

# Translating India: Geopolitical Identity in Elizabeth Hamilton's *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* (1797)

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## Introduction

Elizabeth Hamilton's 1796 *Translations of the Letters of a Hindoo Rajah* is a fictional translation of a series of imaginary epistolary exchanges between the Indian prince Zāarmilla and his two fellow "Hindoo" [*sic*] correspondents, describing their experiences in India and England in the mid-1770s and early 1780s. The novel follows Charles de Secondat Montesquieu's *Persian Letters* (1721) and Oliver Goldsmith's *Citizen of the World* (1762) in using the trope of the Oriental traveller to defamiliarise and satirise European manners, in particular Britain's treatment of women. However, one important difference between Hamilton's work and these earlier examples is the considerable effort the author takes to give the impression of presenting an empirically-valid and historically-specific representation of India. In particular, Hamilton mimics the then-recent translations of Indian texts by figures such as Sir William Jones, Charles Wilkins and Hamilton's own deceased brother, Charles, by including a preliminary dissertation, a glossary and numerous footnotes.

The French theorist Gérard Genette coined the term "paratext" to refer to the different devices and practices—such as introductions, notes, and epigraphs—that operate on the threshold of the text, mediating between author and reader. In this article, I argue that Hamilton's paratexts constitute what Mary Louise Pratt has described as a "contact zone" (Pratt, p. 1): a space in which people separated by geography and history can come into contact with one another and establish relations. The novel was written at a time when Britain had begun sporadically to take political control of different areas in the region, and, ostensibly, Hamilton argues for further Imperial intervention. As a result, *Translations* offers a revealing example of how the Romantic-period

paratext provided an important space in which an emerging British imperial culture could grapple with, and mould, the bewildering plurality of the foreign societies it encountered into coherent national identities.

Importantly, *Letters* is an example of what Gary Kelly calls “the footnote novel”: his label for Romantic-period novels that incorporate “a range of factual, public, and political material” (Kelly p. 157) via their notes. As Kelly observes, both radical and reactionary writers of the period included such additional matter so as to participate in the explosive political debate that had been sparked by the French Revolution. Hamilton’s extensive paratexts for the novel enable her to make numerous contributions to diverse topics of public discussion, including colonialism, radicalism, the present state of literature and female education. However, what is particularly noticeable about Hamilton’s contribution to the polarized debates of the revolutionary decade is the author’s almost schizophrenic advocacy of different progressive and conservative causes. At one moment, she launches a typical Anti-Jacobin attack on William Godwin’s ideas; at another, she espouses the feminist attitudes advocated by his wife Mary Wollstonecraft. As I will demonstrate, examining the novel’s paratexts more closely helps us to unravel Hamilton’s advocacy of different aspects of Jacobin and loyalist thought.

Critics of the time praised the breadth and depth of information about India that Hamilton displayed in her paratexts. *The British Critic* claimed approvingly that the preliminary dissertation demonstrated “a very intimate acquaintance with the history, religion, and manners of the Hindoos [*sic*]”. The same source admired the way Hamilton’s extensive notes and glossary provided the reader with easy-to-use translations, observing that “Miss Hamilton has illuminated her work, not only by a glossary of Oriental words, but, for the convenience of them, by notes explanatory at the foot of the page”. The *Monthly Review* lauded further Hamilton’s dissemination and production of knowledge about India for facilitating cultural understanding and British imperial ambition, claiming that “[i]n proportion . . . to the accumulation of these facts . . . we shall be enabled to tread with a firmer step, among the antiquities of this singular people”. Other critics, however, sounded a warning. The *Analytical Review* took issue with Hamilton’s view that the British had liberated India’s Hindu population by usurping the power of their Muslim

rulers, contending that “it is doubtful whether the generality of readers will perfectly accord with her, in opinion respecting the happy change which the long-suffering Hindoos [*sic*] have experienced under the dominion of Great Britain . . . these injured peoples have merely changed masters, and one species of oppression for another”.<sup>1</sup>

In the next section, I will show how, in her paratexts, Hamilton constructs an essentialised image of Indian national identity in order to legitimise British ambitions in the region. I will then explore how, at certain points in the main text, she undermines the pro-Imperialist arguments she asserts in her paratexts. As I will show, such moments of fracture expose the tensions within Hamilton’s position — as both an Anti-Jacobin Imperialist and a Scots-Irish woman writer. But they also demonstrate the volatile nature of the British Imperial ideology that was forming and coming to prominence in this period. For reasons of brevity, I will put to one side considerations over Hamilton’s use of her paratexts as quasi-legal proofs, vindicating the actions of Warren Hastings, the first governor of British Bengal who was famously accused of corruption in an impeachment in 1787. I will also place at the periphery of my argument what Hamilton’s use of paratexts to participate in the male-dominated domain of Orientalist scholarship might tell us about the space such anterior textual locations opened for gender subversion. This is not because I believe such concerns to be marginal, or unrelated to my main argument. It is due to the fact that I want to focus on the central tension animating the novel: its divided and contradictory approach towards geopolitical identity.

## I. Hinduism

As I mentioned earlier, in her paratexts, Hamilton presents extensive citations and quotations from works by scholars investigating India, such as Thomas Maurice, Nathaniel Brassey Halhed and especially Sir William Jones. In so doing, she seeks to popularise this innovative wave of British scholarship, and boost its attempts to raise the prestige of Hindu culture in Europe. In his *Essay on the Poetry of Nations*, Sir William Jones espoused Hindu culture as “a new set of images and similitudes which future scholars might explain and future poets might imitate”.<sup>2</sup> Hamilton puts into practice Jones’ vision of India as a revitalising force through her integration of Hindu material into the

Anti-Jacobin novel. But Hamilton also imitated some of Jones' paratextual strategies. For instance, in his erudite notes for his 1776 quasi-Oriental poem *The Enchanted Fruit*, Jones mediates Indian culture by making analogies between Classical and Hindu myth, translating Eastern religion into the more familiar and exalted world of classical mythology. He describes "MAHALLEW" as "The Indian JUPITER"; "Bharamy" as "VENUS"; and "Leishing" as "CERES".<sup>3</sup> Likewise, in her "Preliminary Dissertation", Hamilton equates "Ganesa" with "Janus", "Carticeta" with "Mars" and "Cama" with "Cupid" (Hamilton, p. 64). In both cases, Hamilton's and Jones' insistence on the equivalence between Ancient Greece and India has an equivocal colonial politics. Kate Teltscher has described Jones as attempting to "minimize the sense of cultural dissonance" by making "Sanskrit" poetry "reverberate with familiar echoes" (Teltscher, p. 208). And in one sense, we can detect both an open-mindedness to difference and a determination to re-orientate British readers' perspectives in each writers' equation of Hindu deities with Greek and Roman Gods. Nonetheless, this activity still places Hindu culture in an inferior position, regulating it to a less advanced stage of historical 'progress' than eighteenth-century Britain. By putting Hinduism in this lesser location, both Jones and Hamilton imply that India requires modernisation through Imperial intervention.

At the same time, Hamilton assembles an image of Indian culture based exclusively on Hinduism. As Pamela Perkins and Shannon Russell point out in the "Introduction" to their edition of the text: "Hamilton, like many of her contemporaries . . . understood "Indian" culture to mean "Hindu" culture" (Perkins and Russell, p. 24). Indeed, Hamilton hardly uses the word "India" at all, preferring to refer to "Hindoostan" [*sic*] and labelling Zäärmilla a "Hindoo [*sic*] rajah", rather than in Indian one. Likewise, in her "Preliminary Dissertation", Hamilton presents the Hindus as the indigenous people of the region, claiming that "of this country, the Hindoos [*sic*] are the aborigines" (Hamilton, p. 57). According to Hamilton, the Hindus possess a coherent national identity that has persisted across many centuries: "[i]n Hindoostan, [*sic*] the original features that marked the character of their nation, from time immemorial, are still too visible to be mistaken or overlooked" (Hamilton, p. 71). Hamilton translates Indian terms and cultural artefacts as instances of a na-

tional culture. For instance, in her glossary's entry for "Ganesa", she comments that "[i]n many parts of Hindoostan [*sic*] every temple has the image of Ganesa . . . placed over its gate; and the door of every dwelling-house is superscribed with his name" (Hamilton, p. 74). For Hamilton, the repetition of this image across different parts of the country demonstrates that India possesses a coherent national identity based on Hindu religious beliefs. Similarly, Hamilton's notes present Zāārmilla's turns of phrase as national character traits. When for instance, he invokes "Ganesa", a footnote intervenes to inform us that this is "a customary introduction in the writings of the Hindoos" [*sic*] (Hamilton, p. 77). Such comments frame Zāārmilla as a fictional embodiment of a Hindu national identity. In her paratexts, Hamilton uses the apparently neutral position of the translator as a cloak under which she can construct and transmit a highly specific and ideologically-charged image of Hindu culture.

This ideological charge is more striking in Hamilton's description of the history of Islam in India in her "Preliminary Dissertation". Hamilton refuses to treat Islam with the same open-mindedness with which she explores Hinduism, declaring Muhammad a false prophet who founded a virulently imperialistic religion: "[t]he imposter of Mecca had established, as one of the principles of his doctrine, the merit of extending it, either by persuasion, or the sword, to all parts of the earth" (Hamilton, p. 67). Hamilton portrays the Muslim settlers that entered India in various waves of trade and conquest from the seventh century onwards as brutal military forces — binary opposites of the weak, ineffectual yet tolerant Hindus. According to her, "neither the mild and tolerating spirit of the religion of the Hindoos, [*sic*] nor the gentle and inoffensive manners of its votaries, were sufficient to protect them from the intolerant and brutal antipathy of their Mahommedan [*sic*] invaders" (Hamilton, p. 68–9). Hamilton's representation of Islam as an oppressive military force provides an ideological rationale for British imperial intervention, casting the British as liberators who are freeing the Hindus from a long and miserable subjection to a foreign power. She claims that "[i]n those provinces which . . . have fallen under the dominion of Great Britain . . . the long-suffering Hindoos [*sic*] have experienced a happy change . . . salutary regulations . . . persevered in by the present Governor General, will diffuse the

smiles of prosperity and happiness over . . . Hindoostan [*sic*]” (Hamilton, p. 70). While Felicity Nussbaum has argued that “Hamilton provides a surreptitious defence of British imperialism” (Nussbaum, p. 171), it is more accurate to describe the author as presenting a forthright defence in surreptitious textual locations. By placing her argument in the paratext, Hamilton disguises her highly contentious history as a dispassionate mediation of Indian language and culture.

Importantly, as Nigel Leask has argued, Hamilton’s account “is based on an analogy between the Islamic conquest of large parts of Hindu India and the impact of the French revolution on Europe” (Leask, p. 101). In particular, by narrating Indian history as the story of an ancient, tolerant culture ravaged by ideological extremists, Hamilton is relocating Edmund Burke’s conservative interpretation of the French Revolution to India. Just as Burke interpreted events in France as the destruction of a traditional order by revolutionary fanatics, so Hamilton presents the rise of Islam as the eradication of a cohesive society at the hands of extremists, claiming that “[t]he happiness enjoyed by the Hindoos [*sic*] . . . was at length doomed to see its overthrow effected, by the resistless fury of fanatic zeal” (Hamilton, p. 67). In her view, the caste system provided Hindu society with a distinctive structure that commanded virtually universal assent: “[t]he division of the Hindoos into four castes [*sic*] . . . lent its aid toward the preservation of the greater harmony . . . the slightest breach of it never fails to incur universal reprobation” (Hamilton, p. 58 and 60). Hamilton even enlists her Hindu sources as evidence of the harmoniousness of the caste system, quoting approvingly from Charles Wilkins’ 1785 translation of *The Bhagavad-Gita* the claim that “[a] *man being contented with his own particular station obtaineth perfection*” (Hamilton, p. 59).

Importantly, Hamilton’s representation of the caste system is as much a projection of the British class system, as it is a simplified model of the actual intricate web of social interconnections and divisions that existed on the Indian subcontinent. In his 2001 book *Ornamentalism*, David Cannadine proposed that British Imperialism from around 1850 to 1950 was a vehicle that enabled the British to replicate and export their own hierarchical social structure to the colonies. The *Translations* suggests this approach was far more

longstanding, stretching back at least to the late-eighteenth century. By transplanting the Burkean narrative of the Revolution onto India, Hamilton also transforms a specific interpretation of current affairs into universal description of how any challenge to existing hierarchies leads to social collapse. For Hamilton, prior to the Islamic invasion, the fixed social hierarchy provided by the caste system enabled Hindu India to avoid the revolutionary turmoil that was currently engulfing Europe: “such systematic principles . . . necessarily exclude those argumentative disputations, those cruel and obstinate animosities which, alas! . . . have so disturbed the peace of society” (Hamilton, p. 61). The supposedly factual nature of the paratext enables Hamilton to elevate her combination of Anti-Jacobinism and Imperialism to the status of empirical knowledge.

## II. Complicating Imperialism

However, in several ways, Hamilton undermines the colonialist and loyalist values she asserts in her paratexts. Firstly, as Perkins and Russell point out: “[i]f there is any point at which her optimism about imperial expansion cracks, it is in the novel’s treatment of Scotland” (Perkins and Russell, p. 43). Importantly, during his visit to Britain, the Brahmin Sheermaal discovers in the Scottish Highlands “a people whose origin is more ancient than the rocks” (Hamilton, p. 122). Sheermaal describes these Highlanders as an aboriginal people following a traditional way of life: “an ancient nation . . . here preserved in their original purity and perfection” (Hamilton, p. 122). The parallels between them and Hindus are underscored when Sheermaal insists that “the characteristic virtues and peculiar customs of the nation, are so evidently of Hindoo [*sic*] origin” (Hamilton, p. 124). Clearly, there are parodic dimensions to this episode, and Perkins and Russell are right to claim that here Hamilton “laughs at . . . what she presents as the absurd Scottish pride in ancestry” (Perkins and Russell, p. 44), as well as “philological investigations into a common Indo-European language by Sir William Jones” and “eighteenth-century fascination with the origins of the Scottish Celts” (Perkins and Russell, fn., p. 125). But, I would like to suggest that, behind Hamilton’s laughter, lies a more nervous recognition of the parallels between her narrative of the supposed Islamic conquest of India and the British government’s forced

displacement of Highland populations across the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries. As a woman who spent most of her childhood growing up in a Lowlands village that looked onto the Highlands, it is difficult to imagine that Hamilton would have been unaware of this forced mass emigration. Indeed, the class-bound nature of Hindu society can be read as an echo of the hierarchical structure of Highland clans that were being dissolved at the end of the eighteenth-century, as well as a mirror-image of Britain as a whole. This identification between Hindus and Highlanders unsettles profoundly her advocacy of British Imperial intervention into India, casting the British as the agents of colonial destruction, rather than the paternalist protectors of a colonised population. The discrepancy between such ambivalent moments within the text and the paratexts' defence of British Imperialism brings to view a more conflicted attitude towards colonialism.

Such discord is reinforced by the novel's feminist politics. While, for reasons of space, I have put this element to one side, this constitutes an important strand within the novel and its paratexts. Simply by presenting so many extracts from fresh works of scholarship on India in the paratexts of her novel, Hamilton seeks to enfranchise female novel-readers within this male-dominated area of letters. Moreover, Hamilton's criticism of what she sees as Hindu society's age-old subjection of women could be claimed to be at odds with her praise for the fixed power structures of the caste system. Importantly also, Hamilton's feminist attitudes undermine directly aspects of her advocacy of British Imperialism. In one passage, Sheermaal discusses female education in Britain, describing an earlier system in Scotland in which "the young females were . . . sent to certain places of instruction, called day-schools, accompanied by their brothers". Sheermaal claims that the mixed atmosphere encouraged "fraternal affection" and "in the minds of the young females, excited a wish to excel . . . as was altogether incompatible with the preservation of ignorance" (Hamilton, p. 131). What is particularly important about this moment is that here Hamilton aligns her Wollstonecraftian espousal of female education with a veiled critique of the impact of internal colonialism on Scotland. A more egalitarian Scotland is disappearing within a British state whose educational institutions enervate the female mind. Sheermaal reassures us satirically that "the daughter of a mountain rajah will soon be as amiably frivolous, as engag-

ingly ignorant; as weak in body, and in mind, as the pupil of the greatest boarding school in England” (Hamilton, p. 131). While Hamilton’s paratext rely on masculine, imperialist voices, her main text begins to overturn such authorities, subtly contesting them with ideas that potentially subvert her own Anti-Jacobin attitudes.

Hamilton’s novel’s status as a pseudo-translation complicates further the novel’s colonial politics. Hamilton’s Hindu narrators constantly decentre the British reader. Far from placing British in a position of imperial command, Hamilton asks them to view their own culture from the position of the colonised outsider. Sheermaal, for instance, locates Britain in “the remotest corner of the habitable world” (Hamilton, p. 108). Moreover, while Hamilton’s “Preliminary Dissertation” constructs an exclusionist version of Indian identity, many of her annotations disrupt this tidy template. For instance, at the very same moment in which her main text declares the Hindus “the aborigines” of India, a footnote intervenes to inform us that “[t]he word *Hind* . . . is of Persian origin . . . derived from Hind, a supposed son of Ham, the son of Noah” (Hamilton, p. 57). This annotation contradicts her image of the Hindus as India’s settled inhabitants, pointing to an earlier history of Hindu migration to the subcontinent. In her 1992 work *Siting Translation*, Tejaswini Niranjana has argued that translations in the colonial context constitute acts of imaginative conquest, participating “in the act of fixing colonised cultures, making them seem static and unchanging rather than historically constructed” (Niranjana, p. 3). Yet what we see here is that the very act of translation nonetheless undermines Hamilton’s attempts to reduce Indian history to a homogeneous model, subverting the colonial reader’s supposed superiority to the colonised and exposing the suppressed pluralism and dynamism of India.

## Conclusion

In her “Preliminary Dissertation”, Hamilton presents Indian history as the story of a Hindu people victimised by recurrent Islamic invasions. In so doing, she promotes a conception of geopolitical identity based on a settled people, who are linked across time through cultural and religious traditions. However, in the novel itself, and many of its notes, Hamilton begins to articulate a more fluid model, stressing civilizational encounters and recognising the mongrel

character of every culture. Such volatility brings to view some of the profound turbulences operating within the late eighteenth-century geopolitical discourse.

The emergence of modern industrial capitalism in eighteenth-century Europe marked a fundamental shift: from a paternalist society in which power was dispersed across multiple local sources, to one in which political power was centralised in a sovereign state, and economic power in the hands of a metropolitan elite. However, revolutionary turmoil exposed the potentially destabilising effects of the massively increased power of the middle classes and the emergence of a new politically-aware mass reading public. Concepts of national identity, drawing on Burkean ideas of tradition, provided a means of attaining the consent of the diverse populations of the British Isles to this new structure of power. The nation subsumed competing ties of kinship and region, creating both a disciplined work-force and a citizen soldiery to protect commercial interests. Nationalism also facilitated imperialism, enabling Britain to sort the world's perplexing diversity into a series of unified and bounded territories, which could then be subjected to British rule. As Sunil Khilnani has pointed out, the Indian nation-state was in fact a British invention: “[i]t was the British interest in determining geographical boundaries that . . . converted “India” from the name of a cultural region into a precise, pink territory” (Khilnani, p. 155). In so doing, the British Empire acted as a kind of translation machine, ordering and aggregating myriad ethnic communities into nations.

In the paratexts of *Translations of a Hindoo Rajah*, we find a writer seeking to organise disparate pieces of information about India into a coherent national identity. Hamilton attempts to transform a bewildering multiplicity of hybrid cultural forms into a knowable population who can be brought under imperial control. Nonetheless, this act of metamorphosis is disrupted by Hamilton's liminal awareness of the traumatic uprooting of indigenous communities within Britain, her feminist politics, and the novel's status as a translation. Perkins and Russell have argued that “it would be simplistic to explain the respect which Hamilton accords her “outsider” narrator by reference to her own relative “outsider” status as a woman of Scots-Irish parentage” (Perkins and Russell, p. 48). Yet Hamilton's gender and origins shape the novel in

complicated ways. By placing a series of masculine, scholarly voices and pro-Imperialist Imperial political arguments in the paratext, Hamilton makes them her novel's ideological foundation. Yet, in the main text and some of the footnotes, Hamilton undermines the power structures she enforces elsewhere. In an unusual and fascinating way, the novel inverts the conventional relationship between text and paratext. Rather than the paratexts commenting on the main text block, the text itself doubles, underwrites and occasionally assumes a contestatory relationship with the ideas expressed in the paratext. But this discord also suggests a conflict within Hamilton herself, in which the imperial and Anti-Jacobin arguments she asserts are contradicted by her own latent misgivings. As such, the tension between text and paratext does not simply provide us with a lens through which we can make sense of the novel's ideological instability. It also shows us the instability and internally-contested nature of Imperial constructions of colonial national identities in the late eighteenth century and beyond.

#### Notes

1 All of the following citations refer to the versions reprinted in the Perkins and Russell edition of *Translations*. Anon., *The British Critic*, vol. 8, September 1796, pp. 310–312, p. 312. Anon., *Monthly Review*, vol. 21, October 1796, p. 313. *The Analytical Review*, vol. 24, Oct. 1796, pp. 317–8, p. 317.

2 Sir William Jones, *Essay on the Poetry of Nations* (1772) in Michael J. Franklin (ed.) *Sir William Jones: Selected Poetical and Prose Works* (Cardiff: University of Wales Press, 1995) pp. 317–336, p. 336.

3 Sir William Jones, *The Enchanted Fruit; or, The Hindu Wife: An Antediluvian Tale. Written in the Province of Bahar* (1784) reprinted in Franklin (ed.) line 91, p. 84; line 91, p. 91; line 91, p. 91.

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