

DIFFERENT GAZES: REPRESENTATIONS DURING THE RAJ

Amrita Banerjee
Research Scholar,
Department of English,
Jadavpur University,
Kolkata 700032
India

Abstract

One of the key areas in the studies of colonial theory is the relation between the colonizer and the colonized. The representation of the contact zone between the colonizer and colonized in the writings of the colonizer is an important document in this aspect. The critical analysis of these representations is usually limited inside the canon of male writers. The white women who accompanied the white men to India or came on their own also documented their experiences. These documents by the women were perennially out of critical focus. If these writings by the white women are properly studied, they can open up an altogether new field of critical analysis.

In the present paper I intend to look at a few works of memsahibs like Fanny Parks, Emma Roberts, Sara Jeannette Duncan, Mary Martha Sherwood and Alice Perrin who came to India during the Raj. I shall like to highlight the inherent difference between the writings (both Fictional and Non-fictional) of these women and their contemporary white male writers in the presentation of Indian dancing girls and servants. It will be of critical importance in my paper to find out whether the female gaze differed from the male gaze in such cases. The aim of my paper is to read British Women's writings to trace and interrogate the various problems that led the white women of the raj into a crisis of severe anxiety, resulting in deep racial hatred and making it impossible for them to accede to the feminist ideology of colonial sisterhood.

In literary writings about India by the women writers of the nineteenth and early twentieth century, the contact zone was represented as a problematic arena, where different cultures met and clashed. Various novels, short stories, letters and travelogues are full with the representations of contact zone as a space of barbarism, mutual incomprehension, mystery and conflicts. The most prominent form of contact, I think, is the sexual contact which needs a detailed research, so far not handled by the scholars of this field.

To understand the essentialities of gender inequalities in the structure of colonial racism and imperial authority we need to look at Said's *Orientalism*. In Edward Said's treatment of Orientalist discourse, the sexual submission and possession of Oriental women by European men "stands for the pattern of relative strength between East and West" (Said 6). In this "male power-fantasy," the Orient is penetrated, silenced and possessed (Said 207). In Orientalist popular stereotypes the oriental female is exotic and sexually promiscuous. She is often depicted nude or partially-clothed in hundreds of western works of art during the colonial period and is presented as an immodest, active creature of sexual pleasure who holds the key to a myriad of mysterious erotic delights.

According to Said, this is in part a result of the fact that Orientalism was an exclusively male province. He observes that, in Orientalist writings, 'women are usually the creatures of a male power fantasy. They express unlimited sensuality, they are more or less stupid, and above all they are willing' (Said 207). But Said is silent about the women writers who wrote about the Orient. Women's apparent absence as producers of Orientalist discourse was never questioned by Said. Neither has he cared for the absence of the women as agents within colonial power. This mirrors the traditional view that women were not involved in colonial expansion. But, critics like Sara Mills have observed that many women travelled to the colonies and made their own observations which are certainly different from the male viewpoint. It is necessary to reinstate women as agents of colonial expansions as they were not mere spectators of empire located outside the historical and material conditions. Rather, they colluded in the exploitative structures of power. By constructing women as not involved in empire the masculinist historiography that marginalizes women is supported.

It is obvious that the Orient, as it is constructed in texts, does not depict the reality of the East. It is made up of a series of images that tell us more about the occident. In a similar case, we find that the European paradigm of sexual difference constructs women as objects of knowledge (the other within). This does not actually reveal any truth about women. Rather it confirms the status of men as superior. The Western women are therefore feminized as the symbolic inferior in their own society. The question which then arises is that how a Western woman, who is feminized as the symbolic inferior other at home, can exercise the classificatory gaze over the orient that Said described. What access does a white European woman have to the enunciative position of a white superiority that is implicitly male? Sara Mills points out that this tension between the discourses of colonialism and the discourses of gender has made women's position so special in relation to Orientalism. These women have written under two power systems. Firstly, the power of patriarchy which acts upon them as they are middle class married women and secondly, the power of colonial rule which operates upon them through their relations with the colonized people. They occupy a dominant position due to colonialism, but a subordinate place in patriarchy. Because of these discursive pressures, their work exhibits contradictory elements. If we analyze their travelogues or other writings we can surely detect the traces of their co-optation into the male colonizer's discourse. Often, they seem to merely echo the male colonizer's voice. However, they are disempowered by their 'subordinate' position, and indeed, we find that these anxieties of womanhood are voiced through their works. Their simultaneous assertion of colonial power and their sense of being trapped within certain codes of gendered behavior have problematized their position. Neither wholly colonizer, nor entirely innocent of racism, the Raj women's writings are a fascinating study in contrasts and contradictions.

Western feminism is criticized for the Orientalist way it represents the social practices of other races as backward and barbarous, from which the black and brown women need to be rescued by their western sisters. In doing so, it fails to detect the particular needs of these women. They fail to hear the coloured women's voices. Even when they were adopting benevolent positions towards the black and Asian women, they were unable to see themselves as the potential oppressors. Laura Donaldson opines in this respect that, "A predominantly white middle-class feminism exhibits not an overt racism that conjures active dominance and enforced segregation but a more subtle "white solipsism" that passively colluded with a racist culture." (Donaldson 1). If we look at the narratives of colonial women it is seen that they also see the orient from the patriarchal colonialist standpoint. It was of critical interest to find out whether the female gaze differed from the male gaze.

During the early days of empire (in the late 17th and early 18th century) British women were rarely seen in India. This was firstly due to the factor that India was still unsettled and alien to them. Secondly, the charters of the company strictly forbade women to come to the outposts. Women were regarded as disturbances in a colonial entourage. Until the nineteenth century, the East India Company was extremely wary of allowing any increase in the number of European women in India, fearful that any such change might pose a threat to the stability of their relationships with Indian rulers. The rule forced the employees to lead a life without the comforts of family in India. To get rid of their loneliness, the officers of the company either took Indian mistresses or married Portuguese women. In the seventeenth century, the Company's Court of Directors even encouraged their soldiers in Madras to marry Indian non-Christian women in an attempt to prevent them from taking Portuguese wives whose Roman Catholic religion was considered potentially more dangerous than either Hinduism or Islam. To encourage such marriages the company Directors even presented rupees five as a baptizing gift to a mixed marriage children.

So, embarking on relationships with Indian women and choosing to settle in India with the native wife and having mixed race children were common for eighteenth century European men. While official church marriages were perhaps less prevalent in comparison to the number of unofficial relationships, both were viewed with equal acceptance. The wills of officers in Bengal in the late eighteenth and early nineteenth century provide further evidence of the widespread nature of these relationships. These wills bear specific names of Indian women with whom the officers have relationships. The language of the wills clearly indicates the fact that most of the men, involved in these relationships, were monogamous. Most refer affectionately, but obliquely, to their mistresses in secret implied words. Thomas Naylor, a major in the infantry, left Rs 4,000 to his pregnant 'female friend', Mukmul Khanum, as well as the bungalow they shared in Baharampur (fully staffed by their servants) and a £ 3,000 provision for their unborn child (Wald 5-25). Similarly, memoirs such as Captain Bellew's 1843 *Memoirs of a Griffin*, fondly recount such liaisons. Bellew writes of his General's attachment to Sung Sittara Begum (the 'Queen of Stars'), which he describes as a 'harmonious' and 'enduring' union that ended only with the begum's death (114-115). While the majority of these wills and memoirs implicitly acknowledge that the couples were not officially married, yet it is clear from the language of their wills that they have no moral dilemma over it.

But, from the 1790s British policies were changed regarding the relationship between British men and Indian women. Ronald Hyam has identified several reasons for the reversal of

official attitudes to intermarriage in India from the late eighteenth century (116-117). The increasing number and influence of the missionaries helped to tighten a code of Christian morality in increasingly racial terms. Such intimacies which went beyond the sexed- colonial-female-subject and white-male-powerful-colonizer stereotype alarmed the imperial authority. So, the British in India were encouraged to marry British women to maintain their 'pure bloodlines' and establish a social and domestic distance from Indians. In order to prevent mixed race marriages, early in the nineteenth century, the company shipped batches of young unmarried women by the 'Fishing Fleet' from Britain to India to find their husbands. A study shows that whereas in 1810, there were only 250 European women living in India, by 1870, almost 5000 British women lived in North-Western provinces alone (Blunt). The government understood that to complete the racial separation the British society in India must form a self enclosed English-style domestic environment, a 'home' away from home, as by this the native domestic set-up of the English administrator with the native wife will be disrupted and the power of native female sexuality engulfing, emasculating over the British officers will be controlled.

But, in spite of the rules and regulations prohibiting the interracial marriage, the 'native' concubine or *bibi* continued to be kept and interracial sexual liaisons were widely and overtly practiced. Ample examples can be found in east India company officer's letters where there are many references to Indian mistresses or wives. Captain Thomas Williamson's *East India Vade Mecum*, an 1810 travelogue considered as an essential reading for all gentlemen heading to India, contained much meticulous detail regarding Indian wives and mistresses. Williamson, an officer in the Bengal army, outlined the costs for maintaining an Indian mistress (Rs 40 per month, or roughly £ 60 per year) which, he insisted, was 'no great price for a bosom friend; when compared to the sums laid upon some British damsels, who are not always more scrupulous than those I have described' (Wald 11). Indian mistresses were preferred by British officers than European women as they had strong conviction that the European women did not possess constitution strong enough to withstand the climate of India. Indeed as late as in 1858, an officer wrote back to his mother that an 'Eastern Princess' will serve 'all the purposes of a wife without any of the bother' and he had no wish to marry some European 'bitch' unless she 'were an heiress' (Hyam 118). Such letters of the European officers bring to the fore the difference in their perceptions of European and Indian women.

The officers of the Company, who came close to the Indian women, were impressed and charmed by the caring, loving nature of these women. They developed a relation with these women which was not merely sexual. Thomas Williamson even called his Indian mistress a 'bosom friend'. The subject of Indian dancing girls or 'nautch' was also applauded by the Englishmen whereas to the British women it always was a matter of discomfort. In Captain Bellew's 1843 *Memoirs of a Griffin* we find a number of references to the Indian nautch girls. He presented detailed account of nautch shows and praised them for their lively music. He even went on to recount that the numbers sung by Indian nautch girls were so popular that even the white ladies were encouraged to copy them and present them in parties (214-215).

James Forbes, the son of a London merchant and a writer of the East India Company, arrived in Bombay in 1766. In his memoirs he also writes about the grace and appeal of Indian courtesans. He writes,

Many of the dancing girls are extremely delicate in their persons, soft and regular in their features, with forms of perfect symmetry; and, although

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dedicated from infancy to this profession, they in general preserve a decency and modesty in their demeanor, which are more likely to allure, than the shameless effrontery of similar characters in other countries. Their dances require great attention, from the dancer's feet being hung with small bells, which act in concert with the music. Two girls usually perform at the same time; their steps are not so many or active as ours, but much more interesting; as the song, the music, and the motions of the dance, combine to express love, hope, jealousy, despair, and the passions so well known to lovers and very easily to be understood by those who are ignorant of other languages. (61)

If we compare the women's writing of this period to the above mentioned men's writing we find an interesting contrast between them. The women who came to India during this period consider these public-women as a threat. It is evident from their writings, that they consider this sector of Indian womanhood completely devoid of manner, decorum and artistic sense. The women, who travelled to India in late 18th century and early 19th century, viewed the 'nautch' with anxiety and fear as sexually threatening. To them these dancing girls were the epitome of oriental sensuality and they seduced young Europeans to destroy them. As Indian women seldom stepped out in public, these public-women are the only women to whom the British men have an access. Writing in 1828, Mrs. Heber who accompanied her husband Reginald Heber provides an interesting contrast to Forbes' writing. While Forbes thinks that the passions of the nautch girls 'very easily to be understood' by the people of other language, to Mrs. Heber it is utterly unintelligible. She writes about a performance of Nickee, the famous courtesan of Calcutta, who has been named the 'Catalani of the East' and a subsequent nautch show which she attended. Mrs. Heber's disgust can easily be found in her writing—

As the crowd was great, we adjourned into a small room opening out of the upper gallery, where we sat listening to one song after another, devoured by swarms of mosquitoes, till we were heartily tired, when her place was taken by the nâch, or dancing girls,—if dancing that could be called which consisted in strained movements of the arms. Head, and body, the feet, though in perpetual slow motion, seldom moving from the same spot. Some story was evidently intended to be told from the expression of their countenances, but to me it was quite unintelligible. (47)

Mrs. Fenton also criticized the dress and the artistry of dancing girls in her journal written between 1826 and 1830—

...he brought forward an odious specimen of Hindostanee beauty, a dancing-woman, for my special gratification, but such a wretch,—dressed in faded blue muslin bordered with silver, put on in some fashion passing my comprehension. It appeared at least twenty yards, rolled in every direction about her, the ends brought over the shoulders and hanging down before, her hair falling wild about her face. She was dressed in good keeping for a mad woman.

The musicians then commenced a native air, merely a repetition of four notes; she advanced, retreated, swam round, the while making frightful contortions with her arms and hands, head and eyes. This was her 'Poetry of motion'; I could not even laugh at it. (243)

Thus, the general trend in the writings of the memsahibs in India is that they all start their descriptions of the nautch with the dresses and the ornaments worn by the nautch-girls. Next

came the evaluation of their art form. Particularly interesting is the fact that these European women travelers spent more time describing the attire and jewels of the dancing-girls. They devoted less time to describe the dance-shows. They are not that seriously interested in understanding the oriental art and its nuances. They prefer to dump them all as crude and boring. The interest in the dresses of the girls is well covered by the disregard for the way these women look. The dress does not fit the wearer, they feel. Rather, as Emma Roberts says, a tall and graceful figure would have done justice to the beautiful dress (3:186-187). Oriental women are short in stature as the memsahibs often refer to their little hands. The movement of the girls is not graceful, rather they perform certain repetitive gestures which are artless and boring as the memsahibs describe. Going under the surface level of the memsahibs' apparent disregard for the nautch girls, we can surely detect a note of fascination for the way these dancing-girls dress and move. The women writers accept that these Indian nautch girls have a charm of allurements. Their explicit love for oriental attire and distaste for oriental women wearing it, as expressed in their literary representations, hide an implicit preference of the memsahibs for the oriental attires to be carried better by themselves.

When the memsahibs found their men folk making sexual relationships with the colonized people, it gave them a particularly acute feeling of powerlessness. The sensualities of Indian men and women, prostitutes, and their nakedness disturbed British women and this in turn resulted in doubling their hatred towards the natives. Their explicit sensuousness disturbed the British women as they felt that these 'nautch' girls might charm away their men. A sexual competition for male attention and ensuing dissatisfaction are implicit in this general abhorrence for the performing women. In order to conceal this insecurity, they condemned the native dance-shows and its performers as obscene and sought to maintain a stance of cultural superiority. The fact that British women found the 'nautch' a disturbing oriental phenomenon and an example of moral decadence is clear in Mary Martha Sherwood's writing:

The influence of these nautch girls over the other sex, even over men who have been brought up in England, and who have known, admired and respected their own country women, is not to be accounted for. It is only obtained in a peculiar way, but often kept up even when beauty is passed. It steals upon those who came within its charmed circle in a way not unlike that of an intoxicating drug, being the more dangerous to young Europeans because they seldom fear it...All these Englishmen who were beguiled by this sweet music had had mothers at home, and some had mothers still, who in the far distant land of their children's birth, still cared, and prayed, and wept for the once blooming boys, who were then slowly sacrificing themselves to drinking, smoking, want of rest, and the witcheries of unhappy daughters of heathens and infidels.(448-450)

So, in the eyes of Mrs. Sherwood the 'nautch-girls' are witches who hypnotize the innocent young Europeans by their seductive charm and slowly annihilate them. Here, Sherwood directly draws a parallel between the Indian dancing girls and the European ladies and her fear about the impending danger of the charmed Englishmen hint at the uncomfortable assertion that the Indian women are too attractive to resist in comparison to the white women. The British men might forget about their mother or lady-love if they come closer to these native dancing girls. She found that the Indian nautch girls were like dangerous charmers for whom their men would go astray. She was afraid of their men being enchanted by Indian beauties and losing their power of colonial and sexual supremacy.

In Emma Roberts', *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan, with Sketches of Anglo-Indian Society*, written in 1835, we find the same strain of anxiety. Though Roberts attended such performances herself, yet, she fears "In the presence of European ladies the dancing of the *nautch* girls is dull and decorous: but when the audience is exclusively masculine, it is said to assume a different character."(1:252-253). She explicitly shows here her anxiety over the European Gentlemen's tendency to like these Indian *nautch*-shows which to her is beyond the limits of propriety.

These notes of anxiety can directly be contrasted with the playful note of the male writers. While writing about the 'charms' of the Indian *nautch*-girls Captain Mundy is candid enough to mention that the dress of the Indian *nautch* girls were often censorious. He writes,

The upper portion of the costume, however, I am bound to say, is not always quite so impervious to sight as a bodice of more opaque texture than muslin might render it. (91)

He again adds playfully that the propriety of the dance-shows depend upon the spectators.

European ladies not unfrequently attend these spectacles; and, when the dancers are warned beforehand, they only witness a graceful and sufficiently stupid display; but, if thrown off their guard by applause, there is some danger of their carrying the suppleness of their body and limbs quite beyond the graceful, and even bordering on the disgusting. The situation of a gentle man in this case is irksome and uncomfortable; and he sits in constant and not unfounded dread lest this fair libéraux in morality should commit some, perhaps unintentional, solecism against decency. (91-92)

What needs to be looked at in more depth is how notions of gender were bound up with hegemonic ideologies, and how women were both made an instrument of, and were complicitous with, the politics of imperialism. First, I would suggest that the *memsahibs*' Victorian upbringing prohibited them from accepting women's sexuality as purely as a form of entertainment. Yet they continued to sexualize the body of the *nautch*-girl rather than acknowledge her skill as an artist. British women in general were also completely ignorant about the different classifications and hierarchical status of public women in Indian society, which male British writers sometimes showed an awareness of. As such they could not understand that *nautch* girls were not regarded in Indian society as common prostitutes. Some of them were such esteemed artists that they were not even sexually available to all men.

Secondly, the dancing girls were more than just objects of entertainment; in many cases they were the beloved. Moreover, Indian companions were preferred by British officers over European women as they were convinced that European women did not possess a strong enough constitution to withstand the climate of India. Preference for a docile and caring Indian mistress over a European lady was sufficient to arouse sexual jealousy in the minds of British women. The glamorousness of the *nautch* girls and the attention that they received in Indian society was also a source of much anxiety to the emotionally starving *memsahibs*.

Thirdly, up to the nineteenth century, the East India Company was extremely wary of allowing any increase in the number of European women in India – fearful that any such change might pose a threat to the stability of their relationships with Indian rulers. Thereafter, when white women were sent to India, they were sent basically to fulfill the domestic purpose of creating an English home in the colony. Thus, from the very beginning they were positioned as sexual rivals to native Indian women, even as they replaced the Indian wives or mistresses in the white man's life.

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