Nostalgia for the Empire
British nationalism in the spatial representation of colonial India in contemporary romantic novels

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[**Abstract**: In the heydays of the British Empire, in the late 19th and early 20th century, many women novelists wrote romantic adventure stories about female protagonists travelling to the colonies. The aim was to represent and foster female contribution to the cause of Britain's expansionist and "civilizing" mission. Over seven decades have passed since the independence of India and the consequent demise of the British Empire. However, nostalgia for the "Raj," as the Empire was known in the subcontinent, seems to be witnessing a resurgence in the form of romantic novels, which copy the style and format of their 19th century predecessors, typically narrating the story of a young female protagonist travelling from England to India to find a husband. Narrators of these historical romances often stick to the tried-and-tested formula of describing Indian landscapes, cultures and traditions the way they were done over a century ago. Interestingly, the genre's financial success has also encouraged German authors to write similar books with similar plots and descriptions of formerly colonized countries. This paper tries to expose the imperial nostalgia implicit in these books by analysing representations of colonial space and colonial agency in them.]

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As more and more territories were integrated into the Empire and more British citizens began travelling to the colonies to make a living or even find a fortune, news articles, diaries, travelogues and letters with descriptions of life in these regions began to emerge. Adventure novels served to inspire others towards the Empire's cause and justify its mission of "civilizing" primitive peoples. In the beginning, these novels were male-oriented, with protagonists mostly travelling to far-flung colonies and experiencing exotic adventures as they

sought to regulate and consolidate the means of harnessing natural resources from the occupied territories. Soon enough, women also became eager to make a place for themselves in Britain's colonial ambitions, inspiring novels that created a space for them to participate in empire building. Taking their cue from tales of imperial adventure, these stories combined the colonial ambitions of the British Empire with a romantic heroine-centred love story.[1] Furthermore, through the exotic setting of the colonies, the periphery of the British Empire, the reader learned about what constituted empire, what hopes and ambitions underpinned the colonisation, what rules existed for colonizer and colonized and how they were enforced.

A good example of these stories was Flora Annie's Steel's book "On the Face of the Waters", published in 1892. These romances[2] chartered the journey of a young Englishwoman, mostly from the middle-classes, from England to India to find a husband from among the English officers serving in the colony. The quest for love involved the protagonist negotiating her way through complex dynamics that emerged as British ambitions collided with native desire for independence.

Interestingly, these themes that were used in romantic Raj-era novels nearly 150 years ago did not become outdated after Indian independence in 1947 and consequently, the fall of the Empire. These novels, some of which have been written as recently as 2014, usually tell the story of a young female protagonist who travels to India from England to find and marry an eligible bachelor. The stories are set between the late 18th and the early 20th centuries and provide the perfect backdrop for the male and female protagonists, who try to come together despite political instability and the rebellion against British rule.

Popular novels include some written immediately after the dissolution of the British Empire by authors like M.M. Kaye, whose *Shadow of the Moon* (1957) and *The Far Pavilion* (1978) were extremely well received and even made into Hollywood movies. In 1984, Valerie Fitzgerald's *Zemindar* was similarly successful. Of late, romance authors are revisiting India's colonial history as a backdrop for their novels. Latest works include *The Exotic Heir*(originally *Love of my Life)* by Meredith Bond (2013) in English, and *Der Duft von Sandelholz* by Laila al Omari (2012) and *Der Himmel über Darjeeling* by Nicole Vosseler (2006) in German.

This paper analyses these books in two parts. First, I discuss how colonial landscape and life are brought into the (colonial) world through the protagonist/narrator's descriptions, how these serve to highlight the difference between the colony and "home" (e.g. England) and

consequently, how colonial agency plays out in these novels. Second, I aim to show how establishing the idea of "home," i.e., the British nation and its superior moral and cultural values justifies the colonial occupation of territory.

Rewriting the colony

Imperial romance novels served as good examples of the colonial drama, using "a narrative frame and context" that remained colonial, i.e. confined to the experience of colonial actors in the plot (Boehmer, 67). The native's world was described through colonial eyes - a phenomenon described by Gayatri Spivak as "worlding", which is "the way in which colonized space is brought into the 'world'," a "world" created by Eurocentrism. "Worlding" is carried out by mapping territories, by naming them and describing them. In colonial times, this goal was achieved through geographical surveys, letters back to relatives at home, travelogues and imperial adventure romances. (Ashcroft, Griffith, Tiffins 282).

In most romantic fiction written today, "worlding" and differentiating "home" from the colony begins, in a sense, right from the time the protagonist sets sail on a ship to India. In Valerie Fitzgerald's *Zemindar*, for example, the protagonist Laura gets involved in a discussion with her fellow passengers on what India has to offer – its food, seasons and so on. But the conversation soon drifts into the dangers that one may come across in the country. "…And since disaster is so much more a dramatic possibility for general conversation than food, I rose from the table with my head full of half-credible stories of snakes lying coiled in shoes, scorpions lurking in the folds of a dress, mad dogs rushing through city streets…" (Fitzgerald). In this manner, despite its dubious credibility, the description becomes for Laura a way of looking at India and sets the tone for the rest of the book. As the ship makes its way on the Hooghly River, with its "almost motionless brown water" to Calcutta, she muses on whether she will be able to "know enough of this great brooding land stretched below its flat, dun-coloured sky" (Fitzgerald).

Similarly, in *An Exotic Heir,* life in early twentieth century Calcutta is characterized by dust, which "lightly floured every surface, despite the fact that shutters were kept closed for most of the day and the sweeper came through twice with his brooms" (Bond 35). At a ball thrown by the Governor General of India in Calcutta, Cassandra, the protagonist, marvels at officers' uniforms and their wives' elaborate gowns. The smell of flowers in the room is a welcome change from "the street smell of spices and animals" that hangs in the city air. Life in England, by contrast, is characterized by "pristine and cool cleanliness" (Bond 35).The

cool weather of England, compared to hot and dusty India also features strongly in *Shadow of the Moon,* in which the protagonist, Winter, gets her name because her mother Sabrina, who gives birth to her daughter in the scorching summer heat of northern India, remembers the cold, snowy winters of her home in Ware in England. Similarly, the male protagonist in the same novel, muses on what "home" could be like. "What would England look like?... feel like?... smell like?" he asks, comparing it with the "hot and crowded" time he has spent in India (Kaye, 69).

And therefore, any message from home seems to work like a balm, relieving the homesickness that colonial expats experience in India. In *Zemindar*, crowds throng at the port to get a glimpse of the passengers because "the arrival of any ship from 'Home' was a social event in Calcutta, and that all the European residents would be at the quayside to watch the new arrivals, even if they had no excuse for greeting them." (Fitzgerald). The ship's passengers also play along, making sure they are dressed for the role, with clothes that would fit a garden party in England better than the humid Bengal climate.

Thus, worlding in these novels takes place in two ways: one, through descriptions of Indian locations and two, by emphasizing elements that are perceived to be superior back "home". Through its explicit focus on descriptions of the surroundings and life in the Indian colony, the narrative style in these novels also implies the superiority of colonial laws, values and morals, thus giving a at best an unreflective view of empire. In *Zemindar,* for example, the narrative repeatedly focuses on why the deposed king has been the main reason for abject poverty in the princely state of Oudh. The English landlord, by comparison, is sought after by the village folk, because they trust him with dispensing justice. In *Shadow of the Moon,* the narrator valorises Alex Randall's mission as a soldier working for the East India Company, referred to as "John Company" in the novel. "The glamour of India – the vast, glittering, cruel, mysterious land teeming with violence and beauty – and the romance of 'John Company', that prosaic collection of merchant traders from London who had conquered a sub-continent and now maintained their own armies and administered justice and law to sixty million Indians." (Kaye 79).

The above examples illustrate the manner in which imperial discourse is inscribed on colonised space (Ashcroft, Griffths, Tiffin 282) and how the narrative in these novels implies that colonial domination benefits the natives. Thus, "worlding" by the Empire's agents includes convincing the natives of the supremacy and the notion of the British coloniser as a "bringer of civilisation".[3]

In the following section, I discuss how "worlding" sets the stage for an obvious superior agency of the colonial protagonists and for territorial conquest. Second, how does this subsequently create a plot twist that serves as the climax for the novels?

Imperial agency and territorial domination

Like colonial novels written in the 19th century, recent historical romances also feature a male protagonist, a colonial idealist, (Boehmer 65) whose main aim is the furtherance of the Empire and who has "little time for other matters" (Kaye 79). The male character is thus depicted as being distant, like Alex Randall in *Shadow of the Moon* and more recently, Neville Hewitt in *Der Himmelüber Darjeeling.* In the German novels such as *Der Duft von Sandelholz,* the male protagonist is a doctor who wants to bring the advantages of modern medicine, most of all to the East India Company's sepoys, who have suffered under the tropical Indian climate. These personality traits are exactly what make the men attractive for the leading women in these novels. The struggles she faces are part personal and have more to do with her lover's duties as a colonial administrator or servant of the East India Company, which further adds to his charm of being responsible and dedicated to the imperial cause. Consequently, the male protagonist's superior agency is unquestioned. In *Zemindar,* the landowner, Oliver Erskine, is the unilateral administrator of several villages, upon which his rules and laws are enforced. Alex Randall in *Shadow of the Moon* dispenses justice to villagers, who meekly observe and accept the transfer of power from Indian rulers to the British. In *An Exotic Heir,* Julian Ritchie's loyalty to the Empire is unquestioned even though his mother is Bengali, because his father is from the nobility, making Ritchie a prospective heir to an enormous fortune. In fact, his identity spurs him even further to prove himself a worthy servant of the Empire.

However, despite being the main characters and even narrators of most of these stories, the female protagonists have minimal or no agency. Thus, Elisha LeGrant in *Der Duft von Sandelholz* cannot marry her lover, because he has broken his engagement with another woman, leading to a loss in his social stature. She cannot practice medicine because it is unconventional for a woman to do so and must always get her father's permission for everything. In *Der Himmelüber Darjeeling,* Helen is forced to marry Neville Hewitt because her family has no money. Hewitt even goes so far as to force her to wear clothes of his choice. Cassandra in *An Exotic Heir* must do her parents' bidding, be it visiting other English families in Calcutta or marrying the man of their choice. In *Zemindar,* Laura has more freedom because she is an orphan, but even then, her daily itinerary is decided by the family she lives

with and who is "looking after" her during her stay in India. Winter de Ballesteros in *Shadow of the Moon* is unable to make her own decisions in spite of being the heiress to a big fortune, because she is a woman and needs a guardian. The women's powerlessness over their fate is developed as an attractive trait, making the male protagonists more interested in "taking care" of them. Their vulnerability becomes a plot tool and they show their agency through small transgressions of established norms. In *Der Duft von Sandelholz*, for example, Elisha LeGrant sneaks into her father's library to read books on herbs. Helen in *Der Himmel über Darjeeling* refuses to wear a saree her husband wants her to wear and in *An Exotic Heir,* Cassandra refuses to go to visit officers' families in Calcutta with her mother. Bigger problems in the love story, like the heroine refusing to marry the man her parents have chosen, are dealt with in the storyline, without the female protagonist having to do anything.

In almost all novels, native presence – the spaces they occupy - is absent and the drama takes place in its own vacuum-like colonial setting. In *An Exotic heir,* Cassandra's mother refers to native servants as "pieces of furniture" who she doesn't even notice anymore. In *Der Duft von Sandelholz,* the narrator – when talking about Indians – focuses almost exclusively on servants in the household, notably the *punkahwallah,* the native man who sits outside the room and pulls a cord to fan the rooms inside. Native women are either wives of kings – doomed to widow sacrifice – or concubines of the male protagonist and are kept hidden or die in armed conflict with native rebels.

In *Shadow of the Moon,* the Indian nobleman, Kishan Prasad, is portrayed as an enemy of the East India Company and hence "bad," as opposed to the Company's "good" and righteous officer, Alex Randall. Randall's right-hand man, Niaz, is another Indian who plays a major role in the story, but whose Muslim heritage implies that he is a friend of the British, his "people", the Mughals, having ruled India for several hundred years.

In this manner, the narrative displays the hegemonic workings of the Empire, making its domination in metaphorical and physical spaces self-obvious. By building their cantonments in India, colonial officers have successfully "worlded" cities like Calcutta and Bombay, defining them in their way and restricting native access.In almost all novels referred to in this paper, there are lengthy descriptions of colonial life in Calcutta and Lucknow, including the wide roads, white colonial-style bungalows and gardens which are reserved for the British and where no Indians are allowed, except for the servants.These narrative sequences serve as backgrounds where the heroine usually meets her future love interest, but which directly and indirectly hint at colonial superiority. In *Zemindar,* Laura meets her future

lover, Oliver Erskine, at a party thrown by the Lucknow resident. The plot cleverly manoeuvres between men discussing the politics and administration of India and women trying to get attention from men and discussing local gossip. Cassandra in *An Exotic Heir* describes the party's magnificence, the governor General's palace-like residence, the fantastic gowns worn by the ladies and the colourful uniforms by colonial officers, all of which intend to display the British "Raj" in its complete splendour. In *Shadow of the Moon,* the narrator describes officers' parties thrown by the Governor-General serve to display the riches and the power that the British have gained over Indian territory. Calcutta also serves to broadcast the impression that the East India Company has conquered India and that things are going well for them. Thus the city's administrators have the additional task of keeping up to the image that all is well with the Company and hence its lavish balls served to project the image of "gaiety" (Kaye 164).

Many books go a step further, describing the "black" and "white" parts of cities like Bombay, where natives were limited to the "black" towns. Again, the narratives use these features as backgrounds against which the leading lady commits her transgressions, like Cassandra in *An Exotic Heir* visiting the local *bazaar* – a forbidden zone for her - with her lover. Similarly, in *Der Duft von Sandelholz,* Elisha shows her rebellious nature by going to the "black" part of Bombay by herself and rescuing a young native girl who she takes into her care. This plot tool shifts the focus to the heroine's "strong" and daring nature. The subtext, which is the colonial occupation of these cities, remains undercover, making the presence of the Empire and its racism self-explanatory. Then again, it is the coloniser – a woman in this case - who saves the native, the natives themselves being downtrodden themselves or despots, who benefit from exploiting their own people.

Thus, through the construction of the native land by the coloniser and the establishment of his superior agency, the narrative in these stories sets the stage for physically conquering the colony. The novels introduce this aspect through straightforward descriptions of British occupation. In *Zemindar,* the protagonist describes the British residency in Oudh, a princely state where the local ruler, Nawab Wajid Ali, has been deposed by the British. British claim to the Residency or the *Baillie Guard*, as it was known, is demonstrated by the Union Jack flying on a three-storey-high hexagonal tower. The location has been carefully chosen and built with foresight – the first Resident was anticipating a military struggle or at least security problems as the East India Company extended its influence in northern India (Fitzgerald). When Indian sepoys revolt against British rule in 1857, the *Baillie Guard* is

attacked. Several families are forced to face the onslaught of angry Indians and the lovers, Laura and Oliver, are separated from each other. Similarly, in *Shadow of the Moon,* the Mutiny and the ensuing violence serve as a test which the lovers must pass. In both of these books, the lovers separate or are injured and must escape the wrath of the locals, who have plundered, looted and stolen from British officers and their families – who appear as victims in the books. Towards the end, the mutiny as a political event fades from the storyline; what remains is the heroine's struggle – physical, mental and emotional – through the crisis and her union with her lover.

Back to the Empire?

Love stories set in 19th century India are a good example of modern romantic novels, but a close reading of these books indicates the insidiousness of the Empire and its workings, over seventy years after its downfall. The stories reveal the Empire at its colonial and patriarchal best, with British men setting off to prove their ability and contribute their services to the colonial cause, and women following and supporting them in their imperialist goals.

With their emphasis on England as "home" and the just rule over uncivilised natives, these novels are perfect examples for Eurocentric perspectives on the Empire's periphery and compare to Raj-era novels like Rudyard Kipling's *Kim* and Rider Haggard's *She* in their attitudes towards women, natives and colonial territories (Boehmer). While the Empire still existed, these novels allowed their target audience, female readers, to rather effortlessly find their place in the world of the Empire, thus instilling the warm feeling of being part of a just cause.

These novels with their imperialistic-nationalist attitudes, the protagonists' strong sense of English identity, contrasting with the natives and colonised geographies, are reminiscent of a better age. They hark back to Victorian times, when the "metropolis" – Britain – was stable. Britain was prospering and, in a sense, all was right with the world.

Notes

[1]Hsu Min Teo explains that romance was a popular genre in the late 19th century and its plots,"with its attraction, courtship, obstacles, tribulations, suffering and marriage or parting through death" were mapped onto the imperial adventure romance." (87)

[2]Other novelists who wrote in the genre during that time included Bithia Mary Croker, Fanny Emily Farr Penny, Alice Perrin, Maud Diver, Alice Eustace and Juliet Armstrong.

[3]This strategy of "worlding" is best illustrated through the "Minute on Indian education" proposed by Thomas Babington Macaulay in 1835. Macaulay was legal advisor to Lord William Bentinck, the Governor General of India at the time. In his Minute, Macaulay said, "We must at present do our best to form a class who may be interpreters between us and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and colour, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals and in intellect." (Macaulay 3)

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