



Memsahibs in the Empire: An Analysis of Authority, Gender, and Imperialism in Household Manuals

TARINI AWATRAMANI

AWATRAMANI.TARINI@GMAIL.COM

KEYWORDS: COLONIALISM, DOMESTICITY, GENDER, LABOUR HISTORY,
HOUSEHOLD MANUAL

91

Introduction

In the early 1900s, approximately 154,000 Britons lived in India (Leong-Salobir 2015, 2), of which over two-thirds were male (Procida 2002, 8). Most of these men served in the military or civil service, but among them, there were also entrepreneurs, explorers, and missionaries (Leong-Salobir 2015, 2). If 'men went out to India to guard it, to govern it or to make money from it' (David 2007, 53), British women went largely as their wives or daughters. This is especially true for women of the official community of Anglo India¹ who weren't allowed to take up civilian employment except for a few gender-sensitive roles such as inspectors for girls' schools (Procida 2002, 11). In her study of gender, politics, and imperialism in India, Mary Procida notes that women found their place within the colonial apparatus, 'not as independent individuals, but rather as the spouses of officials' and as wives, they were then also 'incorporated into the official community of the Raj and thus into the service of imperialism in India' (ibid.).

The compound English-Urdu word *memsahib*, used to address the wives of British officers, appropriately conveys their mediated position of power and privilege, roughly translating to "master's wife" or "master's woman"² (ibid., 1). Despite their relatively high status or position,



memsahibs were often stereotyped by their contemporaries as frivolous (Leong-Salobir 2015, 3) and superficial (Procida 2002, 11), going from tennis to tea parties (Zlotnick 1996, 53) or, women 'with empty minds and hearts, trying to fill them by despising the natives' (David 2007, 656).

Such perceptions of memsahibs also extended to scholarship on the colonial period in India. While most scholars tended to exclude or marginalise the role of Western women in their studies, those that didn't, focused on 'the racist attitudes of white women and their luxurious life-style' (Chaudhuri & Strobel 1992, 2). However, through the expanding field of women's studies and the development of feminist theories, scholars in the recent past have taken up a more textured analysis of the role of incorporated women (Procida 2002, 4). Departing from interpretations that cast them as either villains or victims (MacMillan 2018, Introduction) and rejecting the underlying logic that empire is an exclusively 'male space' (Chaudhuri & Strobel 1992, 2) these scholars sought a critical understanding of the colonial period by retrieving the historical experiences of women.

Such studies include Sara Suleri's analysis of English women abroad as 'the symbolic representation of the joys of an English home' (Zlotnick 1996, 51), or Rosemary Marangoly George's reading 'that the colonial occupation of the Indian subcontinent established one of the primary arenas in which the Englishwoman first achieved the kind of authoritative-self associated with the modern female subject' (George 1993, 51). Other scholars like Nupur Chaudhuri have focused on the role of Victorian memsahibs as 'agents of cultural exchange between colonisers and colonised' through the dissemination of shawls, jewellery, curry, rice and other Indian cultural influences on Victorian England (Chaudhuri & Strobel 1992, 11). The work of Cecilia Yun Sen Leong-Salobir (2015) also looks at foodways exploring the development of a distinctly colonial cuisine through the paradox of the hierarchical relationship between the ruling white elite and domestic colonial servants.

Understanding the lived experiences of British women in colonial India, however, has posed a challenge for scholars, as 'the wives of civil servants and others under colonial rule had no formal official role to play, no archival records of their presence existed' (Procida 2002, 4). Scholars have had to turn to alternative historical sources such as women's periodicals, newspaper advertisements, private letters, memoirs, and dozens of cookbooks and household manuals written for British women in England and India (Chaudhuri & Strobel 1992, 11). Taking up this reconsideration of British women and imperialism, the objective of this



analysis is to understand how the role of the memsahib and her authority is represented in popular manuals on the management of Anglo-Indian households during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries by which time India 'had become synonymous with the "empire"' (ibid., 242). The research question under investigation encompasses two aspects: How are the women's roles and authority within that domestic sphere depicted in texts on household management? And in what way do these depictions reflect imperial ideology?

Construction of imperial authority

One school says 'You are here to educate the natives to govern themselves. That done, you have only to go about your business.' The other school says 'No man knows the secret of the future; but for practical purposes you must act as if Great Britain were to govern India for all time, doing nothing which in your judgment has any tendency to undermine the foundations of British power'.
—from a memo written by Grant Duff for the incoming Viceroy, Lord Dufferin, 1885. (in David 2007, 68)

To contextualise the role of British women in colonial India, and understand the ideological environment in which the household manuals were written, we have to look briefly at the larger position of the British in India in the late nineteenth century. The advice, quoted above, from the historian Grant Duff to the Viceroy-designate shows that this position was hardly clear-cut.

By the turn of the twentieth century, the British had been in a governing position in India for about 150 years, first as Company, then later, and more extensively, as Crown. In the aftermath of the decisive battles of Plassey in 1757 and Buxar in 1764, British military and administrative control primarily served to advance the commercial interests of the East India Company and its shareholders. However, the Company became increasingly subjected to regulation and oversight by the British government, losing its monopoly on trade in India in 1813 (Keay 2001, 428) and its political independence with the establishment of the Raj after the Great Rebellion of 1857, the first major armed uprising against British rule. Along with these political and administrative reconfigurations came a shift in the narrative that justified the continuation of British rule in India—if the Company had ruled for its own profit, the Crown would rule for the profit of the colonies, bringing free trade, good governance, and moral upliftment.

Colonial rule was thus legitimised by two elements: a British historiography that portrayed preceding political regimes in India as despotic and oppressive rendering their subservient subjects incapable of self-



government (Mann 2004, 5-6) and a related notion that British rule could bring much-needed moral and material progress and was even duty bound to do so:

Accordingly, the Indian population was placed in a master and servant, teacher and pupil, parent and child [...] husband and wife relationship that justified the imposition of discipline, education, and upbringing. In short, the "civilising mission". (ibid. 2004, 6)

This "mission" assumed various forms, taken up by both religious Evangelical institutions—whose goal was to spread Christianity (ibid. 2004, 9)—and by proponents of philanthropic enlightenment or Utilitarianism. The latter emphasised social reform and the introduction of Western ideas and institutions of governance. Despite differing in their means, these groups shared a principal belief that Indians 'had to be educated until they could discipline themselves' (ibid. 2004, 12). Whatever the convictions were behind this underlying mission and its various manifestations, there were extraordinary contradictions between rhetoric and practice: civic values were spread at gun-point and *The Rights of Man* was promoted alongside indentured labour. There was also the paradox that success in this mission would threaten British interests by rendering British rule not just redundant, but illegitimate, as the 'colonised might become civilised and, hence, equal' (ibid. 2004, 24).

94

The discrepancy between principle and practice, rather than undermining the self-legitimising ideology of progress, became leeway—a manoeuvrable and, therefore, powerful justification of British rule that interwove the pursuit of material interests with moral imperatives. To demonstrate how the narrative of a benevolent civilising mandate endured and consolidated, I will end this section with the advice given to another incoming Viceroy of India, twenty years later, in 1905. In his farewell speech, outgoing Viceroy George Curzon speaks to the ideals he hoped his successor Lord Minto would live up to.

[...] to remember that the Almighty has placed your hand on the greatest of his Ploughs, in whose furrow the nations of the future are germinating and taking shape, to drive the blade a little forward in your time, and to feel that somewhere among these millions you have left a little justice or happiness or prosperity, a sense of manliness or moral dignity, a spring of patriotism, a dawn of intellectual enlightenment, or a stirring of duty where it did not before exist – that is enough, that is the Englishman's justification in India. (BBC Radio 4, accessed 28.09.2023)

Role of the memsahib

Where does the memsahib fit in this broader imperial structure and civilising narrative? As mentioned before, women held few official positions,



and, 'any definition of official Anglo-India predicated solely on employment by the Raj would have excluded almost all women' (Procida 2002, 4). As a result, the role of women in the project of imperialism was often unofficial, through social and marital connections to imperial officers. From the 1860s onwards, following the establishment of the British Empire in India in the aftermath of the Rebellion, the number of incorporated wives increased significantly. This period saw a notable shift in imperial culture and British attitudes toward Indians³, leading to a policy of maintaining social distance (Sen 2008, xv). As feelings of cultural superiority gave way to 'avowed feelings of racial antagonism' (Metcalf 1960, 29) colonial officials who had previously taken Indian mistresses, were now encouraged to have British wives and 'create a self-contained English-style society moulded on the pattern of "home"' (Sen 2008, xv). Furthermore, the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, greatly shortened the journey from England to India, making it easier for women to join their husbands (ibid.) and create the ethnocentric environment that 'facilitated their husbands' obligations' (Chaudhuri & Strobel 1992, 242).

The idea that women had an important, supporting moral role in the home was not unique to the colonial context but a prevailing value of the Victorian middle class. In exploring the relationship between domesticity and imperialism, Zlotnick notes that the ideology of domesticity 'emerged out of the evangelicalism of the Clapham Sect in the earliest decades of the nineteenth century to become the dominant ideology of the middle classes by the 1830s and 1840s' (Zlotnick 1996, 53). It centred on separate spheres for the genders: public for men, private for women. Consigned to the domestic space, a woman's task was to maintain a home both morally and economically (Boardman 2000, 150). While this ideal of domesticity positioned women as crucial to the social order, it also constrained them to the roles of virtuous wives and mothers, limiting their participation in public life.

This ideology was not merely transported to India but was reconfigured to align with imperial objectives where women served as partners to their husbands in promoting imperial values through homemaking. In this imperial marriage women could 'accumulate the knowledge and experience to participate in imperial politics and practices' (Procida 2002, 11) but they were mostly there 'to keep house and raise little empire-builders of the future' (MacMillan 2018, Introduction). Regardless of the roles the wives of ICS or imperial officers played, the Raj 'maintained an old-fashioned misogynistic attitude towards women, generally, and wives, in particular, refusing to acknowledge their work or even their presence in the empire' (Procida 2002, 30). This disparity between the importance assigned to the role of women and the actual value placed



on them is consistent with the lack of official records about their function in the colonial administration.

What information is available about the social backgrounds of memsahibs suggests they came from the upper-middle or professional classes, and possessed varying levels of education (often lower than that of their husbands), with only a few having graduated from university (Procida 2004, 12). They went where their husbands were stationed, mostly settling in tight-knit British communities and larger cities like Calcutta and Madras, as they were then called. Here, they had a retinue of servants and while their lives were, to some extent 'much grander than they would have been back home' (MacMillan 2018, Introduction) they had to navigate an environment and social structures that were unfamiliar to them.

The generation of women that came to India toward the end of the nineteenth century benefited from the knowledge of those that had preceded them. The housekeeping manual was one way this knowledge was transferred, but it also represented an extension of the discourse and practices of domesticity within the civilising mission. In the section ahead, I explore Englishwomen's participation in imperial practices and ideology and their roles within the colonial structure as reflected in housekeeping and cookery manuals written to guide them in creating English homes in the empire.

Methodology and analytical framework

To examine the role of the memsahib, in the broader discourse of imperialism, I conduct a critical discourse analysis (CDA) of the opening chapter of a nineteenth-century household manual. Alison Sealey notes 'many CDA projects select as data the discourse that is produced by "elite" social actors, agencies, and institutions' as their influential positions ensure that discourses produced not only represent their positions of power but also contribute to its construction and perpetuation (Sealey 2020, 10-11). Within the framework of CDA, this analysis seeks to understand the memsahib's position of power within the hierarchical structure of the household and its implications for her position in the wider imperial structure. While this paper looks within the text, it must be noted that the text's very existence, as part of a larger body of discursive colonial governance, itself represents an articulation of power and control.

Selection of Data

Between 1800 and 1920, numerous housekeeping guides were authored for British expatriates maintaining a home away from Britain (Salobir



2009, 3). These guides are part of a broader body of literature, encompassing both fiction and journalism, written by Englishwomen who had spent extended periods in India. Manuals, like the best-seller, *Mrs. Beeton's Book of Household Management* (1861), which focused on domestic life within Victorian Britain, were already in wide circulation in England (Steel & Gardiner 2011, xvii). Their colonial counterparts built on this idealisation of a British housekeeper and her home but in an entirely different context—an imperial one that was more exalted but also foreign and therefore more challenging. The household manuals aimed to provide practical advice on a wide range of topics, including accounting in rupees, prices for staff and goods, necessary vocabulary for daily household management (“kitchen Hindustani”), and tips on managing servants. Essentially, these guides aimed to help memsahibs ‘keep Britain alive in the midst of India’ (MacMillan 2018, Introduction).

In this paper, keeping in mind a feasible scope, I consider a single text, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (subtitle: *Giving the Duties of Mistress and Servants, the General Management of the House, and Practical Recipes for Cooking in all its Branches*) published in 1888 by Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner. Like most of their readers, both authors, Grace Gardiner and Flora Annie Steel⁴, were wives of officers in the Indian Civil Service (ICS), who had come to India in their early twenties. By the time this manual was published both had lived in India for over two decades (Steel & Gardiner 2011, ix) and had acquired information they considered useful to pass on to newer arrivals. The opening page of the second edition of the book advertises their experience by noting that the authors are both ‘two twenty years’ residents’ (Steel & Gardiner 2010, Frontmatter). Steel who had the more prominent role in the actual writing of the book (Steel & Gardiner 2011, ix) was already a best-selling writer of fiction.⁵

A second edition of the book was acquired digitally via Humboldt University’s institutional access to online resources. The first edition, now unavailable, was likely self-published in India (1888) before being published again in Edinburgh Scotland in 1890 (*ibid.*, xxviii). After going through several household manuals and cookbooks both online and via the library, I selected this book for its popularity as it was considered ‘the standard household manual’ (Chaudhuri & Strobel 1992, 232). This is supported by the fact that it was revised and reprinted over a dozen times between 1888 and 1917 (George 1993, 106). The book’s extensive publishing history, sets aside the possibility of self-aggrandisement and lends credibility to the claim Steel makes in her autobiography of receiving countless letters from grateful readers (Procida 2002, 87). While we cannot know if the advice in this text was followed, or the real-



life impact of its prescriptions, it can at least be said that this particular book was widely known and purchased, making it a valuable source to reflect on the kind of narratives in circulation on the domestic role of Anglo-Indian women and the broader work of empire.

The second edition of the book consists of 37 chapters on a variety of topics mostly devoted to cooking. These include chapters titled "Soups", "High-Class Entrees and Garnishes", "Game", "Hot Pudding" and "Salads". Other chapters are dedicated to the management of young children, grooming and feeding dogs, gardening, outfits, wages and the longest chapter in the book, "The Duties of Servants". In this paper, I analyse a single chapter, the first in the book called "Duties of a Mistress", as it directly addresses the role of the memsahib. I examine this eleven-page chapter to see how the prescriptions it outlines, the language it employs, and the assumptions it rests upon, reflect the expectations and role of Anglo-Indian women in the domestic and imperial spheres as well as the construction of their authority and power.

Coding and Ethical Considerations

In terms of coding, my approach was a combination of inductive and deductive coding. I first read the text to get a sense of its purpose and how it is achieved through language and rhetoric. After initially coding the data and conceptualising overarching themes and categories, I chose to focus on the foundation and manifestation of the memsahib's authority. Subsequent coding was deductive and based on both my research question and an understanding of the socio-political context.

A few methodological caveats and ethical considerations came up during the process. The first concerned over-extending the manual as a historical document and extrapolating generalisations about how a memsahib ran her house or interacted with her domestic service akin to 'using Vogue to reconstruct the lifestyle of the "typical" modern family' (Higgs 1983, 203). Another major ethical concern raised by scholars working with these texts has been the potential of contributing to the 'glamorisation of imperialism' or validating 'neo-colonial nostalgia for an era when European women in brisk white shirts and safari green supposedly found freedom in empire' (McClintock 1992, 93) Conversely, given the inherent exploitation, racism and power differentials within the memsahib-colonial subject relationship—particularly concerning her domestic workers—the analysis must be vigilant to avoid further stereotyping of the audience of the manual.

Lastly, it was also necessary to keep in mind that this was a book written for profit and renown. Consequently, the depictions and representations it contains are inherently intertwined with it making a case



for its own relevance or necessity. Taking that into account, what follows is an examination of the language (there are no images in the text) and the context in which the text was written while analysing how it constructs the authority of the memsahib and how that authority is linked to British imperial rule.

Findings and analysis

This section outlines the findings based on the research question and an analysis of the data. In each, section I outline and discuss a central finding covering themes and language. It is important to note that here the word "Mistress" refers to the Anglo-Indian woman, or memsahib. In the text "Indians" and "Indian servants" are used interchangeably as the Indians the British housewives mostly encountered were those who worked as their domestic servants. The generic term "servants" is used frequently but refers to a range of different positions, such as sweeper, cook, gardener, bearer, valet and maid. As outlined later, in another chapter called "Duties of the Servants" (Steel & Gardiner 2010, 31), most positions are held by men except for the housemaid and the nurse. The chapter also includes advice on salaries, details about responsibilities associated with these roles as well as the class, caste and religion of those who perform them.

99

The home as district: Rules and order

Descriptions of the role of the British mistress in her home are replete with the language of administration and governance with considerable focus on the establishment of rules and the maintenance of order. The home itself is referred to as her 'domain' and a 'unit of civilisation' (ibid., 4; 7) in which she doesn't do the work but ensures the work gets done. To that end, the 'first duty of a mistress is, of course, to be able to give intelligible orders to her servants' (ibid., 2). Her role is to set up and oversee a system that ensures 'smooth working, quick ordering, and subsequent peace and leisure to the mistress' (ibid., 10).

The role of the mistress is then defined as setting the rules and overseeing the management of the house. Prescriptions to ensure rules are enforced and standards are met are also expressed in the language of governance. The mistress is told she should establish 'laws of the household' and go on 'regular inspection' or an 'inspection parade'. Rules are to be 'enforced' and she must 'insist on her orders being carried out'. When rules are contravened, a 'system of rewards and punishments' ensures order is restored. (ibid., 2-5; 10).

The text also outlines permissible punishments in what reads like a



domestic penal code. As docking pay is illegal and 'few, if any, [servants] have any sense of shame' the authors recommend she 'make a hold' by employing staff at 'the lowest rate at which such servant is obtainable – and so much extra as bakshish, conditional on good service' (ibid., 3). To discourage certain behaviours 'small fines are levied' from the wages 'beginning with one pice for forgetfulness, and running up, through degrees of culpability, to one rupee for lying' (ibid.). Fines collected can later be used as rewards 'so that each servant knows that by good service he can get back his own fines' (ibid.). The authors add that no servant has ever known to take objection or quit because of such a system but rather the 'household quite enters into the spirit of the idea, infinitely preferring it to volcanic eruptions of faulting' (ibid.). Without this systematic approach of the mistress, which includes regular inspections and a framework of rewards and penalties, the authors suggest the house would descend into disorder.

In the text, disorder and disobedience manifest primarily in the form of dirtiness, dishonesty, laziness, and incompetence. To minimise these requires oversight and other "devices" adding a judicial dimension to the executive and legislative roles described above. For example, the text suggests a 'good plan for securing a certain amount of truthfulness in a servant is to insist that anyone who has been caught out in a distinct falsehood should invariably bring witnesses to prove the truth of the smallest detail' (ibid., 4). Despite the earlier reference to an absence of shame in the servant, this recommendation is followed by the observation that such domestic court proceedings tend not to occur, as the servant accused of dishonesty, finds producing a witness 'a great disgrace and worry' and instead requests 'to be given another chance after a few days' (ibid.).

The primary role of the mistress is then, not to do the housekeeping, but to ensure the correct mechanisms are in place so that the house gets kept. The authors are essentially telling the mistress what to tell the servants to do and how to ensure it gets done. This administrative style, as noted by Procida, extended to the rest of the country:

The central paradox of Anglo-Indian life, as indeed of the Raj itself, was the crucial mechanism for running both home and empire were entrusted to Indians with the British relegated to the role of symbolic, if authoritative, presence. (Procida 2002, 82)

Parallels exist not only between the management of Anglo-Indian households and the operation of imperial structures but also in a shared underlying justification for the authority exercised over colonial subjects in both contexts—the beneficial inculcation of English values: 'There is no reason whatever why the ordinary European routine should not be



observed; indeed the more everything is assimilated to English ways, the better and more economical will be the result' (ibid., 7). Moreover, the text makes clear that the mistress must be a role model and that the proper functioning of her house depends on her conduct and values, 'A good mistress in India will try to set a good example to her servants in routine, method and tidiness' (Steel & Gardiner 2010, 5-6).

Setting a good example or instilling values is however, represented as challenging, 'It should never be forgotten that—although it is most true in India—if you want a thing done, you should do it yourself; still, having to do it is a distinct confession of a failure in your original intention' (ibid., 6). The passage emphasises the indispensable supervisory role of the mistress but also implies her inherent superiority and the ineptitude of the colonial subject. What is implicit in these lines is made explicit elsewhere in the text. As the next section will show, if the mistress' domain is the home then "servants" are the subjects over whom she exercises authority and how they are characterised serves to legitimise her control over them.

Legitimising Authority

An analysis of Steel and Gardiner's text presents a paradox regarding the relationship between the mistress and her servants. The text opens with the assertion that housekeeping in India is a 'far easier task in many ways than it is in England' (ibid., 1), alluding to the fact that most readers of this text likely had access to an extensive workforce of cooks, attendants, gardeners, waiters, and so on making the management of their households comparatively effortless to running a household in England (Procida 2002, 83). However, this initial portrayal of ease is countered on the following page when the authors note that 'the personal attention of the mistress is infinitely more needed here than at home' (Steel & Gardiner 2010, 2).

The contradiction between these two statements highlights the paradox of the simultaneous dependency on, and authority over, Indian servants in the Anglo-Indian household. This dependency is masked by legitimising the authority of the mistress in presenting her as the linchpin to maintaining order and cleanliness. The text also naturalises the subservient role of the servants by depicting them as inherently unreliable, dirty, lazy, and dishonest making the ever-watchful eye of the mistress 'infinitely' more essential. The passage below is one of several instances in the text that suggests that "unless" the mistress supervises nothing will function,

Unlike in England, where 'once the machine is well oiled and set in motion, the mistress may rely on fairly even and regular working;



FORUM

here, a few days of absence, or neglect to keep her eyes open, and she will find the servants fall into their old habits with the inherited conservatism of dirt'. (ibid.)

While Steel and Gardiner's text prescribes that an Anglo-Indian home should, and can, be kept as a home in England (ibid., 5) they continually depict the servants as a challenge rather than a facilitator in achieving this ideal. This not only reinforces the indispensability of the British mistress but also underscores the perceived superiority of English values compared to the native predisposition to dirt, disorder, and backwardness or the Indian way of doing things. This contrast becomes evident in passages that attribute 'half the faults of native servants' to 'a lack of thought and method' and stress the commonality of certain problems 'a very constant occurrence at Indian tables—the serving up of stale, sour and unwholesome food', all of which can be avoided if the mistress oversees the household (ibid., 10).

If some tasks must be delegated, albeit with exasperation, others tasks, like keeping accounts or tabs on kitchen supplies she better do herself 'for it is *absolutely impossible* for the khansamah⁶ to give a true account of the consumption of these things daily.' Despite constant references to obduracy or ineptitude, the authors reject the idea 'that it is no use attempting to teach the natives.' Instead, they once again affirm the importance and even virtuous role of the mistress in dealing with her servants, suggesting 'phenomenal patience' strict unbending rules and a 'few generations of training shall have started the Indian servant on a new inheritance of habit' (ibid., 1-2; 5-6).

The memsahib's authority finds further legitimacy through the representation of the servants as children. In addition to inclinations toward 'deceit' and 'slovenliness' (ibid., 1; 9) the domestic staff is on several occasions compared to children who receive instruction, punishment, and discipline.

Certainly, there is at present very little to which we can appeal in the average Indian servant, but then, until it is implanted by training, there is very little sense of duty in a child; yet in some well-regulated nurseries obedience is a foregone conclusion. The secret lies in making rules, and keeping to them. The Indian servant is a child in everything save age, and should be treated as a child; that is to say, kindly, but with the greatest firmness. The laws of the household should be those of the Medes and Persians, and first faults should never go unpunished. By overlooking a first offence, we lose the only opportunity we have of preventing it becoming a habit. (ibid., 3)

Even conscientious disobedience or resistance is dismissed as mere mischief instead of being recognised as a form of protest, 'Indian servants



are like children gaining a certain satisfaction in the idea that at any rate they have been *troublesome*' (ibid., 10). In a section on tried and tested forms of punishments the authors write,

To show what absolute children Indian servants are, the same author has for years adopted castor oil as an ultimatum in all obstinate cases, on the ground that there must be some physical cause for inability to learn or to remember. (ibid., 4)

Infantilising representations of Indian servants alongside the desirability and pre-eminence of English values naturalises the authority of the memsahib. The next section looks at how this dynamic is reinforced by the distinctive language used in the text when addressing its English readers and when referring to their Indian servants.

Language of difference and hierarchy

There are two levels of language in the text that are characterised by differences in diction, humour, figures of speech, and tone. On one level, the authors address their readers with a sense of camaraderie and a shared culture register which is all the more pronounced when referring to the challenges of dealing with Indian servants and the Indian way of things. From textual clues, it can be inferred that their readers are presumably well-read, educated, or, at the very least, receptive to being addressed in such a manner. The language and tone the authors use to address their readers are sympathetic, authoritative, and occasionally witty. When addressing their readers, they use both the third person singular (her, a mistress, ladies in India) and the first-person plural (we), which together create an authoritative yet familiar tone.

The text implicitly sympathises with the problems a mistress would face and often explicitly acknowledges her emotions in dealing with them (e.g., "sinking heart" expecting disarray before she begins the daily inspection of the pantry, scullery, and kitchen). This language and tone stand in contrast to the authors' references to the servants as "natives and Indian servant(s)" or in the third person plural (they, their). This in-group out-group language is particularly pronounced in rhetorical questions the authors pose, 'How are we to punish our servants when we have no hold either on their minds or bodies?' (ibid., 3). In addition to explicitly articulating the gap between the servant and the mistress, the language choices in the text create, and reflect, a dynamic between the strange and the familiar as illustrated in recommendations on acquiring and retaining a servant.

The best plan is to catch your servants young, promoting them to more experienced wages on the bakshish theory above-mentioned.



They generally learn fast enough if it is made worth their while in this way. On the other hand, it is, as a rule, a mistake to keep servants too long in India. Officials should be especially careful on this point, as the Oriental mind connects a confidential servant with corruption. (ibid., 10)

Throughout the text, the authors foster a sense of trust between themselves and their readers while simultaneously portraying the servants as untrustworthy, primarily driven by material incentives rather than moral or ethical considerations. While this might represent a conscious strategy by the writers to endear themselves to their readers, it also certainly represents the logic that underpinned the dynamic of dominance and subordination at the heart of the relationship with the mistress and her Indian staff.

The hierarchy established in the household mirrors the hierarchical structure of the Raj. Procida notes, 'Imperialism is inherently an elitist and exclusive form of government, with its clear theoretical distinctions between the privileged minority of the ruling elite and the vast majority of the disempowered imperial subjects' (Procida 2002, 7). In the household manual, the positions of authority and subordination are naturalised through language and practice, rendering the Anglo-Indian home a microcosm of the broader structures of the empire and a conscious part of the imperial "civilising" ideology in India. While we cannot definitively ascertain the extent to which the readers of this text were aware of this participation, the authors themselves certainly recognised and conveyed this aspect. Toward the end of their opening chapter, they write, 'We do not wish to advocate an unholy haughtiness; but an Indian household can no more be governed peacefully, without dignity and prestige, than an Indian Empire' (Steel & Gardiner 2010, 11).

Running a household might be presented in such exalted terms but ultimately any power it confers is also constrained by the expected gender roles of the time, which primarily confined women to the domestic sphere, even as they were encouraged to see their responsibilities as crucial contributions to the imperial mission. While this contradiction is not explicitly addressed in the text, it is implied in the authors' attempts to reconcile a woman's sense of agency and power in the household with the notion that the household and her running of it is nevertheless her duty.

Female authority and gender roles

Steel and Gardiner (2010) take care to address their readers as modern and educated women emphasising that running a household is no mean task but an important one that requires skill and intelligence. Managing



a house is therefore depicted as an exalted endeavour with memsahibs represented as engaged in 'pioneering' by taking on the 'arduous', even 'disheartening' task of training and managing Indian servants. The authors elevate the task of keeping a house, framing it as 'not merely personal comfort, but the formation of a home – that unit of civilisation where father and children, master and servant, employer and employed, can learn their several duties'. 'Proper administration' in the home is considered an 'art', 'the natural outlet for most talents peculiar to women' and requiring 'both brain and heart.' Moreover, the authors suggest that the significance of the woman's role as the mistress of a house extends beyond the domestic sphere: 'The mistress of a house has it in her power to make debts, as to prevent them; for she, and she only, has the power of preventing that extravagance in small things, which is but the prelude to a like recklessness in greater matters' (ibid., 7-8).

While acknowledging the importance of the mistress's role in maintaining the household, Steel and Gardiner also recognise her aspirations beyond domestic activities. They assert, 'It is not necessary, or in the least degree desirable, that an educated woman should waste the best years of her life in scolding and petty supervision.' Indeed, the book positions itself as a manual on minimising the time women need to devote to household management suggesting that, 'half an hour after breakfast should be sufficient for the whole arrangements for the day.' If work doesn't get done, or doesn't get done well the authors caution against the Mistress taking on the task herself which is seen as a 'defeat' with 'the result being that the lives of educated women are wasted in doing the work of lazy servants.' Instead, they advise, 'If the one you have will not or cannot do it, get another who can' (ibid., 1; 6).

Steel and Gardiner attempt to harmonise the roles of a woman as mistress of the house, duty-bound to fulfil certain domestic functions, with the aspirations of an "educated woman" seeking to engage her intellect. Nowhere in the text is this attempt more apparent than in the following assertion:

Like George Eliot, the greatest of modern women, prides herself on being an excellent housekeeper; and – as was written of that charming author – '*nothing offends her more than the idea that her exceptional intellectual powers should absolve her from ordinary household duties*'. (ibid., 8)

The authors frequently appeal to the intelligence of their readers using direct language with words such as "clever", "intellect", "brain", and "intelligence" but also through biblical, literary, and idiomatic allusions. If the reference to George Eliot reinforced the virtues of domesticity



another reference, this time a Biblical one, warns against overdoing it.

The authors caution against indifference to household duties and being a 'careworn Martha vexed with many things' (ibid., 1). Here Martha is a character from the New Testament (Luke 10:38-42), who is overly zealous about housework while her sister Mary listens to Jesus. The phrase "Whited sepulchre" another biblical metaphor is used to describe someone who is outwardly beautiful but unclean or corrupt on the inside. In the text, it is used to describe servants whose clean white uniforms in the winter 'conceals warm clothes which have been slept in for months' (ibid., 7). Through these references, Steel and Gardiner not only appeal to their reader's minds but also suggest that intelligence is not squandered on domestic affairs. Instead it can be applied to them and, if done effectively, can then be directed elsewhere.

Despite attempts to reconcile women's roles in the domestic sphere with other ambitions, the text contains several inconsistencies. The supervisory role of the mistress is referred to as "petty" in one instance but is described in grander terms elsewhere. Another inconsistency concerns the reasons why a mistress should limit the amount of housework she does herself revealing a tension between agency or self-interest and duty. On the one hand, the mistress is told to minimise her involvement in domestic work in order to secure time for "higher duties" and "leisure". On the other hand, she is advised to avoid doing anything herself (even though she would do it best) for pedagogical purposes⁷—the only way of teaching is to see things done, not to let others see you do them (ibid., 11). These contradictions could stem from the author's attempt to simultaneously flatter, sympathise, and reassure their readers by acknowledging the importance of the mistress's role and its challenges, while also encouragingly noting that the goal is to do less work. The message seems to be: It takes a lot of work to do little.

The inconsistencies in the text also reflect the complex and contradictory nature of women's roles and authority. One key contradiction lies within the household itself, where the mistress's position as a manager and the authority she wields is predicated on the incompetence and unreliability of her servants. This creates the impression that the smooth functioning of the household depends on "her" presence and intelligence which not only masks the extent of her dependency on the servants but inverts it. This dissonance between power and dependency is also apparent when considering that, while the mistress does possess a degree of authority through her marriage, her gender places limitations on this power within the overarching patriarchal and imperialist framework and makes her position dependent on her husband's. This is exemplified in the text's reiteration of her position as wife and mother: 'A good mistress



will remember the breadwinner who requires blood-forming nourishment, and the children whose constitutions are being built up day by day' (ibid., 10).

Conclusion

This paper began by highlighting the relatively small number of Britons in India during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, especially when compared to India's vast population of around 300 million. This disparity reflects a significant aspect of British colonial governance: a hierarchical structure justified by the idea that British presence was indispensable for maintaining order and imparting civilisation in India even though 'the daily tasks that facilitated British imperialism in India were carried out by Indians' (Procida 2002, 83).

An analysis of the text, "Duties of a Mistress" in *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* by Flora Steel and Grace Gardiner, reveals that this structure, and its corresponding rationale, also manifests in prescriptions on how an English woman in India should manage her house. The Anglo-Indian home, the mistress's domain, is presented as a component or unit in the larger imperial administration requiring laws, a system of justice, mechanisms of enforcement, and accounting as if spanning all three areas of government within the microcosm of the house.

If the household is a unit of administration, the text underscores the crucial role of the mistress as an indispensable and propitious administrator. Her oversight, leadership, and interventions are presented as preventing Indian servants from "reverting" to dishonest, lazy, and unclean behaviour. This role is depicted as beneficial, but also as challenging and hence somewhat heroic, given the entrenched habits and predispositions of the servants. Fulfilling the duties of a mistress is seen as requiring fortitude, reflecting a corollary concept of the civilising mission – the 'white man's burden' (Kipling Society, n.d.). This perspective adds further meaning to the opening chapter's title, "Duty of a Mistress", suggesting that her duty extends not only to her family and British imperialism but also to colonial subjects who benefit from learning English values.

In so doing, the text validates the mistress's position of power and inverts the position of dependency in the servant-master relationship. While contradictions and inconsistencies in the text indicate tensions within the model of household management, the language and representations employed in the manual ultimately serve to legitimise an unequal power dynamic and mask the self-interest at the core of the civilising mission, whether in governing a district or managing a home.



This narrative, where self-interest is conflated with sacrifice, finds eloquent expression in the words of a German officer as quoted in another popular guide for English women in India,

What would India be without England, and what would the British Empire be without English women? To these women are due gratitude not only of their country but of the civilised world. Fearlessly the woman of British birth looks in the eye of danger. Faithfully and with willing sacrifice she upholds the standard of the King-Emperor – the standard of culture and of service to humanity. (Count von Königsmarck, *Die Engländer in Indien*, quoted in Diver 1909, Frontmatter)

While this research paper has examined linguistic and conceptual constructs in the text and related them to the socio-political context of imperialism to understand the position of the mistress in an Anglo-Indian household and women in the Raj, it is limited in several ways. The limited data sample and scope of this paper mean it cannot definitively speak to how representative or widespread such narratives were or their impact on lived reality. Further, the dearth of official and written records of women in the Raj means that other dissenting or alternative perspectives are not represented, potentially resulting in a skewed portrayal of the mistress or a false confirmation of existing historical paradigms.

108

Future research could broaden our understanding by examining other household manuals as well as written works produced by Anglo-Indian women in different genres. Comparing these to equivalent literature addressed to English readers in England might also shed light on the specific way the politics of domesticity operated in the colonial context. Additionally, exploring household manuals as part of the administrative literature associated with colonial bureaucracy might reveal how domestic norms were influenced by, or contributed to, broader imperial ideologies. Finally, recovering the histories of the domestic workers so anonymised in these texts would provide valuable insights into their roles in colonial India. It would also elucidate the intersections of imperial ideologies, race, and gender norms and how they played out or were perpetuated, in the domestic sphere, as well as their legacy in shaping domestic worker-employee relations in India today.

Endnotes

¹ Anglo-Indian today refers to Indians of mixed Indian and British descent. In the nineteenth century they were called Eurasians and British people living in India were called Anglo-Indians. In this paper I use the term Anglo-Indian in its original connotation.

² It has also been translated as “Madame boss” (George 1993, 107); Chaudhuri and Strobel explain, ‘The term memsahibs was used originally to show respect for a European married woman in the Bengal Presidency, the first portion denoting ‘ma’am’; over the years the usage spread throughout



the British colonies in Southeast Asia and Africa' (Chaudhuri & Strobel 1992, 242-243).

³ Thomas R. Metcalf outlines an overall disillusionment and shift toward pessimism, authoritarianism and conservatism in Post-Rebellion India. The enthusiasm for reform gives way to the exigency of stable rule exercised with the assistance of India's traditionally powerful and conservative landed class. See Metcalf (1960).

⁴ See also Roye (2017).

⁵ Steel was the author of several collections of short stories and novels. See Steel & Temple (1884).

⁶ Khansamah, which literally means "master of the household gear" (MacMillan 2018, Chap. 9), is defined in the fourth chapter of the manual as the word used in Bengal for the 'housekeeper and head waiter' with the following blanket caveat: 'It is not advisable, however, to make him responsible for the food. A useless servant' (Steel & Gardiner 2010, 31).

⁷ Another reason for not doing housework is provided by Margaret MacMillan in *Women of the Raj* but finds no indication in this text analysed in this paper: 'While the memsahib was not actually expected to do anything around the house herself – indeed the servants were embarrassed and annoyed if she did – she was expected to keep an eye on everything' (MacMillan 2018).

Bibliography

BBC Radio 4. n.d. "Lord Curzon: Goodbye to all that."

https://www.bbc.co.uk/radio4/history/empire/episodes/episode_76.shtml [Accessed 29 July 2004].

Boardman, Kay. 2000. "The ideology of domesticity: The regulation of the household economy in Victorian women's magazines." *Victorian Periodicals Review* 33 (2): 150-164.

Chaudhuri, Nupur & Margaret Strobel, eds. 1992. *Western women and imperialism: Complicity and resistance*. Bloomington and Indianapolis: Indiana University Press.

Diver, Maud. 1909. *The Englishwoman in India*. Edinburgh & London: W. Blackwood and Sons.

George, Rosemary Marangoly. 1993. "Homes in the Empire, empires in the home." *Cultural Critique* 26: 95-127.

Gilmour, David. 2006. *The ruling caste: Imperial lives in the Victorian Raj*. Electronic publication edition. Straus and Giroux.

Higgs, Edward. 1983. "Domestic servants and households in Victorian England." *Social History* 8 (2): 201-210.

Keay, John. 2001. *A history of India*. London & New Delhi: Harper Collins.

Kipling, Rudyard. 1899. "The white man's burden." *The Kipling Society*. https://www.kiplingsociety.co.uk/poem/poems_burden.htm [Accessed 29 July 2024].

MacMillan, Margaret. 2018. *Women of the Raj: The mothers, wives and daughters of the British Empire in India*. London: Thames & Hudson.



- Mann, Michael. 2004. "Torchbearers upon the path of progress: Britain's ideology of 'moral and material progress' in India." In *Colonialism as civilising mission: Cultural ideology in British India*, edited by Harald Fischer-Tiné & Michael Mann, 1-20. London: Anthem.
- McClintock, Anne. 1992. "The angel of progress: Pitfalls of the term 'post-colonialism'." *Social Text* 31/32: 84-98.
- Metcalf, Thomas R. 1960. "The impact of the mutiny on British attitudes to India." *Proceedings of the Indian History Congress* 23 (2): 24-31.
- Leong-Salobir, Cecilia Y. 2015. "Spreading the word: Using cookbooks and colonial memoirs to examine the foodways of British colonials in Asia, 1850-1900." In *The Routledge history of food*, edited by Carol Helstosky, 131-155. London: Routledge.
- Procida, Mary A. 2002. *Married to the Empire: Gender, politics, and imperialism in India, 1883-1947*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
- Roye, Susmita, ed. 2017. *Flora Annie Steel: A critical study of an unconventional memsahib*. New York: University of Alberta Press.
- Sealey, Alison. 2020. "Introduction to discourse: Definitions, debates, and decisions." In *Researching discourse: A student guide*, edited by Christopher Hart. London: Routledge.
- Sen, Indrani, ed. 2008. *Memsahibs' writings: Colonial narratives on Indian women*. Hyderabad: Orient Longman.
- Steel, Flora Annie Webster & Grace Gardiner. 2011. *The complete Indian housekeeper and cook* (Edited by Ralph Crane & Anna Johnston). Oxford: Oxford University Press.
- _____. 2010. *The complete Indian housekeeper and cook: Giving the duties of mistress and servants, the general management of the house and practical recipes for cooking in all its branches*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.
- Steel, Flora Annie Webster & Richard Carnac Temple. 1884. *Wide awake stories: A collection of tales told by little children between sunset and sunrise in the Punjab and Kashmir*. With an essay by R. R. Clark.
- Zlotnick, Susan. 1996. "Domesticating imperialism: Curry and cook-books in Victorian England." *Frontiers: A Journal of Women Studies* 16 (2/3): 51-68.