

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

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Memsahibs who visited India in the 19th century wrote primarily about their first-hand experience of British life in a new land, projecting themselves as social reformers who were concerned about the rescue of native women from age-old orthodox practices such as polygamy, child marriage or infanticide and improving their lot by uplifting the taboo against widow remarriage or female education. By evincing sympathetic concern for native women and presenting themselves as ‘angels of rescue’, white women justified their presence and rationalized their need within the colony. Such thinking conforms to 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.

Unlike their less fortunate compatriots back home, white women in the colonies enjoyed special privileges of social advancement, luxurious and leisurely lifestyle yet their gendered position in a staunchly patriarchal society always made their inferiority to the sahibs explicit. The colony became a home away from their motherland that offered the prospect of a settled and comfortable life. The exhilaration of exploring a new land and the new authority contingent upon their social and racial position proved irresistible to these women. 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. The perils and trials of the outside world were seen as a practical threat to the memsahib. Thus, their interactions with native inhabitants were usually negligible and the opportunity of mixing avoided at all costs. In the colonial domestic space, native helping hands were the only acquaintances memsahibs had and thus knowledge of the empire remained in many cases limited and even biased.

Such documentations of life in the empire usually fall within the larger 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. Writers such as Bithia Mary Croker (1849-1920), Sara Jeannette Duncan (1861-1922), Rudyard Kipling (1865-1936), Alice Perrin (1867-1934) and Maud Diver (1867-1945) 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. Raj

writings are usually marked by a polarizing attitude that portrays sahibs or white people as progressive and morally strong, committed to the service/rescue of socially deprived, morally corrupt and racially inferior natives. Such ideological binaries 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.

A similar dichotomy also informs the Raj writings of Flora Annie Steel (1847-1929) who came to India in 1867 as the wife of Henry William Steel, an engineer with the Indian Civil Service. Her mother's family had estates in Jamaica and she was thus familiar with the workings of the colonial regime. While in India, she devoted herself to the cause of the downtrodden and deprived class of her own sex. She held an important post as an Inspectress of Government and Aided Schools in Punjab. Steel lived in India until 1889 and left for Scotland after her husband's retirement. She started writing while staying in India but wrote vigorously only after leaving the colony. Her vast corpus includes *From the Five Rivers* (1893), *The Flower of Forgiveness* (1894), *The Potter's Thumb: A Novel* (1894), *In the Permanent Way, and Other Stories* (1897), *On the Face of the Waters: A Tale of Mutiny* (1897), *A Prince of Dreamers* (1908), *India through the Ages; A Popular and Picturesque History of Hindustan* (1908), *King-Errant* (1912), *Mistress of Men: A Novel* (1918), *The Builder* (1928) among others. Her long stay of about twenty-two years in the colony inspired her to incorporate Indian characters, particularly women in her works.

Steel 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, 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 realize the condition of the native people. Steel's personal interest in vernacular languages, indigenous customs, reform projects and grassroots pedagogy gave her the opportunity to interact with a wide range of native women. 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 are reflected in the characters that emerge in her works.

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 an alien

space from a different, less exoticized and more realistic perspective. Moreover, female travel writers are far more emotionally, physically and mentally invested with the ‘other’ space than male writers thereby revealing a fresh perspective to the relationship between the East and the West. Steel wrote novels about historical figures such as Mughal queens as well as about the daily struggles of ordinary married women, widows and servants revealing her in-depth knowledge and understanding of Indians and their daily lives.

The passage of time has taken a toll on Steel’s literary relevance, barring a few noteworthy scholarly works. Despite the detailed analysis of 19th century travel writing or Raj fiction in the previous scholarly works, none of them advocate research towards a single author or detailed and analytical case studies of Steel concentrating only on the native women characters of her works. Apart from biographies such as those by Daya Patwardhan and Violet Powell, modern critical interpretations received a significant push with Benita Parry, Jenny Sharpe, Patrick Brantlinger, Nancy Paxton, Sangeeta Ray, Alan Johnson, Danielle Neilson and Helen Pike Bauer. Her novels, short stories and other non-fictional works have been critically discussed by Anna Johnston and Ralph Crane, Shampa Roy and Grainne Godwin. 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” 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, she appears as a racist and stereotypical imperialist white woman to Parry and Allen Greenberger. Paxton also shares the same notion with Greenberger stating that Steel “constantly compromised” the cause of native women in order to fruitfully depict the British. Indrani Sen finds her ambivalent and ‘riddled with contradiction’ in her analysis of Steel. 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 works show her sympathies for native women. Second, as an imperialist author who ‘brooks no nonsense from natives of all classes.’ Third, as an ambivalent author fraught with paradoxes. The present thesis intends to show Steel as an imperialist after critically examining her native women characters 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 in Steel with a definite authorial position which has remained lacking till date. British women writers like Steel created memorable characters but they carry along the baggage of imperialism and class consciousness.

Although her outlook on the Indian question seemed lenient yet a belief in cultural and racial superiority was submerged within her literary thinking and thus her artistic biases require analysis.

This research aims to explore in detail the representation of the range of native women characters in both her popular and lesser known 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. Memsahib's 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? In order to make a more nuanced reading of her women characters, this dissertation has been divided into four sub-sections. This four-fold division helps to overcome the drawbacks of a homogenising approach by dividing the female characters in terms of the different social, economic and mental psychological they occupied in Steel's fictional world.

Missionary work from the late 18th century and the advent of western education in India brought a slow though a gradual change in native women's consciousness and they became a part of the emancipatory project of the West. 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. The first chapter titled "Married Women: The Dilemmas of Domesticity", discusses how Steel portrays marriage and its consequences as an essential part of a colonial woman's life. Steel spent a couple of years in India and took a deep interest in zenana life. She had a considerable amount of knowledge about the married woman's daily experiences and was also aware of their deprivation at the hands of men.

Marriage is a complex social phenomenon and the author shows through her narratives the underprivileged, static, superficial lives of native child-brides, barren women, co-wives, surrogate mothers or barren women irrespective of whether she was a queen of the Mughal dynasty or an ordinary woman. Steel peeps deep into their lives, creating them as palpable entities and granting them an emotional life but her authorial agency is put to question at the end of the narratives. In the historical novels, her 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. In the novel *Mistress of Men: A Novel* (1918) Steel portrays queen Nurjahan or Mihrunnissa, who gets married to Jahangir, as a charismatic personality, exceptionally beautiful, powerful and a supremely intelligent

politician. In the novel *King Errant* (1912) Maham, the main consort of Babar is a much more ordinary woman yet one who exercised her powers to make her son Humayun, the heir to the Mughal Empire.

The less privileged native women characters like Saraswati in the short story “The Sorrowful Hour”, Nihali in “Amor Vincit Omnia” or Uma in the short story “Uma Himavutee” (from the collection *In the Permanent Way and Other Stories*, 1897) shows the plight of ordinary married women and their unfortunate plight in a patriarchal society. 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. Feroza in the eponymous short story “Feroza” from the collection *The Flower of Forgiveness* (1894) aspires to change her degraded life through Western education. But her western educated husband, Ahmed Ali’s double standards and treachery leads to the loss of her dream of a happy conjugal life and ultimately she commits suicide. The short story “At a Girls’ School” (from the collection *From the Five Rivers*, 1893), also conveys the sad narrative of Hoshiaribi who is forced into prostitution even after getting the benefits of an English education that ironically is not able to sustain her body and soul. The crippled girl, Kirpo in the short story “Mussumat Kirpo’s Doll” (from the collection *The Flower of Forgiveness*, 1894) is a student on paper in the local missionary school. She gets a Japanese doll by chance and it becomes her prized possession. Yet circumstances lead to the loss of her doll and even on her deathbed, she craves for it rather than her new-born infant. Her sad fate makes a mockery of the attempted change these women aspire through education. A few of the characters like Suttu in the short story “Suttu” (from the collection *From the Five Rivers*, 1893) and Maimuna in the story “An Appreciated Rupee” (from the collection *The Mercy of the Lord*, 1914) keep faith in the empire and believe in its power of protection. They experiment with their lives and ultimately fail in the process of changing their lives. The expression of superiority along with the white woman’s burden results in rejection, domination and failure for these native women. Seldom are the characters rescued from their deprived position. Steel refuses to give her characters, both historical and commonplace, artistic immunity from disastrous endings. She rejects any form of upliftment for them and the stereotyped endings bring out her colonial sympathies. 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 precolonial India courtesans (also referred to as *devadasis* and *tawaifs* 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. 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. The second chapter titled "Courtesans: Sensuality Unveiled", examines the representation of courtesans and prostitutes who were perceived as a threat to the peaceful conjugal life of white women. After the revolt of 1857, the relationship between the Britishers and Indians totally changed. 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 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. The white women who visited the empire seldom sympathized with these overtly eroticized and attractive native women since they offered a threat to the domestic space. This class of native women enjoyed both power and economic freedom which was seldom available to white women. The insensitivity and lack of understanding of the memsahib made the courtesan either a disgusting spectacle or a dangerous threat. Thus, the white people denied accepting the hierarchical and socio-traditional difference between a courtesan and a prostitute.

In the short story "A Debt of Honour" (from the collection *The Flower of Forgiveness*, 1894), Gulabi the court singer saves the life of Smith Jones. Jones repays the debt of his and his forefathers and the kiss he gives to the courtesan is the act that gives ultimate release and salvation to Gulabi. The idea of centring a story 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. Rana-dil, who unites in marriage with Prince Dara, the son of Shahjahan, in the novel *The Builder* (1928) is a prostitute. But her intelligence, sensitive behaviour and commitment towards her lover portray a different picture of her. In the end, she commits suicide but her role both as a wife and courtesan preserves her distinguished position in the text. Sobrai Begum in the novel *Voices in the Night: A Chromatic Fantasia* (1900) is the exact opposite of Rana-dil. Sobrai joins prostitution to enjoy physical pleasures and her overtly sexual body makes her a spectacle. But she represented the alter-ego of British woman traveller and the attractiveness of the courtesan was offset by her racial status. In the novel, *The Potter's Thumb: A Novel* (1894) the courtesan Chandni is a rare combination of beauty and intelligence. She enjoys her power and authority dwarfing even the white people with her cunning intrigues. But in the end, Steel resists from assigning any change in her future and confines her to the quarters of infamy. Siyah Yamin from the novel *A Prince of Dreamers* (1988) is a courtesan who in her childhood was consecrated as a *devadasi*. Her theft of the Kohinoor diamond in the story and betrayal make

her ending tragic and is probably Steel's way of negotiating between the courtesan's freedom and her dangerous sensuality. Yasmeena in "A Tourist Ticket" (from the collection *In the Permanent Way and Other Stories*, 1897) is projected as a prostitute who has sold her soul to the devil. Her conspiracy and theft make Raheem the craftsman, a lifetime cripple. Yasmeena's portrayal as a cunning and degraded prostitute who exploits men to lead a better life shows how Steel conforms to the stereotype of the sensual and degenerate native sex-worker. Steel tries to give Burfani, another woman of ill fame, in the story "Fire and Ice" (from the collection *In the Guardianship of God*, 1903) a different portrayal but her death by burning questions Steel's attempt to change the life of the prostitute. The author celebrates the intelligence and temperament of her courtesan characters but neither of them is immune from ultimate destruction. They either succumb to death or are silenced thereby making Steel's rhetoric of upliftment a sham.

The third chapter titled "Domestic Servants: The (In)significance of Servitude" examines the native women servant figures in Steel's selected works. The manner, motive and method of the helping hands and their servitude in colonial spaces is presented and analysed in detail. The memsahibs who came to the empire in most cases had servants as their only companions. Lurking behind curtains, in the kitchen or in the verandah, their presence in the narratives seems almost spectral yet they were a crucial element in providing service to their white masters. A disciplined and faithful servant was sought for in order to make life in the empire enjoyable and relaxing. But they are heard and their existence felt only when they are required to perform their service roles. Their voices come to us in most cases filtered through the author/narrator. Although masters and servants often shared a certain amount of closeness to create a reliable and trustworthy relationship yet the gap always existed.

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. The figure of the ayah is quite common in colonial narratives as they are seen as the first and most reliable comforters and supporters in a mistress's life. In the short story, "Feroza" in the collection *The Flower of Forgiveness* (1894) the duenna Mytab is positioned as a caregiver and companion of Feroza and Kareema. She consoles Feroza when her husband betrays her and decides to take a second wife. Feroza commits suicide after her hard-earned English education fails to provide her a happy conjugal life as she had imagined. The duenna is the only person who sympathizes with her and she is deeply affected by the

mistress's sudden death. 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. Zainub, the duenna in the novel *The Potter's Thumb* (1894) is manipulated by Chandni, the courtesan to fulfil her cunning schemes against the sahibs. Zainub plays along when she is instructed to introduce Azizan to tempt the sahib but with time she feels ashamed to be part of the plan and revolts. She finally loses her life on the secret stairway leading to the tower and remains mummified there as a punishment for her crimes. In the novel, *Mistress of Men* (1918), Dilaram is a helping hand who performs her role as a surrogate mother, takes care of the household and remains a friend, helper and guardian to her mistress Nurjahan. But her exit from the narrative is abrupt and no other information is given about her by the author in the end of the novel. Dilaram in a way holds authority and command as long as she performs her role and duty to her master. Her disposal from the text reminds of her lowly position as a helping hand. In the short story "Shah Sujah's Mouse" (from the collection *From the Five Rivers*, 1893), the helping hand Fazli is a troublemaker. She 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. Her negligence and inhuman behaviour makes her a detestable character and she is left in the narrative to fend for her fate, in comparison to all the other servants of Steel. Whether portrayed as good or evil, all servant characters are removed from the narrative through death and the author's silence about them once their productivity ceases is noticeable. Steel's detachment is a symbol of the colonial uneasiness vis-à-vis the native servant.

The fourth chapter titled "Widows: The Living Sati" 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 are analysed from the perspective of sati and widow characters. The death of a husband deprives a woman of the authority she enjoys in her marital house. She becomes a valueless figure, a social outcast and is faced with innumerable struggles and deprivations. The patriarchal society imposes various rituals, fasts, dress codes, diet restrictions and behavioral norms on a widow, making her life intolerable. Widows were seen as an economic burden, socially unproductive and culturally inauspicious. Many widows, to save themselves from everyday negligence accepted death by burning as an easier option for freedom from their deplorable lives. The colonizers saw the immolation of women on the funeral pyre of their husbands as both a spectacle and an inhuman act of sacrifice. Both the

display of sati and the unfortunate plight of women who refused to commit the act were of topical relevance to the western reader.

Durga dai in the short story “In the House of Coppersmith” (from the collection *The Flower of Forgiveness*, 1894) is portrayed as a sexually frustrated widow. In order to gain back her position and prestige within the family, she establishes a sexual relationship with her brother-in-law. Taking the role of a seductress, she aspires to gain motherhood but in the end, is betrayed by her lover. She murders him and 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. Tara in the mutiny novel, *On the Face of the Waters* (1897) is a living sati. She is saved from her husband’s funeral pyre by Jim Douglas but in the end, she immolates herself. Sarsuti in the story “The Footsteps of a Dog” (from the collection *The Mercy of the Lord*, 1914) also commits sati but her death is more of a protest than a sacrifice against the patriarchal domination imposed on her. In “A Maiden’s Prayer” (from *The Mercy of the Lord*, 1914), Parbutti commits suicide by throwing a bomb after her fiancé’s death. Although she never gets married to the man nor consummates her marriage, she is still designated as a widow. Her death is a form of symbolic protest against her family members and society who fail to provide her with emotional and physical support to live. The unnamed widow in the story “The Kings Well” (from the collection *In the Permanent Way and Other Stories*, 1897) faces an unfortunate and horrible death at the hands of white soldiers without committing any crime. 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.

Nihali’s mother-in-law, a widow in the story “Amor Vincit Omnia” (from the collection *In the Permanent Way and Other Stories*, 1897) and Gunesh Chund’s mother in the story “Gunesh Chund” (from the collection *From the Five Rivers*, 1893) are portrayed as cunning, inhuman and corrupted people who destroy entire families at the end. The stories “An Appreciated Rupee” from the collection *The Mercy of the Lord* (1914) and “Suttu” from the collection *From the Five Rivers* (1893) bring into focus socio-economic evils. Even though they suffer ill-treatment and are victims of patriarchy, yet Maimuna (in “An Appreciated Rupee” from the collection *The Mercy of the Lord*, 1914) and Suttu (in “Suttu” from the collection *From the Five Rivers*, 1893) show an indomitable spirit to fight against all odds. In “On the Second Story” (from the collection *In the Permanent Way and Other Stories*, 1897) Ananda, a widow is given as a human sacrifice at the Kali shrine for loving Ramanunda. Seldom does Steel use her authorial position to provide any solution to their condition. Thus,

despite the unfortunate plight of her widow characters the author often remains silent spectators to their suffering or prescribes death to these women in the end.

Memsahib writers articulated their own ideologies, beliefs and social biases through their narrative representations. As this present work has tried to show through an analysis of select texts, Steel's representation of and sympathy for native women is very often undermined by her imperialist beliefs. While as a woman she is conscious of the deprivation and patriarchal subjugation of native women she is equally mindful of her position as a memsahib. Art unlike factual history has the power to re-create the real world in new ways yet most of Steel's characters like their real life counterparts remain confined to their drudging lives. In certain cases, where she portrays native women as fighters who clash against patriarchy and show courage to revolt against social and familial atrocities, Steel seldom gives them the opportunity to evolve and their freedom is shown to be an exception rather than the norm. Colonial women who try to rise against circumstances are either rare or their modern enlightened thinking is seen to be a by-product of western education. Such women are shown to possess extraordinary personalities and characteristics that are in consonance with the ideals of the western world, so Steel gives them the opportunity to thrive but only for a limited period. Steel's own personal experiences and struggles sub-consciously influenced the portrayal of her characters but her realism and compassion was counterbalanced by the constancy of her commitment to her own class of people, her narratives are thus a very subtle assertion of her imperial power and authority.

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