

Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600–1857

Review Number: 492

Publish date: Wednesday, 1 February, 2006

Author: Michael Fisher

ISBN: 8178241544

Date of Publication: 2004

Publisher: Permanent Black

Place of Publication: Delhi

Reviewer: Michael Dodson

While reading Michael Fisher's new book, *Counterflows to Colonialism: Indian Travellers and Settlers in Britain, 1600–1857*, which details the diverse experiences of South Asians in Britain, I often found myself reminded of Tayeb Salih's 1969 novel *Season of Migration to the North*.⁽¹⁾ The figure at the heart of this remarkable story, originally written in Arabic, is Mustafa Sa'eed, a man who leaves his native Sudan to attend school first in Cairo, then in London, where he eventually becomes lecturer in economics. It has been argued that Mustafa's journey northward, and his turbulent life in Britain, should be seen as an attempt to reverse the dominant 'flow' of European imperialism, and that the novel itself effectively presents a postcolonial 'counter-narrative' to the paradigmatic account of the European imperial project, Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (the narrative within *Season of Migration* is recounted from along the banks of the river Nile, rather than upon the river Thames, for example).⁽²⁾

Counterflows to Colonialism is in many ways the historical equivalent to Tayeb Salih's novel. Fisher sets out to trace the 'counterflow' of South Asians to Britain during the rise of British imperialism, the ways these men and women 'participated variously in British society', and how their very presence 'compelled British responses' (p. 1). Arguably, Fisher presents in this book a kind of precursor to studies of the contemporary diaspora, somewhat in the vein of recent examinations of historical 'globalisation'.⁽³⁾ Certainly, at times, one can perceive in the book distant echoes of contemporary debates over asylum and immigration, as when European sailors complained in the eighteenth century that Asian seamen were taking work away from them (p. 73). Some of Fisher's previous work has also touched upon the theme of the early Indian 'diaspora' in Europe: he has written a biography of Dean Mahomet, an Indian sepoy who settled in Ireland in the late eighteenth century, and later in England, marrying an Anglo-Irish woman, and (perhaps most importantly) opening the first 'curry house' in London – the Hindoostanee Coffee House in George Street. Fisher is also the editor of much of Dean Mahomet's writings.⁽⁴⁾

The real strength, and pleasure, of *Counterflows to Colonialism* are the largely unknown and very interesting stories of South Asian men and women, and their entangled lives in Britain, which Fisher relates in some detail. Fisher is clearly interested, both in this book and in his wider writing, to reassess 'empire' as a more complex, fluid, and contested set of practices than is often acknowledged. Indeed, the geographical focus of the book, and the unravelling of 'empire' in Britain, neatly demonstrates that imperialism incorporated elements of exchange, negotiation, and contestation (however uneven), often in the most unexpected of ways.

Fisher divides *Counterflows* into three chronological sections (1600–1790, 1790–1830, 1830–57), each representative, he argues, of a particular era in the character of empire. That is, Fisher envisions a progression from the seventeenth and eighteenth century, with its relatively fluid identity boundaries, to a nineteenth century which imposed increasingly restrictive identity conditions upon non-Europeans. This is linked by Fisher to the concordant rise in British imperial self-confidence, territorial expansion, and the validation of images of European ascendancy. Yet one of the key arguments Fisher wants to make is that in many cases, throughout much of this period, British perceptions of Indians' 'class', as well as their 'gender', were often more important determinants of South Asians' social and cultural empowerment, or disempowerment, in Britain than, necessarily, their status as subjects of a 'colonised race'.

I agree fundamentally with Fisher's programme in this book, namely, his desire to see empire and imperialism in a wider perspective, with a greater attention paid to the dynamicism of power, the diverse agendas of individuals, and the differential outcomes for different historical actors, which are so often obscured 'underneath' the catch-all umbrella of 'empire'.⁽⁵⁾ This, certainly, is a step forward from the emphasis upon the variety and extent of colonial power which has for some time been a principal focus of the historiography of empire in South Asia (in the work of Bernard Cohn, for example, but more particularly in that of Nicholas Dirks). Yet I would want to raise some concerns about the structure which the book tends to follow, in order to emphasise these sorts of 'negotiations'.

In particular, the transition from the pre- or early colonial period to the 'high imperialism' of the mid-nineteenth century is substantiated by reference to some well-worn historical 'moments' and texts, such as T. B. Macaulay's 1835 'Minute' on education (which emphasised the superiority of English education), and I am not sure that such an easily formulated periodisation is warranted. Indeed, Fisher's book is, overall, a testament to the fluidity and complexity of what is supposed to be a burgeoning 'age of empire', which makes the periodisation he pursues here something of an enigma. In other words, a conception of empire as 'fluid', 'contested' and full of 'tension' belies easy formulations of a 'friendly' imperialism in the eighteenth century (such as we see in William Dalrymple's *White Mughals*, which clearly regards selected inter-racial relationships as being indicative of the British empire's overall character), or a 'high' imperialism of the nineteenth. Certainly I think that Fisher often acknowledges as much when he notes, for example, that during the early nineteenth century, increasingly 'self-confident colonialism' made Indian servants in Britain appear more as 'potential welfare problems' than hitherto, though simultaneously, 'the lived experience of such servants varied widely, and reflected their individual negotiations' (p. 215).

Moreover, within this broad narrative of British imperial strengthening and consolidation, Fisher emphasises displays of Indian agency in order to highlight what he describes as the 'multiple sites of contestation and cooperation as well as the inconsistencies and contradictions' inherent in colonialism, and by extension, Indian experiences in Britain (p. 13). As I have said, one must have some sympathy for this project, given the often-prevalent historiographical focus upon 'colonial power'. Yet simultaneously, I am not convinced that this is the best way of seeing empire as a complex set of phenomena. In essence, invocations of Indian 'agency', set against a backdrop of 'colonial power' do not necessarily intimate any sort of substantial complexity. In particular, Fisher sometimes provides little depth to his discussions of Europeans, or their understandings of imperial ideologies, for example, relying upon straightforward invocations of European prejudice. As such, the search for Indian 'agency', in certain instances, might have been de-emphasised in order to pursue in more depth a stronger sense of Indian-European entangledness, compromise and even inner conflict.

The first section of Fisher's book details the lives of Indians in Britain during an early period of increasing trade and nascent imperial consolidation, 1600 to 1790. Fisher is here concerned to detail the ways in which Indians were relatively free to be able to 'negotiate ... identity and relationship' (p. 49) with British society and culture, given Britain's unfamiliarity with India, and the lack of an overtly imperial relationship. Also important in this respect was the ability of Indians to adapt and adopt elements of British class structure to their benefit, as well as to take advantage of economic opportunities as they presented themselves.

Lascars (lashkar), for example, Indian sailors who travelled to Britain aboard the East India Company's ships as gang-hired labour, demanded high wages consonant with those paid to British sailors in the seventeenth century, and in the eighteenth, organised to keep control over the supply of much needed maritime labour (though their wages were as often appropriated by an intermediary Indian labour contractor, the ghat serang). Lascars also successfully petitioned the East India Company's directors for redress on occasions where the ship's captain withheld wages or other promised provisions. Once in Britain, many lascars were unable to afford to return to India. While the Company's directors most often accepted some financial and moral responsibility for these men, lascars also expressed their grievances through petitions to the crown, and in one case, by 'desecrating' the image of Queen Anne in St Paul's cathedral in 1679.

South Asian elites at this time were able to move through British society with relative ease. Fisher recounts the life of Joseph Emin (1726–1809), an Armenian, who wrote in English of his journey from India and life in Britain. A recurring theme of Emin's autobiography, Fisher notes, is his belief that 'his personal courage and willingness to adapt to British values would (and should) earn him the admiration of British audiences' (p. 73). Emin apparently encountered 'few preconceptions about his ethnicity' (p. 75) and so was able to negotiate his identity in Britain largely without encumbrance. Emin befriended Edmund Burke, and was later patronised by the Duke of Northumberland. According to Fisher, Emin was able to move in such circles due to his 'Armenian patriotic sentiments' and his 'indomitable quest for liberty for his oppressed people' (p. 76). Similarly, Fisher relates how Hanumantrao, a brahman, and emissary of the Maratha Peshwa (king), received the support of Edmund Burke when he arrived in Britain in 1781, eventually gaining gifts from King George III and travelling costs from the East India Company's directors. Yet it would appear that the favours received represented less the esteem in which he and the Peshwa were held by Britons generally, and rather more were the result of the usefulness which Hanumantrao played in Burke's own political wranglings over the power of the East India Company. Indeed, Hanumantrao bolstered Burke's persecution of Warren Hastings, by condemning before parliament Hastings's 1775 public hanging in Calcutta of Nandakumar, a critic of the Company's administration.

Throughout the seventeenth and much of the eighteenth century, then, Indians in Britain, though subject to forms of discrimination, were able to negotiate elements of their social identities, to express agency in some forms, often by working within Britain's structures of class. Fisher argues in the second section of his book, however, which covers over four chapters the period approximately 1790 to 1830, that 'colonial patterns intensified' (p. 9). This section includes chapters on Indian lascars and servants in Britain. Fisher argues that the fortunes of lascars tended to decline during this period, due largely to the imposition of increasingly restrictive structures 'within the context of developing British colonialism in Asia' (p. 138), while servants and slaves could fare somewhat better, due to the Abolitionist Movement, for example. There are also detailed chapters on Indian elites which tend to emphasise their gradual disempowerment in Britain.

Of particular interest are the experiences of Indian teachers of Persian who travelled to Britain in the late eighteenth century in order to offer their services to young men expecting to travel overseas. These teachers, Fisher notes, did not possess a sense of inferiority to Europeans, but rather, 'remained staunch advocates of their own religion and customs' (p. 106), and felt that they represented an 'authentic' expertise (in contrast to William Jones, for example, whose Persian grammar they decried as being defective). Yet over time this 'authentic' expertise was devalued by the Company, in favour of European methods of teaching.

Fisher describes the lives of four Indians who were employed by the East India Company at two educational

institutions during the early decades of the nineteenth century: Haileybury College, which trained civil servants, and Addiscombe, for military cadets. These men took positions of responsibility and authority over Britons, and held in British society the status of professional gentlemen. Sheth Ghoolam Hyder, for example, the first Persian Writing Master at Haileybury, drew a salary of £200 annually, and also employed British servants. Further teachers recruited directly from India demanded very high salaries indeed, at £600 a year plus expenses, which exceeded what the British professors were paid. Moreover, these men were able to extract from the Company further salary raises and housing benefits, in order to maintain what they viewed as appropriate standards to their social class, and in several cases married British women.

Fisher sees, however, a gradual marginalisation of this Indian linguistic expertise. In one case, Hassan Ali, who was employed at Addiscombe, completed in 1812 a *Grammar of the Hindoostanie Language* as a way of seeking professional 'advancement'. The *Grammar*, however, was judged to be little more than a 'literary curiosity' by orientalists Charles Stewart and Alexander Hamilton, who also noted that it had been 'surpassed' by the publication of other European-authored grammars. 'Native speakers', in other words, were replaced in the Company's educational institutions in Britain, as European-authored grammars and lexicons were considered more suitable or authoritative. Certainly, from 1823 onwards 'college authorities had decided that the alleged disruption these Muslim Indian men had on a student's moral education outweighed their linguistic advantages as "native speakers"' (p. 131). The one 'native speaker' employed by the Company in Britain from the late 1820s, in order to ensure that students attained as high a level of fluency as possible, was an Iranian, Muhammed Ibrahim, who knew Persian but no Indian languages. Apparently one significant factor which recommended this man to the Company was that he had considerably Anglicised himself (unlike the Indian teachers who went before him): he had adopted European dress, had no objections to eating with Europeans, and reportedly had a good knowledge of English.

Fisher's argument is that during the 'transitional' period of c.1790–1830, Indian teachers were initially able to negotiate relatively high social standings for themselves in Britain because of their class background in India, and the knowledge they possessed, though over time this status diminished as Indian languages and cultures were increasingly disparaged in Britain, and considered of less consequence than the impartation of Christian, and British moral values. The mechanism by which this happens is left quite vague, however. Fisher refers to Macaulay's 'Minute' on education, as well as 'the force of colonialism' (p. 108), 'increasingly disparaging colonial attitudes towards Indians generally' (p. 131) and 'growing British sentiment against Indians as the inferior colonized' (p. 125). It is arguable, at least in the Indian context, that Macaulay's 'Minute' was more effective in the promotion of Orientalist (or 'constructive Orientalist') educational methodologies. Policies of extreme Anglicisation were understood by Governor-General Lord Auckland as being unworkable and unrealistic, and the adaptation of Indian languages and knowledge within government education opened up interesting opportunities for Indians to draw upon their expertise, and critically engage the host of colonial representations disseminated there.⁽⁶⁾ Methodologically, the framework of unvariegated 'colonial power' and 'colonial ideology' set against sporadic displays of Indian agency seems inadequate to account for the complexities of lived experiences in this context.

The last part of *Counterflows to Colonialism*, which also incorporates four chapters, deals with the period 1830–57, marking the last decades of Company rule in India. This period culminates, Fisher argues, in Indians and Britons identifying 'themselves and each other as opposing peoples' (p. 7). Here Fisher describes Indian diplomats sent to Britain, who often sought to circumvent the Company's government in India to appeal directly to the Company's directors in London, or to the British Crown. These included the famed Hindu reformer Rammohun Roy, who came to Britain in order to petition for a better pension on behalf of the Mughal emperor. While in London, Roy reportedly lived lavishly, conversed with James Mill and Jeremy Bentham, and attended the coronation of King William IV. Roy was no fool. He researched the successes and failures of former Indian diplomatic missions to Britain, as well as the nature of British governance, and came prepared with extensive documentation. In any case, he often met with hostility from Britons, and his early death in 1833 put an end to further negotiations on behalf of the emperor. Similarly, the Maratha Maharaja Pratap Singh of Satara sent a series of delegations to London in the late 1830s in order to counter what he perceived as continued persecution by the Company's local government in Bombay.

While in London, these ambassadors used the British press to generate enough controversy to force the Company to account for its actions against Satara, though, as Fisher notes, these ambassadors lacked 'the force to reverse the direction of colonialism' (p. 279). In other words, they were largely unable to successfully press the Company in London to take corrective action, despite their limited public relations victories.

Fisher also describes Indians who came to Britain during this period not for political gain, but rather for the purpose of augmenting their personal status. Particularly interesting here is the case of one of the sons of Mysore's (in)famous ruler Tipu Sultan, a figure vilified in the late eighteenth-century British press by his resistance to the Company's expansion in southern India. Mahomed Jamh ood-Deen travelled to London early in 1835, and entered into British high society as 'the Prince of Mysore' (p. 306). He met with both King William IV and Queen Victoria, playing up their shared 'royal status' (anticipating the post-1857 elaboration of a 'royal cult' in the rule of India).⁽⁷⁾ Jamh ood-Deen also successfully pressed some of his demands in London for an enhanced pension, due to him under the terms of the defeat of Mysore. Similarly, a variety of Indians travelled to Britain in order to further their knowledge and education. In 1845 a group of four advanced medical students travelled from Calcutta to London with Henry Goodeve, professor of anatomy at the Calcutta Medical College, to study at University College London. Goodeve recognised that the students competed along 'national' lines against their British peers, and though they generally did very well in their studies, Goodeve also is thought to have cast them collectively in the emerging stereotype of 'intelligent but effeminately weak, physically and morally' (p. 371). One student, Soojee Comar Chuckerbutty, converted to Christianity in Britain, and became a member of the Royal College of Surgeons. Chuckerbutty's apparent Anglicisation, and his high educational attainments in Britain, allowed him to return to India as assistant surgeon in the service of the Bengal government.

It would certainly seem, therefore, that the rise of colonial sentiment in the nineteenth century proved but little impediment, in isolated instances at least, to the advancement of individual Indian aspirations. This is particularly so in cases where Indians adapted to British society through strategies of Anglicisation, or class allegiance. Yet in the last chapter of his book, Fisher also highlights the declining fortunes of working class Indians in Britain. Doubly disadvantaged by class and race, they built an integrated community in London's East End. Lascars, in particular, were left without financial protection following 1834 as the Crown withdrew the Company's monopoly on seaborne trade with India, and hence their responsibilities to support or repatriate them.

Unfortunately, there has not been space, even in this forum, to consider all the chapters, and to do justice to the full extent, of Michael Fisher's *Counterflows to Colonialism*. It is a long book, at nearly 500 pages, and choosing elements from the wide array of interesting material presented here has been difficult. I learned a lot from Fisher's book, it has to be said. I had not realised the extent or importance of the Indian presence in Britain prior to 1857, having focused like so many of my colleagues on the colonial experience within South Asia itself. I have highlighted a methodological problem, as I see it, in the book, but in practice, Fisher nevertheless still manages to instil in the reader a sense of the historical dynamicism which this context demands.

It is worth pausing, however, to consider in the context of Fisher's book, and the chronological development which he has used, whether we want to view empire, and imperialism, as necessarily the gradual extension of power over the structures of rule (economic, social, cultural, and political), accompanied by a narrative of consolidation, powerfulness and decline. Or is it preferable to conceptualise empire as always a procession of contradiction, ambiguity and vagaries of conflict? Does the assignation of 'periods' by reference to dominant perceptions of relative power relationships obscure the interstices of colonialism, its 'ever-fractured gaze' (to paraphrase Homi Bhabha)? Ultimately I think that Michael Fisher's *Counterflows to Colonialism* still presents us with an important contribution to understanding the British Empire beyond the standard narratives and standard historiographical conceptualisations. By shifting our focus to Indians and expressions of empire within Britain, and by stressing the negotiations Indians undertook there, Fisher has delineated important aspects of what emerging histories of imperialism might look like.

Notes

1. Tayeb Salih, *Season of Migration to the North* (Denys Johnson-Davies, transl., Portsmouth, NH, 1969).[Back to \(1\)](#)
2. For considerations of *Season of Migration*, see, for example, E. W. Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1993), p. 211; S. S. Makdisi, 'The Empire Renarrated: "Season of Migration to the North" and the Reinvention of the Present', in *Critical Inquiry*, 18.4 (1992), 804–820.[Back to \(2\)](#)
3. For example, *Globalization in World History*, ed. A. G. Hopkins (New York, 2003).[Back to \(3\)](#)
4. M. Fisher, *The First Indian Author in English: Dean Mahomed (1759–1851) in India, Ireland, and England* (New Delhi, 1996; 2000); and *The Travels of Dean Mahomet: An Eighteenth-Century Journey Through India*, ed. M. Fisher (Berkeley, Calif., 1997).[Back to \(4\)](#)
5. See, for example, *Tensions of Empire: Colonial Cultures in a Bourgeois World*, ed. F. Cooper and A. L. Stoler (Berkeley, Calif., 1997).[Back to \(5\)](#)
6. See, for example, M. S. Dodson, 'Re-Presented for the Pandits: James Ballantyne, "Useful Knowledge," and Sanskrit Scholarship in Benares College during the Mid-Nineteenth Century', in *Modern Asian Studies*, 36.2 (2002), 257–298.[Back to \(6\)](#)
7. See, D. Cannadine, *Ornamentalism: How the British Saw Their Empire* (2001).[Back to \(7\)](#)

Other reviews:

[2]

Source URL: <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/review/492#comment-0>

Links

[1] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/item/2856>

[2] <https://reviews.history.ac.uk/>