

BEST EXPORT QUALITY
by Skye Arundhati Thomas

At the time of writing this, #Colonial has 265,129 posts on Instagram. Photographs of white rooms with white furniture, wrought iron chandeliers and low-slung ceiling fans. Small plants in oversized pots, lace curtains floating softly in a breeze ... Women at the gym drinking diet tea, swimming pools lined with palm trees. A slab of wasabi.

A recent article in the *Spectator* complains that, on visits to India, local tour guides are too enthusiastic about showing white tourists old colonial buildings, desperate to recreate an imperial atmosphere. The reporter in question would rather have a poolside cocktail, turn her face up to the sun and 'think dreamy thoughts.' She calls it: Imperialism 2.0.¹ The suggestion is that former colonies are more than happy to indulge an imperial fancy. And she is not entirely incorrect: luxury hotels often advertise a 'colonial charm', the glamour of living for a few days in the leftover haze of the British Raj. Hotel hallways are lined with photographs of polo matches played atop painted elephants instead of horses, or alfresco lunches surrounded by servants turning tall fans as memsahib smokes opium from a long pipe. The high life as packaged by the British Empire.

The 'colonial' presents itself as an easy aesthetic: it is the exotic, the tropical – the sweaty, humid air of endless summers. It is ice cubes wrapped in towels or towels folded into swans, laid gently over a bed of rose petals. #Colonial is all about a *feeling*. Mystery, pageantry, adventure. The # itself, a signifier for what is trending, tells us that this feeling is a popular one, often set within a string of other trendy tags, #ootd for example (outfit of the day). Colonialism, in its entirety, is thus flattened to fit into a neat frame of aesthetic gestures. An aesthetic that feigns a certain kind of innocence, held up as it is by a

set of props, a particularly dark shade of wood for instance. Beaten and battered, weathered just the right amount.

Last summer, a friend invited me to her sister's wedding reception. I bought a dress – pink, raw silk, a scooped back, very elegant. I rushed down the Mall to make it on time and headed to the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, to what used to be the India Office. We were in the Durbar Court, a tautology, *Durbar* an Urdu word with Persian root, reminiscent of the gilded halls of old Mughal courts. The long rectangular room was panelled with little arches inlaid with carved stories of white men brooding over 'Orientals'. Oil portraits of imperial officials were hung high up on the walls, and the ceiling – a glass pyramid – let the sky pour in. At the bar, I asked another guest if he knew what the venue used to be. He replied, 'Oh I don't know, I thought it was a hotel.'

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In 2005, a Bombay-born businessman, Sanjiv Mehta, purchased the East India Company (EIC) – the trademark, the coat of arms, and its intellectual property – for twenty million pounds. Not the 'company', just the brand, readymade by history. Five years later, on the sixty-third anniversary of Indian Independence, Mehta opened a teashop in Mayfair, next to a Margiela store and opposite a travel agency that specialises in bespoke tourism – 'the perfect way to start your love affair with India!' The EIC has a Tea Library run by a resident Tea Master who will happily explain the lineage of every leaf. An excellent Orange Pekoe, if you like, handpicked from a bush planted by Prince Philip himself on a state visit to Sri Lanka in 1954. Just seventy-five pounds for sixty grams, replete with a silver caddy and spoon. The company also

sells gold and silver coins stamped with either the face of the Queen, Sachin Tendulkar or the EIC coat of arms. Mehta explains, 'The EIC had great pioneering spirit and that remains. Without the company, Britain would not have tea on its tables and in Mumbai and Bangalore, people would not be having jam on their toast for breakfast.'² I guess that is one way of seeing things.

The East India Company, founded in September 1599, was the second company in history to be structured in the manner most corporations are today – open to public investment, and thereby a mechanism able to mobilise large amounts of capital (and most importantly, superior weapons technology). In the Royal Charter of the EIC, issued in 1600, no mention was made of the company holding overseas territory, although it did give them the right to wage war. *Trade not territory*, they claimed at first. When the EIC arrived in India, there was no centralised government, just disparate kingdoms across a very large piece of land. It went on to fundamentally alter the economic structure of the country by consolidating all trade under one agency: itself. A commercial enterprise turned into a political one, slowly seizing land and waging bloody war, resulting in an imperial rule that lasted nearly two hundred years.

British writer and 'leading historian on India', William Dalrymple once stated – from a sunny terrace overlooking his farm outside Delhi, while watching peacocks dance across a field – 'we did something in India that is worth celebrating – we brought the beginning of parliamentary democracy, for one. Of course, nothing that the British brought to India can be unambiguously celebrated, but to ignore our past is fatuous.'³ Dalrymple explains how, in English schools, imperial history is often just skipped over – from Henry VIII straight to the Holocaust. In fact, it is not uncommon to happen upon British people who have never even heard of the East India Company. *But to*

ignore our past is fatuous. A hole, a gap, one that is being filled up by 'dreamy thoughts' and the promise of luxury. And let us not forget the charm, that *feeling*, the force upon which everything rests. Like drugged and defanged snakes we sway to its gentle rhythm, fed by a silver spoon, or the face of the Queen.

For Mehta, purchasing the remains of the EIC is an act of reclaiming; turning the political enterprise back into a commercial one. An Indian news channel reports on Mehta's purchase and the EIC: 'The company crest does not inspire political anger anymore, it only denotes a company in the business of the good life and some of the more acceptable qualities of the old EIC.'⁴ According to whom, exactly? As an Indian, I am outraged to know that the name is now so casually placed back into homes, onto shelves and onto little silver artefacts that sit in tall glass cupboards just for show. I find it difficult to digest that it is in Indian homes that these tea bags and silver caddies, adorned with the EIC crest, reside. And when they do, what does this say about our own aspirations as a country?

It is not uncommon that in India the white body is fetishised, a juju in the hands of brown bodies still negotiating their postcolonial place. *Best Export Quality* is a label often stamped indiscriminately onto goods in the market or on the teleshopping channel: cotton, sandalwood, tea, a Jaipur razai. Not only because yes, it is our best quality that is exported rather than sold locally, but also because the local aspiration is to own something that is good enough to export, as though things can only be legitimised if approved from the outside. Perhaps the gesture that clinches the new EIC's desperation is its Sachin Tendulkar gold coin, pressed with the face of the cricket player. Men like Tendulkar are certainly our best export quality; darling of the international cricket world, poster boy for the colonial sport ... Timeless. Tradition. Luxury. Fine Goods. Bespoke. The colonial structure perseveres,

regardless of its brutal history, simply because it has been reshaped into yet another iteration of commodity, an aesthetic reduced to its supposed charm. Like a fine Darjeeling First Flush. Floral and earthy, purists will agree it's too good for milk.

- 1 Melissa Kite, Next time I go to India, I want imperialism 2.0. January 23, 2016. <http://www.spectator.co.uk/2016/01/next-time-i-go-to-india-i-want-imperialism-2-0/> [Accessed January 2016]
- 2 Rachel Rickard Starus, East India Co is back, with Indian owner. August 16, 2010. <http://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/india/East-India-Co-is-back-with-Indian-owner/article-show/6316784.cms> [Accessed October 2015]
- 3 Stuart Jeffries, The Best Exotic Nostalgia Boom: Why the Colonial Style is Back. March 19, 2015. <http://www.theguardian.com/culture/2015/mar/19/the-best-exotic-nostalgia-boom-why-colonial-style-is-back> [Accessed October 2015]
- 4 CNN-IBN. Proud to own East India Company, says Chairman Sanjiv Mehta. August 8, 2015. <http://www.ibnlive.com/videos/world/proud-to-own-east-india-company-says-chairman-sanjiv-mehta-1034599.html> [Accessed November 2015]