

Liberator or Oppressor? An Inquiry on the Memsahib's Relationship With Her Ayah.

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Wittenberg Class of 1999

The *memsahibs*, the “masters’ women,” first came to the British colony of India in the nineteenth century as the wives and companions of British men in India.¹ One of the *memsahib’s* duties in the colony was the supervision of the servants, an important job that needed “both brain and heart.”² Many British women who came to India felt both a need to maintain racial superiority over the local people but also a “burden” of uplifting the status of Indian women.³ I will explore this relationship between the *memsahib* and her *ayah* from the mid-1800s to the turn of the century.

The *ayah* was the female servant, and depending on the household, she was either the children’s nurse or the *memsahib’s* attendant. Not many Anglo-Indian⁴ households hired *ayahs* because the majority of Indian servants were men. A handbook written for British women in India, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper & Cook*, gives a detailed description of the *ayah’s* duties and explains when she should bring the *memsahib* tea, what to say and ask and in exactly what order to do her daily chores. The *ayah*, sometimes, was not only the personal attendant to the *memsahib* but also responsible for serving her mistress’ guests.⁵ *Ayahs*, whose primary job was that of a children’s nurse, had a great deal of responsibility and the *memsahibs* were advised to put their faith in the *ayah*.

Some British women did not approve of households hiring *ayahs*. In her account of a boarding school for Christian girls, Mary Carpenter, a missionary educator, explains how “In England, such girls would be...intended for domestic service...however, that such can rarely be the case in India...it would not...be safe for a young girl to be placed as a servant in the family.” Since many households employed

mostly men as domestic servants, Carpenter expresses a fear that the young *ayah* would become a victim of these Indian male servants’ sexual desires. She suggests that it would be better to marry these girls off at the age of fifteen to male converts so they could use their skills as housewives.⁶ Although female servants in England found themselves in a similar situation, often being the only woman, perhaps there was a fear that the Indian *ayah* was more defenseless and childlike compared to her British counterpart. This concern that reformers express toward Indian women illustrates how although they, in many ways, wanted to uplift and educate Indian girls, they still found it important to maintain some structured British hierarchy. For many British women, they believed that the main reason for educating Indian women was to prepare them for a life of Victorian domesticity.⁷

Many *memsahib’s* descriptions of *ayahs* show a mixture of respect and condescension toward these women. One account explains that *ayahs* are “singularly kind, injudicious, patient and thoughtless in their care of children,” but reminds the *memsahib* that they lack the high level of common sense possessed by the British.⁸ However, in her autobiography, Flora Annie Steel, the wife of a British official, shares a touching experience with Fazli, her *ayah*. When Steel had to leave her six-month-old daughter to the care of a friend, Fazli consoled her mistress with words that “struck deep into my heart.” She told her, “You leave her in God’s care, memsahib.” Steel perhaps felt a sense of shame in her attitude toward Indians when she wrote of this experience, “And these are the people we dub heathen!”⁹ This statement acknowledges

one of the many contradictions in colonial values. Steel could see that Fazli was not an inferior savage, yet in all her other accounts about servants, she describes the need for the *memsahib* to assert her control.

There are many sources describing the sexual threat ("black peril") of local male servants to the *memsahib*, which posed the danger of disrupting the social distance that maintained colonial society.¹⁰ Some British women however, felt threatened by their husband's relations with Indian women.¹¹ Although Indian women's sexuality is not mentioned as an issue when hiring *ayahs*, perhaps the threat was there for the *memsahib*. In her autobiography, Steel expressed a concern that Muslim women in *pardah* (seclusion) were "inevitably over-obsessed with sex" and she also advised against the hiring of Muslim women because of their laziness. Because of her concern with these women's sexuality, laziness may not have been the only reason not to hire Muslim *ayahs*. However, some women may have felt relief at the idea of their husbands having sexual relations with local women. Pregnancy and childbirth were very dangerous in the colonies and anything that could cut back on the *memsahib's* chances of getting pregnant may have been accepted.

Some *memsahibs* also felt threatened by their *ayahs* who took care of their children. Although some *ayahs* were accused of simply spoiling the children, one *memsahib* wrote in 1929: "You can have very little idea of the enormous grip which the average...*ayah* gets on a child even when the mother is about most of the time."¹³ It was usually the *ayah* who did the majority of the child-care for British children. Indian *ayahs*, because of their inferior position in the colonial hierarchy, were not in any position to discipline or punish their masters' children. Thus, it was not uncommon for British children to keep fonder memories of their kind and loving *ayahs* than of their mothers. Also, since the children spent so much time with their *ayah*, they would hear many Indian stories and would often learn to speak Indian languages before learning English. This would cause difficulties in maintaining British superiority especially as children began to absorb the culture which their parents deemed inferior.

For many British women, Indian servants were usually the only interaction they had with the indigenous people. According to historian Margaret Strobel, it was through the servants that the *memsahib* based her view on Indian life and culture.¹⁵ Most husbands felt a need to protect their wives from the "uncivilized" Indian culture, thus preventing the *memsahibs* from leaving the secure confines of the Anglo-Indian community. This isolation resulted commonly in boredom and frustrations expressed primarily toward the servants and their inability to behave like their civilized rulers.

Memsahibs, outside the home, had no real control or power within the Raj. Although they were members of the ruling class, British women were ultimately still subservient to their husbands. In an effort to keep up appearances of having power, *memsahibs* used whatever tools they could to demean and humiliate the Indians they came in contact with, including treating their adult servants as children.

According to *The Complete Indian Housekeeper & Cook*, an Indian servant is not a savage, but "a child in everything save age and should be treated as a child; that is to say, kindly but with the greatest firmness." It advises that the *memsahib* use a "system of rewards and punishments" to encourage her servants to work properly. A dose of castor oil is suggested as an adequate punishment for a misbehaving adult servant.¹⁶ This condescending attitude illustrates another way for the *memsahibs* to maintain the proper racial hierarchy within their homes.

One of the primary concerns of the *memsahib* was regarding the Indian's lack of personal hygiene. One Englishwoman claimed that "the worst charges brought against native servants are uncleanness and a propensity to petty thefts and lies..."¹⁷ Therefore, it was crucial to the *Memsahib* that she never let her guard down, lest "neglect on the part of the mistress, results in the servants falling into their old habits with the inherited conservation of dirt."¹⁸ She was also responsible for providing a clean living environment for the servants while teaching them how to apply British standards of hygiene to their own lives.

The *memsahib* also had to gain an understanding of India's caste system in order to

work around the restrictions it posed on servants' duties. The duties of each servant differed according to their caste. For example, a cook could not clean and a duster could not sweep. These limitations often led to households with as many as sixty servants. Instead of lessening the burdens of housekeeping, sometimes the *mem sahib* may have found herself overwhelmed by the duties of supervising the plethora of servants.¹⁹ Although there was the option of hiring Muslim servants for whom, technically, there was no problem of caste,²⁰ some households preferred to avoid these servants for the sexual threat, which was mentioned earlier.

In order to give "intelligible orders to her servants," the *mem sahib* was sometimes expected to learn the local language.²¹ That some British women felt obliged to learn the local language is interesting because they learned the language for different reasons than their children did. British children who learned Bengali or Hindi from their *ayahs* did so to enjoy hearing Indian folktales or to play with their *ayah's* children; their mothers, on the other hand, used their knowledge of the local tongue as a tool for asserting control over their servants, and also perhaps to alleviate their boredom.

Many *mem sahibs* showed, through their writings, the juxtaposition between their feminism and racism. While some made efforts to promote Indian women's education and supported the suffrage movement, they also believed in maintaining the hierarchy of the Raj wherein Indians were inferior. There was an "absolute necessity," Flora Steel wrote in her autobiography, "for high-handed dignity in dealing with those who for thousands of years have been accustomed to it. They love it. It appeals to them...."²²

Other feminists and reformers supported the education of Indian women in an effort to encourage them "to establish households in which Victorian domesticity would prevail."²³ Although not blatantly racist, this kind of attitude illustrates how the *mem sahibs* believed in the superiority of their British lifestyle. With these attitudes, it seems unclear whether the colonizers believed that some Indians could be

taught to be like the British and uplift themselves to the status of their rulers, or if Indians were inherently inferior and teaching them British morals would only succeed in making them slightly better off.

Other *mem sahibs* did not feel the same burden to help the unfortunate Indian women that other British women felt. According to them, Indian women were quite resourceful and happy in their position: "That a sweeper woman should always be a sweeper woman, and should marry a sweeper or some equivalently low-caste man, seems to them even as a decree of nature which it were useless to overthrow . . . I do not think that the working woman of the East is in such bad case when set beside her European sisters."²⁴ This sort of opinion may have been more the exception than the rule because of the colonial nature of having to assert that the ruling power is superior and is somehow "saving" the colonized peoples from their own culture.

In their view that Indian women led wretched lives, many *mem sahibs* often forgot that legally and socially, they were not really as independent as they believed themselves to be. Some *mem sahibs* believed that in England, a woman was treated as "a human being of equal rights with man; mistress of her own sex," who had control over her body and could make independent reproductive decisions.²⁵ Whether or not this was actually true for some British women, perhaps it made them feel better about their own inferior position to feel pity for the Indian women whom they viewed as less fortunate.

In her relationship with the *ayah*, perhaps the only Indian woman she communicated with, the *mem sahib* may have felt that her concerns of not being her husband's equal in the politics of the Raj were small compared to what she believed her servant's position in Indian society was. Not only could she do her part in "helping" maintain the colonial power structure in the private sphere, but the *mem sahib* could also work at focusing some of her efforts on improving her Indian "sisters'" pitiable lives. Both attitudes, although seemingly contradictory, may have been the most useful coping mechanism of the *mem sahib*.

End Notes

¹ Margaret MacMillan, *Women of the Raj* (New York: Thames and Hudson Inc., 1988), 7.

² Flora Annie Steel, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper & Cook* (London: William Heineman, 1907), 7.

³ Antoinette Burton, "The White Woman's Burden: British Feminists and 'The Indian Woman,' 1865-1895," in *Western Women and Imperialism*, ed. Nupur Chaudhri and Margaret Strobel (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 137.

⁴ For the purpose of this study, the term "Anglo-Indians" is used to refer to the British in India. Later, around 1881, it was used as a term to describe those of mixed British and Indian descent. MacMillan, 43.

⁵ Steel, *Complete Indian Housekeeper & Cook*, 86.

⁶ Mary Carpenter, "Surat, Bombay and Poona, 1868," in *The Queen's Daughter: An Anthology of Victorian Feminist Writings on India 1857-1900*, edited by Penelope Tuson (Berkshire: Ithaca Press, 1995), 80.

⁷ Barbara N. Ramusack, "Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India, 1865-1945," in *Western Women and Imperialism*, ed. Nupur Chaudhri and Margaret Strobel (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1992), 123.

⁸ Steel, *Complete Indian Housekeeper & Cook*, 85.

⁹ Flora Annie Steel, *Garden of Fidelity Being the Autobiography of Flora Annie Steel, 1847-1929* (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1929), 53.

¹⁰ Margaret Strobel, *European Women and the Second British Empire* (Indianapolis: Indiana University Press, 1991), 24.

¹¹ Strobel, 4

¹² Steel, *Garden of Fidelity*, 121.

¹³ Janice N. Brownfoot, "Memsahibs in Malaya: A Study of European Wives in a British Colony and Protectorate 1900-1940," in *The Incorporated Wife*, edited by Hillary Callan and Shirley Ardenner (Worcester: Billing & Sons Limited), 198.

¹⁴ MacMillan, 137-38.

¹⁵ Strobel, 22.

¹⁶ Steel, *Complete Indian Housekeeper & Cook*, 3.

¹⁷ Maud Diver, *The Englishwoman in India* (London: W. Blackwood & Sons, 1909); quoted in Dennis Kincaid, *British Social Life in India 1608-1937* (London: George Routledge and Sons, Ltd., 1938), 247.

¹⁸ Steel, *Complete Indian Housekeeper & Cook*, 2.

¹⁹ Mary Ann Lind, *The Compassionate Memsahibs: Welfare Activities of British Women in India, 1900-1947*. (Connecticut: Greenwood Press, Inc., 1988), 23.

²⁰ However, the Hindu caste system "had spilled over into India's other religious groups," including Islam. MacMillan, 38.

²¹ Steel, *Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, 2.

²² Steel, *Garden of Fidelity*, 133.

²³ Ramusack, 123.

²⁴ Mary Billington, "Women in India" in *The Queen's Daughter: An Anthology of Victorian Feminist Writings on India 1857-1900*, edited by Penelope Tuson (Berkshire: Ithaca Press, 1995), 317.

²⁵ Flora Annie Steel, *India: Painted by Mortimer Menpes*, Described by Flora Annie Steel (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1905; reprint, Delhi: Neeraj Publishing House, 1982), 156.

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