

THE APOLLONIAN

A Journal of Interdisciplinary Studies (Online, Open-Access, Peer-Reviewed)

Vol. 1, Issue 2 (December 2014) || ISSN 2393-9001

Chief Editor: Girindra Narayan Roy

Editors: Subashish Bhattacharjee & Saikat Guha

Feature—*Twentieth Century Women's Writing*

Research Article:

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Unveiling Native Women's Resistance: An Analysis of Flora
Annie Steele's Novel *Voices in the Night: A Chromatic Fantasia*

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"...Empire was in short, not just a phenomenon "out there" but a fundamental part of domestic culture and national identity in modern Britain." (Burton, 175)

This is what Antoinette Burton said in her discussion of the visibility and the imposing presence of Empire in Victorian domestic culture. The Empire's obsessive reiterations in the late 19th century and early 20th century is demonstrated in the colonial discourse, especially, with concept of the "Orient" as a powerful European ideological construction. Edward Said in *Orientalism* demonstrate that the "Orient is the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilization, its language, its deepest and most recurring images of the other" (Said 1).

The "Orient" became a place of great attraction and European men and women began travelling to the east and wrote several travel accounts like – memoirs, letters, diaries, housekeeping manuals, medical treatise, magazines, missionary texts and romance stories. Said commented: "around 60,000 books dealing with the Near Orient were written between 1800-1950" (204).

Initially, the Imperial literary enterprise was a masculine affair but from 1820's onwards we witness the emergence of the British women in the Indian subcontinent and also in the literary scenario. The "white women" of colonial India came from all walks of life initially as wives, daughters or sisters of colonial administrators and then as physicians, Journalist, governess, missionaries, teachers and writers. These "white women" were called by the Indian natives as "Memsahibs"¹. Gradually as time passed more and "Memsahibs" appeared on the

scene and began assisting their husbands in the expansion of the great Imperial drama. They inculcated a feeling of social superiority and brought a “little England” in the midst of the Colonial India. The white colonial “Memsahibs” had ample of free time and wrote extensively during their residence in India. Their writings graphically described the Indian landscape, the intrigues about the natives, their exotic culture, along with experiences of their own domestic lives and how they shifted to their public and social engagements frequently. This contributed to the popularity of India as a *locus amoenus* of “romance.”

During the era of the *Raj* several romances and stories were created and cast into dramatic relief against the background of an Orientalized India by the Memsahib’ writers. One of the most popular “Memsahib” of the times was Flora Annie Steel who was part of the British ruling elite from 1868-1889. A Jamaican sugar plantation heiress Flora came to India in 1868 as a young bride to Henry William Steel an official in the Imperial government. It was the beginning of her long stay of almost twenty two years. For her contribution to colonial discourse against the back drop of imperial world she has been nick named “Female Kipling”. Initially though, Steel played the role of a “conventional Memsahib” gradually she developed a genuine interest in the lives of the native women especially the “exotic female.” She explored their native cultures and even learnt the Punjabi and Hindi languages. Her palette of literacy works has a long list of novels, short stories, guide books, an autobiography etc.

Flora Annie Steel, the “unconventional Memsahib” was often blamed of being fiercely supportive of British Imperialism and holding contradictory opinions concerning gender to the extent of sometimes intensifying major “colonial myths” about women. It was argued that though she had become closely involved with India’s social issues and native women’s oppression, her role as a representative of the British Empire, demonstrates a sense of “anxiety.” Though she was part of the Imperialist regime she boldly criticized some aspects of the Imperial policy and focused on Indian life and manners ignored by other Anglo-Indian writers. Her writing deals much with the Indian way of life as well as the Imperial households and showcases the immense differences between the western and eastern life styles and mentality.

Her writings displays accurately not only the circumstances under which the “native women” lived and how they deal with the religious and social issues but also the reinforcing of western stereotypical images about the “Orient” and the “Exotic,” which she critiqued.

2.

It is a late Victorian novel and the background is set in the colonized nation India. She began researching this novel during her stay in Lucknow in 1898 and completed it in two years. The novel is mapped along the historical shifts and the socio political dynamics of the times. Through a woman's point of view, more say, a Mem Sahib's gaze she unravels the mysteries and intrigues of the native women and the harsh realities faced by them.

During her long residence in India she had come across "native" Indian women from all walks of life. She understood the sentiments of these women who were labelled as the "exotic Other" and closely studied their gendered position in society. These "native" women were the "courtesans" and the "nautch girls" who were oppressed doubly both by the patriarchal practices and the imperial ideologies. Steel presents a sympathetic attitude towards them and tries to lend a voice to their oppression.

Voices in the Night, revolves around the fictional town of Nushapore, having a dwelling of 50,000 inhabitants. The background deals with the on-slaught of the terrible bubonic plague in the town along with the penetrating interference of the colonial officials cleanliness drives, dilemmas of "rehab" and the ruthless attempts to control the "exotic" native females bodies. Steel tries to interweave the stories of the "native women" with the "white women" of the British masters.

Against the back-drop, the author brings out the thin patina of the English rule which was held down dangerously with turbulent undercurrents. The colonial masters had to face heavy death toll of the British officials and their families during the Uprising of 1857 and the medical health hazards related to tropical disease. The imperial masters were still trying to recover from the "shock" they had received from the Mutiny; not to forget the epidemic of "Asiatic Cholera and Plague" that had ripped through Europe, resurfacing every now and then. The other leading cause of sickness and death were Malaria, enteric fever, small pox and venereal disease topping the list.

During the second half of the late 19th century, and the early 20th century the representation of the "native" woman became very significant as there was a heightened cultural focus on the Indian women. One major reason was the colonial agenda of "native female's" social reform and to justify their "civilizing" mission. The issue of women's upliftment was a tool of colonial ideology focusing on reformist issues like child marriage, widow-remarriage, female education and abolishment of sati, polygamy etc. The idea of the "exotic woman" ² was a serious

burden to the Victorian Imperialist “anxieties.” The Imperial masters projected themselves as humane social reformers on a “moral” mission especially of rescuing the “native” women from the squalors of the brothels and the closed walls of the patriarchal boundaries.

Steel in her novel brings out the site of the Indian “bazaar” which was visualized as filthy and infested with all sorts of disease and immoral acts. A characteristic feature of Steel’s fiction is her fascination with fiercely independent and rebellious Indian courtesans. The “bazaar” areas were condemned by the British officials as highly polluted and “contaminated.” There were places in the cantonments known as “regimental bazaars” where prostitution could be regulated and located easily.

Steel creates a strong, rebellious female in the character of the courtesan Dilaram who was also a dancer. She is described as a “passed mistress in the oldest of profession for women” (39); “she was of the old school, educated to her craft” (40). Her voice of resistance is heard when she says, “We of the bazaar lead the world by the nose!” (40). It is also suggestive of female seduction.

The white man’s anxieties about gynecological decay in the colonies affecting both their women and the physical health of their officials was a grave concern. Edward Tilt³ in his treatise *Health in India for British Women* (1875) argued that the “morbid womb” was a major threat to the Imperial vision. Their “wombs” had to be healthy, as therein, the “seed,” of the next generation of Imperial masters will take birth. Therefore, it was important that the English men remain free from venereal disease or other sexually transmitted infections. The proper functioning of their reproductive bodies was central to the preservation of the *Raj* and so they were warned to stay away from the native women with loose morals who were “carriers” of sexual contagious diseases. The novel discusses how the regulations were carried out and Dilaram strongly opposed the interference of the British to establish “lock hospitals” wherein, prostitutes were detained forcibly, until cured of the dreaded venereal disease. Her “quarters” was in the “bazaar” of Nushapore and she dominated the area. She is a typical courtesan of the bazaar and is described as “yawning, blowsy, ill-kept woman,” she carries with her an “indescribable grace” and a sharp wit. The brothels were not clean having cramped spaces and the narrow leading passages were dark, dimly lighted corridors with giggling bellies. However, men from all walks of life thronged to these areas, including the Nawab Jehan Aziz.

Dilaram, as a courtesan refused to submit to the licensing system of regulating prostitution. She refused to conform to the Imperial norms and played

politics by spreading rumour that the British had double motives with the anti-measures drives. She instigated the people of list the plague- regulations saying that the officials were actually invading to “search respectable houses” to kidnap young women for licensed brothels. Grace Memsahib’s stolen jewel box with the hidden controversial “letter” of the British government’s secret measures was believed to have disappeared into the depths of Dilaram’s “bazaar” area. It was indeed a site of political resistance as the “indiscretion” prompts the “native” to strategize their resistance and plan counter measures against the government’s regulations. Dilaram’s cleverness and her linkages helped the Indian insurgents to protest against these measures for regulations and control.

The prostitutes of the Indian “bazaars” were quite powerful agents in the society as they had played a pivotal role during in 1857 Uprising. The British administrators in the novel are seen haunted by the echoes of the Mutiny. It was believed that the “bazaar” courtesans played a role in the rebellion by providing refuge and financial assistance and also urging the Indian mutineers on by taunting on their masculinity. Another dangerous role play was transmitting venereal disease and other infections to the British military troops. Therefore, the need to “flush out” the infections and regulate the anti-social activities was shown to be so important in the novel.

The market of the courtesans was quite lucrative and many of them was well off and also earned “respect” in society. Some owned large mansions with beautiful gardens. One such mansions “exotic” place is mentioned by Steel in the novel. Grace Arbuthnot and Leslie find themselves hosting a tea-party in a former courtesan’s pleasure garden”

It was a quaint place, tucked away between the two angles of the city wall for greater convenience in secret comings and goings to secret pleasures; and it was all the quainter how because of the English women sipping tea on the steps of the gilded summer house, the Englishmen calling tennis scores in what had been the rose-water tank, in which kings; favourites had bathed and on which they had floated in silver barges. (235)

The garden’s unsettling seductiveness was indeed quite intoxicating and the two white women, Grace and Lesley, felt trapped by “these senses.” The suggestiveness was so strong that Lesley felt uncomfortable and disturbed, while Grace enjoyed an adulterous flirtation and welcomed its dangerous sensuality. Such was the seductive ambivalence that the white women felt carried away.

The “brothels” were also seat of classical activities; these quarters which housed several young girls trained them in classical music and dance. These courtesans actively shaped and produced a variety of cultural activities within these women quarters. They were called the “nautch girls,” i.e., dancers who entertained the men or other mixed audiences. Steel creates in her stories courtesans who were always dancers or “nautch girls” like Dilaram and Sobrai Begum in the *Voices in the Night* and Chandni, the courtesan in the novel *The Potter’s Thumb* (1894). The courtesans and “nautch girls” constantly crossed borders and resides performing in the “bazaars” change places to private homes and even public halls. Emma Roberts, writer of *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindustan* (1835) observed that: “Many of the nautch girls are extremely rich, those most in esteem being very highly paid for their performances; the celebrated Calcutta heroine [...] receives 1000 rupees monthly, whenever she is engaged” (qtd. in Dyson 348).

The other “exotic female” that Steel portrays in the novel is Sobrai Begum; she belonged to an upper-class family and was a close relative of the pauper Nawab Jehan Aziz. The author’s description of the run-away princess is indeed praise worthy. Sobrai a high spirited young woman wanted to escape the so-called respectable yet dull life steeped in genteel poverty. In Chapter 2 of the novel, she laments about their poverty: “we good women have scarce flour left to fill our stomach” (21). She was indeed a vocal woman: “Sobrai was not born of those who are patient in well-doing” (24). The words spoken by Lateefa, the kite maker echoes the socio-cultural background of the times: “yet god knows how hard it is to keep girls silent when the world about them hath grown so noisy” (25).

Sobrai resided in the “Zenana”⁴ of the Nawabin Noormahal, the wife of Nawab Jehan Aziz. She was bold and very different from the other women folk in the “zenana.” Despite belonging to an upper caste and living under “purdah” she refuted the patriarchal domains. Sobrai bought her own freedom by stealing “the four white pearls” which had fallen on the worn out carpet when Noormahal had thrown them in anger. She slipped them in her mouth unnoticed and fled from the zenana. She had made up her mind to accept Miss Leezie’s offer “of educating her to that walk of life. She should not remain dowerless, unwed, within four walls, all her life” (36) she thought.

After her flight from the “gilded cage,” Sobrai lands in a licensed brothel and performs spectacular erotic- self display. She constructs a spectacle of herself as a courtesan or a “public” woman – the woman of the “bazaar.” She dances before the

British soldiers “with a fierce exultation” and an unrestrained yet dignified sensuality (162).

She defies her upper-class norms, becomes a prostitute and her “body” ruptures hierarchies. She comes face to face with the Memsahib Grace Arbuthnot who felt jealous or challenged by her sensuous appearance. As the racial Other, Grace felt that Sobrais exhibitions intensified and actualizes the allure of the “unsanitised” space. Her “body” thus becomes a source of “self-knowledge” and “jouissance”.⁵ The erotic advances and her spectacular body attempts to assert its visibility and resistance to the masculine Imperial world. Grace the “unhappy” Memsahib finds a glimpse of an unregulated female body drawing its energy from the “contamination” of the over-crowded “bazaars” of Nushapore.

Many at times the Imperial Memsahibs felt challenged by the exotic figure. We see in Grace Arbuthnot the “white Memsahib” burdened by Victorian modesty and colonial domesticity. By producing “orientalized” female bodies, infection both physical and moral threatened to unravel the domestic threads which held the imperial fabric together.

In 1777, Jemina Kindersley, a Memsahib wrote about her own experiences with the oriental courtesans: “it is their languishing glances, wanton smiles, and attitudes not quite consistent with decency, which are so much admired” (qtd. in Dyson 336). The Memsahib’s “gaze” as observers of the nautch girls expressed a level of discomfort with the public display of the female body as they were born and brought up under strict disciplines of Victorian ideology of “womanhood.” Sobrai Begum, the courtesan stands in stark contrast to the modest Memsahib, Grace Arbuthnot who is trapped in her gilded cage, whereas, Sobrai buys her own freedom. Dilaram the other elderly prostitute uses her sexual power and intelligence to unsure her own survival. The Memsahibs are obliged to play the stereotypical roles expected of a British official’s wife. They cannot break the shackles which bound a typical Victorian house wife.

Down the ages, women irrespective of race, colour, class or used has been presented from expressing their sexuality. Feminist psychoanalyst like Julia Kristeva suggest that women must begin with their sexuality and bodies and must speak in the new language it calls for and they will establish a “point of view” which will be a “site of difference.”

The connection between the “bazaars” and colonial prostitutions can be faced with the Imperial governments stringent ways to control the spread of the bubonic plague and venereal disease in the bazaars, the zenanas and cantonment areas of

Nushapore. The disease and infections could represent a “site of resistance” to colonial authority which had to be controlled. The “docile” sanitized, fragile bodies of the white Memsahibs were thought to be greatly susceptible to the unhygienic conditions and disease of the tropics. The Victorian medical establishes “fears of contagious oriental bodies” which resulted in several medical treatise⁶ and guide books for the white Memsahibs to tackle with the repeated assaults of the diseases.

With the Indian Contagious Disease Act of 1864, the Imperial government took up measures to control the havoc caused by prostitution. This Act established a system of licensed prostitution by means of which women were periodically examined. Gradually, Victorian tropical medicine become inhabitability preoccupied with not only preserving the health of the colonizers but also with regulating and controlling the bodies and medical discourses of the racial “Other.” Thus the bodies of the white women and the lives of the white men were both vulnerable to the exposure of the disease ridden Indian subcontinent—“the breath of the infected ‘other’,” and if constructed in terms of race or class it was presumed to be invasive and threatening.

3.

Steel, in the novel, tried to project the notion that for the colonized, resistance to plague regulations which treated their bodies as “state property” (Arnold 211) was closely linked with political dissent. Steel though at times displays the tool of Imperialism like the other Memsahibs of her times, she stands apart in her construction of the “native exotic female” depicted in the novel. She shows how the women of both the races and their bodies become battlegrounds as their spaces have been invaded by the social and Imperial ideology. The Imperial governments “civilizing” and “moralizing” drives are seen as interferences, intrusion and invasion into the public and private domains of the Indian communities. The partial presences and equivocal spaces produced through encounters between the Memsahibs and the native courtesans reveal the colonial female novelists grappling with the profoundly disturbing implications of her place with Imperial history.

The politics of gender was deployed to sustain the Imperial interest in the colonies. The concept of gender in relation to power and control runs throughout in the novel displaying the construction of the female sexuality in terms of the patriarchal ideology. Sexuality is not an innate quality and not naturally given. It is rather the consequences of social interactions and patriarchal constructions. Complex negotiations existed between the colonizers and the colonized which is

explored in Steel's novel bringing out the instability and the ambiguity of the "white masters" which counter the canonical text of the Empire.

END NOTES:

¹ The term "Memsahib" represents the Indian pronunciation of "Ma'am" and "Sahib" (Arabic for Sir) who were the white masters. Memsahibs were usually white, upper-class women often addressed with respect by non-whites.

² Since the time of the East India Company with reports given by the European travelers, the empire had been observed by the figure of the "odalisque" a term describing a woman from the Indian "zenana" or "harems." She is the "exotic woman" who represents the courtesans and "nautch girls" in the Indian setting constructed within the British culture and fiction.

³ Edward Jilt was the member of the Royal College of Physicians and fellow of the Obstetrical Society of London who published a medical manual entitled *Health in India for British Women* (1875).

⁴ "Zenana" or the women's quarter comes from the Persian word "ZAN" means woman. The literal meaning of the word is "of the women" or "pertaining to women" having a separate enclosure exclusively for women.

⁵ "Jouissance" in French means physical or intellectual pleasure, delight or ecstasy and enjoyment.

⁶ John Clark's *Observations on the Diseases in Long Voyager to Hot Countries* (1773); James Johnson's *The Influence of Tropical Climate, Especially the Climate of India, on European Constitutions* (1813); Edward Tilt's *Health in India for British Women* (1875).

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