities, and other curious items, Parkes also gathered numerous unusual specimens of indigenous flora and fauna. In the text, plants are often identified by two additional names beyond the common English one – signalling both her claim to scientific authority through the Latin name and her presumed native knowledge, which enhanced her authoritative status as well as her potential role in advancing colonial expansion[21]. Regarding the zoological specimens, through her collecting practices, Parkes not only consolidates dominance over the untamed and unpredictable context, but also displays the intrepid and resourceful spirit that characterized male British settlers. In one section of her account, she writes: «Killed a scorpion in my bathing-room, a good fat old fellow; prepared him with arsenical soap, and added him to the collection of curiosities in my museum»[22] (Parkes, 1850, I, p. 61). Elsewhere, apart from mentioning the butterflies and grasshoppers she had caught, she refers to a «small venomous whipsnake» (ibid., p. 242) hidden in her dressing-room: «I put it into the bottle of horrors» (ibid.).

Parkes's narrative also bears a thought-provoking subtitle: *During Four-and-twenty Years in the East; with Revelations of Life in the Zenana*. As Nigel Leask (2002, p. 228) has pointed out, «colonial India is generalized

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19 According to Tanvi Lal (2016, p. 28), «Parkes's use of the picturesque often trivializes India or the Indian culture as objects for her amusement».

20 A similar projection strategy is employed to make sense of the strange and puzzling environment: the delightful view from her bungalow in Rajpūr «puts [her] in mind of Switzerland» (Parkes, 1850, II, p. 225). The palaces in Lucknow «have fronts in imitation of the palaces in Naples and Rome» (ibid., I, p. 184), exemplifying what Maurizio Ascari (2006, p. 234) describes as a peculiar «hybridization between India and Italy» – a recurring element in the narrative.

21 See also Ghose and Mills, 2001, pp. 5-6. The glossary at the beginning of the first volume of the travelogue furnishes interesting examples. See also Parkes, 1850, I, p. 148.

22 This passage reveals marks of her later revision: she anachronistically mentions the museum that would be established only after her return to England.

into a vaguely evocative East», whose mysterious allure is enhanced by the sensational «revelations» of the «zenana», the secluded women's apartments within a large mansion – commonly known as the harem. Fantasized as «the ultimate abode of lasciviousness and vice» (Melman, 1989, p. 301), where hedonistic princes and kings could indulge in the sexual pleasures afforded by countless odalisques and concubines, the zenana was positively forbidden to men. Women travel writers, therefore, often became experts in what may be termed "harem literature", thus «claim[ing] for themselves a specialism within Orientalist knowledge that could be both generalist and scholarly» (Lewis, 2005, p. 48). Parkes visibly profits from her readership's craving for this sub-genre[23]; moreover, in Sara Mills's opinion (1994, p. 43), «in writing about the zenana [... she] makes herself as an imperial subject and also contributes to the imperial task of revealing the secrets of the colonized country»[24]. The author intentionally titillates her audience – thus boosting the sales of her text – by confirming stereotypical perceptions of the harem. She is intrigued by the large zenana of an elderly king, whom she longs to visit: «although the King be about seventy, there is no reason why he may not have a large zenana, wives of all sorts and kinds, – "the black, the blue, the brown, the fair" – for purposes of state and show» (Parkes, 1850, II, p. 136). To further enhance the mediated experience of those who would consume her travelogue, she alludes to Lady Montagu's work[25] (ibid., I, p. 59), which would certainly conjure up tantalizing visions of *Oriental* beauty. On a different occasion, the multiple wives of another king – clad in their splendid and colorful garments and adorned with a profusion of large pearls, emeralds, and diamonds – are evocatively compared to «creatures of the Arabian tales» (ibid., p. 88) or to «Lallah Rookh in her bridal attire»[26] (ibid.).

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23 As Reina Lewis (2004, p. 12) observes, «From the eighteenth century on, whether you wrote about living in one, visiting one, or escaping from one, any book that had anything to do with the harem sold». Malek Alloula (1978, p. 3) defines it as a Western «obsession».

24 Remarkably, she also insists on emphasizing her pioneering role as an explorer: «I know of no European lady, with the exception of one, who has ever had an opportunity of becoming intimate with native ladies of rank» (Parkes, 1850, I, p. 379).

25 With her voyeuristic and hyper-eroticized portrayals of harems and hammams, Lady Montagu's *Turkish Embassy Letters* (1763) became the archetype of harem literature.

26 The references are to the *Arabian Nights* and to the work of Thomas Moore.

In her descriptions, Parkes objectifies and itemizes Eastern women, depicting them as an awe-inspiring inventory of perfectly chiseled, fetishized body parts. The portrayal of Mulka Humanee Begum proves exemplary: «Her figure is tall and commanding; her hair jet black, very long and straight; her hands and arms are lovely, very lovely» (ibid., p. 384). Infused with a homoerotic tinge, the writer's dreams are «haunted» (ibid., p. 388) by her ravishing beauty[27]. At other times, Parkes dwells on biased and widely circulated visions of harem life as a site of moral degeneracy – where opium consumption is a common practice[28] – wicked machinations[29], and murder: «A zenana is a delightful place for private murder» (ibid., II, p. 56); «never was any place so full of intrigue, scandal, and chit-chat as a zenana» (ibid., I, p. 450). These passages seem to imply that, to be released from the shackles of sexual exploitation and barbarism, British intervention is deemed necessary. In one of the most poignant episodes of *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque*, a widow condemned to suttee is miraculously rescued by an English official who patronizingly acts as her savior and protector: «you are now an outcast from the Hindoos», he says, «but I will take charge of you, the Company will protect you» (ibid., p. 92).

Despite what has been argued so far, Parkes's narrative harbors provocative reflections and subversive undertones, beginning with her own name in the frontispiece – FANIPARKS transliterated into Urdu letters to be read from right to left (Eaton, 2018, p. 9) – which seemingly reveals her intention to blur boundaries while aligning herself (albeit symbolically) with

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27 A few contrasting passages are included, however, to appeal to her female readership: «Those women who are beautiful are very rare [...] the rest are generally plain. In England beauty is more commonly diffused amongst all classes» (Parkes, 1850, II, p. 215).

28 Zenana inmates are described as always languid and sleepy due to opium, which they reportedly also administer to their children up to the age of six (Parkes, 1850, I, pp. 380-381). The adventurous author herself cannot refrain from experimenting with it: «The flavour is very pleasant, and if you only eat enough, you will become as tipsy as mortal may desire» (ibid., p. 452).

29 If a woman of high rank cannot bear a child, she is fattened up as if she were pregnant. After nine months, she takes the newborn baby of a low-caste woman, who, in exchange, is given money «and perhaps a dose of poison to secure her silence» (Parkes, 1850, I, p. 392). See also ibid., pp. 391 and 453.

the local culture. In addition, in the coloured drawing placed alongside the Introduction, far from identifying with a genteel creature – as expected of a proper Victorian representative of the fair sex – she portrays herself as a gigantic spider[30], perfectly integrated into the natural environment.

It is in the trusting and intimate relationships Parkes forms with some of the ladies she encounters, however, that her account becomes truly transgressive. Her close contact with zenana inmates enables her to voice concerns about the subordinate state of the second sex, regardless of the country in which women live. As she (1850, II, pp. 56-57) sharply observes,

> «A man may have as many wives as he pleases, and mistresses without number; – it only adds to his dignity! If a woman take [sic] a lover, she is murdered, and cast like a dog into a ditch. It is the same all the world over; the women, being the weaker, are the playthings, the drudges, or the victims of the men: a woman is a slave from her birth; and the more I see of life, the more I pity the condition of the women».

Her profound sisterhood with the Baiza Bai – a Mahratta queen and widow, deposed by her adoptive son – allows her to express her resentment against the doctrine of coverture in Britain, which denied legal existence to married women – «the white slaves of England» (ibid., p. 8) – by merging their identities with those of their husbands. Clear references are also made to the extreme financial insecurity faced by Victorian women, at a time when the Married Women's Property Acts had not yet come into force:

> «Speaking of the privations endured by Hindoo widows, her Highness mentioned that all luxurious food was denied them, as well as a bed; and their situation was rendered as painful as possible. She asked me how an English widow fared?
> I told her, «An English lady enjoyed all the luxury of her husband's house during his life; but, on his death, she was turned out of the family mansion, to make room for the heir, and pensioned off; whilst the old horse was allowed the run of the park, and permitted to finish his days amidst the

30 In the opening pages of her account, she writes: «the insects are of monstrous growth, such spiders!» (Parkes, 1850, I, p. 26).

pastures he loved in his prime». The Hindoo widow, however young, must not marry again.
The fate of women and of melons is alike. «Whether the melon falls on the knife or the knife on the melon, the melon is the sufferer».
We spoke of the severity of the laws of England with respect to married women, how completely *by law* they are the slaves of their husbands, and how little hope there is of redress.
You might as well «Twist a rope of sand», or «Beg a husband of a widow», as urge the men to emancipate the white slaves of England (ibid.)».

In several passages of *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque*, the author articulates her views on the dress code adopted by women both at home and in her host country. Parkes harshly criticizes the constricting stiffness of European female garments[31], which she compares to the exoskeleton of a lobster – the subtle metaphorical implication being that women cannot stand on their own. Although she cannot refrain from aestheticizing her Eastern sisters – equated to ancient statues – the greater freedom they enjoy in their movements never ceases to amaze her.

«Mulka walks very gracefully, and is as straight as an arrow. In Europe, how rarely – how very rarely does a woman walk gracefully! bound up in stays, the body is as stiff as a lobster in its shell; that snake-like, undulating movement, – the poetry of motion – is lost, destroyed by the stiffness of the waist and hip, which impedes the free movement of the limbs. A lady in European attire gives me the idea of a German mannikin; an Asiatic, in her flowing drapery, recalls the statues of antiquity (ibid., I, p. 383)».

Back in her motherland, she further comments on this, adding challenging reflections on the homogenization of the female body, resembling that of a serially fabricated doll – a sport or a toy created for the entertainment of its owner:

«What can be more ugly than the dress of the English? I have not seen a graceful girl in the kingdom: girls who would otherwise be graceful are so

31 In another passage of the narrative, she feels «pained and annoyed by [... the] ugly bonnets and stiff and graceless dresses of the English ladies» (Parkes, 1850, I, p. 353).

> pinched and lashed up in corsets, they have all and every one the same stiff dollish appearance; and that dollish form and gait is what is considered beautiful! Look at the outline of a figure; the corset is ever before you; In former days the devil on two sticks was a favourite pastime. The figure of the European fair one is not unlike that toy. Then the *bustle* – , what an invention to deform the shape! (ibid., II, pp. 332-333)».

Parkes never indulges in what Kader Konuk (2004, p. 393) terms «ethnomasquerade», i.e. «the performance of an ethnic identity through the mimicking of clothes, gestures, appearance, language, cultural codes, or other components of identity formation». Nonetheless, on one particular occasion, she wears a Mahratta riding costume that enables her to ride astride – in the male fashion – rather than sidesaddle, as ladies were expected to do. The excitement of this previously unknown freedom and sense of empowerment prompts her to blame Queen Elizabeth «and her stupidity in changing the style of riding for women. *En cavalier*, it appeared so safe, as I could have jumped over to the moon» (Parkes, 1850, II, p. 6). In another passage, during one of her explorations, her «long silk gown» (ibid., p. 302) causes her to fall when it gets caught on a rock. She ingeniously decides to make a new attire for herself in the Turkish manner – «a dress more suited for such expeditions» (ibid.) – which also prevents her from being robbed by thieves, who mistake her for a man. The garments she discards emblematically signify the vulnerability and cultural strictures she yearns to leave behind.

Some observations on women's education are also included in Parkes's account. Noticing the «indecision and effeminacy» (ibid., p. 216) of one of the princes, the traveller remarks that it comes as no surprise, since the formal education of both boys and girls is not shaped by standardized models, thus allowing one's true personality to emerge. «*There*» – she continues, emphasizing the difference from *here* by italicizing the word – «they both receive the same education, and the result is similar. In Europe men have so greatly the advantage of women from receiving a superior education, and in being made to act for, and depend upon themselves from childhood, that of course the superiority is on the male side; the women are kept under and have not fair play» (ibid.). The extraordinary dexterity with weapons of the Ghoorka women – whose bravery matches that of their male counterparts –

prompts her to express another cutting comment: «they [Ghoorka women] acted with the natural courage inherent in us all, never having been taught that it was pretty and interesting to be sweet, timid creatures!» (ibid., p. 243). The traveller herself devotes many a passage to the strange weapons she acquires and learns to handle[32] – fine additions to a collection that also includes rifles, muskets, and pistols[33].

As the years elapse, Parkes becomes increasingly critical of the East India Company's management – a «rather daring» (Alam, 2015, p. 6) attitude «for a government official's wife» (ibid.). The deep sacredness she attributes to the Taj Mahal – «I cannot enter the Taj without feelings of deep devotion» (Parkes, 1850, I, p. 356) – is defiled by the crass ignorance and disrespect of her compatriots: «Can you imagine any thing so detestable? European ladies and gentlemen have the band to play on the marble terrace, and dance quadrilles in front of the tomb!» (ibid., p. 355). She is appalled to read in the *Calcutta John Bull* (July 26, 1831) that the Governor-General, out of greed, is attempting to sell the mausoleum: «By what authority does the Governor-General offer the taj [sic] for sale? [...] To sell the tomb raised over an empress, which, from its extraordinary beauty, is the wonder of the world?»[34] (ibid., p. 220). Her countrymen's insolence and lack of intercultural awareness are also evident in the conversion of an exquisite section of the Agra fort into a kitchen:

> Some wretches of European officers – to their disgrace be it said – made this beautiful room a cook-room! And the ceiling, the fine marbles, and the inlaid work, are all one mass of blackness and defilement! Perhaps they cooked the sū'ar, the hog, the unclean beast, within the sleeping apartments of Noor-jahān, – the proud, the beautiful Sultana![35] (ibid., pp. 364-365).

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32 For instance, she takes a *lāthī*, a long bamboo stick «headed with iron» (Parkes, 1850, I, p. 132), as a curiosity for her cabinet, proudly specifying that it had been used in a fight that had cost some villagers their lives.

33 See, for example, Parkes, 1850, II, pp. 302 and 359.

34 Elsewhere, she writes that «the erection of the Taj was the most delicate and elegant tribute, and the highest compliment, ever paid to woman» (Parkes, 1850, I, p. 359). The Governor-General's attempt, therefore, strikes her not only as a cultural insult, but also as an offence to womanhood.

35 Even in this case, womanhood is insulted.

In 1838, while Parkes was in the Himalayan foothills, the sad news of her father's demise reached her. She promptly returned to England, remaining away from the Subcontinent until 1844[36]. After joining her husband in Cape Town, in 1843, and nursing him back to health, the couple spent one last year in India before definitively parting from their adoptive land and its people, in 1845. During her brief stay in her country of origin, she felt alienated and «a little disgusted» (Parkes, 1850, II, p. 331) by the dampness and the cold she could no longer tolerate. The unbridled freedom she had previously enjoyed made her more openly critical of ladylike propriety and rebellious against its mortifying unwritten rules. When she visited a horticultural exhibition in Plymouth, for example, her enthusiasm at recognizing many tropical plants was marred by the reprimanding glances of other visitors, perplexed by her moving about unchaperoned: «I went to the place alone, and the people expressed their surprise at my having done so – how absurd! As if I were to be a prisoner unless some lady could accompany me – wah! wah! I shall never be tamed, I trust, to the ideas of propriety of civilized Lady *Log*» (ibid., p. 334).

4. Conclusion: Parkes's portable India

«How I love this life in the wilderness!» – she wrote in 1844 – «I shall never be content to vegetate in England in some quiet country place» (Parkes, 1850, II, p. 455). Indeed, the skilled traveller never vegetated but rather successfully capitalized on her singular experience. Apart from publishing her popular travelogue, in 1851 – the year of the Great Exhibition – she financed the construction of the *Grand Moving Diorama of Hindostan*, staged at the Asiatic Gallery in the Baker Street Bazaar[37]. If the three-dimensional view

36 Her mother also passed away in 1841. A gap in her travelogue, between 1839 and 1843, is briefly acknowledged as follows: «I will pass over my wanderings in France, Belgium, and Germany without comment. My absence from India was prolonged far beyond the time originally allotted me, by the deep and numerous afflictions that fell upon me» (Parkes, 1850, II, p. 346). Her husband died of kidney disease in England, in 1854.

37 The show was later staged in Hull, in 1853.

of the landscape around the Ganges «recreat[ed] India as spectacle and justify[ed] further imperial endeavours on the subcontinent» (Goldsworthy, 2018, p. 140), as Johanna Goldsworthy has elucidated, it certainly contributed both to securing an income (and, therefore financial, independence) and to consolidating her reputation as an expert on India. Visitors to the diorama also had access to her museum, or cabinet of curiosities, another controversial attraction in which all the heterogeneous items she had painstakingly collected in India – whether bought or stolen – were displayed, exposed to the British voyeuristic and imperialist gaze. If Parkes somehow concurred in the spectacularization and commodification of the *Orient*, it is undeniable that through refreshing and invigorating contact with alterity, she managed to claim an agency that, as a woman, would otherwise have been denied to her. Moreover, she had the opportunity to cross boundaries, question inveterate social norms, challenge preposterous gender restrictions, thus living a different life from what her lot would have been, or, as she wrote in the Farewell section of her account, «a life independent of *her own* life» (Parkes, 1850, II, p. 496).

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