



The Empire Will Not Be Your Priest

By Saloni Sharma



This piece was written by a third-year undergraduate student for the course “WRITE 297: Introduction to Writing Non-fiction”, an introductory class in writing literary non-fiction prose taught by Professor Christine Wiesenthal at the University of Alberta. In one course assignment, the students were asked to explore any Adam Matthew Digital database to find a seed story: any primary source that sparked the student’s imagination with the potential to be explored in a longer piece of creative non-fiction. Saloni Sharma’s piece, “The Empire Will Not Be Your Priest”, was one five student seed stories that turned into final end-of-term writing projects, using Adam Matthew Digital’s *India, Raj and Empire* database for inspiration.

When you were born, your mother sent the time and place of your birth to a priest back home who would then provide a rough estimate of how your life would play out. He mailed back a little red book with Lord Ganesh on the cover; for Hindus, astrology is inextricable from religion. Each page had a chart that was broken up into twelve sections, each representing a different house and zodiac. Your past lives marked each house with a different story. It was your karma and kismet determining the good, the bad, and everything in between. But the priest did not mention the looming past that coils around you like the rope used to lynch the Indian revolutionaries in the early 1930s. No, that past seems to belong to the archives and history books. So, maybe the only thing that belongs to you is your birth chart. But how can that be true when the Western archives include a Hindu birth chart from the 1700s with a depiction of your venerated gods and label them “mythological figures?” Those are your gods, not their mythologies. Perhaps it is an attempt at secularism. Or maybe a consequence of assimilation and Western knowledge systems. Either way, you are forever entangled in a predetermined fate that feels dictated by the British Empire and not your birth chart. They settled into the role of the priest and planets quite nicely, but no longer. You will reclaim what is yours.

Salt. All you could taste was salt from your tears as your mother dressed you in the heavy lehenga your grandma brought from India. You hated it. She kept telling you how pretty you looked, but you knew you were going to stick out like a sore thumb. It was picture day, not a wedding. When you looked in the mirror, you saw your chubby body all gussied up in fuchsia and gold. The embroidery on the top sparkled as the sun came through your window. The sequins would scratch the inside of your arms when you moved around too much. You wanted to believe it looked like a golden warrior chest plate that you could wear in the battle against the white world, yet the itchiness always got the best of you. But you will learn to deal with it.

You remember the contempt you felt when your parents mounted the Indian folk painting depicting Lord Krishna, his cows, and some villagers above your bed. You questioned why you could not have normal artwork or posters of Hannah Montana on your wall. But your mother would always say the same thing: “It looks pretty.” Pretty. You hated that word. You hated how it meant something different to your Indian parents. For you, pretty was being white with long blonde hair and light eyes. Pretty was speaking English and having the teachers



"A manual of astrological computations with numerous diagrams and mythological figures, written in 1788, piece 2." Material sourced from The National Library of Scotland and digitised in Adam Matthew Digital's India, Raj and Empire database. Further reproduction without permission prohibited.

talk about how perfect you were. Pretty was not some weird painting from a foreign country nor a bright fuchsia lehenga that you would pretend was anything other than what it was. But you will learn to unlearn.

You now look at paintings from Kapur Singh from the latter half of the 19th century as a third-year university student. The painting depicts the arrival of Lord Krishna into the human world. It reminds you of the painting that still hangs over your bed. But this painting is from another era, an era that continues to shape your relationship to the motherland. You wish you could tell your peers the story of this birth from memory. And you wish you could tell others why the sky is dark or who the man carrying the baby Krishna is. Perhaps a sense of cultural pride could be a tool in your writing, but you are sure you ignored your mother whenever she would try to tell the tale.

You think about Kapur Singh, an Indian person who worked on this painting despite the looming British presence. Sometimes you wonder if Singh, too, felt the need to abandon all the things that made them Indian to fit the British culture. You are reminded of a quote from Arundhati Roy: "There is a war that makes us adore our conquerors and despise ourselves." You wonder if Singh felt like that as you sit in the comfort of the "first world." But you do not forget that you are a product of the ruins of the British Empire.

You notice the depiction of the mother breastfeeding in the painting. You wonder if this act is something that may have offended the colonizers. Their Medieval and Renaissance paintings say otherwise. Then again, you do not think the British saw you as being any different than animals. In the words of Winston Churchill responding to the Bengal famine of 1943, "I hate Indians. They are beastly people with a beastly religion. The famine is their own fault for breeding like rabbits."

Winston Churchill. You remember learning about him in Grade 11, but it was not the same Winston Churchill your mother told you about: the Churchill who hated Indians and minorities. No. Instead, your Social Studies teacher called him a hero of the West because he was one who led Great Britain to victory in World War II. She had pictures of him all around

the classroom. She never mentioned the East. This was only three years ago. 2017. So much for "decolonizing" the classroom.

The phrase, "the sun never sets on the British Empire", is one that you associate with the past. You want to believe that the phrase was rendered obsolete when some of the "savage" countries gained their independence in the 20th century. But the consequence of colonialism latches onto you, etching their beliefs and notions into the hands that were meant to hold the intricate patterns of henna. How is the sun to set when it still comes through your window when you are dressed in gold, forcing you to despise your culture? The flames from this sun light up the pyre that encapsulates your traditions. Its flames glow gold from all the riches stolen, and it is fueling anger and resentment. But cremation always leaves ashes, and now you are left picking up the remains and holding them as close as possible.

Not too long ago, you took a Canadian politics class. You expected discussions about party platforms and pipelines; instead, you learned about the ways Canada's racist past is not a past at all. You still see politicians valorizing men like John A. Macdonald, who believed in the Aryan race and racial purity. How could you not question your existence as a child when you are embedded in a culture that did not want you.

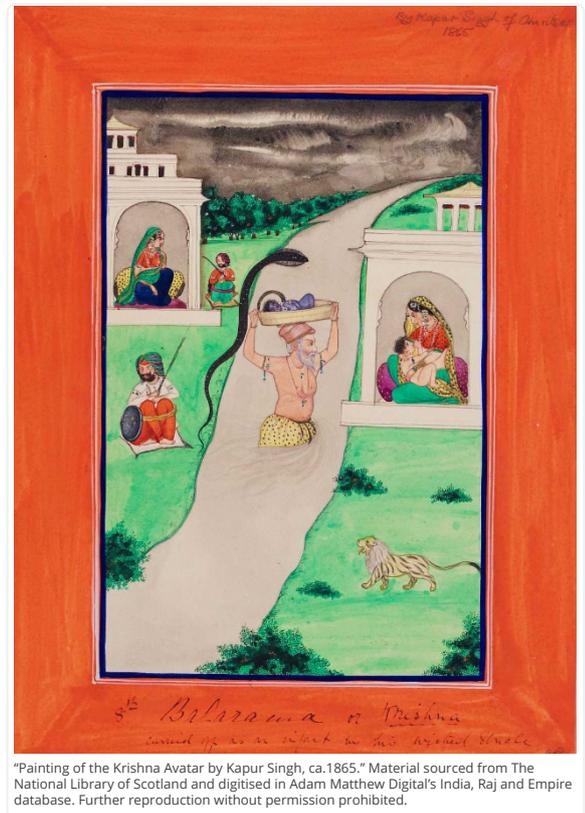
Your culture is one of many facets of your existence, but when your ancestors fought the fight of their life against the British Raj, against the empire that robbed your ancestral home, leaving it to be seen as the "third world" and forcing them to beg their robbers, your culture

becomes the very battlegrounds for your survival. Yet, you continue to pledge your allegiance and give yourself to a British Commonwealth country like Canada. A country that is sustained by the dispossession and attempted erasure of the first inhabitants of the land. But this is not the end of the story. Indigenous solidarity and resurgence are well and alive, and you are learning from it.

When you were born, your mother sent the time and place of your birth to a priest back home. You thought it would mean nothing because you existed in the continuum of Empire that consisted of Hannah Montana and other blue eyed, blonde haired people. But here you stand, embracing all the shattered parts of your cultural and religious identity. Empire will not be your priest, and it will certainly not colonize your planets. It will not call your gods mythologies. You will win the war while wearing your itchy armor.

Works Cited

- Adam Matthew Digital's [India, Raj & Empire](#) database
- Hari, Johaann. "Not his finest hour: The dark side of Winston Churchill." Independent, 27 Oct. 2010
- Roy, Arundhati. The God of Small Things. 1997.



"Painting of the Krishna Avatar by Kapur Singh, ca.1865." Material sourced from The National Library of Scotland and digitised in Adam Matthew Digital's India, Raj and Empire database. Further reproduction without permission prohibited.

Saloni Sharma is a third-year undergraduate student at the University of Alberta. She is pursuing a double major in English and Political Science. Born and raised on Treaty 6 / Métis territory, in Edmonton, Alberta, Saloni is interested in learning about what it means to live on treaty land as both a settler and child of South Asian immigrants. Although she mostly explores Canada's relationship to Indigeneity in her classes, Saloni has recently become interested in writing about the Indian diasporic experience. In the future, Saloni hopes to continue learning and writing about settler-colonialism in Canada.

"The writing process of this piece was one that really pushed me to go out of my comfort zone. I have never written about my experience with colonialism and wanted to heal from some of the experiences by writing it down. In my earlier drafts, I talk about how my story is not profound or groundbreaking, but I was advised not to water down my experiences just because other writers have written about these things before me. I owe it to myself to explore these topics, and I am excited to write more about them. It was definitely difficult living through these experiences, but I am happy with how my piece turned out. I attempted to take a more disjointed approach to this piece and experiment with a different format. I am used to basing my writing on chronology, so this was a rewarding writing experience."

