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Travelling to India: Eliza Fay's Narrative Account of her Voyages

Eliza Fay's *Original Letters from India*,[1] published posthumously in 1817, bring the dangers and excitements of a somewhat forgotten age to contemporary times. Edward Morgan Forster, while living in India (1921-22) came across her *Letters*, initially sold to the *Calcutta Gazette* to pay off her debts. He became so interested in them, while he was doing research for his novel, *A Passage to India* (1924), that he managed to convince Virginia and Leonard Woolf to publish a Hogarth Press edition of Fay's *Letters* in 1925, the first to be published outside India. As he writes in the "Introductory Notes": "Eliza Fay is a work of art. But she was also a historical character, who wielded and resumed a pen". (*Letters*, 2010: 7)

His interest must undoubtedly be linked to the geographical, historical, personal and political value of her *Letters*, comprising not one, but three voyages to India: the first voyage in 1779, the second in 1784 and the third in 1796. Despite his research in the India Office Records at Bengal, precious little is known about her biography. She was born in 1756, perhaps at Blackheath, South London. Her father may have been a sailor, for she refers to his knowledge of the motion of a ship, "when beating up in the wind's eye" (*Letters*, 2010: 158) and to her own resemblance to him, when disguised in a pair of striped trousers (*Letters*, 2010: 9). We don´t know anything about her upbringing. All we know with certainty is that when she was in her early twenties she married an Irish lawyer, who had been called to the Bar at Lincoln's

[1] Henceforth, this title will appear in its abbreviated form under the name of "Letters".

Inn and who was going to be barrister and advocate at the Supreme Court of Calcutta. She died at the age of sixty, divorced and penniless in Calcutta, in 1816.

As readers of her travelogue, we meet her at the age of twenty-three, when she embarked at Dover for Calais on 11th April 1779 – and from thence to India, a journey that would last twelve months and eighteen days. This is the spatial and chronological starting point of an adventurous, intrepid autobiographical narrative that constantly calls our attention to life's vicissitudes and the narrator's struggles against a variety of perils and adversities.

Although at the outset she may be classified as an "auxiliary traveller" in a supporting role to her husband's career in Calcutta, it is her presence as an active participant – traveller, writer and resourceful woman – rather than as a passive character that strikes us. Her almost pioneering attitude of being an "incorporated wife",[2] that is to say, one willing to share with her husband the so called burden of Empire, as well as her willingness to set out on a voyage to the Orient are remarkable.

We should not forget that until the eighteenth century travel outside Europe was essentially a male experience. Travel narratives of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries were tales of male pioneers marking new frontiers of discovery and trade. Before the eighteenth century the only experience of female travelling was religious. According to Billie Melman (1995: 9-10), Lady Mary Wortley Montagu's *Embassy Letters* (1763) is the first secular text by a woman on the Orient (Middle East), thus giving rise to a tradition that would widen the scope of European women's experience.

In spite of the feminine interest in the Orient and other parts of the world, women's active participation, which evolved outside the main locations of metropolitan power and knowledge, was neglected for a long time. Suffice it to recall here, for example, the refusal of the British Royal Geographical Society to acknowledge the wealth of botanical and anthropological information brought home by lady travellers and its decision not to accept women as full members until

[2] On the role of the incorporated wife, see, for instance, H. Callan and S. Ardener (eds.), *The Incorporated Wife* (London: Croom Helm, 1984).

1913. Colonialism was regarded as an essentially masculine enterprise, massively supported by the public school ethos, adventure stories and other energizing myth narratives. Women, in this context, played an extremely minor role as spectators or victims. One example of this neglect towards the role of women or what might be called "gender-blindness" is Edward Said's book, *Orientalism* (1978), from which women are conspicuous for their absence.

Distances and voyages were, in fact, dreadful. The consolidation of the British rule in India was a slow, hazardous process. For a long time, the idea of an Eastern empire, able to control the trade between England and the lands east of the Cape of Good Hope was much grander than reality itself. After 1600, when a Royal Charter was granted to the East India Company by Queen Elizabeth I, the English had first to overcome the opposition of the Portuguese and the Dutch and win trading concessions from the Mughals. For nearly a hundred and fifty years they were traders operating from coastal settlements. The weakening of the Portuguese power in the seventeenth century and the fall of the Mughal Empire in the eighteenth century helped them considerably. After the death of the old emperor, Aurangzeb, in 1707, who died without leaving a clear successor, the East India Company pushed further into India and took advantage of the political chaos. So, in the second half of the eighteenth century, after gaining a foothold in Bengal, in the north, against the French and quashing their aspirations in Southern India, the major Indian powers they had to contend with were the Maharattas (1818) in Western India, the Sikhs in the North-west (1849) and Tipu Sultan of Mysore and his father, the Nizam of Hyderabad, Hyder Ali, the man who held Eliza Fay and her husband prisoners in the South.

Under these strained circumstances, it is no wonder that, as Mary Lind tells us, Company men from 1600 to 1750 "were more likely to marry Portuguese women [daughters and widows of the Portuguese] or take mistresses from among the Indian women" (1988: 6), than travel together with their women – a situation which would radically change in the second half of the nineteenth century with the consolidation of the British hegemony on the Indian subcontinent, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1868 and the constant improvements in maritime and land transport.

Be all that as it may, even by late nineteenth century standards, the voyage of Eliza Fay is nothing less than heroic. Together with her husband, she took the overland route through France, over the Alps to Italy, whence she embarked at Leghorn – one of the most important ports of the entire Mediterranean area – for Alexandria, followed by a short stay at Grand Cairo. Then they pursued their journey across the Desert to Suez and finally across the Red Sea and the Indian Ocean until they reached Calicut, where they were seized by the officers of Hyder Ali, who had made an alliance with the French to dominate Southern India.

As we can see, the geographical coverage of her travelogue is extensive. To these places, bearing in mind her subsequent voyages, many others could be added: the island of St. Helena in South Atlantic, Cape Town, Cape Verde, the Canary Islands and the island of Madeira, about which she writes pleasant words, regarding the picturesque and romantic scenery, the grapes and the wine, the churches and convents, though she confesses to preferring the Spanish ladies to the Portuguese, "finding them more easy in their manners, and much better educated." (*Letters*, 2010: 254)

Using Northrop Frye's terminology, we are faced with what he calls a "then narrative" (1976: 47-50), in epistolary form – her letters are addressed to either one of her two sisters, or to some familiar entity she calls "my dear friends", or, in the second part of the *Letters*, to some unidentified woman, termed "My Dear Madam" – that invites the reader to move constantly from one spot to another, awaiting the description of things that happen to the first person narrator, for the most part externally. In Northrop Frye's opinion, this constitutes the very essence of the archetypal tradition of romance and its underlying sensationalism. Given the spatial dimension of her narrative and the impression of a never-ending movement – since the very *locus* of the travel account is non-domestic –, we will consider for the sake of distinctiveness two notions of space – static space (her settled life in India – Calcutta, as a wife and later as an independent woman) and dynamic space (the road, the sea and the sailing vessel, seen simultaneously as a maritime means of transport, a type of vehicle, and as a home, a paradox whose social and cultural significance we will discuss later).

As far as the latter is concerned – the dynamic space – a dividing line is somehow set by Eliza Fay between the quieter, less hazardous West, though demanding caution and attentiveness, and the overwhelming, unfathomable, frightening East. At Leghorn, Italy, where Eliza Fay and her husband were warmly received by the Barreto Brothers, an Indo-Portuguese family, engaged in Eastern trade, she writes about her state of anxiety before embarking on a Swedish ship that would take them to Alexandria, in Egypt.

> Through this kind family I saw whatever was worthy of note in Leghorn, and its environs; but my increasing anxiety as to our journey, took from me all power of investigation. When one sees merely with the eye, and the wandering mind is travelling to the friends left far behind, or forward to the unknown clime whither its destiny points, few recollections of places and things will remain on it. […] We have often boasted of the superiority of the British flag, but alas poor old England! her flag is here humbled in the dust; we have several ships in the mole, but if one dare venture out, so many French Privateers are hovering round, that she must be taken in a few hours. […] As there was no likelihood of meeting with an English vessel, we engaged a passage in a Swedish one, […] for Alexandria, at 6 pounds each […] so last night I quitted the shores of Europe, God knows for how long. (*Letters,* 2010: 63-65)

As mentioned, they had left France and Italy behind, a journey that in many ways differed from the nobleman's classic Grand Tour, then a symbol of wealth and cultural accomplishment. For the Fays money was apparently a scarce resource, requiring good management and balanced, economical decisions. Eliza Fay's comments about the choice of their accommodation, the preparation of their meals in the open, her self-contained attitude regarding the purchase of goldwork, velvets and other similar products, as well as her criticisms against the lack of honesty and the exorbitant exchange rate imposed by French dealers are instances of their middle-class attitude, the type of people that helped maintain the Empire and whose travel accounts were satisfying an ever-increasing readership.

> […] so we have little to do with the Inns, except at night, when we provide ourselves with meat for the next day. As to breakfast and dinner we fix on a place where there is water at hand, and there sit down under the shade of a tree, and make a fire, while the horses graze comfortably, and eat their corn. Ask my father if he does not think this is a good plan? At least we find it pleasant and much more to our taste, than spending more time as well as money, in the wretched public houses we have hitherto met with. (*Letters*, 2010: 44)

While in France, Auxerre en Burgoyne, one hundred and thirty miles from Paris, she writes:

> […] we were in a street scarce wide enough to admit the light; our chamber paved with tiles, which most likely have never been wetted, nor even rubbed, since the building of the house; add to this two *Commodités* in the same state […]; the very air I breathed seemed almost pestilential. (*Letters*, 2010: 40-41)

The same happens in Italy:

> […] the Inn was little better than a large barn or hovel, and the men we found in it, so completely like all we conceive of Banditti, and assassins, that every horrible story I had heard or read of, instantly came into my head; […] We arrived pretty early at Genoa, a grand but gloomy disagreeable city, owing to the houses being very high, and the streets so narrow you might almost shake hands across them out of the window. (*Letters*, 2010: 59)

Yet, the ugliness and the squalor of the places as well as the states of weariness and dejection alternate with picturesque descriptions, passages describing sights (cathedrals, churches, palaces, museums), theatrical performances or other festivities (e.g., fireworks in Paris, a mass in Turin), or anything else worthy of attention, from the price of a bottle of Burgundy to observations on ladies' fashion and suchlike curiosities of manners and customs. In description after description, we become travellers/tourists ourselves, coming to know every halting place with its ghastliness and main points of attraction.

The same duality of recording her experiences en route applies to her visit to Alexandria and the region of Grand Cairo. The magnificence

of Pompey's pillar and the pyramids – "those prodigies of human labour" (*Letters*, 2010: 77) – the mythical palace of Cleopatra, the grandeur of the Nile – "that perpetual source of plenty" (*Letters*, 2010: 76), the beauty of the city of Rosetta, ten miles from the mouth of Nile, "surrounded by groves of lemons and orange trees" (*Letters*, 2010: 76) – are intermingled with feelings of unpleasantness and horror produced by the city of Grand Cairo, where she "can perceive neither order, beauty, nor grandeur". (*Letters*, 2010: 80)

The focusing on detail and local colour produces a fictional flavour which is indicative of Eliza Fay's awareness of speaking to an audience larger than her family. The fact is that this kind of travel literature, which resulted from the expansion of the British abroad, unlike the former narrative travels of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries frequently used by historians as a useful archive, serves as a way of affording amusement and entertainment to an increasing market-place and readership, eager for vicarious travel. The 1816 Preface of her *Letters* refers to the value of the " 'unembellished narrative of simple facts and real sufferings' " (*Letters*, 2010: 27) by a woman who was afraid of the "pains" and "penalties" then generally inflicted on female authorships." (*Letters*, 2010: 28) "The wit of Fielding" – as the author explains – "is no longer held over them in terrorem, and the delineations of Smollet would apply to them in vain. The race of learned ladies ridiculed by these gentlemen is extinct. A female author is no longer regarded as an object of derision, nor is she wounded by unkind reproof from the *literary Lords of Creation*." (*Letters*, 2010: 29) – a signal that Fay's approach to travel writing might have been entrepreneurial with an eye to eventual publication.

For the purposes of our analysis, though, what is far more important than the passages describing sight-seeing or the potential commercial value of the *Letters*, is its human dimension, the character of the first person-narrator that emerges behind the descriptive sketches and the scenes of adversity and imminent danger. During the first part of the journey (the European route), the traveller, Eliza Fay, had already given proof of her inquisitive eye, high powers of observation and courage, but it is in the second part of the voyage, the moment she leaves Europe and reaches the East that her endurance and resourcefulness come to the

fore. As she put it, she felt "a stranger in a strange land […]. Compared with the uncouth beings who govern this country [Egypt], I felt at home with the natives of France [though England was at war with France at the time], and I will even say of Italy." (*Letters*, 2010: 73-74)

The accounts of the crossing of the Desert (between Egypt and Suez) and their imprisonment by Hyder Ali at Calicut provide memorable instances of her indomitable courage and descriptive powers. As we read these accounts the remoteness and terror-stricken world of those days pass before us like a pageant.

> […] we yesterday arrived at Suez from Grand Cairo, after a journey of three days, over a most dreadful Desert, where every night we slept under the great canopy of Heaven, and where we were every hour in danger of being destroyed by troops of Arabian robbers. […] I bore the fatigues of the desert, like a Lion, though but just recovering from my illness. We have been pillaged of almost every thing by the Arabs. This is the Paradise of thieves, I think the whole population may be divided into two classes of them; those who adopt force, and those who effect their purpose by fraud. (*Letters*, 2010: 83-84)

And then she gives us a more detailed description of that eventful journey, the way a caravan of thousands of people (in this case five thousand people) is organized to cross the Desert.

> I resume my pen in order to give you some account of our passing the Desert, which being done by a method of travelling totally different from any thing in England […] Each gentleman of our party had a horse, and it is common to hire a camel between two, with panniers to carry their provisions […]. Females who can afford the expence (sic), are more comfortably accommodated -; these travel in a kind of litter, called a Tataravan; […]. The litter has a top and is surmounted by shabby, ill-contrived Venetian blinds, which in the day, increase the suffocating heat, but are of use during the nights which are cold and piercing. Every camel carries skins of water, but before you have been many hours on the Desert, it becomes of the colour of coffee. I was warned of this, and recommended to provide small guglets of porous earth, which after filling with purified water, I slung to the top of my Tataravan; and this with water melons, and hard eggs, proved the best refreshments I could have taken. (*Letters*, 2010: 96-97)

As we move on, as readers, we come upon grotesque scenes of excruciating suffering, which affected both men and animals.

> The extreme heat of the weather so overpowered him [young Mr Taylor, going out as assistant surgeon to the Bengal establishment], that he resigned all hope of life, and at length, in a fit of despondency, actually allowed himself to slide down from his horse, that he might die on the ground. […] When my mind was a little relieved […] I had leisure to think of the horses; […] The wretched creatures suffered so much from heat and thirst, that their groaning was terrible, and added to this an involuntary rattling in the throat, as if they were on the point of expiring, so that one heard them with a mixture of compassion and horror extremely painful to bear: […] With the dogs, we were less successful, - three very fine ones set out with us, but none survived – one of them was the most beautiful Italian greyhound […] the poor creature dropt down gasping, but ere he had breathed his last, a brutal Arab cut him to pieces before his masters (sic) face; and on his expressing anger at his cruel behaviour, ran after him with a drawn scymiter – you may judge from this incident, what wretches we were cast amongst. (*Letters*, 2010: 99-100)

This scene cannot be dissociated from the experience of the previous caravan that was plundered. As it crossed the Desert, from Suez on their way to Cairo, the Europeans therein met a fateful destiny. When they were attacked, the group split. Some continued to Cairo, others returned to Suez. Only Renault de St.Germaine, a godson of the French General Joseph Dupleix, reached Cairo, while all the others perished. Those who returned to Suez were luckier, though they were robbed of all their merchandise and possessions. As soon as the Fays arrived at Alexandria, they were informed of this catastrophe. This is Mrs Fay's account of the tragedy, which, according to Forster, is fairly accurate.

> On Monday the 14th of June they left Suez […] when suddenly an alarm was given of an Attack, as they, poor souls, were sleeping across their baskets. Capt. Barrington on awaking ordered a dozen bales to be given to them immediately: but alas! They were already in possession of the whole; for the Camel drivers did not defend themselves an instant, but left their beasts at the mercy of robbers; […] Here I must request you to […] reflect whether it be possible even for

> imagination to conceive a more dreadful scene to those concerned, particularly to Mr. O'Donnell, who […] had in less than four years realized a fortune of near £30,000; the bulk of which he laid out in merchandise on the inviting prospect of gaining 50 per cent, and as his health was in a very weak state proposed retiring to Europe. What must that man have felt, a helpless spectator of his own ruin. […] The inhuman wretches not content with stripping them to the skin, drove away their camels, and left them in a burning sandy Desert, which the feet can scarcely touch, without being blistered, exposed to the scorching rays of the sun and utterly destitute of sustenance of every kind; no house, tree, or even shrub to afford them shelter. […] One of the French gentlemen was by this time become very ill, and his brother perceiving a house at some miles distance […] prevailed on him to lie down under a stunted tree […]. Hope, anxiety and affection combined to quicken his pace, and rendered poor Vanderfield, the Danish captain, unable to keep up with him […] till at length nature being completely exhausted, he dropped and was soon relieved from his miseries by Death. Nor was the condition of the survivors far more enviable, when having with difficulty, reached the building after which they had toiled so long, it proved to be an uninhabited shed. (*Letters*, 2010: 87-89)

Both these scenes incorporate many of the characteristic elements of what Mary Louise Pratt termed "survival literature – first-person stories of shipwrecks, castaways, mutinies, abandonments, and […] captivities" (1992: 87): popular, sensational tales of overseas adventure which originated in the first phase of European expansion, during the late fifteenth century. The main difference is that, in this case, the narrator is not the protagonist, but the onlooker or the gatherer of news, who conveys her emotional response to the plight of those around her. And by so doing, she draws on the Gothic tradition and the techniques of sentimental literature, thus gratifying the voyeuristic impulses of her readers. However, as Tabish Khair points out:

> […] the predominance of 'violent emotions' in Gothic fiction should not be seen as merely a stylistic feature, influenced by mainstream sentimentalism and 'artistic' trends such as sensationalism, or a reaction to the reason and balance of the Enlightenment, though of course it is that too. The violent emotions of Gothic fiction also need to be understood as an attempt to narrate the Otherness of the

> Other, and the impact of this Otherness on the Self. (2009: 86-87)

As such, she calls on the reader not only to identify through horror and empathy with others and her feelings for others, but also with herself and her fears of helplessness before a racial Other/ the Arabs. Her evocation of England should be read in this context: "Oh England! Dear England! How often did I apostrophize thee, land of liberty and safety". (*Letters*, 2010: 93)

What is particularly striking in terms of comparison with their imprisonment in Calicut by Hyder Ali is her leading role and agency. In other words, the first-person narrator is here the main victim and heroine. The Fays were imprisoned from November 5, 1779 to February 17, 1780. The other Europeans on board the same ship – the Nathalia – were set free on December 16. Hyder Ali, supported by the French, had good reason to suspect English intrigues against him that autumn. Firstly, the Fays were sent to the English Factory at Calicut, then to the Fort and finally back to the Factory. They were confined without the necessaries of life, separated from their luggage, the whole of which was violently plundered and the remaining parts damaged and rendered useless by salt water. Their situation, totally "in power of barbarians" (*Letters*, 2010: 110), as she openly states, was appalling.

> […] Mr Fay contrived to conceal our watches in my hair, having first stopped their going by sticking pins in the wheels; and the little money we possessed, and what small articles I could take without exciting suspicion, were concealed about my person. Thus equipped I crawled out, […] and in an instant, the Cabin was filled with Sepoys. […] But when I came on deck, the scene which presented itself would have appalled the stoutest heart; […] The poor sailors were so distracted, that many of them could scarcely be restrained from jumping over board to escape slavery; […] we reached the shore dripping wet - […] they compelled us to walk above a mile thro' a heavy sand, surrounded by all the mob of Calicut, who seemed to take pleasure in beholding the distress of white people, those constant objects of their envy and detestation. (*Letters*, 2010: 118-120)

The English Factory was, moreover, devoid of every domestic convenience:

> […]an empty house […]not a single chair to sit on, or any other bed than the floor. […] with my little bundle for a pillow, I stretched myself on the floor, amidst dirt and rubbish, and enjoyed a fine sleep of more than three hours. (*Letters*, 2010: 120-121)

Their situation in the Fort, where they had rats and bats as companions, was no better.

> We were this morning hurried away at a moments (sic) warning to the fort, crouded (sic) together in a horrid dark place scarcely twenty feet square, swarming with rats, and almost suffocating for want of air. […] my husband and I, were obliged to pass the night among our companions in misery – rats continually gnawing the feet of my couch, whose perpetual squeaking would have prevented sleep […] Mr Fay protested that whole legions of evil spirits had taken possession of our apartment, […]. The rats also played their part in the Comedy; […] but our winged adversaries were not so easily foiled; – they persisted in their assaults 'till day-break, when what should we find had caused all this disturbance, but a parcel of poor harmless bats!. (*Letters*, 2010: 135-136)

In spite of her weariness and poor health, Mrs Fay's sense of alertness and endurance is remarkable. While in the Fort, she discovered a trap-door, leading to some lofts, formerly the store rooms of Kanhoji Angria, the Pirate (a Mahratta freebooter of the earlier eighteenth century who plundered the Western coast), and from the remaining spoils she conjured up a room with a couch and some sort of mattress to sleep on. Particularly noteworthy is her astuteness and persistence in finding their "concealed treasure" (*Letters*, 2010: 125), e.g., their three watches and money put into a glove, which quite unexpectedly was taken by a hurricane of rain and wind; or her courage in defending her husband from being stabbed by Pereira, a native Portuguese officer in Hyder Ali's service, who served as a sort of intermediary between the Fays and Father Ricardo, a friar belonging to the Portuguese convent, supposedly entrusted with the preparation of their escape. Her protective role, regarding her husband's weaknesses or misconduct, surfaces more than once in the narrative. So, being constantly enabled to rise above her misfortunes, she even starts learning Portuguese, as she becomes aware

of its importance in dealing not only with their false friends (Pereira and Father Ricardo), but also with their rescuer, a Jew named Isaac.

The adventure narrative – which has been commonly remarked upon by such critics as Martin Green – is "the energizing myth of empire". (1979: XI) "To celebrate adventure was", in other words, "to celebrate empire." (Green, 1979: 37) As he explains:

> […]adventure seems to mean a series of events, partly but not wholly accidental, in settings remote from the domestic and probably from the civilized (at least in the psychological sense of remote), which constitute a challenge to the central character. In meeting this challenge he/she performs a series of exploits which make him/her a hero, eminent in virtues such as courage, fortitude, cunning, strength, leadership and persistence. (Green, 1979: 23)

Green has exemplified the way this myth has been materialized in literature by male authors and specifically by male heroes, starting with Robinson Crusoe by Daniel Defoe. Quite interestingly, Fay's text foregrounds women's involvement in a vein that in several aspects reminds us of Defoe's novel. The narrative *persona* emerging from the text results in a hero/heroine who combines feminized helplessness and sensibility with manly fortitude, cunning and persistence in the face of extreme horror or adversity in a hostile setting, remote from home, leading thus to a future process of emancipation and to the subversion of the ethos of domesticity and dominant notions of femininity so popular in nineteenth-century England.

Yet, not only are her experiences on land remarkable. Those at sea are equally revealing of her energetic and enduring character. Fay's letters to her sister are filled with appalling details of shipboard life. At the start of her first voyage there might have been enough food, but then the captain kept his passengers half-starved. As she proudly reports: "I soon learnt our genteel maxim was 'catch as catch can,' – the longest arm fared best; and you cannot imagine what a good scrambler I am become". (*Letters*, 2010: 108) On one voyage back to England, she nearly suffocated: "The port of my cabin being kept almost constantly shut, and the door opening into the steerage; I had neither light nor air but from a scuttle." (*Letters*, 2010: 218)

Moreover, the fury and roughness of the sea and its inherent dangers are also portrayed in heroic terms throughout her diary. Their adventure over the bar of Cochin to catch Captain Richardson's ship that would take them to Madras is illustrative of her resolution and courage:

> When we came to the water side, what should this mighty boat prove, but a narrow Canoe with paddles, scarcely big enough to contain us […]. Never shall I forget what I felt on looking round us […]; every wave rising many feet higher than the boat, and threatening to overwhelm us with instant destruction. I sat at first with my face to the stern, but afterwards moved to the front, and when I saw a wave coming, bowed my head to receive it. We were a mile from the shore and at least two from the ship. […] When I was speaking a tremendous wave broke over us, and half filled the boat with water, on which, thinking to be presumptuous to proceed, we ordered the men to make for the nearest land, but this the wind would not permit, so we were obliged to keep on, and had reached within a mile from the ship, when she began to spread her sails […]. Our people now wanted to quit the pursuit, as she gained ground considerably, but we kept them in good humour by promising more money, and putting a white handkerchief on a stick, waved it in the air. After some time we had the pleasure to see her tack about and lye to so in another half hour we came up with her […] – wet through and nearly frightened to death, being very moment in the most imminent danger. […] without waiting for the chair to be lowered I scrambled on board, and had I not been relieved by a violent burst of tears, must have fainted. (*Letters*, 2010: 156-157)

Finally, the arrival in Calcutta, one of the three British presidencies, which with Bombay in the West and Madras in the South functioned as the East India Company's main trading bases in India, puts an end to or interrupts the adventures of travel, of what we termed earlier a dynamic space, and sets up a static space, an Anglo-Indian society in the making: the first governor-general of the Company's Indian territories, William Hastings (1772-1785) and his Lady Governess, an acute sense of hierarchy, a Supreme Council of Justice and a High Court, luxury in housing and clothing, a lot of servants and a social conviviality made up of dinner and tea parties and formal callings. Her portrait of Calcutta is therefore very different from Kipling's "City of Dreadful Night" (*Life's*

Handicap) and the late twentieth century Mother Teresa's city. She lived most of the time secluded in a social circle that distanced itself from native India.

Yet, her twenty-second letter affords us glimpses of the colonial encounter. Amongst her observations on East Indian customs and society, there are two themes that particularly draw our attention: the religious manifestations of popular Hinduism, whose bigoted idolatry, in her opinion, was comparable, in some ways, to "Romish"/Catholic superstition, even though she doesn´t condemn it openly; and the problem of *sati*, the practice of native widow-burning, one of the first areas of British legislative reforms, prohibited by law by William Bentick in 1829.

At this point, it is worth contrasting Fay's views with the overall discursive logic of Said's orientalism, seen as a discourse to stigmatize the racial Other, whether Indian or Arab, so as to legitimize the cultural and economic leadership of the West. By drawing on the idea of conquest and discovery, as Jyotsna Singh remarks, "the British gained a privileged epistemological position […] which they could then process […] via the intractable colonial binarisms: civilization and barbarism, tradition and modernity, and Christianity and heathenism, among others." (1996: 2) Hence the interest of Eliza Fay's comments on the practice of widow self-immolation, which are untainted by racial prejudice or any of the binarisms that usually opposes the civilized West to the uncivilized East. Contrary to mainstream political thought, later enforced by the attitudes of Evangelicals and Utilitarians towards India, Eliza Fay sees the practice of *sati* above all as a gender problem, the problem of women's lack of freedom and subservient behaviour in relation to male authority and their often unkind husbands.

> […] this practice [Indian marriages] is entirely a political scheme intended to insure the care and good offices of wives to their husbands, who have not failed in most countries to invent a sufficient number of rules to render the weaker sex totally subservient to their authority. I cannot avoid smiling when I hear a gentleman bring forward the conduct of Hindoo women, as a test of superior character, since I am well aware that so much are we the slaves of habit every where that were it necessary for a woman's reputation to burn herself in England,

> many a one who has accepted a husband merely for the sake of an establishment, who has lived with him without affection; perhaps thwarted his views, dissipated his fortune and rendered his life uncomfortable to its close, would yet mount the funeral pile with all imaginable decency and die with heroic fortitude. The most specious sacrifices are not always the greatest, she who wages war with a naturally petulant temper, who practices a rigid self-denial, endures without complaining the unkindness, infidelity, extravagance, meanness or scorn, of the man to whom she has given a tender and confiding heart, and for whose happiness and well being in life all the powers of her mind are engaged; – is ten times more of a heroine than the slave of bigotry and superstition. (*Letters,* 2010: 203)

As a result, the symbolic division between East and West is discursively and ideologically abolished. At this point, we may wonder if her attitude towards *sati* – the way she sees the feminine Other and by extension the feminine Self – is not partly motivated by her husband's misconduct and anti-social behaviour. It has been suggested that Anthony Fay was sent to Calcutta to prepare for the eventual impeachment of Sir Elijah Impey, Chief Justice of the Supreme Court. The fact is that soon after arriving at Calcutta, he was admitted to the Supreme Court, went over to the opposition and turned against his former patrons, *Sir* Elijah Impey and *Sir* Robert Chambers, also judges in the Supreme Court.

In addition to this situation, the unhappiness of her married life and the news of the birth of an illegitimate child of her husband's led to the separation of the couple. This painful blow functions as a turning point in her life – pushing her back towards travelling and the bolder adventures of the so called dynamic space. She becomes a milliner, engaged in the selling of muslins and other fabrics. She visits England twice: the first time in 1783 – after a long voyage of ten months, and the second time, in 1794. But, what is particularly striking about those voyages, besides the dreadful and amusing episodes of shipboard life, is her reaction when she arrives in England, namely her emotional shock produced by the news of the deaths of her beloved parents and a sense of isolation, which took hold of her. "I rather rejoiced at quitting England" – she confesses – "as the whole time of my stay had been imbittered by a succession of losses and disappointments". (*Letters*, 2010: 246)

We should not forget, as Joana Trollope explains, that the Empire was an escape for many English women who desperately looked for "a chance of self-esteem and achievement that could not be obtained at home." (1988: 30) Obviously, in the case of Eliza Fay, England, where marriage was the only proper sphere for a woman, wouldn't be an ideal place for her, nor even the inner circles of Anglo-Indian society, where social status and hierarchy played a decisive role. That is why she took refuge in free trade – the very foundation stone of the whole imperial enterprise – and adopted the sailing vessel – also named as a sort of "floating prison" (*Letters*, 2010: 230) – and the attractions of its ports of call (such as St. Helena in the South Atlantic, Cape Town, Madeira or the Canaries), as her own home. The apposition between "home" and "the world", being one of the archetypal features of the epic tradition, is here masterly portrayed by a woman, who in spite of her misfortunes, managed to escape the structures of patriarchal rule and take advantage of the experiences provided by the empire, as a compound of adventurous living, free trade and liberty. It is no wonder, therefore, as Simon Winchester argues, that "Shelley would have been proud" of her letters and "Jane Austen just shocked, shocked." (*Letters*, 2010: XII)

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