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Memsahibs on the Faithful Indian Wife
The Outsider's Perspective on the Other

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Abstract- Memsahibs on the Faithful Indian Wife: The Outsider's Perspective on the Other explores how British colonial women (memsahibs) constructed and interpreted the identity of Indian wives during the colonial period. Through travel writings, memoirs, and personal narratives, memsahibs often portrayed Indian women as submissive, loyal, and confined within rigid cultural and domestic boundaries. This study critically examines these representations as products of colonial ideology, shaped by cultural bias, imperial power structures, and a sense of Western superiority. It highlights how such narratives contributed to the "othering" of Indian women while simultaneously reinforcing colonial authority. By analyzing these outsider perspectives, the paper reveals the intersection of gender, race, and colonial discourse, and questions the authenticity and implications of these portrayals in shaping historical and cultural understanding.

Keywords- Memsahib, Colonial Discourse, Indian Wife, Othering, Gender Representation, Imperial Ideology.

I. Introduction

The portrayal of women in fiction, be it Sita of Ramayana or Penelope of the Odyssey, has always intrigued scholars. Women have drawn attention to themselves throughout history despite having been largely relegated to supporting roles to men—the heroes—in fiction. Each narrative shaped its own women, wholly defined by men's interests, subordinated and relegated to roles in service of the men in their orbit.

Throughout history, every prominent tale has been presented through male-centred narratives. The focus is chiefly on the achievements of men as kings, soldiers, warriors, and freedom fighters. Rarely were there depictions of women in a role greater than that of a mother, daughter, sister, or wife. Women were often portrayed in passivity, as either going with the flow or fighting to retain their "purity" of womanhood or nationhood. The colonial and postcolonial texts portrayed the men in an active role outside the threshold of the Indian home, fighting against the coloniser, while women were to remain inside and preserve the sanctity of their culture in its purest form. The women were declared the preservers of national identity, forced onto a pedestal of the "faithful Indian wife", the pativrata nari whose sole aim in life was to serve her husband and act as a support system for the men in her life. This ghar-bahir dichotomy (Chatterjee, P. 1987) in texts was a direct reflection of the real world, where women were once again expected to stay within the threshold and leave the real world to the men.

This can be seen in the treatment of women as side characters, who wait for their beloved to return from wars or grand quests and perform the wifely duty of maintaining their fidelity and their husband's respect in society. The women are reduced to merely

the men's strengths or weaknesses. In Bankimchandra Chatterjee's Anandmath, the women are seen by men as a weakness, something that would distract the men from their duty towards the motherland and while Bankim attempts to paint women as a support system through Kalyani and Shanti, he also proceeds to show through both that men are indeed distracted by women and that women only exist in their proximity to men.

My greatest happiness on earth is that I am the wife of a hero. Will you abandon your patriotic duties for the sake of a wretched woman like me? You don't have to love me—I do not need such happiness—but please do not renounce the religion of valour. (Chatterjee; 689)

The Indian Women in Colonial Literature

It was in the colonial period that Indian women were being written about by writers and historians as the central character, often still portrayed in the idealised image of Sati or Shakuntala, but with more and more focus being brought to the fact that the Englishmen knew little about the Indian woman outside of the stereotype of the ideal, yet exotic, female. The writings of the British Memsahibs gained recognition as they were the most accurate source of information about the lives of these elusive creatures. Not even the Indian men truly knew about the Indian woman due to the custom of purdah.

In my paper, I will focus on depictions of Indian women by the Memsahibs and missionaries in their writings. I will attempt to identify the cause of the manner in which Indian women were depicted. For this, I will be analysing the excerpts compiled and edited by Indrani Sen in her book, Memsahib's Writings: Colonial Narratives on Indian Women. I will also refer to British women settled or living in colonised India as memsahibs to differentiate them from English madams living in England, as this distinction is important for delving deeper into the minds and motivations behind their writings and depictions of Indian women, as I do in the later segment of my paper.

Prior to the 1856 rebellion, the Englishmen were known to keep native mistresses, quite taken by the ideal of the pativrata as they were; an ideal woman whose sole purpose in life was husband worship and the continuity of his bloodline. This female paradigm deeply fascinated the colonists. This prescriptive model of modesty and self-sacrifice was often extolled and meant to counter the growing self-assertiveness of the memsahib.

In an excerpt from Annie Besant's writing in 1896, she extolls the virtue of the faithful Indian wife. She invokes the image of the faithful wife from Hindu mythology, such as Sita, Savitri, and Shakuntala, to support her claims. She claimed that the Indian wife is an exemplary womanly ideal that the self-assertiveness of Western women shouldn't pollute. She wrote,

She is taught to love, serve, obey her husband in all things; to her he is to be as a God. And here comes in the general principle spoken of above; his faults do not excuse any failure in her duty; she is taught to be the ideal wife, whether or not he be the ideal husband…she must remain faithful however dutiless he may be. (211)

She continues to portray the Indian woman as the other, stereotyping her as a "delicate, gracious, sweet and tender type, with its gentle courtesy, its serene dignity" (211) which would be unable to "endure in the rush of western life and the self-assertiveness of the western civilization."(211)

Margaret Noble, later known as Sister Nivedita, also echoes the opinion presented by Besant when she wrote that the Indian woman dreams of, women in renunciation: Sita, whose love found its richest expression in the lifelong farewell that made her husband the ideal king; Sati, who died rather than hear a word against Siva, even from her own father; and Uma, realizing that her love was given in vain, yet pursuing the more the eagerly the chosen path. (212)

She wrote that wifehood was "thought great in proportion to its giving and not in its receiving" (213). And that, "It would never occur to anyone to praise a woman's charms…on the score that she retained her husband's affection during her whole life"(213)

Ironically enough, while praising the Indian wife's devotion, she also betrays a note of the mother stereotype forced upon women under the patriarchal system. She states,
Turning as he does to the memory of his mother for the ideal perfection, there is again something of motherhood in what he brings to his wife. As a child might do, she cooks for him and serves him sitting before him as he eats to fan away the flies…It is not equality. No. But who talks of a vulgar equality, asks the Hindu wife, when she may have instead the unspeakable blessedness of offering worship? (213)

Both these accounts in defense of the faithful Indian wife stereotype offer an idealistic reading from the perspective of English memsahibs enchanted by Indian society. Besant's words "taught to love, serve and obey her husband" as a God and Noble's attempt to speak for the Hindu wife in talking about that "vulgar equality" betray a strand of the colonization of the minds of the Indian women by the patriarchal system they were brought up in. There is an ignorance of the negative connotations of the claim that Indian women were happy in their oppression, especially now, when it has been understood that much of this ideology was forced upon women by the patriarchy to enable their willing subjugation. The concept of the pativrata nari was the most effective tool for the oppression of Indian women by men, especially in the orthodox, Brahmin families and any breach of this ideal by the woman would result in her excommunication from society.

On the opposite spectrum of this perspective of the Indian women, we had the English memsahib's considering the native women uneducated, oppressed and traditional in the way they presented themselves, or rather when they didn't present themselves at all to the gentlemen. This can be seen in many sections throughout Sen's book, but is most noticeable in the section focusing on the practice of purdah. The majority of the memsahibs are critical of purdah, presenting the view that the zenana women are victims of a degraded life and that the system should be eradicated like Mrs. M. Weibrecht, who compares them to caged birds,

…it is literally 'The place for women,' from the Persian word 'zen,' a woman, and 'ana,' place; but this is not all it means and implies…Everywhere (zenana) means the same thing, namely, that women are not to be trusted, but must be shut up like birds in a cage-must be hidden from the sight of all but their own husbands. (107)

Thus, the memsahib's depiction of the Indian woman was not a monolithic perspective meant to hammer home one particular stereotype, it did, however, fulfil the role of any colonial text: to present the colonised native as the inferior 'other' against which the West could be defined. Whether it was due to a strain of sympathy over shared circumstances or pity for an inferior, they succeeded in presenting the Indian woman as a traditional, primitive and soft creature that needed to either be guided by their western sisters or to be kept safe from the influence of the self-assertive western woman to preserve that traditional and primitive spiritual beauty.

A Foreign Woman's Eye

This anthology by Sen covers the perspective of the memsahib's writings over a span of a full century, and as is common with human progression, the ideals and circumstances of both the English and the Indian women had changed dramatically through the years, along with the societal changes that both Britain and India were themselves going through. The memsahib was indeed, in some ways, far more progressive than the typical Indian native woman and even the English madam.

One must, however, remember the history of patriarchal ideations imposed upon the English woman in England prior to, and during the colonial rule, as well as the history behind the word 'memsahib' and what it implies.

The concept of pater familias –men as the head of the family— was firmly ingrained in Victorian British culture. As stated by Swastika Hore, in her essay, Memsahib: Who are you?

A wife's place in the family was secondary to her husband but was not unimportant; her duties to tend to her husband and properly raise their children were considered as crucial cornerstones of social stability by the Victorians. Men and women inhabited separate spheres–the outside world and the domestic world. This not only ensured the proper functioning of marriage as a unit but also prevented the convergence of the two spheres. (Hore)

The typical Victorian housewife, despite being the mistress of the house, was a docile, soft-spoken, ideal lady firmly rooted to the concept of home, and who put her family's needs before her. This, however, changed once they began to accompany their husbands to India following the Indian Rebellion of 1857 and the subsequent decline of the East India Company, where they became a part of the Raj and its colonial projects. The memsahibs were handed the task to "raise little empire-builders of the future" (Hore). However, their move from the Victorian household to the colonies in India altered their perspective and the ideal Victorian wife was replaced by the memsahib. The word is a combination of the English word madam and the Arabic word sahib. Its use became popular during the British Raj in India to respectfully address a married white woman, usually by the colonised natives.

The memsahib's role was that of a "domestic administrator" (Hore), as the empire and home became interchangeable. The memsahibs were encouraged by their community to carry out their part in civilising the natives within their domestic boundaries. They were further urged to "adopt the "white woman's burden" of uplifting the downtrodden 'native' women" (Hore). They were required to be an authoritative and domineering figure within the household to recreate the power relations characteristic of the imperial regime with the memsahibs at the top of the domestic hierarchy. Ironically, these exact traits were what made them seemingly vapid and unlikeable to English male writers and historians.

Therefore, the memsahib herself became the 'other', not just in relation to the Indian womenfolk but also in relation to the English madam. The term memsahib, became a stereotype often being used by English and Native writers, along with other derogatory words to label women as "nuns", "sluts", "whores" and more.

Today the term Sahib is used to address the upper classes of Indian men while their wives are referred to as memsahibs by those of lower class. Memsahib continues to be used as a respectful form of address as long as it has a connection to Sahib. Thus, it remains a patriarchal stereotype to confine the women to the ghar where their identity is defined through their relation to men. The memsahibs had stepped out of the narrow confines of the Victorian tradition, but they were still confined to the domestic sphere and still performing womanly duties as defined by the patriarch.

The woman continued to bear the brunt of the consequence of colonialism, once again shoved in a passive position of being acted upon as opposed to being the one carrying out the action. However, for a long time her role and construction in colonial society was not considered beyond the surface level.

By the 2000's increasing attention was being paid to the construction of women in colonized India. On one hand, Victorian women had been frequently held responsible for damaging the otherwise lax relations between the British men and Indian women in the 18th century, seen often as the staunchest upholders of racial stereotypes and hierarchies as well as having been vilified for elaborating the social and cultural hierarchies which led to the widening of the distance between the colonizers and the colonized (Caplan). On the other hand, they were also almost universally stereotyped as a particularly superficial, frivolous, conceited, and snobbish variety of the English woman. Gartrell suggested that very few women had ever been portrayed as negatively as the British memsahibs. One cannot ignore the fact, however, that these memsahibs were simply reproducing the attitudes of their British official husbands in how they treated the colonised. It is also worth remembering that British women were themselves victims of patriarchal politics that defined the limitations to their own freedom.

The British memsahib thus becomes a separate type from the English madam back in her home country. The memsahib was finally outside the distinct boundary defined by the patriarchal system and had far more freedom to act, now with the responsibility to guide the native women below her status in society into becoming a good colonial subject. This position while giving her a role with greater power was still entirely defined by the men, the sahibs they were married to.

The blame of deepening the wounds of the colonized was conveniently pushed onto the memsahibs which painted a harsh, almost villainous picture of the women, with their constant gossip, mistreatment of the natives and their supposed lack of womanly behaviour becoming their only descriptor in fictional works written by English men. An instance of this can be seen in E.M. Forster's The Passage to India, which provides us with multiple images of the English lady in a curiously set contrast. On the one hand, we are presented the young and curious Adela Quested and the elderly Mrs. Moore, both polite and charming women who have just arrived in India from Britain. In sharp contrast, we have Mrs. Turton, the memsahib who has lived in India with her husband for years, who is shown as a demeaning and ill-mannered woman, her hypocrisy and racism being highlighted through the eyes of the good English women.

The memsahib was an outcast, having achieved a level of freedom and having stepped out of her imperialist nation, the home, into the man's world of the colonized nation state and sharing the responsibility of colonizing the women at the domestic level, they could no longer truly return to the position inside the status meant for the virtuous English Madam back home neither could they be truly accepted by those in the colonized state.

The rebellion of 1857 ended the rule of the East India Company and the Crown took over. This phase was marked by the cultural shift that demanded the maintenance of social distance from the 'other'. Colonial officials were now encouraged to marry English girls and to cultivate a society of purebred English, recreating the racial purity of Britain. 1860's onwards English women were encouraged to come and join their husbands in India. The number of women travelling increased dramatically with the introduction of Steamships and the Suez Canal in 1869.

With their arrival, however, the attitude toward inter-racial relations took a nose dive and the idea of Englishmen keeping native mistresses and having irregular liaisons was looked down upon. In a manner then, the memsahibs had become a sexual rival to the native woman whom she had in effect displaced in the white man's life. This led to the stereotyping of Eurasian women-who were a product of these liaisons- such as Mrs. May Mainwaring in Mulk Raj Anand's Coolie who was excluded from participating in the English society due to not being pukka, being stereotyped as sensual and lacking in willpower. They were seen by the British as a potential threat that could bridge the gap between ruler and the ruled. In fact, even Anand portrays the Eurasian woman as sensual and infidel, unable to control her physical desires despite being portrayed in a better light than both the English memsahibs and the Indian women like Bibiji.

A major fallout of this scenario was that the memsahibs were completely isolated and could only interact with fellow memsahibs. The only native women they were exposed to were the ayahs who acted as their primary source of information on the natives. The missionaries, on the other hand, were free to mix with the natives and could interact with the women within their households, and while this allowed for more reliable sources of information, these women were often looked down upon due to their closeness to the natives.

It was only in the 19th century that the British began to see themselves as a part of the 'civilising mission' and attempted to uplift the 'downtrodden Indian women'. The gendered social evils they attacked were Sati, female infanticide, practising purdah and the poor treatment of the widows. This was when the rhetoric of the "white men saving brown women from brown men" came into play to label the Indians as a barbaric and uncivilised race that needed to be ruled over and guided as though it were an unruly toddler. This infantilization of the natives allowed the West to define itself once again as the civilised centre and this extended to the efforts and writing of the memsahibs where they became the saviors of the poor, uneducated native women who were oppressed and needed to be spoken for, conveniently remodeling the earlier statement into, "white women saving brown women from brown men". The fact remains however that there were interconnections, however, oblique between the upliftment of native women and the imperialist program.

The memsahib was being used as a tool for imperialism, Her freedom was merely an instrument for the support of the imperialist requirements of her husband's position as an official stationed in colonial India. These writings were undeniably colonial knowledge as theirs was a colonial perspective and their observations were rooted in colonial power relationships. There was a plurality to their perception, solidifying that there was no monolithic gaze directed by these women. The memsahibs, already perceived by their own as frivolous and vain were conscious of being perceived as inferior and rejected by Indians. As per the caste system the Europeans were untouchables. Even the servants and low caste did not eat what had been handled by the Europeans. Flora Annie Steel wrote, "…Bismillah! I'm glad my man doesn't live in a country where the women go about half naked."(282). Another memsahib, Christina Bremner wrote,

At a village near Dehlie, I remember speaking to a handsome little dark boy and patting his olive cheek. The scream of terror with which he responded made me wonder if the natives depict the devil as white to their children. (282)

The relationship between the two wasn't simply of the powerful memsahib oppressing the 'abject' colonised women. It was, in fact, far more complex and contradictory. The memsahibs were ultimately not the idealised English madam living in the imperial state, having left the home and therefore stepping outside the threshold defined by the patriarchal system, and neither were they the exotic native women with whom they could never relate and interact outside of the colonial power structure and parameters once again defined by the patriarchal system they belonged to. This meant that even these memsahibs were bound by The Law of Threshold, much like the native women, as Malashri Lal stated in her book, The Law of the Threshold: Women Writers in Indian English,

Men have, traditionally, passed over the threshold unchallenged and partaken of both worlds, the one within and the other without. Women have been expected to inhabit only the one world contained by the boundaries of the home. For a woman a step over the bar is an act of transgression. Having committed the act they may never re-enter their designated first world and must live by their irretrievable choice of making the other world their permanent space. (Lal; 12)

Perhaps their views and opinions on native women were formed by a desire to define themselves in a manner that did not strip them of an identity. Defining the native women as oppressed, powerless and primitive victims of patriarchy effectively made them the 'other' and redefined the memsahibs as the free and self-assertive centre. Despite this, however, the memsahib was only free when compared to the Indian native woman.

A question needs to be asked, however, there is very little to go on regarding the Indian woman's perspective on her own experiences or what she would have thought of the opinions of the memsahibs. Indrani Sen does tackle this question in her introductory note, claiming rightfully so that the Indian women did enter into the consciousness of the memsahibs, however, that still remains the memsahib's perspective and not that of the Indian woman herself. The voice may not have been silenced, but it has been muffled by the barrier of another intellectual presence in its narration. Even the 'native gaze' that Sen claims allows for the Indian woman's voice to show through is chiefly the perspective of the memsahib coloured by her discomfort and fear of rejection. As Spivak makes clear in her essay, Can the Subaltern Speak? 'the benevolent impulse to represent the subaltern groups effectively appropriates the voice of the subaltern and thereby silences them'(56).

To conclude, for a long time the memsahib was demonised as the villain of the Empire and blamed for many of its evils, particularly racism. The last two decades, however, saw a shift in the way she has been thought of. She was both a victim as well as the beneficiary of colonialism. While she was marginalised within her own community, she was also in a position of power and enjoyed the privileges of belonging to the ruling society. The memsahib was then an outsider attempting to create an identity for herself by regarding herself as a better educated, more progressive and self-assertive, superior woman by 'othering' and infantilizing the native woman. The memsahibs became the assertive center and the native women became the 'other' against which their progressiveness could be measured. As a woman who had for all intents and purposes been 'othered' by her own society, the memsahib was now "poised on the threshold, acutely aware of her isolation."

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