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# “Going Nautch Girl” in the *Fin de Siècle*: The White Woman Burdened by Colonial Domesticity

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IN THEIR INTRODUCTION to *The Fin de Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History c. 1880–1900*, Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst aptly summarize the turn of the century in England as a “time fraught both with anxiety and an exhilarating sense of possibility”<sup>1</sup>—a time when the British had mixed feelings about almost every aspect of their life, including their encounters with the nonwhite races of the world. Despite a growing awareness of the duality marking this transitional period, current scholarship (beginning with Patrick Brantlinger’s seminal discussion of the “Imperial Gothic” in *Rule of Darkness* to subsequent works by Nils Claesson, Kelly Hurley, Nicholas Daly, William Hughes, and Andrew Smith<sup>2</sup>) continues to project a one-sided view of the British-foreign encounter, upholding Joseph Conrad’s *Heart of Darkness* as the archetypal imperial romance about the “anxiety” of cultural and racial degeneration at the turn of the century. Missing from such scholarship is a more promising understanding of the idea of “going native,” the idea that intimate contact with alternative cultures and ways of being could perhaps free the British subject from the constraints of society, or the idea that by taking on the appearance, life, habits or customs of a non-European race, British men or women might just advance rather than regress.

Although understudied in current scholarship on the *fin de siècle*, many Anglo-Indian women who wrote imperial romances in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods engage with this very possibility. More specifically, a cluster of Anglo-Indian novels written between the 1890s and 1920s by female writers introduce Memsahibs (the wives or daughters of high-ranking civil servants and officers in colonial India) who contemplate the idea of turning courtesan and of subsequently escaping their domestic and imperial obligations, obligations

that seem to thwart rather than foster their aspirations for female independence. As Thomas Metcalf aptly suggests, "the English woman, within the private sphere she presided over, bore the unenviable responsibility—what one may call the 'white woman's burden'<sup>3</sup>—of both representing the virtues of domesticity and extending the authority of the Raj."<sup>4</sup> Seeking freedom from this "unenviable" burden to cultivate and guard English civilization in British India, Englishwomen in these novels entertain the prospect of "going native," or more precisely of "going nautch girl"—of imaginatively or literally adopting the appearance, dress, food, activities, or living space of the relatively more "free and happy" Indian dancing girl or courtesan.

### **The "Free and Happy" Nautch Girl: An Indian Model of Female Independence**

In contrast to the domestically burdened Memsahib, the public Indian dancing girl or courtesan (commonly dubbed the "nautch girl" by the British<sup>5</sup>) seemed to enjoy a relatively autonomous lifestyle—an observation disseminated through a large body of nineteenth-century fiction and nonfiction. Writing in the 1890s, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky, for example, asserts that out of the women in India "Only the nachnis ... can be said to be free and happy and live respected by others."<sup>6</sup> The *Indian Messenger* even reported that dancing girls "moved 'more freely in native society than public women in civilized countries are even allowed to do' and that they were treated with greater 'attention and respect' than married women."<sup>7</sup> As partial and constructed as some of these descriptions may have been, the general consensus among the British in the nineteenth century was that the nautch girl possessed a higher degree of freedom than married women, Indian or British.

Confirming this observation in her widely cited study, Veena Talwar Oldenburg records the "self-perceptions" of the Muslim courtesans of Lucknow (formally known as tawaifs), who view themselves "as powerful, independent, even subversive women."<sup>8</sup> Oldenburg classifies these female performers as a matricentric community who establish a counterculture to patriarchy—a "lifestyle as resistance"<sup>9</sup>—characterized by financial, political, and physical independence. Indeed, the day-to-day activities of influential nineteenth-century courtesans such as those of Lucknow extended far beyond their sexual exploits and their rigorous training in classical dance and singing. A tawaif's education in Indian literature, arts and politics enabled her to converse intellectually with her male clients as well as showcase her skills in composing

and reciting poetry.<sup>10</sup> A courtesan's affiliation with men of political import, in turn, gave her intimate knowledge of the court system and its politics,<sup>11</sup> as in the case of Lalun from Rudyard Kipling's "On the City Wall" (1888) who "knows everything,"<sup>12</sup> from the daily gossip of the city to the "secrets of Government offices."<sup>13</sup> Even though, as single women, Muslim courtesans were exempted from domestic roles, they often pursued a sexual relationship with a lover of their choice while remaining "free from stigma"<sup>14</sup>—especially within a society that indentified them as cultured and reputable artists rather than prostitutes. More important, because of their widespread popularity, these professional entertainers and courtesans accrued ample wealth and property, living a luxurious lifestyle marked by economic independence. Writing in 1837, Emma Roberts describes the profession of these performers as lucrative: "Many of the nautch girls are extremely rich, those most in esteem being very highly paid for their performances: the celebrated Calcutta heroine [Nickee] ... receives 1000 rupees (£100) nightly,<sup>15</sup> whenever she is engaged."<sup>16</sup> Thus, by securing an education in literature and the arts, a generous income, the rights to property, and even the pleasures of nonmarital sexuality, the nautch girl became an anomalous Indian woman who lived more freely and happily than the white woman sequestered in her Anglo-Indian bungalow.

### **Burdened Memsahibs "Going Nautch Girl" in the *Fin de Siècle***

It is not surprising that this apparently autonomous lifestyle attracted those Englishwomen in India who felt constrained by their domesticity and who hence craved a similar existence. After all, unlike the nondomestic and nonmarital lifestyle of the tawaif, the (racial) empowerment of the Anglo-Indian female in the colony was contingent on epitomizing and performing the very role—the Angel in the House—that was the source of her confinement.<sup>17</sup> In other words, British women in India negotiated for "domestic power within a discourse that reproduce[d] their subordination,"<sup>18</sup> working "within a finite range of gender roles that constitute[d] the cultural norm."<sup>19</sup>

Married in 1867 to a member of the Indian Civil Service, living in India for twenty-two years, Flora Annie Steel is the archetypal Memsahib who exemplifies the white woman's paradoxical search for a position of authority in the manly work of empire and her accompanying confinement deeper and deeper into the womanly sphere of the home. That is, women like Steel claimed their gender-specific role in the civilizing mission of India only by "enact[ing] within the bungalow a role similar

to the one her husband played outside."<sup>20</sup> Accordingly, in her domestic guidebook *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (1888) Steel celebrates housework as a valuable national contribution by drawing an analogy between effective housekeeping and effective imperial rule: "an Indian household," she asserts, "can no more be governed peacefully, without dignity and prestige, than an Indian empire."<sup>21</sup> Recycling the iconic image of the domestic angel to meet imperial ends, Anglo-Indian housewives like Steel thus upheld the colonial bungalow as a site for female empowerment in British India.

On first glance, then, having written extensively on housekeeping in India, Steel appears to be a faithful advocate of colonial domesticity. However, her fictions betray a sense of dissatisfaction toward this imperial homemaking by presenting unhappy domestic women who, constrained by their roles as housewives, are drawn to their female antithesis: the nondomestic, emancipated nautch girl. Leading among these novels is *Voices in the Night: A Chromatic Fantasia* (1900), which features a Memsahib, Grace Arbuthnot, who "came, to begin with, of an Anglo-Indian family which had written its name large on the annals of Empire," and as "an only daughter, she had kept house for her father, the Lieutenant Governor of his time."<sup>22</sup> Now married to Lieutenant-Governor George Arbuthnot, residing in the fictional city of Nushapore, Grace fails to meet the expectations set out for a standard colonial housewife and instead undergoes fits of self-pity as a wife and mother who is still in love with her ex-fiancé and son's biological father, Jack Raymond. Priya Pal-Lapinski in her analysis of the novel suggests that Grace, due to her discontentment with her present life, holds "a strange connection or affinity with the courtesans or dancing girls in the bazaar; an affinity that interrupts her regulated life as imperial wife and mother."<sup>23</sup> Indeed, she conveys a subtle attraction to public women like the local tawaif, Dilaram, who possesses a fiercely independent personality, asserting that "We of the Bazaar lead the world by the nose."<sup>24</sup> Craving a similar emancipation and authority, Grace is particularly susceptible to the pull of the tawaif's rebellious lifestyle in the city, which first attracts her when the immaterial and seductive music of the bazaar reaches her precariously fortified bungalow and awakens feared but also invited desires: "Like the quickened throb of a heart [the sound of the drum comes] faintly, indefinitely, from the distance and darkness of the city," and Grace immediately "picture[s] for herself the environment whence it rose." At the centre of it all is "the shrilling voice or posturing figure of a woman"<sup>25</sup>—the figure of a

dancing courtesan. The resonating sound of the drums and the accompanying image of a “posturing figure” unsettle Grace’s veneer of civilized restraint, “rousing a perfect passion of reckless unrest in her own [heart],” threatening to unleash her deepest desires: “This time it was a fear of her own self that came to Grace Arbuthnot as she listened—a fear of her own sex.”<sup>26</sup>

While Grace can only imagine the liberating experience of dancing in the expansive bazaar, the Begum (or Indian princess) Sobrai in Steel’s novel literally “goes nautch girl,” preferring to live as a courtesan like Dilaram in the depths of the city rather than as a princess in a palace. Realizing that she “could not remain ... within four walls all her life,” Sobrai “make[s] her push for freedom”<sup>27</sup> and, in a crucial scene in the novel, relishes her first taste of independence: with “a sudden dare-devil delight” and a “gleam of pure mischief,” she boldly sings and dances in the bazaar before a male audience, experiencing “the only bit of fun she had had in a fort-night’s freedom.”<sup>28</sup> By introducing the character of Begum Sobrai, Steel aligns the imperial housewife with the zenana woman in her novel since both (although to differing degrees) feel stifled by their dictated domestic roles and fantasize about being a nondomestic and liberated dancing girl. As Pal-Lapinski argues, when Grace catches sight of the Begum dancing in the boundless bazaar, “Sobrai’s revolutionary exhibitionism intensifies and actualizes the allure of the unsanitized space, providing a momentary glimpse of an unregulated female body drawing its energy from the ‘contamination’ of the overcrowded bazaar.”<sup>29</sup>

In her earlier and more widely read mutiny novel, *On the Face of the Waters* (1897), Steel introduces another unhappy Memsahib who is momentarily released from the constraints of domesticity through her physical connection to a nautch girl. Married to an unfaithful and unloving husband, widowed during the turmoil of the 1857 revolt, Kate assumes the disguise of a tawaif and lives incognito on a rooftop, a *kotha*, for much of the narrative. With the help of her love interest, Jim Douglas, she adorns herself in the full attire of a deceased nautch girl, Zora, and even dyes her hair and darkens her skin colour to resemble a native race. Rather than fear or repulsion, she experiences a strange “thrill” and exhilaration from her bodily likeness to a dancing girl: “Everything amuses me, interests me. It is so quaint, so new. Even this dress; it is hardly credible, but I wished so much for a looking-glass just now, to see how I looked in it.”<sup>30</sup> Current scholarship on the novel concentrates on the eventual demise of Indian female characters, who

are expunged from the narrative so that Kate can assume her "natural" role as wife to Jim Douglas.<sup>31</sup> However, these readings fail to recognize that Kate's momentary release from her domestic identity, a time in the narrative when she feels most free and empowered, materializes only because of her temporary transformation into an Indian courtesan. That is, Kate's survival and happiness in the nondomestic space of the bazaar is contingent on "going nautch girl."

Steel was perhaps the first but not the only *fin-de-siècle* writer to experiment with the idea of Memsahibs-turning-nautch-girl in her novels. The daughter of a colonel in the British army of Lahore, Victoria Cross (pseudonym for Annie Sophie Cory) spent much of her earlier years in India and was well acquainted with the restrictions placed on the Anglo-Indian female in the empire. During the span of her literary career, Cross continually undermined Victorian gender ideologies and is best known for her New Woman fictions—many of which seem to draw a correlation between the modern femininity of her female characters and their affinity for dancing.<sup>32</sup> In *Life of My Heart* (1905), for example, Frances, who has defied British expectations of the iconic role of a Memsahib by marrying the Muslim Hamakhan, reinforces her rebelliousness by putting on a musical entertainment for a native male audience. Not only does she sing "with the zest and glee of a native,"<sup>33</sup> but she also performs a modern dance routine that symbolizes her bold break from her duties as a colonial housewife. As Hsu-Ming Teo argues, "Women were supposed to be the bringers of civilization and the upholders of superior Western imperial standards in the colonies. There was a widespread feeling that women dancing for the 'natives' was highly unbecoming, and even potentially destabilizing of the imperial order."<sup>34</sup> Likewise, by putting her performing body on spectacle in open invitation to the native male gaze, Frances completely disregards the cult of domesticity in British India that restricts her physically to the space of the Anglo-Indian bungalow.

Married to a lieutenant-colonel of the British Indian army, and having experienced firsthand the toils of colonial domestic life, Bithia Mary Croker is another prolific writer of Anglo-Indian romances that contain fictional female characters who seek release from their domestic obligations. In many of her narratives, Memsahibs fulfill this goal by turning to the profession of dancing, drawing inspiration from nautch girls, as a viable alternative. In *The Company's Servant* (1907), for example, the female protagonist Rosita Fountaine is a New Woman figure and an aspiring dancer who lives many years in the Indian town



of Tani-Kul where she becomes acquainted with the artistry of the Indian dancing girl and comes to share an “affinity to the postures of a Temple nautch girl.”<sup>35</sup> By the end of the novel, Rosita has earned herself both fame and wealth, living luxuriously in “true Nautch-girl fashion,”<sup>36</sup> by performing her newfound talent on the world stage. In another one of her novels, *Her Own People* (1903), Croker collapses the gap between the freedom-seeking Memsahib and the relatively free nautch girl by introducing the character of the Eurasian Dominga who, although living among the Anglo-Indians, is well trained in the “poetry of motion,” possessing the “swaying, undulating grace of her renowned grandmother, the Nautch Girl.”<sup>37</sup> Residing within the domestic space of the Anglo-Indian community itself, and attracting the interest of many of her fellow Memsahibs, Dominga brings the desire to “go nautch girl” even closer to the colonial home. *The Cat’s Paw* (1902), although to a lesser extent, also represents dancing as an emancipatory act for the stifled Anglo-Indian woman; Eulalie Foneca’s spontaneous outbursts of bodily movement accompany and calm her during moments of domestic stress.<sup>38</sup> Writing later in the century, Ida Alexa Ross Wylie shares Croker’s interest in Western dancers who are rejuvenated by their encounter with Indian dance forms. In *The Hermit Doctor of Gaya* (1916), also published under the title *Tristram Sahib*, the dancer Sigrid Fersen, who suffers from a fatal illness and is spending her last days in India, undergoes a spiritual reawakening that restores her to health when she dances in the ruins of a Hindu temple as an Indian “priestess” or temple dancer.<sup>39</sup> From all these examples it is clear that various Anglo-Indian novels of the *fin de siècle* present British women who are discontented with their domestic lifestyles and thereby enticed by the thought of “going nautch girl”—of living in the bazaar, wearing the courtesan’s clothes, performing her dance, and sharing in her power.

### **From Angel in the House to Woman in the Bazaar**

Among this cluster of fiction that emerged at the turn of the century, Alice Perrin’s little-known *The Woman in the Bazaar* (1914), a novel that seems to echo the plot and reintroduce some of the motifs pervading Steel’s *Voices in the Night*, merits our close attention. “Going nautch girl” materializes in this work of fiction through the Englishwoman’s ultimate act of betrayal: her decision to flee the sequestered British bungalow, the sanctity of imperial Englishness in India, for the expansive and noncolonized space of the Indian bazaar, where the nautch girl reigns supreme.



Alice Perrin was a Mem sahib who spent many years in India, first as a daughter to a general of the Bengal army and then as a wife to a member of the Indian Public Works, and her novel *The Woman in the Bazaar* is a prime example of a Mem sahib leaving the domestic and colonized realm of the Anglo-Indian bungalow for the public, noncolonized realm of the native city. Perrin's female protagonist, Rafella Forte, is an imperial housewife who turns courtesan after a bitter divorce from a jealous husband. Over the course of the narrative, she undergoes a drastic transformation from the sheltered daughter of an English vicar to the confined wife of a British officer in India and finally to the independent courtesan of an Indian aristocrat.

When we are first introduced to Rafella at the start of the novel, she epitomizes domestic virtue as the dutiful daughter of the local vicar of an "isolated little Cotswold village" in England.<sup>40</sup> Adhering to the dominant Victorian ideology of the Angel in the House, she immediately attracts Captain George Conventry during his timely visit to his homeland, satisfying his orthodox beliefs about a woman's proper role: "His ideal of womanhood was modelled on the type represented by his mother and his aunts and his spinster sister, ladies whose sole charm lay in their personal virtue, the keynote of whose lives was duty to the home."<sup>41</sup> Having lived a sheltered life, Rafella indeed is the epitome of female virtue: "innocent, guileless, unacquainted with evil—white and unsullied in thought and experience."<sup>42</sup> In fact, this "innocent," "white," and "unsullied" Englishwoman is the perfect candidate for marriage to an Anglo-Indian like George since officers in the colonial outpost were encouraged to wed domestic angels like Rafella, particularly following the mutiny of 1857 when the desire for racial segregation intensified. Such wives, it was hoped, would nurture the much-needed cult of domesticity in the colony and deter men from succumbing to Eastern temptations (particularly sexual ones) that jeopardized the survival of the imperial race.<sup>43</sup> George, therefore, is the mouthpiece in Perrin's novel of a patriarchal imperialism that upholds "English family structures, which restricted women to the home, as a sign of national virtue and superior morals."<sup>44</sup>

Rafella first challenges George's "ideal of womanhood" when she desires greater mobility and activity in the empire. Putting her missionary background to use, she takes up the task of reforming men who are in danger of a moral and physical degeneration in the seductive and permissive environment of India:

Rafella had discovered a pleasanter method of doing good to others, that of bestowing good advice on erring young men, inviting their confidences, using her pure and virtuous influence—deluding herself<sup>45</sup> and the susceptible youths with the notion that she was their mother-confessor and friend, their safeguard against wicked temptations and wiles of the world.<sup>46</sup>

By positioning herself as a maternal advisor to men experiencing relapses in their behaviour, Rafella enacts the typical role performed by many female missionaries who entered the colonies. As Anna Johnston suggests in her work on the “coalition of imperialism, gender, and domesticity,”<sup>47</sup> evangelical discourse engendered women as innately more spiritual than men because they inhabited the private sphere—a sphere that supposedly was removed and protected from the vices permeating public spaces.<sup>48</sup> Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall arrive at a similar conclusion: “All were agreed that domestic seclusion gave a proper basis for a truly religious life and since women were seen as naturally occupying the domestic sphere this was one of the reasons why women were seen as more ‘naturally’ religious than men.”<sup>49</sup> Male imperialists, in contrast, were deemed readily susceptible to temptations pervading the public world, in constant danger of “going native” and hence desperately in need of British women’s moral intervention. As a “mother-confessor and friend,” Rafella takes on this gender-specific responsibility of rescuing and deterring men from immoral conduct, which in turn offers her a sense of purpose in the colonial context. As Johnston articulates, “colonial environments provided white women with a new kind of emancipation in terms of their integration of the roles of domesticity and work outside the home.”<sup>50</sup> Likewise, Rafella values her womanly burden to civilize British men because it is a legitimate means for her to participate in the public sphere.

However, Rafella’s pride in her public ambitions is short-lived. Her husband fears that her close interactions with men of ill repute, particularly the notorious Mr. Kennard, might taint her virtuous character and thereby damage her symbolic role in India as the repository of morality and civilization. Rafella feels stifled by her husband’s jealous behaviour, which is at odds with her newfound desire to fulfill her imperial responsibility in India. The conflict between Rafella and George enacts the common tension in the *fin de siècle* between the need to keep the Anglo-Indian woman isolated in her bungalow and the growing female aspiration to work outside the home. It enacts the problematic position of the Memsahib who, in entering the public sphere, immediately compromised the very foundation of her claim to authority: her domestic virtue. Indeed, as Thomas Metcalf argues, “by pitting against

each other the extremes of decorative seclusion and vigorous activity, the female roles set out within the Raj enforced upon the White Woman exceptional tensions of race and gender."<sup>51</sup> According to her race, the Memsahib had an imperial duty to perform as a colonialist, but according to her gender she had a more important domestic duty to perform as a housewife. Ultimately, the British woman in India—as George himself would maintain—was a “convenient [icon] to be valued, yet protected and segregated.”<sup>52</sup> Upholding the Memsahib’s iconic role as the Angel in the House, in other words, often took precedence over providing her with imperial activities outside the home. Thus, while her role as advice-giver to “erring men” is potentially empowering for Rafella, it is also potentially contaminating in the eyes of the male imperialist who fears her moral deterioration.

Coming to recognize her domestic identity as more of a burden than a gift, Rafella resents George for his unfounded distrust and accusations: “George’s hostility towards Mr. Kennard had aroused all the obstinacy in her nature. Her self-esteem was wounded. It was positively insulting of George to question her conduct.”<sup>53</sup> Yet, as the archetypal patriarch, George Coventry “could contemplate matrimony only under conditions of supreme possession, mental as well as physical.”<sup>54</sup> The severity of his jealousy culminates in his threat to kill Rafella if she continues to meet with Mr. Kennard. In a desperate attempt to save herself from his unbridled anger, Rafella “flee[s]” and “run[s]”<sup>55</sup> from her husband and the house that epitomizes her imprisonment, as she frantically tries to open “the door that had been bolted by him as they entered.”<sup>56</sup>

In fleeing from her husband and the bungalow, Rafella rejects colonial domesticity for its direct opposite: the public life of a tawaif in the Indian bazaar. Years after their last encounter, her ex-husband witnesses her standing confidently and happily on the balcony of a kotha (an upper-storied apartment commonly occupied by tawaifs) located at the heart of the city, “in the street of the dancers and such-like.”<sup>57</sup> At this point, Rafella has undergone a complete transformation from the Angel in the House to the Woman in the Bazaar; she has relinquished the bungalow in the Anglo-Indian community for the kotha in the Indian city. In *Delusions and Discoveries*, Benita Parry suggests that the bazaar was “a metaphor for pleasure and vice, the repository of India’s corruptions drawing weak white men and women into its vile embrace.”<sup>58</sup> Indeed, it did entice those men and women whose ties to a national and imperial heritage were weakened by their desire for emancipation from their imperial obligations—men and women who,

subsequently, were susceptible to “going native.” As the police officer in Perrin’s novel confirms after hearing the “unsavoury rumour” of the Englishwoman in the bazaar, “That sort of thing isn’t so uncommon as you’d think.”<sup>59</sup>

His words gesture towards the many, albeit historically repressed, examples of British women “going native” and renouncing their ties to England to find solace in a foreign culture—perhaps the most troubling being the case of Ulrich Wheeler, daughter of General Wheeler, who was originally glorified in accounts of the mutiny as the epitome of female courage and virtue<sup>60</sup> yet later discovered “living quietly” in a native bazaar married to a sowar who presumably saved her life.<sup>61</sup> Along similar lines, H. Hervey’s *The European in India* (1913) documents the example of Mrs. Beathe who started a new life in the bazaar under the alias Perdita, finding financial and emotional relief in her newly adopted culture after being rejected by her own.<sup>62</sup> Perrin draws on these historical examples in her portrayal of Rafella, who “drift[s] into one of the big bazaars”<sup>63</sup> in search of an alternative lifestyle after the divorce shatters her faith in marital happiness. In fact, Englishwomen went native in the bazaar more often than the British were ready to admit since these women’s willing conversions to a supposedly inferior religion and culture was a blow to the male imperialist’s ego. Recognizing it as a threat to his own authority, George, likewise, is haunted for much of the narrative by “a whisper, a rumour, that a woman, an Englishwoman, was living in a certain quarter of the bazaar.”<sup>64</sup>

Considering the pervasive appeal of the bazaar, it is not surprising that Captain George Coventry’s second wife, Trixie, is also “awfully interested and amused” by the spectacular city when she first witnesses “a native procession, a wedding, or a festival of some kind.”<sup>65</sup> Indeed, India’s urban landscape has an intoxicating effect on her senses:

“India rather frightens me ... and yet I get fits of fascination that make me feel as if the country has bewitched me.... I felt the spell of it this evening on the river, and still more strongly when we were waiting in the bazaar for the procession to pass. That big city, full of people, we really know nothing about, with all sorts of weird things happening in it that we never hear of. I think the bazaar is quite wonderful.”<sup>66</sup>

Frightening yet fascinating, weird yet wonderful—the bazaar is an exhilarating place that offers infinite possibilities to a “modern girl” like Trixie.<sup>67</sup> For that reason, her very presence in this nondomestic site, where her body is on public display before male natives, makes her husband anxious: “It recurred to him unpleasantly, increasing his an-

noyance that his wife should have been exposed to the gaze of a crowd of excited natives in company with a man who was not her husband. In his opinion, the less Englishwomen were observed of Orientals the better. His determination strengthened that in future Trixie should have no escort but himself."<sup>68</sup> In his second marriage, George once again desires to monitor the mobility of his wife in the public sphere. In order to protect her virtue, he wants to keep her sheltered, away from the possible detrimental effects of the Indian environment. Indeed, as Parry discusses, imperialist rhetoric stressed the importance of keeping Memsahibs isolated from Indian culture and people; Anglo-Indian women were to "barricade themselves" from the influences of a decadent India by hiding deeper in their bungalows and "shield[ing] their consciousness against Indian encroachment."<sup>69</sup> In other words, there was a "neurotic concern with protecting their identity from pollution by strange, unwholesome and deviant India."<sup>70</sup>

George is less successful in safeguarding his ex-wife who, by embracing the life of a nautch girl, secures freedom from the confined space of the Anglo-Indian home. She reigns supreme in the bazaar where George, in contrast, feels out of place, unable to navigate his way through the unruly chaos of the "stifling city."<sup>71</sup> Entering the densely populated city one night in search of a shortcut to his destination, George is incessantly interrupted by Indian processions and by relentlessly bumpy pathways. From every rooftop "rose faint sounds of music and the murmur of voices."<sup>72</sup> As he travels down the "main street of the city," he sees "rough string bedsteads set outside the shops and dwellings, figures, scantily clothed, sprawling upon them."<sup>73</sup> He also encounters a procession that includes "a gaudy group of nautch girls singing, twirling."<sup>74</sup> And finally, in order to find his way through the overly crowded bazaar, he is forced to enter the heart of the city, "the street ... of the dancing women and such-like,"<sup>75</sup> where nightly entertainments transpire in the kothas: "Some of the balconies were silent and deserted, others held shadowy shapes; one or two interiors were ablaze with light, and the sound of tinkling music floated from them."<sup>76</sup> Clearly, dancing girls and musicians assume an overpowering presence in the nondomestic(ated) and noncolonized space of the bazaar, a space that completely escapes George's control and threatens to engulf him for good. In fact, "It seemed to him that he had been driving for hours through this fetid wilderness of bricks, as if he should never emerge into air that was pure and untainted."<sup>77</sup>

When he reaches the heart of the inner city and his pony stumbles in a pothole, George is forced to stop beneath a terrace where he finally encounters “The Woman in the Bazaar” who, in “native dress and tinsel-veil,” “emerged onto a balcony above, and stood looking down on the group.”<sup>78</sup> The frontispiece to the 1914 edition by J. Dewar Mills (Fig. 1) vividly captures the self-satisfied spirit with which the Memsahib-turned-naught-girl embraces her new identity and claims ownership of her opulent surroundings. Amidst a crowd of male admirers, Rafella catches sight of her distressed ex-husband and expresses amusement and mockery, rather than fear, over the male imperialist’s utter lack of authority in a domain where she holds sway: “... softly the woman laughed—not only laughed, but threw something down<sup>79</sup> that landed, lightly, at his feet. A hoarse murmur of comment went up from the on-lookers; one of them, a weedy youth, picked the object up and tendered it to the sahib, exclaiming with insolent politeness: ‘Thou art favoured, heaven-born.’”<sup>80</sup> By facetiously selecting him, Rafella reverses the position of power that George once held over her, when he ventured into the “isolated little Cotswold village”<sup>81</sup> in England and selected her as his bride. She exercises the authority in this public site, not as a dependent wife but an independent courtesan.

While her presence in the bazaar empowers her and threatens British imperial culture, Rafella expresses an even stronger defiance to colonial domesticity by pursuing a sexual relationship with a native. Moments after he recognizes her, a stunned George watches as Rafella descends from her balcony, enters a lavish “scarlet-hooded vehicle” owned by the “rich” Babu Chandra Das and leaves southwards to live as his mistress.<sup>82</sup> By accepting an Indian man as her lover, Rafella subverts one of the main roles prescribed to British women in India: the maintenance of a racial and cultural divide between the British colonizers and the colonized natives. In the popular British imagination, an Englishwoman’s body was a synecdoche for the nation, making any “invasion” of her body by a nonwhite male a direct attack on Britain itself and a danger to the eugenical reproduction of the imperial race.<sup>83</sup> However, as Gail Cunningham concludes, “by the *fin de siècle* several writers were producing romances showing English women willingly entering sexual relationships with Indians.”<sup>84</sup> In a culture that placed British women as the “repositories of morality” and “the ultimate symbols of western refinement and high culture,”<sup>85</sup> such interracial liaisons posed a strong challenge to imperial authority and provoked the fear of a reverse colonization. Likewise, in choosing Babu Chandra Das



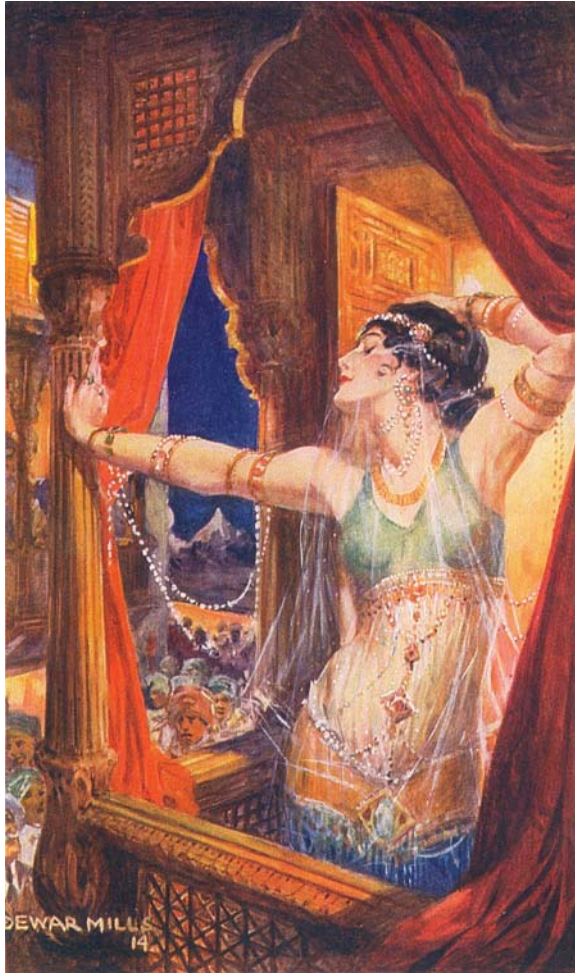


Fig. 1 Frontispiece to *The Woman in the Bazaar* by J. Dewar Mills

London: Cassell and Company, 1914



as her lover, Rafella commits the ultimate act of “going native”: she prefers a partner of native rather than British descent and invites a bodily contamination that jeopardizes her racial purity.

In the course of the narrative, Rafella thus transforms from the archetypal imperial housewife to the rebellious public courtesan. An appalled George recognizes that “The woman in the bazaar, who lived in the street of the dancers and such-like, who now drove away in the *rath* of Babu Chandra Das, was Rafella, his wife of the years that were over and dead.”<sup>86</sup> Rafella creates herself anew by stepping outside the bounds of her bungalow and embracing the spirit of the city, by renouncing her role of the Angel in the House for the more favourable one as “the woman in the bazaar.” The boundlessness of the bazaar rather than the sanctity of the home provides her route to female emancipation. As a courtesan, she chooses her lovers, lives lavishly, is well respected by her admirers, and roams freely in the expansive space of the city.

### Testing the Contours of Imperial Feminism

Perrin’s *The Woman in the Bazaar* is a prime example of a subgenre of Anglo-Indian fiction that emerged in the *fin de siècle* and introduced the prospect of Memsahibs “going nautch girl.” The writers of these narratives all made use of a common generic form—the novel—to communicate the growing resentment of their female characters toward the “white woman’s burden” in the colonial bungalow and a subsequent fantasy to relieve themselves of their domestic duties by turning courtesan. In *Delusions and Discoveries*, Parry devotes a chapter to the study of best-selling Anglo-Indian “novelettes”<sup>87</sup> written by women between the 1890s and the 1920s and faults many of them (including Alice Perrin, Bithia Mary Croker, and Ida Alexa Ross Wylie) for their ungrounded and purely fantastic representation of India: “The fictional India compounded of banal guesses and clichés, of inaccuracies and half-truths which the romancers fashioned won them an avid readership. Their fantasies met with and satisfied the reader’s needs, their distortions served as valid insights.” “The romantic writers,” she goes on to conclude, “reveal themselves rather than India,”<sup>88</sup> projecting their own fantasies and desires onto an Indian landscape and people.

Considering that one of these authors, Wylie, had never even been to India, and that many of the rest did not have day-to-day, intimate contact with Indian culture and its people, Parry’s assessment of Anglo-Indian women’s fiction indeed seems accurate and useful, shedding

light on the subjectivity and partiality inherent in the novels addressed above. While it is incredibly naïve to think that these British writers could provide an authentic and complete representation of tawaifs when they themselves probably never encountered one face-to-face, particularly during the latter half of the century when nautch performances in Anglo-Indian homes were strongly discouraged, it seems just as naïve and problematic to dismiss these renderings as purely fictional, as completely divorced from any historical reality. In other words, if we reduce these works of fiction to mere fantasies that invented the nautch girl as the British women desired her, not as she was, we run the risk of negating all possibility that nautch girls posed a legitimate degree of resistance to colonial ideologies and undermine any real power that they may have held in British India. Upon closer inspection, then, perhaps we can confirm some truth about the nautch girls (women who to a large extent did not write their own histories) from these novels; collectively these fictional works do reveal a widely acknowledged fact, one that was already entrenched in the British imagination through other genres (including journals, travelogues, memoirs and diaries): the tawaifs did possess a relative degree of political, social, economic and physical freedom that was inevitably attractive to British women in India who felt burdened by their imperial domestic roles.

In fact, at a time when the women's movement in England was gaining ground, and British women across the globe sought greater mobility in the public sphere, these fictions introduced the tawaif as a potential source of rescue for unhappy domestic women. "Going nautch girl" in these narratives therefore not only challenged the Victorian cult of domesticity in British India but, more important, subverted the racial hierarchization of womanhood that was at the heart of the civilizing mission. After all, throughout British rule in India, colonial practices and policies were dependent on the widespread belief that women were synecdoches of their respective nations and that a nation's degree of civilization was legible through the status and treatment it accorded its women. Indian widowhood, sati, child marriage, female infanticide and the zenana, for this reason, figured prominently in colonial representations of India—depicting a backward nation where barbaric men needlessly victimized their women—and subsequently justified the civilizing mission as an honourable and humane cause devoted to the "rescue" of defenceless colonial women. As Antoinette Burton, Napur Chaudhuri, and Margaret Strobel among others have argued, in the late-Victorian and Edwardian periods, Western feminists self-serving-

ly complied with this rhetoric and represented themselves as the most liberated women in the world while discursively inventing colonial, particularly Indian, women as oppressed, passive and, thus, in need of their philanthropic aid: by “imagining the women of India as helpless colonial subjects, British feminists constructed the Indian women as a foil against which to gauge their own progress” and “appropriated to themselves as imperial Britons the highest and most legitimate form of ‘feminism.’”<sup>89</sup>

While these groundbreaking studies have alerted us to the racialization underlying much of Western feminism, less scholarship has been devoted to exposing the counter narratives that arose during British women’s encounters with Indian women who challenged these feminist imperial formations—women like the nautch girl who seemed to embody an even higher “form of ‘feminism.’” Dating as far back as the early nineteenth-century, Jyotsna Singh argues that nautch girls “did not figure in the nineteenth century colonial debates about the rescue of women”<sup>90</sup> alongside sati, early marriage, illiteracy, or female infanticide. Instead, these dancing girls projected the relative disempowerment of British women in the empire. The nautch girl’s “marginal position vis-à-vis marriage,” she argues, “gave them an independent status, unavailable to most women in colonial domesticity.”<sup>91</sup> Sara Suleri, in *The Rhetoric of English India*, more assertively claims that the English female traveller in the Raj was “in a far greater confinement than that of her Indian counterpart.”<sup>92</sup> That is, according to Suleri, “The accomplishment of the courtesan allow[ed] her a greater intellectual and erotic liberty than the English woman could hope for.”<sup>93</sup>

Fictions that introduce British women “going nautch girl,” such as Perrin’s *The Woman in the Bazaar*, offer a much-needed alternative reading of the British/Indian female encounter that does not merely recycle, and inadvertently cement, the dichotomy of the emancipated British woman and the oppressed Indian woman. Instead, subverting this rhetoric, these Anglo-Indian novels render the independent nautch girls as a foil to the domestically subjugated white women in India. As Flora Annie Steel admitted in one of her nonfictional works, “the Western Woman has quite as much to learn from the Eastern woman as the Eastern woman has from the Western”<sup>94</sup>—and it is this reverse emulation of Indian rather than British standards that surfaces in these novels and opens the door for Memsahibs to experiment with a non-Western model of female independence that promises to liberate white women from the burdens of colonial domesticity.

## Notes

1. Sally Ledger and Roger Luckhurst, "Introduction: Reading the 'Fin de Siècle,'" *The Fin de Siècle: A Reader in Cultural History c. 1880–1900* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), xiii.
2. Patrick Brantlinger, "Imperial Gothic: Atavism and the Occult in the British Adventure Novel, 1880–1914," *Rule of Darkness: British Literature and Imperialism, 1830–1914* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1988), 227–54; Nils Clausson, "Degeneration, Fin-de-Siècle Gothic, and the Science of Detection," *Journal of Narrative Theory*, 35.1 (2005), 60–87; Kelly Hurley, *The Gothic Body: Sexuality, Materialism and Degeneration at the Fin de Siècle* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004); Nicholas Daly, *Modernism, Romance and the Fin de Siècle, 1880–1914* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999); William Hughes and Andrew Smith, eds., *Empire and the Gothic: The Politics of Genre* (Houndmills, Hampshire: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003).
3. Widely alluded to in discussions of imperial feminism, the term "the white woman's burden" is most readily associated with the work of the historian Antoinette Burton. See "The White Woman's Burden: British Feminists and the Indian Woman, 1865–1915," *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, Napur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, eds. (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1992), 137–57; and Antoinette Burton, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865–1915* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1994).
4. Thomas R. Metcalf, *Ideologies of the Raj* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997), 391.
5. Inadequate in defining the lifestyle and function of Indian female performers, the term "nautch girls" derives from an anglicized version of the Hindi/Urdu verb "nach" (to dance). It became prominent in the nineteenth century among both the colonizers and the colonized and overwrote the many words previously used to describe different groups of Indian female performers varying by class, region, and religion. For the most part, the writers cited in this paragraph refer interchangeably to the independent female communities formed by tawaifs (Muslim courtesans of Northern India) and the devadasis (Hindu temple dancers of Southern India). For further research on the devadasi tradition, see Kakolee Chakraborty, *Women as Devadasis: Origin and Growth of the Devadasi Profession* (New Delhi: Deep and Deep Publications, 2000); and Amrit Srinivasan, "Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance," *Economic and Political Weekly*, 20.44 (2 November 1985), 1869–76. For further research on the tawaif tradition, see Veena Talwar Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of Courtesans of Lucknow," *Contesting Power: Resistance and Everyday Social Relations in South Asia*, Douglas Haynes and Gyan Prakash, eds. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 23–55; Jennifer Post, "Professional Women in Indian Music: The Death of the Courtesan Tradition," *Women and Music in Cross-Cultural Perspective*, Ellen Koskoff, ed. (New York: Greenwood Press, 1987), 97–109; and Lata Singh, "Retrieving Voices from the Margins: The Courtesan and the Nation's Narrative," *Indian Journal of Gender Studies*, 14 (2007), 93–116.
6. Helen Petrovna Blavatsky, *From the Caves and Jungles of Hindostan* (Madras and London: The Theosophical Publishing House, 1892), 122.
7. Quoted in Punjab Purity Association, "Opinions on the Nautch Question" (Lahore: New Lyall Press, 1894), 104.
8. Oldenburg, "Lifestyle as Resistance," 26. In explicating the lifestyles of a class of women whose histories are to a large extent irretrievable, this article does not rely exclusively on the image circulating in British and Anglo-Indian literature of the nineteenth century but more so on the work of subaltern historiographers, like Oldenburg, who have collected and studied the scarce accounts we do have left on these Indian female communities.
9. *Ibid.*, 23.
10. *Ibid.*, 30.
11. *Ibid.*, 30.
12. Rudyard Kipling, "On the City Wall," *In Black and White* (Allahabad: A. H. Wheeler, 1888), 76.
13. *Ibid.*, 77.
14. Ketaki Kushari Dyson, *A Various Universe: A Study of the Journals and Memoirs of British Men and Women in the Indian Subcontinent* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1978), 147.
15. In the 1860s, even "a randi [a lower-class street performer] charged a nightly rate of five rupees and often more," while "a male labourer was only paid two to four annas [one rupee=16 annas] and

a female labourer only half that." See Veena Talwar Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow 1856–1857* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1984), 138.

16. Emma Roberts, *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan: With Sketches of Anglo-Indian Society* (London: W. H. Allen and Co., 1837), 192.

17. The Crown sought a demographical shift alongside the changes in the political structure of post-mutiny India, and sent a greater number of British women to the colony to be wives of British administrators, officers, and soldiers. These women became responsible for nurturing a colonial domesticity that would not only reproduce a microcosmic England in India, but more importantly deter men from "going native" or from pursuing interracial relationships that often resulted in mixed-race offspring. In turn, due to this official policy, Anglo-Indian women were blamed for disrupting previously compromising relations between Indians and the British—engendering what Margaret Strobel calls "the myth of the destructive female." For a deeper discussion on the interrelationship among the Memsahib, domesticity, and imperialism, see Margaret Strobel, *European Women and the Second British Empire* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1991); Rosemary Marangoly George, ed., *Burning Down the House* (Boulder, CO: Westview Press, 1998); Georgina Gowman, "Imperial Geographies of Home: Memsahibs and Missahibs in India and Britain, 1915–47," *Cultural Geographies*, 10.4 (2003), 424–41; and Alison Blunt, "Imperial Geographies of Home: British Women in India, 1886–1925," *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, 24 (1999), 421–40.

18. Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of Woman in the Colonial Text* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), 8.

19. *Ibid.*, 10.

20. Metcalf, 109.

21. Quoted in Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire*, 93. Coauthored with Grace Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* became the most popular and definitive domestic guidebook for women living in India, advising them on everything from appointing and managing servants, to designing menus, rearing children, furnishing the house and dressing for the Indian climate.

22. Flora Annie Webster Steel, *Voices in the Night: A Chromatic Fantasia* (New York: Macmillan Company, 1900), 16.

23. *Ibid.*, 67.

24. *Ibid.*, 40.

25. *Ibid.*, 142.

26. *Ibid.*, 144.

27. *Ibid.*, 136.

28. *Ibid.*, 161.

29. Priya Pal-Lapinski, "Infection as Resistance: Exoticized Memsahibs and Native Courtesans in Colonial India," *The Exotic Woman in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction and Culture: A Reconsideration* (Durham: University of New Hampshire Press, 2005), 70.

30. Flora Annie Webster Steel, *On the Face of the Waters* (London: Macmillan, 1897), 284.

31. See, for example, Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire*, 105–109; Jennifer L. Otsuki, "The Memsahib and the Ends of Empire: Feminine Desire in Flora Annie Steel's *On the Face of the Waters*," *Victorian Literature and Culture*, 24 (1996), 1–29; Revathi Krishnaswamy, "Imperial Feminism in an Age of Homosocial Colonialism: Flora Annie Steel's *On the Face of the Waters*," *Effeminism: The Economy of Colonial Desire* (Michigan: University of Michigan Press, 1998), 71–99; and Hsu-Ming Teo, "Romancing the Raj: Interracial Relations in Anglo-Indian Romance Novels," *History of Intellectual Culture*, 4.1 (2004), 1–18.

32. Other novels by Victoria Cross that feature strong female characters who are passionate about dancing include *Six Chapters of a Man's Life* (New York: Macaulay Company, 1903); *Six Women* (London: T. Werner Laurie, 1906); and *Paula* (London: Kensington Press, 1908). For the correlation between dancing and rebellious women in the works of other New Woman writers, see George Egerton, "A Cross Line," *A New Woman Reader: Fiction, Article and Drama of the 1890s*, Carolyn Christensen Nelson, ed. (Toronto: Broadview Press, 2000), 8–21; and Mona Caird, *Daughters of Danaus* (New York: Feminist Press, 1989).

33. Victoria Cross, *Life of My Heart* (London: Walter Scott Publishing, 1905), 152.

34. Hsu-Ming Teo, "Women's Travel, Dance and British Metropolitan Anxieties, 1890–1939," *Gender and History*, 12.2 (2000), 381.
35. Bithia Mary Croker, *The Company's Servant: A Romance of Southern India* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1907), 132.
36. *Ibid.*, 318.
37. Bithia Mary Croker, *Her Own People* (London: Hurst and Blackett, 1903), 239.
38. Bithia Mary Croker, *The Cat's Paw* (London: Chatto and Windus, 1902), 197.
39. Ida Alexa Ross Wylie, *The Hermit Doctor of Gaya; A Love Story of Modern India* (London: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1916), 436.
40. Alice Perrin, *The Woman in the Bazaar* (London: Cassell and Company, 1914), 1.
41. *Ibid.*, 6.
42. *Ibid.*, 15.
43. Ann Laura Stoler, "Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Gender and Morality in the Making of Race," *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2002), 33.
44. Jyotsna G. Singh, "The Gendering of Empire," *Colonial Narratives / Cultural Dialogues: 'Discoveries' of India in the Language of Colonialism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1995), 92.
45. The narrator's satirical word choice may suggest Rafella is "deluding herself" by thinking that she can make a difference in the moral outlook of depraved men and she is "deluding herself" in thinking that these men are genuinely interested in her teachings, and not in her.
46. Perrin, 47–48.
47. Anna Johnston, *Missionary Writing and Empire, 1800–1860* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2003), 38.
48. *Ibid.*, 45.
49. Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall, *Family Fortunes: Men and Women of the English Middle Class, 1780–1850* (London: Routledge, 1992), 90.
50. Johnston, 49.
51. Metcalf, 109.
52. Singh, 81.
53. Perrin, 69.
54. *Ibid.*, 16.
55. *Ibid.*, 198.
56. *Ibid.*, 92.
57. *Ibid.*, 196.
58. Benita Parry, *Delusions and Discoveries: Studies in India in the British Imagination, 1800–1940* (London: Penguin Press, 1972), 96.
59. Perrin, 176.
60. The well-known tale about Miss Wheeler recounts her fierce courage in murdering her abductors, and then committing suicide to avoid any dishonour to her feminine virtue. See Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire*, 71–73; and P. J. O. Taylor, *A Star Shall Fall* (Michigan: University of Michigan, 1993), 60–78.
61. Sharpe, 72.
62. Cited in Pran Nevile, *Love Stories of the Raj* (New Delhi: Penguin Press, 1995), 177.
63. Perrin, 176.
64. *Ibid.*, 126.
65. *Ibid.*, 123.
66. *Ibid.*, 125.

67. Ibid., 99.
68. Ibid., 127.
69. Parry, 6.
70. Ibid., 6.
71. Perrin, 197.
72. Ibid., 190.
73. Ibid., 191.
74. Ibid., 192.
75. Ibid., 192.
76. Ibid., 193.
77. Ibid., 191.
78. Ibid., 193.
79. A garland of jasmine.
80. Perrin, 194.
81. Ibid., 1.
82. Ibid., 195.
83. Particularly following the accusations of rape that emerged during the rebellion, Memsahibs were deemed to be “in need of protection from lascivious Indians.” See Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class Under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Cities, 1793–1905* (London: Wedenfeld and Nicholson, 1980), 5.
84. Gail Cunningham, ed., “Introduction,” in Victoria Cross, *Anna Lombard* (Birmingham: University of Birmingham Press, 2003), xvii. See, for example, Victoria Cross, *Anna Lombard*; Victoria Cross, *Life of My Heart*; Ida Alexa Ross Wylie, *The Hermit Doctor of Gaya*; and Alice Eustac, *A Girl from the Jungle* (London: Mills and Boon, 1928).
85. E. H. Collingham, *Imperial Bodies: The Physical Experience of the Raj, 1800–1947* (Cambridge: Polity, 2001), 42.
86. Perrin, 196.
87. It is unclear why Parry consistently refers to these novels as “novelettes.”
88. Parry, 98.
89. Burton, 137.
90. Singh, 111.
91. Ibid.
92. Sara Suleri, *The Rhetoric of English India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1992), 92.
93. Ibid.
94. Flora Annie Steel and Mortimer Menpes, *India* (London: Adam and Charles Black, 1905), 105.