And There They Were: Mrs. Dalloway, British Identity and the Indian Other

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In Virginia Woolf's novel *Mrs. Dalloway*, the sign 'India' floats on administrative gossip, alongside Miss Kilman's traveling trunks, and in the memory of Helena Parry. The reader must look at the fringes of the parties, the sugared almonds, and the green silk dresses, and ask what a novel ostensibly about a single day in London might have to do with India, itself more a political concept than an ethnic reality. What could London have to do with the geographically and culturally distant subcontinent of India? Furthermore, why might it be important that in *Mrs. Dalloway*, India is never fully present, but rather endures as a memory in the minds of the characters who have both recently returned from India and remember India from before the century's end? Using postcolonial critic Edward Said's concept of orientalism, which is, broadly, Western discourses or "system[s] of knowledge about the East," I hope to examine how the novel's characters construct British identity through and in opposition to the Indian other.[1] When India does appear in the novel, it is a flattened, abstract concept associated both with ignorance and the exotic. By understanding India as a term that involves a complex set of discourses that draw an "ontological and epistemological distinction" between the East and the West, we can better understand India as reflected in the occidental, imperialist perspectives of the novel's characters.[1] However, just because *Mrs. Dalloway* affects and is also affected by problematic colonial representations of India does not mean that it is not valuable both as a historical artifact and a work of literature. I will argue that through *Mrs. Dalloway's* free indirect discourse, which focuses closely on individual experience and identity construction, the novel reminds us what it means to reconstruct the past and what it means to remember and be remembered.

Through its narrative technique, *Mrs. Dalloway* seems to work towards what Indian historian Gajendra Singh advocates for in writing "life-history": a focus on the individual or witness that "takes into account failings of memory and everyday myth-making."[2] The life-histories of Peter Walsh, Helena Parry, and Clarissa Dalloway question what it means to be remembered, as they construct and are constructed through each other's faculties of memory and acts of speech. The novel's narrative technique brings to light what Singh in his book *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars* argues is essential to writing life-history, and especially applies to the context of subaltern studies of South Asia: thinking about the "experiences and requirement of the individual—how the person copes with society rather than how society copes with the stream of individuals."[2] *Mrs. Dalloway,* in its close-up focus on the lived experiences of its characters, embodies such a narrative history.

In writing both history and literature, some voices will remain silent and forgotten. Positing a complete history presumes an inevitable and knowable past, and thus ignores the essential fact of contingency, loss, and absence inherent in writing narrative histories. I will start at the end of things and employ a non-chronological approach some historians use to highlight the contingency of history.[2] At the end of *Mrs. Dalloway,* Clarissa Dalloway, hosting her much-anticipated party, leads Peter Walsh to her Aunt Helena Parry to converse over their shared experiences in India:

> At the mention of India, or even Ceylon, [Miss Parry's] eyes (only one was glass) slowly deepened, became blue, beheld, not human beings — she had no tender memories, no proud illusions about Viceroys, Generals, Mutinies — it was orchids she saw, and mountain passes and herself carried on the backs of coolies in the 'sixties over solitary peaks; or descending to uproot orchids (startling blossoms, never beheld before) which she painted in water-colour; an indomitable Englishwoman, fretful if disturbed by the War, say, which dropped a bomb at her very door, from her deep meditation over orchids and her own figure journeying in the 'sixties in India — but here was Peter.[3]

Helena Parry reproduces a European Imperialist myth of empty, unpossessed land as she imagines the Burmese landscape (today Myanmar) as "solitary" and seemingly populated only by exotic orchids. The "coolies" (a derogatory term for Asian laborers) she refers to are literally *beneath* her and do not seem to count as people, as she places them outside the category of human beings—"her eyes […] beheld, not human beings…it was orchids she saw."[3] Helena uses the gaze of the colonizer to conceive of an India not as a space of culture, local history, and living and feeling human beings but rather as a novel canvas for the self-construction of her own knowledge and identity; it is through her exclusion of the Indian other that Helena gains agency as botanist and an "indomitable Englishwoman."[3] Gaze functions interestingly here, for Helena, with her one glass eye, constructs the indigenous as sightless—the orchids she paints are "never beheld before," implying that her sight counts as the first discovery of these flowers. Helena's watercolors form a scientific system of knowledge about India as an unpopulated, exotic locale, where indigenous bodies lack sight and agency, and function solely as a mode of travel.

It is interesting what Helena explicitly excludes from her memory of Burma: she does not see "human beings"—here the rough opposition of colonizing and colonized actors of Indian imperial politics—Viceroys, Generals, Mutinies," and thus she has "no tender memories" or "proud illusions."[3] The proper nouns Helena lists follow one right after another, gesturing to a loosely conceived hierarchical structuring of British rule: colonial governors first, then generals, and lastly "Mutinies," which are not individual actors, but events, specifically armed uprisings. The people of India are not represented bodily in this schema; they are simply a collective situated at the bottom of a colonial hierarchy. In constructed opposition to the ruling hierarchy of Britain, through their acts of defiance, Indians are created as the other.

By focusing on the non-human elements of India—the exotic and natural beauty of the landscape—Helena's memory of India claims an essentially apolitical position unaffected by "illusion."[3] While she claims a perspective outside of political discourse, outside of the administrative affairs of colonial Indian, with access to a "true" image of India; Helena nonetheless, through her coded position as superior to the Indian other, participates in the very orientalist discourses she eschews. In *Orientalism*, Said contends that the Occident's conception of the Orient is not simply fantasy, or a product wholly of the imagination. Said argues that the system of knowledge about the Orient is importantly founded in reality; however, the

culture of the Orient remains a larger reality than orientalist discourses can contain or understand, for the Orient's "lives, histories, and customs have a brute reality obviously greater than anything that could be said about them by the West."[1] At the end of this passage, Helena Parry gains embodiment as a result of her memory of India; she sees her "own figure journeying in the 'sixties in India."[3] In this way, Helena constructs herself as an indomitable artist and an embodied individual through her memory of Burma in contrast to the unembodied, sightless inhabitants of India.

A similar action of British identity construction takes place early in the novel, when Peter Walsh, who has recently returned from India, recalls his time in India as an administrator whilst looking at his image in a shop window:

> And there he was, this fortunate man, himself, reflected in the plate-glass window of a motor-car manufacturer in Victoria Street. All India lay behind him; plains, mountains; epidemics of cholera; a district twice as big as Ireland; decisions he had come to alone — he, Peter Walsh; who was now really for the first time in his life, in love. […] For he had a turn for mechanics; had invented a plough in his district, had ordered wheel-barrows from England, but the coolies wouldn't use them, all of which Clarissa knew nothing whatever about.[3]

The free indirect discourse style here begins with a definitive statement of Peter's spatial and temporal existence that will be echoed throughout the novel—"And there he was."[3] This statement of existence enacted through the passive past tense delineates Peter's individuality as he situates himself in both time and space. Peter foregrounds himself as a unique individual juxtaposed against a background of a removed Indian; he imagines India as physically behind him, both in space, as if he is eclipsing the entire continent, and also temporally, as India now persists in his memory. At first, Peter's description of India is one of vastness, the scope of limitless landscape conjured by unqualified "plains" and "mountains." From this panorama we move to quite another kind of sweeping vastness: the viral spread of disease. Cholera, a disease beginning with fever-like symptoms and ultimately deteriorating the body to the point of death, heavily preoccupied colonial administrators; the origins and transmission of the disease were unknown and British administrators were tasked with preventing and containing outbreaks. Additionally, before 1868, cholera in British medical discourses was thought to be "endemic (constantly present) at the mouth of the River Ganges, in Bengal, in India."[4] On this understanding, medical and administrative discourses about cholera associated India and the colonized body with the spread of deadly, infectious disease. The myth of cholera's single, geographically specific origin in India speaks to how the political realities of colonial rule can affect medical knowledge. Thus Peter, in his depiction of a cholera-swept India, works within a long-standing colonial framework that understood India as the source of epidemic disease; Peter expresses anxiety about his identity as British colonial administrator and his fears about the spread of disease.

Peter also enacts a conflation of his administrative district with the whole country of India: "All of India lay behind him…a district twice as big as Ireland."[3] The whole area of British-ruled India, which would in 1922 include modern-day countries Myanmar, Bangladesh, Sri Lanka, Pakistan, and Bhutan, is reduced to Peter's administrative district. In this way, India serves as a sign that confers on Peter his status as colonial administrator, and functions to confirm his own masculine, British image reflected back to him in the glass. He depicts the "coolies" in his district as obstinate and backwards, and Peter voices his frustration at their refusal to use his imported wheelbarrows and invented machine. Peter associates himself with an ingenuity and individuality that he believes the Indians do not possess; indeed, the "coolies" do not utilize Peter's contributions. Through his depiction of a cholera-swept India metonymically representing his own administrative district, Peter constructs himself as resourceful, solitary, and unique, and reproduces an orientalist dichotomy between Britain and India, West and East. He can be read constructing his identity through a relation to the colonized "coolie" Indian, the landscape of India, and the viral uncontrollable spread of disease. Like Helena, Peter places himself in "positional superiority" to the "coolies" he administers and thus reproduces orientalist discourses.[1]

However, *Mrs. Dalloway,* through its narrative technique of free indirect discourse, also works at cross-purposes to its characters' constructions of identity through the Indian other. As the characters turn their lenses on each other, an interesting absence of identity takes place, particularly in the relationship between Peter and Clarissa. Clarissa remembers Peter, who has been absent for five years in the first page of the novel, as singularly unembodied and almost, in a way, in the midst of a disappearance. Looking out the window with a sense of foreboding, Clarissa imperfectly recalls Peter talking to her:

> "Musing among the vegetables?"—was that it? — "I prefer men to cauliflowers"— was that it? He must have said it at breakfast one morning when she had gone out on to the terrace — Peter Walsh. He would be back from India one of these days, June or July, she forgot which, for his letters were awfully dull; it was his sayings one remembered; his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness and, when millions of things had utterly vanished — how strange it was! — a few sayings like this about cabbages.[3]

In our first introduction to Peter Walsh, shakily filtered through Clarissa's unspoken reminiscence, Clarissa is unable to remember the Peter's exact words and instead offers us a series of possibilities: "Musing among the vegetables?"—was that it?—"I prefer men to cauliflowers"—was that it"?[3] Clarissa's memory, in her failure to land upon a singular and precise past, unseats and unfixes an objective, unified past. Clarissa, far from the steady and reliable omniscience offered through third person narration, cannot reconstruct another character. This opening scene sets up the imperfect, fractured logic of memory at play in the pages that will follow. Save for the occasional structuring interludes of third person narration that move the reader between individual perspectives, the free and indirect discourse places us within such fractured, faulty perspectives. Indeed, we do not receive a fixed description of Peter's physicality; rather, Clarissa's "remembered" Peter is a jumbled set of speech acts, physical features, personal effects, and personality traits: "it was his saying one remembered; his eyes, his pocket-knife, his smile, his grumpiness".[3] In this way, Peter, because of his proximal distance from Clarissa in both time and place seems to lose his identity through Clarissa's remembrance, the very identity he labors to construct throughout the novel.

Thus, while the characters in the novel seem to define, construct, and embody themselves in relation to an abstract, orientalist understanding of colonial India, another interesting action occurs in the novel as memory erodes identity, and uncertainty and possibility deconstruct surety of existence and presence. While the characters preoccupy themselves with constructions of identity through disembodied and othered representations of Indians, they also struggle with their own identities as incomplete and fractured. The characters' identity constructions both defiantly insist on fixed presence and enact a haunting disappearance. When Clarissa declares at her party both "there was old Miss Parry" and "here was Peter," and when Peter speaks the final

sentence of the novel "For there she was," these declarations seem to be imbued with a sense of their fragility, self-aware of the anxiety underlying their speakers' utterances, haunted by the unspoken knowledge of imminent disappearance.[3]

Mrs. Dalloway simultaneously constructs identity through its characters' representations of an othered India and erodes these identities through its characters' memories. The novel can be read as reinforcing orientalism in its creation of a divide between East and West, but can also be read as simultaneously deconstructing this binary. Through its free indirect discourse, the novel also reminds us about the nature of writing history, and speaks to a history of—to use Gajendra Singh's term—"haunting presences," where the individual's way of creating themselves and others is laced with anxiety about being remembered.[2] *Mrs. Dalloway* illustrates the desire of its characters to be wholly represented—to construct themselves as complete and whole in contrast to the other—and betrays an anxiety about disappearance underlying these desires.

Gajendra Singh, in his postcolonial history of sepoy participation in World War I, utilizes such an approach to reading the past. He reads for silences and for the latent desires of the sepoy soldiers and in doing so, asks for these forgotten witnesses of the Great War to be read and remembered.[2] While it is possible to argue that the past is unpresentable because of our faulty faculties of memory, unvoiced desires, and large silences, Singh incorporates such ghostly accounts into his project of writing a sepoy life-history of World War I. He views history neither as objective and inevitable nor as disappeared and silent, but rather as a complex narrative emerging in the interplay of individual experience and complex political discourse. *Mrs. Dalloway* and Singh, are interestingly related in their representations of memory. Both could be read at odds with each other in their projects of representation, with *Mrs. Dalloway* enacting an effacement and Gajendra Singh seeking a recovery of Indian voices.[2]

In order to read the past and write history, as readers and historians, we must take into account our own faulty faculties of memory and unvoiced desires to be remembered as whole and complete. *Mrs. Dalloway*, a novel at once symptomatic of orientalist discourses and problematic in its understandings of the Indian other, is important to a project of writing life-history, for through the novel, we come to understand the anxiety of the individual's self-construction, and how the "other" functions to relieve this anxiety. Through Virginia Woolf's *Mrs. Dalloway* and Singh's project of sepoy life-histories, we come to understand the insecure individual as intimately concerned in any project of history. The individual is caught up in political discourses, at times unable to remember, desirous of fixed presence and identity, yet, all the while admitting absence. We learn to work with history not as complete and inevitable, but as incomplete and tenuous as our own individual memory.

References

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[2]Singh, G. (2014) *The Testimonies of Indian Soldiers and the Two World Wars: Between Self and Sepoy*. Bloomsbury Academic. Pg 187, 190.

[3]Woolf, V. (1925) *Mrs. Dalloway*. Brace. Pg 3, 48-9, 178, 194.

[4]Watts, S. (2001) "From Rapid Change to Stasis: Official Responses to Cholera in British-ruled India and Egypt: 1860 to C. 1921". *Journal of World History* 12.2. Pg. 321.