

Ravished Angels: The Memsahib in 1857 Mutiny Fiction

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In the ideology of the British Raj, the “civilized” and “refined” Englishwoman, in sharp contrast to the veiled and “degraded” Indian woman in need of rescue, was seen as a marker of British superiority. The memsahib or the colonial Englishwoman out on her “civilizing mission” has been considerably visible in Indian cinema. In Amir Khan’s *Lagaan*, she plays an important part with communicable ambivalence. Satyajit Ray in his *Ghare Baire* had a memsahib as Bimala’s music teacher to suggest Bimala’s exposures beyond her traditional household. That was a seminal suggestion. Rituporno Ghosh in his *Chokher Bali* explained Binodini’s contacts with memsahib missionaries to add another shade to her character beyond her widowhood. We see missionary memsahibs hawking in the bylanes of Calcutta to gather girl students for their schools. This sequence establishes the film’s historicity. In his other film, *Antarmahal*, Rituporno, with his keen sense of history, shows a Durgapratima (clay idol) with the face of Queen Victoria being carried to the rural zamindar’s palace through paddy fields and canals and orchards. Shyam Benegal in his *Junoon*, however, deviates from this apparent role-fixing of the memsahib. *Junoon* is the story of a one-sided love—a rebel sepoy of the 1857 Mutiny falls in love with an English girl whose family he has rescued and sheltered.

In these film stories, the memsahib is an exotic beauty, an angel who can guide the Indians to a higher life, be it by teaching English alphabets, or English music, or English manners and attire, or the English game of cricket. She is to be worshipped, and desired, from afar.

The matriarchal iconography of the Hindus codifies exoticism on their mother images. This exoticism found an easy way to mingle with the exoticism of the memsahibs. Especially the mother image of Queen Victoria as the Empress of her Indian empire acted as the catalytic agent to build up the angel image of the memsahib, so brilliantly expressed by the Durga idol travelling over the green expanses of rural Bengal in Rituporno’s film. Indian literature following the Sepoy Mutiny bears evidence of this massive appropriation of the pure and angelic image of the memsahib. There are numerous instances of bad sahibs, but bad memsahibs are hard to come by. Cross-breedings and cross-fertilizations between two alien cultures are fortuitously abundant in more visible channels in colonial times.

This angelic image of the memsahib finds a strange corroboration in the memsahib figure in a sizeable amount of Mutiny fiction in English, in which she is a site loaded with ideological and symbolic significance, where race, gender, politics, and culture converge.

The Sepoy Mutiny, as the British chose to call the 1857 Indian uprising started by some native regiments of the East India Company and joined in most places by discontented civilians, peasants and landlords, was one 19th century military event that commanded an unusual level of public attention in Britain. The rebellion, which did not spread in all parts of the country,

nor lasted much over a year, was seen as a very serious threat to British dominion of India, primarily because its violence involved civilians, including British women and children.

Featured initially in dispatches, political debates, and newspaper reports, the Mutiny soon provoked a vast body of writing: political, historical, biographical, autobiographical, personal, and fictional. The Mutiny novel became an important sub-genre of the 19th century Anglo-Indian novel, especially in the years between the uprising and the First World War. The first ten years following the event produced just three novels, the next twenty saw nine novels being published. The most productive years were the 1890s, with sixteen novels, followed by about fifteen novels written till 1914. As the First World War, a much larger and much more complex political crisis, threatened the very existence of the British Empire, the interest in the Indian revolt waned, though authors continue to use the Mutiny as a background in quite a few late works till date.

This article examines the diverse representations of the colonial Englishwoman within the genre. In the process it actually maps the “construction” of what is perhaps the most complex and layered of all colonial representations, namely the “Mutiny memsahib.” I have chosen two early novels, Edward Money’s *The Wife and the Ward; or A Life’s Error* (1859), and James Grant’s *First Love and Last Love: A Tale of the Indian Mutiny* (1867) to trace the “construction” and violation of the angel/memsahib. In keeping with the popular representation of the rebellion as the “barbaric attack of the dark savage native” on the “helpless white woman” or the memsahib, the two representative works of early Mutiny literature reiterate the predominant representation of the memsahib as the silent, passive sufferer, totally at the mercy of the male attackers and rescuers.

The duration of the films I mentioned are almost the same as the duration of the Mutiny novels, the period between 1857 and 1914, though the novelizing and filming times are at least two thirds of a century apart. However, the memsahib retains her angelic quality through these times.

The popular view about the Englishwoman in all forms of Mutiny narratives is that she is predominantly the victim, the sufferer, and in some versions, she is also the instigator of the Mutiny, primarily because of her aloofness and snobbery. Mutiny novels, at least the early ones, reiterate the tendency to simplify the complexity of the imperial military crisis by suggesting that the memsahib is one of the primary causes of the Mutiny, though it is a very different kind of instigation that they talk about. I would like to begin with a dream. Marion Paris, the young heroine of Edward Money’s *The Wife and the Ward; or A Life’s Error*, the first novel I deal with in detail, has a terrifying dream (extracted below), which is a projection of the familiar deep-seated distrust and fear of the white woman of the unknown dark Asiatic, something which was probably always present, but surfaced more aggressively post 1857. As she is forced to venture into a threateningly unfamiliar territory, thrown out of the comforting safety of her white enclave, her anxiety and unwillingness to tread into the unknown translates into this nightmare. But I suggest that Marion’s dream is worth paying attention to for another reason: it has in it the seeds of the image of the British woman as the object of lust and hence the

perpetrator of the insurgence and its sacrificial victim, an image very prominent, but yet to be explored by commentators:

Shortly after, a messenger with a flag of truce appeared, and ... said he had been sent by the rajah to offer them deliverance; but that one condition must be accepted therewith, which was, that the Missie Baba [Marion] should be given over to his master, as the rajah loved her, and wished to marry her. ... As the messenger retired, he told the servants the offer he had brought, and added that, on the refusal being received, the mine that was prepared under the house would be fired The servants, who had hitherto fought bravely in defense of their masters, then came in a body, and insisted on the terms being accepted, ... and were about to open the doors to the besiegers. Edgington and Mr. Peters remonstrated; but even as they did so, a guard of the Nana's entered the house, followed by the rajah himself, who advanced to claim his bride. He took her hand ... and passing his arm round her waist, was about to remove her, when poor Marion awoke with a shriek (Money 295-6)

I argue that in the fictional accounts, she does not initiate the Mutiny by her snobbishness or racial aloofness, in fact, the Mutiny memsahib is rarely the stereotyped ignorant, intolerant and gossiping figure, whose vindictive ways infuriate the natives, sparking off the mass unrest against the rulers. She is, on the contrary, young, ignorant, innocent, and powerless and passive. But she is also extremely beautiful and attractive, and hence extremely desirable to the “dark natives”; she thus allures Indian men of power, who break into rebellion not only to defeat the British but also to possess her. And the novelists naturally take great care in creating the pristine virginal beauty of the memsahib, so that long before she is actually physically threatened by the mutineers or loses the security of her home and her family, she is carefully constructed as the potential victim of the Mutiny. This careful and gradual construction of the memsahib as a combination of the unsuspecting, innocent temptress and sacrificial victim in Mutiny fiction has not attracted much comment from critics. But it is definitely interesting to note how she is carefully and deliberately constructed as a sexualized victim. In the novelists' erotic description of her pristine virginal beauty, one detects a male gaze acutely aware of her sensuousness and sensuality—it is as if she is looked at through the eyes of the “barbaric Asiatic” that can conceive of her only as an object of sexual fantasy. Marion Paris in *The Wife and the Ward* is the pure, beautiful, defenseless, young Englishwoman, “just bursting into womanhood”; her “wonderfully perfect Grecian profile,” ivory skin and massy blond hair, detailed with utmost care by Money, identify her as an object of desire to the readers much before the Nana Sahib of Bithoor lusts for her (Money 216-17).

Similarly in Grant's *First Love and Last Love*, the Weston sisters are described in unmistakably erotic terms. Madelena Weston, as she first appears, is dressed in flowing, transparent white muslin, her white shoulders and tapering arms visible through the fine texture of her dress (Grant 45-46). Her younger sister Polly is abducted by a native. When she tries to elude his grasp, “he grasped her rudely by the shoulder, tearing all her muslin dress, and rending her bodice, and then the lovely English girl stood palpitating before them in all the ivory whiteness of her skin, bare almost to the slender waist”(Grant 143). Thus, in most early Mutiny novels,

the Englishwoman is the object of unbridled native lust much before the Mutiny actually breaks out, and she is at the mercy of the “brown skinned rapists.” Typically the Anglo-Indian heroine would stand out for her beauty, poise and grace, she would be blond, beautiful, blue-eyed, and well-dressed. The Mutiny heroine possesses the same attributes, and in balls and such social gatherings, she often finds herself the object of interest and ultimately of unbridled desire of Indian men of power, both Hindu and Muslim, be it the Nana of Bithoor, or Azimoolah Khan, his deputy, or the lecherous princes of Delhi or smaller kingdoms.

I look at this sexual objectification of the memsahib’s body as the Mutiny novelists’ first step towards the construction of the memsahib as a victim of the rebellion, redefining the term “victim.” She is a victim because she is abused, hunted, raped and killed by native mutineers; but before that she is first consciously constructed as a sexualized “object” to be desired, possessed and mauled, her beautiful body specifically identified as a site of unspeakable atrocities by dark-skinned native offenders. This identification of the memsahib primarily as a body or as a beautiful object, combined with emphasis on her physical frailty and helplessness, leads to the ultimate unspeakable torture she faces in the accounts, that is, rape and murder. The torture meted out to her, in its turn, provokes every self-respecting Englishman to avenge her suffering, thus creating the masculine “hero” of Mutiny fiction. The memsahib, I contend, plays a very complex and significant role in the Mutiny novel: that of a catalyst, passive yet pivotal; it is primarily because she is desired, tortured or killed, that the men get to play the role of the heroes. In other words, it is only because she is pretty and passive, that her men get to be active.

I begin with this very first novel on the Sepoy Mutiny, written barely a year after the rebellion was over, in 1859. The choice of Edward Money’s *The Wife and the Ward; or A Life’s Error* (renamed *Woman’s Fortitude: A Tale of the Cawnpore Tragedy* in a subsequent 1881 edition) is not solely due to chronological reasons, but primarily because of its difference with the novels that follow. Being a very early work, it belongs to the category of what Gautam Chakravarty calls the “novel of insurgency”; that is, a novel which depicts the violence of the incident, focusing on the treachery of the murderous villains—the natives, and does not have enough scope to glorify the heroic acts of retaliation by the British. It is perhaps the only Mutiny novel where the heroine dies without the hero avenging her misfortune.

Money’s novel, drawing heavily on newspaper accounts (“fiction founded on fact,” he says in his dedication) (7), begins in the practice of the Anglo-Indian “station romance,” as is evident from the choice of his first title, with a meticulously detailed picture of the “English social life in Hindoostan.” The hero is the popular, honest, and “not so handsome” Captain Arthur Edgington, an officer of the 99th Native Infantry stationed at Dinapore. He commits his “life’s error” by entering into a loveless and incompatible marriage with the cold and calculating Beatrice Plane, daughter of a retired Patna judge. The “ward” who comes between the “wife” and Captain Edgington is the exquisitely beautiful sixteen year old Marion Paris, who arrives from England to live with them. She wins over both her guardian and his wife with her innate goodness and sympathy, and gradually a bond develops between Arthur and Marion. But then the plot moves into “the saddest scene in the late Bengal mutinies,” and to the domestic

complications of the Edgingtons is added the political upheaval of British India. Beatrice escapes as she had already left for Patna to be with her ailing mother. Arthur and Marion face the Mutiny together. The novel ends on the “bloody boat-docks” of Satichaura:

“Arthur,” said a tremulous voice, “Arthur, I will be shot by your side.” Edgington turned, and there, as an angel of light amidst the dark scenes enacting, stood Marion Paris, still beautiful, with a wild light in her eyes, and her partly-untrammelled gold hair, blown out by the hot blasts, brushing against his cheek.

But it was not Edgington alone who remarked the young girl and her wild beauty; the rajah, on the bank, did so too, and shrieked out, ---

“Cease firing on that boat. There is the prize—the girl in white. A hundred gold mohurs to whoever brings her to me.”

Terrified, Marion begs Arthur to save her from the clutches of the Nana.

“There is but one way,” whispered Edgington, as he bent his head to hers, while a frightful pallor overspread his face.

“I *choose* that way! It is that way I mean. Your promise—remember! Quick, ‘twill be too late directly.”

“God bless thee then in death, my Marion!” exclaimed Edgington, as he imprinted one long and ardent kiss on the lips of the young girl. It was the first and the last kiss that he ever gave her. She shut her eyes, for she could not look on the instant death which she knew awaited her. One instant more, as, with a trembling hand, the pistol was cocked, and the next the brains of Marion Paris bespattered the chest of her guardian. (Money 402-3)

And thus Mutiny fiction gets its first memsahib victim. But, as I have already pointed out, Money had already marked Marion as a victim of native lust long before she dies. As she appears in the social circle of Dinapore, the author dedicates a considerable amount of textual space to describe her appeal. Spotted and stared at by the Nana of Bhithoor at a party, she suffers from a sense of humiliation and insecurity:

The Nana ... gazed at Marion with his fiery eyes, while his lips moved as if he muttered to himself. Miss Paris, accidentally looking up, caught his passionate gaze fixed on her, and started as she did so. She did not blush: she turned pale, and moved uneasily in her chair. She was frightened; but why, she could not say. (Money 273)

Published about a decade after the rebellion, James Grant’s *First Love and Last Love* depends heavily on the sensational newspaper reports of systematic rape and mutilation of British women at the hands of the rebel soldiers. In his graphic and repeated detailing of the mutilated and raped bodies of the defenseless women strewn on the streets of Delhi, he violates what is perhaps the most powerful literary taboo of the Victorian era, which otherwise censored the mention, leave alone description of naked female bodies. Grant’s novel abounds in such sensational and gory descriptions, where the Englishwoman is shown as nothing more than a

brutalized body, displayed, as it were, through words, to be pitied and avenged. The chaplain Rev. Jennings is butchered in front of his daughter, “a young lady possessed of great beauty” who had recently come from England. She too perished, after being subjected to indignities “which a Mohammedan would consider the worst and vilest his own wife or daughter could suffer” (Grant 47-48). Scenes of violence and torture are described in graphic detail:

The women were always stripped of their clothing, treated with every indignity, and then slowly tortured to death, or hacked at once to pieces, according to the fancy of their captors. Poor little children were dashed on the pavement, ripped open, or quartered alive by the ferocious 3rd Cavalry (a corps chiefly of Mohammedans) ... No mercy was shown to age or sex. Delicate women were stripped to the skin, turned thus into the streets, beaten with bamboos, pelted with filth, and abandoned to the vile lusts of blood-stained miscreants, until death or madness terminated their unutterable woe. To possess one drop of European blood, or to be suspected of being a Christian, was sufficient to ensure a merciless death. (Grant 58)

At times, Grant directly quotes from sensational reports and rumors about the torture meted out to the women, without even attempting to fictionalize these accounts:

Then the sepoy fixed their bayonets and brought forth the melancholy prisoners—eight ladies, eight gentlemen, and eleven children, all in the agonies of thirst and utter exhaustion, and deliberately they placed them all in a row under a burning sun. Mrs. Rhys, who had an infant in her arms, implored the soubadar to give it a little water, and to take her own life as the price of the gift; but the barbarian snatched the poor babe from her breast and dashed it on the ground head foremost.

“Oh Father in Heaven!” shrieked the poor mother, attempting to throw herself over the quivering body of the child, but she was thrust back by a charged bayonet; a few volleys followed, and they were all left together in a gory heap, under the hot meridian sun.

The king, the princes, and leaders, seized upon the British Treasury, containing more than half a million sterling; but they seized upon more than that; “forty-eight females, most of them girls from ten to fourteen years, many being delicately nurtured ladies, were kept for the base purposes of the leaders of the insurrection for a whole week.” At the end of that time, their clothes were rent from them, and they were surrendered to the lowest ruffians in Delhi, to amuse in the streets and the open light of day. Fingers, breasts, and noses were cut off; “one lady was three days dying; they flayed the face of another, and made her walk through the streets, perfectly nude,” according to a native eyewitness. (Grant 74-75)

The novel is unabashedly about victims, more than it is about heroes and villains. It is as much about the violence faced by the “victims”—the Weston sisters Madalena, Kate and Polly at the hands of mutineers in Delhi in May 1857, as about the heroic efforts of the two young British officers, Rowley Melon and Jack Harrower. On what was supposed to be Kate and Rowley’s

wedding night, all hell breaks loose in Delhi as the Flagstaff tower falls. The Westons—three sisters and their father, the chaplain—are separated, Lena and Jack manage to escape the bloodbathed streets of Delhi and move about for several days in the outskirts of the city, taking shelter in the ruined temples in the jungle, and in homes of faithful villagers. Lena thus escapes “a fate worse than death” as she finds a protector in her admirer Jack. To avoid being recognized, she dresses up as an Afghan woman—a device that more “active” heroines would adopt in later novels in their attempts to participate in the action.

Kate’s adventures are more complicated. As Rowley goes off to join the force, she is initially given shelter by an old Parsee cloth merchant Jamshetjee who tries to smuggle her out of Delhi wrapped up as a corpse being carried to the Tower of Silence. But the trick is discovered, and she is locked up in her own house by one Pershad Singh, who lusts after the young and pretty Kate. There is the constant threat of her being raped by him, but Pershad Singh is forced to send her to Meerut to escape the wrath of Prince Mirza Mugol, who wants Kate for himself. Thus Kate, too, survives the uprising. After Delhi is recaptured by the British, the two friends get their rewards—Lena agrees to marry Jack, and Rowley and Kate’s marriage is consummated.

The fate of the fourteen year old Polly is much worse. She is tricked into accompanying their trusted servant Assim Alee, who hands her over to the Dervish Hafiz Falladeen: “She felt as if in a dream; her fluttering heart died within her, and her knees bent under her, as the grasp of the hideous dervish tightened to a tiger clutch on her delicate arm, and his keen, fierce and sensual eyes gloated over her fair face, her golden hair, and wonderfully bright and beautiful complexion” (Grant 39-40). She is lusted after by Prince Abu Baker, who sends his trusted attendant Baboo Bulli Singh to get her. Prince Abu Baker tries seducing the terrified Polly, she spurns him but has wits enough to bargain for her dear father’s life. Dr. Weston dies wasted by confinement and sorrow, and Polly falls sick. She is filled with hatred bordering on insanity for the prince, who waits for her recovery and consent. His wives, too, wait for an opportunity to get rid of the “feringhee” girl, but leave her to her fate. The siege of Delhi comes to an end with British forces entering the city, Abu Baker’s patience runs out; he finally loses control when Polly, encouraged by the bugles, pounces on him and strikes him (symbolizing her nation’s attack on the savage Indians). Furious, he orders her to be tied hand and foot to a twelve pound gun, and handed to the sepoys and then to the “budmashes of the city.” Polly “was torn from her bed; her muslin night dress rent from her by coarse, remorseless hands,” (Grant 270) and she was then dragged down the white marble stair of the Cuchuc-Oda. After much fighting Delhi is retaken by the British, the princes are killed by Hodson, and Jack Harrower finds “against the palace wall ... the body of a girl, snowy white, sorely emaciated, and nailed by her hands and feet against the masonry ...” (Grant 310). Polly Weston thus emerges as the archetypal sacrificial victim figure in her Christ-like suffering and painful end, a favorite stereotype of numerous later novelists, as also a symbol of Britain, attacked by treacherous natives, but ultimately victorious.

As we see, thus, the memsahibs in the first phase of Mutiny fiction perfectly fit the definition of the wronged Englishwoman, they are the victim-heroines, silent, passive sufferers, constantly

threatened by violation of their virginal bodies and preferring violent, painful death to dishonor, encouraging their men to take unimaginable risks to avenge the wrongs done to them. But, as shown above, they are conceptualized as pristine white female bodies to be desired by dark Indians, the novelists' descriptions invariably emphasizing their physical attributes, which tempt Indian men of power and spark off the Mutiny, to put it very simply. These novels seem to hinge on the racial superiority of the memsahib, suggesting that her white skin put her at a disadvantage, emphasizing the "otherness" of the inferior Indian male illustrated by his almost primitive instinctive reaction of the memsahib. To the "barbaric Asiatic," she is seen as a prize to be won, her unfamiliar white body a curious object to be desired and possessed, as James Grant explains in *First Love and Last Love*:

To the brutal Mussulman and sensual Hindoo, the position occupied by an English lady, or any Christian woman, seems absurd and incomprehensible; and hence came the mad desire to insult, degrade, and torture, ere they slew them. (76-77)

Works Cited

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