

Title-‘*Memsahibs in Colonial India*’ (1820-1930)

Moumita Datta^{1*}

^{1*}Dept. of History, Panchakot Mahavidyalaya, Purulia, W.B., e-mail: moumita001@gmail.com

Abstract

The present paper is a broad survey of the activities of the ‘Memsahibs in Colonial India’ (1820- 1930) based on memoirs. memsahibs who were portrayed as agents of imperialism were in reality victims of it.

Key word: memsahibs, white, black, imperialism, race, natives.

The present paper is a broad survey of the activities of the ‘*Memsahibs in Colonial India*’ (1820- 1930) based on memoirs. The European women were termed in the official documents as the „white“ women. It is in that sense or in that verb that I want to investigate this nomenclature. The study hopes to make an important contribution to scholarship on ‘gender and imperialism’ as well the racial complexities which existed between the ‘white’ rulers and the ‘black’ natives. It shows ways in which representatives of marginal ‘white’ women articulated with broader notions about gender, race and class to justify the imperial interests of the British Raj.

The central goal of this thesis is to explore the relationship between ‘gender and imperialism’ Accepting the arguments of historian *Joan Wallach Scott*, it is assumed that gender is a constitutive element of social relationship based on the perceived differences between the sexes and a primary way of signifying relationship of power. In addition, gender provides a way to decode meaning and to understand the complex convections among various forms of human interactions.¹ Consequently imperialism provides a field for the operation of gender and gender plays an important role for the propagation of imperialism. So they are complementing each other. Therefore gender plays a key role to the imperial politics and that any evaluation of British rule in India must consider it. So within the broad frame of ‘gender and imperialism’ my focus is on the *Memsahibs in colonial India*. The period under review is 1820 to 1930, though examples have been cited from beyond this time frame.

The memsahibs were ambiguously placed within the imperial design. Though their position was quite unenviable at home, their new found status in the colony vested

them with certain powers, not only over the colonized women but also over the men. Though barred to exercise direct & formal powers, memsahibs experienced the privileges and problems of imperialism in ways different from their men. They were neither an executive part of the empire nor enjoyed the direct profits that Europe and her men did. But nonetheless, they had their own moments of racial pride and prejudice and exercised certain authority over the colonized women and men, authority which had trickled down from imperial masculinity.

The geographical tangible space that the colony created not only helped the empire in dumping her cheap machine made goods but also relieved her of surplus population. Men and women flocked into the colonies in search of better life and brighter prospects.²

Colonies provided a way of venting not only the surplus energy of the colonizers but also their surplus population. India being one of them, provided matrimonial as well as employment opportunities to Britain's surplus women. In the 18th C ship loaded with white women roughly called 'fishing fleets' came to India.³ In fact such was their outflow that Britain had emigration societies which worked from establishing hostels where women could live before leaving England to finding them suitable employment in the colonies. Not all of them however were on a way to look for men and money. Some were just accompanying their brother or husband like *Emily Eden* or *Fanny Parks* who brought with them enormous curiosity and a critical eye for the oriental ways of life and living 1860 onwards, English women started coming in great numbers as resident wives in India.⁴ More than their own initiative, the imperial rulers thought settlement of memsahibs in the colony would help to further the imperial identity. It was thought that memsahibs would help the rulers to maintain their aloofness towards native women and thus curb interracial mixing, which became very necessary in the post 1857 era. The influx of memsahibs in the Indian society, gave rise to some complicated and variegated social and cultural relations that moulded the impression of the imperial women towards their native counterparts.

The Merriam Webster dictionary describes the word 'memsahib' as the conjunction of the English word ma'am or madam, with the Hindi / Urdu term 'sahib'. This union of words gave rise to the category of the memsahibs who were defined as "a white foreign woman of high social status living in India, especially the wife of a British Official". According to the Merriam Webster dictionary, the first known use of the term is assigned to the year 1852.⁵

The Hon. *Emily Eden* in a letter dated Feb 13th, 1838 alludes to the use of the term 'memsahib' for the English women in India. The Rev. T. Acland has also referred to the use of the term 'meem sahib' in a journal entry of August 7th 1843 while giving an

account of the moufossil society of Cuttack. It is apparent that while the use of the term 'memsahib' was popular among the British populace residing in India, its official entry into the lexicons, is of a later date.⁶ The first memsahib to undertake the voyage to India was perhaps, a Mrs. *Hudson* and her maid Francis Webb, who went as companion to an Armenian lady who had been born in India. But it was much later, in the 18th C that a British woman first put to paper her thoughts on her interface with India. Thus began the beginning of a most fruitful relation of the memsahib's writing on India.⁷ *Jenima Kinderley* landed in Madras in 1765 and settled of Allahabad, where she became one of the British India's earliest official memsahibs by settling with her husband *Jenima* was married to Lieutenant Nathaniel Kindersley in 1762 April. In 1764 her son was born and she set out for India, where Mr. Kindersby was to join the Bengal Artillery of the East India Company. They spent the next four years, mostly at Calcutta and Allahabad .In 1769 *Jenima* returned to England on account of her son's illness as well as her husband's death on the same year. She wrote numerous accounts like 'Letters from the island of Teneriffe, Brazil, the Cape of Good Hope, and the East Indies' were published.

The entire genre of British writings on India in the 18th C and the first half of the 19th C were either a summary of sea voyages to India or the cataloguing of the history, legal codes and the flora and fauna of India. In the list of women authors who have left behind narratives based on their personal experiences in India that cannot be omitted, and that is of *Mrs. Katherine Gufford*, nee *Cooke*, who although has not left behind any account on her own, but she was the first memsahib to earn a place in the Company's history.⁸

It is of course well known that many memsahibs came to India during the colonial period, and some of them have left interesting accounts of their experiences in India. Since these accounts were written by women, they allow us in exploring the role of gender in India as colonialism progressed.

There writings were soon followed by the original letters from India; containing a narrative of journey through Egypt and the author's imprisonment at Calicut by Hyder Ally, to which was added an abstract of *Three subsequent voyages to India* by *Eliza Fay*. These were letters written by *Eliza Fay* to her sister and later to her friend, in the style of a journal. These were first published in 1817. These letters throw light on the social life of Calcutta at the time of Warren Hastings and Sir Philip Francis. She had an unsuccessful marriage with *Anthony Fay*, a barrister, but she was residing at Calcutta. Though she herself died in 1816 and her letters were published posthumously in the subsequent year 1817.⁹

Maria Graham, later lady *Callott*, came to India in early 1809, with her father and married *Lieutenant Thomas Graham* in 1809. Her reminiscences of her stay in India were written solely for the amusement and reading. Mrs. *Colonel Annie Katherine Elwood*, penned the details about her residence in India, in letters which were originally written for her sister Mrs. *Elphinstone*, her work is titled *Narrative of a journey overland from England by the continent of Egypt and the Red sea to India; including a residence there, and voyage home in the years 1825- 28*. She hoped that her writing would be beneficial for later overland travellers.¹⁰

An intrepid traveler, who has left behind a voluminous account of her residence and travels within India, is *Fanny Parks*, who sailed for India with her husband *Charles Crawford Parks*, a writer in the East India Company in 1822. *Fanny Park's* record of her experience of India were published as the *Wanderings of a pilgrim in search of the picturesque, during four and twenty years in the East, with revelations of the life in the Zenana*.¹¹

Another source consulted for the present study is the letters from Madras: during the years 1836-1839 within by *Julia Maitland*. Around the same time, the *Eden* sisters, *Emma* and *Frances*, accompanied their brother, *George Auckland* to India in 1835, the country to which he was appointed Governor General. Both the sisters were intrepid keepers of journals, however in posterity, *Emily Eden* is better known than her younger sister *Frances Eden*, whose vision of India was much better than *Francis Eden*.

Marianna Postons was another memsahibs recording her reminiscences of her residence in India. Her work '*Cutch or Random sketches taken during a residence in one of the Northern provinces of western India, interspersed with legends and traditons'* commences from the 29th Sep.1837 and was published two years later. *Marianna Postons*, an officer with the East India Company, Bombay native infantry in Feb 1833, whom she accompanied to India. Her work is on the 'General and domestic manners of the population in its various castes'.¹²

Another work cited from secondary sources has been authored by Vicountess *Amelia Cary Falkland*. *Amelia* married *Lucious Bentinck Cary* who was the governor of Bombay from 1848 to 1853. Her journal gives an impression on the social life of the Bombay.

From around the 1880s, colonial wives had also emerged as highly popular novelists and writers of short stories. After the establishment of colonial empire, the memsahib's position was that of an imperialist. Interestingly the word 'memsahib' (madam-sahib) with its suggestion of power and authority is belived to have originated in the mid-19th C.¹³ the memsahibs were appropriating the power and privilege of their husbands and displaying the well known rank snobbery of a hierarchical society. Infact *Flora Annie Steel* in *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* a handbook for young memsahibs

newly arrived from England famously compared the running of a colonial household to administering the British Empire.¹⁴ Many memsahibs like *Sarah Jeannette Duncan*, suffered acutely from loneliness, boredom and homesickness.¹⁵

One difference from *Julia Maitland's* time is that the memsahibs of the 1870s remained completely ignorant of the local languages. So there was problem in mixing with the natives. Many India born memsahibs returned as grow up daughters to rejoin their parents after schooling in England such as *Alice Perrin* and *Maud Diver*. There were some travelers and journalists like *Christina Brenner* and *Mary Frances Billington* in the 1890s. In addition to these colonial society also consisted of lower class memsahibs who were not included in the collection of writings.¹⁶

Around the 1860s, there were also secular white women like *Mary Carpenter* and the *Annette Akroyd*, who was the wife of a colonial official.¹⁷ Both of them played important roles in schooling for girls. The most striking exception around the 1890s onwards was *Flora Annie Steel*, the vocal and opinionated 'memsahib'. Alongside of being the wife of an administrator who led the typical life of a 'memsahib' when posted at large stations like Ludhiana, *Steel* was unusual in starting schools for girls in remote parts of Punjab like Kasur where her husband was stationed later she took up the government post of Inspectress of girls schools where she was put in charge of schools in the northern region.¹⁸

In 1890s the memsahibs also interacted on a relatively equal plane with the 'New Indian Women' who had come out of the purdah into the open. Moreover the early 20th C was also the period of anti- colonial, national Movement. There was the curious phenomenon of 'Indianised' memsahibs such as *Margaret Noble* (sister *Nivedita*), *Annie Besant* involved in the nationalism. These memsahibs came to India around the late 19th C and early 20th C, stayed in this country and became Indian in their perception and attire to such an extent that they were drawn into the nationalist movement. In sharp contrast to these women were the American journalist *Katherine Mayo* (1920) who persisted in carrying out the colonial agenda of attacking Indian culture with renewed authority.¹⁹

The writing of the British authors have highlighted the widening divergence between the British Raj and the natives after the sepoy mutiny of 1857 and popularized a negative stereotype of the memsahibs.²⁰ The white women supposedly disapproved of the sexual intimacy between the white men and the native women. Therefore when the white women began arriving in the colonies in large numbers, which in the case of India was in the 1820s, they disrupted the relationship that had developed between the white men and the native women.²¹ Consequently the memsahibs were allegedly more racist than the white men and were responsible for the creation of greater social

distance between the white rulers and the native subjects.²² *Ashis Nandy* in his book *Intimate Enemy* accepts this fact. Percival Spear argues that in the social life that memsahib 'widened the racial gulf' by holding to 'their insular whims and prejudices'.²³

The presence of the white women and specially the memsahibs didn't inadvertently produce, stronger racial divisions rather it was in some cases intended precisely to enforce the separation between the white rulers and the native subjects.²⁴ A majority of the British authors blames the memsahibs for disrupting and eventually losing their social superiority, consequently much of their scholarship relied on overly-simplified, moralistic dichotomies to explain white women's behaviour. Secondly according to the stereotype, memsahibs aroused the sublime sexual passions of the native men, from whom they needed protection, thus leading to further extension of barriers between the British Raj and the native subjects.

Finally the memsahibs were thought to be frivolous, lazy nuisance who didn't contribute anything positive to the empire building process but actually interfered in the constructive work of the white men. The authors like *Rudyard Kipling* and *Trevelyan* accepts this view. They opine that the memsahibs by their activities created hurdles in the empire building process.²⁵

Historian *Margaret Strobel* refutes the above assumption of the British authors. She attacks the assumption that relationship between the white men and the native women were on equal terms and invariably contributed to cross cultural sympathy and understanding. Such liaisons were typically coercive with the dominant white men exerting puse over the native colonized woman.

Secondly memsahibs were not solely responsible for intensifying reaction or creating wider social distances between the white rulers and the native subjects. Rather their arrival coincided with other developments in the colonial society such as increase of more virulent racism, rise of evangelical Christianity and intensified exploitation of indigenous land and labour.²⁶

Margaret Strobel further argues that blaming the memsahibs for these changes in the nature of colonial rule, accorded the white woman with more power and authority than they actually wielded. The British Raj enforced policies which segregated and isolated the memsahibs from the native subjects. The memsahibs occupied an ambiguous position as members of the inferior sex within a superior race.²⁷ As wives, mothers and hostesses, they participated more indirectly and with less authority than the white male officials in the process of the spread of imperialism.

Strobel's critique is particularly important because the stereotype of the destructive memsahibs remains pervasive and continues to influence most social histories of

colonialism. Early feminist histories of 'gender and imperialism' responded to the portrait of the memsahibs as villains by devising an opposing interpretation of them as victims of a patriarchal imperial system constructed by British Raj to serve their own interests.²⁸

As an alternative to this villain versus victim model, others have constructed a model in order to demonstrate that the memsahibs often played benevolent roles in the colonial settings as maternal missionaries, secular missionaries, philanthropists, medical practitioners and reformers.²⁹ Many historians have explained the works of the memsahibs as part of the imperialist process. Unfortunately, however most of these works continued to be framed by simplistic dichotomies.³⁰

In an attempt to transcend these shortcomings inherent in dichotomies and hierarchical models, scholars like *Jane Haggis* and *Catherine Hall*, suggest an alternative theoretical approach. *Jane Haggis* suggests a model of an imperial power matrix in which gender, race and class operate.³¹ In *Catherine Hall's* words such categories of experience may be conceived of as an 'axis of power, sometimes contradicting each other.'³² Historian *Mrinalini Sinha* observes, 'gender was an important axis along which colonial power was constructed alone cannot provide a sufficient basis of analysis. It must consider other categories such as race and class as well'.³³

¹ Joan Wallach Scott, „Gender: A useful category of Historical Analysis“ *American Historical Review*, Vol. 91 (5) 1986, pp1053-1075.

² Sharmistha De, '*Marginal Europeans in Colonial India (1860-1920)*', Kolkata Thema, 2008, pp. 190.

³ Ronald Hyam, '*Empire and sexuality: The British Experience*', Manchester, 1990, p.117

⁴ Sukla Chatterjee, 'Contested virtue: Imperial women's crisis with colonized womanhood', *Occasional paper 22*, Kolkata Institute of Development Studies, Nov 2010,p2

⁵ Mac. Millan, '*Women of the Raj; The mothers, wives and daughters of the British empire*', New York, Random House trade paperbacks, 2005,pp xi-x-xxxij

⁶ Shalini Awasthi, '*Social and Cultural depictions of India 1700 – 1850C' (The memsahibs narrations)*, Delhi, Swati Publications, 2013, pp.1-21.

⁷ Indrani Sen (ed.) '*Memsahibs writings: Colonial narratives on Indian women*,' Orient Longman, 2008, pp. ix-xxix.

⁸ Shalini Awasthi, '*Social and Cultural depictions of India 1700 – 1850C' The memsahibs narrations*,op cite, pp.1-21.

⁹ Ibid, pp.1-21

¹⁰ Ibid pp.1-21

¹¹ Fanny, Parks, '*Wanderings of a Pilgrim: In search of the picturesque, During four and twenty years in the East: within Revelation of life in the Zenana*', London, Pelham Richardson, 23, Cornhill, 1850, p77-87

¹² Marianne Postons, '*Western India in 1838*', 2 vols., London 1839 Indrani Sen (ed.), '*Memsahibs' writings : Colonial narratives on Indian Women*,'Orient Blackswan, New Delhi, 2008, p6

¹³ Indrani Sen (ed.), '*Memsahibs writings: Colonial narratives on Indian Women*,' op cite, p6

¹⁴ Flora Annie Steel & G. Gardiner, '*The complete Indian housekeeper and cook*', London, William Heineman, 1909, pp.1-11.

- 15 Sarah Jeannette Duncan, *'The simple Adventures of a Mem sahib,'* Chatto & Windus press, London, 1894, p4
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Ronald Hyam, *'Empire and sexual opportunity,'* *The journal of imperial and common wealth history*, Vol. xiv, no. 2, Jan 1986, pp. 63-64
- 22 Ashis Nandy, *'The Intimate Enemy and recovery of self under colonialism,'* Oxford university press, 1983, pp 4-6.
- 23 Percival Spear, *'The Nabobs,'* London, 1963, p 243
- 24 Kenneth Ballhatchet, *'Race, sex and class under the Raj: Imperial attitudes and policies and their critics (1793-1905),'* London, Weidenfeld & Nicholson, 1980, Introduction.
- 25 Rudyard Kipling and Trevelyan created a negative image of the mem sahibs to prevent them from coming to the colonies as well as to prevent them from mixing with the natives.
- 26 Margaret Strobel, *'European Women and the second British Empire,'* Indiana University Press, 1991, pp. 172.
- 27 Claudia Knapman, *'White women in Fiji (1835-1930): The Ruin of Empire,'* Boston: Allen and Unwin, 1987.
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- 33 Mrinalini Sinha, *'Colonial Masculinity: The mainly Englishman and the effeminate Bengali in the late 19th Century,'* Manchester university press, 1995, pp xi,15.