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The British-Indian experience:
Flora Annie Steel as an
unconventional 'memsahib'.

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Fig. 1. Flora Annie Steel.

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1. Introduction

At the age of twenty Flora Annie Webster and her brand-new husband Henry William Steel set off for India. Thus began Flora's life in a country she would come to find intriguing but mysterious and "hard for a Westerner to grip" (Steel 92). During the twenty-two years she and her husband spent in India, Flora became interested in the lives of Indian women, learnt the local languages and explored rural Indian culture. These interests helped shape her writings which deal with Indian life and the immense difference between the Eastern and the Western way of living. Steel published over thirty volumes of work, consisting of short stories and novels, as well as non-fictional works on the history of India, a feminist pamphlet and an autobiography. Her short stories and novels helped establish her reputation as Rudyard Kipling's only serious rival and her unusual insight into the lives of the Indian people caused her work to be seen as a rich source of knowledge about India (Hulme, McDougall 74). However, as Jenny Sharpe puts it, "Flora Annie Steel, perhaps more than anyone else, embodies the memsahib in all of her contradictions" (Qtd. in Hulme, McDougall 74). While she made a genuine attempt to grasp 'native' life and is held to be one of the few writers who did not reduce Indian women to voiceless entities, she nevertheless fiercely supported British rule in India (Hulme, McDougall 74) and held quite contradictory opinions concerning gender, to the extent of sometimes intensifying major colonial myths about women (Sen 134). In this respect I will explore how her short stories accurately portray the circumstances under which Indian women lived and how they deal with important social issues while at the same time reinforcing western stereotypical images about 'the Orient'.

Because British India forms the background of this thesis, I will first take a closer look at the British presence in India. After that, I will focus on the concept of gender in relation to imperialism by looking at the position of women in British India. Furthermore, I intend to look at how Flora Annie Steel fulfilled her role as a married British Indian woman, a 'memsahib', in a rather unconventional way, by expressing a genuine concern for the Indian people and for the women in particular. I will

link this to her support of the suffragettes back in Britain. And, finally, I plan to explore how her writings express both her love for and her dissatisfaction with the British Empire.

2. The British in India

2.1. Orientalism

In the nineteenth century, Britain had become one of the most powerful nations of that time. The British Empire had grown to include territories on almost every continent and had expanded its influence over several colonies. Because of their power status and the belief in their superiority, the British adopted and sustained certain Western stereotypical images about 'the Orient'. In Orientalism Edward Said examines and criticizes the notion of 'the Orient' as a powerful European ideological construction. He questions a wide variety of assumptions about 'the East' and explores how 'the West' deals with the 'otherness' of Eastern culture, customs and beliefs. His work forms an important background for postcolonial studies as it reveals how the created image of 'the Orient' can be a reflection of European imperialism and racism.

The French and the British have had a long tradition of Orientalism, a way of coming to terms with 'the Orient' that is based on the Orient's place in European Western experience (1). These nations have dominated 'the Orient' from the beginning of the nineteenth century until the end of the Second World War (4). Said describes 'the Orient' as "the place of Europe's greatest and richest and oldest colonies, the source of its civilizations and languages, its cultural contestant, and one of its deepest and most recurring images of 'the Other'" (1). In addition, "'the Orient' has helped to define Europe (or the West) as its contrasting image, idea, personality, experience." (1). Since the Second World War America has dominated 'the Orient', and approaches it as France and Britain once did (4).

The term 'Orientalism' encompasses different, but interdependent meanings (2). The first designation for Orientalism is an academic one: anyone who teaches, researches, or writes about 'the Orient' studies Orientalism and is therefore an Orientalist (Said 2). Related to this academic

tradition is a more general definition of Orientalism as a style of thought based upon an ontological and epistemological distinction made between 'the Orient' and 'the Occident' (2). The third and more historically defined meaning of Orientalism deals with a Western style of dominating, restructuring, and having authority over 'the Orient' (Said 3).

What is important is the awareness that 'the Orient' is not merely there, just as 'the Occident' itself is not just there either (Said 4). 'The Orient' as well as 'the West' are man-made geographical, cultural and historical entities (5). However, it would be wrong and deceitful to conclude that 'the Orient' is a creation with no corresponding reality or to assume that it is just a figure of the imagination (Said 5). Instead, the relationship between 'Occident' and 'Orient' is a relationship of domination and power (5): Orientalism is a product of European-Atlantic power over 'the Orient' rather than a truthful discourse about 'the Orient' itself (Said 6). Furthermore, Orientalism is never far from the idea of European superiority and the distinction between 'us' Europeans and 'them' non-Europeans that goes along with it (7). In the nineteenth century, race theories, based on Darwin's theories, helped to develop theses of Oriental degeneracy and inequality and supported the division of races into advanced and backward, or European-Aryan and Oriental-African (Said 206). Consequently, the whole question of imperialism, as it was debated in the nineteenth century, was dominated by the advanced/backward binarism (Said 207). Said describes the consequences of this binary division as follows: "The Oriental was linked thus to elements in Western society (delinquents, the insane, women, the poor) having in common an identity best described as lamentably alien" (207). Orientals were not perceived as people, but as problems to be solved or as entities to be subjected (Said 207).

One of the crucial developments in nineteenth-century Orientalism was the forming of a body of essential ideas about 'the Orient'; the word 'Oriental' now automatically called up a coherent cluster of seemingly objective information about 'the Orient' (205). During the entire nineteenth century 'the Orient' was a favourite place for Europeans to travel in and write about (Said 157): "around 60,000 books dealing with the Near Orient were written between 1800 and 1950"

(204). A large part of these books represented 'the Orient' as an exclusively male arena and portrayed the women, the creatures of a male power-fantasy, as sensual, stupid and willing (Said 207).

Edward Said claims that an Englishman in India in the late nineteenth century probably did not take an interest in the country, its people and culture because of India's status as a British colony (11). According to him the English approached 'the Orient' as Englishmen first, as individuals second (Said 11). Although it is undoubtedly true that a nation's ideology, convictions and beliefs affect its inhabitants and that the colonizer always has his way of approaching the colonized, that is, from a superior position, it is, however, wrong to generalize. As we will see later on, Flora Annie Steel was someone who did take an interest in India, its people, language and culture. To say that she did not support the British Empire would be inaccurate, but she definitely criticized certain aspects of Britain's policy and focused on aspects of Indian life ignored by other Anglo-Indian writers.

Ultimately, Edward Said emphasizes the fact that Orientalism forms "a considerable dimension of modern political-intellectual culture, and as such has less to do with the Orient than it does with 'our' world" (12). 'Our' world functions as a lense through which 'the Orient' is experienced; this lense shapes the language, perception and form of the encounter with 'the East' (Said 58).

2.2. The East India Company (1600-1858)

During the reign of Queen Elizabeth, the British already had a few trading centers at Madras, Bombay, and Calcutta. After that, they continued to be present in and managed to expand their influence over India until its independence in 1947 (Cody). It all began with the forming of The East India Company in 1600. This company had a monopoly over the entire trading in the East of India, and also effectively became the ruler of territories larger than the United Kingdom itself (Landow "The British East India Company"). The company consisted of a number of London businessmen who

made money by importing spices from South Asia (Landow “The British East India Company”). The foreign competition forced the company to create its own military and administrative departments, thereby becoming an imperial power in its own right (Landow). However, the famine in Bengal in 1770, which led to the death of more or less one-third of the population, and the company’s enormous debts, showed the failure of the company to rule over such a large area (Page, Sonnenburg 677). Consequently, with the Regulating Act of 1773 and the India Act of 1784, the British parliament created a government-controlled policy-making body, whereas before, the power of decision-making about Britain’s colonies lay in the hands of the company’s shareholders (Landow). The British government took away the Company’s monopoly in 1813, and after 1834 it worked as the government’s agency until the Mutiny in 1857, when the Colonial Office took full control (Landow “The British East India Company”).

The mutiny of 1857 began as an uprising in the Bengal Army, of which the cartridge for the new Enfield rifle was the immediate cause (Cody). The cartridge had to be bitten before it was loaded, and there was a rumor saying that the cartridge was greased with the fat from cows and pigs; since the cow is sacred to the Hindus and the pig is considered unclean by the Muslims, both religious groups were offended (Cody). The deeper cause of the Mutiny was the anger over the Westernization of India and the fear that ‘native’ religions, traditions, and customs would be lost (Cody). Besides, Indians were only gradually allowed to participate in the structure of the government, which made it impossible for them to have a hold over their own fate (Cody). All of these factors combined, led to the outbreak of the mutiny in Meerut, where officers were killed by their soldiers on May 10, 1857 (Cody). The next day, Europeans were massacred at Delhi. It took the British troops, aided by Sikhs and Gurkas, over a year to put down the rebellion (Cody).

2.3. 'The British Raj' (1858-1947)

In 1858 India became a British colony and was now governed by the crown. During this period, which is often referred to as 'The British Raj', a lot of changes occurred in British India which would finally lead up to its independence in 1947.

2.3.1. British rule and gradual change

Several differences with the period before the mutiny can be detected. First of all, the British and the Indian economy were closely connected in this period because of the direct government of India by the British crown and because of the technological change following the industrial revolution. Many changes in transport and communication had already been made before the mutiny, but with the industrial revolution, a real modernisation was brought about (Keay 430). Railways, roads and canals were built in a fast tempo causing an expansion of the export of, for example, cotton to other countries (Stein 259). Furthermore, there was a reduction of taxes in India during this period: "Light taxes and good laws – nothing more is wanting for national and individual prosperity all over the globe" (Qtd. in Keay 430). While taxes in 1872 amounted to a total of 15% of India's national income, they were reduced to only 5% in 1930 (Stein 257).

The conditions in India, however, were less positive than they appeared to be. In The Rise and Fall of British India, Karl De Schweinitz makes an interesting observation when he says that "the British in India caused the internal allocation of resources to lower the Indian net product below what it would have been in their absence", and that this "loss of income was transferred to England", often referred to as "the drain" from India to Britain (191). During 'The British Raj', India also experienced some of the worst famines ever recorded, including the Great famine of 1876-78, in which six to ten million people died (Davis 7), and the Indian famine of 1899-1900, in which an

estimated 1.25 million people died, although R.C. Dutt claimed that it “was actually three or four times this” (qtd. in Davis 173). In Late Victorian Holocausts, Mike Davis claims that although the British attributed the famines to the laws of nature, their own policy in India really was one of the main causes of these famines (58).

As I have mentioned before; when The East India Company was abolished in 1858, India came under the control of the British crown. Naturally, this new situation demanded a new structure for the governance of Indian affairs. In Whitehall it was decided that the authority of the Court of Directors and the Board of Control was to be transferred to the India office (Blyth 4). The secretary of state represented Indian interests in Parliament and in the Cabinet, and the council of India, a body consisting of experienced Indian officials, was established to give advice (Blyth 4). In India, the governor general assumed the additional title of viceroy and became the head of the supreme government in Calcutta (4). These arrangements were designed in order for parliament to be able to examine India more closely and to place the Indian regions under the closer care of the viceroy’s government (4). As Robert J. Blyth notices in The empire of the Raj: “there was no sudden transformation in the conduct of domestic or external policy but rather a steady change in emphasis and in procedure” (Blyth 4).

Still, British rulers did not pay much attention to the needs of the Indian population. After the revolt the British were convinced that reform was “pointless as well as dangerous” and that the Indians could never be like them (Qtd. in Bandyopādhyāya 73). They were convinced of their own superiority and did not want to share their power with the ‘barbarous’ Indians (Bandyopādhyāya 73). However, it had not always been like this (Macmillan xiii). The British who had made their way to India in the sixteenth, seventeenth, and eighteenth century had come as traders, not as conquerors (Macmillan xiii). They knew that if they wanted to trade, they had to adjust to Indian customs (xiii). It was not until the Industrial Revolution, which changed the division of power in the world, that the British started to feel superior to other races (Macmillan xvi). Many members of the now confident British middle class went to India and were reluctant to leave their prejudices about India behind

(xvi). To them, India was a stagnant civilization with primitive arts, savage customs and heathen religions (Macmillan xvii). Nevertheless, India, perceived as a colony of 'savages', succeeded in becoming more and more autonomous in the years following the Great Mutiny, until, finally, it reached independence in 1947.

2.3.2. Toward self-government

The first steps toward self-government in British India were taken in the late nineteenth century when the Indian Councils Act of 1861 established limited self-government in Bengal, Madras and Bombay (Bandyopādhyāya 280). The Act of 1892 introduced a limited form of election to appoint the councils (Bandyopādhyāya 217). The Local Self-Government Act of 1882, the Ilbert Bill of 1883, the Government of India Act of 1909, also known as the Morley-Minto Reforms, and the Montagu-Chelmsford Reforms of 1919 also generated several changes for the Indian people. The Morley-Minto reforms of 1909, for example, introduced the principle of election, but they only provided limited roles for the Indians in the legislative councils, consequently, they could not satisfy any of the Indian political groups (281), "and had to be revised within ten years" (Bandyopādhyāya 281).

Different explanations have been given for the initiation of these reforms. First of all, there is the theory of 'weak imperialism' asserted by the old Cambridge School. This theory saw the empire as something 'weak', in need of Indian collaborators, and argues that this was the reason why more and more Indians were taken up in different governing institutions (Bandyopādhyāya 280). Others have claimed that the empire's fiscal crisis led to the buying of Indian support by letting Indians represent their own people (Bandyopādhyāya 280). But the most important reason was probably the following one: the growth of Indian nationalism (Bandyopādhyāya 281).

During the First World War there was a growing frustration about the existing constitution and a demand for more self-governing rights (Bandyopādhyāya 282). The idea of Indian self-rule also became more widely accepted in British political circles, which caused important changes in British

government policies (282). The Second World War was even more critical for India than the first had been. It accelerated an ultimate crisis for British rule and for the identity of India as a self-governed nation (Louis, Brown 435). Because India was a highly important strategic point for the defence of the British Empire in the Middle East (Bandyopādhyāya 439), Indian material support and political loyalty were crucial (Brown, Louis 436). In return for cooperation during this worldwide conflict, Britain offered full Dominion Status or the option to secede from the Empire-Commonwealth after the war (436). When the war ended there was some uncertainty about who was to inherit 'the Raj' and about what kind of nation it would become (Brown, Louis 436). The major obstacle was the Hindu-Muslim divide (Bandyopādhyāya 443), but in August 1947 independence and partition were a fact, India now consisted of two separate and independent states: Hindu India and Muslim Pakistan (Bandyopādhyāya 455).

3. Gender and imperialism

3.1. A "definition" of gender

Before examining the position of women in 'the Raj', it is important that we determine the meaning of the term 'gender'. According to Joan Scott, the term 'gender' can be used in different ways. First of all, there is the grammatical meaning of gender: "to talk of persons or creatures of the masculine or feminine gender, meaning of the male or female sex" (Qtd. in Scott 1053). Secondly, there is the feminist interpretation of the term as "a way of referring to the social organization of the relationship between the sexes." (Scott 1053). In addition to that, 'gender' was a term used by those who claimed that "women's scholarship would fundamentally transform disciplinary paradigms" (1054): "We are learning", wrote three feminist historians, "that the writing of women into history necessarily involves redefining and enlarging traditional notions of historical significance, to encompass personal, subjective experience as well as public and political activities. It is not too much to suggest that however hesitant the actual beginnings, such a methodology implies not only a new

history of women, but also a new history” (Qtd. in Scott 1054).

The approaches used by historians can be divided into two distinct categories: the first category is descriptive, the second one is causal (Scott 1056). The descriptive approach describes the existence of phenomena or realities without interpreting, explaining, or attributing causality (1056). The causal approach theorizes about the nature of these phenomena or realities (Scott 1056).

An example of the descriptive approach is the recent usage of ‘gender’ as a synonym for ‘women’. Many books and articles whose subject is ‘women’s history’ substitute ‘gender’ for ‘women’ in their titles, mostly because they believe this will increase its political acceptability (Scott 1056). Whereas the term ‘women’s history’ declares its politics by asserting that women are valid historical subjects, ‘gender’ includes but does not name ‘women’ and so seems to pose no critical threat (Scott 1056). ‘Gender’ as a substitute for ‘women’ is also used to suggest that information about women is necessarily information about men, that one implies the study of the other, and that the world of women is a part of the world of men, created in and by it (Scott 1056). In addition, the term ‘gender’ rejects biological explanations for the discriminating differences between men and women and emphasizes the subjective nature of the cultural construction of appropriate roles for men and women (Scott 1056).

These descriptive usages of gender have been employed by historians most often to map out a new terrain (Scott 1057). As social historians turned to new objects of study, gender was relevant for such topics as women, children, families and gender ideologies: areas involving relations between the sexes (Scott 1057). Because, on the face of it, war, diplomacy, and high politics have not been explicitly about those relations, gender seems not to apply and so continues to be irrelevant to the thinking of historians concerned with issues of politics and power (Scott 1057). As a consequence, it has not been enough for women’s history to prove that women had a history or that women participated in the major political upheavals of Western civilization (1055):

In the case of women’s history, the response of most non-feminist historians has been acknowledgement and then separation or dismissal (“women had a history

separate from men's, therefore let feminist do women's history, which need not concern us"; or "women's history is about sex and the family and should be done separately from political and economic history"). In the case of women's participation, the response has been minimal interest at best ("my understanding of the French Revolution is not changed by knowing that women participated in it"). (1055)

Some historians were aware of this problem and have tried to come up with usable theoretical formulations of gender that might change the existing historical paradigms and provide a synthesizing perspective on the difference in social experience between men and women (Scott 1057).

The core of Scott's definition of gender rests on an integral connection between two propositions. The first proposition says that "gender is a constitutive element of social relationships based on perceived differences between the sexes", and the second one asserts that "gender is a primary field within which or by means of which power is articulated" (Scott 1069). These two propositions can be applied to the examination of implications of gender in relation to imperialism. Indeed, what seems to be important when we write about 'gender and imperialism' is how, on the basis of perceived differences between the sexes, men and women are attributed different roles within the empire.

To conclude I would like to point out that we need to pay attention to the way in which 'gender', as an important category of analysis, becomes intertwined with two other categories, those of 'race' and 'class', which are related to the distribution of power within the empire. An interest in these categories signals an interest in a history that includes stories of the oppressed and an analysis of the meaning and nature of their oppression (Scott 1054). The terms 'gender', 'class' and 'race' may give the impression that clear definitions exist for all three of these terms, but this is not the case (Scott 1055). Although 'class' is often associated with Marx's theory of economic determination and historical change, 'race' and 'gender' convey no such associations (1055). Among those who use

these terms, there is no consensus about their meaning. In the case of gender, as I have explained, the usage involves a range of theoretical positions as well as simple descriptive references to the relationship between the sexes (Scott 1055).

Based on these three categories, divisions between people were made, which helped structure the distribution of power within the colony.

With the growth of empire, gender, like race, helped define the contrast between ruler and ruled, and so provided a way to order Britain's relations with its Indian subjects. Throughout, though the two are not identical, the categories of gender intersected with those of race. As a result, British men, British women, Indian men and Indian women were all fitted for distinct roles within the ideology of 'the Raj'. (Metcalf 93)

3.2. 'Gender', 'class', and 'race' in 'The British Raj'

3.2.1. Gender

The reluctance of historians to include women in history and to accept the memsahib as a focus of serious academic study has only recently started to take a turn in the other direction (Procida 3). In Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance, Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel argue that "In general, theories about colonialism have stressed its "masculine" nature, highlighting the essential components of domination, control, and structures of unequal power. For the most part, scholarship has reinforced the common belief among imperialists that colonies were 'no place for a white woman'" (Chaudhuri 3). So, by defining colonialism as something masculine, most scholars marginalized or even left women out of their studies. As a consequence, the British Empire has often been perceived as a male-dominated arena, moreover, the empire is believed to have been essential to the construction of British masculine identity in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century (Procida 3). Some historians, for example, have argued that

the empire provided a climate within which bachelorhood was an acceptable alternative for the men who felt restrained by middle-class domesticity back in Britain (Procida 3). Others have pointed out that the 'natural' division of society into male and female spheres was achieved within the empire by the creation of the stereotype of the 'effeminate Bengali babu' (3). Mrinalini Sinha gives a definition of this particular type of Indian, or Bengali man in Colonial Masculinity: the 'Manly Englishman' and the 'Effeminate Bengali' in the Late Nineteenth Century: "Over time, effeminacy had evolved from a loosely defined attribute associated with the entire population of Bengal, and sometimes, by extension, of all of India, to an attribute associated very specifically with Western-educated Indians, a large majority of whom were Bengali Hindus" (Sinha 16). These babus functioned as social actors, like British women did back home, enabling the British men to enact scenarios of masculinity (Sinha 35).

Because gender is often conceptualized in oppositional terms, the depiction of empire as a male-dominated arena inevitably implicates that the few women who were able to breach its masculine sphere, had to answer to the traditional image of the woman as a domestic creature (Procida 3). In Married to the Empire, Mary Procida claims that "The feminine influence on imperialism has been most fully analysed in the context of the transient encounter between Europeans and 'the other' in the 'contact zone' in which Western women are more observers of empire than full-ledged participants in the creation of imperialism itself" (4). But then she reconsiders their insignificance when she observes that "The wives of the officials in India were not imperial transients, but residents whose lives were intimately connected with the practices and ideologies of imperialism" (Procida 4).

It is important to recognize that the theories that have shaped our understanding of gender are not necessarily useful in analysing the workings of gender in imperial India (Procida 5). Anglo-Indian women accommodated themselves to the public world of the empire by embracing masculine activities, such as hunting and sports, rather than by creating new public arenas for feminine activity as women had done in Britain (Procida 5-6). Therefore, the image that best describes gender relationships in 'the Raj' is that of a partnership between men and women as imperialists in a

masculine environment, rather than one of antagonism between adventurous men and ultra-domestic women (Procida 6). Indeed, as Mary Procida points out: "The point is not that women, in general, had no place in the empire, but rather that feminine women, like effeminate men, were not suited to imperial endeavours" (6). Thus, the image of imperial femininity as highly domesticated, in contrast with a hyper-masculinist version of imperialism fails on several accounts. Procida gives two important reasons why this image does not accurately describe the situation in British India. "First", she writes, "this notion fails to account for the difference between biological notions of sex and mutable social constructions of gender, a difference which lies at the heart of gender history" (6). What she means by this is that imperial conditions may have created a new vision of British masculinity, but that this does not imply that women could not adopt these masculine traits. Indeed, in many cases, British women in the outposts of empire took on 'masculine' characteristics (Procida 6). This means that they wore men's clothing, participated in male sports such as polo, were addressed as 'sir', and even fought for the empire (Procida 6). By engaging in masculine-associated activities, a white woman was able to "overcome the constraints of gender and to signify masculine authority in her person" (Qtd. in Procida 6). With just one sentence, Procida illustrates this situation fairly accurately: "The empire may have been masculine, but it certainly was not exclusively male" (6). The second reason why the description of the British Empire as a world in which women were relegated to the sidelines is inaccurate, is because it ignores the historical facts of British women's lives in 'the Raj'(Procida 7). Anglo-India consisted of a substantial number of British women who embodied an essential part of the structure of imperial social circles (Procida 7). Their marriages to civil or military officials of 'the Raj' constituted a close relationship with Anglo-India where, as Procida puts it, "their lives were intimately intertwined with the fortunes of the empire" (Procida 7).

Women's exclusion from employment within the official community of 'the Raj' did not diminish their commitment to the empire, which they practiced through their marital relationships. In their position as officials' wives, these women became incorporated into the official community, and because of their commitment, became regarded as a crucial part of the social and cultural

aspects of official Anglo-India and of its political-imperial functions (Procida 11). Rather than restricting women's experiences, marriage allowed women to accumulate knowledge about the workings of the empire and gave them access to the imperial politics and practices (Procida 11). Because the status of an Anglo-Indian was determined by more than an official title, women claimed, as Procida puts it, "an affiliation with the empire and an expertise in imperial politics based on their knowledge of India, their longevity in the subcontinent, and their personal sacrifices for the empire" (11).

Still, their presence in the official archives of 'the Raj' is obscure and the reason for this is the fact that, although they were perceived as important to the social and cultural life of Anglo-India, the official policy of 'the Raj' was to ignore them unless forced to do otherwise (Procida 4). This is why the gathering of knowledge about the experiences of British women in the empire requires the investigation of alternative sources such as diaries, letters, memoirs, oral interviews, and novels (Procida 4). These varied records of Anglo-Indian women's experiences in 'the Raj' reveal them as active agents in imperial politics, a facet of the imperial story generally ignored in the existing historiography (Procida 5).

3.2.2. Class

Class was an important determinant of status in Anglo-India. Members of the official elite were recruited from the British professional and upper-middle classes, and admired the lifestyle of the landed aristocracy in England (Ballhatchet 164). Within the empire, they dominated the administrative and military systems, where social distance seemed essential to their authority (Ballhatchet 164).

To attract only the most competent administrators, the ICS devised a competitive examination process. Up to the First World War, Indian civil service exams were devised so as to test the candidate's intelligence and to leave no room for 'open competition', except between the

members of that select social sphere of cultivated men (Szreter 164, 165). After the First World War, however, as professional opportunities in Britain opened up and nationalist agitation in India made imperial careers less secure and less attractive, the various Indian services found it more difficult to attract and retain first-class recruits (Procida 11). In 1936, as recruitment of candidates became more difficult, the ICS abandoned its competitive examination process and simply accepted candidates with a good honours degree (11). After the outbreak of the Second World War, the Indian Services dramatically reduced recruitment, and after 1943 no new officers joined the ICS (Procida 11-12).

Although less information is available about the social backgrounds of the wives of the ICS officers, it seems that most of these women came from middle-class professional backgrounds similar to their husbands', although their level of education was generally lower (Procida 12). After the First World War, when the ICS itself began accepting recruits from more varied backgrounds, ICS wives were drawn from a wider social spectrum (12). Services that were less prestigious and less competitive undoubtedly drew both officials and their wives from more varied social backgrounds (Procida 12).

An enormous gap in the colonial class hierarchy divided the memsahib from female Christian missionaries who were generally of lower-middle-class origins (Sen 11). These women got in close contact with the 'natives', spoke their languages and played an active role in reform activities (Sen 11). In spite of the similarities in their involvement with 'native' women, Flora Annie Steel was rather critical of these missionaries and their reform activities, not always agreeing with their methods and approach.

An even greater social and cultural gap separated the memsahib from the barrack wife who was more or less absent from the discursive writings of Anglo-India (Sen 12). There was no clear government policy on these barrack women, who lived under horrible circumstances: wife-beating, desertion by husbands, female drunkenness, poverty and high female mortality were common features (Sen 12).

Finally, many 'official' and 'non-official' Anglo-Indians were themselves the children of Anglo-Indians and represented a class apart from newcomers to the subcontinent (Procida 12). They had been born in India, many spoke Hindustani as a first language, and they viewed India as their true home (Procida 12).

Class division was not only prevalent in the Anglo-Indian community, but formed an important part of Hindu society as well. The British saw caste as an indicator of occupation, social standing, and intellectual ability and attempted to equate the Hindu caste system to their own social class system (Boroian, de Poix 80). As a consequence, the social stratification of the Anglo-Indian community came to be reinforced by, and even drew upon, the rigidity and complexity of the caste system (Sen 10). Indeed, the Anglo-Indians defined themselves as 'white Brahmin' or the 'ruling caste' (Sen 10) and, intentionally or not, intensified the Hindu caste system during their reign (Boroian, de Poix 80).

3.2.3. Race

Nineteenth century 'race theories' were developed to confirm the inferiority of coloured races and of women (Sen 7). In Charles Darwin's The Descent of Man (1871) it was stated that women possessed "faculties... characteristic of the lower races...and of a past and lower state of civilization" (qtd. in Sen 7). Men, in contrast, were characterised by the higher faculties of "deep thought, reason or imagination" (qtd. in Sen 7). Craniology, the study of the shape and size of the skull, was deployed to establish female intellectual inferiority. In this way 'science' was used to confirm the supposedly indisputable biological evidence that "The skulls of man and woman are to be separated as if they belonged to two different species.... The type of the female skull approaches, in many respects, that of the infant, and in a still greater degree, that of the lower races" (qtd. in Sen 7).

Thus in a significant conflation of racism and sexism, women and the darker races

were bracketed as similar, volatile, undependable, passive, irrational, childish and inferior to the white male. In addition, the darker races were located as cowardly, treacherous, sensual and fickle, and their sexuality perceived as deviant. This argument sought to reinforce the theory of the inability of self-governance in women and in the darker races ... thereby validating the necessity for their being governed and controlled by the adult white male. (Sen 7-8)

This is how the Anglo-Indians justified British rule in India, which became synonymous with the country's material and moral progress (Mann 13). Legal reform was supposed to have a positive impact on the 'superstitious beliefs', 'irrational thinking' and 'partially barbaric behaviour' of the Indian people (Mann 17). There were recurrent demands that the official elite should stay away from the nautch parties given by wealthy Indians at which dancing girls performed. The Friend of India in 1835 argued instead for 'conversation parties', where Indians might be educated (Ballhatchet 123).

Clearly, 'Official' Anglo-India; the British men and women responsible for determining and implementing imperial policy, constituted only a minority of the European population in India, but exercised a power and influence disproportionate to their numbers (Procida 9). Although the Indian civil service was staffed primarily by Indians, the British monopolized the best-paid and most prestigious positions (Procida 9). At the top of the pyramid were the 'civilians' of the ICS. There were around a thousand of these privileged men, whose responsibilities included overseeing British rule in India and administering justice throughout 'the Raj' (Procida 9). The less prestigious and badly compensated branches of the civil service were dominated by Indians, or, as in the case of railroads, by Eurasians (Procida 9). In the interwar period, more Indians infiltrated the upper ranks of the civil services as the result of a conscious attempt to incorporate more Indians into responsible governmental positions (Procida 10). In response to this process of Indianization the cultural dimensions of Anglo-India were altered in order to distinguish a new domain of privilege based more strictly on race and less on status within the imperial hierarchy (10). Thus, for example, many station clubs, which served as important locations for socializing among the official community, tried to

exclude Indian imperial officials on the basis of race alone when their positions within the imperial services would have otherwise guaranteed them access (Procida 10).

The armed forces of British India consisted of the Indian army and of officers and soldiers of the British Army stationed in India. The British Army, the more prestigious service, was made up of regular army units, whose officers and men were Europeans temporarily stationed in India (Procida 10). The Indian Army, by contrast, consisted out of Indian soldiers, but, until the Second World War, was officered almost exclusively by the British. As was the case in the civil services, discrepancies in pay and status in the armed forces served automatically to exclude most Indians from the privileges of official Anglo-India (Procida 11). Indians could not hold a commission in the British army and, even within the Indian Army, held primarily the lower-paying, less-prestigious Viceroy's commission, rather than the King's commission held by all British officers in both armies (Procida 11). Likewise, Eurasians, according to British officials, did not show the qualities which were needed in responsible posts. Eurasians, it was said, could not be army officers or medical officers because they would be despised by Indian soldiers and would not be accepted as equals by British officers (Ballhatchet 164-65). Similarly, Indian princes as members of a ruling class but not of the ruling race were seen as a threat to the social hierarchy established by the official elite. Toward the end of the nineteenth century, when these princes were acquiring a Western education and Western tastes, it was feared that, by marrying a British woman, they would try to breach the instance separating them from the ruling race (Ballhatchet 165).

4. The women of 'the Raj'

The word 'memsahib' (i.e. 'madam sahib') suggests that Anglo-Indian women were associated with notions of power and status (Sen 11). Given the colonial context and a privileging of race over other factors, the white woman automatically occupied a position of superiority over all 'natives' including those of social eminence (Sen 11). However, the middle-class memsahib's status

of power was complicated by her inferior position vis-à-vis the men of her own race and class (Sen 11).

4.1. Marriage

By the time 'the Raj' reached its climax in the late nineteenth century, British women had been going to India for a very long time. Women went to India for several different reasons. Some were hoping to find work in the colony, mostly as governesses, others followed their missionary vocation, and some simply returned there after having finished their education in Britain (Macmillan 3). The great majority, however, followed their husbands to the colony or hoped to find one there (Macmillan 3).

In 'The British Raj' there were many restrictions against marriage – at least before the 'appropriate' time (Procida 30). Civilian officials, for example, were not expected to marry until they had moved several rungs up the ladder of promotion (Procida 31). Various reasons account for this rule. First of all, it was believed that a wife and family would hinder the mobility of the civilian officer (Procida 32). Secondly, the mobile life of the civilian, who often had to travel across rough terrain with minimal equipment, could not provide the comforts deemed necessary for a wife (32). Marriage could also distract a man from devoting all of his time, energy and attention to his work (32). And finally, perhaps the most important reason to avoid or postpone marriage was the expense involved in maintaining a wife, and the children almost certain to follow after matrimony (Procida 33). It almost seems as if there was no place for wives in 'the Raj'. However, most officials did marry when the time was right (Procida 36).

The emotional, intellectual and sexual companionship promised by a marital relationship certainly played an important role in the decision to marry (36). Marriage was also an important undertaking for Anglo-Indian families and for the entire empire (37). Just as marriages in Britain often forged political, social and/or economic alliances among families, marriage in 'the Raj' was a union, not only of the man and woman involved, but also of imperial lineages (Procida 37). Next to that

there were several other reasons for an officer to get married (36). In the imperial context, marriage became the vehicle through which both men and women could best serve the empire (Procida 36). The more important his duties to 'the Raj' and the higher up his position on the imperial ladder, the greater a man's need for a wife's assistance (36-37). The 'right' sort of wife could advance a husband's career and ease the burden of his work, but the 'wrong' sort could just as easily make his life miserable, delay promotions, or provoke transfers to punishment posts (Procida 40). Consequently, notions of wifely duty and virtue that defined the Anglo-Indian wife were very different from those characterizing the ideal wife in Britain (Procida 40). First of all, it was important that the wife enjoyed the outdoor-life (40); riding skill, for example, was a necessity (Procida 41). A good wife should also share her husband's passions, and she should be self-sufficient, to amuse herself in the long hours when her husband was at work and the children at school in England (Procida 41). It was even better if the greater Anglo-Indian community could benefit from a wife's interests. Thus a flair for music, to provide entertainment at parties, or a passion for gardening, to supply vegetables for the station, were more suitable occupations than reading (41). More important than her accomplishments, however, was a wife's mental attitude towards the inconveniences of Anglo-Indian life (Procida 41). Consequently, the wives who embodied masculine values of courage, physical strength and verbal discretion were best suited for an Indian official and would successfully further the career of their husbands (Procida 42). For the British women their husbands were their connection to 'the Raj' (42). Therefore it was important that husband and wife shared the same interests. Sociologists have referred to this phenomenon as the 'incorporation' of wives into their husband's work (Procida 42). 'The Raj' had a set of well-defined expectations for the officials' wives which acknowledged the cooperative nature of imperial work by according husband and wife the same social status (43). The senior women, referred to as 'burra mems' were considered to be community leaders like their husbands and the wives of the junior officers often felt intimidated by these important wives (Procida 44). For the government it was both cheaper and more efficient to 'employ' the wives of its officials for certain 'feminine' tasks rather than to recruit female

professionals to perform this work (Procida 44). The government of India did employ a few women, almost all unmarried, in positions for which men were evidently unsuited according to prevailing British assumptions about gender (Procida 44). In 1912, for instance, forty-eight women worked as inspectors of girls' schools (44-45). Flora Annie Steel, one of the earliest of these female inspectors, recalled that she worked long hours for the small compensation of Rs 16 per day (Procida 45). Mary Procida observes how "Steel's case indicates that even when married women were independently employed by the government, the authorities continued to view them as appendages of their husbands" (45). When Steel displeased her superiors in the Education Department, they "called upon her husband, an ICS officer, to discipline her – a task of which he confessed himself incapable – and transferred Mr Steel to a distant post in the unfulfilled hope, according to Mrs Steel, that she would abandon her position obediently to follow him." (Procida 45).

Although many Anglo-Indian wives took an active and intelligent interest in the workings of the empire and served as their husbands' primary advisors and assistants, certain conditions challenged the women's fulfilment of their wifely duties. A first one was the hot weather, which made women abandon their husbands for the cool of the hills (Procida 46). However, the memsahib who deserted her husband for the less exhaustive conditions of a hill station was the target of contempt and frequent jokes (46). A good wife certainly was expected to stand by her man, no matter what. A more serious dilemma arose, however, when wives had to choose between husband and children (46). Anglo-Indian children from the age of six onwards were sent to Britain for their education. The mother could either accompany her offspring to Britain to make a home for them there, thus satisfying her maternal instincts, or she could stay in India, to attend to her husband's needs (Procida 46). It was often so that the wife chose to stay with her husband, which led to much sorrow when saying goodbye to the children, as Adeline Kingscote adequately described it "No page in life is sadder than this one in the story of Anglo-Indian experience" (Qtd. in Procida 46). By emphasizing the incredible burdens women endured to remain with their husbands, the wives showed the importance of their imperial responsibilities. Thus, Anglo-Indian women made the

ultimate sacrifice of parting with their children because 'the Raj', personified by their husbands, could not function without their fixed attention and constant participation (Procida 46). In return for this sacrifice, they gained unique access to the workings of the empire (47).

The professional partnership between husband and wife often erased visible distinctions between the imperial official and his wife (Procida 47). Anglo-Indian women who went on 'tours' of the district with their husbands often wore men's clothes which were better suited to the outdoor activities, such as hiking, camping and riding, than the traditional women's clothes (Procida 47). The subtle message conveyed to the Indians, however, was that husband and wife were equal partners in the business of empire (Procida 50-51). Indeed, an important facet of the 'civilizing mission' of the British in India was the cultivation of British ideas of gender, marriage and the family, as expressed through the practices of imperialism (Procida 51).

4.2. Home

A wife's tasks certainly stretched beyond the assistance of her husband. In The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner wrote that "An Indian household can no more be governed peacefully, without dignity and prestige, than an Indian Empire." (Macmillan 161). The Anglo-Indian household had to run smoothly and peacefully in order to serve both the family who lived there and the larger Anglo-Indian family. This imperial home stood in sharp contrast to the ideal of middle-class British domesticity that had developed from the late-eighteenth century onwards (Procida 56). Still, historians have mostly considered the Anglo-Indian home from the point of view of the English domestic idyll (Procida 57). In this interpretation, women were bound to the home, leading a reclusive life in the house, while their husbands were out in the public, doing the real work (57). The distinction between the private and the public lay at the core of British domestic ideology and was thus reinforced by this representation of British-Indian life. The reality of the Anglo-Indian home, however, did not coincide with this division between the domestic domain,

associated with women, and the public domain, ruled by men. The idea of two separate spheres is not applicable to British India where the public and the private merged at the juncture of the home (Procida 57).

The Anglo-Indian home was an arena for political discussion and administrative action and functioned both as a home and an office (Procida 58). This reconceptualization of the domestic space placed the Anglo-Indian home at the centre of imperial politics (Procida 58). And, more importantly, the altered nature of the imperial household affected the position of women, both within the home and outside of it, within the realm of imperial politics (Procida 58). Although women continued to be associated with domesticity, they were part of the outside world as well because the home was part of the public world of the empire (58). Occupations and concerns that in Britain often bound women to the home were less demanding and of less importance in India, where the servants took care of the children and were in charge of the household duties (Procida 58). Visitors to India frequently noted that Anglo-Indian women were not preoccupied with household duties. Indians noticed the contrast with the Indian women who devoted themselves to their family and home and were critical of the Anglo-Indian women who neglected their domestic duties (Procida 81). In Married to the Empire, Mary A. Procida defines what she calls “the central paradox of the Raj” which refers to the fact that “the crucial mechanisms for running both home and empire were entrusted to Indians, with the British relegated to the role of symbolic, if authoritative, presence” (82). Indeed, the Anglo-Indian household was run by Indian domestic servants and not by the Anglo-Indian wives. This situation had a profound impact on Anglo-Indian women’s lives and their relationship to the empire (83). In running their households and directing their domestic servants, Anglo-Indian wives adopted many of the techniques employed by their husbands in governing the empire (Procida 87). Through the relationship with their servants British-Indian women were expected to function as examples of European superiority and to enforce respect (87). The Anglo-Indian cookbooks and household management guides written in order to assist the young Anglo-Indian wives (86) underlined the general importance of acquiring the respect of the household staff and prescribed appropriate

behaviour for the various servants engaged in the household duties (Procida 88). Because of the minimization of their own household role, many wives necessarily delegated great authority to their servants (Procida 97). It was not strange that the wives put the servants in control of the household since these servants knew a great deal more about running a household than did a young bride (97). Also, many Anglo-Indians developed an intimate relationship with their servants and completely trusted them (Procida 98).

While most Anglo-Indian cookbooks gave advice to young and inexperienced Anglo-Indian women, several cookbooks addressed either men, or a mixed audience of men and women (Procida 102-103). To most Anglo-Indians, men's involvement in domestic and culinary affairs was not considered unmasculine or inappropriate (104). Although women were responsible for most household duties, these tasks were not strictly gendered as feminine and were clearly less demanding than their British counterpart (Procida 105).

For the British-Indian men and women, the work of empire took precedence over domestic responsibilities (Procida 105). The Indian servants freed women from the burdens of housekeeping and enabled them to turn their energy and attention to the work of empire both in their home and beyond (Procida 105).

4.3. Friendships

A difficulty that most women faced was that, especially on the smaller stations, there was little to do (Macmillan 138-139). Most Anglo-Indians found local society rather dull and the government did not encourage them to engage with 'the natives' (Macmillan 43). The memsahibs learned to keep the Indians at arm's length and to look inward to their own community for friendship and amusement (Macmillan 68). The interaction that did arise between Anglo-Indians and their Indian servants was in many cases put to a stop by the Industrial Revolution, which led Europeans to believe that they were superior to the rest of the world (54). Consequently, the Indians were

perceived as inferior and it was argued that they were so far behind that they would never catch up and thus could not be civilized (Macmillan 56). The other great obstacle to friendship, according to the British, was the way in which Indians behaved toward women (57). Indians, whether Hindu or Muslim, treated their own women in a bad way according to British standards (Macmillan 58). This certainly widened the gap between both cultures.

Unlike other British-Indian women, Flora Annie Steel got in close contact with the Indian people; she stressed the importance of learning the local languages and got engaged in a number of health and education programs. Because these activities were usually assigned to female missionaries, who came from outside the colonial bureaucracy, this turns her into an unusual example of the 'burra memsahib' (Sen 133). In her writings she focuses on 'native' life and approaches social issues concerning Indian women. Because of her involvement in the 'native' women's lives, Steel's insight is rather unique and therefore interesting to study. (Hulme, McDougall 73-74) But it is also important to question the role of British Indian women in furthering Britain's imperial agenda (Hulme, McDougall 79). While Steel did not always agree with the way in which the British governed India, and dared to question some of their methods and beliefs, she was a woman of her time, whose thinking was undoubtedly influenced by the Victorian belief in the superiority of the British race and the greatness of the British Empire.

5. Flora Annie Steel

5.1. Biography

"Of course I was born; everyone is, and even in 1847 there was a sufficiency of ceremonial about the mystery of birth to employ many Sairey Gamps and duly diplomaed doctors. So I was born at Sudbury Priory, Harrow." (Steel 1). Thus Flora Annie Steel, born Flora Annie Webster, begins her remarkable autobiography The Garden of Fidelity in which she divides her life into four periods coinciding with the four seasons: "Spring till I married at twenty. Summer till I began to write at forty.

Autumn when I published my experiences. Winter when I turned my eyes chiefly to the snow-clad mountains." (Steel v).

With ten brothers and sisters, Flora Annie Steel was part of a big Scottish family with a dedicated mother who encouraged her children's imagination and a passionate father who favoured his little Annie (Steel 2). She refers to these early years as "the happiest I remember" (13) and describes herself as a cheerful and lighthearted child. At the age of nine she and her family moved to Burnside, Scotland where she missed her brothers, who had gone to masters' houses (14). Still, she refers to this place as a paradise (17). She loved the countryside and the spaciousness surrounding their house (17). Being a rather active child who loved to work with her hands rather than sit around reading books, she could certainly use up her energy in the woods and around the lochs (Steel 19).

At the age of twenty she married the civilian officer, Henry William Steel, but it is without great enthusiasm that she recounts this event: "Why I married I cannot say: I never have been able to say. I do not think either of us was in love. I know I was not; I never have been." (27). Because of her husband's career in the Indian Civil Service, they had to leave for India almost immediately.

It was an uneventful spring: but it will show what manner of a girl it was, who at twenty, accustomed to the varied life of a large family, went out to the solitudes and the distractions of India. Knowing nothing: absolutely nothing – save what she could learn from books. (27)

Her life in British India was not going to be easy. The circumstances under which they had to live being extremely different from those at home, the excruciating heat and strange diseases leading to situations which were new and frightening. Upon travelling to Lahore, the seat of the Punjab Government, where her husband had to get orders concerning the place where they were going to be stationed (Steel 32), Steel was exposed to these extreme circumstances for the first time: "The heat was terrific. Rain had fallen short, a famine was threatening, especially in the Cis-Sutlej districts of the Panjab, through which we were literally whirled in the box upon wheels, drawn by miserable starveling ponies, which at that time was the only method of travel beyond Delhi." (30-31). They

were stationed at Ludhiana, where there were no other European women and where the heat and the travelling took their toll on Steel who felt homesick (34). Because of her illness her husband took her to Kasauli, to be the guest of Colonel Reynell Taylor, a commissioner who offered indefinite house-room to Steel in this much cooler hill station (Steel 35). Then suddenly they were offered a place at a new station on condition that they would leave at once but Flora was pregnant and the long journey would be difficult and even dangerous for the unborn child and for the mother (43). Still, they decided to take the offer and went to the hill station of Dalhousie (43). Unfortunately, she lost her child; "Is there any regret a woman can feel so bitter as the regret over her child that has been born dead?" (Steel 44). But it did not take her long to recover and become pregnant again, and with the birth of her daughter, Flora's life changed immensely (Steel 52). It enabled her to immerse herself more in local life, to learn the local language and to get to know the area (52). "I think my little daughter provided the first link of my subsequent enchainment to the interests of the village women." (Steel 57).

After Dalhousie they were destined for Kasur (58), where Flora learned a great deal about the Indian ways and acquired an understanding of the Indian mentality (Steel 104). As she says in her autobiography "At Kasur there was literally *no one* but the natives" (Steel 104), which is why she started to care for sick Indian women and children (60) and taught English to advanced scholars, mostly boys up to sixteen (62). Here she experienced the extreme difficulty of "educating India on Western lines while the environment remained Eastern" (Steel 62-63). Because of the success of her teaching skills, the Chief Native Administrator suggested the possibility of a female school (63). At first Flora did not interfere with the workings of the government, but as she gradually developed her own opinions concerning the organisation of education and reform projects, she got into several quarrels with the authorities (Steel 64).

When Flora and her husband left Kasur after three years, Flora had certainly learned a lot about India and felt a deep connection to the country and its people (Steel 110). Because she had done a lot for the townspeople over the years, they offered her a present before she left: a round,

gem-set brooch (110-111). She cried when she received this beautiful gift and in her autobiography she refers to Kasur as her “Star of India” (111), which indicates her affiliation with this town and its inhabitants.

However, she nuances her knowledge and understanding of India and emphasizes that it is a country that is hard to understand for outsiders: “but though I had learnt a good many things during my three years at Kasur, I had not learnt all! No! not even when I left India finally in 1899 had I learnt half; it is a hard country for a Westerner to grip.” (Steel 92).

Because of Flora’s strong-mindedness Margaret Macmillan describes her as an “unconventional women” and states that “she never allowed herself to be turned into the standard memsahib” (Macmillan 245). Steel was very much a part of Anglo-India and as the wife of a senior British administrator she hosted parties, organized amateur theatricals and engaged herself in station life (Sen 133). However, at the same time she took an unusual interest in ‘native’ life and got to know a lot more about Indian life than what was deemed necessary for a memsahib. She participated in ‘native’ female social reform activities and did not hesitate to point out mistakes made by the British government. She distributed western medicines among the women in remote areas, took a special interest in female education and set up a girls’ school at Kasur (Sen 133). When the Punjab government appointed her Inspectress of Girls’ Schools in Lahore, she discovered that degrees were being sold at the Punjab University (Macmillan 246). She asked the senior official about this and when he told her that they knew the English knew but that they wished to ignore this, Flora was outraged and refused to let the matter go (246). As a consequence, one false charge after another was dropped against her and eventually her husband was transferred to the other end of the Punjab (Steel 172). Flora was supposed to follow him but she refused to do so and when her husband was asked why he did not keep his wife in order, he simply answered: “Take her for a month and try” (Steel 173). So she lived alone in the big house for nearly a year, while the rumour, that she would be assassinated, spread. Ultimately, however, proof that she was right was found and her reputation was cleared (173).

About half of Flora's autobiography consists of several anecdotes about the things she saw and experienced in India. These anecdotes show her affiliation with the country and its people and illustrate her commitment to them and their commitment to her. One of these little stories is about how her scholars surprised her with a beautiful dress. Flora was told to come down to the school at daybreak where she found the door barred and a noise as of singing birds within. She called out: "Little birds, little birds, why do you sing the night long?" And the answer came back in chorus: "We sing for freedom, for freedom. Let us go! Let us go!" Then she unbarred the door and all the children rushed out, flinging spools of cotton at her as they passed. Afterwards, they gathered the spools up, they wove them, they dyed the cloth, they embroidered it and made her a beautiful dress (Steel 174).

At the age of forty-two, Flora Annie Steel left India (182). When she looked back on her twenty-two years spent in India, she regretted that she had not interfered more with certain matters and that she had not used her knowledge of India to enforce change (Steel 183). She and her husband had been moved fifteen times in sixteen years and she claims this instability to be the reason why there is "no time either for the ruler to know the people or the people to know the ruler" (189-190). But still she had "learnt a good deal and made many friends" (186). On the whole, this period had been a very happy one in her life (Steel 186).

5.2. Literary career

Up until 1889, when she left India, Flora Annie Steel had not even tried to publish any of the literary work she had been writing all her life (Steel 186). She had done some press work for the editor of the Indian Public Opinion, and she had brought out a volume of Folk Tales for children called Wide Awake Stories, published in England as Tales of the Punjab (187). Furthermore she had published The Indian Cook and Housekeeper, together with Grace Gardiner (Steel 187). In the introduction to this book its usefulness to "the girl who suddenly found herself a memsahib" is

articulated, “even if she found herself living in camps or in the jungle, on the hills or in the plains, whether she was the wife of an influential Indian Civil Service officer or a missionary” (Steel, Gardiner ix). According to Flora this cookery book has done the most good of all the good her pen has done (Steel 187). In his essay entitled “‘Going Nautch Girl’ in the *Fin de Siècle*: The White Woman Burdened by Colonial Domesticity”, Charn Jagpal argues that Steel’s The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook celebrates housework as a valuable contribution to colonial rule by drawing an analogy between adequate housekeeping and adequate imperial rule: “an Indian household can no more be governed peacefully, without dignity and prestige, than an Indian empire.” Here the iconic image of the domestic angel is recycled and applied to the workings of the empire.

These two books published in India were Steel’s sole attempts at writing before she went back to Britain in 1889 (188), where a friend of hers suggested that she should write some of her experiences down (Steel 193). So she wrote the short story “LaI” and sent it to one of the minor magazines. The story was returned with thanks but Flora did not give in and sent it to Macmillan’s, who sent her a request for more (194). Macmillan’s published many of Steel’s stories and her first novel Miss Stuart’s Legacy (Steel 195). Steel refers to Mr. Mowbray Morris of Macmillan’s Magazine as her literary godfather, although he only discovered that she was a woman after three years of constant correspondence (194).

In the autumn of 1894 Steel returned to India by herself to do some research for she felt that “heaps and heaps of things must be learnt before I could finish what for years and years had been lying at the back of my brain – a book about the Mutiny.” (Steel 200). When she arrived at Kasur she was received with a warm welcome and decided to make use of the magnetic power which she had always had with the Indians (207). She did a lot of doctoring during her stay, having very often as many as fifty patients a day (211), and she talked to many Indians about what they thought had caused the mutiny (Steel 210). When On the Face of the Waters was finally published, after being rejected by Macmillan’s, it was an immense success. As Flora notes “the Indian Mutiny was then the Epic of the Race. So it is no wonder the book, when it was published, sold like hot cakes; it is no

wonder that after almost countless editions and formats, it still sells” (Steel 226). A lot has been written about this novel which, against the background of the mutiny, focuses on two imperfect British marriages and illustrates several aspects of Victorian thinking about colonialism, gender and domesticity.

In 1897 Flora again set sail for India to collect background material on the new novel she was working on called Voices in the Night (Powell 102), which deals with the difficulties of uniting ‘East’ and ‘West’ (Powell 105). It was to be her last visit to India and at the end of this visit, when the doctor gave her hashish to soothe her fever, she finally got to understand the dreaminess of the Indian people which had baffled her for over twenty years (Steel 241).

Publishing from the 1880s through the first three decades of the twentieth century, Steel wrote about thirty works of fiction and non-fiction. Her novels, some of which are about Anglo-Indian life while others are set in Britain, were widely read and praised. Five of them are historical novels about India, four of which deal with the time of the Mughal emperors. Flora also published a housekeeping book, a pamphlet on women’s rights called “The Fruit of the Tree”, and a vivid autobiography. However, her most accurate and interesting depiction of Indian life can be found in her short stories which are often unmediated by any western presence and which investigate ‘native’ life and the position of Indian women within society.

5.3. The Wrongs of Women

During her lifetime Flora developed a great interest “not so much in the rights but in the wrongs of women” (Steel 265). She called herself a “vehement Suffragette” (Steel 222) and was president of the Women Writers Suffrage League. She refused to pay taxes for her weekend cottage at Aberdovey on the ground that she was not a citizen (Steel 265) and when women finally got the right to vote she telegraphed one word to her daughter: “Victory.” (Steel 266). Nevertheless, her attitude toward the contemporary feminist movement was fraught with ambivalence (Sen 134).

Steel's works of fiction are surprisingly hostile against Victorian feminism and the notion of the New Woman in particular (Sen 134). In her novel The Potter's Thumb, for example, the notion of the New Woman is deconstructed. At the beginning of this novel Rose Tweedie serves as an example of the New Woman, but she slowly surrenders to the ideal of domesticity in service of the empire, allowing herself to be transformed into the perfect colonial wife (Pal-Lapinski 72).

When it came to Indian women, Flora was even more sceptical about the possibility of reform: "the question of the women's vote in India is negligible; it means nothing." (Steel 253). Although her stories discuss several social issues, they often end in failure as the women are unable to escape their situation and are not aided by the English women who promote reform. Indeed, Flora was very critical of English women's involvement in reform activities because these women reductively stereotyped Indian women as voiceless, helpless and ignorant and therefore requiring the benevolent gestures of their Western sisters (Roy 60). Their concern though sincere was connected with their own search for greater public roles within the empire and they looked at and talked of Indian women in ways that strengthened racial and cultural hierarchies (Roy 60).

5.3.1. In Britain

In 1866 a group of women started a petition which demanded that women should have the same political rights as men, thus the women's suffrage movement was formed (Nelson 119). Later that year John Stuart Mill presented the petition to Parliament, without any success. Although the women's suffrage campaign was making progress on other fronts: women were allowed into higher education, they could vote in local government elections and married women's property acts were being passed, women continued being excluded from the workings of the government (Crawford ix). Therefore Emmeline Pankhurst and her daughter Christabel formed the Women's Social and Political Union through which they wanted to wake up the nation "through deeds, not words" (Joannou 157). However, with the outbreak of the First World War, the movement suspended its militancy in order

to support the war. In 1918, women aged thirty and over were finally given the right to vote (Joannou 5). Rather important for women writers was the formation of the Women Writer's Suffrage League, of which Flora Annie Steel was elected president. Flora wrote a pamphlet on women's rights called "The Fruit of the Tree" in which she stressed the need for cooperation between men and women and demanded equal treatment. However, her militancy was purely verbal. She used her word skills to fight for women's rights but was clever enough to see that some suffragettes' hysterical violence damaged their claim to be rational beings (Powell 122-123).

In her fight for the Suffrage, Flora faced male prejudice as well as female opposition. On 2 July 1913 Flora, together with Miss S. Macnaughtan, had a dinner meeting with Mrs. Humphry Ward and Miss Pott, two anti-suffragists. To illustrate the need for the women's vote, Flora made an interesting comparison: "The truth is that life is a stereoscope in which two points of view were necessary for the right perception of any and every problem pictured on its changeful mirror." ("For & Against Woman Suffrage"). She had always stressed the need for cooperation between men and women: "The outlook of man and woman being essentially different, it stands to reason that the inclusion of a different element into public and private life, into politics, morals, and manners must be beneficial to humanity as a whole" (Steel, "A vision of the future").

In an article in the newspaper Votes For Women, Steel tried to answer the following question: "Have we women the right to resist taxation?" She comes to the conclusion that "Statute 25 of Edward I says that no tax shall be imposed without the assent of the representatives of those taxed. We women have no representatives; therefore we cannot legally be taxed unless we have a vote" (Steel "Caesar's or God's?"). As a consequence, she refused to pay taxes for her weekend cottage at Aberdovey as long as women did not get the right to vote.

Flora also commented on man's obsession with sex and reacted against its importance in determining woman's position. According to her the obsession with sex can be traced back all the way to Adam and Eve. Because Eve made a mistake when eating from the forbidden fruit, woman has become associated with evil and is reduced to an instrument of pleasure. But sex has nothing to

do with politics, progress or personal power and should therefore be seen as what it is: a mere physical attribute. "So our sole request should be this: that sex disabilities in all things should no longer be tolerated" (Steel "Fight the good fight"). In her pamphlet "The Fruit of the Tree" Steel discusses the meaning of the "Curse of Eve" and argues that women will never regain their independence until they realize how they lost it.

The struggle for the vote had made her wonder what lay at the bottom of woman's disabilities (Steel 266). At the very end of Steel's autobiography a chapter is added by her daughter who writes about how her mother at the end of her life turned to the subject of the "Curse of Eve" (291). Steel often wondered about the cause of the belief that women possess a dangerous sensuality which they use to tempt men, as in the old Genesis story (Steel 290). She suddenly realized that woman's 'jealousy' is the clue (Steel 291). It is "the primal cause of that disharmony of the racial instincts which is the root of so many of our social evils" (Steel 92).

In the desire to have and to hold, to keep the man from straying, the 'woman's desire was to her husband' – not seasonally but at all times. This may seem to some an idle clue; to others it may seem I have wasted my time, brought nothing worth having to the storehouse of the world, but for myself I have no alternative, what came to me must be given to the world, to the dustheap perhaps, but it will have been given.

(292)

In the spring of 1928 she finished her novel The Curse of Eve which advocates birth control for women (292).

5.3.2. In India

The Woman Question, which was generating passionate debates in the mother country was either ignored completely or met with hostility in the Anglo-Indian press (Sen 67). In 1870 The Englishman's Saturday Evening Journal ridiculed masculine women who were "wild for woman's

rights”, inscribing them as “bold in habits or without modesty in mind” (Qtd. in Sen 68). Twenty years later, the same newspaper went on to question the contemporary British “eulogies in praise of the mental capacity of women”, emphasizing men’s intellectual superiority and women’s inferiority (Sen 68). In its turn, The Madras Mail, an otherwise fairly liberal paper, opposed medical professions for women for fear that its “coarse and immodest associations” would destroy “a woman’s modesty” (Qtd. in Sen 68). But there were exceptions to this hostile behaviour toward women’s reform. The Calcutta Review, for example, devoted an article entirely to the Woman Question, in which it supported careers for women, defended John Stuart Mill’s views on women’s right to vote, opposed the idea of “separate spheres”, and regretted that women were not encouraged to think and were “sternly forbidden to look beyond the home circle” (Sen 68). However, generally speaking, the writings on the subject seem to have been conservative, leading Maud Diver to despair about “the extreme backwardness of Anglo-Indian society in recognising the modern advance in the intellectual and social position of women” (Qtd. in Sen 68).

For Anglo-Indian men, the Indian women’s obedience and purity functioned as an example for the behaviour of their own women. They manifested their own patriarchal tendencies by drawing upon admired models of Eastern female obedience in effectuating an ‘Indianisation’ of the Anglo-Indian female (Sen 70). Sometimes Anglo-Indians went so far as to valorise certain ‘native’ social practices that they had all along condemned as oppressive and had sought to abolish (Sen 69). The Calcutta Review, for example, while discussing the purdah and other social evils and prompting their removal, went on to refer to the purdah as “attended with less evil, than if women were advanced towards the English idea of their rights and privileges” (Qtd. in Sen 69).

In contrast, “When it came to Indian women”, Indrani Sen argues, “the colonisers represented themselves as paternalist saviours fighting Indian patriarchy.” (70). The degradation of Hindu women was symbolized for the British by practices like the burning of widows at their husband’s funeral pyres and the seclusion of women from public life. India was represented as a place of timeless superstition, where sacrifice and abuse were all too prevalent and which needed to

be rescued by the British (Levine 54). By 'saving' these women, the British could both reinforce their own masculinity and legitimate their rule (Levine 53). So the British reformers tackled social issues related to Indian women and made sure their rule brought about moral and social improvement in order to be able to defend their presence in India (Reddy 47).

In the first half of the nineteenth century the Woman Question in India was focused around the issue of the sati (Tharu, Lalita 356). 'Sati' refers to the act of the burning of a widow on the funeral pyre of her husband (Sarkar 38) and was also used to describe the widows who underwent this ritual. The Hindu Sati was seen by many as the example of wifely perfection. The Hindu widow's death at her husband's funeral pyre was not just an affirmation of patriarchal authority but it also functioned as "a rejection of all other men" (Banerjee 120). The question of the inhuman treatment of widows and of widow remarriage was a major focus of reform in the second half of the nineteenth century (Tharu, Lalita 356). The issue of widows and especially of child widows was largely a problem of the higher Hindu castes among whom child marriage was practiced and remarriage prohibited (Sarkar 79). The passing of the Sati Act of 1829, the Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856 and the Hindu Succession Act were initial attempts at improving the conditions for Hindu widows (Reddy 47).

An important social issue that attracted the attention from the British as well as the Indian elite was the question of child marriage. The Child Marriage Restraint Bill (also known as the Sarda Act) was the result of almost seventy years of agitation by Indian reformers and legislators (Albinia 428). In 1860, the age of consent had been set at ten years for girls, the Special Marriage Bill raised it to fourteen years for Brahmos in 1872, and in 1891 the age was raised to twelve years for all girls (428). But reformers considered this to be unacceptably low, and their attempts to raise the age of consent were seen by conservatives as an attack on Hindu culture. In "Womanhood Laid Bare", Alice Albinia argues that the passing of the much contested Sarda Act in 1929 was triggered by a travel-book by an American journalist which contested carefully-constructed notions of Indian female sexuality (428).

According to Albinia, Katherine Mayo's book Mother India, published in 1927, shocked the American, British and Indian public due to its highly sensational description of the "pitiful" life of Indian Hindu women (428). In an age when the domestic sphere was still considered a largely private affair, Mayo openly discussed the sexual habits of Hindus by asserting that husbands regularly raped their child brides (428). 'Early marriage' had been debated in the Legislative Assembly for some time now, but Mayo's way of approaching the matter, by linking it to infant mortality, widespread venereal disease, and prostitution, certainly drew a lot of attention (428-29). Moreover, she connected prostitution with Hindu religious practice, asserting that high-caste wives with impotent husbands were sent to temples to be impregnated by priests and that young girls were bestowed on priests as devadasis, whom she interpreted as prostitutes. This connection – between high-caste women, child-marriage, child-widows and prostitution – had been made before (Albinia 429). In 1872, the British official A. Mackenzy had noted: "In Bengal the prostitute class seems to be chiefly recruited from the ranks of Hindu widows...often it is stated: women of good caste" (Qtd. in Albinia 429). In 1885, R. Ragoonath Row described the burden of Brahmin widows, concluding that these widows are "shunned...It then becomes necessary for her to sell her body for the sake of bread" (Qtd. in Albinia 429). But according to Albinia, Katherine Mayo was the first person to take the matter out in the open (429). In contrast to governmental legislation on sati, widow-remarriage and child-marriage – issues which were seen to have direct impact on the whole fabric of Hindu society – nineteenth-century laws on prostitution were passed without much protest from the Indian elite. Prostitutes may have been "an accepted part of society" but they nevertheless carried too much stigma to be defended and laws on prostitution were not seen as an attack on Indian culture and ideals (Albinia 429). The same definitely could not be said of other British legislation concerning women, the opposition to which partly explains the government's slowness in initiating 'social reform'. Therefore it has been argued that Mayo's "muck-raking" work accelerated the sudden passing of the Sarda Act, for it became obvious to (the majority of) the Legislative Assembly that the world would condemn them unless they passed the Bill (Albinia 429).

Any investigation into the question of Indian women's reform must necessarily be situated within the indigenous context of social stratification (Roy 59). This entails looking at how high caste men fiercely debated among each other and entered into varying degrees of collaboration and conflict with the colonial regime over numerous issues related to women's reform (Roy 59). In her article, Shampa Roy asserts that "in shaping the contours of female education even the liberal Hindu reformers were anxious to preserve the gendered division of labour and mark out a middle-class private sphere within which the recast woman would be the emblem of upper caste patriarchal norms and anti-colonial indigenism" (59). A study of the various periodicals, pamphlets, tracts and school journals of the late nineteenth century Punjab reveal that while the issue of women's reform was hotly debated in Hindu society, the insecurity and desire for a self-enhancing identity among the urban middle-class Hindus and Sikhs led them to adopt certain attitudes towards women which ultimately contributed to consolidating rather than challenging the norms of upper caste, middle-class patriarchy (Roy 59).

In her writings, Flora Annie Steel commented on the idea of social reform in relation to Indian women. In an article in Women's Industrial News Flora discussed the status of "Working Women in India". She asserts that the Indian woman's ideal is motherhood and that it is this conviction that gives birth to many customs horrible to the British eye, such as child marriage, female infanticide, and polygamy. Because the Indian woman is primarily seen as a mother, the proportion of women who have to earn their bread entirely unsupported or encouraged by a man is very small indeed. In her autobiography she refers to the ideal of motherhood as "the root of the evil" (246). The conviction that woman was created to bear sons leads to many of the social problems which prevail in India (Steel 244). First of all, there is the necessity for sexual purity, and once we get this, seclusion follows as a matter of course (Steel 244). In the Arthashastra (a Sanskrit work of the 4th century B.C. which contains information and instructions about various aspects of social life) no distinct mention of the purdah or the veil is to be found; but the penalties laid down for the women who, for any cause save danger, go beyond their husband's houses are severe, and the details of the

various offences a married woman may commit against her husband curiously defined (Steel 244). By referring to the victim role of Indian women and by generalizing the idea that women were created to bear sons, Steel herself becomes responsible for reinforcing certain stereotypical images about Indian women. The British saw Indian women as objects of pity in need of rescue (Wangu 160). Consequently, at the beginning of the twentieth century, attempts were made to “change illiterate and passive women into strong females idealized in British feminism” (Wangu 160). Government educational facilities and missionary women forced Indian women to move slowly toward self-expression and self-assertion against corrupt Hindu traditions, without taking into account the complexities of the Indian context (Wangu 160). Often, reform projects failed to actually help the supposed beneficiaries of these projects. Although Steel sometimes confirmed those stereotypical images of Indian women which made the British refer to them as helpless victims in need of rescue, she also pointed out the deficiencies of the educational and reform systems designed to help these women.

In an article called “The Unrest in India” Flora discusses the problems related to reform, in this case of the zenana system. Zenana refers to the part of a Muslim house reserved for the women of the household (Farquhar 405). With the Mahomedan invasion in the 12th century, Hindus adopted this practice of female seclusion because they tried to imitate their conquerors and because they wanted to keep their women safe (Farquhar 405). Where the Zenana system prevails, men, other than the head of the house and his sons, are not allowed to see the women who are forbidden to enter public life (Farquhar 405). Consequently, the influence of women is limited to the family circle, and does not reach society (405). It is, Flora says, “a fatal mistake for reformers to attempt to ameliorate the hardships of seclusion of the zenana system, for that is only to help perpetuate it.” (“The Unrest in India”). She adequately describes the complexity of the question of reform in India and the problems related to it: “What is wanted is to grasp the whole problem of India in its entirety. Let us not rush in with civilization where angels might very well fear to tread.” Although Steel did not condemn reform, she did criticize the notion of westernization. In her autobiography she emphasizes

the differences between East and West: "In truth, Kipling is right. 'East is East and West is West, and never the twain shall meet'." (Steel 220).

In some of her articles as in her autobiography and in her works of fiction, Flora comments on the idea of interracial female friendship. While she applauds a closeness between Indian and white women in her autobiography, she describes a completely different type of relationship in her fiction, where Indian women are often jealous of the white memsahib or where they fight over the love of a white man. In "The Unrest in India" she also refers to the Indian woman as being jealous of the white woman: "The women of India on the whole are against us." According to her, Indian women dislike British rule because they dislike British women: "The two most salient causes of their opposition are undoubtedly religion and pure feminine jealousy". In this respect it is interesting to look at some observations made by Antoinette Burton in Burdens of History. In her book Burton writes that a wide variety of Victorian women who wrote for feminist periodicals, demonstrated a keen interest in the condition of Eastern women, especially of the Indian woman (97). The Victorian feminist press thereby functioned as a forum where British women could exercise their authority over colonial womanhood (98). Those who read the feminist periodical literature of the period learnt who "the Indian woman" was. Needless to say, what British feminists wrote about Indian women justified their colonial and subordinate role (Burton 98). What distinguishes Flora Annie Steel from these women is the fact that Flora had actually lived in India for about twenty years. Because of her familiarity with India and with the Indian people she had a profound insight into their customs, beliefs and everyday lives. However, even though she showed a great interest in the lives of Indian women, she often relied on stereotypical images when representing Indian women in her writings.

6. Short stories

"The greater part of British literature on India... was written by Anglo-Indian officials and their wives, men and women from a section of British society which identified with prevailing

national beliefs, trusted in the excellence of their social order and evinced a robust faith in Western civilization” (Parry 30). In Delusions and Discoveries: India in the British Imagination Benita Parry asserts that the Anglo-Indians looked down on Indian customs and beliefs (31) and kept their distance from Indian society (Parry 30). Anglo-Indian writers often excluded Indian life from their stories or fell back on stereotypes when it came to portraying Indian women, who are often reduced to subjects of pleasure or to voiceless, passive entities. Most memsahibs wrote station romances or domestic novels which “married the ideology of patriarchy to the ideology of imperialism and merged the story of love and marriage and the story of European civilization, subsuming all relations to an identity rooted in imperialism” (Roy 58). The plots of these women-authored and more often than not women-centered Anglo-Indian narratives focus on the ups and downs of the romantic relationship between a white man and a white woman within the colonial context (Roy 58). The narrative moves inevitably toward marriage, a union that seems necessary for extending and sustaining the empire (58). Indian women are often erased from these writings and when they do appear it is to tempt the white men into having sex with them, thus making inter-racial sex an obstacle that the British hero has to overcome in his move towards the right, white partner (Roy 58).

It has been argued that Flora Annie Steel was one of the few writers who examined issues like gender and sexuality in relation to Indian women without falling back on racial stereotypes. What characterizes her work is her acquaintance with Indian life, and for this reason her literary work was seen as a reliable and rich source of information about India (Sen 132). Her short stories in particular have been praised for their accurate portrayal of ‘native’ life and for their depiction of a number of issues concerning Indian women (Sen 131-132). In these stories she especially focuses on issues related to ‘native’ female social uplift and often traces of a white community are completely erased (132). On the other hand, however, Steel’s writings are full of contradictions regarding gender, to the extent of sometimes enhancing major colonial myths about India and about Indian women (Sen 134).

6.1. Social issues

Steel's short stories often deal with the disadvantaged position of women in Indian society (Sen 140). These stories address problems such as that of Hindu widowhood and remarriage, female infanticide, child marriage, early childbirth and polygamy (140). The system of marriage and oppressive domestic site are criticized as well (Sen 140). These women are shown to be tyrannized by male relatives such as husband, brother or brother-in-law and sometimes drift into prostitution or poverty (Sen 140). From time to time a spirited female fighter arises who resists the gendered role ascribed to her but who eventually cannot avoid being crushed down by the system (Sen 140).

The story "The Sorrowful Hour" (In the Permanent Way) deals with polygamy and the neglect of a childless wife. Saraswati is jealous of her husband's love for his new wife Maya and her son. She cannot handle the fact that he does not pay any attention to her now that he has a son and tries to kill the child by putting down a viper close to where the little boy is playing. But when the snake is about to bite the child she quickly picks him up and regrets her deed. Still, Saraswati knows that she will remain unhappy unless something changes. So she visits Dhun Devi, the wise woman, and asks her what to do (278). This woman says she will help Saraswati to become pregnant which will lead her husband to love her as much as he loves Maya. Unfortunately, Saraswati dies while giving birth to a dead baby girl. When she asks with her last breath whether her child is a boy or a girl, Dhun Devi tells her it is a son, for it would be "foolishness" to "die for a dead girl" (283).

The story "Uma Himavutee" (In the Permanent Way) forms an exception to the negative portrayal of Hindu marriage. In this story the woman Uma-devi is childless, which makes her feel like a failure because her husband Shiv-deo needs children to help him with his work on the land. The only solution would be for her husband to get a second wife who can bring him children, but Uma-devi cannot bear the idea of her husband with another wife: "She could not, she would not let Shivo take another woman by the hand. How could they ask her, still young, still beautiful, still beloved, to give him another bride?" (169). In spite of her objection, she realizes that this is the only solution,

and eventually agrees to accept the fact that her husband needs a second wife. When a year later the girl gives birth to a son, Uma-devi's jealousy grows as she realizes that her husband's love for his other wife will only grow: "Now she was to see love grow to his face for the child which was not hers, knowing that love for its mother must grow also unseen in his heart." (176). After the birth Uma-devi withdraws herself from the happy scene and goes away to cry in despair. Nevertheless, this story ends happily when her husband comes looking for her and takes her by the hand to lead her home (179).

Of course, this story is only an exception as many of Steel's short stories do not end in the same happy fashion. Often the man's decision to marry a second wife, a common feature if the first wife is barren, has a disastrous result (Sen 141). In the story "Gunesh Chund" (From the Five Rivers), for example, the title character is the headman of his village. He needs a son who can become the next *lumberdar*. When his wife gives birth to a girl, he realizes he will have to marry another woman who can bare him a son. When his wife finds out that her husband is going to marry a second wife, she dies from a broken heart and promises that her ghost will keep on haunting him, thus denying her husband and his new wife a happy marriage.

Sometimes a strong woman who fights the old customs and refuses to be forced into the traditional role of women arises from these stories. The character of Fatma in "At a Girl's School" (From the Five Rivers) is such an example of a spirited girl who supports her brother and his wife and takes care of their child:

That household, consisting of disreputable, good-for-nothing Peru, who gambled away the five rupees he gained by helping to carry his wife and other students to and from the school; shiftless Hoshiaribi, who spent half her scholarship of ten rupees on her clothes; and Fatma, whose eight annas a week for cleaning the writing-boards seemed to keep the whole going, was a perpetual puzzle to the English lady, even without the child. (151)

When she becomes a teacher, Fatma decides that she does not need a husband: “She had seen enough of husbands, and would never marry. She had her babies and her school; and then there was always Lahu, who was as wise as any saint, and as good as any father to the boys” (172). But when her brother marries a rich widow, causing his first wife to become depressed and eventually turn to prostitution, he no longer needs his sister to take care of him and marries her off to a “honourable, if somewhat old man” (178). Although Fatma refuses, there is nothing she can do and so she has to accept that she is unable to escape the system. Still, we could say that she is rescued from her wifely duties when she dies of cholera before entering into marriage.

In “The Wings of a Dove” (In the Permanent Way) Kabootri represents the spirited girl who fights poverty in her family (Sen 140). Because her father does not earn enough money she has to support him by working as a bird-slayer: “She hath business in her, and a right feeling. She takes once and hath done with it till the value is paid. The gift of the old bodice and shawl, which my house gave her, kept us free for six months.” (339). However, she kills herself at the end of the story when she sees her handsome Eurasian lover with two beautiful girls (354).

The story “Suttu” (From the Five Rivers) deals with an independent child-widow who refuses to remarry because she has sworn a vow of celibacy. While her father-in-law wants to marry her off to someone from the village, Suttu searches for the gold that is hidden somewhere in the family churchyard. Her father-in-law cannot force her to marry as long as her paralyzed grandfather, who is worshiped as a saint, is still alive. The saint knows where the gold is hidden and Suttu hopes that he will speak again one day to tell her because then she will not have to marry Kazi’s son, a pock-marked man with one eye (102), who tells her she is “too young and too well favoured for a religious” (103). When Kazi’s son tries to grab her, she slaps him: “Her free right hand came down on one cheek with a resounding slap, making him stagger. Her left, thus released, followed suit on the other. ‘Go!’ she cried, ‘or I will make Shahbash yonder strangle thee with his monkey arms. Go! And remember that Suttu, the *fakeerni*, hath slapped thee in the face!’” (105). Later on, when Kazi’s son is bitten by a snake, she refuses to cure him unless he promises not to marry her, thus escaping her horrible faith.

When she eventually finds the gold, which turns out to be nothing more than a few farthings, she realizes that there is no real treasure and tricks her father-in-law as well, by letting him have the land in return for her freedom.

The occasional appearance of a spirited Indian woman in Steel's fiction shows that the white woman functioned as an example of female emancipation. However, in other cases Indian women were held up as ideals of wifely duty to be imitated by western women (Sen 147). Thus along with a model of female independence Steel's literary texts also offer prescriptions of female obedience (Sen 148). In her book India Steel looks at the history of India, its people, religions, and culture. In a chapter about "The Women of India", she focuses on the differences between Indian women and Western women:

In the West we formulate as our ideal woman a human being of equal rights with man; mistress of her own sex, as he is master of his; therefore free to use that sex as she chooses. Mother *in posse*, she has *in esse* a right to refuse motherhood.

In the East this is not so. The ideal there, is of a human being who is not the equal of man ... Outside marriage there should be no sex, and not to marry is wilfully to murder the possibility of life. (157)

In this text Steel advocates the Western ideal of equality between man and woman, an ideal she supported her whole life. However, further on in the text she comments on the Indian ideal of womanhood and states that Western women could learn a lot from Eastern women who represent "the highest ideal the world has ever known" (166). She even regrets the fact that Indian women are learning how to read and have become acquainted with different ideas about life and love, which will lead to trouble and misery: "There are indeed few happier households than Indian ones; or rather, one should perhaps use the past tense, since the native girl is fast learning to read novels, and ere long will doubtless grasp the fact that love makes the world go round — perhaps by turning people's heads!" (165). She then goes on to prefer the purdah to the titter of the Tam-o'-Shanter girl (165).

Although Steel supported suffragism and the notion of equality between men and women, she nevertheless felt that the Western woman could learn a great deal from the Eastern woman (165).

In another instance, however, she criticizes Indian women by asserting that the men of India are the victims of their wives:

For the men of India are — poor souls! — the most henpecked in the world. They — especially the Mahommedans — make a brave show; they may even, should they have some slight knowledge of English, stigmatise their women-folk as “poor ignorant idiots,” but once behind the purdah in the women’s apartments, Bob Acres’ courage is stable in comparison with theirs. I know no more pitiable object on this earth than an elderly Turk having his beard dyed blue by his female relations! ... Of course, there are exceptions, but the general form of Home Rule is feminine despotism veiled by a slavish subserviency in trivial details. (163-164)

She even accused Mahommedan women of being “over-obsessed by sex” (autobiography 121). The issue of ‘native’ female sensuality often returns in Steel’s narratives and is seen as the cause of many social problems, including and especially polygamy (Sen 142). Often the sensuality of the younger wives captivates the overwhelmed husbands, which drives the first wife to jealous despair to the point of sometimes committing suicide (Sen 142). According to Indrani Sen, Steel’s narratives show a bizarre version of the trope of sati-suicide. Instead of the faithful widowed wife, in this case, it is the jealous Indian wife who kills herself – not at the death of her husband, but at the death of his sexual attentions (142). So the wife commits suicide because of her emotional ‘widowhood’ and the traditional significance of sati as wifely devotion is transformed into destructive female sensuality and passion (Sen 143).

The story “In the House of a Coppersmith” (The Flower of Forgiveness) deals with the problem of destructive female sensuality in relation to the issue of Hindu widowhood (143). When Durga Dei’s husband dies, her status is reduced to that of an unfortunate widow whose widow’s garment desexualizes her and disguises her passionate nature (Sen 143). She starts sleeping with her

brother-in-law in the hope that he will marry her, but when she becomes pregnant, Gopal's wife arranges a second marriage elsewhere for Gopal (143). When Gopal agrees to this, Durga lets him drink tamarind water which has been lying too dangerously long in one of his own copper vessels, which leads to his death (Sen 144).

Thus the social-reform issue of widow remarriage, as Indrani Sen puts it, "comes to be entangled with a problematic female sexuality" (144). According to Indrani Sen, Steel criticizes the circumstances of Hindu widows in her non-literary texts but praises the enforced celibacy of Hindu widows in her literary texts (144). Many of Steel's narratives display this kind of contradictions, so that on the surface the need for social change is being encouraged, while the subtext contests that stand (Sen 144).

In "On the Second Story" (In the Permanent Way) the social issues of child widowhood and Hindu widow remarriage are discussed. However, instead of allowing Anunda and Ramanund to get married, their happiness is prevented by Anunda's death. In this way, widow remarriage is prohibited and the lovers are denied a happy ending. According to Indrani Sen, Steel's appraisal of widow celibacy suggests a disapproval of widow remarriage (144). She argues that the reformist agenda in Steel's fiction is complicated by "unspoken and irrational anxieties about the chaotic potential of the widow's physical desire" (144). In "On the Second Story" we certainly get an allusion to physical desire as the widow Anunda thinks of Ramanund as her lover only and is reluctant to marry him: "We cannot be married – I am a widow,' she repeated obstinately; 'but I will go with you all the same.' Then, seeing a certain reproach in his face, she frowned. 'Dost think I am wicked, my lord? I am not wicked at all; but Mai Kali gave me a lover, not a husband.'" (62). Steel's narratives often construct a "destructive native female sexuality which is fatal to domesticity, human relations and sometimes even to life itself" (Sen 142). This is the case in "On the Second Story" where Anunda's wicked sensuality leads to her own death.

Another way of approaching Anunda's death is by looking at it from the point of view of the nineteenth-century colonial myth of an unchanging India (Sen 144). From this point of view India is

perceived as a stagnant civilization where efforts at social reform are worthless and even questionable (Sen 144). While Ramanund is described as a specimen “of most acute intelligence, and, by virtue of inherited spiritual distinction, singularly free from the sensual, passive, acquiescence in the limitations of life which brings content to the most of humanity” (45), he cannot escape the old customs and beliefs as Anunda dies because she is sacrificed to the goddess Kâli. In the beginning of the story Ramanund is associated with the West: “On the one side, backed by the cavernous darkness of the low, wide door, was the naked, savage-looking figure, with its hands dripping still in heavy red drops, stretched out in menace over the lamp. On the other was Ramanund, backed by his friends, decent, civilised, in their Western-cut white clothing.” (53). Like the Westerner he ridicules the religious terror which has seized upon the neighbourhood because of the spreading cholera and he rejects the ritual of human sacrifice, but when Anunda dies and he is saved, and when together with his survival the cholera disappears, he realizes that the power of the goddess Kâli is not to be underestimated (73).

The colonial myth constructed in some of Steel’s narratives is that of the failure of western ‘rational’ methods to replace the ‘blind faith’ of the ‘native’, with western education represented as powerless in fighting the superstitious mind of the ‘Other’ (Sen 145). Although in this story Ramanund does not hold on to superstitions, it is Hindu society that emerges as superstitious, opposed to change, and ruled by the worship of the goddess Kâli (Sen 145). Because of the inflexibility and superstition of Hindu society, Ramanund’s Western ways fail and Anunda dies.

6.2. The failure of reform

The failure of Western ways and reform projects is not always to blame on the conservatism of Hindu society. In the article, “‘a miserable sham’: Flora Annie Steel’s short fictions and the question of Indian women’s reform”, Shampa Roy argues that “Steel’s short fictions are remarkable in that they draw the readers’ attention to the confused aspirations and frustrated desires, despair

and even death that the poorly visualised, inefficiently administered reform projects cause in the lives of various Indian women, the supposed beneficiaries of these reform efforts” (58). In Steel’s Punjab-based stories the critical scrutiny is directed at the badly run government schools and also at the English women – teachers, missionaries and philanthropic wives of administrators – who became involved in reform projects for Indian women (Roy 60). These were women who reductively stereotyped Indian women as voiceless, helpless and ignorant and therefore requiring the benevolent gestures of their Western sisters (Roy 60). The various English women in Steel’s Punjab-based stories who are involved in reformatory programmes are seen as ultimately betraying and failing the Indian women (Roy 60). Besides raising questions about the efficiency and relevance of the government schools, the reform efforts of missionary women are subjected to ironic scrutiny in Steel’s stories (Roy 60).

In the story “Mussumat Kirpo’s doll” (The Flower of Forgiveness) the failure of imperial reformatory efforts is explored (Roy 61). The title character of this story is represented as being the supposed beneficiary of the reform activities of some English female teachers and the missionary Julia Smith (Roy 62). From the very beginning of the story these women’s ambition of helping the girls at their school is described with the necessary irony: “The Commissioner’s wife has half-a-dozen children of her own, and prides herself on understanding them; but these bairns are a race apart. She neither comprehends them, nor the fluent, scholastic Hindustani with which her flushed, excited country-women introduce each claimant to her notice. Still she smiles, and says, “Bohut uchcha” (very good), and nods as if she did.” (276). The story begins with a prize-giving at the school whereby Kirpo receives a Japanese doll (277). But the doll is not considered a proper gift: “Of course, as a rule, we always draw the line about dolls when a girl is married. Sometimes it seems a little hard, for they are so small, you know; still it is best to have a rule; all these tiny trifles help to emphasise our views on the child-marriage question. But if you will be kind enough in this case — just to avoid confusion — we will rectify the mistake to-morrow.” (277). So when Julia Smith goes back to the school the next day to get the doll back from Kirpo, she discovers that Kirpo is not there: “But Kirpo was not at

school. Why should she be, seeing that she was a paper-pupil and the prize giving was over?" (278-79). The absence of any response from Miss Smith indicates that such malpractices (of expecting the students to show up only on prize-giving days) were common features of the education system (Roy 63). Julia finds Kirpo at home where her mother-in-law, Mai Gungo, exploits her for her labour and her child-bearing abilities (Roy 63): "poor Kirpo did not count for much in that bustling Hindu household. But for the fact that she was useful at the trade and as a general drudge, Mai Gungo would long ago have found some excuse for sending the girl, who had so woefully disappointed all expectations, back to her people" (279). Julia's concern for Kirpo is not entirely altruistic either and the English ladies have had patience with Kirpo, who has been learning the alphabet for five years, only because her father-in-law is a man of influence (Roy 63). As soon as she "finds firm footing in less rapacious houses" (281), Miss Smith stops paying visits to Kirpo. This abandonment is described in a rather powerful way through a series of speculations about Kirpo's daily existence (Roy 63):

Things went on as if it (the doll) had not been in that straggling Hindu house, with its big courtyard and dark slips of rooms. Perhaps Kirpo got up at night to play with it; perhaps she never played with it at all, but, having wrapped it in a napkin and buried it away somewhere, was content in its possession like the man with his one talent; for this miserliness belongs, as a rule, to those who have few things, not many ... She was not worked quite so hard now (being pregnant), since that might affect the future promise. Perhaps this gave Kirpo more time to play with the Japanese doll, perhaps it did not. Outwardly, at any rate, life went on in the courtyard as though no such thing existed. (281-282)

The tragic quality of this description implies a sharp critique of Miss Smith's decision to abandon Kirpo (Roy 63). When Julia Smith finally does visit Kirpo, the girl is about to die after childbirth (Roy 63). She seems restless because she cannot hold her own baby, but when Julia hands her son to her, Kirpo calls for her doll: "My doll! my doll! I like my doll best", but "before they could fetch it from the Mission compound Kirpo was dead." (285).

The story "At a Girls' School" (From the Five Rivers) also scrutinizes the education of Indian women at a government-run girls' school (Roy 64). In this story the investigation of the supposed advance and improvement coming from educational reform from the point of view of the lives of the two central characters: Fatma and Hoshiaribi, is complicated by the question of class (Roy 64):

That household, consisting of disreputable, good-for-nothing Peru, who gambled away the five rupees he gained by helping to carry his wife and other students to and from the school; shiftless Hoshiaribi, who spent half her scholarship of ten rupees on her clothes; and Fatma, whose eight annas a week for cleaning the writing-boards seemed to keep the whole going, was a perpetual puzzle to the English lady, even without the child. (151)

Though the girls desperately want to get an education, it is not for the sake of mental emancipation but because they want to get the scholarship money given to them by the government (Roy 64): "Do stick to your lessons, and remember why you come here. Think, just think, of the money that is being spent on your education!" Hoshiaribi gave a triumphant glance at the Bengali girl. That was it. They had paid her to learn, and she had learned. The rest was an injustice." (156). Hoshiaribi dislikes the idea of having to get a job after she will have finished her education. She says that the government pays her to learn and not to work and that is what she will keep on doing (155). But her idea of what a scholarship is, is ridiculed by a girl from her class who tells Hoshiaribi she does not understand the meaning of a scholarship (155): "Perhaps I don't," retorted Hoshiaribi, flushing up. 'My fathers were not scribes and quill drivers since creation, like yours. My people are poor. If I go home I must spin and grind corn. I will not. I tell you *I will not!*'" (155-156). But when she no longer receives a scholarship, Hoshiaribi has to become accustomed to "the lowest pay of a branch-schoolteacher" (161), a profession which she does not perform with pride or joy: "She hated teaching, but it was that or starvation." (161). This new situation she is in and the extremely low pay she receives, lead to misery, unhappiness, depression, desertion by her husband and ultimately prostitution (Roy 65).

Fatma, Hoshiaribi's sister-in-law, has to take care of her brother's children. She asks the memsahib to be promoted to the primary department because "it is a long way to carry the baby to Hoshiaribi" (152). The memsahib is not entirely indifferent to Fatma's difficult situation, but fails to see to her need because the school is not designed to help girls like Fatma (Roy 65). In fact, the supposed beneficiary reform projects are criticized from the very beginning when the organisation of the school is being described:

Up-stairs, in the primary department, the babel had lost its first barbarous simplicity; the makers of it did not always understand what they themselves were saying, and the uncertainty of all things had damped their infant light-heartedness. Higher again, in the third story, quite an academic silence prevailed among the girls working away at Euclid, algebra, and all the 'ologies, and they had learned an automatic thrust forward of the arm towards the teacher worthy of a British board school. This never failed to please exotic philanthropy. The connection may not have been quite clear, but this particular branch of knowledge was invariably looked upon as a sign that education was really at last beginning to leaven the mass of deplorable female ignorance in India. (145)

So the school is described as an oiled machine that follows "a perfect ladder of learning" (145) but soon enough the relevance of what the girls are being taught is put into question. The description of Fatma's school ironically criticizes government-run schools and reform projects (Roy 65):

Fatma's school was emphatically a school with the learning left out. To be sure, the pupils chanted their letters, and asserted the gospel that one and one make two all the world over; but, after that, education went down the by-path of learning how to sit still and do as you were bid. Yet somehow the wee girlies liked it well, and their busy mothers liked it better still. In that crowded quarter of evil repute it was something to have a crèche, where for a few hours the little ones with a tempting

jewel or two were safe from the avarice of any passer-by. And then Fatma's pupils gave no trouble at home. So the school thrived, and though educationally, of course, it was a miserable sham, it gave great satisfaction to all concerned, Fatma finding sufficient payment in the general good-will of her neighbours, and the constant relays of nurse-maids she secured. (171)

In an article called "The women of India and how we are making them miserable" Steel comments on the education of Indian women. According to her education is spreading amongst the women of the lower classes in India, but instead of helping them, it places them out of touch with the men whom they marry and who are not educated. The problem, says Steel, lies in the fact that "we are at present educating the lower class of girls, who have simply no chance to become the wives of men of the educated kind" (Steel, "The women of India and how we are making them miserable"). Flora Annie Steel condemned the idea that the British reform and education projects were the key to solving all of these women's problems. In reality, they failed to provide a real solution and did not consider any additional factors like class. While the memsahibs and missionaries represented themselves as saviours, they often failed to meet the real needs of many Indian women. The women in this story do not benefit from their education, instead they are unable to escape the circumstances under which they live and their situation seems to remain unchanged or has deteriorated by the end of the story.

"Gunesh Chund" (From the Five Rivers) is yet another story where western education fails to provide real help. When Gunesh' wife Veru gives birth to a daughter instead of a son, she realizes that her husband will have to marry a second wife. Veru, who supports modern ways, finds little comfort in Western beliefs and opinions and cannot seem to convince herself of the fact that it is not a shame to have a daughter instead of a son:

In her heart of hearts she could not overcome the inherited conviction that the meanest thing on God's earth was a sonless wife. Cultured retorts as to what she had

heard and read in school of Western opinions, and of the sex of the Queen-Empress, did very well as lethal weapons, but as inward balm were most unsatisfactory. (13)

In Woman and Empire Indrani Sen rightfully states that Steel draws a distinction between simple female education and literacy, which she applauds, on the one hand, and Westernization, which she criticizes as futile, on the other hand (146). In an interview Steel has commented on the issue of educating Indian women, and her verdict was rather negative: "European education brings them trouble." She goes on to criticize the Western influence on India when she says that "This simple life... had been preserved for three thousand years by Indian civilization, but ours will destroy it in fifty years".

In the story "Feroza" (The Flower of Forgiveness) the title character is jealous of the white memsahib: "Feroza hath old green trousers and her man is learning to be "wise," forsooth! amongst the mems. So she is jealous". (202). The reason of her jealousy lies in the fact that her husband went to England to get an education, because of which, she fears, he will lose his interest in her since she did not enjoy an education or does not wear fine clothes (Sen 146). So she decides to undergo a transformation to become more like a Western woman. But her sister-in-law Kareem criticizes Feroza's plan: "Thou art but a woman at best, and life is over for us with the first wrinkle, no matter what we learn" (211). By the time her husband returns, Feroza has changed enormously: "she sat on a chair now, and her white stockings and patent-leather shoes twisted themselves tortuously about its legs." (224). However, her husband's own westernization did not reach beyond the surface (Sen 146) and upon his return he resumes the lifestyle of "an orthodox Mohammedan" (233). As a consequence, Feroza's husband is now more attracted to the 'unreformed' Kareem than to his modernized wife (Sen 146). Feroza cannot stand the idea of losing her husband to a second wife so she puts an end to her own life by jumping into a well (243).

Westernization was also condemned because it could endanger British rule. In "Silver Speech and Golden Silence" (The Mercy of the Lord) the dangers of education are shown. The story starts with the prize-giving at a mission school in Ilmpur, a little Punjab town. The student Gunpat-Rai is

giving a speech and is praised for his eloquence and accurate English pronunciation. Five years later, Gunpat-Rai has become a follower of Arya Somajh agitators, a Hindu reform movement advocating independence, later on prosecuted by the British. The Englishman Tom Gordon tells Gunpat to keep silent about this (196). According to Gordon the few educated men of India should speak for themselves and not for the whole of India. When Gunpat-Rai refuses to follow Gordon's advice and gives a speech about "the crimes we charge against this alien Government of India", he is arrested (198). In his speech he uses the words of Edmund Burke on the impeachment of Warren Hastings:

We charge this offender with no crimes, that have not arisen from passions, which it is criminal to harbour; with no offences, that have not their root in avarice, rapacity, pride, insolence, ferocity, treachery, cruelty, malignity of temper; in short, in nothing, that does not argue a total extinction of all moral principle; that does not manifest an inveterate blackness of heart, died in grain with malice, vitiated, corrupted, gangrened to the very core. (Burke 19)

Edmund Burke was a philosopher, politician and statesman and has been closely associated with the famous Select Committee of the House of Commons on India (Burke, Langford, Marshall 626). This committee was charged to report on how the "British Possessions in the East Indies may be held and governed with the greatest Security and Advantage to this Country, and by what Means the Happiness of the Native Inhabitants may be best promoted." (Qtd. in Burke, Langford, Marshall 626). In 1784 he charged Warren Hastings, who was appointed the first Governor-General of India in 1773 (Eliot 144), with high crimes and misdemeanours (Eliot 184). Hastings was impeached in 1787 (Eliot 173), but the trial, which began in 1788, only ended in 1795 (Eliot 295). Burke's long and eloquent speech claimed that Hastings' administration had been corrupt, tyrannical, and inspired by motives of wanton aggression against 'native' rulers (Eliot 184). In his protest against British rule, Gunpat-Rai uses the same words Burke used in his speech on the impeachment of Warren Hastings.

After his arrest, Gunpat finally stops talking and falls into 'golden silence'. He only breaks his silence in front of the jury of Englishmen when he is on trial and exclaims: "I learnt it at school" (198),

whereupon the judge says “we know what you learnt at school” (198). The story then ends with a sad note: “But that did not lessen the sentence.” (198).

In this story, what the British teach the Indians at the mission school is, ironically enough, used against them. While Gunpat-Rai’s eloquence, a sign of his successful westernization, is celebrated at the beginning of the story, he is put to silence as soon as he uses his knowledge to resist British rule. In Materialist feminism: a reader in class, difference and women’s lives, Hennessy and Ingraham emphasize the fact that “It was only by continuously emphasizing the depravity of the natives that Britain could argue for its presence in India as a civilizing force.” (201). However, “Britain’s long-term imperial plans also meant that it had to maintain state of dependence, hence its resistance to modernizing reform.” (201). The British’ support of reform and education projects only went so far as to show their good intentions and justify their role as civilizer, as soon as the Indian people threatened to use their knowledge to fight for independence, modernization and westernization were no longer celebrated but condemned.

At times, Flora Annie Steel showed herself to be a true exponent of the British Empire. She glorified the Anglo-Indians who, according to her, successfully governed “three hundred millions of people dispersed through close on two millions of square miles, especially when, in the process of government, no less than one hundred and forty-seven different dialects have to be considered” (201). In this respect, it is interesting to examine how certain stereotypical western images of the Indian people are inscribed in Steel’s stories.

6.3. Stereotypes

Although Steel’s short stories focus on Indian life and criticize the way in which the missionaries and memsahibs try to improve the lives of Indian women without really grasping the complexity of their situation, her stories also contain and enhance certain stereotypical images about Indian women. Indeed, as Gayatri Spivak has argued: “any project that aims to look at colonial

writing on Indian women has to work with the awareness that the voices of the Indian women heard in these writings are not unproblematically authentic but mediated” (Qtd. in Roy 57).

Notwithstanding the occasional appearance of Indian women as the sources of a destructive sensuality, the larger part of Steel’s short stories represent Indian women as the passionless victims of their sexually uncontrolled men. In the essay “The Construction of Woman in Three Popular Texts of Empire” Rosemary Hennessy and Rajeswari Mohan argue that “the sexualization of the colonial subject drew upon the contradictory Victorian construction of the feminine as both uncontrolled and passionless” (203). These two aspects of the feminine were divided between the colonial male, constructed as sexually uncontrolled, and the colonial female, constructed as passionless (203). For the Anglo-Indian reformer, the Oriental male’s lack of sexual restraint signified his otherness and confirmed his lower nature as being less civilized and controlled and therefore more effeminate than his manly British counterpart (Hennessy, Ingraham 203). This allowed the British-Indians to represent themselves as the saviours of the defenseless Indian girls by protecting them from their sexually uncontrolled men (203).

The story “Suttu” (From the Five Rivers) confirms the stereotypical image of Indian women as passionless victims and Indian men as uncontrolled sexual beings. The story deals with a beautiful young widow who refuses to remarry because she has sworn a vow of celibacy. Her decision is criticized because “Suttu, the fakeerni, if somewhat outrageous, was distinctly attractive. That made her vow of celibacy all the more unnatural.” (102). Her father-in-law wants her to remarry Kazi’s son, a man with pockmarks and one eye. When Kazi’s son tries to convince Suttu to marry him, her beauty makes it impossible for him to control himself and he grabs her: “It was too much. He seized her by the wrist and glared at her, every evil instinct roused to fury.” (105). However, Suttu, who refuses to give up her religious oath, slaps him in the face. Later on, she refuses to cure him from snakebite unless he promises that he will not marry her, in this way she escapes her horrible faith.

Sometimes the notion of sexual uncontrollability became connected with the issue of child marriage. The British objected to child marriage by focusing on the rapacious sexuality of Bengali

men who were accused of essentially raping their child brides (Hennessy, Ingraham 203). In this way, sexuality became the ground on which alterity was invoked to legitimate British presence (Hennessy, Ingraham 203). In the story “Mussumat Kirpo’s doll” (In the Permanent Way) Kirpo is a child bride who is represented as a victim of oppressive familial arrangements (Roy 64). While Steel here criticizes the insufficiency of reform and education projects, she fails to take a clear position regarding the use of issues like child marriage to legitimate British presence, thus, in a way, legitimizing imperial presence herself (Hennessy, Ingraham 201). Hennessy and Ingraham have argued that “by treating the British characters with a certain degree of amused sarcasm, the narrative puts under pressure the traditional paradigms of imperialism—philanthropy and evangelism. However, while the irony dissolves previously held positions, it offers nothing in return.” (Hennessy, Ingraham 201). From this uncommitted position observations are made and contradictions are put forward in an ironic tone without ever resolving them (Hennessy, Ingraham 201).

Another story that illustrates Steel’s contradictory position toward British presence is “Gunesh Chund” (From the Five Rivers). In this story Indian women are portrayed either as weak (Gunesh’ wife) or as superstitious (Gunesh’ mother). The two women of the story can be seen as opposites: while Gunesh’ wife Veru has received an education and lives according to modern ways, Gunesh’ mother holds on to old customs and traditions and does not like her daughter-in-law’s “new-fangled ways” (22): “My curse upon her and every woman who learns—” (54). The women of the village also criticize Veru’s pretensions to scholarship: “though how any woman could be so wrong-minded as to usurp man’s estate by learning to read and write passed their simple understanding.” (12). The extreme contrast between these two women becomes fully clear when Veru’s daughter is sick and Veru wants to call a male doctor while her mother-in-law refuses to let a man into her house and insists on following the old ways to cure the child (21-22). Without Veru’s knowing, Gunesh’ mother calls her friends to cast the devil out of the child by fumigations (28). As a result, the child dies. Then the old women sacrifice the child in order to bring sons to the hearth (30), but when the jackals do not give the women a sign, it is decided that Gunesh needs a new wife (37).

While Veru is getting sicker and weaker, Gunesh' mother chooses a new wife for her son. When Veru finds out that her husband is going to marry a second wife, she dies from a broken heart and promises that her ghost will haunt them.

The narrative portrays Veru as a hysterical woman who dies because of an emotional breakdown caused by the death of her child and her husband's second marriage. In fact, according to the narrator, all Indian women are hysterical beings: "Then, as the full extent of the result came home to her, shriek after shriek rent the air, and she fell into one of the violent hysterical fits so common among Indian women of all classes." (30). This characteristic reduces them to weak entities who cannot handle any setbacks without falling into depression. Her mother-in-law, although an emotionally strong woman, has her own deficiencies as she clings to the 'native', barbarian customs and methods which cause her granddaughter to die. In portraying Indian women as hysterical or as superstitious and barbarous the alterity of the Oriental female, which justifies imperial presence, is established (Hennessy, Ingraham 199).

This story clearly demonstrates Steel's ambiguous attitude toward imperial presence and modernizing reform. On the one hand, by letting the mother end up being "old, sonless, hopeless" (57), Steel justifies imperial presence which would destroy such barbarous, 'native' customs. On the other hand, by denying Veru to find any real consolation in the modern, western ideas of marriage and motherhood, Steel criticizes the westernization of Eastern women through reform projects.

Like "Gunesh Chund" several other stories show Steel's portrayal of India as a country that is determined by superstition, magic and cruel religious practices. The story "A Maiden's Prayer" (The Mercy of the Lord), for example, draws a connection between cruel religious practices and terrorist political activities (Parry, Sprinker 112). In this story the girl Parbutti is going to marry a young student. When Parbutti goes to the household shrine to worship Kali, she overhears a discussion between her brother, her soon-to-be husband and two other young men. She hears them talk about liberty and equality and sees them hide explosives in Kali's shrine. On the day of the marriage, Parbutti's bridegroom and her brother are arrested, soon after, her brother dies in prison and the

bridegroom kills himself. Parbutti then goes to the shrine and sacrifices herself to Kali by igniting the explosives.

Although Steel, convinced that she had discerned the real India (Parry, Sprinker 104), claimed that she managed to construct a close relationship with the Indian people, her stories show that she did not completely dismiss the existing stereotypical images and supported certain imperial beliefs. She declared that her observations were truthful sources of information and was confident that her presence in India had enhanced the prestige of 'The British Raj' (Parry, Sprinker 105), but she also believed that the Indians with whom she associated did not dismiss her autocracy, but rather enjoyed it (Parry, Sprinker 104), which "shows the absolute necessity for high-handed dignity in dealing with those who for thousands of years have been accustomed to it." (Steel 133). Because she could not completely distance herself from the imperial ideology, Steel's writings contain a gap between ruler and ruled which cannot be closed. According to Benita Parry and Michael Sprinker we need to make a distinction between Steel's rational observations and her emotional reaction: "Where her intelligence led her to make formal assertions of tolerance, her instincts and the whole weight of conformity compelled her into portrayals which are suffocated with distaste." (106).

In this respect it is interesting to examine Steel's disapproval of interracial female friendship and miscegenation in her narratives (Sen 148). In her autobiography she promoted deep friendships with Indian women based on closeness and understanding, but her fictions often dismiss such affiliations and show quite another relationship; that of sexual rivalry over a white man (148). In the story "Feroza" (The Flower of Forgiveness) the title character is jealous of the white memsahib because her husband left her to get an education "amongst the mems" (202). And in stories like "Mussumat Kirpo's doll" and "At a girls' school" the English women pretend to salvage the troubled Indian girls but never succeed in actually improving anything about their situation.

"A Danger Signal" (In the Permanent Way) and "A Debt of Honour" (The Flower of Forgiveness) both deal with the 'desertion' of the 'native' girl or woman by a white man (Sen 149). In "A Debt of Honour" an ancient court singer, deserted in her youth by an English adventurer, waits

patiently for his return (Sen 149). When an English administrator hears this story he decides to redeem the debt of his countryman by kissing the woman. In "A Danger Signal" the granddaughter of a railway signaler is fascinated by the passing trains. One day she signals a train to stop and falls in love with the young English administrator aboard the train. Before she realizes what has happened, she watches the train roll away with a dazed look on her face (234).

In these narratives colonial miscegenation turns out to be more harmful to the girl than it is to the Englishman who either leaves or falls in love with a white woman (Sen 149). However, according to Indrani Sen we need to look beyond the "overt sympathy for the deserted/devoted Indian woman" and look at the "submerged fears and anxieties about the disruptive powers of interracial sex" (149). In other words, miscegenation is rejected as undesirable in these stories on grounds of race and culture (Sen 149).

The tension between her interest in Indian culture, customs and people, her desire to help Indian women and her criticism concerning the British reform efforts on the one hand, and her glorification of the Anglo-Indians, her confirmation of certain stereotypical images about 'the Orient' and her dismissal of certain 'native' customs and traditions on the other hand, turn Flora Annie Steel's stories into very fascinating sources of research regarding her ambiguous position toward British India.

7. Conclusion

The aim of this thesis was to examine how Flora Annie Steel fulfilled her role as a memsahib in British India. She was not a conventional memsahib, to say the least, but engaged in activities which were considered unusual for a woman of her standing. Generally speaking, a memsahib was not supposed to engage with the 'natives' or show any interest in Indian culture and customs, yet for Steel these activities were the sole thing that kept her from going insane during the long hours when her husband was working. So she forced herself to learn the local languages, established a school for girls, translated Punjabi folk-tales into English and provided medical help. She claimed that she easily established close relations with all Indian women and that neither the heat nor the discomforts could undermine her enthusiasm.

But how different really was her approach to India? We cannot deny the fact that Steel supported Anglo-Indian rule: "The Anglo-Indian is a product of which the Empire may well be proud" (India 505), and shared certain Western ideas about 'the East': "East is East, and West is West, and never the twain shall meet." (Steel 220). In her autobiography she wrote that it is necessary to learn about Indian traditions and habits in order to rule the Indian people. And although she fiercely supported the fight for suffragism in Britain and demanded equal treatment for men and women, she rejected the idea of reform in relation to Indian women.

Steel's short stories proved themselves to be rich sources of knowledge and interesting subjects of study concerning her attitude toward India and the mechanisms of the British Empire. When examining these stories, the ambiguity of her ideas and convictions asserts itself. While some of her narratives criticize the failure of British reform projects to effectively improve the situation of many Indian women, others reduce these women to stereotypical characters. Therefore we can say that her support of change comes to be entangled with and is complicated by her portrayal of Indian society as degenerate and superstitious, and that her fascination with India does not erase her disgust with certain 'native' customs and traditions.

Flora Annie Steel's life and writings are rendered with contradictions and suggest that she had an intriguing personality that is not easy to grasp, which makes it incredibly fascinating to study how she experienced her life in British-India and how she fulfilled her role as a memsahib. Obviously, she did not represent the conventional memsahib who kept her distance from 'native' life and focused on the Anglo-Indian community, but it would also be wrong to completely set her apart from the ideology of the British Empire which influenced her in many ways.

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