THROUGH THE MEMSAHIB'S EYES: REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIAN WOMEN IN FLORA ANNIE STEEL'S (1847-1929) RAJ WRITINGS

THESIS SUBMITTED FOR THE AWARD OF THE DEGREE OF DOCTOR OF PHILOSOPHY (ARTS) AT JADAVPUR UNIVERSITY

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Dedicated to Bapi & Maa

Certified that the Thesis entitled

THROUGH THE MEMSAHIB'S EYES: REPRESENTATIONS OF INDIAN WOMEN IN FLORA ANNIE STEEL'S (1847-1929) RAJ WRITINGS submitted by me for the award of the Degree of Doctor of Philosophy in Arts at Jadavpur University is based upon my original work carried out under the supervision of Professor Sonia Sahoo, Department of English, Jadavpur University and that neither this thesis nor any part of it has been submitted before for any degree or diploma anywhere/elsewhere.

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INTRODUCTION

The British Empire in 19th century India made it possible for middle-class English women to travel to the colony and lead privileged lives as memsahibs with certain well-defined, visible powers and prerogatives based on racial hierarchies.[1] Memsahibs, who visited the country, wrote mainly about their first-hand experience of British life in India. The interaction of these two classes of people, who were entirely different in both physical and psychological parameters, created a new kind of coexistence. The visiting memsahibs portrayed themselves as social reformers or workers concerned about the upliftment of native women from age-old orthodox practices such as polygamy, child marriage, infanticide, taboos against widow remarriages, female education or social discriminations contingent upon widowhood and motherhood. By showing sympathy and concern for their downtrodden native 'sisters' and presenting themselves as 'angels of rescue', white women justified their presence and rationalized their need within the colony. Such thinking conforms with the so-called notion of the 'white man's burden' that became an ideological tool for Europeans to prove their racial, cultural and intellectual superiority vis-à-vis natives.

The relationship between British imperialism and Indian women's subordination was interlinked. The century showed the contradictory approach of foreign people regarding the native women's question and inequality in sex relationships in the colony which helped legitimize their rule. The Britisher's claim of non-interference and posture of a liberalizing force in the empire fell through when the colonized males took up the task of the modernization, education and progress of their womenfolk along their own traditional, socio-political lines. The emergence of the 'new woman' in the Indian context was no longer modelled on the Victorian prototype of the woman who crossed domestic borders into the public sphere or the stereotypical 'angel in the house' present in the figure of the ideal wife or mother, but framed along nationalist lines which changed the perspective of viewing colonial subjugated women. The gender inequality that women had faced through generations in the hands of patriarchy and from white people under colonial rule started to change with the advent of social reformers. The Indian nationalists and reformers like Raja Ram Mohan Roy (1772-1833), Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar (1820-91), Keshub Chandra

[1] Shampa Roy, "A Miserable Sham: Flora Annie Steel's Short Fictions and the Question of Indian Women's Reform," *Feminist Review*, Vol. 94 (2010), p.56.

Sen (1838-84), Madhav Govind Ranade (1842-1901), among others, started to work for the upliftment of native women through education and by reviving the historic-spiritual glorious past of the Hindus.[2] According to Partha Chatterjee the discourse of nationalism was framed along spatial binaries. Within the external domain or *bahir* and the inner domain or *ghar*, women were considered part of the inner life (home) and as such were thought to represent the sacrosanct values of that space. This inner space was also identified with the nation's ancient traditions that needed protection from external intrusion represented by the colonizers. Thus, this inner space of the nation and the women who were thought to be a synecdochic extension of that space were perceived to be in need of protection.[3] By assimilating the benefits of western education and not its total rejection, a native woman could modernize herself and take part in the nationalist project keeping her tradition and culture intact. But contemporary western observers created a discourse which condemned women as inferior and backward compared to the memsahibs. This sense of self-imposed superiority which was the tide of the time became the primary criterion to create and sustain the stereotype of the so-called subjugated East. Thus, despite their self-presentation as messiahs of the downtrodden, the memsahib, like her male counterpart, too was governed by notions of racial superiority, class hierarchy, religious intolerance and fear of oriental sexuality that coloured their imperial thinking.

For most memsahibs who visited India, colonial life was a dream come true since it promised a luxurious lifestyle in sprawling bungalows, round-the-clock pampering by numerous servants and the luxury of leisure that was unthinkable in England. The mobility, freedom and authority that these women enjoyed in an alien environment were far from possible in England. Back home unmarried women or those without the privilege of being born into a wealthy family often had to lead impoverished lives as tutors, governesses and missionaries. Life in the colony thus afforded an excellent opportunity for these women to settle their lives for the better. The white woman saw colonial life as an excellent opportunity for social advancement and migrated to the empire as tutors, wives of officers, sisters of soldiers, missionaries or solo travellers. The exhilaration of exploring a new land

[2] Rachana Chakraborty, "Women's Education and Empowerment in Colonial Bengal," in *Responding to the West: Essays on Colonial Domination and Asian Agency*, ed. Hans Hägerdal (Amsterdam: Amsterdam UP), pp.87-91.

[3] Partha Chatterjee, "Colonialism, Nationalism, and Colonialized Women: The Contest in India," *American Ethnologist*, Vol. 16, No. 4 (November, 1989), pp.623-24.

and the new authority contingent upon their social and racial position proved irresistible to these women. The colony became a home away from their motherland that offered the prospect of a settled and comfortable life.

Apart from the lure of having a better life, companionship was yet another reason that facilitated the process of white women going to the colonies. The process of empire-building also involved the risk of white men mingling with native women or taking a native woman as mistress and fathering children of mixed parentage. So, the sizable presence of married women or spinsters in search of eligible bachelors became a common factor in the colony. Marriage hence became an avenue to bring women out of domestic drudgery, injustice and subjugation into a life of security and comfort. However, Friedrich Engels (in 1880) condemned marriage, as it brought nothing except "domestic enslavement of the woman."[4] Whereas marriage and childbearing were seen as the only possible duties of a woman, the empire brought these women opportunities to grow, enjoy freedom and design their own lives as they wished.

In the Victorian era, the advent of scientific progress, capitalism and Darwinism initiated and created a hierarchical model of thinking that pervaded all aspects of life. Charles Darwin's *Descent of Man* which was published in 1871 for instance viewed women as "lower animals" and her possession of intelligence, "intuition, perhaps imitation…faculties of the lower races…and of a past and lower stage of civilisation".[5] Evidence of the inferiority of women was further established through biological study, "The skulls of man and woman are to be separated as if they belonged to two different species…we may therefore say that the type of the female skull approaches, in many respects, that of the infant, and in a still greater degree, that of the lower races".[6] Such thinking paved the way towards seeing women in the colonies as mere hangers-on. Elizabeth Sewell in 1865 stated that, "Not one girl in a hundred would be able to work up

[4] Frederick Engels, *The Origin of the Family, Private Property and the State* (1884; Moscow: Progress Publishers, 1977), p.74.

[5] Charles Darwin, *Descent of Man and Selection in Relation to Sex* (1871) cited in Sudesh Vaid, "Ideologies on Women in 19th century Britain, 1850's-70's," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 2, No. 43 (October 26, 1985), p.66.

[6] Carl Vogt, *Lectures on Man: His Place on Creation and in the History of the Earth*, ed. James Hunt (London: Longman, 1864) p.81, cited in Rebecca Stott, "The Dark Continent: Africa as Female Body in Haggard's Adventure Fiction," *Feminist Review*, No.32 (Summer, 1989), pp.76-7.

the subjects required for an Indian Civil Service examination in the way which boys do."[7] Thus even though white women in the colonies enjoyed special privileges yet their gendered position in a staunchly patriarchal English society always made their inferiority to the sahibs explicit. The colonial world too was not entirely free of such gendered constructs for it made a separation between two spheres - the home (*andarmahal*) which was the domain of the woman and the outer world which was presided over by man.[8] The perils and trials of the outside world were seen as a threat to the memsahib. Moreover, the scope for freedom and opportunity that India presented to these white women was seen as a cause of concern to the white men. The colony was felt to provide ample opportunity for women to go astray, imbibing the native culture and becoming accustomed to the 'othered' way of life and hence became a source of anxiety to the British imagination.

Theoretically, the empire allowed the memsahib to know the native people and their culture, realize its socio-political conditions and presented them with the prospect to know the new world closely. However, in reality, their interaction with native inhabitants was usually negligible and the opportunity of mixing was avoided at all costs. In the bungalow, the native helping hands were the only acquaintance a memsahib had and thus knowledge of the empire remained in many cases limited and even biased. Such personalized documentations of life in the empire usually fell within the rubric of Raj writing – a genre that encompasses those British authors whether male or female who had the opportunity of visiting India and presenting their first-hand experience of the country in the period starting right after the rebellion of 1857 and ending with India's independence in 1947. Raj narratives asserted its claim to having full-proof knowledge of the colony and its people and included authors such as Bithia Mary Croker (1849-1920), Sara Jeannette Duncan (1861-1922), Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), Alice Perrin (1867-1934), Maud Diver (1867-1945) and E.M. Forster (1879-1970) among others. Together these authors made a commendable contribution to this genre and popularized a form of writing that drew its sustenance from the day-to-day experiences both inside and outside the colonial home. One marked feature of the genre was its symbolic construction of nostalgia for one's homeland

[7] Elizabeth Sewell, *Principles of Education* (1865) cited in Patricia Hollis, ed., Women *in Public, 1850-1900: Documents of the Victorian Women's Movement* (London: Allen & Unwin, 1979), p.143.

[8] Supriya Chaudhuri, "Space, Interiority and Affect in CHARULATA and GHARE BAIRE," *Journal of The Moving Image,* Department of Film Studies, Jadavpur University (2007) in this article she shows how, *Bimala* or *Charulata* of Rabindranath Tagore's narratives aspire to break the confines of the private sphere of the home or inner quarter to seek love, authority and subjective position in the public or outer space.

and the associated discourse of detachment or sentimentality of being away from one's true home or family and residing in an alien space of the empire. The displacement from one's own familiar space and entry into a foreign country created anxiety and a wariness about all things native.

Raj writings are usually marked by a polarizing attitude that portrays sahibs or white people as progressive, intelligent, superior, responsible, dignified and morally strong who are devoted to the service/rescue of deprived, doomed, psychologically deformed, morally corrupt and inferior natives. These imperial narratives are usually concerned with rationalizing the white man's intervention into native land and establishing the empire for the benefit, growth and upliftment of Indians. Such ideological constructs are also to be found in memsahib's writings that reveal an implicit recognition of the white woman's racial superiority and socio-cultural authority. Hence, even though white women were doubly marginalized in their own country, entry into the colony significantly changed their status by conferring on them a position of imperial power.

A similar dichotomy also mediates the Raj writings of Flora Annie Steel (1847-1929), a renowned novelist, writer and reformist born in Sudbury, Middlesex in England who came to India in 1867 as the wife of Henry William Steel, an engineer with the Indian Civil Service. She was sixth among the eleven children of George Webster, a government employee and Isabella Webster. Her mother's family had estates in Jamaica and she was thus familiar with the workings of the colonial regime. Steel was noted for being a prolific writer on colonial life who held a special interest in native women both pragmatic and aesthetic. While in India, she devoted herself to the cause of the downtrodden and deprived class of her own sex. She had held an important post as an Inspectress of Government and Aided Schools in Punjab and worked with John Lockwood Kipling, the father of Rudyard Kipling, to foster and promote Indian art and craft as he was then the curator of Lahore Museum. She had an inclination toward sewing and the *Phulkari* technique of embroidery attracted her attention. She took the initiative to popularize it and also initiated native women workers to get some profit by making artworks and handicrafts. She was also interested in woollen embroidery done by women belonging to the Bhatia race (in the Gurgaon and Hisar districts of modern-day Punjab) and praised their creativity.

Steel lived in India until 1889 and left for Scotland after her husband's retirement. Her settlement there could not however diminish her enthusiasm and interest in the colony. Her stature as a writer, author and philosopher began to grow mainly from then onwards (also had previous writings while staying in India) as she wrote works such as *Wide Awake*

Stories (1884), *From the Five Rivers* (1893), *Miss Stuart's Legacy* (1893), *Tales of the Punjab* (1894), *The Flower of Forgiveness* (1894), *The Potter's Thumb* (1894), *Red Rowans* (1895), *In the Permanent Way, and Other Stories* (1897), *In the Tideway* (1897), *The Hosts of the Lord* (1900), *Voices in the Night* (1900), *In the Guardianship of God* (1903), *A Book of Mortals* (1905), *India* (1905), *A Sovereign Remedy* (1906), *A Prince of Dreamers* (1908), *India through the Ages; A Popular and Picturesque History of Hindustan* (1908), *King-Errant* (1912), *The Adventures of Akbar* (1913), *The Mercy of the Lord* (1914), *Marmaduke* (1917), *Mistress of Men* (1918), *English Fairy Tales* (1922) and *A Tale of Indian Heroes* (1923) among others. Her autobiography *The Garden of Fidelity* (1930) was published posthumously by her daughter Mabel (b.1870) after the unfortunate demise of the author. Steel travelled back to India in 1894 to do extensive research in order to write her famous Mutiny novel *On the Face of the Waters* (1896) and in 1897 for her work *Voices in the Night: A Chromatic Fantasia* (1900). Her long stay of about twenty-two years in the colony (mainly in Punjab, Kasur, Lahore, Bombay and Kashmir) inspired her to incorporate Indian characters, particularly women in her works.

Unlike other contemporary memsahibs, Steel's interest in vernacular languages, indigenous customs, reform projects and grassroots pedagogy gave her the opportunity to interact with native women. At Kasur, she opened the first girl's school to educate native women. Before leaving the country, she published her advice manual (co-authored with Grace Gardiner) *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (1888) which became an important guidebook for every memsahib visiting India. The advice manuals became so popular that a new white woman's life in the colony was unthinkable without them. Steel also acquired immense popularity with her mutiny novel *On the Face of the Waters*. She was a creative writer like many others of her time and also a well-organized individual for she performed her role as a memsahib perfectly, attending parties, playing tennis games, joining clubs, staging theatrical performances, organizing picnics, passing the hot summer months at hill stations like Dalhousie and Shimla and enjoying all the leisure that the empire provided. She toured the country extensively with her husband and enjoyed the scenic beauty of the colony. She kept herself busy by inspecting servants, taking care of the household, attending to her child and even helping her husband at times. Her personal involvement with Henry and his work allowed her to closely understand the condition of the native people. During her stay at Kasur, she gave medical aid, educated children and devoted herself to uplifting the condition of married women, purdah ladies, child-wives and barren women. These daily experiences were reflected in the characters that emerge in

her works. Her enthusiasm and effort to work for the betterment of native women caught the attention of the government and Steel was subsequently appointed as the Inspectress of girl's schools.[9]

A British writer's view was believed to be original, unbiased and unorthodox, sympathetic to the cause of the downtrodden natives whereas they were well aware of their superior imperial positioning. Authors who lacked first-hand experience of India usually depicted the country as a fabulous and exotic land. However, spending time in the colony and encountering various issues of the empire at the ground level transforms the creative endeavour of an author and inspires him/her to write about the alien space from a different, less exoticized and more realistic perspective. After the East India Company changed from a mere trading company to a full-fledged ruler, many writers came to India to get an actual experience of the colony. Such writers tried to give a mirror image of the native land to the people of their homeland. Many of them depicted the empire as a space that was ghastly, diseased, filled with illiterate inhabitants, a place with stinking bazaars and a land of death with unbearably hot summers. Steel is influenced by the tradition created by her pioneer contemporary Rudyard Kipling but she kept her own creative identity intact. Kipling and Taylor due to their occupations as a journalist and officer respectively got exposed to a wide range of colonial life but the freedom enjoyed by Steel as a woman and a reformist enabled her to witness native life far more closely. She is also known as the "female Kipling", a sobriquet which according to Pal-Lapinski would not have made her particularly happy.[10] Steel slightly deviates from Kipling's stance and is assumedly more sympathetic to the cause of the Indians. Although British writers wrote on similar topics, their individual presentations were different. Steel's autobiography *The Garden of Fidelity* reveals in detail her attitude towards the native colony. In most writings by memsahib authors, British characters are portrayed sympathetically while Indians are caricatured. Yet the socio-economic, political and aesthetic space of Steel is different from that of Kipling. His India is submerged in imperialism, darkness and class consciousness. The country is portrayed as ghastly and diseased, filled with dinghy cities where improvement and

[9] Ferheiz Coover Bharucha, "A Study of the Characters of Indian Women in the Novels of Colonel Philip Meadows Taylor Mrs. Flora Annie Steel and Rudyard Kipling," Ph.D. Thesis, Department of English (Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey University, 1983), pp.157-58.

[10] Piya Pal Lapinski, *The Exotic Woman in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction and Culture: A Reconsideration* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2005), p.65.

upliftment are impossible. Predictably in any comparison between the West and the East, the stakes are piled against the latter. The empire for Kipling is nothing but a place for ayahs, servants, prostitutes, downtrodden orthodox men, *jungli*s and natives who are much inferior to his intellectual mind. His class consciousness, imperial pride and the image of the white man as the 'huzoor' or master of the colonized are not overtly shared by Steel. Kipling's consciousness of the imperial burden prevents him from understanding and empathizing with the plight of native people, particularly women. Hsu-Ming Teo in *Romancing the Raj* claims that whereas other memsahib writers have presented an "*Indian-less India*" in their texts, Steel does exactly the opposite.[11] Her creation of a variety of native characters ranging from Mughal queens to ordinary widows and *bazaar* prostitutes shows her in-depth knowledge and understanding of Indians and their lives.

As a white writer, Steel shared the legacy of Kipling but Steel had her own individuality and thought process as a woman imperialist writing about the colony. On the surface, her outlook and aesthetic strategy seem to be similar to Kipling's but the range of her survey of feminine issues is much wider and deeper. Steel writes novels about historical figures such as harem ladies as well as about the daily struggles of ordinary colonial women. India for Steel comprises skilful potters, artisans, charming women and lush natural scenery. The pristine glory of historical monuments, emperors, queens and palaces come alive in her stories. Steel's narratives enrich the British tradition of representing India but the pattern and portrayal of the opposites (East and West) are much more nuanced. The tensions presented between the socio-political realities of the native world, its economic constraints, her personal sentiments and the insecurities of the religious sphere come hand in hand in her texts. In the creative space of Steel's writings, native life is presented as she understands it. She is creatively involved in the making of the narrative world of her fiction similar to other memsahib writers during that period but presents her view of colonial life with aesthetic and emotive astuteness. Her sympathy and feeling towards the downtrodden unprivileged native woman blended with an undercurrent of imperial superiority to create an interesting literary world for the reader. This latent subtext of racial privilege and the implicit tension between the East and the West embedded within the larger narrative of colonial empathy imparts a peculiar flavour to her narratives.

[11] Hsu-Ming Teo, "Romancing the Raj: Interracial Relations in Anglo-Indian Romance Novels," *History of Intellectual Culture*, Vol. 4, No. 1 (2004), p.4.

Although Steel is the primary subject of this dissertation, a brief account of her other contemporaries will help to put her in perspective. A special mention is required for Annie Wood Besant (1847-1933), who came to India and was much influenced by India's religious ideas. Saleni Armstrong Hopkins (b.1855), who is famous for her book *Within the Purdah*: *Also, in the Zenana Homes of Indian Princes, and Heroes and Heroines of Zion* (1898) was a Canadian-born American physician, medical missionary and author rolled into one. Mary Frances Billington (1862-1925) was an English journalist and writer famous for *Woman in India* (1895). In the novel *A Month in a Dandi: A Woman's Wanderings in Northern India* (c.1891) writer Christina Sinclair Bramner (b.1857) was also concerned with women's questions and colonial issues. Mary Carpenter (1807-1877), who visited India between 1860-76 was an educationist and social reformer. Her seminal works include *Six Months in India* (1868) and *The Last Days in England of the Rajah Rammohun Roy* (1866). Carpenter had met Raja Rammohun in England, was deeply influenced by his ideas and later came to India. Elizabeth Cooper's (1877-1945) *The Harim and the Purdah, Studies of Oriental Women*, which was a comparative account of women's lives in China, India, Japan, Egypt and Burma, published in 1915 gives a detailed description of the life of native women. Cooper was an American and a professional writer who travelled widely to write books on feminine themes and subjects. *Lilamani: A Study in Possibilities* (1911) and *The English Woman in India* (1909) are the two famous works of the English author, biographer, journalist and novelist Maud Diver (1867-1945). Lady Dufferin (1843-1936), visited India between 1884-1889. She published her experiences in 1889 as *Our Viceregal Life in India: Selections from My Journal, 1884-1888*. She was quite successful as a diplomat's wife and widely known as the incorporator and facilitator of improved medical facilities for colonial women.

The long list of memsahibs who came to the empire includes among others Sara Jeannette Duncan (1861-1922) who was also a popular name amongst women travel writers. Her work *The Simple Adventures of a Memsahib* (1893) is quite appreciable. Emily Eden (1797-1869) was an English poet and novelist whose writing about English life in the empire during the 19th century became quite popular among English readers. Anne Katherine Elwood (1796-1873) came to India and lived in Bombay from 1825-28. Her experience as a traveller and writer is shared in *Narrative of a Journey Overland from England* (1830). Jenny Fuller (1851-1900) was criticized for her insight and description of native women in her book *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood* (1900). The novel *The Romance of the Harem* which was published in 1873 and written by India-born British

travel writer, social worker and novelist, Anna Harriette Leonowens (1831-1915) is an interesting read. Julia Maitland (1808-1864) was also quite a popular name as she and her husband initiated boy's schools for proper education in the country. Her book *Letters from Madras, during the years 1836-39, by a Lady* (1846) is read even today. Katherine Mayo (1867-1940) criticized Indian religion, custom and orthodox rules in her work *Mother India* (1927). Margaret Noble (1867-1911), better known as Sister Nivedita wrote *The Web of Indian Life* (1904) and worked under the guidance of the monk Swami Vivekananda (1863-1902).

The next three mentioned authors were quite famous for their dealings with the affairs of the Indian colony. Fanny Parkes (1794-1875) lived in the country for twenty-four years and thus her local experience was also unique. She was a traveller born in Wales who came to the colony between 1822 to 1845. Her work *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque during four and twenty years in the East with Revelations of Life in the Zenana* (1850) is vividly interesting to read. Alice Perrin (1876-1934) had a long history of staying in the country for almost twenty-five years. She became successful after the publication of her short ghost story collection *East of Suez* (1901) and novels like *Woman in Bazaar* (1914) and *Star of India* (1919). Marianne Postans (1811-1897), lived in India from 1833 to 1838. Her novels *Western India* (1839), *The Moslem Noble***:** *His Land and People, with Some Notices of the Parsees, Or Ancient Persians* (1857) were popular amongst her readers. Emma Roberts (1791-1840) who was an English travel writer and poet wrote about Indian life from her recollection, *Scenes and characteristics of Hindostan; with sketches of Anglo-Indian society* (1835), a work that made her famous as a writer. Mary Martha Sherwood (1775-1851) was a writer of children's literature. Her works published by her daughter in later years include *The History of Little Henry and his Bearer* (1814) and *The Memoirs of Sergeant Dale, his Daughter and the Orphan Mary* (1815). Mary Weitbrecht (1808-1888), came to India in 1832. Her novel *Woman in India and Christian Work in the Zenana* (1875) and Lady Annie Wilson's (1855-1921) *Letters from India* (1911) are distinguished works in the area of women's travel writing besides those of Steel.

Any corpus of literature dealing with colonialism, empire, issues related to imperialism or the subaltern gains a better perspective when read through the theoretical framework established by Edward Said (1935-2005). Said's work especially his seminal book *Orientalism* (1978) affords a rich insight into the mechanisms of power that undergirded the empire. The immense popularity of the book shows that Said's critique of

Western hegemony, influence and condescending view of the non-western world is a hidden reality. The present work will attempt to apply the relevance of Saidian theory as a tool to interpret Steel's writings though there are certain points where Saidian ideas may not fit in seamlessly with Steel's thinking. The cultural and hierarchical issues dealt with in Said's *Orientalism* has significant relevance in the present work. The idea of 'discourse' (*Archaeology of Knowledge*, 1969) by Michel Foucault (1926-1984) creates a subjectivity of power and knowledge and Said's thoughts on orientalism vividly show the Western imperial domination of the 'East'. Foucault's discontinuities or ruptures in the linguistic analysis are influenced by the discourses which remain un-said or hidden and influence both Said and the whites. In order to create and produce the orient psychologically, politically, economically and sociologically, the West has to discipline its discourses intelligently. They need to produce a voice and thought of their own which could dominate the 'other'. According to Said, "Dealing with the Orient - dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western-style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient"[12] is the real/true picture of the Occident.

Europe's fascination with the East as a place of exoticism grew from the increased opportunities for travel. Dissatisfied with the conditioned living of the home space, men desired to travel to unknown worlds to explore, navigate and do away with boredom. However, travel also entails that a person moves away from home and familiar surroundings and negotiates his/her own identity vis-à-vis the unknown 'other'. As a genre, travel literature has addressed this growing need to investigate what lay beyond man's knowledge periphery. Men wrote about their travelling experiences as missionaries, soldiers, merchants, adventurers or explorers. Yet the voluntary nature of travel found in such cases is also complemented by the forced travel of captives, refugees or slaves. Travel in the latter case sometimes takes the form of trauma because it dislocates humans from their homeland for reasons that are beyond one's control. Migration for instance can make a man lose his place for a lifetime. Whether it takes the form of slave memoirs, sailors' stories, merchant travelogues or missionary accounts, travel narratives are entail consumption by a receptive audience.

[12] Edward W. Said, *Orientalism* (1978; New York: Vintage Books, 1979), p.3.

The encounter with foreign places has a long history that goes back to the ancient Greek and Roman epics like the *Odyssey* (8th century B.C.E.) and the *Aeneid* (29-19 B.C.E.) and also encompasses the *Bible* (especially the Book of Exodus, 5th century B.C.E.). In classical times military expeditions to Europe and Asia constituted an extended form of travel that included economic benefits. The ancient Greek geographical accounts of the 1st and 2nd century C.E. such as Strabo's *Geographica* (probably in the 5th century C.E., 1-17 books) and Pausanias' *Description of Greece* (2nd Century C.E., 10 books) have documented places, creeds and unknown people in their writings. During the Middle Ages, pilgrimage constituted an important form of travel as laid out in Geoffrey Chaucer's *The Canterbury Tales* (1387-1400) which is narrated in the form of stories told by pilgrim-travellers. Ibn Battuta (1304-1368/9 or 1377) in his travelogue in '*Rihla*' (1355) translated as *A Gift to Those Who Contemplate the Wonders of Cities and the Marvels of Travelling* also talks about a traveller's experience. Richard Hakluyt's travelogues such as *Divers Voyages Touching the Discoverie of America* (1582) and the more popular *The Principal Navigations, Voiages, Traffiques, and Discoveries of the English Nation* (1598-1600) reveal the hidden excitements of travel. During the Renaissance and the Enlightenment, the spirit of travel became more humanistic and Francis Bacon's essay *Of Travel* (1625) could be an appropriate example. Other renowned works in the genre or ones that show influences of that form include Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719), Jonathan Swift's *Gulliver's Travels* (1726), Jules Verne's, *The Journey around the World in 80 days* (1873) and Joseph Conrad's *Heart of Darkness* (1899), Charles Dickens' *American Notes for General Circulation* (1842) and *Pictures from Italy* (1846), Mark Twain's *The Innocents Abroad, or The New Pilgrims' Progress* (1869), Hans Christian Andersen's *Pictures of Sweden* (1851), *A Poet's Bazaar, In Spain and A Visit to Portugal in 1866* (1876). The *Tory Quarterly Review* (1809-1967), the *Whig Edinburgh Review* (1802-1929) and the *Blackwood's Magazine* (1817-1980) published travel-related matters regularly. Although the genre has evolved over the years, the basic format of a tale about a wanderer who is on a quest to explore and bind the unknown alien world with the known stays unchanged.[13]

[13] The information are historical facts and three books that have helped in writing of this thesis are *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, ed. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (London: Cambridge UP, 2002), Casey Blanton, *Travel Writing: The Self and the World* (London: Prentice Hall International, 1997), Barbara Korte, *English Travel Writing from Pilgrimages to Post Colonial Explorations* (1996), trans. Catherine Matthias (New York: St Martin's Press, 2000).

In the earlier eras, travel writing was mostly sponsored by rich patrons or monarchs which determined the kind of viewpoint presented in these narratives. The narrative strategy adopted by these writers was thus a complex combination of pragmatism and entertainment. William H. Sherman states that travel writers "had to balance the known and the unknown, the traditional imperatives of persuasion and entertainment, and their individual interests with those of their patrons, employers, and monarchs."[14] But with the coming of the 15th and 16th centuries, the pattern changed with the European countries' interest in trade and commerce. The commercialization of travel and its consequent popularity changed the modus operandi of travel narratives.

Colonialism, modernization of printing technology and expansion in mercantile mechanisms changed the course of travel literature. This had a direct impact on women travellers as well, especially in the context of the 19th century. In previous centuries, women travelled with companions and seldom did they undertake solo trips. Exceptions were also present, for instance, Elizabeth Baker, unfortunately, died when she was travelling to India (Madras) to meet her husband Aron Baker in 1625. In the 15th century, *The Book of Margery Kempe* (published probably in 1431) by pilgrim and Christian mystic Margery Kempe introduced women as explorers but with the coming of the 19th century travelling became a practical possibility for women. Industrialization and European imperialism made the world safer for women's travel. The opening of the Suez Canal, the coming up of steamers and railways facilitated the movement of women and inspired them to break the bondage of home and explore the unknown world. The freedom that travelling gave to these women was unimaginable in the Western world at that time.

Women started to travel to the empire colonies as companions of the male members of their households and engaged in missionary work, scientific pursuits or documented local life and customs. Travel saved them from the boredom of family life and rescued them from the socially sanctioned duties of a wife, daughter or mother. It also provided them with intellectual expansion and gave them the required opportunity and space to explore the unknown world. In *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation*, Mary Louise Pratt states that women who travelled with their male partners were more engaged in

[14] William H. Sherman, "Stirrings and Searchings (1500-1720)," in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing*, eds. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (London: Cambridge UP, 2002), p.31.

searching for themselves when the husband or brother was busy exploring the empire.[15] English men taking up native mistresses and the birth of Eurasian children was also another practical reason why the British let their women travel to the colonies in huge numbers. Such women were derisively referred to as 'fishing fleets.' Anne de Courcey states "The scramble for wealth following the grant of the *diwani* made India a tremendously attractive pond in which to 'fish' for a rich husband, and it is in the period from, 1756 to about 1784 that the great fishing fleets arrived bearing young-and not so young-ladies openly pursuing rich husbands".[16] But her observation is not fully acceptable as later on many women travellers are seen travelling alone to the colonies.

Male travel writers are often more factual, unemotional and unmoved by the surrounding space; women, on the other hand, are easily touched by their surroundings. They are far more intimate and personal in their approach towards native life and its people. Female explorers are emotionally, physically and mentally connected with the 'other' space. Susan Bassnett in *Travel writing and Gender* (2002) comments that "Women travellers are therefore categorized as doubly different: they differ from other, more orthodox, socially conformist women, and from male travellers who use the journey as a means of discovering more about their masculinity."[17] Thus, women's travel gave a far more intimate insight into matters that could never be expected from a male traveller. Their writings also put up a tough fight vis-à-vis their male counterparts in acquiring a place in the print market. Memsahibs could easily cope with adversities and adapt to the world of the natives and their writings introduce a fresh perspective to the relationship between the East and the West. The journey could at times be dangerous and troublesome but the aesthetic and spiritual experience consequent upon travel and the opportunity it provided to know the real self made women's travel fulfilling. Their manner and their writing style was influenced by the differences between their own culture and that of the natives. In *Culture and Imperialism* (1993), Said states that a traveller is an alien to the unknown/new world he travels to. The culture, ethnicity, identity, tradition and economic-political

[15] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York: Routledge, 1992), p.160.

[16] Anne de Courcey, *The Fishing Fleet: Husband-Hunting in the Raj* (New York: Harper Collins, 2012), p.103.

[17] Susan Bassnett, "Travel Writing and Gender," in *The Cambridge Companion to Travel Writing,* eds. Peter Hulme and Tim Youngs (London: Cambridge UP, 2002), p.246.

situations differ from his own world. His habit, intellectual and moral behaviour will lead him to describe and prescribe the colonial world as a place of resistance. An individual's subjective consciousness and structure of feeling help to construct his/her travelling experience which in many cases blocks the 'others' narrative to produce the hegemonic power narrative of the ruling class. Travelling accounts thus cease to be a simple tale about a new territory. The method and aim of a traveller and travel writing are both interesting and also problematic. Travel works become the narrative of the author, influencing and manipulating the context and its content by suppressing the true events and life of the natives. A British traveller indulges in using an imaginative, biased and authoritative note that strains the narrative while describing the superiority of the ruler and the inferiority of the ruled. The complex picture of the colony and the associated ambivalence describing it makes a travel account interesting and intellectually engaging.

While travel literature has been around for centuries, it has initiated exciting avenues for research in the 20th century. Peter Hulme's *Colonial Encounters; Europe and the Native Caribbean, 1492-1797* (1986), Stephen Greenblatt's *Marvelous Possessions: The Wonder of the New World* (1991) and Mary Louise Pratt's *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (1992) are among the many critical texts that have influenced the literary world of Oriental Studies. Greenblatt portrays in the book *Marvelous Possessions,* the Third World and its dream of a marvelous transformation accentuated by the Western world. He narrates and creates stories which transform the power mechanism of the modern world against the native world depicting it as a fascinating place and an exotic land which attracts exploration, instigates surveillance and invites scrutiny. Pratt discusses 18th and 19th century travel narratives and their historical perspective from various standpoints. The ways a traveller explores and gazes upon a non-human, non-European colonial land are intricately discussed by Pratt. Hulme, on the other hand, brings travel-related discussions to the focal point, associating a discourse of the Western world's imperial and colonial relationship with the native Caribbean world. He intricately discusses the cultural crossing, violence and discrimination faced by characters like Pocahantas, Caliban, Friday and Yarico at the hands of the Europeans. All three works show the difference between the Occident and Oriental worlds influencing, interacting and struggling with each other for their own making. Travel narratives, explorations and journeys to the unknown have become an exciting premise and fulfil socio-political, cultural and economic needs. Steel's works can never be fully regarded as a travel narrative but their essence has influenced her too.

The genre of 19th century travel writing has been widely discussed starting from the latter half of the 20th century. Some of the most influential works (and ones that have helped in giving direction to this dissertation) are Udayon Misra's *The Raj in Fiction: A Study of Nineteenth-Century British Attitudes Towards India* (1987)[18] which surveys Anglo-Indian fiction from a selected period of time. Misra deals with the British attitude towards the people of India that is revealed through various writers amongst which Philip Meadows Taylor's work deserves mention. The works are primarily discussed from socio-political and historical perspectives. In *Chronicles of the Raj: A Study of Literary Reaction to the Imperial Idea towards the End of the Raj* (1979)[19] Shamsul Islam shares the British attitude towards the colony through authors such as Rudyard Kipling, E.M. Forster, E.J. Thompson, George Orwell and John Masters. Islam's overall bias towards Rudyard Kipling sometimes becomes monotonous and his interest in major authors at the expense of minor ones is questionable. Although the book is an interesting study of imperialist attitudes in select 19th century fiction, it tries to read most authors and their works through the narrative framework created by Kipling which is autobiographical, patriotic, imperialist and minutely observatory. In her book *Delusions and Discoveries: Studies on India in the British Imagination: 1880-1930* (1972) [20] Benita Parry similarly shows that the British people living in India detached themselves physically and psychologically from the colony and its people. The book includes the treatment of both racist and liberal attitudes in authors ranging from Steel to Maud Diver and Kipling. She comments on Steel's ambivalence and examines the liberal thinking of writers such as Edward James Thompson, Edmund Chandler and E.M. Forster among others. Any study that tries to look at an analysis of culture, empire and colonial life should be able to benefit from it.

Allen J. Greenberger's *The British Image of India: A Study in the Literature of Imperialism 1880-1960* (1969) [21] examines a range of British writers in India between 1880 to 1960. The work is important as it shares considerable insight and valuable comments on

[18] Udayon Misra, *The Raj in Fiction: A Study of Nineteenth-Century British Attitudes Towards India* (Delhi: B. R. Publishing, 1987).

[19] Shamsul Islam, *Chronicles of the Raj: A Study of Literary Reaction to the Imperial Idea towards the End of the Raj* (Totowa, N.J.: Rowman and Littlefield, 1979).

[20] Benita Parry, *Delusions and Discoveries: Studies on India in the British Imagination, 1880–1930* (London: The Penguin Press, 1972).

[21] Allen J. Greenberger, The *British Image of India: A Study in the Literature of Imperialism 1880-1960* (New York: Oxford UP, 1969).

the topic. Greenberger states that a writer's first-hand experience is essential to understand an alien society, culture and population fruitfully. Their constructed image of India not only influenced the people of the West but also the sahibs who would come to the empire. Greenberger divides fiction written between 1880 and 1960 into three periods: Era of Confidence (1880-1910), Era of Doubt (1910-1935) and Era of Melancholy (1935-1960) which shows the detachment of the writers from the truth and relying on imaginative standpoints in fiction. Aviva Briefel's *The Racial Hand in the Victorian Imagination* (2015)[22] shows how a human body part - the hand - is a site of pain, torture, labour, creativity and imperialism. An interesting work that deals with the artisan's artistic hand is the novel *The Potter's Thumb* by Steel which deals with similar issues as discussed by Briefel. *Married to the Empire: Gender, Politics and Imperialism in India, 1883-1947* (2002)[23] by Mary A. Procida reveals the vulnerability of white women in the hands of European men. If women needed men to 'rescue' them from socio-political bondage, the male coloniser required the presence of white women in their lives as amiable supporters, competent politicians, expert hostesses, enthusiastic travellers, influencing educators and dutiful wives in India to keep their existence going. Procida's narrative tries to bring to the forefront imperial authority, struggle, neglect, subjugation, sympathy and the power politics of Western women and tries to fruitfully reciprocate its context through a different subject in the colonial space.

Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text (1993)[24] by Jenny Sharpe is an exceptional work that deals with rape in the colony. The Indian Rebellion or the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 brought about a change in worldview about the empire. The imagined barbarism, mutilation and rape of white women at the hands of native mutineers led to fierce counter-attacks and numerous merciless killings of natives as a form of just retribution for their 'crimes'. The white man's burden to impart justice and torture the native 'convict' was followed to the utmost. Sharpe questions this mentality of the West and its religious orthodoxy through Steel's novel *On the Face of the Waters*. The work

[22] Aviva Briefel, *The Racial Hand in the Victorian Imagination* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2015).

[23] Mary A. Procida, *Married to the Empire: Gender, Politics and Imperialism in India, 1883-1947* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2002).

[24] Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

Discourses of Difference: Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism (1991)[25] by Sara Mills brings out the difficulty women travellers faced in an alien space. She states that the discourse of imperialism is internally related to women's questions both Indian and Western. She discusses three writers - Alexandra David-Neel, Mary Kingsley and Nina Mazuchelli - from the perspective of patriarchy, male domination and colonialism. Nancy Paxton in her seminal work *Writing under the Raj: Gender, Race and Rape in the British Colonial Imagination 1830-1947* (1999)[26] takes up the rape narrative in the years between 1830 and 1947. Her writing revolves around women-centric issues and deals with writers such as Kipling, E.M. Forster, George Orwell, Swarnakumari Devi, Fanny Emily Farr Penny, Maud Diver, Rabindranath Tagore, Steel, Lord Byron, Percy Shelley and Meadows Taylor. Her book does a commendable study of child marriages, romances, interracial marriages, religious narratives and imperialistic issues.

Gauri Vishwanathan in her book *The Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (1989)[27] shows that the white people's introduction of English language and literature to the native country for learning had ulterior motives camouflaged in it. English became a linguistic tool and catalyst in order to inject certain values, topics and systems into the minds of Indians. Vishwanathan uses Antonio Gramsci's model of hegemony and power politics to show the racial supremacy practised by the sahibs. Pratt's *Imperial Eyes* (1992)[28] is a path-breaking book on decolonization, travel, feminism and imperialism. The author has divided her work into three distinct sub-categories of which the first deals with the travel narrative on Africa, the second part looks at the re-invention of America and the third part discusses travel as well as the colonialism project in the time period between 1850 to 1980. Ralph Crane and Anna Johnston in their chapter "Administering Domestic Space: Flora Annie Steel's The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook" in the book

[25] Sara Mills, *Discourses of Difference: Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism* (New York: Routledge, 1991).

[26] Nancy L Paxton, *Writing under the Raj: Gender, Race and Rape in the British Colonial Imagination 1830-1947* (London: Rutgers UP, 1999).

[27] Gauri Viswanathan, *Masks of Conquest: Literary Study and British Rule in India* (New York: Columbia UP, 1989).

[28] Mary Louise Pratt, Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation (London and New York: Routledge, 1992).

Empire Calling: Administering Colonial Australasia and India (2013)[29] discuss and review Steel's depiction of the domestic space and the daily adventures of a memsahib's life in her advice manual *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (1888). The politics of contamination and the associated fear concerning the natives make the chapter an interesting read. Grainne Goodwin's essay "I was chosen out as Oracular: The *Fin-de-Siècle* Journalism of Flora Annie Steel"[30] deals with the question of marriage, societal position and political placement in women's life with special emphasis on Steel's novel *Miss Stuart's Legacy* (1893).

Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism (1993)[31] by Rajeswari Sunder Rajan is an interesting piece of work on sati. The two chapters "The subject of Sati" and "Representing Sati" have provided helpful insights towards writing the present thesis. Indrani Sen's *Woman and Empire: Representations in the Writings of British India, 1858-1900* (2002)[32] is another seminal work which devotes a chapter to Steel and portrays her as a person who is rent with contradictions about her racial and class position. *Memsahibs Abroad: Writings by Women Travellers in Nineteenth-Century India* (1998)[33] by Indira Ghose divides chapters by sub-headings such as servants, religion, travel and relates these ideas to the memsahib's experience. In the chapter titled "Servants" memsahibs like Fanny Parkes, Emma Roberts, Florence Marryat and Julia Cherlot Maitland among others share their personal experiences with their servants. The book *Memsahibs' Writings: Colonial Narratives on Indian Women* (2008)[34] edited by Indrani Sen is a very interesting work that examines the ideas, thoughts and behaviour of memsahibs such as Mary Marth Sherwood, Annie Katharine Elwood, Marianne Postans

[29] Ralph Crane and Anna Johnston, "Administering Domestic Space: Flora Annie Steel's The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook," in *Empire Calling: Administering Colonial Spaces in Australasia and India*, eds. Ralph Crane, Anna Johnston, and C. Vijayasree (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2013).

[30] Grainne Goodwin, "I was chosen out as Oracular: The *Fin-de-Siècle* Journalism of Flora Annie Steel," *Women's Writing*, Vol. 18, No. 4 (2011), pp.505-23.

[31] Rajeswari Sunder Rajan, *Real and Imagined Women: Gender, Culture and Postcolonialism* (Oxon: Routledge, 1993).

[32] Indrani Sen, *Woman and Empire* (New Delhi: Orient Longman Pvt. Ltd., 2002).

[33] Indira Ghosh, *Memsahibs Abroad: Writings by Women Travellers in Nineteenth Century India* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1998).

[34] Indrani Sen, *Memsahibs' Writing: Colonial Narratives on Indian Women* (2008; New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2012).

and Emily Eden who visited India. Shampa Roy's article "'A Miserable Sham': Flora Annie Steel's Short Fictions and the Question of Indian Women's Reform" (2010)[35] deals with women's questions in Steel's short stories and gives considerable insight into stories like "At a Girls' School" (1893), "Feroza" (1894) and "A Maiden's Prayer" (1910). Sangeeta Ray in her article "Woman as 'Suttee': The Construction of India in Three Victorian Narratives" (2002)[36] deals with the question, interpretation and projection of the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 keeping a minute relation with the three authors, Steel (*On the Face of the Waters*), Taylor (*Seeta*) and Harriet Martineau (*British Rule in India*). She shows the reader the various ways the European people have exploited the native space and installed their authority, superiority and power to make the empire a project for profit in every possible way.

Quite a few dissertations that have looked at 19th century British travel writing and have helped to form the ideas driving this present work include among others *A Study of the Characters of Indian Women in the Novels of Colonel Philip Meadows Taylor, Mrs Flora Annie Steel and Rudyard Kipling* (1983)[37] by Ferheiz Coover Bharucha. The author has given a detailed idea about the socio-political context during the time when Kipling and Steel were writing. She has successfully given a survey of these writers' works but it lacks a detailed critical analysis. R.S. Chulki in *The Image of India in the Works of Philip Meadows Taylor* (1985)[38] has provided a minute description of pre-Vedic India till the advent of Anglo-Indians and also discussed their literature. The work pertains to a single author - Philip Meadows Taylor - a renowned name in Raj fiction. Although the work has no direct relationship with the subject matter of the present thesis, it does provide a useful insight into the works of a sahib who wrote during the same period as Steel. *Representations of Women in the Fiction of the British Raj in the 19th Century* (1995) [39] by

[35] Shampa Roy, "A Miserable Sham: Flora Annie Steel's Short Fictions and the Question of Indian Women's Reform," *Feminist Review*, Vol. 94 (2010).

[36] Sangeeta Ray, *En-Gendering India: Woman and Nation in Colonial and Postcolonial Narratives* (Durham and London: Duke UP, 2000).

[37] Bharucha, "A Study of the Characters."

[38] R.S. Chulki, "The Image of India in The Works of Philip Meadows Taylor," Ph.D. Thesis, Department of English (Karnatak University, 1985).

[39] Indrani Sen, "Representations of Women in the Fiction of the British Raj in the 19th Century," Ph.D. Thesis, School of Language Literature and Culture Studies (Jawaharlal Nehru University, 1995).

Indrani Sen is a seminal thesis on the area of travel and Raj writing and is indispensable for information regarding Steel's works. She has concentrated on two writers, Steel and Taylor. She has given a comprehensive idea about the genre of Raj literature. She has taken into account Steel's famous works and stories but a more detailed analysis could have made the book a must-read for researchers in the area of Empire writing. In *The Imaging of the Anglo-Indian Woman in Literature* (2004)[40] Ranjana Kaul gives detailed information on Anglo-Indian life and the social and imperial issues relating to contemporary writers. She has discussed racism, Raj fiction and women's issues with special attention to the works of Kipling and Walter Scott. Babitha Justin in the *Making of an Anecdotal India: A Study in the Writings of British Women Travellers in Independent India* (2007)[41] talks about the experience of travel, the thrill of seeing the unknown and the process of representing it for the reader. She portrays the imagined and the real world of the empire through the impressions shared by British travellers, mainly women. The ways a traveller engages oneself with the travelling experiences are interestingly drawn in the thesis. Images of camera lenses, minute descriptions, figures and maps are also included to make the reading more captivating. The author has also incorporated white women's personal life stories, ideas and adventures in her work.

Sanjib Sahoo's *A Critical Study of Domestic Servants in Indian Fiction in English* (2009)[42] is not directly related to 19th century travel literature but the author's discussion about the servant's body, labour and space through an analysis of various Indian narratives is noteworthy and proved especially helpful for the present work. *The White Woman's Burden: Sexual Anxieties in British Women's Writings on India, 1800 to 1919* (2016)[43] by Amrita Banerjee is another significant piece of research that is divided into three sections. The first part gives an idea about memsahib's views on *nautch* women, the second deals with inter-racial marriages and their associated insecurities and the third part comprises the

[40] Ranjana Kaul, "The Imaging of The Anglo-Indian Woman in Literature," Ph.D. Thesis, Centre of Linguistics and English School of Language (Jawaharlal Nehru University, 2004).

[41] Babitha Justin, "Making of An Anecdotal India: A Study in The Writings of British Women Travellers in Independent India," Ph.D. Thesis, Department of English School of Humanities (University of Hyderabad, (2007).

[42] Sanjib Sahoo, "A Critical Study of Domestic Servants in Indian Fiction," Ph.D. Thesis, Department of English & Foreign Languages (Tezpur University, 2009).

[43] Amrita Banerjee, "The White Woman's Burden: Sexual Anxieties in British Women's Writings on India, 1800 To 1919," Ph.D. Thesis, Department of English (Jadavpur University, 2016).

British women's views on purdah. Apart from providing information about travel writing and its socio-political context, Banerjee has also devoted considerable space to Steel by concentrating on her most notable works such as *On the Face of the Waters, Voices in the Night: A Chromatic Fantasia, The Potter's Thumb: A Novel* and *The Flower of Forgiveness.* Finally, the thesis titled *Representation of India in Select British Women Novelists and Travel Writers of the Long Eighteenth Century* (2019)[44] by Arnab Chatterjee deals with popular 18th century travel narratives. Although this work has no direct relationship with the present thesis it gives valuable background information about travel writing. Chatterjee has taken into account authors such as Phebe Gibbes, Elizabeth Hamilton, Lady Morgan and the travelogues of Jemima Kindersley and Eliza Fay to make the work engrossing.

Despite the detailed analysis of 19th century travel writing or Raj fiction in these scholarly works, none of them are geared towards research on a single author - on a detailed and analytical case study of Steel concentrating only on the native women characters of her works. While a few of her more popular short stories and novels are taken for discussion a detailed analysis is absent in most works. The lesser-known works such as the 'servant' stories and historical novels have been mostly neglected in previous research. The present thesis attempts to critically examine the corpus of Steel's works with certain exceptions. Not all of her works have been taken into account as many of her fictional and non-fictional works do not fit in with the larger research objectives of this dissertation. The purpose of the present work is to deal only with those texts that are women-centric and concerned primarily with the discussion and analysis of native women characters.

As a writer Steel is concerned with women's issues and her female characters are diversely portrayed in their psychological and physical spaces. Yet many of the critical works that do focus upon her have sometimes conformed to stereotypes in examining Steel's representation of native women. In order to make a more nuanced reading of her women characters, this dissertation has been divided into four sub-sections. The first chapter "Married Women: The Dilemmas of Domesticity" looks at married women in general that includes child-brides, co-wives, barren women, mothers and surrogate mothers in their various socio-cultural contexts. The problems, struggles and deprivations faced by native women in the family and society are examined. The second chapter "Courtesans:

[44] Arnab Chatterjee, "Representation of India in Select British Women Novelists and Travel Writers of the Long Eighteenth Century," Ph.D. Thesis, Department of English (Visva-Bharati, 2019).

Sensuality Unveiled" concerns the representation of widowed women characters in Steel. The women who did not commit sati had to bear the burden of being a 'living sati' throughout their lives. The deplorable condition of these women after the loss of their husbands is discussed and explored in detail as are those widowed women who rescued themselves from patriarchal domination and came out as survivors. The third chapter "Domestic Servants: The (In)significance of Servitude" deals with the representation of *nautch* women and courtesans from various strata of society. They include both *tawaifs* who find mention in the pages of history as well as common professional prostitutes in Steel's novels and short stories. The chapter also examines Steel's portrayal of their lives and the agency she conferred on them. The fourth and final chapter "Widows: The Living Sati" addresses the portrayal of domestic helps and women servants who are seen as indispensable to a memsahib's life. Servant figures like ayahs, maids, *khitmatgarh*s and *dhyee*s to *darwans, vhisties* and *malins* are portrayed in various ways, sometimes as rescuers, amiable subordinates, dependants or even as conspirators. Colonial life was fully dependent on servants and their representation by a memsahib writer deserves greater scrutiny. This four-fold division helps to overcome the drawbacks of a homogenising approach by dividing the female characters in terms of the different social and mental spaces they occupied in Steel's fictional world. Such a division would also help to address the wide range of dichotomies present in her women characters: powerful/helpless, charismatic/unattractive, soulful/emotionless, dependent/autonomous, creative/destructive, fallen/pure, fruitful/sterile, authoritative/fragile, honest/dishonest, compassionate/revengeful, resilient/vulnerable, beautiful/ugly, wealthy/impoverished, intelligent/irrational. These binaries not only help to map the range of her characters but also provide a tool to analyse the complexity of the author's own position before her readers.

The passage of time has taken a toll on Steel's literary relevance as many years of scholarly neglect have erased her from the readers' minds barring a few noteworthy contributions by biographers such as Daya Patwardhan[45] and Violet Powell.[46] Apart from some of the works named earlier wherein Steel forms part of considerable work on travel writing, her works have also formed the subject of critical studies and analysis by scholars

[45] Daya Patwardhan, *A Star of India, Flora Annie Steel: Her Works and Times* (Poona: A.V. Griha Prakashan, 1963).

[46] V. Powell, *Flora Annie Steel: Novelist of India* (London: Heinemann, 1981).

in modern times such as Benita Parry[47], Patrick Brantlinger[48], and Jenny Sharpe[49],Nancy Paxton[50], Sangeeta Ray[51], Alan Johnson[52], Danielle Neilson[53] and Helen Pike Bauer.[54] Her novels, short stories and other non-fictional works have been critically discussed by Anna Johnston and Ralph Crane[55], Shampa Roy[56] and Grainne Godwin.[57] Her narratives have received ample praise for their realistic representation of native life, customs, traditions and injustices, a point noted by Patwardhan who comments on her superior "historical accuracy"[58] in comparison to her contemporaries. Scholarly discussions on Steel have tended to take diametrically opposed views on her writings. Thus, whereas she is portrayed as a compassionate memsahib by Pat Barr[59], she appears as a racist and stereotypical

[47] Benita Parry, *Delusions and Discoveries: Studies on India in the British Imagination, 1880–1930* (London: The Penguin Press, 1972).

[48] Patrick Brantlinger, *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914* (New York: Cornell UP, 1988).

[49] Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993).

[50] Nancy L Paxton, *Writing under the Raj: Gender, Race and Rape in the British Colonial Imagination 1830-1947* (London: Rutgers UP, 1999).

[51] Sangeeta Ray, *En-Gendering India,* op. cit.

[52] Alan Johnson, "Going Jungli: Flora Annie Steel's Wild Civility," in *Flora Annie Steel: A Critical Study of An Unconventional Memsahib*, ed. Susmita Roye (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2017), pp.123-160.

[53] Danielle Neilson, "Women Who Serve in Times of Need: Recreating an Uprising in Flora Annie Steel's Voices in the Night," in Susmita Roye, ed., op. cit., pp.1-29.

[54] Helen Pike Bauer, "Flora Annie Steel and Indian Girlhood," in Susmita Roye, ed., op. cit., pp.77-100.

[55] Ralph Crane and Anna Johnston, "Administering Domestic Space" and "How to Dine in India Flora Annie Steel's The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook and the Anglo-Indian Imagination," in Susmita Roye, ed., op. cit., pp.161-182.

[56] Shampa Roy, "A Miserable Sham: Flora Annie Steel's Short Fictions and the Question of Indian Women's Reform," *Feminist Review,* Vol. 94 (2010).

[57] Grainne Goodwin, "Yours truly, Flora Annie Steel: Gender, Empire, and Indian Pressure Politics in the Times's Correspondence Columns, 1897–1910," in Susmita Roye, ed., op. cit., pp.183-106.

[58] Patwardhan, *A Star of India*, p.100.

[59] Pat Barr, *The Memsahibs: The Women of Victorian India* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), p.158.

imperialist white woman to Parry[60] and Allen Greenberger.[61] Paxton also shares the same notion with Greenberger stating that Steel "constantly compromised"[62] the cause of native women in order to fruitfully depict the Britishers. Indrani Sen finds her ambivalent and 'riddled with contradiction' in her analysis of Steel.[63] Thus, critics and writers are divided into mainly three groups based on their views on the author. First, Steel as a feminist and how her workings shows her sympathies for native women. Second, as an imperialist author who 'brooks no nonsense from natives of all classes.'[64] Third, as an ambivalent author fraught with paradoxes. The present thesis intends to show how Steel's ambivalence hides her imperialist tendencies through a critical examination of her native women characters[65] in both her popular as well as lesser known and neglected texts. Steel is discussed as a solo author and her native women in her narratives are divided into four major sections; married women, courtesans, widows and servants or helping hands in order to avoid a homogenizing approach. The research work intends to invest Steel with a definite authorial position which has remained lacking till date.

The difference between the East and the West's culture, society, traditions and religious beliefs helped condense the author's ideas. She was critical of the native women's poor lifestyle, sympathetic towards societal discrimination faced by widows or old women and derisive in her attitude towards prostitutes/fallen women. Her writing style is interestingly convincing and attractive yet not much has been conclusively established about her creative ideological biases. Creation is an artistic process that can erase the barriers of class, hierarchy and race in a writer. However, the extent to which Steel was

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[60] Benita Parry, *Delusions and Discoveries: Studies on India in the British Imagination, 1880–1930* (London: The Penguin Press, 1972).

[61] Allen J. Greenberger, The *British Image of India: A Study in the Literature of Imperialism 1880-1960* (New York: Oxford UP, 1969).

[62] Nancy L. Paxton, "Complicity and Resistance in the Writings of Flora Annie Steel and Annie Besant," in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, eds. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992), p.163.

[63] Indrani Sen, *Women and Empire: Representations in the Writings of British India 1858-1900* (2002; New Delhi: Orient Longman, 2008), pp.133-35.

[64] Ibid., p.135.

[65] Native women characters of Steel have been discussed by critics in previous works. But her native characters in her lesser-known narratives have not been discussed by dividing them into socioeconomic groups such as married women, courtesans, widows and servants. The present thesis will critically examine such characters in detail.

able to use art to diminish or exacerbate the difference between Western and Eastern culture has not been extensively worked upon. Even the works of Parry or Patwardhan fail to make a clear statement about her writing style and intellectual biases.

British women writers like Steel create memorable characters but they carry along the baggage of imperialism and class consciousness. A belief in cultural superiority was submerged within her literary thinking and thus her artistic biases require rethinking. The barrier of language or the cultural and historical displacement from her homeland must have influenced her while portraying native women characters in her texts. Her outlook on the Indian question though lenient is not clearly represented and is always ambivalent. In the moment of creation, sometimes the writers forget their own history (their traditions) and by un-learning the past portrays the characters with greater truth, beauty and emotion. As the prejudice of the colonizer dissolves, they become more humane and empathetic to the narrator's/character's psychology and intellect. The characters evolve, revolve and dissolve under the creative eye of the author. Steel in her writing invests the woman's question with importance since female characters such as married women, widows, maids, *dhyee*s, prostitutes, renowned courtesans, royal queens, harem ladies, child-wives, barren women, prostitutes and co-wives form the bulk of her writings. It is interesting to see the ways in which Steel explores the psyche of her native women characters who are sufferers within the family, victims of religion or socio-political processes or professional *tawaifs* in their hereditary trade, divested of the glory of history or social prestige. It is really fascinating for the readers to witness how and in what ways Steel blends both the psychological and physical discourses within the creative domain of her texts.

The present thesis will aim to explore the representation of the wide gamut of native women characters in her select short stories and novels. It will try to examine such colonial characters from the perspective of a memsahib author who even while carrying the white woman's burden revealed at times a startlingly humane approach towards her native characters. Memsahibs' writings are perceived to be biased and racist in their approach, but the question is to what extent Steel's works were tainted with the same imperialist venom. Was there any noticeable difference between her and her contemporaries in addressing the white woman's burden? Susmita Roye in her edited book *Flora Annie Steel: A Critical Study of an Unconventional Memsahib* (2017) states that even though work has been done

on Steel, "Critics are quite divided on how to categorize her."[66] As a writer who comes across as a reformist, well-wisher and empathizer of Indian women, Steel merits detailed and further investigation.

This work aims at examining her identity both as a memsahib writer and as a woman. It seeks to make a thorough survey of the narrative structures and thought processes that Steel used to both create and contextualize her native women characters in various socio-political and cultural spaces. Steel being a memsahib, colonizer, prolific writer, educationist, social worker and most importantly as a female figure often empathizes with her characters even as she explores and questions their plight. It is interesting to see how Steel explores the psyche of her female characters who are shown as sufferers within the family, victims of religious orthodoxies or socio-political processes. The ways in which Steel blends both the psychological and physical discourses surrounding her native characters even while camouflaging her imperialist leanings is intriguing.

Steel was an extensive and prolific writer who had a huge collection of fictional and non-fictional texts such as advice manuals, folk tales and short story collections at her disposal. She stayed in India for more than twenty years and the intensity of her knowledge of everything native is proved through her versatile incorporation of indigenous subject matter in her narratives. They include matters related to sati, widowhood, *tawaif* women, child-brides and helping hands which makes her an interesting subject for research. While scholars have worked extensively on her selected texts yet a single-author, detailed and critical investigation is still due. Her historical novels, for instance, have renowned figures of the Mughal Empire as characters that have only been mentioned in passing in other critical studies and demand further exploration. Likewise, though critics have indulged in a discussion of her works on married women (such as *On the Face of the Waters*, *The Law of Threshold*, "On the Second Story", "The Sorrowful Hour") individualized and detailed research has not been done.

The present thesis aims to introduce in detail the characters who are important but have been left out of both Steel's popular and lesser known texts. Sati and widow characters have initiated interest in critics (in texts like *On the Face of the Waters*, "A Maidens Prayer", "On the Second Story", "Suttu") but a comprehensive and extensive analysis of these unfortunate women figures needs further investigation. Her courtesan and *tawaif*

[66] Susmita Roye, ed., *Flora Annie Steel: A Critical Study of An Unconventional Memsahib* (Edmonton: University of Alberta Press, 2017), p.xix.

characters are influential and powerful women who sometimes question the authority of white women. Although some of these women (like Zora, Chandni, Dilaram) have been discussed, a critical insight into almost all her significant characters has largely been neglected in previous research. Similarly, the life of memsahibs in a colony comes to a standstill without the help of their servants. To make their life comfortable and their stay in the empire a luxury, servant figures become indispensable. Steel has introduced maids, *dhyee*s and helping hands while discussing native life in her various narratives but no critical interpretation has been done about this group of people. The present work seeks to fill in the gap in scholarship by attempting a detailed investigation of these women characters while keeping an eye on the memsahib's authorial point of view.

Critical discussion on Steel has been restricted to biographies (Daya Patwardhan) or generalized works (Patrick Brantlinger) or in reference to a few renowned texts (Benita Parry). Steel's position as an imperialist, a female author and a white woman invites scrutiny and this dissertation will attempt to do it in detail. The general discussion on Steel has centred on her so-called 'ambivalence' (Daya Patwardhan, Jenny Sharpe, Indrani Sen) but her authorial oscillation between these two positions – imperialist and native sympathizer needs cross-examination. The present work will try and show how the so-called ambivalence in Steel is actually a literary façade for her latent imperialist sympathies. This thesis will use descriptive, analytical and critical interpretative methods to discuss such questions. The present work relies upon minute reading and evaluation of selected fictional texts with the aim of reappraising Steel's identity as an imperialist memsahib writer and interrogating the 'ambivalence' so often attributed to her.

CHAPTER ONE

Married Women: The Dilemmas of Domesticity

Marriage must be a relation of sympathy or of conquest.

George Eliot[1]

Marriage has always been considered an essential part of a woman's life which can be accepted, idealized, appreciated or resisted. Marriage works at different levels: psychologically, physically and emotionally in the life of the woman/bride and also in the lives of the natal families involved in wedding rituals. Marriage in the Hindu religion is seen as a sacred union of two individuals to pursue three fundamental things: *dharma*, *arth* and *kama* (righteousness, economic values and pleasure principle). In Hinduism, there are eight different kinds of marriages like Brahma, Daiva and Gandharva among others.[2] The definition of each of these marriages may vary but the reality of marriage is one and singular. It implies a culturally sanctioned union between two people that establishes certain rights and obligations between them extending to include their children and in-laws.[3] Marriage is not only a union of two souls but a social bonding. People of two different families come together and become kin through this auspicious union. A companionate marriage entails sacrifice, adjustment and compromise on the part of both husband and wife yet in a patriarchal society women "especially brides – are admonished to constrain their own desire to conform to family expectations and needs".[4] This limited and restrictive existence is a universal phenomenon and not simply peculiar to native women only. Indrani Sen in her study *Woman and Empire* (2002), states that British women in the 19th century were resigned to a "Limited cultural role [in which] marriage and

[1] George Eliot, *Romola* (London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1886), p.380.

[2] Manusmriti, "The Eight Forms of Marriage," Section IV, Verse 3.24 & 3.26, ed., Ganganath Jha, 1920, accessed January 23, 2020, https://www.wisdomlib.org/ hinduism/book/manusmriti-with-the-commentary-ofmedhatithi/d/doc199792.html.

[3] William A. Haviland, et al., *Cultural Anthropology: The Human Challenge*, 13th ed. (Boston: Wadsworth Cengage Learning, 2017), p.209.

[4] Lindsey Harlan and Paul B. Courtright, "Introduction: On Hindu Marriage and Its Margins," in *From the Margins of Hindu Marriage: Essays on Gender, Religion, and Culture*, eds. Lindsey Harlan Paul B. Courtright (New York: Oxford UP, 1995), p.8.

motherhood were identified as the central goals suitable for middle-class women."[5] A woman was expected to be a self-sacrificing daughter, an ideal bride, a responsible mother and camouflage the reality of her drudgery (and of her individuality) and never aspire to be independent.[6] This chapter intends to examine the institution of marriage through the discourse of colonialism, its significance in real life and the fictional world of women who have "crossed or transgressed its borders".[7] The present work observes the life of native married women through the binaries of privileged/unprivileged, fortunate/destitute, and settled/unsettled. Women are believed to be born to serve the demands of patriarchy – in childhood as a daughter, in youth as a wife and in middle age as a mother. She is not allowed freedom or given importance as an individual.

In the 19th century Indian social and cultural scenario, a woman was viewed as an epitome of virtue who would keep on performing her duties as a wife and as a mother as long as she was capable. Perceived to be physically, emotionally and economically weaker than men, society found it easier to control, subjugate and dominate women. The debates about child marriage, sati, polygamy, widow remarriage, female education and the Age of Consent Bill (1891)[8] proposed a discourse of social reform in the public sphere to change the condition of women of the time. Between the two dynamics, one to view women as pious and devoted to the inner sphere (*ghar)* and the other to educate women and give them opportunities in the public sphere (*bahir)*, reformists like Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar became proponents of the latter. Women's questions thus became the object and instrument of socio-cultural reconstruction and also a symbol for the newly educated Indian male's modernizing project. Although the actual result of these male-centric reformations regarding women is confusing and debatable[9] yet in the latter part of

[5] Indrani Sen, *Woman and Empire* (New Delhi: Orient Longman Private Limited, 2002), p.3.

[6] Sen, *Woman and Empire*, p.10.

[7] Ibid., p.3.

[8] The Age of Consent Act (1891) was a legislation enacted in British India which raised the age of consent in marriage (or sexual union) for girls/woman from ten to twelve years.

[9] Sumanta Banerjee, "Marginalization of Women's Popular Culture in Nineteenth Century Bengal," in *Recasting Women: Essays in Colonial History,* eds. Kumkum Sangari and Sudesh Vaid (New Delhi: Kali for Women, 1989), pp.127-79.

the 19th and the beginning of the 20th century, development of women, mainly in the upper and middle classes did occur.[10]

Indian literary texts took a new turn with the depiction of married women characters in the writings of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee (1838-1894), Sarat Chandra Chatterjee (1876-1938) and Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941). These writers explored the prevalent reformist spirit of the Bengal Renaissance to present before the readers the condition of women in Bengali *bhadralok* society. The Nobel laureate Tagore in the essay "Women" (from the collection *Personality*), Bankim Chandra in "Samya" and "Narir Mulya" by Sarat Chandra expressed their progressive ideas about women. In Tagore's "Streer Patra" ("The Wife's Letter", 1914), from the collection titled *Golpo Gucchcho,* Mrinal who is the *mejo bou* (second son's wife) of a middle-class family defies subjugation and comes out of the marital bond to lead a free life of her own. In the novella *Nastanirh* (*The Ruined Nest*, 1901), Charulata the wife of Bhupati is a well-educated, wealthy and beautiful woman who falls in love with Amol, her brother-in-law. Their friendship and intimacy ruin the marital relationship forever. The family or the nest that she had created with effort, breaks and nothing can restore it again to its former status as Charu has moved beyond the role required of her as a wife. *Chokher Bali* (*Eyesore*, 1903) shows the hardships a married woman faces due to an unfaithful husband. The illicit relationship of Mahendra ruins the life of his wife Ashalata. The presence of overt sexuality in the widow Binodini and the child-like innocence of Ashalata present a contrast to each other in the narrative. The growing maturity of Asha and her disillusionment with her husband's so-called godly status shows the power of a wife and the unforgiving attitude of a cheated woman. She accepts Mahendra back into her life but the love is lost. With Binodini accepting a life of spirituality, the novel ends with a note of marital reunion but the larger question regarding the sanctity of marriage, love and trust remains unanswered. *Rajmohan's Wife* (1864) by Bankim Chandra tells the story of Matangini, the bold and beautiful wife of the aged Rajmohan. She goes against all odds and saves the life and property of Madhav Ghose. She withstands the torture of her husband and finally comes out as a martyr. Jibananda's wife Shanti in the novel *Anandamath* (*The Abbey of Bliss*, 1882) by Bankim Chandra reveals her power, sacrifice and devotion towards the nation even going against the wish of her husband. Sarat Chandra's *Parinita* (*The Married Girl*, 1914), *Biraj Bau* (*Mrs Biraj,* 1914) and *Palli Samaj*

[10] Amlan Das Gupta, "Women and Music: The Case of North India," in *Women of India: Colonial and Post-Colonial Periods*, ed. Bharati Ray (New Delhi: Sage, 2005), pp.454-84.

(*The Village Commune*, 1916) also deals with the discourses relating to marriage, education, domesticity and male domination that became a part of women's lives of the period. All the women characters in the above discussed works portray radical transformation in one way or the other.

The situation of married British women improved marginally with the coming of the 19th century when they were embellished with privileges like voting rights, freedom from domesticity and suffrage movements. There was harsh criticism of male domination and denial to play the role of the 'angel in the house' but the reality of the majority of them remained unchanged. The woman (after marriage) who came from a wealthy family usually brought money, jewellery and ancestral property that directly went to the husband's safekeeping. The husband had the authority to deal with this property in any way he wished. The wife eventually became a mother but had no authority over her child. Any offspring she gave birth to legally became her husband's possession. The experience that marriage provides is the same for every woman irrespective of class, race or society be it in India or England. Perkin jokingly asks women to abstain from it, "Marriage was the life plan of most women, and the single state a fate to be avoided like the plague."[11]

In an attempt to 'protect' its women, patriarchal society sanctioned a lifestyle which in many cases deprived them of their selfhood, power and identity. Patriarchy kept women under its control by creating laws, religious beliefs and social customs. Sir William Blackstone in *Commentaries on the Laws of England* (1765–69) mentions that the law was "for her protection and benefit, so great a favorite is the female sex in the laws of England."[12] Hence,

> "If a married woman committed any crime in her husband's presence, except murder or high treason, the law presumed that she performed the deed under his coercion and was therefore guiltless. He was also responsible for her debts, whether contracted while under his roof or living away from him, unless in the latter case he took legal steps, including an announcement in

[11] Joan Perkin, *Women and Marriage in 19th Century England* (London: Routledge, 1989), p.3.

[12] William Blackstone, *Commentaries on the Laws of England*, Vol. I (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1765), p.9.

> the public press, to repudiate them. He was obliged by law to support her as long as she shared bed and board (which the law enjoined her to do)."[13]

The invisible chains that bound these women after committing to a lifetime of conjugality unknowingly became a part of their existence. Although the passing of Legislative Acts and Bills supporting women's empowerment brought some change but the core of discrimination remained intact.

Although the fate of a woman as a wife remains static; the forms of deprivation, subjugation and torment change with social position, class, race and country. "The supreme paradox of this male-oriented system of property and social structure was that marriage was the fulcrum on which its whole world turned, and women, as the chief instruments and match-makers, held the levers which turned it."[14] The fate of marriage mainly depends on the compatibility between partners and the strength of their relationship. Although a mother's or wife's position in a few cases gives the woman a certain amount of power and authority, yet the success of marriage in both rich and poor households is thought to depend solely on the wife. Joan Perkin states, "In *A Vindication of the Rights of Women*, 1792, the radical Mary Wollstonecraft emphasized women's lack of political rights and attacked 'the divine right of husbands', but she was wholly in favour of marriage as an institution and called it "the cement of society".[15] Her contemporary Elizabeth Montagu's (1718-1800) (also known as the 'Queen of the Blues') notion of marriage is interesting. She states, "When I hear two people voluntarily, and on their own suggestion, entering into a bargain for perhaps fifty years cohabitation. I am so much of Solomon's mind that the end of a feast is better than the beginning of a fray that I weep more at a wedding than a funeral."[16] Wollstonecraft on the other hand ironically suggests that marriage without passion and friendship has a long-lasting future.[17] Charlotte Brontë in a letter (dated 11 May, 1852)

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[13] Perkin, *Women and Marriage*, p.2.

[14] Ibid., p.6.

[15] Ibid., p.30.

[16] Elizabeth Montagu, *Mrs. Montagu 'Queen of The Blues': Her Letters and Friendships from 1762 to 1800*, Vol-II, ed. Reginald Blunt (New York: Houghton Mifflin Co., 1906), p.356.

[17] Perkin, *Women and Marriage*, p.55.

states that marriage between two people is nothing but "selfishness."[18] Yet women are often assumed to be active participants within marriage and are often held responsible for the welfare or the downfall of marriage and family.

Missionary work from the late 18th century and the advent of western education in India brought a slow though gradual change in native women's consciousness and they became a part of the emancipatory project of the West. Steel for instance started a girl's school at Kasur to educate native women. This reformist zeal of the British women is pictured in her narratives such as "At the Girl's School" and "Feroza". Lady Dufferin too established the Zenana Mission Movement during the 1870s to ensure that purdah women took advantage of trained and experienced physicians rather than inexperienced midwives.[19] The unprivileged condition and deprived state of native women who lived at the mercy of both the patriarchy and derogatory social customs became a stereotypical image/idea for the memsahibs.

> "Authors like Sydney Owenson and Barbara Hoole, who wrote short stories and novels primarily between 1810 and 1830, wrote of British life in India, as their male contemporaries did. In 1874, William Browne Hockley was among the first British writers to delve into the topic of Indian women. Shortly after, writers such as Flora Annie Steel, Maud Diver, and Olivia A. Baldwin took on the role of discussing Indian women in their prose."[20]

The spread of western education and missionary activities in the zenana aspired to change the life of native women. Thus, the British projected themselves as the sole saviour of native women from their state[21] of dependence.

Steel resided in India with her husband and had firsthand experience of native life. After the revolt of 1857, the British attitude towards natives changed and they started to be taken more seriously. The colonizers became interested in native life and many memsahibs

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[18] Perkin, *Women and Marriage*, p.56.

[19] Pat Barr, *The Memsahibs: The Women of Victorian India* (London: Faber and Faber, 2011), p.158.

[20] Leslie M. Reich, "The White Author's Burden: Justifications of Empire in the Fiction of British India," Senior Honors Theses-4, (University of Pennsylvania: 2007), p.33, accessed March 11, 2018, https://repository.upenn.edu /cgi/ viewcontent.cgi?article=1003&context=hist_honors.

[21] Ibid., p.24.

who visited India after the opening of the Suez Canal started exploring the empire, though the usual imperialistic attitude and biased behaviour continued to mediate their works. Steel spent a couple of years in India and took a deep interest in zenana life and acquired a considerable amount of knowledge about the native lifestyle. Spending her leisure in a fruitfully enjoyable manner was her motto and thus she divided her time doing philanthropic works and managing the household. While she engaged in the English lady's typical day-to-day activities such as managing the household or doing activities such as boating, picnics, visiting friends and relations, gardening or sports, her sensitive outlook towards her brown sisters also remained remarkable. Marriage has always been a theme of significance for Flora Annie Steel. Her autobiography *The Garden of Fidelity* (1930) gives a detailed description of her own and her mother's marital life. She recalls how as an adorable three-year-old child with beautiful curls of hair, she met her husband in his first Eton jacket:

> "It was during these ten years of my life at Harrow that I first met my husband. It was at a child's party. I, aged three, was much admired in a white frock and blue sash, because my fair curls touched the hem…he was at the party, a nice-looking little boy in his first Eton jacket."[22]

She goes on to describe the circumstances surrounding her own marriage as well,

> "Why I married I cannot say: I never have been able to say. I do not think either of us was in love. I know I was not; I never have been. That is a sad fact, but it has to be faced. It has not made life any the less entrancing, any the less full of what Swinburne calls Fair passions and bountiful pities and loves without stain. My husband confessed guiltily that, but for the best man, his brother, he would certainly have run away that bitterly cold 31st of December, and I comforted him by saying truthfully that…I had to go through with it as a duty."[23]

[22] Flora Annie Steel, *The Garden of Fidelity: Being the Autobiography of Flora Annie Steel, 1847-1929* (London: Macmillan, 1930), p.9.

[23] Ibid.p.27.

The above passage gives an interesting glimpse into Steel's personal views about her own married life. She seems rather unbiased and freely represents the unromantic truth about marriage before the reader without any hesitation. It seems that she was reluctant to get drawn into married life and perceived it only as being part of her duty towards the family. Marriage is a complex paradigm that most women have to negotiate with or without personal choice. Steel through her narratives tried to portray the unprivileged, static, superficial and deprived lives of native married women whether she was a queen of the Mughal dynasty or an ordinary woman. Her narratives offer a brutally stark yet emotionally vulnerable peek into their lives although her portrayals are often marked by ambivalence. The ladies of upper-class society (or harem ladies) sometimes escape the daily struggles of life but in middle-class married life, a wife suffers the most, either by abiding with or rejecting the social and cultural norms. Steel in her historical novels such as the *Mistress of Men*: *A Novel* (1918), *King Errant* (1912) and *A Prince of Dreamers* (1908) deals with the topic of marriage and surrogate motherhood with subtlety. The harem women are depicted as ideal women with exceptional qualities. Steel has given a remarkable insight into the female psyche and has allowed ample opportunity for the married women characters in her novels and short stories to evolve and mature though the endings of such narratives are quite often problematic. Thus, women who appear in these fictional worlds are portrayed both positively as well as negatively.

Steel wrote close to 85 short stories on Indian and Anglo-Indian life which were published in the prestigious Macmillan's Magazine and by other renowned publishing houses and enjoyed a great amount of fame at the time and is even read today. The author in her works talks about the disadvantages and deplorable living conditions of native Indian women. She questions issues like child marriages or the life of domestic drudgery and suffering in her narratives. A colonial native woman was doubly marginalized, firstly, by the patriarchal society and secondly, as a marginalized gendered entity. Mrinalini Sinha states, "Gender was an important axis along which colonial power was constructed, and…at the same time the category of gender itself was never distinct from national, class, caste, and racial categories."[24]

The women characters portrayed in Steel's writing come from different social, cultural and religious backgrounds and from different time periods of history. Although the

[24] Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1995), p.11.

reality of marriage, motherhood, childbirth and child-rearing remain fairly the same for all women yet their quality differs across social classes. Child marriages, polygamy, betrayal or death by suicide are some of the commonly recurring themes that the author explores in her texts. At the same time, she touches upon issues relating to women's upliftment, the exercise of agency and their quest for freedom. For the purpose of analysis, an attempt has been made to divide the characters into two sections: the first dealing with renowned historical women and the second comprising ordinary native women. Such a division will make it easier to examine the various ways in which they are depicted: progressive and modern, emaciated or dominated, rejected and victimized. Most of the women in the stories like "The Sorrowful Hour", "Amor Vincit Omnia", "Uma Himavutee" (from the short story collection titled *In the Permanent Way, and Other Stories*, 1897), "Mussumat Kirpo's Doll", "Feroza" (from the short story collection titled *The Flower of Forgiveness*, 1894) and "At the Girl's School" (from the collection titled *From the Five Rivers*, 1893) are ordinary people who are shown as coming under western influence and offer a contrast to royal characters portrayed in novels like *Mistress of Men* (1918) and *King Errant* (1912). The response of the various characters (in the above-mentioned texts) to a difficult situation depends on class convictions, religious beliefs and social conditions as well as on their individual thought processes. Some women are able to boldly come out from the trials of life even as the rest continue to suffer and perform the same traditional roles in a patriarchal society. The following novels and short stories will discuss the issues concerning colonial women from both royal and ordinary walks of life in different times and spaces.

***Mistress of Men*: *A Novel* (1918)**

Mistress of Men deals with one of the most influential women in the Mughal Empire – Queen Nurjahan[25]. Her charismatic personality, extraordinary authority in the Mughal court and the power she enjoyed in her personal life as the emperor's lover add to her enduring popularity amongst readers. According to historical sources, Nurjahan was born as Mihrunnissa (meaning 'the Sun of Women') in 1577 on a caravan travelling from Tehran

[25] "Flora Annie Steel, whose last story," *Lyttelton Times*, Volume CXVII, Issue 17639, 17 November 1917, p.4, accessed December 6, 2022, https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/LT19171117.2.15?items_per_page=100&query=flora+annie+steel&snippet=true. The news item states that 'Flora Annie Steel, whose last story was somewhat disappointing, has wisely returned to her old Indian background. Her new story is entitled 'Mistress of Men.' It is a seventeenth century romance, based on the life of Nurjahan the Beautiful, wife of the famous Emperor Jahangir, and forms the second volume of a trilogy, begun with "King Errant," which the author is devoting to the history of Mia before the British occupation.

(in modern day Iran) to India.[26] Her father Mirza Ghiyas-ud-din, a learned man interested in poetry and her mother Asmat Begum (she appears as Bibi Azizan in the novel) both had an aristocratic lineage. According to Alexander Dow, the infant does not receive the name Mihrunnissa until the family reaches Lahore.[27]

However, the girl is abandoned by her parents in the midst of a desert because she is a girl, whereas her brothers are considered a part of the family because they are men. Zaman Shah the driver of the caravan rescues the child from the desert and after feeding her proclaims praise for god: "By Allah!...She is better than most of her sex, she knows what she wants, and gives no trouble when she gets it. I will call her Queen o' Women."[28] Zaman Shah treats her like his own daughter and gives her a name commensurate to her beauty. Her saviour and surrogate father calls her "the queen of women"[29], which is a destiny she goes on to fulfill.

She grows up under the watchful care of Dilaram, her nurse who in later years becomes her lifelong companion and helper in running the Mughal Empire. Dilaram takes charge of the child's all-round care and Mihrunnissa grows to be a beauty. When Mihrunnissa comes of marriageable age, she chooses her cousin Sher Afkan (a title conferred for his bravery) instead of Salim (the crown prince) as her husband. But the death of Emperor Akbar brings a sea-change in the life of Mihrunnissa and her husband. Salim after ascending the throne (and now known as Jahangir) wishes to marry her. Twenty years have passed after Mihrunnissa rejects his proposal but he has not yet forgotten his love for the woman. As a result, Sher Afkan receives a letter requesting him to grant a divorce to Mihrunnissa and on behalf of the king, "Send her to the Imperial harem."[30] Sher Afkan or Ali Kul being a man of moral principles and dignity rejects the proposal given by the emperor and is determined to avenge Jahangir for insulting his wife, the mother of his child and a dignified woman of the community. The emperor's proposal is an insult to both the partners, specifically Mihrunnissa. She realizes that this is Jahangir's revenge for rejecting

[26] Ellison Banks Findly, *Nur Jahan: Empress of Mughal India* (New York: Oxford, 1993), p.3.

[27] Alexander Dow, *The History of Hindostan, Vol. 3, From the Death of Akbar to the Settlement of the Empire Under Aurungzebe* (1770; New Delhi: Today & Tomorrow's Printers & Publishers, 1973), p.22.

[28] Steel, *Mistress of Men* (Toronto: S.B. Gundy Publisher, 1918), p.7.

[29] Ibid.

[30] Ibid., p.87.

him in her teens. Sher Afkan who is truly devoted to his wife asks for her decision. She outwardly rejects the heinous proposition of the emperor's and revolts against his supreme authority. She had rejected Salim years ago and married her cousin. The second time too she rejects Jahangir saying, "A thousand times no!...I say that death is preferable."[31] She is a woman of authority and decides not to yield to the emperor's autocratic power.

She rejects being an object that can be "bought and sold."[32] She is a woman of dignity, a dutiful wife and a loving mother in her household. During their last conversation, Ali Kul tells her, "Thy beauty is enough to madden any man."[33] He calls her the light of his house and gives her all due respect and love. Likewise, Mihrunnissa knew that she was an extraordinarily beautiful woman and that any man could lose his heart to her. The realization brings both contempt and joy, "Looking down on the beauty of the body in which at times it revealed, condemning it utterly. Had she only been as other women, life would have gone on peacefully."[34] She thinks about her coming fate not as a wife nor as a mother but only as a woman. "Beauty saves the world"[35] is a well-known quote from Fyodor Dostoevsky's *The Idiot* (1869) but for Nurjahan it becomes both fatal and dangerous. Like Lady Macbeth who proposes to "unsex"[36] herself, Mihrunnissa too desires to lose her beauty. She curses her own body and blames herself for everything that has happened to her family, "God, why didst Thou give me Beauty? Why, oh why?"[37] For the first time in her life, she wants to become an ordinary woman. The couple is ordered to go to Agra and surrender but both husband and wife refuse to do so. Ali Kul goes against the wishes of the emperor and is thus brutally murdered.

The primary goal in Mihrunnissa's mind after the terrible incident is to avenge her dead husband. When Dilaram, she and her daughter reach Agra, under strict supervision

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[31] Steel, *Mistress of Men*, p.87.

[32] Ibid., p.89.

[33] Ibid., p.88.

[34] Ibid., p.92.

[35] Fyodor Dostoyevsky, *The Idiot* (first published in *The Russian Messenger*, 1868–69), trans. Eva Martin, Project Gutenberg, Part III, V, accessed March 15, 2020, https://gutenberg.org/files/2638/2638-h/2638-h.htm.

[36] William Shakespeare, *Macbeth* Act I, Scene V, 38-43, taken from Albert R. Braunmuller, ed. *Macbeth* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1997), p.125.

[37] Steel, *Mistress of Men*, p.98.

they are taken under the care of the ladies of the royal harem. Although harem ladies seldom have a connection with the outer world, she is allowed to have visitors at her place. The most important part of the novel is the meeting of Jahangir and Mihrunnissa after she has arrived at Agra. Their meeting is not a happy one but when Salim addresses her lovingly as "Meru", the intensity of his passion could be induced. This was the name he used to call her when they were childhood playmates. But she has changed with the course of time and she is a mature woman now, the mother of a child. The pecking call is bitterly answered by Mihrunnissa, "My lord might tell his slave what he desires."[38] The widow, being a beauty, knew well enough that the emperor desired her body. She refuses to be touched and bravely warns him, "Stand back, my lord!" she cried, stretching out her left hand in negation, the right gripping the dagger beneath her veil. "Seest thou not the corpse of a murdered man between us? Go not near it, lest it rise and kill thee."[39]

She condemns the emperor and blames him for her widowhood. The woman is alone and in a helpless situation but her dignity is unique and fascinating. She is in dire contempt and tries to thrust the dagger from the emperor's hands crying out, "Take it…Yea, take it and kill the wife as thou didst kill the husband. Take it, or I do the deed myself!"[40] But Jahangir saves her and realizes the mental state of the widow and leaves her alone. He decides not to take her by force and leaves her to choose the course of her own life. But the three long years of seclusion teaches many new things to Mihrunnissa. Her widowhood gives her the rights and power she seldom enjoyed as a wife. After rejecting the pension from the emperor, she starts living on her own money by making delicacies. She had been arrogant and revengeful in the first few years but gradually with time, she consoles herself.

Time and experience make her realize that a woman is not just born to be a wife, a mistress or a mother; but she could do something fruitful to leave her mark on the world. She realizes that her second marriage to the emperor would be a great opportunity as it would make her the empress of the Mughal dynasty. She recollects her old life as a wife of a soldier and realizes, "What was there then between her and a man's life save sex; and sex was going. And suddenly all the past seemed to slip from her like the chrysalis from the

[38] Steel, *Mistress of Men*, p.122.

[39] Ibid.

[40] Ibid., pp.122-23.

dragon-fly, and for a moment she felt new wings, shimmering, iridescent wings…To save an Empire was better than to ruin one."[41]

She decides to think about the marriage proposal seriously. The emperor had waited for the woman of his dreams for many years and their marriage makes them understand each other in a new light. The portrayal of their relationship is one of the few instances of mature companionate marriage which is not dependent on physicality alone. Mihrunnissa may have married a man of her choice the first time but her second marriage makes her realize the meaning of the real union between two souls. "Nur Jahan was by the time of her second marriage an experienced woman, no longer prey to adolescent desires and already successful in bearing a child. Hers could be a mature love, sometimes nurturing, sometimes scolding, sometimes relinquishing, but always a partner to her husband's idiosyncrasies."[42] Alexander Dow remarks,

> "She accepted, apparently authentically, the psychological, emotional, and philosophical rapport that was supposed to exist between husband and wife and, recalling perhaps the unit concept of Hindu marriage, she moved smoothly, if creatively, through the duties assigned a king's consort. Most importantly, however, she knew how to match the needs and quirks of the difficult personality of her husband with talents and abilities that were now assuredly her own."[43]

The bonding and compromise seen in their relationship was a rare sight in the Mughal harem. Steel in her autobiography, *The Garden of Fidelity* says that she had always steered herself away from passionate feelings toward men. The reason for Steel not understanding emotions could be her own lack of interest in basic sexual experiences of life. It seems that her own self-realization and her personal thoughts on love, marriage and motherhood could have been factors influencing her creation of women characters. In most cases, the women in her narratives are her fictional alter-egos. Steel never endeavored to write about sexual intimacy between partners in her narratives. She has given only slight hints of physicality

[41] Steel, *Mistress of Men*, p.145.

[42] Findly, *Nur Jahan*, p.80.

[43] Dow, *The History of Hindostan*, p.180.

in texts and left most of it to the imagination. Both the author and her husband lived together and though their marriage was not a great success yet it remained a happy union. Steel preferred spirituality and her psychological insights were far more acute in comparison to the expressions of physical experience.

Mihrunnissa enjoyed the authority and privileges of being a queen but she repeatedly asserts in the text that sensuality in advanced years is not the only thing that keeps a relationship going. With time, she evolves into a new woman, totally independent, alluring and beautiful. The relationship between the two partners brought bliss, peace in their hearts and mutual respect for each other. History may have condemned the queen but Steel portrays her as one with a clear heart. Mihrunnissa becomes both a wife and a caregiver to her husband in his later life, and the emperor is like "a child in her hands."[44] The king being physically ill needs protective care to sustain his life and the queen becomes his ideal partner. History looks at Nurjahan as a negative influence on the king's life. She is hated by many of the influential men of the court and the crown prince Khurram (later Shahjahan) too does not accept her authority and detests her for being so powerful in both the harem and court. People around her criticized her saying: "'It is the cursed beauty of her that hath bewitched the Most High,' said one, concentrating the criticism of his group, 'and she hath so many charms there is no trapping her! Would to God she was in Agra, to die of the plague!'"[45] The lines reflect the hatred that patriarchal society had for this powerful woman. The emperor is seen as a puppet in her hands and for men to take orders from her or perform in accordance with her wishes was seen as an insult to patriarchy. Although there are numerous plots to disempower her yet none succeeds.

If she becomes an emotionally and politically supportive wife, Steel also portrays Mihrunnissa as a less than perfect mother who sacrifices her daughter in her scheming and plotting and marries her off for political gain. The author portrays her daughter Shahriyar as the queen's obverse who resembles her father more than her mother. Mihrunnissa's motherhood is sacrificed under the burden of being a powerful queen. The author does not mention much about her daughter from her first marriage in the novel. Shahriyar remains a mere adjunct to the queen's powerful personality and in many ways she represents the unhappiness of women staying on in unfulfilling relationships. Yet she shows some of the

[44] Steel, *Mistress of Men*, p.202.

[45] Ibid., p.204.

feisty spirit of her mother when she proclaims her decision to go back to her homeland after handing over her only child to Nurjahan. She makes it clear that she has performed her duties as a faithful wife and obedient daughter. The birth of the baby now allows the mother to seek freedom from a loveless marriage.

> '"Ah, ammajan,' she said suddenly, impulsively, to Nurjahan, whose eyes were on the child. 'Have I not done my part? The babe is there for thee, now let me go! As thou knowest, I had foresworn the married life. I was canoness. Did I not say, even as a child, that I cared not to have a husband? Yet did I obey thee. Thou didst not think of me, mother, it was the child that I should bear. Well, I have borne it.'"[46]

The queen takes charge of her granddaughter immediately and caringly utters, "I take it as thy gift, daughter, clean and wholesome and healthy, as becomes the descendant of Ali Kul, honorable gentleman. Never a child shall be loved more than this child. Thou hast done thy task well, and thou shalt have freedom."[47]

Motherhood has always been an important part of Steel's writing. Being a loving and caring mother, she was extremely sensitive towards motherly affection. Losing a child in India and deciding to sacrifice motherhood for her health had always been a source of regret for her. She lost her firstborn and the grief stayed with her throughout her life. "Is there any regret a woman can feel as bitter as the regret over her child that has been born dead? Was there anything she could have done? Was there anything she had omitted? Why had she not given her life to save it? And the poor little dear had been so punctual. She had not failed!...But most of all I wondered if it had really been death?"[48] The death of the child shattered Steel emotionally but as a wife, she had to move on and perform her responsibilities as a mother later in life. This was a regret that remained with her till death.

Mihrunnissa is an enigmatic personality who manages to break the prototype of an ideal Indian woman as sanctioned by society and openly uses her power and authority to serve greater ends. Marriage is usually a form of socially sanctioned control of women but

[46] Steel, *Mistress of Men*, pp.282-83.

[47] Ibid., p.283.

[48] Steel, *The Garden of Fidelity*, pp.44-45.

Mihrunnissa's evolution into power comes after her marriage with Jahangir. Her expanding authority becomes dangerous and frightening to other people in the court and even to the emperor's sons. She is seen as a threat to the court nobles who enjoy undue powers and exploit resources for their own benefit. The Mughal court was dominated by patriarchal norms; there was no place for a woman to rule. Nurjahan was neither a royal-born lady nor an heiress to extraordinary wealth. It was the marriage that gave her the authority to dominate men yet such powers were vested in her through her association with Jahangir. The dignity due to her as the chief queen of Jahangir could only continue only till the king was alive. It fascinates to see how she never fails during a crisis and evolves as a fighter who resists domination from patriarchal society. The bold and charismatic nature of Mihrunnissa acts as a foil to the lives of the other married women depicted in the subsequent narratives of this chapter. According to G. Le Grand Jacob, "It is not unusual to consider Eastern women as a down-trodden, poor-spirited race, and yet cases are numerous in which they have been the actual rulers, whilst fathers, husbands, and sons were of small account."[49]

Steel recreated her in such a way that the character speaks for itself. She relies on historical sources but fills in the missing gaps through her creative imagination without losing the essence of Nurjahan's personality. Steel endowed her with feminine and humane sensibilities thereby detaching her from the aspersions that have been cast upon her through the ages. Steel states, "Sinister motives were found for her every action; above all, personal ambition was held to be her ruling motive. This assertion is, to my mind, pulverized by the undenied fact that, after her husband, the Emperor Jahangir's, death, she voluntarily retired from all public life and lived a widow indeed."[50] His death opened a new phase in her life as she renounced all worldly things to lead an ascetic life. A British memsahib supporting and iconizing a native queen is rare indeed. Steel attempts to give voice to the buried history that turns a married woman into a 'hero'.

Native women were often portrayed as lustful by nature in western narratives. Yet Steel projects her characters as not bound only by the chains of passionate emotions. Steel in her own life too never had been bothered with mere passion or feminine sentiments. The author emphasizes that the queen was not weak in love but rather a force that enabled her

[49] Major-Gen. G. Le Grand Jacob, *Western India: Before and During the Mutinies* (London: Henry S. King & Co.,1871), p.13.

[50] Ibid., p.vii.

to transform and go against all the odds in life. Steel invested Mihrunnissa with a voice and tried to rectify what she had heard about the queen several years later when she visited her tomb in India. As a woman and a writer, Steel describes Nurjahan as she thought her to be, as a human figure with palpable emotions. The author with her creative insight has been transparent and lucid in describing Mihrunnissa both as a queen and as a woman.

The speed of Nurjahan's ascendency towards power is not because of her beauty but due to her personal and professional efficiency. In *The History of Hindostan, Vol. 3* (1770) Dow states, "Her abilities were uncommon; for she rendered herself absolute, in a government in which women are thought incapable of bearing any part…Noor-Jehan stood forth in public; she broke through all restraint and custom, and acquired power by her own address, more than by the weakness of Jehangire."[51] Nurjahan constructs a tomb for the emperor, leaving the palace walls and taking shelter on the banks of river Ravi to live in peace for the rest of her life. She leaves the glamor, opulence and power of courtly life and adopts a simple life. "She, a woman, had done her part. She had ruled well. She had made one man die with dignity as Emperor of all the Indies."[52] As a religious recluse she involves herself in charitable works for the welfare of women.

Steel's depiction of Nurjahan recalls the late 19th century concept of the 'New Woman' (a term coined in the 1920s, though the movement started from the 1890s) who was a symbol of changing gender constructs in England. The 'new woman' had the freedom to make their presence felt in the public sphere and even flaunt their sexuality. They were less tied down to the shackles of domesticity than women of earlier generations and were thus often perceived to be morally deviant by a society that was still predominantly conservative. To be a 'new woman' was to be associated with the expression of freedom, autonomy and individuality. These women refused to be tied down by the confines of marriage and domesticity and ventured into the public realm as office staff, mill/factory workers, athletes, performers or political activists. Nurjahan's political acumen and her shrewd insight into and participation in court life shows how like the Victorian 'new woman' she too was able to carve out an unorthodox role for herself. However, historical facts related to Nurjahan's fall from power after the death of Jahangir and her later life as a recluse seemed to provide a perfect cautionary if not moralistic ending for a woman who

[51] Dow, *The History of Hindostan*, p.184.

[52] Steel, *Mistress of Men*, p.76.

'transgressed' beyond accepted social borders. Steel's works were directed towards a western reading audience and she would not have risked her authorial popularity by endorsing Nurjahan's radical characteristics. Yet, the native queen's charisma and her placement within the exotic world of the Mughal empire remained a subject worth writing about.

***King Errant* (1912)**

The novel *King Errant* centers around the character of Maham, the chief consort of Babur. Steel declares that she is creating Maham from her own imagination and her account might not be historically accurate like that of Nurjahan. Maham is portrayed by the author both as a royal lady and a woman with ordinary sentiments and emotions. According to historical sources, "Maham Begum was the chief lady of the royal household and mother of Babur's eldest son. She was supreme and had well-defined rights over other inmates. Maham Begum was the third wife and chief consort of Babur, the founder of the Mughal Empire"[53] A short description of Maham is also present in Babur's autobiography, *Baburnama* (translated into Persian in 1589–90 CE). The figure of Maham is created with utmost care by Steel. She not only provides a detailed life history of Maham but also sheds interesting light on the relationship between the king and the queen. Babur had many queens and mistresses in his harem but Maham became a special one both in his political affairs and in his private life. Steel in order to create Babur's character in full glory places Maham as a supporting figure. To do justice to the queen the author portrays her with care and sensitivity. As Babur's favourite she is spoiled by the king's love and patronage. She may not be a charismatic figure like Mihrunnissa, but she is a married woman with expected sentiments and emotions. Being the mother of the heir of the kingdom, she has a special place both in the king's life and amongst the other women of the harem.

Maham Begum is featured in the novel as an example of a woman who prefers to enjoy patriarchal power and royal authority. She is portrayed as a beautiful, intelligent woman of royal birth given in arranged marriage to a deformed husband, Gharib Begh. She accepts her toils bravely and with the sudden death of her first husband, she gains freedom. Her dead husband's last wish was to see her happy by marrying her to his cousin Babur. But she gives up her claim to Babur when Masuum (the first wife of Babur) and the emperor

[53] Gulbadan Begum, *Humayun Nama*, trans. A.S. Beveridge (1902; Delhi: Atlantic, 1972), pp.8-9.

fall in love with each other. She even rejects life as the queen of Babur when the king decides to marry her to fulfill his dying friend's wish. She gains power and prestige through her deeds and marries Babur after the death of Masuum. Devoted to her husband and only living son Humayun throughout her life, she is drawn by the author with innate humane feelings. She feels jealous of the other heirs in the polygamous zenana household. She is created by the author as a woman with very different qualities from that of Nurjahan.

Another important figure in the text is that of Khanzada Begum, an extraordinarily beautiful and intelligent woman. Babur's sister appears in *King Errant* as a martyr who sacrifices her life for the betterment of her brother and the welfare of the country. She places her duty over her personal well-being and marries a man she never loved in her life. The marriage became a political negotiation that saved Babur and his empire from the enemy's hands. Khanzada is created as a figure totally at the mercy of the patriarchal society. Although she unites with her brother after long years of separation, the love and bonding they shared as siblings never withered. Lady Mubarika is another example of a woman who is sacrificed for the purpose of war negotiation. She leaves her privileged position in her father's palace and marries Babur without loving him. She is a royal lady who accepts the marriage to bring political stability to her kingdom. She leaves a young lover in her kingdom Kabul and decides to be a part of Babur's zenana. Living an almost secluded life, she loves Babur but there is no romantic passion in it. The marriage became an act of duty, which as a woman she accepts and performs till her death.

When Babur is absent for long periods of time from Kabul, Maham used to write long letters to give him every useful information about the kingdom. After the birth of Humayun, Maham gave birth to four more children but none of them survived. The last son Faruk died too and brought sadness to the parents. The death of a child is always pathetic and both parents suffer the loss. Mothers are affected both physically and psychologically after the loss of a child. In *The Garden of Fidelity*, Steel shares an incident from her childhood days when she lost her younger sister,

> "I thought she looked beautiful— flowers on her goldy curls, her little embroidered frock so fresh and dainty. She died suddenly a few hours after her first party, and they had dressed her as she had gone thither—her tiny

> blue shoes so unsoiled…That episode has remained with me to the present day. I fancy it has had much to do with my future actions."[54]

Losing one's loved one has always been a pathetic reality in Steel's life. Maybe that is a reason behind her dealing with death-related issues so empathetically in her narratives. Babur is pictured in the text as a loving husband, a great *badshah* (king) and a devoted father. Babur is worried more about Maham after the loss of his son because she has to bear all these hardships alone without his support in Kabul. Babur fulfils all his duties to the fullest and wins the heart of the readers in every aspect. Through this emotional turmoil the reality of the characters comes out and they become more human. At the time, about which Steel was writing, the letter was the only means of communication. Babur used to write long letters to his queen. After the death of their son, "He wrote her the most loving of letters, begging her not to hurt him by such words. Even had he not had, by her forethought and kindness, other sons, Humayun would have satisfied him. Humayun was a son of whom anyone might be proud; so handsome, so courtly, so brave."[55] Babur truly loves the mother and so the son becomes his weakness. He is not only a great lover but also a devoted father and a great emperor.

Steel creates Maham as a perfect wife as well as a perfect mother. But she too has faults of her own. In a harem life between numerous wives, mistresses and children, jealousy and competition for greater power are common features. So, plotting and sub-plotting are hatched to gain authority. Begetting a suitable heir is always a political issue. So, when another queen Dildar's son Alwar became quite a favourite with Babur, Maham became worried about her only son's future. The readers can witness in her a fit of growing jealousy against Alwar.

> "Though barely six he was, as his little sister had said, a unique of the age, and Babar, who had not seen him since he was a baby in arms, was almost pathetically proud of him." 'Maham could not allow any other child other than Humayun to sit on the throne after Babur.' "His devotion, indeed, raised

[54] Steel, *The Garden of Fidelity,* p.6.

[55] Steel, *King Errant* (New York: Frederick A. Stokes Company Publishers, 1912), p.322.

> a suspicion of jealousy even in Maham's generous heart for her own son Humayun."[56]

Babur is a practical and sensible man. He could imagine the fear and turmoil Maham might have felt about Alwar. But he assures her that he has already chosen Humayun as his heir to the throne after his death. The readers in the narrative might be inclined to misjudge Maham for being so scheming in nature but she is after all a human being with her own ambitions and emotions. Maham as a character in the novel never tries to evolve or achieve anything for her own self. She lacks the charisma and versatility that Mihrunnissa enjoys in her life. Maham wishes and aspires to make her only son the heir apparent and then king in future. In the Mughal household women's authority was limited and if enjoyed could only be done indoors. By making Humayun's position secure, Maham in a way secures her own position and future, as a would-be king's mother. She might be criticized by the readers for doing nothing worthy for the welfare of the empire. She is different from Mihrunnissa and her influence is limited and only reflected inside the harem. Her behaviour is justifiable for a woman who has suffered in her first marriage (with a crippled man) and wants to create a better future in her second opportunity as a queen of the Mughal dynasty.

In the latter part of the novel, readers see Humayun ill and almost on the verge of death. He fell so ill that all hope for his survival is over. The mother has lost her three children after their births; it is only Humayun to whom she devotes her entire life. Steel portrays the pathos of the situation so magnificently that readers can feel a mother's remorse in her words. Maham exclaims pathetically, '"Why should my lord grieve,' she said, 'because of my son? There is no necessity. He is King. He has other sons — I have but this one! — therefore I grieve.'"[57] The mother's will power is eroding under tremendous mental pressure but Babur is intelligent enough to handle the sensitive situation with care and understanding. The dilemma of a father and a husband is demonstrated uniquely through Babur in the narrative. Humayun's illness presents the threat of losing the heir to an empire. At the end, Humayun wins over his illness but Babur dies soon after this incident.

[56] Steel, *King Errant*, p.334.

[57] Ibid., pp.344-46.

The character of Maham remains interesting even when she has no crucial duty to play in the narrative. She has no distinguishing historical existence other than in a few archival pieces of literature. She is shown as an ordinary woman, who was satisfied with the everyday domesticities of her royal life. She lacks the charisma to impress the readers and has no narrative presence other than being a caring wife and a devoted mother. She aspires to no freedom or power for her own self, she is not even interested in public affairs of the state or willing to participate in creating artworks. She seems happy in her secluded life and led a comfortable queen's life and accepts its bondages wholeheartedly. She is never seen to capture the central focus of the narrative or heard voicing her own cause or thinking critically like Mihrunnissa serving to show how even royal women despite their status often had no identity of their own. Her historical presence brings out the contrasts between the two royal women in their full bloom at the zenith of the Mughal Empire. Maham is a happily married woman and life is not so complicated for her within the four walls of the royal palace. Steel shows the readers that the simple life of a royal woman without high ambition or dreams could also be enjoyable in its own way. As a married woman, Maham is an ideal wife and as a mother, she remains selfless and loving. The time during which she lived was a period when such power and prestige was not enjoyed or dreamt of by white people. Even though she was not a central figure in court politics she was portrayed as a distinguished figure. The rest of the characters such as Khanzada and Mubarika are portrayed as mere tools at the hands of patriarchal machinery. They have no way to exert their own choice and identity and represent the fate of most married women in Steel's narratives. The lives of these royal women recall how Sarojini Naidu in her poem "Purdah Nashin" shows that the imagined life of opulence and languid ease of harem ladies often hid the reality of sadness and suffering.

"Her life is a revolving dream
Of languid and sequestered ease;
Her girdles and her fillets gleam
Like changing fires on sunset seas;…
But though no hand unsanctioned dares
Unveil the mysteries of her grace,
Time lifts the curtain unawares,
And Sorrow looks into her face…"[58]

[58] Sarojini Naidu, "The Pardah Nashin," in *The Golden Threshold* (1896; Hyderabad: William Heinemann,1905), pp.87-88.

Steel wrote close to 85 short stories on Indian and Anglo-Indian life which were published in the prestigious Macmillan's Magazine and by other renowned publishing houses and enjoyed a great amount of fame at the time and even read today. The author in her works talks about the disadvantages and deplorable living conditions of Indian native women. She questions issues like child marriages, the domestic life of women or the system of marriage in her narratives. A colonial native woman is doubly marginalized, firstly, by the patriarchal society and secondly, as a marginalized gendered entity. Mrinalini Sinha states, "Gender was an important axis along which colonial power was constructed, and…at the same time the category of gender itself was never distinct from national, class, caste, and racial categories."[59] The following short stories and novels will discuss the issues concerning colonial women in different times and spaces.

"The Sorrowful Hour" (1897)

The short story "The Sorrowful Hour" (from the collection *In the Permanent Way, and Other Stories*) deals with two married women Saraswati and Maya sharing the same household and husband. The elderly wife is an ordinary woman not sensual or alluring like the town-bred second wife. The narrative deals mainly with the first wife and her petty womanly jealousies against the other family members. Saraswati is childless and so three years ago she welcomed Maya into her house and the two women have divided the husband's share of love amongst each other. But the largest share is upon Maya, the newly wedded wife of Gurditta, the *subedar* or head man of the village.

Maya is young and has given the man his long-awaited son Chujju. Thus, Saraswati is utterly neglected by her husband. The love scene in the narrative that Saraswati overhears makes her truly envious of the other woman. Helen Mackenzie states, "As no man can love two or more women equally, and as no woman can bear that another should share her husband's affections, I see there are heart-burnings innumerable."[60] The same happens with the first wife in the story. The love and caressing that she enjoyed years ago in her youth are now showered on Maya. The woman being the mother of his child is the apple of the eye of the *subedar*.

[59] Mrinalini Sinha, *Colonial Masculinity: The 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century* (Manchester and New York: Manchester UP, 1995), p.11.

[60] Helen Mackenzie, *Six Years in India* (London: Richard Bentley, New Burlington Street, 1857), p.80.

Saraswati welcomed Maya home and shared her husband with her but the narrative shows that she was jealous and resentful of her. The constrained relationship is obvious because Saraswati had become the neglected part of the bargain of love. Maya with her pretty face and youthful body totally captured her elderly husband. "But Maya? Ah! well was she called Maya—the woman prolific of deceit and illusion, of whom the pundits spoke; woman, not content with being the child-bringer…Maya, with her petty, pretty face, her petty, pretty ways."[61] Gurditta loved his wife dearly and was a good father to Chujju. Maya was a town-bred modern woman; she was not scared of her husband and shared a loving compassionate relationship with him. Saraswati, on the other hand, was an urban-bred simple woman whose only motto in life was to be a mother which was also not fulfilled.

In a society where motherhood has become a status symbol, barrenness can lead to torture and even humiliation. Saraswati desperately needs a child of her own. She clings to the belief that a child of her own could bring back her lost luck and the love of her husband. The author creates a beautiful picture to make the readers understand what the two women who are poles apart think about themselves. As the narrative progresses, Saraswati becomes desperate and places a snake in the kitchen to kill Maya while she is cooking. The plan falls short when Chijju goes dangerously close to the snake but Saraswati finding the child in danger saves him. Killing a child would not bring back the lost love and honour she had received from her husband. After the attempted failure, she goes to Dhun Devi, a kind of quack medicine woman of the village and admits clearly that she could never be a murderer. '"Thou must find other wisdom for me, mother,' she said briefly. 'Such is not for me."…Lo! I have tried it and 'tis not my way. Nor would I kill her. That was too trivial, seeing she is not worth life. I want but my share.'"[62]

The author does not clarify why Saraswati could not be a mother. It seems that she had some ailment and pregnancy could be fatal to her health. The time of childbirth could be her "sorrowful hour" and lead to her death. Her advanced age and health condition did not allow her to get pregnant. But she does manage to get pregnant after many years but dies giving birth to a girl child. The author creates a pathetic picture of Saraswati, her dead child and Maya taunting her even on her deathbed. '"Only a girl, after all the fuss,' came

[61] Steel, "The Sorrowful Hour," from *In the Permanent Way, and Other Stories* (London: Macmillan, 1897), p.270

[62] Ibid., p.280.

Maya's high, clear voice…'To die for a girl — for a dead girl, too — what foolishness.'"[63] Saraswati gives birth to a dead baby girl and the last scene of the story makes Saraswati a miserably tragic character. She is not aware of her misfortune and thinks that her child is alive. She is on her deathbed but worries about her newborn child and husband.

> '"The child — is it well with the child?' came in a faint voice. Dhun Devi's clasp gripped firmer; a look recalling long past years came to her face. 'Yea, mother, it is well; thy son sleeps in thine arms.' Then, craning up from her crooked old age to reach his ear, she whispered swiftly: 'Say 'tis so if thou art a man, and bid her God-speed on her journey.' So, with her husband's hand in hers, a child in her arms, and a smile on her face, came the end of Saraswati's Sorrowful Hour."[64]

She wants to regain her grip on life, she desires to change the position that society has prescribed for her. The ending of the story shows how a child slept in its mother's arms and all was well. Dhun Devi advises Gurditta to do her justice by performing her last rites. He puts his hand in hers, and keeping the dead child in her arms he performs a perfect reunion for the dead wife. The scene states that even through death she has gained the love of her husband and a daughter of her own. In the end, she indeed becomes a mother and through it gets back her husband's affection even at the cost of her death. The author makes her a winner. But the victory comes at great cost and proves that "Indian women exist at the mercy of their customs, and at the mercy of the Indian men who enforce those customs."[65]

"Amor Vincit Omnia" (1897)

"Amor Vincit Omnia" (from *In the Permanent Way, and Other Stories*) opens with Govind Sahai, a young, intelligent and studious boy. The other members of the house are his widowed mother and his grandparents. They are left to take care of their only grandson after the death of his father. The widowed mother has both a tyrannical and a loving presence in the narrative. The household is poor yet the people residing there are content

[63] Steel, *King Errant*, p.283.

[64] Ibid., p.284.

[65] Reich, "The White Author's Burden," p.24.

with their position. Govind's mother is portrayed as a simple and motherly individual, ubiquitous in many households of native India who loves and adores her only son as an asset. She is a hardworking and intelligent woman and years of struggle in family life have hardened her from within. Emotional breakouts or ignorant behaviour is never visible in her in the course of the narrative. When Govind's teacher talks about a suitable marriage for him, Govind's mother promptly replies that she had already arranged one for her son.

The story progresses and readers observe that Govind is not shy in talking openly about his marriage with his mother. He even proposes that he would marry a girl with blue eyes, '"Happy enough, mother,' he admitted, then felt Amor Vincit Omnia under his arms, and sighed…'Oh, mother, I would she had fair hair and blue eyes!'"[66] But the wish is not taken seriously as a British woman would be unacceptable in a Hindu household. The above statement shows that the young boy is full of romantic love notions imbibed from books like '*Amor Vincit Omnai*', which he read profusely neglecting the prescribed textbooks prescribed in the academic syllabus. The scholarship money that he procured by gaining good marks in the examination is important to run the household smoothly. Even the teacher warns him and advises him to concentrate on his studies rather than reading 'light' literature. The family's economic condition is not good but marriage holds a special significance in a Hindu household and the mother takes every possible care to make it special for her son.

Nihali, the young wife of Govind is not a memsahib with blue eyes but an ordinary woman, though beautiful. The young couple find in each other a companion and the relationship is more akin to friendship than a normal marriage bond. Thus, spending time with each other becomes a day-to-day affair and Govind neglects his studies without paying heed to their deplorable economic condition. The widowed mother is soon disappointed with the couple, but mainly with the new bride for her insensitive and foolish behaviour. "The pious widow used to blush over her son's habit of saying goodbye to his wife when he had to leave her for an hour or two. It might be English fashion, warranted by all the love literature in creation; it was not decent. Neither did she approve of seeing them, as now, seated together over that ridiculous farce of pothooks. Marriage was one thing, love-making was another, so she spoke sharply."[67] Govind's mother was an uneducated person,

[66] Steel, "Amor Vincit Omnia," from *In the Permanent Way, and Other Stories* (London: Macmillan, 1897), p.313.

[67] Ibid, p.317.

orthodox to the core and she hated her son's western way of treating his wife. She thought it to be an utterly ridiculous thing to do in front of elderly people in the family. She even objected to the couple spending time together.

Nihali's widowed mother-in-law maintained strict rules and regulations in her household. Being an elderly woman, she knew the sensual allures of life but her son had to get a scholarship in order to run the household. She could see that Govind was busy reading romantic tales to his ignorant child-wife and neglecting his studies. So, she creates various hurdles to keep him away from the girl but fails. As a child-bride of thirteen Nihali had no voice of her own; she remains a minor character in the text. Steel has neither given her voice nor authority to change her doomed fate. The wife neither takes any stand nor warns her husband not to neglect his studies. Her husband and her mother-in-law are the two people who are seen taking decisions for other members of the house. Being an intelligent woman, the mother decides to make an end to the happy union by taking a harsh decision. The condition of the child-bride in the house is problematic. Nihali is a pretty child of thirteen and is genuinely loved by her young husband. The western etiquette and modern ideas that her husband showers on Nihali is something very new to her. She became a true friend and companion of her husband. The stories that are read to her by her husband opened up a new world to her. She enjoys the unconditional love of her husband and she takes ample care to make her husband happy, "he used up all the stock-in-trade of the sentimental novelist for little Nihali's benefit, and she listened to his rhapsodies on perfect marriage and twin souls, her eyes set wide with wonder, admiration, and belief…She nestled her sleek head on his shoulder, telling him that she believed every word he said."[68] But the news of the coming separation brings remorse and turns their life into a huge reason for distress and dissatisfaction. No one asked Nihali whether she wished to go back to her mother's place. She cannot resist the injustice done to her. She acts like a puppet and performs what is desired of her as a wife and a daughter-in-law. Thus, Govind's mother sends Nihali back to her natal home to live amongst her own people. The couple feel cheated and hurt by the decision of the mother, "That night, when the rest of the little household retired from the roof, leaving the luxury of fresh air to the younger people, he and Nihali sat down under the stars on the still flower-strewn bed, and cried like the children

[68] Steel, "Amor Vincit Omnia," p.319.

they were."[69] The two innocent people suffer and their life changes totally after this incident. Immaturity in life, the newness of responsibility and imperfection in thinking led to disaster and death in the story.

Steel in her autobiography *The Garden of Fidelity* (1930) shares a similar incident. She narrates that western education and modern lifestyle seldom suit native people. She portrays the disastrous life of a young educated boy who suffers due to his ailing child and fails to concentrate on his exam.

> "A nice boy of about thirteen was so conspicuously bad in the little written exercise I used to give out for homework, that I asked him the reason why. To my surprise, he burst into tears and sobbed 'My baby is dying'. And die it did, though I tried my utmost; but the mother was just twelve, and the poor little dear had no vitality. It was just one of those foredoomed babies, one of those children of immature parents for which there is a special name amongst the women, which means the "forerunner". But give an instant's thought to the poor lad who was trying to mix up English grammar with fatherhood?" [70]

The same plight happens to Govind as well and the outcome is shocking. Govind as a father and a husband tries his best to keep everything under control but fails. He is a lad without knowledge and maturity and unknowingly faces the vicissitudes of life. Steel's experience makes the story realistic and its outcome cathartic. He is caught in the dilemma of a man torn between his duties as a son and a husband. The narrative brings out the pathetic condition of Govind who has to appear for his exam at a time when his newborn baby is left dying. His obligation to his family and responsibility as a pupil makes him sit for his exam but he cannot write anything.

> "He took the papers and went with them to his desk; nay, more, he did his level best with them, nerving himself to the effort chiefly by thoughts of master Ji's disappointment if he failed. But his personal interest in the matter

[69] Steel, "Amor Vincit Omnia," p.321.

[70] Steel, *The Garden of Fidelity,* p.63.

> seemed gone; that was centered on a roof in the dusty city where one child sat crying over another. What were plus or minus to him save a world with or without an unnecessary infant?"[71]

The paragraph brings out the utter fruitlessness of education and the unsympathetic attitude shown by all the other members of the household towards the dying child, Govind and his wife. The scene becomes even more pathetic when we see Govind writing a paper when the exam itself has lost the power to create any meaning in his life.

> "He remembered and yet forgot. So, when the order to go up for the second paper came he rose with his brain in a whirl, a wild desire to cry, 'Let me alone, my baby is dying!' "seeming to blot out everything else in the world. Perhaps had he done so he might have had a chance in the examiners' human pity; as it was, he pulled himself together, and failed hopelessly."[72]

The pitiful situation miserably affects the young parents. The time Govind shows up beside his wife, the child is already dead. "When Govind reached home Nihali's arms were empty. There is no need to say more. It was an unnecessary infant to all save those two."[73] The parents of the newborn suffer the most and that disturbs the readers too. Nihali his child-bride, is not of the right age to give birth to a child. She has not gained the physical maturity and mental stability to be a mother.

The story proceeds and the economic condition of the family worsens; Nihali's mother takes her back to their paternal house. Though Govind suffers the absence of his wife yet he makes no objection. The last blow, his separation from Nihali totally shatters him from within. He must have failed in various ways but he loved his wife dearly. The small life pension of his grandfather that helped to sustain the household also stops when the grandfather dies suddenly due to autumn fever. Nihali is just a child when she has to face the death of her own child. The death of immature infants is still a common occurrence in India. But the two shocks, the loss of a child and the utter poverty that stood in between

[71] Steel, "Amor Vincit Omnia," p.326.

[72] Ibid., p.328.

[73] Ibid.

the partners became too much for them to withstand. Nihali takes refuge in her mother's house but her life after losing both her husband and child could never be the same again. The author too maintains her silence about the plight of the unfortunate Nihali after the death of Govind.

The final incident of the story is heartbreaking and agonizing. The passage quoted below shows the futility of human life. Govind's health worsens as the novel proceeds. The repeated shocks become unbearable for him. Govind plans to leave the house and goes to the library. His mother tearfully objects to him going out as he is critically ill and it may lead to a fatal consequence. Govind assures his mother,

> '"Reading will not hurt me, amma jan,' he replied, 'and the examination is next month.' But he dies in the library itself. "They found him two hours afterwards seated at the desk before the ledger, his head resting on a novel he had just been entering in the register. A horrible stain of blood from the blood vessel he had ruptured blotted the page, but through it you could still see, in his bold handwriting: Amor Vincit Omnia. Govind Sahai, Kyasth."[74]

The failure in both private and public life takes a dangerous toll on Govind. The last time readers find him in the library, issuing the same book that he read before his marriage and later with Nihali. The title of the book when translated read 'love conquers all', which becomes the irony in his life. Govind's death creates the impression that young English-educated native youths could never win over life's hurdles. His presence in the text keeps the narrative going and in the end he proves himself an utter failure. Steel magnifies not only the poverty of the family but also brings into focus the subjugated position of the natives before the colonizers. Without any authorial position to speak for them, "The babu drifts in and out of the story at times convenient for the British."[75]

Govind fails utterly in every sphere and with his death Nihali's life becomes pathetic. In colonial Indian households young women were given in marriage at a very young age, Nihali too became part of the same unfortunate bargain. The poor girls suffer the consequences of such marriages which lead to untimely pregnancies and the death of

[74] Steel, "Amor Vincit Omnia," p.327-28.

[75] Reich, "The White Author's Burden," p.81.

the newborn. Nihali married Govind when they were in their teens. Nihali's pregnancy is not delayed and being young she gives birth to a premature child. The bodily stamina and the experience of motherhood cannot be expected from a girl of thirteen or fourteen. The baby dies and the young parents suffer abominably from the unexpected shock. They are deeply affected by the loss of their firstborn but no other member of the family shared their suffering. The burden of the household, their marital separation and then the death of their newborn child creates a depression in the couple's life. They are shattered by such an unimaginable outcome of their conjugal life. Death and widowhood, in the end, make the narrative depressing and pathetic. It also creates a cathartic effect in the mind of the readers. Death may have been a solution for Govind but the author keeps any information about the widowed Nihali in abeyance and the question of her future remains unresolved. A child widow's life in a native country is dangerous as well as deplorable. So, in a way, Govind's physical death brings both moral and psychological death to his child-bride.

"Mussumat Kirpo's Doll" (1894)

In the story "Mussumat Kirpo's Doll" (from *The Flower of Forgiveness*), the protagonist Kirpo (a cripple by birth), falls prey to the reformatory zeal of the English missionaries who devoted themselves to the upliftment of downtrodden and illiterate natives. The story begins with a prize-giving ceremony for the female students of the school. The narrator compares the young pupils sitting on the floor of the school with horticultural plants set in rows, "On the bare ground…like seedlings in a bed."[76] The prize-giving ceremony is in full force but a mistake happens when a Japanese doll is handed over to Kirpo. The author introduces the poor deformed girl taking gifts on the prize-giving day in a school, "Mussumat Kirpo took her doll stolidly; — a sickly, stupid-looking girl, limping as she walked dully, stolidly back to her place."[77] Most of the girls who are present there for the ceremony are "paper pupils."[78] They neither have real existence in the school nor do they get any fruitful education to uplift themselves. The missionary lady Miss Julia fails as a teacher in educating her pupils properly. The so-called enlightened educated British ladies who come to India to spread Western education with the wish to elevate the condition of

[76] Steel, "Mussumat Kirpo's Doll," from *The Flower of Forgiveness* (London: Macmillan, 1894), p.275.

[77] Ibid., p.277.

[78] Ibid., p.279.

their native sisters fall flat in the narrative. Steel creates the school scene with wit and the teacher's lack of commitment toward real education is the object of the author's critique. She tries to show through her narrative the flaws of Western education and its ineffectiveness in India.

Miss Julia goes to the house of Kirpo to get back the doll given to her by mistake. The incident is important as the teacher gives permission to the girl to keep the doll in her safekeeping for another year. "The Miss-sahib…gentle, womanly eyes saw something she recognized in the child-like, yet unchildlike face looking into hers. 'Would you like to keep it, dear?' she asked gently. Kirpo nodded her head."[79] The child develops a weakness toward the doll. It was the only possession that Kirpo could call her own. She knew it well that like her books, the doll too would be sold by her in-laws to acquire money. But Miss Julia feels for the child and grants her permission to keep the doll for a year with the promise that next year the doll would need to be returned to school. "This admixture of cunning rather dashed poor Julia's pity; but in the end, Kirpo went back to her work with the Japanese doll carefully concealed in her veil, and for the next year Julia Smith never caught sight of it again."[80] The readers are not sure whether the child plays with the doll or not. But the curiosity remains about Kirpo and her Japanese doll. "Perhaps Kirpo got up at night to play with it; perhaps she never played with it at all, but, having wrapped it in a napkin and buried it away somewhere, was content in its possession like the man with his one talent; for this miserliness belongs, as a rule, to those who have few things, not many."[81]

Slowly Miss Julia loses interest in Kirpo as she gets access to other houses to introduce her reform projects. The abandonment of Kirpo by her parents, her in-laws and even by her teacher results in her ruin. Everyone disapproves of her and eliminates her from their lives and ceases to care for her. Her situation worsens when her immature body has to prepare for motherhood. Mai Gungo, her mother-in-law, exploits Kirpo for a male heir. No one is interested in the well-being of Kirpo. On one hand, Miss Julia is concerned about getting her doll back and on the other hand, the mother-in-law cares only for an heir at the expense of the girl.

[79] Steel, "Mussumat Kirpo's Doll," p.280.

[80] Ibid., p.281.

[81] Ibid.

Kirpo as a human being ceases to exist both in the school and in the family. Steel too has created Kirpo as an underprivileged individual but she never bothers to have her life changed by providing her with true education. This attitude of the writer brings into focus the question of whether the missionaries and memsahib authors were truly willing to do any real welfare work or whether their support for their native sisters was just a sham. When Julia Smith does get time to visit Kirpo, the latter is on her deathbed. She has done her part by giving birth to the heir of the family. But the girl is losing her hold on her dear fruitless life and none cared to alter it. The teacher thinks that since she is a mother and has a living child to play with she would not care for the doll, and even at such a crucial moment, the memsahib proves her insensitivity and inability to understand Kirpo. "The girl's head shifted uneasily on the hard pillow. 'Ay! and the prize-giving day must be close, I have been thinking. If the Misses will look behind the straw yonder she will find the doll. It is not hurt. And the Miss can give it to someone else. I don't want it any more. She might give it to a little girl this time. She could play with it.'"[82] Kirpo could well realize that she did not have much time left. She craves something which she truly loved and moves uneasily on her deathbed. Miss Julia is bewildered witnessing the pitiful situation and insists the mother-in-law to give the newborn baby to Kirpo. But it turns out that it is not the child but the doll that Kirpo wants to hold in her hands for the last time.

> '"Give her the baby — only for a minute,' pleaded Julia with tears in her eyes. Mai Gungo frowned; but a neighbor broke in hastily —'Ay! give it to her, gossip, lest in her evil ways she returns for it when she is dead.' So, they laid the baby beside her; but the restless head went on turning restlessly from side to side. 'My doll! my doll! I like my doll best.'"[83]

The last scene brings out the childish instinct of a girl; she wants a doll, not her motherhood. She is not physically and mentally prepared to be a mother just like is unable to become a student at the school. A doll is more important to her than a living child. It is obvious that being so tender of age she had not realized the meaning of marriage or motherhood. The mother-in-law is not worried about Kirpo either, she has finished her duty and her death

[82] Steel, "Mussumat Kirpo's Doll," pp.283-84.

[83] Ibid., p.285.

seems to bring happiness to the household. The mother dies before the doll could be brought from the mission compound. According to Hennessey and Mohan, the author fails as a creator and a human being to rescue Kirpo from her untimely and pathetic death. The impracticality of missionary education for the native married women in the colony is vehemently criticized by them. "The narrative, instead of using the alterity of the familial arrangement that oppresses Kirpo to advance an implicit argument on behalf of English reformist intervention, consciously disrupts the discourse of English feminine philanthropy."[84] Society takes everything from her including her doll, leaving her to die.

A newspaper article dated 14 March 2020 (in *Ananda Bazaar Patrika*)[85] covered a story of a girl who cut off her doll's head when her family forced her to marry. The family decided to give her in marriage whereas she wanted to continue her studies. In utter distress, the girl cut the head of her favourite doll and threw it in the courtroom showing her rejection of the patriarchal rules as well as symbolizing the death of her own dreams. By cutting the head of her doll, she in a way cut her own aspirations for growth and happy life. Authorities took immediate measures and the girl was rescued and the family called off the marriage. But nothing of that sort happens with Kirpo. So, after the death of the child, "Life went on in the courtyard as though no such thing existed."[86]

"Uma Himavutee" (1897)

"Uma Himavutee" is taken from the short story collection *In the Permanent Way, and Other Stories*. Uma Devi the married woman in Steel's story shares a loving relationship with her husband. She has been barren even after ten years of marriage and could not bring forth a child of her own. The house was deserted with only three people residing in it. The house needed an heir, a son to help them in old age just as Shivo and Uma were taking care of their old father-in-law. A psychological turmoil is noticed when the wife is unable to decide whether she should take another woman into her house or live heirless. Uma knows well that the result of taking a new wife would mean sharing her husband's love and affection with another person. Her husband loved her but she knew well that she would

[84] R. Hennessey and R. Mohan, "The Construction of Woman in Three Popular Texts of The Empire: Towards A Critique of Materialist Feminism," *Textual Practice*, Vol. 3, No. 3 (1989), pp.323-59.

[85] Arunaksha Bhattacharya, "*balikabelay biye! kop putuler golay* (Child marriage! Anger shown by slitting the doll's head)," *Ananda Bazar Patrika*, March 14, 2020, p.3. (A Bengali Newspaper from Kolkata).

[86] Steel, "Mussumat Kirpo's Doll," p.282.

suffer after the second marriage. She is a woman of twenty-five and worries about their future. She was well aware that Shivo too wanted an heir to take care of them and the field when they would turn old like *baba-ji* (father-in-law).

Thus, the husband and wife together decide to bring a new member into the family. Uma loves her husband dearly and so accepts the decision of his marriage but refuses to take an active part in the wedding. The emotional turmoil, the amount of dejection a woman feels when she has to share her love with someone else is unbearable. Uma is a good woman, a loving wife and a dutiful daughter-in-law but that does not make her equal to a mother. Motherhood is the highest dignity given to a woman in an Indian household. She does all her duties yet she fails to be a mother. The narrative shows her mental turmoil and her inner anxiety after the birth of a child from the second marriage.

The birth of the son in the narrative is drawn with much care by the author. The scene shows Shivo waiting in the courtyard to get a glimpse of his newborn child. The first wife has sacrificed a lot but decides to give her best in every circumstance even when the second wife is in labour. She knows that her position in the house would change with the birth of the child. But her duty to the house is more than mere feminine emotions and suffering. Thus, Uma brings the baby to his father, "I bring thee thy son, husband. Look on it and take its image to thine heart."[87] She is aware that he would love his son as well as the mother of the child more than her. But she is helpless as it is her duty to make her husband happy. She exclaims, "I bring thee thy son."[88] It is an important moment because she does not mention the name of the mother here but her own name. The reason being she is the one who sacrifices her love and shares her house and her husband with another woman to achieve her goal of bringing an heir to the family. Uma could have easily denied her duty and kept the house heirless. If she decided not to share her place with anyone the two men of the house would never have uttered a word against her wishes. It is Uma who virtually becomes the real mother of the child, a kind of psychological surrogacy dawns upon her.

Through her sacrifice, she gets everything back at the end of the story. Indrani Sen states that a happy conclusion is a rare sight in Steel's stories. The sensuality of the younger

[87] Steel, "Uma Himavutee," from *In the Permanent Way, and Other Stories* (London: Macmillan, 1897), p.228.

[88] Ibid.

wife fails to charm the husband and Uma is saved from a deplorable life.[89] The dream of a perfect married life is fulfilled in the narrative as the readers witness the couple walking back to their house, together. "They went homeward through the lightening fields, — she a dutiful step behind the man, — the printing presses over at the other side of the world were busy, amid flaring gas-jets and the clamor of marvelous machinery, in discussing in a thousand ways the dreary old problems of whether marriage is a failure or not."[90] Steel tried to create her native women characters in a different light and even granted them success in a few instances. Steel's female protagonists are not always sufferers but sometimes come out as martyrs. But her attitude towards Uma is different. She is created as a self-sacrificing woman, without any agency or voice of her own. Her sacrifice seems right and her suffering brings no newness to the text. She reveals the helplessness of women in Steel's text and her depiction of native married women as powerless is proved in the end.

"Feroza" (1894)

"Feroza" from the short story collection *The Flower of Forgiveness* introduces "Feroza," the protagonist who is busy welcoming Miss Smith (the missionary lady and a teacher) into her house. She is a free-spirited woman who feels suffocated in the inner quarters of zenana life and craves change. The story charts a journey of wish fulfillment for Feroza. She wishes to be a suitable life partner for her English-educated husband who stays abroad. Feroza aspired to be an educated lady who could easily read her husband's letters without anyone's help. The teacher Miss Smith gets permission to intrude into the purdah life of the inhabitants of the house and begin teaching. Although Feroza and Miss Smith are different in every aspect, they develop a friendship that stays till the end of the story.

Married at a very young age and separated from her husband, Feroza knows little about Mir, her husband. She is inquisitive and wants to learn to read and write on her own. Feroza aspires to have a happy conjugal life and hopes to make Mir fall in love with her by getting educated. She aspires to become an educated woman and hopes to use her learning as a way of attracting her husband. According to Indrani Sen, "the wife of the barrister is afraid of rejection from the Western-educated husband. She does not want to be proved naïve in comparison to the memsahibs that her husband had met abroad. She wanted to

[89] Indrani Sen, "Representations of Women in the Fiction of the British Raj in the 19th Century," Ph.D. Thesis, School of Language Literature and Culture Studies (Jawaharlal Nehru University: 1995), p.41.

[90] Steel, "Uma Himavutee," p.231.

bring an 'uncomfortable transformation' in herself."[91] She is scared and thinks that she cannot attract him with her physicality and imbibing Western education seems to be the only way to prove her worth to him. In Muslim households, foreign education was a forbidden affair. But the girl's interest and quest to learn helped her to win over all odds and Miss Smith soon became a daily visitor.

Steel creates two women characters within the same household who are totally different from each other. Kareema advises Feroza not to indulge in learning or writing as that would not make Mir happy. Kareema is a woman who has no ambition to do anything contrary to social customs. She is a simple woman with very ordinary thoughts and dreams. Kareema is an example of the kind of woman who is present in every native household. She advises Feroza to be more feminine and tries to teach her ways to allure her husband. Kareema is shown as a sexualized patron of beauty without any power or aspiration of her own. She is a woman who is bound by the flesh and lacks the intelligence to be a dignified human being. But the other girl proves to be her opposite. Feroza labours to pursue Western education to make her husband happy. She thinks that colonial education must have anglicized him and made a new modern man out of the old Mir. The main focus of Feroza is to achieve the same status and position as Mir by educating herself in a new fashion. She works so hard that Miss Smith becomes worried about her health.

On the other hand, Kareema is portrayed as a total contrast to Feroza. She refuses to be guided by her husband, by Feroza or any other member of the family. She refuses to be decent and morally correct and chooses to marry Mir (her brother-in-law) for her future comfort after her own husband's death. She is well aware of social customs and also intelligent enough to rectify her widowed state without a thought about Feroza. High moral values and a cultivated sense of right and wrong are not seen in her. She thinks that religion and social customs are essential for human existence. In a way, her harshness and practical thinking help her to survive in life. Her bodily charms win admiration from Mir even though she proves dull in matters of the intellect. She rejects social upliftment, western education and enlightenment and submits happily to her zenana life. In British women's reform writings native women like Kareema are always drawn as passive, neglected creatures living in dark dinghy places. They have no power or authority of their own and do not aspire to change.

[91] Steel, "Feroza," from *The Flower of Forgiveness* (London: Macmillan, 1894), p.160.

A woman like Feroza who breaks all rules to change herself completely to please her husband fails when Mir after his long stay abroad does not change or forget his orthodox roots. He had to marry at a very young age and travel abroad for his studies. Mir is pictured by Steel as a person who fails to gain true western education. He is laughed at and satirized by others. The tragic betrayal that Feroza faces after her husband's return makes her life miserable. Even after Mir's second marriage to Kareema is decided upon, Feroza is kept in the dark about it. When she learns that Kareema is going to be her husband's second wife she feels betrayed and dejected. A Muslim man's attitude toward polygamy is shown as cruel and mortifying. Kareema's husband dies and the family decides to give her in marriage to Mir and she accepts it happily. Mir accepts polygamy as his duty toward his family and religion. Burton states that Mir is a character who has no definite standpoint and oscillates between his acquired western modern education and native sentiment. He is attracted to Kareema and in order to justify his (wrong) decision poses as a victim to his London friends.[92] His ambiguous and confused state results in Feroza's untimely death. In the last scene, Miss Julia appears again, but here too she can do nothing but watch her pupil suffer as a victim, "Miss Smith knelt beside her and took the slender cold hand in hers. 'My dear! My dear!' she whispered through her sobs, 'Surely you need not have gone so far, so very far for help.'"[93] The effectiveness of Miss Julia's cry becomes stronger in the last lines. She fails both as a woman and as a teacher to rescue her student Feroza as she had gone beyond all worldly suffering. The story moves to its tragic conclusion and "the dead face was hidden even from her tears."[94] The British women and missionary ladies portrayed in Steel's texts in many instances prove to be failures. Their attempted rescue of their native sisters while keeping intact their own privileged space and hierarchical position, backfire in the narratives.

"At a Girls' School" (1893)

"At a Girls' School" (from the collection *From the Five Rivers*) is a story about two poor women, Hoshiaribi a married girl (mother) and Fatima, sister of Peru (the unmarried aunt)

[92] A. Burton, *At the Heart of the Empire: Indians & The Colonial Encounter in Late-Victorian Britain* (California: University of California Press,1998), p.19.

[93] Steel, "Feroza," p.187.

[94] Ibid.

and surrogate mother of the children. The narrative starts inside the school premises. Although the chapter deals mainly with married women and mothers, Fatima becomes an exception as she is an unmarried surrogate mother to Peru's children. The story revolves mainly around Hoshiaribi and Fatima, the two ladies of the household who are diametrically opposite to each other in terms of their characters. The contrast is not contingent upon physical appearance with Hoshiaribi being beautiful and Fatima being thin or ugly but in terms of performing the duty of motherhood which is done by Fatima but rejected by Hoshiaribi. Fatima is

> "A child of about ten, with a sharp, old face. Her blue trousers were rent at the knees, her skinny hands inconceivably smeared with ink— there was more ink than hand—and the coarse cotton cloth she wore as a veil was frayed, worn, and dirty…A competent observer could have told at once that she belonged to the Kashmiri quarter, and to either a poverty-stricken or a bereaved house. No mother's fingers had been at that plaited hair for weeks."[95]

The above passage shows how a girl of ten years turns into a mother and takes care of the household. A woman like Fatima who was a real fighter had turned herself into a caregiver. But the other members of the household showed neither affection nor tenderness towards her.

The story criticizes the utter inefficacy of government-run schools and the education it provides. Steel questions the quantity and quality of this imperial education. Most of the students attended this school not for education but for money. Many girls like Hoshiaribi attended school to earn a scholarship for running their households. The money the school provided became a life force for those who could not successfully complete a simple algebraic numerical. Thus, the economic situation of Indian women was easily understandable from Steel's narrative. These women neither had freedom nor money of their own. Seldom did they have any privileged position in the household. The money given as a scholarship to these women became their only means of sustenance. So, Hoshiaribi wanted to keep on learning as long as she gained monetarily from it. Learning becomes a

[95] Steel, "At a Girl's School," from *the Five Rivers* (London: W. Heinemann, 1893), p.147.

way to keep her body and soul together. The education that Hoshiaribi and Fatima deem necessary is not for their emancipation or progress. Even after completing the required level of education, their position remained unchanged. After Hoshiaribi fails the exam she has to leave school. She manages to get hold of a job at a school with very low pay.

But Fatima is successful and sets up a crèche to take care of the small children of her neighbourhood. The school proves quite successful. Steel examines and brings out through the story the inadequacy and gaps of western education practiced in India by missionary women. In her autobiography, she describes a lady in a similar situation. "A pretty young girl of sixteen nursing her first baby and puzzling her brains over fractions in an upper classmate Victoria School in Lahore, leading to her having qualms 'especially when I found out that she was married to an ignorant man. But, of course, the six rupees a month for her scholarship was an efficient aid to family finance."[96] She is sympathizing with the girl but also criticizes her vulnerable situation. The author is questioning not only the educational process but also the class issues that were associated with learning. She questions the relevance, necessity and requirement of education for native women of India which was nothing but a sham. As an author she also questions the need for foreign education as it fails to bring any positive results. The amount of anxiety and depression it created in the immature minds of Fatima and Hoshiaribi is irrelevant. Steel herself became a school inspector in native girls' schools in India so it is evident that she was writing the story directly from her first-hand experience.

In real-life struggles, the high-sounding western emancipation project fails miserably and also shatters the possibility for change. The reality of antagonistic marriages, deplorable monetary conditions, birth of numerous children in a single household and financially unproductive male members all add up to make the narrative interesting. The idealized femininity cherished by the upper-middle class western-educated men fails to win the scene. Hoshiaribi is not interested in motherhood or in her studies. She is not the object of affection of her husband who is a drunkard and totally neglects her. She is worried about winning a scholarship to make her life easier. The labour or struggle of the two poor girls as wife, breadwinner, biological mother and surrogate mother makes the idea of Western enlightenment a mockery.

[96] Steel, *The Garden of Fidelity,* p.167.

The withdrawal of the scholarship changes the life of the two women in the narrative. Hoshiaribi has to work as a school teacher for exceedingly low pay, which results in depression and frustration. Being abandoned by her husband she, at last, takes up prostitution as her livelihood. Fatima on the other hand establishes a school, which critiques western teaching and its processes yet it becomes a huge success. Fatima shows both courage and intelligence which in times of distress results in a partial settlement of their lives. Her school becomes a life force for her. It became the favourite place for both the small children and their mothers, much more favourable than the government-run school. The school lacks the strict rules and regulations of western education but it has a humanitarian loving touch that makes learning easy and possible for all. Whereas Hoshiaribi fails as a teacher, Fatima with less knowledge learns how to manage both her life and school together. Fatima's school was emphatically a school with the learning left out. Yet somehow the girls liked it well and their busy mothers liked it more. The imperialistic reform project and its outcome are mocked by the author. The imperialistic enterprise to educate native women becomes a miserable sham and is rejected by all. Even Fatima is not rescued in the end. She along with all her family members dies of an epidemic. So both women fail to gain freedom in their lives in the end. Antoinette Burton says, "Throughout contemporary middle-class feminist discourse 'the Indian woman' served as evidence of British feminists' special imperial 'burden.'"[97] The author takes up the imperial burden to educate these women but abstains from giving them a good and dignified life. The native women are destined to fail in most cases.

In the historical novels, Steel's characters and happenings symbolize real people and events, preserving the continuity of those experiences and becoming ineffable historical repositories, telling a tale uniting both past and present. Although British women had great access to the female inner quarters, still the author's intellectual intervention and speculation on the colonial harem culture is limited. Steel in the novels *Mistress of Men* and *King Errant* talks about two Mughal queens and narrates their individual life histories. The past has been put before the readers in its own glory and the author has desisted from altering its content. The reason being that her time frame does not allow alterations and second, Steel by showing the good old days proclaims it to have been lost forever. This

[97] Antoinette M Burton, "The White Woman's Burden: British Feminists and 'The Indian Woman', 1865-1915," in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance,* eds. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (Bloomington, Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1992), p.137.

enables her to make her imperial aspirations and rule legitimate even as she portrays ordinary native women characters in her texts. She does not fully sympathize with Nihali, Feroza, Saraswati or Uma. The result of impractical aspirations and their doomed future is shown through the lives of Hoshiaribi and Fatima. In the story "Uma Himavutee" we see Maya as a greedy, jealous person who only thinks about her own welfare and totally neglects the first wife Uma. In "At the Girls' School", Hoshiaribi has to ultimately take up prostitution because her husband Peru takes fancy to a bazaar woman, Chandini and leaves her with his children. Nihali, the child-bride and mother of a dead infant girl is seen torn between two responsibilities, the dictates of her own heart as a wife and the dictates of patriarchal tradition as a woman. She is turned into a commodity by her mother-in-law and her own mother as both use her on their own terms. Feroza, Fatima or Saraswati suffer in one way or another at the hands of society, tradition and patriarchy. Indrani Sen says that Steel's stories show, "The impossibility of change. So, even while on the surface the need for social change is being urged, the underlying thrust in a few of the shorter fiction seems to be that change or reform is difficult in this country, if not altogether impossible."[98] In all the above discussed stories, the author has compromised the condition of women as mothers, wives and human entities. The rhetoric of feminine inequality carefully mirrors the traditional colonial belief of a memsahib who creates a separate sphere for the colonizer/colonized, master/servant and sahib/native.

But Steel refused to accept the notion that, in India, British imperialism is monolithic and absolutely authoritarian. Steel presents the eternal glory of each individual character in her narratives rather than showering them with temporal glory. Her deliberate search for an extremely distinct quality of life is possible only because of her explorative power and mature thinking. The perfected soul of the author though biased in many cases presents to her readers the authentic experiences of colonial life. In these above-discussed texts, crisis within marriage, the problem of barren women, child-brides and surrogate motherhood are often used as a narrative strategy to provide and keep up the vitality of the discussion. Keeping the argument concentrated on the conventional ideology of gender, race and class issues Steel creates her characters with a hope for change. She clearly states that she is not a hero worshiper and could not work outside the idealized order of racial stereotypes enjoying her position as a memsahib. She is a woman and an efficient writer,

[98] Sen, "Representations of Women," p.51.

an intelligent talker and also a clever strategist. Every gaze of hers is under her own imperial surveillance.

The narratives no doubt try to be progressive and inspiring yet they fail to move the readers and also neglect to reveal the real truth of the colonial existence of native women in India. In a newspaper interview Steel comments that,

> "In the part of India with which I am acquainted— the Punjab — a girl is not married until she is 13 or even older, and in that country she is a young woman at that age. The result of my own personal observation is that marriages in India are singularly happy. There are fewer cases of unkindness and violence than in this country. The dowry system is a great protection to the wife. Every wife takes her husband a dowry, which is a kind of marriage settlement against unkindness. If she is badly treated and thus compelled to go back to her father's house, the husband has to return her dowry; probably he has spent it, and as it is not often convenient for him to refund the money, he takes care to treat his wife well."[99] Her statement and the condition of married women in her narratives show contradiction. It is obvious; she is not in favour of child marriage but to her, Indian husbands are "The husbands of India can exact obedience and can have beauty, sweet temper and accomplishments in their wives by the simple process of marrying several; but Mrs Steel assures us that the advantages are more apparent than real because the husbands of India are the most henpecked on earth."[100]

To prove her ambivalent nature her statement about Indian marriage is essential, "The result of my own personal observation," proceeds Mrs Steel, "is that marriages in India are

[99] "Marriages in India," *Evening Post*, Vol. LIV, Issue 69, 18 September, 1897, p.2, accessed December 6, 2022, https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/EP18970918.2.66?items_per_page=100&page=2&query=flora+annie+steel&snippet=true.

[100] "Marriage And Pleasure: Mrs. Flora Annie Steel" has a striking article in the 'Monthly Review', *Lyttelton Times*, Vol. CXV, Issue 14066, 22 May 1906, p.6, accessed December 6, 2022, https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/LT19060522.2.45.2?items_per_page=100&page=2&query=flora+annie+steel&snippet=true.

singularly happy. There are fewer cases of unkindness and violence than in this country."[101] Steel's view and her narratives prove her as an imperial representative who worked both as a supporter of the imperial hegemony even while critiquing it. The readers can visualize a mixture of late Victorian sentiments and the influence of the new reformatory ideas of the time in Steel's writings. She acts as an agent of historical change while keeping her ambivalence intact. Conserving the tradition and culture of her homeland she redefines the imbalance of power mechanism and de-masculinizes the colonial system. Taking the burden of an ideal memsahib, she attempts to save the cause of Indian women. Rhetorical manipulation and the language of universal sisterhood for the cause of her dominated brown sisters became a rhetorical tactic in her writings. Being an emotional person and a good author, she cunningly camouflaged the true meaning of her writing.

She has drawn her texts to create an image of colonial reform and rejected in many cases the intrusion of her own imperialist baggage. She kept true to her own beliefs and historical notion of imperialism but was never been too harsh or critical of native problems. The dominant gender politics is clearly visible in the doomed future of the author's women characters. They reveal how "Anglo-Indian authors painted images of India which reflected the India they wanted to believe existed, and the ways in which this image contributed to an argument for rule in the subcontinent. In other words, British fiction writers represented India and Indians in ways which made their rule seem essential."[102] Imperial thinking, colonial motives and patriarchal notions blended into a uniform tool to restrict native women's expansion in the texts. The expression of superiority along with the white woman's burden results in rejection, domination and failure for these native women. They experiment with their lives and ultimately fail in the process of changing their lives. This puts a question on the real intention of Steel in creating the image of the subjugated, dominated and underprivileged native women. Seldom are the characters rescued from their deprived position. The characters in the beginning, believe in themselves and exhibit the potential for individual growth but attain neither prosperity nor freedom in the end. The virtuous wives or mothers who need to be saved from age-old domination by the West, in the end, are sacrificed. The English woman's relationship with their native sisters is often

[101] "The Women of India," *Bay of Plenty Times*, Vol. XXIV, Issue 3601, 22 September 1897, p.3, Accessed December 6, 2022, https://paperspast.natlib.govt.nz/newspapers/BOPT18970922.2.16?items_pe r_page= 100&page=2&query=flora+annie+steel&snippet=true.

[102] Reich, "The White Author's Burden," p.10.

wreathed with ambivalence. Steel using the same tools of imperialism defends her 'empire'. Her women are torn between the western dream of upliftment and the eastern ideology of subjugation. They are seen touching new heights of life but they have to always remember their downtrodden origin, the Mughal women being the only exceptions. Taking western education, the ordinary married women of these narratives are haunted by its consequences. The initiative to rescue native women is masked under colonialism in Steel's creative projects. She has tried to create ideal mothers, wives or surrogate mothers both in historical and fictional writings. In the case of historical fiction, the harem ladies are seen to exercise full authority and power. The reason could be that the glorious past and the position of the historical characters could not be tampered with. Their narrative defied manipulation and so the imperial authority accepted them with dignity. The colony is glorified and shown to have lost its former control in a bid to justify imperialistic domination for the native people. The acquired land is shown to be a virgin territory that needed modification, refinement and alteration as represented through the lives of ordinary women characters. The women in many instances are stigmatized and call out for change but in the end, have a doomed future. Steel discussed the problems of the Indo-British intervention as an interviewer, informant and writer. So, it proves that Steel constructed a many-layered image of the colony and its people but reconstituted it to suit her own creative project as an imperialist.

CHAPTER TWO

Courtesans: Sensuality Unveiled

The prostitute is not, as feminists claim, the victim of men, but rather their conqueror, an outlaw, who controls the sexual channels between nature and culture.

Camille Paglia:1992[1]

Men have tried to enforce or tie-down a woman's sexuality within the bounds of conjugality. Throughout history, patriarchy on one hand constructed the ideal of married women and on the other hand deconstructed it by creating the culturally aberrant figures of *devadasi*s, *tawaif*s or prostitutes. After 1860, women who engaged in sexual intercourse outside marriage were defined as prostitutes both by British evangelical standards and by the moral standards of the newly constructed English educated native elite.[2] This class of women failed to breach the gap that existed between a married woman and a *tawaif*. The sexual purity of these women was often compromised, hence they faced scrutiny and distrust from society. Courtesans were seen primarily as companions, confidantes and lovers with whom men's relationships were characterized by leisure, pleasure and affection, even if it was expected that the courtesan feigned enjoyment with her customers.[3] Thus, it would appear that mutual love was of comparatively small account. Although courtesans took very few men as their sexual partners compared to prostitutes, they were always seen as 'other' women. Their presence destroyed marital relationships though patriarchy justified punishment of a wife at the hands of the husband when she became jealous of a prostitute. "A woman of a refractive nature shall be taught manners by three beats with a bamboo bark, or a rope, or with the palm of his hand on her hips"[4].

While the amount of domination and deprivation women had to face in a patriarchal society was beyond imagination, in the case of courtesans it reached a different level

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[1] Camille Paglia, *Sexual Personae: Art & Decadence from Nefertiti to Emily Dickinson* (New York: Vintage Books, 1992), p.18.

[2] Arya R Hackney, "The Question of Agency and Conjugal Norms for The Devadasi," M.A. Thesis Department of Religious Studies (University of Colorado, 2013), pp.22-23.

[3] Megan Elizabeth Hamm, "Activism, Sex Work and Womanhood in North India," Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Anthropology (University of Pittsburgh, 2012), pp.212-18.

[4] Kautilya, *Arthashastra*, trans. R. Shamasastry (Bangalore: Government Press, 1915), p.222. (Book III "Concerning Law," Chapter III "The Duty of a Wife; Maintenance of A Woman; Cruelty to Women")

altogether. In precolonial India courtesans (also referred to as *devadasi*s and *tawaif*s depending on their geographic location) were professional singers and dancers attached to royal or princely courts who played an important role in fostering Indian classical arts. They enjoyed wealth, power and prestige and were accorded respect. Their status reached its zenith during the Mughal era when "They formed part of the retinue of kings and nawabs…many of them were outstanding dancers and singers, who lived in comfort and luxury…To be associated with a *tawaif* was considered to be a symbol of status, wealth, sophistication and culture…no one considered her to be a bad woman or an object of pity."[5] They may not have been involved in sexual relationships with their wealthy clients and if they did the relationship was purely consensual. Their status was similar to that of the Japanese geisha who were highly educated trained artists who in exchange for sexual benefits took gifts and not money like prostitutes.[6] They originated in 18th century Japan, both inside and outside the pleasure quarters and were defined as 'entertainers' or 'artistes': the word *gei-sha* literally means 'arts person'.[7]

The *devadasi* system had a long lineage and history entangled with it and there are many disputes about its origin too. The first confirmed reference to a *devadasi* was during the rule of the Keshari Dynasty in the 6th century in South India. The practice began when one of the great queens of the dynasty decided that in order to honour the gods, certain women who were trained in classical dancing, should be married to the deities.[8] The term *devadasi* is a shortened form of the Tamil *tevaradiyal* which translates as 'slave of the god'. Literally, it meant 'at the feet of the god' and referred to the class of women who through various ritualized ceremonies of 'marriage' dedicated themselves to the deities of temples and other ritual objects.[9] Known by various names, the cult of dedicating girls to temples prevailed all over India under different forms and names- as Maharis in Kerala, Nat in

[5] Pran Nevile, *Nautch Girls of India: Dancers, Singers, Playmates* (Paris and New York: Ravi Kumar Publisher, 1996), p.100.

[6] Hamm, "Activism, Sex Work," pp.212-18.

[7] Lesley Downer, "The City Geisha and Their Role in Modern Japan Anomaly or Artistes," in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, eds. Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon (New York: Oxford UP, 2006), p.223.

[8] Nagappa B.E, "The Problems and Challenges of Devadasis Women's - A Sociological Study with Special References to Ballari and Koppal District," *JETIR*, Vol. 6, Issue 1 (January 2019), p.1070.

[9] Amrit Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance," *Economic and Political Weekly*, Vol. 20, Issue No. 44 (02 Nov, 1985), pp.1869-76.

Assam, Muralis in Maharashtra, Patras and Maharis in Orissa, Basavis and Devalis in Andhra and Basavis or Jogatis in Karnataka.[10] This kind of practice rose out of the intersections between religion, poverty and societal norms.[11] These women enjoyed great freedom and prestige since they had religiously sanctioned partners, wealthy patrons and were respected by all members of the society. But their wealth and power started eroding with the coming of the Mughals and finally came to an end with the British invasion. They were seens as temptresses and became objects of controversy. With the introduction of colonialism, these women were left to fend for themselves, turning into mere prostitutes and entertainers on various occasions to keep their body and soul together.[12]

The courtesans' presence is mentioned in ancient historical accounts of Hindu, Buddhist and Jain courts. They were divided into secular courtesans and *devadasi*s, the latter being courtesans who additionally served religious functions in Hindu temples.[13] The earliest mention of prostitution occurs in the *Rig Veda*, the most ancient literary work of India. The later Pali term *muhuttia* (lasting for an instant), or its Sanskrit equivalent *muhurtika* signified purely temporary unions with no lasting relationship or obligation. Early Buddhist literatures, especially the *Jatakas*, bear testimony to the existence of different categories of prostitutes and incidentally provides some information about their fees as well as their financial position. The *Jatakas* mention various categories like *vest, nariyo, gamaniyo ganika, vannadasi, kumbhadasi. Muhuttia* and *janapadakalyani* are mentioned in several Buddhist texts in the sense of the most beautiful women who could be enjoyed by the entire *janapada*. It is significant that in some *Jatakas* the courtesans were described as *nagarasobhani* (ornaments of the city).[14] The *Kamasutra* describes the remarkable array of skills that courtesans were expected to master.[15] The exceptionally civilized public woman, proficient in arts and endowed with winsome qualities, was called

[10] Sudha Jha, "Facets of Exploitation of Women in Ancient India," Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Archaeology and Ancient History (The Maharaja Sayajirao University of Baroda, 2008), p.234.

[11] Ankur Shingal, "The Devadasi System: Temple Prostitution in India," *UCLA Women's Law Journal*, 22: 1 (2015), p.108.

[12] Ibid., pp.109-10.

[13] Hamm, "Activism, Sex Work," pp.212-13.

[14] Jha, "Facets of Exploitation of Women," pp.173-78.

[15] Doris M. Srinivasan, "Royalty's Courtesans and God's Mortal Wives: Keepers of Culture in Precolonial India," in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, eds. Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon (New York: Oxford UP, 2006), p.161.

a *ganika*. A *vesya*, or specifically a woman called a *rilpajivd*, was a prostitute, ranked below the *ganika*, whose artistic talents she did not possess. A very low-grade prostitute (a 'whore') was a *pumscali* and a prostitute who was a slave was a *dasi*, such as a *kumbhadasi* or a "pots-and-pans" prostitute consigned to the most menial of tasks. A temple dancer, or religious courtesan, was called a *devadasi*.[16] The *Pandava* army, while marching to the battlefield of Kurukshetra, included wagons carrying prostitutes.[17] These women who were artists and sexual favour granters shows the ambivalent nature of the gender roles constructed by society. The courtesans practised dance, music and drama to amuse their patrons and also for self-improvement. Kalidasa depicted men visiting courtesans and escorting them to the gardens and forests to enjoy themselves. He writes beautifully about such women in the *Ritmamhara*, in the *Meghaduta* and describes them in a poetic way.[18] Their expertise and skills in the arts made them sexually and culturally more powerful than ordinary women.

Sumanta Banerjee in his work *Under the Raj: Prostitution in Colonial Bengal* (1998) makes a distinction between Muslim *tawaif*s and other prostitutes in his writing. *Tawaif*s were highly sophisticated and skilled performers who originated at the Mughal court and later found pride of place at courts of Nawabs such as that of Awadh, Hyderabad and Mysore. They were bound by a special code of conduct and cultivated and practised North Indian classical and semi-classical musical (ghazal and *nazm*) and dance (kathak and *mujra*) forms, as handed down to them by their mothers and grandmothers (later to become part of different gharanas). Royalty often sent their sons to learn art, literature and etiquette (*tehzeeb* and *tameez*) from these courtesans. These well-educated women organized nautches for the British and their native patrons. In many instances, British officials too defined the performances as an art form but that empathy for native culture declined with time. A special mention should be made of a Bengal based courtesan Nickee, who seemed to have ruled the stage for more than two decades and was compared by European listeners to contemporary singers in Europe such as the Italian soprano, Angelica Catalani (1780-1849) and the German soprano, Elizabeth Billington (1768-1818), who were fascinating

[16] Srinivasan, "Royalty's Courtesans," p.162.

[17] Jha "Facets of Exploitation of Women," pp.178-82.

[18] Ibid., pp.225-26.

connoisseurs of music in Europe in those days. Other *baiji* singers and dancers like Ushoorun, Begum Jan, Hingool, Nanni-jan and Supanjan also deserve mention. [19]

With the coming of the British the elite status and the affluent lifestyle of courtesans now dubbed as 'nautch girls' (Anglicized version of 'nach' or dance) eroded and they came to be termed as mere prostitutes. As more and more Indian territories came under rule of the East India Company and later the British Crown, their royal patronage under Indian rulers slowly eroded. Speaking of the opulent wealth of the courtesans, Veena Talwar Oldenburg states,

> "The courtesans' names were also on lists of property: (houses, orchards, manufacturing and retail establishments for food and luxury items) confiscated by British officials for their proven involvement in the siege of Lucknow and the rebellion against British rule in 1857. These women, though patently noncombatants, were penalised for their instigation of and pecuniary assistance to the rebels. On yet another list, some twenty pages long, are recorded the spoils of war seized from one set of 'female apartments' in the palace and garden complex called the Qaisar Bagh, where some of the deposed ex-King Wajid Ali Shah's three hundred or more consorts resided when it was seized by the British. It is a remarkable list, eloquently evocative of a privileged existence: gold and silver ornaments studded with precious stones, embroidered cashmere wool and brocade shawls, bejeweled caps and shoes, silver-, gold-, jade-, and amber-handled fly whisks, silver cutlery, jade goblets, plates, spittoons, *huqqahs* and silver utensils for serving and storing food and drink, and valuable furnishings."[20]

The British refused to accept the hierarchical and sociocultural difference between the courtesan and commonplace prostitute. Although most Englishmen attended nautch parties that were commonplace during early 19th century interactions between British officers and wealthy Indian elite, their overall attitude was of neglect and non-involvement in native

[19] Sumanta Banerjee, *Under the Raj: Prostitution in Colonial Bengal* (New York: Monthly Review Press, 1998), pp.11-13.

[20] Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of the Courtesans of Lucknow," *Feminist Studies*, Vol. 16, No. 2 (Summer 1990), pp.259-60.

matters. The women who remained outside the bounds of respectable society were at the receiving end of hatred from both natives as well as Britishers. They failed to understand the implication of courtesan culture with religious and cultural ties.[21] The courtesans' fortunes took a turn for the worse with the Sepoy Mutiny of 1857 in which many of them played a pivotal role, with their *kothas* (houses) becoming secret meeting places for rebels, their money providing support to the cause of the revolutionaries.[22] After the Mutiny the British retaliated against the courtesans by pulling down the last vestiges of their carefully preserved culture. Because of the erosion of their patronage base, the British misunderstanding and classification of *tawaifs* as prostitutes and the anti-Nautch movement, the *tawaif* was often presented as a much-maligned relic of a more graceful, opulent past.[23] Furthermore, the British colonialists' lack of understanding of this diverse tradition and their frequent insensitivity to these women-centric performative traditions, led them to impose the Victorian label of 'prostitute' on this community.[24] At a time when Victorian society stressed on chastity, morality and domestic virtues, courtesans were rechristened as fleshmongers and their *kotha*s were termed as brothels. They were brought under the purview of the Contagious Diseases Act of 1864 that permitted the government to monitor and control them. Their insult and degradation reached a new low when clinical examination became mandatory for all women of this class. In the late 19th century the anti-nautch movement was launched by Christian missionaries and Indian reformers.[25] Since their livelihoods got destroyed, many courtesans were forced to join the flesh trade which further solidified their perceived association with prostitution.

Since the social and financial status of courtesans underwent a radical decline by the last decade of the 19th century, they could not assist in the Swadeshi or non-cooperation movements as they had done during the Mutiny though there were exceptions such as Gauhar Jaan (celebrated record artist in the 1900s) and Husna Bai of the Tawaif Sabha from

[21] Hackney, "The Question of Agency," pp.60-61.

[22] Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "Role of the Tawaifs in the Revolt of 1857" in YouTube channel "Karwaan: The Heritage Exploration Initiative" on November 20, 2021, accessed January 20, 2023, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ar3taxb1N7s.

[23] Hamm, "Activism, Sex Work," pp.212-18.

[24] Ibid., pp. 229-32.

[25] Jeffrey L. Spear and Meduri Avanthi, "Knowing the Dancer: East Meets West," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, Vol. 32, Issue 2 (September 2004), pp.435-48.

Varanasi. It is believed that Gandhi when faced with a request by courtesans in Barisal (in present day Bangladesh) and Kakinada (now in Andhra Pradesh) to be inducted into the Indian National Congress, had reportedly asked them to give up sex work and start spinning the charkha instead. This social ostracization prevented their proactive participation in the freedom struggle (as they had done in the Sepoy Mutiny) because educated and respectable middle class women (the *bhadramahila*) did not want to be engaged in a movement where they would have to share stage with courtesans. Yet despite their ostracization, they remained a subject of exotic interest and Oriental enquiry to the colonizers, whether as missionaries, memsahib authors or administrative sahibs, who expressed a secret desire to know these women from close quarters. Many a time, contemporary literature gave a misrepresentation of these courtesan figures.

With the opening of the Suez canal in 1869 British women flocked to India for various reasons – to find suitable marriage partners, second, for missionary activities, as wives of British men working in the colonies and finally also as prostitutes – though the influx had started as early as the 1800s. For example, a large number of Englishwomen plied their trade from lodgings in Kerr's Lane (now Collin Lane) and Dacres Lane in Central Calcutta and later in Kareya region of south Calcutta.[26] They gave sexual favours to both white men and natives. The educated British women who came to the colonies believed in white supremacy and burdened themselves with the task of eradicating the influence of these erotic women. They realized that the native woman's body was too aggressive and tempting to white men. The memsahibs perceived these nautch women in two different ways – as a spectacle to be gazed on from a distance and as a potent threat to family life. This view on the part of Englishwomen was itself a continuation of the larger British perception of and changing attitude towards courtesans. When British presence in India was minimal as in the 18th century, they were significantly more receptive of Indian arts and culture. But as their presence grew from the early 19th century onwards they became less open in their reception of all things Indian and their attitude towards courtesans was just one symptom of that larger change. This attitudinal change was moreover supplemented by new Victorian standards of morality, gender roles, appropriate gender-specific behaviour and idealistic notions of what constituted pure Britishness. The British initially constructed Indian women in general and courtesans in particular as overtly

[26] Banerjee, *Under the Raj*, pp.48-49.

eroticized beings who were sexually available and later as a potential moral threat and bodily temptation to naïve Englishmen thereby undermining the legitimacy of foreign rule through miscegenation. Such women were symbols of the 'fallen woman' and needed urgent rescuing from their immoral practices by the British. Thus, the colonizers attitude towards the so-called nautch-girls was yet another means of consolidating their imperial rule over India. The present chapter attempts to look at the representation of courtesan characters in Steel's narratives for the nautch performance represented one of the few spaces of interaction between memsahibs and native women, the other being the enclosed *zenana* though by the mid 19th century the presence of respectable white women at these performances were positively discouraged. By the time she started writing the sahib and the memsahib had emerged as cultural and political ideals who helped to solidify British rule in India. The figure of the memsahib was seen to be essential to protecting the hegemonic purity of the colonial empire. The binary between the morally pure, asexual white woman and the unchaste, sexually obscene native woman became a means of British ethical self-definition vis-à-vis the sensual 'Other'. The present chapter will examine how Steel contributes to this discourse or deviates from it.

"A Debt of Honour" (1894)

"A Debt of Honour" (from the collection *The Flower of Forgiveness*) introduces Smith Jones the assistant commissioner, a young man who has come down from his homeland to serve the natives of India. According to the author, he is appointed in a government post to bring justice to the ignorant lot. Doing his duty he suffers a bad fall from his horse and injures himself. His gaining of consciousness comes about through an interesting incident. Feeling a kiss upon his lips, he becomes irritated as he "had a strong dislike to kisses."[27] Lying flat on the white sand and under the bright Indian sunlight he can decipher a brown hand fanning him unceasingly with a fan made of peacock feathers. He becomes embarrassed with his situation and tries to put a stop to the kind gesture. He says, "I could get up now if you would remove that fan."[28] Unable to take any more suspense, Smith gets up and discovers an old woman sitting dignifiedly in a wicker basket. He knows that in India old people are carried about in a like manner. The old withered woman is seen sitting

[27] Flora Annie Steel, "A Debt of Honour," from *The Flower of Forgiveness* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1894), p.319.

[28] Ibid., p.321.

in one of the baskets and on the other end of the pole, small earthen pots are attached to the *banghy*. Jones is not surprised by her appearance but rather pleased to see her. The body of the woman has grown old and withered with age but the colourful costume she wore suits her. The red silk petticoat, the tinsel veil and the red embroidered covering on the upper part of the body reveal that she was a courtesan by profession. The waxen face and the bright black eyes are the most attractive features of this shrunken bundle of bones. "Old age had driven womanhood away; it had stolen every curve, every contour, every colour; and yet, possibly because the slow furnace of natural life is kinder than its artificial fires…She was dressed in a way which even his ignorance of the gala costumes of respectable females told him was unusual."[29]

The old woman introduces herself in full demeanour as Gulabi and asks Jones whether his grandfather had been in India previously, for then he must have known her as she was famous as the bard of Jodhnagar. "Nevertheless, if the Presence's great-grandfather (Heaven cool his grave!) had been in Jodhnagar when he was young, he might have heard Gulabi sing. I am Gulabi, *Huzoor*."[30] She had been a singer of the great maharani residing in the pearl palace. In those days, she used to perform for the guests at the palace. She makes it clear that the British officials used to frequent the palace in the past for gold, money and love and not as in the present to rule the native land. Jones asks the old woman to sing for him as she did in olden days. Gulabi unhesitatingly agrees to sing and Jones realizes that he is privileged to hear and witness such an old art form that had lost its significance in the present.

The woman opens her heart in front of the sahib, she shares the story of her life with the unknown man. She reveals how once upon a time a white man used to frequent the chambers of the queen and made false promises of love to her. But in reality, he was greedy for the money and the jewels in the queen's possession. The courtesan too fell in love with the same white man and he promised a kiss in return for her singing in the palace quarters. He gave her a written note stating, "To-night, when the gong chimes one, the seeker will find a kiss, in the twelve-doored marble summer-house bowered in roses."[31] Nevertheless, the news did not remain a secret and the queen's lover, an influential man in the court

[29] Steel, "A Debt of Honour," pp.322-23.

[30] Ibid., pp.323-25.

[31] Ibid, pp.382-83.

hatched a plan to punish the Englishman by death for his attempted theft of the queen's jewels. Gulabi guessed the tragic ending of the sahib at the hands of the cunning courtier. She had allured the courtier into the palace garden and promised to give a kiss of love. Being a man of fallen repute he could not resist the temptation of having a feminine beauty in his possession and arrived at the garden without fail. Gulabi murdered the courtier-lover of the queen in the garden palace. After her arrest, the queen punished Gulabi by cutting off both her legs thus making her a cripple. She had to remain in the palace like a caged bird and continue with her life.

Yet the sahib proved to be a coward and never returned to Gulabi. The courtesan waited for his return and expected that her lover would fulfil his given promise. Gulabi accuses Smith and his people of being spoiled and defective by nature. She kept on waiting for the sahib and his kiss but he probably forgot about the promise given to a native courtesan. The sahib never came back and the old Gulabi desperately asks Smith, "Pillar of Justice, from the land of the western sun, say! did the Rose deserve the kiss which never came? Hath, she not waited long enough for the promised kiss?"[32] Smith remains bewildered after hearing her sad life story and the neglect that a white man had shown towards the native woman.

Dittu (a relative who is carrying her to the Ganges) has only heard the story of her tragic life from his elders. He is going to Haridwar to immerse the ashes of his forefathers as is the custom among the Hindus but it is also his job to "take her — to — to Hurdwar — and — and leave her there."[33] After hearing Gulabi's story, Jones decides to bestow a kiss on the lips of the old woman who has been yearning for a true lover's kiss for years. "He even forgot himself, as he stepped into the shadowy gulf, stooped, and paid another man's debt of honour with a kiss."[34] He shows the required honour his forefathers had missed paying to this courtesan. She had been waiting for her lost love for years but no one came to claim her. Struck by her long and sad wait, the white man pays the "debt of honour" with a kiss. Jones did not forget the incident even after leaving India, "a married man, with a charming wife and a growing family, but never, he assured me, had he forgotten, nor could he ever forget, that kiss! He declared that for one short second the whole world was at his

[32] Steel, "A Debt of Honour," p.331.

[33] Ibid., p.335.

[34] Ibid., p.338.

feet, the wilderness a blossoming rose, the perfumes of which lingered"[35] in his senses. He kept on cherishing his encounter with the singer and demonstrated his growing attachment to Gulabi within a brief span of time. Steel's story is about the strange bond struck between a *tawaif* and a sahib that blends respect and dignity into it.

Tawaif characters have been an object of desire and fascination from the past to the present. However, they remain ambiguous and secretive, veiled but showy, performative yet meretricious.[36] Their graceful beauty apart, these characters defy categorization in terms of class structures and claim respect from people superior to them. Unlike other women, they are free from social strictures and their existence is mobile. Despite the grace and charm of her character, Gulabi's life is a tragic one as she has suffered both in her youth and in old age. No one is interested in her life nor worried about her death. Life has shown her no love, respect or fulfilment. So, death is the only way for Gulabi to acquire release from her pathetic life. Knowing well that she could not return to the past; she thinks continually of a release from the present life through death.[37] Although Jones repays the debt of his forefathers, the kiss is the act that gives ultimate release and salvation to Gulabi. The idea of a story that centre's on the British sahib's benevolence and decision to help an old native woman is an implicit comment on the salvific presence of the colonizers in India. Steel negates the possibility of forging a bond of love between the other sahib and Gulabi in her youth for that would amount to a transgression of social and racial boundaries. Yet for a suffering old courtesan to receive the kiss she has yearned for years changes its status from an act of passionate love exchanged between equals to an act of moral obligation and responsibility between people belonging to different racial and social hierarchies. It seems as if the relation between whites and natives can only be circumscribed in the language of commerce and debt settlement.

A Prince of Dreamers (1988)

The novel *A Prince of Dreamers* revolves around the character of the Mughal emperor Akbar and the Kohinoor diamond which he considered lucky for himself. The story begins

[35] Steel, "A Debt of Honour," p.338.

[36] Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon, eds., *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (New York: Oxford UP, 2006), p.3.

[37] Krupa Kirit Shandilya, "Sacred Subjects: Gender and Nation in South Asian Fiction," Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Literature in English (Cornell University, 2009), p.96.

with the theft of that diamond and ends with the revelation of a courtesan's involvement in that theft and her eventual death. The author introduces Siyah Yamin alias Siyala, the darling courtesan of the town. She is a light-hearted lady with a quick wit to amuse anyone, a rare beauty who had been bestowed for service to men. Siyala shares a close bonding with the widow Atma Devi from childhood even though they inhabit two different worlds. Atma's white robes presented a stark contrast to Siyala's dress of gay vibrant colours of pink and yellow. She is presented as physically attractive and intelligent in conversation. The way she sat or spoke made her appealing to her noble clients. "She was a small woman, extraordinarily graceful, extraordinarily beautiful, with a tiny oval innocent-looking face on which neither pleasure nor pain left any mark whatsoever."[38] As a former *devadasi* she knew the art of alluring men. Siyala could make fun of the emperor but Atma remained anxious about her meddling in the political matters of the kingdom. But the courtesan showed no compunction about her behaviour and continued to conspire against the king.

Siyah Yamin is conscious of her shortcomings but does not care much about the consequences. She is not allowed to marry as she was the wife of God, married to the Almighty in childhood. She is allowed to entertain influential men or love a man of her desire but she always needs to remember that she is a 'public' woman. She is not allowed to do anything outside the law of the land and the king's wishes. She mockingly comments about her marriage, "He is Syed, and set on his religion. So, I said the Creed and he gave me one of the eight marriages — I forget which. These Mahommedan ceremonials are not awe-inspiring like the Seven Steps and the Sacrificial Fire; lo! even with no man, but a dagger, that gave me shivers."[39] It is clear from her words that she detests any kind of shackle to a woman's freedom. Steel shows her to be a consort to many men and her body being sexually used by them.

Siyala regrets during her conversation with Atma that she was not born as a man because then she would have been able to exercise power and authority. She detests the life of a woman and dreams that if born as a man she could have aspired to become one of the influential men in the town. Atma is bewildered by her friend's behaviour and asks, "what art thou in very truth? Sometimes thou seem to me of the stars; at times thou art very

[38] Steel, *A Prince of Dreamers* (London: William Heinemann, 1908), pp.32-33.

[39] Ibid., p.35.

earth."[40] Atma is the only person who has the privilege of getting a glimpse into the true nature of the courtesan, her childhood friend. Yet Siyala displays a split personality, on one hand, she shows up as a lusty courtesan and on the other hand seems to be an ascetic who has transcended desire and materiality. Siyala states,

> "'I am Woman,' she replied, flinging her high turban aside and drawing the loose fallen tresses of her hair through her fingers lazily, settling them in dainty fashion on her shoulders, …'I am ready for his desire. I am the uttermost Nothingness which tempts Form. I am Maya, illusion and delusion!'"[41]

She affirms that she is nothing but *Maya*. Her experience as a former *devadasi* (though the reason why she joins the profession remains vague) and then as a sexual partner of numerous men had taught her the fruitlessness of physicality. Despite her sexuality she was a woman whose identity always lay outside the bonds of marriage. As the chosen consorts of God, *devadasi*s – "literally the slaves or bond-servants of god – were not, strictly speaking, a caste...One could be born into their community, but some girls were formally adopted after being offered, or even sold, to the temples by their families."[42] Doris M. Srinivasan finds the courtesan's sexuality to be a formidable instrument of power.[43] In *The Courtesans' Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives* (2006) Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon corroborates this when they states that,

> "The female life force of the sacred Indian *devadasi* could render her extraordinarily powerful because she literally took God, and other men who partook of God, into her body and incorporated that divine force into her own fluids, thus inspiring a sacred transformation. Without the Christian contempt for the body, the *devadasi* is indeed a temptress, yet her sexual attractions and potency are tantamount to godliness. In a Chinese variation

[40] Steel, *A Prince of Dreamers,* p.123.

[41] Ibid., p.123.

[42] Ibid., p.437.

[43] Srinivasan, "Royalty's Courtesans and God's," pp.161-78.

> on such transformations, the Bodhisattva Guanyin manifests herself in various stories as a beautiful young prostitute who has sex with men in order to free them from desire."[44]

As the novel progresses Siyala transcends her present identity as courtesan and takes on her former persona as a *devadasi*. Her graceful dance in front of the deity, the emperor and other men proves her true identity and gives a befitting answer to the controversy surrounding her marriage. Siyala admits that she is a *devadasi* and enchants all present at the place with her graceful temple dance. The *devadasi*s artistic qualities as a performer allowed them to go beyond prescribed gender and class roles and enjoy social privileges, professional opportunities and access to civic spaces that were generally denied to other women. By utilizing the arts of rhetoric, music, dance, poetry, fashion or magic, courtesans let themselves into an existence that went beyond a mere commodification of their bodies.[45] Siyala is portrayed not just as a beautiful woman but also as an artist with creative abilities and unique qualities. Her ancient dance and the oldest chant of her race arrest everyone's attention with a bewitching effect. She exclaims,

"*I am the dancer Prakrit,*
The wanton of change and unrest,
And the sound of my dancing feet
Roused the Sleeper self-em-meshed,
And the eyes that were blind with peace
Looked out and saw I was sweet,
So the worlds whirled to my feet
And Life grew big with Increase.
Death danced in the arms of Birth
And Tears were coupled with Mirth
And Cold things hurried to Heat
And Heat to Flame and Fire,
Till the whole world, racked with desire,
Kept time to my dancing feet.
Prakrit! Prakrit! "[46]

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[44] Feldman and Gordon, eds.*, The Courtesan's Arts*, p.13. See Srinivasan, "Royalty's Courtesans and God's," p.169 and Chun-fan Yu, Kuan-*yin: The Chinese Transformation of Avalokitesvara* (New York: Columbia UP, 2001), p.424.)

[45] Feldman and Gordon, eds.*, The Courtesan's Arts*, p.10.

[46] Steel, *A Prince of Dreamers*, pp.132-33.

She goes beyond physicality, she becomes 'prakrit' or the epitome of nothingness. Being a man of great intelligence, Akbar understood everything and asks the men who belong to her rumored married husband Jamal-ud-din's Muslim community whether they would accept a *devadasi* as a part of their Islamic faith, but they reject her as a harlot. She has multiple sexual partners and is considered impure. Both the Hindus and Muslims desire to take her into their physical possession but when she affirms her truth of being a *devadasi* many years ago everyone loses interest in her. She is thus perceived as a threat to the social order that is maintained by marriage between a man and a sexually chaste woman. The courtesan is seen as the antithesis of a wife in society. The *tawaif* is a figure of desire but she is different from the desexualized figure of the wife.[47] Eventually, all commotion regarding the marriage of the courtesan settles down and Siyah Yamin returns to her *dhooly* to her own life.

Finally, the novel takes another turn when Siyah Yamin conspires to steal the lucky diamond from Akbar. After stealing, she sets up a trap not only for Atma, her childhood friend but also for royal ladies like aunt Rosebody and Umm Kulsum. She makes a fool of all the women around her as well as the men. Although Khodabad and Ibrahim are the two partners in her crime, the planning and final execution is done by the courtesan alone. The climax comes in the courtesan's rooftop paradise where the two childhood friends confront each other. Siyala has no wish to hand over the diamond to Atma. As she struggles she cries out in exasperation, '"It — it is mine.' she gasped. 'No one shall have it — I claim — I am the woman and I will have–."'[48] But she fails to keep it in possession of hers. Siyala could understand well that the woman sitting opposite to her had an idea of all her treacheries. Truth is more powerful than guile or deceit. In her attempt to save herself Siyala attacks Atma with her dagger but fails to kill her. Atma in her turn snatches the king's diamond from the woman's bosom and the struggle ends with the death of the courtesan. "Suddenly there was silence. Resistance melted out of Atma Devi's arms; her insistent hand, still seeking, found what it sought. She gave a sharp cry of joy and relaxed her hold."[49] Thus, the courtesan's life comes to an end.

[47] Hamm, "Activism, Sex Work," pp.199-200.

[48] Steel, *A Prince of Dreamers*, p.287.

[49] Ibid.

The author may have created Siyala but fails to do justice to the nuances of her own creation. Siyala straddles two identities as a *devadasi* and later as a professional courtesan. Although the reason for the change remains unspecified, it may represent the disintegration of the *devadasi* system after the Mughal invasion. Yet both identities are perceived to exist outside the conventional domestic sphere.[50] Siyala represents a combination of the mystical and ethereal with the sensual and the corporeal. Her sexuality would have been seen as an aberrance in a new reformed Victorian society where the idealized woman was constructed as an angel within the household and whose sexuality was muted. Yet despite the negative connotation attached to the figure of the courtesan, British women writers' views regarding these women were not uniform by nature and usually swayed between portraying these women either as exemplars of Oriental decadence and corrupting influences on society (especially to British men) or as 'fallen women' and victims of an unjust colonial society. Courtesans like Siyala did not conform to the existing British standards of morality and were seen as sensual and exotic temptations to white men who as the physical site of ethnic mixing destroyed the validity of the imperial project. However, her powerful portrayal and the sense of agency she possesses adds a positive dimension to her character. Although British women had a privileged position in the imperial set-up yet they were subjugated on the grounds of gender in their homeland. Judged against the repressions that British women faced under the pretext of being the 'angel in the house', the independence and social mobility possessed by women like Siyala would have created a delectably dangerous frisson for a white woman reader. Thus, Siyala's handsome representation but her ultimate untimely death for the crime of stealing the Kohinoor is probably Steel's way of negotiating between the courtesan's freedom and her dangerous sensuality. As a woman she would have appreciated the will-power and individuality of a character like Siyala but her death underlines the danger that a character like her posed to the imperial project.

"A Tourist Ticket" (1897)

Yasmeena in the short story "A Tourist Ticket" (from the collection *In the Permanent Way, and Other Stories*) is probably one of the most vicious courtesan characters created by Steel. Her presence in the text is by virtue of two brothers – Hoshyar and Raheem. Despite being blood brothers, the two have opposed personalities. Whereas the younger Hoshyar is

[50] Spear and Avanthi "Knowing the Dancer," p.440.

crude and materialistic, the elder Raheem is pious and spiritualistic. The younger brother is a hypocrite who is mired in worldly things whereas the elder brother is both protective and productive. Raheem is a skilled artist who makes combs which are pieces of artwork in themselves. He decides to take up the practice of the family occupation of making handicrafts as his profession whereas the younger one chooses to be an office clerk. In addition, Hoshyar is a man of many ill habits which make him a contrast to his elder brother. He openly declares that he gave a damn about his religion whereas the elder one saved money to go on hajj. Worldly toils and physical labour is alien to Hoshyar's carefree nature but Raheem being a spiritually inclined man wishes to save him from all odds. Raheem is determined to save his brother as he had promised his now deceased parents that he would take utmost care of his younger brother. However, Hoshyar falls into evil ways and blackmails his brother for the money that he had set aside for pilgrimage. He has no regret for his reckless behaviour nor is ashamed of asking for money for fulfilling the wishes of his kept woman, Yasmeena. Raheem does not have a good opinion regarding the woman – '"Not Yasmeena?'…'Thou hast Yasmeena on thy brain, brother. She is no worse than others of her trade, and that will last till all men are of thy way of thinking...she is not as the others, now; she is not to be bought or sold herself.'"[51] But his brother tries to defend Yasmeena by saying that she is different from the other women in her profession. His answers easily show the amount of influence the courtesan exerted upon Hoshyar who is just a puppet in the hands of the woman.

Yasmeena hatches a plan and asks her lover to lure his brother into her trap. She is a cunning woman and knows nothing but monetary gain. She has no morality, nor dignity of a normal human being. She is a woman true to her trade, a spoiled woman who plans to get hold of the ticket that Raheem bought with the intention of going for pilgrimage. She scolds Hoshyar, "'Tis thou that art the fool,'…'Why didst not take the ticket? It must be worth something, surely?'"[52] Realizing that it is only her lover who could play the part of the trickster she entices Hoshyar with her words, "Hoshyar looked at her as a man looks at a venomous snake, he has no power to kill."[53] Hoshyar feels powerless in front of the prostitute. He could understand that deceiving his own brother would be a fault but he could

[51] Steel, "A Tourist Ticket," from *In the Permanent Way, and Other Stories* (London: Macmillan, 1897), pp.168-70.

[52] Ibid., pp.182-84.

[53] Ibid., p.183.

not do anything to stop the woman. He is just a puppet who works for the fulfilment of base desires that robs him of all dignity.

Yasmeena reveals her character as a true wench of the bad quarters. She executes her plan neatly and uses Hoshyar to make a fool of his brother. She advises her servant to make sherbet with sandalwood essence and she mixes some potion in it. She asks her servant girl to welcome Raheem in the back courtyard of her house. She is sure that her plan would work if he is alone. Raheem would have the spiked sherbet and fall unconscious which would give Hoshyar time to steal his ticket from Raheem's brocade bag. She will sell the ticket for forty rupees to another person and gain money. She explains clearly that she would take ten rupees as her commission for the work and leave thirty rupees for Hoshyar's enjoyment. Raheem's long cherished dream of going for hajj fails when the ticket is stolen from the bag by his own brother. At the railway station when the officer-in-charge asks for his ticket he is unable to produce it. Heartbroken, he prepares to return home on the next train but he loses both his legs in an accident while coming back. Raheem asks, "Then the Huzoor means that I shall never be able to walk again?" The doctor makes it clear to him that he has no possibility of ever walking and fulfilling his dream of going on pilgrimage. "'May God reward the Huzoor forever and ever,' said Raheem in a whisper, raising both hands in a salute, and his face was one radiant smile."[54] He believes that he is sure to get a place in paradise for as a cripple he will have a special privilege and need not worry about completing the mandatory hajj.

The burden of Raheem's painful and dreadful plight falls on the cruel Yasmeena. She is shown to be engrossed in her physicality. Though Hoshyar thinks her to be different from others in her profession she proves in the end to be a base and corrupt woman. Yasmeena's portrayal as a cunning and degraded prostitute who has lost her soul to sin and as one who exploits men to lead a better life shows how Steel conforms to the stereotype of the sensual and degenerate native sex-worker. There is no sympathy visible in Steel and Yasmeena is left to live in her state of sin.

Builder **(1928)**

The novel *Builder* begins on a sad note, with the emperor Shahjahan mourning the death of his beloved wife Mumtaz. He has taken ill, renouncing both food and sleep as he laments

[54] Steel, "A Tourist Ticket," p.191.

his loss. Steel introduces four prostitute characters in the narrative beginning with Chambeli. She is portrayed as a courtesan who only caters to the sexual needs and whims of men. Shahjahan is bereaved after the death of his wife. Chambeli sends the most beautiful woman from her quarters to tempt the emperor out of his bereavement. He suddenly felt a kiss from a woman dressed exactly like his dead wife. At first, he could not understand what is happening but then he realizes the trick played by Chambeli. She has sent a beautiful prostitute from her house of ill fame to tempt the emperor but in vain. The emperor's punishment of Chambeli's woman is swift. She is seated upon a donkey and paraded through the town stark naked. The cruelty of the scene is memorable as she reaches her quarters speechless and almost dead with fear and shame. Chambeli is portrayed as a true harlot of the town, who knows how to deal with flesh but lacks human sentiments. Physicality is her defining characteristic who is only interested in making money for her own profit and advantage. Steel balances her portrayal through the depiction of Rana-dil, another courtesan in her house.

Rana-dil's narrative pans out vis-à-vis her relationship with Dara, the eldest son of emperor Shahjahan. The novel beautifully describes their first meeting in the desert when Dara and Aurungzeb are out on a forest expedition. Dara and Aurungzeb, two brothers, are out for a hunting expedition. All of a sudden they come across a crying child. While Dara is worried about the weeping child and wants to take care of her, his brother shows total disgust about the situation. The incident shows the difference between the two brothers even as it introduces the future lovers, Dara and Rana-dil, for the first time in the novel. Dara decides to return the girl to the village before leaving for his palace. He asks her name and she says it's Rana-dil which means clear heart. "'Rana-dil,' came the reply. 'Rana-dil harlot.' The name seemed to echo in the lad's brain, as carelessly, recklessly, he rode on to catch up his brother if so, it might be. Rana-dil—clear heart—clear heart—clear heart."[55] With time she proves that her name is true to her character. She is a genuinely good and honest girl and in future is going to hold a special place in Dara's life.

Much later, circumstances lead to Rana-dil becoming the caregiver of the royal princess Jahanara who suffers an accident during a dance performance. This eventually leads to frequent meetings between the Rana-dil and Dara and their interactions lead to love. Dara starts to feel for the courtesan, so one day he confronts her in Jahanara's

[55] Steel, *The Builder* (London: John Lane, 1928), p.39.

chamber. "I love thee, Rana-dil."[56] Since Rana-dil was a harlot by profession she could easily have accepted him as her wedded husband because Dara wished to take her lawfully and not as a concubine. But she is shocked by such a sudden proposal – "She cried. 'And look not at me thus— as all men look when they say they love! Dost think I lived for five long years in the house of Chambeli the procuress, and have not seen that look again and again? Thou shalt not look it, brother, who hast been my strength, my stay, I will not see it.'"[57] Her refusal of Dara's proposal shows that she had lost interest in conjugal love and hated the grossness that came with physicality. She knew that marriage would enable her to lead a happy life but still she rejects the proposal. With the passage of time she realizes that the call of true love could not be left unanswered. But even after Rana-dil is able to overcome her own inhibitions about marrying Dara, her decision and the emperor's royal consent to the marriage causes a stir among the harem women and the general population. A royal prince and a girl from the bad quarters may fall in love but their union cannot be sanctioned in a patriarchal society since the public mobility and sexuality of the sex-worker goes against the purity of the marital bond and is seen as a threat to the social order.[58]

But despite all opposition, Rana-dil becomes the wedded wife of Dara but she is not given acceptance within the palace walls. Neither a part of the brothel nor a part of the Mughal family, Rana-dil becomes an outcast living on the margins of both the worlds. She belongs to none of them completely and is seen struggling to cope with life standing on the periphery of the two opposed worlds. She exists in a liminal space between the *zenana* and the *kotha* and straddles two identities as *tawaif* and *purdah-nasheen*. Dara, being a good human being, goes against the social-cultural and traditional customs of his family and decides to marry a harlot. But the question remains whether Rana-dil gets any kindness or sympathy from the other members of her in-laws family.

The passage of time takes a toll on their married life. After a leap of a few years, the emperor has grown old and Aurungzeb has gained much power and authority at the expense of his other brothers, especially Dara. He is treacherously murdered after which Aurangzeb proposes marriage to Rana-dil. But she prefers to die than accept her fate since she had an innate sense of dignity in her. Rana-dil's last emotional words after the loss of

[56] Steel, *The Builder*, p.119.

[57] Ibid.

[58] Hamm, "Activism, Sex Work," p.179

her lover, "O God ! Let me not be too late!"[59] shows how much she loves Dara. Steel creates through Rana-dil the astonishing life story of a woman who is unique in her own way. She proves her fidelity, her moral value and her good nature throughout the narrative. Though she has experienced physicality as a *tawaif* but she transcends it. Refusing indulgence in base physicality she chooses the path of spirituality to win against the odds that life has stacked against her. Yet, her status as a fallen woman stays unchanged even in death.

The third prostitute character is that of the harlot named Mai, an old woman who had been the foremost in her trade in her youth. Now with age, she chooses to become a teacher and help girls to train and excel in the profession. Although her former beauty, wealth and power had been lost with time she was confident that teaching the tricks of the trade to the girls under her charge would enable them to excel as prostitutes. The fourth and final character is that of Gulnari, the head duenna of the dancing girls and the new matron of Rana-dil after she purchases her from Chambeli. Within a few days, she realizes that the new girl in her possession is different from others. Rana-dil wishes for freedom from her disrespectful life and knows that unless she pays the entire purchase amount to Gulnari she would not receive liberation from her degraded life. The old woman is eager to secure her own old age, so she accepts Rana-dil's proposal. But Gulnari is a crude woman who is too cunning to fall into any trap. She eventually breaks Rana-dil's trust by betraying her to Aurungzeb who wants to possess her for himself since the latter is shrewd enough to bribe her handsomely in return for her favour. She proves her baseness and shows that it is impossible to expect humanity or trust from the likes of her. Yet, for an aged, worn out and impoverished courtesan like Gulnari who has no security for the future, it is common to indulge in odd jobs and petty crimes to make ends meet or save money for a comfortable future.

Steel paints her courtesan characters in various hues in this novel. The British had no cultural equivalent to the figure of the courtesan in their own society. The only comparable figure was that of the sex-worker, hence British narratives were not equipped to understand the various facets to a courtesan's identity. Thus, the delicate hierarchy between various grades of courtesans and *devadasi*s were ignored by the British and they were clubbed into one uniform category of the morally corrupt and sexually perverted prostitute. In her depictions of these four afore-mentioned characters, Steel takes care to

[59] Steel, *The Builder*, p.318.

produce a moral distinction between them. Mai and Gulnari represent one end of the moral spectrum since they are both old and looking for ways to secure their future which leads them to hatch intrigues or commit crimes. At the other end is Rana-dil, the woman who supposedly belongs to a respectable family but has been forced by fate to become a courtesan. Steel is careful to show how despite her involvement in the sex-trade, she has an innate spirituality about her much like Siyah Yamin's character previously discussed who blends the physical and the spiritual in herself.

Voices in The Night: A Chromatic Fantasia **(1900)**

The novel *Voices in The Night* begins with the conversation between Sobrai Begum, her aunt Khojee and uncle Lateefa. She is a woman of beauty, with a voluminous figure but she only thinks for herself unlike the other women of her royal family. Lateefa, who is her uncle, has seen her grow and knows her manners well. He could easily understand that the girl would bring trouble to the family. Thus, we see him repeatedly advising her to change her ways and lead a good life. He had seen her conversing with cantonment prostitutes who were brought a few times to perform in the house by the nawab Jehan, an ill-charactered man. The condition of the family was deplorable since they faced difficulties in making ends meet. But the nawab being a hypocrite did not care about the other members of the family nor was he concerned about his child. Sobrai did not want to remain in the house because that would entail life-long suffering. She even feared that she would die a spinster without any family of her own. She rebukes the nawab who on one hand condones the British way of life but on the other hand, denies any access to freedom by the women of his house. Although Sobrai's virtue is questioned repeatedly by her own family, she keeps on speaking the unpleasant truth. Her family members realize that she will not remain in the family for too long. Sobrai finds an opportunity to escape from her drudgery when a quarrel breaks out between Jehan and his wife Noormahal over a missing string of valuable pearls. As both partners make the household miserable with their clash, Sobrai accidentally finds four pearls under the carpet which had somehow got dislodged from the original string. She gets the opportunity to escape and enjoy freedom and life to the fullest.

Jehan's trysts at the disreputable localities in Nushapore introduces another courtesan named Dilaram. Steel creates her as a very powerful and colourful woman of the house of ill fame. She may have lost her youthful charm but she still enjoyed power and authority. She was aware of Sobrai's whereabouts and informed Jehan that she was not with the native prostitutes but with the English prostitute named Miss Leezie from the

cantonment area. Dilaram was aware of the poverty faced by the women of the royal family because Jehan as the man of the house did nothing to alleviate their condition. Although the old ways of grandeur and wealth were no more but the hereditary attitude of royal privilege still lingered in the nawab. He becomes furious on hearing the truth about Sobrai and lashes the courtesan. He threatens her but Dilaram is well aware of her position, She states, "'There is no need, my lord,' she said superbly, 'to teach Dilaram her duty to the virtuous women who sit free of shame in the noble houses where she dances. We learn that first of all.'"[60] She is too powerful for the nawab to misbehave with. Dilaram belonged to the bad quarters and was aware of the difference between them and women of respectable houses. She knew well how Jehan felt on hearing about the scandal in his family and thus very intelligently humiliates him.

In Dilaram, Steel creates a woman who is proud of her status as a harlot. She is a woman who interrogates patriarchy and the colonial system and refuses to submit. She is not afraid of ruffling religious sentiments of the Hindus nor is she interested in the contemporary political situation. "Talk not to me, saint, as to thy Hindoo widows who believe in golden papers and gods. Yet 'tis true! We of the bazaar lead the world by the nose! Let none meddle with the men's women or with our will, or they meddle to their cost!"[61] She is involved in the wellbeing of herself and other native women of her kind and even threatens others if anyone dares to disrupt her peace. She uses the plural marker to identify herself as a collective entity to resist medical examination and hence resists the colonization of her body. It was believed that this class of women weakened the British militarily by transmitting venereal diseases and other infections; a problem the imperial government sought to control with the Indian Contagious Disease Acts of 1864 (this act was repealed in 1883). The act helped to establish a system of licensed prostitution where the women were periodically examined and in the novel, the courtesan Dilaram, refuses to submit to this licensing system. She continues to practise her performance in the non-colonized space of the bazaar and refuses to become one like Miss Leezie. She resists the colonial gaze and protects the native woman's body from humiliation and insult.

Steel also presents a nautch performance happening at the time of the plague pandemic. The whites are bored and disappointed by the performance of the courtesan

[60] Steel, *Voices in The Night* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1900), p.40.

[61] Ibid., p.43.

which was a common response by the colonizers given their inability to understand and insensitivity towards the culture and artistic heritage of the Indians. The native elites are shown embarrassed and abashed at the abrupt ending of the entertainment but could do nothing. The courtesans were hated by the ruling class and their disgust is shown by their misbehaviour. The author also introduces the cantonment prostitute Miss Leezie as a foil to the image of the native courtesan. These white women have to live in prostitute quarters, within the boundaries of the cantonment, whereas women like Dilaram enjoy comparatively more freedom and authority in their quarters. The cantonment prostitutes are only a means of sexual gratification used and misused by the white patriarchy and possesses no power or speech of their own. She has to abide by the rules and protocols set by the British men which the native courtesan is at liberty to flout. The native courtesan appears as a much more vibrant and powerful character both aesthetically and culturally in contrast to British prostitutes.

Steel shows that Miss Leezie feels angry and disturbed by Sobrai's authority and her beauty. Unlike her, Sobrai is a sensual woman, overtly attractive, intelligent and enjoys total control over her body as a result of which she is not allowed to perform at the cantonment because she is thought to be too provocative for English men. Sobrai is an interesting character created by Steel and the only one amongst the many who renounces a life of respectability to become a courtesan by choice and not by compulsion. Birth in a royal family would have kept her in seclusion but she decides to enjoy her life.

> "She was a clever girl in her way, with an ancestry of pride as well as wickedness; and above all, of a fierce faculty for obtaining personal gratification. And there was none here. All was rule and regulation. No freedom, no fun, no frivolity; in a way, no choice. But that, she told herself, was the result of Miss Leezie's mean breeding. Dilaram enjoyed herself more, and so would she,"[62]

She is an intelligent woman willing to secure her life both monetarily and emotionally. She fruitfully utilizes the absence of Miss Leezie when a young British soldier comes to the bazaar to enjoy himself and notices her. Steel's description of the meeting is striking,

[62] Steel, *Voices in The Night*, p.158.

> "He sat up and stared. This was something he had never seen before! This was the Arabian Nights! It was, however, only Sobrai in the dress of a princess of the blood royal; softly orange and yellow in her trailing skirts, faintly purple and gold above, with a starred green veil hiding all but the gleam of sham jewels, the lustre of false pearls, and a finger-tip placed in warning where the lips should be".[63]

Steel creates Sobrai as an irresistible woman. The attraction is sexual though men are also attracted to her not because she is beautiful but because she had the etiquette and charm that the bazaar prostitutes lacked. Although she is poor, she does not dress ordinarily but is decked up in a worn-out royal dress. Her decorous movements and her songs (which were sung by the bards/*tawaifs* in royal courts) creates an extraordinarily surreal and sensual environment that engrosses those who sees her. Sobrai too seems obsessed, "A sudden dare-devil delight seized on the girl, her voice rose to its fullest pitch, she began to dance. Not with the posturings and suggestions of the bazaar, but with dignified gestures and scarcely perceptible swayings suited to her heavy robes, and to the words she sang."[64] She never displays herself as an ordinary prostitute who is marked by indecency or over-sensuality but maintains her dignity thereby appealing to the sahibs but she could also display herself as a spectacle for male consumption. "She threw back her veil, and the hour-glass drum, twirled above her head, sent its message out over the clustering crowd. So, it came to pass that Lady Arbuthnot, driving home, saw in the flesh what she had seen in her mind's eye – the woman's figure centring a circle of eager men's faces."[65] Jean-Leon Geromes's painting of the Egyptian dancer, *Dance of the Almeh* (1863), is an interesting example of how the exoticized women's body could be liberating for women viewers, despite the superficial trappings of erotic fantasy. In ethnographic travel literature, the Eastern dancing girls, known as *almeh/ghazzeyah* (plural *ghawazee*) in the Middle East and nautch girls in India, were marked by their visible, public body as distinct from the invisible, private body of the harem inmates. Gerome's *almeh* publicly displays her

[63] Steel, *Voices in The Night*, p.160.

[64] Ibid., p.161.

[65] Ibid., p.162.

flamboyant, uncorseted body with considerable self-assurance. She refuses to be domesticated. When the painting was exhibited in the Salon of 1864, it was viewed as immoral by some critics. [66] A similar situation is created in the text, when the figure of Sobrai creates an exotic sensation in her spectators both men and women.

Sobrai breaks the rules and resists the colonizer's tendency to associate the *tawaif*'s body as fallen and diseased. But she is soon arrested by the authorities on charges of displaying illicit sexuality. She is sent to prison and accused of theft and thus Steel disrupts native female sexuality to conform to the white male imagination. Sobrai threatens patriarchy, resists imperial authority and evolves into a supremely powerful woman. The novel ends on an abrupt note, Sobrai remains in prison, Jehan suffers death, Noormahal commits suicide in order to save herself from medical check-up by the English authorities and Dilaram is made into a scapegoat by Jehan and Burkat Ali. The author ends the narrative without giving a clear idea about the future of these influential and talented women yet it is clear that the powerful freedom and authority of these women proved immensely alluring if not exemplary to British women writers who had crossed the borders of England to set up home in an alien land. In a way they represented the alter-ego of British women travellers, yet the attractiveness of these courtesans was offset by their racial status. Hence, despite the power and beauty of their characterization, these women ultimately meet a sad end. Authority and freedom, Steel seems to imply, can only find expression and sanction in the colonizers and not in the colonized who are nothing less than ciphers of an inferior and subjugated race.

***The Potter's Thumb: A Novel* (1894)**

The plot centres on the construction of a dam by British officials and the native people's attempt to disrupt it. The main initiative is taken by the dewan of Hoddinberg and Chandni, the courtesan of the town. Chandni's first introduction in the novel comes from Dan and George Keene (two sahibs working for the construction of the dam), "That is Chandni," said Dan, passing on, regardless; "she generally sits here."[67] She is the famous beauty of the bad quarters, her name translates as moonlit night. "They call her Chandni-rat, or

[66] Piya Pal Lapinski, *The Exotic Woman in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction and Culture: A Reconsideration* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2005), p.69.

[67] Steel, *The Potter's Thumb: A Novel* (New York: Harper & Brothers Publishers, 1894), p.4.

Moonlit Night, as a rule. If tales be true, a good deal of the night is about her."[68] The name Chandni is interesting, it is not known whether the name is given by her parents or she procured it herself when she became the darling of the town. George is surprised to see the graceful figure greeting them with a salaam from the building above the causeway. He could not see her clearly as the building is screened but the smell of jasmine flowers and the clinging of silver bells introduces the well-known figure in Hoddinberg. She is the mistress of the town, specially kept for the pleasures of Dalel Beg (grandson of the old dewan) a powerful figure in the empire who had bought her at Delhi bazaar from a Hindu man. Dan and George are well aware of the superiority of the dewan, Zubrul Zaman and his power in Hoddinberg.

Although the name of the courtesan means 'soft light of the moon' but her nature is the exact opposite. She is one of the strongest courtesan characters created by Steel. She is an exceedingly graceful, intelligent and beautiful woman. She is not exactly young, it seems that she is middle-aged but she has not yet lost her charms with men. Her excessive power to control men, both native and white makes her a winner in most situations. She is even involved in the political intrigues of the town and being a cunning woman takes a direct interest in it. Her wickedness offers a contrast to her lover Dalel Beg who is a loser. She is the woman of the bazaar and enjoys her grip over all the news and happenings in Hoddinberg. Though she is a woman belonging to the bad quarters yet she is different from other low-born prostitutes. She is dignified and graceful in her appearance and so she has the privilege of having clients from the royal family. Her beauty and intelligence make her Dalel Beg's favourite as well as that of the old dewan's, who is seen intriguing with her in secret. The sluice gate needs to be opened but the sahibs are not interested in doing so. The courtesan is seen taking an important part in the conspiracy with Dalel Beg to open the gates.

Although she is a woman of the profession but many a times Chandni is shown contemplating about her old age and the need to find security in any manner possible.

> "There was no mist of reserve between her and her profession; she had been born to it, as her forebears had been. Her success in it was rather a matter of pride than shame, her only anxiety being the future. Should she linger on, as

[68] Steel, *The Potter's Thumb*, p.4.

> she had been doing, in hope that out of sheer conservatism Dalel Beg would attach her to him permanently by some of the many possible marriages; or should she risk the life of a go-between in her old age ; return to Delhi and amuse herself ?"[69]

Chandni's desire to renounce her present profession and be a part of the royal family through marriage with Dalel is another reason for her to conspire and attend secret meetings with the old dewan. But her hopes are destroyed when Dalel marries a white memsahib thereby showing his treachery and hurting Chandni physically. The behaviour of the man is not only shocking for the woman but also humiliating. "Lo! thou hast given me something, O Mirza Dalel Beg, which no man hath given before to Chandni the courtesan. It is enough. I go."[70] She realizes the fruitlessness of such relations and punctures her dream of marriage with her lover.

In the narrative, Chandni has failed multiple times to win over George but the dewan is sympathetic to her repeated losses. The old man addresses her as 'daughter' and shows her the respect which a courtesan seldom enjoyed in men's company. '"Nay, daughter,' he said, approvingly, 'I well believe failure was not thy fault. As for thy plans—speak.' She drew her lips closer to his ear and laid one hand on his knee as if to hold his attention. 'Father! all men care for something; he cares not for what he has been given, let us try others.'"[71] She in a way makes the bond between them stronger by addressing him as 'father', an unusual pair consisting of an old man and a beautiful courtesan. Chandni understood the true nature of Keene sahib, she tries to use the innocent girl Azizan as a bet to win him over. In her hands Azizan becomes a decoy and she facilitates the sahib to fall in love with the girl as he paints her portrait. But the girl too is seen slowly falling in love with the sahib and starts enjoying her new-found freedom. Chandni is not at all interested in Azizan or in her future life. She works as a puppet in the hand of the courtesan and has a doomed life at the end.

The courtesan remains too focused on her work and thinks about no one. She does not accept failure easily. She is seen hatching one plan after another to destroy the sahibs.

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[69] Steel, *The Potter's Thumb*, p.33.

[70] Ibid., pp.260-61.

[71] Ibid., p.34.

She is portrayed in the text as a co-conspirator, a threat to both native and white domestic life, too powerful to keep under control by anyone. She has the capability to manipulate powerful figures and divert the imperial gaze on those who had tried in vain to prove her a failure. The courtesan undermines the so-called invincibility of the British people, conquering them both psychologically and physically. She is successful in drawing both Dan and George into the conspiracy. Chandni makes her victims perform according to her wishes. She manipulates them in order to gain access to the key to the sluice gate, confidently handling all the issues that come into her life and brooks no nonsense from other characters.

Dan and Lewis desire to kill Chandni because they fail to control her. History attests to how courtesans endured gang rapes or mutilations as punishment for presumed misdeeds. She is perceived with disgust by the whites and viewed as a threat to the colonial order. Her death seems to be the only solution available in the narrative. However, unlike the other *tawaif* characters who meet death in Steel's narratives, she is exceptional in being granted freedom and authority at the end. She gets back her old position in Hoddinberg. "As of old, too, the clash of silver anklets came from the shadows, for Chandni was back in her old quarters and with a recognized position."[72] Chandni is an exceptional character in Steel's corpus because her influence and authority extend into the future. She seems to be one of those rare instances where Steel's gendered empathy for Chandni manages to supersede her racial affiliation. She remains in her former position, unjudged by the author and without evincing any form of social emancipation that may come about as a result of the white man's moral intervention.

"Fire and Ice" (1903)

Burfani (in story collection *In the Guardianship of God*) was a popular courtesan of the town who lived in a three storeyed house where the upper floor belonged to her and the second floor to her brother and his family. But these two portions of the house belonged to totally different worlds. The relationship between Burfani and Lazizan, her brother's wife, was not normal but quite strained. Burfani carried forward the hereditary profession of her family as a courtesan and she was also the sole breadwinner of the family. The text introduces Burfani as a beautiful woman, "a sugar-drop herself, rose or saffron decked with

[72] Steel, *The Potter's Thumb*, p.348.

silver leaf, a slender scrap of a creature who tinkled as she walked and gave out a perfume of heavy scented flowers."[73]

She was adept at exchanging wealth with love from the people who use to frequent her place. "Courtesans themselves managed and even owned the salon venue…she could exercise control over proceedings and also over who should be admitted to the performance. Control, finally, enabled courtesans to have family members live in their establishments, especially daughters, real or putative, who could become singers, but also sons and brothers who attended to service tasks and even served as subsidiary musical accompanists."[74] She was the sole earning member of the house and gave enough money to her brother and his family. The reason for choosing such a means of survival was not clear. Burfanis's mother was not directly linked to the bad quarters yet she chose to be a part of the hereditary trade.

When the fourth child, the boy, dies of illness, Burfani pays a visit to her brother's quarters. Burfani is dressed in a burqa and though she was a woman of the bazaar, she maintained the propriety and decency of a respectable family. Steel gives a glimpse of the two women's lives, one leading life as a public entertainer and the other living a confined life and taking care of the family. Lazizan is jealous of the upper-storey lady and is an unhappy soul, bored with her married life and repeated motherhood. She craves to be something different, yearning for a life like Burfani and is confident that she would perform better than the courtesan if introduced into the bad trade. She asks Burfani why she could not lead a life of a courtesan like her and enjoy liberty. Burfani keeps her cool and says that one should not change one's profession. Burfani has all the comforts of life and has freedom of choice which Lazizan does not not enjoy. But Burfani in her life could never be a wife or a mother, she was born a courtesan and would die as one. Precolonial Indian *ganika*s (courtesans of the feudal courts) and *devadasi*s (temple goddesses) both filled a problematic sexual role that differed sharply from that of the wife and was necessary for society's self-sustenance. In that world (as Doris Srinivasan stresses) wives were keepers of lineage and courtesans were keepers of culture.[75] The wife has no idea about the real struggle of a courtesan, living in the protection of patriarchy is different from life outside it. Burfani

[73] Steel, "Fire and Ice," from *In the Guardianship of God* (London: Macmillan & Co., 1903), p.51.

[74] Regula Burdchardt Quireshi, "Female Agency and Patrilineal Constraints; Situating Courtesans in Twentieth Century India," in *The Courtesan's Arts: Cross-Cultural Perspectives*, eds. Martha Feldman and Bonnie Gordon (New York: Oxford UP, 2006), p.318.

[75] Feldman and Gordon, eds., *The Courtesan's Arts*, p.6.

advises Lazizan to stick to her own life and continue it without fretting about other things. "'God knows!' she said with a sudden smile. 'Anyhow, sister, 'tis not wise to change one's profession as one grows old.'"[76] Yet still Lazizan declares to her husband that she could not carry on with her present boring and unworthy life.

She leaves her previous life and settles into one which is totally different from the first one. But soon she realizes that she has done a huge mistake in her life. "And so, when a few days after the flitting from the second story, she, being sick to death of dullness, thought the time had come for self-assertion, she found herself mistaken."[77] She blames Burfani for all her misfortune in life. So, she decides to take revenge by burning her alive. She lights a fire on the stairs to the second-story and removes all ways of escape for Burfani. The house being made of lath and plaster comes to a dangerous blaze sooner than she has expected and brings an end to the life of both the women. Burfani takes no steps to save herself from imminent death. She is seen at the window for the last time and a tinkle of laughter is heard. "And at the sound something white and ghostlike slipped back from the window with a tinkle of laughter. 'Burfani! Burfani!' shouted the crowd. 'Drop gently-we'll save you! Burfani! Burfani!'"[78] But Burfani does not save her deplorable life. The house comes down with a roar upon Lazizan and both the women share the same fate, both are drowned by the blaze of fire. Both vice and virtue unite in death and no deviation can be found in the end that shows the fruitlessness of life as a prostitute both in the eyes of society and in the psyche of the author. Steel cares not to save either of the women, as one is newly introduced to the profession and the other has gained maturity in its vile ambience.

***On the Face of the Waters* (1897)**

Zora Bibi, who features in the novel *On the Face of the Waters*, is a courtesan (but not by birth) sold into the bad quarters. She has been a victim of circumstances which makes her a *tawaif*. She is an extraordinarily beautiful woman and her beauty attracted Jim Douglas to rescue her from the house of ill fame. The beauty of the ivory tint of her skin, large black eyes and the sensuality of the woman made the couple's life on the rooftop house a bliss for long eight years. Zora is seen not as a wedded wife and though she loves the white man

[76] Steel, "Fire and Ice," p.56.

[77] Ibid., p.61.

[78] Ibid., p.65.

till her last days, she does not embrace western lifestyle. She is after all a courtesan and not acceptable as a life partner for Jim. He has shown respect to the woman and makes her life blissful with love. But her span of life is short and her life as Jim's partner comes to an abrupt ending. Native women like her could be a temporary part of the sahib's life but not a permanent refuge for a lifetime. She is destined to die which eventually happens and the author frees both the woman and the man from any social, moral and racial obligation. Jim is free to enjoy his life anew as the experience of oriental exoticism is satiated. The end to Zora and Jim's love life is essential to keep the difference between the East and West intact. She rose above other native sisters in the profession yet she too faced the same doomed future.

The courtesan-prostitute dichotomy has long exercised the Anglo-Indian and British imagination and has found literary expression in short stories, poems, essays, novels, memoirs, letters and travel accounts. The colonial literary genres have found these exotic 'other' women as extremely attractive, dominating and influential persons. The European women who were tired of practising as 'angels in the house' desired to break through the social and traditional norms of patriarchal hegemony. The British married woman had to keep a respectable and faithful relationship with her husband, maintain sexual purity and fidelity to the only man in her life. In contrast courtesans were much better off than the white memsahibs who flocked to India after the opening of the Suez Canal. The women of the East had both monetary and social privileges which the white women could never imagine. "'Going nautch girl' in these narratives therefore not only challenged the Victorian cult of domesticity in British India but, more important, subverted the racial hierarchization of womanhood that was at the heart of the civilizing mission."[79] Thus,

> "Writing in 1837, Emma Roberts describes the profession of these performers as lucrative. Many of the nautch girls were extremely rich, those most in esteem being very highly paid for their performances. The celebrated Calcutta heroine (Nickee) received a princely sum of 1000 rupees every night, whenever she was called to perform. Thus, by securing training in literature and the other arts, a generous income, the right to property and

[79] Charn Jagpal, "Going Nautch Girl" in the Fin de Siècle: The White Woman Burdened by Colonial Domesticity," *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920*, ELT Press, Vol. 52, No. 3 (2009), p.267.

> even the pleasure of sexuality albeit outside marriage, the nautch girl became an anomalous native woman who lived more freely and happily than the white woman in her Anglo-Indian bungalow."[80]

"Writing in the 1890s, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, for example, asserts that among the native women in India only the *nachni*s can be said to be free and happy and live a dignified life."[81] The marital home of respectable women were places that were different from the eroticised *kotha* (house of ill fame) of the courtesan. This inaccessibility of an unknown oriental space attracted the imagination of the British people both men and women alike.

Their performing body is exposed to the constant scrutiny of the foreigner's gaze. Colonial perceptions of Englishmen about native Indian men were negative in nature. Thus, a rescue mission was required to save these women from such indigenous menfolk. The white people came to the empire with a civilizing mission and devoted themselves to the honourable and humane cause of ''rescuing'' defenceless colonial women.[82] This was the time when Britain was witnessing the women's movement and the native nautch girls were seen as the focal point of rescue and development. Antoinette Burton, Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel among others have argued,

> "(I)n the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods, Western feminists self-servingly complied with this rhetoric and represented themselves as the most liberated women in the world while discursively inventing colonial, particularly Indian women as oppressed, passive and thus, in need of their philanthropic aid. By imagining the women of India as helpless colonial subjects, British feminists constructed the Indian woman as a foil against which to gauge their own progress and appropriated to themselves as imperial Britons the highest and most legitimate form of feminism."[83]

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[80] Jagpal, "Going Nautch Girl," pp.253-54.

[81] Ibid.

[82] Ibid., p.267.

[83] Antoinette Burton, "The White Woman's Burden: British Feminists and the Indian Woman, 1865–1915" in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, eds. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1992), p.137.

The married women and the widows who performed strict purdah were also the seat of immense foreign interest. "Inderpal Grewal argues that in the South Asian context, 'the construct of the veil or 'purdah' by English imperialists became the metaphor for 'home' of the Indian nationalists'[84] i.e. the opacity of Indian women to the Orientalist gaze is what enabled her to preserve her modesty and hence attain respectability."[85] But in the case of the *tawaif* veiling was not a necessity as they were open to the gaze of both European and Indian men. One instance of this could be the character of Sobrai Begum who unveils herself to use her body as well her performance as a spectacle for the men (mostly British soldiers) at the bazaar. Sobrai's belief and behaviour is nothing but a continuation of an age-old cultural lineage of performance and respectability practised by the courtesans in India. The performative body as Judith Butler describes it, is "a constructed identity, a performative accomplishment which the mundane social audience, including the actors themselves, come to believe and to perform in the mode of belief."[86] Sobrai desires to create a space that is distinct from those of cantonment women prostitutes like Miss Leezie. In the end, she attains freedom and resides in a space that is radically different from the family home of a married woman. The *kotha* does not destabilize the respectable houses as it is already an outside space created by society. But the truth is this 'separate sphere' remains unbreachable in society. One instance of this could be Rana-dil, who is a courtesan who is inducted into a respectable house as a wife but still she remains a socially peripheral figure. Her present position as a wife destabilizes both her previous (as courtesan) and present (married women) status and she suffers identity dislocation throughout the novel.

Authors like Ida Alexa Ross Wylie (1885-1959)[87] who had no direct contact with the colonial women very easily wrote about their lives out of imagination. This second-hand knowledge led to misguidance and mis-representation of native women and created a fantasy world as desired by the writers.

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[84] Inderpal Grewal, *Home and Harem: Nation, Gender, Empire, And the Cultures of Travel* (Durham: Duke UP, 1996), p.54.

[85] Shandilya, "Sacred Subjects," p.69.

[86] Judith Butler, "Performative Acts and Gender Constitution: An Essay in Phenomenology and Feminist Theory," *Theatre Journal*, 49 (1988), p.519.

[87] I.A.R.Wylie was an Australian-British-American novelist, short story writer, screenwriter, and a poet. Notable works are *The Native Born, or, The Rajah's People* (1910), *Tristram Sahib* (1915) among the many others.

> "The romantic writers, she goes on to conclude, reveal themselves rather than India, projecting their own fantasies and desires onto an Indian landscape and people. It is worthy to note that they invented the courtesan figure as they desired and erasing or negating all possibility that nautch girls posed a legitimate degree of resistance to colonial ideologies and undermine any real power that they may have held in British India."[88]

White sexuality met with a profound challenge in contrast to native men frequenting the courtesan quarters. Miscegenation, moral degradation or contamination by diseased bodies were the few hurdles that British men easily crossed to gratify their sensual urges and in their fetish for exotic sensualized foreign bodies. The native world offered an enlarged place of exposure and easy sexual opportunity to the Britons. According to Rana Kabbana "Europe was charmed by an Orient that shimmered with possibilities, that promised a sexual space, a voyage away from the self, an escape from the dictates of bourgeois morality and the metropolis."[89] Victorian morality and gendered hierarchy excluded the native courtesan women from entering into any form of modernization project and coined them as women having seductive charms and overt sexuality that is threatening.[90] Thus, new methods and rules were constructed to tame these overtly sexual bodies.

The term 'courtesan' is problematic as it is hard to define a woman of such a reputation. She was not a base-born prostitute nor could she be a part of a respectable household. She lived on the periphery of society where her sexuality and reputation made her both available yet unavailable to men. She was not confined inside brothels but neither could she be legally the wife of a man. She was always seen challenging societal norms and never conforming to the authoritative narrative of human life. Anglo-Indian writers who wrote in the late Victorian and Edwardian periods carried with them the moral obligation and white man's burden while defining independent women like the courtesans. Between the 1820s and 1920s, memsahibs in large numbers came to visit the orient for various reasons. These women writers in many cases meditated on the freedom and colourful life of the *tawaif*s. Familial responsibilities, imperial indebtedness and racial

[88] Jagpal, "Going Nautch Girl," pp.266-67.

[89] Rana Kabbani, *Europe's Myths of Orient: Devise and Rule* (London: Pandora Press, 1986), p.67.

[90] Anupama Taranath, "Disrupting Colonial Modernity: Indian Courtesans and Literary Cultures 1888-1912," Ph.D. Thesis, Department of Literature (University of California, 2000), pp.13-19.

burden made the life of western women miserable. The independence of the courtesan fostered aspiration for independence that was denied to them in their homeland. British women who were deprived of freedom and dominated by society attempted to vicariously seek independence and authority by creating a subordinate class of native women. While they wanted to experience the freedom a courtesan enjoyed both physically and socially, yet racial and hierarchical imperatives necessitated the domination and subjugation of these native bodies.

These white memsahibs desirous of introducing the discourse of enlightenment, education, health and welfare for their brown sisters. Powered by racial hierarchy and socio-political position the memsahibs participated in welfare and missionary activities for the downtrodden uneducated heathen women of India. Antoinette Burton illustrates how Indian women's disempowerment became a crucial source for 19th century upper-class English women's empowerment.[91] They constructed both working-class women in Britain and the secluded Indian women as their sisters who stood in need of their particularly individual feminist project. Courtesans, prostitutes, *tawaif*s, nautch girls, dancing women, *devadasi*s and others who were seen as a threat to their home or domesticity were cornered as unethical, wrong or improper. In her book *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood* (1900), Mrs. Marcus Fuller, the wife of an English missionary, strongly condemned the nautch institution and the *devadasi* practise of dedicating young girls to temples.[92] Memsahibs like Fuller, in order to make the anti-nautch campaign successful in India, advised the British high officials and the native hosts to abstain from involving and organizing nautch performances. So, as the emancipatory movement of native women progressed, courtesans, *devadasis* and *tawaifs* were also targeted for change/reform.

"*Devadasi*s, nautch girls, courtesans, cantonment prostitutes and dancing girls were all targeted as part of the zealous Anti-Nautch Campaign, even though each of these categories of women had their own particular history and context in relation to sex work, dance and the public sphere."[93] "The Indian and the western reformists portrayed these women as immoral, dangerous and provocative to peaceful existence. By erasing differences among the categories, these public women came under the umbrella term

[91] Burton, "The White Woman's Burden," pp.137-57.

[92] Mrs. Marcus B. Fuller, *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood* (New York: Fleming H. Revell Company, 1900), p.119.

[93] Taranath, "Disrupting Colonial Modernity," pp.95-96.

'dancing woman'."[94] A permanent blow came with the passing of the Contagious Disease Acts in Britain of 1864, 1866 and 1868 which criminalized these performing bodies. By 1947, Indian reformists in the Madras Presidency passed a legislative bill that prevented the continuation of the *devadasi* system. This legislation was known as the Madras *Devadasi* (Prevention of Dedication) Bill of 1947, which was later called the State of Tamil Nadu *Devadasi* (Prevention of Dedication) Bill of 1947 to reflect the state's modern name. This bill stated the following: "An Act to prevent the dedication of women as *devadasi*s in the [State of Tamil Nadu] the practice still prevails in certain parts of the [State of Tamil Nadu] of dedicating women as "*devadasi*s" to Hindu deities, idols, objects of worship, temples and other religious institutions; such practice, however ancient and pure in its origin, leads many of the women so dedicated to a life of prostitution; it is necessary to put an end to the practice."[95] Thus, a protest both inside and outside the country culminated in the downfall of the traditional art form.

Steel came to India after her marriage in 1867 and spent twenty-two years with her husband visiting many places as the wife of a British civil service officer. The unmarried and unrestrained lifestyle of the courtesan must have attracted and influenced Steel. Women who are confined in the house find nautch women free, much more liberated, emancipated and an antithesis to their own status as a wife, mother or daughter.[96] Like the memsahib character Grace Arbuthnot in the novel *Voices in the Night*, she desires to see the outside world where free women dominate men which she eventually comes to witness in the bazaar. As Pal-Lapinski argues, when Grace catches sight of Sobrai Begum dancing in the boundless bazaar, she sees how "her revolutionary exhibitionism intensifies and actualizes the allure of the unsanitized space, providing a momentary glimpse of an unregulated female body drawing its energy from the contamination of the overcrowded bazaar."[97] Thus we see that Steel's characters such as Dilaram, Sobrai, Yasmeena, Chandni, Burfani or Rana-dil enjoy independent personality, power and authority compared to the married woman whether native or white. This is the basic instinct of all courtesan characters in Steel's novels. Sara Suleri claims that the English female traveller in the Raj was in far

[94] Taranath, "Disrupting Colonial Modernity," pp.95-96.

[95] Hackney, "The Question of Agency," pp.12-13.

[96] Jagpal, "Going Nautch Girl," p.255.

[97] Lapinski, *The Exotic Woman,* p.70.

greater confinement than her Indian counterpart, "the accomplishment of the courtesan allowed her a greater intellectual and erotic liberty than the English woman could ever hope for."[98]

The challenges thrown by these *tawaif*s to the other characters of the novels are interesting. In the mutiny novel, *On the Face of the Waters* (1897) Steel creates a nautch girl Zora who lives in the rooftop house during mutiny time. The main questions that arise here are that the *tawaif*'s agency denotes who she is but the question of her power and authority in Jim's life is not provided by the author. Steel modifies and re-constructs their age-old position and welcomes them to perform in her text but seldom rescues them from a doomed future. The courtesan's performative body, physicality, agency and sometimes unwomanly behaviours make them unique as characters. According to Krupa Kirit Shandilya, the *tawaif*s of these novels struggle to reinsert themselves into their respective societies by performing socially sanctioned forms of respectability. As "the embodiment of purdah, *tawaif*s re-instate the virtues and codes of their traditions, which are modesty, service and devotion. In doing so, they ironically become the repositories of the social norms valued by their society."[99] All the courtesans dealt with so far are directed by a peculiar code of morals defined by their experience and circumstances alike. The westerners could not understand how to differentiate women in India into distinct categories. The variety of women ranging from courtesans, *tawaif*s and prostitutes to wives, temple dancers, widows and ayahs were absent in the societal structure of the western world. In India, on one hand, we have the sati, the epitome of chastity, on the other hand, we have the *tawaif*s, the symbols of vice. It was difficult for the Britishers to compartmentalize the varieties of women as they had a very slight understanding of the cultural and traditional vastness of the orient. The temple dancers who practised both religion and sensuality equally in their lives was something very new to them.

Compared to the women who practised purdah and harem culture in India, the *tawaif*'s relationship with her clients was free and sensually gratifying for both partners. There were no strings attached and the woman could move freely from one man to another or practise polygamous sexual union as she found suitable. Love and pleasure were the two things that attracted men towards women outside the purdah culture. So for the courtesan

[98] Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), p.92.

[99] Shandilya, "Sacred Subjects," p.104.

characters like Sobrai, Yasmeena, Chandni or Burfani, it is just a profession and never a true emotional union. As long as men will be lustful of women's bodies the profession of Gulnari, Chambeli and Mai will never cease to flourish. These harlots have seen a lot and their experiences make them understand the ways of survival in a cruel patriarchal world. Thus, Rana-dil is used by Gulnari in a very crude and cunning way to gain money to secure her own future.

The courtesans' bodies are depersonalized and exposed to the gaze of the writers. The amount of power they exercised, the monetary benefits that they got and the survival strategies they employed make women like Mai, Chambeli and Gulnari interesting. Mai who is shown as a tutor of young girls is base born, uneducated and uses force to control the girls. She has seen the use of force and brutality as a part of her own life. Mai does very basic things to keep body and soul together. She has been a victim of sordid trade in her youth and so tries to make all the girls a replica of herself. Chambeli is a part of the same tribe but is more intelligent and dignified than Mai. Her life is comfortable as she knows the way to cater to the wishes of lustful men. She has been through many difficulties and shows no personal attachment to anyone and perceives all men and women as commodities. She sends Rana-dil under the supervision of Gulnari as the singing talents of Rana-dil had turned boring for the men of Agra. She is a woman who is aware of her lifestyle and arranges it the way it suited her. Gulnari is a woman who is different from the other courtesan, she is intelligent and acquires knowledge from her clients and associates herself with the current situation. Gulnari has lost the charm and beauty of her youth. She tries to conceal her ageing body and with the help of cosmetics. However, she fails to erase her baseness, lustful and deceptive nature under makeup. Her excessive use of opium shows that she is not satisfied and detests her life. Gulnari is seen as a contrasting figure to Rana-dil as moral values have no place in her life. She gets lost under the weight of other matters in the narrative. Nothing much is shared by the author about this *tawaif*.

Dilaram is a courtesan who amongst many is portrayed as a culprit in the eyes of western people and as an instigator of the rebellion. She acts as a political agent for the benefit of her own motherland. The courtesan shows deference for aunt Khojeeya but shows no respect for Jehan Aziz. She is a woman who is clear about her motives and desires, which makes her all the more attractive and dangerous. She desires to rule her world and thus keeps at bay base-born woman like Miss Leezie. Dilaram performs like true patriots

and works for the welfare of her people against the foreign foe.[100] She acts as a guide and protector of all sisters of her profession. She too has no definite ending and Steel leaves readers in the dark about her future.

Material gain is also important for women like Siyala and Yasmeena but sensual gratification is also important for courtesan like Sobrai. Burfani does not wish to submit to her destined life as a courtesan and wants to end it. Chandni cherishes respectability and craves a settled life even attempting to marry into the royal family. Yet no change comes and she stays confined to her profession forever. The novel (*The Potter's Thumb: A Novel*) ends with her re-settling in her old life in the bazaar and in Dalel's life. She is a woman who is base-born but desires to be incorporated into the royal house. She is the only one who carries the burden of the novel on her shoulders but in the end, gains nothing. Her position remains the same and by doing work for others, she suffers both emotionally and physically. She has to continue her life as a courtesan and the author gives no respite to her in the end.

Each of the courtesans create their aura and personality in their own spaces. Siyah Yamin, another courtesan of the Mughal period is both a model of repulsion and attraction. She is an unchaste woman and Steel projects her as a *devadasi* or *nitya sumangali*, who is married to the deity. As a symbol of good luck, beauty and fame the *devadasi* was welcome in all rich men's homes on happy occasions of celebration and honour. Her strict professionalism made her an adjunct to conservative domestic society, not its ravager.[101] Siyah Yamin is dedicated to the deity but she is emotionally and sexually exploited by men. She is a figure who turns into a courtesan and ravages the narrative with her hatred and guile. Steel fails to understand her fully and portrays her more like a courtesan, erasing from her all the dignity of a *devadasi*. The only time she performs fully as a *devadasi* is in the court in presence of the king and creates a spectacle of her erotic beauty. Her feminine agency and her performance become secondary to her body which is projected as a visual object of attraction. She loses out as a woman and is seen only as a pleasure giver to men. A question arises whether under colonial law *devadasi*s were to be seen as holy women whose devotion was expressed artistically and therefore public women by accidence or else

[100] Ferheiz Coover Bharucha, "A Study of the Characters of Indian Women in the Novels of Colonel Philip Meadows Taylor Mrs. Flora Annie Steel and Rudyard Kipling," Ph.D. Thesis, Department of English (Shreemati Nathibai Damodar Thackersey University, 1983), p.313.

[101] Srinivasen, "Reform and Revival," p.1870.

as essentially prostitutes and therefore only accidentally artists.[102] She is an evil character who is devoid of love, regret and patriotism, motivated only by her passion for possession.

Yasmeena is a courtesan ("A Tourist Ticket", 1897) who only desires to bring trouble to men. She is devoid of any principal or values in her life and acts for the destruction of anyone who comes close to her. Steel creates her as a vicious creature who works for the ruin of both the brothers in the text. Yasmeena makes it clear that neither men nor scruples shall ever stand in the way of fulfilling her desires. She has a compelling possessiveness that seeks to dispossess others of both material wealth and spiritual light. Burfani ("Fire and Ice", 1903) is both a victim of and victor over her profession; born to her trade, she has perforce to submit to its status, but in truth, she never succumbs to playing this role which is repugnant to her. Burfani, like Chandni, cherishes respectability all the more. She is worthy of being saved because though born into a despised profession, she hardly belongs to it. For Lazizan death is horrifying and premature and brings with it a denial of passion. Hence, she shrieked at the time of death. For Burfani, death is a release from the despicable life to which she was condemned and therefore is accompanied by a tinkling of laughter.[103]

All the narratives have different storylines with distinct viewpoints but all the women perform the same role of vicious, unstable and overtly sexualized characters, the only exception being Gulabi and Burfani. The character of the Indian courtesan in British texts is mostly portrayed as a sexualized lascivious woman possessing the power to control men. Viewing the courtesans from an outsider's point of view, Britishers failed to differentiate between the English prostitutes and the *tawaif*s of the empire.

> "The representation of courtesans have been mediated through the antagonism of the western people, the analytic view of the opposite sex, the imperial hostile gaze of the missionaries and idealizing vision of the memsahib authors. They still remain the rejected as well as constrained figures of contemporary modern society. The colonial understanding seems to be based on the assumption that, while in Europe prostitution was more of an exception than a rule, caused by individual aberrations (like vanity,

[102] Spear and Avanthi, *"*Knowing the Dancer," p.439.

[103] Bharucha, "A Study of the Characters," p.302.

> laziness), in India it was almost as a rule caused by the all-pervading socio-religious habits."[104]

And for the memsahibs these figures became a threat to their domestic world, an epitome of exotic sexuality, a powerful figure and a woman free from all the patriarchal norms and thus a target of female jealousy.

The writers have the power to give voice to their creations or keep them in silence. Sumanta Banerjee questions if they "were really silent, or they were condemned to a historically silent category because their voices were not recorded on paper?" The problem lies in discovering these silenced voices?[105] The question that arises is whether the voice of the courtesans belong to a particular author or to their fictional creations. Mostly, courtesans are a historically silent category where the original voices are never heard. Steel has moulded the historic body of the courtesans, making it engrossing to get access to the popular readership of the time. She objectifies, textualizes and commodifies the oriental woman to suit the competing discourse of colonialism. If taken into consideration, the courtesan figure exists in the borderline between fact and fiction, she is an artist psychologically and a performer in reality. She resides in the artistic, cultural and performative space. It is not possible to separate the figure of the courtesan from its performative body. The gaze thus shifts from the dancer to the dancing and clears the body from all associated obligations and impurity. The transcendent body and the women in it are ecstatic, beyond ordinary judgement.

A prostitute hires her body as other professions or skilled labour does to procure money. Banerjee states that "in the case of the prostitute, she hires out the most tender and innermost parts of the female body – the reproductive system and its physical components – which remain a major, if not basic, constituent of the man-woman relationship, emotional and otherwise."[106] But Steel fails to sympathize with the fallen women in her narratives. The difference between a western 'hooker' and an Indian courtesan is brilliantly echoed in an interview, which presents the case with greater clarity. The courtesan's *nakhre*,

[104] Banerjee, *Under the Raj*, p.179.

[105] Ibid., p.5.

[106] Ibid., p.18.

particularly the sexual pretence, are brilliantly echoed in the following interview Studs Terkel conducted, in the early 1970s, with a Chicago hooker, Roberta Victor:

> "Of course we faked it...The ethic was…You always fake it. You're putting something over on him and he is paying for something he really didn't get. That's the only way you keep any sense of self-respect. The call girl ethic is very strong…Here I was doing absolutely nothing, feeling nothing, and in twenty minutes I was going to walk out with fifty dollars in my pocket... How many people could make fifty dollars for twenty minutes work? and no taxes, nothing!..."[107]

This small example makes the readers understand why the west fails to understand the *tawaif* culture, its prospects and the prestige attached to it. Steel tries to give agency to her courtesan characters but ensures in most of the cases that no prospect of further development or success is noticed at the conclusion of the narrative. The so-called 'white woman's burden' or the moral imperative of rescuing native women from drudgery and patriarchal domination falls flat in this case. Steel acknowledges the elite profession and acquaints it with the art form, associating it with a brilliant past but in reality, she performs the role of a British memsahib writer and imperial ruler who fails to articulate the truth in the end.

[107] Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance," p.259.

CHAPTER THREE

Domestic Servants: The (In)significance of Servitude

'Let us, then, be up and doing,
With a heart for any fate;
Still achieving—still pursuing,
Learn to labour and to wait.'
–H. W. Longfellow[1]

The term servant is masked under various layers of class, status and identity issues and burdened under the veil of psychological ambivalence. Servant figures are represented in literature, art and drama but they come to the forefront only when the author finds it appropriate. Seldom do they get the chance to take the role of a narrator, narrating the self-tale with independence. Servants are represented in literature as "the natural subjects of ideologies, of selfless devotion, sacrifice, altruism."[2] The master's narrative and the subaltern subjectivity of the servant have intertwined with each other's personalities to create a unique blend of domesticity. The history of servant representations in various genres, modes and types of literature is wide and vast-ranging. Colonial literature has tried to capture the real lives of the men and women of the lower strata but has always been influenced and guided by the moral and ideological concerns of the employers or their authors. According to Linda Anderson, servants should be "obedient, efficient, quiet, honest, healthy and apparently content with their place – servants who were the equivalent of well-oiled machines – were the ideal."[3] But with changing time and space, servant figures are re-discovered, projected as individuals and designated a voice of their own.

The English mistress in the colonial setting easily acquires the master's language and appropriates the hierarchical divisions in order to keep the servants under strict order. Although subordinate to the sahib, the mistress is the second person in command of her home and controls the band of hard-working, obedient servants. The commands and

[1] Henry Wadsworth Longfellow, "A Psalm of Life," in *Voices of The Night* (Boston: Cambridge, John Owen, 1839), p.7.

[2] Jane Anderson, "A Very Private Business: Migration and Domestic Work," Centre on Migration, Policy and Society, University of Oxford (Working Paper 28, 2006), p.18.

[3] Linda Anderson, *A Place in the Story: Servants and Service in Shakespeare's Plays* (Newark: University of Delaware, 2005), p.24.

demands of the master/mistress necessitate a special tone of language that denotes hierarchy. It is devoid of personal touch and acts as a symbol of the overt difference between them and the servant. The manner of acceptance and obedience of a servant's narrative always contrasts with the employer's mode of speech, demeanour and activity. The British home was constructed as an extended image of the empire and the management of servants was seen as nothing but an allegory of imperial authority. Organizing the native servant and his serving body as acceptable and productive was the main intention of the memsahibs. A disciplined and faithful helping hand was seen as a perfect person and often sought for recruitment in the colonial household. For the smooth functioning of family life, a mistress had to supervise well and keep her eyes open to every trivial detail. Cissie Fairchilds describes the relationship between a master and a servant interestingly as that of "domestic enemies."[4] In many instances, the helping hands were not thought to be trustworthy and were criticized. The lower-class identity of these poor people was kept intact to project the hierarchical superiority of the British people. The maintenance of the brand value of the master automatically created the servant class as inferior and underprivileged. The impersonal tone and code of hierarchy practised by the master terrified the working class creating a sort of automatic obedience in them.

The helping hands who were introduced in a memsahib's residency were employed after strict supervision and thorough verification by the mistress who often oversaw the letters of recommendation, the rules of the house, the payment procedure and the time limit of work set for a servant. In exchange for their labour and according to their working capability, their wages were regulated. Issues like granting of leave, holidays and cutting wages for absenteeism were the sole responsibility and liability of the employer. The servant class also varied according to their gender, age, work competency and seniority. To keep a house well-maintained, the distance between the employer and the employed should always be present. Steel too initiated her sisters who lived in India, to get acquainted with the local language, as it made life trouble-free and the management of servants easier. The colonial mistress in their advice manuals was asked to keep the servants in check. The memsahib's role was to inspect and scrutinize each and every detail of the house along with the expenditures in the kitchen. It was urged that the mistress should take the role of a supervisor and not indulge in any manual work with the servants. Checking the list of day-

[4] Bridget Hill, *Servants: English Domestics in the Eighteenth Century* (1996; Oxford: Oxford Scholarship Online, 2011), p.5.

to-day belongings of the store room to the amount of protein a family needed for breakfast was seen as an ideal behaviour of a mistress in a colony.

The memsahibs who came to India in the 18th and 19th centuries and later, had servants, in most cases as the only companion in their lonely lives. The mistress often had to establish a close relationship with the servants as they were lonely and bored with their husbands busy with establishing a colony in India. The possibility of going out was less and problematic for most memsahibs because of their inability to establish bonding with the religious systems, social customs and their lack of knowledge of the native language. The thinking and behaviour of the memsahibs were coloured by the servants as they seldom had very little contact with the outside world or interest in exploring the real India. So, the servants became the only people who had a connection with the European people living in the bungalow. Thus, the memsahibs viewed their helping hands as the perfect representative of colonial life and everything Indian. So, it is evident that in many cases they misjudged and misinterpreted their servant's behaviour.

The masters had little or no definite sense of the lifestyle of the people they dominated in the empire. The *ayah*s, wet nurses, chambermaids and *dhyees* were the handful of women who became indispensable in the houses of the white people. Among the numerous female servants present, an *ayah*[5] was a prominent name in a colonial household. *Ayah*s not only took care of the small children but also of their mothers. An *ayah* who was responsible for taking care of the mistress of the household would enjoy special powers and privileges against the other servants. These helping hands seldom had names and were addressed as *naukar* or the *dasi* of the ladies which brought out the masterly authority in prominence. The maids in return call the masters *'sahib*s', *'memsahib*s' or *'sarkar*' (reflecting a relation of power and patronage). *The Pioneer*, an Anglo-Indian newspaper in 1880 showered praise on an *ayah* and called her "a Confidential Secretary in the Home Dept."[6] So, the figure of *ayah* had many roles to perform in a house, on one hand, she became the only available counterpart of the memsahib for the servants and on the other hand, she was the rare image and the identity of her class to the mistress who kept the household going. Her manners, humanity and moral values, in the end, were attributed to the other servants working in the family.

[5] *Ayah* was a 'native woman' employed as lady's maid or nursemaid in Anglo-Indian households in the nineteenth century.

[6] *The Pioneer*, 22 October 1880. (Daily newspaper from Allahabad, India).

In the book *Sketches of Native Life and Character in South India* (1869) by F.E.W., *ayah*s are praised and said to be a sought-after gem to make a colonial house full of bliss. According to her, a woman who has no other family ties of her own should be recruited. The woman will then be more loving and caring and, "Such *ayah*s will nurse their mistresses in illness with a motherly devotion and they will regard the children entrusted to their charge as their own and dearer than their own. Patient, cheerful, respectful and trustworthy, an *ayah* of this class is worth her weight in gold."[7] But she (*ayah*) is compared by another memsahib with a milking cow through her job of attending to a white baby. To them, as she nourishes a child with her milk the figure of the *ayah* is nothing but 'a virtual milk cow.'[8]

The *ayah*s sometimes preferred white children over their own. The native children thus, in many cases died without the care of the mother and with a dearth of proper nutrition. The portion of the milk which should have nourished a native baby became the food of a white child. The experience of Mrs. Marth M. Sherwood is shared, "It can't be helped. The mothers never fret after them; when they nurse a white baby they cease to care for their own. They say, 'White child is good, black child is slave."[9] Instances of the death of native infants due to the negligence of the mother were a common occurrence in colonial households. Julia Maitland's, *Letters from Madras During the Years 1836-1839* (1846), *by a Lady* shared the experience of her servant, "The *ayah* is a caste woman and her whims are the plague of my life: I am obliged to keep a cook on purpose for her because her food must all be dressed by a person of her own caste; and even then she will sometimes starve all day, rather than eat it."[10] So, we see that servants took special favours from their employers on various occasions.

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[7] F.E.W., *Sketches of Native Life and Character in South India* (Madras: Higginbotham & Co., 1869), pp.90-91.

[8] Indrani Sen, "Colonial Domesticities, Contentious Interactions: Ayahs, Wet-Nurses and Memsahibs in Colonial India," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 16:3 (2009), p.253.

[9] Mrs. Sherwood, *The Life and Times of Mrs Sherwood (1775–1851): From the Diaries of Captain and Mrs Sherwood (Cambridge Library Collection - Literary Studies)*, ed. F. J. Harvey Darton (1910; Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 2011), p.365.

[10] Julia Charlotte Maitland, *Letters from Madras During the Years 1836-1839 by a Lady* (London: John Murray, 1846), Letter the Twelfth, accessed April 1, 2021, http://digital.library.upenn.edu/women/ maitland/madras/madras. html.

The *ayah* often was recruited as a lady's maid to help the memsahib in her day-to-day household chores and also served as a companion in her lonely life. The sahib in most cases was busy ruling the colony which led their wives to find some alternative to gain information about the native land and its people. Maud Diver in her famous work *The Englishwoman in India* (1909) states,

> "The *ayah* is a born-bred gossip; her tongue is a stranger to the golden fetter of truth and working without risk of serious miss-statement it may almost be said that the unscrupulous chattering of her and her kind has done more to darken understanding and confirm countless misconception than any of the ways and works of English women themselves."[11]

Thus, the *ayah*s were sought for being virtuous, loving and affectionate in their dealings with the memsahib but also hated for being a born gossip and criticized for their idleness and carelessness. Many English mistresses disliked these helping hands, "These women are not uncommonly grossly immoral also and their only characters are those which they possess on paper. They are to be avoided."[12] The *ayah*s were also found to be thieves, taking the memsahib's personal belongings and even giving white children opium or drugs to keep them quiet and manageable. The author in her advice manual instructed the mistress to go on 'a regular inspection round the compound'[13], maintain monthly audits, keep 'written accounts showing their total yearly receipts and expenditure',[14] and manage the servants with a 'balance of rewards and punishments' in daily life.[15] According to Steel, the colonial servant was nothing but "a child in everything save age and should be treated as a child that is to say, kindly, but with the greatest firmness."[16] The domestic servant was one who mostly shared the house or the compound with the master. To serve the master

[11] Maud Diver, *The Englishwoman in India* (London: W. Blackwood, 1909), pp.86-87.

[12] F.E.W. *Sketches of Native Life*, p.92.

[13] Flora Annie Steel and G. Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (1888; London: Heinemann, 1909), p.4.

[14] Ibid., p.19.

[15] Ibid., p.3.

[16] Ibid.

better these people remained in the same place but they always remained an outsider. Even if the life of the memsahib remained busy keeping the house organized, they took ample interest in taking the 'civilizing mission' to the servants living in her compound.[17] Keeping the burden of the empire intact, the white women visited the *zenana* and did missionary work for the native women's all-around improvement.

Although the servant's class were often seen as children[18], in many cases the servants were flogged or punished for their crime. In the advice manual, Steel herself mentioned a flogging incident.[19] Muslim servants were preferred compared to Hindus and Christians were also welcomed in white families. Male servants were chosen more than women. Ample consideration was given to gender, working capability and quality of the human being before being taken in for employment. White servants, if present, were given the highest prestige than the other native ones. Usually, the native servants were believed to be immoral, unclean, filthy and carriers of diseases and so kept at a distance from their masters. The inequality and subordinate stature of these helping hands cemented the difference between the colonizer and the colonized, ruler and the ruled.

Servants were required to keep the 'domestic empire' of the British household moving. The category of the colonial servant was homogeneous; they comprised the poor downtrodden mostly Dalit women/lower class people living as societal outcasts. Numerous servants, ranging from, *mali* (gardener), *ayah* (maid), *bhishti* (water carrier), *punkah wallah* (pullers of fans), *khitmatgarh* (butler*), masalchi* (lit lamps and candles), *darwan* (guard), *baburchi* (cook*)* and many more were seen employed to keep the life of the white people easy and comfortable. Almost every European family with a moderate source of income kept servants. Religious and social obligations were also a reason for so many servants in a small family. Memsahibs preferred to keep fewer servants for easy maintenance but in India division of labour was acted out in accordance with caste and class systems. "In the face of the caste system, the European mistress found herself helpless in reducing the number of 'native' servants in her household with servants unwilling to perform tasks 'inappropriate' for their caste. The large retinue of domestic servants no doubt contributed to the air of imperial grandeur. But the underside was that it led to enormous domestic

[17] Sen, "Colonial Domesticities," p.300.

[18] Mrs. Motherly, *The Servant's Behavior Book: or, Hints on Manners and Dress for Maid Servants in Small Households* (London: Bell and Daldy, 1859), pp.23-28.

[19] V. Powell, *Flora Annie Steel: Novelist of India* (London: Heinemann, 1981), p.39.

expenditure, which remained a perennial source of annoyance."[20] A *malin* (wife of a gardener, who deals with flowers) will never be seen cooking, or an *ayah* seldom did the work of a *mathrani* (woman who cleans female roughage). A particular servant after the completion of work was often seen waiting for other orders as their service changed with time. English mistresses were seen complaining about the leisure the servants enjoyed in a native household. Thus, constant monitoring and vigilance were required by the memsahib to keep the servants on their toes.

Unable to do their work single-handedly, the white women looked for servants as soon as their ships landed in India. The child born to a memsahib in the native climate was often seen as delicate and fragile. The memsahibs were unable to take sole responsibility for their baby's care and took the help of the *ayah* to replace her responsibility. Steel too preferred to unburden herself from the task of motherhood. She states, "If the Western woman is unable to fulfil her first due to her child, let her thank Heaven for the gift of anyone able: do that duty for her."[21] But mothers like Merry Martha Sherwood posed a different viewpoint, the empty parlour or the white baby's attachment to the so-called native mother brought jealousy and insecurity. "It is touching to see the European baby hanging on the breast of the black woman and testifying towards her all the tenderness which is due to its own mother. It is not uncommon to see the delicate, white hand stroking the swarthy face of the foster-parent and even to observe the foster-mother smiling upon the child, really, I believe, usually feeling for it unfeigned and inextinguishable love."[22] Staying in India for twenty-two years the author had a deep understanding of the native people and the overall condition of life in a colony. So, on one hand, she praised her *ayah* Fazli, "A better servant never existed. Few English nurses would have surpassed her in order, cleanliness and discipline…"[23] On the other hand, it also made the white nanny invincible for the proper growth of a child, "Our own experience was, a good *ayah*, well looked after, for the infant, but for children out of arms, a good, well-principled English nurse was

[20] Sen, "Colonial Domesticities," p.302.

[21] Steel and Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper*, pp.166-76.

[22] Sherwood, *The Life and Times*, p.406.

[23] Steel, *The Garden of Fidelity: Being the Autobiography of Flora Annie Steel 1847–1929* (London: Macmillan & Co. Ltd., 1929), p.52.

essential."[24] So, her statements raise doubts about her thought process regarding the native servant. But the real-life experience of Emma Roberts made her share another viewpoint, "European woman, if attainable, demand enormous wages; they soon learn to give themselves airs and require the attendance of the natives during the hot weather: the Mussalman *ayah* is usually found lesser evil of the two and when she happens to be clever and active, she is a treasure beyond price."[25] So, it makes things clear that the servant characters in the memsahibs narratives always remain couched in ambivalence, oscillating between faithfulness and threat.

In the Himalayas and on the Indian Plains (1884), Constance Frederica Gordon Cumming shares some positive attributes about servants. She states, "They certainly are a curious race. So strange a mixture of childishness and cunning, delighted by the simplest pleasures, children with children, unwearied to their devotion to the delicate white-faced little ones whom the climate renders so terribly fractious; great solemn men walking up and down for hours with unruffled patience, trying to soothe shrieking babies and probably getting a good dose of the same sort at night in their own little hovels, hovels, by the way, from which I doubt whether any European could come in such spotless white robes."[26] Her narrative has special significance as the way she describes her helping hand is seldom seen in the narratives of the master class. Her kind gratitude and thoughtful insight into the lives of these poor servants claim appraisal. She asserts,

> "As attendants, they are wonderfully good. Quick, noiseless, detecting in a moment what is wanted, patient and 'answering not again' to an extent that might sometimes shame their masters, who have certainly no more claim to fallenness than 'the niggers' of whom they think so lightly; for to see an English man fly into a passion with a native and strike a man who dares not hit him back, is humiliating indeed."[27]

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[24] Steel and Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper*, pp.166-67.

[25] Emma Roberts, *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan, with Sketches of Anglo-Indian Society*, Vol. 1 (London: W.H. Allen, 1835), pp.92-93.

[26] C. F. Gordon Cumming, *In the Himalayas and on The Indian Plains* (1884; London: Chatto & Windos. 1886), pp.252-53.

[27] Cumming, *In the Himalayas*, pp.252-53.

When most of the memsahibs were busy scrutinizing and finding fault with the servants, Cumming's writing gave a true glimpse into the servant class. In the book *Memsahibs Abroad: Writings by Women Travellers in Nineteenth Century India* (1998), Indira Ghosh describes the servants as "both stupid and devious."[28] Showing dissatisfaction, claiming attendance and the attitude of inspection among the master kept the gap between the two races intact. E. Augusta King who had been a part of the empire and dealt with the native servant states, "Most of the servants in hanging a picture, would hang it upside down, so little can they see any meaning in it. I suppose it is chiefly a matter of education. I wonder if a dog would be taught to recognize a portrait."[29] The inhuman attitude and the note of neglect seen in the narrative; show the day-to-day struggling life of a servant in the midst of white people.

In the absence of mothers and close relatives, the memsahibs had to rely on the *ayah*s and *ammahs* or wet nurses to rear their children in India. The novel, *Englishwoman in India* suggests that *ayah*s were an important substitute for wet nurses found in Britain and their working results were mostly good for the child.[30] A special relationship grew up between the caregiver and the child. The proximity to the *ayah* gave the child easy access to the language, culture and tradition of native life. British mothers often failed to understand the loving relationship between an *ayah* and a child. The close associations were often seen with contempt and disgust or termed dangerous for the moral and biological growth of a child. European mothers in many cases prefered to send their children to their homeland (for proper growth and development) even if the separation broke them inwardly. For example, Julia Thomas Maitland, residing in Madras and wife of a district judge, was afraid of keeping her infant in charge of native nannies. She states, "I intend as much as possible, to prevent her learning the native language thought is rather difficult…most English children do learn them (native languages) and all sorts of mischief with them and grow like little Hindoos…I hope to bring her home before it becomes of any consequence and mean while keep her as much as possible with me."[31] The foundation of difference that

[28] Indira Ghosh, *Memsahibs Abroad: Writings by Women Travellers in Nineteenth Century India* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 1998), p.184.

[29] E Augusta King, *The Diary of a Civilian's Wife in India, 1877-1882*, Vol. I (London: Richard Bentley, 1884), pp.114-15.

[30] Diver, *The Englishwoman*, p.52.

[31] Maitland, "Letters from Madras," p.114.

existed between the colonizer and the colonized could dwindle due to such close relations with the natives. Steel took her sixteen-month-old child back to her motherland.[32] The isolation from their children and often from their husbands being away or busy at work created tremendous psychological pressure for the memsahibs. The void created in the mind and heart, in many cases, lasted throughout the lifespan of a European woman. To keep up with the Victorian and colonial expectations they (white women) were left with nothing other than loneliness and depression. Love affairs and extramarital liaisons thus became a common phenomenon in the lives of these European women. The racial hierarchy seemed to lose its tight grip when Europeans started learning native languages and customs. But the difference, in some sort, always prevailed amongst the whites and was never totally erased.

In Britain, a single maid took care of a lot of things single-handedly. But in India, a definite task was assigned to a particular servant. There were no particular rules about the definite number of domestics in a house, as it varied with the number of masters and their family members. Letters, diaries, journals and even novels written by the memsahibs often talked about their numerous servants. The relatives, other family members and readers in the homeland got a glimpse of Indian life and its working-class people through such representations. According to Agatha James, "In India, one has to keep an absurd number [of servants], three or four at least to do the work of one, because of caste, which interferes with work sadly."[33] Unable to understand native religious structures; the memsahibs thought Indians to be confused, lazy and foolish.

Memsahibs thus proclaimed native servants as unwilling to work or unproductive. The servants were also severely punished if found uncontrollable. An incident described by a memsahib (1882) to her husband in a letter states, "I told Dr. and Mrs. Dallas about the man disappearing just when he had to go with you because you had been angry with him in the morning, but of course, I did not say you had struck him."[34] In another incident, Mrs Gutherie's description of her *ayah* brought out her distaste towards the native woman

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[32] Nupur Chaudhuri, "*Memsahib*s and Motherhood in Nineteenth-Century Colonial India," *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 31, No. 4 (Summer, 1988), p.533.

[33] Agatha James, "Housekeeping and House Management in India," in *The Lady at Home and Abroad: Her Guide and Friend*, ed. Anon (London: Abbott, Jones and Co., 1898), p.372.

[34] Florence Marshman Bailey to her husband Frederick Bailey, 13 January 1882, MSS Eur F157/37, OIOC, cited in Nupur Chaudhuri, "Memsahibs and their Servants in Nineteenth-century India," *Women's History Review*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (1994), pp.554-55.

servant, "very small and very black and as she sat in her low chair, or on the ground, with her skinny arms round the fair child, she looked exactly like a monkey wrapped up in white muslin".[35] Such a sub-human representation of the natives created the image of stable and long-lasting colonial rule.

Colonial servants generally lived in the same compound as the master, but in a separate location outside the immediate space of the master's mansion for easy access to the house. Servants were never permitted to serve themselves along with their masters. In many cases, they were poorly fed and the mistress seldom took any interest in taking care of their lives. As long as servants were available for their service they were admitted and welcomed into the lives of their employers. But the difference between the ruler and the ruled always existed, though in a submerged fashion. Too close contact with a helping hand in many cases aroused unnecessary doubts and questions in the mind of both the mistress and the helping hand. In colonial India, memsahibs thoroughly detested native women establishing any kind of contact with British men. The sexual liaison between a servant woman and the master of the family was intensely feared since it threatened to disrupt the happiness of the family. In the empire, British sahibs were seen keeping concubines and *bibis* to make their own life comfortable. The possibility of blood intermixture along with the fear of racial pollution and the threat of erasure of the hierarchical gap between the ruler and the ruled initiated memsahibs to visit India (fleeting ships) to find eligible bachelors (for marriage) at the end of the 18th century. European people saw the close contact between a native woman and a white man with disgust and Eurasian children were seen as a burden on their shoulders. The movement of a servant in the private space of the home created anxiety in the mind and heart of the mistress. To create a more reliable as well as a trustworthy relationship with a servant a certain amount of closeness with the mistress was accepted but the gap always existed. The rule to keep subordinates in check was maintained and thought of as a moral goal for every master and mistress in the empire.

Seen as a threat to a happy household, the moral quality and sensuality of the servant-woman was a problem faced in the colonial household. In Indian and colonial patriarchal families, an intimate relationship with a helping hand was not seen as normal and attracted both gossip and problems in the house. In the late 18th and 19th centuries, the servant figure emerged in the literature primarily, to bring out the importance of happy

[35] Mrs Gutherie, *My Year in an Indian Fort*, Vol. 1 (London: Hurst & Blackett, 1877), p.244.

family life. However, these servant characters always have an unsettling presence in the narratives. When a widow and a married woman have to remain under strict social regulation, a maid or a servant can enjoy easy access to the patriarchy by using bodily charms. The image of a sexually available servant is noticeable in literature. This in a way shows the double standards of the patriarchal society and puts a question about its accountability. The erotic native servant is a picture created by society and the sexually available lower-class woman is contrasted with the ideal image of a docile faithful Victorian lady or a *bhadromohila* in a native household. The difference both in class and hierarchy between a master and servant shows the true complexity of the latter in daily life. The servant's identity becomes insignificant the moment he/she loses attachment to the master class.

Sexual and physical exploitation was often faced by women servants at the hands of their masters. *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens: Women's Alliances in Early Modern England* (1999) gave a clear picture of the condition of maids in a master's household. The servants "have limited power to resist the demands and criticism of their employers."[36] Often having no other place to seek help, these women silently bore the sexual advancements of these privileged classes of people. "In the eighteenth century, it seemed very natural that masters—and their sons—should regard their servants as sexually available. Female servants existed, it was held by many, for their masters' convenience. Sexual encounters with servants seemed 'natural' and were 'socially acceptable'—at least to the upper class."[37] 'An eroticism of inequality'[38] attracted men of higher classes who fell for servant women. Seduced by the master, the poor woman even got pregnant. Instances of losing jobs were common occurrences when scandalous liaisons got the ear of the mistress of the house. "Servanthood," Cissie Fairchilds writes, "often stripped them of many elements necessary to a sense of identity."[39] These poor women had nothing to do but be servants on the one hand and sexual tools on the other hand for the family. So, being

[36] Ann Rosalind Jones, "Maidservants of London: Sisterhoods of Kinship and Labor," in *Maids and Mistresses, Cousins and Queens: Women's Alliances in Early Modern England*, eds. Susan Frye and Karen Robertson (New York: Oxford UP, 1999), p.26.

[37] Sarah C. Maza, *Servants and Masters in 18th-Century France: The Uses of Loyalty* (1983; Princeton: Princeton UP, 2014), p.165.

[38] Ibid., p.166.

[39] Cissie Fairchilds, *Domestic Enemies: Servants and Their Masters in Old Regime France* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins UP, 1984), p.101.

a servant was not an easy task, to be true and much more difficult than the work of a mistress.

Unfortunately, servants are present in colonial narratives but inconsistently. They remain silent in most cases, found talking only when they are required to perform. The expression of the servants is hardly voiced by them and has to solely depend on and trust the creator, which is seldom accurate and true. But instances of bad behaviour on the part of the servants, extortion of money by deceit and *ayah*s neglecting their duties are also present. Rajya Sabha on 3rd December 2004 introduced an act that defines the issues of service and the details are shared below; the act suggests amongst many, as 'domestic servant' means any person who earns his livelihood by working in the household of his employer and doing household chores; 'employer' means any person or family who employs housemaid or domestic servant as the case may be, for doing their household chores; 'housemaid' means a women servant who performs household chores for wages.[40]

In the early colonial period, the means and manner of servitude were influenced by the Mughals in a certain sense. Terms like *naukar* or *chakar* had their lineage in the 15th and 16th centuries. '*Naukrani*' is a common Hindi word but it seems it was not very frequently used in Mughal-period sources.[41] Slaves, workers and service providers were not socially acknowledged before the arrival of Muslim culture. The master-servant dialectic got a new turn with the coming of the new Mughal monarchy in India. The Muslim civilization mostly the emperors brought with them the servant culture that made life impossible without them. Though the exercise of power politics against the servants was present from medieval times, the dependency on helping hands became more acute as time progressed. In the medieval household, the presence of slaves was found in many historical records like Kautilya's *Artha Sastra* (3rd century B.C.E.), *Manusmrti* (*The Laws of Manu*) by Manu, translated into English in 1766 by William Jones and also in Buddhist and Jain literature. Though men having sexual liaisons with servants was seen as inappropriate, a woman having a physical relationship with a slave or a servant was harshly

[40] The Housemaids and Domestic Servants (Conditions of Service and Welfare) Bill, 2004, Bill No. XXXV, Rajya Sabha, India, December 3, 2004.

[41] Nitin Sinha, "Who Is (Not) a Servant, Anyway? Domestic Servants and Service in Early Colonial India," *Modern Asian Studies*, 55, 1 (2021), p.165.

punished as seen in *Artha Sastra*.[42] Ben Jonson's *The Alchemist* (1610) and William Shakespeare's *The Tempest* (1610-1611) created their servant characters in different contexts, colours and frames. Charles Dickens, William Makepeace Thackeray, Anthony Trollope, Wilkie Collins, Emily and Charlotte Bronte were 19th century Victorian novelists who vividly created servants as both loyal supporters and as thieves or tricksters.

The life of a servant during the Victorian period could be a struggling one as in many houses there was only one maid who had to take care of the whole family. Doing all the chores and performing all the laborious work with very little time for personal leisure was the life of most servants. Being recruited by good employers seldom provided them with any extra advantage in life. Malnourished servants were found in many families as they were seen as an extra burden to feed even when they worked hard both inside and outside the house. Firstly, male servants were found in abundance but with time female helping hands became prevalent in European houses. Less strenuous to manage than a male servant, maids became a popular option and their wages also differed considerably from the opposite gender.

Servants were indispensable in big houses, for instance, the "Duke of Bedford had 300 servants in his employ and the Duke of Portland employed 320."[43] Middle-class and modest houses had few servants, though not so numerous to make life uncomfortable. A gentleman who was unmarried or lived alone had 'a boy' or a valet to do all his work. Keeping themselves invisible, this class of people continued to labour for years without getting anything in return. Secret passages and hidden doorways were the places where these poor people were seen executing their work silently. Living in poor accommodations, receiving low wages and facing sexual and societal exploitation, the lives of the people living down the stairs/below stairs were pathetic.

Samuel Richardson's *Pamela or Virtue Rewarded* (1740) is a notable work that brings out for the first time in English literature the trials and tribulations of a maidservant. She is sexually harassed and the master Mr. B, a wealthy landowner, takes undue advantage of her after his mother's death. The letters and journal entries between Pamela and her impoverished mother give the reader a critical conception of the study of a servant's life

[42] Kautilya, *The Arthashastra*, ed., rearranged and trans. L. N. Rangarajan (New Delhi: Penguin, 1992), p.484.

[43] Donna Hatch, "Servants in Regency England," April 29, 2016, accessed April 2, 2021, https://donnahatch.com/servants-in-regency-england/.

history during that period. *Joseph Andrews or The History of the Adventures of Joseph Andrews and of his Friend Mr. Abraham Adams* (1742), by Henry Fielding talks about the faithful servant Joseph, the brother of Pamela. The lady of the house, Lady Booby finds him attractive and tries to make him her lover. But the boy saves himself from moral degradation and leaves the employer to live a life of his own choice. Daniel Defoe's *Robinson Crusoe* (1719) shares the story of Friday, a servant who after coming back to England with his master dies and no detail is given about his life after he left the island with his newfound master. Though Ellen 'Nelly' Dean or Mrs. Dean in Emily Brontë's (1847) novel *Wuthering Heights* is an ambivalent figure, she is the narrator as well as the servant of the family working both in Thrushcross Grange and Wuthering Heights. George Eliot in the short story "The Sad Fortunes of Reverend Amos Barton" from the *Scenes of Clerical Life* (1857) collection talks about a nanny and her selfless attitude towards the employer. Another notable character is Lee who is the Cantonese cook in the narrative of John Steinbeck's *East of Eden* (1952), which also requires a special mention. Sam Weller, the valet in Charles Dickens' *The Posthumous Papers of the Pickwick Club* written in 1836 also gives us a glimpse of a faithful, comic servant of Mr. Samuel Pickwick. Daphne Du Maurier's *Rebecca* (1938) portrays Mrs. Danvers who is a dreamer as well as a housekeeper in the family. In the seminal works of Arthur Conan Doyle, Mrs. Hudson shows us how a housekeeper should perform at a crucial time. These are all fictional servants who dominated our hearts and minds for ages. Their popularity and adaptability to the changes of time and space through centuries need acclamation.

A short survey of helping hands like, 'Ramu-kaka' or 'Kanta-bai' in Indian households will make the scenario understandable and clearer to the reader. From 1880 onwards hiring a helping hand to do daily chores had become a fashion statement for the wealthy middle-class people of colonial Bengal. Keeping the domestic area secluded from colonial interference was the main motto of the men of that time. The so-called *ghar* (inside) and *bahir* (outside) were kept in two different spaces with helping hands creating a special relationship with middle-class families. Both nurturing and oppressive, the family ties between an employer and a helping hand created the image of a perfect hegemonic subject. The aristocratic Brahmo family of Tagore was not only affluent culturally, economically and socially but also had a reservoir of numerous servants to look after family matters. Tagore was seen personally sharing his memories of growing up under the surveillance of servants. The mothers of these houses (*bhadramahila*) seldom took the responsibility of rearing children. These native women influenced and occasioned a new

change in their life, keeping the Victorian prototype of an angel in the house intact. According to *Samsad English Bengali Dictionary* (1981) "the word servant in Bengali translates into *chakar, vritya,* or *karmachari,* the latter indicating a wide range of people who serve in some form or another."[44] Gideon Colquhoun Sconce who was an advocate of the High Court of Calcutta in his work, *A Handy Book on the Law of Master and Servant* (published in 1870) states,

> "The word 'servant', in its ordinary colloquial sense, is usually understood to mean servants of the domestic or menial class, but in its legal acceptance it includes anyone who is bound to perform services, on the authority and for the benefit of another, his 'master,' whether these services are rendered gratuitously or for a stipulated consideration."[45]

Ambikacharan Gupta, a professional manual writer, states "There is no way a *bhadralok* can function for a moment without a servant...one needs servants to perform domestic chores; servants are necessary even to travel around; without servants, it is impossible to maintain one's dignity."[46] So, it is somewhat clear that the woman (mistress) of the Bengali household treated servants in most cases as members of the family.

In many writer's narratives like Kalyani Datta's *Meyemahal* (*Women's World,* 1993) the servant characters 'Kunjadada' and 'Bejodidi' are the faithful, permanent and loyal servants who are born and brought up in the master's house and live there till death. It is interesting to see the power and authority the servants enjoyed over the children and the young women of the family. They both dominated and loved the household with a patronizing attitude. Tagore had mixed feelings about the servants he grew up with. Being part of a wealthy family with numerous members, servants were required in huge numbers to keep it properly managed. The mothers were occupied in their work and the children of the house in many cases were left in the hands of servants, who cared for them but also punished them severely for misdeeds. Tagore's well-known poem "Puraton Vritya" ("The Old Servant") shares the character of a lowly poor employer and his loyal faithful servant.

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[44] Swapna M. Banerjee, "Down Memory Lane: Representations of Domestic Workers in Middle Class Personal Narratives," *Journal of Social History,* Vol. 37, No. 3 (Spring, 2004), pp.586-87.

[45] Ibid., p.587.

[46] Ibid., pp.587-88.

Sarala Debi Chaudhurani, who was a member of the Tagore family, in her narrative of her life *Jivaner Jhara Pata* (*The Fallen Leaves of Life*, 1975) brings out her heartfelt memories of a daughter who was never been loved by her mother and had a deprived childhood, "Like an inaccessible queen, she stayed away from us. Our maid's lap became our mother's lap. I never knew what mother's affection was; mother never kissed me or pat me gently with her hand."[47] Mongola, her *ayah* who took care of her often used to slap her and was harsh in dealing with her. The trauma that she suffered in her younger days stayed with her throughout her life as a bad memory.

Hemantakumari Sen Gupta, in her work titled, *Sekaler Ramani* (*Women's Lives in the Past*, 1901) shares her fear about the maids of her house,

> "Women in those days were hard working and efficient and they did all the domestic chores themselves. Some families had one or two maids who were entrusted with the responsibility of child care. The housewives were afraid of the maids just as they were of their sisters-in-law (emphasis mine). Some of the maids were quiet and affectionate. But some were querulous. They drove young brides crazy by torturing them in many ways. The brides secretly put up with this torture due to their stupidity."[48]

But a servant like Kamini's mother, the old helping hand, was the person who came to the mistress' (Hemantakumari's) rescue and helped her to deal with her in-laws. The mother-like figure assured Hemantakumari of her future happiness and guided her in matters when problems arose in her life. Giribala Debi's *Raibari* (1962), an autobiography similarly shared her memories vividly describing her days with her supportive servant.[49] So, a mixed feeling about the servant is seen in the above texts.

The art of making a home depends on the skill and intelligence of the mistress and her capability to get the required amount of service from her helping hands. In the advice

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[47] Sarala Debi Chaudhurani, *Jivaner Jhara Pata* (Calcutta, 1975, originally pub. in 1879), p.1, cited in Swapna M. Banerjee, op. cit., p.695.

[48] Hemantakumari Sen Gupta, "Sekaler Ramani" in *Antahpur*, 1308 B.S. (April 1901), pp.82-89, cited in Swapna M. Banerjee, op. cit., p.696.

[49] Banerjee, "Down Memory Lane," p.697.

manual, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (1888) Flora Annie Steel makes the following statement,

> "Housekeeping in India, when once the first strangeness has worn off, is a far easier task in many ways than it is in England, though it none the less requires time … Easy, however, as the actual housekeeping is in India, the personal attention of the mistress is quite as much needed here as at home. The Indian servant, it is true, learns more readily and is guiltless of the sniffiness with which Mary Jane receives suggestions; but a few days of absence or neglect on the part of the mistress, results in the servants falling into their old habits with the inherited conservatism of dirt."[50]

So, a good housemistress could create a bunch of amiable and faithful servants with a little effort to help her in the proper execution of day-to-day work.

A faithful and amiable servant is required by a mistress but they are always reminded of their true status. Forgetting or forgiving is not the role of the employer. The emotional attachment of a mistress to her *ayah* lasted as long she stayed in the colony. In the mutiny time instances were found of servants rescuing the British and risking their own lives. But the moment these people left India none spared a thought about the poor servant's future or that the servant's life could also be at stake. As long as the employer got benefited from them, they were represented in British literary writing. The moment the employer got access to a better life, the reason for tolerating the servants became a nagging question. But that was not the case with the children, "Colonial children adored their *ayah*s and retained warm memories of them long after everything else Indian had passed out of their lives."[51] The attachment that grew between a child and the surrogate mother was a special one and was free from the issues (race, class and caste hierarchies) that dominated the hearts and minds of adults.

Bridget Hill states that the existence of the servants is felt but, "They remain enigmatic figures." [52] We seldom know their lives because of the dearth of evidence and

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[50] Steel and Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper*, pp.1-2.

[51] Indrani Sen, *Memsahibs' Writing: Colonial Narratives on Indian Women* (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2012), pp.67-68.

[52] Hill, *Servants: English Domestics*, p.4.

written information. Through the writings of the employer such as letters, journals, novels, short stories, memoirs and autobiographies we get a partial glimpse of this class of people. In very rare circumstances we come to know about them and their individuality as a person. They are described as the employers find appropriate and, in many cases, reveal the servant's personality keeping their orientation filtered before presenting. But at moments of distress, the servants retort back and their spontaneity is seen as a breach of decorum. In both the literature of the historical past and contemporary period, we see their widespread presence but their life narratives are always incompletely drawn. The moment they are revealed as real individuals; they are silently erased from the narrative. A particular stylistic method is used to describe a servant and keep them in check by the master community both in British and Indian households. The present chapter intends to critically portray the native women servant figures in Steel's selected works. The manner, motive and method of their servitude in Steel are presented and analysed in detail. The characters in question are Mytab in the short story "Feroza" in the collection *The Flower of Forgiveness* (1894), Zainub, the duenna in the novel *The Potters Thumb*: *A Novel* (1894), Dilaram, in the novel *Mistress of Men*: *A Novel* (1918), Fuzli in "Shah Sujah's Mouse" from the story collection *From the Five Rivers* (1893). The figure of the *ayah* is seen numerously present in the narratives as they are seen as the most reliable comforters in a mistress's life. Sharing a special bond with the lady of the British household which was unique in most cases, they also faced neglect, deception and injustice.

The servants who returned the colonial gaze were an important issue that problematized the colonial mind. The white people were aware of the native servant's moral and psychological judgment capacity. The western ways of lifestyle were put under scrutiny by the servant's attitude. Memsahibs wearing revealing clothes, having contact with other white men, dancing and partying with unknown people disturbed the servant's native respectability, customs and way of thought. The eastern way of life and its moral engagements created a rift in the thought process of the helping hand against the sahib. Memsahibs like Maud Diver stressed the *ayah*'s ability to harm the imperial identity of a mistress.[53] The private life of the white people was not hidden from their servants. The moral surveillance and judgment of the servants made the white people alert about their behaviour. The colonial identity and national prestige were always questioned and required

[53] Diver, *The Englishwoman*, pp.86-87.

constant polishing. The servant also questioned the white man's duplicity and gazed back at the deception practised by their masters.

The discourse and ideology of the master class are always camouflaged in society. The negative experiences of the revolt of 1857 affected the minds of both the whites and the natives making the relationship much strained. People working in British households had to experience humiliation, racial taunts, ignorance as well as misbehaviour at the hands of their masters/mistresses. With the suppression of the revolt and the transfer of power from the East India Company to the Crown, the earlier negligence turned into hatred and coined a new term for them, 'niggers'.[54] To exploit the servant's portrayal of an ideal image is essential for the employer. It is the servants whose existence creates in return a spectrum for a master. The identity of a helping hand is internally connected with the subjectivity of the employer. The safety, security and comfort of the master are the moral obligation of a servant. Society has always attempted to create skilful subjects. After years of service, these servants are also sent back to their respective homes as the luxury enjoyed by them in the master's place is not their own. They are trained not to forget their social position even if they stayed with the employer for years.

The critical gap in power politics intensified when the difference between a master and a servant was seen through the lens of imperialist motives. The servant's movement in both the private and public space of a colonial home confused the inhabitants, risking their drawn boundaries. Thus, the employers created an area of 'limited closeness' (the idea is personal) for them in their lives. The employers in many cases felt uneasy with the helping hands and saw it as a menace to their domestic bliss. A servant working in many colonial houses was seen as filthy, soiled and dirty in contrast to the spotless, cleansed and pure house of the master. The upper and middle-class people or European households could keep servants for their daily work. It gave them both comfort and the desired status and position required to be a part of a polished society. But there was a high risk of slippage of the employer's information by the servants to the outside world through gossip. In 1822, Ramoonee an *ayah* was brought before the Supreme Court at Fort William in Calcutta for a trial. She had to give witness to the adultery of Robert Cunliffe's wife Louisa Cunliffe with another sahib. She was a part of their personal space and thus had a definite idea about

[54] Nupur Chaudhuri, "Memsahibs and their Servants in Nineteenth-century India," *Women's History Review*, Vol. 3, No. 4 (1994), p.557.

the behaviours of the white people in the house.[55] So, it is clear that the mixing of hierarchical distinctions between the two classes was considered dangerous. The colonial servants were the poorest of all and were satisfied with their position as a helping hand in European homes. Though they preferred amiable servants, lower caste women were preferred by memsahibs over Muslim or upper-class Hindu women. The caste system was not a significant term for white people. But issues of gender took a crucial and significant part in the recruitment of servants. Constant attention was paid while taking in *ayah*s, cooks, gardeners and butlers in the house because their work was laborious and needed skill. "Domestic service involves the mixing of a variety of categories that might otherwise be kept separate – including class, race, ethnicity, nationality and gender, depending on the particulars of local hierarchies and economies."[56] To keep the prestige and honour of the home intact the servants' voices needed to be voiceless. Sara Dickey in her work gave a glimpse of a Tamil family,

> "Rachel, a middle-class Catholic woman in her forties who belongs to a scheduled caste, told me that she and her sister strongly suspected their long-time servant of stealing one of Rachel's daughter's anklets. Speaking in Tamil, she said, 'We asked her, Did you see the anklet lying anywhere when you swept?' We asked her whether she saw the anklet when she swept the house. She said that she didn't see it and went outside. I don't know if she had hidden it outside, but she brought the anklet when she came back in, saying that she had thrown it out along with the garbage. For most employers, as for Rachel, this act would have constituted compelling evidence of theft. Yet Rachel did not fire her servant; when I asked why, she answered, 'We continue to keep her on. When she comes to work, she completes the work quickly and then leaves.' 'All right,' I prompted and she

[55] Evidence taken before the Supreme Court of Judicature of the Presidency of Calcutta on the 'Bill intituled' 'An Act to Dissolve the Marriage of Robert Henry Cunliffe, Esquire, with Louisa his now Wife, and to Enable Him to Marry Again' (London, 1841) (hereafter, Evidence on the Bill) cited in Nitin Varma "The Many Lives of *Ayah* Life Trajectories of Female Servants in Early Nineteenth-Century India," in *Servants Pasts: Late-Eighteenth to Twentieth-Century, South Asia,* Vol. 2, eds. Nitin Sinha and Nitin Varma (New Delhi: Orient Blackswan, 2019), p.73.

[56] Sara Dickey, "Permeable Homes: Domestic Service, Household Space, and the Vulnerability of Class Boundaries in Urban India," *American Ethnologist,* Vol. 27, No. 2 (May, 2000), p.470.

> continued. It's true then, she won't go and complain in the neighbouring house if we run out of idlis and don't give her any...She won't talk about what happens here when she goes to other houses. She has good qualities like these. That's why we continue to keep her."[57]

The moment a servant crosses her boundary or reveals any family secret, he/she ceases to be a part of the same house anymore. The existence and continuance of a servant in the master's place is also struggling.

The life of an English governess in the 19th century was full of emotional, social and psychological tension. She was expected to look after her pupils and teach them moral values and good etiquette in life. But the question of her position was fraught with ambivalence as she fitted nowhere in the social system. In many cases, she had to take care of the child, work as a helper to the mother and do light household chores as a servant. Even if working with kind people she seldom got social prestige and many times was considered inferior. Though she stepped up the social ladder and was in a better position than a servant, her isolation, as well as friendliness (the master-servant relation) with the family, was understandable. She had to spend her evenings alone without anyone to talk to. It was really awkward to converse with the servants and also irrelevant to be with the employer. This class of women were very poorly paid and often remained unmarried with little prospect of a good future life. Living life in another's house, rearing their children and in the end, leaving the place and position after a few years made their life pathetic. Unable to move down to the class of servants and unable to be a part of the respectable household she remained an unanswered question in both history and literature. She frequently looked for a better situation or new employment but met with failure. She had to be all alone in the world, struggling through tough situations in life. She was treated as a blank page where any writer could try their skill and interpret them in a new light. Charlotte Brontë, Anne Brontë and William Thackeray are writers who found the governess characters interesting for their narratives. Steel too finds the governess figures attractive and fruitfully introduced them in her writing. Though the present chapter intends to talk only about the influence of the helping hands, an attempt is made to bring out and analyze two women characters

[57] Dickey, "Permeable Homes," p.477.

Mytab and Zynub who have mixed identities in Steel's narrative. Being, on one hand, a chaperon and on the other hand a servant, they signal their ambivalent presence in the texts.

"Feroza" (1894)

Mytab in the short story "Feroza" from the collection *The Flower of Forgiveness* is a duenna or a governess whose position is complicated in the native household. She is a character who on one hand keeps an eye on the women folk of the house, assisting them in their various duties and on the other hand, also does menial jobs while sharing the house. In European countries, particularly in the Victorian period the concept of a governess, generally a spinster from a poor social background and without any marriage prospects was always positioned higher than the servants enjoying a special relationship with the house inmates. But a native colonial space hardly manages the strict distinction as seen in Ahmed Ali's house. The two married women Feroza and Kareema are under the supervision of Mytab and she acts more like a caregiver, with a kind heart rather than behaving like a strict mother-in-law to them. She is not a servant but more of a chaperon in the Muslim household. Being barren and without any other elderly figure in the house, Mytab enjoys both power and respect. The author gives the readers no idea about her marital status or a glimpse of her own family. She is created for service to the master and will continue to perform as long as she exists in the narrative. Her personality, uniqueness or her capability as a distinct human being is not portrayed by the author. From the beginning, the reader sees her selfless, protective attitude towards the ladies; the beautiful yet rough-spoken Kareema, the wife of Inaiyut and the ugly, soft-spoken Feroza, the wife of the would-be barrister Meer Ahmed Ali who was studying in London. She is seen consoling Feroza that memsahibs are not as bad as society portrays them to be, "The mems have many clothes; God knows how many, or how they bear them when even the skin He gives is too hot. They are sad-coloured, these mems, with green spectacles serving as veils. Not that they need them, for they are virtuous and keep their eyes from men truck."[58] She is created as a supportive, benevolent and nurturing individual who makes use of her minimal knowledge to bring peace and happiness to the house.

Mytab occupies an unusual position and the philosophy of her association with the employer is more of a confidant than a duenna. She is not a rigorous, authoritarian woman

[58] Steel, *Flower of Forgiveness* (London: MacMillan and Co., 1894), p.156.

and in many cases helps the ladies to do odd jobs, helping them to fulfil their heart's desire even if that is dishonourable to the reputation of the family. The night when Feroza meets Miss Julia Smith, it is the duenna who brings her back safely into the house from the cantonment. The incident shows her attachment to the ladies, as a motherly figure. Seeing the lady unharmed, she scolds her saying, "Hai! have I found thee at last, graceless! scandalous!"[59] The incident is scandalous but she is an expert at camouflaging the incidents for the benefit of the poor child bride Feroza.

Throughout the text she is not seen milking the cows, cleaning the kitchen or doing other menial jobs. Her work as a caregiver is questioned and her status remains complicated till the end. Mytab has been active in protecting the woman, she takes care to make life easy for her mistresses, helping Feroza and Kareema meet the memsahib and in the end adopted the matter of English education of Feroza in the border framework. Though she objects to the use of soap in the house yet she accepts Feroza's quest for social welfare. Her ability to persuade Feroza and Kareema to remain chaste and abide by societal norms is punctured when the memsahib starts visiting the house. But her deep humanitarian sentiments make her a volunteer for both the women as she tries to understand Feroza's mind and welfare scheme. Being an old woman with experience in the ways of women's life she repeatedly tries to put 'sense' in Feroza's ears. She fails utterly and the result is Feroza putting extra pressure on her to learn the new western ways, neglecting both her health and the old accepted manners of a married woman. She easily understands that the steps the lady of the house has taken will bring disgrace and stress to her own life. But being a servant, she remains silent as she has to work for the master to keep her body and soul together.

Mytab has been a part of the family for a long period and wishes well for the ladies. It seems that she shares a keen relationship of love and favour in the house. But her existence as more like a servant is a sharp contrast to the respectable married ladies of Meer Ali. Steel has given her authority but the question remains about its efficacy. She is not educated but shows accomplishment and refinement of thought about the introduction of English education. Mytab reinvents her position as she fails to control both Feroza and Kareema from doing their jobs. She is sympathetic to the burdened lives of *zenana* ladies but is also sceptical of modern ways of life. She is not a woman like Feroza who can indulge

[59] Steel, *Flower of Forgiveness*, p.167.

in taking risks. She has to abide by the rules of the house as she will be held responsible for any unwanted trouble in the inner women's quarters.

The women of the house are physically, economically and socially dependent on their husbands and they control the women's lives and are the sole authority to make decisions. Though professional in her task, Mytab has also become emotionally tied down by the women of the house. The capability of the duenna in the story is put under scrutiny. She has to work to keep the societal constructions intact but Mytab willingly gives a chance to Feroza to meet the memsahib in the cantonment. Challenging all aspects of a *zenana* life, Mytab is seen as a rescuer of Feroza in the night when she has lost all hope of help and ensures their safe return to the house. Feroza's demand for change by using perfumed soap as a toilette like the educated ladies is not accepted by the duenna. She behaves more like a mother than a governess when Feroza cannot be found in the compound. She acts with urgency and informs the others about Feroza's intention of going western by accepting Christianity as her new religion. The author has drawn her but used her as a part of the narrative, giving no importance or individual identity to her. She is the epitome of a self-appointed and selfless representative who is deeply shocked by the sudden death of Feroza. The record of Mytab's own feelings in her voice is not heard. Whatever she intended is voiced by the author or narrated by other characters. The text gives her no scope to evolve and all aspects of her character growth are terminated from the beginning.

But from the time when Feroza learns that her husband is going to marry Kareema, the widow of his brother, we see Mytab in a new light. She consoles her and comforts her as a mother and shares her own experience as a woman. She claims, "Mytab's chill old hand fell on the girl's straining arm like a touch of Death. 'Allah akhbar wa Mohammed rasul! Hast forgotten the faith, Feroza Begum, Moguli? Thine? Since when has the wife a right to claim all? Since when hast thou become a mem?'"[60] She understands the pathetic situation of Feroza when all family members fail to do justice to her. Mytab tries to make the poor girl realise that *zenana* women have neither power nor privilege to work against the wish of the patriarchy or put a question on the pre-existing societal norms. Her low, degraded and deprived life has taught her the truth of life. Mytab assures Feroza and also advises that life as the second wife to her husband Ahmed Ali will not be intolerable because she has no other option available to change it. Modern education enables women

[60] Steel, *Flower of Forgiveness*, p.174.

to adopt and adapt to changes with time but the life of a *zenana* woman is confined to the four walls of a house. Characters like Mytab bring to the readers the question of right and wrong, fair and unfair, correct and incorrect, keeping oneself as a silent observer.

In the end, Steel gives her no opportunity to place her life in a better position. Mytab dedicates her work and life to the betterment of the family which is not her own. But her condition as a duenna is not reciprocated in the narrative by any of the members. Mytab has tried to teach faith and moral values to the women of the family but her power and acceptability are put into question at various times in the text. First, she warns Feroza and Kareema against meeting the memsahib, secondly, she warns Feroza from going out into the cantonment, third, she tries to bring peace to the life of Feroza and in the end, she applies all her skills to save the poor lady's life but fails. Her secondary position as well as her reliability in the owner's house clips her wings and she fails to take the appropriate measures necessary for the family.

It is not easy to break social rules, regulations and accepted beliefs that are present in our lives. After the death of Feroza, Mytab disappears from the narrative. The author portrays her lamenting the death of the poor woman who has drowned herself to death. The bereavement and the grief on the duenna's face show her closeness to the deceased woman. The sudden death of Feroza symbolically ends her life as well and the narrative comes to a sudden halt. What remains in life or the future of this old duenna hardly seems to matter to the author or the surviving family members. The reader too seems to overlook any question that may arise about Mytab's life and existence because her social position is complicated and made ambivalent throughout centuries by writers.

***The Potters Thumb*: *A Novel* (1894)**

Zainub, the duenna in the novel *The Potters Thumb* is portrayed more like a servant than a chaperon. Chandni, the powerful courtesan figure in the novel has a significant political function and uses Zainub to extend and amplify her cunning initiatives to gain a profitable place in respectable society. The poor woman, who is associated with the duty of taking care of the *zenana* ladies in the palace falls prey to the deceitful Chandni and with her advice, the duenna has to manage one of the inmates of the women's quarters, the brown-haired Azizan for a conspiracy. It is speculated that Azizan is the daughter of the old potter who was lost sixteen years ago on a rainy night from his house. The courtesan is aware of the girl's beauty and plans to fabricate her identity and initiate a love affair with the sahib, George Keene. Azizan is a young lady without the proper experience of life since she had

never stepped outside the walls of the palace. Azizan is a minor character and it is the duenna who skilfully exploits her innocence to make Chandni's plans successful. The Dewan has to lend Azizan as she is the only one who is fit enough to be a model for the sahib to paint a picture. Her youth and beauty along with the etiquette of the palace are sure to attract the sahib and he will fall for her in due time. Chandni's political success depends on the skilful execution of the plan by Zainub. The sahib is the keeper of the key which opens the log gates of water necessary for cultivation in Hoddinburg. The Dewan and the courtesan plan to steal the key by bribing Keene with the Ayodha pot (a rare and beautiful artwork made by the potter) but the sahib being honest, they remain unsuccessful. To make their plan work, Chandni takes the help of Azizan to get hold of the sahib. It is the duenna who has knowledge of the whole matter and is instructed to keep a strict eye on the girl.

When the reader first meets Zainub she is portrayed as a semi-professional woman having a maternal position (more than a caregiver) in the life of Azizan. She is the only one who has a constant presence in the girl's life. Giving constant care and support to the young lady, the duenna is seen as the only person responsible and sensitive for her wellbeing and acts as a mother figure to her. Her close association with the young lady makes her worry about Azizan's future when Chandni shares her plan. Surprisingly Zainub refuses at first to be a part of such heinous planning and plotting against the sahib. But the influence of an attendant is far more than a courtesan like Chandni who frequents men's quarters. So, as the novel proceeds, Zainub and Azizan perform as per the plan of the courtesan and the old Dewan.

The first meeting that happens between the sahib and the girl is interesting. Azizan from the beginning keeps the truth about her identity away from Keene. She introduces her as a poor girl whose mother has been ill and she is in dire need of the sahib's quinine. She also intelligently makes a plan to make him paint her thereby creating the appropriate setting for them to fall in love with each other. Keene is mesmerized by her beauty and assures her of giving her quinine but asks her permission to paint her in return. Totally unaware of the dangerous conspiracy hatched by the courtesan, the sahib easily falls prey to her ill motives. He can only make out that an old woman, Zainub, takes care of the girl and many interruptions take place between them during conversations. George sees the girl slipping into the white domino (cloak) that the old woman always kept ready at the gate. On returning to her palace, Zainub warns the girl not to disclose to anyone in the palace about her meeting with the sahib. The duenna threaten the girl and young Azizan without any knowledge of the conspiracy, swear to do as instructed. "'Now mind,' scolded Zainub,

as they shuffled back to the women's apartments, 'if thou sayest a word of this to the girls, thou goest not out again; but the old bridegroom comes instead.' 'I will go again,' said the girl, gravely. 'I liked it. But the sun made my eyes ache without the veil. Yes, I will go again, amma-jan' (nurse)."[61] The old woman is scared as she knows the consequence of breaking the laws of the woman's quarter. Being helpless herself, she keeps on helping the two young people meet each other. But it is interesting that Azizan addresses her as her mother, *amma-jan* unaware of the part Zainub is playing to ruin her life.

The duenna attempts to stop Chandni from harming Azizan but in vain. Being a poor dependent servant, she has no power against the influential characters of the novel. Zainub shows her true self when she decides to work against Chandni. The game of politics is sure to ruin the life of the two young people and Zainub is seen as the only person confronting the courtesan in the narrative against such misdeeds. The meeting between her and the courtesan is a crucial part of the text as it changes the reader's perception of the duenna. She asks boldly,

> "'What is to come of this foolishness?' She continues, 'T'was a week at first; now it's ten days. She used to give me no trouble and now she sits by the lattice in a fever for the next day—that is the plague of girls…I would not pass such another year with this one for all the money thou couldst give. Nor is it safe for me, or for thee, Chandni, with those eyes in the child's head. Let be, 'tis no good. Would I have never consented to begin the work? I will do no more."[62]

When the duenna hopes to get a positive answer to her request, Chandni refuses outright to save the girl and threatens the duenna in return.

Power tends to manifest itself indirectly and so Zainub returns empty-handed from the courtesan. Her quest to protect and save the *zenana* lady falls flat. The personal relationship of the two women Zainub and Azizan is unique as one is an old, experienced mother-like figure and the other a beautiful young lady with little knowledge about the patriarchal world outside the palace. She is madly in love with a sahib who will never

[61] Steel, *The Potter's Thumb: A Novel* (Harper & Brothers Publishers: New York, 1894), p.42.

[62] Ibid., p.45.

reciprocate her feelings. Zainub is the only character in the novel who truly cares for the young girl and continuously sought her support till the end. She is the only person found to perform as a caring and sensitive human character in the text. She is the one who protects and nurtures the emotions of Azizan. She goes with her scant income to the *ayah* of Mrs. Boynton to get back the Ayodha pot which has become a token of love for Azizan. "Zainub crept away disconsolate; …Still, she must do her best and if the mem had the Ayodhya pot in the palace there was always a chance of being able to steal it. As a beginning, she spent some of Chandni's rupees on sweetmeats and, hiding the tray under her domino, set off to pay her respects to Mrs. Boynton's *ayah*."[63] She plans to get hold of the pot which Azizan had given to the sahib. George, unaware of the girl's feelings, gave it to the memsahib, his true love. Aware of the emotional turmoil that Azizan is going through, the old servant feels utterly helpless and becomes desperate to take any fruitful step to save the girl from impending disaster. But she fails to do justice to the poor girl, as she is nothing but a powerless old woman. She is also frightened about her position and being an old woman, she has no better place than the palace to spend her future. As the novel progresses the duenna takes resolute steps to make amends for her crime.

She is well aware that her plans would face opposition from other members of the royalty and acts prudently. She takes Azizan to the tower to get back the Ayodha pot in the middle of the storm and waits alone inside the staircase in utter darkness. On her return Azizan is horrified to see the duenna dead.

> "'Mai Zainub! Mai Zainub!' she called again... Could she be dead! Then came a blaze of light, showing her the familiar face all unfamiliar; the fixed eyes wide open, the jaw fallen. The next instant she was dashing down the stairs recklessly; down and down, out into the open over the debris, anywhere so as to leave the horror behind. The wind caught her, the rain blinded her and the thunder cracked overhead as she ran on blindly, till with a cry she slipped on a loose brick and fell stunned against a mass of broken masonry. So she lay, looking almost as dead as the poor old duenna, huddled

[63] Steel, *The Potter's Thumb*, p.128.

> up on that landing in the secret stair where, with one final twinge at her heart, rheumatism had left her forever."[64]

In her attempt to return the favour and trust of the girl and rectify her misdeeds, the duenna desperately works for a better future but unfortunately, she goes down the stairs of the tower and meets her end on the steps without anyone's support. Though her death is horrifying to the reader it seems that her end comes as divine retribution.

But what attracts the reader's attention is the silence maintained by the author in the course of the narrative. Zainub's death is not normal; it is abruptly presented before the readers. With the death of the old duenna, all possibility of Azizan putting her life back on track is erased. By killing off Zainub the author both stops the narrative from further progress and also leaves Azizan in complete darkness about the future. The horrible death and the way Zainub's body is left to rot in the tower seem both pathetic and unjust. She does not enjoy respect in her life nor does she receive the dignity of a human being in her death. Her body is left in the tower to transform into a mummy without the benefit of last rites. Even the girl Azizan who is in a way responsible for her untimely death does anything in return.

> "Not long; for already the mined wall had gone, disclosing a portion of the secret stair where Zainub, the old duenna, lay, parched up almost to a mummy—a hideous sight, no doubt, had there been light enough to see it; but there was not and the refugees upon the higher ground could discern nothing but the block of the old tower and the swirling water below."[65]

Both Chandni and Azizan have used Zainub for their benefit. The girl who is cared for by the old woman even fails to do justice for Zainub at the end. Azizan also suffers her pathetic plight, but nothing more is shared by the author about the motherly figure of Zainub or the girl after the incident. Unheard and unrecognized, Zainub remains confined within the pages of the narrative like a mummy with no one to rescue her, not even the author.

[64] Steel, *The Potter's Thumb*, p.137.

[65] Ibid., p.243.

***Mistress of Men*: *A Novel* (1918)**

Dilaram, in the novel *Mistress of Men* is a tall, wealthy, full-breasted, Muslim servant, who knows all about the household and its dark secrets more than any other member of the family. The name of the servant means, 'peaceful-hearted.'[66] She has no home of her own and considers the master's house as her own. It is not known whether her forefathers had served in the same household or not. No personal details about the maid are shared by the author. Whether she was born and brought up in the same household is not known. She has earned her position as a caregiver to the mistress, Bibi Azizan and performs her role as a surrogate mother to the children, especially to Mihrunnissa. She keeps the household under her care and the master/mistress takes every decision after consulting her. She is like a *de facto* authority in the family. Dilaram may have been a servant but her intelligence, virtue and moral values deserve appreciation. She nurses the babies of the mistress, cooks food and is considered an important member of the household.

The servant woman is seen to grow old in the narrative. In the opening scene, in the desert when the mistress is in labour Dilaram acts as her *dhyee*. Her presence is seen from the beginning of the novel when the readers are first introduced to the girl-child of Ghiyass-ud-din, the new father. He asks, "'What is't, Dilaram boy or girl?' 'The Prophet's wisdom be thine,' was the quick masterful retort. 'Will the man not let a body have time to look around?' And after a second's pause, the verdict was given. 'A girl, master, only a girl.'"[67] But the child, being a girl, is not welcomed by the family. The father does not even bother to see her face but the servant Dilaram cannot remain silent and appreciates the beauty of the new member of the family. She minutely scrutinizes the girl-child and pronounces her to be a beautiful greedy lass. The reader sees the servant manoeuvring and trying to convince the father to keep the baby with them. But the poor circumstances of the family, their nomadic conditions of living and the dearth of money forces the father to decide the opposite. But the situation is drawn with care as the readers can feel the emotional turmoil of leaving the baby to die in the midst of the undulating sand dunes. "Dilaram scarcely asked herself the question and yet there was something in the tiny puckered face appearing like a mask out of the soft sand which made her pause for a second and mutter under her breath: 'A lusty one indeed! Had the good God but given the soul-bit a male body-bit, it

[66] Meaning of the name 'Dilaram' is taken from <https://muslimnames.com/dilaram, accessed April 1, 2021.

[67] Steel, *Mistress of Men* (Toronto: S. B. Gundy Publisher, 1918), p.1.

might have been a fine fighting man.'"[68] She exercises her authority and morally supports the master in taking such an inhuman decision. She is seen as a good person in settling disputes as the novel progresses. Dilaram understands the ways of the patriarchal world and laments at the fate of the newborn child. She consoles the man, "The die is cast, meeàn jee," she said, "and 'tis kindest in the end. Lo! A pellet of the Dream-Compeller concealed in sugar on the tongue and this transitory world remains not; the bud blossoms in Paradise."[69] She thinks that death is better for the girl than living in a deplorable and pathetic situation like her or her mother.

The readers may feel curious about Dilaram as she is such an important figure in the novel. The actions or decisions that the master or the lady of the house takes are burdened on her shoulders. The girl is saved by Zaman Shah, chief constable and conveyer of caravans and given back to the family. It is Dilaram who becomes the caregiver and, in a way, takes the position of a surrogate mother. "The master mistakes,' she said coolly. 'The Lord hath given her back to me, who am woman and who loved her from the first… And he comes to me in the middle of the night with the babe he discarded at dawn."[70] The real mother Bibi Azizan from the beginning dislikes the girl as Mihrunnissa has two elder brothers before her. Thus, the reader sees Dilaram taking utmost care and is seen saving her life many times in the course of the narrative. As the novel progresses, we see the girl growing into a beauty and in the meantime, the family acquires another faithful servant, Phusla by saving his life in the desert. The old man is a strangler by profession and is seen taking part in both private and political affairs to keep Mihrunnissa safe from any kind of harm. The old man and the woman form a unique bond of respect and trust between themselves which is rare in a native household.

Dilaram is also seen as a link between the outer and the inner world. She has placed herself in such a position where she can ask questions even to the mistress and retort back whenever she faces misbehaviour of any kind. Bibi Azizan, though the mother of Mihrunnissa, is seldom seen taking the reins of the household. Instead, Dilaram is seen as the caregiver as well as the moral and ethical guide of the family. Her sovereignty is not restricted inside the house but extends beyond its margins. She is the one who acts with the

[68] Steel, *Mistress of Men*, p.4.

[69] Ibid., pp.2-3.

[70] Ibid., p.19.

same clarity and conviction outside the home space as well. She is critically drawn by the author. As a member of the servant class, she has the ability and the sanction to move outside the house that is lacking in others, being members of the master class. Many a time she is seen indulging in conversation with unknown people, using men to do various odd jobs and hatching conspiracies to save the life of the young girl, Mihrunnissa. The confinement of her mistress under the role of respectability does not apply to Dilaram. What the lady cannot do is easily done by the servant. So, the sovereignty and power of the lady are in a way vicariously enjoyed by the servant woman.

The old Phusla dies in order to save the life of the queen. The relationship between the old servant and the mistress is seen when the family decides to send his ashes to his native village and this responsibility is taken by Dilaram. She has a deep sense of gratitude and that makes her different from the other people in her class. Her birth or circumstances in life may have been unfortunate but Mihrunnissa is always seen maintaining a cordial relationship with her as an almost surrogate motherly figure till the end.

> "Nor, though the ashes were duly put in a proper receptacle and Nurjahan promised to send them safe to the village in the Deccan whence the Strangler had said he came, was she content. She sat weeping and shaking her well high bald head disconsolately. 'Nay, nay, Meru!' she moaned, reverting to childish days.' Thou meanest well, but none can see to it save I. Look you, I, too, grow old nay, I am old and past work as he was. Yet must my bones lay near his ashes, for, see you, we were as brother and sister. So of what use are thirty-two teeth to one rice grain? Better to send us both by one carrier. Lo! I can sit in one basket and he in the other…' So, two days later, a quaint procession started southwards from the Imperial camp, Dilaram attired in scarlet like a bride, seated in a spangled *dhooli* which seemed too small for her size and flouncing garments, preceded by a bhangy wallah, his bamboo yoke scarce bent by the weight of Phusla's ashes in one basket, balanced by the coolie's pipe in the other."[71]

[71] Steel, *Mistress of Men*, pp.270-71.

Dilaram is created as a functional figure to perform her duties as a servant. Her heroism is seen repeatedly in the narrative but is not acknowledged by the author or Queen Mihrunnissa. She is seen taking care of the girl-child from the beginning but we see no reward for her lifelong struggle, sacrifices and labour.

Dilaram, as the text progresses, opens herself through her special intonations, language and gestures. She is the surrogate mother of Mihrunnissa and has done more than her real mother could have done for her well-being. She is the protective layer that filters all evil before it reaches the girl. She is seen accompanying Mihrunnissa inside and outside the house. In times of both distress and happiness, readers see her as the sole companion of her mistress. Inside the *zenana* quarters, we see Dilaram as a caregiver, a servant, a moral guardian and a loving mother figure. Keeping her subordinate status intact she questions the difference that society creates between her and her mistress. She is on one hand the ideal servant and on the other hand an ideal mother substitute in the novel. But her individuality is seldom brought forth as her role as a mother, wife or nurse is not essential for the author. She puts herself in dangerous situations to keep the inmates safe in the house. This makes her a unique figure in herself, more versatile than queen Mihrunnissa. She has all qualities to become the moral axis of the members of the family. She is even seen questioning the social custom and patriarchal rules that circumscribed the life of women. Though we see her as the architect of the household, she too has a doomed future. She is not saved by the author or by Mihrunnissa in the concluding part of the novel.

Her personality and the space she dominates with her presence suddenly disappear with her leaving the queen to do her promised work for Phusla. Till the end, we see her doing her job, abiding by her duties even if she is an old woman herself. It is Dilaram who starts for an unknown future alone, with the ashes of Phusla towards his village to perform her role as a true friend to the dead man. She is a charismatic and versatile figure who can judge both the private and political affairs of the state. Her nationality, class, ethnicity and sexuality, nothing is discussed in the text. She is a woman without any definite identity of her own. The way she questions pre-existing inequalities and shows the stigma associated with the daily labour class is significant and important. The moment we see Dilaram's inability to perform due to her growing age, the author and the queen decide to shift her to another position and place. The image of Dilaram going outside her palace dressed like a bride on a camel shows the end of her character in the narrative. Nothing more is shared or discussed about the old faithful servant after this incident. It seems that neither the author nor the queen takes any interest in her life or thinks about her future. She is present in the

text as long as she and Phusla could help the narrative to move smoothly. The moment their performance and capability for service wears down they are found dead or the text prefers to be silent about them. No falsification of the truth about them is seen but a sense of neglect acts as a part of the narrative strategy in the novel.

The text not only ignores but also marginalizes the existence of servant characters like Dilaram and Phusla. Dilaram is, on one hand, a person who manoeuvres and enjoys some of her mistress' power and on the other hand, carries her servant status well. Even as a servant, through her devotion, hard work and intelligence Dilaram creates a special position for herself in the text. She is not a mere servant anymore but is placed in an elevated position where she can question her mistress. She is superior to other servants present in the house like Phusla, the old strangler. She is always seen in motion, every moment busy with work. She is the one who lives to give care to her employer. Even though she performs all her work selflessly her status as a servant will never change. She maintains the ethos of the master's household and earns respect from all the other characters in the novel. But she is also reminded of her lowly position. Dilaram in a way holds authority and command as long as she performs her role and duty to her master. She is submissive and recalcitrant at the same time, two sides of the same coin.

"Shah Sujah's Mouse" (1893)

Emma Roberts in her travel manual *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan* (1835) narrates the vulnerability of British children and the memsahibs in the colonial environment.[72] "Shah Sujah's Mouse" from the collection of short stories *From the Five Rivers* by Steel introduces another servant figure called Fazli and the problems a mistress faces in the fruitful management of an imperial house. From the beginning, the author introduces the figure of the *ayah* or *dhyee* who is taken into the family to give proper care to the white child. In the story, the *ayah* Fazli is a troublesome but necessary character who needs constant management. She sees herself as an important part of the house. Steel portrays her as a twin of her maid by the same name but they have opposing characteristics. She gives rise to tension and confusion through her careless manners. The *ayah*'s role in the story is the most unsettling one as she is responsible for the missing child. An *ayah*'s child-rearing ability is put to scrutiny as the white mistress entrusts the child to her care

[72] Emma Roberts, *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan, with Sketches of Anglo-Indian Society, Vol. 2* (London: W.H. Allen, 1835), p.121.

entirely and yet she fails to perform her duty properly. Mary Martha Sherwood while living in India shared her experience about her *ayah*. She was grateful for the help rendered by the woman and shared how it is indispensable for the child in its formative years.[73] But the exact opposite happens in the narrative.

Native servants in the empire always loved white children and both shared a special relationship with each other. But that is not seen in the text as the *ayah* is drawn as careless and lacking in affection towards the child. The novel begins with the ayah beating her breast when the baby goes missing from the house. "Fuzli, the *ayah,* prone on her stomach, beating her palms in the dust, called God to witness that he had never been out of her sight except for one single minute when she took a pull at the gardener's pipe."[74] The child goes out of the *ayah*'s site while she is busy puffing and enjoying leisure. The absence of the baby creates a great stir in the household and becomes a matter of concern and results in anxiety for the parents. The incident evokes anxiety and puts a question mark on the trustworthiness of native helping hands. All the members of the house tried to find the lost child but failed to get any trace of him.

As the novel progresses, the child comes back home with a crippled and psychologically disturbed man named Shah Sujah's mouse. The sudden presence of this unknown figure in the narrative brings the opportunity to fruitfully study the variance between and complexity of both the British and Indian minds. The way the members of the family perceive the physically challenged man is interesting. It brings out, on one hand, the reckless attitude of the *ayah* and on the other hand the violent (visual) presence of a native figure in the colonial space. The mixing of the child and the 'mouse man' dislocated the boundary between the ruler and the ruled. The crippled man stays at the religious shrine and collects alms to keep his body and soul together. None of his personal relationships or any story about his family is mentioned in the story. As the evening proceeds, all Shah Sujah's mouse (all the crippled men) go back to the shrine to take rest.

The Indian climate takes a toll on the fragile child's body, being out for a long time and Sonny slowly falls ill. The child's proximity to the "mouse man" is hated by the *ayah* even though she is responsible for the missing child. She calls him, *janowar* or animal and behaves rudely, "Loh! said the *ayah,* indignantly. He is nothing but a mouse—a *janowar*.

[73] Sherwood, *The Life and Times*, p.365.

[74] Steel, "Shah Sujah's Mouse," from *Story Collection from The Five Rivers* (London: William Heinemann, 1893), p.82.

Give him a rupee, Memsahiba and let him go; if the *Huzoor*, indeed, will not hang him for stealing my king of kings."[75] The *ayah* calls the man a '*janowar*', 'an animal' and brings out her failure as a human being to show minimum empathy towards the "mouse man" and to society in general. But the boy recognizes the "mouse man" as an individual and accepts him in his life. It is the "mouse man" who becomes his sole playmate till he breathes his last.

The pliant, accommodating, helpful and loving nature of the "mouse man" attracts the child and creates a special bonding between them. But a constant colonial fear of harm and indiscipline haunts the parents' minds till the doctor advises them not to interfere with the sickly child's happiness. The child grows fragile with advancing time leaving the parents utterly helpless. The mother with a heavy heart welcomes all the indiscipline that the child desires during his last moments. The "mouse man" is thus welcomed into the house compound and seen spending time with the child. The "mouse man" is both deaf and dumb and fails to gather any sympathy from the other servants of the house. The little boy tries his best to make the members of the family acquainted with his newfound playmate but fails. It is after the death of the child that the mother understands that the boy was talking about his pet squirrels who were also obedient friends of the "mouse man".

An *ayah* is a person who is responsible for the supervision and surveillance of the child. Fuzli is questioned and monitored by the white people, as she is both rejected and accepted in the family. Her presence in the child's life brings no acclaimed improvement and with the passage of time the boy's health declines. The negative attitude that the *ayah* shares in the text is important as she is projected as just the opposite of all the above-discussed sisters of her class. She is reckless, hot-tempered and hates the "mouse man" for no reason. After the death of the child, the parents go away from the scene leaving the *ayah* alone. The *ayah* is left alone to cope with the emotional loss of the child. None shares any interest in her future and she is present in the narrative as long the white people have the opportunity to prove her reckless and inhuman in her dealings. She acted as the surrogate mother of the child and the death must have affected her but she has none to share her loss with.

Shah Sujah's "mouse" is expressionless but his kindness and attachment to animals and the child is surprising. But here too the *ayah* Fuzli is shown irritated by the man's

[75] Steel, "Shah Sujah's Mouse," pp.84-85.

presence, “Dew falling, mem sahiba remarked the *ayah,* in a dissatisfied tone. ‘Time Sonny *baba* leave *janowars* alone.’”[76] She cannot adjust herself to the presence of the “mouse man” who seems to disturb her mentally. The man and the sickly child create a bond of love till the end. The squirrels that used to come to the man for alms slowly become friends with the child. They come fearlessly to the cot where the child breathed his last. The death of the child creates a vacuum in the parent’s life and they leave the place immediately leaving the *ayah* behind to take care of the house. The “mouse man” with his disability is unable to comprehend the situation and goes on visiting the house every day thereby making the *ayah* angry. Frustrated, she states,

> “Master, having given orders for the *janowar* to go, the police had naturally taken him away. He had come back again and begged—naturally, when the mem sahiba had given him sweet rice every day. But she had given nothing, nothing at all, except information to the police. Then they had taken him away again miles and miles, quite close to the highroad to the shrine and had bidden him to go home. Even a *janowar* could have found his way had he chosen; but the obstinate animal had come back after the sweet rice. So then everyone had been told not to give the disobedient one anything to eat.”[77]

The *ayah*, being juvenile, absurd, ignorant and repulsive about his presence, stops giving him food and even calls the police to take him back to his shrine. But the “mouse man” dies of hunger and fever at the same spot where the child used to lie during his lifetime. Beside the grave of the child, the “mouse man” gets his ultimate freedom through death.

The sahib and the doctor who in a way understood the situation gives the “mouse man” proper prestige by creating a grave for him. But Fuzli utterly fails to acknowledge and accept the “mouse man's” presence till the story ends thereby revealing herself as unintelligent, dull and ignorant. Constructed as the ‘other’; she adheres to the stereotyped image of a dull-witted native woman. Fuzli is created by the author in order to mock her unintelligence and to marginalize her position both as a servant and as a human being. Thus,

[76] Steel, “Shah Sujah’s Mouse,” p.90.

[77] Ibid., pp.94-95.

the *ayah* conforms to the stereotyped image of downtrodden, demon-like creatures, the real '*janowar*' in comparison to Shah Sujah's "mouse".

The colonial home becomes a microcosm of imperial identity and the memsahib is the sole authority to dominate it. The servants, helping hands and subordinates, thus gives her the opportunity of reproducing/enjoying the power and authority within the four walls of the colonial house. The terms 'sahib', 'master', 'sir' or 'memsahib' and 'mistress' are the verb forms that a servant uses to distance themselves from their employers. Accessibility of the service of the servant and the power politics of the master in the attempt to control the servant's body as well as the mind is very significant. The servant's dressing, intonation and bodily movements should be different from the masters. The masters create a working space for these poor people that are suffocating and troublesome. Colonial anxiety and ambiguity threatened the relationship between a mistress and her helping hands. The *ayah*'*s* role as a surrogate mother to the white child created a cultural and psychological rift within the hearts of the insecure British mothers. The stereotype of the dark-skinned tyrannizing figure in a way threatened the memsahib's authorial presence.

The power politics of the white masters are threatened by the close relationship shared between an *ayah* and a baby. Her language is alien to the employer and creates a threat to their hierarchical status and existence. So, by creating the stereotype of a stupid and unreliable servant figure, the master attempts to stop the erosion of imperial codes and rules of their society. In order to undermine the charming picture of an *ayah* who is seen taking care of her master's child, an opposite image is essential. In order to stop the cultural contamination a detachment from an unfaithful servant is crucial. The author herself advises new mothers to take *ayah*s/native maids for infants only and emphasises the presence of English nannies as the child grew older.[78] Thus, it is clear that the factors of class and race prevailed as a dominating presence in the minds and hearts of the white people. So, the *ayah* is created as a tyrannical figure who makes life problematic for a happy household in the above story. The domestic panorama of the British household is seldom seen recognizing the servant figure as a human being just like them; a difference always exists. Oppression and exploitation are necessary to keep these child-like ignorant servant figures under control both in real and fictional lives.

[78] Steel and Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper*, p.167.

The relationship between a master and servant is unique and generalizations are not possible. They represent love, affection and bonding on one hand and on the other hand conflict, tension, threat and distrust. The servants are an indispensable trauma of every colonial master. Exploration of the literature on servants has taken us through the corridors of the historical past, giving an idea of domestic life, human mentality, social and psychological constraints. The master class and the servants coexist in the same household sharing their individuality and labour. The diverse experience of the servants depended on their difference from the social and economic status of the employer. Whether it be colonial homes or native, each household had its own style and method to deal with employees. While constructing native servants in the narrative the white memsahib authors had mixed feelings towards them. Appreciation and suspicion came hand in hand towards the servants. The deep-rooted colonial prejudices and imperial hierarchy of the masters failed to recognize the positive aspect of the servants. Servants were seen as dirty and polluting the cleanliness of an imperial household with their unwanted presence. Servants were rendered both physically and metaphorically opaque to the visibility of the employer. The domestic worker was treated as physically different from the employing family as if somehow, she/he did not possess the same kind of thinking and feeling capacities as the masters did.[79]

Questions arise about the authenticity of the narratives that deal with servants and their lives. Mostly written from an outsider's point of view and referring to a totally different strata of life, the master or writer seldom brought out the truth of a servant. Having a minimal part in narratives or remaining totally silent in literary representations, they do not get the opportunity to express themselves in their own voice. Paxton argues that Steel's feminism was compromised by the power she claimed as a civil servant's wife under the Raj.[80] Servants like Dilaram, Fuzli, Mytab, Zainub, or Phusla (the male servant) are portrayed or imagined for the sake of their employees, thus making them secondary people in the narratives. The servant's representation marks and shows the exploitation and coercion that Zainub or Dilaram face in the texts and is presented before the reader only after polishing its contents. The emotional dependency of the servant and the psychological

[79] Rosie Cox, *The Servant Problem Domestic Employment in a Global Economy* (New York: I.B. Tauris & Co Ltd., 2006), pp.94-95.

[80] Nancy L. Paxton, "Complicity and Resistance in the Writings of Flora Annie Steel and Annie Besant" in *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance,* eds. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana UP, 1992), pp.158-76.

attachment that grows with one's master arise through years of experience. But unfortunately, such sentiments and devotion are not shared by the employer. So, it becomes easy to send Dilaram away with the ashes of Phusla to an unknown future, silence the voice of Fuzli by accusing her as an inhuman creature, give death to a true friend like the old strangler Phusla, murder Zainub in cold blood in the darkness of the stairs and last but not the least create an abrupt closure in the text to stop any further discussion about the motherly figure of the duenna, Mytab. None has any interest in their existence and so their loss is also of no consequence. No one, not the author nor the other characters in the narratives feel for these poor downtrodden women. The home is an image of the empire, Fae Dussart's states,

> "Anglo-Indian mistresses privileged the domestic sphere as the place where the relations of power structuring racial and gender identities were learned by employers and servants alike. Mistresses (and, less often, masters) saw themselves as doing a service to imperial society by training their domestic employees in the duties of civilised life."[81]

The silent, almost invisible identity and compromising individuality of the servants are idealized and termed as absolute but never celebrated.

The white woman is unable to visualize the native woman as her sister. Steel's white mistresses and working-class people see themselves as alien and opposed to each other and fail to reciprocate or sympathize with each other's feelings. The master figures have utterly failed to understand the helping hands or relate to each other's experiences, thought processes and ordeals. Indian servants like Dilaram, Fuzli, or Zainub served as ideal figures to create the image of the master. Their habit of servitude and submission kept the dominance of the masters intact. The physical darkness of the native servant Fuzli is associated with her moral and psychological darkness by the white people. "In Victorian terms 'responsibility' was custodial, classist, ageist and hierarchical."[82] So, the helping hands are destined to prove they are unqualified, distrustful and lowly in their dealings. New improved and more humane images are not granted to them by the author or by

[81] Fae Ceridwen Dussart, "That 'Unit of Civilisation' and 'The Talent Peculiar to Women': British Employers and their Servants in the Nineteenth-century Indian Empire," *Identities*, No. 22, Issue 6 (2015), p.707.

[82] Chaudhuri and Strobel, *Western Women and Imperialism*, p.139.

society. The threat of bridging the gap that exists between a master and servant is too alarming and problematic. The management of a home and servants is nothing but an allegory of the ruling empire. The servants have neither the narrative capability nor the individuality to speak on their own. They are seen as 'objects' and the master as his subject even if the servant is like the selfless figure of Dilaram. Social and cultural hegemony always influences the servants' personalities as seen in the life of Mytab. Servant characters are drawn as insufficient and always suffer from a cultural lack as compared to their masters. "Englishwoman is advised to monitor the native as a partible person because the servant's use of branded, English biographical objects impinges directly on the English home and identity because these objects mediate between the native body and the white one."[83] Detaching the servant's body and his labour makes the domination secure and the dominator privileged. The childlike, dirty, diseased and ignorant image is seen to suit the servant's character. So, it can be concluded that the patience shown by the employer while dealing with the employee in many cases camouflages the hatred, resentment and bitterness in their mind. Steel portrays her servant characters with colonialist undertones. "Anglo-Indian home became the site of the public performance of imperial politics."[84] Her imperialist attitudes towards her own creation bring before the readers her true identity as a memsahib author. Unable to detach her intentions and biases towards her higher racial and cultural position, her servants take the shape of unwanted, outsiders who cease to exist in the narrative when the author finds them inappropriate. "The native cannot be allowed *sole* and unsupervised agential control"[85] they need constant supervision and control of the employer. The master even fails to recognize the servant as a human being and seldom appreciates his/her merits. Thus, the established truth and reality of the life of servants is that "once a servant, always a servant".[86]

[83] Pramod K. Nayar, "The Colonial Home: Managing Objects and Servants in British India," *Anglo Saxonica*, No. 17, Issue 1, Art. 8 (2020), pp.8-9.

[84] Sinha, "Who Is (Not) a Servant," p.318.

[85] Nayar, "The Colonial Home," p.8.

[86] Sinha, "Who Is (Not) a Servant," p.159.

CHAPTER FOUR

Widows: The Living Sati

'Widow: the word consumes itself.'
Sylvia Plath[1]

The state of widowhood is both a political condition and a personal situation. Widows are designated as a deprived and socially marginalized group. A widow is a woman who has lost her husband and abstained from remarriage. Indian society endows a married woman with a social status that achieves its highest culmination with motherhood. The death of the husband, thus, deprives the wife of the authority she enjoyed in her marital phase. Widowhood brings a sudden change in her life, whether socially, economically or culturally. While widows may undergo suffering in every part of the world, the scenario in Hindu culture is deplorable and discriminatory. This dreadful condition is mainly contingent on historical factors, cultural traditions or religious circumstances. Within patriarchal society widows are valueless identities and faceless ciphers who are perceived to be socially dead even if they are physically alive. A widow, who decided against committing sati (also spelt as suttee) had to negotiate with various rituals, fasts, dress codes, diet restrictions and specific behavioural norms that make her life intolerable. Hence, rather than accept this slow death, many widows chose to become *sati* as the latter option offered a mode of escape from the patriarchal strictures that bound a widow's life.

The Sanskrit word *vidhawa* that ultimately derived from the Indo-European '*Widewe*' or '*widhi*' ('separated') meant 'lacking/destitute'. In *Prachin Bharat Mein Widhwas* (*Widows in Ancient India*) (1994) renowned historian Devi Prasad Tiwari gives a list of words that referred to a widow such as *Avira, Yati, Yatni, Randa, Nishphala, Vishwasta, Mritbhartika, Katyayani, Mrit Patika* and *Jalika*.[2] M. Rajkumar states, "Widows, who in the learned tongue are called *'Vidhwa',* a word akin to the Latin 'vidua' are given less respect than *Sumangali* (married woman) and when they happen to have no

[1] Sylvia Plath, "Widow," *Poetry*, Vol. 99, No. 4 (March, 1962), p.347, accessed June 20, 2022, https://www.poetryfoundation.org/poetrymagazine/browse?contentId=28955.

[2] Devi Prasad Tiwari, *Prachin Bharat Mein Widhwas* (Lucknow: Tarun Publishers, 1994), pp.2-4, cited in Bindu, "Widows and Widowhood in the Colonial Punjab," Ph.D. Thesis, Department of History (Panjab University, 2009), p.1.

children, they are generally looked upon with utmost scorn. The very fact of meeting a widow is considered to bring ill luck."[3] In the *Dharam Sutras* and *Dharam Shastras* (100 C.E. to 500 C.E.), widowhood was solely attributed to '*Purva Karma'* (past actions).[4] Widowhood in one's life was thought to be the result of sinful deeds committed in the previous birth. M.A. Fritz portrays the horrible condition of this class of women and asserts that widowhood was a challenge and brought with it a crisis in women's life. Her social adjustment to the new situation after the death of her husband became problematic.[5] Widowhood changed the status of a woman even as she accepted her fate and the consequent sufferings calmly in the face of persecution by her family and society.

In the Vedic Age however, women were held in high esteem and they occupied superior positions vis-à-vis men. They enjoyed social status and privileges at par with the opposite gender and were allowed to participate in intellectual and religious activities. The ancient epics tell us how entire kingdoms got destroyed because of wrongs done against a woman. The most prominent narrative in this regard is that of Draupadi, the queen of the five Pandavas, whose insult at the *sabha* (palace court) led to the epic war of *Mahabharata*. In the other ancient epic *Ramayana*, the whole dynasty of Ravana was destroyed for abducting Sita. Yet the rhetoric of exchange explicit in the scene of Draupadi's insult or the test by fire that Sita has to undergo to prove her chastity shows that despite the elevated status of women in ancient society, the seeds of their later subjugation and commoditization were already present.

In the poem "Savitri", Toru Dutt (1856-1877) uses the eponymous character who saves her husband Satyavan from Yama, the god of death, to romanticize the vision of a bygone golden past when women roamed with freedom and without the fear of physical harm. Dutt projects the Vedic era as a golden age for guaranteeing women's mobility and freedom thereby drawing comparisons with the present degradation: In those far-off primeval days/Fair India's daughters were not pent/In closed zenanas. On her ways,/Savitri

[3] M. Rajkumar Agarwal, *Encyclopaedia of Women and Development* (New Delhi: Anmol Publications, Vol. 16, 2000), p.2.

[4] Uma Chakravarti, "Ideological and Material Structure of Widowhood," in *Widow in India, Social Neglect and Public Action*, ed., Martha Alter Chen (Delhi: Sage Publications, 1998), p.71.

[5] M.A Fritz, "A Study of Widowhood in Sociology and Social Research," *Yojana*, January 14(1) (1979), p.53.

at her pleasure went/Whither she chose.[6] But women's lot changed with the passage of time. For Dutt that moment of change came with the arrival of Muslims and their concept of the closed zenana where women were forced to live behind the purdah. However, the legal status of women started to decline from the 8th century onwards. The changing status of women was also marked by its changing treatment of widows and the gradual solidification of the practice of sati.

In ancient India, the state of widowhood was flexible since a widow had the freedom to choose between different options after her husband's death. According to the *Parashar Samhita*, she could embrace *sahamarana* (the voluntary acceptance of death on the funeral pyre of her husband); opt for *brahmacharya* (celibacy) or re-marry. Whereas Kunti in the *Mahabharata* led a life of spiritual celibacy after the death of her husband Pandu and Madri immolated herself with her dead husband, Mandodari in the *Ramayana* married her brother-in-law after her husband's death. However, in the late Vedic and early medieval periods, this flexibility slowly ceased. The *Manusmriti* (1250 B.C.E.-1000 B.C.E.) is a seminal work on Brahminical law and Hinduism that significantly curbed the freedom of women and condemned the remarriage (*niyoga*) of a widow.[7] Various kinds of rituals and observances became associated with widowhood in terms of diet and clothing. Later scholars such as Madhavacharya (1300-1386), Nandapandita (1550-1630) followed the *Manusmriti* in denying privilege to a widow.

Although *Smriti* law remained silent on sati, throughout history the spectacle of sati has attracted far more public attention than the silent suffering, loneliness and apathy associated with widowhood. Linked in popular imagination with the myth of the goddess Sati who burnt herself to death unable to bear the insult of her husband Shiva by her father Daksha, the 'voluntary' embracing of death by fire is first mentioned in the *Mahabharata*. An instance of self-immolation is mentioned to have happened at Taxila (now in modern day Pakistan) in the 4th century B.C.E.[8] Sati stones (*satīpeethas*) and their inscriptions commemorating the self-immolation of women can be traced back to the early 6th century though in all likelihood its practice was confined to the higher castes of Brahmins and Kshatriyas. Banabhatta's *Harsacharita* (7th century) informs how King Harshavardhana

[6] Toru Dutt, *Ancient Ballads and Legends of Hindustan* (London: Kegan Paul Trench & Co., 1881), p.2.

[7] Manusmriti, v.160, viii.226, ix.47, cited in Mandakranta Bose, ed., *Faces of the Feminine in Ancient, Medieval, and Modern India* (New York and Oxford: Oxford UP, 2000), p.10.

[8] Vincent Arthur Smith, *The Oxford History of India* (1908; Oxford: Oxford UP, 1923), p.86.

tried to dissuade his mother from committing sati but failed.[9] Tapare Kammārī from Mysore (1088 C.E.) the wife of Navalāṣi Rājan practised *sahagamana* and burned herself to death.[10] The act was perceived to act as a means of expiating the sins of the husband's family since fire is seen as a great purifier and holds a special place in Hindu religious rituals and ceremonies. After the advent of the Muslims (12th-16th centuries) in India, such practices increased especially among the warrior classes of Rajasthan where women practised mass immolation or *Jauhar* in order to protect themselves from falling into the hands of enemies. Gradually, sati became an acceptable social practice. Romila Thapar observes that sati was merely a means of subjugating women.[11] One of the prime motives behind such subjugation was not simply social or religious but economic. Among the Bengal Brahmins the incidence of sati was intrinsically linked to the *Dayabhaga* (dating to the 12th century) legal system that guaranteed property inheritance rights to widows[12]. Women were thus encouraged and may be forced to commit sati as an act of honour and sacrifice for the sake of the husband but this was only a means of ensuring that her share of the property could be made available to other relatives. Hundreds of *satipeethas* that were the sites of horrible deaths turned into places of pilgrimage and often temples were constructed there, thereby providing the concerned family and sometimes the whole village with economic security. Mortal women were portrayed as goddesses and placed on the highest pedestal in Hindu religion and society. By portraying the death of an unfortunate and helpless woman as a heroic act, the family members camouflaged their murderous instincts. Immolated women often took on the form of Durga or Sati and became a means of conferring social prestige, economic support and religious well-being to the family for years. Sati was a solution not just to the problem of inheritance rights but it also prevented her sexuality from ruining the family.[13] In *Economic Aspects of Sati*, Ashvini Agrawal

[9] The Harsha-Charita of Banabhatta trans. E. B. Cowell and F. W Thomas, 1897, accessed May 12, 2021, http://www. columbia.edu/itc/mealac/pritchett/00litlinks/harshacharita/chapter05.htm.

[10] Anjali Verma, *Women and Society in Early Medieval India: Re-interpreting Epigraphs* (London: Routledge, 2019), pp.76-77.

[11] Romila Thapar, "Sati in History," *Seminar*, No. 342 (February 1988), p.15.

[12] Meenakshi Jain, *Sati Evangelicals, Baptist Missionaries, and the Changing Colonial Discourse* (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2016), pp.192-93.

[13] R.S. Sharma, *Perspectives in Social and Economic History of Early India* (New Delhi: Munshiram Manoharlal, 1983), p.97.

claims that sati was projected as a form of 'dharma' but was actually a means of patriarchal subjugation.[14]

Although some of the Mughal emperors took the initiative to prohibit sati notably Humayun and Akbar, it became a central point of debate in colonial India. The initial response to the act was one of tolerance since the British were careful not to ruffle native religious sentiments though later, they justified it on the grounds of the circumstance under which it could be done. Lord Cornwallis (1738 – 1805) during his time showered sympathy on widowed women committing sati but also added that the British should exert all their "private influence to dissuade the natives from practice so repugnant to humanity and the first principles of religion, they do not deem it advisable to authorize him to prevent the observance of it by coercive measures, or by any exertion of his official powers; as the public prohibition of a ceremony, authorized by the tenets of the religion of the Hindoos and from the observance of which they have never yet been restricted by the ruling power..."[15] Such initial toleration on the part of the British led to a spurt in cases, especially among the upper classes of Bengal. Although the collection of accurate data on widow burning was not possible, historical records show the cases to be around 7941 between 1813-1828. In the province of Bengal alone, the number of sati cases was 18,23,575.[16] Eventually, however, the government (under the auspices of Governor-General Lord William Bentinck) banned sati in 1829 (Bengal Sati Regulation) projecting it as a barbarous and heinous native practice that justified the intervention and continued rule of the British in India. Bentinck addressed the issue of sati stating,

> "The first step to this better understanding will be dissociation of religious belief and practice from blood and murder. They will then, when no longer under this brutalizing excitement, view with more calmness, acknowledged truths... I disavow in these remarks or in this measure any view whatever to

[14] Ashvini Agrawal, "Economic Aspects of Sati," in *Women in Indian History: Social, Economic, Political and Cultural Perspectives*, ed. Kiran Pawar (Patiala: Vision & Venture, 1996), p.65.

[15] Parliamentary Papers (1821), Vol. 18, p.22, cited in Meenakshi Jain, *Sati Evangelicals, Baptist Missionaries, and the Changing Colonial Discourse* (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2016), p.201.

[16] Dipti Mayee Sahoo, "Analysis of Hindu Widowhood in Indian Literature," *IOSR Journal of Humanities and Social Science (IOSR-JHSS)*, Vol. 21, Issue 9, Ver. 7 (September, 2016), p.64.

> conversion to our own faith. I write and feel as a legislator for the Hindus and as I believe many enlightened Hindus think and feel."[17]

Mrityunjaya Vidyalankar, the chief pundit of the Nizamat Adalat in Calcutta argued that the barbaric act had no "*Shastric* sanction and that an ascetic life had greater merit than immolation."[18] Bykunthanath Banerjee, who was the Secretary of the Unitarian Hindu Community urged to abolish sati.[19] Raja Rammohan Roy was a steadfast opponent of widow burning on her husband's funeral pyre and in his *Conference between an Advocate for, and are Opponent of, the Practice of Burning of Widows Alive* (1818), followed by the *Second Conference* (1820), newspaper *Sambada Kaumudi* (1821) campaigned against sati. Gaurisankar Bhattacharya (editor of *Sambada Bhaskara*), Kalinath Roy Chowdhury, Dwarakanath Tagore and Prasanna Kumar Tagore, Munshi Mathuranath Mullick, Ramakrishna Sinha and Anandaprasad Bandyopadhyay were all against the practice of sati.[20]

In the Victorian imagination, sati was a source of morbid pleasure on one hand and on the other a symbol of exemplary sacrifice. In the larger debate on the women's question, the woman who committed sati was interpreted either as a victim of orthodox Brahmanism or else as a willing participant in a barbaric practice. British writers often gave eye-witness accounts of the plight of these women in their narratives. Rev. William Ward stated that within the span of twelve months, more than five thousand women committed sati in India.[21] Benjamin Walker rued that by committing sati a woman only added to her own misery. Her sacrifice could never be a cause of relief to the husband if he was a sinner.[22] Job Charnock, the founder of Calcutta had married a sati who was rescued from the funeral

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[17] William Bentinck in his Minutes of 8th November, 1829 (Section B: 403-18), cited in Meenakshi Jain, *Sati Evangelicals, Baptist Missionaries, and the Changing Colonial Discourse* (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2016), pp.205-06.

[18] Jain, *Sati Evangelicals*, p.208.

[19] Benoy Bhusan Roy, *Socioeconomic Impact of Sati in Bengal and the Role of Raja Rammohun Roy* (Kolkata: Naya Prokash, 1987), p.84.

[20] Jain, *Sati Evangelicals*, p.209.

[21] William Ward, *A View of the History, Literature and Religion of the Hindus* (Hartford: H. Huntington, 1824), p.57.

[22] Benjamin Walker, *Hindu World: An Encyclopedic Survey of Hinduism,* Vol. II (New York: Frederick A. Praeger, 1968), p.464.

pyre.[23] The subject of widow immolation became so popular that periodicals, novels, newspapers and even personal accounts were published for the reader's consumption. This 'barbarous' and inhuman practice became a perfect theme that kept the press busy for a long time.

The difference between the sati and the widow was really a difference of degree and not of kind. Devendra Das in "The Hindu Widow*"* (1886) makes this clear when he says, "The only difference for us since *sati* was abolished is, that we then died quickly if cruelly, but now we die all our lives in lingering pain."[24] A widow had to suffer throughout her life and this mortal death faced every day was pathetic for a lone woman devoid of any support. Her family members do not provide the emotional and materialistic support that a deprived woman needs after the loss of her husband. Widowhood was a form of social stigma that removed a woman from mainstream social and cultural life and transformed her into a non-entity. A woman who disagreed to become a sati was seen as having a social stigma. The painful and horrific death of sati was seen as a way out but living the life of a widow was terrifying for the prolonged agony it inflicted on a woman. Uma Chakravarti in *Gender, Caste and Labour: The Ideological and Material Structure of Widowhood* (1998) states that widowhood is a curse to a woman. The forced celibacy and the devotional rituals one has to perform are unnecessary burdens.[25] The *Vṛiddha-Harita* lays down a list of rules that the widow needs to follow in her lifetime. She has to refrain from adorning her hair and applying collyrium to her eyes, give up addictions like chewing betel-nut, renounce wearing perfumes, flowers or ornaments. Instead, she should wear coarse dyed white cloth, consume food (two square meals each day) from a bronze vessel, sleep on the ground on a mat of Kuśā grass, always remain calm and devote herself to the worship of the almighty.[26] Widowhood was seen as retribution for a crime she committed in her previous birth or for her infidelity in the present life. To purge her from her own sin, a widow had to abide by the rules and regulations prescribed by society. Her life became an act of penance and physical and mental torment was viewed as the only way to achieve respite and salvation.

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[23] Arvind Sharma, *Sati: Historical and Phenomenological Essays* (Delhi: Motilal Banarsidass, 1988), p.4.

[24] Devendra Das, "The Hindu Widow," *The Nineteenth Century*, Vol. 20 (September 1886), p.372.

[25] Chakravarti, "Ideological and Material Structure," p.73.

[26] *Vriddha-Harita*, XI, 205–10, cited in Anjali Verma, *Women and Society in Early Medieval India: Re-interpreting Epigraphs* (London: Routledge, 2019), p.65.

She was seen as an inauspicious being and was not allowed to participate in ceremonies or family gatherings.

A woman who disagreed to become a sati was seen as a social anomaly and avoided by society at large that made her an inauspicious human being and a criminal offender. The reason for this was that the moment a woman was divested of her marital relationship; her position became problematic and questionable. Conjugal relationship and the possibility of reproduction stopped with the death of the husband. The widow thus became both socially as well as sexually dead to society. The death of the spouse did not give the woman freedom but turned her into an enslaved creature. She ceased to exist for the other members of the family and was erased from the discourse of society. Her independent social position created gender inequality and made her a dependent being throughout her life. Thus, she became easy prey to ruthless societal attitudes, faced dispossession from the husband's property or became a victim of rape. The son of a widow could also mistreat his mother and abject her to a life of poverty and helplessness. These women were often mistreated by their in-laws and used as domestic servants even in their own households. In contrast, Muslim widows enjoyed a certain amount of freedom because the Koran encourages remarriage and the right to inherit the husband's property. Moreover, the notion of *zakat* that directed the voluntary giving of a certain amount of one's wealth for charitable causes gave a certain amount of financial backing to widows in Islam.

The present chapter attempts to bring together two different yet complementary phases in a woman's life – as a widow and as a sati – in the context of late 19th and early 20th century India where the failure of one stage led to the other stage. The texts that are taken into consideration will be analysed from the perspective of sati and widow characters. By the time Steel started writing the practice of sati had long been legally put on hold yet the larger documented macro history of Sati's demise does not reflect the unrecorded micro-history of its continued existence at the grassroots level. Thus, sati continued to generate horror and revulsion mixed with secret admiration in subsequent writers. As a memsahib writer Steel would have seen the sati both as a painful victim of patriarchy or else as a symbol of freedom, agency and powerful wifely devotion. The victimization of females at the hands of native men aroused missionary motives and the modern 'new women' of the west sought to rescue their native counterparts as their moral and social duty. British women would not have been familiar with the dispossession of Indian widows since the condition of the former was visibly better. Jane Austen's *Persuasion* (1818) introduces Lady Russell who chooses to lead an independent widowed life. Mrs Darnford

in Clara Reeve's *The School for Widows* (1791) has to provide for herself as a governess when her husband dies. Western culture allowed its women to live a free life even after the loss of their spouses. Although the situation differed from case to case, 19th century British women suffered less compared to the native widows and did not face social exclusion and stigmatization.

In the aftermath of the ban on sati and the passing of the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act (1856), the important questions raised in the latter half of the 19th century centred on the deprived condition of widows and the issue of widow remarriage. As a result of the young age of girls when they got married, many of them became widows even before they reached puberty. This important piece of legislation was given formal enactment by Lord Dalhousie after Ishwar Chandra Vidyasagar along with a few elite progressive men campaigned for widow remarriage in the face of massive opposition by Radhakanta Deb and his followers who were staunch believers in the established Hindu custom that a woman's second marriage was illegal and any children born of that union were deemed illegitimate. The new law gave these children legitimacy and secured them property inheritance from their father's family.

The image of pure womanhood had been a driving force in the nationalist movement. Hindu women in general and the widow, in particular, were moulded into idealistic figures even as Hindu nationalists sought to define the nation along the lines of the motherly figure. Nationalist sentiment based itself on the idea that a woman was meant to be protected and controlled by patriarchy. The burning of a widow was a means of keeping her sanctity intact so that her uncontrolled sexual energy could be curtailed. The woman's body became a symbol of national honour that brought shame and indignity to the nation through its violation. The widow with her self-denying image, therefore, became a site of pride and glory for the Hindu nationalist. The sacrifice and the hardship of widowhood were thought to be a part of age-old cultural beliefs and practices. By renouncing all worldly comforts and chastising her body, she was thought to be spiritually connected with the dead spouse. Her sufferings were justified as a voluntary act of penance. Her life thus took on the trappings of asceticism within the household. Sumit Sarkar in *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908* (1972), states that the sati became a source of nationalist inspiration and Rabindranath Tagore too linked self-immolation with the

swadeshi movement.[27] In the writings of Bankim Chandra Chatterjee, the figure of the sati is adored as the last hope for the nation.[28] Dagnar Ansari remarked that in Indian literature the image of the liberated woman and the disappearance of sati as a theme marked the improvement of women's position.[29]

The modern, western-educated reformists intended to save the native widows from orthodox Hindu traditions. Widow burning and their suffering were no longer seen as a spectacle but were associated with barbarity and religious fanaticism. Voluntary or forced sati was condemned and universally denigrated with the coming of the 19th century. "The widow was denied "heroic autonomy," she was to be pitied rather than admired. There was also a new emphasis on sati as a religious rite.[30] They viewed the customs and the regulations which were designed for widowhood as an offence against humanity. Thus, the upper-class *bhadralok* (Kalinath Roy Chowdhury and Dwarakanath Tagore) or English-educated middle-class men took up the project of saving the woman from age-old vicious customs and superstitions. Joining hands with them were the colonizers who resolved to introduce reform and thus, the issue became a white man's burden. The imperialist project made immolation a crime against women and termed it a barbaric practice. In the *Asiatic Journal* a commentator writes, "When martyrdom is mentioned, it could not for a moment be intended to compare that sacred cause to the heartless and senseless superstition of misguided Hindoo widows ..."[31] Thus, the abolition of the act took the form of a reform project for the nationalist towards their native sisters. It also became a moral burden for the white people who wanted to do away with native barbarity.

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[27] Sumit Sarkar, *The Swadeshi Movement in Bengal 1903-1908* (Delhi: Peoples Publishing House, 1972), p.47-63.

[28] Bankimchandra Chatterjee, "Kamalakanter Daptar," in *Bankim Rachanabali*, Vol. 11, Calcutta, 1954, cited in Tanika Sarkar, *Hindu Wife, Hindu Nation Community, Religion, and Cultural Nationalism* (New Delhi: Permanent Black, 2001), p.42.

[29] Dagmar Ansari, *Die Frau im Modernen Hindi-Roman Nach 1947* (Berlin: Institut für Orientforschung, No. 68, 1970), cited in David Dell, "The Sati Theme," *Journal of South Asian Literature*, Vol. 12, No. ¾ (Spring-Summer, 1977), pp.55-65.

[30] Andrea Major, *Pious Flames European Encounters with Sati* (Oxford: Oxford UP, 2006), pp.23-24 and *Sovereignty and Social Reform in India: British Colonialism and the Campaign against Sati, 1830-60* (London: Routledge, 2011), pp.125-168.

[31] *Asiatic Journal*, Vol. 14 (1822), p.127, cited in Meenakshi Jain, *Sati Evangelicals, Baptist Missionaries, and the Changing Colonial Discourse* (New Delhi: Aryan Books International, 2016), p.40.

The real condition of widowed women was quite different from what is written in archival resources. The abolition of sati in 1829 and the legal sanction for widow remarriage in 1856 failed to bring any change in the life of the widows at the grassroots level. The legal safeguards lost their momentum soon and implementation and acceptance of the acts were seldom done willingly. In many cases, widows were expelled from their natal homes and that of their in-laws and forced to take shelter at religious places like Puri, Vrindavan and Mathura. Forced pilgrimage to such places was the only option for these destitute women. They were expected to devote their body and soul to the almighty but in most cases were sexually exploited by the Brahmins or temple priests. Throughout the period the notion that widows were sexually available was rampant. But ironically, sometimes prostitution though seen as a sign of moral decay and bodily pollution, became a single means of survival for the young widows. Implementation and acceptance of the acts were seldom done willingly and thus, within a short time lost their momentum. A proper initiative to re-establish the lives of the widows was not seen in any sphere of society at that time.

However, eminent writers and reformers presented the cause of this helpless class of women in literature and attempted to provide a voice to widow characters. Bankim Chandra Chatterjee's (1838-1894) essay *The Confessions of a Young Bengal* (1872) states that "No enlightened human being can bring himself to believe in the moral excellency of perpetual widowhood…The necessary minor premises being assumed, sound logic compels us to cry with one voice, Hinduism must be destroyed."[32] But his cry for change failed to save his widow heroines Kundanandini and Rohini from the novels *The Poison Tree* (1873) and *Krishnakanta's Will* (1878) respectively from a doomed future. Being a progressive and literate man, Chatterjee brought before the readers the plight of the widows in Hindu society and attempted a rescue for these helpless women through his writing. The widow Kundanandini in *The Poison Tree* is attracted to a married man, Nagendra Babu. The wealthy landlord too could not control his feelings for the young widow even though he had the beautiful Suryamukhi as his wife. Although widow remarriage is shown in the text but Kundanandini ultimately commits suicide by poisoning herself. She gets the opportunity to excel in her new life as the wife of Nagendra but she falls prey to ill motives and thus has a doomed future. In the other novel, *Krishnakanta's Will* the readers are

[32] Bankimchandra Chatterjee, "The Confessions of a Young Bengal," *Mukherjee's Magazine* (December 1872), in *Bankim Rachanavali* (Calcutta: Shishu Sahitya Samsad Pvt. Ltd., 1960), pp.137-41.

introduced to Rohini, the lusty widow who elopes with Govind Lal. The widow is caught red-handed while replacing the will of Krishnakanta but Govind Lal, the inheritor of the property saves her and elopes with her to begin a life of sin. He soon realizes that Rohini should not be trusted and her sexuality is threatening. He murders her and in the end, he turns into an ascetic. In both novels, the reader clearly understands that death and not remarriage is the only solution available to the widows to attain freedom from the patriarchal society.

Rabindranath Tagore (1861-1941) was also a social reformer who advocated for the betterment of the weaker sex. *Chokher Bali* (*Eyesore*)[33] which was published in 1902 argued about the condition of widows and the prospect of their remarriage. The protagonist, the widow, beautiful Binodini is the grain of sand in the eyes of the patriarchal society that dominates and deprives a woman of her own identity. *Chokher Bali* was acclaimed and translated into various languages. Tagore brings out the sexual frustration of a widowed woman and her repressed sexuality in the narrative. The text begins and the readers see that Binodini is attracted to the conjugal life of Asha and Mahendra. Even as a widow, she refuses to comply with societal rigidities and enjoys the freedom of life. She falls for Mahendra, the spoiled son of a landlord's family. His childhood friend Bihari proposes marriage to Binodini but she rejects him. Mahendra wishes to establish an illicit affair with the beautiful Binodini. Though she loves Bihari her illicit relationship with Mahendra makes her unsuitable for a proper marriage. But the widow's vengeful nature and immaturity of Asha destroy the married life of the couple. The revenge that Binodini designed to take on Mahendra becomes fruitless in the end and she leaves for Kasi to live the life of an ascetic. She leaves the *bhadralok* society and decides to devote her life to spirituality. In the end, Binodini accepts her widowhood and leaves to attain salvation. Even if the widow is a suitable candidate for remarriage and Bihari is willing to accept her, she decides to remain a widow. The rigid notions and stigma that surround widow remarriage or rescue show the impossibility of a social and psychological change even if the possibility is tenuously present.

Palli Samaj by Sarat Chandra Chatterjee (1876-1938) was published in 1916 and became a seminal work that attempts to break the romanticized view of village life and brings out the social condition of a widow. In the work, Rama and Ramesh are childhood

[33] 'Eyesore' was used as the title for *Chokher Bali* first English translation by Surendranath Tagore (1914).

friends but the romantic affair comes to an end with the girl's marriage to another man. But after the death of the husband, Rama and Ramesh renew their relationship but society rejects it. Disgusted by the politics and drudgery of village life, Ramesh leaves the place for a better future. The widow remains confined in her world and no emancipation happens to rescue her from her dejected life. The condition of this unfortunate class of women never materializes for the better whether in life or fiction. The grief of widowhood could not be expressed in literature, as a lot remained unsaid and unheard on the pages of history. The gruesomeness of real life is much more horrible than what is expressed by any writer.

Widowhood for an Indian woman is the last and the most degrading stage of life.[34] Rajindra Singh Bedi's Sahitya Akademi award-winning novella *Ek Chadar Maili Si (I Take This Woman)* (1965) explores the practice of levirate which was the norm in many places in north India especially Punjab in the colonial period. It was a social practice that allowed a widow to marry the brother of the dead husband.[35] The sudden death of Rano's husband forces her to accept Mangal, her brother-in-law as her second husband according to the custom of the village. Though she protested against such a union since Mangal was more like a son to her, both of them are forced to be a part of the marriage, however dreadful it is to their moral values. Thus, the patriarchal society ensures that the property remains in the house.

Set in India before Independence, the film *Water* (2005) exposes the custom of marriage and the deplorable condition of widowhood in India. Deepa Mehta's film is a social document that brings out the evil practice of sending widows to pilgrimage centres like Kashi, Mathura and Varanasi. These women are forgotten by everyone and had to live a life of poverty and deprivation. In India, since the mortality rate of men is higher than women and the spouse is always much older than the bride, widowhood was a common phenomenon.[36] Mehta portrays the plight of Kalyani, a beautiful widow who is used for prostitution by the ashram leader Madhumati. Narayan, the hero who is a true Gandhian comes as a rescuer in Kalyani's life. He truly loves her and both dreams to settle down in marriage. But the story changes drastically when Kalyani meets his father, who is one of her exploiters. Unable to go back to her past life she submits herself to the water of Ganga

[34] Mukesh Ahuja, *Widows Role and Adjustment* (Delhi: Vishwa Prakashan, 1996), p.21.

[35] K. P. Chattopadhyay, "Levirate and Kinship in India," *Royal Anthropological Institute of Great Britain and Ireland*, Vol. 22 (March, 1922), pp.36-41.

[36] Martha Alter Chen, *Perpetual Mourning: Widowhood in Rural India* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2001), p.3.

and attains salvation. The death of Kalyani brings forth the sordidness of the male-dominated world.

Given the range of Steel's widow characters, this chapter looks at them from different perspectives: marginalized, sexually frustrated, socially vulnerable, wicked and sexually exploited. The texts show how the memsahib writer uses her narratives to present before western readers the dilemma of widowhood and the suffering that comes with it in a patriarchal society. Steel is intensely sensitive in her approach toward the loss of a companion/partner through death. There are rarely any widows' narratives available during the period and their experiences percolate through other people's voices that in most cases fail to bring out the reality and the intensity of their suffering. Yet Steel gives them importance as characters in her texts even as she shows how these women get accustomed to their dispossessed state. She shows them as ruined by their constant struggles but instances of fighting back to reverse their fate or position and gaining independence are not a rarity either. Steel fashions her widow characters as living, palpable subjects and their painful life affects the reader both emotionally and psychologically.

Colonial memsahibs who visited the empire were deeply engrossed in the pathetic existence of native widows. Western texts structured them into their plots to portray the plight of these unfortunate for consumption by a foreign reading audience. Steel has sympathetically incorporated widow figures in her narratives and also brought to the open their deplorable existence and modes of survival. Her widows are diverse but also similar at many points. The narratives in which they are placed show them on one hand as disgraced and humiliated and on the other hand as fighters, poised and dignified. Remarriage in Hindu society was not morally accepted even though the government had given it legal sanction. Even child widows were not allowed to re-settle in life through a second marriage. She was expected to live a celibate life and renounce sexual intimacies with 'other' men. The widow's yearning for conjugality was either neglected or forcefully silenced. Sexuality is a natural phenomenon and a biological necessity. A widower on the other hand was expected to remarry and live a fulfilling life even if he had passed the marriageable age.

"In the House of a Coppersmith" (1894)

Against this context "In the House of a Coppersmith" from the short story collection *The Flower of Forgiveness* Steel chooses a daring theme for discussion. Young women who lost their husbands and do not accept sati are seen as threats to the household. Durga dei's narrative makes explicit the patriarchal stereotype of the widow who cannot be kept

restrained and tied down within prescribed limits. She accepts the white robe of widowhood but refuses to live caged like an animal. Knowing well about her body and its needs, she hatches a perfect plan to regain her lost power in the house. Her brother-in-law Gopal's wife Parbutti is without a child and giving an heir to the family would assure her a powerful position in the family. Her new role as Gopal's second wife and the mother of the family heir would give her the authority and power she had lost as a widow. The readers witness her resurrection as a woman who independently fights in the midst of adversities. Durga dramatically and very openly expresses her choice and freedom of thought. She might have been a docile and dedicated wife in the past but widowhood transforms her character. She has learnt that her repressed sexuality could only get a voice by establishing a conjugal relationship with Gopal. She rejects taking up the traditional role of a *pativrata nari* (husband-worshipping woman) and does the exact opposite. In the text, the reader sees her dominating all the other characters with her strength and potential feminine energy. Gopal ultimately betrays her and even threatens her to remain silent about their affair. However, Durga dei asserts her power as a human being and punishes the man who has wronged her. Like the mother goddess Kali, she slays the offender and brings justice for herself even as society remains horrified and bewildered by her quick decision and ingenious plotting.

She projects herself as a transgressor who threatens the stability and security of the private space of the home. Being a victim of social forces, facing patriarchal domination and betrayal in personal life, her character becomes a threat to the peace and stability of the family. Simone de Beauvoir states that sexuality is coextensive with existence and can be understood in two very different ways, it can mean that every experience of the existent has a sexual significance, or that every sexual phenomenon has an existential import.[37] Women tend to incline towards love and sensuality. Karl Kraus states, "Sexuality poorly repressed unsettles some families; well repressed it unsettles the whole world".[38] The same thing happens in the narrative where Durga dei's body becomes an object and subject of desire. Her shrouded existence could not control the embers of passion when she beholds the manly body of her brother-in-law, Gopal. His scantily-covered body tired from work arouses passion in her nerves that is uncontrollable. Rakesh Thakur explains it thus, "She

[37] Simone de Beauvoir, *The Second Sex* (1949), trans. and ed. H.M. Parshley (London: Jonathan Cape, 1953), p.65.

[38] Karl Kraus, *Half Truths and One and a Half Truths: Selected Aphorisms* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976), p.101.

desires not only in marriage, legitimate desire or an act of procreation, as the passive recipient of male touch; but she is a woman awakened by her own self, her own body and has a deep and primal longing for her own body and its pleasures."[39] The biased patriarchal society only acknowledges male sexuality and denies it to women.

Although her act is a punishable offence, her pathetic state and psychic instability create a cathartic effect in the reader's mind. She is shown as the stereotyped unfaithful widow figure who by giving death to the unfaithful man in her life brings justice for herself. She resists suffering at the hands of society, as her position is doubly problematic, on one hand, she is a helpless widow and on the other hand pregnant with a child, which is an outcome of an illicit relationship. The difficult circumstance makes Durga dei a cold-blooded murderer but the readers also realize that if given a chance she could have been a loving mother too. Her emotional intensity and her ability to change the course of the story shock the readers. Although she was a passive wife in the past, her incipient motherhood makes her dangerous and cruel to the extreme. She is so involved in her present crime that she forgets about the future of the illegitimate child in her womb. Durga dei and the new widow, Parbutti are placed on the same pedestal with the death of Gopal, the breadwinner of the house. She is portrayed as an unwanted, humiliated, inauspicious and pathetic character by Steel. The helpless widows have an unknown future ahead and Steel is not interested in their ultimate fate, she maintains her silence. Although Durga dei changes the whole course of the narrative and along with it alters her status from a deprived, helpless woman to a person of immense authority and power yet the author remains silent about her future. Her position of power is temporary and Steel restores the societal status quo by hinting at the life of uncertainty that awaits the two widows.

"The King's Well" (1897)

Durga Dei's expression of sexual desire outside the bounds of the married relationship is similar to that of the nameless widow in "The King's Well" (from the collection *In the Permanent Way*) who opts for a different lifestyle by establishing a relationship with a sahib and thus is condemned and punished through death. Nathaniel James Craddock is the protagonist of the narrative who shares his horrific experience during the mutiny when he was hiding in the king's well to save his life. While hiding, he meets a young widow and

[39] Rakesh Thakur, "Locating Perception and Paradoxes Within an Image" in *Films and Feminism: Essays in Indian Cinema*, eds. Jasbir Jain and Sudha Rai (New Delhi: Rawat Publications, 2002), p.267.

both fall in love with each other. The woman provided him with food and helped to sustain his life. The unnamed native widow and the white man share a unique bond of trust and love. But the widow is brutally murdered by the white sepoys when she came dressed in a man's clothes to inform Craddock of the news of their coming.

> "It was she, Sir, down the King's steps in the man's dress, an' behind her, my God! not black devils but white ones with red coats an' set bayonets! — 'Maharaj! Maharaj! Justice! Justice!' 'I was out, sir, tearing up to meet her in a second, shoutin' in English to hold hard — that she was a woman; but them cursed *bawly* echoes mixed it all up, an' the cursed baggy trousers and things, didn't give me no chance of a-hearin' through its bein' half-dark 'Maharaj! Maharaj!' 'I heard it plain enough, God knows. I hear it now sometimes, sir, an' I see her face as I saw it for the only time in the light afore I fell over her dead body a-lying on the steps half-way down the stairs o' justice."[40]

Years have passed but Craddock has not forgotten about the widowed woman and her memory still lingers in his mind. The author has punished the nameless widow through death and shows that even if a love relationship between a white man and a native woman happens, a positive ending could never be wished for. Steel's imperial position fails to give justice to a widow who risks her life to save a white man.

"An Appreciated Rupee" (1914) and "Suttu" (1893)

"An Appreciated Rupee" (from the collection *The Mercy of the Lord* and "Suttu" (from the collection *From the Five Rivers*) bring into the limelight the socio-economic evils of colonial society and the ability of the protagonist to defeat adversity to create a better future. The two central widow figures in these narratives, Maimuna Begum and Suttu, are drastically opposed personalities but their conditions are similar, where one is emotionally exhausted by men and the other one is consumed by them physically. Both are neglected as human beings by all the other characters in their respective narratives. The loss of their respective spouses brings trouble and the condition of these widows becomes terrible. A

[40] Flora Annie Steel, "The King's Well," from *In the Permanent Way* (London: Macmillan, 1897), pp.210-11.

widow is either forced to accept a second marriage or lead a life neglected by both her natal family and in-laws. "An Appreciated Rupee", introduces the reader to Maimuna Begum, an old Muslim woman who is deprived of her property rights and thrown out of the family to fend for herself. The woman was not loved by her husband Jehan Latifa nor supported by her in-laws after his death. John Stuart Mill in his work *Essays on Sex Equality* states that women are physically, socially and also economically dependent on men. Thus, marriage is the woman's only option in life to enjoy economic stability and be a relevant figure in the patriarchal society.[41]

Outside marriage, a woman has no economic value or status. Maimuna is engaged not as a wife but as a faithful helping hand and kept to cook and take care of her aging and ailing husband. She had lost her first husband to measles at a very tender age and found the second one at a very mature age. The second husband is not a loving man and only Maimuna's cooking abilities attracted him towards her. So, the couple shares no emotional bonding or attachment towards each other. After the death of her second husband readers see her struggles to keep body and soul together. Even though all her hope is gone, she resolves finally to take the help of British authorities to bring a change in her condition. She appeals to the Crown and gains justice when her due share of her husband's property is handed to her and she is able to lead a respectable life. The coin which she wore on her neck had the image of queen Victoria inscribed on and this coin alters her destiny. The coin is sent as a memorandum of her first young husband who died years ago making her suffer throughout her life. The coin with the queen's image saves her,

> "'It was a day or two after this that an English official was sitting smoking in his verandah, when he became aware of a whispered colloquy behind him. It was someone, no doubt, trying, through the red-coated chaprasi, to gain an audience of him; and he was newly back from office, tired, impatient, perhaps, of the hopelessness of doing justice always. So he took no notice till something roused him to a swift turn, a swifter question.' 'What's that, chaprasi!' That was the unmistakable chink of fallen silver, the unmistakable whirr of a running rupee, the unmistakable buzzing ring of its settling to rest. And there, midway between a giving and a taking hand, lay

[41] J.S. Mill and Harriet Taylor Mill, *Essays on Sex Equality* (Chicago*:* University of Chicago Press, 1917), p.73.

> the rupee itself the Queen's head uppermost. 'Hazoor' explained the chaprasi, glibly, 'your slave was virtuously refusing; he was sending this ill-bred one away. Hat! *budhi*! Hat!' But the sight of that head on the precious rupee, which, after many heart searchings, poor Maimuna had determined to risk in this effort to gain justice from a budhi like herself, whose enemies also had knavish tricks, brought courage to the old heart and the old woman stood her ground. 'Gharibparwar I' she said quietly, with her best salaam and in the old Pathan house they had taught manners, if nothing else 'Little Fatma, the pen-maker's daughter, says that Wictoria Kaiser-i-hind is an old woman like me and so I have fixed my hopes on her. There is my rupee. It is all I have and I want my widow's portion.'"[42]

Steel, through Maimuna Begum, shares an alternative life for a widow who resists both economic and political subjugation and fights against all odds. She proves her authority and refuses to end her life by starvation. Whereas the patriarchal system lauded a widow if she remained faithful to her subordinated and deprived status, Maimuna does exactly the opposite and undermines the socio-cultural system that gave sanction to a widow's lifelong subservience to other people's mercy.

On the other hand, the eponymous Suttu is a young attractive widow who renounces her suitor and invites financial insecurity in her life. She was given away in a forced marriage at a very young age and when she becomes a widow, she chooses the life of an ascetic. A woman who loses her husband is viewed as untouchable. Her presence is deemed to be malicious and sinful. Surviving one's dead husband is seen as a crime by society and necessitates life-long penance and suffering. Yet she refuses her marriage proposal to Kazi's son and makes an independent move by dedicating her life to God. The lure of political power and marital security could not subjugate her to another man. She remains an independent soul and with the help of a British sahib looks after her dates orchard and takes care of her property. Suttu unmasks the brutality and licentiousness of patriarchal society without being frightened about the outcome. Her desire and decisions in life worked to rebuild her personality and, in the end, assures a good self-independent future for her. She comes out of the deplorable and degrading situation only because she has the potential

[42] Steel, "An Appreciated Rupee," from *The Mercy of the Lord* (New York: G.H. Doran, 1914), pp.125-26.

and talent to work differently than other widows. Her handsome figure and intelligence in a time of crisis makes her a model for other widowed women. Steel gives Suttu the autonomy to rejoice in her freedom and aesthetically liberates her from the dominating society. It is interesting to note that characters like Suttu are rare specimens in both literature and society.

Widowhood is considered to be a phase of instability and uncertainty. The characters of widows, whether old or young, attractive or ugly, morally good or bad go through the same amount of loss and frustration in Steel's writings even though the circumstances of their existence, personal or otherwise, differ to a large extent. Yet Maimuna and Suttu are exceptional in their motives when judged against the trope of the suffering and marginalized widow. Both the women, one young and the other old, protest against socio-economic deprivation and in the end, come out as winners and settle themselves financially with dignity. Even though they suffer ill-treatment and are victims of patriarchy, yet Maimuna and Suttu show an indomitable spirit to fight against all odds. However, it is important to note that liberation from suffering and socio-economic well-being in the case of both these characters comes through Western mediation. Steel seems to sanction permanent and positive transformation in the life of her widow characters only when it comes through the colonial agency. Any other mode of self-transformation is temporary and doomed to failure as evident in the fate of Durga dei discussed earlier in this chapter.

A similar kind of limited agency is also to be found in characters like Tara in the famous mutiny novel *On the Face of the Waters*: *A Tale of the Mutiny* (1897), Sarsuti in the story "The Footsteps of a Dog" (from the collection *The Mercy of the Lord,* 1914), Atma Devi in *A Prince of Dreamers* (1988) and Parbutti in "A Maiden's Prayer" (from *The Mercy of the Lord*, 1914). What connects these four characters is their decision to embrace death willingly in the face of difficult circumstances. Unlike the other widows who may be physically alive but are dead in spirit, characters like Tara, Sarsuti, Atma and Parbutti exercise a certain amount of control over their lives that is not conventionally available to other characters. They fall prey to societal brutalities but they revolt against such constraints and achieve freedom through voluntary death. Whereas Tara and Sarsuti commit sati, Atma knifes herself and Parbutti accepts death by bomb blast as the only form of liberation thereby asserting their independent personalities.

***On the Face of the Waters: A Tale of the Mutiny* (1897)**

On the Face of the Waters: A Tale of the Mutiny is famous amongst readers as a popular work on the Indian Mutiny of 1857. It narrates the sad tale of the widow Tara, who is saved by the sahib James Greyman from the funeral pyre of her deceased husband. Tara, which is another name for Goddess Durga, is portrayed as a kind-hearted dutiful widow who loves the sahib but fails to express it. She had dedicated herself to being a sati but the timely interference of James and her brother Soma saves her life. Tara Devi and her brother Soma Chund are Rajputs of the Yadubanshi tribe and are rescued and given shelter in the sahib's house. The widow is shown as a helping hand in the sahib's family. After the death of the sahib's bibi, Tara becomes the caregiver of the memsahib who takes shelter to save her life from the murderous mutineers. The widow's attentiveness to the proper care and management of Kate Erlton is praiseworthy. She understands well that Kate has fallen in love with the sahib even if she pretends not to care about the man. Residing with the white woman in the same place makes the two women understand each other closely. Even if a sense of compassion arises, a wide gap prevails between the two women making their relationship complicated. In the end, though sick and bedridden, James fails to stop Tara from self-immolation. She had tried to lead the life of a normal woman, wearing coloured clothes and adorning herself with jewellery that was strictly taboo for a widow. Death is Tara's only way to go beyond all the suffering, pain and discomfort she faced while living as a widow. Her rescue makes her an outcast to her own people. For a Rajput, the humiliation of leading the life of an untouchable is miserable. Though she is given a second chance at life yet the baggage of orthodox traditions proves too much for her to handle. Her secret love for the sahib does not achieve a culmination and her loss of courage mocks her throughout her life. She loathes the idea of being involved with another man and refuses to undermine her religious beliefs by marrying him. She abstains from the feelings that apparently make her morally corrupt. Sati seems the only way to provide her with the glorification that her normal life always denied her. She had tried her best but could not change her position in life. She selflessly loved the sahib but he never responded to her feelings. Failing repeatedly in her life to grasp anything material, important and fruitful to live on, Tara chooses death. Death by immolation would give her back the lost prestige, power and authority that she had craved throughout her life. She would change from a mortal woman to a goddess by committing sati. The act of self-immolation becomes her only respite from a lowly and degrading human life. She craves to do something extraordinary that would give her an upper hand over Zora or Kate. She rejects the

subordinate position both as a native woman and as a widow. Rejecting the double marginalization, Tara burns herself to death to gain her desired freedom. Death by burning thus becomes a liberating act and not a painful trauma for Tara. Through her death, she brings the desired closure to the text.

"On the Footsteps of a Dog" (1914)

The voluntary choice of death connects Tara with Sarsuti in the story "On the Footsteps of a Dog" who after her betrayal by her husband becomes the sole breadwinner of the family and leads her life through immense stress and hardship. Sarsuti is another character of Steel who rejects *patidharma* or a life of devotion to the husband. Even though her husband Prema betrays her, she becomes a sati. But her sacrifice is not designed to save the unfaithful man from the tortures of purgatory. She commits suicide in order to free her own life and assign herself power and authority that was denied to her during her lifetime. She had failed as a wife and could not bear a child of her own. But the power and authority she enjoyed by burning herself to death was unique and surpassed all her struggles. She becomes a sati and changes her mortal position to an immortal goddess. She refuses to remain under patriarchal domination and proves her worth as a feminine entity. The author fails to save her but through her death, she comes out as a winner in the end.

***A Prince of Dreamers* (1988)**

Atma Devi in the novel *A Prince of Dreamers* places herself as a '*charan*' which means at 'one's feet' as a special guard of the emperor Abkar as her forefathers had done in the past. She is a staunch follower of her duties to the king and dedicates her life to the cause. She is portrayed as a young, selfless, pure, beautiful widow who lost her husband when she was a mere child. She creates a very different image of herself in comparison with her bosom friend Siyala, the cunning and morally corrupt courtesan. At the beginning of the narrative, the reader sees her gracefully dressed, present at the Mughal court to claim her right to be a *charan* for the king. Even though she is a woman, she refuses to give away the prestigious position that her previous generation had enjoyed. She is determined and well aware of her requirements and eventually gets permission to serve Akbar, the Badshah of Hindustan.

Atma Devi is portrayed as a foil to the character of the *tawaif* Siyala, her childhood friend. Whereas the former is an epitome of selfless love, intelligence and true human values, the latter is a dubious and deceitful woman who has submerged her body and soul into cunning and sensual pleasures. Her house is the meeting point of all shrewd men of

the court. Planning and plotting to ruin the emperor and his son is their only quest in life. The courtesan tries many times to harm the king and plans to leave the city after stealing the Kohinoor diamond, considered to be the bringer of good fortune to the king. The widow's beliefs and trust in her friend and the bonding they shared seemed to be true on a superficial level. However, Siyala uses the widow's faith and trust to get hold of the diamond. She even makes a false statement against Atma and betrays her repeatedly. In the end, the widow kills the courtesan and returns the precious stone to the safekeeping of Birbal. But in doing so, she becomes a victim of the dubious treachery of the other evil characters present at the court. She finally kills herself to save the reputation and prestige of Akbar. Atma being a Hindu widow could not defy her cultural heritage and her death reveals her subservience to orthodox religious sentiments. The widow could have changed her life by marrying the king but she insisted on doing her duty by sacrificing her emotion and feminine feelings towards the man she truly loved. It is clear from the narrative that she was attracted to him. Her suicide, committed in order to save the king from dishonour, is portrayed as a form of sati. Neither the dream of power nor the desire for a new beginning in life can change her sense of responsibility as a widow. Being a Hindu woman, her commitment and loyalty to her religion are more important than her life. Thus, Atma commits sati, not by burning herself on the funeral pyre but by stabbing herself to death in the lap of her lover, Akbar. Giving her life for the emperor Akbar is nothing less than an act of sacrifice shown by the widow. According to religious custom and social obligations, she was a widow and could not marry again even if that person was the emperor. She redefines death and proves her fidelity to the man she loved. In the end, the narrative chooses to close itself, with the dead body of the widow lying in the caressing hands of the emperor.

"A Maiden's Prayer" (1914)

In "A Maiden's Prayer", Parbuti after the death of her fiancé is immediately designated as a widow even though the proposed marriage never happens in the text. However, Parbuti is neither given in marriage to her proposed suitor nor is there any consummation of their union. Even though her fiancé never appears to claim her as his wife, patriarchy designates her as a widow. Her life changes and she is subjugated to domination and forced to abide by the rules of widowhood without any fault of her own. The woman who desired a happy marital life turns into a widow for a lifetime. Her parents too do not come to her rescue and she goes through both psychological and physical torment. In various regions of India,

widows undergo tonsuring, jewellery and colourful clothing are henceforth forbidden after the husband dies. She is seen as a curse, a bad omen and dreaded by all members of the family. Unable to bear her situation, she commits sati by hurling the bomb her fiancé had hidden inside the temple. Her death is the only way to freedom from a life that is an unanswered question to her. She has no idea or knowledge about her situation in life. Parbuti decides to accept death as the only option to reunite with her dead fiancé. Her death is horrifying as the scattered remains of her body after the bomb blast in the shrine acts as a protest and eye-opener to those who have subjugated her as a widowed woman when she is just an unwedded maiden. Death seems to her the only way to unite with her dead husband and proclaim her entity as a wife. She gains liberty as a maiden or a widow or as a lover is not known but one is sure that death gave her the power to disown society from interfering in her life. Decked up as a newly wedded woman, she commits suicide and her death gives her the freedom she lacks as a living human entity.

The above discussed four characters bring into play the question of women's agency in choosing death. For the western world, the initial response to sati was one of non-interference. The immolation of a widow on her husband's funeral pyre was seen as a spectacle that awed western eyes. Luke Scrafton expressed a high opinion of the woman who volunteered to die with her dead husband, going on to state that

> "No women are more remarkable for their conjugal fidelity, in which they are distinguished beyond the rest of their sex, by that remarkable custom of burning with their husband...Let it be considered, they are brought up together from their infancy; the woman has no opportunity of ever conversing with any other man; her affections are centred solely on this one object of her love; she is firmly persuaded that by being burnt with him, she shall be happy with him in another world; that if she neglects this last token of affection, he may take another wife and she is separated from him forever. However false these principles, yet, if those poor women are persuaded that they are true, you must allow that they are powerful motives."[43]

[43] Luke Scrafton, *Reflections on the Government of Indostan* (1761; London: W. Richardson and S. Clark, 1763), p.9.

Instances of willing sati were numerous. The French orientalist, Pierre Sonnerat saw the death of a woman with her dead husband as a bond of love and fidelity. He states,

> "The Brahmins encourage her to sacrifice herself with assurances that she is going to enjoy eternal felicity in paradise, where she will become the wife of some god, who will espouse her as a reward for her virtue...however extravagant and atrocious this custom may appear, it is easy to give a reason for it. The extreme love of some women for their husband, the despair at their loss and the desire to follow them, was the first cause of this sacrifice, which custom authorized and time made universal."[44]

The Italian traveller Pietro Della Valle confirmed that, "This burning of Women upon the death of their Husbands is at their own choice to do it or not and indeed few practice it..."[45] Francois Martin, who was a part of French East India Company, arrived in India in 1669 and claimed that the custom was "not very widely practiced now"[46] thereby stressing the woman's ability to make a choice. The debate about voluntary and forced sati was the most controversial issue of the time. Few believed that Hindu religious orthodoxy was responsible for the inhuman act of burning a living woman with her dead husband. Others believed that in order to save themselves from a deplorable life of widowhood, women willingly volunteered for sati. Some of the records by Baptist missionaries gave a totally different response. William Carey (1793) during his stay in Nadia witnessed widow immolation. "Burning women with their husbands is a practice too frequent. We were at Nuddea [Nadia] last Lord's day and were informed that about a month ago two women devoted themselves in this manner."[47] Claudius Buchanan, showed the frequency of sati stated, "Explaining these figures (275 cases were recorded in 1803; between 15th April and 15th October 1804 there were 115 cases) no account was taken of burnings in a district to

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[44] Andrea Major, *Pious Flames: European Encounters with Sati 1500–1830* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2006), pp.87-98.

[45] Pietro Della Valle, *The Travels of Pietro Della Valle in India*, ed. Edward Gray (1892; New Delhi: Asian Educational Services, 1991), pp.84-85.

[46] Francois Martin, *India in the 17th Century (Social, Economic, and Political) Memoirs of Francois Martin, Vol. II, Part I, 1681-1688*, trans. Lotika Varadarajan (New Delhi: Manohar, 1984), pp.1154-56.

[47] Geoffrey Oddie, *Imagined Hinduism: British Protestant Missionary Constructions of Hinduism, 1793-1900* (New Delhi: Sage Publications, 2006), p.143.

the west of Calcutta, nor further than twenty miles in some other directions; so that the whole number of burnings within thirty miles round Calcutta must have been considerably greater than is here stated."[48] In his cinematic retelling of Kamal Kumar Majumdar's story in *Antarjali Yatra* (1987), Goutam Ghose explores the practice of sati in Bengal in the year 1832 just after the anti-sati legislation had been passed. The story centres on the fate of the hapless Yashobati who is married off to an octogenarian Kulin Brahmin on the verge of death with the promise made by her father that she will commit sati after his death so that he may achieve divine salvation. She is kept company on the burning ghat by the *chandal* or cremator of corpses and they strike up an unlikely relationship that transgresses caste and social boundaries. However, the tale ends with Yashobati voluntarily drowning herself in the Ganga when she realizes that her husband is no more. The possibility of a new relationship is aborted for that would undermine the patriarchal status quo. Like Yashobati, widows like Atma Devi and Tara have internalized the rules and prescriptions binding the life of widows, so they are not able to start a new life.

"On The Second Story" (1897)

The social and physical security a married woman avails is destroyed with the death of the husband. The father's guardianship of the daughter is transferred to her husband after marriage. Widowhood exposes the woman to sexual and other forms of exploitation. "On The Second Story" (from the collection *In the Permanent Way*) brings before the readers the power dynamics between two widows, one a young helpless girl Ananda who has a long life ahead of her and another an old widowed mother belonging to a Brahmin family with her western-educated son Ramanund. Both women experience the same domination in society but in a very different way. Ramanund and his mother live on the second storey of a building which also houses the shrine of the goddess Kali on the ground floor. Thousands of devotees frequent the place throughout the day, eyeing the young handsome Ramanund going up and down the stairs of the house. The dark beliefs of religious orthodoxy mingle with the darkness of the shrine; the intoxicating smell of incense sticks and the crimson colour of the flowers that adorn the deity impregnate the place with fearful devotion. Being "a mathematical master in a mission school"[49] Ramanund has no belief in

[48] Claudius Buchanan, *Christian Researches in Asia: With Notices on The Translation of The Scriptures into The Oriental Languages* (1811; London: Ward & Co., 1849), pp.21-22.

[49] Steel, "On the Second Story," from *In the Permanent Way* (London: Macmillan, 1897), p.56.

absurd native customs. His education makes him progressive and different from the other characters in the story.

His mother, though having borne a son like Ramanund, is still occupied with her own orthodox religious and social systems. She is a staunch believer in the powers of the goddess Kali. Her son's western education has no effect on the old widow's religious beliefs. Her son having "read Herbert Spencer and John Stuart Mill"[50] is the face of new India, a supporter of swaraj, a middle-class educated man who is ready to revolt against all odds. Belonging to a family whose forefathers had been priests in the shrine, the widowed mother enjoys extreme power and authority in the family. Despite her privileged position, the relationship between mother and son sours over the son's decision to marry the widow Ananda. The rift between the two, one shackled in age-old customs and the other a new and progressive individual dominates the narrative. "In truth Ramanund had no special desire to marry at all; or even to fall in love. He was too busy with the exact sciences to experimentalise on the suspension of the critical faculty in man; besides, he had definitely made up his mind to marry a widow when he did marry".[51]

Life takes a different turn when in the midst of the cholera epidemic, Ramanund comes face to face with a young and beautiful widow Ananda who had come to the shrine to demand justice for her sad plight from the goddess. She had lost her handsome husband and is now on the verge of being sexually exploited by the corrupt priests of the shrine. Her youth and beauty become a threat to her survival and she prays to Kali for safety. De Beauvoir explains how males regard females and condemn them as sex objects. She states, "She is called 'the sex' which is meant that she appears essentially to the male as a sexual being. For him she is sex–absolute sex no less."[52] Being a widow Ananda has no one to fall back on as a protector, she becomes prey to the lust of a religious priest. She cries for help, "I am pretty. Far prettier than the other girls who have husbands. Mai Kali! listen this once —this once only! Kill me now when Thou art killing so many and give me a husband in the next life; or let me go —let me be free — free to choose my own way —my own lover. Mother! Mother! if Thou wouldst only wake! —if Thou wouldst only listen! —if Thou

[50] Steel, "On the Second Story," pp.56-57.

[51] Ibid., p.59.

[52] Beauvoir, *The Second Sex*, p.15-16.

wouldst only look and see how pretty I am !"[53] Unable to bear the pain of such a degrading and horrible life, she shares her grief and asks the mother goddess to protect her. Being in a bewildered state of mind, Ananda prays for a genuine lover who could claim her body as well as her mind with pure love and passion. That lover comes in the guise of Ramanund and both the man and the young woman fall in love with each other. The hero comes as her rescuer and the lovers desire to begin a new life away from the orthodox society.

Remarriage was considered a scandalous proposition for a widow in 19th century India. The old widowed mother of Ramunand being a believer in old customs refuses to take the widow as her daughter-in-law. Ananda is shown as a powerless figure who is dwarfed by patriarchy. She realizes that her hope of a happy married life would never achieve culmination just as Ramanund comes to understand the problems and oppositions he would have to face to save the widow's life. He decides to elope with the woman he loves to another city and lead a life free of all constraints. With the affair going public and his mother opposing the marriage, the situation becomes critical and dangerous for the couple.

Although his mother is herself a widow, her social status, wealth and position differ totally from that of the young widow. Despite being a victim of patriarchy, she fails to empathize with the young girl's vulnerable and powerless position. The old mother vehemently protests against Ramanund's decision and could well have been secretly involved in the murder of her son's lover. What is lacking in the old widow's character is humanity and emotional understanding for the helpless Ananda. Despite all protests from the old mother Ramunand buys two railway tickets, arranges for a carriage and waits for Ananda to arrive. When the waiting becomes prolonged, he steps inside the shrine where human sacrifices are taking place to appease the wrath of Goddess Kali. He recognizes the decapitated head of Ananda in the midst of the blood and gore covering the place. The sacrificial death of Ananda ends the epidemic as well as the love of Ramunand. The orthodox religious system of the colonial world claimed many sacrifices to keep its believers attached to the shrine and the widow Ananda was just one of the many victims. Her death at the hands of the temple priest shows the fruitlessness of the life of a widow in society. Through her death, Ananda is robbed of the dignity of a human being but none protest for her cause.

[53] Steel, "On the Second Story," pp.72-73.

Steel has created an exceptional ending to her narrative. The ghastly and horrifying outcome of the love affair is frightening as well as psychologically disturbing. The fate of the two widows is portrayed as being complementary to each other. Where one is sacrificed for her supposed defilement of established customs, the other is rewarded with a mentally unstable son for the rest of her life. The remarriage of Ananda could have given her a new lease on life but death seems to be the only solution available to the patriarchal society in such a situation. Death is portrayed as the only mode of escape from patriarchal domination and religious stricture in the text.

"Gunesh Chund" (1893)

Not all widows are deserving of sympathy and Steel introduces various widowed matriarchs similar to Ramanund's mother whose sole purpose is to make other's lives miserable. The story "Gunesh Chund" (from the collection *From the Five Rivers*) introduces a manipulative widow character who conceals her hand in causing double deaths. The widowed mother-in-law who is a hard-to-please woman is always at loggerheads with her daughter-in-law, Veru. Gunesh Chund, the man of the house, is the loving and kind-hearted husband of Veru. Being an educated woman Veru is disgusted by the widow's provocative nature and irritating attitude. The mother-in-law behaves badly with Veru and Gunesh when their daughter Nihali is born. She wanted a grandson as the heir but the birth of a girl-child makes her behaviour disgusting and intolerable. The sickly child becomes the apple of the eye of her parents but is wholeheartedly hated by the grandmother.

Uneducated, orthodox and cruel to the core, the widow loved her son more than anything else in the world. The widow's constant nagging for a new wife for her son makes the atmosphere of the house very tense. The infant slowly loses its vitality and the mother in order to save the child sneaks away from the house to find a remedy to save her dying daughter. The old widow finding such an opportunity chokes Nihali to death by exposing the child to the smoke created by red chillies and turmeric powder. The terrible smoke suffocates the poor child to death. Neither the mother nor the father could save her from the insidious motive of the widow. The tragedy reaches its climax when the widow, with help from other widows of the village, places the corpse of Nihali in the forest to be devoured by wild jackals. She even waits all night till the morning sun comes out to witness the gruesome scene and get assurance that the evil influence of the infant has been eradicated from her family. When Veru comes to know about her daughter's fate at the

hands of her mother-in-law, she protests and quarrels with the evil woman but in vain. The wife is expecting another child but her mother-in-law provides a second blow to her with the news of Gunesh's impending second marriage. The news makes her lose all desire to live and within a few days Veru dies. The mother-in-law who rules over the family is a tyrant bound by orthodoxies; a cruel creature without any human feelings or emotions. Steel betrays no emotions while portraying the widowed mother. Her motherly qualities are put into question when she chokes Nihali to death. Being the son of the widow, Gunesh could not punish his own mother for her wrongdoings. The only authorial punishment she receives is to bear the untimely loss of her beloved son Gunesh who passes away unable to bear the grief of his wife and daughter's premature deaths. The narrative may not have been able to save Nihali from the jackals or Veru from a sad untimely death but Steel does seek nemesis for their deaths by depriving the widow of her only son. The widow is not killed but is left to face an uncertain future as a lone old woman.

"Amor Vincit Omnai" (1897)

"Amor Vincit Omnai" (from the collection *In the Permanent Way*) tells the story of a love affair between the young couple Govind Sahai and Nihali and their unfortunate end because of the widowed mother's overt interference in their lives. Govind's mother is shown as an important figure in the household as she is responsible for keeping the poor family from going downhill after the death of her husband. The family is in dire need of the academic fellowship that Govind could easily acquire by scoring good marks in the exam. The mother is an illiterate woman but understands well that Govind is the only person who could save the family from future crises. The poor widow arranges for her son's marriage and brings home the beautiful Nihali as her daughter-in-law. From the beginning of the story, the readers see Govind as a romantic individual who is more interested in poring over sentimental and emotional literary pieces than in his own textbooks. The mother realizing that Govind is not interested in studies sends off his bride to her mother's place. The separation creates a vacuum in Govind's life. She fails to realize that the separation will destroy Govind both within and without. The mental pressure that the mother creates on him is excessive for the young man. The daily tension and psychological pressure of keeping body and soul together destroy him. The death of their infant, the tremendous mental pressure from his mother and separation from his wife, the only companion of his life, culminating in his doom. Abject poverty, failure in life, frustration and defeat result in Govind's death at the library by the bursting of his arteries due to excessive coughing. As

a tragic hero, his idealism results in his destruction. Readers may criticize the widowed mother for her insensitivity. Her decisions make her on the one hand an old unromantic selfish human being who has no emotional feelings and on the other a responsible mother who is burdened with the maintenance of her family. The story ends with the death of the son and nothing more is shared by the author about the widowed mother.

In all such widowed characters, Steel portrays suffering in various forms. The cruelty of Govind's mother is a form of practical wisdom that comes from years of suffering and deprivation. She deems the love her son shows to his newlywed wife as a crime. Her attitude towards the newlywed couple seems unfair and prejudiced. She fails to realize their emotional state as the hard social existence of a widow changed her tenderness to pragmatism. The abrupt death of her only son due to her own scheming ironically guarantees the very suffering that she is trying to escape from. Her textual afterlife remains unclear, for Steel concludes the narrative at the point where her son dies. Her importance as a character ceases the moment Govind passes away, what happens to her after that is of less import. It seems that her failure to bring about a happy conclusion to the narrative of her own life reinforces the social and aesthetic model of the suffering widow.

The narrative on widowhood and its suffering is a silent one and is usually not a part of mainstream narratives. History has always marginalized widows and ignored their real-life stories and individualized voices. The pathetic situation of hundreds of widows at religious places like Vrindavan, Puri and Gaya is never mentioned in the socio-political discourse. Widowhood presents a problem to a society that is largely bound by patriarchal dictates. The traditional roles that are assigned to a woman as wife, daughter, mother or even prostitute are all defined by the presence of a patriarchal figure. However, a widow gains her identity through the absence of such a figure and hence defies social categorization. Their penance and suffering are seen as the badge of virtuosity and the trope of the 'honourable widow' is a myth invented by the patriarchy to serve its own needs. Steel's fiction explores various shades of the stereotype of the virtuous widow and it is the deviations that make her work interesting.

These deviations emerge in the form of insensitive and cruel widows such as Gunesh or Govind's respective mothers; expressions of desire as in Durga dei, Ananda or Veru; the wish to live independently as in Maimuna and Suttu or the exercise of limited agency as in Tara, Sarsuti, Atma and Parbutti. The last four women are unconventional because they take control of their lives and tenuously resist the injustices done to them by the patriarchal society by voluntarily accepting death. Steel's representations are largely

defined by her own interests and her implicit acknowledgement of the 'white woman's burden' that entailed the uplifting of downtrodden native women. The 19th century British discourse on native widows was majorly concentrated on religious sanctions and oppressive customs such as child-marriage, sati and widow remarriage even though many of these customs were class or region-specific or else quite infrequently practised. Steel's widows cover a wide range of characters that have different religious or class backgrounds yet suffering is the badge of their entire tribe. Their hardships bear witness to the brutality of colonial life and its customs – evident in the vicious cruelty of Gunesh's mother who feeds her dead grandchild to jackals and the temple priest who sacrifices the innocent Ananda in the name of religious orthodoxy. Most of the widows, whether morally innocent or culpable, receive no authorial comment or judgement. All possibilities of a better life are undermined when Steel lets the sociocultural status quo remain intact. Ananda is not able to fulfil her dream of settling down with Ramanund, Durga dei's hope of giving an heir to the family comes to nought, Atma, Tara and the unnamed widow in "The King's well" fail to bring to fruition their cross-religious and cross-cultural relationships with a Muslim emperor and English sahibs. Their deaths seem to be an affirmation of the belief that a widow has no right to live happily after the death of her husband. The fate of Gunesh, Govind and Ramanund's mothers after the loss of their sons remains in the dark. The only instances of a successful future life come through Western influence and not the personal agency as in the case of Suttu and Maimuna, thereby implicitly rationalizing the presence of the British rulers in India and their benevolent role in uplifting native women.

In a system that largely silences the voices of widows and would-be sati, Steel can be credited with creating her characters as individualized entities. While not all her narratives give equal space to these widowed characters, the range and diversity of her characterization are striking. However, portrayals of suffering betray no emotions on her part, her silence even seems to condone the very system of which these characters are victims. The absence of the empathizing authorial figure makes Steel's superior cultural position and hierarchical difference from the native widows apparent. There are no deviations from the status quo and the only culmination of these narratives lies in violent deaths or lifelong struggles. As a woman, Steel gave voice to these socially marginalized characters and their sufferings but as a memsahib, she could not envisage a better future for them without the intervention of Western colonial agency.

The texts bring before the reader two radically different narratives – that of native women and the other of the western woman. Although Steel had ample knowledge about

the women of the colony due to her extensive travels, yet she did not risk going beyond her imperial and gendered position. The plight of native widows was difficult to comprehend for a memsahib because English society was far more progressive and liberal in its approach to widowed women. The strictures of *patidharma* remained alien to her and were something that could only be broached impersonally from a distance. So even as she attempted to narrate the sad fate of colonial widows the gap between them and herself remained ever visible. Thus, the widows remain as marginalized figures and any attempt at relieving their condition is futile and doomed to failure except in certain cases like that of Suttu and Maimuna.

CONCLUSION

More British than the British.
Flora Annie Steel[1]

The imperative for social reform implicit in the white woman's colonial burden often emerges in rather paradoxical ways in Steel and in her narratives. Although few of her texts do show criticism of native orthodoxy and conservatism and the need for change yet her narratives seldom end on a note of positive social change. Steel was trapped in the colonial discourse and belief in the stereotype of the decadent empire that endangered civilizing missions of all kinds. Her image as an idealistic memsahib author carrying the 'white woman's burden' is often marked by contradictions. "Even while on the surface the need for social change is being urged, the underlying thrust of the narrative subverts the very possibility of reform."[2] Anglo-Indian women in their narrative representations often kept intact their own ideologies and beliefs even as they tried to send out a social message for the cause of Indian women. The complexity of this association always ensured a 'biased representational' pattern while discussing native women's issues. The trope of universal sisterhood falls flat when the native woman's question is critically investigated.

The published descriptive account of travel and exploration shaped the domestic understanding of the Europeans about the native colonies in the 19th century. The distant lands shaped, reflected and tainted their belief system. The memsahibs who visited the empire while adjusting to the comforts and disadvantages of the colonies also served as interpreters and disseminators of native cultural settings through their writings. The Indian colony became a land of opportunities for the memsahibs, most of whom were involved in literary endeavours. "The writer as a colonizer ought to be considered as more than a mere figure of speech, given the practical role which writing plays in the actual processes of colonial expansion and administration. In fact the structures of writing and those of political power can never be wholly distinguished from one another and the writer already colonizes

[1] Flora Annie Steel, *The Garden of Fidelity: Being the Autobiography of Flora Annie Steel, 1847-1929* (London: Macmillan, 1930), p.156.

[2] Indrani Sen, *Gendered Transactions: The White Woman in Colonial India, c. 1820–1930* (Manchester: Manchester UP, 2017), p.75.

that part of the discourse which is subject to negation."[3] The alien colonial space inspired, nurtured and educated a memsahib with its uniqueness, difference and variance. The colonial space with all its exoticism created a fruitful opportunity for these white women to intrude into the personal life of the subjugated and dominated native women, guiding them towards a new way of living that was influenced by western education, contemporary suffragette movements and Victorian ideals of freedom.

Steel in her novels and numerous short stories portrayed a literary image of native women from a memsahib's point of view. The ways in which a culture perceives an empire also defines the strategies by which it controls that empire. A colony could be better controlled and ruled if it proved to be orthodox, deformed, illiterate, deprived and underprivileged. "The philosophical self-creation of Europe was thus dependent on the constitution of the other: 'Europe has only been able to become a man through creating monsters and slaves.'"[4] Thus, the creation of a class of women who were uneducated, mentally deformed, socially deprived, physically impoverished and helpless was essential to establish the racial hierarchy and superiority of the memsahib. The gap between the white and the native woman shaped the civilizing project, the mission to rescue and educate the native made the process of manipulation easier. Working for the downtrodden woman in the garb of social activism and writing about their deplorable condition become a self-satisfactory and jingoistic endeavour for white women writers.

The gaze of a memsahib can never be entirely innocent and devoid of ideological insights. The colonial gaze provided a framework to recreate and refashion the concept of Indian womanhood in the empire. White women were always enticed and curious about native women and their lives. The memsahibs who visited or resided in the empire had mixed notions regarding the Indian womenfolk. The inner quarters or zenana life was projected as an exotic and desirable place. Fanny Parkes for example was fascinated to see the beauties of the royal harem, "haunted by the beautiful Mulka Begum."[5] Emily Eden, who was the sister of George Eden, the Governor General in India wrote letters containing

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[3] David Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire: Colonial Discourse in Journalism, and Fredric Jameson Travel Writing, and Imperial Administration* (Durham & London: Duke UP, 1993), p.93.

[4] Indira Ghose, *Women Travellers in Colonial India: The Power of the Female Gaze* (Delhi: Oxford UP, 1998), p.7.

[5] Fanny Parkes, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque, During Four and Twenty Years in the East, with Revelations of Life in the Zenana*, Vol. I (London: Pelham Richardson, 1850), p.383.

information about her experience of colonial life. In one of such letters, she described Raja Runjeet Singh's zenana quarter and her intense desire to "see some of these high-caste ladies several times…so as to hear their story and their way of life and their thoughts."[6] But Jemima Kindersley, on the other hand, showed contempt for the yellow complexion of Muslim native women and stated that red and white coloured skin tones would suit them better. Her mocking tone and critical perception of native life made the whites a "little superior in knowledge to the brute creation (natives)."[7] Lady Maria Nugent (during her stay in India from 1811 to 1814) reciprocated the physical isolation of the harem lady Munni Begum, the widow of Mir Jafar. She states, her "chief amusements are smoking the hookah, conversing with her attendants…and swimming painted little ducks."[8] Nugent totally erased the political influence Munni had during her time. Thus, in the writings, ambiguity and obscurity were perceived while dealing with the native women's questions. Fanny Parkes made no bones about her displeasure, "I was glad to see a zenana, but much disappointed: the women were not ladylike."[9] Homi Bhabha recalls this subjectification, a strategy of the ruler and the ruled, scenario to create the subject/object; an essential criterion for imperialism. The rationale for the superiority of English 'identity' is created through sexual, racial and hierarchical differences.[10] Native women's discourse was associated with sensuality and ignorance and seen as un-ladylike compared to white women. Emily Eden shared her superiority against the Indian women stating, "The poor ignorant creatures are perfectly unconscious what a very superior article an Englishwoman is. They think us

[6] Emily Eden, *Up the Country, Letters Written to Her Sister from the Upper Provinces of India* (London: Richard Bentley, 1867), p.237.

[7] Mrs. Kindersley, *Letters from the Island of Teneriffe, Brazil, the Cape of Good Hope and the East Indies* (London: J. Nourse, in the Strand, Bookseller to His Majesty. Kindersley, 1777), p.233.

[8] Ashley L. Cohen, *Lady Nugent's East India Journal: A Critical Edition* (New Delhi: Oxford UP, 2014), pp.216-17.

[9] Parkes, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim,* p.58.

[10] Homi K. Bhabha, "The Other Question: Stereotype, Discrimination and The Discourse of Colonialism" in *The Location of Culture* (London and New York: Routledge, 1994), p.67. This article was first published in *Screen* in November-December 1983 issue, title of the article was "The Other Question…Homi K Bhabha Reconsiders the Stereotype and Colonial Discourse". This article was a revision of a paper given at the Sociology of Literature Conference, Essex University, 1982 and published in Francis Barker, (ed.), The Politics of Theory, Colchester, 1983.

contemptible, if anything, which is a mistake."[11] This points out how the native woman was used as a means of white self-definition.

From 1830 onwards missionary activities took up the responsibility to create the empire and work out reformist projects involving native women. "The zenana was seen as the hub of ignorance and superstition, and therefore a fit object of the missionary's labour to bring in light and knowledge for their 'imprisoned sisters'."[12] The imperial reform movements were always linked with political and social agendas. Imbued with Victorian ideology and the rhetoric of colonial subjugation, Steel's fictive world comprised spaces where white women could portray themselves as saviours of their native sisters. The desire to penetrate the veiled 'other' space of native women was part of the imperialist and hegemonic initiative of the white women. "The figure of the Oriental woman has functioned as the veiled interior of Western identity, she calls into question dualistic conceptions of identity and difference, and of West and East."[13] It could be easily speculated that cultural and sexual differences were intertwined in colonial narratives. The way native women's questions were discussed, judged and admonished created a historical framework that justified a lack on the part of native women which necessitated western intervention and reform. Karl Marx erases Indian history when he says that, "Indian society has no history at all, at least no known history. What we call her history is but the history of successive intruders who founded their empires on the passive basis of that unresisting and unchanging society."[14] By erasing a nation's tradition and culture, the progress of the western world was constructed on the foundations of a regressive Eastern society.

Steel's fictional representation of her colonial sisters was filtered through imperialist and hegemonic ideology. Her role both as a resident memsahib in India and a white author writing for an English audience created a unique blend in her writing style. Steel's knowledge of the local languages and her ability to establish contact with the zenana women helped her to understand the alien native world better than her contemporaries like

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[11] Eden, *Up the Country*, p.132.

[12] Mrs. Weitbrecht, *The Women of India and Christian Work in the Zenana* (London: James Nisbet & Co., 1875), p.68.

[13] Meyda Yegenoglu, *Colonial Fantasies: Towards a Feminist Reading of Orientalism* (Cambridge: Cambridge UP, 1998), p.1.

[14] Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish: The Birth of the Prison* (1975), trans. Alan Sheridan (1977; New York: Vintage Books, 1995), p.322.

Rudyard Kipling, Philip Meadows Taylor and other memsahibs like Maud Diver for instance. As a colonizer and woman her racial and gendered roles contradicted each other. Steel enjoyed a typical memsahib's life in India but also maintained a distance from the British people in general. A busy husband and the loneliness of the empty parlour did not create a depressing and negative attitude in her. Rather, she toured the country, enjoyed the natural beauty and gathered gems for her creative writing. Her stories and novels show how closely she observed the orient and was influenced by it. She attempted to re-create herself through her creations and her reflections on the subaltern 'other' as something new or exotic. Being an officer's wife in the colony, she easily imbibed the manner of the colonial culture and participated in the imperialistic process that suited her position. By disseminating the difference between the cultures of the East and the West to the people of Britain, she fulfilled her loyalty to her imperial position.

She was calculative and intelligent enough to exert the exact degree of subordination and authority on her colonial women characters that shrewdly complemented her socio-political responsibility as a memsahib author. Her involvement with the women's cause while genuinely sympathetic was also an attempt to carry the invisible burden of her superior race. As a woman Steel showed genuine concern for native women's issues while being deeply rooted in her imperialistic attitude. She states, "The absolute necessity for high-handed dignity in dealing with those who for thousands of years have been accustomed to it."[15] On one hand, the author criticised the overtly sexual nature of native women, on the other hand, she praised their sacrificing attitude by creating a visual panorama of immolating women, self-sacrificing servants or married women. She romanticised the purity of the village wife and questioned the sensuality of courtesan or the corrupting attitude of town-bred Indian women. Thus, she constructed the norm of ideal behaviour for her native characters in the narratives that could be manipulated and adjusted as per her need.

Close contact with the native world, its customs, traditions, heritage, history, rules, regulations and culture, all influenced the author deeply. The colonial space was both hierarchical and gendered. Depiction of native women in this context was not only difficult but also problematic. The corpus of Steel's characters comprising married women like Sarsuti, Maya, Nihali, Uma, Kirpo, Kareema, Feroza, Hoshiaribi, Fatima, Maham,

[15] Steel, *The Garden of Fidelity*, p.113.

Mihrunnissa; courtesans like Gulabi, Siyah Yamin, Yasmeena, Rana-dil, Sobrai Begum, Chandni, Burfani; widows like Durga dei, Maimuna Begum, Suttu, Tara, Sarsuti, Veeru, Parbuti, the nameless widow in the story *The Kings Well*, Ananda, Ramanund's mother, Gunesh Chund's mother, Nihali, Atma Devi or servants like Mytab, Zainub, Dilaram and Fazli spanned across the spectrum of class, caste and religion. But all of them shared in a 'double marginalization' by virtue of their underprivileged and deprived position in society and also by virtue of being the inferior gender in a patriarchal society.

In order to portray Steel from a totally different framework, ten terms are taken into consideration to map her imperialist identity thereby erasing all superficial ambivalences. They are observation, entitlement, artistic creativity, ranking, defilement, denial, affirmation, glorification, eroticisation and resistance. These terms are chosen to represent the different facets of Steel's colonial existence and imperial ideology as revealed through her narratives. They trace the ways in which a white writer comprehended the discourse of the empire. As members of the colonial class; they morally, psychologically and physically legitimized their own position within the white community. The list of terms taken into consideration do not lay claim to being accurate, for there may be other ways to express the writer's colonial experience. In the present discussion, these terms are merely used to articulate Steel's authorial position and demonstrate her intellectual biases for her own people. The terms often overlap with each other and are not indicative of a singular monolithic position thus making them more appropriate for discussion. The slippage between categories is unavoidable and their critical assumptions are probable for the thesis.

The texts that are taken for analysis have been critically mapped through these above mentioned terms. The first term 'observation' refers to the imperial privilege of gazing and surveillance of the memsahibs on their native sisters. The white people were self-consciously aware of the power of their observation and the privilege accorded by the colonizer's gaze. The expression of the voice of one race over another was an ideological strategy. 'Looking back' was hardly ever an option for the native. The privilege of having a 'subject' position vis-à-vis the native 'objects' "offers aesthetic pleasure on one hand, information and authority on the other."[16] Thus, characters like Mytab and Zainub fail to voice their views or wishes against the textual trajectory that is traced for them by the author. The second term 'entitlement' allowed the colonizers the freedom of discourse and

[16] Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, p.15.

the acquired territory (native space) was inherited/surveyed as if it was their own, a phenomenon that Mary Louise Pratt calls "monarch of all I survey."[17] Steel uses the creative licence to depict her characters the way she wishes. Thus, Ananda is slaughtered at the Kali shrine without any shred of human dignity. 'Artistic creativity' by the memsahib author rationalizes a pattern of presentation that can be related to the idea of imperialism. "The writer's eye is always in some sense colonizing the landscape, mastering and portioning, fixing zones and poles, arranging and deepening the scene as the object of desire."[18] Steel's narrative technique provides the reader with pleasurable ignorance thus keeping them safely removed from the real condition of the natives. Through its deviation from the real, the author manipulates her creative world to suit the expectations of the western reading public. Tara and Sarsuti's committing Sati adds to the awe of the British readers.

The term 'ranking' examines the various ways the colonized is positioned in the mind of the colonizer. The author has assigned a particular position for the women in her narratives, enforcing the colonized 'object' of presentation within pre-defined boundaries and subordinate ranking. Sobrai Begum and Siyah Yamin are constructed as powerful figures but they lack a definite standpoint in their lives. By assigning and allotting space for assertion by native people, Steel creates her own privileged identity both as a memsahib and a writer. The next word 'defilement' very interestingly displays the corruption, pollution, savagery, illiteracy and uncivilized nature of the empire and its people. In a colonial setting, every native 'weaknesses' has its own related political discourse associated with it. Thus, sexual promiscuity, unemployment, filth, religious orthodoxy, health or sanitation, population growth were seen as symptoms of the hypocrisy of a particular nation. These various factors added to the overall impression of degeneration of the native culture and proclaimed its subordination successfully to the superior nation of the Britishers. Fazli, thus, is left to fend for her fate and adjust to her loss when her white master and mistress leaves the place after the death of their child. 'Denial' was a common strategy practised by Britishers to prove the barrenness, blankness and lack on the part of the colonizers. The constant reiteration of the disparity between the ruler and the ruled established the concept of empire. The absence of modern attitudes and lack of proper

[17] Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (New York: Routledge, 1992), p.201.

[18] Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, p.27.

governance made the existence of the colony possible and justifiable. "Colonialism may be seen as an extreme form of this social condition, where the constant threat to a precariously established order serves to intensify, in rhetoric as well as in more material forms of oppression, the obsessive repudiation of the Other."[19] Thus, denying and diminishing Chandni's authority and power when she becomes a threat to the whites is nothing but a shrewdly intelligent strategy.

'Affirmation' is another term that presents an ideal hegemonic 'ideology' to govern and rule the downtrodden and deprived. Western writing conceives of the 'Other' as absence, emptiness, nothingness, or death. Negating or rejecting the native 'object' creates an ideal space for the colonial expansion of the white 'subject'. "The writer is the original and ultimate colonizer, conquering the space of consciousness with the exclusionary and divisive structures of representation."[20] Thus, Feroza, Kirpo and Nihali are portrayed as a deprived lot without any possibility of changing their doomed future. The next chosen term 'glorification' shows that the Occident is always a prestigious, glorified, ideal space and the stark opposite of the Orient. Thus, the white woman or the memsahib author has the licence to portray the native people as they aspire to establish them. The native women who are given a chance to do away with their subjugated situation are given recognition by the author only to create an image of strong Victorian white women. Though the prospect of upliftment is visualized for her native sisters, Steel consciously creates a trap that will result in their fall at the end. She intentionally submits all the powerful and authoritative native women whether servants, widows, courtesans or married women/mothers into darkness. 'Eroticisation' is a term that is extensively related to virgin colonial land and colonial existence. The overt sexuality of native women, primarily the courtesans are seen as a threat to peaceful domesticity. The fertility of the land and the body is seen to be an object of interest and scrutiny to the whites. The exotic body of Sobrai is seen as a threat to the respectable public and domestic existence of the whites. Although many other native women characters are depicted with a ray of hope at the beginning, with time they too have a doomed future. The memsahib sanctions plunder and exploration of the native woman's body, the colonial space and even the natural surroundings by an alien gaze but always maintains an imperial distance. Steel never expresses the racist attitude distinctly in her

[19] Spurr, *The Rhetoric of Empire*, p.79.

[20] Ibid., p.93.

narratives. She tries to camouflage her hegemonic ideologies and the white woman's burden. But her reinforcement and justification of imperial governance makes her colonial baggage visible to the readers. Last but not least, the term, 'resistance' (in the sense of maintaining a distance) is practised by the whites to do away with colonial interference, mixing and creating the gap and hierarchy between the West and the East. Steel has considered and constructed her native women as subjugated, deprived and vulnerable and thus their upliftment becomes an imperialist project. The only exceptions being the two Mughal queens, Maham and Mihrunnissa who enjoyed power and prestige during their lifetime.

Steel's creative discourse thus becomes nothing but a manifestation of power and authority. "Power produces knowledge (and not simply by encouraging it because it serves power or by applying it because it is useful); that power and knowledge directly imply one another; that there is no power relation without the correlative constitution of a field of knowledge, nor any knowledge that does not presuppose and constitute at the same time power relations."[21] The acquired knowledge and power of the memsahib influenced her creative world as well as her behavioural patterns. Her narrative discourse was thus influenced by her culturally, traditionally and hierarchically acquired knowledge. Steel's native women characters are created by keeping her imperial and racial standpoint intact. The author's gendered position made her empathetic to the deprivation and domination of native women but she also remained conscious of her imperial role as a memsahib. Mary Louise Pratt explains this mutual interaction as taking place within a 'contact zone' where two races mix with each other and transculturation takes place.[22] The depiction of the 'other(ed)' culture created a power structure for the colonizer. But in many cases, despite her intelligence, creativity and feminist leanings, Steel failed to erase her imperial identity.

The native women characters in this present work have been critically discussed from socialistic and colonialist perspectives. Steel has created and identified her native characters, as an ideal memsahib writer should conform to the prototype of a white woman author. The system of colonial surveillance and control dominated her both as a human being and as an author. Her understanding of the alien space and its native women, conforms to the preconceived notions of a colonial travel writer who was mindful of her

[21] Foucault, *Discipline and Punish,* p.27.

[22] Mary Louise Pratt, "Arts of the Contact Zone," *Profession* (1991), p.36.

larger reading audience. Steel connected herself with the cause of the colonial woman by empathizing with their cause, suffering, deprivation as well as with their intelligence and the little joys of their lives. On one hand, her feminine nature nurtured such characters, on the other hand, as a prominent icon of the empire, she neglected them as well. Steel fails to reimagine and reclaim the native world beyond narrow colonial borders. Her claims to (un)equal sisterhood in her fictional and non-fictional worlds ultimately underscores the moral and cultural superiority of English women.

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Dated: