

SETTING THE RECORD STRAIGHT: 'MEMSAHIB' IN THE SHORT FICTION OF THE ANGLO-INDIAN WOMEN WRITERS

Md Sikandar Ali

Associate Professor, Department of English
Shahjalal University of Science and Technology
Sylhet, Bangladesh

Abstract

At first look this paper may strike the reader as an endeavour to delve into the documents of a half-forgotten time. But as far as the volume of the Anglo-Indian literature is concerned, there is more to it than meets the eye. Of the remnants of the Raj, nothing is more enduring than the literature of this period. Till very recently it was believed that apart from Kipling, Forster and Orwell, the rest did not count. The purpose of this paper, among other things, is to disprove this notion and bring to light the fact that there is a large body of work of the first order by women writers and the neglect of their writing in English curriculum is undeserved. Secondly, this paper aims to break the prejudice implanted in the minds of the readers of the Indian subcontinent by male writers like Kipling, Forster etc. who gave us notorious Mrs. Reiver and Mrs. Turton. It seeks to dispel the misconception about the memsahibs and establish the truth that despite their shortcomings, many of them developed strong attachment to this soil and its people and suffered great hardships in a climate that was unlike theirs. The facts that emerge from the fiction by Anglo-Indian women writers manifest that far from being obnoxious, they played proactive roles and as such the usual practice of shifting every blame on memsahib for even the slightest pinprick attests to their being more sinned against than sinning.

Keywords: memsahib, fiction, Anglo-Indian, women writers

Introduction:

The term 'Anglo-Indian' was applied originally to the British in India which included soldiers, civilians, their wives, and only later to people of mixed British and Indian descent. Here it is used in its original meaning. The Anglo-Indian community did not regard themselves as Indians in any sense; they were the rulers ruling a foreign country, and many of them who had lived in India for more than one generation continued to look upon England as their real home. It is an irony that Anglo-Indian women popularly known as 'memsahib' has been generally portrayed in the negative light by male writers for their apparent lack of sympathy and understanding of India though a gifted few of these

very women have provided us with the best insight into the Indian mind and life. Curiously enough, the literary merit of these writers has not always been fully acknowledged though their contribution in the field of short fiction clearly outstrips that of their male counterparts.

In the days of Clive and Hastings, it was not uncommon for an Englishman to marry Indian girls or to enter into liaison with them. But these were times when English women in India were not numerous. But things began to change by the second quarter of the nineteenth century with the arrival of English women in large numbers. Scawen Blunt who visited India in the late nineteenth century informs, "With the introduction of railways, quick posts and telegraphic messages, Englishwomen ceased to dread India as a field of marriage" (47). The East India Company brought women from England thinking they would marry and provide solace to lonely English merchants. In British India there streamed in the wives and daughters of men who served the Raj. Added to these groups was another class of women who came as home keepers for English men with the ultimate hope of finding a husband. As Coralie Younger in her *Wicked Women of the Raj* humorously comments: "During India's cold weather season, women would sail out from England to India to plunder its plentiful storehouse of bachelors" (Young 15). Though the title memsahib was mainly applied to the wives of sahibs and English women in positions of authority, all married or marriageable Anglo-Indian women came to be broadly categorized as memsahib. The spirit of the age also drew another distinct group of women to India called the missionaries.

The attack on 'memsahib' pre-dates Kipling who created notorious characters like Mrs Reiver and Mrs Hauksbee. But he was not wholly critical of the Anglo-Indian women as such. Rather in his stories like 'William the Conqueror' Kipling sympathized with those women who helped administer the Raj. In fact the first significant attack on Anglo-Indian women came from Wilfred Scawen Blunt, the poet and writer. In his book *Ideas About India* he stated:

The English women in India during the last thirty years has been the cause of half the bitter feelings there between race and race...it is her constantly increasing influence now that widens the gulf of ill-feeling and makes amalgamation daily more impossible...The English collector, or the English doctor, or the English judge may have the best will in the world to meet their Indian neighbours. Their wives will hear nothing of the sort, and the result is meaningless interchange of cold civilities. (Blunt 47)

Some lesser charges leveled against Anglo-Indian women are their idleness, vanity, frivolity, scandal-mongering, flirtations and rudeness towards the Indians etc. and that they were responsible for many things that are undesirable. The stereotyped portrait of the memsahib still persists in popular imagination because writers like Kipling, Forster,

Orwell, Dennis Kincaid and Edmund Candler etc. depicted them with one or more of these traits. A satiric portrait of memsahib is captured in the following verse:

The ladies of Mahableshtar
 In such sweet charms abound
 That doctors say their livers
 Are marvelously sound;
 But Poona ! oh in Poona
 They scold and nag all day,
 And contradict their husbands
 Until they fade away (Kincaid 257)

The hill stations were notoriously reputed to be the hotbeds of gossip and scandal the nature of which was cynically suggested by Kipling in this sarcastic rhyme:

Jack's own Jill goes up the hill
 To Murree or Chakrata;
 Jack remains, and dies in the plains,
 And Jill remarries soon after (Kincaid 261)

Taken piecemeal, what the male writers say about Anglo-Indian women is true and even writers like Maud Diver and Ethel Winfred Savi admit to their shortcomings. What Diver has to say partly justifies Kipling's charge: "in the Himalayas... frivolity reaches its highest height and social pleasures are, to all appearance, the end and aim of everyone's existence" (Kipling 24). In 'The Interloper' by Savi we hear a sweeper say: "Like many another, she might seek to make herself attractive in the eyes of her male friends and leave her husband and home to look after themselves" (Savi 158).

But the views above without being wholly untrue obscure part of the picture. What escapes the notice of the male writers is the physical and emotional challenge that the Anglo-Indian women faced in India. Maud Diver, as early as 1909, attempted to refute the adverse criticism against the memsahib:

It must be acknowledged that a surface glance at certain aspects of Anglo-Indian life would appear to justify much of the unsparing criticism to which they are subjected. But a deeper knowledge of what life in India really means would soften those criticism to a surprising extent. (Diver 5)

She pleaded for sympathy and misunderstanding in stressing that " Despite the serious disability, social atmosphere she is bound to live, move and have her being... the fact remains that India's heroines and martyrs far outnumber her social sinners" (Diver 10) Except Kipling none of the major main writers wrote fiction about India. Forster did not write any. The stories of Orwell do not even come to half a dozen. Lionel James, Edmund Candler, Leonard Woolf are relatively obscure names. Against these paltry few males,

there are nearly a dozen women writers who have turned out short stories running to a few scores. The most prominent among them are Flora Annie Steel, Bithia Mary Croker, Sara Jeannette Duncan, Ethel Winifred Savi, Alice Perrin, Maud Diver, Katherine Mayo and Christen Weston.

Sara Jeannette Duncan gives us a glimpse into the hard life of English women in India in her short fiction 'A Mother in India'. It deals with the separation between a mother and her child - a painful aspect of the British presence in India. Most Anglo-Indian parents were forced to send their children to England "...sooner after the fifth year" (Diver 44) for reasons of health and schooling while they stayed back to nurse their wounds which never healed. Helena sent her daughter Cecily to England with a sergeant's wife. The pain of separation was so much that her "capacity for worry was completely absorbed." (Duncan 75). When letters had come from Cecily's aunt, her present governess, John and Helena "used to wade through the long and thin sheets" (Duncan 77). The emotional deprivation on the part of the mother and the child "brought compunction to her heart and tears to her eyes" (Duncan 78). After four years when the couple were returning to England on three months' leave, on her way Helena became impatient to meet her daughter: "My days and nights as the ship crept on were full of a long ache to possess her" (Duncan 78). She is led to her child sleeping in a crib. "Won't you kiss her?" the child's well-meaning guardian asks the visiting mother. "I don't think I could take such an advantage of her", (Duncan 80) replies the mother. A few moments later she drops the ironic mask and admits her loss without a trace of sentimentality: "I may have been Cecily's mother in theory but I was John's wife in fact." (Duncan 80). To choose between husband and child was the tragic lot of these women, and they knew that they would have to fail either as wife or mother.

There is no violence in 'A Mother in India', no crime, no blood, not much local colour, not even any Indians - the big fat spider of a money lender in the first paragraph has no name. Yet this is as vivid a tale as any. What a wonderful story of mother and daughter and how thoroughly colonial the estrangements of their situation. The mother's values are those of the Raj; she is downright, practical and bold. The daughter who has been raised in England is inexperienced, a little timid and insipid and lacks the artifice to get a husband for her in India. Such visits by young English women to hook a husband in the East were very common.

These women came out with such regularity and with such transparent ambitions that they were unkindly dubbed as the 'fishing fleet'. The failure to catch a husband was not viewed sympathetically and women who returned to England unwed were rather brutally referred to as 'Returned Empties'" (16 Younger)

In the end we find Helena crestfallen and Cecily a 'born spinster'.

Flora Annie Steel exhibited a kind of sympathetic understanding of India unmatched by any of her contemporaries. For example, speaking of the Indian

irreverence for time in her autobiography, *The Garden of Fidelity* (1929) she observes that

One of the first lessons to learn in India is that 'Time is nought'. At first it is exasperating; but when one comes to realize the philosophic truth which underlies the crude statement one is forced to respect it. (Steel, 32)

One of Steel's best stories 'The Doll Maker' portrays an English couple George Langford and Mrs. Langford enduring the agony of separation with their children. The children have been packed off to England, and the husband and wife, their lives now empty, are drifting apart.

This is an inescapable fate for most Anglo-Indians. The heart of a memsahib is divided between her husband and the children. Maud Diver describes her love for both husband and children as "a two-edged sword that shall pierce her heart" (Diver 42). After a relentless debate within herself she invariably "chooses the lesser evilto stay with the man not to damn his life with sadness and recrimination" (Diver 46).

The Christmas has no appeal for Mrs. Langford. Even she is oblivious of it. "Christmas eve!" she echoed. "Yes! I suppose it is; but I had forgotten- there isn't much to remind one of it in India." (Steel 22). An old servant, who has outlived his usefulness makes a rag doll and gives it to his master and mistress as a Christmas gift for their children: "It is for the child-people", he said, in his cracked old voice. "This dust-like one has nothing else, but a doll is always a doll to them, a child is a child to the man and the woman" (Steel 27).

It was Christmas day which is the children's day and Mrs. Langford was sitting on a rocking chair with the rag doll looking like a 'ridiculous thing' fondly placed on her lap which, at one point, she gathered closer in her arms with a great show of affection at the sight of which George Langford, her husband "understood once and for all, how empty his house had been to her, how empty her arms, how empty her life" (Steel 30) and he proceeds to pack the thing up to be sent to the children by the Messageries steamer.

Ethel Winifred Savi's 'The Interloper' gives us an idea of how a memsahib learns to live with the rigours of Indian life. Even for a memsahib who was generally surrounded by half a dozen servants and *khansama*, life was not all roses. Even before Irma, the memsahib in the current story, arrived one of the servants, anxious about losing his liberty, had made a mental picture of how the would-be memsahib was likely to conduct herself:

Like as not, this woman he is bringing from across the Black Water will have no tolerance for this land of ours. Many have I seen come and go ... and it's generally fear that turns their livers to water, for such have no stomach for difficulties. She will hear this and that. She will tremble when a thunderstorm breaks overhead with deafening crashes. The sight of a snake will paralyse initiative. Insects will be as pins in her flesh. She will be afraid to eat or drink

lest she be seized with the Bad Sickness, and naught will content her but to sojourn in the mountains the moment the weather gets hot and the sun blisters the skin. Then, when it is established beyond that a child is on the way, of a truth, she will turn and flee. Our Sahib will escort her to the docks and breathe a sigh of satisfaction when the vessel departs, realizing that freedom and contentment are only for the unwed, and that cursed is the man who yields his neck to the yoke of marriage when he is of the race that has ceased to uphold the supremacy of the male (Savi 159).

This is the traditional portrait of a memsahib in India. For all its humour and unconscious cynicism, above passage reveals the physical hardship and emotional turbulence of the memsahib in India. But unlike the exaggerated image of a traditional memsahib, Irma proved capable of enduring hardships without complaint. She had few scopes of recreation outside the club but she never grumbled. He did not start or faint at the sight of a deadly *karait* which had climbed on the *jhilmil*. Far from overworking her servants she ensured a pay rise for all of them. But her worst nightmare presented itself when she had to stand face to face with a mad dog in her own room which “she was told she might have to guard against in the East, though, with some luck, she might never be actually in personal danger” (Savi 170). Luckily she escaped the danger though at the cost of the life of her most faithful servant, Emamdin.

As for the memsahib's emotional hardships, few speak better than Sara Jeannette Duncan in 'The Pool in the Desert'. It is the story of one woman's courageous bid to recapture her youth and her sense of joy in the midst of the arid Frontier and among people who have become 'sepulchres of themselves'. Judy Harbottle accepts a young subaltern, Somers Chichele, 'as the contemporary of her soul if not of her body'. She neither wins nor loses, but in her dignified struggle one sees the emotional trauma that Anglo-Indian women experienced. The story is a strong rebuttal of the commonly held notion that many Anglo-Indian women deserted their husbands during the scorching summer months to make merry with young army officers in the Indian hills. Duncan, in quiet tone and with ironic understatement, gives the women's point of view – a point of view mainly absent in fiction by men writers of the Raj.

Much of Perrin's fiction is marked by violence, sudden deaths and disasters. This comes as no surprise in a land where deaths from small pox, cholera, rabies, plague and snake bites were not uncommon. Her stories are cleverly crafted. Indian idioms are translated, not literally, but with a feel for the English language. A brilliant satirist, she portrays the English and the Indians with a fine eye for the comic and the eccentric. In 'The Fakir's Island' by Perrin we are given a frightening picture of a 'Khood Festival'. Mona Selwyn, the would-be wife of George Robertson, a captain of the British army, contracted small pox from the fair. The captain went away on a month's leave responding

to an urgent call. He had no way of knowing that Mona had fallen ill because he had traveled to “regions where letters could not follow him” (Perrin 212). His return was delayed by one more month. It was a sorry sight to see her when he returned:

She was greatly disfigured...the fair curly hair had been cropped short, and the blue eyes were full of a sadness that cut Robertson to the heart...She gave a distressed little cry and covered her face with her hands... Tears of weakness, disappointment, misery ran from her eyes and she sobbed helplessly (Perrin 213)

The memsahibs have all too often been criticized for their love of luxury but the inner state of their minds went largely unnoticed. Their slanderers conveniently forget that they also had a fair share of the sorrows and misfortunes that mark the lives of ordinary people. In ‘The Centipede’ by the same author we get the picture of an English mother sitting tearfully by the deathbed of her young daughter with the *ayah* comforting her.

-- “Oh! *Ayah*, the life is passing from my babba, and if sleep come not to her she will die!”

-- “*Mem-sahib*, weep not; the child shall leave.” (Perrin 123)

The child dies. Such deaths were not uncommon. It was touching to see a bereaved mother trying to pick up the pieces of her mind and struggling to return to normal life.

In ‘Ann White’ Perrin gives us a glimpse into the pathetic aspect of British life in India the exact nature of which is hardly recognized either by the Indians or adequately understood by their own countrymen in England. We find the speaker of the story reminiscing her life in India sitting in an English Churchyard.

As I glanced about me I thought what a contrast to the arid cemeteries I had seen in India, with their neglected memorials to the victims of exile, all the tragic inscriptions that told of untimely deaths; women and little children who in England might have recovered from sickness, men cut off in their youth, or when long –looked–for retirement was in sight, sometimes whole families swept away by cholera. Few white people die natural deaths in India; if they live they go home, and if they die there is seldom one of their kindred in the country to visit and attend their graves. (Perrin 191)

The story also throws some light on the horrors of the Indian Mutiny and the ever-present British fear of another massacre. Without revealing any of her own biases, Perrin shows the mutual contempt the two races often had for each other. Ann White, the central female character of this story was a victim of this Indian mutiny in 1857. The story provides us a glimpse of the brutality suffered by the Anglo-Indians of all kinds as an aftermath of it.

When in '57, the native regiment at Jutpore mutinied, murdering officers, women and children, the only Europeans to somehow escape death in the station, as far as was known at the time, were the members of the mission. But when, alas, too late, a British relief party arrived and were scouring the neighbourhood in search of the rebels, a little English girl of about ten years old was found in the jungle, starving, disguised as a native. What was her name, who had disguised her and hidden her away, could never be ascertained; she herself was too exhausted to speak when rescued, and though in time her bodily strength returned, both reason and memory had been lost beyond hope of recovery. The missionaries took charge of her ... there, ever since, she had lived. (Perrin 196)

The British troops in their turn carried out a gruesome massacre at Jallianwala Bagh in 1919 commanded by General Reginald Dyer. This further polarized the two communities. Though the Anglo-Indian women writers were relatively more sympathetic towards the natives, they were nonetheless strong supporters of the Raj without exception. They believed in "upholding the British prestige in the East" (Diver 88). A weak Raj administration meant a sense of insecurity for them. They were perpetually haunted by the horrors that had befallen their predecessors during the mutiny and, presently, by the fear of possible vengeance from the Indians. That's why every political agitation by the Indians increased their fear of a further mutiny. But their attitude towards India can be attributed in large part to an innate sense of racial superiority.

Conclusion:

These stories by Anglo-Indian women writers are more than documents of a dead past and colourful account of a half-forgotten time. Though mostly the life of the Anglo-Indians forms the staple of this article the stories under discussion also give us valuable insight into the socio-political fabric of our life in Indian subcontinent. It also brings to light the fact that the indiscriminate attacks on the memsahibs treating them as the fountainhead of many social ills were blatantly exaggerated. Though this article cannot wholly dispel the deep-rooted misconception about the Anglo-Indian women, it goes a long way to show that their service, sacrifice and contribution have not been small.

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