

“Designed for eternity”: Kashmiri Shawls, Empire, and Cultures of Production and Consumption in Mid-Victorian Britain

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[The shawl’s] invaluable material might give us a thread, so to speak, of direct communication with those remote regions of Chinese Tartary and Eastern Turkestan, of which by the way . . . ordinary readers have learned little more than was known to the Italians of the thirteenth century, after the return of Marco Polo.

This quote, from an 1865 article in *Once a Week*, draws attention to a rarely examined interconnection between the fashion for Kashmiri shawls in Victorian Britain and the rather intense preoccupation in popular narratives from this period with their place of origin, the raw material of which they were manufactured, the processes involved in their production, and the people who produced them.¹ This preoccupation linked the production, circulation, and consumption of Kashmiri shawls to the gradual absorption of empire, variously defined, into the everyday lives and practices of Victorian Britons. A variety of Victorian narratives on Kashmiri shawls, including travelogues, novels, journal articles, poems, pamphlets, and so on, literally brought the empire home by attempting to place that remotest of regions—Kashmir—within the geography of the British empire and, as in the case of the *Once a Week* article, used the op-

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¹ W. M. W., “Cashmere Shawls: Of What Are They Made?” *Once a Week* 12 (1865): 70.

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portunity to increase readers' scientific knowledge about the origins of *asuli*—that “invaluable material” of which shawls were woven—while describing this raw material as a critical “thread” of communication between ordinary Britons and the mountain tribes who inhabited the outer edges of the British empire.

As Catherine Hall and Sonya Rose have recently demonstrated, empire was an accepted idea in the lives of “ordinary people” in Britain, who felt at home with the concept even as empire connected them to “global circuits of production, distribution and exchange, to the exploitation and oppression of millions of other imperial subjects.”² In the same volume, Joanna de Groot makes a persuasive case for studying the links between consumption and empire, since, as she points out, products from the colonies were both pervasive and invisible in the lives of Britons.³ Focusing on narratives on Kashmiri shawls produced primarily in the metropole during the mid-Victorian moment when commodity culture was at its height and empire, in general, but India, in particular, was on the minds of Britons, this article demonstrates that the discourse surrounding shawls was about far more than simply the consumption of an “exotic” commodity from the East and the production of its British imitations. In fact, I argue that Victorian material culture, in general, and particularly the consumption, production, and circulation of Kashmiri shawls, is an ideal vehicle for understanding not only how empire might have been interjected into the lives of ordinary Victorians but also how they actively interacted with the idea of empire. Far from appearing as a nebulous entity situated in distant lands, the constituent parts of empire were readily identifiable in these narratives, as, for instance, Kashmir—a distinct, exceptional place on the frontiers of the British empire.

The article further argues that the idea of empire itself, as mediated through its commodities, was a fluid category that could be deployed for various different purposes in Victorian public culture. More specifically, shawl narratives outline the processes through which empire was domesticated as Kashmiri shawls became central components of larger Victorian discourses, for instance, on the effects of industrialization and mechanization on design, ideas about authenticity and imitation, and the increasing concern with expanding the scientific and geographical knowledge of ordinary Britons while also educating them, especially young women, on the merits of good taste. All of these, ultimately, encapsulated anxieties about defining and defending British modernity in the global imperial context. In fact, the idea of the modern industrial product was itself clearly shaped by Victorian Britain's encounter with global commodities such as Kashmiri shawls and their indigenous imitations.

THE PRODUCTION OF SHAWLS

The English word “shawl” derives from the Persian (and Kashmiri) *shaal*, which refers not just to a particular article of clothing, such as the shoulder mantle, but

² Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose, “Introduction: Being at Home with the Empire,” in *At Home with the Empire: Metropolitan Culture and the Imperial World*, ed. Catherine Hall and Sonya O. Rose (Cambridge, 2006), 21–22.

³ Joanna de Groot, “Metropolitan Desires and Colonial Connections: Reflections on Consumption and Empire,” in Hall and Rose, *At Home with the Empire*, 170.

also to a variety of fine woolen fabrics.⁴ The production of Kashmiri shawls began in Kashmir in the mid-fifteenth century and gathered momentum under the patronage of the Mughal emperor Akbar after his conquest of the Kashmir Valley in 1586. Until the eighteenth century, Kashmiri shawls were entirely handwoven on looms made of wooden sticks on which the weft yarn was wound and interlaced with the warp to produce intricate patterns. Such shawls were known as Kani shawls from the name of the Kashmiri village, Kanihama, in which they were manufactured.⁵ In response to changing market demand at the turn of the nineteenth century, embroidered shawls came to be produced and gained much popularity; these shawls, also known as Amli, were essentially plain woven shawls on which intricate patterns were embroidered.⁶

Both Kani and Amli shawls were woven of yarn derived from wool known as pashmina (literally, in Persian and Kashmiri, soft hair).⁷ Pashmina is the fleece of the central Asian mountain goat found in the Himalayan regions of Yarkhand, Khotan, Sinkiang, Lhasa, and Ladakh. The goat has two kinds of hair: the outer coat, which is thicker and coarser, and the inner coat, which is much finer and more delicate. As a result, the first step in the manufacture of Kashmiri shawls involved the separation of the harder hairs from the finer ones through the laborious process of combing. This task, and also the spinning of the fine hair into yarn on a wooden spinning wheel, was carried out by women. The next step was to dye the yarn in various colors, followed by plain or patterned weaving, carried out almost exclusively by Kashmiri Muslim male weavers on a simple, shuttle-type handloom. This was a labor-intensive process, and weaving one Kani shawl could take as many as three to twelve months, depending on the intricacy of the pattern, which also made these commodities very expensive.⁸

Kashmiri shawl weaving was never a folk textile art meant strictly for local Kashmiri consumption; it was from its very inception a commercial, court-patronized, and state-controlled enterprise aimed at the market.⁹ This is evident from the fact that Kashmiri shawls have distinct designs, patterns, and colors depending on the demands of different markets at particular historical moments. In Mughal and later British India, for instance, Kashmiri shawls were not only used as primarily male shoulder mantles but also as *khillat*, or royal gifts of cloth through which a

⁴ Mohammed Ashraf Wani, *Jammawar: Kani Shawl Weaving in Kashmir* (Pune, 1995), 2.

⁵ *Ibid.*, 1–7.

⁶ Elizabeth Mikosch, “The Scent of Flowers: Kashmir Shawls in the Collection of the Textile Museum,” *Textile Museum Journal* 24 (1985): 12.

⁷ This term should not be confused with the pashminas or pashmeres one finds strewn in most clothing outlets in the West during the fall and winter seasons, since these commodities are almost always made of silk with a little bit of cashmere thrown in for softness. The use of the term “pashmina” to refer to these articles is, of course, a clever marketing ploy aimed at invoking a connection to the Kashmiri shawl, with its heady associations of oriental luxury and mystique. There was another related fiber used in Kashmiri shawl weaving, known as *shahtoosh*, which is the inner layer of extremely fine hair found on the underbelly of the chiru, or the Tibetan mountain antelope, and is referred to by W. M. W. as *asuli* (or real). Since the demand for *shahtoosh* shawls resulted in poaching and the near extinction of the chiru, the sale of these shawls is now banned under international law. Asha Rani Mathur, *Indian Shawls: Mantles of Splendour* (Delhi, 2004), 23.

⁸ Wani, *Jammawar*, 8–12, 26–28.

⁹ Abdul Ahad, *Kashmir to Frankfurt: A Study of Arts and Crafts (with a Chapter on the Freedom Struggle of Kashmir)* (New Delhi, 1987), 9–11, 44–47.

complex set of meanings were literally transferred between the royal patron and gift recipient.¹⁰ And shawls traveled far beyond the borders of the Indian subcontinent; as Michelle Maskiell points out, shawls have been circulating in world trade since the sixteenth century. They were coveted articles of clothing and gift exchange in Persia, the Ottoman Empire, and even Russia long before they became fashionable as women's drapery in Western Europe and eventually North America in the nineteenth century.¹¹ Agents of merchants from around the world were stationed in Srinagar—the primary center of shawl production in the Kashmir Valley—to commission and directly purchase shawls to meet demands of particular home markets. In fact, an Armenian merchant sent to Kashmir from the Ottoman court in the late eighteenth century is credited with having introduced the idea of embroidering plain woven shawls to make their production less time consuming and more cost effective.¹² As the shawl trade grew through the course of the eighteenth century, successive governments of Kashmir became heavily involved in regulating the manufacture of these commodities as a significant source of state income.¹³

Kashmiri shawls made their way to Britain and Europe through a variety of means, primarily as gifts for female relatives brought or sent to Britain by the officials and servants of the East India Company in the late eighteenth century.¹⁴ Although the East India Company was involved in the export of shawls to Britain and Europe, high tariffs on these luxury items made them unprofitable as trade commodities. High duties thus encouraged a private trade in shawls, carried out by mercantile importers as well as British women returning from India, who would carry a number of shawls back with them as their own clothing to avoid duties and sell them to prominent shawl stores in London.¹⁵

Although the shawl did not become an essential fashion accessory for British women until the turn of the nineteenth century, British imitations had begun to appear as early as 1777, mainly in Edinburgh.¹⁶ Norwich and Paisley were to follow suit soon after, with Paisley gaining ascendancy as the primary British imitation shawl center in the first few decades of the nineteenth century. The success of Paisley as a center of the shawl industry is evident from the fact that its name became synonymous with the pinecone pattern—known as paisley—that was the

¹⁰ See, for instance, Stewart Gordon, ed., *Robes of Honor: Khl'at in Pre-colonial and Colonial India* (New Delhi, 2003).

¹¹ Michelle Maskiell, "Consuming Kashmir: Shawls and Empires, 1500–2000," *Journal of World History* 13, no. 1 (Spring 2002): 27–65.

¹² Mikosch, "The Scent of Flowers," 12.

¹³ Until 1871, the government of Jammu and Kashmir derived annual revenues of Rs. 600,000 from its taxation on shawls. See Walter R. Lawrence, *The Valley of Kashmir* (1895; repr., Jammu, 1996), 440.

¹⁴ In a letter to her brother posted in India, M. A. specifically requests him to send her a red or white "cachemire," which she hopes will be "square, and of the Harlequin pattern, which is most admired in England." She adds in the next sentence, "Perhaps mamma might think it undutiful, if you were not to send her one at the same time." See *The East India Sketch-Book by a Lady, In Two Volumes* (London, 1833), 2:12. In Jane Austen's *Mansfield Park* (1814), Lady Bertram wants her nephew, who is embarking on a naval career, to go to India, "that I may have a shawl. I think I will have two shawls." Quoted in Edward Said, *Culture and Imperialism* (New York, 1994), 93.

¹⁵ *Reminiscences of an Old Draper* (London, 1876), 60–61, 82, 86.

¹⁶ Meta Muir, "The Edinburgh Shawl," in *A Century of Scottish Shawlmaking, Edinburgh 1777–1847, Paisley 1805–1877* (Edinburgh, 1962), 5.

main design woven on early nineteenth-century Kashmiri shawls, later imitated on British loom shawls. The material, designs, and looms used for weaving were in constant flux throughout the period of imitation shawl manufacture, as British towns competed with each other to produce a fine, durable, and inexpensive product that could rival the Kashmiri shawl.¹⁷ Paisley was most successful in this endeavor, since its weavers used new weaving mechanisms, such as the harness and later the Jacquard loom, and their shawl merchants sent agents to London to copy the latest Kashmiri shawl patterns. In the period between 1820 and 1840, the production of shawls was taking place in an international arena, with centers in Scotland, England, France, India, and Kashmir “selling each other shawls, adapting or pirating each other’s designs, and exchanging raw materials.”¹⁸ Paisley shawls were a much more accessible option for the middle classes, for excellent Paisley shawls cost between £20–25, and average Paisley shawls could be acquired for £3–9, while a Kashmiri shawl could cost upward of £200.¹⁹

The imitation of Asian production techniques and designs by British industries with an aim to produce cheaper products for the mass market was hardly novel in the context of the global imperial economy.²⁰ This is particularly evident in the case of cotton textiles from India, such as calicoes, that fostered the growth of Britain’s cotton industry, with cheaply printed calicoes becoming central to the British consumer and industrial revolutions.²¹ The transfer of shawl knowledge to Britain and the production of British imitations was unique in some ways, however, since it places British debates on modernity, in particular industrial modernity, so squarely in the political and economic context of a specific geographical corner of the British Indian empire.

SHAWLS AND EMPIRE

“Maharaja Gulab Singh acknowledges the supremacy of the British Government and will in token of such supremacy present annually to the British Government one horse, twelve shawl goats of approved breed (six male and six female) and three pairs of Kashmir shawls,” declared Article X of the Treaty of Amritsar, through the terms of which, in March 1846, the Kashmir Valley became part of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir within the British Indian empire, as the region was made over to the Dogra ruler Gulab Singh by the East India Company

¹⁷ Local manufacturing boards and organizations, such as the Board of Trustees for Manufactures in Scotland, handed out premiums and awards to those who produced the best shawls. See *ibid.* It is important to note that several European imitation shawl centers in Paris, Lyon, Geneva, and Vienna, for instance, had also arisen by the early nineteenth century. Imitation shawls from Paris and Lyon, in particular, were held in high regard and their designs coveted by other imitation centers, especially in Britain. See Mikosch, “The Scent of Flowers,” 17.

¹⁸ C. H. Rock, *Paisley Shawls: A Chapter in the Industrial Revolution* (Paisley, 1966), 9.

¹⁹ *Ibid.*, 11; John B. Ireland, *From Wall Street to Cashmere, Five Years in Asia, Africa and Europe* (New York, 1859), 302.

²⁰ See, for instance, Maxine Berg, “In Pursuit of Luxury: Global History and British Consumer Goods in the Eighteenth Century,” *Past and Present*, no. 182 (February 2004): 85–142.

²¹ See, for instance, Chandra Mukerji, *From Graven Images: Patterns of Modern Materialism* (New York, 1983); and more recently, Lara Kriegel, “Culture and the Copy: Calico, Capitalism, and Design Copyright in Early Victorian Britain,” *Journal of British Studies* 43, no. 2 (April 2004): 233–65.

in exchange for a sum of Rs 7.5 million (Rs seventy-five lakhs).²² It is evident from the terms of the treaty that, beyond its strategic significance to its imperial goals in northwestern India and Central Asia, Kashmir's importance to the East India Company lay in the ability of its people to manufacture Kashmiri shawls and as a conduit to that animal—the shawl goat—that had been the focus of intense investigation in British India and Britain since the late eighteenth century. Not only was the exchange agreed upon in Amritsar a ritual reenactment of the Mughal tradition of *khillat*, through which the gift of twelve shawl goats and three pairs of shawls to the British crown brought Kashmir firmly within the ambit of the British empire, but equally significantly, the gift of shawl goats affirmed Kashmir as a source of scientific knowledge about the manufacture of these commodities that could ultimately be transferred to the metropolis to further industrial innovation, thus drawing Kashmir into the global imperial economy.

The intensesness of the Kashmiri shawl's materiality—its exquisite softness, delicacy, and warmth—was very much a part of its appeal in Victorian Britain. In fact, its associations with luxury and beauty were determined foremost by the quality of its fabric and only then by the intricacy of its patterns. Long before Victorian narratives attempted to explain the shawl's extraordinary fineness to ordinary readers, there was an entire imperial machinery devoted to gathering information on the product's manufacture in Kashmir. As early as the late eighteenth century, the East India Company was more intent on learning about the processes involved in the manufacture of shawls than it was in exporting these commodities to Britain. This endeavor can be seen as part of the larger imperial project of the East India Company to establish control over those regions of south and central Asia that lay beyond its political and economic ambit, but it also demonstrates the extent to which empire was not just a source of goods but quite as much a source of knowledge associated with their production.

The Company's board of control in London not only wished to obtain as much information as possible on the processes involved in the manufacture of shawls but also, recognizing the high quality of the yarn that went into their manufacture, advocated studying and possibly breeding the shawl goat (or Cashmerian sheep as it was sometimes referred to in correspondence) in Britain. From the perspective of the Company's board of control, it was their duty to assist the "agriculture and manufacturing interests of this country," in particular, such organizations as the Society for the Improvement of British Wool, founded in Edinburgh in 1791.²³ A pair of shawl goats were, in fact, shipped to Britain in the last decade of the eighteenth century, but the female died on the journey, and the male was housed in the villa of celebrated surgeon John Hunter to undergo experiments for cross-breeding purposes, which were unsuccessful. While exciting the interest of some observers, who noted his existence as one of many "rare, Asiatic curiosities," in

²² C. U. Aitchison, *A Collection of Treaties, Engagements and Sanads relating to India and Neighboring Countries (Revised and Continued up to 1929)*, Vol. XII: *Jammu and Kashmir, Sikkim, Assam and Burma* (1929; repr., Delhi, 1983), 20–22.

²³ Bengal and Bombay Public Records, IOR/E/4/1026, 10 October 1810, 558–59, Asia, Pacific and Africa Collections (APAC), British Library (BL). See also Bombay Commercial Circular, IOR/E/4/1007, 4 May 1791, 501–4, APAC, BL; Bombay Commercial Dispatches, IOR/E/4/1011, 27 July 1796, 395, APAC, BL.

Hunter's gardens, the goat produced little tangible impact on the British wool industry.²⁴

These early experiments having failed, John Sinclair, the president of the Board of Agriculture, wrote in 1810 to Warren Hastings, the former governor general of the English East India Company, seeking his opinion on the substance of which "fine Cashmere shawls are composed and the utility of introducing the breed of the animals producing it into this kingdom."²⁵ Hastings's reply to Sinclair is telling: "The government of Bengal possesses or ought to possess, improved means of intercourse with Cashmeer, where the finest shawls are manufactured, and the best materials for their composition may be concluded to be the growth of that country, or its neighborhood, or within the scope of information."²⁶ For the Company, however, information was harder to find than Hastings hoped, due to its very shaky political relationship with Kashmir, which at that point was a part of the Sikh kingdom of the Punjab, whose ruler, Ranjit Singh, was the Company's *bête noire* in the region. As a result, among other things, Kashmir held a virtual monopoly on the shawl wool trade from Ladakh and other regions in central Asia. The governor general of the Company, Lord Bentinck, was so desirous of improving trade and political relations between the Company's dominions and Kashmir that he made a gift of British imitation shawls to Maharaja Ranjit Singh, "to be favored with your highnesses opinions on the comparative merits and defects of the manufactures."²⁷ Although the Company was unable to make inroads into the trade between central Asia and Kashmir until 1870, the gift of twelve shawl goats under the terms of the Treaty of Amritsar, when Kashmir passed from Sikh to Dogra hands, was an attempt to redress this imbalance. Shawls and shawl goats, then, were intimately tied to the Company's imperial anxieties and economic ambitions in the region.

The desire to gather information on shawls and shawl goats was an expression of a more confident British imperialism in early nineteenth-century India that sought to open up the subcontinent, particularly its frontiers, to scientific exploration, which David Arnold has recently argued established a "complex relationship . . . between India's material existence—its terrain, climate, vegetation, wildlife,

²⁴ Jesse Foot, *The Life of John Hunter* (London, 1794), 242.

²⁵ Organizations such as the Board of Agriculture and the aforementioned Society for the Improvement of British Wool, founded in Edinburgh, were examples of what C. A. Bayly has termed "agrarian patriotism," a key ideological feature of the second British empire (1780–1830), which utilized ideas of British agricultural improvement to draw together Britain's empire in Europe, in particular Scotland and Ireland, although its ideological reach clearly went far beyond Europe to Britain's emergent empire in Asia. C. A. Bayly, *Imperial Meridian: The British Empire and the World, 1780–1830* (Essex, 1989), 121–26. Warren Hastings to John Sinclair, 24 June 1810, Warren Hastings Papers, BL Add. MSS 29,234, fol. 229.

²⁶ Warren Hastings to John Sinclair, 24 June 1810, Warren Hastings Papers, BL Add. MSS 29,234, fol. 230.

²⁷ Governor General to Raja Runjeet Singh, 17 December 1832, IOR/F4/1466/57661, APAC, BL. In the early nineteenth century, the Company's board of control regularly sent consignments of British shawls suited specifically to the India market to its boards of trade in Bombay, Madras, and Bengal, which were instructed to sell the items and obtain reports on their reception by native shawl dealers. See Bombay Commercial Dispatches, IOR/E/4/1041, 12 December 1821, 67–68, APAC, BL; Madras Commercial Dispatches, IOR E/4/926, 5 December 1821, 117–19, APAC, BL; Bombay Commercial Dispatches, IOR E/4/1028, 1 May 1812, 407, APAC, BL.

and so on—and the identity created for India from out of its physical base.”²⁸ Many of the men carrying out these explorations and penning travelogues about their journeys were interested in advancing the cause of science in their particular fields, such as botany. But the travels of the adventurer William Moorcroft in Kashmir, Ladakh, and central Asia, were equally significantly about furthering the cause of industrialization and mechanization in Britain, for which these remote regions were to serve as repositories of empirical knowledge.²⁹

Born in 1767 in Lancashire and trained as a surgeon in Liverpool, Moorcroft eventually settled on veterinary medicine as a career, becoming a horse consultant and purchasing agent in London for the East India Company. In 1808, he set sail for India as horse breeder for the Company.³⁰ Although sanctioned by the Company to undertake a trip to the northwestern regions of India for a collection of good horse breeds, Moorcroft’s trip in 1822–23 to Kashmir, Ladakh, and Bokhara had a much more ambitious agenda. Financed in large measure by the Calcutta business houses of John Palmer and James Mackillop, which provided him with a variety of British goods, including English cottons, chintz, cutlery, ironmongery, and so on, for sale in these regions, the unstated purpose of this journey was to capture the markets of inner Asia for British goods as well as gather information on the raw materials and production techniques used by natives of these regions.³¹ Moorcroft was especially interested in the possibilities of breaking into the shawl wool trade between Ladakh and Kashmir so that British shawl industries could gain access to this raw material and in the acquisition of a thorough understanding of the processes involved in the manufacture of shawls, from the cleaning and spinning of shawl wool to the dyeing and washing of the final product.

While in Kashmir, where he spent several months over the winter of 1822–23, Moorcroft undertook a methodical study of shawl manufacture. He meticulously recorded notes on the subject, based on questioning and close observation of several hundred weavers and artists whom he employed to weave shawls and copy shawl patterns for him.³² Unable to break into the shawl wool trade for the Company, Moorcroft revived the idea of importing shawl goats to Britain, where they could be bred for the purposes of yielding the fleece that made Kashmiri shawls so fine. He went even further to suggest that the best way to import knowledge about Kashmiri shawls into Britain was by importing Kashmiri weavers themselves so that English manufacturers could “seize the advantages of the science and manipulation the experience of centuries has supplied to that branch of manufacturers, which, through local circumstances, has been favored and fostered into a more profitable and most extensive trade . . . for rivalry in which several European

²⁸ David Arnold, *The Tropics and the Traveling Gaze: India, Landscape, and Science, 1800–1856* (Seattle, 2006), 27.

²⁹ According to Arnold, Indians were rarely seen as repositories of scientific knowledge by colonial officials and scientific explorers who were instrumental in establishing hierarchies of knowledge in early nineteenth-century India. Rather, the “information” gathered from them was considered practical and empirical. *Ibid.*, 181.

³⁰ Most of the biographical information on Moorcroft is culled from Garry Alder, *Beyond Bokhara: The Life of William Moorcroft, Asian Explorer and Pioneer Veterinary Surgeon, 1767–1825* (London, 1985), chaps. 1, 4, 5.

³¹ *Ibid.*, 212.

³² *Ibid.*, 297–98.

Nations are now contending. When the English Manufacturers shall have gained the whole mystery of those artists who are now confessedly the best performers, let them engraft their own improvements but let them now start with all appearances and means to boot.”³³ Although clearly impressed by the creativity and technique employed by Kashmiri weavers and pattern drawers, he was convinced that once the British shawl industry gained access to these techniques and patterns, the quality of its shawls would be far superior to Kashmiri shawls: “The English borrowed the art of printing Chintz from the Artists of this country and now surpass their teachers, and a similar event may reasonably be expected with regard to shawls.”³⁴ Ultimately, for Moorcroft, the techniques involved in the production of shawls could not be allowed to remain in the hands of Kashmiri weavers—whom he described as ingenious but oppressed and fraudulent—they had to be systematized into scientific knowledge through an imperial mediator so as to be more effectively utilized by British industry.³⁵

Moorcroft’s detailed notes on shawl manufacture as well as the thirty-four drawings of shawl patterns he commissioned undoubtedly became an invaluable source of information for the British shawl industry. More importantly, his numerous journals and other writings, characterized by C. A. Bayly as “one of the densest pieces of commercial reporting to pass through the Company’s archive in the early nineteenth century,” codified knowledge about Kashmiri shawls, and to an extent about Kashmir and its people as well, that was then endlessly reproduced and circulated in writings on the subject, in colonial India as well as Britain.³⁶ At the time of his death in 1825, Moorcroft had been unable to open up the region to British trade or create a space for the Company to take a more active role in Kashmir’s affairs; nevertheless, his career illustrates the significance of Kashmiri shawls as a conduit for British imperial objectives in the region as well as a repository of commercial and scientific knowledge from and about the imperial frontier that would eventually mediate the British public’s understanding of this constituent part of empire in distinct ways.

By the time Moorcroft’s voluminous writings were published posthumously as a travelogue in 1841, dozens of other British travelers to various parts of India, including Kashmir, had published their travel writings as part of the “lively market for Indiana” that had emerged in Britain in the first few decades of the nineteenth century.³⁷ Not only did travelers to the remote corners of the empire fulfill part of this fascination with India, in particular its landscape, their writings also spawned an entire genre of narratives set in or about India by authors who had themselves

³³ William Moorcroft to C. T. Metcalfe, 21 May 1820, Moorcroft Collection, BL Eur. MSS F38, 30.

³⁴ Ibid.

³⁵ William Moorcroft, *Travels in the Himalayan Provinces of Hindustan and the Punjab, in Ladakh and Kashmir, in Peshawar, Kabul, Kunduz, and Bokhara: From 1819 to 1825*, 2 vols. (London, 1841), 2:295.

³⁶ C. A. Bayly, *Empire and Information: Intelligence Gathering and Social Communication in India, 1780–1870* (Cambridge, 1997), 135.

³⁷ Arnold, *Tropics and the Traveling Gaze*, 25–26. Examples of travelers to Kashmir include Alexander “Bokhara” Burns, whose three-volume travelogue sold out on the day of its publication in 1834. The travelogues written by Godfrey Vigne, Victor Jacquemont, and Alexander Cunningham, all of whom traveled through northwestern India, including Kashmir, likewise enjoyed wide circulation. See Alder, *Beyond Bokhara*, 368.

never set foot in the region. As Catherine Hall argues, for these authors, empire was imagined entirely from the metropole, as “they too constructed mental maps of empire and grammars of difference, they too made stories of what they knew and imagined and what they did not.”³⁸ One such narrative, Thomas Moore’s epic poem *Lalla Rookh*—first published in 1817 and republished in innumerable editions through the nineteenth century—which related the story of Princess Lalla Rookh’s journey from Delhi to Kashmir, where she was to marry a young prince, had ensured a special place for Kashmir in the Victorian imaginary by creating an image of the region as exceptional, a beautiful place distinct from the hot and dusty plains of Hindustan.³⁹ The distinctiveness of the region was further exacerbated by the political fact that Kashmir was never brought under direct British rule, despite the pleas of almost all the scientific explorers and travelers to the valley, including Moorcroft and Godfrey Vigne. Vigne argued that under British rule, this ancient land could become “the focus of Asiatic civilization: a miniature England in the heart of Asia.”⁴⁰

It is hardly surprising in this context that one of the ways in which a specific place on the frontiers of the British empire—Kashmir—was presented to the British public was through its most celebrated commodity—the Kashmiri shawl—the fashion for which had reached its apogee by the 1840s. The many Victorian narratives on shawls, written almost always by men and women who had never actually visited Kashmir, then, performed two interrelated didactic functions: first, they educated readers about Kashmir through Kashmiri shawls—concrete material manifestations of its beauty and exceptionality—which fulfilled the larger concern of these narratives to educate Victorian Britons about the diverse and varied geography of the British empire, and, second, they translated the specialized, scientific knowledge about Kashmiri shawl manufacture that had been transmitted to the British shawl industry by men such as Moorcroft into a more popular form, while at the same time highlighting the relationship between Kashmir, shawl production, and imperial politics.

The early nineteenth-century British fascination with India, according to Arnold, has to be viewed as part of Romanticism’s engagement with the region, which was enmeshed with modes of viewing, understanding, and recording its landscape

³⁸ Catherine Hall, “Epilogue: Imperial Careering at Home; Harriet Martineau on Empire,” in *Colonial Lives across the British Empire: Imperial Careering in the Long Nineteenth Century*, ed. David Lambert and Alan Lester (Cambridge, 2006), 341.

³⁹ Thomas Moore, *“Lalla Rookh”: An Oriental Romance* (Buffalo, NY, 1850). Clearly, several editions of this poem were also published in nineteenth-century America. Moore had himself never visited India or Kashmir. An exhibition of paintings based on Godfrey Vigne’s drawings of Kashmir’s landscape were exhibited at the Panorama at Leicester Square in 1849; the accompanying pamphlet began with a paragraph from *Lalla Rookh*: “Who has not heard of the Vale of Kashmir, / With its roses the brightest that earth ever gave; / Its temples and grottoes, and fountains as clear / As the love-lighted eyes that hang over their wave? / Oh! To see at sunset, when warm o’er the lake / Its splendour at parting a summer eve throws, / Like a bride full of blushes, when ling’ring to take / A last look at the mirror, at night, e’er she goes.” See *Descriptions of a View of the Valley and City of Kashmir now Exhibiting at The Panorama, Leicester Square, Painted by the Proprietor Robert Burford from Drawings taken in 1835, By G. T. Vigne* (London, 1849), 3.

⁴⁰ Godfrey Thomas Vigne, *Travels in Kashmir, Ladak, Iskardo, the Countries Adjoining the Mountain-Course of the Indus and the Himalaya, North of the Punjab*, 2 vols. (1842; repr., New Delhi, 1981), 2:68.

that came to be ultimately perceived as part of the tropical world.⁴¹ While Kashmir was very much an aspect of Romanticism's appropriation of India, its place within the Romantic imagination was quite distinct, as it was described time and again as "unquestionably one of the most beautiful spots in all Asia, or perhaps the whole habitable world."⁴² Its geography and landscape—as a valley nestled among the Himalayas featuring verdant slopes, flower-filled meadows, and gurgling brooks—was critical to this distinctiveness. It is no surprise that shawl narratives not only described Kashmir as "a valley and place so beautiful that some writers maintain that it must have been the Garden of Eden" but, more significantly, linked this beauty to the ability of its people, who while "not exactly moral or virtuous and wanting in civilization" were nevertheless "ingenious, artistic, and wonderfully applicant" enough to produce articles of exquisite and unrivaled beauty, such as the Kashmiri shawl, that could not but adorn a gentlewoman's form.⁴³

While the pastoral landscape of the valley was responsible for lending its weavers their artistic abilities, its geographical location, according to these narratives, placed Kashmir in an enviable position to control the raw material that lent Kashmiri shawls their supreme fineness. The narratives, then, spent much time attempting to scientifically ascertain the material basis for the difference in quality between shawls of Kashmiri manufacture and those produced in other parts of the world, in particular other parts of British India and Britain, claiming that there was "no scientific description" of the "fibre from which is woven perhaps the choicest of all the fabrics of the loom," which endowed shawls from Kashmir with "a certain superiority—subtle though distinct."⁴⁴ Detailed discussions of the shawl goat, its scientific name, its habitat, scientific reasons for the fineness and warmth of its fleece as opposed to the down of other animals, and the methods for collecting its fleece and converting it to yarn usually filled the pages of these narratives.

This was also the period when the commodity literally came alive and began speaking for itself through various avenues in Victorian Britain.⁴⁵ Hardly a new phenomenon, since commodities had been speaking in British literature since the eighteenth century, the trope took on new meanings and found new forms of expression in the context of the rise of mid-Victorian commodity capitalism, in which a rapidly growing middle class was increasingly participating.⁴⁶ So intense was the concern with the materiality of Kashmiri shawls and the animal that yielded the raw material of which they were woven that an 1841 novel, by Charles White, titled *The Cashmere Shawl: An Eastern Fiction*, used a Kashmiri shawl as narrator.⁴⁷ This shawl tells the story from the perspective of its own becoming: from the hair on the underbelly of a peacefully grazing shawl goat in the mountains of central Asia to fleece in the markets of Yarkhand, to yarn woven into an exquisite shawl in Kashmir, to the shawl making its way through kingdoms in British India. Clearly,

⁴¹ Arnold, *Tropics and the Traveling Gaze*, 35–37.

⁴² *Descriptions of a View of the Valley*, 3.

⁴³ *Kashmeer and its Shawls* (London, 1875), 9–10.

⁴⁴ W. M. W., "Cashmere Shawls," 68.

⁴⁵ Thomas Richards, *The Commodity Culture of Victorian England: Advertising and Spectacle, 1851–1914* (Stanford, CA, 1990), 2–3.

⁴⁶ I would like to thank Simon Joyce and Deidre Lynch for this insight.

⁴⁷ Charles White, *The Cashmere Shawl: An Eastern Fiction*, 3 vols. (London, 1840).

this three-volume novel was meant to entertain readers even as it instructed them in meticulous detail about the origins of a popular commodity in Victorian culture by linking the material stages in the commodity's existence with specific geographical spaces on the frontiers of the British empire, whose inhabitants appeared as characters in a series of romantic tales complete with star-crossed lovers, evil villains, amazons commanding elephants, murder, mayhem, and last-minute rescues of distressed damsels by their ever-faithful lovers, all set in the luxuriant valleys and mountains of Kashmir and central Asia.

There is no evidence to suggest that White, a colonel in the Coldstream Guards, had ever traveled to the regions he describes in the book; the closest he got to central Asia was Istanbul, where he spent several years and encountered shawls from Kashmir in the bazaars. But that is precisely what makes the novel so interesting, since it is in some senses not unlike Shelley's poem *Alastor*, which Saree Makdisi argues, invents the terrain (of the imperial frontier) it sets out to represent.⁴⁸ According to Makdisi, "The Orient itself, as a space of material, discursive, and figurative opportunity, had to be entirely reinvented and rediscovered" by Europeans in the early nineteenth century.⁴⁹ As the article "Cashmere Shawls" asserted, Shelley's descriptions in *Alastor* of these "trans Himalayan solitudes . . . affords as suggestive a description of them as any with which the few subsequent explorers of those parts have furnished us."⁵⁰ Most shawl narratives, thus, advocated the actual opening up of British trade with regions of central Asia that yielded shawl wool, not only to gain access to the valuable shawl raw material but quite as much to allow "scientific geographers" to penetrate this as-yet-unexplored region to gather information that could then be made available to ordinary Britons.

Alongside "the geographical notation, the theoretical mapping and charting of territory," as Edward Said has described the underlying concern of nineteenth-century British fiction, these fictional and nonfictional forays into Kashmir and central Asia through the Kashmiri shawl and its raw material also engaged directly with imperial politics in the region.⁵¹ Some, for instance, took the opportunity to endorse the ruler of the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir as "an enlightened prince, who, stepping out of the well-worn groove laid down by his predecessors, is constantly devising means for the welfare of his subjects."⁵² This particular tract, *Kashmeer and its Shawls*, written on the occasion of the Prince of Wales's impending visit to Kashmir, sanctioned the British government's relationship with the princely state by celebrating its most well-known manufacture, which continued to serve as the material representation of the political and economic relationship between the two, endowing the former with suzerainty over its territories and the latter with political legitimacy to rule over them. Not surprisingly, it was on the same visit that the Prince of Wales was to receive a gift of a shawl from the Dogra ruler of Kashmir—a shawl that was minutely embroidered with the map of Srinagar (the center of shawl production and the capital of Jammu and Kashmir)—as a

⁴⁸ Amanda Gilroy, "Introduction," and Saree Makdisi, "Shelley's *Alastor*: Travel beyond the Limit," both in *Romantic Geographies: Discourses of Travel, 1775–1844*, ed. Amanda Gilroy (Manchester, 2000), 11, 240.

⁴⁹ Makdisi, "Shelley's *Alastor*," 252–53.

⁵⁰ W. M. W., "Cashmere Shawls," 70.

⁵¹ Said, *Culture and Imperialism*, 58.

⁵² *Kashmeer and its Shawls*, 12.

recognition of the paramountcy of the British crown on the city of Srinagar and by extension the territories of the state, while at the same time claiming them as the ruler's sovereign territories.⁵³ The tract thus linked the uniqueness of Kashmir's landscape, its people, and their products with its special political position within the British Indian empire, and by extension, within the imperial imagination of the metropole.

Despite the fact that these narratives were rife with misinformation—parts of central Asia and Kashmir were often confused for one another, while Kashmiri shawl weavers were misidentified as “Hindoos,” for instance—they performed the basic function of differentiating Kashmir from other parts of that amorphous entity India and presented it as a place distinct within the British Indian empire.⁵⁴ Kashmir's exceptionality, however, did not prevent shawl narratives from placing the region and its products within the discourse on difference that was part and parcel of the larger discourse on imperial modernity in Victorian Britain, in this particular case through comparisons between Kashmiri shawls and their British imitations.

THE SHAWL AS VICTORIAN COMMODITY

As Victorian commodity culture reached its apogee, possessions became, Deborah Cohen argues, “a way of defining oneself in a society where it was increasingly difficult to tell people apart.”⁵⁵ Not only were commodities a means through which to identify and define distinctions based on race, class, and gender, but they were also playing the role of instruments to cultivate good taste among the burgeoning middle class.⁵⁶ Even as lowly mass-produced commodities, such as soap, came to be celebrated and acquire new meanings that drew on ideas of empire and domesticity, a study of luxury commodities such as Kashmiri shawls and their British imitations reveals not only the ways in which a specific part of empire was defined through commodities but, more significantly, how their production and consumption encapsulated deep anxieties, apparent in the emergent narrative on the declension of British taste and design, about the “modernity” of the British industrial product and its continued dominance in the global capitalist system.⁵⁷

Shawl fashion was at its acme in mid-nineteenth-century Britain, when upper-class women consumed shawls from Kashmir and their higher-quality British imitations, while middle-class women bought cheaper imitations at a furious pace.

⁵³ Chitralekha Zutshi, *Languages of Belonging: Islam, Regional Identity, and the Making of Kashmir* (New York, 2004), 49–50. As stipulated by the Treaty of Amritsar, three pairs of Kashmiri shawls continued to be presented to the queen in recognition of the paramountcy of the British crown over the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir, although the gift of shawl goats had been discontinued by the 1870s. See *Kashmeer and its Shawls*, 24.

⁵⁴ The misidentification of Kashmiri weavers as Hindus (as opposed to Muslims, which they actually were) is unsurprising, given that the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir was being reframed in colonial discourse as a Hindu entity after its 1846 creation and transfer to Dogra rulers, themselves Hindus with little legitimacy to rule over the largely Muslim population of Kashmir. Zutshi, *Languages of Belonging*, 46–49.

⁵⁵ Deborah Cohen, *Household Gods: The British and Their Possessions* (New Haven, CT, 2006), xi.

⁵⁶ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender, and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (New York, 1995); Cohen, *Household Gods*, xii.

⁵⁷ McClintock, *Imperial Leather*, esp. chap. 5.

The increasing popularity of shawls was reflected in their presence in paintings and novels that appropriated their foreignness, demonstrating the British woman's right to ownership over this exotic object. In mid-nineteenth-century novels such as Elizabeth Gaskell's *North and South* (1845), for instance, shawls appear in domestic, womanly settings, where women could identify with and experience them away from the male world of commerce, which was thus domesticated in the process.⁵⁸ Narratives on shawls, on the other hand, while comparing Kashmiri shawls with their British imitations and through them measuring British industrial and scientific strength against Kashmir, and by extension the empire as a whole, also served as instructive texts on the definition of good taste and the dangers of falling prey to the ephemeral trends of fashion, in particular for their young female readers.

From this perspective, shawl narratives reflected two central preoccupations of Victorian culture, which came to the fore through visual spectacles such as the Great Exhibition of 1851: the relationship between authenticity and imitation and the decline of British design and subsequently taste as displayed by industrial goods.⁵⁹ Although the Great Exhibition exhibited British industrial manufactures, such as Paisley and Norwich shawls, as examples of British industrial ingenuity and lauded them for imitating oriental patterns even as they improved upon them, the event became the center of a reform movement that sought to rescue British design from tastelessness.⁶⁰ This concern with the lack of taste in British industrial products is palpable in an essay by Ralph Nicholson Wornum entitled "The Exhibition as a Lesson in Taste."⁶¹ Decrying the absence of a "national taste" or

⁵⁸ See Suzanne Daly, "Kashmir Shawls in Mid-Victorian Novels," *Victorian Literature and Culture* 30, no. 1 (March 2002): 237–55; Penelope Alfrey, "The Social Background to the Shawl," in *The Norwich Shawl: Its History and a Catalogue of the Collection at Strangers Hall Museum, Norwich*, ed. Pamela Claburn (London, 1995), 23–32. Piya Chatterjee makes a similar argument for the case of tea, a commodity that, she argues, held both material and symbolic significance in Victorian England, where the tea parlor came to symbolize "a safe tranquility, a cocooned interior nurtured by women." See Piya Chatterjee, *A Time for Tea: Women, Labor, and Post/Colonial Politics on an Indian Plantation* (Durham, NC, 2001), 40.

⁵⁹ As Lara Kriegel's article deftly illustrates in relation to debates surrounding calico production and design piracy, the "paradox of original and copy in an age of mechanical reproduction" was very much a part of Victorian "productive culture and cultural production." See Kriegel, "Culture and the Copy," 233–65. The concern with the lack of taste in British art and by extension its manufactures was reinvigorated with the appointment of a select committee of the Royal Society of Arts, Manufactures, and Commerce in 1835, which attributed the decline in sale of English manufactures domestically and abroad to their lack of taste. See *ibid.*, 240–41; Lyndel Saunders King, *The Industrialization of Taste: Victorian England and the Art Union of London* (Ann Arbor, MI, 1985), 27–28.

⁶⁰ *The Crystal Palace Exhibition Illustrated Catalogue, London 1851, an Unabridged Republication of the Art-Journal Special Issue* (New York, 1970), 55, 103, 157, 254, 308; Cohen, *Household Gods*, 16–17. See also Paul Greenhalgh, *Ephemeral Vistas: The Expositions Universelles, Great Exhibitions, and World's Fairs, 1851–1939* (Manchester, 1988), 19, 23–24. The rhetoric of the decline of taste during the Great Exhibition also incorporated a concern with the "democratization of art," representing the lowering of aesthetic standards and the possibility of the production of copies of works of art through new technologies, which could then be available to all classes. See Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher B. Steiner, "Art, Authenticity, and the Baggage of Cultural Encounter," in *Unpacking Culture: Art and Commodity in Colonial and Postcolonial Worlds*, ed. Ruth B. Phillips and Christopher Steiner (Berkeley, 1999), 9–11.

⁶¹ Ralph Nicholson Wornum, "The Exhibition as a Lesson in Taste," in *The Crystal Palace Exhibition Illustrated Catalogue*, i–xxii.

sense of design in the European, particularly English, industrial manufactures displayed at the exhibition, Wornum argued that once manufactures had attained a high degree of mechanical perfection, the next essential “stage of cultivation” they had to attain was that of taste, something that the exhibits of European manufactures had clearly failed to accomplish, since, presumably, they were aimed at the mass market. Commenting on the European imitation shawls displayed at the exhibition, he stated that English and French designers were far more skilled than the “hereditary weaver of the East” and yet insisted on copying Eastern shawl patterns, resulting in the production of “spurious Cashmeres,” which, although true copies of the original, could only ever be considered copies.⁶²

It is interesting to observe how shawl narratives responded to these critiques of the British imitation shawl by design purists, since their responses embodied anxieties about British industrial dominance in the context of the imperial economy. One such narrative, Harriet Martineau’s “Shawls,” published in the journal *Household Words*, is worth discussing in some detail here, since Martineau wrote prodigiously about empire from within the metropole and did so specifically from the perspective of political economy.⁶³ Not surprisingly, this particular article defends British imitations as a domestic, and modern, improvement on the exotic by focusing not so much on the material of which Kashmiri shawls were woven but on the actual processes involved in their production as well as their designs. “If any article of dress could be immutable,” declared Martineau, “it would be the shawl; designed for eternity in the unchanging East; copied from patterns which are the heirloom of a caste, and woven by fatalists, to be worn by adorers of the ancient garment, who resent the idea of the smallest change.”⁶⁴ And yet, this immutable article, according to Martineau, was being transformed in the British textile towns of Norwich and Paisley, at the hands of British weavers who used advanced industrial technologies. For her, the production of imitation shawls was a matter of patriotic pride: she noted that the queen and several countesses had offered their Kashmiri shawls as examples to British shawl manufacturers out of a sense of “patriotic desire for the improvement of our shawl patterns. From these, the manufacturers of Norwich and Paisley produce such beautiful things that, but for the unaccountable and unrivaled superiority of the Orientals in the production of this particular article, we should be all satisfaction and admiration.”⁶⁵

Although Kashmiri shawl patterns were clearly superior, the “Orientals,” according to Martineau, were unwilling and incapable of adapting to industrial technologies, such as the Jacquard loom, which had made the weaving process much faster and led to the production of cheaper and more “modern” shawls (as Martineau described the printed variety being produced at Paisley). While she described the Kashmiri weaver as toiling over a primitive loom, weaving shawls with patterns that had been passed down to him through generations, Martineau’s description of the shawl production process in Paisley evoked a sense of constant motion, demonstrating the genius of English industrial innovation. Industrialization, after all, was evidence of European exceptionalism, in contradistinction to which stood

⁶² *Ibid.*, vi.

⁶³ Hall, “Epilogue: Imperial Careering at Home,” 342–44.

⁶⁴ Harriet Martineau, “Shawls,” *Household Words*, August 1852, 553.

⁶⁵ *Ibid.*

the Kashmiri shawl weaver, a primary example of the “Asiatic mode of production.”⁶⁶

Thus, while admitting that Kashmiri shawls were superior, Martineau suggested that British imitation shawls were perhaps more worthy of admiration, especially since owning them expressed one’s pride in indigenous industrial innovations and resultant products. She concluded by imagining a scenario where weavers from Bokhara and Kashmir could observe the production of imitation shawls at Paisley:

It seems a pity that the fat, easy, lazy Bokharan, and the slim, lithe, patient Hindoo, should not come to Paisley, and see how shawls are made. . . . How strange [to them] would be the noise, and the stench, and the speed, and the numbers employed, and the amount of production! To the one, it may be the work of years to furnish to the traveling merchant strips of eight inches wide, enough to make a shawl; and to the other, the production of such an article is an event in life; while here, at Paisley . . . the weaving of the most genuine and venerable kind occupies only a week.⁶⁷

The Paisley shawl, now itself “genuine and venerable,” ultimately triumphed by forcing advancements on this Asian, ostensibly “immutable” article of dress. Martineau thus legitimized the consumption of imitation shawls by middle-class British women, who could not hope to afford a shawl from Kashmir but could still wear a Paisley shawl with pride and as a marker of respectability. Not only had Kashmiri shawls been imitated, but the knowledge associated with them had been either ejected from (antiquity, barbarism) or transferred to (propriety, majesty) their British counterparts.

As stated above, British imitation of Asian textile designs and technologies was hardly novel; even Moorcroft recognized this when he equated the production of imitation shawls with the much earlier tradition of printing chintz (copied from Indian designs) in Britain. What is interesting, of course, is that the acquisition of technical knowledge from the “Orient” and the resultant production of imitations was now accompanied by the insertion of these “new” goods into a narrative of British imperial modernity. Martineau’s elaborate comparisons of the techniques used by Kashmiri weavers with those employed by the weavers of Paisley were designed to present the imitations as more than simply cheaper, pirated copies of oriental luxury products; they were, instead, to be consumed by middle-class British women as modern goods. Imitation shawls were thus the modern equivalents of their primitive Kashmiri counterparts, retaining, however, some of the grandeur associated with their oriental cousins.

For Victorian design purists, however, since commodities possessed moral qualities, this unabashed celebration of industrial imitations masked the deeper, now moral, issue of bad taste exhibited by these modern products. As Cohen argues, in the latter half of nineteenth-century Britain, bad taste came to be seen as a sign of “moral turpitude,” and taste became something that could be taught to and learned by the masses.⁶⁸ An important aspect of this discourse was a focus on the quality of beauty, which was linked to divinity, even as ugliness came to be seen as possessing evil qualities, thus endowing instruction in taste with religious fervor

⁶⁶ Maskiell, “Consuming Kashmir,” 53.

⁶⁷ Martineau, “Shawls,” 556.

⁶⁸ Cohen, *Household Gods*, 19–21.

and moral urgency.⁶⁹ Furthermore, a concern with the declension of artistic taste was intermeshed with the discourse on authenticity being articulated by movements such as the arts and crafts movement, which looked to the colonized Other to define good taste and beauty, in particular to the Indian village community, untouched by modernity, where the Indian craftsman was still producing the “authentic” product.⁷⁰

Similar ideas informed a group of colonial officials in British India who undertook the task of rescuing Indian crafts from degenerative European influences such as commercialism, mechanization, and the negligence of the colonial state in preserving Indian craft traditions that resided in the village community.⁷¹ The textile traditions of India, and Kashmiri shawls in particular, got much attention in these individuals’ writings, which expounded at length on the decline of the “traditional” shawl, laying the blame squarely on the Kashmiri shawl trade. As George Birdwood, a major proponent of this movement in colonial India, lamented in his work *The Arts of India*, Kashmiri shawls had been ruined by Kashmiri weavers eager to adopt French designs and dyes in creating these “sumptuous fabrics.”⁷² The drive to define (and rescue) the purely native product, free of external influences, clearly drew on an earlier, more established orientalist scholarly tradition, led by men such as William Jones, which had been concerned with defining and preserving the purely native Indian tradition, in the process restoring it to its original glory. Interestingly, many early orientalists were themselves avid collectors of a variety of Indian objects.⁷³ In the case of the British and colonial arts and crafts movements, the same “primitive” qualities in the Other that had to be improved upon to produce the modern industrial product also served to render it as a site for nostalgia for an untouched, more tasteful, preindustrial past.⁷⁴

Even as the modernity of industrialization was called into question, it was the instruments of modernity that were being used to capture the “traditional” beauty of Kashmir and its products. As the princely state of Jammu and Kashmir was more firmly drawn into British Indian colonial politics by the late nineteenth century, colonial discourse celebrated Kashmir’s exceptionality, among other things as the “Happy Valley,” where the British could escape the searing heat of the

⁶⁹ Ibid., 26.

⁷⁰ Ananda Kentish Coomaraswamy, *The Indian Craftsman* (London, 1909).

⁷¹ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, “Orientalism, Nationalism and the Reconstruction of ‘Indian’ Art in Calcutta,” in *Perceptions of South Asia’s Visual Past*, ed. Catherine B. Asher and Thomas R. Metcalf (New Delhi, 1994), 48.

⁷² George C. M. Birdwood, *The Arts of India* (1880; repr., Channel Islands, 1986), 134, 280.

⁷³ For a detailed discussion of the importance of early orientalists’ object/art collections in defining their personal lives and their role as imperial agents, see Maya Jasanoff, *Edge of Empire: Lives, Culture, and Conquest in the East, 1750–1850* (New York, 2005), esp. pt. 1.

⁷⁴ William Morris, a major proponent of the arts and crafts movement, captured this nostalgia well: “For so far reaching is this curse of commercial war that . . . the Indian or Japanese craftsman may no longer ply his craft leisurely, . . . in producing a maze of strange beauty on a piece of cloth; a steam engine is set a-going at Manchester, . . . and the Asiatic worker, if he is not starved to death outright, as plentifully happens, is driven himself into a factory, . . . and nothing of character is left in him.” Quoted in Coomaraswamy, *The Indian Craftsman*, 106. For a discussion of the emergence of the Indian craftsman as a site of nostalgia for the British and colonial arts and crafts movements, see Deepali Dewan, “Scripting South Asia’s Visual Past: *The Journal of Indian Art and Industry* and the Production of Knowledge in the Late Nineteenth Century,” in *Imperial Co-histories: National Identities and the British and Colonial Press*, ed. Julie Codell (London, 2003), 29–44.

Indian plains to discuss the business of ruling British India over hunting and fishing expeditions.⁷⁵ The celebration of the natural beauty of Kashmir's landscape, which had hitherto been largely textual, acquired a visual dimension through the practice of photography, as, in Ananya Jahanara Kabir's words, "the rumour of Kashmir was verified and transformed by the camera as the touchstone of modernity."⁷⁶ Even as Kashmir was transformed into a modern tourist space, its ancient monuments and Sanskrit texts (meticulously studied by European scholars in the late nineteenth century) conferred on it the status of a repository of untouched Indian tradition, while its products continued to serve as examples of authentic oriental craftsmanship in Victorian commodity culture.

Founded in 1875 as a "revolt against mid-Victorian taste," Liberty's of London sold goods from all over the "Orient," marketing them as tasteful products "superior in colour and more varied and beautiful in design than the productions of Europe . . . at a much lower cost."⁷⁷ Arthur Lasenby Liberty fashioned his store as an educational as much as a commercial enterprise that preserved "the beautiful and unique art teachings of the Eastern world," while decrying the adulteration of Eastern arts and manufactures with French design forms.⁷⁸ The store often exhibited Kashmiri loom-woven shawls in order "to educate the British public to appreciate the gems of the intricate art of the East."⁷⁹ Designed to counteract the new middle-class desire for cheap, tasteless industrial goods, the ambience within the store, such as that of its famed "Eastern Bazaar," transported shoppers to "Damascus or Baghdad, in one of those dreamy, interminable bazaars we read of in the charming sketches of Eastern travel by Nathaniel Wills."⁸⁰ This dreamy atmosphere was created through dimly lit rooms perfumed with sandalwood and incense, from the walls of which hung Kashmiri shawls and through which British shoppers could experience Kashmir or Damascus or Baghdad, without visiting their breathtaking landscapes.⁸¹

At the same time, the store's catalogs demonstrated that it was constantly adapting the art of the "orientals" to suit European needs and demands, thus performing its patriotic duty by invigorating home industry. For instance, pashmina cloth for dress materials, expensive and increasingly difficult to obtain, was replaced at Liberty's with British versions variously called Umritza Cashmere, Liberty Pashmin, and so on. According to its catalogs, these materials were made of the finest wools imported from India but woven in the mills of Yorkshire and Lancashire, thus producing, according to fashion magazines, "a cloth which combines the softness and warmth of Indian Cashmere with the good qualities of European manufac-

⁷⁵ Zutshi, *Languages of Belonging*, 3–4.

⁷⁶ Ananya Jahanara Kabir, *Territory of Desire: Representing the Valley of Kashmir* (Minneapolis, 2009), 93.

⁷⁷ *Liberty's 1875–1975: An Exhibition to Mark the Firm's Centenary, July–October, 1975* (London, 1975), 4; *Liberty's Catalogue*, 1881 (1), 2, Microfiche Collection (MF), Victoria and Albert Museum Library (V&A).

⁷⁸ *Liberty's Catalogue*, 1887 (2), 63, MF, V&A.

⁷⁹ *Liberty's Catalogue*, 1886 (2), 53, MF, V&A.

⁸⁰ *Liberty's 1875–1975*, 4; *Liberty's Catalogue*, 1881 (1), 17, MF, V&A.

⁸¹ *Liberty's Catalogue*, 1881 (1), 17, MF, V&A.

ture.”⁸² Everyday activities, such as dressing in this case, could be suffused with patriotism; particularly, as de Groot argues, it was the “*combination* of the domestic . . . with the colonial . . . which had cultural power and impact.”⁸³

An examination of narratives on shawls suggests that the discourse on tasteful dressing, moreover, was a specifically gendered one tailored to instruct young women in the moral qualities of good taste while warning them about the dangers of falling prey to the modernity of fashion, particularly pertinent given the gradual decline of shawl fashion in Britain starting in the 1860s.⁸⁴ As the 1854 treatise *Dress as a Fine Art* pointed out, “fashion in dress was usually dictated by caprice or accident, or by a desire for novelty,” while taste in dress was “founded upon the observance of certain laws of nature.”⁸⁵ In shawl narratives, the latter quality was readily applicable to Kashmiri shawls and the craftsmen who drew on the beauty of nature to produce them, thus rendering them untouched by the evils of fashion or the demands of the market. It was a moral virtue, thus, to educate young women to be accomplished enough in “the art of shopping” to select “with unerring precision . . . a shawl of real Cashmere manufacture out of a promiscuous heap of others whether of British or foreign manufacture.”⁸⁶

Not surprisingly, many shawl narratives performed the specifically didactic function of distinguishing between shawls from Kashmir and all other shawls for their young readers. *Kashmeer and its Shawls*, for instance, was written as a dialogue between a young girl and her mother, during which the mother takes it upon herself to educate her daughter about the unrivaled quality of Kashmiri shawls, which she describes as “genuine,” and possessing “extraordinary beauty, . . . fineness in quality, . . . elegance in taste and design, and . . . soft brilliancy of . . . colours,” that could not be matched by any other shawl from Asia or Europe.⁸⁷ After describing to her daughter in detail the materials used in the production of the “genuine” shawl and how it was manufactured in Kashmir by patient and relentless workers with “exquisite skill,” who work “at their looms like clerks at their desk,” drawing inspiration from their beautiful natural surroundings, the mother tells her that if she passes a test on Kashmiri shawls, she will ask her father to present the girl with a Kashmiri shawl as a gift, perhaps a wedding gift, which she hopes the girl would wear whether or not the shawl was in fashion, since

⁸² *Liberty's Catalogue*, 1883 (2), 11, MF, V&A. Liberty's thus also took credit for stimulating the British woolen industry that had, its catalogs claimed, been languishing for years and was in danger of “passing into Continental hands.” See *Liberty's Catalogue*, 1887 (2), 68, MF, V&A.

⁸³ de Groot, “Metropolitan Desires and Colonial Connections,” 170.

⁸⁴ A variety of factors, including changing dress styles—particularly the rise of the bustled skirt—which were more suited to shorter mantillas, led to the decline of shawl fashion in Europe in the 1870s, although the Kashmiri and Indian shawl industries continued to supply a growing Indian demand for these commodities. See Sara Pendergast and Tom Pendergast, *Fashion, Costume and Culture: Clothing, Headwear, Body Decorations, and Footwear through the Ages*, vol. 3, *European Culture from the Renaissance to the Modern Era* (Detroit, 2004), 627; George Watt and Percy Brown, *Indian Art at Delhi: Being the Official Catalogue of the Delhi Exhibition 1902–1903* (1903; repr., Delhi, 1987), 346–47.

⁸⁵ Mrs. Merrifield, *Dress as a Fine Art* (London, 1854), 6, 2.

⁸⁶ W. M. W., “Cashmere Shawls,” 68.

⁸⁷ *Kashmeer and its Shawls*, 10–11.

“independent of its intrinsic value, it is the most refined item of dress a lady can adorn her person with.”⁸⁸

The tract then launches into a searing indictment of the superficiality of fashion, which it terms a “tyrant” that has decided that Kashmiri shawls “must be banished from all good society.”⁸⁹ The mother expresses incredulity at how such a tasteful, modest female garment could have gone out of fashion, not simply among the poor but also the wealthy, who, despite their education, let their dressmakers and milliners decide what they will or will no longer wear.⁹⁰ Ultimately, equating taste to a moral quality, she declares that “taste, like truth, must prevail” and hopes that the “wheel of fashion” will turn and “raise the Kashmeer Shawl to its former position, and that a garment, as modest as it is becoming, putting aside its beauty, durability, and excellence, may soon re-assert, under the patronage of our much-loved Queen and her daughter the Princess of Wales, that place in a lady’s wardrobe . . . it so eminently deserves.”⁹¹ Not only was good taste a moral quality, but it was also clearly a quality possessed by the upper classes, who had the responsibility to set a good example for those on lower social rungs to emulate.

The dangers of falling prey to bad taste were clear, but it was equally important to warn young Victorian women about the frivolity of taste, which made it “unfit for a rational mind,” as the young woman in the narrative poem *The New Cashmere Shawl* discovered when she is out walking the parade wearing her new Kashmiri shawl with her friends, “the Miss Browns.”⁹² In their London-made mantillas, the Miss Browns whisper with contempt to each other about the fact that she is wearing a garment that has “gone quite out of fashion.”⁹³ Her mother’s response to her after she has related this incident is presented as a lesson to all young women: “I trust that the lesson you’ve learned to day / Will not be forgotten in haste; / Nor your time for improvement be trifled away / With people of frivolous taste.”⁹⁴ Because they were in fashion, and hence modern, the London-made mantillas, and their wearers, were equated with tastelessness and triviality, while a commodity from the edge of empire, with its associations of delicacy, modesty, beauty, and hence tradition, became worthy of being a part of a young Victorian woman’s attire.

The contradictions evident in presenting and marketing Eastern goods as authentic products and hence repositories of good taste are worth pointing out. Eastern handicrafts were prized precisely because they were seen as being above market demands, hence untouched by modernity, and yet, these products, particularly luxury commodities such as Kashmiri shawls, had been geared to foreign markets for centuries. As Maxine Berg has pointed out, Eastern commodities had

⁸⁸ Ibid., 48–49nn., 13–14. Scholars have argued that Kashmiri shawls held more than merely social value for women in Victorian Britain, since they were also economically valuable and could be inherited. See Nupur Chaudhuri, “Shawls, Jewelry, Curry, and Rice in Victorian Britain,” in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, ed. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (Bloomington, IN, 1992), 234; Maskiell, “Consuming Kashmir,” 38.

⁸⁹ *Kashmeer and its Shawls*, 55.

⁹⁰ Ibid., 53–54.

⁹¹ Ibid., 58.

⁹² *The New Cashmere Shawl* (London, 1852), 7.

⁹³ Ibid., 21.

⁹⁴ Ibid.

long been “a construct of the market, seeming to represent the lives and values of the East, but constructed to meet European preconceptions of eastern art.”⁹⁵ After all, stores such as Liberty’s were commercial enterprises that thrived on marketing “authentic” oriental products, which ironically had been produced especially for them. While Kashmiri shawl weavers had long been adaptive, they were equally berated and celebrated for the supposed qualities they embodied: those of an unchanging, traditional, preindustrial past. As the qualities of tradition and immutability attached, in turn, to Kashmiri shawls, the discourse surrounding them came to embody mid-Victorian Britain’s deepening unease with industrial modernity, both by its proponents as much as its detractors.

CONCLUSION

The history of Kashmiri shawls continues to be presented in contemporary scholarship as “a morality tale for all those caught up in the boom and bust of fashion,” even as the Indian and Western bourgeoisie join hands once again to romanticize Indian craftsmanship, and Kashmiri shawls, coveted as much by Hollywood stars as “desi babes,” reemerge as embodiments of “luxury, sensuality, elitism, heritage, and a heady dose of mystique.”⁹⁶ A study of Kashmiri shawls in the context of mid-nineteenth-century popular and commodity culture—a period during which Kashmiri shawls and their British imitations became prized articles of fashion and came to occupy a special place in the Victorian popular imagination—helps trace the antecedents of this scholarly and popular memory. More significantly still, it illustrates that Victorians experienced and represented empire through its commodities, which not only helped them disaggregate the vast British imperial space into discrete parts but also provided means through which to culturally map it while participating in the drama of imperial politics.

Furthermore, by focusing on the production of a particular colonial commodity in Kashmir and its consumption in Britain, shawl narratives brought empire to the center of Victorian anxieties and debates about the meaning and impact of industrial modernity. Even as Kashmir emerged as the traditional Other—ironically created as such through the mechanisms of modernity—of a modern Britain, to be simultaneously embraced and rejected, the ostensible immutability of its prime product—the Kashmiri shawl—made it both an embodiment of Asian backwardness that had been overtaken by the stunning ingenuity of British industrialization as well as a symbol of authentic, tasteful craftsmanship that had been lost in the British race to mechanize. Whether derided or lauded, Kashmiri shawls (and their imitations) allowed Britons living in the metropole to interact with the discourse and culture of transnational production and consumption and through it to naturalize a specific part of the empire as they partook in its lived experience.

⁹⁵ Maxine Berg, “Asian Luxuries and the Making of the European Consumer Revolution,” in *Luxury in the Eighteenth Century: Debates, Desires and Delectable Goods*, ed. Maxine Berg and Elizabeth Eger (New York, 2003), 228.

⁹⁶ Peter Harris, “The Kashmir Shawl: Lessons in History and Studies in Technology,” *Ars Textrina* 16 (1991): 105; Preiti Sharma Shahane, “Hollywood Stars to Desi Babes Cosy Up to Pashmina,” *Economic Times*, New Delhi ed., 7 December 2005.