
Kate Marsh’s *India in the French imagination* is as much about analyzing a French discourse about the British as it is about discourse about India and—in lesser part—British discourse about the French in India. In her Introduction to the book, ‘The French Presence in India between 1754 and 1815: From the “Beaux Jours du Gouvernement de Dupleix” to Annihilation?’, Marsh frames the problematic relationship of the French in India by plunging into a brief summary of the French East India Company’s history. She establishes the history of the comptoirs, the trading factories that would become the only steady markers of French presence in India. She argues, as many have before, that most of Dupleix’s will for expansionism was autonomous and that policy from Versailles was for trading rights.

After *Fictions of 1947: Representations of Indian Decolonization 1919-1962* (2007),¹ the present volume is Marsh’s second monograph with clear echoes of the first book *India in the French Imagination*. It is largely devoted to representational analysis of French literary and political texts from the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. Marsh’s primary sources are fiction and travel accounts and letters. The book is a brief 141 pages long, probably because of publishing restraints and thus the author has to struggle to cover both a summary of the history of the French in India and offer an analysis of discourse about India.

There are good books about the French in India, all cited in the bibliography, but few have addressed the theme of India in the French imagination in any depth. The precursor that comes to mind immediately is Jackie Assayag’s *L’Inde Fabuleuse: Le Charme Discret de l’Exotisme Français, XVIIe-XXe Siècles* (1999).² It is summarily dismissed in a single reference in a footnote, Marsh simply stating that Assayag’s *longue durée* approach created ‘a monolithic and misleading view of French encounters with India’ (144, fn. 6). The literary analysis practiced by Marsh can be qualified

without hesitation as _à la Edward Saïd_. Yet, Saïd’s _Orientalism_ fares no better than Assayag’s work in Marsh’s judgment and is clearly challenged as ‘oversimplified and generalizing with its divisive binarism’ (23).

Nevertheless, Marsh employs the same tools as Saïd as she turns to analyzing passages from a limited sample of the 30 fictional and 135 available travel accounts to look at the construction of identities in chapter two. This observation is not a reproach, as few critics of Saïd have done away with representation or with the discourse analysis Saïd adopted from Michel Foucault. One can safely say that Saïd has done more for popularizing Saussure’s ideas on representation than anyone, and that now speaking of representation and of Orientalism often go hand in hand. They certainly do here for Marsh. From the aforementioned literary texts, Marsh argues that the image of India functioned both as a trope of exoticism and a site of European rivalry with the British. This dual focus gives the book a mixed preoccupation with European rivalries and French exoticism with its literary imagery of naked temple dancers (_baydière_), widow burning (_sati_), and fakirs and Brahmins. Marsh argues that in the French imagination the Oriental despot of the eighteenth century came to be replaced by rapacious Britons (24). The analysis of otherness concludes with a description of the 1788 visit of Tipu Sultan’s (r. 1782-1799) ambassadors to Versailles. Citing Louise Élisabeth Vigée Lebrun’s (1755-1842) acceptance of her commission to paint the ambassador Mohammed Dervich Khan as ‘_nous acceptâmes par pure curiosité_’ (we accepted for sheer curiosity), Marsh concentrates on the contemporary meaning of the word ‘curieux’, and argues for a cross-cultural encounter with curiosity being the main sentiment on both sides. Marie Louise Pratt’s _Imperial Eyes_ (1992)\(^3\) fares much better than Saïd under Marsh’s pen. With the appearance of the figures of all three ambassadors on Sèvres coffee cups, Marsh, with the help of Krysztof Pomian’s famous book _Collectors and Curiosities_ (1990),\(^4\) argues for a commodification and fetishization of the Indian other. Save for this half page interlude, the book is mostly literary and does not analyze objects or goods.

From this rich, but predictable, second chapter on ‘Constructing India as _Other_’, Marsh embarks on several more themes, including ‘Emasculating

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