

Mirroring Trajectories of the ‘Self’ and the ‘Other’ in the Imperial Home

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Abstract

The politics of ‘racism’ and ‘sexism’ are visible in the white women’s subtle relationship with the native servants, who were the closest link to the Indians. Their interaction was determined by the trajectories of race, class and gender. The complexities of these dynamics intrude upon the ‘domestic space’ of the Imperial Home. These dynamics are not to be overlooked as they are deeply ingrained in the stereotypical attitude accentuating the concept of the ‘superior race’ and the ‘inferior race’.

Objectives:

- *To elucidate the politics of the ‘self’ and the ‘other’ in Colonial India.*
- *To encompass the cultural dynamics between the white women and the native servants.*

Keywords: *Imperial, self, other, superior, inferior, racism, sexism.*

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The Colonial enterprise was extremely a masculine domain represented by power and wealth, exhibited through the youthful virility of mother Britannia’s sons. During the Raj days the Empire overshadowed and coloured every aspect of the socio-political and literary framework invariably. As such ‘Empire’ and ‘Imperialism’ are manifested in almost all canonical literature written by male writers and the likes of Forster, Kipling, Orwell, Scott, Allen and Dalrymple; their names have been synonymous with the literature of Colonial India. The colonies for their remoteness and strangeness evoke a sense of exotic and enigmatic experience, which finds expression in the literature of the times. As such, the colonies function as a “convenient plot device” for the beginnings, turning points and ending of fiction. (Ruskin 17)

Though the power-politics of the Imperialistic regime rested on male hegemony, female contributions to the reinforcement of the colonial realm in the socio-cultural contexts is quite impressive. The early part of the nineteenth century bears testimony to the growing presence of the white women, especially in the socio-literary scenario. Though their contributions have generally been ignored in the existing historiography and their presence in the official Raj archives remains obscure, investigation into the alternative sources, like personal letters, diaries, memoirs, oral interviews, travelogues, fictions etc unravel the untold tales “silenced” in the pages of history. As the group of women writers entered the male arena, they created a space for Memsahib Writings- a genre of Anglo- Indian Literature by white women set against the background of the Raj.

The early Memsahib Writings graphically detailed the alien landscape surrounding their ‘homes’, their various social activities and their daily household routines helped by the Indian domestics who were the only closest link to the

Natives. This paper attempts to bring an overview of the relationship between the white women and the native Indians (servants) and capture the trajectories in the representation of the 'self' and the 'other' within their domestic space.

The Victorian England socialised the British women in such a way through advice –manuals, domestic journals and novels alike, that they harboured a preconceived negative connotation of the 'dark' natives and found the looming presence of male domestics unbearable and inferior. The nineteenth century British middle-class household generally had two to three servants and the white women were astonished with the attendance of the brood of helpers in the Anglo-Indian household. The list of native helpers employed in the Imperial home as mentioned by Mrs R. M. Coopland in her diary, *A Lady's Escape from Gwalior and Life in the Fort of Agra during the Mutines in 1857*, are, a kitmutghar (Butler), a chuprasee (bearer), a dhoby (laundryman), a dirzee (tailor), an ayah (maid), a wet-nurse, mali (gardener), chowkidar (watchman) etc. In the advice manuals also, future Memsahibs were provided with a list of several helpers encouraging them to get acquainted with the household staff. Due to the prevailing caste system in India, domestic helpers were hired according to their caste; for instance, only lower caste would touch the broom and do menial jobs, hence different helpers were assigned specific chores according to their caste and class. These servants were a group of natives, the white women came in close contact every day, and what they saw or how they communicated with them shaped their attitudes towards the Indian people at large.

Located at the heart of the domestic realm, the interaction between the mistress of the Imperial home and her native servants reveals the binary concepts of Racism and Sexism during the Raj. So much so, they expounded a generalised image of all Indians as a 'inferior' race in contrast to their so called 'superior' race to the female readers back home in England. Since domestic work in Britain was considered to be a woman's work, the Memsahibs found the presence of the male domestics somewhat unacceptable and an intrusion into the solely woman's domain for which she expressed her intense displeasure from time to time. The native's dark skin, their socio-cultural and religious background, their linguistic differences along with their superstitious beliefs and rituals created an aura of mystery around them. As a result, the white women associated elements like 'alien', 'exotic', 'heathen', 'sinister', and 'savage' to depict the Indian natives. These notions probably triggered the foundations of hostility between the colonizers and the colonized.

The European women residing in India wrote several housekeeping manuals for the newcomers, specifically detailing how to control the native domestics. Flora Anne Steel and G. Gardiner in their advice manual- *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook (1893)* mentioned the practice of 'buksheesh' (monetary rewards) and how it can be manipulated in terms of rewards and punishment. The white women were advised to levy small fines on the helpers – such as, one pica (paisa) for forgetfulness or one rupee for telling lies.. The money that accumulated through fines was given as buksheesh, a strategy adopted by them to keep the helpers pleased with their servility.

Mary Wimberley in her *Diary* (3rd June 1827) wrote that her carriage-driver was flogged for a trivial mistake. Even Flora Steel, who is considered to be an 'unconventional' Memsahib for her philanthropic works, also carried out stern punishment by whipping one of her servants for mistreating her mule. The housewives' manuals depict the servants as uncivilized and so must be punished immediately after they commit any mistake. Maybe, this was the reason the natives were prejudiced and punished at the slightest pretext. Though physical violence against servants was banned in Britain, beatings were common practices during the colonial era in India especially in their dealings with the domestic helpers.

Moreover, it is observed that the white women presumed that all natives are lazy and dishonest. Their writings reveal how there was a constant feeling of suspicion and distrust towards the native helpers. Mary Wimberley wrote in her *Diary* dated 14th March 1826 that her household servants "sleep half the day". Actually, each domestic work was assigned to a particular person and on completion servants were entitled to take a rest. However, the Memsahibs found their work culture absurd and labelled the native helpers as "too lazy" and they "cheat, lie and steal". In an 1864 advice manual, one memsahib wrote, 'where it is possible to cheat, they will generally do so. A friend of mine firmly delivers a native never speaks the truth except by accident ...'

Among the varied service providers, the Ayahs were figured as a crucial part of the domestic realm but less explored characters among the natives in the Imperial households. They are the native nurse- maids or nannies, the female caregivers to European children in India, and the only female native helper beside a wet-nurse (for nursing children). Almost every English home irrespective of class had ayahs to look after their children. The ayahs were quite close to the European children, who were the next generation of imperial rulers. It was also noticed that the children were more attached to their ayahs than their parents; as till 6 to 8 years they were brought up in the colonies and then sent to England to train them with English education and values.

From the children's point of view ayahs were gentle, small, plum women clad in 'white sari', with 'gleaming oiled hair', who doted over the 'missibabas' and 'missisahib'. Mrs Guthrie, in her work, *My Year in an Indian Fort*, described her ayah as being 'very small and very black, and she sat in her low chair, or on the ground, with her skinny arms around the fair child...'. In another novel depicting the childhood of the European children in the colonies by Frances Burnett – *A Little Princess*, the author paints the picture of the young girl Sara who lived like a princess in India, and was 'worshiped' by her native servants who lavished affection on her. (Burnett 10). Another Memsahib Nancy Vernede, who spent her childhood in Lucknow, fondly remembered how as a child she went to sleep peacefully 'with the reassuring voice of her ayah's soft singing and the faint clash of her bangles outside the door' (MacMillan 153). The accounts unravel how the ayahs showered their mistress's children with love and affection, sung lullabies, comforted them when they were sick or frightened and narrated native folktales to which the European children fondly grew up. These female domestics were very possessive about the white children entrusted in their care. This underlined the representation of the 'loyal' native woman of the Raj.

Though the Memsahibs depended a great deal on their ayahs, they were quite wary of their presence and influence over their children. Advice manual books written specifically for women and mothers, namely, *Birch's Management* warned about the potential danger of leaving their young children to the care of native servants. Moreover, there was a risk of the children to be infected with various diseases such as cholera, dysentery, tuberculosis, ophthalmia, etc. from the ayahs who had very little health and hygiene sense. Stories also circulated that some gave children opium to keep them quiet or even molested little boys who were under their care. According to *Birch Management*, children could not possibly learn the necessary virtues of obedience, self-control and hard work in the company of the indulgent servants. Again, Steel and Gardiner further commented that the young British children under the native's care were "proverbially captious, disobedient, and easily thrown out of gear" and they conceived that the European children in India grew up accustomed to having their whims and fancies obeyed. Indians were blamed of bad parenting, spoiling children and cuddling them more than needed, so there was every possibility of the European children who were raised by the native ayahs or nannies to be pampered by them. No doubt, Lilian Ashby mentioned India as a "Land of Spoildom".

The overall attitude the European colonizers had, towards the native population finds expression in their thoughts and the ambiguous depiction of the servants in their household. The clash between the two races continued every now and then in the domestic arena, thus drawing the dividing line between the 'master' and the 'slave' accentuating the class, race and social distinctions. Representation of the native Indians, strategically foregrounded in the 'Memsahib Writings' emphasizes the dichotomy of the 'self' and the 'other'. The white women were encouraged to rule the natives with firm command and thus projected having a kind of masculine domination and authority like their male counterparts in their interplay with the natives' helpers.

A feminist perspective of the 'self' and the 'other' is well defined by Simone de Beauvoir in her declaration- 'He is the Subject; he is the Absolute- She is the Other'. In the imperial domesticity the Memsahib assumes herself to be the 'self' and looked down at the natives as the 'other', a non-subject and an inferior race of people. The women of the 'Raj' played a significant role in the process of Empire-building by their 'home-making' policies in the colonies. 'Home' becomes the 'Imperial Home'- the microcosm of the Empire and the Memsahibs being the 'mistresses' of the domestic 'domain' adopted similar techniques employed by their 'men' in governing the Empire. The curated environment creates a Colonial 'space' and facilitates exploitation and exaggeration of the natives and their culture. It is often observed that relationships and incidents are often twisted and manipulated to give the

desired viewpoint – the position from which the readers or audience are made to see the ‘object of virtue’ talked about. Through the relationships with their domestic servants, especially, in the control and communications with them, the Memsahibs were expected to function as co-agents of European superiority and enforce respect both in the public and in the domestic space (Procida 87).

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