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### Hubble-Bubble of Transcultural Encounters: A Study of the Social Life of the Hookah

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This article traces the cultural history of the hookah in Indian culture from the seventeenth century to the nineteenth century, focusing on its imbrication in cultural practices and cultural narratives. In proximity with thing theory's idea of the agency of "chance interruption" to disclose the "physicality of things" (Brown 4), I argue that chance interruptions of monetisation turned hookahs as "objects" into hookahs as "things." In the first part of the article, I trace the origin of the hookah culture and then examine one such interruption of monetisation – the patronage system of the Nawabs – that made the hookahs's thing status evident and recognisable. Moreover, in the first section, I further elaborate Bill Brown's use of the term "chance interruption" and how it links to the "physicality" of the hookah in the wake of the Nawabi system. Interacting with the posthuman idea of how the material environment forms and transforms human beings, I explore the thingness of the hookah in the context of a "bazaar of thingness" (Appadurai 18) present in India. To underline this metamorphosis, in the first part of the paper, I demonstrate two things: a) an object becomes a thing through "a sequence of encapsulations" (Connor 18); that is, the production of a "thing" is directly associated with the production of a chain of significations connected to the thing itself, and b) thingness is not inherent in things but it is the effect "of recognitions and uses performed within frames of understanding (which may be markets or ad hoc negotiations of action or desire or bodily skills as much as they may be intellectual formatting or sedimented codes)" (Frow 285). To put it differently, an object evolves into a thing if it is humanly recognised. Broadly, I argue in the first section that transcultural encounters are responsible for "thingifying" hookahs. In the second part of the paper, I analyse the second interruption of monetisation, the mercantile system of the British. Furthermore, I contend that by employing the thing status of the hookah in his play, *The Play of the Hookah Smoker: A Farce in Four Acts*, Thakur Jagmohan Singh (1857–1899), an Indian playwright writing on the cusp of modernity, has created one of the first myths of Hindi nationalism. This myth feminises and demonises Bengalis, speakers of the Bengali language, so that Hindi can be extolled as the national language of the country.

#### I. Historical Interruptus and the Birth of Hookah Culture

According to Brown, the physicality of things is disclosed when, for example, "the interruption of the habit of looking through windows as transparencies enables the protagonist to look at a window itself in its opacity" (Brown 4). Citing the example of the protagonist, a doctoral student, who was addicted to the habit of looking at the filthy window (rather than through the window) in A.S. Byatt's novel, *The Biographer's Tale*, Brown claims that an object becomes a thing when rather than being looked through, it is looked at; that is, we "confront the thingness of objects when they stop working for us: when the drill breaks, when the car stalls, when the windows get filthy" (Brown 4). For Brown, a thing is not a window to history, society, nature or culture but a

physicality, which becomes noticeable through chance interruptions. These interruptions disrupt the “discourse of objectivity that allows us to use them [objects] as facts” (4). Thus, these interruptions transform objects into things, however momentarily, by changing the relation of objects with human subjects as they are no more “looked through” but “looked at.”

Following the argument laid down by Brown, I show in this section that the idea of chance interruptions can be further extended to interruptions of monetisation, and how these interruptions are responsible for bringing the paradigm shift from “looking through” to “looking at” in regard to the hookah.

The hookah as an “object” became established in India in the late sixteenth century, and gained currency in the seventeenth century. Perhaps Asad Beg, a nobleman and a courtier of the Mughal emperor, Akbar, can be considered the pioneering figure in establishing hookah culture in India. He divulges in his treatise that “in Bijapur I had found some tobacco. Never having seen the like in India, I brought some with me, and prepared a handsome pipe of jewel work” (Beg 102). He further adds that “I sent some to several of the nobles, while others sent to ask for some; indeed, all, without exception, wanted some, and the practice was introduced. After that the merchants began to sell it, so the custom of smoking spread rapidly” (104). Beg’s words clearly underline the excitement that went hand in hand with the reception of hookahs in India. Jahangir’s ban on tobacco in 1617 and *fatwas* issued against tobacco “by the orthodox ulema” (Eraly 105) couldn’t stop the circulation of hookahs. In the hands of Beg, the hookah culture certainly gained momentum but the historical transformation of hookahs from “objects” to “things” happened only with the rise of the Nawabi culture in the eighteenth century. I argue that, under the Nawabi system, hookahs became recognisable because: first, they arrested what Brown calls “the circuits of production and distribution, consumption and exhibition” (4); second, people started “looking at” them rather than “through” them; and finally, their materiality became visible only because of this “world in becoming” (to invoke Martin Heidegger). This worlding of the ever changing world of Nawabs underlined the materiality of hookahs. In the paragraphs to follow, I demonstrate how the hookah changed from being an object to being a thing.

In 1722 Saadat Khan, a Persian nobleman, founded the Nawabi dynasty of the Awadh.<sup>[1]</sup> Saadat began his career as the first Nawab working under the aegis of the Mughal emperor, but soon broke away from the Mughal empire and created his own autonomous kingdom of Awadh. <sup>[2]</sup> By the time Shuja-ud-daula came to throne as the third Nawab in 1754, “the idea that revenues collected from Oudh [an alternative spelling of Awadh] should be submitted to the emperor had changed and the province of Oudh became wealthy at the expense of the Delhi court” (Llewellyn-Jones 3). Thus Lucknow, which became the capital of Awadh, prospered between 1775 and 1856 (the year when the last Nawab, Wajid Ali Shah was deposed by the East India Company). I argue that the prosperity of Lucknow with its rise to the status of capital provided the first interruption of monetisation, and transformed the hookah into a crucial cultural thing. This interruption is directly connected to the defeat of Asaf-ud-Daula, the fourth Nawab, at the battle of Buxar. Although he lost his administrative title, he continued to enjoy full control over revenue collection. Loss of administrative control freed the Nawab of any administrative responsibility and money from revenue taxes allowed him to play the role of a benefactor to arts and culture. Thus began the first series of encapsulations in which, according to Abdul Sharar, one of the most important historians to capture the world of Lucknow: “[t]his altruism of the rich, in the way they showed regard for others and lavished generosity on them without a thought that they were conferring a favour, displayed their nobility and became the model for social etiquette” (191). This distinct world of etiquette and manners provided social life to the hookah and gave it a chance to arrest circuits of consumption and exhibition. Since hookahs in the Nawabi culture are not only affiliated with wealth (as noticed in the pre-Nawabi world) but also to etiquette and courtesy, they became symbols that were no longer “looked through” but “looked at.” Like the instance of the window discussed by Brown, hookahs were looked at during the Nawabi period as it was not the size or the cost but the sheer presence of the hookahs that uplifted the social status of the user. Using these symbols and their physicality allowed the user to become a part of the new world of

the Nawabi culture and *tehzeeb* (manners).

Hookahs's proximity with Nawabs helped them in gaining social status, and thus they became a much sought after commodity. Gradually, *tawa'ifs* (courtesans) began using hookahs to emphasise their social status. *Tawa'ifs*, one of the many types of courtesans, were at the top of the hierarchy and they were seen as reputable and epitomes of culture and civilised behavior. They were trained dancers and singers, and "typically a wealthy courtier, often the king himself, began his direct association with [them] .... He was obliged to make regular contributions in cash and jewelry, and privileged to invite his friends to soirées and enjoy an exclusive sexual relationship with a *tawa'if*" (Oldenburg 263). This association with the courtesans raised hookahs from the level of mere pleasure objects to a discourse that has the power to civilise: "it is said that until a person had association with courtesans he was not a polished man" (Sharar 192). Tilly Kettle's painting titled *Dancing Girl* (1772) is one such illustration of this association between the *tawa'if* and the hookah.



**Figure 1.** Tilly Kettle, *Dancing Girl*, 1772, Oil on Canvas, 194.9 × 121.3 cm, reproduced courtesy of the Yale Centre for British Art, Paul Mellon Collection, Paintings and Sculpture, B1981.25.385 <<http://collections.britishart.yale.edu/vufind/Record/1671353>>

The hookah as a "highly dressed" (Hickey 136) avatar gradually became a symbol of social prestige as well as culture for the English Nabobs and royals. William Hickey, an English lawyer

who visited India in the eighteenth century, was advised by another Englishman about the necessity of hookahs in this way: “Undoubtedly it is, for you might as well be out of the world as out of the fashion. Here everybody uses a hookah, and it is impossible to get on without” (136).

Besides being the symbol of social prestige and culture, the hookah eventually became what Connor calls “a thinking thing” in its role as the negotiator / mediator that can resolve differences between the natives: “A cloth is laid over the knees of the seller and purchaser, as they squat *vis-à-vis* on the ground close together; the hookah is introduced, and resorted to, whenever any little difference takes place” (Williamson 464). The hookah in its role as a mediator continued to underscore codes that can help humans to recognise its status as a thing.

The officers of the East India Company borrowed their love for their embellished hookahs from the Nawabs whom they defeated in the Battle of Buxar in 1764. [3] With the advent of the British in India in general and Lucknow in particular began a new series of encapsulations *vis-à-vis* hookahs. William Dalrymple, a British historian narrates the love of hookahs among the East India Company officers while discussing the character of the fourth baronet, Sir Thomas Metcalfe:

Certainly he was a notably fastidious man, with feelings so refined that he could not bear to see women eat cheese .... He would never have dreamt of dressing, as some of his predecessors had, in full Mughal *pagri* and *jama*.... His one concession to Indian taste was to smoke a silver hookah. This he did every day after breakfast, for exactly thirty minutes. (49–50)

Soon hookahs along with hookah *burdars* (those who prepared hookah pipes for the British to smoke) became a means to underscore the difference between the civilised and the barbarian. Although the use of the hookah pipe was adopted from the Indians, soon in its embellished incarnation along with the use of expensive tobacco, the hookah came to signify the civilised nature of the British rather than Indians. Surprisingly, the hookah became so integral to the East India Company officials that social gatherings could not be conceived without a puff of hookah. [4]

One can notice that the ascent of the hookah to the status of thing is also associated with the always changing nature of the Nawabi world. The Nawabi world was always marred by sudden transformations on account of the unanticipated decline of the Mughal empire and the meteoric rise of the British Company in India. I read the violent and frightful transitions that hookahs have undergone on the cusp of modernity in the light of Heidegger’s notion of the “worlding” of the modern world. Often characterised as “world in becoming,” “worlding” for Heidegger remains a complex mixture of ever changing perspectives and non-essentialist possibilities of the modern world. This notion accommodates and accounts for the changed consciousnesses of quasi-subjects like the hookah. Moreover, following the Heideggerian argument that “the world of *Dasein* is a with-world [*Mitwelt*]. Being-in is Being with Others” (155), I argue that the presence or *Dasein* of the hookah becomes visible only in its engagement with others, not in isolation. I argue that this changing world, or what Heidegger calls the worlding, is responsible for changing the object status of the hookah and bestowing upon it the presence (*Dasein*) that transformed the hookah into a thing.

Furthermore, the presence of the hookah as a thing becomes evident when one reads it in the wake of Jane Bennett’s idea of a thing with agency. According to Bennett, “thing-power, as a kind of agency, is the property of an assemblage. Thing-power materialism is a (necessarily speculative) onto-theory that presumes that matter has an inclination to make connections and form networks of relations with varying degrees of stability” (354). In conjunction with Bennett’s idea of agency, the hookah established itself in India as an “object” of social taste and addiction and soon in the hands of the Nawabs, it became a “thing” with an ability to civilise; its engagement with the British, further, turned it into a denser “thing” promulgating cultural imperialism as its usage differentiated between the civilised English and the barbaric Indians.



## II. The Hookah as Memento Foedari

The character of the hookah was further anthropomorphised in 1857 as India came under direct British rule. I read this change in administration as the second interruption of monetisation. This change resulted from the new mercantile system of the British. The new system ensured that the excess that remained one of the hallmarks of the Nawabi rule was replaced by reasonable and moral behavior. This change was noticed, immediately, after the British managed to defeat the nationalists in the Great Revolt of 1857. The hookah was held accountable for the war and laxity on the part of the British to let the war happen or delay on their part to curb it immediately. After the war, the hookah, a bosom friend of the British as well as the Mughals, was exiled. [5] It came to be seen as an Oriental seductress that could seduce the British to participate in what Conrad terms “the horror, the horror” of Oriental ways. Suddenly, it became a thing to be abstained from because, first, it “encouraged vice and Oriental repose for the ‘indolent in mind and body’ who refused the hookah with difficulty due to their lack of character” (Patterson 111). Secondly, hookah smoking promoted contact with hookah-*burdars*, and thus it led to breaking “the social distance between Indian men and the British women” (111). In the hands of the British, the hookah became a national subject with negative aesthetics. This transformation of the hookah into a dangerous thing is the manifestation of its “thing- power” (to use a phrase from Jane Bennett). According to Bennett, the “thing-power often first reveals itself as a negativity, a confounding or fouling up of an intention, desire, schema, or concept” (361). The victory of the British against the Indian rebels in the revolt of 1857 brought forth an idea of honor. Post-1857, honor became one of the pillars of British Raj in India and one of the Ten Commandments that the British had to stick to while ruling the “natives.” This idea of honor established the hookah’s status as an outcast.

If before the revolt, the hookah was seen as the symbol of Oriental grandeur, a reputable symbol of pleasure, after it, it was negatively feminised due to its connection with *tawa'ifs*. After the Great Revolt the hookah started to be seen in a negative light, as the symbol of debauchery and effeminacy.

Premchand, one of the most prominent Hindi writers, threw light on this world of excess and luxury in his story “Shatranj Ke Khiladi” (“The Chess Players” 1924). The story stresses the addiction to chess of two aristocrats under the reign of the last Nawab, Wajid Ali Shah. The story was adapted into a film of the same name by Satyajit Ray in 1977. Other than chess, the second device used by Premchand to emphasise the excess in this world, is the hookah. In fact, the hookah became the symbol of excess as Premchand writes: “Hookah, like the heart of a lover, always kept burning” (116).

To further illustrate this point, I engage with the social life of the hookah after 1857 in regard to its representation in *The Play of the Hookah-Smoker* by Thakur Jagmohan Singh. *The Play of the Hookah Smoker* was “probably written during Jagmohan’s studies at the Wards’ Institution and Queen’s College in Banaras, i.e., between 1866 and 1878” (Singh 283). In the history of India, the year 1857 is considered a monumental year for two reasons. First, it is known for the Great Revolt (often called the first war of Indian Independence) against the British, and secondly, the Great Revolt ended the control of the East India Company and plunged India into the colonial rule era called the British Raj.

Tennyson captured the saddened voice of an English coloniser, in his poem “The Defence of Lucknow” when he projected patriotic Indians participating in the Great Revolt as “murderous mole[s]” (141). Thakur Jagmohan Singh was the son of one of these “murderous moles” who participated in the war of 1857. Singh’s father, Saryuprasad, lost all his estates to the British after it was discovered that he participated against the British, and he then “committed suicide to avoid being transferred to the Andaman Islands” (Walle 283). Jagmohan Singh, born shortly before his father’s death in 1857, was “sent by the government to Banaras in 1866 to study at the Wards’ Institution and Queen’s College” (Walle 283). Both these institutions were especially designed by

the British to create “a class who may be interpreters between us [the British] and the millions whom we govern; a class of persons, Indian in blood and color, but English in taste, in opinions, in morals, and in intellect. To that class we may leave it to refine the vernacular dialects of the country” (Macaulay 430). Although influenced by British education, Singh, along with his friend, Bharatendu Harishchandra, used his knowledge of British ways to start the first wave of nationalism in the Hindi belt, which is “considered to extend across North India from Rajasthan to Bihar” (Shackle and Snell 4). Rather than showing the colonial influence on the corpus of Singh, which Robert van de Walle has already documented, I engage with Singh’s discourse of nationalism. One of the characteristic features of Singh’s discourse is its espousal of masculinity. The idea of masculinity remained influential among the Indian nationalists. According to Aravamudan, the reason for the espousal of “androgyny and remasculinization” by the Indian nationalists was to counter the charge of native effeminacy and degeneration by the Anglicist British colonisers (Aravamudan 65).

In proximity with both the idea of masculinity and Indians as “murderous moles” proposed by Tennyson, Singh proposes his idea of a “murderous mole” as a person from the region of Bengal. The play interweaves three words – Bengali, hookah, and dishonor – to create a nationalist narrative by engaging with two storylines. The first part of the story presents a “deceitful” student named Kirachi hailing from the region of Bengal (Singh 291). The second part deals with the eponymous and anonymous Bengali Hookah smoker, who is considered boastful and a “fool” by other characters in the story (291).

By interrelating Bengali, hookahs and dishonor, Singh advances one of the first myths of nationalism. This myth positions Hindi, especially standard Hindi spoken by educated people like Hound (role played by Singh himself) and Madanmohan in the play, as the divinely ordained language hailing from Vedic Sanskrit, as proposed by the nationalists in the Hindi belt. The divine character of Hindi is underlined through the innocent and honorable nature of the characters who use it in the play. By proposing that the speakers of Bengali are tricksters, effeminate and dishonorable, the play demonises them. The two reasons that led to the demonisation of Bengalis in the play are: first, Bengali is a language that competed with Hindi for being the *lingua franca* of India. Secondly, Singh’s articulation of Bengali males as deceitful and effeminate was the product of the larger colonial debate of the status of an educated Bengali male. The Great Revolt of 1857 highlighted the failure of the Anglicist program that wanted to create a class of people closer to the English taste. In India that class was primarily dominated by educated Bengali males:

The expression of Indian discontent in 1857 was seen as a warning against the radical restructuring of ‘traditional’ Indian society. The suppression of the rebellion and the transfer of India from the East India Company to the British Crown in 1858 ushered in a new era of caution: the colonial administrators henceforth sought allies in the traditional landholding classes and orthodox religious leaders who were seen as the main forces behind the rebellion of 1857. (Sinha 4)

It is relevant to remember that Singh was the member of one such traditional landholding class.

The task of demonising Bengalis is accomplished by a simple process of “othering.” This “othering” is achieved by Singh through a two-step process. First, he feminises (as well as presents the deceitful side of) the Bengali male through verse, and second, he presents the foolish side of him through the dramatic device of the aside.

In the paragraphs to follow, I illustrate this two-step process of “othering” by engaging with two Bengali characters: Kirachi, and an anonymous Hookah smoker. In Act III, Hound informs Madanmohan about how he was deceived by his Bengali friend, Kirachi, and while describing the treacherous behavior of Kirachi, he recites this verse: “[m]y beloved has gone and taken away her caresses, my throat has become sore with not eating” (Singh 286). In the same act, Kirachi is further feminised as Madanmohan sings the song written by Prempatra to describe the trauma

suffered by Hound at the hands of Kirachi: “[t]he beloved has taken my heart and deceived me” (288). Both these verses play an important role in feminising Kirachi.

In Act IV, Nakku, in conversation with the anonymous Hookah-smoker, presents the true character of the Hookah-smoker to the audience through aside. The dialogue between them reads like this:

Hookah-smoker: Those fools [Pandits] don’t know a thing about reality.

Nakku: Yes, you are right sir ... (softly) you are a *F-o-o-l*.

Hookah-smoker: You know every single *Vice* in the world is caused by good advice.

Nakku: (softly) ... he’s gone mad. (291)

This dialogue between Nakku and Hookah-smoker clearly shows how Hookah-smoker has been ridiculed through the dramatic device of the aside, and thus the play is a good example of how an educated Hindi-speaking elite in Banaras like Singh regarded Bengalis. This othering mechanism adopted by Singh from the British can be a part of what Mary Louise Pratt called transculturation, a term used by ethnographers “to describe how subordinated or marginal groups select and invent from materials transmitted to them by a dominant or metropolitan culture” (6). Like the “Orient other” created by the British, the Bengali “other” lacks all elements of charm and goodness for an educated Hindi speaking elite. Interestingly, the deceitful Bengalis are shown to smoke hookahs either to highlight how hookahs can make you dishonorable and effeminate or to accentuate how hookahs are hand in glove with deceit and dishonor. This device of othering using the hookah has also remained popular among film directors such as Satyajit Ray. Ray, in his film, *Jalsaghar (The Music Room, 1958)* uses this device to critique the ‘Bengali’ masculinity. The ‘Bengali’ patriarch in the film is imagined as a decadent figure almost always at the mercy of the hookah and music.

The hookah, in the play is a constant collaborator of the Bengalis, which is presented as the “other” of honor. In other words, the play manages to dub the hookah as memento *foedari*. Memento *foedari* is a symbol that continuously reminds one of an act of dishonor. The hookah, in nineteenth century Hindi literature, is acknowledged as a symbol of treachery and dishonor by both the British and the Indians located in the Hindi belt. As shown in the first section, the hookah’s engagement with courtesans feminised it. Following the argument, one can say that the transformation of a Bengali man into an effeminate man is due to the influence of the hookah. Thus, the influencing power of the hookah further suggests that “this is not a world, in the first instance, of subjects and objects, but of various materialities constantly engaged in a network of relations. It is a world populated less by individuals than by groupings or compositions that shift over time” (Bennett 354). Additionally, the hookah’s power to influence can be considered as an articulation of its thing-power.

In summation, this paper serves as a testimony to the thingness of the hookah. In the course of the paper, I have analysed the transformation of the hookah into a thing. I have shown how interruptions of monetisation in the Indian context can be seen as an extension of what Brown calls “chance interruption.” These interruptions helped us in catching a glimpse of the thing-power of the hookah. The thing-power of the hookah is manifested not in its “singularity” and “ruliness” (I have taken both these terms from Appadurai) but how it manages to be many things from being a symbol emphasising social hierarchy to memento *foedari*, a symbol of dishonor. The hookah’s thing status is related both to its power to invade liminal spaces of social hierarchy and social control, and its power to perform within the frames of human understanding. Although the eschewal of the hookah by the British and Indians alike after the war of 1857 ended its usage, the

“thing” status of the hookah continued to gain prominence. Postmodernist resurrections of hookah bars all over the world are nostalgic murmurs of the lost celebrity status of the hookah and what a thing it used to be.

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## Endnotes

1. The term ‘nawab’ is “derived from the Persian word for ‘deputy,’ implying recognition of the ultimate sovereignty of the Mughal emperors” (Llewellyn-Jones 2).
2. Ironically, the creation of the office of Nawab by the Mughal government was to bring together “the offices of revenue manager (*diwan*) and governor (*subahdar*)” to strengthen the foundation of the Mughal rule (Bayly 19).
3. Discussing the role of smoking among the officials of the East India Company, Percival Spear writes: “By the sixties [1760s] the fashion of hookah smoking had become firmly established” (98).
4. Johan Splinter Stavorinus, who came to India as a captain in the employ of the Dutch East India Company, described one such meeting with the Governor of Calcutta in 1669. He writes:

Here we found, in a large and airy saloon, a table of sixty or seventy covers. The service was entirely of plate .... When the cloth was taken away, a *hooka*, which is a glass filled with water, through which the smoke of tobacco is drawn, and of which I shall speak further, was set before every one of the company, and after having smoked for half an hour, we all rose from table, and separated each to his respective dwelling. (145)

5. Bahadur Shah Zafar, the last Mughal King, was “not allowed” his hookah during his trial on 27 January 1958 (Dalrymple 436).

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