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Can the memsahib speak? A re-examination of the tropes and stereotypes surrounding the Anglo-Indian female during the Indian Rebellion of 1857

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This essay offers an exploration of the tropes and stereotypes that came to define the Anglo-Indian female during the Indian Rebellion of 1857. Powerful at the time, these notions of imperial femininity survived within subsequent androcentric historical discourse. Through an in depth analysis of female accounts of the Rebellion, evidence can be uncovered that gainsays these accepted 'truths,' particularly the mutual exclusivity of male and female realms. This essay documents how the dominant stereotypes of women as 'helpless,' 'domestic' and 'passive' were founded in male narratives of 1857, but also subverted in those of female authorship. The most potent and lasting trope of femininity surrounding the Rebellion, the 'fallen woman,' is also shown to be a product of a heavily gendered discourse in which women were conspicuously silenced.

Introduction

Subaltern classes are subject to the initiatives of the dominant class, even when they rebel; they are in a state of anxious defence. Every trace of autonomous initiative is therefore of inestimable value

Antonio Gramsci¹

Beginning in the 1970s, Gramsci's concept of the 'subaltern' was transmuted from its Italian context by the Subaltern Studies collective in order to create a uniquely Indian form of subalternity.² This essay seeks to examine the Indian Rebellion of 1857 from another 'subaltern' standpoint; that of the Anglo-Indian female, or Memsahib. At first glance, the Anglo-Indian female, so privileged in her position of race, may not be expected to comply with the parameters of the 'subaltern.' Nevertheless, knowledge has not been typically transmitted from the feminine perspective, and although she may not represent a subaltern 'class,' the European woman does indeed embody a knowledge source that has consistently been dismissed or undermined. Thus, on the Gramscian model, even the most socially respectable European female can be classified as 'subaltern.' This subalternisation in relation to the histories of the events of 1857-8, described here as the 'Indian

Rebellion,' began with its very conception in Meerut. From its birth, the Rebellion was conceived of in heavily gendered terms. Women were often referred to within male narratives, but always in ways that conformed to pre-established notions of what it was to be a woman. Accordingly, it was not women who were present within these narratives, but an idealised stereotyping of the female sex that reduced the female body and personality to a set of inscriptions on the sanctity of womanhood.

The accounts left by women, predominantly in journals and published letters, have a complicated relationship with these surviving male narratives. According to much of the current secondary historical literature, women's accounts of the Indian Rebellion served to reinforce the position of women as it was defined by men. Ostensibly, within these narratives, the Anglo-Indian women of imperial India conform to their own stereotyping. These histories, such as those of Ira Bhattacharya and Jane Robinson, are content to take the female position as solely domestic and localised, and their work upholds the notion that women were unable to conceive of breaking the boundaries of the feminine sphere; that their radii of influence did not extend beyond the circumference of the home. Herein lies the suggestion that the tropes and stereotypes of the nineteenth century determined and constructed the reality of the imperial feminine.

¹ Antonio Gramsci, *Antonio Gramsci: Prison Notebooks*, Vol. II, (New York: Columbia University Press, 1992), p. 21

² David Ludden (ed.), *Reading Subaltern Studies: Critical History, Contested Meaning and the Globalisation of South Asia*, (London: Anthem Press, 2002), p. 15

This essay will challenge these assumptions through a close reading of female narratives in order to uncover the ‘trace of autonomous initiative’ that is so valuable to the historian. This initiative manifests within female accounts in moments of dislocation from established gender roles and tropes. This essay will establish the degree to which these acts of rebellion allowed for the greater autonomy and agency of women in their own representation.

Methodology

The number of surviving accounts written by Anglo-Indian men and women on the topic of the Indian Rebellion is substantial and provides the historian with an extensive primary source pool. The numbers of publications released in the immediate aftermath of the Rebellion indicated the thirst back home for the intimate details of the battle between the ‘mutinous’ rebels and the heroic bastions of civilisation, the British army. Despite the gradual opening of the literary world to women throughout the nineteenth century, female narratives display palpable evidence of self-induced censorship, as well as the inevitable editorial work of the publisher. This censorship is reflective of the firmly established conviction that the realms of female and male knowledge were polarised territories. The need to conform to the standards of a polite British readership, and the fear of what should happen otherwise, would

be the concern of any woman looking to publish her ‘Mutiny diary.’ Any assessment of female narratives of the Indian Rebellion should thus be mindful of the *absences* within the text, the unsaid and the silenced, as well as the tangible words on the page.

The intentions behind these narratives, as with any primary source, deserve a critical assessment at the hands of the historian. According to Kaushik Roy, ‘not only do these sources reflect the Victorian ideas of race and national pride, but they also draw on, and reinforce, a series of mythic narratives,’³ which should undoubtedly act as a warning sign for any historian looking to establish a critical view of the Rebellion itself. The desire to justify and promote the glorious civilising mission of the colonial enterprise at a time when power was being consolidated on more substantial terms in India cannot go unnoticed within the rhetoric of both male and female accounts. Nevertheless, these ‘mythic narratives’ form the centre of this essay, because the focus here is representation, and to what extent representation determined the reality of the Anglo-Indian woman. Thus the hyperbole and self-glorification of colonial narratives are integral to this assessment, and

³ Kaushik Roy, ‘Combat, Combat Motivation and the Construction of Identities: A Case Study’ in Gavin Rand and Crispin Bates (eds.), *Mutiny at the Margins: New Perspectives on the Indian Uprising of 1857*, Volume 4: Military Aspects of the Indian Uprising, (New Delhi: Sage, forthcoming), p. 25

should not be discounted on the basis of jingoism or hubris.

Criticisms have been made of histories that solely focus on the European side of the colonial equation, but this essay is not necessarily a history of the victors as such. Indian men and women were undoubtedly the worst hit, most victimised group during the Rebellion, and throughout the colonial endeavour at large in India that followed. Studies that attempt to suture their story back into mainstream historiography are undoubtedly of great importance. Nonetheless women, both in the colonial era and the subsequent histories of it, have been consistently represented as ‘a species apart, scarcely if at all to be considered a part of civil society’⁴ and thus, despite all their privilege and luxury, this is not an unnecessary glorification of the coloniser’s place in history. As has been detailed, this can be seen as a subalternist, rather than simply a Eurocentric history.

The sources that have been chosen for this essay reflect the topographical and physically variant settings of the Rebellion, as well as the varying contexts of violence. Delhi, Gwalior, Agra, Cawnpore (Kanpur), and Lucknow are all explored within this essay, although numerically Lucknow is greater represented by

virtue of the fact that most of the surviving journals originate here. Men and women are represented in near equal numbers, as this essay aims to convey that the histories of men and women should be viewed as intertwined, rather than divergent.

Structure

The first section of this essay will explore three tropes of stereotypes that came to represent that Anglo-Indian female in 1857, although they have their origins within a metropolitan context. These stereotypes have proven particularly resilient within histories of 1857, and thus this section shall explore whether notions of women as ‘domestic’, ‘helpless’, and ‘passive’ reflect the reality of the female position in 1857, or whether Gramscian ‘traces of autonomous initiative’ can be uncovered to present moments of rebellion within female narratives against their own representation. This section will also address issues of censorship, and the impact it had on the publication of female narratives. The second section of this paper will address the most prominent and enduring of the tropes within the ‘Mutiny narratives’ of men and women alike, that of the ‘violated female.’ It will seek to address how sexual assault impacted upon and determined the representation of women during the Rebellion, and to what extent the denial of

⁴ Gayatri Chakravorty Spivak, ‘Subaltern Studies: Deconstructing Historiography’ in Ranajit Guha (ed.), *Subaltern Studies IV*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1985), p. 358

rape post-Rebellion played an equally important part in this representation.

From Victorian Britain to Imperial India: three tropes and stereotypes

This section will explore three tropes and stereotypes of the feminine which were metamorphosed from the context of metropolitan Victorian Britain to the setting of nineteenth century India. The notions of women as ‘domestic’, ‘helpless’, and ‘passive’ all have their origins within ideas that placed women resolutely in the separate sphere of the home, where they performed their roles as beacons of morality, tenderness and purity. What is clear however is that Anglo-Indian women who experienced the Indian Rebellion were not necessarily complicit in the formation of these representations, and often refused to conform to their own stereotypes.

Women as ‘domestic’

The stereotyping of women as purely domestic beings confined to the spatial limits of the home pervaded Victorian ideas of the feminine and was closely tied to the idea that the opposing sexes could be compartmentalised into ‘separate spheres.’ According to Amanda Vickery ‘the dialectical polarity between home and world is an ancient trope of western writing; the notion that women were uniquely fashioned for the private realm is as least as old

as Aristotle.’⁵ Despite its age-old existence, Leonore Davidoff details how it was the nineteenth century that saw the complete solidification of what shall be called the ‘woman as domestic’ trope in Britain.⁶ The complete subsuming of ‘woman’ into ‘home’ created strict notions of propriety and sexual security which enclosed women within a ‘net of prohibitions and psychological barriers to venturing alone over the threshold of the private home.’⁷ Penelope Tuson demonstrates how the domestic qualities demanded of women in the metropole were expected to be transferred to the imperial setting and thus, in the context of 1857, ‘Victorian notions of domestic femininity and public and private attitudes towards the role and status of women were tested in the hostile and foreign environment of a colonial uprising.’⁸

The doctrine of ‘separate spheres,’ has been upheld by some modern historians in their attempts to allow the Anglo-Indian women to ‘speak’ within female histories of 1857. These historians, such as Jane Robinson and Ira Bhattacharya, have focused largely on the

⁵ Amanda Vickery, ‘Golden Age to Separate Spheres? A Review of the Categories and Chronology of English Women’s History’, *The Historic Journal*, 36, 2 (1993), pp. 383-414, p. 383

⁶ Leonore Davidoff, ‘Gender and the “Great Divide”’: Public and Private in British Gender History’, *Journal of Women’s History*, Vol. 15, No. 1, Spring 2003, pp. 11-27, p. 11

⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 19

⁸ Penelope Tuson, ‘Mutiny Narratives and the Imperial Feminine: European Women’s Accounts of the Rebellion in India in 1857’, *Women’s Studies International Forum*, 21:3, 1998, pp. 291-303, p. 291

domesticised descriptions of day to day activities within female ‘Mutiny narratives,’ which purportedly allow for the exploration of the more ‘human and ordinary aspects of a popular uprising.’⁹ Bhattacharya draws a resolute line of contrast between the narratives of men and women who lived under siege during the Rebellion, which juxtaposes the domestic confinement of women to the military activity of men. In stating that ‘women could not conceive of writing about events that were taking place outside the domestic sphere; they thought it best to limit themselves to what was happening within the four walls of their home’¹⁰ she upholds the conviction that the hegemonising control of the separate spheres doctrine was so complete that it defined not only what women could write about, but also what they could *know*. In her volume *Angels of Albion: Women of the Indian Mutiny*, Robinson likewise emphasises the need to separate the experiences of men and women in 1857. She contends that histories of the Rebellion have, to their detriment, traditionally been androcentric metanarratives centred on ‘a military campaign, all about soldiers and sepoys, arrogance and insurrection, politics and heroes’¹¹ and

therefore women have remained on the fringes of mainstream historiography, never being ‘allowed to speak for themselves.’¹²

The major fault line in the analyses of Robinson and Bhattacharya is that they reinforce the mutual exclusivity of the male and female realms, rendering women to a purely domesticated and thus apolitical and anti-militarised sphere of knowledge. Indeed, it appears that they advocate the creation of a female centric history of the Indian Rebellion in which the context of conflict must be lost altogether, and women seen in the sterile, local, and domesticated environment in which they were supposed to have existed. As Joan W. Scott argues, the upholding of the notion of the separate spheres doctrine is damaging to the writing of history as it ‘perpetuates the fictions that one sphere, the experience of one sex, has little or nothing to do with the other.’¹³ Thus, Robinson’s declaration that women should be allowed to speak is a noble one, but women’s voices should not be seen as wholly distinct from the masculine realm of ‘soldiers and sepoys,’ as shall be demonstrated throughout this section.

One way in which women’s narratives challenge the stereotype of women’s domesticity is through the demonstration of military knowledge and concerns. It is evident

⁹ Ira Bhattacharya, ‘Besieged in Common: Shared Narratives of British Men and Women in 1857’, in (ed.) Andrea Major and Crispin Bates, *Mutiny at the Margins: New Perspectives on the Indian Uprising of 1857*, Volume 2, *Britain and the Indian Uprising*, (New Delhi: Sage, 2013), p. 189

¹⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 185

¹¹ Jane Robinson, *Angels of Albion: Women of the Indian Mutiny*, (London: Penguin Books, 1996), p. xvi

¹² *Ibid.*, p. xx

¹³ Joan W. Scott, ‘Gender: A Useful Category of Historical Analysis’, *The American Historical Review*, Vol. 91, No. 5 (Dec., 1986), pp. 1053-1075, p. 1056

from a close reading of female narratives that women could be and were more privy to military information than some men, and it is this familiarity with and interest in the military events of 1857 that allowed women to break the knowledge boundaries enforced by stereotypical gender roles. This knowledge, which is denied those living under siege by Bhattacharya and Robinson, in turn enabled women to voice overt condemnations of the male leadership in India. This willingness to explicitly encroach upon the masculine realm of war and politics signifies a complete subversion of the trope that enforced women's position as 'submissive and domesticated.'¹⁴

In his introduction to Maria Germon's journal of the siege of Lucknow, Colin Welch stated that readers 'will search her pages in vain for any clue as to what the Mutiny was all about, what lay beneath the surface she records.'¹⁵ He thus implied that on matters of military concerns, Germon will offer the reader no insight; she will not have access to this masculine sphere. Yet, Maria's journal recounted multiple days during which she and the rest of her party were visited by the elite military command at Lucknow, and informed of news regarding the military situation

Saturday, October 17th. We had a slight attack during the night. Two letters came from Cawnpore giving account of our reinforcements – they will not be here quite so soon as was expected.

Sunday, October 25th. The General came and told us that he expected the Madras Column was close to Allum Bagh.

Monday, October 26th. Letters had come in the night with capital news – the Delhi column had beaten the Futteyghur mutineers and taken all their guns.¹⁶

The journal of Lady Julia Inglis also chronicled instances of when she was shown communications from the high military command by her husband, 'this morning, as I was dressing, John brought me a copy of a letter which had been received from General Havelock last night.'¹⁷ Mrs Harris' journal of the siege of Lucknow conveys a good knowledge of military tactics and correspondence, and her access to the supposedly masculine realm of 'rebellion' is displayed when she is able to quote directly from a letter sent by General Wheeler to Sir Henry Lawrence.¹⁸

¹⁴ Vickery, 'Golden Age to Separate Spheres?', p. 384

¹⁵ Maria Germon, *Journal of the Siege of Lucknow: An Episode of the Indian Mutiny*, (London: Constable Publishers, 1958), p. vii

¹⁶ Germon, *Journal of the Siege of Lucknow*, pp. 107-110

¹⁷ Lady Julia Inglis, *The Siege of Lucknow: A Diary*, (London: James R. Osgood, McIlvaine & Co., 1892), p. 135

¹⁸ Mrs James P. Harris, *A Lady's Diary of the Siege of Lucknow Written for the Perusal of Friends at Home*, (London: John Murray, 1858), p. 59

What makes this knowledge and these breaks from the domestic more profound is the overt criticism offered within female narratives on the actions of men. Mrs Harris' journal displays an almost brazen disregard for the military leadership in India. She was not averse to offering open denigrations on the actions of men, for example when discussing the beginnings of the Rebellion she wrote

There have been three regiments disbanded, and the men turned loose on the country to foment ill-feeling; whereas if the *first* which mutinied had been annihilated with grape-shot, there would have been an end to the tumult and many lives saved.¹⁹

Throughout the rest of her journal, Harris is content to critique both General Wheeler and Sir Henry Lawrence, the latter for trusting the Sikhs²⁰ and the former for 'not having removed all the guns and ammunition into the entrenched camp [at Cawnpore] when there was time.'²¹ Adelaide Case, who also penned her experiences under siege at Lucknow, offered further observations on the failings of the military; 'the extraordinary infatuation of officers in native corps never choosing to believe it possible that their regiments could prove faithless, is one of the most remarkable features in the whole of this mutiny.'²² In

contrast to the encroachments upon the masculine world of 'soldiers and sepoy's' shown by women who had access to male relatives or friends within the military command, Ruth Coopland described how her husband was very much kept in the dark on army matters as, being a priest, he was 'not admitted to military consultations.'²³ Despite the limitations upon her husband's knowledge Ruth, who fled from Gwalior to Agra during the Rebellion, cast constant aspersions on the military leadership in her journal, 'it seems surpassingly strange that so little notice was taken of the impending danger by those whose duty it was to care for the safety of a mighty empire.'²⁴

Knowledge and critique of Anglo-Indian men and the military decision making that took place throughout the Rebellion poses a direct challenge to the 'separate spheres' doctrine that posited 'woman' as interchangeable with 'home.' However, the most overt challenge to this stereotyping is demonstrated by women who were able to completely physically extricate themselves from the setting of the domestic, and partake in military activities themselves. The most prominent example of this is the case of Frances Duberly who marched 2000 miles across India chasing sepoy's with her husband's regiment. The book

¹⁹ Ibid., pp. 3-4

²⁰ Ibid., p. 62

²¹ Harris, *A Lady's Diary of the Siege of Lucknow*, p. 67

²² Adelaide Case, *Day by Day at Lucknow: A Journal of the Siege of Lucknow*, (London: Richard Bentley, 1858), p. 281

²³ Ibid., p. 89

²⁴ Ruth Coopland, *A Lady's Escape from Gwalior and Life in the Fort of Agra During the Mutinies of 1857*, (London, Smith, Elder and Co., 1859), p. 79

she published detailing her experiences was entitled *Campaigning Experiences in Rajpootana and Central India During the Suppression of the Mutiny 1857-1858*. The phrase ‘campaigning experiences’ offers the explicit suggestion that the author was an active participant in these campaigns, an entirely inconceivable notion if women were exclusively confined to the spatial and ideological limitations of the domestic.

Duberly’s narrative displays similar breaks with the feminine sphere as those women under siege; she was willing to criticise men of high military standing, and indeed she did so most scathingly. When informed of a General who has refused to move his troops without adequate provisions she offered the rather derisive indictment, ‘without inspecting the invoice we could not tell what condiments might be considered necessary to enable this luxurious force to move.’²⁵ Furthermore, when we recall Robinson’s conviction that histories of 1857 have for too long been ‘a military campaign, all about soldiers and sepoy,’²⁶ at the expense of a female presence, it is difficult to place Duberly’s account of riding into battle outside of these categorisations

The impulse to accompany the cavalry and artillery was irresistible; and I never, never shall

forget the throbbing excitement of that short gallop, when the horse beneath one, raging in his fierce strength, and made with excitement, barely touched the ground.²⁷

Duberly never excluded herself from the world of ‘soldiers and sepoy,’ she considered herself as very much a part of the military operations that were taking place around her. Proclamations such as ‘our fighting instincts were once more aroused’²⁸ are hence indicative of her complete mental and physical removal from the confines of the domestic sphere.

Thus it can be argued that the presence of moments within female narratives during which women depart from the traditional sphere of domesticity challenges Bhattacharya’s analysis that women under siege could only conceive of writing about ‘what they knew best – the sphere of the home.’²⁹ Furthermore, Robinson’s claim that in order to create subalternist histories of the imperial feminine one must look beyond the traditional masculine realms of knowledge, and thus enforce the doctrine of ‘separate spheres,’ means that women are allowed to ‘speak’ but only in a voice conditioned by what the historian believes them capable of knowing. The idea that an Anglo-Indian feminine history of the Indian Rebellion can be written by focusing solely on the domestic merely

²⁵ Mrs Henry Duberly, *Campaigning Experiences in Rajpootana and Central India During the Suppression of the Mutiny, 1857-1858*, (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1859), p. 201

²⁶ Robinson, *Angels of Albion*, p. xvi

²⁷ Duberly, *Campaigning Experiences*, p. 135

²⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 109, my emphasis

²⁹ Bhattacharya, ‘Besieged in Common’, p. 185

continues to uphold Victorian stereotypical categorisations that created static definitive boundaries of what it meant to be male and what it meant to be female during the Rebellion of 1857.

Women as 'Helpless'

Women's histories of the Rebellion must look beyond the simulacrum of female domesticity to uncover a more nuanced approach towards female spheres of knowledge within the setting of war, yet the domestic female is not the only lasting trope preventing this analysis. A further stereotype of women drew upon the idea of female domesticity to create the trope of the 'helpless woman.' If women existed purely in the private realm, away from the masculine world of military and politics, it was implausible that they should be agents of their own defence. This was further enhanced by notions of masculinity that placed the male unequivocally in the role of heroic protector of the female sex. The belief that men held the monopoly on force and chivalry thus ostensibly rendered women to a position of total reliance upon a masculine guardian. Consequently, one of the most enduring tropes of the Indian Rebellion was the innocent female as the 'helpless victim' of Indian aggression.

William Forbes-Mitchell began his account of the Rebellion by stating that it was a story of

'man's bravery and of woman's devotion,'³⁰ necessarily implying that women existed outside the jurisdiction of 'brave.' He declared within his narrative that his motivation for continuing the brutal suppression of the Rebellion was the thought of 'helpless women and children.'³¹ Similar sentiments were expressed in the account of Sir George Trevelyan regarding the killing of women at Cawnpore, 'if the Nana knew the valour and strength of our officers too well to allow him to be merciful, how came it that he did not respect the weakness of our ladies?'³² Remarking on the difficulties of siege life at Cawnpore, Captain Mowbray Thompson stated 'if it were so with men of mature years, sustained by the fullness of physical strength, how much more terrific were the nights passed inside those barracks by our women and children!'³³ Within all of these narratives women are continually placed alongside children in their physical and mental capabilities, and are recurrently seen in a more vulnerable position than Anglo-Indian men. Indeed, 'helpless' almost reads as a prefix in the conjoined expression helpless-women-and-children within these accounts. These notions of womanly helplessness were visually

³⁰ William Forbes-Mitchell, *Reminiscences of the Great Mutiny 1857-59: Including the Relief, Siege, and Capture of Lucknow, and the Campaigns in Rohilcund and Oude*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1893), p. viii

³¹ *Ibid.*, p. 31

³² Sir George Trevelyan, *Cawnpore*, (London: Macmillan and Co., 1886), p. 116

³³ Captain Mowbray Thompson, *The Story of Cawnpore*, (London: Richard Bentley, 1859), p. 67

reconstructed in Joseph Paton's *In Memoriam* which initially depicted British women at the mercy of a group of blood-thirsty sepoys, but in the face of public outrage was modified to represent valiant Highlanders rescuing the helpless women and children as they waited in passive patience.³⁴

The accounts of women are profoundly less likely to advocate the truth of the 'helpless woman' trope. Indira Ghose argues that the accounts of women under siege are predominantly concerned with survival tactics rather than grand notions of male heroism, and create a far more nuanced picture of women as agents of their own defence.³⁵ The journal of Ruth Coopland forms a two-pronged attack on the trope of the 'helpless woman' by both asserting feminine strength as well as denigrating the male monopoly on courage and chivalry. The epigraph to her book is taken from Goethe and sets the tone for a narrative that seeks to examine the fabled fortitude of the male sex in comparison to its decidedly weaker female counterpart

I saw the youth become at once a man, the
grey beard
Turn young again, the child grow to a lusty
youth –
Yes, and that sex, the weak, as men most
call it,

Show itself brave and strong, and of a
ready mind.³⁶

As the first stages of Rebellion began to show in Gwalior, Ruth learnt to fire her husband's rifle, resolute as she was 'not to die without a struggle.'³⁷ Once her husband had been killed on the first evening of violence, Coopland fled the city in the company of other women whose husbands were either dead or missing. During their escape, the women came across a European man sheltering in his house and Coopland expressed in her journal the disgust she felt at the man's distress, 'the weak and childish conduct of this man was sickening; he almost cried, and kept saying, "O we shall all be killed": instead of trying to help, he only proved a burden to us.'³⁸ Coopland orchestrates a complete gender reversal between herself and this man, ascribing to his character all the stereotypical female tropes demonstrated in the abovementioned androcentric chronicles. She systematically destroys the myth of man as protector, concluding that in these moments of intense trauma and violence, women have proved their equal, if not exceeding capabilities in comparison to men. Although she acknowledges the weakness of *some* women, she fundamentally challenges the trope of the 'helpless woman'

³⁴ Joseph Noel Paton, *In Memoriam*, 1858, oil on panel, see Appendix, Figure 1

³⁵ Indira Ghose (ed.), *Memsahibs Abroad: Writings by Women Travellers in Nineteenth Century India*, (Delhi: Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 9

³⁶ Coopland, *A Lady's Escape from Gwalior*, p.i

³⁷ *Ibid.*, p. 111

³⁸ *Ibid.*, p. 131

Some men may think that women are weak and only fitted to do trivial things, and endure petty troubles; and there are women who deserve no higher opinion...but there are many who can endure with fortitude and patience what even soldiers shrink from. Men are fitted by education and constitution to dare and to do yet they have been surpassed, in presence of mind and in the power of endurance, by weak women.³⁹

Instances of male cowardice are not exclusively found in the narratives of women. Captain Mowbray Thompson's chronicle includes the story of one officer at Cawnpore who despite being 'of high rank, and in the prime of life,' failed absolutely in his masculine duties of protection. The Captain recalls how 'this craven-hearted man...seemed not to possess a thought beyond that of preserving his own worthless life...not even the perils of his own wife could rouse this man to exertion.'⁴⁰ The polarity between men and women with regards to bravery and honour is thus further undermined here.

A further example of a woman orchestrating this gender reversal and thus working to undermine the notion of the 'helpless woman' can be found in the account of Julia Haldane, who documented her family's escape from Delhi. Julia's narrative portrayed

how it was her mother, Elizabeth Wagentreiber whose intelligence, instincts and horsemanship saved their lives whilst her husband, George Wagentreiber, obediently followed his wife's instructions. It is Mrs Wagentreiber who first acknowledged that her family were in imminent danger, because it is was her, rather than her husband, who understood the atmosphere of discontent that surrounded them. Her daughter Julia recalled how 'my mother...at once made up her mind to fly...she at once told my stepfather it was time for us to get out of Delhi.'⁴¹ When their male companions attempted to convince Elizabeth that she was acting irrationally 'she was firm and told them they had better do the same at once.'⁴² It is Julia's mother who guarded them whilst the 'rebels' attempted to search the house in which they had taken shelter, and when she deemed that they are no longer safe, it was she who drove their carriage and instructed her husband what to do with his weapons. Although the reliability of Julia Haldane's account has been called into question by William Dalrymple, who favours the account of her step-father George,⁴³ Mr Wagentreiber's publication also described his submission to his wife, 'my dear wife asked me to keep my fire arms at hand, so I took a

³⁹ Coopland, *A Lady's Escape from Gwalior*, p. 117

⁴⁰ Mowbray Thompson, *The Story of Cawnpore*, pp. 90-91

⁴¹ Julia Haldane, *The Story of Our Escape from Delhi in 1857*, (Agra: S. Brown & Sons, 1888), p. 6

⁴² Haldane, *The Story of Our Escape from Delhi*, p. 6

⁴³ William Dalrymple, *The Last Mughal: The Fall of Delhi, 1857*, (London: Bloomsbury Publishing, 2006), p. 519

double-barrelled gun loaded with ball.’⁴⁴ Accordingly, in this scenario it was Mrs Wagentreiber who ‘assumed the role of omnipotent protector’ whilst her husband, for all his weaponry, took on the role of ‘defenceless victim,’⁴⁵ as he was powerless without his wife’s protection and instruction.

Although Mowbray Thompspon is eager to remind his reader that his story is an exceptional case, all of these accounts fundamentally challenge the resolute boundaries of woman as ‘victim’ and male as ‘protector’ perpetuated within the majority of male dominated heroic discourses of the Rebellion. These accounts all serve to undermine the trope of the ‘helpless woman’ by transcribing stereotypical notions of femininity on to the body of the male, whilst at the same time asserting the bravery and superior ‘masculinity’ of the women. Here, women rebelled against their stereotyping and thus battled against the stereotype of their sex as existing within a separate sphere of femininity which posited them as the helpless victim waiting to be saved.

Women as ‘Passive’

The stereotyping of women as ‘passive’ both informed, and was informed by, the previously discussed tropes of womanhood. Female

pacifism was arguably an unavoidable trope if women were seen to be confined to a sphere of domesticity, totally helpless and reliant upon the defence of men. Davidoff details how the nineteenth century British woman would have been considered a ‘site of morality’⁴⁶ representing ‘the emotions, the Heart, or sometimes the Soul.’⁴⁷ Women were also supposed to be ‘pious and pure’⁴⁸ and thus their morality and purity necessarily detached them from the masculine world of war and killing. Mowbray Thompson conveys how the women of Cawnpore, even when suffering unheard of privations, continued to uphold these stereotypical values, ‘looking back upon the horrible straits to which women were driven, the maintenance of modesty and delicate feeling by them to that last, is one of the greatest marvels of the heart-rending memories of those twenty-one days.’⁴⁹ The result of this ostensibly inherent pacifism within the female character was that ‘the world of politics, war and conflict was imagined as wholly removed from these saintly, moral beings.’⁵⁰ Whether apocryphal or not, a story recounted by Mowbray Thompson is indicative of the idea

⁴⁶ Leonore Davidoff, ‘Gender and the “Great Divide”’, p. 20

⁴⁷ Leonore Davidoff, ‘Class and Gender in Victorian England’ in *Sex and Class in Women’s History: Essays from Feminist Studies*, (eds.) Newton, Ryam and Walkowitz, (London: Routledge & Keegan Paul, 1983), p. 19

⁴⁸ Vickery, ‘Golden Age to Separate Spheres?’, p. 384

⁴⁹ Mowbray Thompson, *The Story of Cawnpore*, p. 89

⁵⁰ Heather Streets, *Martial Races: The Military, Race and Masculinity in British Imperial Culture, 1857-1914*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2004), p. 42

⁴⁴ Cited in *ibid.*, p. 186

⁴⁵ Mary A. Procida, *Married to the Empire: Gender, Politics and Imperialism in India, 1883-1947*, (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2002), p. 123

that, no matter what a woman suffered, she would remain determinedly passive and resolutely tender in all she did,

Mrs White, a private's wife, was walking with her husband...her twin children were one in each arm, when a single bullet passed through her husband; killing him, it passes also through both her arms, breaking them, and close behind the breathless husband and father fell the widow and her babes...I saw her afterwards in the main-guard lying upon her back, with the two children, twins, laid one at each breast, while the mother's bosom refused not what her arms had no power to administer⁵¹

The image created by Mowbray Thompson is one of utter quietude amidst death and destruction, with the female at the centre. Devoid of two functioning limbs, this principled woman does not desire revenge and does not display anger; her only concern is for her children. The image of Mrs White tending to her twins is thus one of extreme passivity, in which she is entirely removed from the conflict that rages around her. This image of passivity is similarly embodied in the aforementioned painting of Joseph Paton, *In Memoriam*, which displayed the nineteenth century binary opposition of 'men as active and women as passive,'⁵² as it is the women who were depicted as static, waiting to receive their fate

⁵¹ Mowbray Thompson, *The Story of Cawnpore*, p. 101

⁵² Ralph Crane and Radhika Mohanram, 'The Iconography of Gender: The Indian Uprising of 1857', *Feminist Studies in English Literature*, Volume 16, No, 2 (2008), pp. 5-30, p. 18

either at the hands of the sepoys in the original, or the Highlanders in the revised version.⁵³

The stereotype of women as passive was further enforced by metropolitan commentaries on the Rebellion published by the *Lady's Newspaper*, which consistently implored that feminine values of pity and mercy be enacted upon the rebels. The newspaper argued that it was 'natural that women, especially the women of England, to whose heart the sorrow comes the nearest, should intercede to stay the fury of the Avenger.'⁵⁴ The overt use of female stereotypes of morality and compassion were closely embroiled with Christian values of mercy, and sought to present kind conduct towards Indians as an explicitly *feminine* act

let every woman use the privilege of her gentle but resistless influence in both asking and claiming mercy for these perishing people, to save them from the trampling down of the hoofs of vengeance...let the voice of woman's pity penetrate wherever father, brother, husband, son, or relative may wield a weapon in this warfare, and let the word that it carries be 'Mercy, and not Vengeance!'⁵⁵

These depictions of the passivity of woman arguably conform to Joanna Burke's analysis which contends that 'battle narratives have

⁵³ Paton, *In Memoriam*, See Appendix, Figure 1

⁵⁴ *Lady's Newspaper*, 17 October, 1857 cited in Alison Blunt, 'Embodying War: British Women and Domestic Defilement in the Indian 'Mutiny', 1857-8', *Journal of Historical Geography*, 26, 3 (2000), pp. 403-428, p. 410

⁵⁵ *Lady's Newspaper*, 29 August 1857 cited in Alison Blunt, 'Embodying War', p. 404

tended to contrast feminine pacifism with a more bellicose masculinity.⁵⁶ The presence of bloodlust, thirst for revenge, or overt brutality within female narratives would thus lie in complete opposition to these notions of womanhood detailed by Paton, Mowbray Thompson, and the *Lady's Newspaper*.

However, there are significant breaks with this stereotype in the narratives of many women who showed an overtly brutalised psyche which resulted in their advocacy of sometimes extreme forms of retribution towards those whom they deem to have violated their fellow countrymen and women. This presents a significant challenge to Robinson's suggestion that the world of 'arrogance and insurrection' is divorced from the world of femininity. Furthermore, to argue that women lay outside the masculine sphere of colonial arrogance allows women to be presented as apart from the colonial machinery and the racialised attitudes that accompanied it. Women were not immune to the pervasive Orientalised attitudes that informed colonial arrogance, and Robinson does them too much of a service by suggesting this.

Frances Duberly's desire for revenge is palpable in her account of the Rebellion, 'I can only look forward with awe to the day of vengeance, when our hands shall be dipped in the blood of our enemies, and the tongues of

⁵⁶ Joanna Bourke, *An Intimate History of Killing: Face-to-Face Killing in Twentieth Century Warfare*, (London: Granta Books, 1999), p. 309

our dogs shall be red through the same.'⁵⁷ This statement offers an insight into the overt brutality of the British retribution administered upon the men, women, and children of India in their attempts to reassert control over the territory, and also marks an extreme departure from the trope of woman as moral and passive. The picture Duberly perpetuates of herself could not be more remote from the image of passive Mrs White invoked by Mowbray Thompson. Ruth Coopland offered her reader a similar, only marginally less brutal, opinion on what should happen to the rebellious Indians of Delhi, 'I could not but think it was a disgrace to England that this city, instead of being razed to the ground, should be allowed to stand, with its blood-stained walls and streets.'⁵⁸ Coopland also declared that a rebellious shopkeeper she encountered 'met his richly deserved fate in a ditch near Delhi.'⁵⁹ In a telling moment of vitriol, Adelaide Case wrote; 'I hope that we shall get in and blow them [the rebellious sepoys] up.'⁶⁰ Mrs Harris, the wife of the Lucknow chaplain, at one point describes how she is praying for rain because 'niggers abominate wet weather.'⁶¹ Her use of the term 'nigger' here is even more illuminating when we consider Sam Fortescue's conviction that this derogatory moniker generally fell 'from the

⁵⁷ Duberly, *Campaigning Experiences*, p. 26

⁵⁸ Coopland, *A Lady's Escape from Gwalior*, p. 278

⁵⁹ *Ibid.*, p. 27

⁶⁰ Case, *Day by Day at Lucknow*, p. 113

⁶¹ Harris, *A Lady's Diary of the Siege of Lucknow*, p. 68

tongues of the rougher soldiery.’⁶² The statements of these women are entirely incomparable to the ‘delicate feeling’ of women as detailed within Mowbray Thompson’s narrative.

The presence of vengeful rather than merciful sentiments in female narratives thus works in opposition to the trope of the passive female. The calls from the domestic setting of peaceful England for women to instil morality into their men seem entirely unrealistic in the wholly separate context of war and colonial endeavour. Indira Ghose contends that the ‘violence’ of Ruth Coopland’s feelings towards Indians is perhaps ‘not surprising in the light of her experiences.’⁶³ Indeed, Coopland herself admitted that ‘by some my judgement of the natives of India may be deemed harsh; but I had little time to know them favourably, and have suffered too deeply from them.’⁶⁴ To understand the reticence of these women to sympathise with the Indians is not to condone their vocal support of a brutal regime, rather, to understand these calls for revenge allows the historian to place women firmly in the realm of ‘masculine’ militarised ideology and suggests that any portrayal of them as inherently moral or passive does not collude with the reality of their rather unmerciful philosophies. Just as

male attitudes were conditioned by Orientalist, racist, and militarised notions of the Other and the Rebellion itself, so were those of the Memsahibs of 1857.

Sectional summary

The moments of dislocation from established gender tropes and stereotypes throughout female narratives suggest that there existed within the female consciousness an active desire to rebel against her representation. Female publications on the Indian Rebellion offer the reader counternarratives to those produced by men, and often yield challenges to those histories being produced now which continue to replicate the stereotypical position of women in 1857. The contrasting images of women as represented by men, and women as a self-represented reality, suggest that current histories upholding notions of separate spheres and stark gender polarisation are failing to uncover these ‘traces of autonomous initiative’ so crucial to the creation of a feminine history of 1857. If the traditional direction of knowledge transmission is to be reversed, so that the female perspective of the Indian Rebellion is considered a valuable source outside of the realm of social histories of domesticity, these moments of dislocation will play a central role.

However, there is evidence of self-censorship within these narratives which means that the *absences* in women’s texts are also

⁶² Sam Fortescue, ‘“Rascally Pandies and Feringhi Dogs”: a Study of British Attitudes to Indians during the 1857 Uprising’, *Edinburgh Papers in South Asian Studies*, Number 18, 2003, pp. 1-32, p. 4

⁶³ Ghose, *Memsahibs Abroad*, p. 199

⁶⁴ Coopland, *A Lady’s Escape from Gwalior*, p. vi

crucial to this re-examining. Women who dared to make incursions within their narratives into spheres of knowledge traditionally considered beyond their remit often accompany their observations with apologies. Frances Duberly, the most explicit case of a woman breaking the boundaries of feminine stereotypes began her journal by stating, ‘I trust that I shall be pardoned if occasionally I am tempted to touch upon points which may seem beyond a woman’s province.’⁶⁵ Adelaide Case struggled over the publication of her journal because ‘it cannot but fail (for no woman is equal to the task) to do justice to the heroism, or to describe in adequate terms the great sufferings, of the gallant defenders of Lucknow.’⁶⁶ In exploring Victorian discourses, Foucault remarks that

silence itself – the things one declines to say, or is forbidden to name, the discretion that is required between different speakers – is less the absolute limit of discourse, the other side from which it is separated by a strict boundary, than an element that functions alongside the things said, with them and in relation to them within over-all strategies⁶⁷

In relation to female self-censorship this analysis is particularly relevant, as it conveys how these moments of rebellion are central to forming an understanding of the female

⁶⁵ Duberly, *Campaigning Experiences*, p. v

⁶⁶ Case, *Day by Day at Lucknow*, p. iv

⁶⁷ Michel Foucault, *The History of Sexuality: An Introduction*, translated by Robert Hurley, (Middlesex, Penguin Books, 1984), p. 27

position in 1857. Indeed, it is the historian’s duty to acknowledge that silences can speak as loudly as concrete assertions. In his exploration of British representations of India within fiction, Ashok Malhotra details how publications had to be placed ‘in relation to the demand and prevailing fashions of the literary market place.’⁶⁸ Arguably, non-fiction writing must be viewed in the same way, with the market place fashions being transplanted by the conventions and tastes of a fundamentally judgemental society, conditioned by a patriarchal system of female oppression.

Furthermore, these narratives were produced in order to be sold, and thus the publisher would have enforced certain limitations conditioned by what they believed the public to desire.

What Alison Blunt calls the ‘central and often transgressive’⁶⁹ role of women thus must be uncovered, not overlooked, because it speaks from the margins of history, rather than the traditional body of the masculine metanarrative.

Exploring the unspeakable: sexual assault in 1857

The notion of the ‘violated woman’ is the most lasting of all the tropes that surround the Rebellion of 1857. This trope was founded

⁶⁸ Ashok Malhotra, ‘Book-History Approaches to India: Representations of the Subcontinent in Novel and Verse, 1780-1823’, *History Compass*, 8/2 (2010), pp. 143-151, p. 143

⁶⁹ Blunt, ‘Embodying War’, p. 404

upon the widespread rumours concerning the sexual assault of European women by Indian men during the Rebellion, and these tales are pervasive throughout the narratives of both men and women. The epicentre of these rumours is impossible to pinpoint, but the fate of the two hundred women at Cawnpore, whose deceased bodies were found deposited in a well ‘naked and dismembered,’⁷⁰ are the most lasting and penetrating images of the defiled woman. When the uprising had been quelled, the British commissioned a fact-finding report to investigate the rumours and establish the truths; namely, the veracity behind ‘the alleged dishonour of European females at the time of the mutinies.’⁷¹ The subsequent findings of what is now ubiquitously termed the ‘Muir Report’ are used as evidence by most modern historians to counter all claims in colonial discourses that perpetuated these rumours as absolute truths. However, during the Rebellion these rumours transformed the female body into a powerful site upon which idealised notions of femininity, honour, and womanhood were projected. The following section will seek to address how this ‘unspeakable’ phenomenon came to determine the position of women in 1857.

⁷⁰ Rosie Llewellyn-Jones, *The Great Uprising in India, 1857-58: Untold Stories, Indian and British*, (Suffolk: The Boydell Press, 2007), p. 184

⁷¹ Sir William Muir, ‘Memorandum on the Treatment of European Females’, *Records of the Intelligence Department of the Government of the North-West Provinces of India during the Mutiny of 1857*, Vol. I, (Edinburgh: T. & T. Clark, 1902), p.367

The unspeakable

The notion of rape as unspeakable, or at least unrepresentable, is reflective of Foucault’s conviction that in the nineteenth century, ‘on the subject of sex, silence became the rule.’⁷² The repression of sex is palpable in the accounts of men and women who never discuss the details of the rumours that they hear. Adelaide Case forecast that if the sepoys were to attack the women at Lucknow they would ‘commit horrors too fearful even to think of!’⁷³ Maria Germon pronounced that the tales she heard from the women who had escaped from Seetapore were ‘too barbarous and inhuman to mention.’⁷⁴ Mrs Harris too alluded to fates worse than death when she describes the ‘wholesale murder (and even worse) of English women.’⁷⁵ Constant hints at something ‘more’ than death subdue sex at the level of language, but continuously remind the reader of its presence.

On the other hand, sex was subdued, but not as silenced in male narratives of the Rebellion. Reverend A. Duff was more explicit when he announced that the ‘murderous savages’ liked ‘to play with their victims before dispatching them!’⁷⁶ John Chalmers unequivocally pertained to sexual violence

⁷² Foucault, *The History of Sexuality*, p. 3

⁷³ Case, *Day by Day at Lucknow*, p. 103

⁷⁴ Germon, *Journal of the Siege of Lucknow*, p. 41

⁷⁵ Harris, *A Lady’s Diary of the Siege of Lucknow*, p. 178

⁷⁶ Reverend A. Duff, *The Indian Rebellion: Its Causes and Results in a Series of Letters*, (New York: Robert Carter & Brothers, 1858), p. 63

when he wrote of ‘European ladies violated, publicly exposed, and then tortured to death.’⁷⁷

In one account, written by a clergyman, the sepoys who instigated the murder of the prisoners at the Red Fort in Delhi are described as having taken

forty-eight females, most of the girls of from ten to fourteen, many delicately nurtured ladies, violated them, and kept them for the base purposes of the heads of the insurrection for a whole week. At the end of that time, they made them strip themselves, and gave them up to the lowest of the people, to abuse in broad day-light in the streets of Delhi.⁷⁸

Therefore, the position of women as victims of sexual assault, be this real or imagined, is far more pronounced in the accounts of men. The silences that surrounded sex, particularly in female accounts, is central to forming an understanding of how sexual assault came to determine the plight of women with regards to rape as the ‘unrepresentable centre’⁷⁹ of Mutiny narratives. Whereas women were able to combat notions of domesticity, helplessness, and passivity, if any women were raped (and as Sharpe contends it is feasible that

a few were⁸⁰) they would probably never make their experience public knowledge.⁸¹ This resulted in women becoming the ‘sexed subject of colonial discourse,’⁸² and their ‘experiences’ were predominantly related through the mouthpiece of masculine narratives which posited them simultaneously as victims and utterly degraded human beings. This ‘violent reproduction of gender roles’⁸³ reinforced the sexual superiority of men by reminding readers that it was the woman’s sex that was so easily taken.

Sanctity of womanhood

One of the ways that women came to be represented by their own unspeakable fate was through the extreme worshiping of female womanhood which arose from the fear that women’s bodies were being violated. In turn, women’s sex was invested ‘with such extraordinary value that the lives of women themselves [were] devalued.’⁸⁴ Ruth Coopland expressed how the men at Agra came to the conclusion that a woman’s honour was of uncompromising value,

I believe it was planned amongst the officers that, in the case it became inevitable that the women would fall into the hands of the

⁷⁷ John Chalmers, *Letters from the Indian Mutiny 1857-59*, (ed.) Richard Terrell, (Norwich: Michael Russell, 1992), p. 107

⁷⁸ Cited in Kim Wagner, *The Great Fear of 1857: Rumours, Conspiracies and the Making of the Indian Uprising*, (Oxfordshire: Peter Lang Ltd, 2010), p. 236

⁷⁹ Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire: The Figure of the Woman in the Colonial Text*, (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1993), p. 66

⁸⁰ *Ibid.*, p. 67

⁸¹ Nancy Paxton, ‘Mobilising Chivalry: Rape in British Novels about the Indian Uprising of 1857’, *Victorian Studies*, Vol. 36, No. 1 (Autumn, 1992), pp. 5-30, p. 8

⁸² Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire*, p. 12

⁸³ *Ibid.*, p. 67

⁸⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 100

rebels, they should all be blown up in the powder magazine: even the soldiers said they would themselves shoot us rather than we should be treated like the Cawnpore ladies⁸⁵

The agency of women in determining their own fate is entirely absent here. A woman's honour is set at a decidedly higher price than her life and thus women are in a position of complete subservience to the pronouncements of men, who hold the monopoly on violence. According to Mary Procida, the death of the women at Cawnpore epitomised 'the sanctity of British womanhood'⁸⁶ which thenceforth created a condition of absolute, non-negotiable purity for all women to aspire to. For Sharpe, the devotion to the female cause taken up by the men who looked down the well at Cawnpore, resulted in 'the fetishisation of body parts' which in turn 'objectifie[d] the female corpse over and above any value that women might have in life.'⁸⁷ According to one account, the captured women at Cawnpore received a note from Nana Sahib detailing his 'bad motives' but the women did not ever consider the loss of their honour, and received the letter 'with great indignation, and a firm resolution to die, or kill each other with their own teeth, if any forcible means were employed to seduce them.'⁸⁸ The absurdity of this suggestion is

merely evidence of the extreme lengths women were expected to go in order to avoid becoming the 'fallen' woman. Furthermore, these notions created a hierarchical system of value in which the sanctity of womanhood was placed firmly above the living body of the woman, forcing women to aspire to become an idealised representation of themselves.

The story of Miss Wheeler, the daughter of Sir Henry Wheeler who commanded the besieged at Cawnpore, perhaps best epitomises the reverence of women's honour above any other facets of their personality. Miss Wheeler, it was supposed, had been captured during the initial 'Cawnpore massacre' at the Satichaura Ghat by a man named Ali Khan, and subsequently taken to his house. The *Friend of India* newspaper commented on the 3rd September 1857 that Miss Wheeler 'remained with this man til night when he went out and came home drunk; so soon as he was asleep she took a sword and cut off his head, his brother's head, his wife's and two children's... and Miss Wheeler then jumped down a well and was killed.'⁸⁹ Other versions of the events substitute the sword for a revolver, but they all result in the self-sacrificial suicide of Miss Wheeler at the altar of female honour, a fate that mirrored

⁸⁵ Coopland, *A Lady's Escape from Gwalior*, p. 215

⁸⁶ Procida, *Married to the Empire*, p. 113

⁸⁷ Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire*, p. 66

⁸⁸ W. J. Shepherd, *A Brief Account, by Mr Shepherd, of the Outbreak at Cawnpore, and the disasters which resulted therefrom to the Christian community of the*

station, in (ed.) G. W. Forrest, *Selections from the Letters Despatches and Other State Papers Preserved in the Military Department of the Government of India 1857-58*, Volume II, (Calcutta: Military Department Press, 1902), p. 138

⁸⁹ Cited in Harish Trivedi and Richard Allen (eds.), *Literature and Nation: Britain and India 1800-1990*, (London: Routledge, 2000), p. 228

that of her fellow women at Cawnpore. As a result, Miss Wheeler ‘became an almost iconic figure of the Mutiny, embodying the purity...of the British woman.’⁹⁰ Despite the stories universally detailing Miss Wheeler’s skilful use of weaponry, it was her chastity and her morality, as opposed to her military courage or expertise, for which she was remembered.⁹¹ Miss Wheeler’s true Eurasian identity was revealed only years after the Rebellion, when she was found to be very much alive and living in a Muslim household. Her name was thus tarnished; as exemplified by Trevelyan who detailed how her decision to forgo her womanly morals could be explained because she was ‘by no means of pure English blood.’⁹² However, her appropriation as a figure of purity had served its purpose, reinforcing the subjugation of the female to the ideals and morals that defined her in masculine discourse.

Retaliation and revenge

The third way in which sexual assault came to determine the position of women in 1857 was through the use of rape to justify brutal retaliatory measures against Indian rebels. Francis Jarman describes the stories of rape as

‘energising myths’⁹³ whereby men would be galvanised into action against those who had insulted women. In the diary he published of his time in India following the Rebellion, *The Times* correspondent William Howard Russell observed the abundant presence of scrawls and drawings inscribed on the walls of houses along the road to Cawnpore, imploring those who next passed to ‘revenge your slaughtered countrywomen!’ accompanied by pictures of hanging sepoy.⁹⁴ Similar sentiments expressing the desire for vengeance and retribution as a result of the stories of violation are found in the diaries of men who fought during the Rebellion. William Forbes-Mitchell’s account recorded how, at the battle of Secundrabâgh, ‘by the time the bayonet had done its work of retribution, the throats of our men were hoarse with shouting “Cawnpore! You bloody murderers!”’⁹⁵ In a letter written to his sister, Fred Roberts described the massacre at Cawnpore and claimed that he ‘would undergo cheerfully any privation, any amount of work, living in the hopes of a *revenge* on these cruel murderers.’⁹⁶ John Tenniel’s *Punch* cartoon ‘The British Lion’s Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger,’ published in August 1857, is a

⁹⁰ Grace Moore, *Dickens and Empire: Discourses of Class, Race and Colonialism in the Works of Charles Dickens*, (Hampshire: Ashgate Publishing Limited), p. 151

⁹¹ Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire*, p. 71

⁹² Trevelyan, *Cawnpore*, p. 213

⁹³ Francis Jarman, *White Skin, Dark Skin, Power, Dream: Collected Essays on Literature and Culture*, (United States: The Borgo Press, 2005), p. 25

⁹⁴ William Howard Russell, *My Diary in India in the Year 1858-9*, (London: Routledge, Warne, and Routledge, 1860), p. 144

⁹⁵ Forbes-Mitchell, *Reminiscences*, p. 57

⁹⁶ Fred Roberts, *Letters Written During the Indian Mutiny*, (London: Macmillan and Co., Limited, 1924), p. 45

further example of the use of sexual assault to justify revenge. The Bengal Tiger is depicted standing over the prostrate body of a naked, white woman whilst an enraged British Lion righteously launches itself forwards in vengeance.⁹⁷ This cartoon ‘re-inscribe[d] the trope of the vulnerable white woman in need of white masculine protection from the bestial brown man’⁹⁸ and thus called upon the noble Briton to avenge his fallen female compatriots.

According to Francis Jarman, ‘the outraging of a white woman by a non-white man overturns the established structures that govern dealings between the races, thereby provoking and justifying the savage revenge that usually follows.’⁹⁹ In this context, masculine desire for revenge was not founded upon or motivated by the supposed horror of the female experience in 1857. Rather, British men read the rape of ‘their’ women as a profound challenge to the political, military, and racial hierarchies of India, whereby their monopoly on power was being shaken to its very foundations by the assumed sexual depravity of the Indian Other. The rumours of sexual assault were thus utilised as a means by which to ‘accelerate the barbarisation of

warfare.’¹⁰⁰ As has been previously demonstrated, women were not always averse to the ruthless tactics of the British soldiers; they too felt the need for revenge. What women did not do, however, is equate the politics of rape to the politics of empire as a means through which to express their ‘imperial fears and fantasies.’¹⁰¹ As stated by Nancy Paxton, the prevalence of sexual assault in 1857 ‘emerged at a particular crisis point in the British rule of India and performed specific ideological work.’¹⁰² This ideological work functioned to equate the fragile position of women to the fragile position of British rule in India whereby women’s violation became a tool through which to position counterinsurgency efforts as the ‘restoration of moral order.’¹⁰³ Thus, the British portrayals reduced women to the status of a pawn in the imperial game, their bodies depreciated to a site upon which rival males contended a battle for military and political supremacy.

Truths and fictions

The much appropriated quote of the Greek playwright Aeschylus that ‘in war, truth is the

⁹⁷ John Tenniel, ‘The British Lion’s Vengeance on the Bengal Tiger’, *Punch*, August 22 1857, pp. 76-77, see Appendix, Figure 2

⁹⁸ Crane and Mohanram, ‘The Iconography of Gender’, p. 15

⁹⁹ Jarman, *White Skin, Dark Skin, Power, Dream*, p. 26

¹⁰⁰ Roy, ‘Combat, Combat Motivation and the Construction of Identities’, p. 30

¹⁰¹ Elizabeth Kolsky, ‘“The Body Evidencing the Crime”: Rape on Trial in Colonial India, 1860 -1947’, *Gender and History*, Volume 22, Number 1, April 2010, pp. 109-130, p. 109

¹⁰² Paxton, ‘Mobilising Chivalry’, p. 6

¹⁰³ Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire*, p. 6

first casualty'¹⁰⁴ is central to the widespread presence of sexual assault, or at least allusions to it, within narratives concerning 1857 and their subsequent historical evaluation. It is now widely accepted that tales of brutal sex crimes were the result of runaway imaginations, and the rumours themselves were the biggest truth-casualties of the conflict. As argued by Kaye,

Beyond [the] wholesale killing and burying, which sickened the whole Christian world, and roused English manhood in India to a pitch of national hatred that took years to allay, the atrocity was not pushed. The refinements of cruelty – the unutterable shame – with which, in some of the chronicles of the day, this hideous massacre was attended, were but fictions of an excited imagination¹⁰⁵

Modern historians such as Rudrangshu Mukherjee support Kaye's convictions, basing their assessments on the findings of the Muir Report, which Mukherjee describes as 'very definite.'¹⁰⁶ Penelope Tuson is perhaps in the minority when she contends that 'it is simply impossible from the women's narratives to find evidence either to substantiate the reality of rape of white women, or to dispel the

myths.'¹⁰⁷ Indeed, even within the Muir Report itself one can find ambiguities. The postscript to the report, dated 5th January 1858 reads

There are points connected with the long detention of the Nana's victims which render Cawnpoor a peculiar case, and may cast a suspicion on the treatment of the prisoners there... I would recommend further particular enquiry there.¹⁰⁸

What is interesting about Tuson's analysis is that it is concerned with women's accounts, whereas the majority of other histories examining these rumours are based on findings by men. Indeed, all eight of the people from whom Muir sought information for his report were men.¹⁰⁹ The re-examination of the Muir Report and the presence of sexual assault within female narratives could be an interesting line of future historical investigation, although it will always be complicated by nineteenth century notions of dishonour and the extreme silencing of sex.

Differentiating between truths and fictions is not the aim of this essay however; rather the concern is with the transition that was made from 'truth' to 'fiction,' from established fact to figment of the overworked imagination. Central to this transition is the way in which these changing discourses

¹⁰⁴ Aeschylus, cited in Elena V. Baraban, Stephan Jaeger, and Adam Muller (eds.), *Fighting Words and Images: Representing War Across the Disciplines*, (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 2012), p. 132

¹⁰⁵ Sir John William Kaye, *A History of the Sepoy War in India, 1857-1858*, Volume II, (London: W. H. Allen & Co., 1870), p. 373

¹⁰⁶ Rudrangshu Mukherjee, "'Satan Let Loose upon Earth': The Kanpur Massacres in India in the Revolt of 1857," *Past and Present*, No. 128 (Aug., 1990), pp. 92-116, p. 115

¹⁰⁷ Tuson, 'Mutiny Narratives and the Imperial Feminine', p. 299

¹⁰⁸ Muir, 'Memorandum on the Treatment of European Females', p. 379

¹⁰⁹ Muir, 'Memorandum on the Treatment of European Females', p. 368

determined the position of women in 1857. The male accounts published once the Rebellion had been suppressed, such as those of Mowbray Thompson, Trevelyan, and Forbes-Mitchell all clearly refuted the rumours and establish that no women were violated. Regarding Cawnpore, Trevelyan recorded how Indian sentries were given ‘a strict charge to suffer no one to molest the prisoners.’¹¹⁰ Mowbray Thompson claimed that ‘there is reason to hope that one, and only one exception to the bitterest of anguish was allotted to them [the women] – immunity from the brutal violence of their captors’ worst passions.’¹¹¹ Forbes-Mitchell made a similar assumption when he stated that ‘most of the women had been most barbarously murdered, but not dishonoured, with the exception of a few of the young and good-looking ones.’¹¹² These accounts were all published at a later date than the previously mentioned male accounts, such as that of Reverend Duff, which offered no such denials.

There is thus a distinctive break between male accounts that were published during or in the immediate aftermath of the Rebellion, and those published in the years to come. It can be assumed that the British did not commission the Muir Report to exonerate the name of the Indian rebels, and thus it must be questioned why they were not content to allow the Indian

name to be tarnished with the brush of sexual deviancy? If we separate the issue of sexual assault from truth-finding, the changing position of men regarding the rape of European women reveals ‘the ambiguities and contradictions in the interfaces of issues such as race, woman, and nationhood in nineteenth-century India.’¹¹³ As has been previously demonstrated, the fate of women was closely tied to the fate of the British mission in India, and as a result, any violation of women would have occasioned a profound reordering of traditional racial and power hierarchies. As argued by Sharpe, the stories of rape and cruelty had high stakes precisely because they demonstrated that the rebels ‘had unsettled the colonial order to the degree of reversing its hierarchy of mastery and servitude.’¹¹⁴ Hence the transition from Rebellion to peace necessitated the disproving of the rumours to fully reassert British control, as well as to affirm that the British hold over India had never become so tenuous as to allow their women to be violated in this way. Nowhere in the official reports are women consulted, despite the matter being centred upon *their* bodies, and consequently, their position as a tool of empire is once again enforced here.

¹¹⁰ Trevelyan, *Cawnpore*, p. 212

¹¹¹ Mowbray Thompson, *The Story of Cawnpore*, p. 212

¹¹² Forbes-Mitchell, *Reminiscences*, p. 17

¹¹³ Indrani Sen, *Women and Empire: Representations in the Writings of British India 1858-1900*, (New Delhi: Orient Longman Private Limited, 2002), p. 26

¹¹⁴ Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire*, p. 65

Sectional summary

The trope of the ‘violated woman’ determined the position of women in 1857 through the eradication of female agency in expressing a distinctly female experience. Women neither challenged the prevalence of rape during the Rebellion nor gave witness to its absolute truth, rather it was men as part of a mobilised army whom acted as the agents of rumour-spreading, and then subsequently reinforced the stories as fictions. Although most women were killed after their alleged rape, this does not excuse the lack of female input in the examination of sexual assault; indeed, none of the contributors could produce first hand testimonies themselves. The lack of female presence within the subsequent investigation is rather indicative of a male-lead drive to determine the way in which sexual assault, and thus women, were perceived in the wake of the Rebellion. It is important to ask *why* the transition was made from truth to fiction, and for *whom*. Arguably, women’s bodies were appropriated to serve certain functions when necessary, such as the justification for brutal retaliatory measures, but when this need was eliminated by the restoration of control, the denial of their supposed experience was advantageous for the men who were trying to reassert political and ideological authority. The strict silencing of sex and the horror and shame that so often accompanies rape resulted in a vacuum within female narratives with the unrepresentable,

unspeakable act at its centre. Although self-censorship determined what a woman could publish, the matter of sex had far more grievous social consequences and thus the silences around sex for women were even more resolute than the previously explored tropes.

Conclusion

This essay has sought to examine the ways in which Anglo-Indian women were represented through the tropes and stereotypes of colonial discourses during and after the Indian Rebellion of 1857, and to what extent these representations reflected the reality of the female position. By studying the valuable and interesting primary sources discussed above, it has been possible to produce a history of these women that is not purely conditioned by nineteenth century tropes and stereotypes. In doing so, this essay has argued that the existing literature which fails to challenge these ingrained assumptions by typecasting the Memsahib to a figure of utter domestication and purity, needs to be reconsidered. The narratives discussed here show that the Memsahib was neither spatially confined to the home nor ‘pure’ of heart and mind. The Anglo-Indian woman could be as conceited, as vengeful, as ignorant, and as racist as her male counterparts; she was not an Angel from the prelapsarian world of Albion. Neither however, was she helpless or inherently reliant upon the bravery and fortitude of man. Indeed, when

thrust into the masculine world of conflict, the Anglo-Indian woman appears to have been rather resourceful.

Thus, it has been argued that the female narratives produced during the Indian Rebellion fundamentally challenge the separate spheres doctrine which is so frequently upheld by the current historical literature. The evidence shows that these women were indeed capable of transgressing female knowledge-realms. With reference to the trope of women as ‘domestic,’ this transgression is most explicit through incursions into the ‘masculine’ world of military and politics. The trope of the ‘helpless’ woman is further destabilised by those narratives which serve to invert typical gender roles by transporting stereotypical notions of weak femininity on to the body of the male, whilst at the same time affirming the bravery and superior ‘masculinity’ of women. The trope of the woman as ‘passive’ is challenged by women who display overtly ruthless and antagonistic sentiments within their narratives, which in turn challenges the notion that women were somehow set apart from the colonial endeavour, or free from racist, Orientalised ideologies.

Although the accounts studied challenge the traditional representation of women in these three areas, the trope of the ‘fallen’ woman and the area of sexual assault prove a greater challenge to the uncovering of women’s agency. The stigmatisation of sex and the

inordinately high price that was placed upon female honour relegated women to a position of near inexorable silence. Women neither challenged the prevalence of rape during the Rebellion nor gave witness to its absolute truth. Instead, rumours of sexual assault were disseminated from within a mobilised army of males, who later acted to reject these supposed truths as fictions. Indeed, this transition from truth to fiction presents an important topic for further historical debate, and any such analysis should examine the motives for and against the propagation and subsequent denial of these rumours. Indeed, even the establishment of these stories as fictions could be up for further exploration. In order to do this it would be necessary to assess the British and Indian experience of 1857 within a broader framework of the prevalence of rape at times of war, as well as the specific colonial context from which these issues arose. Such an analysis would do well to simultaneously evaluate the actions of the British in more searching and critical ways. At the very least, there should be some recognition that the majority of our knowledge on sexual assault in 1857 originates within androcentric colonial discourses.

A further line of possible inquiry would be the way in which female self-censorship has affected the subsequent historical exploration of women. There is a potential to argue that moments of dislocation from established gender roles, the critique of the male leadership

in India for example, are perhaps not as pronounced as they might be because of women's self-induced silence. Hannah Arendt's concept of the 'banality of evil,' whereby evil acts can be perpetrated by those without an inherent wickedness or indeed, evil motives, but do have extreme consequences¹¹⁵ might be translated onto a gendered framework of historical analysis. What could be termed the 'banality of omission' would result in the displacement of 'evil acts' in favour of self-censorship, whereby women who consciously conformed to stereotypes of womanhood would be guilty of silencing themselves, thus having an extreme effect on the subsequent exploration of women's history. They would have initiated their own silencing and their own historical marginalisation, despite this not being their explicit *intention*.

Ultimately, as contended by Anne

McClintock, 'white women were not hapless onlookers of empire but were ambiguously complicit both as colonisers and colonised, privileged and restricted, acted upon and acting.'¹¹⁶ Herein lie the obscurities within the female position in 1857; the Anglo-Indian woman was neither wholly determined by the tropes and stereotypes that came to define her, nor was she able to assert her agency completely. Accordingly, the historian looking to truly explore the female experience of 1857 must not constrain themselves to a face value reading of the female narratives; rather it is imperative to place these publications in context and look for those valued silences, the traces of autonomous initiative which when cultivated, allow women to speak in a voice other than that conditioned by what the historian believes them to be capable of knowing. 🧐

¹¹⁵ Dana Villa, 'Hannah Arendt: 1906-1975', *The Review of Politics*, Volume 71, Number 1, 'Political Philosophy in the Twentieth Century' (Winter 2009), pp. 20-36, p. 35

¹¹⁶ Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest*, (New York: Routledge, 1995), p. 6

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