International Journal of Humanities and Social Science Research
www.socialsciencejournal.in
ISSN: 2455-2070
Received: 13-03-2026, Accepted: 13-04-2026, Published: 28-04-2026
Volume 12, Issue 2, 2026, Page No. 145-148

Colonial memsahibs and their experience of the orient

Vinus Thakur
Department of History, Panjab University Chandigarh, Punjab, India

Abstract
The social fabric of the colonial period was interwoven with threads of complex interactions of the colonial women, popularly referred to as Memsahibs, with their new environment. Owing much to the Charter Act of 1813, which formally allowed women (wives and family) to accompany officers on their post in India, the women were now faced with peculiar surroundings. The memsahibs who perceived their new milieu through a veil of orientalist assumptions and racial hierarchies often had reactions ranging from assimilation to integration or even segregation. The representation of these memsahibs in contemporary literature along with their own diaries, letters, memoirs, travelogues, autobiographies and retrospective reflections gives us rich information in regards to their dilemmas, confrontations and perspectives of the native society including its institutions and people on one hand and the prevalent beliefs and dogmas about racial, social and cultural differences and hierarchies on the other. The research is aimed at a qualitative, historical and interpretive study of the afore mentioned primary and secondary sources discussing reflections and representations of the 19th century socio-cultural milieu of India by the memsahibs and its subsequent evolution post 1857. An effort will also be made to understand how the memsahibs were perceived by the colonial as well as the natives especially with respect to their position and privileges thus studying the relevance and applicability of theories of double colonization, intersectionality and dual marginalization. The research strives to examine the role of memsahibs in the cultural reproduction of colonial authority, particularly within the private sphere of the colonial household. It also delves in situating the narratives of Memsahibs within broader historiographical debates on gender, empire, and colonial knowledge production.

Keywords: Colonialism, memsahibs, literary representation, gender and empire, colonial domesticity

Introduction

The initial historical discourse with reference to colonial India was largely premised on the administrative, military and economic activities of the East India Company. What cannot be contested is that the advent of the British marked a new phase in Indian history. Initially operating as mere traders, they gradually began to expand control and influence, resulting in the establishment and fortification of their settlements and later their subsequent territories. While the 'original charter' of 1600 CE forbade British women from accompanying officers on their posts in India, the Napoleonic blockade further pushed British merchants to pressurize the parliament to open up India for trade and end company's monopoly. The result was the subsequent passing of the charter acts of 1813 and 1833 which opened India to European merchants and missionaries. The lesser discussed clause of the act of 1813, which however forms the spine of this research, was the formal allowance of women of the metropolis to accompany their husbands, brothers or fathers to their posts in the colony of India. This newfound allowance added to the social fabric of India new strands of unfamiliar yet exquisite weave. The colonial women found themselves in an environment so foreign and different that their contact with the native society and institutions, its people, festivals, fairs, high society, flora, fauna, customs, traditions, etc all become an object of intrigue for anyone interested in the study of colonialism. The word 'memsahib' as the conjunction of the English word ma'am or madam, with the Hindi/Urdu term 'sahib' gave rise to the category of the memsahibs who were defined as 'a white foreign women of high social status living in India, especially the wife of a British Official'. When the British women flocked Indian lands, their activities, coping mechanisms and how they adjusted to their strange surroundings were rarely considered worthy of being recorded. Early writers have presented to us a typical image of a fragile and frivolous memsahib, frolicking from games of bridge to tennis to tea parties in the hills.

Luckily for us, the lived experiences of the colonial women, who came to be referred to as Memsahibs, are well documented by them in the form of letters to friends or family, personal diaries, travel accounts, etc. These are a rich source of information in terms of study of the perspectives and notions that the memsahibs held towards the Indian society. We also come across nuances where memsahibs either reiterate or contradict theories of racial hierarchy and orientalism. Such details are of value since they help us in situating the memsahibs as active observers and reflectors of the waves of change and continuity in their new environment. The memsahibs were neither unaware nor ignorant to the contemporary ideas floating in the circles of company officials. In some instances, the writings of colonial women played a huge role alleviating the memsahibs to the pedestal of cultural agents whose works and words shaped perception of Indian society. This thus brings to light the idea of colonial domesticity and how the presence of their women counterpart influenced and changed the way company officials carried on with their daily affairs and duties.

The presence of Memsahibs in India has much to tell us about how gender plays a huge role in shaping the society. The reflections of John Lang in his book Wanderings in India, brushes upon the state of social circles of Anglo Indians. He observes how instances of altercations, scuffles and elopements amongst Anglo-Indian community, though not completely vanished, had significantly decreased and

that the 'tone of the Anglo-Indian society had improved' in comparison to previous years, referring to the mid-19th century. The gradual mellowing of the temperament of the wild side of high society of the servants of the company and later the empire was more visible only after 1857, hence the events of 1857 and the Act of 1858 must have significantly impacted the thought process company officers and their families. Post 1857, the writings of memsahibs indicate towards high levels of anxiety and fear pertaining to cultural and sexual defilement, thus bringing about stern measures for segregation and reduced interactions with the natives. The evolution of perception of the memsahibs of the natives post 1857 is another matter of great intrigue, especially since Indias administration now fell directly under the British crown. With the elimination of the East India Company from the scene and the acquisition of responsibilities by the crown, much effort was made to influence the native society, especially the Indian royalty into painting a benevolent picture of the crown. The increased liaisons between the Indians and Europeans, especially nobility, of opposite genders often led to what were generally called scandals.

The year of 1857 can be seen as a watershed moment in the history of colonialism in India in general, and the study of perceptions and perspectives of Memsahibs in particular. 1857 is thus of grave importance to this research since it presents the perfect markers, in the longitudinal study, for periodization and sectioning of the 19th century (i.e. from 1800 to 1900 CE) into two comparable parts. The changes post 1857 in terms of racial boundaries, norms of gender responsibilities, domestic underpinnings of gender in the white household, weight of colonial pride on the shoulders of white (wo)man, etc all become matter of study in this research.

Literature Review

The initial image presented to us of the typical memsahib who was to keep herself busy in frolics, tea parties and balls by early writers was soon overshadowed by the circulation of the writings of the memsahibs themselves. Many of them wrote in an intelligent and entertaining manner about their lived experiences in India. The letters of Emily Eden, sister of Lord Auckland are clever and important source of information. She, in a letter dated Feb 13, 1838 alludes to the use of the term 'memsahib' for the English women in India (Eden, 1866) [4]. Theodore Acland has also referred to the use of the term 'Meem sahib' in a journal entry of August 7, 1843 while giving an account of the mofussil society of Cuttack. It is apparent that while the use of the term 'memsahib' was popular among the British populace residing in India, its official entry into the lexicons, is of a later date (Awasthi, 2013) [10]. The first memsahib to undertake the voyage to India was perhaps, a Mrs. Hudson and her maid Francis Webb, who went as companion to an Armenian lady who had been born in India. But it was much later, in the 18th century that a British woman first put to paper her thoughts on her interface with India. Thus began the beginning of a most fruitful relation of the memsahib's writing on India (Sen, 2008) [2].

The memsahibs were ambiguously placed within the imperial design. Though their position was quite unenviable at home, their new found status in the colony vested them with certain powers, not only over the colonized women but also over the men. Though barred to exercise direct and formal powers, memsahibs experienced the privileges and problems of imperialism in ways different from the men. They were neither an executive part of the empire nor enjoyed the direct profits that Europe and European men did. But nonetheless, they had their own moments of racial pride and prejudice and exercised certain authority over the colonized women and men, authority which had trickled down from imperial masculinity. (Petersen & Rutherford, 1986) [9].

Maud Diver maintained that the random assertion made by Kipling about the 'lower tone of social morality' in India was unjust and untrue. Countering the 'east is east and west is west' argument of Kipling, she asserts the east and west to be complimentary and even her writings positively depict mixed marriages in 'Lilamani: A Study of Possibilities'. Yet she argues that there should be only limited dilution of the British blood as is evident from her novel 'Desmond's Daughter' (Barr, 1976) [8].

Whilst accompanying their brother or husband like in the case of Emily Eden or Fanny Parks the memsahibs brought with them enormous curiosity and a critical eye for the oriental ways of life and living. From 1860 onwards, English women started coming in great numbers as resident wives in India. More than their own initiative, the imperial rulers thought settlement of memsahibs in the colony would help to further the imperial identity. It was thought that memsahibs would help the rulers to maintain their aloofness towards native women and thus curb interracial mixing, which became very necessary in the post 1857 era. The influx of memsahibs in the Indian society, gave rise to some complicated and variegated social and cultural relations that moulded the impression of the imperial women towards their native counter parts.

It is of course well known that many memsahibs left interesting accounts of their experiences in India. Since these accounts were written by women, they allow us in exploring the role of gender in India as colonialism progressed. The original letters of Eliza Fay, containing a narrative of journey through Egypt and an abstract of three subsequent voyages to India. These were letters written by her to her sister and later to her friend, in the style of a journal. These letters throw light on the social life of Calcutta at the time of Warren Hastings and Sir Philip Francis. Though she herself died in 1816 and her letters were published posthumously in the subsequent year 1817. (Awasthi, 2013) [10]

A fearless traveller, who has left behind a voluminous account of her residence and travels within India, is Fanny Parks, who sailed for India with her husband Charles Crawford Parks, a writer in the East India Company in 1822. Her work reveals the life in the zenana (Parkes, 1850) [5].

From around the 1880s, colonial wives had also emerged as highly popular novelists and writers of short stories. After the establishment of colonial empire, the memsahib's position was that of an imperialist. Interestingly the word 'memsahib' (madam-sahib) with its suggestion of power and authority is believed to have originated in the mid-19th C.13 the memsahibs were appropriating the power and privilege of their husbands and displaying the well-known rank snobbery of a hierarchical society. In fact, Flora Annie Steel in The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook a handbook for young memsahibs newly arrived from England famously compared the running of a colonial

household to administering the British Empire (Steel & Gardinier, 1909) [11].

Around the 1860s, there were also secular white women like Mary Carpenter and the Annette Akroyd. Both of them played important roles in schooling for girls. The most striking exception was Flora Annie Steel, the vocal and opinionated 'memsahib' who along with being the wife of an administrator who led the typical life of a 'memsahib' when posted at large stations like Ludhiana, was unusual in starting schools for girls in remote parts of Punjab like Kasur where her husband was stationed. Later, she took up the government post of Inspector of girl's schools where she was put in charge of schools in the northern region (Barr, 1976) [8].

In 1890s the memsahibs also interacted on a relatively equal plane with the 'New Indian Women' who had come out of the purdah into the open. Moreover, the early 20th century, though it is not a part of our period of study, was also the period of anti- colonial, national Movement. There was the curious phenomenon of 'Indianized' memsahibs such as Margaret Noble (sister Nivedita), Annie Besant involved in the nationalism. These memsahibs came to India around the late 19th and early 20th century, stayed in this country and became Indian in their perception and attire to such an extent that they were drawn into the nationalist movement.

Methodology

The methodology primarily is based on study of primary sources like personal writings of British women residing in India during the nineteenth century, including letters, diaries, memoirs, travel narratives, and autobiographical reflections, for example Fanny Parkes' Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque (1850), Emily Eden's Up the Country (1866) [4], etc. These offer rich information on Indian domestic life, customs, climate, religious practices, and interactions with Indian servants.

Secondary sources like journal articles and edited volumes on gender and empire, colonial domesticity, and postcolonial theory which inform us about narratives, theories and broader historiographical debates are also important to place the writings of the memsahibs in the wider context.

Archives are important for the study of relevant manuscripts, private correspondence and personal papers, if accessible. Supplementary records on colonial households, travel and social life are also to be analysed. Wherever available, missionary archives and women society records must also be utilised to contextualise memsahibs' experiences.

Discourse analysis to study the structure, form, pattern and silences of memsahibs' writings is crucial. Recurring themes of hygiene, morality, domestic order, food habits, religious rituals, and gender relations must be studied especially with relation to imperial and racial underpinnings. A gendered lens to examine how the colonial household became a space for enforcing racial hierarchies and regulating social distance between colonisers and colonised.

Comparative analysis of the period before and after the revolt of 1857 is necessary to study the shift in memsahib attitudes from initial cultural curiosity and adaptation to later racial anxiety and segregation.

One cannot however completely rely upon the writings of memsahibs since they are not free from racial biases, prejudices, selective observations, and imperial reflections on the Indian society. The main aim of the research hence, is not to reconstruct the Indian society as an objective reality but rather focus on the representation of Indian life as it was understood, interpreted and represented within colonial discourse.

In a nutshell, the methodology will be an amalgamation of archival research, discourse analysis, text analysis and comparative analysis of the different sourced in order to get real understanding of the perspectives of memsahibs on one hand and their representation and perceptions in contemporary works on the other.

Memsahibs and the Oriental Experience

The research explores the perspective of colonial women in India in regards to their everyday experiences in their new surroundings and how their writings were crucial in shaping the overall perception of India and Indian lifestyle. What role and influence these writings had in reiterating colonial authority and establishing native subservience are also matter of study. Memsahibs hence are made pivotal in their role as keen carriers of imperial ideologies on one hand and asserting racial hierarchies within colonial domestic spaces on the other. Memsahibs are thus seen as active observers and reflectors of change rather than passive background of colonial landscape.

Ideas associated with the intersection of gender and colonial narratives brings to fore issues of colonial domesticity, rigid racial segregation as a consequence of alleviated status of a white woman in comparison to a native man, even if the latter is royalty. Stark contrast between the fluid early associations and the strained and detestable later liaisons, often termed as scandals as an aftermath of the revolt of 1857 is an interesting part of the study. Henceforth racial and sexual anxieties along with cultural divide and moral differences were heightened and the bridge between the civilized and the barbarians was burnt.

The study highlights the colonial household as a critical site of imperial governance, where memsahibs regulated Indian servants, enforced British norms of hygiene and domestic order, and policed racial boundaries. By examining representations of food habits, religious practices, family life, and gender relations, the research reveals how Indian lifestyles were constructed as inferior, unhygienic, or morally deficient in contrast to British ideals of civilisation. Such representations not only legitimised colonial authority but also reinforced the gendered logic of empire, wherein British women assumed moral responsibility for upholding racial purity and imperial respectability.

At the same time, the research acknowledges the ambivalence and heterogeneity within memsahib experiences. Early nineteenth-century writings reveal moments of curiosity, adaptation, and cultural intimacy, complicating monolithic portrayals of colonial women. However, these engagements remained structured by unequal power relations and did not disrupt imperial hierarchies. By the late nineteenth century, memsahib narratives increasingly reflected fear, surveillance, and moral distance, shaped by the trauma and memory of 1857.

By integrating postcolonial and feminist historiography, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of colonial modernity and the intimate dimensions of empire. It demonstrates how gendered domestic practices and everyday representations were central to the maintenance of colonial power. Ultimately, the research seeks to historicise

memsahib culture as a dynamic and consequential element of British imperialism, offering insights into the enduring legacies of colonial knowledge and racialised cultural discourse.

Significance of the Study

This research is significant because unlike the popular colonial discourse which is based on administrative, military and economic events and activities, this research brings the focus on the everyday life and domestic aspect of colonial history. Domestic spaces are thus alleviated to the status of sites of power and reimposition of racial and colonial boundaries. Women and their works, along with their perspectives are brought to the fore and their contribution to the historiography of colonial India is understood especially their role in shaping imperial perceptions of Indian lifestyle. By analysing memsahibs' writings, the study highlights how imperial authority was reproduced not only through governance but also through cultural practices and gendered norms.

By challenging the simplistic portrayal of memsahibs as passive victims of empire or uncomplicated agents of domination, this research presents them as complex historical agents trying to assert race, gender, and class within the colonial context. Thus, the existing debate on intersectionality, double colonization and amalgamation of gender and power is enriched.

Perhaps the most significant facet is the value of personal writings like letters, diaries, etc. as rich sources of history. Through a critical analysis of these materials, the study highlights that even personal and intimate texts can reflect broader ideologies and perspective of the prevailing times, hence becoming rich contributors of colonial knowledge generation and its circulation.

References

1. Lang J. Wanderings in India: and other Sketches of Life in Hindostan. London: Favil and Edwards Printers, 1859, 28.
2. Sen I (ed.). Memsahibs writings: Colonial narratives on Indian women. New Delhi: Orient BlackSwan, 2008, ix-xxix.
3. Nevile P. Stories from the Raj: Sahibs, Memsahibs and Others. New Delhi: Indialog Publications Pvt Ltd, 2004, 25-32.
4. Eden E. Up the country: Letters written to her sister from the upper provinces of India. Richard Bentley, 1866, 65.
5. Parkes F. Wanderings of a pilgrim in search of the picturesque, during four-and-twenty years in the East. Pelham Richardson., 1850, 77-87.
6. Sen I. Woman and empire: Representations of the memsahib in nineteenth-century India. Orient Longman, 2002.
7. Chatterjee S. Contested virtue: Imperial women's Crisis with Colonized Womanhood. Kolkata Institute of Development Studies, 2010, 2.
8. Barr P. The Memsahibs: The Women of Victorian India. London: Secker & Warburg., 1976, 96.
9. Petersen KH, Rutherford A (ed.). A Double Colonization: Colonial and Post-colonial Women's Writing. Oxford: Dangaroo Press, 1986.
10. Awasthi S. Social and Cultural depictions of India 1700 – 1850 (The memsahibs' narrations). Delhi: Swati Publications, 2013, 1-21.
11. Steel FA, Gardiner G. The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook. London: William Heineman, 1909, 1- 11.