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## Visions: “If You See Her Face You Die”: Orientalist Gothic and Colonialism in Bithia Croker’s Indian Ghost Stories.

### Abstract

This paper analyzes Bithia Mary Croker’s ghost stories of the British Raj to argue that Croker in her texts reframes the eighteenth-century Orientalist Gothic writing tradition to critique British imperial presence in India. I specifically discuss two of Croker’s short stories, namely “To Let” (1893) and “If You See Her Face” (1893) published in her anthology of Indian ghost fiction *To Let* (1893). The paper traces how Croker uses two distinct characteristics of eighteenth-century colonial Indian society—the tradition of nautch performances and the architectural space of the dak bungalows—which continued into early-nineteenth century British India under the vigilance of the Empire to simultaneously attack the imperial consciousness and dislocate the imperial heartland from within the colony. In my critique of the two stories, I take a transhistorical approach wherein my analysis starts with and builds upon the eighteenth century and moves into the late nineteenth century. The paper traces how Croker uses two distinct characteristics of eighteenth-century colonial Indian society—the tradition of nautch performances and the architectural space of the dak bungalows—which continued into early-nineteenth century India under the vigilance of the British empire to simultaneously attack the imperial consciousness and dislocate the imperial heartland from within the colony. The short stories build upon and expand the eighteenth-century gothic tradition that threads together the internal and the external, in this case the “others” of the British empire. They use Orientalist gothic elements to reflect the growing contentions in the Indian city of Lucknow against British imperial forces that also compromises the apparently safe and secure domestic space of the colonial dak bungalows. In doing so, Croker uses the figures of racial and gendered others to subvert the politico-cultural hierarchies of race, class, and gender.

### Keywords

Orientalist gothic, Colonialism, Bithia Croker, nineteenth century, eighteenth century, women's writing, colonial architectural spaces, ghost stories, British India

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It is in the Gothic novel that women writers could first accuse the 'real world' of falsehood and deep disorder. Or perhaps, they rather asked whether masculine control is not just another delusion in the nightmare of absurd historical reality in which we are all involved. (Doody 562)

As British women peregrinated to colonial India at the cusp of late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, their interactions with Indian men and women bore witness to an intricate interchange of English and Indian cultural currents. Unsurprisingly then, the colonial Gothic fiction produced by British women, who lived in India during the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries are located in the interstices of race, class, gender, and colonialism. This paper analyzes Bithia Mary Croker's ghost stories of the British Raj to argue that Croker in her texts reframes the eighteenth-century Orientalist Gothic writing tradition to critique British imperial presence in India. I specifically discuss two of Croker's short stories, namely "To Let" and "If You See Her Face" published in her anthology of Indian ghost fiction *To Let* (1893). In my critique of the two stories, I take a transhistorical approach wherein my analysis starts with and builds upon the eighteenth century and moves into the late nineteenth century. The paper traces how Croker uses two distinct characteristics of eighteenth-century colonial Indian society – the tradition of *nautch* performances and the architectural space of the *dak* bungalows – which continued into early-nineteenth century India under the vigilance of the British empire to simultaneously attack the imperial consciousness and dislocate the imperial heartland from within the colony. The short stories build upon and expand the eighteenth-century Gothic tradition that threads together the internal and the external, in this case the "others" of the British empire. They use Orientalist Gothic elements to reflect the growing contentions in the Indian city of Lucknow against British imperial forces that also compromises the apparently safe and secure domestic space of the colonial *dak* bungalows. In doing so, Croker uses the figures of racial and gendered others to subvert the politico-cultural hierarchies of race, class, and gender.

Croker travelled to British India in 1877 with her husband, John Stokes Croker, a lieutenant colonel in the Royal Scots and Munster Fusiliers, and lived in Madras, Bengal, and Tamil Nadu. The colonial culture and society in the different Indian provinces in the nineteenth century provided her with a vast context for her fiction. She penned forty-two novels and seven volumes of short stories, a close examination of which would bring to the fore how Croker's narratives closely reflect the worlds that she knew, and are "based on her first-hand experience within the British colonial empire" (Edmundson 94). She is known for her

seventeen novels set in India and one in Burma. *Beyond the Pale* (1897) and *Lismoyle* (1914) are notable amongst seven other novels that were set in Ireland (Raza). Thus, Croker's experience with the imperial discourse extends beyond her stay in India and can be traced back to her lived experience as a woman hailing from another significant British colony much closer to home, Ireland. Due to the scant biographical and little critical information publicly available on Bithia Croker and her work, Croker's positionality in relation to the British empire, as well as her authorial stance on it is subject to both speculation and interpretation. At a basic level, her subjectivity as an Anglo-Irish woman situates her as both a colonized figure (in the context of Ireland) and an imperial, white *memsahib* (in the context of British India). Much like her own dichotomous position with regards to the British empire, her stories offer an ambivalent critique of the imperial presence in colonized India. While the narratives do not explicitly repel the agents of empire, they offer an insidious critique of the imperialist project and foreground native figures and forms of indigenous knowledge to challenge models of phallogentric imperialism.

The nineteenth-century Gothic tradition emerges out of the age of western colonialism of the eighteenth century and the popular Oriental tale. Alan Richardson argues that “[t]he Orientalist vogue in literary writing, which flourished in Britain during the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries, constituted a crucial element of the larger cultural, scholarly, and administrative enterprise known in retrospect as “Orientalism”” (1). The Orient land (and peoples) became an ontological site to establish the supremacy of the “modern” and “civilized” West by defining it against the “passive and threatening ‘Orient,’” which was made to symbolize “irrationality, cruelty, effeminacy, and superstition” (Richardson 2). It was, therefore, evident that the Orientalist Gothic tradition would set its sensationalist narratives of social, cultural, and racial deviancy in the Orient. With the advent of the age of colonial exploration from the middle of the eighteenth century, the Gothic genre also became a part of the project of colonizing the external other (Kitson 169). In this context, it is important to note that British colonization of India was consolidated in the eighteenth century after the Battle of Plassey in 1757. Carl Bolton in *Writing the Empire: Robert Southey and Romantic Colonialism* observes that “at the end of the eighteenth and beginning of the nineteenth centuries, the future of India – as a mercantile outpost under the control of the East India Company, and after 1813 as a territory of the British Empire – was an important topic of debate in Britain” (13). As a result, the external colony of India was constructed as a site of a power-knowledge-control triad. It also became a site associated with sexually illicit practices of the external and the racial other providing rich grounds for Orientalist Gothic narratives.

### **Nautch girl, imperial gaze, and female retribution**

In Bithia Croker's short story "If You See Her Face" (1893), the figure of the spectral *nautch* girl emerges as a native, female revenant, who rises from within the colonized space to punish figures representing empire and colonialism in British India. In this text, imperial figures include, on the one hand, the Tiger Rajah of Oonomore, who represents the dying embers of a regional monarchy long conquered by the English forces, and on the other hand, Gregson and Goring, the agents of the East India Company, who act as envoys of the British Empire and its colonial domination in India. The *nautch* girl as the spectral center of the story embodies the gendered and the racialized other's retribution against both English and native, phallogocentric, colonizing authorities.

At the very outset, "Her Face" subverts the authority of the colonial, male, and racially "superior" figure, who is conventionally considered within the empire as the producer of decisive knowledge on indigenous peoples, histories, and cultures. In doing so, the short story dismantles the hierarchical binary between the colonial figures and the apparently repressed colonized subjects. It instead places the British political agents at the mercy of native Indian villagers. The intellectual and spatial displacements of the imperial agents are prominently exposed when Gregson and Goring are stranded in the middle of native wilderness as their locomotive journey is abruptly halted owing to a "break on the line" (183). The "Eurasian" rail guard only manages to cite "bridge gone" as the cause of the line-break (183).<sup>1</sup> He also informs the two English men that there are no rest-houses near their location. In absence of an alternate means of transportation, the messenger deployed to inform the next station would have to travel on foot, and another train from the junction would take until noon the next day to arrive (183). Further, Gregson's and Goring's deserted state intellectually displaces them in the native, wild outskirts of Oonomore, despite their being the political agents – representative of intellectual authority – to the Rajah of the region, described in the story as only a child. They find themselves without access to any productive information to alleviate their condition. Moreover, the railway track, which is hailed as a western invention and import, meant to facilitate easy penetration and exploitation of the native heartland by imperial agents, instead maroons them in a remote, inhospitable, and native wilderness, comprising "the dusty cactus hedge, the white telegraph posts, the expanse of brownish grass, black goats, and [the] jungle," (183) that renders them vulnerable to wild animal attacks.

Croker builds on a characteristic feature of the eighteenth-century Orientalist Gothic tradition, namely a simultaneous exoticization and "monstrosization" of

the Oriental other, as the story describes Gregson's and Goring's encounter with the native landscape and villagers of Oonomore. Peter J. Kitson argues that the genre of Orientalist Gothic rose prominently on the English literary scene as the British forces conquered more territories in India and became increasingly involved in the power politics of the declining Ottoman empire in the East (169). He defines the Orientalist Gothic as an "illegitimate hybrid," comprising the Gothic and the Oriental, which is "capable of being combined in monstrous and unusual forms and [is] part of a dangerous and infectious cultural obsession with the exotic and unusual" (169). As such, Kitson's definition emphasizes how the Orientalist Gothic combines both elements of exoticism and monstrosity in its representation of the alien other. In "Her Face," the trope of exoticization of the Eastern lands is manifest in Goring, who gets excited about an alluring prospect of hunting black bucks in the wilderness, while they are waiting for the rescue train to arrive the next day (184). He says to Gregson, "I really think it is hardly worth while [sic] to move," while "cast[ing] a greedy eye in the direction of a promising snipe jheel [marshy lakes]" (185). On the contrary, the apparently exotic land turns barren, desolate, and inhospitable in Gregson's actual encounter with it. Gregson brooks no quibble and demands to go to Kori, the nearest village from their location, to temporarily reside in the Oonomore Rajah's hunting mansion. He condescends to travelling on foot since as an imperial personage, entitled as the "Protector of the Poor," he could not "stoop to [riding in] a country cart" (185). As they trek through the country road, a once "promising" hunting spot turns into "a barren, melancholy-looking tract, diversified with scanty pasture and marshy patches (or jheels), pools of water, tall reeds, and brown grasses" (186). Even when the landscape is dotted with "droves of lean cattle, paddy birds, milk-white herons, and cranes [...] who danced to one another in a stately not to say solemn, fashion," the wild prospect stretched in front of the English men is described as "truly a bleak, desolate-looking region" (186). The rural scenery features "save one or two miserable huts and some thorn bushes," "no sign of tree or human habitation" (187). The description of the landscape offered here, as Gregson and Goring encounter it further into the native heartland, is a far cry from the traditional description of Eastern lands given by the Orientalist as an exciting and picturesque place of romance, love, and adventure.

The native landscape becomes increasingly threatening as Gregson and Goring come across the "wretched village" described as the "once prosperous hanger-on of the now deserted hunting place" (187). On their arrival, they are surrounded by beggars and petitioners, drawn to them by the presence of Gregson, who is hailed as a "Burra-Burra sahib" and a "great and all-powerful personage" (187). However, Gregson violently shirks away from the encroaching presence and touch of the villagers. The omniscient narrator comments that:

Mr. Gregson liked to feel his own importance at a *darbar*, or an official dinner, but it was quite another matter to have it thrust upon him by a gang of clamoring paupers—the maimed, the halt, the blind—crying out against taxation, imploring alms, and mercy. He was a hard man, with a quick impatient temper. An aged blind beldame got in his way, and he struck her savagely with his stick. (187)

Gregson's visible uneasiness when encountered by "a gang of clamoring [native] paupers," betrays a perceptible fear of the physical touch of the racial and colonized other. He is not only stranded in an alien land about which he knows nothing, but is also surrounded by abject, subaltern figures – the maimed, the halt, the blind, and the beldame – whose physical proximity to his body makes him uncomfortable. The narrative juxtaposes Gregson's feelings when he is at a *darbar* or an official dinner with this colonial encounter, when he is thrust amidst the native villagers. To Gregson, the act of being the center of a crowd when performed in a familiar, imperial space – a *darbar* or an official dinner – symbolizes glorification of British empire and empowerment of the imperial agents. As such, he likes to "feel his own importance" in an imperial space because it symbolizes his participation in perpetrating the colonial power and reach of Great Britain. However, this same act loses its apparent appeal and becomes threatening when it is done by a group of abject, native figures in an unknown land. Perhaps, in his encounter with the native, Gregson subconsciously perceives his powerlessness as he finds himself crowded and lacking intelligence on how to deal with this band of native figures. Consequently, his fear of powerlessness is physically manifested when he loses his "quick temper" and lashes out savagely at the "aged blind beldame" when she gets in his way.

Through Gregson's uncanny encounter with the "aged blind beldame," who is rumored to have "the evil eye," Croker re-emphasizes indigenous knowledge as a tool to challenge the dominance of the agents of phallogocentric imperialism. On the one hand, Gregson instantaneously takes out his stick and thrashes the old woman, halting only when Goring intervenes in his act. On the other hand, Goring, known for being "a sahib with a soft heart," gives the old woman a "real rupee" which elicits a generous warning from her. The woman warns them not to set foot in the *khana* palace (the dining hall) of the Kori mansion, which has become the abode of the ghost of an anonymous *nautch* girl, who had been raped and mutilated by Tiger Rajah, the former raja of Oonomore, and present ruler's grandfather (188). While Goring heeds the warning and decides to stay outside the mansion ruminating about the tragic tale of the *nautch* girl, Gregson chooses to ignore the native woman's warning and stays in the *khana* palace. As Gregson

occupies himself with writing official letters, he first hears the jingling of the *nautch* girl's anklets. Following the sound when he lifts his eyes up to look at the *nautch* girl, he meets her gaze and dies. The fact that Goring is left unharmed because he treated the old woman kindly and heeded her advice foregrounds how the narrative critiques a certain model of abusive, imperial masculinity, particularly embodied by Gregson. Since, Goring shows sympathy towards the old woman, heeds her warning, and empathetically muses over the *nautch* girl's tragedy, his figure seems to be somewhat redeemed in the eyes of the *nautch* girl. Contrarily, she punishes Gregson as he is the hypermasculinist colonizer, who only believes himself to be the authoritative producer of knowledge on native peoples and eschews alternate forms of indigenous intellect.

In "Her Face," the "abhuman" figure of the spectral *nautch* girl challenges white, phallogocentric, western, imperialism. The white privilege of the empire depended on the sexual purity of the body of the white woman, who was considered to be sexually inviolable. Simultaneously, the body of the Oriental other was marked as a site of devious sexuality (Kitson 168). As the embodiment of the Orientalized other, the *nautch* girl signifies illicit sexuality and abhorrence, evoking anxiety about an invasion by the sexually 'deviant' "abhuman" of the white socially-normative sphere. The specter of the *nautch* girl emerges as an avenger of the gendered other from the vestiges of colonial India. In the eighteenth-century, *nautch* girls were regarded as ritualized objects of male gaze, pleasure, and sexual abuse in pre-colonial India, when different regions of the country were ruled by native monarchies. As such, the first incident of violence and eventual death is paratextually inflicted on the *nautch* girl by the Tiger Rajah, the native monarch of Oonomore at his Kori mansion. Though the text does not mention if the specter of the *nautch* girl was able to exact her revenge on her actual native abuser, it is made evident that she kills Gregson, who decides to penetrate her abode. Indrani Sen claims that:

the 'nautch' formed an integral part of cross-cultural social life, with wealthy Indian hosts providing music and dance as entertainment. For Englishwomen in this period [late eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries], therefore, dancing girls – or 'nautch girls', as they were called – marked one of the points of gendered interactions with the cultural, colonial and racial other. (xvii)

Sen's remark emphasizes that the *nautch* girl was discursively marked as "one of the points of gendered interactions with the cultural, colonial and racial other."



Gregson's physical encounter with the spectral *nautch* girl transforms his body into a site of racial and cultural interchange. By intruding the inner recesses of the native female space, Gregson's subjecthood overlaps with that of the Tiger Rajah, who symbolizes the native monarchs that cooperated with the British. This implicit participation of the Tiger Rajah in the British imperial project in India is evident from the fact that Gregson and Goring are acting as "political agents" to Tiger Rajah's current successor, the boy-ruler of Oonomore. As such, both the Tiger Rajah and Gregson are part of an existing chain of gendered violence, be it under native monarchy or British colonialism. Gregson's body then becomes a conduit that unites the past, native aggressor with the present, imperial perpetrator and combines both forms of oppressive masculine domination, native and colonial, against which the *nautch* girl exacts her revenge. The story uses this characteristically sexualized figure of the *nautch* girl to intercept and critique gendered encounters between the empire and the subaltern Indian figures. It also highlights what Sara Suleri has defined as "the anxiety of empire," (5) which signifies European vulnerability in its colonial encounter. Simultaneously representing the empire and embodying native, patriarchal masculinity, Gregson's confrontation with the spectral *nautch* girl epitomizes the transgressive encounter between, on the one hand, the forces of native and colonial patriarchies, and on the other hand, the gendered and racial other that eventually results in a violent overthrow of the imperial masculine agent.

To exact this violent revenge against the phallogocentric imperial figure, it becomes necessary in the course of the narrative, to pit the spectral dancer against Gregson, who represents chauvinistic, phallogocentric imperialism in the story. Gregson's hypermasculine character distinguishes him from both his assistant Goring, and the impoverished Indian natives, a fact established at the very outset. Gregson is described as:

A civilian of twenty-five years' standing, short of neck, short of stature, and short of temper. His red face, pale prominent eyes, and fierce bushy brows had gained for him the nick name of "The Prawn;" but he was also known as a marvellously clever financier, ambitious, shrewd, and prompt in action; and by those who were under him, he was less loved than feared. (181)

According to the omniscient narrator, Gregson is a typical hypermasculinized agent of British empire with his "short temper," "red face," and "pale prominent eyes". His "prompt actions" induce fear in his juniors and the natives alike. He is also a marvellously "clever financier," "ambitious," and "shrewd," which suggest

that Gregson is a worldly man of business, who clearly sees that his role in the empire-building project is to capture colonized lands for the imperial government. His mercantile nature represents the capitalist ideology of the imperial project, which predominantly considered the colonies in terms of trade, commerce, and profit. Further, Gregson is too proud of his robust masculinity that distinguishes him from the kind-hearted Goring, and evidently enjoys exercising his “superior,” gendered agency to dominate others: he beats an old, crippled, native woman until intervened by another European man; and he takes pride in deriding the native Indians as uncouth and uncultured barbarians (181). It is then apt in the narrative that the spectral dancer chooses Gregson as her target to exact her revenge on the figure of the colonial patriarch.

When the imperial, hypermasculinized, and mercantile figure is confronted with the supernatural *nautch* girl, it generates a transgressive space in the text that facilitates the “abhuman” *nautch* girl to contest the British man. The text, therefore, dismantles the gendered hierarchy between the powerful, masculinized West and the weak, feminized East. The fact that Gregson decides to intrude the *khana* palace, traditionally described as the virgin domestic space belonging to the woman – but which is instead transformed into a place where the *nautch* girl is violated and her face mangled by the Tiger Rajah (194) – in turn sets the specter free to exact her vengeance on the transgressor.<sup>2</sup> Gregson’s intrusion into the *khana* palace symbolizes an enforced colonization of India by the British imperial forces. When the old woman first mentions the *nautch* girl to Gregson and Goring, she introduces the spectral dancer as appearing only in the *khana* palace, which signifies the domestic sphere of traditional Indian mansions. As such, Gregson’s forced penetration of the dancer’s virgin space that also recalls his earlier remark of inspecting the property for acquisition, not only reflects the subjugation of Indian women by British men, but also re-enacts the *nautch* girl’s violation by the Tiger Rajah, the figure of the chauvinistic, pre-colonial Indian patriarch. These acts of repeated transgression set the dancer’s wrathful vengeance against the present, unwanted, imperial, interloper, suggesting the undesired status of the imperial agents in colonial India.

Moreover, the spectral dancer employs her body and dance, which had commodified her as the sexualized object of male gaze and pleasure throughout her life to exact her revenge on the imperial transgressor. The *nautch* girl uses her dance to entice both Goring and Gregson. When Goring hears the sound of the *nautch* girl’s “tom toms” as she emerges from the garden, he describes his encounter with the spectral dancer as “startling as it was uncanny”:

Two twinkling little brown feet, dancing before him on the marble pavement! [Sic] exquisite feet, that seemed scarcely to touch the ground, and that kept perfect time to the inspiriting sounds of the tom-toms; they were decked with massive golden anklets, which tinkled as they moved, and above them waved a few inches of the heavy yellow golden brodered skirt of the dancing-girl. No more was visible. Round and round the fairy feet flitted, in a very poetry of motion; faster and faster played the tom-toms. Such dancing, such nimble feet, it had never been [his] to behold. (193-94)

However, the dance that was supposed to evoke a sense of pleasure, and which Goring describes as a “poetry of motion” (193), turns fatal as the *nautch* girl confronts Gregson. This interweaving of innocence and fatalness is described in a real-life account of the *nautch* girl's performance by a white *memsahib* as recorded by Sen:

The influence of these nautch-girls over the other sex, even over men who have been brought up in England, and who have known, admired, and respected their own country-women, is not to be accounted for. It is not only obtained in a very peculiar way, but often kept up even when beauty is passed. *It steals upon those who come within its charmed circle in a way not unlike that of an intoxicating drug, being the more dangerous to young Europeans because they seldom fear it.* (My emphasis; 3)

The contrast between Sen's rendition of a real-life *nautch* performance by an English *memsahib* and Goring's description of the spectral performance highlights a transformation of the native dancer's feminine charms, from exuding allure and pleasure to her individual act of retribution. No longer contained within her mortal body that can be limited, controlled, and brutalized by the physical, social, and gender superiority of men, the *nautch* girl is free from masculine control and domination. Without being restrained by both native and colonial gender discourses, she regains her agency and her, albeit spectral, body and uses it to punish Gregson for his intrusion into the *khana* palace. The *nautch* girl's transformation represents the moment when she no longer remains powerless and

marginalized. By exacting her violent retribution, the spectral performer emerges as an ‘excess’ to both Indian and imperial patriarchal societies. In her spectral form, the *nautch* girl rises above her victimization by the Tiger Rajah, and punishes Gregson, who in her eyes symbolize both the native and the colonial patriarch.

### **Female Gothic, colonial house, and ghosts of the empire**

Just as “Her Face” presents a critique of male violence against Indian women, Bithia Croker’s short story “To Let” (1893) uses a prominent eighteenth-century female-Gothic motif, namely distressed white women trapped in antiquated colonial houses haunted by ghosts of white women who met tragic ends, to further critique British imperial presence in colonial India. In doing so, I recall Margaret Anne Doody’s claim regarding eighteenth-century Gothic novels, which forms the epigraph of my article. Doody asserts that it is in the subversive genre of Gothic novels that women could challenge the official narratives of history dictated, upheld, and celebrated by the patriarchal society. As a result, generally, female Gothic narratives contest the definite parameters of history by intercepting its realism with surrealism, absurdism, and the supernatural.<sup>2</sup> “To Let,” which narrates the haunted encounters between two British female protagonists and the specter of an English woman trapped in a colonial *dak* bungalow questions the imperial conquest of India. Here, the English women protagonists become narrated ontological spaces that expose how imperial figures, be they men or women, are threatened by the apparently ‘feminized’ and ‘colonized’ Indian natives and landscapes.

A significant characteristic of eighteenth-century female Gothic texts is challenging male-dominated historiography. According to Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith, women’s expulsion from official accounts of history, as what Christina Crosby calls “the unhistorical other of history” (Crosby 1), alerted eighteenth-century Gothic women writers to the ways in which history seems to be always constructed from a subjective and essentially masculine point of view (Wallace and Smith 3). Female Gothic narratives then aim to subvert the monolithic and patriarchal construct of history by continuously intercepting it with plural, contradictory, and alternate histories, and by incorporating the perspectives of gender, racial, and cultural others. In “To Let,” subaltern figures within indigenous spaces are shown to have agency that resists colonial domination. It also underscores the growing dissension between Indian “subjects” and English “masters” in British India. By setting the plot of the story in the city of Lucknow, the former capital of Awadh during the Mughal era and a site of continuous contention in colonial India since the eighteenth century, Croker’s text

encapsulates the prolonged resentment of the Indian masses, which resulted from the catastrophic defeat of the Mughal forces at the hands of the British army at the watershed Battle of Buxar, 1764.<sup>4</sup>

Similar to “Her Face,” the narrative of “To Let” also foregrounds indigenous knowledge as a tool to otherize imperial figures in native spaces. Croker demonstrates that indigenous knowledge is crucial to surviving in the colonized land. In “To Let,” the two white female protagonists, Susan Shandon and Aggie, consider taking a trip to the hill stations of Lucknow to escape the scorching Indian heat. Initially, Aggie refuses to leave behind her husband Tom, who “could only get two months’ leave (July and August)” from his office, during the sweltering summers and delays the family trip to the mountains (3). Aggie is finally forced to rescind her demand in the face of scorching Indian summer, but by then almost all accessible *dak* bungalows on the hills have already been reserved by other English families. Thus, when an acquaintance, Edith Chalmers, finds the Briarwood Bungalow for Aggie at an exceptionally cheap rent of eight hundred rupees (8), both female protagonists are elated. Though the unusually low price of the Briarwood Bungalow late in the vacationing season would have suggested to a local Indian that something is wrong with the place, the two English women, unaware of local knowledge, fail to perceive the threat and danger that lay hidden behind the cheap rental. The text employs the Gothic trope of secrecy to dismantle the binary between the imperial figures and the natives. Due to their lack of local knowledge, the white women become vulnerable and are trapped in the haunted bungalow, unlike the informed indigenous residents of the locality who consciously stay away from the house.

“To Let” refers to a cumulative history of defeat, conquest, shame, and anger of the repressed Indian subjects as it represents resentful, native, subaltern figures, who repeatedly confront the English *memsahibs* with hostile gazes and withdrawn attitudes. The narrative builds a rhetoric of non-belongingness as it portrays Susan and Aggie as external others to the indigenous Indian community. It suggests an act of reverse othering of the Englishwomen, who figure in the minds of the Indian masses as symbolizing the British empire. A surging sense of non-belongingness and hostility becomes evident in the text when Aggie and Susan first confront the Indian *palki*-bearers, who are called to carry them to the Briarwood bungalow, nestled in the hills of Lucknow. Aggie’s and Susan’s joy lasts until they start journeying uphill with the Indian natives. Susan describes her journey as a “novel sensation” but:

so long as the slopes were moderate, and the paths wide; but the higher we went, the narrower became

the path, the steeper the naked precipice; and as my coolies would walk at the extreme edge, with the utmost indifference to my frantic appeals to “Beetor! Beetor!”—and would change poles at the most agonizing corners—my feelings were very mixed, especially when droves of loose pack ponies came thundering downhill, with no respect for the rights of the road. (10)

Susan’s reflections on the withdrawn and reckless attitudes of the native coolies “with the utmost indifference to [her] frantic appeals” reveal how the text unsettles the binary between the imperial master and the colonized subject. It is no longer the indigenous population, who are characterized as the powerless and effeminized other and are subjected to the whims of their imperial “owners”. Rather, the Indian coolies utterly disregard the presence, safety, and authority of the English women, who unexpectedly find themselves in danger quite literally in the hands of men, who are not only their class and racial inferiors, but are also sent to serve them. The story shows that the colonized other threatens the protection of the white English women, thereby dislodging the racial superiority of the imperial figures.

Susan’s fear materializes from her realization that she is entirely at the mercy of the indifferent – almost bordering on hostile – natives, who could drop her from the open *palkis* at any time. Her agony is accentuated by the inhibiting mountainous terrain of their journey. The meandering and unpredictable hilly paths with steep curves compel Susan to recognize how utterly powerless she is when confronted with inimical Indian landscape and equally inhospitable *coolies*. Her disempowered state becomes a metaphor of the fact that all along it is the imperial forces who are the undesired other in the apparently colonized India. Though the English women in the text are imperial figures, at the same time they are out of place in the indigenous setting. Their lack of local knowledge and language makes them unable to control the *palki*-bearers’ action. They occupy an ambiguous position in the colonized space: they are imperial figures but fail to hold onto their power and are at the mercy of the natives.

Nalini Pai asserts that the colonial *dak* bungalow, which is located on the precipice of an apparently familiar and conquered territory for the Westerner, is also the disconcerting interstitial place, where the Westerner “looks on the unfamiliar interior space that the native Indian occupies,” and s/he is forced to encounter the strange native (203). In “To Let,” the colonial *dak* bungalow becomes a site for enacting the confrontation between imperial and colonized

figures that subverts the hierarchical relationship between the empire and its colonies. It does so by revealing the imperial forces as external other to the indigenous Indian population. Drawing on Pai's observation, I assert that Briarwood bungalow is the contentious, supernatural site, where Susan and Aggie in their encounters with the trapped ghost of Lucy are compelled to re-live the reiterations of patriarchal violence perpetrated on women (both Indian and English) over the ages. The haunting of Aggie and Susan by spectral Lucy, all of whom are trapped within the domestic space of Briarwood is symbolic of the sacrifice (loss of loved ones, relocation from home, and eventually death) that they are being asked to make in the name of empire. Briarwood initially belonged to a retired British Colonel, who lived with his wife and his daughter Lucy. Lucy was betrothed to a young soldier from the Guides, but their marriage never came to fruition for the soldier mysteriously died. In her grief-stricken state, Lucy drives herself over the railing of the house to be reunited with her late lover in the afterlife. However, ever since that fateful night, Briarwood has re-enacted the tragedy of Lucy for every guest (which invariably has always been Englishwomen). During their stay, Aggie and Susan (the only residents at Briarwood for the local domestic aids would all leave the premise by sunset) are kept awake by the dead soldier's deafening calls for Lucy. The absence of vision and heightened hearing intensify Susan's and Aggie's fear at their encounters with Lucy's ghost and her dead fiancé's ear-piercing cries. At one such encounter, Susan reflects:

I paused, my tongue silenced, by the awful pallor of [Aggie's] face, and the expression of her eyes, as she sat with her little hands clutching the arms of her chair, and her whole figure bent forward in an attitude of listening—an attitude of rigid terror... the horse's hoofs made a loud clattering noise on the stone-paved verandah outside, and a man's voice—a young man's eager voice—called, "Lucy." (28-29)

Evidently, the two English women are imprisoned within the haunted edifice by the ghastly re-enactment of Briarwood's colonial tragedy and a raging storm in the native wilderness without. Aggie's and Susan's supernatural entrapment in the *dak* bungalow accentuates their precarious and unwanted state in the colonized landscape. The familiar, colonial space of the *dak* bungalow cannot protect the imperial figures from encountering the fatal consequences of imperial projects. Aggie and Susan are made to realize that they are irredeemably "other" to and othered by the Indian landscape.

The narrative of “To Let” subverts the domestic space of the colonial house, the iconic *dak* bungalow, which was maintained on the command of imperial men to safeguard the body of the Englishwoman by keeping her ‘in’, while her male counterparts – father, husband, or brother – conquered and ruled alien territory and the barbaric masses of the colony. The space of the *dak* bungalow was initially both a central spot for pleasure and a crucial site of protection of the bodies of white women, while their husbands played the greater part of controlling the empire. However, as shown in Croker’s text, every night at Briarwood, Susan and Aggie are petrified by the chilling cries for Lucy and the apparition of Lucy jumping off the verandah. The intensity of their fear eventually compels the two women to run outside, rather than staying within the supposedly protected interior space of the colonial house, as soon as they hear Tom arriving the next morning. The fact that the two English women are forced to venture outside the protected domestic space of Briarwood due to repeated hauntings by the specter of another English woman establishes a palimpsestuous bond between the past and the present sufferings inflicted on women in the name of phallogentric imperialism.

Bithia Croker’s short Gothic stories bring home the realization that the high price of imperialism is paid with the blood of both British and Indian men and women, and the memories of those who died due to the imperial project continue to haunt their successors. Much like the phantom *nautch* girl in “If You See Her Face,” Lucy’s ghost serves as a reminder of the layers of violence (physical and psychological) inflicted on the person of the woman, both native and English in the phallogentric society in both the East and the West. The female ghost too is trapped in a loop to continuously return and compel her successors to confront their victimization by imperial forces. Ironically, but rather similar to the *nautch* girl, who emerges as the gendered excess to both the imperial and the native figures, Susan and Aggie as English women act as the ontological spaces of the imperial cultural excess within the colonized space. The white women’s expulsion becomes a metaphor for the undesired imperial presence in colonized India.

Croker’s colonial ghost stories reframe the Orientalist Gothic genre, which emerges out of the larger context of British colonialism in the eighteenth and the nineteenth centuries and the popular Oriental tale that “imagines” this cross-cultural encounter and conquest to challenge phallogentric imperialism. The spectral *nautch* girl in “If You See Her Face” emerges as the female revenant within the native colonized space to subvert, attack, and overthrow the normative gender hierarchies of both Indian and British phallogentric colonialism. At the same time, the English female protagonists in “To Let” embody the binary of the home/nation and the other as they are transformed into the external other in their



encounters with the hostile natives and with the English female ghost in the contested space of a colonial *dak* bungalow. "To Let" also becomes a metaphor for Croker's position as an Irish woman and the wife of a colonial soldier posted in India. As an Anglo-Irish memsahib in India, Croker emerges as a liminal figure, having an ambivalent relationship with the British empire. On the one hand as a *memsahib* figure, she is representative of the empire in colonial India, and on the other hand, as an Irish woman, she also carries the colonially-inflected legacy of Ireland as an internal other to Britain. Reflecting the writer's duality of subjecthood in the colonized space of British India, the two short stories show that it is the empire which is objectified and repelled by colonial India.

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#### Notes

<sup>1</sup> Given the social, political, and communal unrest that pervaded British India during the nineteenth century, it would be logically apt to conjecture that a probable reason for the abrupt removal of the bridge is bombing of the railway track as a form of indigenous resistance to the colonial rule, even if nothing is explicitly mentioned in the narrative. Moreover, the initial railway lines established by the English forces in India ploughed through dense forests and arid lands, that exposed both the native laborers and the rail tracks to harsh weathers and wild animal attacks. Often, reports were made of damaged rail tracks on account of an elephant or a tiger attack. Thus, in citing this peculiar incident, "Her face" alludes to how the British "civilizing" forces were in constant conflict with the native peoples and the natural wilderness, that were pushing back against the colonial domination.

<sup>2</sup> The term *khana* literally means food both in Hindi and Urdu. As such, a *khana* palace would imply a combined dining and kitchen space in the interior of the royal palace. In nineteenth-century Bengal, which had witnessed the reign of several nawabs before the British government rooted out native monarchy in the province, the *khana* palace would be considered equivalent to a zenana space, inhabited by both the women of the ruler's household and the domestic maids.

<sup>3</sup> The term "female Gothic" is much contested, and was not coined until 1976, when Ellen Moers used it to broadly define "the work that women have done in the literary mode that, since the eighteenth century, we have called the Gothic" (qtd. in Wallace 1). However, the notion of female Gothic existed during the late eighteenth century, long before it rose to prominence and was recognized as a genre of literature produced by women in the early 1990s. Diana Wallace and Andrew Smith observe that Ann Radcliffe's eighteenth-century novels characterized by "their heroines in flight from male tyrants across fantastical landscapes and in search of lost mothers entombed in womb-like dungeons beneath patriarchal castles" as the beginning of "female Gothic" (2).

<sup>4</sup> Edmundson proposes that by setting the story in Lucknow, "Croker implicitly hints at the tensions caused by the British East India Company's annexation of the Awadh province in 1856 and the city's involvement in the violence of the Indian Rebellion the following year" (103). However, I assert that the rhetoric of betrayal, defeat, and of subsequent dissent and rebellion runs deeper in the veins of Lucknow's indigenous population as it dates back to the eighteenth-century Battle of Buxar. The decisive Battle of Buxar was fought between the English East India company, under the leadership of Hector Munro, and the combined forces of Mir Qasim, the Nawab of Bengal, Shuja-ud-Daula, Nawab of Awadh, and Mughal Emperor Shah Alam II. British victory at Buxar completely crushed the remaining indigenous forces resisting the Company's

dominion, and led to the infamous Treaty of Allahabad (1765), which politically marked the beginning of British rule in India (Bhattacharje A96). Combined with the Battle of Plassey, which was fought just seven years ago, and who's scars still remained fresh in the minds of the people, the Battle of Buxar further ingrained the shame of complete subjugation, and ignited the unquenchable desire of rebellion in Indian masses.

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