

The Memsahib Writes: Double Consciousness in 19th Century Memsahib Literature

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Abstract

The memoirs and letters written by Memsahibs of colonial India has always been an oddity of the colonial enterprise of British India. The Memsahibs, by virtue of their ambivalent position in India, left deeply ambivalent accounts of their lives spent in India. On one hand, they diverged from the prevalent models of European femininity and on the other hand, they were considered the upholders of Englishness amidst the corrupting influence of the Orient. This paper traces the history of Memsahibs in India and tries to analyze their letters and memoirs to look for a sort of “double consciousness” in their writings, an ambivalence regarding their own subjectivity as well as their Indian surroundings.

Keywords: Memsahibs, British India, Calcutta, Double Consciousness, memoir

The relation of women and imperialism has always been fraught with ambivalence. This is perhaps best exemplified in the figure of Memsahib, or the European women in India. Therefore, the works of the Memsahibs has not been accorded the same honor as the writings by the colonial Sahibs. As more and more Memsahib texts are unearthed, we would perhaps be able to break away from the stereotype notion of Memsahibs as silly, snobbish creatures and appreciate their contribution to the colonial project. First, this paper traces a history of the Memsahibs in India to see how the institution has evolved from its inception to 19th century. Then, a study of daily lives of the Memsahibs and try to excavate the stereotypes of representation that exist about Memsahibs. Next, the Memsahibs will be located within the spectrum of Victorian femininity. It is the contention of the study that it will be impossible to straitjacket the Memsahib in any ready-made categories of representation, Instead, we have to be perceptive about the ambiguities of the epistemological status of Memsahibs in order to read the double consciousness in their writing. By a double consciousness, a complex matrix of contradictory opinions that exist side by side in their writings is meant. It is the contention of this paper that this double consciousness is a defining feature of Memsahib writing and as a result, they are fundamentally unstable and defy conventional reading. This double consciousness exists in both the structural and thematic level of the texts and in the last two sections of the paper, the ambiguities in the structural and thematic content of the books will be pointed out, at the same time investigating the ideological cross currents responsible for such.

The European women were not equal partners to the Empire in its founding stage. They were almost definitively absent in the early activities of the Empire. In fact, “Until towards the end of the [17th] century no Englishwomen were permitted by the Company to share the exile of its servants” (Wright, 1917). Naturally, Europeans freely took Indian women as their companions. This practice continued well into

the next century, but facing stiff competition from the new phenomenon known as “The Fishing Fleet”, Job Charnock, the founder of Kolkata was known to take an Indian wife himself whom he rescued from Sati. It was similarly noted by later historians that Indian women had a “corrupting” influence over the European men, influencing them to renounce their Western manners (Blechynden, 1905, p. 9). William Dalrymple’s immensely readable *The White Mughals* (2003) is the more recent work to discuss these intermarriages between the European men and Indian women. Dalrymple (2003) wrote that this phenomenon “seemed to raise huge questions about Britishness and nature of Empire where “...the easy labels of religion, ethnicity...turned out...to be surprisingly unstable” (p. 38). The behavior of the Europeans was very hard to control in those early wild years, particularly because the lack of strong authority and the bonds of family to instill a sense of responsibility. Wright (1917) wrote about the 17th-18th centuries how “in the absence of the refining and restraining influence of [European] women, social customs in these early settlements should have degenerated largely into drinking customs” (p. 416). This proved a problem for the Imperialists, for their purpose was not to assimilate but to dominate. But it would be erroneous to say that European women were as a whole, absent in India. There were other European powers in fray at this time as well, namely the French, Dutch and the others. Marriages were common between these communities, the most notable being Madame Grand, the celebrated French beauty of Chandernagore whose first marriage to a British civilian of Calcutta in the middle of 18th century (Moorhouse, 2008). Women were hard to get by primarily because journey back to Europe was difficult. Travel time to England via the Cape of Good Hope was difficult and lengthy, and “company employees would hope to return home once before retirement, so that finding a British bride was difficult” (Courcy, 2003, p. 3). The first European women who arrived in Bombay were in the year 1671 as a part of the British Fishing Fleet (Courcy, 2003, p. 3). But the supply was a mere trickle compared to the demand. Therefore, mixed marriages or taking Indian wives or concubines remained a very common practice. Kathleen Blechynden in her book, *Calcutta: Past and Present* writes how the early records of Calcutta show that “many of the English factors of Bengal were married to native ladies, many of whom

became converts to Roman Catholic faith” (Blechynden, 1905, p. 32). Lord Cornwallis (1786-93) was the first governor-general to inter caste marriages legally condemning. It was also made illegal for children of Anglo Indian marriages to serve in the company. Lord Wellesley (1798-1805), his successor banned all Indians and Anglo-Indians from social functions in Calcutta (Blanchette, 2013). Thus, at the beginning of 19th century, inter-race unions were effectively accompanied by the tint of social stigma. This paved the way for more European women to travel to India, either with their husbands or to come as a part of the “Fishing Fleet” – shiploads of single women hoping to capture European single men in the colonies. This created huge opportunities for plain girls to travel to India to find husbands. A popular poem doing rounds in *Calcutta Review Vol. XXV* at that time sarcastically quipped,

Pale faded stuff, by time grown faint
Will brighten up through art
A Britain gives their faces paint
For sale at Indian’s mart. (Dev, 1905, p. 252)

Thus, the early origins of the Memsahibs in India lie in gross physical needs of the European male. A sum of 200 Rupees per month was allowed to married civilians and a premium was held out to bachelors to enter into matrimony (Dev, 1905, p. 253). The marriages were affairs of necessity rather than matters of the heart. Anne De Courcy writes about the inordinate hurry of courtship for these marriages. Women were almost immediately scooped up by civilian and officers, widows were proposed in the funerals of their dead husbands (Dev, 1905, p. 253). The women who failed to secure men in the metropolis would move to the countryside and more remote frontiers, which had an even bigger paucity of women of marriageable age. Gradually the Memsahib-less India began to be populated by Memsahibs – thickly in the metropolitan cities, thinly in the more remote corners, generally called “Up the Country” (Hare, 1893, p. 271). Thus, we can infer that the Memsahib presence in India was exclusively an Imperialist one, to keep the European men in the colonies “happy”. Indira Ghose (2007) pointed out that by 1840, a trend of “increasing contempt for the natives and the segregation between the races” (p. 110) was in place, solidifying race relations and making the advent of

Memsahibs more normal. Alexander Hamilton, in his *A New Account of East Indies* (1744), noted that during his visit in India there were many ladies in Calcutta. It consisted of European women who arrived from England, their daughters, Indian women who married and converted Europeans, and also the wives of the local Armenian merchants (as cited in Blechynden, 1905, p. 24). They were mainly clustered around the Old Fort area (the space between the present Koilaghat Street and Fairlie Place). This formed the first nucleus for the society of Calcutta.

The daily household duties and functions of the Memsahibs were carried out on an almost ritualistic basis. Raja Benoy Krishna Deb (1905) noted an elaborate daily ritual of the Memsahibs. He cites numerous other sources which can be summarized as that Memsahib is generally negligent to her household works. They would rise up really late, around nine and then would proceed to have toiletries and a long lunch, followed by a heavy siesta (p. 253). On waking up, they would proceed to dress up for the events of the evening. One would wonder the point of such elaborately ritualistic life. Was it a defense mechanism of some sort or simply a source of comfort in daily ritualistic patterns? The following passage might serve as an explanation;

Divided from the home country by such tremendous obstacles, India was literally a land of exile to the Englishmen and women who dwelt there, and they seem to have done their best to gild their cage, and to compensate themselves for the loss of Western comfort, by indulgence in Eastern splendor. (Blechynden, 1905, p. 126)

Indeed, there was something very symbolic and ritualistic to the European life in India as it becomes apparent from the writings of these women.

Hamilton, whom Blechynden uses as a source in her book, also gave us a description of the lifestyle of the men and women of Calcutta at that time. Despite the stifling weather, “ladies crowned their elaborate coiffure with heavy turbans to attend a crowded reception, or to dance till daybreak at a ball, even in the sultry month of May” (Blechynden, 1905, p. 126). Church going was an important part of the social calendar and all Calcutta society met regularly at church on

Sunday mornings, for there was no evening service, where also young ladies, on their first arrival in the settlement, made their public debut (Blechynden, 1905, p. 131).

The Memsahibs had a life full of leisure and;

Dancing was always a favorite amusement in Calcutta, and the ladies being in the minority did their best to redress the balance by each dancing as many dances as she could possibly crowd into one night. (Blechynden, 1905, p. 114)

There were conflicting reports of the promiscuity of women. It is a fact that some marriages were extremely successful. Also, hasty marriages often proved to be great mismatches and “Calcutta having been known for affairs of the Coeur as much as the court of Versailles” (Dev, 1905, p. 252). There were also other amusements available to the ladies of that time like taking a ride down the fashionable parts of Calcutta or sailing down to Barrackpore for a country retreat. The overall image of the Memsahibs was they were lazy and snobbish. Sara Mills cited Pat Barr and said that “Writers have handed down to us a fictional image of the typical ‘memsahib’ as a frivolous, snobbish and selfish creature who flitted from bridge to tennis parties ‘in the hills’ while her poor husband slaved ‘on the plains’” (Mills, 1991, p. 59). The view is not only inaccurate but also sexist. Such generalizations are nothing but a reflection of the prevalent anxiety surrounding the unresolved status of Memsahibs. Now the paper will deal in detail about this unresolved status of the Memsahibs which status arose from the shadowy zone they occupied in the public-private discourse of the 19th century. Modern studies have gone beyond this image of Memsahibs as indolent creatures and have focused in their writings for salvaging their role in the colonial enterprise.

Though the Memsahibs were far removed from England, their model code of conduct was overwhelmingly British. The prevalent social mores of England were reflected in the colonies also. We can draw a direct parallel of the promiscuous British society of India during the close of 18th century that Raja Benoy Krishna Deb talked about and the licentious Regency Period in England (Dev, 1905, p. 253). It is not to be assumed however that the British population in the colony

imitated their hedonistic British counterparts. The situations at the two places were different. When we come to the fourth decade of the 19th century, changes have taken place in both the throne of England and also in India. There was increasingly a move towards “reactionary conservatism...which created a climate favorable to the traditionalist conception of woman under the sway of man and within the confines of family” (Bosch, 1974, p. 28). The major writers of the time wrote in lengths about the issue of women’s subjection. Notable among them was John Ruskin’s “Of Queen’s Gardens” (1865) that in the benevolent rhetoric of glorification relegated the woman to the private sphere. The advice books for women at that time urged them to be thrifty, economical and submissive. However, thinkers like John Stuart Mill espoused for the emancipation of women from their ontological bondage in the hugely controversial *The Subjection of Women* (1869). Kate Millett is of the opinion that “Compressed within these two statements [Mill and Ruskin] is nearly the whole range and possibility of Victorian thought on the subject” (Millett, 1970, p. 2). Now, it is required to place the Memsahibs within this spectrum of discourse around 19th century femininity. For that, the difference of situation of women in England and India must be considered. Firstly, the society was a closed and tiny one. Every white skinned person who is a regular resident of a city was expected to know all others. In most cases, class divisions were also erased as a result. Secondly, even the lowliest of European Memsahib had some number of servants, relieving her of performing the essential duties of women at that time in Europe – housekeeping and child rearing. It is true that the noble women of Europe were also relieved of such duties but women irrespective of their class had a lot of time in their hands. If we use Ruskin’s terminology we might even call the Memsahibs “queens” in their own way, the bourgeoisie fantasy of unchanging constant femininity. Thirdly, the absence of Europeans in general meant that the women were pushed to non-traditional roles like managing theatres or attending durbars. In some cases, the women were accorded the same status as with the men. Fourthly, the women of Victorian England were excluded from any form of physical activity, thus validating their status as the ‘weaker vessel’ (Bialeschki, 2003, p. 23). But women in the colonies travelled widely and sometimes under difficult circumstances. In fact,

their existence in India would presuppose a survivor of travels and exertions in the unhealthy tropics. One cursory look at the texts considered in the texts written by Eden or Canning would attest to the fact.

Therefore, their participation in the public sphere was more than any average European women of their time. The spheres were not very separated as it was in Victorian England of that time. Harriot Hamilton-Temple-Blackwood, Marchioness of Dufferin and Ava (referred henceforth as Lady Dufferin) sat over as he watched her husband pass an important act. (Dufferin, 1889, p. 82). Charlotte Canning, Countess Canning (Lady Canning) wrote about the Mutiny in volumes, often to “reveal the true nature of events and not what is written in the newspapers in London” (Hare, 1893, p. 164). What is more surprising is that one point she writes, “I want C to do this” (Hare, 1893, p. 181). It is insinuated that their husbands took them into confidence when it came to matters of the state. Instead of separation of spheres, we find a porous intermingling of spheres. It is partly rendered possible because of the distance of India from London, “the center of civilization”. Emily Eden wrote how his brother dictated that she and her sister Fanny must dine with them on “all male” occasions (Eden, 1866). This symbolic intrusion in the masculine sphere is what renders the façade of masculinist Raj distorted with agencies of female intrusion. At a point in her letters Miss Eden provided a clue as to how the women were kept so abreast of the political situation. She mentions “copying letters for George” (Eden, 1866) in one of her letters. Such examples further support the contention that the separation of spheres was not only a problematic notion in the colonies but it was rather an inconvenient one. The women in the colonies were not invisible like their British counterparts. In fact, they were all too visible, their visibility heightened by their rarity. They functioned as the type of women Ruskin would have called ‘lilies’, “a vague nostalgia about the heroic middle ages, and saccharin assertions about The Home” (Millett, 1970, p. 7). However, home in this context would need emendation. But before that a passage by Ruskin needs to be cited to make a point.

Now their separate characters are briefly these. The man's power is active progressive, defensive. He is eminently the doer, the

creator, the discoverer, the defender...But the woman's power is for ...sweet ordering, arrangement, and decision. She sees the qualities of things, their claims, and their places. (Millett, 1970, p. 7)

The division of labor is convenient, and can also be used to justify the paradigms of colonial rule. “Females play an important part in the colonial enterprise as signifiers, but not as producers of signification” (Mills, 1991, p. 58). The aggressor male figure would carry on the task of securing and governing the Empire, while the women perform the symbolic role. Home in this case, would be the idea of Britain and the women somehow, with all the expectations of morality and constancy are supposed to steer the course of male counterparts towards righteous action. Ann Stoler has pointed to the fact that social distance was a cornerstone of British colonial rule. The role delegated to the Englishwoman in the colonial scenario was precisely that of patrolling racial boundaries (Ghose, 2007, p. 108). This symbolic role gave rise to a double consciousness in the Memsahib psyche, arising out of conflict between their position as an individual woman subject and their ideological creation as the moralizing compass of Empire. The source of this ambiguity is brilliantly theorized by Jenny Sharpe in her book *Allegories of Empire* (1993) where she said, “The contradictions to white femininity are more evident in a colonial context where the middle-class English woman, oscillating between a dominant position of race and a subordinate one of gender” (p. 12). This ambiguity is also reflected in the texts in consideration and the next sections would try to show that the Memsahib fiction is virtually inscribed in this double consciousness which exists in both thematic and structural level of the texts.

In this section, I look at Emily Eden’s *Up the Country* and *Letters from India*, Lady Canning’s letters collected in Augustus Hare’s *The Story of two Noble Lives* and lady Dufferin’s *Our Viceregal Life*. A common factor to these three women was their ambivalent relationship to the Oriental existence. The preconceived notion of India was that of an exotic land, full of dangers and sublime beauty. But Calcutta, their home in their exile was nothing like the exotic landscape they had expected. Instead it was thoroughly British. Charlotte Canning, in one

of her letters, mentioned that “there is nothing Eastern or picturesque here. It is like the Regent’s Park...not a particle of Indian architecture” (Hare, 1893, p. 68). Emily Eden, in one of her letter, wrote, “When we go up the country, I shall send you something really pretty, to show what our subjects can do. In Calcutta, there are only things “that one gets in London, and at a fourth of the price” (Eden, 1872, p. 137).

The comfort and familiarity that Calcutta brought them usually would undercut their need to portray the Oriental to make their letters attractive. Often, they labored under the dread that the verisimilitude of Calcutta with London would be dull subjects to write home. Lady Canning wrote – “I am quite delighted at the success of my journal in the family, but by this time I am afraid it has got so dull you will not care much for it” (Hare, 1893, p. 93). Emily Eden echoed a similar sentiment in her writing, a kind of plea to her readers not to be bored by her essentially mundane life (Eden, 1866, p. 37). The Oriental is therefore sought out by these Memsahibs in the nooks and corners of their existence and we find these women actively seeking out the exotic. The myth of the lazy Englishwoman languishing in her own European house breaks down. Instead, we find instances where the Memsahibs drive out to the native quarters, in a similar manner of conquest like her male counterparts, recording, sketching and subjugating the wild oriental subjects in their writings. In a characteristic passage, Canning said,

Such odd groups squatting at the doors of the huts, and sometimes such handsome wild countenances; then every now and then a Chinese, with his twinkling eyes and yellow face and satin dress, stalking along amongst those black naked creatures. I believe this whole country and our being here, and everything about it, is a *dream*. (Hare, 1893, p. 117)

Interestingly, the word “dream” is also used by Lady Canning on her arrival to Kolkata to address the lush tropical greenery that her eyes feasted on (Hare, 1893, p. 117). The idea of the tropical sublime as a dream can be posited against the reality of the European quarters of Calcutta, a simulation of London illustrating the double consciousness.

This conflict is again tied with the idea of historic progress and loss of picturesqueness of India. Awareness to such conflict between the untamed exotic and modern progress is also fraught in these writings. This sense of temporality is very important to locate in Memsahib writings because most critical works of travel writing view the European consciousness as a static, unchanging entity. These kinds of ahistorical analysis usually decontextualize Memsahib writings and reduce them to a kind of ahistoric puddle of ideas without any bigger implications. The three texts considered in the study cover a good length of what is now known as Victorian Age. The entire period described above was a time of great change for the Indian Empire not just politically but also economically and scientifically. In a way, it stands between the old days of feudal India and its first steps as a modern power in 20th century. Technological advancement is often regarded as responsible for the loss of the exoticness of the Orient. Emily Eden's preface to her book *Up the Country* (1866) read,

Now that India has fallen under the curse of railroads, and that life and property will soon become as insecure there as they are here, the splendor of a Governor-General's progress is at an end.

The Kootub will probably become a Railway Station ; the Taj will, of course, under the sway of an Agra Company (Limited, except for destruction), be bought up for a monster hotel ; and the Governor-General will dwindle down into a first-class passenger with a carpet-bag. These details, these- fore, of a journey that was picturesque in its motley pro-cessions, in its splendid crowds, and in its ' barbaric gold and pearl,' may be thought amusing. So many changes have since taken place in Indian modes of travelling, that these contrasts of public grandeur and private discomfort will probably be seen no more, on a scale of such magnitude. (Eden, 1866, p. vi)

The passage pits history and science at odds with each other. It also signifies the closing up of the zone of difference between the East and the West and therefore a demystification of the Raj. This is her retrospective vision of the Empire but she indirectly also asserts that the process is not just due to technological advancement but rather due to

the course of history itself. Her anxiety about the future and nostalgia of the past is directly at odds with the civilizing mission of the British Empire, and as a whole undermines her own official position as an agent of the Empire.

Emily Eden's fear of the loss of the charisma of the Raj was unfounded. The ages of exoticism might have been indeed a thing of past, but newer discourses had occupied its place to keep the machinery of Raj afloat. Instead of a reverential sense of difference, Lady Dufferin, who was writing almost half a century after Eden, finds herself integrated in the abstract metaphysics of the colonized mind. The queen had already assumed a quasi-divine status and the vicereine, as Lady Dufferin finds out, is not trailing far behind. In a prize giving ceremony in Chinsurah,

All the school children sat in the open central court; a raised passage ran all round it, on three sides of which the fathers and the brother and the low caste maid-servants were grouped, and on the fourth I sat, literally in the seat of the gods, supported by the quality of the place...Now, either gods have gone down in the world, or 'Vicereines' have gone up. (Dufferin, 1889, p. 70)

Her statement "gods have come down" is a testimony to the newer configuration and the solidification of the idea of the British Raj, and its naturalization as an intricate part of the tamed exotic orient.

The double consciousness as a thematic feature also becomes apparent when we look at the subjectivities of the Memsahibs as constructed in their works. these subjectivities constructed are called because it is a central concern to challenge that Memsahib selfhood can be a static identity. The problem of locating a stable textuality becomes more problematic when, as Pratt asserts,

In texts, we are dealing with an illusory textualisation of an illusory construct, and this representation is itself not coherent or unified ...I would argue that a coherent 'self', in textual terms, is impossible. The text itself is not a stable field of meaning, but something which readers work on and interpret. (Pratt, 1992, p. 38)

The instability of the Memsahib accounts is testimony to the fact. The narrative expectancy and an implicit code of behavior that dominated their lives made sure that the selves of the Memsahibs were constantly under scrutiny. In the texts analyzed, we see a constant attempt to fashion their own image. The image is based on the popular vision of Victorian femininity – unselfish, constant women who spent their time being useful to their home. “The cult of home was the keystone of colonial ideology. For this was the function that the memsahib was expected to fulfill—to represent forever England in the Raj. What they did was stage one continual performance of Englishness” (Ghose, 2007, p. 112). As argued before, home for these women would mean the greater *Locus amoneous* of the colonial white settlement. Nayar forwards the concept of Imperial Sublime as a sort of Orientalist perception of the landscape where “... an aesthetics of terror and vastness, darkness and obscurity... a colonial topography where various cultural/ ethnographic specificities are ignored.” (Nayar, 2002, p. 3) followed by an act of self-affirmation, the traveler then retreats into a landscape of amenity. Nayar also tells us how an oppositional approach between tamed/ untamed, sublime/ mundane is a feature of eighteenth century travel writing. The *Locus amoneous*, or a pleasant place is simply the landscape inhabited by Europeans that provided a safe haven to these women. Therefore, whatever they do, they had to prove useful the colonial cause and appear useful to the colony at large this would generally mean extended symbolic duties which included presiding and throwing balls, visiting orphan schools and giving away the prizes. Lady Canning noted the splendid entrance she made at the ball at Calcutta celebrating Queen Victoria’s birthday, “I came in with C, which seems to me my proper place” (Hare, 1893, p. 107). We see that the balls and parties are not enjoyed for their own sake, but for the ceremonial import that they carry. The ceremonial nature of the institution of the Memsahibs undercut the emotional one. The first casualty was friendship. The First Ladies of the Empire had very few or no friends, almost none from their own brethren. Emily Eden wrote, “We had become really acquainted with the officers, which is more than we shall be with anybody here” (Eden, 1872, p. 107). The people referred in the passage are the crews of a ship about to sail to England. The friendships made by these Memsahibs were all male. It is curious

that Emily Eden carefully dissociates from the stereotype of the lazy colonial Memsahibs. Maybe, she was in a position of privilege to do so. The stance of the unaffected, upright Memsahib counterpart was seen as a perquisite complement to the efficient rule of their male counterparts. Lady Canning wrote:

'Government House' is looked up to as the authority for everything to a degree which is astonishing. People, you say, tell you that I have done good and have influence. I am not in the slightest degree aware of it, and not conscious that I have done any-thing but lead a more idle and selfish life than I ever did before in all my days. (Hare, 1893, p. 197)

The symbolic role of the Memsahib couldn't be articulated more frankly. One of the chief points asserted through the paper is that while the male British imperialists were figures of military prowess and ran the Empire, their female counterparts and their 'soft skills' were also an important element for the image of the Raj. "In the British Empire, women's home management was upgraded to a political act—Englishwomen's contribution to the task of running the empire" (Ghose, 2007, p. 119).

Another common strategy adopted by the Memsahibs was the stance of disinterestedness in Indian affairs. But that guise often falls off, revealing true flesh and blood emotions within. This symbolic function cannot be a person's true identity. The conflict between the assumed selfhood and the true selfhood is all too apparent in their works. "There is an inherent incongruity between their self-image as victim and the role they staked out for themselves as an indispensable pillar of the empire" (Ghose, 2007, p. 123). Sometimes, they are all too human, prey to moments of sensory temptation. The British officials were forbidden to accept personal gifts at the century to stop private money hoarding. Eden wrote about her own desire to possess the emerald earrings gifted to her by the Nawab of Oude, "I should like them, should you not? They will probably be sold at Delhi" (Eden, 1866, p. 68). Where do we look for such moments of introspection and soul searching? When not talking about their social roles, these women were inevitably bored. Lady Canning wrote, "...Putting dimity in the

drawing room or a new mat is the principal event I can look forward to, or choosing thirty out of a list of names for dinner” (Hare, 1893, p. 84). Elsewhere we get a moving picture of her isolation as her status as a white woman and the “First Lady” when she said, “I own the society is duller than I imagined, but I look forward to filling up my staff with excitement” (Hare, 1893, p. 89). Such glimpses of ennui are frequent but carefully mentioned besides heavy activities. It is as if their symbolic selves are in a constant competition with their true ones and they jostle for space in their narratives. Besides letter writing to their loved ones there were other pass times. As Lady Canning noted, books were hard to come by. Emily Eden thanked her sister for the “Boz’s magazine” (Eden, 1866, p. 91) and Lady Canning noted her excitement at the arrival of new books from England (Hare, 1893, p. 65). Lady Canning mentioned rereading her favorite memoir again and again for the sake of passing time (Hare, 1893, p. 67). Visiting charitable institutions gave Lady Canning great joy but the hustle-bustle she ensued made her realize “... [she] cannot do it very often” (Hare 1893, 97). Chances of real interaction at public events are very little. About the Anglo-Indian society, she wrote, “Everyone knows who everybody is...” (Hare, 1893, p. 156). The little society was short of women and full of gossip. The extent of her isolation is revealed when she remarks off-handedly, “...no one is intimate enough to gossip with me” (Hare, 1893, p. 155). Here we find the harshness of the Raj regime on the personal lives of these women. They were usually sent from England contrary to the families who have generation old connections with India. Their relative isolation meant they made very few friends in their stay and would stay away from nepotism. Faced with such loneliness they naturally took to filling pages of their journals. Painting served as a refuge, besides writing letters — “one’s hand can always go on and on” (Hare, 1893, p. 156). The same double vision exists while dealing with the natives. The representation of the natives is highly paradoxical on many levels. Mary Louise Pratt’s classification of travel accounts shall be used to talk about the gaze. Pratt’s division of scientific and sentimental novel has a lot to say about natives are perceived in European travel writings. She says that in sentimental mode of writing the Europeans and the natives interact with each other and determine the course of action while in scientific mode they remain “separate non-

interacting spheres, each responsible for their own desires, intentions, and actions” (Pratt, 1992, p. 51). However, in the Memsahib accounts the two dualities are not very clearly sketched. This is because while on one hand the Europeans were positioned at a large distance from the average natives they were also heavily dependent on their native servants. There are many instances where the Memsahib is just a disinterested observer of the Indian body, reflecting the anxieties of the Black inscrutability, hermetically sealed off from any contact. In such places, the black-white duality is more like scientific travel writing and “all are interchangeable; none is distinguished from another by a name or any other feature; and their presence, their disponibilité, and subaltern status, are now taken for granted” (Pratt, 1992, p. 51). But again, daily contact humanized these natives in the eyes of these Memsahibs and they were described in human terms. All the three accounts have numerous such examples of very close rapport set up between the Memsahibs and the natives and the narrative draws substance from a dialogue between them. In such cases, the dynamic is not merely of one way looking, but tends more to be what Pratt called “reciprocal vision”, where the native looks back at the European subject. This is a feature of sentimental travel writing.

Predictably, there is no hint of sexuality in these accounts and it would be useless to do so. But when analyzing the passages, where the narrative does establish reciprocal vision, we can find strong sexual overtones to the gaze. However, it is not merely a heterosexual reciprocal vision; in some cases, they have strong homoerotic content. This vision, according to Pratt, “...is determined by that great sentimental obsession, transracial erotics” (Pratt, 1992, p. 82). Lady Dufferin wrote about her husband’s attraction for “... the muscles exhibited by who wear very few garments... I think it was to their brown color and to their muscles that the Viceroy was looking forward when he ordered his little boys” (Dufferin, 1889, p. 146). We do not know what sort of “artistic pleasure” Lord Dufferin derived from the brown boys, but references of the sexual gaze are obvious. However, the women seem to deny their sexuality altogether. Emily Eden said that she is too old for the combs gifted to her” (Eden 1866, 53) warding off any hint of alleged sexual desire. She also writes about the black male body,

...Dressed precisely as he was the first moment he came into the world he had not even a turban on, but his long black hair was hanging on his shoulders. He was smoking his hookah, and seemed to be enjoying his airing very much. I rather envied him; he could not have felt half so feverish as I did with my clothes on. (Eden, 1872, p. 45)

One might wonder what would have been the nature of envy or what feelings excited in the mind of a Victorian woman seeing the naked body out for. Lady Dufferin tried to reconcile with the woman-like dresses of young girls which she finds “sad to give a doll as a prize to some poor little creature...on the very verge of matrimony” (Dufferin, 1889, p. 45). There lies a suggestion of sexual threat and transgression which the white women shrink away from. She refers to young girls as womanly later in the text but does not like the Indian girls being dressed in European fashions. Here, she locates the Indian women as a locus of fecundity and sexuality and the tensions rise wherever there is a crossing over between the two. There is a slight fetishization of the Indian girls as dolls and a kind of fairytale figures. Another significant feature was her entrance in the “zenana” or the seraglio along with her husband. Here she seems to be a force of masculine agency, literally “penetrating” the harem (Dufferin, 1889, p. 72). All the above examples locate the motif of desire very strongly in the reciprocal vision. Such visions naturally cross the border between the European-native divide and democratizes human contact. The human contact is further established in sentimental writing, where, as Pratt writes, the natives be understood by Europeans in the same term Europeans understand themselves. “The myth of reciprocal vision has egalitarian undertones, challenging the notion of Imperial ideology” (Pratt, 1992, p. 44).

The reciprocal vision and the knowledge of shared humanity contain strong elements of subversion. As Pratt said, this “relational approach to culture raises genuine possibilities of critical self-questioning” (Pratt, 1992, p. 84).

Their reaction to the “other” is often visceral and generates impulses that are not only subversive but only touched with a hint of grotesque. While visiting through famine stricken parts of India, she imagined,

perhaps two thousand years hence, when the art of steam has been forgotten...some black governor general of England will be marching through his southern provinces and will go look at some ruins...and will feed some white looking skeletons, and say what distress the poor creatures must be in, and his sister will write to Mary D. in Delhi, and complain of the cold, explain to her what snow is, and how the natives wear bonnets. (Eden, 1866, p. 67)

Her comment is significant because whilst she foresees a turning of the tables, she however does not see an end of the empire. The Indian subjects have Christian names now and she is no different from her British counterpart. There is an apparent upturning of hierarchy, but on the other hand, a sense of how things would remain just the same. It becomes a problematic validation and condemnation of the Raj at the same time. The sister of the governor will be the same sad figure devoid of agency, strutting behind her brother as a dependent, black or white. She transcended her racial prejudices to portray a picture of the condition of women. The machinery of imperialism will roll on, with both the rulers and ruled falling prey to its machinery. The stimulus of the reaction, the sight of starving multitude reminds her of the common humanity and suffering by the mercantile capitalism and becomes an implicit critique of the Raj. In such instances, the critique is “relativized, or even parodied, European ideologies are never questioned directly.” The narrative draws its power from “this combination of humanism, egalitarianism, and critical relativism anchored securely in a sense of European authenticity, power, and legitimacy” (Pratt, 1992, p. 84). However, despite all the subversion, she remains entrenched in the European consciousness. Therefore, we see that a great ambiguity is a pervading theme of these texts. It is never possible to reconcile the contradictory voices in the text. As Peter Hulme (1986) would put it – “The venture...is archaeological; no smooth history emerges, but rather a series of fragments which, read speculatively, hint at a story that can never be fully recovered” (as cited in Mills, 1991, p. 6)

The books I have selected come from a very privileged category of Memsahibs. I have selected the writings of a very privileged class of

women. In such a process, I do not aim to make a rounded study of the memsahib existence, but simply bring out one aspect of it. But however, it needs to be emphasized that the Memsahib existence in India had basic ideological underpinnings. Sara Mills has pointed out the prevalence of the personal form in women's writing happens because,

Poised ambivalently between private and public statement, it can also be seen as a process, rooted in the private dimension of living which does not take as its goal or form from its status as social and cultural artifact...the diary for many writers can be regarded as a symptom of restriction, giving a provisional voice to women who were denied confident access to public expression. (Mills, 1991, p. 41)

The women were circumscribed not only by form but also language. There were also set masculine standards what a woman can depict and what she cannot (Mills, 1991, p. 42). In these texts, as shown earlier, self-censorship is very evident and in Pratt's theorization of travel writings and it is useful to point out features about the narrative strategy of the texts considered here. Pratt divided travel writing into two broad categories – Scientific and Sentimental. While the scientific mode of writing was exclusively a province of men, women tended more to the sentimental form. Sentimental travel writing puts the narrator to the forefront. The account charts the course of the protagonist through various landscapes and the chief part of the narrative centers around the veracity of personal experience. "The textual space/time that corresponds to the space/time of traveling is filled with (made out of) human activity, interactions among the travelers themselves or with people they encounter" (Mills, 1991, p. 76). Pratt also says that the natural descriptions in the Sentimental mode are connected to human agency as opposed to the scientific mode of writing. The immediacy and subjectivity are the key words in the writing. "Authority lies in the authenticity of somebody's felt experience" (Mills, 1991, p. 77). Therefore, first person grammatical signs dominate the texts. When the two fuse it is to supplement one another. The Sentimental mode of writing is more rooted in the personal realm of existence (Mills, 1991, p. 79). Reciprocation is a very important part in this narrative. It is the reciprocity of the action that drives the narrative. This description can

be very well used to characterize the books used in this paper. However, in these narratives, “The difference between equal and unequal exchange is suppressed.” The utopian vision of reciprocity is undercut by passages of dissonance. However, it must not be assumed that these texts follow the scientific mode totally. There are exceptions, where the sentimental verges into scientific or vice versa. It is true, that Pratt has ascribed the scientific travel writing to the writers. But it is possible to show that there is strong scientific strain of writing in these texts.

What were the narrative strategies adapted by these women in their writings? Susan Bassnett wrote

It is rare to find the kind of serious, anthropological monograph with extended footnotes like those produced by many male writers, which may be due to the exclusion of women from scientific professions in the nineteenth century. ...but offers the reader photographs, ink drawings, conversations, and chatty accounts of incidents involving people she meets on her journey rather than scientific analysis. (Bassnett, 2002, p. 225)

In a way, these accounts provide an “other” within the White “self”, with fissures appearing in their writings that help us reconstruct alternative tales to the narrative of the Raj. While the male travel accounts progressed usually systematically from describing the topography and moving gradually over to people and history. The accounts of women were more idiosyncratic, personal, and fragmentary. It was easy for a man to collect his material from preexisting bodies of work. But “Women, generally lacking access to political, administrative, and scholarly structures, tended to claim authority and value for their travel texts by emphasizing the epistemological value of the subjective experience” (Bassnett, 2002, p. 252). Most of them are viewed events but closer inspection reveals the dynamics of seeing/hearing/ mythicizing/ condemning as much more complex than it seems. It was expected that they had some prior knowledge of India. The whole purpose of these memoirs to some extent was to subconsciously drill in the idea of Empire in the British common populace. But the actual experience is much more vivid than the imagined ones. The real experience and the subconscious need to

portray India as an ideologically fraught site forms the site of very interesting conflicts in the narratives. Lady Canning writes, "... Oh there are deficiencies in Calcutta which no one ever told me of...but which are enough to deter anyone from coming to live here voluntarily" (Hare, 1893, p. 56). We see them making the best out of their situations, learning the intricate cast hierarchy of servants or the enormity of the rambling Government House. Observations were often moderated by explanations, explained by a helpful maid or servant. There is no indication as to how these explanations came forth, but one can imagine that these women filled their time in their hands by learning and observing the overwhelmingly newness of the situation. Sometimes, there are lacunas and blind spots to their understanding, which are voluntarily, filled up by premeditated prejudices. Emily Eden wrote, "...but I never ask questions, I hate information" (Eden, 1866, p. 89). Other white ladies of the settlement also aided them. Newspapers were also read as Lady Canning noted lackluster comments about her inaugural dress with a sense of disappointment (Eden, 1866, p. 89). At one instance, Emily wrote, "My jemandar was interpreting them" (Eden, 1866, p. 32), while referring to a contingent of native women. These translators no doubt, served as an important fount of knowledge, often mediating their responses towards a particular event. It must have been hard for an Indian to be an objective translator for one would not let go an opportunity to assume a stance of a translator. Analogies and common tropes were often used, and familiarity to certain objects was often used to evoke a sense of identification. The narratives grow gossipy when dealing with hearsay, direct and egotistic when talking about personal conduct. All these form a complex matrix of knowledge formation that is sometimes reflected. This matrix is essential for reflecting the said double consciousness, to subvert while being delimited, to be radical while conforming.

In the paper, attempt is made to give a partial understanding of the Memsahib writings. In such a process, a few texts have been selected and have tried to highlight selected issues. The analysis is by no means holistic; rather, it is to alert the readers towards the richness and ambiguity of Memsahib writings. The double consciousness that is used to portray in the paper is by no means a uniform one. There needs to be

unique reconfigurations of double consciousness for various kinds of Memsahib writings.

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