

Another Passage To India By Sarah Shades

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Introduction

Linda Colley's chapter "Another Passage to India" recovers the life of Sarah Shade, a poor and only partly literate British woman whose experiences in late eighteenth-century India challenge heroic accounts of empire. Comparing Shade with George Washington initially appears unusual. Shade was a military camp follower whose mobility depended on husbands, armies, and imperial conflict; Washington became a wealthy landowner, military commander, and the first president of the United States. Yet the contrast is analytically valuable because both lives were formed by the expansion and fragmentation of the British Atlantic empire. Each learned to use opportunity, mobility, and personal reputation, but the resources available to them were radically unequal. Washington could turn surveying, land ownership, war, and public office into durable power. Shade survived through language, adaptation, household labor, relationships, and memory in circumstances she rarely controlled.

The comparison therefore should not reduce both figures to the claim that they "made the most of opportunity." It should examine who was permitted to possess land, command soldiers, publish an authoritative account, and define political liberty. Shade's story exposes empire from below, while Washington's career shows how colonial privilege could be converted into national leadership. Together, they illuminate the relationship among literacy, gender, class, war, slavery, and historical memory. (Anderson & Cayton, 2005)

Sarah Shade: A Life Recorded at the Margins

Sarah Shade appears in Colley's *Captives: Britain, Empire and the World, 1600-1850* as one of the ordinary people caught in Britain's overseas expansion. She was not a senior official, celebrated writer, or wealthy traveler. She belonged to the mobile population surrounding British military forces: wives, partners, children, servants, traders, and camp followers whose work sustained armies but whose lives were seldom preserved in official archives. The published description of Colley's book identifies Shade as a camp follower imprisoned alongside defeated British forces in southern India. (Colley, 2002)

Shade's vulnerability came from several directions. Her poverty limited her choices; her gender placed her legal and economic security largely within relationships with men; and her movement across India was shaped by war. She became attached to a succession of military men and experienced violence, injury, dislocation, and captivity. Colley treats her body itself as evidence of empire because wounds, scars, illness, and survival recorded consequences that official maps and

victory reports concealed.

At the same time, Shade was not merely passive. She learned to navigate unfamiliar environments, communicate across cultural boundaries, perform practical work, and preserve a detailed memory of events. Her story suggests immersion in Indian life beyond the enclosed world of British officers. That adaptation complicates a simple division between British colonizer and Indian subject. Poor Europeans abroad could possess racial privileges while also remaining dependent on Indian knowledge, labor, food, language, and protection. Shade's life demonstrates that empire was not an effortless projection of British power; it was unstable, improvised, and often dangerous for the people who served it.

George Washington: Mobility Converted into Property

Washington's early career also involved movement through contested imperial spaces. Trained as a surveyor, he developed knowledge of Virginia lands and western territories at a time when British colonists, Indigenous nations, land companies, and imperial governments advanced competing claims. Surveying was not simply a neutral technical skill. It translated landscapes into property boundaries and made land legible for sale, settlement, speculation, and taxation. Washington used his professional experience, family relationships, military service, and political connections to accumulate land.

Unlike Shade, Washington operated within institutions that recognized his claims to property and authority. He inherited land and enslaved people, married into wealth, acquired western acreage, served in the Virginia militia, and entered colonial politics. The French and Indian War expanded his military reputation and his familiarity with western territory. The American Revolution later transformed him from a colonial elite within the British Empire into the commander of a movement that rejected British rule.

Washington's fortune cannot be explained solely by talent and discipline. His plantation economy depended on enslaved labor. Mount Vernon's official historical record states that 317 people were enslaved on its farms in 1799 and that Washington controlled both people he owned and people tied to the Custis estate. His land, household, commercial activity, and public status were therefore connected to a system that denied freedom and property to others. Any comparison that praises his ability to create wealth without confronting slavery repeats the unequal historical perspective that Shade's story helps correct. (George Washington's Mount Vernon, n.d.-a; George Washington's Mount Vernon, n.d.-b)

Literacy, Voice, and Who Becomes an Author

One of the sharpest differences between the two figures concerns control over the written record. Washington received limited formal schooling compared with some members of the colonial elite, but he became an accomplished writer of letters, accounts, orders, surveys, and political documents. His papers were preserved because he occupied positions of power. He could communicate directly with officials, creditors, overseers, military officers, and political allies, shaping decisions and his own reputation.

Shade's story reached readers through mediation. Because she was semi-literate or unable to produce a polished written narrative independently, other people helped convert oral memory into print. This process preserved her experiences but also introduced uncertainty. An editor or publisher could reorder events, standardize language, emphasize sensational injuries, or reshape the account for a paying audience. Her narrative is therefore both an invaluable source and a constructed text. Historians must ask which words are likely hers, which belong to an intermediary, and what the publication market expected from tales of captivity and India.

The contrast shows that literacy is more than an individual skill. It is access to institutions that certify a person's account. Washington's documents entered archives as records of government and leadership. Shade's memories entered print as an unusual survival story. Both require critical reading, but the social authority assigned to them was never equal.

War as Opportunity and Catastrophe

War altered both lives. For Washington, military conflict became a route to advancement. His early service produced setbacks as well as experience, but it connected him to influential networks and established the public identity that later supported his appointment as commander in chief. During the Revolution, he possessed institutional command, although he also endured shortages, military defeats, political pressure, and the constant risk that the army would collapse.

For Shade, war was not a chosen public vocation. It entered domestic life, interrupted movement, and exposed camp followers to hunger, capture, disease, and physical violence. She did not receive rank, land grants, or enduring political prestige from suffering. Captivity revealed the limits of British control in India and the dependence of ordinary Britons on military outcomes they could not direct. Her experience reminds readers that wars celebrated through commanders are lived differently by civilians and support populations.

This difference is central to the comparison. Washington exercised strategic agency within war; Shade practiced survival within war. Both displayed endurance, but the rewards attached to that endurance were structured by class and gender.

Empire, Captivity, and Competing Claims to Freedom

Washington's political reputation rests on the struggle for American independence. He helped create a republic whose leaders described British rule as a form of political bondage. Yet the new nation preserved chattel slavery, displaced Indigenous communities, and restricted political participation. Washington's own life contained this contradiction. After the Revolution he expressed private discomfort with slavery and provided in his will for the eventual emancipation of the enslaved people he legally owned, but he did not make abolition a public program and could not free those belonging to the Custis estate.

Shade's literal captivity in India creates a different angle on the language of freedom. She experienced confinement by forces resisting British expansion, but she was also part of an imperial military community. Her personal suffering was real and should not be minimized; at the same time, the conflict cannot be understood by assuming Britain represented freedom and Indian resistance represented tyranny. Captivity narratives often encouraged readers to identify with European prisoners while overlooking conquest, coercion, and the vulnerability of colonized populations.

Placing Shade and Washington together therefore reveals layered freedoms. A colonist could demand independence while enslaving others. A poor British woman could share the empire's racial advantages while lacking economic autonomy. Indian rulers could imprison British captives while also fighting an expanding colonial power. Historical analysis becomes stronger when it refuses to turn any one of these facts into the entire story.

Different Forms of Intelligence

The original comparison values Shade's memory and Washington's strategic ability. That insight can be expanded by distinguishing forms of knowledge. Washington possessed surveying knowledge, agricultural records, military organization, financial calculation, and political communication. These skills were recognized by institutions and converted into offices and property.

Shade possessed embodied and practical knowledge: how to travel with an army, find food, communicate, manage household work, understand local customs, and survive danger. Her linguistic adaptability was especially important in a multilingual colonial environment, although claims about the exact number of languages she spoke should be treated cautiously unless supported by the primary account. Memory allowed her to reconstruct decades of movement after returning to Britain. Her intelligence was not less significant because it lacked formal credentials; it was less rewarded because social institutions valued it differently.

Marriage, Family, and Economic Security

Marriage shaped both lives, but again under unequal conditions. Washington's marriage to Martha Dandridge Custis increased his access to land, wealth, and enslaved labor and strengthened his position within Virginia society. Although their relationship had personal dimensions, marriage also functioned as an economic and legal institution that expanded his resources.

Shade's relationships with military men offered protection and access to the military community, but they could not create equivalent security. The death, reassignment, abandonment, or defeat of a partner could immediately alter her circumstances. Her repeated attachments should not be interpreted as moral failure or opportunism without context. For a poor woman in an army environment, partnership could be one of the few available arrangements for shelter, income, and social recognition.

Public Memory and Historical Scale

Washington became a monumental national figure. Government buildings, schools, currency, and public rituals carry his name. This commemoration can obscure the contingency of his career and the people whose labor supported it. Modern scholarship has increasingly integrated the lives of enslaved people at Mount Vernon into interpretation of Washington, making his achievement more complete rather than less historical.

Shade's recovery works in the opposite direction. She had almost disappeared from conventional histories because she did not command policy or institutions. Colley restores her not to claim that she exercised the same power as Washington, but to change the scale at which empire is studied. Through Shade, readers see that imperial history includes cooks, partners, injured travelers, prisoners, and multilingual intermediaries. Her life challenges the assumption that only decision-makers create historically significant knowledge.

Conclusion

Sarah Shade and George Washington both lived through the reorganization of the British imperial world, but they occupied profoundly different positions within it. Washington converted mobility, surveying, military service, inheritance, marriage, slavery, and political networks into property and national authority. Shade converted memory, practical intelligence, relationships, and cultural adaptation into survival, while her story reached the public only through mediated narration. Their shared resourcefulness should not hide unequal power.

The comparison is most useful when it reveals how opportunity is socially distributed. Washington could claim land and command armies because legal and political institutions recognized him as a

propertied white man. Shade's contributions remained informal because poverty and gender limited her access to those institutions. Reading them together exposes the heroic and the vulnerable sides of empire and demonstrates why history must include both celebrated founders and ordinary people whose bodies and memories carried the costs of expansion.

References

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