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British Women on Indian Zenana: Breach of a Sisterhood

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Abstract: *In the Raj writings, Indian women are generally represented by the white male writers as exotic, charming and sensuous. These men romanticized Indian zenana as they actually did not have any access inside it. In contrast to these writers the British women who accompanied their male counterparts to India visited the zenana and provided a rather disparaging account of the Indian zenana. This paper aims to analyse the British women's writings about Indian zenana which contrasts with the romanticized male narratives about Indian zenana and how the negative attitude of these British women towards their Indian counterparts negates the possibility of any sisterhood developing between them. Focussing on this elusive space of colonial contact zone, the writings of the memsahibs about Indian zenana offer an interesting narrative of race, gender and colonial otherness.*

KeyWords: *Zenana, Sisterhood, Contact Zone, Gender, Anxiety.*

The word Zenana originates from Persian 'zan' meaning 'women'. The word refers to the domestic space exclusive for women, common in South Asian countries like India and Pakistan. The space of Zenana is inextricably linked with ideas and issues of gender. The presentation and the knowledge of Zenana occupy a position of importance in the colonial narratives of late eighteenth and nineteenth century. This can be attributed to a core agenda of colonial policy in India. The early and mid-nineteenth century reform policies of the British government, say for example the evangelical and utilitarian policies of Lord Bentinck or the educational policies of Macaulay, aimed towards a Europeanized India. A visible omission from this colonial gaze was the Zenana or the inner sanctum of the domestic sphere, meant exclusively for women and protected from any outsider. This is where the memsahibs became instrumental in furthering the operations of the empire. Only the white women had any access to the Zenana as they belonged to the same sex and their depiction of the Zenana was exclusively for the European eye.

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Margaret Macmillan has pointed out in Women of the Raj that the purdah system of the Zenana was uncomfortable to male Anglo-Indians. For, while their own women were able to mix freely with the Indian native men, they themselves were denied any access to the female subjects of India. They are only dependent, entirely, or almost entirely on such information as native gentlemen themselves choose to give. In this paper, through the analysis of British women's writings on Purdah or the Zenana, I want to study if the British women also share any streak of anxiety regarding the Zenana women of India.

The reception of the ideas about the Zenana depended on the perception of the memsahib whose perspectives were shaped by her socio-cultural location. The memsahibs were conditioned by eighteenth and nineteenth century conduct books for women and also by poetry and novels that tried to project a standard code of femininity which was shaped, reflected and passed on in their writings. In this discourse normative middle-class femininity was projected as chaste, self-abnegating and with no interest in the public world. Here the middle-class home was presented as a haven run by an angel, one perfectly trained in sexual purity along with prudent domestic skills. This idea of the middle-class domestic angel was farther intensified through opposition to the sexual deviancy of the working-class women and the stereotypical licentiousness of the women of the East. Whereas a western woman was depicted as spending her time in acts of benevolence or self-development, the Indian women were represented as spending it in wastefulness. Ida Pfeiffer, a Viennese world traveller of the 1850s, considers the lethargy of the harem inhabitants a sign of their 'contempt [for] employment and work of every kind' and deplores the state of 'these poor ignorant women' who have nothing better to do than to 'sit cross-legged on carpets and cushions, drinking coffee, smoking nargile, and gossiping with one another' (165).

The representation of the Zenana in colonial women's narratives provides a novel insight into colonial domesticity. In spite of their location inside and in conformity with the colonial discourse, these memsahibs display a varied range in their narratives. The white women had to retain an integrity which was necessary to show before the natives. Yet often they were in the colonies to provide the kind of service hitherto provided by the natives as they replaced the Indian 'bibi' in the white man's house in the colonies. In this situation the white woman's encounter with native women in her home yard was not merely a colonial encounter but a female face-off fraught with tensions.

The descriptions of the Zenana by the memsahibs remarkably lack the colour of a fascinated, romantic gaze upon Indian women. The apparent tone of sympathy or sisterhood in the memsahibs' writings about the Zenana covers a deeper note of anxiety which stems from their description of the colonized 'other'. By labelling the Indian Zenana women as

either backward or vicious, they indirectly present themselves as refined and superior. This covert pattern of veiled anxiety can be identified in the discrepancies between European male and female writings on the Zenana. The oriental harem was always a domain of dreams for the male imagination. Byron's Oriental Tales (1813) and Shelley's 'Laon and Cythna' (1817) are interspersed with such images of the oriental harem that directly confront contemporary bourgeois restrictions on sexuality. Male literary writings about India like William Hockley Brown's Tales of the Zenana (1827) or Meadows Taylor's Confessions of a Thug (1839) also paint similar sketches of the Zenana that are full of exquisitely beautiful women surrounded by despotic males. Whereas these male imaginings of the Zenana invariably play upon the alluring sensuality of eastern women, the women writers' descriptions are always tinged with boredom and matter of fact references contrary to the sensual paradise depicted by male writers. Women's writings aim at stripping the glory of the Zenana and presenting it in its day-to-day mundaneness so that all western male fantasy of the Zenana as a tropical heaven is abolished. Women writers use the exclusivity of their knowledge gained through a privileged entry into the private space of the Zenana to clinch their case. This gendered discrepancy of perception is effectively pointed out by Shampa Roy in her essay "Inside the Royal Zenanas in Colonial India: Avadhi and Other Begums in the Travel Accounts of Fanny Parkes". She draws a classic instance from Jane Eyre by Charlotte Bronte, where Jane in her conversation with Mr. Rochester unknowingly reveals her anxiety over the issue of harem ladies.

He chuckled; he rubbed his hands: 'Oh it is rich to see and hear her!' he exclaimed. 'I would not exchange this one little English girl for the grand Turk's whole seraglio, gazelle-eyes, houri forms and all!'
The Eastern allusion bit me: 'I'll not stand you an inch in the stead of a seraglio,' I said; 'so don't consider me an equivalent for one; if you have a fancy for anything in that line, away with you, sir, to the bazaars of Stamboul without delay, and lay out in extensive slave purchases some of that spare cash'
'

And what will you do, Janet, while I'm bargaining for so many tons of flesh and such an assortment of black eyes?'
'I'll be preparing myself to go out as a missionary to preach liberty to them that are enslaved' (Roy, 51)

So, while Mr. Rochester's reference to the harem ladies expresses his fancy for their 'gazelle eyes' and 'houri forms' – eventually reduced to the 'tons of flesh' and 'assortment of black eyes' that could be bargained for, Jane highlights the enslavement of the harem ladies to such lustful attraction of men and champions the missionary activities that might

reform their situation. She does not like the 'eastern allusion' at all and instantly creates an alternative between herself and the Eastern women. Jane's evangelical intentions are a cover for her feeling of resentment towards Rochester's proposed commodification of her body, which compels her to assume an air of superiority when her demand for respectability as a working woman is challenged.

Anne Katherine Elwood, whose father was an M. P. of Sussex and husband a colonel in the East India Company's Bombay Army, came to India in 1825. She lived in Bombay till 1828 and visited the royal Zenana of Cutch. Her description of the visit is an amalgamation of her class prejudice, racial prejudice and a suppressed note of anxiety. While visiting the queen, the first thing that appealed to her was the heavy jewellery worn by the ladies. Though this grand display of gold and silver fascinates her she does not fail to comment that 'her ornaments were rather heavy than elegant and more valuable than brilliant' (222). Such a pronounced statement on the lack of refinement in the native's taste is a testimony to the British woman visitor's racial superiority. This is farther reinforced when Elwood mentions with great confidence that girl children are regularly poisoned in the Jahrejah community and she terms it a 'barbarous custom'. The way she classifies a particular community as the object of her comment and still manages to insinuate that the natives are generally barbaric becomes conducive to reaffirming her racial prestige, bolstered with a feeling of natural superiority.

Elwood's sense of class superiority, however, is thwarted when she notices that the queen was sitting in a low silver arm chair made farther comfortable with cushions, while the British ladies were provided with common chairs. She also points out that the attendants were seated on the floor, thereby focusing on the hierarchical seating arrangement where the Indian queen occupies the highest position on the most comfortable chair and the British ladies are given their seats on common chairs – above the attendants but below the Indian queen.

Elwood's narrative takes a different perspective which directly contradicts the stereotypical male representation of a sensuous Zenana to supply a rather drab and prosaic description of the royal interior instead, thus stripping off the erotic charm of the Zenana ladies. In her words, "This Zenana, of which so much has been said, and of which Burke, I think, gives so flowery and poetical a description, was a small dark apartment, with unglazed windows closed by wooden shutters." (222)

Fanny Parks, who travelled across India from 1822 to 1845, often compares Indian

ladies with European ladies in her memoir and concludes that their fates are alike in perpetual suffering, as if she is trying to build a bond of sympathy between the women of the two races, yet the visits lead her to shed the aura of beauty that western male writers had built around oriental women. In her description of the visit to Mulka Begum, Parks clearly stipulates that no Indian woman who is desirous of fame or beauty must appear before visitors in daylight, taking opium. When the said Mulka Begum appears in the evening resplendent in all her beauty, the message is quite clear—this beauty is more of an illusion, a product of make-up and accessories. The same thing happens in Parks's visit to Baiza Bai. Parks denounces the myth of oriental beauty that has long been nurtured by white men as unfounded. She reports that actually there are only two or three beautiful women in a single Zenana and the rest are pretty ugly. Parks registers her surprise at seeing so many plain faces around her. Even in her description of the Delhi princess's harem Parks writes, 'A plainer set I never beheld: the verandahs, in which they principally appear to live, and the passages between the apartments, were mal propre.' (215)

Marianne Postans, the wife of Captain Thomas Postans of the East India Company's Bombay Native Infantry, stayed in India from 1834 to 1838. Postans highlights the ignorance of these ladies and ridicules their lack of common sense, referring to the fiasco of making tea in this aristocratic household. She begins with the sermon that it is tough to teach complex ideas of civilization at first, rather one should begin with simple ones, like making tea. Postans once sent some tea to Runchorjee, the head of the family whom Postans mentions as 'my fine old friend Runchorjee Dewan,' but he complained of not getting the taste when his daughter prepared it for him. Postans gets to learn that his daughter boiled the leaves in water with milk, sugar, clove and ginger and gave it to her father without straining. She uses this anecdote to suggest Indian women's lack of skills in adapting to new ways. Postans comments,

I have never met with such total absence of both information and curiosity, as in the family of Runchorjee. They are degraded indeed to a state of mere animal existence… Their ignorance probably appeared more striking, as compared with the refined tastes of the Dewanjee himself; and it was truly grievous to observe, that the prejudices of sect and country, should erect such powerful barriers against family sympathy, and so humiliatingly degrade one sex, as even to render them incapable of understanding, that the other could possess wisdom. (129-30)

There is something here that is worth noting. As the narrative progresses, Postans seems more and more disgusted with the women in Dewanjee's house. But this disgust is

not directed at the men. It contrasts sharply with her admiration for the Dewanjee, who is an educated, soft-spoken and erudite person. The binary division of gender in Indian society, with the exploitation of resources by men and the exclusion of women, is highlighted. Such a representation of gender imbalance in Indian society shows how Indian women are deprived and satisfies Postans' pride in the higher cultural achievement of gender equity in England. What is noticeable is that even after depicting the condition of Indian women as poor and identifying the barrier of the sex in Indian society which limits women's capacity to procure knowledge, Postans remains unsympathetic to the women of the Nargil family, whom she does not represent as oppressed but as foolish and blind to their own situation. Julia Maitland (who came to India in 1836 after her marriage with James Thomas, a senior merchant with the East India Company and stayed for three years in Madras) gives a somewhat more elaborate description of a rich lady she met in Madras. This lady was also very curious about British life and the condition of women in England. But Maitland prefers to highlight this lady's physical appearance by ridiculing her immense girth, her atrocious excess of jewels, and even her ways of walking and talking. Such an obviously one-sided dig at someone's physical appearance testifies to the prejudiced gaze of the white woman and her intentional sexual discrimination in describing Indian women. Maitland writes,

She was an immense creature, but young, with rather a good sphinx-like face,—altogether much like a handsome young feather bed,—dressed in green muslin embroidered with gold, and covered with jewels from top to toe, besides a belt of gold coins round her waist….when she first came in, she twirled, or rather rolled, round and round, and did not know what to do, so the Gomashta bid her make salaam, and sit down on a chair: and then I did the same.(65)

Maitland's slur on the woman's appearance becomes vitriolic when suddenly Mr. A enters the room by mistake. The lady is shocked and leaves instantly. Maitland describes it in the following manner, 'She seemed well amused and comfortable till A—came accidentally into the room, when she jumped up, wheeled round so as to turn her broad back to him, and waddled off as fast as her fat sides would let her.' (66)

Coming back into the room, the lady tells Maitland that Mr. A should not mind, for Indian women are not accustomed to meeting unrelated men. On this Maitland sarcastically comments, 'She did not mind the peons and servants standing by'(66). It is impossible to miss the point here. The Indian lady has no problem exposing herself to native men of the servant class, but she has problems with the sahib and men of her own

class. Maitland is equally critical of this lady's lack of intellect and sensitivity. She is not only fat and inquisitive, but her utter innocence about decorum seems absurd to Maitland. The Indian lady likes the bonnet of the memsahib and spins it on her finger, which shows that she has no sense of manners. The tone of mockery reaches its height when Maitland gives her some pictures to see. Maitland writes cryptically, "I showed her some pictures; she held them upside down and admired them very much" (66). Throughout her narration Maitland remains cynically contemptuous of the native women, all the way from their habits to their cultural upbringing.

Amelia Cary Falkland, the wife of the Governor of Bombay stayed in India between 1848 to 1853. Falkland recounts in her journal published under the title Chow Chow her visit to the household of the widow of Nana Furnawees, whose master was Mahadev Rao, the young Peshwa. Falkland gives another disparaging depiction of this royal household, including the poor architecture, untrained servants and the manners of the lady which do not impress her at all. Falkland has written at length about the interiors of the room and the countenance of the lady but when it comes to the point of conversation, she only mentions that the lady 'was very silent at first' and 'very little conversation was carried on; beyond enquiry after each other's health' (201). Thus, the voice of the Indian lady is not heard. She is merely objectified by the British woman interpreter of her life. All mature Hindoo women, as she says, appear to her to be a cross between a griffin and a witch.

It is particularly interesting to note that in all these writings only the women of the Zenana are portrayed as backward. The men, however, are completely exempted from the charge of backwardness. The memsahibs never suggest in their writings that the system of Purdah was initiated and perpetuated by men. Instead, they represent the Zenana women as decadent and unsophisticated. Coming from the patriarchal set-up of Victorian England, these women could have formed a sisterhood of sympathy with the Indian zenana also dominated in the patriarchal hierarchy. But the de-romanticizing of the Indian Zenana in their writings point towards a relationship fraught with antagonism, anxiety and otherness.

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