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**CONTESTED VIRTUE: IMPERIAL WOMEN'S
CRISIS WITH COLONIZED WOMANHOOD**

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Contested Virtue: Imperial Women's Crisis with Colonized Womanhood

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(This paper attempts to explore the mutual relations between Indian and British women during the colonial period. Concentrating mainly on the period of 18th and 19th century when Nautch as a form of entertainment and interaction was popular among the natives and the sahibs, the paper tends to focus on the ways how specifically the art of nautch and native womanhood at large was viewed under the light of racism and imperialism. How the imperial women reacted to the native culture and native women's sexuality forms the central theme of the paper. The concept of imperial gaze is explained with the help of narratives as well as visuals.)

New roads lie open to me. I

Shall pierce the veil that hides what we desire,

Break through to realms of abstract energy.¹

Journey to the unknown has always been enigmatically alluring because it has involved the penetration and the exposure, the control and the possession of the mysterious and the unveiling of the unknown. It is this enigma that has prompted the capture of distant lands, introducing what we term today as colonialism and imperialism. According to Fray Bartolomé de las Casas, Christopher Columbus in 1498, during his third voyage, came to the conclusion that *the earth was not round contrary to the opinion of astrologers and philosophers...he imagined it ...like a woman's breast on a round ball, and that part of the nipple was higher and closer to the air and heaven (...); and it seemed to him that the Earthly Paradise might be found on this nipple.²* Columbus was not the first European man and never the last to have feminized earth. Fantasizing the land as a woman, distant uncharted territories as virgin in need of possession and ravishment has always been a popular theme of white male eroticism.

The white women were ambiguously placed within the imperial design. Though their

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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, white women experienced the privileges and problems of imperialism in ways different from their men. They were neither an executive part of the empire nor enjoyed the direct profits that Europe and her 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.

The geographical, tangible space that the colony created, not only helped the Empire in dumping her cheap machine made goods, but also relieved her of surplus population. Men and women flocked into the colonies in search of better life and brighter prospects. English essayist W.R Greg, in 1862, lamented the 'unnatural' number of spinsters living in industrial England:

"There is an enormous and increasing number of single women in the nation...a number which, positively and relatively, is indicative of an unwholesome social state, and is both productive and prognostic of much wretchedness and wrong".³

Greg not only identified the 'problem' of his society, but also suggested two ways out of it. First, he advised the single women to adopt the pleasing manners of 'expensive prostitutes' to escape their 'economic redundancy'. Second, he said single women above thirty years of age should be sent to the colonies where there is a surplus of young men and they would find husbands. His ideas enraged the strong-minded women who were fighting for their rights, but remained popular with the general public throughout the century. However it is said that going to one of the British colonies had been an avenue of escape for women long before Greg advocated it.

Colonies provided a way of venting not only the surplus energy of the colonisers but also their surplus population. India, being one of them, provided matrimonial as well as employment opportunities to Britain's 'surplus' women. In the 18th century, shiploads of women mockingly called 'fishing fleets' braved the rough journey to come to the East. In fact such was their outflow that Britain had emigration societies⁴ which worked from establishing hostels where women could live before leaving England to finding them suitable employment in the colonies. Not all of them, however, were on a way to look for men and money. Some were just accompanying their brother or husband like Emily Eden or Fanny Parks who brought with them enormous curiosity and a critical eye for the Oriental ways of life and living. 1860 onwards, Englishwomen started coming in great numbers as resident wives in India. More than their own initiative, the imperial rulers thought settlement of white women in the colony would help to further the 'imperial identity'. Also, it was thought that imperial women 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

white women in the Indian society, gave rise to some complicated and variegated racial and cultural relations that moulded the impression of the imperial women towards their native counterparts.

The native women presented herself to the imperial women in many forms. She was the *pardahnashin*, hidden from public view by strict rules of seclusion, left to be imagined and wondered at. She was the *ayah*, the wet nurse, feeding the white mistress' baby sometimes keeping her own child starving; and at times she was the infamous *nautchgirl*, a source of the master's pleasure and the mistress' contention. The white women, as it is registered in the colonial discourse penned by them, were much intrigued by Indian womanhood, especially its two extremes — the veiled *pardahnashin* and the enticingly playful *nautchgirls*. While the invisibility of the *Pardahnashin* intrigued them, the hyper-visibility of the *nautchgirls* challenged and threatened to destabilize the imperial supremacy; thus while on one hand the colony experienced a contest of power between the colonizer and the colonized, on the other hand it also experienced a wrestle of power between the white and the native woman—to win over the white imperial male.

The Nautchgirl

...many a winning smile and am'rous glance/

*That—lost on us—might even Mahomet entrance!*⁵

— Such was the charm and sweetness of the *Nautchgirls*, the performing artistes of India, who formed an integral part of the culture and tradition. From time immemorial Indian poets have sung about the dazzling beauty of the professional entertainer—the *nartaki*. *Nautchgirls* were the more earthy successors of the divine *apsara*, the legendary beauties and experts in the art of singing and dancing. They always have enjoyed a special and distinct place in the society since ages in the form of *ganikas*, *devdasis*, *nartaki*, *tawaif* and *nautchgirl*. On reaching India the British men were fascinated by these entertainers, who were quite distant from the stiff, corseted, prude Victorian women, they have had dealt with so far. The oriental beauty with supple limbs, graceful movement and flirtatious glances did more than just woo the imperial master's hearts. The *nautchgirls* became a must-have in all parties thrown for and by the Sahibs.

Nautchgirl and the Sahibs

It was a time when only a few white women would come to India because of the hardship such a journey would entail and racism was yet to raise its ugly head; a time when the Sahibs would befriend the Indians and easily adapt the native ways of life; it was a time when boundary between the ruler and the ruled was inconspicuous and both would mix freely with each other; it was a time when it was natural for the white men, far away from their homeland, tired with death, disease and isolation, to

seek solace in the native feminine grace. India was exotic and her women sensual. While Victorian society taught suppression of desires, the colony not only whetted the appetite, but also provided ethereal divine creatures for the satiation and the imperial masters were more than happy. Historian Robert Orme echoed the sentiment of the white men, "nature seems to have showered beauty on the fairer sex throughout Hindustan with a more lavish hand than in most other countries".⁶

Some British officials came to adapt the native ways of life so easily and so heartily that they gained much popularity among the natives and even went to the extent of marrying native ladies and settling in the colony. The most famous British residents in India even went to the extent of having names like Col. James Skinner, known as Secunder Sahib and Sir David Ochterlony, better known as Loony Akhter, who lived in royal grandeur, their enormous harems adding to their reputation. They were known for their legendary love for native women. Col. Skinner used to throw lavish *nautch* parties for the entertainment of his guests and would gift them with miniature paintings of *nautch* girls, sometimes of the very same dancers entertaining them.⁷

Until the third decade of the nineteenth century, when the influx of memsahibs put certain restraint on the mixing of the native ladies and white men, it was common for the sahibs to maintain harem and *zenanas* to keep *biwis*. Larger the size of the harem, higher was the status and social acceptability.

Nautchgirl and the Memsahibs

The memsahibs wrote quite extensively in their diaries, magazines and journals about the *nautch* and the performing artistes. Though considered a chiefly male pastime, the memsahibs too were welcomed and attended the *nautch* parties. Their views on the form of entertainment and the performers vacillated from one extreme to another. While the more liberal ones found the *nautch* tasteful, the music sweet and lyrical, the women beautiful and supple, others commented with more conservatism on the decadent oriental culture and the lack of aesthetics in the art. Some even went to the extent of charging the form of entertainment with vile seductive and sensual motives.

A study of the writings of memsahibs on *nautch* and the performing women reveals multiple aspects of the art and its impact on the colonizers and their women. Some colonial women found the art as appealing as their male counterparts. Anne Katharine Elwood⁸ found the *nautch* a graceful entertainment where the girls act 'coquettishly' yet the 'most fastidious prude might witness, without running a risk of any offence to her modesty.' She also expressed her surprise that the *nautch* girls have never been 'imported for the English stage.' Emily Eden⁹ found the *nautch* charming and graceful, the whole thing a 'curious and unnatural dream'. Anna Harriet Leonowens¹⁰ found it difficult to remove her eyes from the *nautch* girl's pensive and beautiful face. She found the 'dance was a miracle of art, and all the more fascinating because of the

rare beauty of the performers'. Elizabeth Cooper¹¹ found the dancing extremely modest with the dancers fully clothed and graceful.

The same art was however repulsive to other memsahibs. A good amount of detail and causticity is evident in the writings of Mary Martha Sherwood¹². She came to India with her husband and later devoted herself to evangelical works. Little wonder, she was never at peace with this pagan design of desecrating Christian morality.

The influence of these nautchgirls over the other sex, even over men who have been brought up in England, and who have known, admired, and respected their own country-women, is not to be accounted for. It is not only obtained in a very peculiar way, but often kept up even when beauty is passed. It steals upon those who come within its charmed circle in a way not unlike that of an intoxicating drug, being the more dangerous to young Europeans because they seldom fear it...

*All these Englishmen who were beguiled by this sweet music had had mothers at home, and some had mothers still, who in the distant land of their children's birth, still cared, and prayed, and wept for the once blooming boys, who were then slowly sacrificing themselves to drinking, smoking, want of rest, and the witcheries of the unhappy daughters of heathens and infidels...*¹³

Thus her account of the 'unaccountable' effect of the girls on the European men and their attitude towards their country-women is indeed grim. The native *femme fatale* with her hideous native charms has dragged down the powerful yet innocent imperial male towards perdition, giving enough reasons for women like Sherwood to lament. Pagan sensuality has indeed posed a threat to Christian morality.

Emma Roberts¹⁴, a traveller who came to visit her sister in India in the 19th century, was one among the many travellers who set out from their homeland in search of the unknown and unexplored 'other', equipped with a cultural sensibility that was completely at odds with the environment they set out to explore and negotiate. In a particular writing, Roberts focuses on the use of *nautch* as bait, the selective performance which remains boring and innocent in front of the female audiences but said to gain an altogether different dimension in an exclusive white man's company. She has projected the girls as full of deception and guile eager to go to any length for that extra favour.

Madam Marcus Fuller¹⁵, an evangelist, focuses on the moral aspects of the *nautch*, its impact on the society at large. She cites the broken families that should serve as evidences of the decadent society—all for the *nautch* girls. She also urges the administration to ban the entertainment and pave the way for moral reform. One interesting incident is recorded in her speech where the two poor *nautch* girls' endeavour to entertain backfires. Their occasional attempts at singing a tune in English had been vehemently criticized and opposed by the white rulers. "Language has been the consort of empire, and forever shall remain its mate," commented

R.Phillipson¹⁶. Thus to bar access to the empire's language was to bar access to the empire's intricate interior, to strongly assert the cultural inferiority of the ruled. The courtesans figured along with the lowest in the chain of native beings, so asking for a better status than the instruments of pleasure was definitely out of question.

Julia Maitland¹⁷, a judge's wife in south India in the 1830s, found the *nautch* boring enough to send someone to sleep. She found the music of the *vina* 'miserable, just a mixture of twang and whine, and quite monotonous, without even a pretence to a tune'. She found the effect of Hindoo music not very congenial or pleasant on the nerves and quite able to set her teeth on the edge. Much in tune with this observation was the comment of Fanny Parks¹⁸, who was not much excited by the *nautches* she attended at various places though she found 'some of the airs...very pretty'.

Marianne Postans¹⁹ wrote "...the *Natch* woman of India, on her flat foot, with her doubtfully poetic gestures, and hand upraised, in style so essaying, rather as a fishwife than a Houri, to render to every ear the glowing anacreons of the immortal Hafiz." Emma Roberts, mentioned earlier, found that *nautch* girls have no idea whatsoever of modulating their voices, which was quite 'barbarous' and 'inharmonious'. The dance, she found even stranger and less interesting than the music and more monotonous. It is she who wrote:

*In the presence of European ladies the dancing of the Nautchgirls is dull and decorous: but when the audience is exclusively masculine, it is said to assume a different character... The dancing, though not equally barbarous, is exceedingly tiresome, when, as in the presence of ladies, it is circumscribed within the bounds of propriety; but there are some European gentlemen who acquire the native taste for an exhibition which, when addressed to male eyes alone, is said to be not particularly decorous.*²⁰

Both Elizabeth Cooper and Marcus Fuller attached importance to the freedom and recognition the *nautchnees* enjoyed in the society, while Anna Leowens wondered how the poor girl's 'parents could have the heart to doom her to such a profession'.²¹

Mrs. Fuller, in her writings about the *nautchnees*, uses an excerpt from The Times, which says, "*The ample earnings obtained by the dancing-girl, and the comparative luxury in which she lives, unfortunately renders the profession an attractive one. It is said in reference to this class in Lucknow, that a first-class nautch-woman may have jewels and lace of value from one thousand to ten thousand rupees; that her fee for singing for one night is fifteen rupees; and that on occasion of a birth or marriage, it may be as much as two hundred.*"²²

Her comment exposes an entirely new field of gazing at and assessing the *nautchnees*. In their heyday of popularity and power in Mughal India, these ordinary dancers had actually humbled many a mighty ruler with their extraordinary beauty and talent. Many had actually enamored the rajas and princes to rise to the status of their wives. The dancers commanded respect, love and position from the societies they lived in and

had been immortalized in folklores. During the British reign the artistes lost their glory to some extent, yet, not altogether. Wealthy rajas, babus and sahibs maintained a bevy of the danseuse and they were adequately treated. Fashion of marrying them was not obsolete altogether. The girls were more than just objects of entertainment, they were the beloved. Glamour of the girls was unfading still and it was enough to whet the envy and greed of the impoverished Victorian women who were subjected to abject poverty and misery back home. Spending such wealth for such forms of entertainment was unknown in Britain and the sight of the glamour, splendour and easy life of the *nautchnees* might be a reason among many others which initiated and encouraged European prostitution in this colony. It should also be mentioned here that later European women excelled in the profession of prostitution and left far behind their native counterparts. The white prostitutes were a source of much contention and embarrassment to the imperial rulers and were living examples of immodesty, vulgarity and immorality. Besides the wealth and affluence, the attention that the nautchgirls received in the society was much in contrast to the emotionally starving *memsahibs*. Since most of the European women had come to marry, their quest and thirst for the white male company was strong and preset.

There are three main themes of the memsahib's critical analysis of the nautch and the girls. First that the nautch has been used as a bait to seduce the white man, second that harmful impact of the nautch on the white man and the society at large, though it can be safely concluded that wellbeing of Indian society never gained precedence to the middle-class white memsahibs over the wellbeing of their men and third, the lack of refinement or superior artistic and aesthetic flavour in the art of nautch—the opinions forming and operating on the system of surveillance, analysis and rejection and sometimes with an accompanying urge to control and curb the native women's advances because their possession (of the white imperial male bodies) is a possession without permission.

Controlling the native body has not only remained confined to narratives, but has been fortified through the presence of visuals. Without the inclusion of visuals the story remains only half told. A commendable series of work is presented by Mrs. Belnos whose works can be referred to discuss the white female gaze traversing the native body. .

The native-born Mrs.S.C Belnos was the wife of Jean Jacques Belnos, a portrait artist who achieved considerable success in the field of lithography. In the preface to her album called *Twenty Four Plates Illustrative of Hindoo and European Manners in Bengal* from which the following five paintings that is referred to and explained, have been taken, states, "A native of the country some peculiarities of whose customs I have attempted to depict...". *Nautch* falls into this category of 'peculiarities.'



Plate 18: A Nautch

In the first painting by Belnos, titled *A Nautch*, Plate 18, the dancing girl is seated at the feet of two ladies “and singing with all her might”. She describes the dancing girls who at the sight of Europeans in the salon of some raja or babu, ventures to approach some ladies of rank and kneeling at her feet continue singing, at intervals asking for *buxees* or present, which is generally given in the form of few rupees. Two things are the most striking in the painting— the inquisitiveness of the two pairs of white men and women and downward slanting gaze signifying the looking down upon the subject of interest—thus clarifying and reemphasizing the ruler ruled relationship. The plate here depicts the girl singing in the privacy of a salon and the performance is private and limited to only a few visitors.



Plate 17: A Nautch

The second painting (Plate 17) emphasizes the use of *nautch* to promote the relation between the native rulers and the British. Parties, ceremonies, festivals were incomplete without the *Nautch*. Mrs. Belnos gives a detailed description how the grace, beauty and splendour of the *nautch* complemented the grandeur of festivities, where "...the eye is dazzled by a blaze of lights from splendid lustures, triple wall shades, candle brass etc; superb pier glasses, pictures, sofas, chairs, turkey carpets etc. adorn the splendid halls...the hum of human voices, the glittering dresses of the dancing girls, their slow and graceful movement...strikes the stranger with amazement".

Memsahibs and the Purdahnashins

While the *nautch* girls engaged the white women's gaze with their body and the use of it, the *pardahnashins*, occupied it with their *pardah* and their preoccupation with it. While the hyper-visibility of the former disturbed the white women, the invisibility of the later intrigued them. The *pardah* served as the great barrier, the divide and the impenetrable seclusion which whetted enormous curiosities in the imperial women's minds. Normally the women of respectable Indian families observed *pardah* by which they were forbidden to public appearance. *Zenana* and the *Antahpur* as it was variously called were the secluding quarters which contained the females. While the white men never had the access to these isolated parts of the houses, white women however could pay a visit to the *pardahnashins* or the inmates of the *pardah*. White women almost always had been critical regarding the *zenana* since the inmates spent their time in inactivity and idleness in unhealthy, uncongenial surroundings which in turn gave rise to physical illness and was aggravated by the lack of education and proper advice. The matriarch of the quarter was almost always tyrannical. The memsahibs visiting the *pardahnashins* could well identify the two greatest ills of seclusion—mental illness including hysteria and idleness—which they themselves were plagued with, both in home and in the colony. Margaret Urquhart in her study of the Hindu *pardahnashins* of Calcutta remarked in 1924: "the monotony and confinement of the women's lives often result in a lack of nerve control which shows itself in various forms of hysteria".²³ Ideas varied among the memsahibs regarding the secluded space. The monotony of the *zenana* was also stressed where the rich lady leads a purposeless idle life, while the *harem* received a desexualized makeover. Women like Maud Diver saw the female domain as an essentially female communal space with effective communication and sisterhood.

However, Margaret Urquhart's idle *pardahnashins* were critically looked upon by many memsahibs as totem of oriental mysterious covert sexuality. Urquhart herself criticized the "*pardahnashin's* too great emphasis upon the purely physical functions" and "subtle atmosphere of animality". In the first quarter of the twentieth century, Flora Annie Steele projected the *zenana's* "obsession of sexuality"²⁴ and condemned that exercise of sexual functions is the prominent part of the lives of *zenana* women. Urquhart and Steele's views only reemphasize the western construct of the orient's decadent culture and its preoccupation with sexual pleasures. The cultural practices of early parenthood, polygamy and marriage were supposed to be based on desires of the flesh rather than emotional and conjugal bonding.²⁵ The native woman's dress of *sari* too was culturally inscribed as a sensual mode of dress. Without undergarments, which were the normal practice of the day, the *sari* was criticized for its transparency. Fanny Parks, commented on the *sari* that she saw worn by Calcutta *zenana* ladies: "on beholding their attire I was no longer surprised that no other men than their husbands

were permitted to enter the *zenana*...the dress was rather transparent, almost useless as a veil...the form of the limbs and tint of the skin is traced through it"²⁶ Mrs. Weitbrecht, however, remarked about the same Bengali women in a *sari* as "...was most modestly disposed—only a little of her neck and half way up her arm...could be seen." However sari continued to be obscene according to a majority opinion. At last in the 1860-70, with the dress reform, the colonizer could adequately cover the native female body according to English codes of decency by including a blouse and petticoat, no matter however unsuitable it was for the climate.

The Female Gaze

It is evident from the discussion so far that the native *nautchnees* as well as the *pardahnashins* have been a very fit subject which fuelled the white woman's curiosity as well as fed her varying emotions. The native body has not only been used and enjoyed by the imperial masters, but also by the imperial mistresses—loving, hating, and sympathizing through their *gaze*. And the way the *gaze* has played freely on the native body and the discourse that has formed on it, surmises the control that has been exerted. Michael Foucault's theory of discourse as a form of power is particularly relevant in the colonial context; the white women's insecurity and discomfort in the colony took the form of voluminous biased information on the lives and living of native women filling their diaries, journals, books and fictions. These narratives sought to form a strong mould of the native women furthering the idea of the oversexed, dark, veiled orientalism. Indian womanhood became the projected image of the colony itself. It is striking to note that the white women have only been echoing the imperial masters in their urge to penetrate the heart of the oriental darkness by lifting the mysterious *veil*, since the practice of observing *pardah* only heightened the imperial impatience for penetration. Mrs. Belnos's paintings of the native domestic women reflect almost a voyeuristic *gaze* and the exposure of the native skin is adequately emphasized. The painting titled *Interior of a Native Hut* Plate-14, depicts a woman cooking while two naked children playing at her side. The furnishing of the hut with the bare breasted woman and two naked children expresses a strong oriental image. The use of ornaments, amulets, talismans on the bodies of the woman as well as the children also enhances the flavour of the dark, mysterious yet alluring native. While describing the interior and furnishings of the native hut, Belnos talks about the *krodhageru* or the room of anger in which a woman shuts herself up to extort her wants from the man. Her demands vary from a new garment, beautiful jewels she has seen on her neighbor, a palanquin to take her to bathe in the river to a large fish to eat every day—very basic and instinctive demands indeed.



Plate 14: The Interior of a Native Hut



Plate 3: A Hindoo Woman Exposing the Body of her Dead Infant on the Bank's of the Ganges

In the next painting, titled *A Hindoo Woman Exposing the Body of her Dead Infant on the Banks of the Ganges*, Plate-3, which is a scene of a women crying for her dead child has an interesting description; describing the loud show of sorrow of the mother for her dead child, which instead of subsiding, gains momentum and force with comforting words.



Plate 8: Ablutions of a Young Hindoo Woman of Rank on the Bank's of the Ganges

The last painting of reference is titled, *Ablutions of a Young Hindoo Woman of Rank on the Bank's of the Ganges* Plate-8. It is a description of the bathing rituals of a young hindu woman, assisted by others, where the woman “throwing aside the envious veil discovers a form turned in Nature’s most exquisite mould.” It is interesting to note her downcast eyes and her futile attempt at covering her breasts signifying irrepressible sexuality.

The Reasons Behind

“Had it been a male the matter would be more acceptable”.

- So said Karl Marx to Engels on the birth of his daughter Eleanor in 1855. Europe was going through a phase when the lesser importance of daughters was being proved by Christianity and Science together. While Sigmund Freud in 1880s assumed the biological inferiority of women who can only envy the man's penis, Bible's teaching implied that women were born out of Adam's ribs, thus being inferior and secondary to man. Doctrine of separate spheres prevailing in the Victorian society necessitated women to stay confined at home looking after the domestic chores and thus protected from all danger and temptation. It was a time when the primary concern of aristocracy was to beget a male heir and it was the primary duty of the wife to provide for. Lady Westminster, who kept on trying to have a son, when she gave birth to her eighth daughter in 1834, wrote “the *catastrophe* of a daughter was a bore, but what can't be cured must be endured and never mentioned”.²⁷ Middle-class families wanted and preferred sons to carry on the family name but interestingly they were not disappointed when a daughter was born since they were considered cheaper to maintain, with less money spent on a girl's education. However to the working class a daughter was also a potential wage-earner and hence they had little qualms about a girl child. Girls, if ever welcomed or accepted, were solely because of their ability to soothe and take care of the family and parents in old age when the boys would be gone away on more serious business.

Victorian society was crippled by many evils at that time—poverty, lack of clinical facilities, alarming child mortality rate, child labour including their engagement in dangerous occupations, lack of proper education etc. Children, especially little girls, were subjected to strict discipline which sometimes hovered on the border of ruthlessness. Little girls were subjected to corporal punishments and taught to suppress their selves to become more ladylike. Parents were ‘remote and authoritarian.’²⁸ Governess varied from being over-indulgent to abusive. The children were “at the mercy” of the nurses who often terrorised and starved them. Middle and working class girls helped in the domestic chores of the households.

*At the end of their formal schooling, most middle-class girls stayed at home to attend to family duties. They read novels from the circulating library wrote letters or did embroidery in the morning, spent the afternoons shopping or visiting, and their evenings drinking tea or going to concerts and parties. This was the life of an unmarried young woman that Florence Nightingale described as ‘listless and purposeless’.*²⁹

*‘Almost the only career open to middle-class women at mid-century was that of governess, grossly overworked and shockingly underpaid; most were as ignorant as their pupils’.*³⁰

The surrounding environment was grim and unhygienic. Joan Perkin comments: "It is difficult to imagine the dirt, decay, disease and desolation that was common in nineteenth-century English towns...whether a woman was respectable or rough, there was no escape from crowded living and a polluted environment".³¹

Victorian England was going through a strange and difficult time when puritan notion about the body and sexuality prevailed along with prostitution and incest; and these were not confined to the poor sections of the society.³² Ignorance was much encouraged and bodies of women were kept hidden under voluminous amount of clothing. Sex was never associated with pleasure or fun and was never discussed. 'The image of the imperial prude' was 'emblazoned on the restrained, mute, and hypocritical sexuality'. Instances are there where women learnt after two years of marriage that it has not been consummated yet or they never learnt where children came from.

During the 19th century, theories of race were being propagated both by science and by press. Science of racism came into form based on the old concept of the great chain of being even before Darwin came out with his *Origin of Species* in 1859. Racial stereotyping gained momentum stressing the unequal nature of evolution of creations and hence their unequal/arrested development. In much of the literature of the day, the Irish, Negroes, Indians etc. were held to be inferior, an example of lower evolutionary forms. Cartoons portrayed them as demonic with ape-like features. They were attributed with character qualities like poetic, light-hearted, imaginative, highly emotional, playful, passionate, sensual and sentimental—characteristics the Victorians associated with children and women. Thus these races were 'immature' and required guidance by the more highly evolved species than themselves—the English—an irrefutable reason Britain concocted while making India its colony. The colony's 'emotion' was contrasted with the English 'reason', colony's femininity with English 'Masculine virtues', colony's 'poetic' attributes with the English 'pragmatism'. These arguments conveniently supported British rule over the colonies. When ruling the lesser mortals was justified, reasons had to be found out to perpetuate the rule. The Indians were termed an effeminate race and in 1850s Fanny Parks remarked "women have more influence over men in India than in any other country".³³ The native menfolk were under the tyranny of the Purdah women and hence unable to rule the country. Maud Diver in the early 20th century described India as "a woman-country...aloof, yet alluring, like one of her own purdah princesses".³⁴ Such gendered construction fuelled the racial and hierarchical relation between the colonized and the colonizer thus furthering the subordination and exploitation of the colony. What is interesting in this regard is the white women's agency in perpetuating the rule. White middle-class women, in spite of being victims of sexism in their own country, could not identify the exploitation of the native women or their helplessness. Instead, their visions were fogged by imperial superiority when they dealt with native women who were not only burdened with the imbalances of their relations with their own men and society but

also the brutal arrangement of hierarchical rules and restrictions that structured their new relation with imperial men and women.

Anne McClintock very aptly comments that the colony became a “fantastic magic lantern of the mind onto which Europe projected its forbidden sexual desires and fears.”³⁵ The colony served dual purposes. First, it satiated the instincts and desires and whatever were forbidden at home. Second, it served a cathartic purpose by inspiring awe, horror and fear. It provided a fantasy relaxation and pleasure to the paranoid rulers to pretend that it was the ‘Other’ which is dark, pervert and low and they were there to put things right. The white female gaze too sought its satiation either by being critical or being appreciative and almost all the time trying to be correctional. Whatever it was, the colony completely occupied the mind of the female colonizer: her mirror of missing dreams and anticipated nightmares.

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