



Imperial women in colonial setting: fiction, female identity and the British Empire

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Abstract

It is essential to examine the imperialist discourse of how the western women became vehicle of global feminism. Many of these women donned new roles challenging the norms of the traditional setting in colonial setup. Sharing their husband responsibility these memsahibs facilitated the percolation of the British policies and assertion of British culture. By placing them in the transnational sphere and by incorporating interdisciplinary approaches, it is apparent that these imperial women emerged as cultural stand bearers to shape and sustain an empire. This paper is an attempt to focus on the concept of gender in relation to colonialism by focussing on an imperial woman Flora Annie Steel, how she adopted a path which did not confirm to the standards of the age.

Keywords: British policies, culture, imperial woman

Introduction

It is true saying -one that should never be far from the minds of Englishwomen in India-that for the upholding of British prestige in the East, far more credit is due to the individual men and women who have carried out their lives loftiest conceptions of English truth and virtue, than to the collective wisdom of the office in Downing - Maud Diver

It is pertinent to unravel the process of distribution of power in the context of imperialism and therefore gender intertwined with race and class becomes an important category of analysis. The figure of memsahib has been a seat of political and social ambivalence and many of them facilitated the political and imperial functions of the British power discourse. These women were incorporated into the official category by virtue of their position as officials wives and because of their commitment became an integral part of the social and cultural aspect of British community based overseas. The emergence of cross disciplinary scholarship and the shift to incorporate cultural histories of empire have added a new dimension to the study of imperialism and colonialism. The traditional history portrays colonialism as a male enterprise, mirrors global rivalry, benevolent assimilation, cultural conflict and economic gains to justify the process of colonialism. It is essential to examine the imperialist discourse of how the western women became vehicle of global feminism. Many of these women in colonial setup donned new roles challenging the roles and norms of the traditional setting. Sharing their husband responsibility these memsahibs facilitated the percolation of the British policies and assertion of British culture thereby influencing the course of empire by cutting across and restructuring gender, class and race; but nevertheless they have remained ethereal historical actors. By placing them in the transnational sphere and by incorporating interdisciplinary approaches, it is apparent that these imperial women emerged as cultural stand bearers to shape and sustain an empire. This paper is an attempt to focus on the concept of

gender in relation to colonialism by focussing on an imperial woman Flora Annie Steel, how she adopted a path which did not confirm to the standards of the age. The study does not replace the conventional understanding but contributes to a greater understanding of the imperial experience.

To understand Colonialism in its entirety one has to take into cognisance the economic, political and social context in which the culture and people encountered each other along with the imbalance of political power that determined the relationship. It is also the context in which the ideologies emerged to justify the western dominance of the eastern and how these countries found a place in the international systems of power relations. Colonialism derives its legitimacy from the political and moral philosophers in the western tradition. It was the path-breaking work of Edward Said which set the course of the historical thought and orientalism became the tool to demystify the phenomenon of imperialism. Orientalism forms a considerable dimension of modern political - intellectual culture and determines the language, perception and the attitude of cross culture interface ^[1]. There has been a proliferation of writings on women in history: these include the white women, the iconic memsahibs as a serious matter of study. These studies exhibit the female as an essential components of domination, control and structures of unequal power and the empire is perceived to be a male dominated arena with women in the periphery ^[2]. This fact implicates that a few women who managed to step into this male dominated sphere had to adhere to the Victorian ideals of domesticity while taking part in the imperial exercise. At the same time wives of the officials who were engaged in colonial exercise were not mere imperial transients, but residents whose lives were intimately connected with the practices and ideologies of imperialism. Therefore it is pertinent to mention the feminine influence on imperialism since a substantial number of women were integral part of the structure of imperial social circles and their lives were intimately intertwined with the fortunes of

the empire^[3].

The nineteenth century witnessed the ascendancy of British imperialism and the notion of racial superiority resulted in certain ideological constructs of the orient. The two dominant streams of the nineteenth century liberalism and colonialism converged on the argument and found justification in the term 'Civilizing Mission' which suggested a tutelage is indispensable for the so called uncivilized societies to the extent where they could sustain liberal institutions. Because of its theme, it became emblematic both of euro-centric racism and aspiration of the west to dominate the east. At a psychological state it is embedded in social consciousness of both the colonizer and the colonized.

The nineteenth century was an age which witnessed the economic supremacy and the political ascendancy of Europe in general and Britain in particular. The reign of Queen Victoria earmarked the tidemark of the great age of colonization. The nationalism the empire generated, the social antipathies against other races it provoked played a crucial part in creating strategic solidarities within the country and a broader imperial identity. Imperils evolved into a national creed and duty in itself became religion. Well-regulated conduct signalled a typical Victorian Englishman; frivolity and pursuit of pleasure were considered destructive of character; the stern austerity of manner, pain and discomfort on the other hand were felt indispensable. The high imperialism generated during the Victorian times was distinguished by the magnitude of geographic expansion; the institution of colonial power was often expressed in forms of aggressive nationalism called jingoism and crystallisation of imperialist ideologies especially those pertaining to race was reinforced by the propagation of theory of Social Darwinism. The racial theories based on Darwinism strengthened the ideologies of oriental degeneracy and inequalities. The imperial project of the geological, meteorological, botanical, zoological, ethnic castes surveys were conducted to understand and harness the knowledge acquired for betterment of their own race and requirement of the administration. The rulers were primarily obsessed with 'pigeon holing of people' into easy reference categories that created the illusion of knowing the colonized people^[4].

It was the period in which stalwart colonial officer, as mentioned in colonial tales, were nurtured and positioned as lord of district and guardian of the people. Public schools in England inculcated the cultivation of those qualities which would prepare civilians as the upholder of paternalistic attitude in the daily task of an Indian administrator. These gentlemen imbued the human spirit and integrity of the Raj. Writing became a favourite pastime and writings reflecting colonial ethos, colonial perceptions and experiences resulted in a rich corpus of literature. Subsequently British India generated the largest imperial archive in the world from the stacks of advanced reports, minutes, instructions, memoirs, letters, reports, climate, dress, décor, cook books, travelogues. As more and more families began to accompany the officers, large number of monographs appeared on the literary canvas of late nineteenth century giving advice and preparing them for the land of exile. These published journals, memoirs, oral testimonies are an important source to document the lives of these women^[5]. Pictures of the houses

they were to live in were shown, the style of bathrooms, flora, fauna, servants, the climate they would face and the tropical diseases they might acquire were made intelligible to those embarking on their onward journey. Fascinated by exotic environment and spices of the east, but confused by ambiguities of culture and uncertainties of character, each viewed India from a unique perspective but some common themes are visible. Whatever their reason for writing, these memoirs became a prism to reflect the personalities and viewpoint of the writers for subsequent times and give a ripe flavour of life in the Victorian age. Management of the bodies of the English women who set sail for foreign shores became a concern for the empire. The British women were cautioned about the tropical heat and disease during their onward journey. Medical assistance was scanty, miscarriages were common as these English-women travelled with their husbands to different parts of the region and their fragile bodies were exposed to the torment of the climate and unhygienic condition^[6].

British empire in India was reaching its apogee; the period from 1848 to 1856 witnessed the ascendancy of British empire under lord Dalhousie, a born imperialist who pursued a policy of vigorous annexation and conquests coupled with the integration of the empire with his ambitious projects of building railways, introduction of posts and telegraphs, improvement of roads and laying of the canals and irrigation projects; the most notable was the annexation of Punjab in 1849. Indian material support and political loyalty were crucial for the sustenance of the imperialism as it occupied important strategic point for the defence of the British empire in the middle east. The establishment of the British Raj in 1857, the American civil war which resulted in greater interest in the Indian cotton and the building of the Suez Canal in 1869 resulted in the shortening of distance between the mother country and her colonies. The out-break of the mutiny in 1857 marked the change - from this time onwards British imperial policy began to concentrate on firm rule and showed greater caution. It was acknowledged that the strength and security of the empire had to rest on authoritative control and responsibility could only facilitate its permanence. Anglo Indian imagery of the unbridgeable chasm separating east from west grew during the period.

The representative of the British Crown was the unassuming Viceroy who was imbued with the high Victorian ideals and set the agenda of colonisation in which political domination was coupled with economic exploitation and racial discrimination. A rigid hierarchy of the administrative set up was established with the inevitable deputy commissioner. The very mention of the Raj Era conjures up the image of the Collector often alluded as the heavenly born. He was the *mai-baap* of the entire district and positioned as lord of district and guardian of the people. He was assisted by his wife - the memsahib who shouldered the regime of domesticity assisted by a coterie of servants. With the growth of the empire, as more and more British women accompanied their families and facilitated the political and imperial functions to administer the territories gender, like race, became one of the determinant to define the Britain relation with its Indian subjects. As a result the British men, British women, Indian men and Indian women were all fitted for British strict adherence to a social

hierarchy built on rank and portrayed the female as grasping to maintain the imperial standards. Learned behaviour and establishment of an upright figure of an officer and gentleman explains the development of a distinct imperial mindset. After receiving training and plump posting these British officers accompanied by their families set sail for foreign shores. Many wives who accompanied their husbands admired and connected with this model of respectability, voicing pride and admiration for their dashing officers. In this process came into existence their female counterparts ladies who could share in the mission to further ambitions of empire distinct roles with the ideology of the raj^[7]. These imperial women combined domestic duties and imperial responsibilities, creating stable and comfortable homes for their husbands and children attempting to recreate England on foreign shores.

Antoinette M. Burton examines the relationship of imperialism to the late nineteenth century feminist movement to explain how understanding of empire fanned the female self-awareness of female empowerment and inculcated in them a sense of national and racial superiority based on Britain's imperial status was an organizing principle of Victorian culture^[8]. These imperial women sought to come to terms with the dislocation and isolation of life in far off locale by reconstructing familiar class hierarchies through social rituals. Community activities offered them avenues to forge bond of friendship and facilitated the formation of emotional support mechanism in an alien environment. They donned social roles, sought each other company through many forms of amusement, strengthening their own social status and conduct based on the privileges rank of their husbands. These women, as public actors and ceremonial performers, donned social roles; they manoeuvred power and bargained within formal spaces. They organised formal dinners, masked balls, billiards, picnics and croquet, offered entertainment - this thrilling or at times unpleasant duty showcased ceremonial pageantry to assert imperial prestige. The ladies acted as Victorian hostess and attempted to design a social life that recreated the ambience of home. They redefined their social realities acting in accordance with their husband status. They were expected to attend countless social events and to act as symbolic representation of their husband status. These women utilized social rituals to design a public culture that showcased and maintained their husband status and imperial authority^[9]. By transferring, adopting and adapting cultural values and customs, these imperial women fashioned a new imperial reality thereby influencing the course of empire by cutting across and restructuring gender, class and racial borders. They appropriated male spaces and applied an adaptive mode of sociability and constructed a new social reality an imperial reality within which they were bound to uphold and sustain imperial prestige. Imbued with Victorian values and customs they fashioned a new imperial image albeit racial degeneration brought about by falling birth rates, disease, racial mixing, war and migration which entrusted them with greater responsibility. Stranded at isolated stations they experienced wilderness and disorientation but sharing their husband sense of duty and mission they appropriated symbols, processes and rankings to facilitate their roles as social functionaries and ceremonial performers. In utilizing dress and home décor these spouses drafted and projected an imperial identity that

reflected upper and middle class gender models; these practises produced a social reality that facilitated the development of an empowered womanhood that sustained imperialist ambitions.

Annie Flora Steel (1847 -19270) has dominated the ideological landscape of the British Raj in diverse ways. Her contemporary Maud diver comments on her illustrious career that she stands alone in this respect, for she has left behind her such a legacy of good works as has not been bequeathed to India by any other English woman in her sphere of life.¹⁰ She was possibly among the most pragmatic and articulate memsahibs in shouldering the White (Wo) man's Burden^[11]. At the same time in her zeal for service she stepped out of the threshold of confines as defined by her elite class and was embarrassing to them. Her outspoken criticism of colonial inefficiency and corruption made her a threat as far as Indian civil service was concerned^[12].

Annie was an autodidactic - unlike her brothers she did not get an opportunity to attend the formal schooling; Instead she was encouraged to read what she pleased from her father's library - history, philosophy, novels, poetry and even medical texts - all this fired her passion for education which she pursued later in her life. Her mother encouraged her interests in amateur theatricals, singing, sewing, drawing and handicrafts. She was hardly twenty when she was married to Henry Steele in 1867. Soon they set sail for Bombay to answer the clarion call of duty which was inherent in her upbringing. Young Annie was exposed to the vagaries of Indian climate and a bout of fever proved fatal for her first pregnancy. A year later, in December 1870, a daughter was born to her whom she named Mabel. The little baby provided her opportunity to interact with the natives and learn about their language, traditions and customs. She describes her daughter as the first link of her subsequent enchainment to the interests of the village women. These encounters opened a new literary discourse in gender issues and helped in decoding the native women, their social issues and a striking familiarity with their daily life. She recounts "A baby is ever a good ambassador and Fazli, the *ayah*, was an excellent attaché. So most evenings I had a regular court, and I picked up much more of the language than I should have done otherwise"¹³ Children in those days were send back to escape the deliberating influence of servants and escape the vagaries of climate. When it came time to send Mabel for schooling back in England, Annie steel filled the void by engaging in a new kind of work which marks her life as unconventional for a *burra memsahib* of her social stature^[14].

As Annie travelled around the province of Punjab she began to take interest in local traditions. She began to pick up local dialect and learn vernacular language and this linguistic skill enabled her to compile folklore of the region and in 1884 she published *Wide-awake Stories: A collection of Tales told by little children between sunset and sunrise in the Punjab and Kashmir* which was republished in England ten years later as *Tales of the Punjab* with illustrations by J. Lockwood Kipling and annotations by major RC Temple which eventually formed the basis of the compilation of the coherent writing of the Legends of Punjab. This colonial enterprise to compile and document culture of the region was necessitated by the politized culture ideology that structures the relationship between colonized informer and colonizer collector. Thus

Colonialism generated intercultural mental space within its overall power structure, but this space has to be negotiated by the players in the field, who deployed both their power, position and individual strategies^[15].

Steel became a close observer of the integration of the European products within the indigenous economy and social practices. She was not insensitive to the ideological aspirations and economic exigencies of the process of colonization and echoes her concern for the capture of colonial markets by the European products, particularly the dominance of cloth market by Manchester imports. Her prolonged residency in India gave her an in-depth and fuller perspective into the indigenous economy and social practices. She echoes her concern for the traditions of artisans and gradual erosion of the handicrafts in the face of onslaught of cheap machine made products like the aniline dyes produced on mass scale which were more fatal to inherited finesse in Indian fabric making; her series on foreign countries and industry published by Adam and Charles Black in 1905 focussed on the deterioration of indigenous crafts. By virtue of her power and influence she could gain access to the domains where an ordinary woman was unable to and garner knowledge about customs and rituals by interviewing the local women; she took up the cause of revival of traditional handicrafts which were threatened by the onslaught of western commercialism. Her illustrated monograph on Phulkari speaks volumes of her keen interest in indigenous culture and was subsequently published by the India office.

As wife of a senior British administrator she took active part in the station life by throwing parties, balls, organised amateur theatricals; at the same time she donned the role which was quite unusual for the conventional memsahibs that of crossing the confines of domesticity of bureaucracy and entering the domestic spheres of the native women. She mustered up the courage to diversify her role and shoulder the 'White Woman's Burden' taking active part in the social emancipation of native women and voicing their concerns. She began to teach English to the young boys in the local school; at the suggestion of the chief native administrator of Kasur she pioneered the setting up of an all Girls school at Kasur. Her grassroots level efforts for the educational reforms won her great appreciation and she was appointed the inspector of schools and in this capacity she was given the responsibility of female education of British territory in Punjab, which stretched from Delhi to Peshawar, a post she refused to relinquish after her husband posting to another place of Punjab and she lived apart from him for about a year. She also served as a member of the Provincial Education Board and worked on the task of introducing reforms in school education and re-writing school primers which were illustrated by John Lockwood Kipling, the father of celebrated writer Rudyard Kipling. In recognition of her services she was also given the charge as Vice President of Victoria Female Orphan Asylum in Punjab. When she learnt that the practice of *purdah* prevented the native women accessibility of local male physicians, she began to dispense the knowledge she had garnered from the medical texts in her early life and started administering medicines in the role of white women reformers who perceived themselves as mothering Indians.

Undoubtedly she played an active role in social uplift of the

female natives and served an model for others English ladies to emulate and brought an amazingly energetic efficiency and an attitude that seems to have enabled her to sweep away the obstacles posed by law and custom whether Indian or British. It was an era in which the new administrative set up was introduced and the shortening of the journey facilitated the Anglo Indian families to equip themselves with the modern amenities, medicines and home décor. The broad sweep of transformation ushered in by the material culture of the Victorian times and of the disarrangement of the traditional fabric form the background of her writings. Steel creates a colonial discourse replete with ambiguous representation of control and authority. An examination of her writings reveal how she used the knowledge she had acquired of the natives to further the interests of imperialism. In the *Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* she reiterates the analogy between effective household management and benevolent imperialism and proclaims that an Indian household can no longer be governed peacefully, without dignity and prestige, than an Indian empire^[16]. The colonial Englishwomen were advised to adapt their dressing to the tropical climate and not yield to the oriental sloppiness of dress^[17].

Her long stay of twenty two years in India fuelled her literary passion and she penned down a rich corpus of literature consisting of over twenty novels and innumerable short stories. Like her contemporary illustrious writer Rudyard Kipling, this female author and educationist was attentive to the eloquence of objects. Annie canvas was the native society but she is distinct in the sense that she was passionate to grasp the native life and at the same time the native women who were the characters of her writings are not voiceless entities. Her novels set in Anglo Indian station romance are peopled with native characters besides the usual Anglo Indian characters. It is in fact the buzzing generated by her short stories which set her writings apart from her contemporaries. She has manifested a great deal of familiarity with the native Indian life and her writings mirror the social life, the customs and the folklore of North India. Her autobiographical writing *The Garden of Fidelity* published after her death in 1929 is an important source to learn about the life she led in India. She admits when her husband was posted in remote areas in north India like Kasur, where there was hardly any other European, she diverted her inner self to decode the local customs by 'acquiring knowledge of India and its people' but with the imperialist design of 'learning more or less how to manage them'^[18]. During this process she developed a close bond and established emotional ties with the women of rural setting. Instances of such bonding include a brooch, which was studded with the gems taken out of their own ornaments, presented to her by the women of Kasur when she was leaving the station, 'so remarkable, so touching, so clearly a token of what their feelings were'^[19]. That touched the emotional chord in her. *On The Face of Waters* based on episode of the Mutiny of 1857 is perhaps the best writing of Steel presenting a balanced view of the British and Indian perspective. She was hardly ten when the mutiny broke out and the atrocities of Nana Sahib shook the western world. The vivid memories of the horrors of revolt scarred her sensitive mind and continued to haunt her for the rest of her life and manifested in her later writings. She located the white women as an important

symbol of British prestige and imperialist dignity in the colony and warning them against any impropriety in dress or conduct which may undermine image of the empire and often censured the missionary women for their too much closeness with the natives.

A close examination reveal the underlying conflicts and contradictions in Annie Steel which has brought an amazing energetic efficiency and an attitude that seems to have enabled her to sweep away the obstacles posed by law and custom whether Indian or British concern for feminist sympathies. An analysis of her writings portray that the sympathetic chord she echoed for the native woman gets lost when she talks about the contemporary Victorian feminist movement, notion of western new woman and suffragist movement in the west. Similarly her attitude towards Indian woman was riddled with contradictions and paradoxes and displayed a mixture of censure and praise. In fact flora Annie steel, perhaps more than anyone else, embodies the memsahib in all of her contradictions. No doubt her writings have energised the debates on gender in Anglo Indian setting but her works reflect her gender attitudes are rent with contradictions, her gender sympathies are often being complicated by her class and race biases^[20].

During the twenty-two years Flora Annie Steel spent in India as the wife of a British administrator in an environment which was hard for a westerner to comprehend or grip, she became interested in the lives of the native women, learnt the local languages and explored the rural culture and these became an integral part of her writings. Her approach was Indo-centric, her writings reflect the socials issues and focus on the indigenous culture and life of the native women; at the same time the paradox is that she has reinforced the western stereotypical images about the orient in her work. An analysis of her career clearly depict her as an imperial woman shouldering the burden of the Empire in promoting the tools coloniser used to create the institution of the empire. Her writings exhibit authoritarian thrust to further the project of post-colonial theorists that seek to investigate, the tools coloniser used to create the institution of the empire. In-fact politicised cultural ideology structured the relationship between the colonised and the coloniser antiquarianism and necessitated the colonial enterprise to compile and document Indian culture, government and Anglo Indian relation. Her writings reflect women's perspective on British Colonial enterprise. In-fact Annie Steel was a true representative of her age and class and supported the imperialist agenda of the empire. She was by all means a memsahib true in her colours, attitudes and perception. Indeed she was a true representative figure of late Victorian and Edwardian 'New Woman' and this essay examines, not the threat to nation and empire represented by the British New Woman but rather 'the New Woman in the colonial peripheries.'

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- 19 *Garden of Fidelity*, p. 10
- 20 Indrani Sen, *Woman and Empire; Representations in the Writings of British India (1858-1900)*, Orient Longman Private Limited, Hyderabad, India, pp. 134-135. Indrani assumption about Steel as a racist, elitist and politically conservative is based mainly on her writings portraying lives of Indian women and draws the premise that steel shows disdain for many of her Indian subjects.