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Katherine Carberry

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Koserstraße 20
14195 Berlin

Contact information:

For more information, please consult our website www.globalhistories.com or contact the editor at: admin@globalhistories.com.

**Dressing Imperialism:
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by

KATHERINE CARBERRY

ABSTRACT

Global histories of commodities have highlighted the interconnectedness of global trade in the nineteenth-century and have demonstrated that commodities bound people of different continents in often invisible ways. Global histories of commodities, however, continue to focus on male actors and their involvement as traders, business owners, and politicians. As a result, such histories often eclipse the experiences of women, the working classes, and the subaltern. Despite such shortcomings, global histories of commodities can reflect on the global conditions which have shaped individuals' affective and material experiences. As such, my work considers how the Kashmiri shawl, a fashionable garment of South Asian origin, came to embody the changing character of British womanhood. This process occurred not only as a result of Britain's colonial presence, but also by way of cross-cultural dialogue between Britain, India, and France. The Kashmiri shawl operated as a nexus of class, race, sex, and gender and is, therefore, well-poised to inform how metropolitan Britons understood and responded to the notion of empire and how consumers negotiated the shifting meanings of foreign commodities.

The shawl's sartorial versatility and proximity to the body render it a highly personal and suggestive item ripe for investigation. A careful examination of British and Anglo-Indian women's letters and travel journals, as well as nineteenth-century artwork, literary works, and print culture, demonstrates that the shawl became a symbolically and sexually charged item because of its connections to both the Orient and British femininity. More specifically, the shawl reveals nineteenth-century concerns surrounding female sexuality and the instability of white racial identity within an expanding British empire.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Katherine Carberry is an MA student studying at Concordia University in Montreal, Canada. Her research interests include gender, sexuality, consumption, and material culture.

“If you wish to judge of an Indian shawl, shut your eyes and feel it; the touch is the test of a good one.”¹ These were the words of Mah Munzel ul-Nissa, recorded in Fanny Parkes’ 1835 journal. Both women were wives of men in the British army and, as a result, became inadvertent ambassadors for South Asian cultural products.² Mah Munzel ul-Nissa continued her explanation of Kashmiri shawls by lamenting that “such shawls as these are not made at the present day in Kashmir; the English have spoiled the market.”³ The two women extolled Kashmiri shawls’ aesthetic virtues, yet also suggested that authentic Indian textile work was inaccessible to British consumers. The latter in Parkes’ eyes had tainted the shawl not only by manufacturing cheap imitations of Indian craft but also because Kashmir’s shawl industry had begun to design shawls expressly for British consumption.⁴

Parkes’ writing declared that a shawl’s quality could not be determined based on its looks. Rather, it was the more primitive and feminine sense of touch that could discern its quality and authenticity.⁵

British women’s adoption of Kashmiri shawls reveals a cultural dialogue between Britain and South Asia. These accessories, like all clothing, are fraught and dynamic objects that reflect how their wearers interacted with an increasingly global world. The lenses of global history and imperial history can thus elucidate how international economic structures and individual desires became enmeshed. This article aims to utilize these approaches to commodity histories because they are well poised to explore how imperial violence and female sexuality were mutually constituted in the discursive realm of British literary culture. The Kashmiri shawl in particular became a symbolically and sexually-charged accessory in literary fiction and the Victorian cultural consciousness because of its connections to both the Orient and British femininity. These connections, in turn, were gleaned from British women’s subordination to men in British society and India’s subordinate position as a British

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- 1 Fanny Parkes, *Begums, Thugs and White Mughals: The Journals of Fanny Parkes*, ed. William Dalrymple (London: Eland, 2012), 477, <https://ocwms.on.worldcat.org/oclc/852756511>.
 - 2 Nupur Chaudhuri, “Shawls, Jewelry, Curry and Rice in Victorian Britain”. In *Western Women and Imperialism*, ed. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 232, <https://hdl-handle-net.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/2027/heb.04617>.
 - 3 Parkes, 477.
 - 4 Michelle Maskiell, “Consuming Kashmir: Shawls and Empires, 1500-2000” *Journal of World History* 13,

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- no. 1 (2002): 48, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/20078943?origin=JSTOR-pdf&seq=1>.
 - 5 Constance Classen, *The Deepest Sense: A Cultural History of Touch* (Urbana, IL: University of Illinois Press, 2012), 125.

colony. More specifically, the purpose of this article is to demonstrate how the shawl revealed nineteenth-century concerns surrounding female sexuality and the instability of white racial identity within an expanding British empire. The shawl's South Asian resonances appealed to British female consumers who harnessed its symbolic and visual language to partake in imperialism and conquest for themselves.

Imperialism was a globalizing project, and, unsurprisingly, histories of empire have contributed to the global turn. Historians of British imperialism Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose have demonstrated that despite possessing varying degrees of awareness about Great Britain's imperial project, traces of imperialism permeated every aspect of British life.⁶ Victorian Britain prospered at the expense of those labouring abroad. In essence, all Britons, even those marginalized by class or gender, participated in imperialism and colonization. British women came to endorse these violent practices in part because of the range of consumer goods that imperialism made available, and, as Krista Lysack has suggested,

the pleasure produced through imperialism.⁷ Thus, the pleasure of amassing and wearing Kashmiri shawls helped to convince Britons of the benefits of imperialism. Chitrlekha Zutshi contributes to this perspective by stating that the British public became aware of Kashmir "through its most celebrated commodity—the Kashmiri shawl—the fashion for which had reached its apogee by the 1840s."⁸ In other words, Britain understood the different parts of its empire through the commodities they produced. The shawl's waxing and waning popularity throughout the first half of the nineteenth-century highlighted the inter-connectedness of competing political and territorial entities such as Britain, France, and India. As a result, British women's responses to this foreign commodity elucidate how race, class, and eroticism became inscribed upon clothing and how those connotations were intentionally mobilized for personal gain.

The years between 1780 and 1850 witnessed an increase in global migrations, international trade, and the proliferation of

6 Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose, "Introduction: Being at Home with the Empire" in *At Home with Empire: Metropolitan Culture and The Imperial World*, ed. Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2006), 2, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/lib/concordia-ebooks/detail.action?docID=281730>.

7 Krista Lysack, *Come Buy Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women's Writing* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008), 16.

8 Chitrlekha Zutshi. "'Designed for Eternity': Kashmiri Shawls, Empire, and Cultures of Production and Consumption in Mid-Victorian Britain" *Journal of British Studies* 48, no. 2 (2009): 429, <https://doi-org.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/10.1086/596107>.

visual and print culture. These new experiences undoubtedly informed how Victorian Britons interpreted the world. Print and visual media are especially useful to this study as they provide glimpses into Victorians' social world. Texts such as Edward Said's *Orientalism*⁹ and *Culture and Imperialism*¹⁰ have demonstrated how cultural forms were crucial purveyors of imperial ideology, which reinforced the notion that Britain was racially, culturally, economically, and technologically superior to other nations.¹¹ Therefore, journals, letters, novels, and artwork will be relevant to assessing how race, class, and eroticism became inscribed upon the Kashmiri shawl. The shawl's sexual overtones and its proximity to the body establish it as a fetish object that alluded to both the imperial conquest of foreign territories as well as the sexual conquest of white European women.

Before venturing any further, it is worth clarifying what is meant by the term "Kashmiri shawl." The word "cashmere" is derived from the former spelling of "Kashmir," the South Asian region that produced

these desirable commodities. Today, "cashmere" most often designates a soft and expensive type of wool. This usage was also present in the nineteenth-century, when the term "cashmere" designated the soft textile we know today.¹² Speaking to the evolution of this term, Paul Sharrad argues that Oriental mystique played a role in marketing the term "cashmere." He notes that "from a Western perspective, 'shawl' means something worn, usually by women, 'cashmere' turns the humble knitted shoulder drape into a luxury fashion item."¹³ There were no consistent names for the Kashmiri shawl in the nineteenth-century. The most common names for the accessory were "cashmere shawl," "Thibet shawl," and "India shawl."¹⁴ For the sake of clarity, this article will use "Kashmiri shawl" as an umbrella term encompassing the rarified garments from Kashmir. These terms, of course, obscure the fact that Kashmir manufactured and exported a multitude of high-quality shawls with different names and styles.¹⁵

9 Edward Said, *Orientalism* (New York: Vintage Books, 2014), 2.

10 Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism*. (New York: Vintage Books, 1993).

11 In *Orientalism*, Said argues that the Orient is a place that exists in the Western imagination. He explains that European writers represented the Middle East, India, and East Asia in ways that affirmed Western superiority.

12 John Irwin, *The Kashmir Shawl*, Victoria and Albert Museum. Museum Monograph, no. 29. (London: H.M. Stationery Office 1973), 4.

13 Paul Sharrad, "Following the Map: A Postcolonial Unpacking of a Kashmir Shawl," *Textile* 2, no. 1 (2004): 66-67, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.2752/147597504778052900>.

14 Suzanne Daly, "Kashmir Shawls in Mid-Victorian Novels," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 30, no. 1 (2002): 247, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25058583?seq=1>.

15 John Forbes Watson, *The Textile*

All at once a lucrative commodity, a fashion item, and a symbol of Britain's growing imperial power, the Kashmiri shawl occupied a unique place in Victorian culture. Victorian society's rising middle-classes and flourishing consumer culture provided the garment with the necessary environment to endure as a luxury commodity for almost a century. This lasting popularity was not merely a whim of fashion. As Philippe Perrot asserts, "Sign or symbol, clothing affirms and reveals cleavages, hierarchies, and solidarities according to a code guaranteed and perpetuated by society and its institutions."¹⁶ The shawl was responsive to decades of colonial expansion and grafted imperial ideology onto British bodies; therefore, its status in British imperial culture is worthy of consideration. For one, it was an article of clothing worn by women both inside and outside the home, and was appropriate in both the public and private sphere. It was also a South Asian accessory whose production, trade, and transport depended on the complex negotiations of different geopolitical entities. These elements combined to bestow the shawl with symbolic

power. In *The Social Life of Things*, anthropologist and cultural critic Arjun Appadurai argues that luxury commodities make up a "special register of consumption," whose "principal use is *rhetorical* and *social*, goods that are simply *incarnated signs*."^{17/18} Luxuries such as the shawl reinforce cultural norms and regulate social relations. The shawl's cultural valence, therefore, offers insight into the construction of an imperialist white womanhood vis-à-vis the colonized Indian subject.

POMP, PRESTIGE, AND FASHIONING EMPIRES

In the first half of the nineteenth-century, shawls were emblematic of the imperial competition between Britain and France. Although the Kashmiri shawl did reach Western Europe in the eighteenth-century, it achieved widespread popularity during Napoleon's First French Empire. Initially an honorific garment worn by high profile South Asian men,¹⁹ Kashmiri shawls became fashionable in Europe after Napoleon

Manufactures and Costumes of the People of India (London: G.E. Eyre and W. Spottiswoode, 1866), 122. https://archive.org/details/gri_33125008608495.

¹⁶ Philippe Perrot, *Fashioning the Bourgeoisie: A History of Clothing in the Nineteenth-Century*, trans. Richard Bienvenu (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1994), 8.

¹⁷ Arjun Appadurai "Introduction: Commodities and the Politics of Value," in *The Social Life of Things: Commodities in Cultural Perspective*, ed. Arjun Appadurai (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 38, <https://hdl-handle-net.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/2027/heb.32141>.

¹⁸ Emphasis original.

¹⁹ Maskiell, 32.

and his army brought them from Egypt as spoils of war. In the British case, men returning from the Indian subcontinent acquired Kashmiri shawls for their female relations.²⁰ The Kashmiri shawl and the white empire gown united to create the neoclassical silhouette associated with the nineteenth century's early decades. This fashionable combination was a rejection of ancient regime dress and, according to E. Claire Cage, "affirmed rigid gender categorizing and reified femininity, but was also appropriated by women to play a role in the construction of modern subjectivities."²¹ Women adopted shawls to be modern and active participants in their countries' recent territorial acquisitions. Their respective countries also used shawls as part of a display of imperial power. This dynamic was at its most obvious during the Great Exhibition of 1851, where Britain and France boasted of their imperial holdings in an ostentatious display of commodities. According to Lara Kriegel, "In 1851, the [Indian] subcontinent seemed to be a living museum which showcased 'industrial habits' preserved in their ancient forms... This continuity separated ageless India not only from the industrialized

nations of Europe, but also from ancient societies such as Egypt and Assyria that only had 'ruins' to offer modernity."²² The displays of shawls as part of the India exhibit contrasted with the machine-made imitation Kashmiri shawls, which were part of France and Britain's exhibits. This juxtaposition made Indian craft appear technologically inferior but also exotic and alluring. To Victorian consumers, the shawl evoked the work of South Asian textile workers, which provided a contrast to the increasingly mechanized British manufacturing. Britain believed itself to be technologically superior to India and, therefore, worthy of dominating it. For Britain, ownership of India and its symbols enabled it to compete with France and incorporate India's cultural prestige into the empire. This appropriation of Indian commodities was evident in the representation of India as a shawl on Queen Victoria's body in conservative political imagery.²³

20 Ibid., 38-39.

21 E. Claire Cage, "The Sartorial Self: Neoclassical Fashion and Gender Identity in France, 1797-1804" *Eighteenth-Century Studies* 42, no. 2 (2009): 194, <https://muse.jhu.edu/article/258257>.

22 Lara Kriegel, "Narrating the Subcontinent in 1851: India at the Crystal Palace.," in *The Great Exhibition of 1851: New Interdisciplinary Essays*, ed. Louise Purbrick (Manchester, UK: Manchester University Press, 2001), 158.

23 In *The Pin in the Queen's Shawl, sketched in Indian ink on 'Imperial Crown,' from a Conservative stand-point*, Queen Victoria's Indian shawl represents India and the pin represents the Queen Victoria's then-new title as Empress of India. See *The Pin in the Queen's Shawl, sketched in Indian ink on 'Imperial Crown,' from a Conservative stand-point*. (London:

For both women and the nation, Kashmiri shawls enabled a process of self-fashioning. Sartorial decisions were some of the few afforded to Victorian women; therefore, the authority over one's appearance enabled women to express their desires and how they wished to interact with the world. In 1865, *Blackwoods' Magazine* even went as far as to describe clothing as one of women's only true possessions.²⁴ Clothing and accessories were, in essence an outward declaration of one's character. Thus, the shawl's popularity indicates not only women's sense of individuality, but also their active participation in imperialism. British women also mobilized the shawl to cultivate prestige. This accessory was metonymic of empire, conquest, and power. Wearing one, therefore, was a statement of a person's wealth, status, and, by extension, their nation's access to the Middle East and India. Along with the panache of belonging to an empire, the Kashmiri shawl also provided its wearer with social distinction, a state in which elites' tastes and consumption patterns became the benchmarks of good taste.²⁵ Owning such a rarified item,

therefore, suggested that a woman had wealthy and well-travelled male connections. These standards and displays of taste, in turn, allowed individuals of different classes to be distinguished from one another. Even within the same social set, shawls could establish a hierarchy between women. In her diary, the Yorkshire noblewoman Anne Lister bemoaned her friend Emma Saltmarshe's inability to procure authentic Kashmiri shawls: "Emma had a shawl on, an imitation Kashmeer [sic] & they looked rather like mercantile people..."²⁶ Lister's comment thus illustrates how shawls acted as potent symbols of social capital and the importance of conspicuous consumption to maintain one's social position.

The accessory's sexual connotations also made it an instrument of seduction, which women could deploy to achieve upward social mobility. For instance, Emma Hamilton's *Attitudes*, a series of Antiquity-inspired dances with shawls, famously helped her achieve fame and marry into the British gentry.²⁷ For women, shawls represented a worthy investment because they retained their economic value and could easily be pawned if a

Remington and Co. 1876), 12.
 24 Dress." *Blackwood's Edinburgh Magazine* 97 (1865): 426.
 25 Pierre Bourdieu, *Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste*, trans. Richard Nice (New York: Routledge Classics, 2010), 32, <https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/lib/concordia->

[ebooks/detail.action?docID=1433990](https://ebookcentral-proquest-com.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/lib/concordia-ebooks/detail.action?docID=1433990).
 26 Helena Whitbread, *The Secret Diaries of Miss Anne Lister* (London: Hachette, 2010), 22 May 1822.
 27 Helen Slaney, "Pots in Performance: Emma Hamilton's Attitudes" in *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 63, no. 1 (2020): 114, <https://doi.org/10.1093/bics/qbaa010>.

woman fell on hard times.²⁸

Shawls survived most of the nineteenth-century's fashion cycles but peaked in popularity in the middle of the decade. The records of Messrs. Kilburn, Kershaw, & Co., indicate that the company imported its largest volume of Indian shawls in 1862.²⁹ By the 1870s, the Kashmiri shawl began to fall out of favour due to the Franco-Prussian War,³⁰ which disrupted French trade routes and economic troubles in Kashmir exacerbated by the interference of the British government.³¹ Nevertheless, shawls were still available for purchase in British department stores well into the 1880s.³² The popularity of this foreign accessory is significant and, therefore, worth considering. The Kashmiri shawl was perhaps the most enduring accessory item that a British woman could possess, and for much of the century, authentic Kashmiri

shawls were a challenge to acquire.

SHAWLS, CONQUEST, AND IMPERIAL BODIES

Possession was central to the shawl's appeal, as was evident in European women's lust for them. On January 24, 1839, the French Countess de Bourke wrote to her English friend Anne Lister thanking her for the gift of an Indian shawl: "Your shawl, my dear Ms. Lister is making many conquests... I have never worn anything so warm, nor so agreeable, it is as soft as a fur, and upon first seeing it many people believed it was the skin of some newly discovered animal"³³ De Bourke described how her new accessory was a success in Parisian society, and the word "conquest" was loaded with meaning as it implied at once a triumph in mondain society, romantic seduction, as well as territorial conquest in an age of imperialism.

In this sense, the Countess de Bourke's letter is in the same spirit as the French satire *Monologue du*

28 Chaudhuri, 235.

29 Author Unknown. *Kashmeer and its Shawls* (London: Wyman & Sons, 1875), 61. In this specific instance, "Indian shawl" refers to a range of shawls from Northern India which included those produced in Kashmir. In 1862, Messrs. Kilburn, Kershaw, & Co brought 15, 860 shawl pieces to Britain.

30 Chitralekha Zutshi, *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, and the Making of Kashmir* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2004), 86.

31 Zutshi, *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, and the Making of Kashmir*, 95.

32 Maskiell, 49.

33 Letter from the Countess de Bourke to Anne Lister, January 24, 1839. Calderdale Archives, SH-7- ML-1043. Translation mine. Original text reads "Votre schalle ma chère Mme Lister fait beaucoup de conquêtes... Je n'ai rien porté de si chaud, ni de si agréable c'est doux comme une fourrure et dans le premier moment plusieurs personnes ont cru que c'était la peau de quelque animal nouvellement découvert."

Cachemire; a comic piece in which a young woman revels in the shawl she received from her intended, a soldier in Algeria.³⁴ Like de Bourke, the *Monologue du Cachemire*'s heroine deployed the idea of dual dominance while admiring the shawl. De Bourke mentions that the woolen shawl appeared to its admirers to be the fur of a newly discovered animal, once more establishing a connection between Kashmiri shawls and the desire to possess the novel and the exotic. Susan B. Hiner describes how this process occurs in the *Monologue du Cachemire*, stating that "when the symbol of conquest comes home to France, it is taken up by the fashion system and apparently seamlessly incorporated into a domestic economy."³⁵ Friendships like Lister and de Bourke's created emotional and cultural links between Britain and France, and Lister's gift of a rare Kashmiri shawl fed into the two nations' oriental fantasies. Wearing a cashmere shawl, therefore, enabled European women to feel like powerful agents in a dynamic global world.

In some instances, women's agency as consumers worried members of the public who wanted to establish clear barriers between British and South Asian culture.

In addition to the connections between colonial, sexual, and military conquest, the Kashmiri shawl's proximity to women's bodies endowed the shawl with further sexual implications. In the late eighteenth-century, Anglo-Indians—that is to say, the British in India—embraced Indian styles of dress, much to the discomfort of those living in Britain, who had a high stake in preserving hierarchies of racial and cultural difference. The assimilation of British colonizers into Indian society was a genuine concern for many members of British society, and nabobs, Britain's nouveau riches who had made their fortune in India, became the subject of ire and ridicule in Britain. Nabob women like Marian Hastings, the wife of Governor-General Warren Hastings, were construed as being greedy, un-English, corrupted by India.³⁶ British women who adopted Indian fashions were also perceived as having loose morals and unrestrained sexuality. They took on the visual and connotative attributes of the indigenous Indian woman, who "was exoticized and demonized in equal measure. Her sexuality was imagined to be wild and uninhibited but also ferocious."³⁷

34 "Monologue du Cachemire," *La Silhouette, journal des caricatures* 3, 1830, 12.

35 Susan Hiner, *Accessories to Modernity: Fashion and the Feminine in Nineteenth-Century France* (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2010), 80.

36 E.M. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies: The Physical Experience of the Raj c.1800-1947* (Cambridge, UK: Polity Press, 2001), 37.

37 Pashmina Murthy "Tropics of Sexuality: Sexual Excess and 'Oriental Vices' in the British Raj," in *Sexual Perversions, 1670-1890* ed. Julie Peakman (New York: Palgrave

For Anglo-Indian women, “going native” meant forgoing respectability and transgressing established sexual norms. Echoing this sentiment, Elizabeth Collingham notes that “a British woman in Indian dress laid herself open to the same sexual gaze which European men cast on Indian women.”³⁸ Restrictions surrounding the adoption of Indian clothing and customs increased throughout the 1820s, as Britain came to see its involvement in India as part of a civilizing mission.³⁹ Added to these restrictions was the discouragement of interracial unions between white Britons and Indians, which threatened to undermine India’s colonization, as it blurred racial boundaries and made white supremacy more challenging to uphold. If Indian clothing was thought inappropriate for British women to wear, why did European fashion embrace and appropriate the Kashmiri shawl?

Not only was the Kashmiri shawl an impressive statement of wealth, but its Oriental overtones also hinted at the risqué. The prohibition on interracial relationships and the adoption of certain Indian customs located Indian dress in the realm of the lascivious. As Anjali Arondekar asserts, Britain’s colonies were “imagined breeding ground[s] for a spectrum of imagined sexual vices.”⁴⁰ Through the Oriental fantasy

associated with the Kashmiri shawl, British women gained access to the sexual potency of the South Asian woman, who was fetishized and maligned in equal measure. Suzanne Daly argues that in British fiction, foreign luxury commodities like shawls had exotic and transformative properties that could transmute impoverished young women into sophisticated and marriageable versions of themselves.⁴¹ Despite the Kashmiri shawl’s ability to elevate British women, those worn by Anglo-Indians suggested that the wearers had adopted too many foreign customs and posed a threat to British culture.

Kashmiri shawls and their European imitations similarly provided a window into Victorian women’s desires and sexuality. Pre-Raphaelite painters employed the shawl for its allegorical purposes, particularly with regard to sexuality. William Holman Hunt’s *The Awakening Conscience*, for example, depicts a young woman as she receives a divine message to break off an affair. In this scene, a Paisley shawl is loosely fitted around her waist to suggest her sexual laxity. As the mistress of a wealthy man, she is seen to be seduced by the fashionable apartment, piano, and shawl in the painting. The loosening of the shawl as she stands up to leave her old

MacMillan, 2009), 222.

38 Collingham, 40.

39 Ibid, 51.

40 Anjali R. Arondekar. *For the Record:*

On Sexuality and the Colonial Archive in India. Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2009), 105.

41 Daly, 283.

ways underscores the fact that this scene is a redemptive moment for a person that audiences would have recognized as a fallen woman. The shawl, therefore, acts as a fetish that can represent transgressive desires and behaviours. In her analysis of the piano, Laura Voracheck reminds scholars that fetish objects abounded in the nineteenth-century. Drawing on McClintock's work, Voracheck explains that "as the middle-class woman is constructed with a bodiless class-based sexuality," her sexual expression was then transposed onto objects.⁴² A similar process occurred with shawls, as evidenced by the intense desire women had for them. In the early 1850s, *Punch or the London Charivari* lampooned women's obsession with shawls, even going so far as to predict which days of the year women would ruin their husbands' finances by buying them.⁴³ Thus, shawls were a currency that not only expressed female desire, but also enacted it.

This associative transfer of cultural attributes in relation to British women's agency was a salient element in William Makepeace Thackeray's novel *Vanity Fair*. In this novel, Thackeray explored the multivalent meanings of shawls

and their links to female virtue and sexuality through the book's heroines Becky Sharp and Amelia Sedley, who both conveyed desire and ambition through their sartorial choices. It is worth noting that Thackeray was Anglo-Indian himself, and had a half-Indian half-sister and niece that he tried to conceal from London society.⁴⁴ Thackeray's ambivalence toward the mixture of South Asian and British culture make his perspective on South Asian products and transculturation, therefore, most useful to consider.

Vanity Fair takes place during the Napoleonic Wars, a time when India heavily influenced British identity. However, it was published in 1847, when British power in India and British national identity had coalesced. As in most of early Victorian literature, a gift of shawls was suggestive of romantic attachment. For instance, during Amelia Sedley's widowhood, she receives financial support from her friend and admirer William Dobbin while he is away in India. In one scene, Dobbin sends her family "...a pair of shawls, a white one for her and a black one with palm-leaves for her mother... The shawls were worth fifty guineas apiece at the very least, as Mrs. Sedley knew. She wore hers

42 Laura Voracheck, "'The Instrument of the Century': The Piano as an Icon of Female Sexuality in the Nineteenth Century" *George Eliot-George Henry Lewes Studies* no. 38/39 (2000): 27, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/42827934?seq=1>.

43 "Seeing the New Year In" *Punch or the London Charivari* 4, 1843.

44 Susan Ray, "Thackeray and India: Re-examining England's Narrative of its Indian Empire." *Victorians: A Journal of Literature and Culture*, no. 120. (2011): 36, https://link.gale.com/apps/doc/A275038043/LitRC?u=concordi_main&sid=LitRC&xid=eaa14896.

in state at church at Brompton, and was congratulated by her female friends upon the splendid acquisition. Emmy's, too, became prettily her modest black gown."⁴⁵ This gift implies an impending engagement between Amelia and Dobbin, and the Sedleys immediately recognize the value of shawls sent directly from India. Amelia's parents are quick to show the shawls to their acquaintances in the chaste and controlled church space. The pairing of the dark, sober gown with the Kashmiri shawl was the accoutrement of any classic Victorian heroine, a sign of moral fortitude and sobriety.⁴⁶

While Amelia accepts the gift of a shawl from someone she considers marrying, her counterpart Becky Sharp, however, receives shawls as gifts from the men with whom she is having extramarital affairs. The two heroines' actions reflected the shawl's dual meanings with regard to women. Thérèse Dolan has identified in nineteenth-century French culture wherein "the shawl became animated in discourse as a vexed metonym of respectability as well as venality..."⁴⁷ Amelia was

an example of how to correctly consume South Asian culture, while Becky offered a portrait of the dangers of over-acculturation. Becky, whose mother was French, receives shawls first from her new husband Rawdon and later from her lover General Tufto. The sexual and colonial connotations in this moment are salient: "Besides these, and the little mare, the General, her slave and worshipper, had made her many very handsome presents, in the shape of cashmere shawls bought at the auction of a bankrupt French general's lady, and numerous tributes from the jewelers' shops."⁴⁸ It is significant that the shawls are not brought directly from India, but are instead purchased second-hand from a newly destitute Frenchwoman. This scene mirrors the later moment when Amelia sells her shawl to pay for her son's school books.⁴⁹ To Amelia, the shawl is more than an ornament because it allows her to invest in her son's education. In other words, she uses South Asian goods to secure upward mobility for her son. Becky, by contrast, mobilizes expensive shawls to appear wealthier and secure credit to buy more items that she cannot afford. The comparison of Becky and Amelia thus complicated the relationship between shawls and marriage, but also reinforced an association with uncontrolled sexuality.

45 William Makepeace Thackeray, *Vanity Fair* (New York City: Bantam Classics, 1997), 457.

46 Suzanne Keen, "Quaker Dress, Sexuality, and the Domestication of Reform in the Victorian Novel" *Victorian Literature and Culture* 30, no. 1 (2002): 211, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/25058582?seq=1>.

47 Thérèse Dolan, "Fringe Benefits: Manet's Olympia and Her Shawl" *Art Bulletin* 97, no. 4 (2015):

410-411, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43947752?seq=1>.

48 Thackeray, 340.

49 Thackeray, 541.

Over-acculturation was also a genuine concern surrounding women's consumer habits. Elizabeth Collingham explains the anxieties surrounding British bodies in Indian clothes by noting that "India was allowed to shape the body of the Anglo-Indian but only as long as it did not overwhelm it or make it unrecognizable as an essentially British body."⁵⁰ In the early nineteenth-century, wearing garments like Kashmiri shawls represented a dominance over India, rather than allowing Indian culture to alter Britain, despite the fact that it invariably did regardless.⁵¹ Becky's corruption is also visible in her teenage orientalist fantasy of marrying a man in the colonial service and wearing the accompanying markers of status: "she had arrayed herself in an infinity of shawls, turbans, and diamond necklaces, and had mounted upon an elephant ... in order to pay a visit of ceremony to the Grand Mogul."⁵² In her daydream, Becky uses her husband's money to purchase these luxury items. However, in reality, she finds herself receiving patronage from a lover, one who has been to India, and who chooses to buy her second-hand shawls. Rather than an elephant, she has "a little mare." Most importantly, she refers to the General as her "slave" and "worshipper," which conveys a gendered power dynamic that evokes Orientalist clichés of sex

50 Collingham, 33.

51 Ibid, 34.

52 Thackeray, 22.

and despotism. The term "tribute," in particular, positions Becky as a powerful entity who could exert power over the men that gifted her jewels and shawls. *Vanity Fair* contains more references to shawls than any other nineteenth-century British novel. Thackeray's use of shawls to explore women's sexual and economic agency as well as the treatment of Anglo-Indians in British society thus makes this novel a vital source for understanding the Kashmiri shawl's multiple meanings in British culture. Becky Sharp's greed and susceptibility to the shawl's oriental mystique was detrimental to her and the men she ensnares. Ultimately, Thackeray makes the point that close proximity to Indian culture could also threaten Britain's national character.

ORIENTALISM AND CONSUMING THE AUTHENTIC

Beyond the Kashmiri shawl's imperial resonances, India's geographical remoteness added another dimension to its cultural and economic value. The widening gulf between British manufactured goods and genuine Indian products thrust the shawl into the realm of the mystical and primitive. Additionally, the presence of imitations increased the perceived value of genuine Kashmiri shawls. For this reason, Walter Benjamin's concept of "aura" is helpful in understanding how Victorians ascribed value to the shawl, how it became a coveted

luxury item, and how it gained cultural valence. Benjamin describes aura as a work of art's rootedness in a particular time and place; a work of art's original context is what renders it valuable. Therefore, what is at stake when art is reproduced is the aura itself, that which makes a work of art unique. Benjamin further asserts that "the uniqueness of a work of art is inseparable from its being embedded in the fabric of tradition."⁵³ The Kashmiri shawl's aura thus derived from its Indian origins and Kashmir's remoteness, both from a geographical and imperial standpoint.

Appadurai echoes this sentiment by declaring that "it is the aesthetics of decontextualization (itself driven by the quest for novelty) that is at the heart of the display, in high brow Western homes, of the tools and artifacts of the 'other'...In these objects, we see not only the equation of the authentic with the exotic object, but also the aesthetics of diversion."⁵⁴ Kashmir was a princely state and not under direct British rule, yet it produced desirable luxury items that attracted British consumers. Chitrlekha Zutshi asserts that most Britons writing about shawls saw Kashmir's resources as ripe for extraction. Britons "advocated the actual opening up of British trade with regions of central Asia that yielded shawl wool, not only to gain

access to the valuable shawl raw material but quite as much to allow 'scientific geographers' to penetrate this as-yet unexplored region to gather information that could then be made available to ordinary Britons."⁵⁵ This quest to acquire the novel and the exotic not only motivated colonization, but it also shaped Britons' understanding of Kashmir.

The shawl's presence in Victorian society and culture similarly evinced imperial and sexual ideologies, which were also articulated through the oriental body. Charles C. White's adventure novel *The Cashmere Shawl: An Eastern Fiction* featured an Eastern narrator who had been transformed from a goat into a Kashmiri shawl, and later into a sheet of paper. This narrator speaks through magic and relates their adventures throughout the Middle East and Kashmir. What separated this novel from better known canonical works of the period was its lowbrow style and international setting. White's novel reached Victorian audiences in 1841, when British Orientalism was at a high point, and the First Anglo-Afghan War had begun. For

55 Chitrlekha Zutshi, "'Designed for Eternity': Kashmiri Shawls, Empire, and Cultures of Production and Consumption in Mid-Victorian Britain," 431, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/journal-of-british-studies/article/designed-for-eternity-kashmiri-shawls-empire-and-cultures-of-production-and-consumption-in-midvictorian-britain/8BC637E16F9C0009A4A8097114FC630F>.

53 Walter Benjamin, *Illuminations*, trans. Harry John (New York: Schocken Books, 1969), 220.

54 Appadurai, 28.

this reason, White's story provided a glimpse into Kashmiri shawls as they existed within the Victorian imagination.

The works of British writers, such as William Makepeace Thackeray or Elizabeth Gaskell, deployed shawls to hint at aspects of a person's character or even British society as a whole. *The Cashmere Shawl*, by contrast, presented the shawl as a witness to history brought to life by the authenticating touch of others. The narrative takes place almost entirely in the Middle East, which provides ample material to discern how British consumers interpreted foreign commodities as well as their nation's imperial role.

The former shawl introduces itself to the novel's narrator by detailing its origins:

I was formerly one of the most costly shawls that ever issued from the looms of Islamabad. I have witnessed many singular adventures, both in the East and West. I have been the envied inhabitant of harems, palaces and bagnios. I have shaded the brows of Sultans, Pachas, Omrahs and Khans. I have girded the waists of Sultanas, Princesses, Khanums and Bayaderes. I have passed through many hands; enjoyed great glories, and alas—devoured infinite dirt. Until at length—O destiny! when worn out, soiled, tattered and thread bare as a half naked dervish, I

was sold to a rag merchant.⁵⁶

The former shawl's introduction to the reader is rife with Orientalist tropes and reveals tensions between eroticism, authenticity, and power. The Kashmiri shawl had been a symbol of royal patronage and cultural capital in the Indo-Persian world through the eighteenth and early nineteenth-century, just as it was in Europe.⁵⁷ The shawl confirms its authenticity by establishing its connection to powerful Eastern individuals. For the Victorian reader, its claim of having witnessed remarkable occurrences "both in East and West," implies worldliness, a knowledge of both cultures, as well as a proximity to the Western reader. Most importantly, the shawl's worldliness and contact with foreign bodies lend credibility to its narrative. Edward Said introduced the sexualized other as a defining feature of Orientalism in literature, and White's novel is no exception—his choice of words decisively grounded the shawl's authenticity and allure in its proximity to oriental bodies.⁵⁸

In addition, White made the shawl a witness to an imagined and inaccessible Oriental experience. The shawl claims that it was once the "envied inhabitant of harems, palaces and bagnios," private and feminized spaces that few could

56 Charles C. White, *The Cashmere Shawl an Eastern Fiction, Vol.1*. (London: Henry Colburn, 1840), ix.

57 Sharrad, 74.

58 Said, 188.

access, but nevertheless fascinated the European imagination. The shawl “shaded brows” and “girdled waists” of Eastern nobility, thus fueling the sexualized Orientalist fantasies of nineteenth-century consumers. The interest in harems and the women who inhabited them was a common feature of nineteenth-century cultural products. Art historian Joan del Plato has argued that the need to assert control over foreign women’s bodies aligned with the projects to annex territories in Asia and the Middle East, noting, “at its most fundamental, the Western erotics offered by the harem picture is both an acknowledgment and a violation of the sanctity of Muslim private life.”⁵⁹ These experiences provided the narrator, and by extension, its British author, with the necessary cultural authority to depict India and the Middle East, and the shawl thus became imbued with the magical touch of foreign people.

This attention to the shawl’s encounters with physical bodies continues as it “passed through many hands.” Touch evoked sensuality, but it was also a possible point of contagion. Hands were, in fact, a source of great physiognomical interest to nineteenth-century audiences as

they were the conduit that allowed people to cast aspersions on a person’s gentility and proximity to physical labour. For this reason, hands were sexually charged parts of the body, which Anne McClintock describes as “the organs in which Victorian sexuality and the economy literally touched.”⁶⁰ The “many hands” the shawl refers to included romantic characters such as skilled Kashmiri weavers, the beautiful daughter of an exiled nobleman, princesses, Oriental despots, and Ottoman merchants. The phrase “devoured infinite dirt” referred to Adam and Eve’s expulsion from the Garden of Eden and prefaces the shawl’s debased status when it became “thread bare as a half-naked dervish.” Nevertheless, this simile suggests a noble quality to the shawl’s bedraggled state. The comparison to a Sufi suggests that its mystical elements overrode the primitivity associated with nakedness.

The corporeality and mysticism served to make the shawl more alluring and worthy of interest. In another instance, the shawl narrator describes his first owner Gulab, the daughter of an exiled Persian noble who grew up living a nomadic life in Afghanistan and Kashmir. The narrator describes her toilette as she prepares to enter a forced marriage to the Khan.

59 Joan del Plato, “Dress and Undress: Clothing and Eroticism in Nineteenth-Century Visual Representations of the Harem” in *Harem Stories: Envisioning Places and Living in Spaces* ed. Marilyn Booth (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 2010), 283.

60 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*. (New York: Routledge, 1995), 99, <https://hdl-handle-net.lib-ezproxy.concordia.ca/2027/heb.02146>.

She dons “a shawl, which from its delicate quality must have been woven from the wool of some of my relations, was wound round her waist; a string of pearls, fastened by a beautiful Badakshan ruby, set in diamonds, was twined several times round her neck...”⁶¹ Here, the shawl is paired with expensive jewels to convey the luxury and splendour Britons imagined of the Orient. The adornments on Gulab’s waist and neck emphasized the coerced sexual transaction that is her upcoming marriage. Contained within the pages of British fiction was the notion that proximity to oriental bodies was alluring and authenticating, rather than carrying possible contagion, which some believed South Asian goods could transmit.⁶²

The link between touching and contagion was a crucial one. Concern surrounding contagion and the danger of over acculturation mirrored anxieties about female desire and Britain’s shifting technological landscape. During the Industrial Revolution, large scale manufacturing supplanted Britain’s cottage industry and produced consumer goods with expropriated raw materials from British colonies. This new mode of

production left many consumers wanting products that showcased skilled craftsmanship. Aviva Briefel has noted this occurrence, stating that “the talismanic power scribed to non-white hands in Victorian writings extended to their professed ability to fill in for the missing hands of British industry.”⁶³ The touch of non-white hands was most desirable in luxury goods. By contrast, British consumers worried about foreign workers contaminating food items such as tea. This process led British marketers of empire tea to emphasize how their tea was untouched by Indian hands.⁶⁴

Touch was, therefore, desirable only when it fulfilled orientalist fantasies rooted in an unequal relationship between British consumers and the imagined inhabitants of lands they sought to conquer. The proliferation of exotic foreign goods threatened to overwhelm the bodies of English women who were thought to be the nation’s moral arbiters. Women’s desire for foreign commodities like Kashmiri shawls encouraged colonial exploitation, but also threatened to alter Britain from the inside. Krista Lysack also discusses “the imperial exhibitionary complex of luxury shops that sought to decontextualize oriental goods and thus prohibit

61 White, 307.

62 Suchitra Choudhury, “‘It was an Imitation to be Sure’ The Imitation Indian Shawl in Design Reform and Imaginative Fiction” *Textile History* 46, no. 2 (2015): 205, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00404969.2015.1121666>.

63 Aviva Briefel, *The Racial Hand in the Victorian Imagination* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2015), 51.

64 Erika Rappaport, *A Thirst for Empire: How Tea Shaped the Modern World* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2017), 165.

women's identification with the forces of exploited labor by which these goods were produced."⁶⁵ As a result, capitalist consumerism sought to stabilize women's identification with foreign commodities "by constructing women as the consumers rather than the consumed."⁶⁶ Hence, shopping served the purpose of regulating female desire in a way that satisfied British women's desire to engage with a global world and reaffirmed Britain's dominance over colonized peoples.

At once a commodity, a fashion item, a sign of Britain's growing imperial power, and a symbol of women's sexual and economic agency, the Kashmiri shawl occupied a unique space in Victorian culture. The shawl's numerous imitations and role in asserting taste and status gave way to concerns about the authenticity of the accessory and the women who wore it. Likewise, India's ancient history and vast cultural output threatened to overwhelm British cultural identity, as did the possibility of miscegenation. The first half of the nineteenth-century was for Britain a moment of identity-making, colonialism, and global restructuring. This period's changes make it worthwhile to consider how the shawl's cultural construction responded to the century's developments. As British colonialism progressed, so did the interest in Oriental bodies, for the Kashmiri shawl was an Indian

garment with obvious connections to South Asia and British women. Representations of the Kashmiri shawl serve as a vector for understanding Victorians' attitudes toward both women and colonial subjects. These attitudes are most evident when considering Indians' perceived ability to authenticate Kashmiri shawls, as Mah Munzel ul-Nissa did in Fanny Parkes' journal, as well as the power to corrupt British bodies and minds. The sensual associations between Kashmiri shawls and the exoticism of the East shaped how women valued shawls, in addition to how society understood the women who wore them. British women were able to wield shawls as weapons for social and sexual control, just as Britain sought to assert greater dominance in South Asia. This interplay highlights the interconnectedness of the global commodity trade, the spread of imperialism, and the discourse surrounding female and racialized bodies. At first glance, the Kashmiri shawl appears to be a beautiful and sensual object, but to Victorians, these same qualities threatened to corrupt their empire from within.

⁶⁵ Lysack, 19.

⁶⁶ *Ibid.*, 19.