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Mary Densmore
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Power and Gender: British Women's Role in 19th Century Imperial India

During the nineteenth century, there was a wave of British women who were transplanted to British-colonized India, following fathers, brothers, or new husbands who were stationed in colonial positions in the Eastern sphere. In initial scholarship on the period, historians studied men as the sole power players of imperialism, often ignoring or downplaying women's roles, both as complicit or resistant imperialists. However, recent movements in academia attempt to understand and unpack the female experience and the complicated role that women played in imperialism through their creation of the imperial domestic sphere. Examination of housekeeping manuals and travel guides, written by women and for women during this period, reveals the more complex and often unrecognized ways in which British wives and daughters facilitated imperialism through roles that hinged crucially on racial and class lines. These gendered and racially charged issues within the imperial structure are important to explore, as early strains of "first wave" feminism may have emerged from the powerful roles women played in colonial spaces. These sources propagated ideas of British superiority, romanticized the 'exotic', and brought a microcosm of British society to India within the domestic sphere—which reinforced and supported Britain's imperial mission in foreign spaces. Whether intentional or not, these sources reflect the active role women played in imperialism; this both empowers women through displaying their resilience and agency, and reveals them as power players in imperial conquest.

Since the 1970s, there has been a surge of public interest in colonialism and imperial matters, yet as Indian scholar, Napur Chauduri, notes, “historians of colonialism have often dealt with the public experiences of officials, emphasizing the political activities of white male colonials”.¹ For a long time, the female experience was largely ignored, or addressed only in negative stereotypes and harmful generalizations or mistruths. Historian Janice Schroeder notes, “stereotypes of the female circulated in Victorian travel and literature, popular fiction, and reviews in the periodical press, and continue to appear in contemporary biographical accounts”.² One of the most dominant stereotypes that writers and scholars look at is that of the *memsahib*. This term has a long and complicated history of its usage. It was originally used by native peoples of India as a term of respect for a European married woman—yet the term later spread to other areas of Southeast Asia and Africa.³ It eventually became associated with a more complicated usage; *memsahib* became a way to negatively stereotype white European women as lazy, stupid, passive, and racist. In his book, *Empire and Sexuality*, Ronald Hyam describes the stereotype of the:

Dull, incurious eyes of the *memsahib*...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.⁴

¹ Napur Chaudhuri, “Memsahibs and Motherhood in Nineteenth-Century Colonial India.” *Victorian Studies* 31, no. 4, (1988): 517.

² Janice Schroeder, “Strangers in Every Port: Stereotypes of Victorian Victorian Women Travelers”. *Victorian Review* 24 (2). Victorian Studies Association of Western Canada, 118.

³ Napur Chaudhuri, “Memsahibs and Motherhood”, 517.

⁴ Ronald Hyam, *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience*, 119. Manchester: Manchester UP, 1990. Print.

More recent scholarship, correlating with the current feminist movements of social and political change, attempts to look at a more varied and realistic experiences of Western women in imperial spaces. Some historians, like Napur Chaudhuri, look at the domestic role of British motherhood in India, while others such as Kumari Jayawardena explore women's contributions to political and social reform, missionary work, and medical care in Southeast Asia and Africa. It is necessary to further explore these alternative experiences and different roles that British women played in India, and other colonial places, because they have been left out of history for decades. As Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel write, In general, theories about colonialism have stressed its 'masculine' nature, highlighting the essential components of domination, control, and structures of unequal power.⁵

The complexities of gender, race, class, and power are revealed on a global scale through this study of the many western women that moved outside their homeland and into completely foreign places. It is important to note that this paper looks at and attempts to unpack a very narrow scope of female experience, looking specifically at middle-upper class, British women in imperial India. This is not to say that this is the most important or even most interesting lens through which the female imperialist experience can be viewed. It is simply that these household guides and the lives contained within them explore ideas that resound across the imperial experience: western women did in fact have agency and important roles in facilitating empire building. These sources also point to certain ties to and

⁵ Napur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, "Introduction." In *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, 3. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992.

conclusions about future feminist movements in the West that have continuing impact across cultural and political lines even to this very day.

From the 18th century into early 19th century, colonization of India had not yet reached its full scale that would grow throughout the remainder of the British Empire. There was more a sense of exploration and configuration with the foreign culture and land than infiltration and settlement. One significant kind of source from women during this period came in the form of Eastern travel literature. Such travel and writing introduced these privileged women to a greater sense of independence, exposed them to diverse cultures, and gave them a unique opportunity to enter into publishing and lend their voice to public discourse. This travel literature is also interesting to examine because it reflects the female experience, the judgments as portrayed by women themselves, and the strange role these writings played in empire building and romanticizing the Eastern stretches of the British Empire. As noted by scholar Chattopadhyay:

Despite the rhetoric of uncontaminated vision, the European eye was necessarily constituted by a European framework of judging and attributing a land, which they used to describe as this distant corner of empire.⁶

Women were exploring and publicly recording their experiences and ideas, yet they too were subject to their cultural biases and euro-centric lens. They also had much less freedom of opinion when it came to writing; given their social status in comparison to men, it is much more likely that they were bound by European socio-political conventions when writing. Whether intentionally used this way or not, women played a role in producing this propaganda; these reflections on India

⁶ Swati Chattopadhyay, "The Colonial Uncanny." In *Representing Calcutta: Modernity, Nationalism, and the Colonial Uncanny*, 26. London: Routledge, 2005.

introduced the British public to the idea of the exotic culture and foreign products of the East—and also asserted British superiority.

Maria Graham, a young British woman who traveled to India with her father and married a Scotsman while there, recorded her experiences in a journal and then published them into a travel guide of sorts. This book was published in 1813, when British culture and a sense of domesticity were not yet fully entrenched in Indian spaces. While at times Graham's observations seem to glorify local Indian culture, her writings also create a sense of exoticism of the East. Graham writes about her approach by ship to Calcutta, "you are surrounded by sharks and crocodiles...the black islands of Saugor...the dark jungle...nest of serpents, den of tigers, scenes of human sacrifice, which not all the vigilance of the British government can prevent".⁷ Passages such as this function dually—to enchant the British reader with the foreign and unknown, and also set up "reminders of heathen culture" and the necessity of British conquering.⁸ Although Graham's various publications put her, a female voice, on the map for travel literature and gave her a role in shaping the public's opinions, she still was withheld by constraints of the western imperialist gaze.

Graham's journal also serves as a clue to the imperial timeline in India, reflecting the lack of British women and sense of home in the foreign land during these early stages; she notes:

The civil servants to governments being, in Bombay, for the most part young men...the great number of men, and the small number of rational companions, make a deplorable prospect to one who anticipates a long residence here.⁹

⁷ Maria Graham, "Journal of a Residence in India." Empire Online. Adam Matthew, 1812. Web. 132.

⁸ Chattopadhyay, "The Colonial Uncanny" p. 27

⁹ Graham, *Journal of a Residence*, 30.

Most of the British engagement in India at this point was in the form of men who were officers or involved in government. While the existing English settlements of British culture were “in general so well represented by those of a country town at home [in Britain]”, there was not a widespread sense of British culture in India at this point.¹⁰ This is important, as it was not until the British women and their domestic imperialism emerged that India was fully inducted into the tradition of British colonization.

There were different categories of colonies under the British Empire, depending on levels of British engagement and settlement in the separate regions. India was not a settler colony, in which foreign people would move into a region in the hopes of settling new communities. It was initially a colony based on economic resources and trade, in which the British-influenced Indian citizens who would “[pay] high taxes, were captive consumers of British products, and served in Britain’s colonial army”.¹¹ The goal was not for the British to conquer the land and settle permanently there, yet as Timothy Parsons argues, it was “without a doubt the most important and influential of Britain’s imperial possessions”.¹² Because of the deeply rooted economic involvement and value in Indian resources and trade, the British invested a lot of administrative effort into maintaining strong control and influence over India and its peoples. This meant a substantial amount of British men were moved to India in various administrative and military positions.

¹⁰ Graham, *Journal of a Residence*, 30.

¹¹ Timothy Parsons, *The British Imperial Century, 1815-1914: A World History Perspective*. Lanham, Md.: Rowman & Littlefield, 1999. 33.

¹² Parsons, *The British Imperial Century*, 33.

Naturally, their wives, daughters, and sisters often followed—creating homes and small pockets of British life and culture. India was the first of Britain’s major imperial possessions to have a non-white, non-European majority. As such, there were strict guidelines and greater effort required from the British women to create acceptable domestic spaces in exotic and foreign lands, despite the knowledge that these homes were not permanent settlements.

We see explicit evidence of increasingly Europeanized domestic spaces of colonial India in the next type of source—the household advice manual. It is a type of writing that is the product of a period much more entrenched in British imperialism in India:

The publication and popularity of household guides reflected the increased number of British women [living] in India, consolidation of imperial domesticity...and British confidence in imperial rule and its reproduction on a household scale.¹³

These guides, designed specifically to instruct new wives on replicating British life within the foreign space of India, reflect the more active role that women played in imperial conquest. This is shown through their replication of imperialism on a miniature scale, within the home. If British men dominated foreign spaces by aggression and economic domination, the women crafted empire more subtly, through an invasion of culture, traditions, and socialization. However, their power was still very tied to more traditionally masculine ideas of conquering foreign spaces and impressing superiority upon minority groups.

I looked at several of these guides, but will focus on two specifically; *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (1890), by Flora Annie Steel and Grace

¹³ Alison Blunt, "Imperial Geographies of Home: British Domesticity in India, 1886-1925." *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* 24, no. 4 (1999): 422. JSTOR.

Gardner, and *The Englishwoman in India* (1864), by an anonymous author who qualifies herself only as a “lady resident”. While the lady resident mentions living in India for seven years at the time of her writing, Steel and Gardner spent twenty years in India before they wrote their manual; yet all of these women are clearly deeply entrenched in Anglo-Indian life and face the task of daily replicating and maintaining British culture and domesticity in a foreign land. While many historians study imperial domesticity in ways that separate the private home sphere and the public space of empire, these guides reflect the ideas of scholars like Bonnie Smith and Catherine Hall who critique the concept of the “separate spheres” as more of an ideology than an actual lived experience or reality for colonial women. Such academics point out the ways in which women were often much more involved in their husband’s lives and work, both inside and outside the home, than the ideal of “separate spheres” reflects. Alison Blunt notes about the British housewife’s experience in India, “domestic roles reproduced imperial power relations on a household scale and the political significance of imperial domesticity extended beyond the boundaries of the home”.¹⁴ Men dominated the public sphere while women orchestrated life in the home, behind closed doors; however, this does not mean that the two worlds did not blend together and influence one another in many powerful ways. In enacting small-scale imperialism within the home, British women supported and spread European imperialism while also spreading deeply entrenched British culture throughout the continent.

¹⁴ Blunt, “Imperial Geographies of Home”, 423.

These housekeeping manuals take great care to lay out in detail all the items a newly married British woman should bring on her journey to her new home in order to maintain the proper sense of British-ness. This includes everything from table and kitchenware, lamps, carriages, writing supplies, bedding linens, to British-made guns and medicine¹⁵. Not only does this detail the superiority the British feel their items possess—that they are willing to cart them across the world—but also the magnitude of effort they exert to entirely recreate a domestic haven of British life and culture in a foreign space. The extensive table of contents in *Housekeeper* includes chapters exploring the big tasks, like “Duties of the Mistress; Duties of the Servants; The Storeroom; Management of Young Children” and various recipes, but also cover more minute details such as “Hints on Poultry; Gardening; Cows and Dairy; Dogs; Wages; Hints on Outfits; Soups and Sauces”.¹⁶ These books are meant to impart *crucial* information that a British woman should know before and while living in India; the great detail and vast amount of information they include shows the incredibly high the standard these wives were meant to create and maintain. These women essentially brought a piece of Britain to the East, instructed by these manuals on “detailed advice on the successful establishment and maintenance of imperial domesticity and its dependence on their own appropriate behavior within the home”.¹⁷ In doing so, these women also created a standard for British consumerism, promoting British goods and their necessity to a ‘civilized’ and proper

¹⁵ *The Englishwoman in India (By a Resident Lady)*. “Furniture and Household Necessities Desirable to Be Brought From Home.” London: Smith, Elder & Co., 1864.

¹⁶ Flora Steel, Annie Webster, and G. Gardner. “Table of Contents”. *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*. 2nd ed. Edinburgh: F. Murray, 1890.

¹⁷ Blunt, *Imperial Geographies of Home*, 422.

home. This was crucial to the imperial project, in which the British were hoping to create a class of Indians who were avid consumers of their culture and products. These British housewives played their role as models of behavior and consumption, acting their part in the British imperial agenda.

In *Englishwoman in India*, the author discredits the native people's civility and morality; "it is quite natural to expect them [natives] to pilfer small articles of food... a friend of mine firmly believes a native never speaks the truth except by accident and really this is hardly an exaggeration".¹⁸ Steel and Gardner also mention the servants in their guide, claiming, "the Indian servant is a child in everything, savage, and should be treated so...few, if any, have any sense of shame".¹⁹ While interactions with English servants back in the homeland likely laid out similar distrust and need to instruct lower class peoples, these guidebooks were charged with racial language as well. The books lay out the conversion of these immoral, savage Indian servants as an almost noble duty, in which they teach them how to act to the British standard. The women see this process as akin to teaching young children right from wrong; however, upon further reflection, as mentioned in the article "Imperial Geographies of Home", "British women with their servants [actually] embodied imperial power on a domestic scale".²⁰ The same way that men were conquering the markets and native lands, the women were invading the domestic sphere and converting the natives to their own brand of British culture and standard. These guidebooks detail a wealth of information on how British

¹⁸ *Englishwoman in India*, 58-59

¹⁹ Steel and Gardner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, 3.

²⁰ Blunt, "Imperial Geographies of Home", 427.

women were expected to behave and exist in India. This includes the responsibility to enforce British standards within their home, but also to force this conversion onto native peoples within the home. It is important to acknowledge that these books are prescriptive, rather than descriptive; they are guides written to describe an ideal, but perhaps do not tell an exact reality for the British housewife. Surface research on various journals and correspondence seem to find similar experiences among young wives and women that parallel certain aspects of these guidebooks—indicating that there is some truth to the reality of them at least for a particular category of British women. It also reveals a lot simply that these were ideals that women thought important to write down and pass along, over and over again. Although women's experience is often neglected in history, these particular sources reveal important information—implicating British women in imperialism and acknowledging their role as colonial oppressors.

There are many complexities and intersecting issues tied up in these sources and the study of British women's experience in imperial India. They reflect poignant connections between not only gender, but also race and class, in positioning and claiming power. It is important to note misconceptions about female roles and position, but also to look at the implications of white, middle-upper class female empowerment at the hands of Indian women and culture. Scholars Chaudhuri and Strobel point out, "scholarly interest in white colonial women has grown [and]...this subject raises important issues of historical interpretation and present concern".²¹ This interest in the feminist colonial experience is pointedly white and risks

²¹ Chaudhuri and Strobel, *Western Women and Imperialism*, 1.

romanticizing European women as pioneering and heroic for their attempts to grasp power from the patriarchy and implement it in their own ways through imperialism. This mirrors early issues with First and Second Wave feminism, and these movements' roles in the constructed narrative of largely white female progress. Some scholars discuss this female progress in a way that neglects to acknowledge the oppression of native peoples that this involved and "typically lacks a historical and specific understanding of the colonial context, central to which was the exploitation of indigenous peoples".²² Female empire building and the European woman's domination of the domestic sphere in India was very gendered; as the household manuals show, their power had a lot to do with female servants and asserting British superiority. British women excised imperial power in the Anglo-Indian home, just as men had wielded power in the public sphere for centuries through economic, military, and political domination.

It is impossible in one study to examine all facets of the imperial experience, including race, gender, class, and nation. This is made even more complex by the interwoven nature and effects of these constructed categorizations. In examining these household manuals, one specific type of untold experience is revealed, and many other realities are hinted at and glimpsed from between the lines.

Imperialism allowed white women to inhabit more complex roles, even allowing more power in certain aspects than they might have held back in Britain. Yet, this power, like it always does, came at the expense of someone else—the indigenous peoples of conquered lands. This study is not meant to assign blame exactly to

²² Chaudhuri and Strobel, *Western Women and Imperialism*, 1.

European women in India, but rather an attempt to look at the implications of these shifts in power—both during imperialism and as they continue to exist today. It seems very plausible that these more powerful, imperial roles that British women took on in India translated into a desire for more power back home in Britain, starting the seed for the first wave feminism of Western suffragettes and intellectuals. A “Third Wave” feminist critique of these primary sources could reveal the roots of exclusive and privileged feminism as being perpetuated by growing nineteenth century ideas of nationalism, race, and class. This complicated implication of gendered power at the exclusion of racial minorities would be interesting to explore, as it parallels issues that continue to exist today—about a century after the British Empire’s dissolution at the height of imperial power—in feminist ideology and women of color’s exclusion from the mainstream movement.

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