

“I know nothing about them, nor I don’t wish to”: The *memsahib* and the myth of the lost Empire

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M. Sc. Economic and Social History

16 March 2000

It has long been said that the biggest mistake the British made in India was to bring their women out, thus making it impossible to meet Indians as friends. New standards of racial prejudice were, it was said, imposed by hostesses drawing intricate distinctions between shades of colour, as the memsahibs elaborated an imperial social etiquette. They combined an exhaustive knowledge of precedence within European society with a lamentable ignorance of anything outside it... Moping and sickly, narrowly intolerant, vindictive to the locals, despotic and abusive to their servants, usually bored, invariably gossiping viciously, prone to extra-marital affairs, cruelly insensitive to Indian women and hopelessly insulated from them—such is the memsahib stereotype.¹

—Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality*

So Ronald Hyam summarizes the memsahib myth in his celebrated or infamous 1990 book, *Empire and Sexuality*. Hyam then attempts to let the memsahib off the hook. He admits that the social separation of Indian society from Anglo-Indian society in the late nineteenth century was a matter of deliberate policy, that the government encouraged the importation of British wives precisely in order to build and maintain that separation, and that it was Englishmen who created, defined, and regulated the role of the Englishwoman in India.² But in the end he finds the traditional account impossible to resist. In the conclusion of his book he writes: “when all the objections have been rehearsed, the idea that memsahibs were at least in part centrally involved in the deterioration of race relations from the 1860s still will not quite go away... the timing remains evidence of a remarkable correlation, to say the least.”³

Leaving aside the question of how one can be “in part centrally involved,” one cannot help but remember the statistician’s first maxim: Correlation does not indicate causality. There was more to the changes in the colonial world than the coming of the wives and the turning inward of Anglo-Indian society. A whole host of developments contributed to the institutionalization of racial difference in the colonies. Margaret Strobel provides a partial list: “intensified appropriation of indigenous land and/or labor, a heightened racial prejudice, the growth of evangelical Christianity with its ethnocentrism and attack on nonmarital and nonmonogamous liaisons, a shortage of administrative personnel, and the increased numbers of women *and* men.”⁴ The growing population of white women in the colonies was not the cause of any of these. It was, rather, a symptom, deliberately fostered, of a sea change in British attitudes and policies. What evolved in response to that change was a social system that maintained itself in the colonies by the steady importation and indoctrination of British women. They were already Victorians when they came out; the system made them Anglo-Indians.

¹ Hyam 119

² Hyam 119

³ Hyam 208

⁴ Strobel 2

“It took little time,” Margaret MacMillan writes, “for most of the women who came out to India at the height of the Raj to become memsahibs.”⁵ They quickly adapted to the requirements of their new society; and the requirements were strict. The Anglo-Indian community was insular, conformist, a nest of prejudices, habits, and rules. With all the stresses of moving to a new community halfway around the world it must have come as something of a relief to the newly arrived British wife that she was not expected to know, or to learn, much of India or Indians; rather the reverse. One Madras lady of the 1830s, asked what she had seen of the ‘natives’, replied “Oh, nothing! Thank goodness, I know nothing at all about them, nor I don’t wish to: really I think the less one sees and knows about them the better.”⁶

At most the memsahib might learn enough of the local language to order the servants—indeed, English-speaking servants were regarded as untrustworthy, and those, such as the wives of British Army officers, who had to have them were looked on with pity and contempt.⁷ But anything more than the necessary rude forms and imperatives—anything one would need to converse with Indians as social equals—was “not done”.⁸ By the late nineteenth century, the social separation of India and Anglo-India was effectively complete, but it was British men more than British women that insisted on it. Using *purdah* as an excuse to separate European women and Indian men, they argued: “Their argument,” Anne Wilson wrote in the early 1900s, “is that until an Indian gentleman will allow them to meet his wife, they will not allow him to meet an English lady.” English ladies could meet the Indian gentleman’s wife, of course, but ignorance of the local language combined with alien and intolerant Victorian mores made it hard for British women to talk to Indian women and left them little to talk about.⁹ “For the most part,” MacMillan writes, “the races did not make much attempt to understand each other.”¹⁰

It had not always been thus. There had been British women in India long before there were memsahibs in the way we have come to imagine them; the wives of private merchants and of Company servants were the center of Calcutta society at least as far back as the 1780s.¹¹ The contempt of the English for India, and of the Englishwoman in particular, was a relatively recent development. In the days when the representatives of the East India Company dealt with Indian merchants and nobles as equals, or even as supplicants, British women learned Indian languages, read Indian books, admired Indian styles and customs, and enjoyed the company of *zenana* women.¹² Their example demonstrates, as Francis Hutchins said, that whatever one

⁵ MacMillan 55

⁶ MacMillan 56

⁷ Allen and Mason 71-72

⁸ MacMillan 56

⁹ MacMillan 60

¹⁰ MacMillan 61

¹¹ MacMillan 68

¹² MacMillan 56-57

might think of the Englishwoman in India, “moralism, domesticity, and racial bigotry were not necessary attributes of her sex.”

If the Victorian memsahib exhibited more of these characteristics than her predecessors, she was reflecting a general shift in British attitudes, made all the more harsh by the strictures of colonial society.¹³ One cannot blame the changing face of the Raj on the ‘mistake’ of ‘bringing the women out’; the mid-nineteenth century English wife in India may have been a different creature from her predecessors, but so was her husband a different sort of man from those who had come before. “The early years of the British presence had called for adventurers, if not scoundrels; by the nineteenth century, administrators were needed,” writes MacMillan. These new men, “the empire-builders, the Henry Lawrences with their prayers and their sense of mission... were getting the wives they wanted—and deserved.”¹⁴

The nabobs of the eighteenth century had been able to buy their way into the aristocracy, or at least the aristocratic lifestyle, when they returned to England; though the mortality rate among young ‘writers’ coming out to India in the Company’s service exceeded fifty percent, until perhaps the 1770s a man who survived twelve or fifteen years’ service could reasonably expect to come home with a fortune amounting to tens of thousands of pounds.¹⁵ The middle-class ICS administrators of the nineteenth century were in a different situation: their salaries were high, very high by government standards, but there was no possibility of coming home with a fortune. They could live like aristocrats in India—indeed, they had to; the post-Mutiny Anglo-Indian code of conduct would permit nothing less—but their new lifestyle was only temporary, to be lost when they returned to England.¹⁶ More important than lifestyle, however, was status—especially status vis-à-vis Indian society. Strobel writes:

Elaborate social rituals maintained the social distance between Europeans and indigenous peoples and reinforced social hierarchy within the European community. Guarding the social boundaries often fell to women, as it did in Britain.... The disparaging picture of shallow women engaged in frivolous social conventions derives at least in part from our contemporary disparagement of the idea of Society and our failure to understand the function of these rituals in a colonial context.¹⁷

The 1857 Mutiny and its accompanying civil rebellion ushered in a new strictness in colonial rule. The memsahib was given the task of enforcing within the house the same colonial order her husband enforced outside; the task, in Thomas Metcalf’s words, “of a masculine assertion of ordering rationality in the face of a feminized India.”¹⁸ The home was “the front line of a battlefield”; the memsahib’s treatment of her servants mirrored her husband’s treatment of Indians he came into contact with at

¹³ Hutchins 107

¹⁴ MacMillan 62

¹⁵ Marshall 230

¹⁶ Hutchins 107-108

¹⁷ Strobel 9

¹⁸ Metcalf 178

work, whether petitioners or dignitaries—a fundamental component of Britain’s “rule by prestige”.¹⁹ Contemporary observers were well aware of this interplay: they knew that, as Flora Annie Steel wrote in 1904, “an Indian household can no more be governed peacefully, without dignity and prestige, than an Indian Empire.”²⁰ And though it was the need to impress the natives that was advanced as the justification for the greater strictness of Anglo-India as compared with Home, that strictness also had the real function of keeping the exotic hothouse plant of Victorian society alive in a hostile environment.²¹ As Hutchins writes: “It was a highly artificial society, so tightly knit that it exerted a compelling pressure on all of its members. It was a society dedicated to keep alive the memory of English life, hence inclined to foster feelings of self-pity and dissatisfaction with the imperfect replica—which was all that was possible under Indian conditions.”²² The memsahibs were not innocent, of course, not merely pawns on some man’s game of empire. But neither were they responsible for creating the situation they helped to perpetuate. And by concentrating on the figure of the memsahib the historian risks losing sight of a larger picture, in which the interaction between white women and empire was much more complex and variegated. There were many white women in colonial India who were not memsahibs as we understand them, and their numbers and variety only increased as the Raj neared its end.

The memsahibs came almost exclusively from the middle classes. Lower-class women seem to be a largely silent presence in the history of Imperial India. Occasionally some individual woman might make enough of a splash to attract notice, generally censure, as in the case of Florry Bryan’s 1893 marriage to the Maharaja of Patiala. “Not only did the marriage transgress against the social distance mandated by imperial ideology,” Strobel writes, “but his high social status and her lower-class background confused even more the racial, sexual, and class hierarchies of Empire.”²³ Official policy might make note of certain lower-class women *as* a class; European prostitutes were a particular thorn in the side of the administration as, like Miss Bryan, they confused the race and gender hierarchies that underlay the Raj; their “immoral” behavior also was thought to reflect badly on Europeans as a race, further undermining British authority.²⁴ But the memsahibs would no more mention such women in their correspondence than they would invite them into their drawing-rooms; and as for the sahibs, they found little enough of interest in their own wives (“with few exceptions,” MacMillan writes, “the men say far more about favourite horses and dogs”); they could hardly be expected to record the details of the lives of those outside their social circle.²⁵ If these women themselves recorded their experiences,

¹⁹ Allen and Mason 61-62

²⁰ quoted in Metcalf, 179

²¹ Hutchins 28-29

²² Hutchins 101

²³ Strobel 4

²⁴ Metcalf 103

²⁵ MacMillan 52

their works seem to have escaped the archives. But it appears that there were considerable numbers of them and that their history has yet to be written.

The Victorians believed in feminine purity, but not in feminine equality—indeed, the two were fundamentally incompatible. “Women were elevated to a pedestal,” Hutchins writes, “where they were expected to stay.” Public affairs were the domain of masculine men; women could no more be expected to deal with them than could the ‘effeminate Bengali’.²⁶ But the second half of the nineteenth century saw the gradual emergence of the ‘new woman’, individual, independent of family ties and conventional restraints.²⁷ The colonies gave some of these women opportunities they would not have had at home. Missionary work, for instance, was an early outlet for European women looking for an escape on the constraints of life in the home country.²⁸ The wives of male missionaries had always played an important part in mission work, but the nineteenth century saw growing numbers of independent women coming to India as missionaries in their own right, where they founded women’s groups, girls’ schools and orphanages. They were pioneers in women’s health and women’s medical education. They taught secluded women in their homes and if they failed to make many converts they set a precedent for Indian women’s education.²⁹

By the late nineteenth century it had become possible to discuss social reform without discussing Christianity. The development of new, secular ideas of social reform in Europe and the United States led, following reformers back home like Elizabeth Fry, Josephine Butler, and Florence Nightingale, to a new class of reform-minded women coming to India, women who believed in the ‘civilizing mission’ of empire and worked independently for reform outside of the missionary system and often without reference to explicitly Christian values. There were educators like Mary Carpenter and Annette Ackroyd (later Beveridge), doctors like Edith Pechey and Mary Rutnam, and social reformers like the radical Christian preacher Amy Carmichael, the American ‘muckraker’ Katherine Mayo, and the MP and political organizer Eleanor Rathbone.³⁰

If these reformers were motivated by a belief in the superiority of modern Western values, there was another group of independent-minded European women who were motivated to come to India by an explicit rejection of modernity and Western orthodoxy. Institutional Christianity had been under attack by rationalist humanists at least since Voltaire and Rousseau; as Enlightenment optimism gave way to post-materialist malaise, both rationalism and orthodox religion came under threat from a new interest in astrology, magic, and the occult.³¹ The spiritualist movement

²⁶ Hutchins 49-50

²⁷ Jayawardena 9

²⁸ Jayawardena 21

²⁹ Jayawardena 26

³⁰ Jayawardena 65-66

³¹ Jayawardena 108, 112

combined with the ‘Oriental Renaissance’ in art and scholarship to produce a great deal of interest in ‘Eastern’ religion, philosophy, and culture, the most well-known expression of which was the Theosophical Society founded by Madame Blavatsky. Spiritualism had always had a strong feminist or at least female-centric component, and Theosophy’s Blavatsky and Annie Besant were only the most famous and influential of the women leaders the movement produced.³² In India the theosophists preached universal brotherhood and women’s equality, founded schools and clubs, and involved themselves with nationalist politics. Despite the shakiness of their theology they provided a sense of national self-esteem to many Indians and an ideology to agnostic, anti-colonialist Europeans. The theosophists’ romanticization of India, rejection of Christian universalism and white superiority, and rebellion against European social constraints were a powerful attraction to both reform-minded Indian men and independent-minded Western women, and numbers of the latter were attracted to India as “teachers, social reformers, and propagators of the new faith.”³³

The theosophist belief in ‘Eastern wisdom’ had a price, of course. The essentialization of ‘East’ and ‘West’ as categories, leading to a double standard: Annie Besant, for instance, supported militant suffragettes in England but preached “gentleness and obedience” in India. A rejection of Europe’s ‘civilizing mission’ was also an acceptance—even an idealization—of Indian patriarchy.³⁴ But the Indian patriarchy was likewise often accepting of them, as it was not of the colonial memsahib. The idea that it was the snobbish, isolated, deliberately parochial Englishwomen who ‘lost’ India is particularly interesting in light of the real complexities of the relationship between white women and the Indian nationalist movement. The reformers, who, far from being isolated, learned as much about India as they could, even if they disapproved of it, drew much more vocal opposition than the housewives in the hill stations. For nationalists, the intervention of Western women in Indian social issues was another unwanted colonialist intrusion. Nationalist discourse was necessarily simplifying: it offered a return to a pre-colonial golden age not only of freedom, but prosperity, self-sufficiency, and dignity. The undeniable social problems of colonial India were laid at the door of the Raj. Any attack on Indian cultures and institutions was an attack on the nation, and the attacker an agent of imperialism.³⁵ But this attitude, unlike the passive disdain inherent in the Indian stereotype of the memsahib, did not spread to all white women. White women who supported the nationalist cause were a valuable asset, even an object of reverence.

The theosophists were perhaps the first white women to be deified, so to speak—in a European context one might casually say ‘canonized’, and not mean by it that the Pope had given Catholics permission to pray to them for intercession. But in Annie Besant’s case one suspects that it was her work in the nationalist cause, more

³² Jayawardena 114

³³ Jayawardena 117-119

³⁴ Jayawardena 134

³⁵ Jayawardena 7

than her support for Hindu values and Hindu patriarchy that made her the “white goddess” Kumari Jayawardena describes.³⁶ Certainly “the most revered white women in colonial India” were those women of the early twentieth century who attached themselves to nationalist political leaders and liberationist gurus.³⁷ They romanticized India; they believed in a Vedic Golden Age and saw social evils only as the result of the fall from that age; they idolized the men they followed. But, as Jayawardena writes, “they were also Western ‘new women’ and brought to their work daring and innovation on the one hand and a sense of order, efficiency, and discipline on the other.”³⁸

The interaction between nationalism and feminism shows the complexity of the issues the subjects of gender and colonialism can raise. Jane Haggis writes of the difficulties inherent in writing the history of white women in a colonial context. The subject touches on some of the central questions of feminist historiography: “Is the task primarily to restore women’s presences to the past and the historical account, or is it a broader endeavour to draw on the conceptual absence of women and gender to fundamentally challenge and reinscribe history writing and our accounts of the past?” Recognizing gender as socially constructed, historically and culturally contingent, placing gender within the context of larger, multifaceted systems of hierarchy, inclusion, and exclusion, threatens to “erode the visibility of women as specific historical agents just as their presence is being written into our accounts of the past.”³⁹ But simply taking white women’s recordings of their experiences as “authentic and significant” risks losing sight of the colonial context, “continuing the colonising and Eurocentric discourses of mainstream colonial and imperial histories.”⁴⁰

There is a basic issue at stake that even a self-described mainstream historian should consider when looking at the myth of the memsahib: What is history for? Writing of the post-mortem analyses of British policy in the immediate aftermath of the 1857 Mutiny, Hutchins writes:

The Mutiny could be used as an argument in support of almost anything. The advocate of virtually any policy could argue to his own complete satisfaction that the Mutiny had resulted from the failure to adopt the particular reform which he had been espousing all along... The Mutiny could be portrayed as the result of England’s having done too much, or too little, been too harsh, or too gentle.⁴¹

The same could be said of the final end of Empire a century later: it can be used as an argument in support of almost anything. Addressing the idea that it was British women who ‘lost the Empire’, Claudia Knapman makes a cogent observation: “It protects the actor from the unforeseen consequences of particular actions and from

³⁶ Jayawardena 134

³⁷ Jayawardena 171

³⁸ Jayawardena 176

³⁹ Haggis 46

⁴⁰ Haggis 45, 47

⁴¹ Hutchins 80

real accountability. It leaves the imperial idea itself intact, the men who affected it inviolable and, because the argument is male in origin, it excuses men of the ultimate responsibility for what is now both unpopular and assessed as a failure.”⁴² It is understandable that those who were complicit as individuals in constructing and maintaining the British Empire should try to defend it. It is understandable that historians should wish to discover why the Empire ended when it did. It is understandable that some of those who lived through the Empire’s end and had the responsibility for keeping it together, or were close to those who did, should identify with the Empire’s builders and try to shift the blame for its end away from them. Understandable; but today, more than fifty years after India gained its independence, one would hope for more from the historian than a rehashing of essentially contemporary debates. There are more interesting problems to be addressed.

⁴² quoted in Strobel, 2

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