

**Tracing History through Material Culture:
Indian Goods in Victorian Domestic Fiction**

The Empire Inside: Indian Commodities in Victorian Domestic Novels. Suzanne Daly. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 2011. 167 pp.

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<1>Suzanne Daly's study of Indian goods in Victorian literature contributes to the growing interdisciplinary field of material culture. By exploring the history and politics behind material goods imported to England from India in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Daly reveals the extent to which imperialism penetrated Victorian domesticity.

<2>Studies of material culture have traditionally followed two distinct models. Most works approach a constellation of related commodities, elucidating their history and politics and, depending on their disciplinary perspective, discussing the role of these commodities in culture and/or literature.(1) Some studies adopt a narrower focus, exploring one foodstuff or object through a range of cultural moments or genres.(2) Like Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace and John Burnett, who focus on imported consumables within England, Daly includes a number of related commodities in her study, but Daly's work connects these disparate items through their place of origin. While many studies have discussed the pervasive imperial origins of many goods imported to Britain in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries, Daly chooses to focus only on those commodities produced in India.(3) With this unifying link, Daly brings together items found specifically within the domestic space, in the well-appointed interiors of middle-class Victorian homes and novels.

<3>*The Empire Inside* offers a unique way to link commodities and the related myths surrounding those objects. With chapters devoted to Kashmir shawls, cotton, diamonds, tea, and the changes in Indian imports at the end of the century, Daly argues that these related products forged a sense of what India meant within the British cultural imagination. Daly's well-researched historical background contributes a strong sense of the history and politics of each commodity in India and in parliamentary debates at home in London. While certain novels such as Wilkie Collins's *The Moonstone* (1868) offer glimpses into India's murky past, most Victorian novels, according to Daly, work to obscure the imperial history of the Indian imports appearing within their pages. Objects in novels carry stories and myths and a sense of prestige, but their conflicted, potentially violent past remains hidden. Part of Daly's goal is to restore that history to

our awareness and to use those historical details to create a richer picture of the meanings of imperialism and India in British culture.

<4>In her theoretical introduction, Daly argues that the complex and changing relationship between England and India was mediated, in novels, through the relationship between English people and Indian things. According to Daly, Indian commodities function as a Jamesonian political unconscious in novels, hinting at the contentious role India played in British commerce and politics (4). While Victorian periodicals often dealt overtly with the imperial project, with articles addressing the financial importance and the exotic origins of Indian commodities, nineteenth-century domestic novels were more circumspect, inserting these goods into domestic spaces but hiding their political and commercial histories. By resurrecting the historical subtext of Indian goods in Victorian novels, we gain a greater understanding of English identity, since a large part of that identity hinged upon England's imperial ambitions (4-5). Drawing on anthropological theory asserting the importance of things in generating meaning in everyday life, Daly claims that Victorian novels typically view colonial Indian commodities as "emblems of English identity" (6). This epistemological move of absorbing Indian goods into English everyday life can be interpreted as an attempt to be more at home with the "economic imperatives of imperialism" and that these imperatives helped to shape the English cultural imagination "from the inside" (7).

<5>Throughout her study, Daly's historical research offers insights into Britain's imperial endeavors, and investigates how the material results of colonialism affected everyday life at home in England. The history of Kashmir shawls brings new light to the role of shawls in many Victorian novels, and it is particularly interesting to note how almost all shawls in these novels were brought to English women as gifts from their adventuring male relatives (28). Daly enriches her discussion of shawls with an analysis of several French paintings of women in which Kashmir shawls appear as important signs of status, wealth, and respectability. She also adds a fascinating history of the development of domestic reproductions of Indian shawls and the gradual usurpation of "Kashmir" by the more general term "cashmere."

<6>Exploring the complex colonial implications of the cotton trade, Daly analyzes the complicated symbolism of virginal white Indian muslin in novels such as Elizabeth Gaskell's *Wives and Daughters* (1864-1866) and Margaret Oliphant's *Miss Marjoribanks* (1865-1866). Initially, imported Indian cottons competed with native British wools, but, as with shawls, improvements in cotton manufacturing techniques allowed domestic manufacturers to imitate Indian patterns and fabrics in vast quantities. These new products flooded Indian markets, reversing the direction of imported goods. Nevertheless, British novels continued to mythologize Indian cottons as more authentic and more desirable. Placing many of the famous diamonds of the nineteenth century within their Indian historical context, Daly creates a compelling narrative linking *The Moonstone* and Anthony Trollope's *The Eustace Diamonds* (1872-1873). Collins's novel explicitly locates Indian diamonds within an imperial context, but scholars have generally viewed Trollope's novel as focusing on domestic issues of gender, property, and inheritance. Parliamentary subplots within *The Eustace Diamonds*, Daly notes, highlight national and territorial concerns in India, thus merging the definitions of gems as property and as plunder.

<7>In her chapter on tea, Daly discusses the shift in English tea imports away from a dependence upon China as British planters began to pursue the cultivation and production of tea in India. The civilizing influence of tea often functions, in novels, as a leveling force bringing together the powerful and the powerless, and Daly suggests that this potentially dangerous act is mediated and softened by the women who pour the tea. Appearances of Indian goods gradually diminished within Victorian domestic novels, and Daly's final chapter explores the associations between Indian artifacts and aestheticism and decadence at the end of the century.

<8>The title, *The Empire Inside*, points to the multiple ways that various commodities functioned "inside" of women's homes, lives, and novels in Victorian England. Shawls, cotton, diamonds and tea all held important positions in the specifically feminine spaces of domesticity. The book establishes many of the symbolic meanings of these items through quotations from novels and periodicals. Overall, though, the connections between these goods and the domestic homes they graced could be pursued even further and theorized more thoroughly. Why, for example, were Indian commodities destined for female bodies and spaces once they journeyed to the metropole? How does placing these goods within a feminized context help to defray their potentially troubling histories? What is the connection between the inside of the English nation, the inside of Victorian homes, and the inside of English identity? What is the effect of corralling Indian goods "inside" of these physical and theoretical spaces? Are there risks associated with absorbing Indian goods into the interiors of homes and identities? If so, how are these risks managed or ameliorated?

<9>Similarly, while the book includes liberal references to and quotations from novels, the argument would have been stronger with more textual explication of that evidence. Daly offers remarkably few passages of sustained literary analysis. While the history is fascinating and the scenes in the novels are promising, Daly does not provide enough unpacking of the textual language. She frequently cites Anne McClintock's *Imperial Leather* (1995) as a useful source investigating commercial goods in a colonial context; by comparison, McClintock's study is based upon exhaustive close readings and painstaking analysis. In contrast, Daly's book is very suggestive, but she could have more completely analyzed and examined her textual evidence.

<10>Suzanne Daly's *The Empire Inside* argues that the commodities that decorated Victorian interiors contain hidden insights into British culture. Typically, domestic novels tend to obscure the complex origins of exotic goods imported from India. Daly's historical investigations create a fuller understanding of the commercial and political negotiations underlying the very presence of Indian products within Victorian homes. Historical evidence suggests that Indian shawls weren't as rare or even as authentically Indian as they appear in novels. Parliamentary legislation prohibited the importation of Indian cotton to England, although many novels continue to praise the exotic status of imported cotton. Periodical articles argued about the potential health risks of tea and the contested property claims of Indian princes following English military campaigns. By uniting such seemingly diverse items as shawls and tea, diamonds and cotton, Daly reveals the rich cultural significance of Victorian domesticity and the pervasive connections between British imperialism and Victorian everyday life.

Endnotes

(1)See, for example, Wolfgang Schivelbusch, *Tastes of Paradise: A Social History of Spices, Stimulants, and Intoxicants* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992); John Brewer and Roy Porter, *Consumption and the World of Goods: Consumption and Culture in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries* (New York: Routledge, 1994); Elizabeth Kowaleski-Wallace, *Consuming Subjects: Women, Shopping, and Business in the Eighteenth Century*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1997); Krista Lysack, *Come Buy, Come Buy: Shopping and the Culture of Consumption in Victorian Women's Writing* (Athens, OH: Ohio University Press, 2008); and Erika Rappaport, *Shopping for Pleasure: Women in the Making of London's West End* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2001). John Burnett explores a more tightly linked series of consumables in *Liquid Pleasures: A Social History of Drinks in Modern Britain* (New York: Routledge, 1999).(^)

(2)See Sidney Mintz's landmark study, *Sweetness and Power: The Place of Sugar in Modern History* (New York: Penguin, 1986). Mary Ann O'Farrell's study of blushing, while not focused on a commodity, follows a similar model, tracing one significant cultural idea in *Telling Complexions: The Nineteenth-Century English Novel and the Blush* (Durham, NC: Duke University Press, 1997).(^)

(3)For works devoted to the imperial origins of many imported nineteenth-century British goods, see Brewer and Porter, Mintz, Richards, McClintock and Kowaleski-Wallace cited above. See also James Walvin, *Fruits of Empire: Exotic Produce and British Taste: 1660-1800* (New York: NYU Press, 1997), and Anandi Ramamurthy, *Imperial Persuaders: Images of Africa and Asia in British Advertising* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2003).(^)