ANTOINETTE BURTON

# THE POSTCOLONIAL CAREERS OF SANTHA RAMA RAU

*The Postcolonial Careers of Santha Rama Rau*

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# *The Postcolonial Careers of Santha Rama Rau*

ANTOINETTE BURTON

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*For Patricia Ryan*
in memoriam
1937–2007

beautiful
loving
brave

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My work is not art.—Santha Rama Rau

INTRODUCTION

# *The East as a Postcolonial Career*

When we talk of Asia, remember that India, not because of any ambition of hers, but because of the force of circumstances, because of geography, because of history and because of so many other things, inevitably has to play a very important role in Asia. And not only that; India becomes a kind of meeting ground for various trends and forces, a meeting ground between what might roughly be called the East and the West.—Jawaharlal Nehru, "India's Foreign Policy"

What is the fate of the historians' informant?—Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, *A Critique of Postcolonial Reason*

Santha Rama Rau (b. 1923) was one of the best-known South Asian writers in postwar America. The author of half a dozen books between 1945 and 1970 (travelogues, novels, a memoir, and a Time-Life cookbook as well as a Broadway play), she was a regular contributor to *The New Yorker*, the *New York Times*, and a range of periodicals from *Holiday* magazine to *McCall's* to *Reader's Digest*.[1] Her books were routinely advertised and reviewed in a variety of print culture outlets from Hartford to Kansas City to Shreveport and beyond—venues in which she was typically celebrated as the embodiment of "East Meets West."[2] She was an occasional radio personality and television guest, a recurrent figure on the New York social scene, and a public defender of "the American image abroad."[3] She was, arguably, one of the most popular translators of India—in both its late Raj and its postcolonial incarnations

—to an aspiring middle-class, white U.S. public not only aware of its new role on the world stage but increasingly alive to its responsibilities as the inheritor of the geopolitical power and cultural capital of the former British empire. Though her politics was made at a different historical moment, like the figure of Arundhati Roy in the late-twentieth-century West, Rama Rau enjoyed wide circulation in and, as significantly, "critical promotion" by, the mass media, producing narratives of "the Orient" for an appetitive, consumerist public during an extended moment of American neo-imperial hegemony.[4]

Today, Santha Rama Rau scarcely registers as even a minor diasporic writer, let alone as a major postcolonial figure, whether in India or in the United States. Most people to whom I mentioned her while working on this project had never heard of her. Those who had (mainly South Asians of a certain generation) viewed her as a negligible talent and expressed surprise that I thought she merited any sustained critical attention. What little academic criticism there is on her tends to evaluate her writing as literature, rather than focusing on the trajectory of her career as an authority on India, its role in Asia, and its significance in the postcolonial world.[5] As for Santha Rama Rau herself, she is aware of and bemused by the fate of her public image. As she told me rather self-mockingly in an interview in 2004, she was once introduced to a woman at a cocktail party who said to her, "Santha Rama Rau? Didn't you used to be famous?"[6] Understanding the phenomenon of Rama Rau's career in the marketplace of transnational political culture and historicizing her as a precursor to later generations of postcolonial experts on India and "the East" are, together, the major concerns of this book.

The minor celebrity that Rama Rau's career provided her in the first few decades of postwar America stemmed in part from the opportunities that her elite family background afforded. Raised in India and Britain with stints in prewar South Africa and postwar Tokyo, she was the daughter of nationalist parents with well-established transnational reputations dating from the interwar years. Her father, Benegal Rama Rau, had been a member of the Round Table Conference and served as the first Indian ambassador to the United States after 1945, while her mother, Dhanvanthi Rama Rau, was an ardent advocate of birth control whose feminist commitments and activities spanned two continents.[7] The Rama Raus senior

represent just one of several generations of highly mobile elites that include Rabindranath Tagore, Mohandas K. Gandhi, and Jawaharlal Nehru: Indian nationalists whose relationships to the British imperial center as well as to America, Europe, Africa, and Asia remind us of the often neglected, contrapuntal geographies of travel in the pre-postcolonial world.[8] Santha Rama Rau's intimacy with these traditions, together with her parents' personal and professional connections, gave her an entrée into the upper echelons of American political culture where, especially during the Kennedy years, the cult of celebrity intersected with and was in turn shaped by the diplomatic world of the Washington embassy scene and the United Nations in ways that historians are just beginning to appreciate.[9]

Breaking with a century-old tradition of higher education in Britain for the children of nationalist elites, Rama Rau was the first diplomatic daughter to be sent to college in the United States. She was also the first Indian woman to graduate from Wellesley College (1944), to be followed more famously by Vijay Lakshmi Pandit's daughter (and Nehru's niece), Nayantara Sahgal, who finished three years later.[10] These affiliations created a corridor of influence between Boston and Washington that Rama Rau was to traverse throughout much of her adult life, and which helped cement her reputation as a diasporic Indian writer in America. Although she enjoyed national recognition in her day, and while she traveled back and forth to India on a yearly basis for almost fifty years after graduating from Wellesley, at the height of her career Santha Rama Rau's "America" was effectively New York City and environs, which has served more or less as her permanent home since the early 1950s. Once her uncle, Sir Benegal Narsing Rau, was appointed as Indian delegate to the Security Council in 1950, Santha Rama Rau became privy to its "countless sessions and debates" as well as to the well-heeled social world that swirled around them, first on Long Island, where the UN was temporarily headquartered, and later in Manhattan, where she made some of the most important literary connections of her career, including with Harold Ross of *The New Yorker*.[11]

Santha Rama Rau's relationship with and marriage to Faubion Bowers, who had been an aide to General MacArthur in Tokyo and who traveled in many of the same postwar diplomatic circles as her family, also benefited the career as a journalist and travel writer that she cultivated from

the late 1940s onward. Bowers was an expert on Asian arts and theater, and it was the convergence of his interests with hers that took them to Southeast Asia, Africa, and Russia in the first decades of the Cold War.[12] Although enabled by her family of birth and her choice of partner, the modicum of fame Santha Rama Rau achieved resulted mainly from her success at being recognized as an authority on India on the eve of independence. As the titles of two of her most popular books (*Home to India* [1945] and *This Is India* [1954]) suggest, she entered the American scene as an India expert—someone with impeccable credentials by virtue of her pedigree and her personal experiences.[13] Regardless of the forms it took, Rama Rau's writing offered American readers an insider's view of Indian cultures, traditions, and histories in an effort to counter what she viewed as serious misrepresentations of India in the public mind. As I argue in the ensuing pages, Santha Rama Rau modeled a Cold War cosmopolitanism that was at once grounded in her Indian experiences, inflected by her American careers, and shaped by gendered apprehensions of "the East" that her work both embodied and challenged.

Those postcolonial careers were, in turn, rooted in vigorous criticism of images of India in the Cold War culture of the globally ambitious United States. Although she did not use the word "orientalism"—after all, Edward Said's book of the same name was first published in 1978—Santha Rama Rau elaborated a taxonomy of common misapprehensions about India that anticipated the critical purchase of that now famous term. In *This Is India* (1954), for example, she characterized Western images of India that associated it only with the "primitive" and the "miserable" as "the Mother India school" of thinking—referring to the American reformer Katherine Mayo's book *Mother India*, which caused an international sensation in India, Britain, and America when it was published in 1927 because of the way it pathologized Indian society, particularly with respect to its treatment of women.[14] Several years later, in a series of lectures she gave across the United States to promote her autobiography, *Gifts of Passage* (1961), Santha Rama Rau expanded this critique, telling audiences that the extant literature on India written by Westerners fell into four broad categories: The Lean Bronzed Horseman School; The Sensitive People of a Foreign Culture School; The Earth and Mystery School; and The Mystical Mysterious Orient School.[15] Without naming

names, she indicted a whole cadre of Western writers on both sides of the Atlantic who had carved out a niche for themselves since the interwar period by orientalizing India for Western consumption. These would have included a raft of 1950s writers—including Gardner Fox, whose *Woman of Kali* was advertised with copy that read "in her temple of exotic love the fate of an empire was decided"—as well as interwar writers like Edison Marshall, whose *Love Stories of India* sold in 1945 for the pulp fiction price of twenty-five cents.[16] As Dorothy B. Jones noted in her 1955 study of images of India and China in American film, portrayals of India after independence were less focused on failed attempts at rebellion against the British than their pre-1947 predecessors; this was due at least in part to the influence of Ram Bagi, who began to select Indian-made films like *Light of Asia* for American release in 1949.[17] As she also notes, the themes of primitive tribesmen, affable or treacherous rajahs, and stalwart Bengal soldiers persisted both on screen and off in the Cold War popular imagination.[18]

In the pages that follow, readers will get a glimpse of how densely populated the cultural landscapes of the postwar United States were by images of India—through popular venues like *Reader's Digest* to middlebrow magazines like *Holiday* to the photographs of Jackie Kennedy's 1962 trip to India (which arguably mediated "high" and "low" apprehensions of the "East" to the American public). Despite the rare challenge to stereotypical views, the dominant character of Indian representations was orientalist. And it was the preponderance of these images that Rama Rau sought to refute by representing India as a site of multiple cultural influences, as the home of lively aesthetic and culinary practices both ancient and modern, and, above all, as an appealing tourist destination.[19] Whether she was likening Jaipur to Paris or Bombay to Manhattan (calling the latter "the New York of the Orient"), Rama Rau strove to rescue India from the condescension of Cold War commentators by materializing its complexities and by putting it on the same cultural plane as Euro-America.[20] If in the process she consolidated her own reputation as a "citizen of the world," she did so by rendering India more majestic than miserable, more modern than primitive, more cosmopolitan than provincial. As we will see, for Santha Rama Rau, this meant that India was not just emblematic of the power and possibility of Asia in the new world

order; it was also, both literally and figuratively, representative of "the new world of Asia" *tout court*.[21]

How do we account for the fact that an Indian woman was able to fashion a career as a semi-professional authority on India in a culture saturated with what Christina Klein has called "Cold War orientalism"?[22] We could begin by conceding that simply by entering the public sphere as an Indian woman, Santha Rama Rau was subject to fetishization as an emblem of the Orient herself: that whether she was speaking of India or not, she was always already speaking "as India," with all the gendered connotations (primitiveness, exoticism, sexual availability) which that locative position entailed. It is easy enough to read American press coverage of her in light of this "problematic visibility," as Nandini Bhattacharya has termed the fate of the Indian woman in public, both historically and now.[23] As recent work on the subject suggests, the history of American orientalism is a long and complex phenomenon, and in emphasizing the orientalist character of Rama Rau's Cold War profile I don't want to suggest that she in any sense originated the role of twentieth-century female "oriental" cosmopolitan—a figure embodied by Anna May Wong in the interwar years and by Han Suyin in the same period as Rama Rau.[24] But Santha Rama Rau was certainly one of the more prominent postwar incarnations of oriental and orientalist "mystique." From the appearance of her first book, *Home to India*, published by Harper in 1945, Rama Rau was championed as a writer with "a Western mind . . . [and] an Indian heart."[25] This characterization drew on decades of British colonial discourse about the colonizer / mind / masculine-native / body / feminine split as a rationale for imperial power, redeploying it to orientalize the figure of the Indian woman in historically new but eminently familiar ways. The ornamentalizing effects of this particular brand of American orientalism are also evident in the images of her that appeared in advertisements for and reviews of her books in the *New York Times*, in the poses she struck for fashion outlets like *Flair*, and in the lush and exoticized visuals that accompanied her work for *Holiday* magazine—images over which she exerted some but not total control, and which give a whole new meaning to the phrase "arm-chair orientalism."[26] Although her class status protected her to some degree from the associations with disrespectability that might have attached to her as a single Indian woman

traveling the world, even elite connections such as hers were not necessarily a failsafe against the gendered dangers of "reputation" (an analog of career) in 1950s America. Thus despite her trenchant critique of the "Mystical Mysterious Orient School" of Indian literature, early photographs of Rama Rau often framed her from the neck up, semi-shrouded in a headscarf—at least until she embraced that signature coiffure of the period, the beehive hairdo.[27]

Orientalism certainly offers a powerful interpretive possibility for appreciating how and why Santha Rama Rau was able to do the ideological work she did in Cold War America. But in the end it is a far too limited frame through which to view her. For narratives about her career operated in and through another equally powerful postwar cultural discourse: that of cosmopolitanism. Although the journalists reviewing her books never defined the term, they riffed on the cosmopolitan ideal of universalist, worldly disinterest, casting her work as a combination of detachment from and identification with "local" culture that fulfilled the fantasy of Kantian global community for a newly postcolonial world.[28] It is important to note that in doing so, they sheared cosmopolitanism of some of its negative meaning, including its derogatory associations with merchants and Jews—this in a postwar world filled with millions of people on the move who were not considered cosmopolitan in any sense, positive or negative: partition refugees, concentration camp survivors, and all manner of displaced persons across the globe.[29] In any event, "cosmopolitan" was a term applied to Santha Rama Rau and her work across American print culture in the 1940s and 1950s. Sometimes accompanied by the term "tolerant" (and in one instance, "precocious"), it was a consistent feature of evaluations of her work from *Home to India* through *My Russian Journey* (1959).[30] The progressive, emancipatory logic of some recent theoretical engagements with the concept might lead us to expect a tension between critics' embrace of Rama Rau's cosmopolitan credentials and their eagerness to underscore her orientalist appeal.[31] Not only did the two discourses complement each other; the cosmopolitanism attributed to Rama Rau depended, rhetorically and structurally, on the very East-West nexus her career was said to represent ("where the twain meet," as one newspaper headline proclaimed).[32] Rama Rau was a career cosmopolitan, in other words, because she was, technically at any rate, a

career orientalist: that is, a producer not just of knowledge about India but about the East for the West.[33] As I detail in chapter 1, Rama Rau's 1950 book *East of Home* (published by Harper, as was *Home to India*) used India as a vantage point from which to survey Asia and to stage the story of her own education in pan-Asian sentiment and solidarity—a series of maneuvers that consolidated her reputation as a cosmopolitan writer authorized to interpret "new voices from the Far East," including but not limited to those from the Indian subcontinent.[34]

As with all celebrities, even of the minor variety, Santha Rama Rau's career was not self-made. It depended on "the power of media to disseminate visibility and publicity," which in her case included not just the press but the tentacled publicity machine of Harper, her first publisher and to whom she remained loyal for over two decades.[35] As is clear from Santha Rama Rau's correspondence, her editor there, Elizabeth Lawrence, tried to shape the young author into what she perceived as a marketable mold, especially at the start of Rama Rau's career, when she was asking for guidance about how to "thread together . . . all the odd bits of information and comment . . . that is necessary for a book." Lawrence's advice, which was to emphasize the "woman angle," helped shape what *East of Home* was to become, by Santha Rama Rau's own admission.[36] As for the American media, it was a force she was canny enough to recognize and to try to control, with some success.[37] So, for example, an undated interview with her reported the following reflection on Westerners' accounts of India: " 'Humor. That's what's missing; the Indian sense of humor.' She inhaled her very un-Indian Winston. 'Bengal Lancers indeed!' [she exclaimed]."[38]

To be sure, Rama Rau did not script herself as the cigarette-smoking Indian woman, but smoke she did, and in public, thereby destabilizing some of the gendered stereotypes her image was, perhaps, drafted to evoke. And despite the fact that she relied on representatives from William Morris (one of the major talent agencies of the day) to promote her, Rama Rau was very much her own agent when it came to shaping the ideological contours of her writing career. In *East of Home* she staged her pan-Asianism as a conversion experience: one predicated on a turn away from the old British empire toward the new American empire—an empire which was invested at an accelerated rate in specific postcolonial out-

comes in and for "the Orient" during the high noon of her career. As chapter 1 details, Rama Rau's identification with the realities of postwar American power was in many respects a bid for a new kind of transnational identity. What she offered was a form of Cold War cosmopolitanism that realized the Nehruvian vision of India as a leader in the so-called Third World and defined the parameters of acceptable anti-colonial nationalism. In the process, Rama Rau made visible a variety of semi-imperialisms both within Asia (India over Japan, India over China) and beyond it (India over Africa).[39] These were new, or at least newly prominent, hierarchies of status and value whose origins lay in the ideological legacies and superstructural remnants of the British empire, but whose points of reference were, in the heyday of Rama Rau's career, the so-called Third World and only secondarily "the West."

In many ways, Rama Rau anticipated what Neloufer de Mel has identified as "lateral cosmopolitanism." By this de Mel means a subcontinental perspective that swings north from Colombo to Delhi and Lahore, rather than taking Europe as its lodestar or its pivot.[40] In this sense, it operates in marked contrast to the hierarchical Kantian version, where vectors of influence emanate from imperial centers and radiate outward toward "alternative" modernities. It is also akin to what Françoise Lionnet and Shu-mei Shih have called "minor transnationalism," in that both aim to rethink the verticality of cosmopolitan cultural visions and global/izing analyses especially.[41] As articulated by Santha Rama Rau, cosmopolitanism was a horizontal vision that echoed the commitments to Asian solidarity enunciated by Nehru in the years leading up to the Bandung Conference of 1955, where the doctrine of non-alignment began its official career on the world stage, albeit belatedly in terms of the cross-nationalist practices that had been going on between and among anti-colonialists since at least the 1920s.[42] For some postcolonial critics writing today, the radical potential of this lateralism is undercut by the fact that Santha Rama Rau wrote mainly in the United States, for a Western audience, rather than from India and for India.[43] Indeed, references to her work are scarce on the ground in Indian print culture, at least compared to the thickness of coverage her writing received in American mass media.[44] One telling exception was *JANA: The News Magazine of Resurgent Asia and Africa*, which was published in a comparatively "off-center" Asian locale,

Colombo.[45] The where of Rama Rau's postcolonial was, in other words, the where of much postcoloniality, historically speaking: perennially (if not permanently) out of India. And yet as we will also see in chapter 1, the sweep of her eye, the geographical orientation of her criticism, was—like her brand of cosmopolitanism itself—a break with Eurocentric models, even as it pivoted on an often unspoken American axis. As her early travel writings illustrate, Santha Rama Rau used her reputation as an Indian expert to promote Nehru's vision of India as a "third force," producing knowledge about the historical and cultural meanings of an Asia-centered Indian perspective for consumption in the West and, more pointedly, for postwar American readers.[46]

The question of audience to which I have alluded above is of course crucial, since if Rama Rau had only been writing for Indians and other "others" she would not have been understood as cosmopolitan in the same way, if at all. Indeed, in many respects her claims to postcolonial cosmopolitanism were directly proportional to her deracination from India itself—a critical point to which I will return below. Living in America and pitching to an American public had undeniably constitutive effects on the directions her work would take and, by extension, on her career in the world of American letters. As her writings from the 1950s testify, her "cosmopolitan" approach to Asia bore the imprint of her American experiences and, increasingly, her American sympathies as well. By the end of *East of Home*, and after a few short but formative years as a diasporic subject in America, the knowledge she was producing about the Orient was as in tune with Washington's foreign policy as with Delhi's. This reorientation had to do in part with the influence of Faubion Bowers, whose expertise in the languages and the arts of Asia—and whose earlier career in the American military—clearly shaped her political education.[47] But it also reflected the transformation Rama Rau underwent as she pursued her career as a translator of India and the East to America and Americans. In those first heady days after the publication of *Home to India*, Rama Rau had told Hal Boyle of the *Wichita Beacon* that "our job—those of us lucky to have lived in these two countries—is to interpret them to one another. If we can make ourselves—the Indians—real people to the Americans, we shall have done more than our politicians have been able to do."[48] This is not to say that her efforts at translation or her political perspectives were

overwhelmingly embraced. That was certainly not the case in a venue like the *New York Times*, where all her books were reviewed and which functioned as one point of intersection between political/diplomatic culture and the world of American letters. There she was alternately patronized as a sentimental woman writer and castigated as a mouthpiece for Nehru.[49] Nor was she exempt from being satirized for her modicum of success as an Indian in America. In her compatriot Ved Mehta's blistering account of her in *The New Yorker* in 1962, she comes off as a no-talent writer who panders to the American market, whether literary or Hollywood.[50] These are interpretive spins which suggest that, however much the press tried to contain her through the rubric of cosmopolitanism, Santha Rama Rau was as threatening as she was, finally, unintelligible to the status quo, which did not, and perhaps could not, recognize the complexity of her position as a diasporic figure in America, preferring to read her as an Indian "national" expert on India. For Mehta, who aspired to be a less strictly popular but nonetheless sought-after India expert, there was apparently not room for more than one on the Cold War American scene—evidence, in turn, of a minor celebrity competition that, in the end, reminds us of the seduction of the nation for would-be cosmopolitans and their audiences in the postwar period.[51]

In the end, Rama Rau's determination to present India to Americans by opposing reductive orientalist images with complex and often politically unsettling alternatives made her cosmopolitan vision idiosyncratic if not unique in Cold War America. In this context, making "the East" intelligible in the United States was nothing less than a herculean task. Santha Rama Rau's career took off well before the 1965 U.S. Immigration Act, which changed patterns of migration from South Asia to the United States and delivered Indians to the neighborhoods, classrooms, playgrounds, and offices of Americans at a historically unprecedented rate.[52] This is not to say that there were not Indians, and even prominent ones, in local and national life before the 1960s, though their numbers—only a few thousand in New York City, for example—are an inverse indicator of their cultural capital and political significance, not least because so many were affiliated with the United Nations.[53] As recent scholarship on the Indian diaspora in America has demonstrated, Indians were considered a model minority well before the term had accrued the national political valences