

ABSTRACT

This thesis examines Flora Annie Steel's (1847-1929) representation of native women characters in her literary writings. Steel wrote primarily about colonial life and in doing so addressed numerous issues concerning Indian women. However, her sympathies for native women are complicated by her racial, social and gendered position as a memsahib. While Steel gave Indian women prominent roles in her writings, her imperialistic concerns always influenced her construction of Indian femininity for western readers. Her novels dealt with contemporary topical issues such as polygamy, widowhood, childbirth, child marriage, sati and prostitution showing their effects on the lives of native women. But Steel's treatment of them is fraught with ideological ambivalence.

One of the earliest critical works on Steel is Daya Patwardhan's *A Star of India, Flora Annie Steel: Her Works and Times* (1963) which however adopts a biographical approach and lacks critical theorizing. He has examined Steel's literary output, noting how she engaged herself in the task of learning the local language, acquiring knowledge about native people and incorporating such experiences into her works. However, recent scholarship by Indrani Sen (2002), Jenny Sharpe (1993) and Karyn Huenemann (2000) have focused on her authorial ambivalence tracing how it is difficult to categorize Steel as an imperialist or a colonial sympathizer. Yet such critical works have focused mostly on certain 'popular' (and known) texts at the cost of leaving untouched a bulk of her writings.

This thesis will not only bring some of those 'untouched' (and less known) texts within its critical ambit but will critique the dominant reading of Steel as a writer marked by ambivalence. Steel is often perceived to be a proto-feminist through her moral and aesthetic shouldering of the burden of setting right the wrongs done to native women. But this defense often came at the expense of reproducing a stereotypical image of Indian women common in imperialistic discourses. This conflict lies at the source of the perceived ambivalence in Steel's writings with most commentators noting how she cannot be conveniently pigeon-holed either as an imperialist or as a feminist but somewhere in-between. Yet, such readings have largely been based upon a limited number of her writings and as this thesis contends, a different perspective can emerge if her other lesser known works are also taken into account. Rather, an examination of her selected novels and short stories that deal with the representation of native women reveals that Steel's purported sympathies for their degraded condition might just have been a façade for her latent imperialistic affinities.

With the aim of exploring this assumption, the thesis divides Steel's women characters into four sub-groups that in turn form the basis of four chapters. The first chapter titled "Married Women: The Dilemmas of Domesticity", portrays the impoverished and subjugated life of married women that includes barren-women, child-brides, surrogate mothers and co-wives. Most of these women are bound by a common narrative of deprivation and invisibility that elicits authorial empathy. Yet characters such as Hoshiarbi in "At a Girls' School", Kirpo in "Mussumat Kirpo's Doll" or the eponymous Feroza who try to transcend this narrative through their agency reveal how Steel's purported empathy for native women is weakened by her subservience to colonial stereotypes especially in the fate she reserves for them.

The second chapter titled "Courtesans: Sensuality Unveiled", examines the representation of courtesans and prostitutes who were perceived as a threat to the peaceful conjugal life of white women. The necessity of maintaining the sanctity of the British bloodline made the colonial woman's close contact with white men a source of deep anxiety. While the courtesans' personality and temperament as revealed in the competent handling of a critical situation is celebrated yet Steel reverts to the colonial stereotype by linking their authority and power with provocative bodily charms and/or cunning intrigue. Moreover, authorial compassion is remarkably absent for this particular group of characters.

The third chapter titled "Domestic Servants: The (In)significance of Servitude" examines the invisible existence and labour of servants that powered the smooth functioning of the colonial household. Lurking behind curtains, in the kitchen or in the verandah, their presence in the narratives seems almost spectral yet they were a crucial element in providing service to their white masters. While Steel's narratives confer voice to these conventionally silent figures, yet such voices are filtered through the memsahib's authorial consciousness. The different shades to their characters ranging from the amiable and caring to the dubious and corrupt capture the way in which servants were perceived by the empire as both indispensable and yet suspect. Steel's silence and detachment in certain narratives such as "Shah Sujah's Mouse" and *The Potter's Thumb* is a source of uneasiness that aligns her authorial position more closely with the colonialist.

Sati and widowhood problematized the basic structure of society and the fourth chapter titled "Widows: The Living Sati" explores how the author portrays such characters within her texts. The colonizers saw the immolation of women on the funeral pyre of their husbands as both a spectacle and an inhuman act of sacrifice. Both the display of *sati* and the unfortunate plight of women who refused to commit the act were of topical relevance to the western reader. Women who lost their husbands were seen as an economic burden, socially unproductive and

culturally inauspicious. Steel portrays their unfortunate life and their struggles from a woman's point of view but her characterization and sympathies as in "On the Second Story" or *A Prince of Dreamers* (1908) are filled with paradoxes that makes her authorial position problematic.

Steel was an advocate for social change and reform, but her narratives reject any kind of transformation. Her portrayal of empowered women and female agency in texts like *Mistress of Men: A Novel* (1917), *On the Face of the Waters: A Tale of the Mutiny* (1897), *The Potter's Thumb* (1894) are problematic. The present work explores the interracial interface between a white author and native characters to examine how the enterprise of empire was linked to Steel's feminist consciousness. She debated and discussed women's roles, constructed myths and counter-myths about the native and white women of her time. By teasing out these key ideas, this thesis brings out the implications of the envisioning of native women through the memsahib's eyes.

While writings by memsahibs have attracted a good deal of attention in recent years, Steel remains relatively unknown to a large section of the reading audience. This thesis is an attempt at re-interrogating her identity as a memsahib writer vis-à-vis both her familiar and lesser known works to posit that the ambivalence imputed to her by a generation of scholars may just have been an authorial posture she adopted to tone down her latent imperialist tendencies.