

'Boundaries of Control' – E.R. Stevenson, Indian Colonialism, and the Domestic Postcard (1880-1920)

The boundary between colonial territories and their European colonisers was one frequently traversed by the picture postcard. As a prolific object forging a connection between the continents in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, Emily Rose Stevenson has posited that the postcard's materiality facilitated the popular visual representation of the British empire and its colonies, fuelling Edward Said's contention of 'imagined geographies'.¹ Within her 2013 journal article, titled with the British idiom, 'Home, Sweet Home', Stevenson considers the colonial Indian postcard, particularly those which portray the domestic sphere, and how the British utilised the medium to perpetuate the European 'fantasy of classist aspirations and increased domestic power'² by depicting Indians as uncivilised, subordinate and socially primitive. However, whilst Stevenson's photographic sources reflect the Indian home, or what she considers its 'micro' sphere, it is clear that the image of India's inferior domestic space also became inculcated in the fabrication of Britain's wider 'macro' image as a dominant colonial power. As Steve Edwards elucidates, 'the photographic document was one means through which the colonial powers envisaged their difference from their colonised subjects'³, which is exemplified particularly within the material sources cited by Stevenson. For example, countless contemporary postcards reflect

the emasculation of the Indian male figure to juxtapose the hyper-masculine British cultural aesthetic, and simultaneously present the indigenous Indian woman as destitute and infantile, yet capable of liberation by the guidance and education of the white female saviour. Furthermore, it was not uncommon for British citizens living in India to send postcards depicting photographs of their indigenous servants back to their friends and relatives as a way of conveying a sense of their elevated social rank and command over their racial subordinates. The materiality of the postcard, which became an overwhelmingly prolific and fluid object of photographic communication in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, facilitated these visual representations of India, fuelling the image of British imperial supremacy. Corroborating this argument, the historical anthropologist E. Edwards employs a 'material hermeneutic'⁴ in her study, stressing that the postcard's three-dimensional nature enabled the notion of India's supposed primitivism to circulate across international boundaries. In Stevenson's context, it is clear that the postcard became implicated on both 'micro' and 'macro' levels by projecting images of India's supposedly inferior domestic space, and thereby contributing to the broader British colonial fantasy of possession and control.

Viewing the postcard as a material object is

¹ E. Said, *Orientalism*, (Penguin Books, 1991), p. 49.

² E.R. Stevenson, 'Home, Sweet Home: Women and the "Other Space" of Domesticity in Colonial Indian Postcards, ca. 1820-1920', *Visual Anthropology*, vol. 26, no. 4 (2013), p. 307.

³ S. Edwards, *Photography: A Very Short Introduction*, (Oxford University Press, 2006), p. 24.

⁴ E. Edwards, 'Photography and the Material Performance of the Past', *History and Theory*, vol. 48, no. 4 (2009), p. 149.

a central tenet of both Stevenson's 2013 article and her wider scholarship. In a paper co-authored with S. Hughes, she argues that it is commonly assumed that 'the rapid and large-scale circulation of photographic images is a uniquely twenty-first century phenomenon.'⁵ However, the postcard constituted an early yet prolific means of social and photographic communication, eclipsing the *carte-de-visite* and the cabinet card to become the most widely circulated visual medium of the period. Whilst Stevenson contends that their 'status as ephemeral items of popular culture and communication'⁶ traditionally resulted in a historical neglect of their social significance, its material nature allowed it to traverse social, economic and cultural boundaries. In 1913 alone, it appears that over 903 million postcards were sent in Britain. Given that the British population at the beginning of the twentieth century was approximately forty-six million⁷, it appears that twenty postcards were sent on average per person in 1913, and the amount sent from India to Britain was also substantive. The medium was relatively cheap to send and quick to arrive, with the inclusion of the photograph on one side allowing images to travel to Britain. Whilst the historiography of M. Alloula – centring on French colonial Algeria and the postcard as an object of imperial ideology and sexualisation of the indigenous population – has largely been challenged for perpetuating the heterosexual fantasy it aims to redress, his scholarship does emphasise the complex web of communication encouraged by the postcard, bridging 'social fields, continents and genders'⁸. In the case of Stevenson, Indian postcards from 1880-1920 allowed the notion of British supremacy to be reinforced between the two nations, encouraging social and racial comparisons between the coloniser and the colonised. As suggested by scholars like C.J. Pinney, photography served as a

means of 'solidifying an image of Indians as racially inferior'⁹, with Stevenson's postcards in particular highlighting the differences between the domestic spaces of India and Britain. However, the portrayal of the domestic site undoubtedly provides a wider commentary on the 'macro' image of India as an uncivilised state benefitting from colonial domination – A. Blunt has articulated that 'empire and home were virtually interchangeable terms'¹⁰. For example, a colourised postcard (Fig. 1) which exemplifies this applies the British idiom, 'Home, Sweet Home' onto an Indian family photograph, which with its strong connotations to British idealised domesticity, prompts a cultural comparison between the two states and 'metaphorically alludes to colonial efforts to transpose British familial norms to Indian domesticity.'¹¹ Furthermore, given that the caption to this postcard is written in English and not the vernacular language, it underscores the intended audience as the British middle-class who presumably would consider the location, 'Home, Sweet Home' humorous in comparison to their own 'civilised' domestic setting.

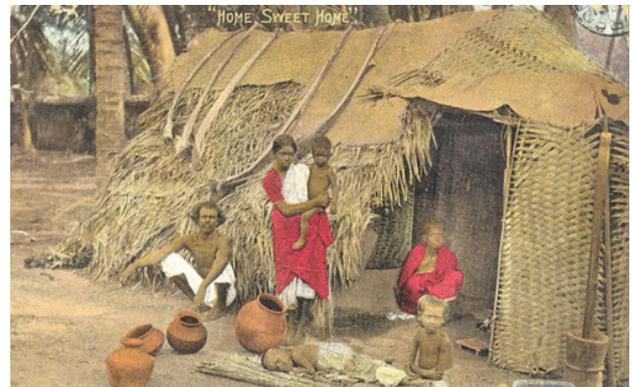


Figure 1 SEQ Figure * ARABIC 1 'Home, Sweet Home'.
Date unknown. Chennai, Tamil Nadu

⁵ S. Hughes & E.R. Stevenson, 'South India Addresses the World: Postcards, Circulation, and Empire', *Circulation*, vol. 9, iss. 2, (2019), p. 1.

⁶ Stevenson, 'Home, Sweet Home', p. 300.

⁷ A. Maddison, *The World Economy: A Millennial Perspective*, (OECD Publications, 2001), p. 183.

⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 323.

⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 302.

¹⁰ A. Blunt, cited in I. Sen, 'Colonial Domesticities, Contentious Interactions: Ayahs, Wet Nurses and Memsahibs in Colonial India', *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, vol. 16, iss. 3 (2009), p. 300.

¹¹ *Ibid.*, p. 299.

However, one of the central visual representations of empire that Stevenson notes was facilitated by the postcard was the emasculation of the indigenous male figure. Through their subordinate presentation within the Indian home, the postcard tapped into the broader imperial ideology whereby the stereotypical British norms of hyper-masculinity were juxtaposed against the feminised Indian male. Hughes and Stevenson argue that contemporary postcards emphasised the subservience of the Indian male, and that 'there is a clear racialised mockery implicit [...] as the viewer is invited to find humour in the incongruous image of a "native" adopting "civilised" habits'¹². A particular postcard (Fig. 2) presents the dichotomy between a British matriarch and a physically lean and half-dressed Indian man, evoking a cultural technique that relegates the latter to the conventionally female domestic environment and reflects the tradition where 'images of the colonial Other are overwhelmingly predicated on an idea of essential racial difference and a concomitant vision of racial supremacy'¹³. By presenting the Indian as unworthy of comparison with male British attributes, and substituting conventional gender hierarchies with racial hierarchies, this domiciliary, 'micro' postcard becomes inculcated in the wider, 'macro' fabrication of Britain's imperial identity. Moreover, Stevenson notes that within this postcard, the Indian home, as a microcosm of the nation itself, is depicted as disorganised, dangerous and technologically backward, with the physical side-by-side layout of the postcard encouraging comparison with the modern, measured and well-organised British kitchen. As a by-product of its materiality and subsequent wide circulation, it allowed the iconography of Indian subordination to permeate British consciousness and subsequently fuel the cultural image of imperial supremacy.

On the other hand, the postcard also lent itself to the visual representation and imagination of empire through photographs of Indian servants, which were circulated by the British in India.

It was through this convention that, frequently memsahibs, sent postcards depicting Indian servants back to their friends and relations in Britain as evidence that they had attained a higher social rank, articulating the white 'fantasy of higher social status'¹⁴. In an article¹⁵ by M.A. Jain which looks at an exhibition of postcards sent from India to Europe between 1900 and the 1930s, for which Stevenson offered several sources from her private collection, the author draws an effective parallel between colonial era postcards and twenty-first century social networking platforms, which, like the British in India, allow us to rapidly share elements of our social lives. Within her article, Stevenson adduces several contemporary postcards that refer to the images of servants using the possessive pronoun, 'our', which through its 'pronouncement of ownership'¹⁶ connotes a strong sense of custodial control. It was thereby this image of India which travelled back to Britain and fuelled the popular imagination of empire through the visual degradation of the indigenous people and comparison with the civilised colonial power.

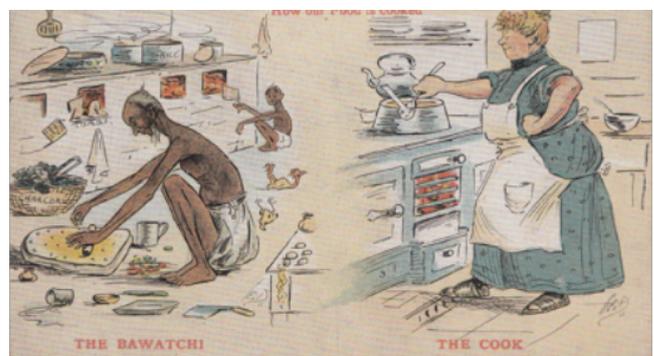


Figure 2 SEQ Figure * ARABIC 2 'East and West Series: How Our Food is Cooked'. Date unknown. Calcutta, India, printed in Britain. Thacker, Spink & Co.

Furthermore, the representation of indigenous women and the female body in contemporary postcards, as destitute and infantile, was also highly

¹² Hughes & Stevenson, 'South India Addresses the World', p. 26.

¹³ Edwards, *Photography: A Very Short Introduction*, p. 24.

¹⁴ Stevenson, 'Home, Sweet Home', p. 307.

¹⁵ M.A. Jain, 'Racism and stereotypes in colonial India's 'Instagram'', *BBC*, 30 September 2018.

¹⁶ Stevenson, 'Home, Sweet Home', p. 307.

significant in the fabrication of India's colonial identity. Stevenson considers several postcards which engineer the image of Indian women as primordial, 'yet capable of being raised and liberated through British female intervention.'¹⁷ It appears to be no coincidence that within a postcard (Fig. 3) which depicts an outdoor domestic scene in the Indian town of Palamcottah, the photographed infant is labelled as 'blind, deaf and dumb'. Encapsulating all the characteristics the British sought to symbolically ascribe to the colonial population, this postcard widens the cultural gulf between the ostensibly primitive Indian population, and their educated, capable colonisers. The issue of Indian female ignorance is presented as remediable by the involvement of white memsahibs who would introduce 'civilised' values to them, echoing the British upper-class convention of female philanthropists taking it upon themselves to extricate the sexually and thus, morally, corrupt 'fallen women' from socio-economic degeneracy. These postcards, which pit British civility against Indian ignorance, subscribe to the contrived 'native type' photography, and reflect what Stevenson has described as a 'conscious construction'¹⁸ of India's subordinate domestic identity and subsequent inferiority in the imperial hierarchy. Furthermore, a recurring trope of these postcards and colonial imagery is the presentation of the female indigenous body as a symbol of control. A modern photograph by Pushpamala N., from her 'Native Women of South India' project (Fig. 4) revives the photographic technique associated with the colonial obsession with racial categorisation and analysis of the indigenous body by framing it by a gridded background. The native body, particularly the female form, served as a pertinent symbol of imperial power – if the British could obtain mastery over the indigenous body, then they could gain mastery over the nation. This portrayal of the indigenous female form is reflected throughout contemporary Indian postcards, where the frequent sexualisation of its subjects serve as a visual manifestation of the white desire to exert control over the native body, and thereby reinforce its authority over the colonial state as a whole.



Figure 3 SEQ Figure * ARABIC 3 'Blind, deaf and dumb Pyari with Miss Swainson'. Date unknown. Church of England Zenana Missionary Society, 27 Chancery Lane, London.



Figure 4 'Toda'. 2000-2003. From Pushpamala N.'s *Native Women of South India*. Gelatin silver photograph.

¹⁷ Ibid., p. 313.

¹⁸ Ibid., p. 320.

To surmise, the postcard can be considered one of the central ways in which the British empire was represented and imagined in the nineteenth and early twentieth century. Whilst Stevenson's analysis focuses on the photographic delineation of the Indian domestic, 'micro' sphere, and its portrayal as uncivilised, it is clear that the indigenous home, as a microcosm of the nation itself, reinforced the construction of India's 'macro' imperial image. As a three-dimensional, fluid object with a social 'life', the materiality of the postcard was responsible for disseminating the enduring images of empire. The sources cited by Stevenson reflect the emasculation of the Indian male figure to contradict the hyper-masculine British ideal, and present indigenous Indian women as benighted, puerile individuals freed from social crudity by the guidance of the white female liberator. Therefore, as E.R. Stevenson articulates, throughout the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the postcard, as a highly prolific instrument of photographic networking, became implicated in the visual representation of empire by invoking the image of British superior domestic power and thereby articulating the colonial fantasy of control.



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