

Situating Memsahibs In Colonial Discourse

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Whenever we talk of British critical vision in colonial India we encompass a geo-space which is inhabited not only by the natives but as well as by the members of the ruling class. The latter include the British men and women, the women popularly being called the 'Memsahibs'. One of the distinguishing features of the discursive practice during this epoch is the greater visibility of the white woman and a conscious attempt at inventing stereotypes. The two major cultural constructs which come out of the critical machinery of the period seek to present the memsahib firstly as the stereotype of the 'idle, pleasure-seeking, materialistic and adulterous memsahib' (Sen 20) which was often set up against the normative figures of her virtuous, metropolitan counterpart and secondly inscribing the memsahib as a 'tragic exile shouldering hardships, discomforts, tragedies and making sacrifices equal to any male counterpart in the course of empire building' (Sen 45).

This paper seeks to question the intention behind such a discursive practice and aims to show how such generalisation helped to put the women not only under the strict watch of patriarchy but also subjected them to the unmistakable 'imperial gaze'.

Let us examine the first stereotype. The overwhelming pre-occupation took the form of exhortatory writings in the Anglo-Indian journals, newspapers and books during this period. These focussed on the moral responsibilities of the English women in India in both her gender responsibilities and as a member of the ruling class. Maud Diver, who is considered to be the first systematic and prominent supporter of the cause of the memsahibs also worked with the premise of a loose female morality in the colony. In her *Englishwoman in India* she opines, 'the last tolerance slips all too easily into a certain laxity ----- mental, moral and physical' (6-7). She attributes this alleged mental and moral torpor in the memsahibs to the climate, disrupted lifestyle, separation from children and other problems.

Whenever the talk of morality comes in the Raj stories, the hill station of Shimla comes into prominence. It was the place where the fairer sex went to seek refuge from the scorching Indian summers. It was looked upon as the abode of licentious pleasures and amorous desires. Rudyard Kipling gives such a description in his poem “Lover’s Litany”:

Eyes of the blue----the Shimla Hills,

Silvered with the moonlight hour,

Pleading of the waltz that thrills,

Dies and echoes round Benmore.

‘Mabel’, ‘officers’, ‘Goodbye’

Glamour, wine and witchery. (8)

This trope of hill station flirtation also lies at the core of Kipling’s collection of short stories, *Plain Tales from the Hills*, where the short pieces go on to effectively mythologize Shimla with its rickshaw rides, tea at Peliti’s, dances at Peterhoff, music at the bandstand and horse riding in the mall as a metaphor for the archetypal Anglo-Indian frivolity. In this collection, the image which comes under much limelight and censure is that of the flirtatious memsahibs. Atleast in six of the stories we come across the character of Mrs. Hauksbee, the woman with deadly charms, who poses a great threat to the vulnerable young colonial men. Kipling gives an ironic description of her exploits and looks:

In Shimla her by-mane was the ‘Stormy Petrel’. She had won that title five times to my own certain knowledge. She was a little, brown, thin, almost skinny woman with big rolling, violet-blue eyes and the sweetest manners in the world...but possessed of many devils of malice and mischievousness. (10)

However in Kipling’s stories we come across two kinds of ladies whose charm entices the men--- one, the young unattached girls who come to the stations to hunt for prospective grooms and the other is the older manipulative woman who exercises great power over her youthful admirers and makes them ‘fetch and carry like a dog’ (56). In Kipling’s ironic narrative, the former is much less critiqued than the latter one because the latter threatens to disturb the hierarchies of not only gender (dominant male / subordinate female) but also of age (older man / younger woman) with respect to heterosexual colonial relations.

Underlying this tremendous discursive obsession with female ‘morality’ and sexual ‘disorderliness’ was the numerical sex imbalance and the critical stress it created. While in the mother-country women demographically outnumbered men (1050:1000). The opposite was true of British India, where at the highest point, men outnumbered women by 3:1¹. This gave rise to a possible threat towards subverting the patriarchal model and interference with the Imperial agenda.

Thus, the body of the white woman became the terrain upon which the issue of female ‘modesty’ was debated. In an effort to contain the memsahib’s sexuality within certain socially controlled codes of dress and conduct, the ideas of ‘permissible’ and ‘forbidden’ gender behaviour were reinvented in the colonial context. Western modes of social behaviour and dressing, like ball-room dancing and low-cut evening gowns, which had been hitherto considered acceptable, were now often critiqued on the grounds that these would undermine respect for white women in a purdah based society.

Apart from projecting the memsahibs in a censorious light, there existed a definite contradictory (even muted) stand. This latter stand inscribed the memsahibs as a tragic exile, one who sacrifices the comforts of the homeland; bears the vagaries of the Indian climate; tolerates immense boredom in order to share a bit of the ‘White Man’s Burden’. The influential memsahib Flora Annie Steele too pointed out: “The majority of European women in India have nothing to do...few companions of [their] own sex...above all, in many cases an empty nursery” (107). From a Victorian perspective, perhaps the memsahib’s greatest tragedy lay in the dislocation of domesticity. Given the practice of sending growing children to study in England to save them from growing up ‘weak and feeble not only in body but in moral strength as well’, either marriage or motherhood had to be sacrificed.

Analogies were often drawn between the running of a home and the management of an empire. No longer, the memsahib’s position was of a matter of triviality and idle luxury. It was reinvented as a model of ‘domestic administration’. This concept of white women as a domestic administrator was fleshed out in the book *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, co-authored by Flora Annie Steele and Grace Gardiner. The book was a set of guidelines which were to be followed by the memsahibs in order to hone their skills in the serious matter of administrating the home. The book gives great stress on the learning of ‘Hindustani’

¹ For population figures of England, see Hollis, *Women in Public*, 33. The figures for India are from Macmillan, *Women of the Raj*, 16.

since it was: “The first duty of a mistress is...to be able to give intelligible orders to her servants” (Steele, Gardiner 12) It further directed them to treat their native servants with a mix of punishment and rewards. The whole book thus, seemed to postulate the notion that imperialism begins at home.

So, whatever may the form of representation be, the intention lurking behind them was the same. Whether the memsahibs were criticised for their moral frivolity or admired for their tenacity to continue living as a ‘tragic exiles’, the root intention was to induct them into the process of cultural imperialism by inscribing them in the colonial discourse as a female paradigm to be emulated by the ‘inferior’ Indian women. Thus, drawing upon Michel Foucault’s notion of the discursive production of knowledge ² which in turn is inextricably connected with the operations of power, it becomes clear how the knowledge about the memsahib was fabricated and circulated to strengthen the colonial adventure in India.

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² See Robert Young, *White Mythologies: Writing History and the West*, London; Routledge, 1990, 159.