



# Cross-dressing and Empowerment in Anglo-Indian Fiction: Embracing Subaltern Invisibility

Jaine Chemmachery

## ► To cite this version:

Jaine Chemmachery. Cross-dressing and Empowerment in Anglo-Indian Fiction: Embracing Subaltern Invisibility. *E-rea - Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone*, 2019, 16.2, 10.4000/erea.7645 . hal-03797815

**HAL Id: hal-03797815**

**<https://hal.science/hal-03797815v1>**

Submitted on 4 Oct 2022

**HAL** is a multi-disciplinary open access archive for the deposit and dissemination of scientific research documents, whether they are published or not. The documents may come from teaching and research institutions in France or abroad, or from public or private research centers.

L'archive ouverte pluridisciplinaire **HAL**, est destinée au dépôt et à la diffusion de documents scientifiques de niveau recherche, publiés ou non, émanant des établissements d'enseignement et de recherche français ou étrangers, des laboratoires publics ou privés.

# E-rea

Revue électronique d'études sur le monde anglophone

16.2 | 2019

1. Cross-Dressing in Fact, Fiction and Fantasy / 2. Transnationalism and Modern American Women Writers

1. Cross-Dressing in Fact, Fiction and Fantasy

---

## Cross-dressing and Empowerment in Anglo-Indian Fiction: Embracing Subaltern Invisibility

JAINE CHEMMACHERY

<https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.7645>

---

### *Résumés*

English Français

In several works of colonial fiction, British characters adopt disguise to escape a potentially dangerous situation or simply to have access to places ordinarily closed to members of the colonizer society. The police officer Strickland, in Rudyard Kipling's short stories, often dresses as an Indian man to get keener knowledge of Indian customs while escaping the British system of surveillance. In another story by Kipling, "His Wedded Wife" (1887), a British soldier, often bullied by his masculine fellow-soldiers, once impersonates his officer's wife so efficiently that gender passing finally earns him the respect of his companions. In many colonial stories, the adoption by cross-dressers of a subaltern persona, in terms of race, class and/or gender, is part of a strategy of empowerment. Drawing on the concept of "subalternity" (Guha 1982), I



want to study the parallel between gender passing and racial passing as regards empowerment in colonial fiction since the two challenge the notions of stable subject-positions. In the wake of “spectrality studies”, one may also wonder about the modalities underlying the visible paradox between empowerment, invisibility and subalternity in colonial fiction. How is one to get more agency by adopting the traits of figures known to be in a situation of minority, and as such, of presumed invisibility? How can subaltern invisibility become a site of empowerment?

Dans la littérature coloniale, les personnages britanniques se déguisent fréquemment afin de se fondre dans le décor et d'échapper à la surveillance du régime en place. Le personnage du policier Strickland, inventé par Kipling, se déguise pour mieux connaître le monde indien mais échappe ainsi au pouvoir panoptique impérial. Dans une nouvelle de Kipling, « His Wedded Wife » (1887), un soldat, souvent malmené par ses pairs qui le trouvent efféminé, incarne un jour la femme d'un officier de manière si convaincante que le travestissement lui permet de gagner le respect de ses compagnons. Le travestissement met en crise les catégories de genre, classe et race et démontre la performativité du genre. Mais quid des enjeux de pouvoir, quand dans la littérature anglo-indienne (écrite par des Britanniques établis en Inde pendant le Raj), est représentée, voire performée, l'adoption d'une identité subalterne par des personnages anglo-indiens ? Il s'agit de réfléchir au paradoxe que constitue l'apparente articulation entre invisibilisation, posture subalterne et *empowerment*. Dans de nombreux cas, l'*empowerment* de personnages anglo-indiens passe par un processus d'invisibilisation puis l'adoption d'une posture subalterne. Il sera intéressant d'analyser le type d'agentivité ainsi produite.

---

## Entrées d'index

**Mots-clés :** nouvelles coloniales, travestissement, race passing, subalternité, invisibilité, émancipation

**Keywords:** colonial short stories, gender-crossing, race-passing, subalternity, invisibility, empowerment

---

## Texte intégral

- 1 In Elaine K. Ginsberg's *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*, many examples are taken from American fiction and culture, especially the history of slavery, to discuss passing from black to white. In colonial British fiction of the end of the nineteenth-century, several native characters were also shown to go through a process of race-passing so as to appear as European. Still, when they did so, they were often reviled by the colonisers as pale copies of European characters even though the fact they were upsetting categories remained visible on the level of poetics.<sup>1</sup>
- 2 But in a nevertheless substantive number of Anglo-Indian works,<sup>2</sup> Anglo-Indian characters, *i.e.* European characters belonging to the realm of power, adopt the identity of subaltern figures, by dressing like and as them, and thus become invisible to their peers. As Ginsberg explains: “Passing is about specularity: the visible and the invisible, the seen and the unseen” (Ginsberg 2). I am interested in understanding to whose eyes such Anglo-Indian characters become invisible and in looking at the type of empowerment<sup>3</sup> occurring in the process of cross-dressing, but also race-passing, as characters move from white to black.
- 3 In the wake of “spectrality studies” which try to theorise, among other things, the invisibility of migrants, as Esther Peeren does in *The Spectral Metaphor* (2014), one may wonder about the modalities underlying the apparent paradox between empowerment, invisibility and subalternity in colonial fiction. How is one to have more agency by adopting the features of figures known to be in a situation of minority? While the black skin of Ralph Ellison's hero in segregated America made him invisible, and ultimately powerless, to the majority of Americans, how could the process of cross-dressing from “white” to



“black” mean empowerment in Anglo-Indian fiction, i.e. fiction focusing on India under British dominion? “Agency” is a concept that was developed in the 1980s by the Subaltern Studies Group, a group of historians led by Ranajit Guha who promoted the writing of a history from below, and whose work was inspired by Gramsci’s writings. It is about the ability of a subject to speak and act on their own within an oppressive system. One may therefore wonder about how invisibility and performance of subalternity can become sites of agency and empowerment in Anglo-Indian fiction.

- 4 After analysing the literary *topos* of cross-dressing – from white to black, and from male to female – in Anglo-Indian fiction, I would like to suggest that such cross-dressing upsets categories, mostly of gender and race, by producing agency and empowerment through a paradoxical combination of “invisibilisation” and performance of subalternity. The final part of the article will be devoted to an analysis of what occurs at the level of poetics. I will specifically examine whether narrative cross-dressing and invisibility can lead to forms of empowerment.

## 1. Disguised colonisers: from original Anglo-Indian characters to literary *cliché*

- 5 The colonial situation in India is characterised by the fact that power lay in the hands of a minority of people. The British obviously represented a minority in terms of numbers as opposed to the millions of Indian people they subjugated. The characters resorting to disguise and race-passing from European to Indian thus initially belong to the dominant society. Cross-dressing and race-passing for Anglo-Indian characters therefore seem to be about avoiding the panoptic imperial gaze and adopting a position of dissidence towards the imperial power, within poetic and aesthetic exploration of India. This would at least be the case for male characters.

- 6 In *On the Face of the Waters* (1896) by Flora Annie Steel, an Englishwoman indeed dresses as a native woman so as to escape death at the time of the 1857 Indian Mutiny:

A horse’s double blanket, dark as the darkness itself [...] She caught it up, and paused deliberately in the darkest corner of the square, to slip off shoes and stockings, petticoats and bodices; then, in the scantiest of costumes, winding the long blanket round her, ayah’s fashion, as a skirt and veil. (Steel 224)

- 7 It is no coincidence that what Kate Erlton leaves behind are typical Victorian garments, highlighting both her British femininity and a certain link to intimacy. The fact that she should then opt for a veil makes her look like a female Indian subaltern. Later in the novel, she is turned into a Hindu lady, which suggests that cross-dressing also has to do with challenging class categories. In Alice Perrin’s *The Woman in the Bazaar* (1914), cross-dressing has also become a necessity for the Englishwoman named Rafella whose bonds with Anglo-India have been broken as she leaves both her English husband and the company of Anglo-Indians.

- 8 Yet, in the case of Kipling’s English policeman who appears in several short stories, cross-dressing abides by different modalities. Strickland largely draws on the multi-faceted explorer Richard Burton who excelled at cross-dressing – legend has it that he was the first European to go to Mecca on pilgrimage, dressed as a Muslim. Strickland’s cross-dressing tendency is hardly understandable by his fellow countrymen as his life is not at risk. Strickland dresses as an Indian man so as to get keener



knowledge of Indian customs: “He held the extraordinary theory that a Policeman in India should try to know as much about the natives as the natives themselves” (“Miss Youghal’s Sais” 24). The term “extraordinary” presents the character as an exception among Anglo-Indians. The following description highlights the wide scope of Strickland’s guises, bringing his figure to upset categories of gender, class and race:

He was perpetually “going Fantee” among the natives [...] He was initiated into the Sat Bhai at Allahabad once, when he was on leave; he knew the Lizard-Song of the Sansis, and the *Halli-Hukk* dance, which is a religious can-can of a startling kind. When a man knows who dances the *Halli-Hukk*, and how, and when, and where, he knows something to be proud of. He has gone deeper than the skin. But Strickland was not proud, though he had helped once, at Jagadhri, at the Painting of the Death Bull, which no Englishman must even look upon; had mastered the thieves’-patter of the *changars*; had taken a Eusufzai horse-thief alone near Attock; and had stood under the sounding-board of a Border mosque and conducted service in the manner of a Sunni Mollah.

His crowning achievement was spending eleven days as a *faqir* or priest in the gardens of Baba Atal at Amritsar, and there picking up the threads of the great Nasiban Murder Case. (“Miss Youghal’s Sais” 24-25)

- 9 The presence of Hindustani words, referring to secret societies, various tribes, places, etc., suggests that cross-dressing is about facing the unknown and about transgression (“which no Englishman must even look upon”), even of categories other than race; “changars” being indeed gangs of women labourers.
- 10 Cross-dressing also exemplifies the link Foucault draws between knowledge and power. The many verbs referring to mastery of knowledge, such as “initiated,” the many occurrences of the verb “know” and “mastered,” are coupled with verbs of action, which suggests that such knowledge enables Strickland to act efficiently. The evocation of Strickland’s ability to help solve the “great Nasiban Murder Case”, hints at his specific power since his actions simultaneously highlight “the incapacity of his seniors” (“Miss Youghal’s Sais” 25). Strickland is assuredly an instrument of British power, as the following sentence underlines: “he obtained great insight into the ways and thefts of *saises* – enough, he says, to have summarily convicted half the population of the Punjab if he had been on business” (“Miss Youghal’s Sais” 27). The power/knowledge relation is finally made explicit when the narrator explains: “Natives hated Strickland; but they were afraid of him. He knew too much” (“Miss Youghal’s Sais” 25).
- 11 But Strickland’s cross-dressing is also about escaping British surveillance and finding some liberty within strictly-controlled Anglo-Indian society by gaining access to places which would have remained inaccessible to him without cross-dressing. He is then also an agent of subversion within the colonial system. From being the origin of the panoptic imperial gaze, Strickland becomes himself “the subject of the gaze” (Lehtonen 136) which he tries to escape. The element of subversion is also perceptible in the fact that, for the marriage with his beloved to occur, Strickland is required to “drop his old ways, and stick to Departmental routine” (“Miss Youghal’s Sais” 29). This sentence and the following passage eloquently show that cross-dressing is, for Strickland, much more than simply putting on the subaltern’s clothes:

it was a sore trial to him; for the streets and the bazars, and the sounds in them, were full of meaning to Strickland, and these called to him to come back and take up his wanderings and his discoveries. [...] He is forgetting the slang, and the beggar’s cant, and the marks, and the signs, and the drift of the undercurrents, which, if a man would master, he must always continue to learn. (29)



12 The many enumerations, whose musical rhythm is produced by the polyptotons, transform India into an object of poetic quest. Synecdoches construct India as a space of poetic and aesthetic exploration for the character on the diegetic level and a window onto the phantasy of India in the otherwise rigid form of the Anglo-Indian text.

13 Cross-dressing for Anglo-Indian characters has become somewhat of a trope in Anglo-Indian fiction. In Flora Annie Steel's novel *On the Face of the Waters* (1896), a man wearing an "Afghan cap" but who is "fairer than the rest" is thought to be an Englishman: "Perhaps he was an Englishman disguised" (Steel 63). The fact the heroine should say so suggests that this might not have been an unusual event. Indeed, the omniscient narrator later explains that "Jim Douglas [...] found the disguise of a frontiersman the easiest to assume, when as now, he wanted to mix in a crowd" (Steel 64). Jim Douglas often resorts to cross-dressing. Once he wants to have insider information from a native woman about the leaders of the Mutiny, "he was back in his mendicant's disguise" (Steel 125), but is later "disguised as a sepoy" (Steel 316), or "walk[s] through the bazaar in his Afghan dress" (Steel 351). These are some of the many examples referring to his cross-dressing but the many occurrences associate cross-dressing in this work with a form of playfulness rather than poetic exploration. The many guises enable the character, who is also interestingly referred to as Mr Greyman – the man who is neither white nor black – to walk into and between worlds without arousing people's attention. Finally, in Forster's *A Passage to India* (1924), cross-dressing is also the prerogative of authoritative Anglo-Indian figures but it has lost its playful and explorative features and has become simply about surveillance. While fellow Anglo-Indian characters were struck by the inventiveness of Strickland's guises, they are utterly *blasé* when they see Ronny McBride cross-dressing. Forster's narrative voice indeed explains: "Mr McBryde's down there dressed as a Holy Man" (Forster 172). Cross-dressing here also has to do with the character's search for insider information. But the plain tone in which the statement is made creates a humorous effect as it ironically highlights the erosion of the phantasy of "discovering the other", which was a literary leitmotiv in Anglo-Indian literature, through the trite stereotype of cross-dressing. Forster plays with a writing tradition which seems to have grown tired of the very *topoi* it once enhanced.

14 Even so, the subversive power of cross-dressing remains as it upsets categories of race, gender, class, which, according to many critics, were redefined, if not constructed, in the colonial context. Robert Young, for instance, was one of the first to establish the relationship between the construction of race and gender. In "Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power", Ann Stoler also contended that sexual matters were "foundational to the material terms in which colonial projects were carried out" (Stoler 14):

class and gender discriminations were transposed into racial distinctions that reverberated in the metropole as they were fortified on colonial ground. [...] Sexual control was both an instrumental image for the body politic – a salient part standing for the whole – and itself fundamental to how racial policies were secured and how colonial projects were carried out. (Stoler 78)

15 It is thus worth analysing the extent to which cross-dressing, especially in Anglo-Indian fiction, upsets categories of gender, race, and class whose definition was central to the politics of empire.



## 2. Trouble in gender and other categories

Where other men took ten days to the Hills, Strickland took leave for what he called *shikar*, put on the disguise that appealed to him at the time, stepped down into the brown crowd, and was swallowed up for a while. (“Miss Youghal’s Sais” 25)

- 16 The use of the Hindustani term *shikar* which means hunting, in a text mainly written in English, associates cross-dressing with some sort of unknown, thus in the context of the Raj, with danger, which is stressed by the ominous valence of the verb “swallowed up”. Strickland’s singular ways are considered with scepticism by Anglo-Indian society; cross-dressing would certainly be seen as something contaminating, corrupting British identity. But such corruption does not seem to threaten Strickland as he is shown to always stick to his English manners, even when he dresses as a *sais* – a servant – to approach the Anglo-Indian lady he has fallen in love with:

she called [...] her paragon among *saises* – the man who was never too busy to get up in the morning and pick flowers for the breakfast-table, and who blacked – actually *blacked* – the hoofs of his horse like a London coachman! (“Miss Youghal’s Sais” 26)

- 17 In Anglo-Indian fiction, cross-dressing has to be temporary; it has to be an ephemeral parenthesis in a male character’s life so as to remain secure and playful. But it can have serious consequences for the mystifying character. A famous example of cross-dressing with harmful consequences to the self is Kim, Kipling’s mixed-race teenage character, who excels in cross-dressing in *Kim* and often wonders about his identity, as shown in the famous question he repeatedly asks himself: “I am Kim. I am Kim. And what is Kim?” (*Kim* 225).

- 18 In Strickland’s case, the dangerous nature of cross-dressing appears in the process of identity (de)/(re)construction it entails and can be seen in the change in onomastics. Kipling’s policeman is indeed referred to in the tale as Strickland, E. Strickland or “Estreekin Sahib”. The variety of names can be seen as marks of the type of relationship people have with the character, but also as the visible consequence of cross-dressing on him, “differing” him – to use Derridean terminology – from what Anglo-Indians would see as his original, English, “real” identity,<sup>4</sup> whose return to, as a matter of fact, requires the help of many:

About seven minutes later, there was a wild hurroosh at the Club. A *sais*, with a blanket and head-rope, was asking all the men he knew: “For Heaven’s sake lend me decent clothes!” As the men did not recognize him, there were some peculiar scenes before Strickland could get a hot bath, with soda in it, in one room, a shirt here, a collar there, a pair of trousers elsewhere, and so on. He galloped off, with half the Club wardrobe on his back, and an utter stranger’s pony under him, to the house of old Youghal. (“Miss Youghal’s Sais” 28)

- 19 British identity is being threatened by cross-dressing as it challenges categories of race, class or gender; the potential identity reconfigurations of the character become objects of narrative concern. Strickland is finally granted a literally new identity, that of “sais-policeman,” as a general calls him. In « Le subalterne parle » (“The Subaltern speaks”), as a reference to Spivak’s essay “Can the subaltern speak?” (1989), Emilienne Baneth-Nouailhetas writes:

les incursions dans l’ambiguïté générique permettent aux sujets « opprimés », objectifiés par les représentants du pouvoir, de refuser de réfracter l’image de ce pouvoir : de refuser à la fois la soumission au discours et la soumission physique par l’ouverture d’un nouvel espace du corps (travesti). Donc l’invention d’une identité imprévue, intempestive, inattendue dans l’ordre de la domination : d’une identité hors-doctrine. (Baneth-Nouailhetas 187)<sup>5</sup>





20 Here the character, an Anglo-Indian, is not “oppressed” *per se* but cross-dressing certainly enables him not to replicate the image of British power and thus to resist such power. His identity is produced as something lying outside or beyond the codes of Anglo-India. The phrase “sais-policeman” goes beyond the expected dialectic between self and other to posit a new third term.

21 But such subversive power is not limited to racial cross-dressing. The parallel between gender passing and racial passing as regards empowerment in colonial fiction is indeed worth studying. Actually, Emilienne Baneth-Nouailhetas uses the notion of “identité hors-doctrine”<sup>6</sup> when referring to Kipling’s tale “His Wedded Wife” (1887) in which gender passing occurs through cross-dressing. A British “subaltern” – which happens to be the name given to officers-to-be in Anglo-India – is also nicknamed “the Worm”. The use of these two terms doubly points to his situation of inferiority. The man is often bullied by his masculine, fellow-soldiers for being too effeminate. To avenge himself, he once impersonates his officer’s wife in such a convincing manner that gender-crossing finally earns him the respect of his companions. Gender-passing through cross-dressing occurs not just on the diegetic level, but at the level of poetics as well. The male protagonist is said to be “an exceedingly pretty point boy”, “with a waist like a girl’s” (“His Wedded Wife” 116). The reappearance of the very same terms to describe the woman he later impersonates without us knowing it – “the girl was a pretty girl” (“His Wedded Wife” 117) – invites us to mentally associate the two characters who happen to embody two sides of subalternity: an inferior status in the army and a gender status which remains minor in Anglo-Indian society which promoted, to put things bluntly, masculine, white, Anglo-Irish and heterosexual values. The fact “the Worm” should also be associated with femininity in a sentence in which he is the subject of a verb used in the passive form – “[he] was made unhappy in several ways” – invites us to ponder over the level of (sexual) violence he is the victim of. In this tale, the soldier gains agency by fully impersonating the subaltern role his fellow-soldiers impose on him, that of a woman. The fact he is nicknamed by his fellow-soldiers “Mrs. Senior Subaltern” (“His Wedded Wife” 121) at the end of the story certainly echoes the way the Senior Subaltern’s wife would be referred to, but it also highlights the performance of multiple white subaltern identities.

22 Kipling’s tale “The Phantom-Rickshaw” (1888) is helpful in order to analyse the articulation between invisibility, subalternity and spectrality. In this tale, an Englishwoman, who has been neglected by her ex-lover dies and becomes a ghost. Passing from living to dead, even becoming ectoplasmic, turns out to be successful for the female character: her former lover cannot cope with the situation of being haunted and breaks off the engagement with his new fiancée. The fact Agnes Wessington manages to communicate better with her former lover once she has become a ghost also suggests a gain in terms of agency in the process of boundary-crossing.

23 It seems that in both cases – the Worm’s and Agnes’s – invisibility and subalternity are associated with empowerment when they are no longer endured but fully adopted. The Worm brilliantly impersonates the officer’s wife and moves from a situation in which his identity was denied (“for the sake of brevity, we will call Henry Augustus Ramsay Faizanne ‘the Worm’” (“His Wedded Wife” 117)) to one in which it is reasserted. Agnes Wessington, being considered as transparent by her former lover, becomes a real translucent ghost and at the end of the story, she and her former lover are reunited.<sup>7</sup> Both cases illustrate Esther Peeren’s definition of agency which is not just for a subject to act on their own initiative, “but to have this acting taken seriously by others as something meaningful that merits a response, whether affirmative or not” (Peeren 15). The response in “The Phantom-Rickshaw” is that the narrator, who has lapsed into madness, is shown wandering with his ghost-mistress in Simla at the end of the tale. As for the Worm, the readers are told that “the ‘Shikarris’ made him President of the Regimental Dramatic Club” (“His Wedded Wife” 120).





24 The Worm's "strategizing of invisibility", in Sarah Sharma's terms, consists in becoming invisible to his fellow-soldiers as himself and fully adopting the persona of another subaltern figure which used to be imposed on him, that of a woman. His invisibility is indeed initially suggested as the narrator explains that he often goes "to his own room to write Home letters" ("His Wedded Wife" 117), which means that he often withdraws from the gaze of his companions, before turning into the hyper-visible figure of the Senior Subaltern's wife:

for the woman from nowhere, in the dusty shoes, and gray travelling dress, was very lovely, with black hair and great eyes full of tears. She was tall, with a fine figure, and her voice had a running sob in it pitiful to hear. As soon as the Senior Subaltern stood up, she threw her arms round his neck, and called him "my darling," and said she could not bear waiting alone in England, and his letters were so short and cold, and she was his to the end of the world, and would he forgive her. This did not sound quite like a lady's way of speaking. It was too demonstrative. ("His Wedded Wife" 118)

25 The many details about her looks highlight her visibility. Her gestures, her words, the fast rhythm due to the numerous polyptotons all partake of this performance of subalternity, which is characterised as "too demonstrative", suggesting excess, in accordance with the idea of hypervisibility.<sup>8</sup> This precisely echoes Emilienne Baneth-Nouailhetas's words: "la force de résistance du subalterne n'est pas dans la contradiction du pouvoir affirmé par la hiérarchie militaire, mais dans l'exagération du rôle assigné" (Baneth-Nouailhetas 191).<sup>9</sup> This performance also recalls Judith Butler's concept where performing involves the construction and deconstruction of identities as well as the creation of norms and transgression.

26 What may seem farcical at first sight appears to be dangerous in the way it upsets categories, as can be inferred from the narrator's words: "I think it was in bad taste. Besides being dangerous" ("His Wedded Wife" 120). Even in Strickland's story, the power deriving from cross-dressing is considered harmful. The narrator indeed claims: "One of these days, Strickland is going to write a little book on his experiences. That book will be worth buying; and even more, worth suppressing" ("Miss Youghal's Sais" 27). Still, the fact that subversion may occur through art in "His Wedded Wife," more specifically drama, within what may be the most regulated structure of colonial power – the military – suggests that a potential of subversion, but not a negation of order, lies within the very structures of power.

27 Invisibility and performance of subalternity are, in the fiction under study, inherently part of the process of empowerment of characters who often occupy a subaltern position in the dominant society. Even Strickland, as a policeman, remains subjected to his superiors' gaze – a mere cog in the British power structure – when he is not disguised as a native man.

28 In many Anglo-Indian stories, as opposed to what was most often the case in Victorian culture,<sup>10</sup> the feminine is the location which is being invested and performed, in a context where European women were in an ambivalent position in society; as members of the dominant society in Anglo-India, they were still devoid of the same level of agency as their male counterparts.

29 It is thus worth wondering what is at stake when the feminine is being performed in Anglo-Indian fiction by an Anglo-Indian man through cross-dressing and "subalternisation". It seems that cross-dressing and race-passing challenged notions of masculinity and femininity, as well as Englishness and Indianness in Anglo-Indian fiction. It now remains to be seen whether such processes of "invisibilisation" and performance of subalternity leading to empowerment may operate at the level of poetics, and not just in the diegesis.



### 3. Textual cross-dressing, spectral performances and female empowerment

- 30 Dressing as natives paradoxically grants such characters who already benefit from a privileged position – given the fact they belong to the Anglo-Indian society – greater liberty:

he states, on honour, that no man can appreciate Simla properly till he has seen it from the *sais*'s point of view. He also says that, if he chose to write all he saw, his head would be broken in several pieces. ("Miss Youghal's Sais" 27)

- 31 Along with the idea of cross-dressing being potentially harmful to the protagonist, the narrator mystifies the reader by positioning the revelations about India beyond the diegesis. According to Emilienne Baneth-Nouailhetas, disguise is not just a trope or a motif; it literally informs the writing: "le récit [...] suit poétiquement cette logique du déguisement qui consiste à être constamment au bord d'une métamorphose jamais accomplie" (Baneth-Nouailhetas 70).<sup>11</sup> Anglo-Indian narratives often oscillate between the ideological and the poetic, a certain aesthetic longing for India and the ideological necessity to stand by colonial rules and hierarchy. What is interesting in Strickland's case is that he cross-dresses as a native but never lets go of his Englishness, echoing Baneth's reference to the unaccomplished metamorphosis – so the adoption of a subaltern position is hereby only limited. The downsides he has to endure as a *sais* are also considered humorously:

he had to keep his temper when he was slanged in the theatre porch by a policeman – especially once when he was abused by a Naik (corporal) he had himself recruited from Isser Jang village – or, worse still, when a young subaltern called him a pig for not making way quickly enough. ("Miss Youghal's Sais" 27)

- 32 Strickland may be called a pig but he is not a "real subaltern" since he still remains in the Anglo-Indian sphere, having better knowledge of the native world than most Anglo-Indians, and thus he can be said to benefit from a paradoxical position, that of the "privileged subaltern". Subalternity is a mere guise which he can choose to drop at any time while, for other types of subalterns – women, rank and file soldiers – performance of subalternity has to do with survival.

- 33 An interesting example of diegetic cross-dressing as well as textual invisibility and performance of subalternity can be found in Alice Perrin's *The Woman in the Bazaar*. In this story of an Anglo-Indian woman who disappears for several decades, what could be seen by a majority of Anglo-Indians as the destitution of an Englishwoman may be conversely analysed as her successful escape from the gaze of the Empire as she inhabits one of the places inaccessible to imperial power, the bazaar. What is particularly interesting is that her invisibility to English power is echoed in the text by a central ellipsis which prevents us from knowing what has happened to her in the diegesis. The ellipsis lies between the evocation of an Englishwoman, Rafella, running away from both her husband, Mr Coventry, and Anglo-Indian society, and the presentation of a new heroine, Trixie, who happens to be Colonel Coventry's second wife. The first part of the novel ends with "what became of her nobody knew, and very few cared; for, after all, it was no one's immediate affair," (Perrin 94) tossing the character beyond diegesis. The second starts with the title Trixie – the name of the new heroine – and the sentence "it was sixteen years since the night of the ball" (Perrin 95). The truth is revealed at the end of the novel when we learn that the woman of the title and Rafella are one and the same person (Perrin 196), even though many clues had been disseminated throughout the narrative. Rafella's adoption of cross-



dressing to become invisible to the eyes of imperial power is thus echoed by a process of textual and narrative retention. Still her presence remained palpable through eerie, almost spectral, acts of enunciation:

Somnolence stole over Coventry's brain [...] Trixie [...] was saying: "George, do come away – think of the woman in the bazaar"; and a crowd of men standing by shouted in chorus: "Yes, remember old chap, the woman in the bazaar. Then [...] he heard Markham repeating – "woman in the bazaar". (Perrin 175-176)

- 34 The words which sound both like a lullaby and a threat repeatedly state the heroine's subalternity, both in terms of gender and class. The fact that she is the "woman in the bazaar" associates Rafella with outcasts and other minor figures of the Indian city. This echoes again Peeren's remark on the various modes of spectral agency and invisibility, here "the ghostliness of the missing" (Peeren 144):

The ghostliness of the missing, then, is primarily predicated on their absent presence: they cannot be located and, as such, partake of Derrida's visible in-visible. While they cannot be seen, they remain present: those looking for them know that they, or their remains, must be somewhere. (Peeren 144)

- 35 In this case, the woman has disappeared – in the diegesis – but her visible invisible presence is irremediably felt through the leitmotiv "the woman in the bazaar" which runs across the novel and is a sign of her, albeit spectral, agency. Here again, the writing plays a game with masks; suggesting, instead of plainly revealing, unwanted secrets lying at the core of the British Empire – of wives leaving their husbands and "going native," of cracks fragmenting the façade of Anglo-Indian homes and morality.

- 36 One more obvious example of enunciative cross-dressing involving invisibility and performance of subalternity may be the transformation of the patronym of Mrs Moore in *A Passage to India* into "Esmis Esmoor" which is used by the Indian crowd as a sort of magic formula while the woman herself has left India for England. What makes it a striking enunciative act is that the meaning of the new phrase, Indianised and thus subalternised, if one thinks of power relations between languages at the time, seems to escape all the British characters, suggesting the impossibility for the colonial power to make sense of Indian acts of enunciation. Cross-dressing is explicitly present at the narrative level, with the use of the participle "travestied": "It was revolting to hear his mother *travestied* into Esmis Esmoor, a Hindu goddess" (*Passage to India* 207, my emphasis). But even though the female character does not dress as a Hindu goddess, a process of transformation akin to verbal cross-dressing is at stake, which here again makes the characters, and readers, confront a form of uncanny. The English old lady, who dies during her passage back to England and was also a "privileged subaltern" in Anglo-India given her race, class and gender, has gained the agency of the invisible, while her name – differed – is echoed repeatedly in India in the diegesis and in the novel as some magical incantation whose meaning may escape the majority but whose poetic and spectral persistence is undeniable.

## Conclusion



- 37 In many Anglo-Indian stories, the adoption by cross-dressers of a subaltern persona and identity, in terms of race, class or gender, after undergoing a process of "invisibilisation", is part of a strategy of empowerment. The performance produced by cross-dressing in the Anglo-Indian world and fiction leads to generic or identity ambivalence which ultimately questions the

solidity of categories precisely invented through colonial modernity. The aim of this paper was to reveal the different forms of invisible, subaltern agency, that are at stake: wilful desire to gain agency by fully playing the game of subalternity for the Worm, half-impersonation of the subaltern for Strickland as he always returns to his function and status in Anglo-Indian society, involuntary agency for Perrin's and Forster's female characters whose relative minor power and status – compared with Anglo-Indian men's – within Anglo-Indian society, are exceeded by the evocative, poetic power of their name, made both spectral and subaltern, at the level of poetics. This demonstration has shed light on a great variety of situations of subalternity and invisible agency and hopefully complexified the dichotomies “coloniser/colonised” or “agent/non-agent” often associated with colonial fiction. The subaltern does not in the end only belong to the colonised sphere but Anglo-Indian society, being extremely hierarchised and patriarchal, did obviously create subalterns of its own with their singular modes of poetic agency that Anglo-Indian fiction accounts for.

---

## ***Bibliographie***

Baneth-Nouailhetas, Emilienne. « Le subalterne parle ». *La Modernité littéraire indienne*, edited by Anne Castaing, Lise Guilhamon, and Laetitia Zecchini. Presses Universitaires de Rennes, 2009, pp. 185-96.

Forster E. M. *A Passage to India*. 1924. Penguin, 1985.  
DOI : 10.5040/9781408169308.00000004

Ginsberg, Elaine K. *Passing and the Fictions of Identity*. Duke University Press, 1996.  
DOI : 10.1215/9780822382027

Kipling, Rudyard. “Miss Youghal's Sais.” 1888. *Plain Tales from the Hills*, edited by Andrew Rutherford. Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 24-29.  
DOI : 10.1093/owc/9780199538614.003.0005

Kipling, Rudyard. “His Wedded Wife.” 1888. *Plain Tales from the Hills*, edited by Andrew Rutherford. Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 116-21.  
DOI : 10.1093/owc/9780199538614.003.0021

Kipling, Rudyard. “The Phantom-Rickshaw.” 1888. *The Man Who Would Be King and Other Stories*, edited by L. Cornell. Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 26-48.  
DOI : 10.1093/owc/9780199536474.003.0003

Kipling, Rudyard. “The Head of the District.” 1891. *Life's Handicap*, edited by A. O. J. Cockshut. Oxford University Press, 1987, pp. 92-114.

Kipling, Rudyard. *Kim*. 1901. Dover Publications Inc., 2005.

Kral, Françoise. *Social Invisibility and Diasporas in Anglophone Literature and Culture: The Fractal Gaze*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.  
DOI : 10.1057/9781137401397

Lehtonen, Sanna. *Girls Transforming: Invisibility and Age-Shifting in Children's Fantasy Fiction Since the 1970s*, Critical Explorations in Science Fiction and Fantasy 38, McFarland & Company, Inc., Publishers, 2013.

McClintock, Anne. “‘No Longer in a Future Heaven’: Gender, Race, and Nationalism.’ *Dangerous Liaisons: Gender, Nation, and Postcolonial Perspectives*, edited by Anne McClintock, Aamir Mufti, and Ella Shohat. University of Minnesota Press, 1997, pp. 89-112.

Peeren, Esther. *The Spectral Metaphor: Living Ghosts and the Agency of Invisibility*. Palgrave Macmillan, 2014.  
DOI : 10.1057/9781137375858

Perrin, Alice. *The Woman in the Bazaar*. Cassell & Co, 1914.



Roye, Susmita and Rajeshwar Mittapalli, *The Male Empire under the Female Gaze: The British Raj and the Memsahib*, Cambria Press, 2013.

Sharma, Sarah. "Baring Life and Lifestyle in the Non-Place." *Cultural Studies* 23.1, 2009, pp. 129-48.

DOI : 10.1080/09502380802016246

Steel, Flora Annie. *On the Face of the Waters*. 1896. *A Raj Collection*, edited by Saros Cowasjee, Oxford University Press, 2005.

Stoler, Ann L. *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule*. University of California Press, 2002.

Young, Robert J. C. *Colonial Desire: Hybridity in Theory, Culture and Race*, Routledge, 1995.

DOI : 10.4324/9780203992203

---

## Notes

1 In "The Head of the District" (1891) by Rudyard Kipling, the main threat to the Anglo-Indian hero is a native man even though the threat does not visibly lie in the disguise. The phrase "Mr. Grish Chunder Dé was more English than the English" ("The Head of the District" 97) echoed a colonial phrase that was used to refer to natives mimicking the British colonisers. But when Tallantire says about Grish Chunder Dé: "He is a very clever S-sahib" (Kipling 1891: 101), the duplication of the initial -s- in the word *sahib* cannot help signaling the threat embodied by the mimicking other at a poetic level.

2 I am using the term to refer to English administrators, traders, civilians, etc. who first settled in India, then followed by English colonisers once the power was transferred from the East India Company to the Crown. The word is thus not used as a synonym of "interracial".

3 Empowerment is here considered as the possibility for an individual oppressed by structures and ideologies of domination (patriarchy, class, etc.) to find ways of resisting the power, which he or she still shares with their oppressors, as they are all part of the dominant society, the coloniser society for that matter. The term thus echoes definitions of empowerment dating back to the 1970s as well as more recent interpretations of the term having to do with individual capacity of action.

4 Questions regarding origins and identity were central preoccupations in Victorian England. The publication of Darwin's *Origin of Species* in 1859, as well as the emergence of the figure of the "New Woman" at the end of the century, were issues of particular concern at the time.

5 "Incursions into generic identity enable subjects that are 'oppressed', objectified by those who have power, to refuse to refract the very image of such power: to refuse both submission to speech and physical submission by opening a new space of the (cross-dressing) body. So here is at stake the invention of an un-imagined identity, one that is untimely, unexpected within the order of domination: the invention of an identity which exists outside doctrine" (my translation).

6 "an identity that exists outside doctrine" (my translation).

7 Agnes Wessington's early invisibility, at least to her ex-lover's eyes, echoes Françoise Kral's contention that "the origin of a person's invisibility is his/her failure to translate his potential visibility into one which is acknowledged by others" (Kral 66).

8 What is interesting is that in "The Phantom-Rickshaw", Mrs Wessington becomes more visible as a ghost than she was to the Anglo-Indian protagonist as a living being. This also occurs because of the "ghosting" of her rickshaw driver and her *saises*. This text therefore narrates a process which involves moving from being invisible as a human being to being more visible, even hypervisible, as a ghost with spectral servants and attire. Pansay, the ex-lover, cannot help wondering about this: "the presence of the 'rickshaw is in itself enough to prove the existence of a spectral illusion. One may see ghosts of men and women, but surely never of coolies and carriages" ("The Phantom-Rickshaw" 70). The ghost is thus characterised by excess as well.

9 "The resilience of the subaltern does not rest on contradicting the power claimed by military hierarchy, but in exaggerating the role one has been assigned" (my translation).

10 Victorian culture gives us many examples of women cross-dressing to appear as men, from Dr. James Miranda Barry, born Margaret Ann Bulkey in the 1790s to Irene Adler in Conan Doyle's "A Scandal in Bohemia" (1891). Yet, the appeal of such a process – involving a woman dressing as a man – could easily be explained by the fact that women could thus gain agency in the public space or have access to traditionally



“manly” professions. It is interesting to see that Anglo-Indian fiction tends to favour the counter-movement, men cross-dressing to appear as women or other types of subalterns.

11 “The narrative poetically follows the logic of disguise which consists in being constantly on the brink of a transformation which has never been fully operated” (my translation).

---

## ***Pour citer cet article***

### *Référence électronique*

Jaine CHEMMACHERY, « Cross-dressing and Empowerment in Anglo-Indian Fiction: Embracing Subaltern Invisibility », *E-rea* [En ligne], 16.2 | 2019, mis en ligne le 15 juin 2019, consulté le 04 octobre 2022. URL : <http://journals.openedition.org/erea/7645> ; DOI : <https://doi.org/10.4000/erea.7645>

---

## ***Auteur***

### **Jaine CHEMMACHERY**

Université Paris-Dauphine / Université Paris 8 (EA 1569)

[jaine.chemmachery@gmail.com](mailto:jaine.chemmachery@gmail.com)

Jaine Chemmachery is an alumna of the ENS Lyon and a Senior Lecturer at University Paris-Dauphine – PSL. She is a member of the research group “Poétique de l'étranger” which is part of EA 1569, “Transcrit” (Transferts critiques anglophones), based in University Paris 8 – Vincennes Saint Denis. She wrote a PhD dissertation on R. Kipling and S. Maugham’s colonial short stories and the relation between colonialism, modernity and the genre of the short story (2013). Her main research fields are colonial and postcolonial literature, Victorian and Neo-Victorian cultural productions, modernity and spectrality studies.

---

## ***Droits d’auteur***



Creative Commons - Attribution - Pas d'Utilisation Commerciale - Pas de Modification 4.0 International - CC BY-NC-ND 4.0

<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc-nd/4.0/>

