



“We of the bazaar lead the world by the nose.”

—Flora Annie Steel, *Voices in the Night:
A Chromatic Fantasia* (1900)

University of Alberta

“I Mean to Win”:

The Nautch Girl and Imperial Feminism at the *Fin de Siècle*

by

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Dedicated to
Nautch Girls—
Past, Present and Future.

Abstract

Grounded in the methodologies of New Historicism, New Criticism, Subaltern Studies, and Colonial Discourse Analysis, this dissertation explores Englishwomen's fictions of the nautch girl (or Indian dancing girl) at the turn of the century. Writing between 1880 to 1920, and within the context of the women's movement, a cluster of British female writers—such as Flora Annie Steel, Bithia Mary Croker, Alice Perrin, Fanny Emily Penny and Ida Alexa Ross Wylie—communicate both a fear of and an attraction towards two interconnected, long-enduring communities of Indian female performers: the *tawaifs* (Muslim courtesans of Northern India) and the *devadasis* (Hindu temple dancers of Southern India). More specifically, the authors grapple with the recognition that these anomalous Indian women have liberties (political, financial, social, and sexual) that British women do not. This recognition significantly undermines the imperial feminist rhetoric circulating at the time that positioned British women as the most emancipated females in the world and as the natural leaders of the international women's movement. The body chapters explore the various ways in which these fictional devadasis or tawaifs test imperial feminism, starting with their threat to the Memsahib's imperial role in the Anglo-Indian home in the first chapter, their seduction of burdened Anglo-Indian domestic women in the second chapter, their terrorization of the British female adventuress in the third chapter, and ending with their appeal to *fin-de-siècle* dancers searching for a modern femininity in the final chapter. My project is urgent at a time when imperial feminism is becoming the dominant narrative by which we are being trained to read encounters between British and Indian women, at the expense of uncovering alternative readings. I conclude the dissertation by suggesting that the recovery of these alternative readings can

be the starting point for rethinking the hierarchies and the boundaries separating First World from Third World feminisms today.

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INTRODUCTION

Testing the Contours of Imperial Feminism:

British Women, “Nautch Girls” and Anglo-Indian Fiction, 1880-1920

The recent film adaptation of *Vanity Fair* (2004), William Makepeace Thackeray’s 1848 novel, was a key inspiration behind my dissertation project. In this film, the South Asian Director Mira Nair heightens the Indian elements that hover in the background of Thackeray’s classic tale by introducing various decorative, musical and cultural motifs borrowed from the Bollywood film industry. Among the many luscious and vibrant spectacles she brings to the screen in her adaptation is an exotic dance sequence led by the heroine Becky Sharp (played by Reese Witherspoon).¹ The scene opens with a few prominent guests, including the King himself, seated in the entertainment hall at Lord Steyne’s mansion and awaiting the evening’s entertainment. After the sound of a drum roll, an energetic voice announces, “Tonight, Lord Steyne will unveil his mystery performance.” Everyone watches intently as Lord Steyne, the host of the dinner party, lifts the cover off a group of female entertainers occupying centre stage. Taking in the scene before him, the King immediately classifies the group of Englishwomen garbed in extravagant Eastern costume as “nautch girls”—a term translated loosely as Indian dancing girls yet having much larger connotations for a Victorian British audience as well as today’s Bollywood watchers.

¹About mid-way through her film, Mira Nair introduces one of her most drastic alterations to Thackeray’s original text: she substitutes the novel’s commentary on the popular nineteenth-century entertainment of charades, where Becky plays the role of the husband-killer Clytemnestra, with an Indian nautch routine.

What immediately struck me about this scene was that Nair's representation of Indian dancing girls, particularly in her characterization of Becky Sharp, drastically



Fig. 2: Scene from *Pakeezah*. 1972.

"Pakeezah Stills." *Sulekha.com*. Sulekha Network, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

deviated from my own understanding of the iconic Bollywood nautch girl—an understanding that had been solidified through a series of

popular films like

Pakeezah (1972), *Umaro*

Jaan (1981), *Mugal-e-Azam* (1960), *Devdas* (2002) among a handful of others. These films follow a recognizable pattern: the tawaif—a Muslim courtesan colloquially referred to as nautchnaywali (a woman who dances)—cannot escape the degrading life of prostitution in the kotha (brothel), where she undergoes a series of misfortunes, including the tragic loss of her lover, and is destined to remain alone forever, marginalized by Indian society. *Pakeezah* is archetypal among these films; it is a well-known, heart-wrenching tale about Sahibjaan who is born in a graveyard as an illegitimate child of a tawaif and deems herself unworthy of love and happiness throughout the film. She not only refuses to marry her lover Salim Ahmed Khan, but also in a climactic scene in the movie dances barefoot on glass to epitomize her self-deprecation. Another famous film, *Umrao Jaan* (both in its 1981 version and 2006 remake) features a famous nineteenth-century courtesan from Lucknow who is abducted and sold to a kotha at a very early age. Even though it is a place where she

learns to read, write, and compose poetry, the kotha emerges as a symbol of eternal imprisonment and hardship for Umrao Jaan, who loses the affections of both her

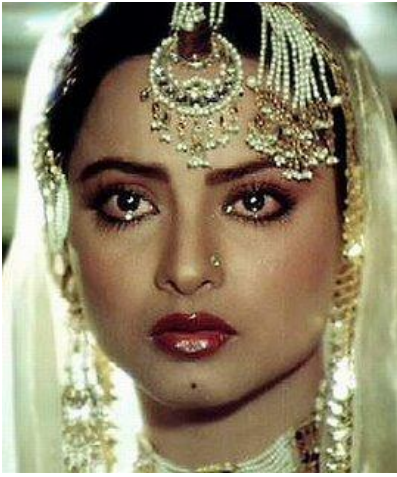


Fig. 2: Scene from *Umrao Jaan*. 1981.

“Rekha.” *Bollywood 501*. Byron Aihara, 2002. Web. Sept 2010.

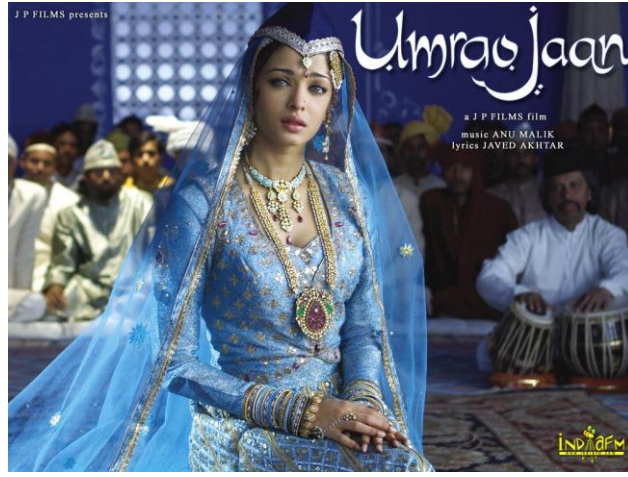


Fig. 3: Scene from *Umrao Jaan*. 2006

“Movie Wallpapers.” *Bollywood Hungama*. Hungama Digital Media Entertainment, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

lover and her birth family due to her stigmatized profession. Equally destined to remain alone, Chandramukhi in *Devdas* is deeply in love with a broken-hearted man by the name of Devdas who has eyes for no other than his Bengali childhood



Fig. 4: Scene from *Devdas*. 2002

“Devdas Review.” *Need Coffee Dot Com*. One Tusk Productions, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

friend, Paro, a chaste upper-caste female who stands in stark contrast to the courtesan.

It was such

films as these that collectively bred

my own reductive understanding of the historic nautch girl as a victim of organized prostitution, as a prisoner in the kotha with little means of escape. Nair’s

representation of Becky Sharp, hence, struck me as odd and yet, at the same time, as refreshingly different. Despite feeling slightly troubled by the director's conflation of Indian with Middle Eastern dance practices and costumes in this scene, I was nevertheless intrigued by the erotic power that Becky Sharp demonstrated during her temporary masquerade as a nautch girl. Accompanied by a dozen background dancers, and dressed in an alluring black outfit accessorized with plentiful jewellery, the British heroine relishes in her lithe, undulating movements and uses the art of



Fig. 5: Nautch Scene from *Vanity Fair*. 2004.
All Movie Photo.Com. UGO Entertainment, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

bodily seduction to wield power over her upper-class spectators. With an air of confidence, she ends her dance in the archetypal Islamic “salaam,” walking proudly and playfully towards the King as she performs the sensual hand gesture, all the while holding the viewer’s gaze and enticing him with her mischievous smile (see fig. 5). Immediately afterwards, every male in the room gives a hearty applause and, most importantly, the King approaches her personally to compliment her

performance: “Ah, Mrs. Crawley,² to the victor the spoils. You have carried off our hearts in triumph.” As “the victor,” Becky indeed earns recognition; she secures a seat next to the King at the dinner table. Deviating from the self-pitying, agentless Muslim courtesans in *Pakeezah*, *Umrao Jaan* and *Devdas*, Becky appropriates the nautch to fulfill her feminist goals—to assert her physical independence, gain control over her male audience, and build social status.

Mira Nair’s radical inclusion of the nautch in her film adaptation of *Vanity Fair* propelled my return to nineteenth-century British texts for an alternative understanding of the lives of Indian female performing artists from that promoted by contemporary Bollywood cinema. Inspired by Becky Sharp’s performance, I was particularly fascinated by the possibility that nautch girls served as models of female empowerment for British women. Through a prolonged, in-depth study of a vast archive of British representations, I soon discovered that colonial writers wrote prolifically about the lifestyles of two female performing communities in particular: the devadasis (generally speaking, Hindu temple dancers of Southern India) and the tawaifs (generally speaking, Muslim courtesans of Northern India). Both of these communities were perceived as having many liberties—political, social, financial, educational, and sexual—that other Indian and British women did not, and it is thus they (out of the many performers falling under the rubric “nautch girls”) that constitute the primary focus of this dissertation.

While a wide variety of genres and forms throughout the British Raj took up the figure of the devadasi or tawaif, I concentrate specifically, here, on an explosion of female-authored Anglo-Indian fiction at the *fin de siècle*. Significantly, this neglected

² At this point of the narrative, Becky is married to Rawdon Crawley.

subgenre of nautch girl fiction cropped up at the same time that the women's movement in Britain was gaining ground, and when fiction-writing offered many Anglo-Indian female authors (caught between Victorian and Modern ideals of womanhood, and torn between their English heritage and their Indian setting) room to test out alternative selves. Writers such as Flora Annie Steel, Bithia Mary Croker, Fanny Emily Penny, Victoria Cross, Alice Perrin, and Ida Alexa Ross Wylie collectively produced an astounding sixty works or so that engaged with the nautch girl figure in some form or another. The sheer volume of fiction, both novels and short stories, that emerged between 1880 and 1920 suggests that these British female writers had an evident and almost fanatic interest in the Indian dancing girl, and it is the objective of this dissertation to suggest how this interest provides new ways of thinking about cross-cultural female encounters at the *fin de siècle*.

More specifically, by locating and analyzing this forgotten subgenre of Anglo-Indian fiction, I provide a revisionist reading of British women's interactions with Indian women, a reading that deviates significantly from the now-prevailing paradigm of "imperial feminism." As recent scholarship has importantly revealed, one of the integral features attributed to nineteenth-century imperial feminism is that British women secured a sense of racial and cultural superiority vis-à-vis colonized women, who they constructed as oppressed, passive, and in need of British rescue from the clutches of indigenous patriarchy. Thinking of themselves as citizens of the most progressive nation in the world, and hence as the most advanced of all national female types, British women assumed that they were the natural leaders of a world-wide women's movement. Yet, diverging from this common conception of British feminist history at the turn of the century, the neglected fictions I study in this

dissertation tell another story—one that does not end with the reassertion of the British woman's relative superiority and the reification of Indian women as passive victims of native patriarchy. Instead, the female Anglo-Indian writers of these works subtly articulate doubts about their imperial and national role when confronted by the seemingly more liberated nautch girl.

Such is the case, for example, with Flora Annie Steel's *The Potter's Thumb*, a novel written in 1894 by the most popular Anglo-Indian female author of her time. It is one of many *fin de siècle* fictions to stage a physical or cultural encounter between the white colonial female and the Indian female performer, in this instance between the Anglo-Indian Rose Tweedie (an emerging New Woman of the 1890s) and the strong-willed courtesan named Chandni (an Indian female rebel who adamantly opposes British colonial rule every chance she gets). During a heated meeting between the two, the rebellious Indian dancer only grows more resilient, confidently asserting that "she was the mistress, and this girl [Rose], despite her courage, was in her power; what is more, she should learn it" (273). This quotation serves as a starting point for understanding the basis of my dissertation: the spirited nautch girl in Steel's novel actively subverts the racial and cultural hierarchy on which the white woman's burden in colonial India was founded. Indeed, with unbending resolve, Chandni identifies herself as the "mistress" and reduces her opponent to a mere "girl"; she sees herself as holding the "power" over an Englishwoman whose "courage" is comparatively insubstantial; and she is adamant that her British counterpart "should learn it"—"should learn" that she is neither the most emancipated of all women, nor the inevitable leader of a global women's movement.

As evident from Steel's characterization of Chandni in *The Potter's Thumb*, it is in the space of fiction that British female writers like Flora Annie Steel grapple with an uneasy recognition that their racial and national identity is not an assured sign of their advancement, and that perhaps their emancipation lies in following—not saving—the more liberated nautch girl, in becoming her disciple and “learn[ing]” from her. After all, this is a battle of which fictional courtesans like Chandni assert, “I Mean to Win” (211)—and win they do, by repeatedly challenging and questioning the very premise of imperial feminist rhetoric. In this respect, through a reinvestigation of British women's literary history at the close of the nineteenth and onset of the twentieth century, and by fusing the methodologies of New Historicism, New Criticism, Subaltern Studies, and Colonial Discourse Analysis, I undertake the important task of exposing British women's self-doubts about imperial feminism. I thereby rethink our understanding of British colonial and feminist history by complicating current scholarly assumptions about British women's relationship to Indian women at the *fin de siècle*. As I explore in the Conclusion, I hope that the reconsideration of postcolonial feminist understandings of the turn-of-the-century women's movement will be fruitful in rethinking cross-cultural female encounters today.

Western Women and Imperialism:

(Re)Defining the Contours of Imperial Feminism

Over the last two decades, there has been a marked interest in rethinking western women's relationship to colonial history, and it is out of this prevailing interest that scholarship on imperial feminism has flourished and come to define our general understanding of colonizer-colonized female relationships. This burgeoning

body of scholarship sprouts from the work of postcolonial feminist scholars, who have collectively raised awareness of the racism implicit in the globalization of western feminism, which takes white women's experience as the norm by which to judge the condition of all women. Among them, Chandra Talpade Mohanty has been particularly influential. Her seminal essay "Under Western Eyes: Feminist Scholarship and Colonial Discourses" exposes the racialization of the "Third World Woman" in western feminist texts—texts which produce and circulate a homogenous and ahistorical view of non-Western women as "sexually constrained," "ignorant, poor, uneducated, tradition-bound, religious, domesticated, family-oriented, victimized etc" (199). By reducing these women to a "singular monolithic subject" (196), European and North American feminists, Mohanty argues, commit an act of cultural imperialism, a discursive colonization of Eastern women who are robbed of their right to self-representation. This textual violence in turn serves the interest of Western feminists who "codify their relationship to the Other in implicitly hierarchical terms" (197). By bemoaning the condition of Third World Women, they configure themselves as relatively liberated, "as educated, modern, as having control over their own bodies and sexualities and the 'freedom' to make their own decisions" (200). Along with many of her contemporaries, Mohanty therefore interrogates Western forms of feminism that universalize women's experiences according to a Western-centric point of view, and in the process engender a reductive and racist image of non-Western women.³

This growing awareness of the racial politics informing contemporary feminist practices has prompted scholars to reinvestigate feminist histories for the

³ See also Valerie Amos and Pratibha Parmar, "Challenging Imperial Feminism"; and Hazel Carby, "White Women Listen! Black Feminism and the Boundaries of Sisterhood."

variable ways in which western women colluded with imperial practices and policies.⁴

In this respect, a growing number of critics have challenged the enduring and deceptive view that colonialism was an exclusively masculine enterprise. In *Gendering Orientalism*, for example, Reina Lewis explores how women were complicit in cultural imperialism by rethinking and contributing to Edward Said's seminal book, *Orientalism*, which she argues pays little attention to female Orientalists. She concentrates specifically on women artists who attained greater acclaim in a male-dominated field through their "involvement in imperial cultural production" (2). "Imperialism," she concludes, "played a role in the very construction of professional creative opportunities for European women" (3). In *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance*, Margaret Strobel and Nupur Chauduri edit a collection of essays (some of which I introduce intermittently throughout this dissertation) that challenge the prevailing assumption that "the colonies were 'no place for a white woman'" (3). Recognizing that "most scholars have simply excluded or marginalized Western women from the focus of their studies" (3), they bring a multitude of issues to the forefront, concentrating mostly on western's women imperial roles in India and Africa. "Historians," they warn, "must not lose sight of the fact that feminism(s) are and always will be as much quests for power as they are battles for rights" (3).

Of particular interest to me in this dissertation is how western women exploited the stereotype of the colonized woman in pursuit of their own emancipation. This line of inquiry has been opened up by Gayatri Spivak in her

⁴ For further research, see Dea Birkett's "The 'White Woman's Burden' in the 'White Man's Grave': The Introduction of British Nurses in Colonial West Africa"; Tracy Jean Boisseau's *White Queen: May French-Sheldon and the Imperial Origins of American Feminist Identity*; Susan L. Blake's "A Woman's Trek: What Difference Does Gender Make"; Mervat Hatem's "Through Each Other's Eyes: The Impact on Colonial Encounter of the Images of Egyptian, Levantine-Egyptian, and European Women, 1860-1920"; and Leslie A. Flemming's "In 'A New Humanity: American Missionaries' Ideals for Women in North India, 1870-1930."

seminal essay, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism.” Spivak is one of the first critics to seriously engage with the relationship between the rise of British feminist individualism and the accompanying discursive construction (or “epistemic violence”) of the female Other in nineteenth-century British literature. In her analysis of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, a “cult text of feminism” (307), she argues that Jane’s development into an empowered domestic woman transpires at the expense of the Third World Woman. While the white woman gains greater agency, “The ‘native female’ as such (*within* discourse, *as* a signifier) is excluded from any share in this emerging norm” (307). Spivak’s now well-known reading of Brontë’s canonical nineteenth-century novel has prompted a reinvestigation of white feminist history for its complicity with racialized representations of colonized women.⁵

Considering the longevity of Britain’s rule in India, the focus on British women’s interests in Indian women has been particularly strong among these burgeoning studies.⁶ Many scholars, ranging from Barbara Ramusack, Margaret Strobel, Anna Johnston, Antoinette Burton, and Kumari Jayawardan, have confirmed that British women secured a sense of racial superiority by writing about the purportedly poor conditions of Indian women, and mobilized their feminist interests by taking on their gender-specific duty in the colonies to save these unfortunates from patriarchal oppression. They capitalized on their role as imperialists to carve out a more empowering place for themselves within male-dominated circles, whether as housewives, nurses, teachers, missionaries or travellers. In this respect, they

⁵ Susan Meyer, Jenny Sharpe, Deidre David and Benita Parry among others have since revisited the novel on similar grounds.

⁶ In this Introduction, I do not provide a comprehensive understanding of British women’s imperial roles in colonial India since, whether as missionaries, teachers, doctors or housewives, and whether residing in the metropole or in the colony, British women enacted the “white woman’s burden” in various ways—some of which did not always involve Indian women, and some of which I will introduce in this dissertation, where relevant.

exploited (and gendered) already-existing rhetoric about Indian women that was used throughout the nineteenth century to justify British rule in India. In the 1820s, under the growing influence of utilitarian and evangelical thought, women became increasingly implicated in the project of colonialism as synecdoches of their respective nations. In *The History of British India* (1818), for example, James Mill claimed, “Among rude people the women are generally degraded; among civilized people they are exalted” (293). He voiced the prevailing Western assumption that a nation’s degree of civilization was legible through the status and treatment it accorded its women, much like the Utopian socialist François Fourier, who considered women to be a “barometer of society,” an index into the “level of advancement of civilization” (qtd. in Hawkesworth 46). Under such colonial logic, India was proven to be uncivilized and degraded: its women faced barbaric customs such as sati, enforced widowhood, early marriages, female infanticide, female illiteracy, polygamy and purdahnashin. These Indian customs became immediate and enduring signifiers of a barbaric society that mistreated its women, justifying British presence in India as a honourable and humane cause to protect defenceless Indian women. To use Spivak’s words, the civilizing project was grounded in a romanticized vision of benevolent “white men saving brown women from brown men” (*Critique of Postcolonial Reason* 284).

As recent scholarship on imperial feminism has revealed, it was not just “white men” but also white women who became involved in such rescue campaigns, and who self-servingly used and maintained a hierarchical distinction between themselves and the colonized women they represented. Antoinette Burton has been particularly influential in historicizing and theorizing the ways in which British

women's constructions of Indian womanhood marked their participation in imperial feminist rhetoric and practices. She has become an authoritative source on imperial feminist history in British India, and her work is particularly useful to me because she sets her parameters around the women's movement at the *fin de siècle*. In both her breakthrough article "The White Woman's Burden: British Feminists and the Indian Woman, 1865-1915" (1990) and her subsequent book *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915* (1994), Burton takes a postcolonial feminist approach to understanding Victorian and Edwardian feminists, who were "conscious of and affected by living in an imperial culture" ("White Woman's Burden" 151). Drawing on a hierarchical notion of ethnic and cultural difference, and perceiving themselves as the most enlightened and advanced of all women across the globe, British women made it their race- and gender-specific obligation—the "White Woman's Burden"⁷—to save their Indian sisters from the plights of child marriage, illiteracy, seclusion, and enforced widowhood, read as the "totality of Eastern women's experiences" (*Burdens* 47).

Burton argues that this rhetoric was promulgated in a cross-generic body of literature and benefitted a variety of reformers (including teachers, missionaries, doctors, and suffragists), who became the "mediators" and "translators" (101) of Indian women, reducing them to mere "texts" (101) for the consumption of a British imperial nation. It was against this reified image of the passively suffering Indian woman that British women measured and confirmed their relative advancement and

⁷ Hester Gray was the first to rewrite Rudyard Kipling's male-centered reflections of imperialism in his seminal poem, "The White Man's Burden," to include British feminists. In her article "The White Woman's Burden" (published on November 27, 1914), she drew on imperial feminist rhetoric to gain support for the suffrage, suggesting that if British women were granted the right to vote they could better assist "the less privileged women of the east" (qtd. in Burton, *Burdens* 10).

emancipation. By “imagining the women of India as helpless colonial subjects,” Burton argues, “British feminists constructed the Indian woman as a foil against which to gauge their own progress” and “appropriated to themselves as imperial Britons the highest and most legitimate form of ‘feminism’” (151). Reassured of their own racial and cultural superiority, feminists configured their work in the empire as an important mission to civilize Indian women under the guise of an international sisterhood—the imaginary construction of “a universal female ‘we’” (3), a united female effort to fight patriarchal oppression. Yet, as Burton suggests, rather than constructing a sisterhood, the hierarchy between British and Indian women suggested a mother-daughter relationship whereby imperial feminists took on the “maternal burden” of ensuring the well-being of their colonial children (121), and of guiding them towards their own liberation.⁸

This feminist imperial authority, as Burton suggests, and as other scholars have also confirmed, was not only “imagined” but also “exercised” (98); textual representations of Indian women, in other words, had real material and cultural consequences. For example, feminists actively acquired funding and support for projects that would employ British women abroad, recognizing that they would reap greater financial and social benefits from working in the empire than they did at home. As Jenny Sharpe suggests, “The unmarried, middle-class women who were hired as governesses, zenana, and missionary school teachers generally found the higher wages and professional status overseas preferable to employment in England”

⁸ Barbara N. Ramusack makes a similar claim in “Cultural Missionaries, Maternal Imperialists, Feminist Allies: British Women Activists in India, 1865-1945.” She exposes the feminization of colonialism by arguing that Western women, who thought of themselves as mothering Indian women, created a nurturing and benevolent version of imperialism that offset the manly attributes of aggression and competition underlying territorial imperialism.

(95). Many of these women established and supervised Indian female schools that were modelled on British education systems. After her visits to India in the 1860s and 1870s, Mary Carpenter was chief among those promoting an education for Indian women, and her publicity in the press led to the initiation of the Mary Carpenter Scholarship. Claiming that the British female virtue of charity should be transferred to the colonial arena, she encouraged women from both the mother country and the colony to play an “active role” in bettering the livelihood of Indian women (*Burdens* 111). Under Carpenter’s influence, India became a fertile ground for employing trained British teachers. While Carpenter paved the path for more female teachers in the colony, Dr. Frances Hoggan played a significant role in persuading British women to find their vocation in India as nurses or doctors and gained financial support for this endeavour through the Lady Dufferin Fund. As a result, Burton argues, Indian Women, who by custom were only treated by female doctors, were “instrumental” (112) in making male-dominated positions more accessible to British women.

In addition to this growth in female teachers and medical professionals in late-nineteenth-century India, many scholars have investigated the rise of female missionaries in the British Raj, who conflated proselytization of India with the civilization of its women. In *Missionary Writing and Empire, 1800-1860*, Anna Johnston, for instance, examines the gendering of evangelical missionary work in the nineteenth century. “Evangelicals nurtured the deep-seated conviction,” Johnston explains, “that Christianity sustained a high status for women” (39). According to this logic, they saw Indian women’s conversion as a prerequisite to their uplift. Missionary schools were established to teach them the tenets of a purportedly more

benevolent and superior religion. In *Feminism and Empire: Women Activists in Imperial Britain, 1790-1865*, Clare Midgley undertakes a similar study. Taking Spivak as her impetus, Midgley seeks to “explore the historical relationship between ‘nascent feminist individualism’ and ‘imperial social mission’ beyond the confines of the literary creation of *Jane Eyre*” (4), focusing particularly on how evangelical women participated in the anti-slavery campaigns, the sati abolition movement and the spread of a western education. Collectively, the revisionist work of scholars such as Antoinette Burton, Barbara N. Ramusack, Anna Johnston, Clare Midgely (to name a few) has exposed that British feminists had much to gain (socially, culturally, and financially) from shouldering the burden to civilize Indian women.

I am indebted to the numerous scholars cited above for interrogating western forms of feminism and exposing its inherent racism; I am indebted to them for illuminating the historical coupling of the women’s movement and imperialism as well as its subsequent exclusion and racialization of colonized women. However, while these groundbreaking studies have alerted us to the cultural imperialism that informed Western feminist practices, less scholarship has been devoted to exposing the counter narratives that arose following British women’s encounters with Indian women who challenged the racial hierarchy on which imperial feminism was founded. In this respect, I feel that the work of these researchers may not be going far enough in troubling imperial feminist formations. They have failed to recognize that colonial discourse was not hegemonic, and accordingly that British women were not always reassured of their racial and cultural supremacy in the colonial context. It is the purpose of this dissertation to expose such moments of self-doubt—moments that materialize frequently in a little-known and -studied subgenre of nautch girl

fiction that presents British women who are troubled (or conversely excited) by the Indian dancer's relative emancipation and power.

In her Introduction to *Burdens of History*, Antoinette Burton does gesture, albeit briefly, to the importance of tracing such incidents which “destabilize the myth of the passive Indian woman” (118):

Indian feminists could and did subvert the version of international sisterhood that their British imperial sisters attempted to foist on them. The representations that British feminists created of passive Indian women were inherently unstable and were contradicted by the actions, and in some cases by the very presence, of Indian women whom it was their intention to depict as part of this sisterhood of women across the world. (30)

Burton cites the examples of Pandita Ramabai, Cornelia Sorabji, Rukhmabai and Mrs. P.L. Roy, who were involved in educational, social and political reforms in India; she also locates evidence of Indian women's involvement in the nationalist movement of the twentieth century. She argues that, while such women “contradicted the stereotypes deployed by British feminists” (30), their achievements were nevertheless marginalized and overpowered by the dominant British-produced discourse on Indian womanhood. Moreover, British women were uncomfortable with the progress of Indian women, and thus justified such advances as brought on by “an outside movement” (118), by the women's movement in the West. Self-servingly, they continually rendered Indian women as “only half-formed feminists in the making” (119) since “British women's emancipation would, should, *must* come first” (120).

However, Burton only mentions those Indian women who often fell under British women's reform plans—that is, upper-caste Indian women who readily informed the British civilizing project. In contrast, I want to offer a more sustained study of communities of Indian women who were not an integral part of these reforms, and who did not appear to be “only half-formed feminists in the making” (119). Jyotsna Singh argues that nautch girls “did not figure in the nineteenth century colonial debates about the rescue of women” (111) alongside sati, early marriage, illiteracy, or female infanticide. In popular colonial discourse, they were not perceived as victims in need of saving (at least not until anti-nautch rhetoric started to gain popularity). Instead, they were perceived as possessing much political, financial, social and sexual freedom—a perception that was entrenched in the British imagination, and that I trace more thoroughly below in my discussion of the elusive term “nautch girls.”



Fig. 6: Daniell, T. “The Nautch.” Oil Painting. c.1850.

“The Tawaif, the Anti-Nautch Movement, and the Development of North Indian Classical Music.” *Chandra and David’s Homepage*. Real Networks, 2010. Web. Sept 2010.

The “Nautch Girls”:

(Un)Defining Tawaif and Devadasi Communities

I must begin my exploration of Indian female performers by complicating my own usage of the terms “nautch” and “nautch girls”⁹—anglicized words deriving from the Hindi/Urdu word *nach*,¹⁰ meaning dance (Nevile, *Nautch Girls* 45). These words became prominent in the nineteenth century among both the colonizers and the colonized, and overwrote many of the words previously used to describe different groups of Indian female performers and performances varying by class, region and religion. Dating back to the early years of the Raj, the catchphrase



Fig. 7: Rousselet, Louis. “Nautch Girl of Ulwur.” Engraving from *India and its Native Princes*. c.1860.

“nautchlater.” *Columbia.edu*. Columbia, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

“nautch girls” became British shorthand for the various entertainments (whether on the street, in temples, in royal courts, or during Indian festivals and celebrations) that colonial men and women witnessed during their travels in India. Anti-nautch campaigners capitalized on this reductive expression later in the nineteenth century in order to dismiss all public female performers as prostitutes. The inherent plurality and temporality of Indian artistic practices were disregarded through this totalizing and ahistorical discursive construct.

⁹ Other spelling variations include naach, natch, nach, noch, notch.

¹⁰ According to Pran Nevile, it is “derived from the Sanskrit word *nṛitya* through the Prakrit *nachcha*” (45)



Fig. 8: Rousselet, Louis. "The Egg-Dance by a Nautch Girl." Engraving from *India and its Native Princes*, c.1860.

"nautchlater." *Columbia.edu*. Columbia, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

My own use of this term not only threatens to eradicate distinctions between a wide-range of Indian cultural practices, but also to misrepresent or under-represent the complexity of female performing communities. That is, translated as dancing girls, the phrase "nautch girls" is limiting and inadequate in capturing the versatile lifestyle and function of these women.

To begin with, their artistic talents often exceeded dancing since many

were also skilful singers, musicians, poets, acrobats, magicians, and gymnasts.¹¹ The term "nautch girls" also presumes that these women were first and foremost entertainers, that their identity was tied to their artistic profession rather than being an aspect of a more complex, multifaceted existence. With this in mind, many scholars have preferred the translation courtesan instead, but as Susie Tharu and K. Lalita suggest "the term 'courtesan' hardly captures the regard and the affection in which these learned and accomplished women were often held. Nor does the translation give us a sense of the wide circle of other artists and connoisseurs of

¹¹ Writing in the 1810s, Mari Nugent, for example, suggests that a group of nautch girls from Lucknow "performed feats of activity, and balance, really very curious and even wonderful" (326). At Cawnpore (Kanpur), she witnesses a performance by a nautch girl from Kashmir, named "String of Pearls," who whirled around while balancing a bottle of rose water on her head and simultaneously crafting a bouquet of flowers out of coloured muslin that she "plac[ed] ... before me in a very graceful manner" (127). See fig. 8.

culture to which some of them belonged” (64). Sharing Tharu’s and Lalita’s concern, I detail below other aspects of these women’s lives that are disregarded or downplayed when they are identified as either dancers or courtesans.

The phrase “nautch girls” becomes even more problematic when we consider that current scholarship on colonial discourse itself is beginning to replace (and perhaps make obsolete) other terms that the British used to address female performers throughout the nineteenth century, including their names. To list a few examples, in her novel *The Missionary* (1811), Sydney Owenson notes a functional distinction between the temple prophetess known as Brachmachira (perhaps a misspelling of Brahmacharya) and the temple priestesses, known as Ramganny (misspelling of Ramjani). Writing almost fifty years later, in his novel *Tara* (1863), Philip Meadows Taylor distinguishes between the higher status of his heroine, who serves the temple, and the low-standing Moorlees (or, Muralis). In *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood*, the missionary and anti-nautch campaigner, Jenny Fuller



Fig. 9: “Nautch Girls, Bombay.” Engraving from *The Graphic*. 1857.

“nautchlater.” *Columbia.edu*. Columbia, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

differentiates between different types of devadasis; the Bhavins from Konkan and Goa, who serve the Lord Mangesh, for example, are different than a group of temple performers in Western and Central India, who “seem[ed] to

form a separate class or caste called *Kalamantin*” (127). The anthropologist John Shortt distinguishes between the devadasis and the tawaifs, claiming that the “thasee” (dasi) or “dancing girl attached to a Pagoda” is not synonymous with Muslim courtesans of the Mughal courts (qtd. in Paxton, “The Temple Dancer” 88).

Not only did some writers notice variances in the class, lifestyle and artistry of various performers (of which only a few are mentioned above), but they also referred to many nautch girls by name. On October 20, 1814, the *Calcutta Gazette* promoted upcoming performances of three celebrated nautch girls, Nicky, Ushoorun and Misree (Nevile, *Nautch Girls* 57). The October 1823 issue of *The Asiatic Journal of London* gave a vivid account of a performance by Begum Jahn and Hingum at the home of Babu Muttelall Mullick (57). Many of the early British settlers in India retained their own troupe of nautch girls, and, perhaps as a result of this proximity, Maria Nugent showed a keen interest in learning their names, writing that “Gilbert has promised to get me the names of the nautch girls; one is, I know, called Moon, another String of Pearls, a third Atta of Roses and so on” (127-128). Many early travel writers also made reference to a famous Calcutta nautch girl named Nicky (also spelled Nicki and Nickee). As these examples collectively attest, colonial writers were not always dismissive of the individuality of female performers. By proposing that they were, scholars themselves may inadvertently be homogenizing Indian female performers through their own use of the word “nautch” to classify a range of nineteenth-century colonial representations.

It is with this crisis of representation in mind that I use the term “nautch” and “nautch girls” throughout this dissertation. While using a variety of other words (dancer, performer, courtesan), none of which seem adequate, I still employ the term

nautch in both noun and adjective form cautiously but purposely in this project to recapture its signification in colonial discourse. That is, in order to understand British women's fictional representations of Indian female performers, I take into consideration the large body of discourse about "nautch girls" circulating in the British imagination from which they drew. At the same time, to prevent further erasure of existing differences, I identify, where possible, which traditions these writers seem to be alluding to. While uncovering the general understanding of nautch girls in colonial discourse, I note British women's attentiveness, however minimal, to geographical, cultural and artistic differences. Generally speaking, they seemed to be



Fig. 10: Prinsep, Valentine Cameron. "A Nautch Girl." Sketch from *Imperial India, An Artist's Journal*. 1879.

"The Tawaif, the Anti-Nautch Movement, and the Development of North Indian Classical Music." *Chandra and David's Homepage*. Real Networks, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

most interested in the often-conflated groups of female performers known as tawaifs and devadasis, both of which were largely perceived as elite courtesans whose clientele consisted of the upper echelons of society and who purportedly held many liberties not granted to other Indian or British women.¹² My focus in this dissertation is not on analyzing the artistry of these women per se (their dance choreographies, music, or songs) but instead on uncovering how their lifestyles were imagined within colonial discourse, and in turn how these imaginings informed the work of female

¹² According to much evidence, the dancers from these two traditions did interact. Pran Nevile records instances where dancers from across the nation gathered to celebrate momentous occasions (35), and reports on the establishment of institutions to teach dance and music (39).

fiction writers at the turn of the century.

Before I turn to these colonial writings, I want to provide a general overview of these female-oriented communities. In my description of nineteenth-century tawaifs and devadasis, whose histories are to a large extent irretrievable and irreducible, I rely on the work of subaltern historiographers who have pieced together information about these women's lives from a vast array of colonial representations, Indian art and literature, historical documents, as well as from these



Fig. 11: Architectural example of an old kotha
 “The Tawaif, the Anti-Nautch Movement, and the Development of North Indian Classical Music.” *Chandra and David’s Homepage*. Real Networks, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

women’s own writings that range from poetry to autobiographical and journalistic writings.¹³ Often, but not exclusively, of Muslim background, tawaifs were courtesans who resided chiefly in Northern India, with many clustering around Benares,

Lucknow, Cawnpore, Jaipur and Delhi. They were trained in the arts of the kathak, one of the leading dances of India which flourished in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, as well as the mujra and the abhinaya. As celebrated performing artists,

¹³ The terms “tawaifs” and “devadasis” are still somewhat monolithic, and do not account for the different regional names given to women falling under these general traditions. Other terms for tawaifs included Lolonis, Domnis, Horokenis, Hentsinis, Nartakis, and Raj-Nartakis. Other terms for Devadasis included Rajdasis, Alanlcordasis, Murali, Bhavinis, Bhagtan or Bhagtani of Marwar, Maharis, Natis, Basavi, Devils of Andhra Pradesh, Jogatis in Northern Karnataka, Ganikas, Vesayas, Patradavaru, Veshis, and Apsaras. For further research on the devadasi tradition, see Kakolee Chakraborty, *Women as Devadasis: Origin and Growth of the Devadasi Profession* and Amrit Srinivasan, “Reform and Revival: The Devadasi and Her Dance. For further research on the tawaif tradition, see Veena Talwar Oldenburg, “Lifestyle as Resistance: The Case of Courtesans of Lucknow,” Jennifer Post, “Professional Women in Indian Music: The Death of the Courtesan Tradition,” and Lata Singh, “Retrieving Voices from the Margins: The Courtesan and the Nation’s Narrative.”

they entertained both in royal courts and within their opulent upper-storied apartments known as kothas, commonly but reductively translated as brothel. Because they were the trendsetters of Indian culture, the day-to-day activities of influential nineteenth-century courtesans extended beyond their rigorous training in classical dance and singing. A tawaif's education in Indian literature, arts and politics enabled her to converse intellectually with her male clients as well as showcase her skills in composing and reciting poetry. Moreover, from an early age, these women were instructed in etiquette and provided lessons in cultural refinement to those men who patronized them. Although, as single women, Muslim courtesans were exempted from domestic roles, they often pursued a sexual relationship with a lover



Fig. 12: Dhurandhar, M. V.
"Mussalman Nautch Girl." Drawing.
c.1910.

"The Tawaif, the Anti-Nautch Movement, and the Development of North Indian Classical Music." *Chandra and David's Homepage*. Real Networks, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

of their choice while remaining "free from stigma" (Dyson 146)—especially within a society that indentified them as cultured and reputable artists rather than prostitutes. More importantly, because of their widespread popularity, these professional entertainers and courtesans accrued ample wealth, living a luxurious lifestyle marked by economic independence that was inherited by future tawaifs—their adopted as well as biological daughters. Furthermore, they became involved in national politics through their daily interactions with men in positions of political power. Generally speaking, these women

enjoyed what Veena Talwar Oldenburg calls a “lifestyle as resistance” (“Lifestyle” 26), a counterculture to patriarchy characterized by socio-cultural prestige as well as financial, political, and physical independence.

While tawaifs were generally speaking (but not exclusively) secularized performers in Northern India of a Muslim background, devadasis were Hindu temple dancers in Southern India whose fame and status revolved around their association with religious institutions and rites. According to Jeffrey L. Spear and Avanthi Meduri, “It was, after all, the women’s religious status that distinguished the

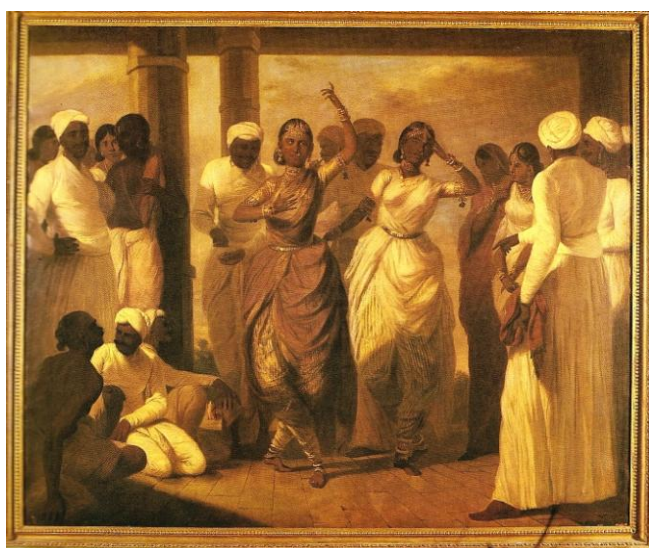


Fig. 13: Kettle, Tilly. “Devadasis or Dancing Girls.” Drawing. 1770.

Nevile, Pran. *Nautch Girls of India: Dancers, Singers and Playmates*. Paris: Ravi Kumar, 1996. 23. Print.

devadasi institution from courtesan traditions of elsewhere” (431). These women were often wed to the idols of Hindu temples, and were integral to upholding and performing religious customs and rituals in India—particularly through their sacred dances (the Dassi-

Attam or Sadir Nautch) that told the stories of their gods. They also performed at weddings and other auspicious occasions since as Ketaki Dyson points out, “No religious occasion was thought to be complete without their attendance” (147). Amrit Srinivasan characterizes the powerful role of these spiritual dancers as follows: “As a picture of good luck, beauty, and fame, the nautch girl was welcome in all rich men's homes on happy occasions of celebration and honour, an adjunct to conservative



Fig. 14: Shoberl, Frederic. "Devedasis or Bayaderes." Illustration from *The World in Miniature: Hindustan*. 1820.

"nautchlater." *Columbia.edu*. Columbia, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

domestic society, not its ravager" (1870). They benefitted financially from this honorary role, acquiring much money for their religiously-sanctioned entertainments and often getting a share of the temple revenue. Protected by the government, they also held politically empowered roles within their respective communities and religious organizations. Because they could read and write, devadasis were highly educated in the sacred traditions, and shared the tawaif's interest in composing

and performing their own poetry. As wives to the immortal gods, they also escaped the fears of widowhood that haunted other Indian women. Their sacred marriage, however, did not deter them from pursuing sexual relations since they "were not required to practice chastity" (Paxton, "Temple Dancer" 85). They "lived outside the secluded domain of the family and outside the bounds of marriage" while at the same time remaining "ritually pure" (85). Like their Muslim counterparts, they owned

and inherited property that was passed down to their female offspring. Despite their prevailing association with the temple, some devadasis did live a more secularized existence, and hence were comparable to their Muslim counterparts in the North. As Spear and Meduri recognize, non-dedicated devadasis “were closer in their practice to the parallel but secular courtesan tradition among Muslims, often grouped under the term ‘tawaif’” (438).

Above I have given a general overview of tawaif and devadasi communities in the nineteenth century, and these summaries provide a working framework by which to understand British representations of these women’s lives. Considering these women were such an integral part of Indian cultural practices, and considering they performed before many nineteenth-century British travellers or residents in India, it is not surprising that the lifestyle of tawaifs and devadasis was a topic addressed in a vast array of colonial writings, ranging from periodicals, histories, travelogues, memoirs and diaries to novels, poetry, short stories, and drama. When studied collectively, they give rise to a sort of mega-discourse on nautch girls that significantly counteracts the dominant narrative about Indian womanhood that, as I traced earlier, prevailed in colonial policies and practices, and informed imperial feminism. Deviating from the stereotype of the passively suffering Indian women, according to a plethora of British accounts, the nautch girls enjoyed many freedoms, including an education in Indian literature and the arts, an ample income, the rights to property, a life outside the domestic roles of wife or mother, and even the pleasures of extramarital affairs. For the most part, the writers cited below refer interchangeably to the independent female communities formed by tawaifs and the devadasis, and I distinguish between them where possible.

As one of many examples, writing in the 1890s, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky positions nautch girls (specifically devadasis) as an exception to the rule about Indian womanhood. She asserts that, out of the women in India, “*Only* the nachnis, the dancing girls consecrated to the gods and serving in the temples (a hereditary position), can be said to be free and happy and live respected by others [my emphasis]” (231). In 1885, the anthropologist, John Shortt, notes that these devadasis are economically prosperous, politically active and able to read and write—in direct contrast to Indian men’s “wives, the mothers of their children, [who] are deprived of learning of any kind, and are carefully shut out from society, not even allowed to appear in public before any assembly of men and are allowed further to grow up in the greatest ignorance and superstition” (qtd. in Paxton, “Temple Dancer” 94). With similar incredulity, Abbe Dubois in *Hindu Manners, Customs and Ceremonies* (1818) writes that “The courtesans [or devadasis] are the only women in India who enjoy the privilege of learning to read, to dance, and to sing. A well-bred and respectable woman would for this reason blush to acquire any of these accomplishments” (586). In problematic ways, Blavatsky, Shortt and Dubois project the agency of temple dancers against a perceived oppression of zenana woman, thereby solidifying colonial observations about domestic Indian women while generating an opposite narrative about public Indian female performers. They cast the nautch girls as anomalies, as women with greater freedom than the domestic women of not only India but also Britain. This was the claim made by one writer in the *Indian Messenger*, who reported that dancing girls “moved ‘more freely in native society than public women in civilized countries are even allowed to do’ and that

Fig. 15: Lenore Snyder as Beebee in *The Nautch Girl, or the Rajah of Chutney-pore*. Photograph. 1891.
 “The Nautch Girl.” *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.



they were treated with greater ‘attention and respect’ than married women” (qtd. in Punjab Purity Association 104).

Nineteenth-century fiction, such as Philip Meadows Taylor’s famous mutiny novel, *Seeta*, also disseminated knowledge about the matricentric empowerment of tawaifs. Peri Buksh, the dancer in Taylor’s narrative, “comes from a ‘good family’ of dancers and singers, the oldest in the province and most renowned” (98). “The family of the Peri,” Taylor reports, “were therefore esteemed ‘highly respectable,’ and she, by hereditary right, was the head of the

district guild of ‘tawaifs,’ or dancers, and thus possessed considerable influence and authority” (99). As a member of a recognized class of artists, and as a leader within a female-oriented structure, Peri Buksh exercises much power over the Indian community. In addition to widely-circulated Anglo-Indian novels like Taylor’s, theatrical British performances at the turn of the century also regularly featured nautch girl characters who seemed to benefit tremendously from their profession. In 1892, the comic opera *The Nautch Girl, or the Rajah of Chutney-pore* opened at the prestigious Savoy. The libretto features a devadasi, Beebee, as the heroine and, when she and her troupe of dancers are first introduced, they celebrate their non-domestic

lifestyle since they can “stay / Unwed for aye” if they so choose. They bask in their privileged existence, recognizing that no one is “half so contented and happy as we”:

And if you ask us whence this endless joy—

This happy lot—this bliss without alloy?

We answer, ‘tis the guerdon of our art

Which few attain, for few can play the part.

With a haughty arrogance, these Indian female performers relish their elitist status.

Nautch girls did not only benefit socially but also economically from their lifestyle. In fact, their financial success continued to astonish British travelers and Anglo-Indians throughout the nineteenth century. Writing in 1837, Emma Roberts describes the profession of tawaifs as lucrative: “Many of the nautch girls are extremely rich, those most in esteem being very highly paid for their performances: the celebrated Calcutta heroine [Nicky] ... receives 1000 rupees (£100) nightly,¹⁴ whenever she is engaged” (192). In her epistolary novel, *The Young Cadet* (1827), Barbara Hofland estimates a lower daily income, but is equally surprised that “they cost, when they are a good band, two or three hundred rupees a night, and will not go up the country for less than five hundred, which is sixty pounds of our money” (152). In various accounts, the extravagant appearance of nautch girls became indicative of their material wealth since they were often adorned in richly embroidered layers of silk and satin, and accessorized with plentiful diamonds and gold. In “City of Dreadful Night,” Rudyard Kipling describes one courtesan in the bazaar, the “Dainty Iniquity,” as wearing “a clink of innumerable bangles, a rustle of

¹⁴ In the 1860s, even “a randi [a lower-class street performer] charged a nightly rate of five rupees and often more,” while “a male labourer was only paid two to four annas [one rupee=16 annas] and a female labourer only half that” (Oldenburg, *The Making of Colonial Lucknow 1856–1857* 138).



Fig. 16: “Dancers from Kashmir.” Engraving from *Le Tour de Monde*. 1883.
 “nautchlater.” *Columbia.edu*. Columbia, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

much fine gauze” (60). She was “blazing—literally blazing—with jewellery from head to foot” (61), the narrator exclaims, with “half a lakh, or fifty thousand pounds worth ... disposed upon her little body” (61). Peri Buksh in Taylor’s *Seeta* is likewise “a very keen lover of money” (100), and takes advantage of the large number of Sepoys congregating at her kotha during the turmoil of the rebellion. “I think that night,” the narrator reports, “the girl reaped a plenteous harvest” (3.105).

The courtesans’ daily interactions with an elite clientele led to other benefits. A dancer’s affiliation with men of political import gave her intimate knowledge of the court system and its politics, as in the case of the tawaif Lalun from Rudyard Kipling’s “On the City Wall” (1888) who “knows everything” (76), from the daily gossip of the city to the “secrets of Government offices” (77). In fact, according to Taylor, their patronage from Indian royalty dated back several hundred years and was the source of their enduring influence. “Centuries ago,” he writes in *Seeta*, Peri

Buksh's "progenitors had sung and danced before Kings of Malwah and Khadsh who had invested the family with privileges and endowed them with lands" (99). Peri Buksh inherits this social status and rights to property, and continues the tradition of entertaining the wealthy to maintain the tawaifs' prestige and power.

Esteemed as artists, nautch girls also enjoyed sexual pleasures without remorse, much to the amazement of the British. "The intimacy of the nachnis [the devadasis] with the gods," Blavatsky writes with shock, "cleanses them from every sin of the flesh and, at the same time, makes them above reproach and sinless" (231). She suggests that "a nachni cannot be 'a fallen woman' as other mortals may be" (231). They have even "deeper respect" than the Roman matrons did (232). Their non-marital sexuality escaped moral degradation since the co-existence of the sacred

Fig. 17: Courtois, G. "The Bayadere."
Engraving. 1880.
 "nautchlater." *Columbia.edu*. Columbia, 2010.
 Web. 20 Sept 2010.



and the sensual was not a source of discomfort in Hinduism as it was in Christianity. According to British accounts, many of these women were also conscious of their sexual lure and used it as a tool to attain further privileges. In *Seeta*, the narrator claims that the tawaif Peri Buksh has a "supple figure of exquisite proportions, which she well knew how to use in her dances" (100), and that she purposefully appeared before her audience in a "close fitting garment" that accentuated her features (100). To assure

their safety, courtesans also had the authority to regulate their clientele within the kotha, and ill behaviour was cause for being thrown out.

Whether in travel literature, in fiction, or on the stage, a general discursive pattern materializes from these nineteenth-century representations of nautch girls, one that does not coincide with the prevailing master-narrative on Indian womanhood. The overall consensus seems to be that Indian female performing communities enjoyed much social, political, financial and sexual freedom. These women's unprecedented agency baffled the colonizers because a similar system did not exist in their own society, and because, under colonial logic, Indian women were supposed to be backward to personify the condition of their nation.

However, it is important to recognize that, considering the inherent partiality of colonial texts, the above descriptions do not comprise a complete and authentic narrative by which to read the lives of devadasis and tawaifs. To suggest so would be doing an injustice to the multitude of Indian performers within a century-long period of time. Furthermore, as Teresa Hubel claims in her study of the abolition of devadasi traditions, "These are the vast majority of women who never wrote the history books that shape the manner in which we, at any particular historical juncture, are trained to remember suggests" (121). From their own perspective, many nautch girls may not have felt the same way about their own lifestyle. As Hsu-Ming Teo suggests, often "travel writers [and the same can be said about the authors of other genres] reflect the preoccupations and inherited cultural traditions of their own societies, so that travel writing tells us more about the writer and her/his society

than about the culture being studied” (“Women’s Travel” 366).¹⁵ Accordingly, as I address throughout this dissertation, many colonial writers commenting on the liberties of the nautch girl did so mainly through the lens of a white bourgeois, middle-class ideology.

Yet, despite these biases, I strongly feel that the large number of texts citing the power of the nautch girls should not be dismissed as purely fictional, as mere Orientalist productions that are completely divorced from a historical actuality. Such a dismissal would silence evidence of Indian female agency where it did indeed exist, and would negate the possibility of these women as posing a legitimate degree of resistance to imperial feminist logic. Therefore, in line with the methodology of subaltern historiographers, throughout this dissertation, where possible, I look outside colonial discourse to conjecture how these women regarded their own lives, resisted colonial and patriarchal power structures, and exploited their authoritative positions to gain more power. As a starting point, the nautch girls were literate and their writings give some insight into how they perceived their own lives. Living in the mid-eighteenth century, Maddupalani was a (secularized) devadasi at the Thanjavur court during the zenith of Telegu court culture. She was a passionate poet and, as Tharu and Lalita explore, she praises her own talents and exudes an arrogant self-satisfaction in the autobiographical prologue preceding her massive collection of erotic poetry, *Radhika Santwanam* (reprinted posthumously in 1910):

¹⁵For example, due to their inability to fully understand the nautch outside their own frameworks of knowledge, British spectators were constantly drawing parallels (or noting differences) between the nautch girls of India and Western performers. Maria Nugent, Emily Eden and Godfrey Mundy all compared a popular nautch girl by the name of Nicky to Angelica Catalani (a famous opera singer at the time), referring to her as the “Catalani of Calcutta,” the “Catalani of the East,” or “Catalini Nicky.” The frequent coupling of Indian dancers with European ballerinas also proliferated in colonial discourse, and the nautch was often used interchangeably with the ballet throughout the British Raj. Even *Hobson-Jobson* defines the nautch as “a kind of ballet-dance performed by women” and, conversely, identifies the ballet as a “European nautch” (620), fusing the two cultural practices.

Which other woman of my kind has
 felicitated scholars with gifts and money?
 To which other woman of my kind have
 epics been dedicated?

Which other woman of my kind has
 won such claim in each of the arts?

You are incomparable,

Muddupalani, among your kind. (qtd. in Tharu and Lalita 116)

Maddupalani greatly values her financial success, her cultural prestige, and her artistic talents as a renowned eighteenth-century courtesan. Fighting to retain such privileges in the twentieth century, another devadasi writes a letter to the *Madras Mail* in 1932, in which she voices the irony of the women's movement in India: "As a class we enjoy the freedom which the Indian association is supposed to be struggling for... We live according to the ideals of our caste following a definite code of morals. We wonder if the social reformers understand what they are doing when they talk ill of us as a whole for the lapses of a few" (qtd. in Spear and Meduri 440). The writer—using the first person plural ("we")—recognizes the "freedom" afforded by her profession, and simultaneously disrupts rising opinions about nautch girls that dismiss them as prostitutes in need of saving. It is perhaps because of such self-validating statements that the *Madras Indian Social Reform Association* (1892) reported that these women were "extremely conscious of their professional rights and status" (qtd. in Oddie 104). There is also evidence that nautch girls put up a fight against colonial rule, especially when it interfered with their profession. For example, as I discuss in Chapter 1, the tawaifs had enough political clout and financial resources to

support the Indian Rebellion of 1857, and, as I detail in Chapter 2, they successfully fought against the regulation of their bodies under the Contagious Diseases Acts. Collectively, the above incidents suggest that at least some nautch girls may have thought fondly of their own lifestyle, and may have recognized as well as worked to maintain their power.

Scholarship on British Women's Encounters with Nautch Girls

Regardless of contrary evidence, many scholars who have investigated British women's representations of the nautch girl (with the exception of Jyotsna Singh and Piya Pal-Lapinski) tend to read them as Orientalist texts that maintain the superiority of the female colonizers. In her study of early nineteenth-century female travel writers, Nandini Bhattacharya creates a very one-sided impression of women's interpretations of the nautch girl. Working within a Saidian paradigm, she traces what she calls a "discursive monoglossia"—a reductive and homogenizing text—of the nautch girl, whose sexual promiscuity is repeatedly evoked as a symbol of backwardness and as a foil to the purity of English women. She argues that *all* British female travellers and wives were threatened by the erotic appeal of the Indian courtesan, and compensated by writing about the "dancer's diseased and atavistic sexuality" (135). Committing textual violence, British women such as Mary Martha Sherwood, Bhattacharya claims, used their representations as a weapon against the nautch girl, engaging in "discursive efforts to rule and contain that body" (136), a "body [that] served as a background or foil against which to define the authorial self favourably" (135).

While I do not deny that many Englishwomen in India felt anxious about the nautch girl's sexuality, and that they subsequently demonized her in their writings

while validating themselves as proper models of femininity (a concept I take up more fully in Chapter 1), I do disagree with the “discursive monoglossia” that Bhattacharya falsely sets up. In other words, she downplays the plurality of representations of female entertainers that were circulating in the early years of the Raj. During this time, the British did not have the same qualms about attending nautch parties that they did increasingly later in the century, with the rising demands for racial segregation. They were regular invitees to feasts and entertainments hosted by Muslim and Hindu royalty, and some Anglo-Indians even retained their own troupe of nautch girls. Among them, Maria Nugent comments positively on a particular dancer in her cantonment: “All her actions were particularly graceful” (127), she reports, and “the best thing of the kind I have seen” (127). In the 1830s, Julia



Fig. 18: D'Oyly, Sir Charles. “Raja Nob Kishen’s Nautch Party.” Watercolour. c.1825-28.

Art Concerns. 2009. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

Maitland likewise perceives the dancers to be “graceful” (43) and “the prettiest of their performances was their beautiful swan-like march” (43). Writing around the same time period, Mrs. Ellwood is so moved by the performers that she suggests they should be brought to the metropole. “It is surprising,” she exclaims, “that a regular set of nautch girls has never been imported for the English stage... The novelty and the splendour of a nautch would recommend them for a season at least” (qtd. in Nevile, *Nautch Girls* 34). A similarly favourable representation emerges in Barbara Hofland’s novel, *The Young Cadet* (1829), in which the narrator describes the “celebrated dancing girls of India” (152) as “persons of great importance” (152), and as extraordinarily “graceful and agile” (152) as well as “generally very handsome” (152). These are only a few of many female reactions that Bhattacharya overlooks in her commitment to a Saidian reading of British women’s writings, one that, however inadvertently, consolidates a hierarchical relationship between the female colonizer and the colonized female.

Both Sara Suleri and Nancy Paxton also position the British woman as a participant in cultural imperialism. In *The Rhetoric of English India*, Sara Suleri argues that British women used their discursive representations of the nautch girl to self-servingly offset the anxiety they felt about these women’s relatively emancipated lifestyles. Unlike Bhattacharya, Suleri therefore does recognize the secret envy British female travellers held for the lives of Indian female performers, but she nevertheless interprets their travelogues as containing this threat, specifically through their use of the picturesque. In their still-life paintings, they make *still* the complexity of the Indian dancing girl, objectifying her while empowering themselves as the writing subject. In her article “The Temple Dancer: Eroticism and Religious Ecstasy,” Nancy

Paxton gives a more historicized reading of nautch girls, specifically devadasis, by tracing their gradual debasement; she locates a shift in perceptions of the temple dancer from the days of romantic Orientalists such as William Jones and Sydney Owenson, to the missionary and anthropological writings of John Shortt, ending with the novel, *The Romance of a Nautch Girl*, by the Anglo-Indian female author, Fanny Emily Penny. While I agree that the changing perceptions of the nautch did have a devastating effect on the lifestyles of these women, British female attitudes towards these women were marked with a degree of plurality at the *fin de siècle* that Paxton does not account for.

Antoinette Burton commits a similar reductionism in the few sentences about nautch girls that appear in *Burdens of History*. In keeping with her thesis, she argues that female missionaries sought to rescue devadasis (although she confuses them with the tawaif tradition in her account) from the sexual violence they endured in their relations with temple priests:

Missionaries were also concerned about ‘nautch girls’—that is, women who danced at princely courts and in the British imagination were most commonly associated with the Lucknow Court of Awadh and the Indian states which survived after 1857. The Christian literature society, for example, condemned them as prostitutes and claimed they were under the control of Hindu elders. (72)

While Burton’s two sentences may be relevant to the way Mary Martha Sherwood, Jenny Fuller, or Amy Carmichael¹⁶ write about the nautch, they dismiss a whole body

¹⁶I discuss Mary Martha Sherwood’s writings in Chapter 1. Jenny Fuller, in *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood*, devotes three chapters to supporting the campaigns. She describes it as a “debasing custom” “sanctioned by religion and society” (123). Amy Carmichael was another female participant

of British female literature that recognizes the nautch girls as powerful, independent women who threaten the very foundation of the “White Woman’s Burden” because they are by no means ignorant, oppressed or in need of rescue. In her commitment to an imperial feminist reading, in other words, Burton poses the danger of unintentionally cementing the very colonialist paradigms that she wants to challenge. That is, she sees the nautch girls as sustaining the hierarchy between emancipated British women and oppressed Indian women despite evidence of the contrary.

Bhattacharya, Suleri, Paxton and Burton all read the nautch girl within imperial feminist rhetoric and with an overpowering awareness of the eventual success of the anti-nautch movements. These campaigns were launched by nationalists and colonialists who sought the abolition of devadasi and tawaif traditions on the grounds that they were systems of enforced prostitution. In 1892, a petition was sent to the governing officials of British India, claiming that “There exists in the Indian community a class of women commonly known as nautch-girls. And that these women are invariably prostitutes” (qtd. in Nevile, *Nautch Girls* 101). Through the repeated dissemination of such rhetoric, the nautch gradually became synonymous with prostitution. While indeed this derogatory image of the nautch girl did exist, and had real consequences on the lives of a diverse range of Indian female performers, not all (or even most) Anglo-Indians at the *fin de siècle* participated in the anti-nautch movement, but rather many opposed it (as I detail in Chapter 3). Those who did participate were predominantly missionaries or greatly influenced by evangelical discourse. Concentrating on this particular sect of writers, many scholars, such as the ones discussed above, interpret colonial representations of tawaifs and

in the anti-nautch movement. As Jo-Ann Wallace suggests in her study of *Lotus Buds*, Carmichael became involved in the evangelical-influenced campaigns to rescue girls dedicated to temple service.

devadasis as culminating towards their abolishment. They anachronistically apply knowledge of the success of anti-nautch campaigns onto readings of *fin de siècle* literature whereas, in my analysis of a subgenre of nautch girl fictions, I favour a more historically-situated approach that recognizes the complexity of British culture at the turn of the century.

Recovering Women's Anglo-Indian Fiction at the *Fin de Siècle*

As I mentioned above, due to the spread of anti-nautch rhetoric, many British men and women living in India were increasingly discouraged from attending Indian entertainments, and this decrease in real-life encounters appears to have fuelled the proliferation of a new subgenre of Anglo-Indian fiction about the nautch girl. As these fictional narratives replaced travel accounts at the close of the nineteenth century, British women took the opportunity to explore their own position in a patriarchal culture *vis-à-vis* the devadasi or tawaif figure. Despite the evident popularity of female-authored Anglo-Indian fictions at the turn of the century, these writers have, for the most part, been marginalized within scholarship on colonial Indian literature and British women's writing. As Shuchi Kapila writes on her study of Bithia Mary Croker, "Early twentieth-century women romancers have not yet received the same serious critical attention as canonical figures such as Rudyard Kipling and EM Forster, who have always been studied for the seriousness and complexity of their Indian experience" (218). Instead, women's fictions have largely been dismissed as unsophisticated tales about courtship, romance and marriage—as is evident from the way they have been classified. For example, Benita Parry terms them "romantic novelettes" (*Delusions* 32), Margaret Stieg uses the phrase "Anglo-Indian Romances" (3), while Alison Sainsbury classifies them as "Anglo-

Indian domestic novels” (163). Steering away from the somewhat limiting and misleading words “domestic” or “romance,” I prefer the more general term Anglo-Indian fiction for these works, all of which were set in British India and revolved around the lives of Europeans, Indians and Eurasians. The recent and rising need to contextualize British women’s literary history within Britain’s imperial history has brought these Anglo-Indian female authors, particularly Flora Annie Steel, out of oblivion, and into the scholarly enterprise. My dissertation intervenes in, while contributing to, this relatively new body of scholarship by offering an alternative reading of the British-Indian female encounter.

These fictions cannot be read in isolation, and must take into consideration how the authors’ exposure to a cross-generic body of writing on the nautch (which I have traced above), as well as their own writings across various forms, informed their representation of nautch girls. Moreover, having a better understanding of the cultural milieu in which the authors lived sheds light on how and why they wrote about these women so frequently in their fictions. Whether they came from England, Ireland or Scotland, most of them (with the exception of Ida Alexa Ross Wylie)¹⁷ assumed the title Anglo-Indian in the colony where their national differences were often elided under their shared imperial identity. Flora Annie Steel, Victoria Cross, Fanny Emily Penny, Bithia Mary Croker and Alice Perrin all resided in India

¹⁷ Throughout the body chapters, I consider not only the commonalities between these women and their fictions but also the differences arising from variables like their geographical location, their group affiliations, and the time period in which they were writing. As Margaret Strobel suggests, “just as scholars have been cautioned not to see ‘Third World Women’ as a singular, homogenous category, it is important to recognize the diversity of European women in British India” (xi). Of the authors I examine, Ida Alexa Wylie is the only one among them who did not reside in India and cannot be classified as an Anglo-Indian writer, and this very difference (as I suggest in Chapter 4) affects the content of her fiction, and the nautch’s place within it. Throughout the body chapters, I consider not only the commonalities between these women and their fictions but also the differences arising from variables like their geographical location, their group affiliations, and the time period in which they were writing.

for varying amounts of time, and were affected first-hand by their position as white women in the empire. Writing at the turn of the century, when new models of womanhood were emerging while age-old patriarchal institutions like the family and marriage were being undermined, Anglo-Indian women faced an ongoing struggle to (re)define themselves in accordance with their growing female aspirations and, conversely, within the cultural norms still governing their lives as members of the ruling race in India. Consequently, as I detail thoroughly in Chapter 1, colonial domesticity was paradoxically both a means of achieving power for these women and an imperial obligation that confined them. Living as part of the ruling enclave in India, they felt burdened by their duties to the race and the nation. Nevertheless, in their nonfiction, they projected an outward devotion to imperial homemaking, a complicity with the white woman's burden in British India and the accompanying racialization of Indian womanhood.

In contrast, it is in their fictions that these authors reveal feelings of inadequacy and dissatisfaction with their role as imperial wives, often via their female characters who look to the nautch girl as a person to both fear and embrace, loathe and desire, for her relative emancipation. Fiction gave these colonial female writers greater license to interrogate their racial and cultural biases than nonfictional forms of writing did; it provided a means by which they could explore non-domestic models of femininity not available to them in their own culture. That is, at a time when they could not yet envision the white woman's successful break from patriarchal power structures, British women experienced these desires vicariously through the figure of the nautch girl—who served as a potential corrective to their actual lives. The Indian female performer afforded Anglo-Indian women a level of

distance as they delved into taboo topics such as sexuality and contemplated a non-domestic, female-dominated lifestyle.

To allow for this distance, these novels unanimously employ an omniscient point of view, where multiple perspectives and voices converge within the same generic space, and hence make it deliberately difficult to locate the opinions and sympathies of the authors. This ambivalence, the confusion of authorial intent, in turn provided the writers a certain level of freedom to engage with topics and identities that they may not have been able to in other forms. In other words, the same distance between the author and the written product is not present in their autobiographical writings, diaries, missionary writings, pamphlets, or housekeeping guides—most of which, considering their purpose and their audience, are written with a more assertive and authoritative tone. In contrast, the multivocal space of fiction allowed the authors and subsequently readers to test out different selves by entering the minds and assuming the personas of different characters, some of which deliberately deviated from their publically performed identities as domestic women.

In this respect, these fictions can reveal “truths” about Anglo-Indian women’s attitudes towards nautch girls in ways that other forms might only gesture towards. More specifically, these novels engage in the subversion of imperial feminist formations because the lifestyle and the character of an Indian, not Western, woman provides an outlet for domestically strained British women. It is with this subversion in mind that I engage closely with these popular works and uncover a reading of cross-cultural female encounters at the *fin de siècle* other than the one substantiating imperial feminist history. Accounting for the multi-faceted identities of the writers and readers, and the complexity of the turn-of-the-century women’s

movement, a close reading of these novels gives us a better understanding of the confused psychological state of the British writers at the turn of the century, and exposes slippages in their treatment of Indian womanhood, slippages that do not rest neatly within established racial and cultural hierarchies.

Caught not only between two nations and cultures, but also between Victorian and Modernist ideals of womanhood, the Anglo-Indian writers of these works re-enact this state of liminality not only in the content but also the generic form of their fictions. Their own doubts about their gender and imperial roles materialize in the confusion of generic boundaries, and in the co-existence of complicity and resistance in their writing. That is, because the writers themselves teeter restlessly between the binaries private/public, British/Indian, Victorian/Modern, the genre in which they write is just as hybridized. It fuses Anglo-Indian fiction with New Woman fiction, the domestic novel with the colonial adventure novel, and thereby introduces models of Victorian womanhood alongside alternative models, whether the New Woman, the nautch girl or a fusion of the two. In light of this generic hybridity, I challenge the typical understanding of this genre of female-authored works (as proposed, for example, by Nancy Armstrong and Alison Sainsbury) as solely didactic, as substantiating and recycling colonial domesticity. While on the one hand these works could be viewed as conduct books designed to educate and shape women for memsahibhood (a concept I take up more fully in Chapter 3), they simultaneously provide a route out of such narrowly-defined roles for women by introducing rebellious New Woman and nautch girl characters. Moreover, it is perhaps because of this narrative ambivalence, and because their novels were marketed as colonial rather than as New Woman texts, that the writers

escaped scathing criticism from the conservative readership of their time despite their engagement with taboo topics such as divorce, illegitimate children, interracial relationships, and female sexuality.

It is difficult to decipher if and how these fictions (trans)formed the identities of the writers and readers themselves. Most of these works were widely read by and circulated to British readers across India, England, and the British colonies as well as other European countries. As Anindyo Roy argues, between the years 1880 and 1930, women's fictional writings on British India became "products of popular culture" (91), and Shuchi Kapila confirms that they "command[ed] as large an audience as Rudyard Kipling" (216). Janice Radway's noteworthy study of romance readers may be useful in assessing the effect of these popular novels on female consumers. According to Radway, domestic women who avidly read romances momentarily "refus[ed] the demands associated with their social roles as wives and mothers" (11). The escapist fiction offered them a temporary and cathartic release, one that did not always transfer to their everyday lives considering the distance these readers often "maintain[ed] between their 'ordinary' lives and their fantasies" (12). The subgenre of nautch girl fiction may have worked similarly. While many *fin-de-siècle* writers and readers seemingly conformed to the maintenance of physical boundaries between themselves and Indian culture and people, their reading of Anglo-Indian fiction allowed them to break away from such insularity and to contemplate the fruitful results of cross-cultural encounters.

Analyzing these novels in light of the burgeoning body of New Woman fiction at the turn of the century might offer an even deeper understanding of how the figure of the nautch girl (like the New Woman) impacted *fin-de-siècle* female

readers. According to Juliet Gardiner, New Woman novels often “testified to the power of fiction as an alternative means of exploration and a manifesto of political change” (qtd. in Richardson and Willis 30). Through fictional repetition, therefore, it is possible that the writers and readers of nautch girl novels also internalized and incorporated this figure into their own identity. By envisioning new social structures and female roles via the nautch girl, these fictions could have impacted the identity of the writers and readers themselves in ways that have been neglected in current scholarship on British women’s history at the *fin de siècle*—scholarship that overlooks popular forms like female-authored Anglo-Indian novels as possible sites for political and social change.

By returning to a forgotten subgenre of novels, I offer new insights into a rich historical time period and rethink current scholarly assumptions about British women’s perceptions about Indian women during a key moment in British feminist history; I significantly problematize prevailing assumptions about the success of imperial feminism at the turn of the century. I urge this line of inquiry at a time when the scholarship on imperial feminism is being recycled to interpret encounters between British and Indian women, while the image of the presumed passivity of Indian women and the presumed superiority of English women remains relatively unquestioned. Ironically, imperial feminism is becoming the dominant narrative by which we are being trained to interpret encounters between British and Indian women, at the expense of uncovering alternative readings. As I summarize below, the novels I analyze in this dissertation open up room for such an alternative reading.

I begin the first chapter by examining fictional nautch girls who threaten the survival of colonial domesticity in British India, and subsequently threaten the imperial

power of Memsahibs (the wives or daughters of high-ranking civil servants and officers in India). According to current scholarship, Anglo-Indian women claimed their gender-specific authority in the civilizing mission of India by overseeing the management of the colonial bungalow—of *their* empire. However, in many of my primary fictions, most notably Flora Annie Steel's *The Potter's Thumb* (1894), the rebellious nautch girl emerges as a “homewrecker.” Not only does she continue to pursue interracial relationships with British men, but she also contests the Memsahib's role as competent household manager (analogously ruler) by continually invading the colonial home, and setting fires, stealing jewels, and bribing the servants.

The second chapter introduces Memsahibs who “go nautch girl” after being burdened by their imperial domestic duties. The relatively autonomous lifestyle of the courtesan attracts these discontented housewives and, in their search for an alternative femininity, they willingly adopt the dress, food, accommodations, customs or habits of the Indian dancing girl. I focus predominantly on Flora Annie Steel's *The Voices in the Night* (1900) and Alice Perrin's *The Woman in the Bazaar* (1914) in which the central female characters leave or imagine leaving their domestic duties in the colonial home for a more enticing existence as a tawaif in the Indian bazaar.

In the third chapter, I explore the encounter between the nautch girl and the female adventuress in India (a variation of the New Woman). Concentrating mainly on Fanny Emily Farr Penny's *The Romance of a Nautch Girl* (1898), I argue that the supernatural nautch girl defies the British woman's ability to penetrate India's mysteries and instead scares her back into the sheltered, albeit sequestered, space of the Anglo-Indian bungalow, where she ultimately embraces the domestic life of a Memsahib and loses her ties to New Womanhood. In contrast, after escaping the clutches of colonial patriarchy, the recalcitrant

nautch girl secures relative freedom and independence. Penny's novel, alongside a few others I discuss, ends ambivalently—an ambivalence that, I suggest, seems to significantly relocate the hope for the women's movement from the British woman to the Indian dancing girl.

The fourth chapter introduces New Women who show an affinity for dancing and who express their modern femininity by performing the nautch—by “going nautch girl” on the stage. Modeled after such real-life examples as Kate Vaughn, Ruth St. Denis and Anna Pavlova, these female characters willingly sacrifice their racial/national purity for the larger goal of achieving female liberation. The Indian dancer becomes an inspiration to white female performers seeking artistic recognition as well as independence, such as for Rosita Fountaine in Bithia Mary Croker's *The Company's Servant* (1907). Under the influence of theosophy, the dance of India also provides spiritual rejuvenation for a dying Western culture, as depicted in Ida Alexa Ross Wylie's *The Hermit Doctor of Gaya* (1916).

In the conclusion, I step outside of a period-specific analysis and trace the legacy of white female bodies performing the nautch. I explain the influence of theosophy on the revival of Vedic traditions and the accompanying replacement of the devadasi tradition with the Bharatnatyam—the so-called “dance of India,” which was performed by upper-caste Brahmin women and played a significant role in the Indian nationalist movement. Despite this eventual containment, I argue that we must continue to uncover examples of British women whose relations with Indian women, non-Western women more generally, do not substantiate imperial feminist rhetoric, both historically and presently.

CHAPTER 1

Domestic Invasions:

The Nautch Girl as Home-Wrecker

While European women living in India came from a vast range of different classes and backgrounds, and took on diverse roles during their residency in the colony, the archetypal Anglo-Indian woman was the “Memsahib”—the wife or daughter of a high-ranking British officer or civil servant in India.¹⁸ Over the last few decades a number of scholars (namely Margaret Strobel, Nupur Chauduri, Rosemary Mangaly George, Mary Procida, Alison Sainsbury and Jenny Sharpe among others) have revisited the lives of these women, who lived as part of the ruling enclave in India, to expose how they variably colluded with colonial policies and practices. This collusion, they notice, often took the form of domestic labour since

¹⁸I heed Margaret Strobel’s warning about the potential to generalize the experiences and identities of white women in the colonies: “Just as scholars have been cautioned not to see ‘Third World women’ as a singular, homogenous category, it is important to recognize the diversity of European women in British Africa and Asia. Where they were in sufficient numbers to form communities, Europeans were split not only by gender, but by class and national differences as well” (xi). Although my dissertation concentrates on women of British nationality, white women in India came from various European countries as well as, particularly in the twentieth century, from North America. They also came to India for diverse purposes. Increasingly in the *fin de siècle*, some came to travel or visit family, while others came to pursue a profession in nursing, medicine, teaching, missionary work, or anthropology. While the title (“Memsahib”) was on occasion assigned to any white woman in India (incidents of its use in Africa and America also exist), it was nevertheless a class-based identity and hence most often reserved for women who ranked higher on the social hierarchy in India. Margaret Strobel defines this hierarchy as follows: “the Indian Civil Service ranked highest, followed by the military, then the civilian officials, business people, missionaries (who generally segregated themselves from other Europeans), police superintendents, railway engineers, planters of tea, indigo or jute, and finally clerks and shopkeepers” (Strobel 8). Among the classes of women who were not readily addressed as Memsahibs were barrack women (see Indira Sen’s *Women and Empire* pages 12-13) and European prostitutes (see Chapter 2). Distinctions of class, age and/or marital status among the women falling under the rubric of Memsahib were further made through the adjectives “chota” (smaller or younger) or “burra” (bigger or older). The title of “chota Memsahib” (or, in some instances, “Miss-Sahib”) was likely used to refer to younger or unmarried Memsahibs. In contrast, “burra Memsahib” would have been reserved for married or older Anglo-Indian women but may also have been used to identify those with more prestige or status.

many Memsahibs celebrated their gender-specific mission to cultivate a colonial domesticity in India. That is, the imperial housewife gained a sense of purpose and worth in the empire by taking on the “white woman’s burden” to civilize the Anglo-Indian home. In undertaking this burden, these wives did not perform the actual labour involved in domestic work but instead oversaw its adequate completion. As household managers, they were responsible for ensuring that the home was kept free of the dirt, disease, and disorder that purportedly plagued India and for ensuring that their microcosmic empire (the house, most typically a bungalow)¹⁹ ran smoothly and efficiently. These revisionist studies of the Memsahib, thus, suggest that white women at the turn of the century gained power and authority in the colony through their ties to imperial homemaking.

By reconsidering the Memsahib’s role in the Anglo-Indian home, scholars have indeed confirmed that British women played an active role in the imperial politics of British India. However, collectively this scholarship has consolidated a somewhat one-sided impression of Anglo-Indian women’s experiences in the colony, creating an illusory sense of their indisputable success and satisfaction as housewives. In their commitment to exposing British women’s collusions with colonialism, critics have inadvertently projected the image of a victorious household manager who meets no obstacles or setbacks and experiences no ambivalences about her newly-assumed womanly burden in the domestic sphere. Such a generalization, in turn,

¹⁹ According to Mary Procida, the bungalow “was usually a single-storey box raised a few feet off the ground surrounded by a wide veranda punctuated by supporting pillars” (63). While the bungalow was the typical and most readily referenced dwelling place for Anglo-Indians, as Procida notes, “the houses of the British in India varied greatly, representing difference in building materials, age, current and former uses, climate and local peculiarities. Anglo-Indian homes ranged from *faux* Swiss chalets at Simla, to houseboats rented by vacationing officials in Kashmir, to houses built on stilts in Burma” (62).

renders the native population of India as complacent to the Englishwoman's imperial authority. A closer examination of fiction by Anglo-Indian women in the *fin de siècle* tells another story. These narratives tend to disturb the dichotomy between the empowered white female ruler and the passive Indian subject, especially when they present the anxiety-provoking encounter between Memsahibs and their Indian female counterparts: the rebellious, non-domestic(ated) nautch girls. During these encounters, faced with active resistance from Indian courtesans, the Memsahibs surface as less confident about their imperial authority in the Anglo-Indian home.

As the Memsahib's rival, the nautch girl contrastingly emerges as a "home-wrecker"—a term I use to define the numerous, but not merely sexual, ways in which she challenges the development and maintenance of colonial domesticity, analogously civilization, in Anglo-India. That is, in a cluster of fictional works, not only do nautch girls continue to pursue a sexual relationship with British men but they also physically invade the colonial home to bribe servants, steal from and spy on their imperial rulers, and confront the Memsahib face-to-face. In these narratives, the Indian dancing girl repeatedly prevents the Memsahib from effectively governing *her* empire—the domestic domain—and robs her of her very source of self-empowerment in *fin-de-siècle* India.

"The Rise of the Memsahib" in the *Fin de Siècle*:

The "White Woman's Burden" in the Anglo-Indian Home

Translated as "Mrs. Master" or "Lady Sahib," the Hindi term "Memsahib" was initially a title of respect given to British women residing in India (synonymously Anglo-Indian women) but soon developed into a derogatory representation in the British imagination. The negative stereotype of the "Memsahib"—inherently

complex, multi-layered and contradictory—emerged most strongly in the latter half of the nineteenth century during the aftermath of the 1857 Indian Rebellion when an influx of British women arrived in India. According to various hostile (predominantly male-produced) accounts, the Memsahib did nothing of value, being utterly useless to the project of material and cultural imperialism. In her study of European women living in the empire from the late nineteenth century up to the second World War,

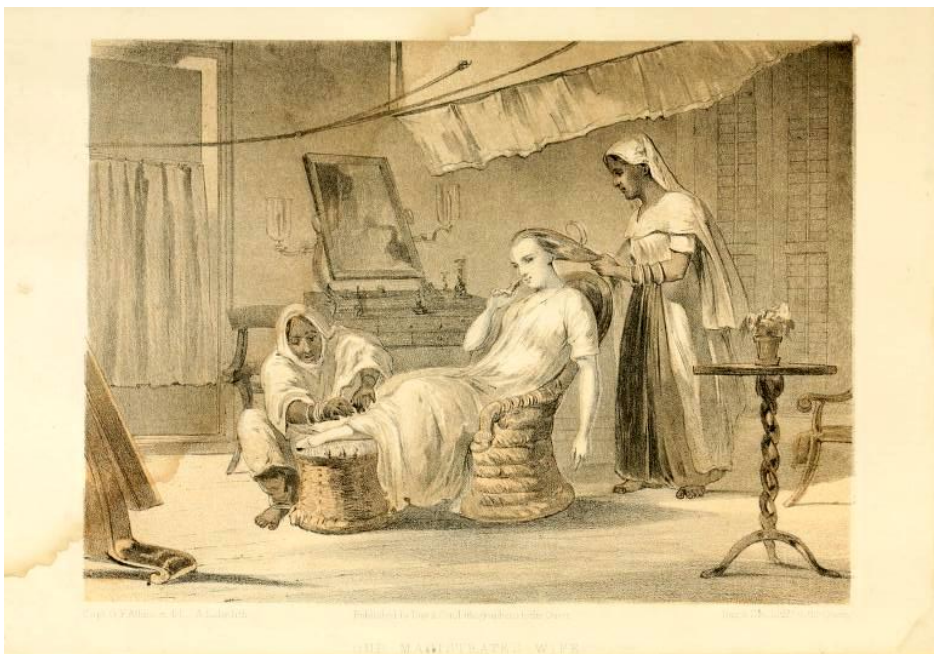


Fig. 19: Atkinson, George. “Our Magistrate’s Wife.” Lithograph from *Curry and Rice*. 1859.

Internet Archive. University of Toronto, 2009. Web. 12 Aug 2009.

Margaret Strobel summarizes the prevailing stereotype as follows: a “petty, frivolous, ethnocentric, and unproductive” woman, “who contribute[d] nothing of benefit either to the imperial enterprise or to indigenous groups” (7).²⁰ This image was circulated through a cross-generic body of work written mostly at the turn of the century and authored by canonical writers like Rudyard Kipling and EM Forster as

²⁰ “Like all stereotypes,” as Strobel notes, “the memsahib stereotype doubtless contains some truth, reflecting the life of social routines and rituals of these women” (7). Likewise, as Sharpe argues, “The stereotype of the memsahib is not simply a false representation of real women but also a sign of the domestic lives they lived” (92).

well as less known authors like Sara Jeanette Duncan.²¹ The Memsahib became an equally popular site of ridicule in pictorial representations of Anglo-India. In his illustrated satire, *“Curry and Rice” on Forty Plates, or, the Ingredients of Social Life at “Our Station” in India* (1859), George Franklin Atkinson, for example, provides a famous caricature of “Our Magistrate’s Wife” (see fig.19) which presents a colonial housewife who enjoys excessive pampering from her native servants. She sits idly (practically lying) on a chair while one servant brushes her hair and the other



Fig. 20: Atkinson, George. “Our Colonel’s Wife.” Lithograph from *Curry and Rice*. 1859.

Internet Archive. University of Toronto, 2009. Web. 12 Aug 2009.

massages her legs. In another satirical sketch, Atkinson depicts “Our Colonel’s Wife” (see fig. 20) surrounded by a handful of Indian tailors, all of them busily working on perfecting her latest dress. Such images were ubiquitous, and captured the predominant nineteenth-century belief that colonial housewives lived a life of excess,

²¹ Rudyard Kipling often gave an unflattering portrayal of Memsahibs as promiscuous and materialistic, such as in *Plain Tales from the Hills*. E.M. Forster’s *A Passage to India* presents a derogatory image of the Anglo-Indian women living in Chandrapore. Sara Janette Duncan’s *The Simple Adventures of a Memsahib* includes a disparaging characterization of Helen Brown.

profligacy and self-interest while avoiding the menial tasks of imperial housekeeping at all costs.

With more and more of them entering the colony, especially at the turn of the century during the rise of the women's movement, many British women collectively became aware of and resented this disparaging image. Subsequently, as Nupur Chauduri, Jenny Sharpe, Indira Sen, and Denise Quirk among others have noted, an increasing number of wives who accompanied their husbands to India in the latter half of the nineteenth century became involved in rewriting the image of the Memsahib or at least in portraying themselves as a deviation from this stereotype. Several of them, for example, testified to the inaccuracy of the aloof, racist and unproductive Anglo-Indian wife by providing evidence of their work (whether as missionaries, teachers, doctors, or nurses) outside the home, work that required intimate contact with Indian people and that supported the imperial cause.²² However, unlike those Englishwomen who arrived in India for the sole purpose of carrying out reformist work, Anglo-Indian women living in insular British communities could not as easily escape their domestic identity (Sharpe 95). Their identity, in other words, was strongly determined by their role as wives to colonial administrators and civil servants. Thus, of greater interest to me in this chapter is how many Anglo-Indian women strategically embraced rather than fought their status as imperial housewives and depicted their role in the colonial domestic sphere itself as an integral contribution to the civilizing mission. More specifically, in their

²² Indira Ghose, for example, studies the travel writings of British women in nineteenth-century India, including Maria Graham, Anne Katherine Elwood, Marianne Postans, Fanny Parks, Emily Eden, and Mary Carpenter, who broke the stereotype of "Memsahibs" as isolated, self-absorbed women caring little for India and its people. In *The Compassionate Memsahibs: Welfare Activities of British Women in India*, Mary Anne Lind undertakes a similar study, exploring the lives of fifteen Anglo-Indian women who were heavily involved in welfare work in the early years of the Raj and who deviate from the typical understanding of the Memsahib.

writings, British women living in India constructed an image of themselves as rulers of the domestic arena—as competent household managers of turbulent colonial homes.

In constructing this image, Memsahibs took advantage of the contradictory and confused nature of domesticity in the colonies, where the cultivation of a home did not comply with the Victorian ideology of separate spheres that was so integral to nineteenth-century gender constructions. As Mary A. Procida aptly points out in her comprehensive study of colonial domesticity, “The trope of the two irreconcilably separate spheres of ‘the home’ and ‘the world’ is inapposite to Anglo-India, where the public and the private merged seamlessly at the juncture of the home” (57). Indeed, rather than providing a refuge from the work of empire, the colonial home was a regular site for officials to convene and discuss politics; it was a place to dwell and to conduct business. In buildings such as the “Government House,” “Residency” or “Flagstaff House,” the “home and office occupied the same space” (59). Unlike in England, there was no definite division between the realms of familial and occupational life in the colonies. It was perhaps for this reason that the Englishwoman in India so strongly confused the spatial politics on which the Victorian gender dichotomy so heavily relied. Her physical presence in India added another layer to the caricature of the Memsahib who, after crossing into the manly arena of imperialism, allegedly lost her domestic virtues. In the British mindset, she adopted the characteristics of a public woman, “a deviant female figure, who had stepped out of the confines of the ‘domestic sphere’ of England and entered the morally un-policed ‘outer sphere’ of the colony” (16).

Increasingly at the turn of the century, and within the context of the women's movement, many Anglo-Indian women became dissatisfied with such allegations and reconfigured this boundary-crossing as advantageous, as their opportunity to enter into the public work of managing an empire. In her in-depth analysis of imperial housewives in India, Mary Procida for example concludes that, "Anglo-Indian women's connection with the domestic sphere was not a mechanism for secluding them from the world but, rather, for integrating them into the symbolic and functional practices of imperialism in India" (77). Sen likewise argues that imperial housewives "appropriate[d] the public (male) arena of the empire and graft[ed] it on to the private (female) sphere of the domestic world—thereby empowering the memsahib by a re-inscription of Anglo-Indian domesticity" (34). In this re-inscription, they emerged as rulers who helped run an empire alongside their husbands or fathers. As Thomas Metcalf suggests in his study of the Raj, the Memsahib had "within the British Indian household, to take on the role her husband played outside: that of a masculine assertion of ordering rationality in the face of a feminized India where disease and disorder raged unchecked" (178). While their participation in the household took various forms,²³ the most well noted in the British imagination was their position as household managers. As Rosemary Mangaly George aptly summarizes in her study of imperial domesticity, "the colonies provided a contemporary situation in which housework and home management were valuable national contributions and celebrated as such by Englishwomen" (45). In this respect, far from being utterly dependent on their husbands and completely

²³ Procida writes, "Women regularly advised and assisted their husbands with a wide variety of work for empire such as undertaking revenue assessments, typing official reports, decoding secret communiqués in wartime, disposing of routine paperwork, touring the district to foster good relations with inhabitants and hunting down dangerous animals" (30).

removed from the “manly” work of empire, Anglo-Indian women suggested that they had their own burden to undertake in the domestic sphere, one that challenged the satirical representation of the Memsahib. As Indira Sen notes, “the memsahib’s position in a large and elaborate household was no longer seen as idle luxury but was instead reinvented as ‘domestic administration’” (34).

This reinvention was promulgated in a large body of literature (consisting of published and private letters, diaries and autobiographies, advice manuals, articles and advice columns in women’s periodicals) that circulated in England as well as India.²⁴ Advice columns in *Englishwoman’s Domestic Magazine* and *Queen: A Lady’s Newspaper and Court Chronicle*, for instance, were saturated with letters from Anglo-Indian women who projected themselves as authorities on surviving domestic life in India (Quirk 171; Chauduri 550). They offered their expertise to newcomers on everything from designing menus, rearing children, supervising servants, keeping financial accounts, furnishing the house and dressing for the Indian climate—all tasks that needed to be completed properly, they asserted, to ensure that the empire ran smoothly. Those seeking a portable, comprehensive copy of this domestic instruction turned to the burgeoning genre of housekeeping guides. The most popular of them, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, was co-authored by the model Memsahibs Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner.²⁵ Undergoing ten editions in the span of three decades, their book became the most popular and definitive

²⁴The re-evaluation of the Memsahib stereotype was not exclusive to women since male authors also reported on British women’s favourable activities in the colony. As Strobel notes, “Philip Mason remembers one woman who rode around in the morning examining stables, garden, and cook house; ran a maternity and child welfare clinic; and finished the day with a party for Indian women who were in purdah (segregated from men), followed by an evening with a visiting officer” (8).

²⁵ These female-authored guide books were competing with earlier works by men, such as R. Ridell’s *Indian Domestic Economy and Receipt Book* (1860) and Colonel Arthur Robert Kenney-Herbert writings in the *Madras Athenaeum* and the *Daily News*, which were then revised into his popular book, *Culinary Jottings for Madras, or a Treatise in Thirty Chapters on Reformed Cookery for Anglo-Indian exiles* (1885).

guide for women residing in or travelling to the colony; it laboriously went through all the things one should and should not do or say during their short- or long-term stay in British India. More importantly, these writers drew a clear analogy between effective housekeeping and effective imperial rule: “We do not wish to advocate an unholy haughtiness; but an Indian house hold,” they assert, “can no more be governed peacefully, without dignity and prestige, than an Indian empire” (9). Continuing with this analogy, “Life in India,” they go on, “always partakes of the nature of a great campaign” (21). According to Indira Sen and Rosemary Mangaly George among others, Steel and Gardiner were only two of a large number of women who positioned the home as a microcosmic empire at the turn of the century, an empire that required an effective and authoritative British female ruler to survive.²⁶ Such, for example, is the claim made by Maud Diver in *The Englishwoman in India*, who compares the burden of the Memsahib in the colonial home to that of the King-Emperor in his kingdom:

What would India be without England, and what would the British Empire be without Englishwomen? To these women are due gratitude not only of their country but of the civilized world. Fearlessly the woman of British birth looks in the eye of danger. Faithfully and with willing sacrifice she upholds the standard of the King-Emperor—the standard of culture and of service to humanity. (Diver, *The Englishwoman in India* ii)

²⁶ The most popular housekeeping guide next to Steel and Gardiner’s was *The Englishwoman in India* (1880) by Maud Diver. Other widely-read guidebooks (some published anonymously) included *Indian Domestic Cookery* (1850), *The Indian Cookery Book* (1869) by “a thirty-five years resident,” *Indian Outfits and Establishment* (1882) by “an Anglo-Indian,” Maude Bradshaw’s *Indian Outfits* (1888), Angela C. Spry’s *The Mem Sahib’s Book of Cookery* (1894), and *The English Bride in India* (1901) by “Chota Mem.”

According to Diver, then, the success of the civilizing mission in the Empire relies heavily on the presence of Englishwomen who deserve infinite praise for their unwavering courage, loyalty and altruism—all characteristics, in turn, that define them as exemplary imperial rulers.

Challenging the prevailing stereotype of the spoiled Memsahib, writers like Maud Diver thus render the ideal domestic woman as a heroic survivor who endures the many hardships of life in India. In *The Englishwoman in India*, for example, she gives a detailed description of all the obstacles a Memsahib would face in the colonies, naming the various insects and reptiles that creep into the Anglo-Indian home, listing the numerous diseases with which they had to contend, and recounting the unbearable boredom of life at the lowly-populated station. Visiting the colony for the first time, a disappointed Mary Maddock likewise reports that “There was nothing very cosy about an Indian bungalow ... The floors were all concrete, the plastered wall white washed and the lofty ceilings were white washed brick supported by steel girders” (qtd. in Procida 63). Like Maddock, others commented frequently

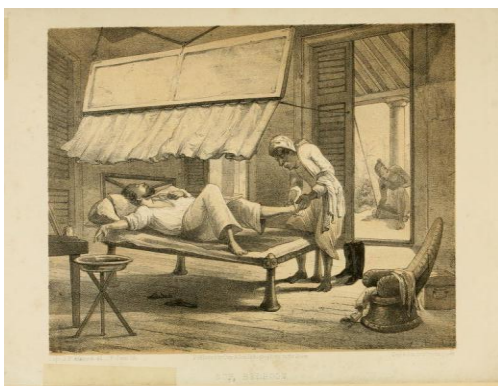


Fig. 21: Atkinson, George. “Our Bed Room.” Lithograph from *Curry and Rice*. 1859.

Internet Archive. University of Toronto, 2009.
Web. 12 Aug 2009.

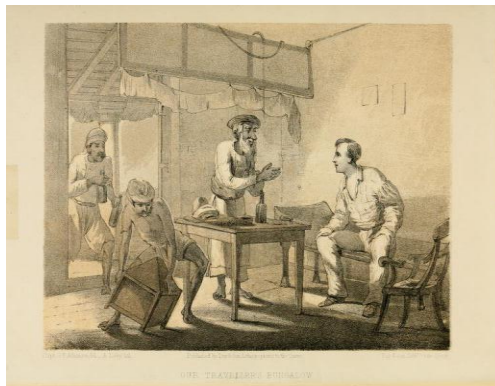


Fig. 22: Atkinson, George. “Our Travellers’ Bungalow.” Lithograph from *Curry and Rice*. 1859.

Internet Archive. University of Toronto, 2009.
Web. 12 Aug 2009.

on the unbearable heat, the relentless insects, the barren walls, the lack of technology—all of which contributed to the relative discomfort of the Anglo-Indian dwelling place. In addition to the poor living conditions, British women endured several other setbacks in their family life. As many writers noted, Anglo-Indians lived a transient lifestyle, always on the move since British officers and officials were regularly transferred from one post to another (Procida 74). Perhaps spoken of with the greatest regret and sorrow was the state of motherhood in India. Not only were Anglo-Indian mothers often separated from their children, who at the age of about seven were sent to England away from the supposedly debilitating effects of the Indian climate (George 50), but many also miscarried or lost their newborn to diseases, malnutrition, or the stifling heat, resulting in a high infant mortality rate. Thus, as their own writings made clear, and as Indira Sen aptly sums up, “The Anglo-Indian woman was represented as suffering from certain specifically gendered difficulties, which include physical hardships in the tropical climate, the danger of disease, the enforced idleness and absence of meaningful activities, the dislocations of domesticity, and, last but not least, the frequent deaths of infant offspring” (29).

By citing the numerous hardships they faced, Anglo-Indian women projected their endurance and perseverance in the colony as all the more heroic. As Diver suggests in *The Englishwoman in India*, “Circumstance is, after all, the supreme test of character, and India tests a woman’s character to the utmost” (21). Passing the numerous tests that were thrown their way, many a housewife proved herself dedicated to creating a comfortable, well-run home. An Anglo-Indian wife living in Punjab in 1879, for example, writes a letter published in *Queen* that praises British

women in India for their ability to domesticate the Indian subcontinent and enact the triumph of civilization over barbarity:

It lies in the power of every Anglo-Indian lady to do as so many are doing and have done; to strive and raise the tone of the society around her by making herself the centre of the true women's kingdom – her house, her home. Let this be kept beautiful and comfortable, a place where, in a land where home life is so sorely tried, others will find in it a restful, home-like place, its beauty and refinement testifying to its owner's pleasure and happiness being found *in* it rather than *out* of it. ("Punjaub" 340)

In their mission to cultivate this "restful, home-like place," women like Steel and Gardiner suggest that they did not have time to sit around idly, as the Memsahib caricature would suggest; many jobs required their immediate and constant attention. As Rosemary Mangaly George summarizes, these women's writing gave the impression that they were bombarded with a never-ending list of domestic tasks, with "doors to be locked, corners to be periodically dusted; rooms to be fumigated and made free of pests; children (ie, 'natives') to be doctored, educated, clothed and disciplined; accounts to be kept; boundaries redrawn and fences mended" (58). In their housekeeping guides it becomes clear that while Memsahibs did not perform the actual labour of locking the doors, dusting the rooms, or mending the fences, they did undertake the more important—or more imperial—job of supervision. As supervisors, they were responsible for delegating tasks to servants, inspecting their completion, as well rewarding hard work while punishing misdemeanours.²⁷ The

²⁷ Such punishment was often rendered as analogous to a parent disciplining her unruly children (Metcalf 179).

“first duty” of the housewife, Steel and Gardiner argue, is “to give intelligible orders,” and the second to “insist on her orders being carried out” (1).

This need for a competent female supervisor in the domestic sphere, however, cannot be understood outside the aftermath of one of the most cataclysmic events in British colonial history: the so-called Indian mutiny of 1857.²⁸ That is, the desire for a more efficiently-run Anglo-Indian home was partly an anxious response to the domestic invasions that occurred during the rebellion. During this time, reports that Indian mutineers were systematically raping, mutilating and murdering Englishwomen took firm hold in the British imagination.²⁹ In narrating such atrocities, many mutiny accounts drew a parallel between the violation of female virtue and the violent intrusion of the sanctity of the Anglo-Indian home. Englishwomen were considered to be vulnerable outside the safety of their domestic spheres: abducted from their homes and relocated to Indian palaces, like the infamous “Bibighar”³⁰ in Cawnpore, they allegedly endured horrible sex crimes before being massacred (Sharpe 64). Moreover, the mutiny left the Anglo-Indian household itself in complete disarray. Surrounded by the mutineers and under the constant fear of an attack, British inhabitants could not replenish basic household necessities like food and water. Switching their loyalties, servants were also

²⁸ British historians have given many names to the uprising of 1857, including the Sepoy Rebellion, the Great Mutiny, and the Revolt of 1857. People of the subcontinent refer to this cataclysmic event, the first serious threat to British rule in India, as India’s “First War of Independence.” I am using the term mutiny intermittently in this paper to recapture the anxieties, both imagined and real, of the colonial rulers.

²⁹ Jenny Sharpe argues that these accounts were to a large degree mythic, a deliberate and strategic exaggeration of the violence that occurs during warfare. Although it is naive to suggest incidents of rape, murder and mutilation (of British *and* Indian women) never existed, the theory that the rebels were systematically violating Englishwomen was disproven by future British investigations (64). According to Sharpe, the memory of the helplessly victimized Anglo-Indian woman re-emerged during future moments of political instability in British India, such as during the Ilbert Bill controversy (1883) as well as the Punjab disturbances (1919), known as the Jallianwala Bagh.

³⁰ For more on the Bibighar, see Sharpe pages 62-64.

abandoning their masters to join rebel forces, and those left behind could not be trusted (64). After overhearing the punkahwallas (servants who pulled the strings of the ceiling fans) anticipating a reversal in power, the Anglo-Indian Mrs. Coopland conjectures the following image: “I could not help fancying, they might have made us punkah and fan *them*, so completely were we in their power” (qtd. in Sharpe 63). In such representations, the turmoil outside the home extended to and endangered the very sanctity of the home—leaving the very base of English morality and civilization unprotected.



Fig. 23: “Miss Wheeler Defending Herself against the Sepoys at Cawnpore, 1857.”

Engraving from Charles Ball’s *The History of the Indian Mutiny*. 1858.

“Indian Mutiny 1857.” *The New Diaspora*. n.d. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

At the turn of the century, more and more Englishwomen challenged not only the image of themselves as lazy and spoiled but also as “passive victims” in need of saving—an image consolidated in a large body of mutiny accounts. In her discussion of the so-called “slaughter house,” or and

Bibighar, Sharpe argues that “The iconic value of the English woman-as-victim is nowhere more evident than in the claims that rebels had crucified their female prisoners like Christ the saviour” (65). Within this allegorical representation, British counterinsurgency was rendered as Christianity’s battle against Heathenism, as civilization’s battle against barbarism.³¹ According to such rhetoric, chivalric British men were enraged by the unjustified abuse of innocent women, and acted with unmatched yet justified violence to defend

³¹ This counterinsurgency, often referred to as the “red peril” or the “campaign of terror,” consisted of blowing prisoners from mouths of canons, looting and massacring, feeding them pork or beef, sticking their dismembered heads on spears, and hanging their mutilated bodies from trees.

their honour, to “protect the weak and defenceless” (76). Consequently, due to such narratives, yet another layer was added to the stereotype of the Memsahib—the fragile British woman in need of protection from lascivious Indian men (Ghose 4).³² Yet, writing within the context of the New Woman movement, Anglo-Indian women started countering this image and instead projecting themselves as capable of fortifying domestic boundaries, of protecting the sanctity of the British home as well as their personal virtue. Unlike during the upheaval of the mutiny, the new Memsahib was a heroine capable of managing potential attacks from within and outside the home. Like the male ruler, she thwarted any attempts at rebellion.

While a large body of recent scholarship has revealed how Memsahibs refashioned themselves discursively during the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, these studies have not explored the potential discrepancy between the idealized image of the imperial housewife and her real day-to-day experiences. After all, the image of the all-knowing and skilful housekeeper emerged as a defence against the stereotype of the lazy, spoiled and victimized Memsahib and was likely a bold exaggeration, perhaps even a discursive over-compensation for a lack of imperial authority in the domestic sphere. While housekeeping guides hence necessarily assumed an authoritative and defensive tone, the subgenre of nautch girl fiction broke away from such instructive modes of writing: it deliberately confused authorial intent through its omniscient, multi-vocal point of view, offering distance between the authorial “I” and the content. The resulting ambivalence allowed the female writers to safely engage with issues that they shied away from in other literary

³²By displacing the justification and the blame for British atrocities against natives onto Englishwomen, these narratives were contributing to what Margaret Strobel calls the “myth of the destructive female.” According to this myth, women were the cause of lasting hostility, mistrust and tension between the British rulers and their Indian subjects.

forms. *Fin de siècle* fiction, then, is one place where we can locate Anglo-Indian women implicitly articulating and grappling with their doubts about their apparent success as imperial wives. In these works, this doubt surfaces most emphatically during their encounter with the nautch girl, who challenges the Memsahib's ability to govern the imperial household. In these narratives, if the Anglo-Indian woman is the home-maker, then the nautch girl emerges as her antithesis: the home-wrecker.

The Nautch Girl as Home-Wrecker

In its current usage, the derogatory and gendered term "home-wrecker" frequently connotes a woman who has sexual relations with a married man. Also regularly referred to as the "other woman," this female threatens the survival of the monogamous relationship, the nuclear family, and, more generally, the sanctity of the home. In this chapter, I attach the term "home-wrecker" to the nautch girl for the multiple, but not merely sexual, ways in which she threatens colonial domesticity during the British Raj, a threat that most directly affects her rival, the British woman in India, and surfaces again and again in fictions of the *fin de siècle*.

In fact, as early as the first decade of the nineteenth century, British women were beginning to recognize interracial relationships between the nautch girl and the male imperialist as a deterrent to the growth of a colonial domesticity in India. For example, Mary Martha Sherwood, who followed her husband (Captain Henry Sherwood) to India in 1805—a time when there were few British women residing in the colony—wrote about her eleven-year experience in the imperial context in several fictional and nonfictional works.³³ Among the many topics she explored, the

³³Married to Captain Henry Sherwood, Mrs. Sherwood (the title under which she published) resided in multiple cities--such as Calcutta, Dinapore, Berhampore, Cawnpore and Meerut—during her residency

nautch girls received particular derision for their detrimental “influence ... over the other sex, even over men who have been bred up in England, and who have known, admired and respected their own countrywomen” (*Life of Mrs. Sherwood* 422). In the presence of the enchanting Indian dancer, these men, Sherwood concludes, were fast forgetting the superior character of “their own countrywomen,” the “lovely face in their native land” (422). Instead, they were falling prey to the seduction, or

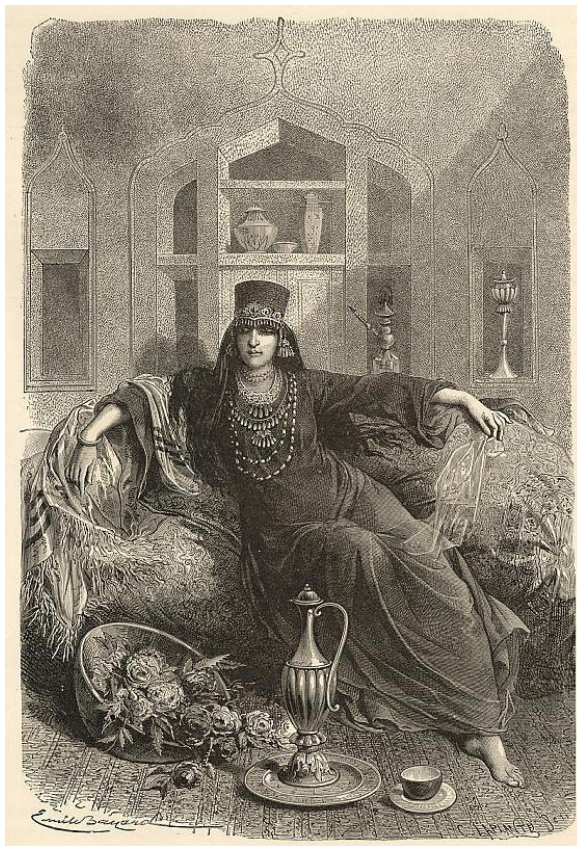


Fig. 24: Bayard, Emile. “Dancing-girl of Cashmere.” Wood Engraving. 1870.
 “nautchlater.” *Columbia.edu*. Columbia, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

“witchcraft” (422), of the nautch girl, whose “influence steals upon the senses of those who come within its charmed circle not unlike that of an intoxicating drug” (422). Sherwood was perhaps one of the first Anglo-Indian women in the early days of the Raj to articulate a correlation between British men “going native” and the declining influence of British women in their lives. Writing in her journal in 1812, for example, she represents their turn to Indian habits and

customs (especially the nautch) as a betrayal to the memory of their devoted mothers, who raised them to become model British citizens:

in India. She was a prolific writer of children’s books, many of which drew on her experiences in India.

All these Englishmen who were beguiled by this sweet music had had mothers at home, and some had mothers still, who, in the far and distant land of their children's birth, still cared, and prayed, and wept for the once blooming boys, who were then slowly sacrificing themselves to drinking, smoking, want of rest, and the witcheries of the unhappy daughters³⁴ of heathens and infidels. (422-3)

In Sherwood's observation, outside the watchful gaze and disciplining hand of their mothers, these "once blooming boys" are "sacrificing themselves" to the Indian



Fig. 25: Carpenter, William. "Kashmiri Nautch Girls Serinugger." Watercolour. 1854.

"The Tawaif, the Anti-Nautch Movement, and the Development of North Indian Classical Music." *Chandra and David's Homepage*. Real Networks, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

vices of bodily, material and sexual excess. The nautch girls' influence over European men is overpowering that of their birth mothers and, more generally, of Englishwomen. As Indira Sen notes, Sherwood "view[s] [the

institution of the nautch] with anxiety and fear as sexually threatening and culturally destabilising" (45)—that is, as home-wrecking.

This detrimental impact of the nautch girls on British men and subsequently British women, Sherwood reports in her journal, became the central motive for her

³⁴ I discuss the contradictions inherent in Sherwood's characterization of the nautch girls (who are described at once as helpless victims and dangerous villains) in Chapter 3, where I trace a similar ambiguity in anti-nautch rhetoric of the late nineteenth century.

subsequent novel, *The History of George Desmond* (1821).³⁵ Writing at a time when British women in India were scarce, and British men purportedly succumbed to Eastern temptations (both sexual and cultural), Sherwood creates a cautionary tale about the nautch girl's dangerous influence. The narrative features a company servant by the name of George Desmond who visits a kotha one night where the devilish, money-hungry tawaif, Amena, performs an enchanting dance. During his prolonged infatuation with this nautch girl, George simultaneously loses ties with his mother and his sister overseas, neglecting to reply to their letters. The one Englishwoman who holds the potential of rescuing George from his slow moral and cultural deterioration and fighting off his fatal attraction to the nautch girl is his fiancé, Emily. As George himself recognizes, in her "virgin beauty" (227) and her positive effect on his character, Emily is a strong foil to Amena: "Oh what a contrast there was between the love of such a woman and that of Amena! By my attachment to Emily my character was refined and exalted—by my connection with Amena, it was depressed and degraded" (189). Despite Emily's uplifting influence, Sherwood warns that sexual relations with nautch girls "are generally found to embitter the whole future course of domestic life" (197). Correspondingly, George is unable to sever his ties with Amena after his marriage to Emily because she allegedly gives birth to his child (later in the narrative we learn George was not the father) and demands continual financial support for their illegitimate offspring.

More importantly, after realizing that her control over the male imperialist is slipping, Amena has her rival for George's affection, Emily, poisoned. In her journal, Sherwood asserts that this malicious murder had a factual basis: "the fact of

³⁵ To make her intent explicit, Sherwood subtitles her novel "founded on facts which occurred in the East Indies, and now published as a useful caution to young men going out to that country."

poisoning is true, and was of no rare occurrence; for it was said many an English wife lost her life from the jealousy of native favourites; but the story of the lovely ‘Emily Desmond’ was taken from a particular case known to me” (*Life of Mrs. Sherwood* 423).³⁶ For this reason, her death represents a pivotal moment in the novel: the death of English morality, discipline and domesticity in India, the death of the “Angel in the House” who has a civilizing influence on the male imperialist and holds promise of his moral salvation. More Significantly, her death clears the path for Amena to take hold of George Desmond’s home and his future, resulting in his moral, cultural and economic decline. “Gloom and ruin,” George notices, “pervaded my whole house and household” after Emily passed away (*George Desmond* 254). His residence, in fact, becomes a site where nautch parties and Indian festivals are regularly held, and where George participates in the native habits of hookah-smoking, drinking and watching Indian female entertainers.

Through the case of George Desmond, Sherwood’s novel presents a cautionary tale that, on one level, warns men against attending nautch parties and succumbing to the enchantment of Indian dancers. On another level, through the character of Emily, it promotes the cultivation of a colonial domesticity in India as a potential preventative for cultural and racial intermixing—an idea that was increasingly being advocated in the mid-nineteenth century, during the time Sherwood was writing, by Utilitarians (such as James Mill and Thomas Macaulay) and Evangelicals (such as George Macaulay Trevelyan and Charles Grant). Both these groups advocated for a greater number of British women to enter the colony and to

³⁶ There is no factual evidence for Sherwood’s bold accusation against native women; her exaggeration is likely a rhetorical strategy by which to gain greater support for the deterrence of interracial relationships.

marry British men in hopes of deterring them from pursuing sexual relations with Indian women that purportedly resulted in mixed-race offspring and sexually transmitted diseases.³⁷ As an evangelical Christian herself, Sherwood supported the development of insular Anglo-Indian communities comprised of nuclear white families with common religious, cultural and national affiliations.³⁸

Such reforms that began early in the century gained greater momentum after the revolt of 1857 at which time the desire for racial segregation increased.³⁹ Following the Rebellion an anxious British government, having lost faith in its invincibility and trust in its native subjects, implemented drastic changes in colonial policies and practices that promoted the segregation of the colonizers from the colonized to reassert racial hierarchies. Arriving at the colony in unprecedented numbers, Englishwomen were integral to the execution of these reforms, and helped fortify cultural, social and linguistic barriers between the white colonizers and

³⁷ See, for example, Jyotsna Singh's chapter on "Gendering of Empire" in *Colonial Narratives/Cultural Dialogues*.

³⁸ Sherwood pursued evangelical missionary work in India and was especially involved in the education of children from both races. Not only did she help in the establishment of schools in India, but she also taught there, conveniently using many of her children's stories as educational tools.

³⁹ Generally speaking, the climate of pre-mutiny India (marked by tolerance and hybridity) differed drastically from that of the post-mutiny. In his ground-breaking work, *White Mughals*, William Dalrymple illuminates a new understanding of pre-mutiny colonial India by tracing multiple cases of British men "going native," or adopting the customs, language and even the religions of India. In his revisionist text, he argues that these men "inhabited a world that was far more hybrid, and with far less clearly defined ethnic, national, and religious borders, than we have been conditioned to expect" in colonial histories or nationalist narratives (5). These cases exemplify the intermingling of Muslim, Hindu, and British cultures in the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries when the British living in India were fairly independent from central authorities. His text unearths the life and legacy of one particular soldier in the army of the East India Company, James Achilles Kirkpatrick, who converted to Islam and assimilated to Mughal culture to marry the beautiful begam Khair-Un-Nissa. Nevertheless, Dalrymple acknowledges that these reforms were beginning to gain support prior to 1857, and makes a distinction between company servants like Kirkpatrick, who lived in the centres of Mughal culture (Hyderabad and Lucknow) where the hybrid Anglo-Mughal lifestyle was more prominent, and those residing in the insular world of the three presidency towns (Calcutta, Bombay and Madras). With the steady growth of British colonial power in the last quarter of the eighteenth century, these presidency towns produced close-knit British communities that discouraged assimilationist practices, such as smoking the hookah, wearing native garments, eating richly spiced food, and especially marrying Indian women (32).

colonized natives (Strobel 52). By embracing this role, they were performing the very duties that administrators sought from them. As Jyotsna Singh concludes, “administrators tacitly understood that more young European men should be allowed to marry and take their wives to colonial outposts, in order to escape temptations that may lead to varied kinds of cultural contamination” (113). These wives helped foster insular Anglo-Indian communities in India that prided themselves on their difference and separation from natives, both spatially and culturally. In her study of British women in India, Procida for example recognizes the political incentive behind the influx of British women in post-mutiny India as follows:

The widespread availability of the quasi-European cuisine, furnishings and social activities facilitated by Anglo-Indian women minimized the temptations to “go native.” The government thus gained some assurance that its officials would be shielded from the supposed lure of the exotic Indian lifestyle, thanks to women’s efforts to provide an attractive alternative. (76)

The domestic heroine of Anglo-India, thus, provided her husband a safe and welcoming retreat from the degenerative environment of India, transferring the Victorian cult of domesticity (the rhetoric of the “Angel in the House”) to the colonies, where it became her duty to save British men from pursuing sexual or marital relationships with Indian women and from succumbing to an Indian lifestyle. As the embodiment of English virtue and morality, she was to civilize the *Englishman*. She was to prevent his lapse into Indian behaviours by cultivating and consolidating his Englishness, and thereby cementing the racial and cultural hierarchies on which imperialism was founded. This gender-specific duty was based

largely on the presumption that British women, residing within the sanctity of the private sphere, were naturally more civilized than their male counterparts and less susceptible to the temptations of the outside (Eastern) world. In other words, as Metcalf aptly suggests, “Pure and virtuous, superior to ‘degraded’ colonial races of either sex, the Englishwoman was meant to enact Britain’s moral superiority” (108). It was for this reason that Englishwomen were “designated as the only appropriate partners for male colonizers, entrusted with upholding a domestic regime that

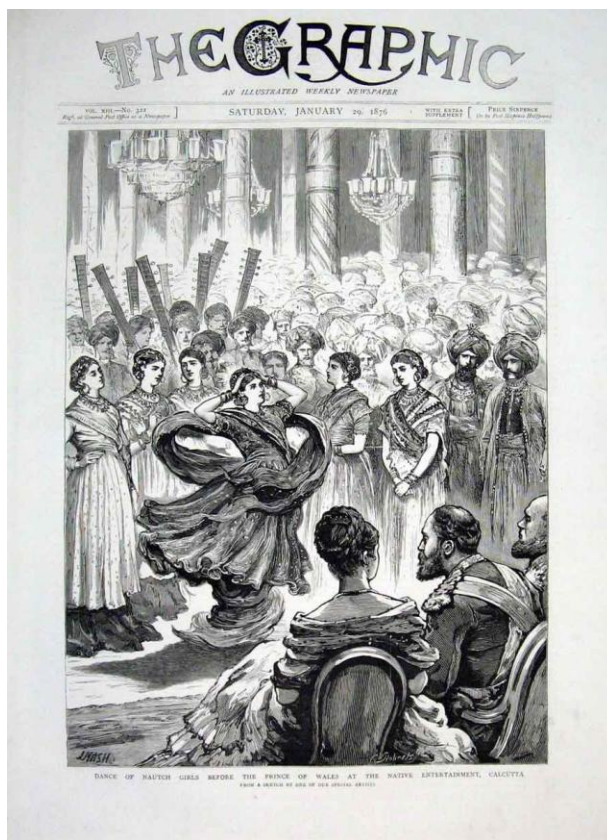


Fig. 26: “Prince of Wales Watching a Nautch in Calcutta.” Engraving from *The Graphic*. Cover Page. 29 Jan 1876.

“nautchlater.” *Columbia.edu*. Columbia, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

prevented men from ‘going native’ and allowed the European community to reproduce itself, literally as well as figuratively” (Buettner 6).

Ideally, then, British women in India policed racial boundaries, steering men away from the sexual and cultural lure of India. While interracial and intercultural mixing indeed decreased in the latter half of the century due to colonial reforms, in the popular British imagination the nautch girl still remained a

perpetual obstacle to the formation and reproduction of the strictly white Anglo-Indian community. To begin with, officials continued to host nautch parties, as was

evident from the Prince of Wales (Albert Edward's) visit to India in 1875. His bold decision to witness a nautch sparked a controversy in British newspapers and magazines of the day (see fig. 26). Those British men and women⁴⁰ who were ardent supporters of the anti-nautch movement, a campaign seeking to abolish the devadasi and tawaif traditions on grounds that they were corrupt Indian systems of prostitution, were especially disappointed with the Prince and considered his desire to watch Indian female entertainers as a betrayal to the civilizing cause. A British citizen of his rank, they argued, should serve as a model of morality for both the natives and his countrymen, and thereby not condone barbaric Indian practices. Even greater social upheaval resulted from the Prince's attendance at a nautch again in 1890, and the next Prince of Wales (George's) in 1906—at which times the anti-nautch movement was gaining even greater momentum.

Underlying this national turmoil was not only the recognition of an emerging opposition to the arguments of anti-nautch campaigners (as I discuss more fully in Chapter 3)⁴¹ but also the fear that the nautch girls still held an erotic power over Englishmen. Nautch parties, according to such rhetoric, continued to be potential sites of cultural hybridity where British and Indian men alike gathered around and consumed the performance of an Indian dancer. Hence, as Sara Suleri suggests in *The Rhetoric of English India*, the threat of the nautch girl's erotic appeal was in the subsequent “cultural contagion” (92). It was the fear of this “infection,” of “cultural intimacy” (92), that propelled the anti-nautch movement, both during

⁴⁰As I develop more fully in the Conclusion, the anti-nautch movement was not solely British-centred; it was supported by Indian reformers who sought the abolishment of the devadasi tradition in their purity campaigns.

⁴¹Many who witnessed the nautch argued that there was nothing debasing about the dancers, their dance or the institution to which they belonged. In fact, many suggested it was a favourable alternative to the immoral life led by entertainers in England (see Chapter 2 and 3).

Sherwood's time and again in the *fin de siècle*. Those involved in the movement to abolish the nautch implicitly communicated the consequence of this sensual appeal as the root of their anxiety. Reverend J. Murdoch, a key figure in the movement, for example, wrote extensively about the degenerative influence of the nautch girls, blaming them for "impoverishing and ruining their patrons" (qtd. in Nevile, *Nautch Girls* 165). In an 1893 pamphlet, he encouraged English ladies to become involved in the movement by, first, never attending a nautch performance themselves and, second, deterring their husbands from going. English wives should, he urged, embrace their gender-specific burden to civilize their husbands and to counteract the immoral influence of the nautch girl. One female missionary, Mrs. Marcus B. (Jenny) Fuller, became particularly involved in this movement and devoted three chapters in her book *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood* to a discussion of nautch girls. In addition to a decline in morals, physical health and financial well-being, men who engaged in relations with Indian dancing girls, Fuller warned, risked the loss of a peaceful and stable home life: "Many a family's happiness has been ruined, and estrangement made complete between husband and wife, by the husband coming under the power and influence of the nautch-girl" (132). In such rhetoric, the nautch girl emerges as a home-wrecker—a woman whose erotic power over the married man jeopardizes the domestic life of both the Englishman and the Englishwoman, and by extension the empire itself.

Despite cases such as the aforementioned ones involving British royalty, cross-cultural encounters between English men and Indian dancing girls did decrease in the latter half of the century due to the growing influence of anti-nautch rhetoric and to reforms that implemented greater racial segregation in the colony.

Nevertheless, as Indira Sen notes, “in the literary productions of the time, the courtesan continued to exercise an erotic power over the Anglo-Indian imagination” (Sen 46). Indeed, again and again, *fin-de-siècle* fiction writers returned to the figure of the nautch girl, both devadasi and tawaif, and her influence over the Englishman. In Rudyard Kipling’s “On the City Wall” (1888), for example, the male narrator and imperialist who visits the kotha one night is mesmerized by the tawaif Lalun’s incomparable beauty, a beauty that he claims “was so great that it troubled the hearts of the British Government and caused them to lose a peace of mind” (131-2). Like George Desmond of Sherwood’s narrative, the narrator is so enchanted by the dancer that he is blind to her anti-imperial schemes and also fooled into helping the Sikh rebel Khem Singh escape British imprisonment. A similar male infatuation with the nautch girl, whether devadasi or tawaif, appears in several other fictional works of the *fin de siècle*, including Henry Bruce’s *The Temple Girl* (1919), Fanny Emily Penny’s *The Romance of a Nautch Girl* (1898), Ida Alexa Ross Wylie’s *The Daughter of Brahma* (1912), Flora Annie Steel’s *Voices in the Night* (1900) as well as her short story “A Debt of Honour” from the collection *Flower of Forgiveness* (1894), Alice Perrin’s “Mary Jones” (1912) and Victoria Cross’s *Six Women* (1906).

In many of these fictional works, particularly those written by women, the authors (like campaigners for the anti-nautch movement) depict interracial relationships as hazardous to the survival of a British domesticity. Written by a woman who herself spent many years in India, Alice Perrin’s short story, “Mary Jones,” is a prime example. It brings the threat of cultural contamination even closer to home, to England itself. In this gothic narrative, Mr. Jones, once a soldier in India but now an elderly man who has recently suffered a stroke, lives secretly for many

years in a small village cottage with a former nautch girl. No one, however, suspects him or his wife, named Mary Jones, to be anything besides an “ordinary old couple” (184), “same as all the other old bodies about the countryside” (183). Only upon her impending death does Mary reveal her true identity before a physician by the name of Dr. Sayne who has come to check up on the couples’ health, particularly after hearing that Mary was recently injured in an accident. Upon his arrival at the cottage, Dr. Sayne encounters a “delirious” (185) housewife who, in her shocked state, has reverted back to her native identity, singing and dancing as her former self: a nautch girl.

In this short story, Perrin not only communicates the impossibility of suppressing one’s racial and national origins, but also warns against the pursuit of interracial relationships for their degenerative effect on domestic life. Indeed, the Jones’s home increasingly takes on the characteristics typically assigned to an Indian residence—that of congestion and decay (Metcalf 179). To begin with, rather than exuding the aura of a typical English abode, the cottage is recognizably foreign, furnished with multiple exotic objects including a “crude coloured picture” of the “Taj at Agra” (183). More importantly, in contrast to the freshness of English air, the atmosphere of the “little” (182) cottage is stifling and suffocating; it is “cramped” (182), “stuffy” (182), “close” (185), and “fusty” (187). Lacking energy and vigour, it is also languid—a trait that was commonly assigned to India and Indians—since even “the light twinkled feebly” (185) and “the kettle hissed drowsily” (182). The lifelessness of the abode mirrors the deterioration in health of the inhabitants themselves. Jones has recently suffered from a stroke that has left him mute and immobile, and his “worn-out consciousness relapse[s further] into senility” (186)

after witnessing his wife's own reversion back to her native roots, back to a time when "she had been no Englishwoman, no Mary Jones in print gown and coarse apron, with rustic speech" (186). Shedding the "civilizing" forces of Englishness, she unleashes her true identity, "mutter[ing] rapidly to herself," "babbl[ing] incoherently" (185), in her mother tongue, Hindustani, of "scented garlands and attar of roses, of



Fig. 27: Woodville, R. Caton. "A Nautch Girl Dancing." *Illustrated London News*. 1891. "nautchlater." *Columbia.edu*. Columbia, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

marriage feasts, of spangled gossamer, of jewels and rupees, and of the beat of the tom-tom⁴²" (185)—of activities readily associated with the nautch girl. She even breaks out into an Indian melody that Dr Sayne, who had recently practiced medicine in India, immediately recognizes: "He had heard it chanted so often in native processions, had caught its echo from bazaar house-tops, on hot-weather nights it had floated towards him from dusky entrances, and he had listened to

it in rajahs' palaces—the song of the *nautch* girl!" (186). The gradual unveiling of Mary Jones's racial origins and occupation, which cannot be suppressed or erased, therefore increasingly Indianize the domestic arena. Before she dies, Mary pollutes the English cottage with her uncontainable, far-reaching music and her dance that are reminiscent of Indian spaces, of "native processions," "bazaar house-tops" (or

⁴² The British frequently referred to the Indian tubla, or drum, as a tom-tom.

kothas), and “rajahs’ palaces.” Alice Perrin’s short story, therefore, not only captures the fear that Englishmen were pursuing relationships with nautch girls but, at the same time, cautions against such transgressions for their detrimental effect on the British home and its inhabitants. More importantly, Perrin magnifies the danger of such interracial marriages by repositioning the nautch girl onto English soil. If given the chance, the Indian dancing girl, she warns, will find her way to the homeland and contaminate British domestic life at its source. The home-wrecker, in this respect, endangers not only the survival of the empire but also the nation.

In contrast to Sherwood and Perrin’s narratives, in *Six Women*, a collection of six stories about Indian women, the New Woman writer Victoria Cross represents the interracial relationship between the Englishman and the nautch girl in a subversive light—as a healthy alternative to an exclusively white relationship.⁴³ The first of these six stories features an unhappily married man, Frank Hamilton, who learns on his wedding night that his wife has married him solely for his money and has no intention of consummating their marriage. Disappointed with the state of his domestic affairs in England, Hamilton accepts a position in India working for the civil government. On his way home from the office one night, he hears melodious music coming from a kotha and decides to locate its source. He enters to find an enchanting nautch girl by the name of Saidie and, due to his instant infatuation, brings her home to live as his Indian mistress. Subverting the anti-nautch rhetoric of Sherwood and Fuller’s narratives, the passionate Saidie is a favourable foil to the

⁴³ The daughter of a colonel in the British army of Lahore, Victoria Cross (pseudonym for Annie Sophie Cory) spent her youth in India.

asexual, repressed and rigid Englishwoman.⁴⁴ Endowed with a poetic sensibility, “she told many things that an Englishwoman would never say, nor would it enter her mind to conceive them” (52). Her passion in turn has a therapeutic effect on Hamilton, who feels “alive for the first time in his existence” (38). This bodily revitalization or “reformation” (29) extends to the changing state of his home. Hamilton gives up the “severely monastic style in which he had lived” (29) for a fully-furnished, “beautiful bungalow” (28) that he names “Saied-i-stan, or the place of happiness” (31). The couple thus occupy a bungalow that, in contrast to the Jones’s cottage, is clean, open, fertile and bright. It is beautifully scented by jasmine, which “pours forth floods of fragrance like incense on the hot, still air” (36), and is well-lit since “a warm glow from shaded lamps came out from each window” (36). Thus, in contrast to the debilitating influence of Amena in Sherwood’s novel and Mary Jones in Perrin’s story, Saidie elevates the domestic sphere to a place of “deep peace” (36), “wonderful energy” (45) and “new life” (45).

By representing Saidie as an Indian counterpart to the British “Angel in the House,” Cross proposes that the cultivation of a healthy domesticity in India was not contingent on the British woman’s presence in the colony. In fact, through the derogatory representation of Hamilton’s wife (Jane), Cross insinuates that the Englishwoman was damaging to the imperial project and to the well-being of the male imperialist; “destroy[ing] the lives of men” (65), she was a demonic being incessantly seeking personal gain at the expense of all those involved. For example, upon her arrival in India, Jane seethes with jealousy over the lavish jewellery and clothes Hamilton has given Saidie: “They are all mine! I should like to drag them off

⁴⁴Nevertheless, Cross’s atypical representation of the nautch girl is problematic. In her rewriting, she downplays their rebellious tendencies by characterizing Saidie as submissive and obedient.

you! Do you understand that an Englishman's money belongs to his wife, and *I* am his wife? You! What are you? He belongs to me, and, whatever you may think, I can take him from you. By our laws he must come back to me" (59). However, despite all her efforts, Jane fails to break Hamilton apart from his Indian mistress and hence resorts to drastic measures. Subverting Sherwood's novel in which the satanic Amena poisons the innocent, unassuming Emily, Cross represents the money-hungry Jane as the "fiend" (65) who murders a pregnant Indian woman, a violent act that escalates into more deaths: Hamilton's revenge on his wife and his own suicide.

In offering this alternative reading, Cross appropriates and reinscribes what Margaret Strobel calls the "myth of the destructive female"—a myth that "blame[s] Western women for creating racial tension by widening the gap between the colonizers and the colonized" (Chauduri and Strobel 11). Jenny Sharpe summarizes the myth as follows: "Because of her strategic positioning within an enforcement of the racial hierarchy, the memsahib is spoken of as embodying the worst evils of the Empire. She is a scapegoat for imperialism, the remedy and poison that both ensures racial segregation and threatens to undermine race relations" (92). Indeed, as pawns and agents in the initiatives of the colonial government, Anglo-Indian women were blamed, first, for being the cause of violent counter-attacks in 1857, and, second, for cementing racial divisions in the post-mutiny period. Through the character of Jane, Cross criticizes the extent to which British women will go to ensure racial segregation, a segregation rooted in personal rather than communal gain. Cross thus aligns herself with, while offering a possible solution out of, the growing animosity towards Mem Sahibs articulated at the turn of the century by male writers like Wilfred Scawen Blunt. In *Ideas about India* (1885), Blunt claims, "The Englishwoman in India

during the last thirty years has been the cause of half the bitter feelings between race and race. It was her presence at Cawnpore and Lucknow that painted the sword of revenge after the mutiny, and it is her constantly increasing influence now that widens the gulf of ill-feeling and makes amalgamation daily more impossible” (qtd. in Sharpe 91). This amalgamation is made possible in Cross’s story through the cross-race relationship between Hamilton and Saidie, a relationship based on mutual respect, trust, and love.

It is perhaps not surprising that, as a New Woman writer who wrote openly and boldly about sexuality, Cross would distance herself from the conservative character of Jane Hamilton. As the epitome of Victorian womanhood, Jane Hamilton after all reads “a copy of ‘Anna Lombard’”—Cross’s most successful New Woman novel—“with the strongest disapproval” (56). This disapproval, for Cross, marks the narrow-mindedness of not only the stereotypical Memsahib but also the conventional Englishwoman. In this respect, whereas Jane is a foil and rival to the New Woman, the nautch girl is her ally in the fight against societal prejudices towards female sexuality. In her distaste for conventions, boundaries and societal expectations, both in “Six Women” and in her other works such as *Anna Lombard* (1901) and *The Life of My Heart* (1905) which explore the physical gratification offered by cross-race relationships,⁴⁵ Cross implicitly advocates a return to the cultural exchange and hybridity marking the earlier days of the Raj when interracial relationships were more common.⁴⁶ Arguably, then, as a home-wrecker turned home-maker, the nautch girl in Cross’s narrative presents an even stronger threat to the

⁴⁵ In chapter 4, I expand on the modernist belief at the turn of the century that sexuality was therapeutic and revitalizing.

⁴⁶ See footnote 39 for a description of pre-mutiny culture.

survival of colonial domesticity in India; she renders the presence of the Englishwoman in India as not only unnecessary but, in fact, hazardous.

Although an anomaly in its subversion of the angelic Englishwoman / demonic nautch girl dichotomy, Cross's narrative nevertheless reifies the recurring rivalry between the two female types, a rivalry over the Englishman and by extension his home. With the exception of *Six Women*, the colonial literature I have traced above promotes racial homogeneity in marital relationships to counteract the degenerative influence of nautch girls; the writers cheer for the Englishwoman to win in this battle between the home-wrecker and the home-maker while imagining the dire consequences of her possible loss. However, in other fictions, as I will suggest through a close examination of Flora Annie Steel's novel *The Potter's Thumb* (1894), these women do not battle for control over the Englishman as much as over physical spaces in India, specifically over the Anglo-Indian home. Such fictions, thus, represent the battle between the two women as an allegorical fight between England and India. The home-wrecking nautch girl, in this context, takes on the identity of a female rebel who attempts to dismantle the British civilizing project embodied in the English residences themselves. After all, nurtured and protected by Anglo-Indian women, the home in colonial India was a synecdoche for the imperial nation, and, within this analogy, the nautch girl was a female mutineer whose attack on British domestic spaces was a simultaneous attack on British rule in India. This analogy surfaces strongly in Flora Annie Steel's novel, *The Potter's Thumb* (1894), in which the tawaif Chandni presents an uncontainable threat throughout the novel, both physically and spiritually invading as well as damaging the precariously fortified homes the Anglo-Indians inhabit. That is, she continually defies boundaries between

British and Indian spaces, disrupting the project to develop insular British communities fenced off from the influence of native society. At a time when British women in India were trying to sustain an image as competent imperial household managers who contributed to the civilizing mission in India, the mutinous tawaif in Steel's novel defies their power by wreaking havoc in the domestic sphere.

“I Mean to Win”:

The Nautch Girl Battles the Memsahib

in Flora Annie Steel's *The Potter's Thumb*

Flora Annie Steel was one of the most well-known and celebrated Anglo-Indian female authors of her time. Considering her vast experience in the imperial context, she has been referred to on numerous occasions in current scholarship as the “female Kipling” (Huenemann 235; Pal-Lapinski 65).⁴⁷ She accompanied her husband, an employee of the Indian Civil Service (ICS), to India in 1868, where she spent more than twenty years of her life as a memsahib. Her literary career skyrocketed in the 1890s when she returned to England and, in the span of thirty years, published approximately twenty novels and a handful of short story collections in addition to her non-fictional writings such as *The Indian Housekeeper and Cook*. Although relatively understudied and unknown next to her more famous mutiny novel *On the Face of the Waters* (1896), Steel's novel *The Potter's Thumb* deserves particular attention for her vivid characterization of the courtesan Chandni.

⁴⁷ Many critics even went as far as claiming that, in her representation of life in India, she surpassed her male counterpart, Rudyard Kipling. In January 1897, *The Critic* argued that “No writer—not even Mr. Kipling—knows the life of the mixed population of the Anglo-Indian empire better than the author of *On the Face of the Waters*” (qtd. in L. Richardson, “*On the Face of the Waters*” 119). Likewise, the *Pall Mall Gazette* reported that “Mrs. Steel has beaten Kipling on his own ground, India” (119).

The tawaif Chandni is a fiercely independent Indian woman who threatens British colonialism in several respects. This “shrewd” (46) and “clever woman” (210, 427) lives in the fictional town of Hodinuggur, a long-enduring city once ruled by Mughal emperors, and adamantly opposes British rule every chance she gets. Throughout the narrative, Chandni is the “brains” (40) behind all anti-colonial activity, always “plotting and scheming” against the British government (82). Causing “disgrace to the department” (23) of Public Works, she is known for her “past scandals” (23) that have resulted in the disastrous opening of the sluice gates and the subsequent deterrence of British irrigation schemes. The novel begins with the hope that this history will not be repeated: the imperial officer Dan Fitzgerald transfers to George Keene, the epitome of civilization, the role of watchman of the sluice gates along with the key that opens them. George now holds the important imperial position in Hodinuggar as an overseer of the new irrigation project—a position that Chandni vows to disrupt.

Chandni’s fight against the British government for ownership of India’s resources (both its water and its wealth) has an added dimension this time. A Memsahib by the name of Gwen Boynton arrives at Hodinuggur and steals the heart of the sluice-gate keeper, ruining Chandni’s original plan to distract George through an emotional entanglement with a local Indian woman named Azizan. Throughout the rest of the narrative, in her commitment to securing victory, Chandni involves the naive, unknowing Memsahib into her convoluted plot to open the sluice gates and to regain access to the precious Hodinuggur jewels that have come in Gwen’s possession, creating a battle between the two women about which Chandni asserts, “I mean to win” (211)—and win she does. In addition to recovering the pearls,

opening the sluice gates, causing a flood, and forcing the British to retreat from their irrigation plans in Hodinuggur, Chandni gains political, financial and social status by the close of the novel. This successful disruption of the civilizing project in Hodinuggur materializes alongside Chandni's continual disruption of British domestic life, both within the "red-brick bungalow" (66) located at Hodinuggur and the more affluent residence at Simla, where the colonial party retreats during the summer. As a home-wrecker, Chandni thus contaminates, destroys, and disorders imperial homes, homes that the Memsahib cannot safeguard against the nautch girl's intrusion.

The Nautch Girl Contaminates

In her characterization of Chandni's uncontainable mobility, Steel seems to draw from a historical recognition that nautch girls transgressed spatial boundaries. As Piya Pal-Lapinski recognizes, "In colonial India, performed in the 'bazaar' areas as well as in private homes, the nautches constantly crossed borders" (69). Especially in the early years of the Raj, the same women who performed before Rajahs in court



Fig. 28: Luard, Jonh Major. "Two Nautch Girls Performing with Musicians." Drawing. c.1830. "nautchlater." *Columbia.edu*. Columbia, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

palaces, public crowds at Indian weddings, or followers at religious festivals regularly entertained the British nobility in their dining rooms, tents, and gardens. The home-wrecking Chandni similarly crosses boundaries again and again in *The Potter's Thumb*,

contaminating all she touches—a contamination that the Memsahib cannot fight off. Failing to fulfill her burden in the domestic sphere, the Anglo-Indian woman is unable to keep the domestic space pure and clean, or to erect walls strong enough to ward off the encroachment of Indian culture. As Jyotsna Singh claims, ideally the Anglo-Indian home was a “space of racial purity that the colonial housewife guarded against contamination from native society” (92). Thomas Metcalf likewise argues that British residents in India tried to shield themselves from a threatening India “by erecting walls of distance marked out by distinctive styles of residence and behaviour” (9). In sharp contrast to the purportedly congested, decaying and unsanitary native areas, the Anglo-Indian “residence and behaviour” ideally epitomized stability, orderliness and cleanliness. The British civil stations or cantonments provided shelter against the rampant dirt, disease, and disorder plaguing the rest of India.

But Chandni is a contaminant who ruptures the construction of physical and cultural boundaries every chance she gets—specifically through her uncontainable sounds and smells, and her mimicry of English rituals. In my analysis of Chandni as a contaminant I draw from and expand on Piya Pal-Lapinski’s work in *The Exotic Woman in Nineteenth-Century British Fiction and Culture: A Reconsideration*. As one of the few scholars who has published on *The Potter’s Thumb*, Pal-Lapinski considers Chandni alongside another of Steel’s tawaifs, Diliram, from *Voices in the Night* (1900) and situates their resistance to colonialism within late-nineteenth-century anxieties about the spread of disease in the empire. By protesting against the Contagious Diseases Acts and evading the medical inspection of their bodies (which I take up more fully in Chapter 2), nautch girls remained non-colonized by British science,

creating a perpetual anxiety of contagion through their untreated bodies. According to Pal-Lapinski, Steel uses the purportedly infected bodies of nautch girls as a metaphor for their resistance to colonial power. In other words, using “disease-as-

Fig. 29: Woman with a Sitar. Photograph. c.1920.

The Tawaif, the Anti-Nautch Movement, and the Development of North Indian Classical Music.” *Chandra and David’s Homepage*. Real Networks, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.



noses of the British inhabitants she reaches. For example, she “break[s] into a respectable and plaintive love-song” and plays her “banjo”⁴⁸ with such vigour that it travels from her rooftop in the Indian bazaar all the way across the canal to George Keane’s bungalow (43). George “pause[s] to listen in sickening suspense” to such

resistance” (66), these fictional tawaifs spread their “infection” to the British, invading and rupturing not only physical but also cultural boundaries between the colonizers and the colonized. Pal-Lapinski’s reflection on contagion is useful in understanding Chandni’s threatening boundlessness in *The Potter’s Thumb*.

One way Chandni contaminates colonial homes is through her intangible, free-ranging sounds and smells—sounds and smells that spread unchecked and pollute the ears and

⁴⁸ Most likely, Steel is referring to a sitar. Perhaps, like many of her contemporaries, she was not familiar with the Indian terminology for Indian musical instruments and subsequently resorts to their anglicization.

“incongruous, barbaric intervals” (43) that are “ruin[ing]” “the country” (43).⁴⁹

Indian music is not the only sound that moves through space and signals the perpetual presence of the nautch girl. The tawaiḥ’s anklets alert British and Indians alike that she is close by. When George first meets Chandni, he hears the “clash of silver bells” (5, 214, 342) before he even sees her walking with “exceeding grace, salaaming to the sahib-logue” (5). Her “clash of silver anklets” (40) reverberate through the bazaar, and “a louder clash of the anklet” (40) often accompanies moments of resolute determination. That is, her “jingling feet strik[e] the ground with a clash” (88, 298) when she desires to be heard. In Steel’s novel, therefore, Chandni’s anklets are not a symbol of sensuality but instead of her determination. Her laughter conveys the same fierce spirit. Through her “reckless” (298), “jeering” (87), “high-pitched” (62), “contemptuous” (298) and “shrill, mocking laughs” (362), Chandni asserts her thirst for victory and rebellion. Chandni’s distinct yet strong scents are just as disruptive to the cultivation of “English” spaces as her sounds. Wherever she goes, she releases a “wave of perfume from the jasmine chaplets”⁵⁰ into the air” (47). In fact, she recognizes that “scent ... is the most powerful stimulant to bygone memories” (47), and hence a means by which to assert her ties to a still surviving Mughal profession. Not surprisingly, then, when Chandni invades her room in Simla, Gwen becomes conscious of the intruder’s identity through this overwhelming smell: “the woman’s trade was unmistakable. It was writ large in the ... chaplets of flowers, the scent of musk and ambergris filling the room” (360). With

⁴⁹ The anxiety over the uncontainable quality of Indian music is expressed also in *Voices in the Night* when the sound of Indian drums and the accompanying image of a “posturing figure” (the dancing girl) find their way from the “distance and darkness of the city” (156), through the open window of a nursery in the Government House, and to the ears of the governor’s wife, Memsahib Grace Arbuthnot, as she performs her domestic and maternal duties. See chapter 2.

⁵⁰ Nautch girls often adorned their hair with jasmine.

her identifiable and far-reaching sounds and smells, Chandni is a contaminant who cannot be contained, “fill[ing]” the spaces she occupies and leaking through the porous walls segregating Indian from British spaces.⁵¹

Chandni contaminates not only physical but also cultural boundaries that divide the British from their Indian subjects. Specifically, she disrupts the very rituals that nurtured a national identity among the Anglo-Indian population, rituals that British women were responsible for carrying out. It was the Memsahib’s duty to cultivate the exclusiveness of colonial society by participating in various English activities, such as organizing and attending balls, clubs, masquerades, card games, and sports (ranging from cricket, tennis, and golf to horse-racing and polo). “Elaborate social rituals,” Margaret Strobel claims, “maintained the social distance between Europeans and indigenous peoples and reinforced social hierarchy within the European community. Guarding the social boundaries often fell to women, as it did in Britain” (8). By promoting the customs of English culture in India, British women thus helped create “unity and uniformity among the imperial community” (Procida 63). These “social rituals,” as Strobel claims, “served to maintain a sense of cultural self-identity” (11).

In Steel’s novels, Indian courtesans, however, continually disrupt this “cultural self-identity.” In *Voices in the Night*, for example, the spectral presence of tawaifs upsets the rituals of tea-drinking and tennis-playing that transpire outside the Government House where the Arbuthnots reside. Specifically, Memsahibs recognize

⁵¹ Comparably, in *The History of George Desmond*, Sherwood describes the smells and sounds of the nautch girl as intoxicating, “steal[ing] upon [George’s] senses” (99) like a drug. He is helplessly engulfed by the “melancholy kind of music” (33) and the scents of rose-water, sandalwood, and jasmine.

that the luscious garden surrounding the house was once a pleasure garden where courtesans consorted with the Mughal nobility:

It was a quaint place, tucked away between two angles of the city wall for greater convenience in secret comings and goings to secret pleasures; and it was all the quainter now because of the Englishwomen sipping tea on the steps of the gilded summer house, the Englishmen calling tennis scores in what had been the rose water tank, in which kings' favourites had bathed, and on which they had floated in silver barges. (235)

The English rituals of drinking “tea” and playing “tennis” cannot erase—or mask—



Fig. 30: Weeks, Edwin Lord. “Nautch Girl Resting.” Oil on Canvas. 1905.

“nautchlater.” *Columbia.edu*. Columbia, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

the lingering presence of the “secret pleasures” that took place in this sensual garden. Pal-Lapinski likewise argues, “As the courtesans’ sensual yet spectral presences invade the atmosphere

of the garden, they also assault the ‘civilizing impulse’ of the English tea party” (68).

Knowledge of its former inhabitants prevents the ladies from enjoying the outdoor gardens and lawns, where Anglo-Indians often dined, entertained and relaxed. As noted by an Anglo-Indian travel writer, gardens and lawns encircling the bungalow “are the symbol[s] of peaceful contentment, and a relaxation to the body and mind after the stress of official or other duties” (qtd. in Procida 75). This is not the case in *Voices in the Night* where the invasive presence of nautch girls arrests such relaxation and shatters the British faith in cultivating Englishness in India.

Even more so than the spectral courtesans in *Voices in the Night*, Chandni contaminates the very rituals that cultivated a shared national identity for Anglo-Indians. She threatens the “Englishness” of certain rituals—specifically the waltz—by performing them herself. She appropriates them, endangering the “purity” of British national identity through her imitations. For example, when she visits the women’s quarters at the Mughal palace, Chandni entertains the zenana women with “a spirited imitation of the way the *memsahibs* waltzed with the *sabib logue*” (49). The significance of this imitation can be explored through Homi K. Bhabha’s concept of colonial mimicry. In “Of Mimicry and Man,” Bhabha addresses the subversive potential of the civilizing project in India that sought to create native intellectuals who closely resembled their British rulers. Bhabha exposes the irreconcilable contradiction at the heart of cultural imperialism: Indians needed to be civilized but could (and should) never reach the level of their white rulers. Colonial mimicry, Bhabha articulates, “is the desire for a reformed, recognizable Other, as a subject of difference, that is almost the same, but not quite” (126). The “mimic man,” in other words, aspires to become like his white master without achieving a true resemblance. Yet, according to Bhabha’s deconstructionist approach, the native’s imperfect replication is menacing rather than celebratory, subversive rather than conformist. The westernized Indian enacts a “mimicry that mocks the binary structure travestying it” (206), destabilizing the dichotomies on which colonialism is founded by “[lying] in between the space between Self and Other, or between identity and difference” (206).

Likewise, Chandni disturbs the boundaries between British and Indian culture through her “imitation” of the most widely performed British dance in India:

the waltz. However, unlike Bhabha's theory of the mimic *man*, in Steel's novel, Chandni's act of mimicry is a *conscious* act of *female* subaltern resistance. Because her replication is uninvited, it does not contribute to the colonial project but instead deliberately blurs cultural distinctions. She performs a "hideous caricature" (Steel, *Potter's Thumb* 49) of the Anglo-Indian female dancer that purposefully mocks rather than celebrates the civilized rituals of English culture.⁵² Steel seems to be drawing, here, from her knowledge of nineteenth-century nautch girls who learned and performed English songs, dances or plays before a British or Indian audience.⁵³

By representing Chandni's parody of the waltz, Steel highlights an underlying anxiety that had existed throughout the nineteenth century—the nautch girl and the Memsahib, as well as their respective dances, were not as dissimilar as the British contended. As early as the 1830s, British and Indians alike were drawing an uneasy connection between the nautch and the waltz. In their travel literature, Emily Eden, Harriet Ashmore, and Julia Maitland all write about the balls held in India as sites of intense flirtation between the deprived British soldiers and the scarce numbers of single British women arriving at the colonies. As Indira Sen notes, "from the earlier East Indian Company days, boatloads of women coming out to India to find husbands were the object of much satire and derision and the women constructed as 'artful and designing' and 'at all times ready to sell their charms to the highest bidder'" (17). Those who "freely indulged" in the "indiscreet" waltz during evening entertainments were particularly regarded in this light (63)—their bodies linked to

⁵²Bhabha's theory of mimicry as resistance has been critiqued by scholars such as Sara Suleri and Benita Parry on the grounds that it is a passive (specifically, discursive) form of resistance, and hence does not necessarily result in an active challenge to colonial authority and rule. See Suleri's *Rhetoric of British India* and Parry's *Postcolonial Studies: A Materialist Critique*.

⁵³ See, for example, Harriot Georgina Blackwood's *Our Viceregal Life in India: Selections from My Journal, 1884-1888*.

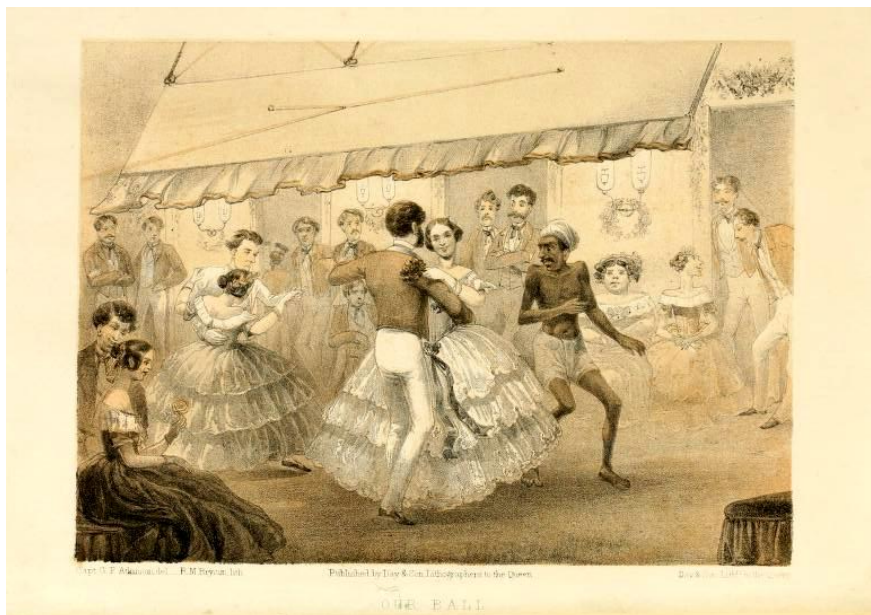


Fig. 31:
Atkinson,
George.
“Our
Balls.”
Lithograph
from *Curry*
and *Rice*.
1859.

Internet
Archive.
University of
Toronto,
2009. Web.
12 Aug
2009.

those of nautch girls. Increasingly in the mid-nineteenth century this link became a source of deep anxiety. As Sara Suleri suggests in her noteworthy work on English India, British women arriving to India were plagued with a “a fear of proximity rather than of difference” (77), recognizing that they were imported to the colonies to provide British men with the very services (domestic and sexual) that the nautch girls had. There was a “hidden recognition that the Indian courtesan provided an uncannily literal replication of the part Anglo-Indian women had been imported to perform” (93).⁵⁴

Drawing on the historical conflation between the waltz and the nautch, respectively between Memsahibs and courtesans, Chandni’s act of mimicry thus deliberately blurs the distinctions between Indian and English women, specifically between herself and Gwen. Recently widowed, left under financial strain, and

⁵⁴ In a desperate attempt to conceal these similarities, British women in India, Suleri argues, reasserted their imperial authority over and difference from nautch girls through what she calls the “feminine picturesque” (93). They attempted to reduce and simplify the identity of the nautch girl, “categoriz[ing her] according to [India’s] own hierarchy of caste, seeing her as the new untouchable in the Anglo-Indian world” (93). In other words, in asserting their distinction from the nautch girl, British women desperately attempted to mask an underlying likeness.

unwilling to part with her love of material objects, Gwen uses her sexuality to hunt for a new husband, and, in her dependence on and manipulation of men, she is no different than Chandni. Chandni's performance of the waltz thereby deconstructs the supposed boundaries between English and Indian femininities; she contaminates "English" rituals upheld by Anglo-Indian women to unveil their resemblance to Indian ones. The implications of this similarity are severe. The civilizing project in India heavily relied on the construction of a dichotomous womanhood (whereby the Englishwoman differed significantly from the Indian woman, whether the passive zenana woman or the promiscuous courtesan), and thus representations that suggested otherwise created a crisis in colonial policies and ideologies. Recognizing this crisis, Trevelyan observed in 1864 that "The free and unrestrained life of an English lady excites the strangest and most unjust ideas in the mind of a Hindoo. Dining and talking and dancing with men connected with them neither by blood nor marriage, never fails to produce upon [Indians] a most false and unfortunate impression" (qtd. in Sen 23). Native men gaze on and interpret Englishwomen as comparable to nautch girls in their loose and frivolous lifestyles.⁵⁵

After witnessing Chandni's "hideous caricature" of the waltz, a gasping crowd of zenana women in *The Potter's Thumb* likewise align the white woman's behaviours and morals with the courtesan's.⁵⁶ This anxious alignment appears in

⁵⁵ Trevelyan also writes, "Western modes of social behaviour and attire like ballroom dancing and low-cut evening gowns, which had been hitherto considered acceptable, were now often critiqued on the grounds that these would undermine respect for white women in a purdah-based society" (qtd. in Sen 23).

⁵⁶ Problematically, the British (and many Indians) polarized Indian womanhood into the oppressed domestic woman and the promiscuous public woman, placing the zenana woman on one end of the spectrum and the nautch girl on the other. Consequently, the British woman's proximity to either generated anxiety. While, here, their likeness to nautch girls produces unease, in Chapter 2, I suggest that it is their resemblance to zenana women that leads them to "go nautch girl"

another one of Steel's stories, "Feroza" from her short-story collection, *Flower of Forgiveness* (1894). The purdah-women in this story consider Memsahibs to be "bold hussies who dance" (156) with "bare breasts and arms" (156).⁵⁷ These fictions indeed draw from concerns voiced in journals such as *The Madras Mail*, which in 1890 reported on the Memsahib's insatiable desire "to laugh, to dance, to sing, to beguile time and to chase dull cares" (qtd. in Sen 18). This concern intensified at the turn of the century when more and more white female performers from Europe toured India and performed openly before non-white male spectators. As Hsu-Ming Teo argues in her study of *fin-de-siècle* dancers, "Women were supposed to be the bringers of civilization and the upholders of superior Western imperial standards in the colonies. There was a widespread feeling that women dancing for the natives was highly unbecoming and even potentially destabilizing of the imperial order" ("Women's Travel" 381). Consolidated by the rape myths of 1857, the stereotype of the sexually rapacious Indian male was used to justify the campaign against colonial female performances at the turn of the century. Hence, as Margaret Macmillan reports, "When word of [Maud] Allan's proposed tour got out among the Anglo-Indian community, 'they reacted as though a Second Mutiny were about to break out'" (qtd. in Teo, "Women's Travel" 381). Conservatives argued that, to avoid a recurrence of the "tragedy" of 1857, white women were to be protected from the lascivious gaze of the natives at all costs. Fiction of the period heightened this anxiety about female performing artists in India. In Victoria Cross's *Life of My Heart*

⁵⁷ This anxious connection between the nautch girl and Englishwoman in the *fin de siècle* appears in other fictional works. In the operatic performance, *The Nautch Girl, or the Rajah of Chutney-pore*, presented at the Savoy in 1891, the principle nautch girl knows and performs a myriad of European dances, including the waltz. Frances in Victoria Cross's novel *Life of My Heart* (1905), likewise, dances the waltz and other Western routines before a native audience who links her body to that of a nautch girl. In Chapter 4, I discuss the hybridity commonly characterizing dances of the *fin de siècle*.

(1905), for example, when the heroine Frances sings and dances before a native audience, the men are dangerously excited: a “fire beg[ins] to tingle in their veins,” and “they press[...] in closer upon her—they almost touch[...] her” (150). Likewise, Mary Holland from Bithia Mary Croker’s *The Company’s Servant* (1907) recognizes that “some of the Bazaar folks in the one-*anna* places at the back, muttered to one another, and grunted, and grinned, with horrible significance” (132) as they witnessed the white female dancer, Rosita Fountaine’s, performance (see Chapter 4).

Chandni’s parody of the British waltz is one of many ways she disrupts the late-nineteenth century project to develop insular Anglo-Indian communities fenced off from the influence of native society. Not only does Chandni, alongside Steel’s other courtesans, disrupt British domestic life by polluting Anglo-Indian homes and rituals, but she also vengefully destroys and disorders their homes. Her threat, in other words, goes beyond the mere spread of contamination; she is an active female rebel whose premeditated invasions and destruction of British residences in Hodinuggur and Simla render her as a native woman to be feared in *The Potter’s Thumb*.

The Nautch Girl Rebels

While in my analysis of Chandni above I extend and deepen Piya Pal-Lapinski’s analysis of Steel’s fictional courtesans, in this next section I argue that, in her characterization of the spirited Chandni, Steel draws not only from their alleged infections and their refusal to abide by the Contagious Diseases Acts, but also and more importantly their participation in anti-colonial activities, specifically the 1857

revolt.⁵⁸ In her study, Pal-Lapinski concludes that “A characteristic feature of Steel’s fiction is her fascination with fiercely independent and rebellious Indian courtesans” (66). Despite her recognition that the characters in Steel’s novels are “haunted by the echoes of the Indian Mutiny of 1857” (68) in which nautch girls purportedly participated, Pal-Lapinski does not adequately develop this line of argument because it does not support her central argument—that it is the contagious bodies of nautch girls that pose the danger of a “reverse invasion, dissolving the boundaries between ‘home’ and the colonies” (60). In fact, her focus on infection (which suggests a passive form of resistance in its inherent rather than self-produced violence) overshadows and downplays the more active role tawaifs played in anti-colonial activities throughout the turn of the century. In other words, although accurate and interesting, Pal-Lapinski’s narrow focus reduces the anti-colonial activities of the nautch girls to their physicality, their purported biological predisposition to disease, rather than to their premeditated rebellious actions.

I argue that Steel’s depiction of Chandni as a mutinous Indian woman responds to the image of tawaifs as political rebels circulating in the British imaginary at the turn of the century—an image that is nevertheless underdeveloped in current studies of the novel. Those few scholars who have commented on Chandni recognize her as a rebellious character. Karen Huenemann, for example, classifies her as a “malicious” woman who “connives for power” (239). Neither Huenemann nor Pal-Lapinski however adequately delineates the relationship between Chandni and her historical predecessors. I propose that, in depicting the nautch girl as a

⁵⁸ I am currently working on an article that engages more deeply with the representation of the mutinous dancing girl in nonfictional and fictional works of the nineteenth century, and especially with the re-emergence of the nautch-girl-as-rebel trope in *fin de siècle* literature.

mutineer, Steel borrows from accounts, however exaggerated, of their role in the rebellion. As Jenny Sharpe notes in *Allegories of Empire*, “Contrary to western stereotypes of the passive Oriental woman, Indian women [including Indian courtesans] are spoken of in the mutiny reports as the worst offenders of the rebel crimes” (74). In *A History of the Indian Mutiny* (1904), George William Forrest is one of many writers, for example, to attribute the cause of the uprising to the “instigation of a courtesan” (xi), a claim that Steel also takes up in her famous mutiny novel, *On the Face of the Waters* (as I discuss below). Others reported that nautch girls, owning and managing their own kothas, offered the rebels a convenient place to meet and discuss politics. In *The Religions and Hidden Cults of India* (1932), George MacMunn explains that these “latticed alcoves” (179) were popular sites of social interaction because they provided a safe and sheltered place for men to exchange words of a private and political nature.

Variably perceived as instigating, supporting and physically participating in the events of 1857, the nautch girls most readily referenced in mutiny accounts were the celebrated Azizun from Cawnpore, Hazrat Mahal from Lucknow, and Nana Sahib’s courtesans, Adela and Hassaini Khanum, also from Cawnpore. Consorting with the Sepoy Shamsuddin Khan, Azizun established her salon near one of the gun batteries that subsequently served as a regular site of assembly for the second cavalry (P.J.O. Taylor 112). Similarly, Hussaini Khanum, who also lived in Cawnpore at the time of the mutiny, offered her home as a suitable location for the Indian soldiers to convene and talk (117). When the opportunity arose, nautch girls even assumed leadership roles during the revolt. The most legendary among them, the Begum of Oudh (Avadh), Hazrat Mahal, was originally a nautch girl at the court of Wajid Ali

Shah, but secured a pre-eminent position during the King's deportation to Calcutta in 1857 when the kingdom was left vulnerable to British attack. The Begum took decisive action and seized the reins of government at once, mobilizing her newly acquired forces and even establishing a female army. Associated with the notorious villain of 1857, Nana Sahib, nautch girls were particularly vilified for their purported involvement in the execution of British women and children at the Bibighar in Cawnpore. Although Nana Sahib was supposedly aided and advised by numerous courtesans, the most well-known in the British imagination were Azizun, Adala and Hussaini Khanum. Writing in the early 1860s, Robert Montgomery Martin describes the sheer inhumanity of the slaughter at Cawnpore, which according to him occurred under the direction of dancing girls: "Adla, [sic] a professed courtesan, who exercised great influence over the Nana, and ... [Hussaini Khanum]—found five men (two of whom were butchers and two villagers); these wretches being armed with swords, entered the prison, hacked and hewed down their wretched victims for many hours" (51-2). In Martin's description, the nautch girls are demonized for their ruthless, inhumane murder of innocent, helpless Englishwomen.

Although it becomes difficult to decipher the line between reality and fabrication in these accounts, to fully and precisely know in what form and to what extent these women participated in the mutiny, we can nevertheless presume that tawaifs had enough financial, political, and social influence to actively assist in the subaltern insurgency of 1857. Subaltern historiographers like Lata Singh and Veena Talwar Oldenburg who have done work on the history of tawaifs likewise confirm this involvement. For example, Lata Singh, in her study of the courtesan, explores the numerous ways in which Azizun offered her support to the mutineers. The

tawaif, she claims, even “formed a group of women who went around fearlessly cheering the men in arms” (6), building soldier morale and fostering patriotism among the masses. Oldenburg, who has studied the financial records kept by the tawaifs, further verifies their participation in the affairs of 1857. Specifically, these affluent women, she argues, were penalized for their “pecuniary assistance to the rebels” (“Lifestyle” 27), and their “names were also on lists of property confiscated by British officials for their proven involvement in the siege of Lucknow and the rebellion against British rule in 1857” (27).

Therefore, despite the inherent exaggerations and distortions plaguing colonial representations, mutiny records collectively exposed the real threat these women posed to both colonial rule and the ideologies that sustained that rule throughout the nineteenth century. In fact, the figure of the native female rebel provided impetus for fiction writers of the *fin de siècle* (such as Flora Annie Steel and Rudyard Kipling) to stage an ongoing anxiety about the tenuous nature of imperial rule in the post-1857 era. In *On the Face of the Waters*, for example, Steel traces the cause of the rebellion to a “taunt from a pair of painted lips” (191), to the meaningless words of a bazaar courtesan who spurs the mutineers to action by undermining their masculinity. “We of the bazaar,” the women on the rooftop claim, “kiss no cowards!” (190). The tawaif featured in Kipling’s short story “On the City Wall” likewise resembles those appearing in the accounts of 1857. Like her historic counterparts, Lalun is unrelenting in her commitment to anti-colonial activities and a key figure in instilling a nationalist and rebellious spirit among the natives. As Indira Sen notes, in this story “the resonances of the Revolt [of 1857] are kept alive through a constant harking back to the event” (182). Lalun’s kotha, for instance, resembles

that of Azizun and Hussaini Khanum: it is a convenient place for an eclectic group of men, including Shiahhs, Sufis, Hindu priests, Pundits, Sikhs, Mullahs, and M.A.'s of the university (76), to gather and converse. "In the long hot nights of latter April and May," the narrator reports, "all the city seemed to assemble in Lalun's little white room to smoke and to talk" (75). Kipling makes the political character of this discussion clear: they get together as the men do at "Freemason's Lodge" (76), and "they talk like the Athenians—always hearing and telling some new thing" (76).⁵⁹ In addition to unifying a diverse range of Indians in her kotha, Lalun participates directly in anticolonial activities when she dupes the British narrator and imperialist into taking the Sikh mutineer Khem Singh, imprisoned for his involvement in 1857, and now disguised as a helpless old man, to safety outside the city during a Muslim-Hindu riot. Before they leave, she (like the tawaifs of Lucknow studied by Oldenburg) also slyly slips the rebel money to fund his revolt. She thus tricks the narrator—who has "become[s] Lalun's Vizier after all" (94)—into inadvertently supporting rather than thwarting Indian nationalism. She exploits the "white face" of the narrator as "even a better safeguard" in carrying out her plans than a native one (93).

Like Kipling, in her characterization of Chandni, Steel appropriates the image of the female rebel circulating in the nineteenth-century British imaginary. However, what distinguishes her work from Kipling's is that, first, Chandni's plot to overthrow the British government now involves a Memsahib, Gwen Boynton, and, second, her battle for supremacy transpires not in the Indian city but at the root of the civilizing

⁵⁹ The dual value of the kotha as a site for entertainment and for male camaraderie surfaces also in Phillip Meadow Taylor's famous mutiny novel, *Seeta*, when the native commander Goor Bux suggests, "I will ask the Nawab to have a nautch, where we can discuss these matters more comfortably than in this dark hole, and see each other's faces" (94).

project itself: the colonial home. Indeed, Chandni's multiple encounters, direct and indirect, with Gwen transpire most often in the domestic sphere, thereby suggesting that, when faced with the nautch girl, British women are no more able to protect the sanctity of the Anglo-Indian home in the *fin de siècle* than they were in 1857. If it is the British woman's "burden" in the post-mutiny years to protect the domestic arena from native invasion, then it is the nautch girl's to continue to undermine her efforts.

Because Chandni "know[s ...] the ways and thoughts of these white people" (173), she "work[s] by fear of exposure" (157-8). She lives to see "the shame which comes to the *sahib-logues* when their pretence of honesty is found out the shame of being untrue to salt" (273). Chandni provokes this shame by gaining access to the most private and scandalous details about the lives of the ruling race, and especially the life of her nemesis, Gwen Boynton. On the surface, Gwen is the ideal Victorian woman transplanted to the colonies; she is "perfectly lady-like" (18). In fact, we are told there never was "a more utterly desirable woman to present as your wife for the world's approval" (143). Chandni, however, sees through the woman's facade of perfection, instead indentifying her as a "regular bad one" (122)—by which Chandni means materialistic, deceptive and self-centred. She is not too far from the truth: recently widowed, and drowning in debts, Gwen is willing to go to any lengths possible to secure a financially stable future for herself—including being secretly engaged to all four male characters in the novel who are completely clueless and eager to fulfil Gwen's every wish.⁶⁰ It is with an awareness of Gwen's destructive self-interests that Chandni involves her in a convoluted plot to open the sluice gates.

⁶⁰ Gwen's love for material objects inscribes her as the stereotypical Memsahib, the frivolous consumer whose sole contribution to imperialism derives from her selfish enjoyment of its material resources. For more on the Memsahib as consumer, see Rosemary Marangoly George, *Burning Down the House*, 52.

She hides three huge pearls, and an emerald, in an Ayodha pot (a trademark of Hodinuggur made by the local potter) that has been gifted to Gwen by one of her many admirers, George Keene. As Chandni anticipates, upon discovering the priceless pearls, Gwen keeps their existence a secret from the rest of the Anglo-Indians and devises a plan to pawn them for a hefty fortune. Gwen secures 6,000 rupees for the jewels without knowing that her nemesis Chandni, with the help of her many spies, has been carefully watching and recording her transaction.

A pivotal moment in the novel occurs when Chandni comes face-to-face with Gwen in her bedchamber. Chandni threatens to expose Gwen's betrayal, theft and secrecy unless she provides her with a forged key that opens the sluice gates. During this confrontation, the Memsahib tries to put up a fight against Chandni, but to no avail. Speaking, as she would to a servant, in the limited Hindustani she knows, she commands Chandni to leave. Yet, her tone merely "evoke[s] one of Chandni's shrill, mocking laughs" (362) and strengthens her resolve. Chandni vehemently reminds Gwen that the Memsahib cannot win in this rivalry:

the *mem sahib* forgets. She is not, as I am, a daughter of the bazaars, and if it comes to words, Chandni has two to her one. So I come quietly to ask reasonably for my rights; not to dispute after the manner of my kind. There is no need to tell the *mem sahib* the story. She remembers it perfectly. She knows it as well as I. But this she does not know; the pearls are mine, and I will have them back, or their price, in revenge. (362).

Considering the pearls are compared to the legendary Koh-i-noor (210), Chandni's adamant request to have them back (even though she already does) is articulated as a negotiation for her "rights," analogously India's right to repossess their material

resources, especially their most sacred and precious heirlooms. The battle turns physical when, out of fear, Gwen steps back in an attempt to escape Chandni, but to no avail. The courtesan's "hand close[s] like a vice on [Gwen's] wrist" (363). Gwen "struggl[es], madly, [giving] one scream after another for help, and breaking from her persecutor's hand, turn[s] to fly" (363). This confrontation between the two women stages an allegorical fight between England and India itself. According to Thomas Metcalf, the Anglo-Indian home often takes on the analogy of "the front line of a battlefield whose commanding officer [is] its British mistress" (Metcalf 179). Chandni, in this respect, attempts to usurp the rule of the commanding officer, Gwen, in order to regain control of her native land. Correspondingly, in this battle, the Memsahib does not emerge as an "active, assertive and assured [defender] of the empire" (132), but instead as a coward who is easily defeated.⁶¹ In order to deter a scandal, and salvage her reputation, Gwen succumbs to Chandni's demands, becoming her accomplice, committing one anti-colonial act after another that, if discovered, would bring her irrevocable public shame.

Chandni's invasion of Gwen's room in Simla is one of many times she sneaks into Anglo-Indian homes. Throughout the narrative, she persistently and skilfully enters British grounds, bungalows, tents, and mansions without detection by her colonial rulers. In her invisibility, Chandni is equated with the shadows of India. When she is first introduced, she emerges from "the deep recesses" (5) of the city like a "shadow" (5). She is also constantly lurking in the "shadowy recesses" (61) of the bazaar, "loung[ing] about in the shadows" (210) as she waits for an opportune time to invade. Likewise, when she seeks entry into Gwen's room at Hodinuggur, she

⁶¹ The New Woman character of Steel's novel, Rose Tweedie, puts up a stronger fight against Chandni (as I discuss in Chapter 3), but even she ultimately loses in this battle for supremacy.

“flit[s] silently as the shadows to the summer-house” (144). Like a sly mutineer, her domestic invasions occur most readily at late hours of the “dark night” (223) when she blends well with her dim surroundings. According to Dan Fitzgerald, the name Chandni itself conjures the image of a “Chandni-rat” or “Moonlit night” (5), and “If tales be true, there is a good deal of night about her” (5)—both in her profession as an entertainer and her spirit as a female rebel. She camouflages her appearance and identity all the more by wearing a “decent white domino” (78), a burqa, which “of all disguises [is] the most complete, since it blots out form, color, expression; even movement” (145). It allows her to move without discovery between native and British areas, between private and public realms. For example, when she visits George at his bungalow, he is “startled by the sudden appearance of a veiled female from a shadowy corner of his verandah” (102). Later, in Simla, she again easily enters Colonel Tweedie’s summer home in her disguise as a “white-robed figure” and stands “in the shadow of the curtain” (348), awaiting Gwen’s arrival.

Significantly, Chandni’s formless presence and unseen nightly invasions undermine the rigid system of surveillance that the British implemented in the post-mutiny era. British systems of espionage in the late-nineteenth century, for example, sought full “transparency of native society” (G. Chakravarty 157). Responding to these intelligence missions, mutiny fictions of the *fin de siècle* constructed a “romance of surveillance” (159) whereby British spy-heroes, often in native disguise, penetrated colonial underworlds to police rebellious activities. These heroes moved easily between British and native worlds, accumulating knowledge of and gaining control over the colonized natives. In *The Potter’s Thumb*, however, by successfully evading the colonial gaze, Chandni defies the British desire for panoptic knowledge. Even her

frequent use of the burqa to hide her true identity draws subversively from mutiny narratives, such as *On the Face of the Waters*, in which Kate Erlton disguises herself as a zenana woman to escape notice from the native rebels. Moreover, Chandni's power does not derive from her corporeality as it does, for example, for Amena in Sherwood's *The History of George Desmond*. As the spectator, not the body-on-spectacle, Chandni in fact subverts the typical representation of the nautch girl as a readily-visible public woman, as a performing body on open display. As Piya Pal-Lapinski argues, the Indian courtesan was "marked by her visible, public body (as distinct from the invisible private body of the harem inmate)" (69). By oscillating between private and public spheres, between the identity of a nautch girl and a zenana woman, Chandni, however, complicates this spatial dichotomy. In fact, she avoids being visually discovered, contained and categorized by the colonizers.

By slipping past the British gaze as she penetrates British enclaves, Chandni also subverts the standard British spy-hero narrative. In Steel's novel, a native woman, not the male imperialist, emerges as the sly, skilful voyeur who invades the most private of British places (the home) to retrieve knowledge and to gain mastery. In this respect, she resembles Lalun from Kipling's "On the City Wall" who "knows everything" (76), from the daily gossip of the city to the "secrets of Government offices" (77). When asked, "when does 175th regiment go to Agra," Lalun is quick to retort that it "does not!"—it is the 118th that goes instead (76). Likewise, Chandni sees all that goes on behind Anglo-Indian walls. Not only does her kotha "overlook[...] the red-hot red-brick house," but she can also "[watch the Anglo-Indians] from an archway in the bazaar" (90). Chandni's panoptic gaze, in fact, captures the lack of privacy marking colonial homes which, according to Mary

Procida, were “open to public view in even [their] most ‘private’ recesses” (64). In this respect, the nautch girl’s eyes are one of her greatest weapon against the British empire, and fittingly the only *visible* organs under her native disguise: the burqa. Gwen experiences the piercing and lingering power of this gaze when she wakes up startled one night: “it was the disturbing effect which the dim consciousness of other eyes fixed on their own has upon most people, which roused Gwen Boynton; ... she opened her eyes suddenly ... , her heart throbbing violently, though ... not a sound was to be heard” (108). Again and again, in her visual obscurity and her all-seeing gaze, Chandni is thus a potent threat to British rule because she cannot be located nor contained.

It is this visual obscurity and all-seeing gaze that in turn allows her to successfully damage Anglo-Indian homes, specifically to set the British tents on fire during one of her many nightly invasions. Considering the bungalow in Hodinuggur is impractical in its size, unable to accommodate Colonel Tweedie and his troop when they arrive from Rajpore, George Keene directs the natives to set up tents, a common means of accommodation for travelling parties in India (Morris and Winchester 11).⁶² “Rising like magic from the bare sand” (Steel, *Potter’s Thumb* 70), these tents initially hold the promise of finally cultivating a “home” in the dreadful atmosphere of Hodinuggur. In fact, the party is pleasantly surprised by the unconventional tranquillity offered by these tents, as Dan Fitzgerald aptly suggests:

Odd; for one naturally associates a camp with wars and tumults, battles, murders, and sudden death; all the evils of a transitory world, in fact. But you

⁶² Margaret MacMillan suggests that camping was common yet dangerous, especially considering tents were “vulnerable to the skilled Indian thieves, who crept in naked and glistening with oil so that even if the inhabitants woke up it was almost impossible to catch them” (78).

must have noticed, Mrs. Boynton, the extraordinary air of peace, serenity, almost of permanence which tents have in the moonlight. Look! Might they not be solid blocks of marble fastened by silver cords? (72).

This air of “peace,” “serenity,” and “permanence,” however, is short-lived due to the presence of the mutinous courtesan. As she walks by the “sleeping camp” (75), Chandni “paus[es]”(75) to reflect on the awe-inspiring effect of the tents, specifically the “*undeserved* serenity and peace” [my emphasis added] embodied by “the double row of gleaming white roofs” (75). In an act of rebellion against this “undeserved peace and security,” Chandni sets fire to the tents and exposes their illusion of permanence. Like her own domestic invasions, the fire makes “not a sound, not a sign” (77), “not a roar, not a crackle” (77). Although the inhabitants survive, the fire “split[s] the taut canvas into long shreds” (77) and leaves the tents “severely damaged” (78). Once the epitome of order and peace in Hodinuggur, the camp now lies “in hopeless chaos,” in a “mass of ropes and canvas lying without beginning or end” (78).

In her vengeance against British colonialism in Hodinuggur, Chandni thus dismantles the very symbols of British colonialism. In their architectural designs, the British strove for endurance, for buildings that proudly displayed the work of civilization by “[standing] as a testament to the continuity and cohesiveness of the empire” (Procida 63). Likewise, the tents required careful planning through the use of tools, such as a “measuring tape” to “[map] the ground into squares” (70), and upon completion represented a significant achievement in Hodinuggur. It is this imperial achievement that Chandni seeks to attack and manages to destroy.

In addition to invading and dismantling British homes, Chandni rebels against British rule in Hodinuggur by securing the participation and loyalty of the native servants. In fact, she manipulates the domestic staff into becoming her spies and accomplices, leaving the Anglo-Indian home vulnerable to further invasion and rebellion. Living in a foreign climate, under foreign customs and practices, Anglo-Indians indeed were fairly dependent on native servants to execute daily tasks, from cooking and cleaning, to gardening and childcare. Thus, one of the central imperial responsibilities of the Anglo-Indian housewife was the management of her native household servants, the Indians with whom she interacted regularly. It is not surprising, in this case, “that numerous household guides,” as Metcalf suggests, “warned the Anglo-Indian housewife that she must ever be on the alert, and must exercise a careful surveillance over the habits and customs of her staff” (179). In *The Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, for example, Steel and Gardiner represented this “careful surveillance” as “an inspection parade” that “beg[an] immediately after breakfast, or as near ten o’clock as circumstances will allow” (qtd. in George 58). Like Steel and Gardiner, R. Ridell in *Indian Domestic Economy* (1860) devoted much time to discussing the management of servants, their proper treatment, punishment, wages, and liveries (Chaudhuri 558). According to Nupur Chauduri, collectively such textual representations (ranging from letters and travelogues, to housekeeping guides) contributed to and confirmed the role of the emerging female imperialist of the *fin de siècle*: “by writing about their Indian servants, memsahibs identified themselves as active participants in Britian’s imperial venture in India” (549). More specifically they achieved an authoritative self in India by drawing an analogy between their rule over their domestic help and the male colonizer’s rule over colonized people (Chauduri

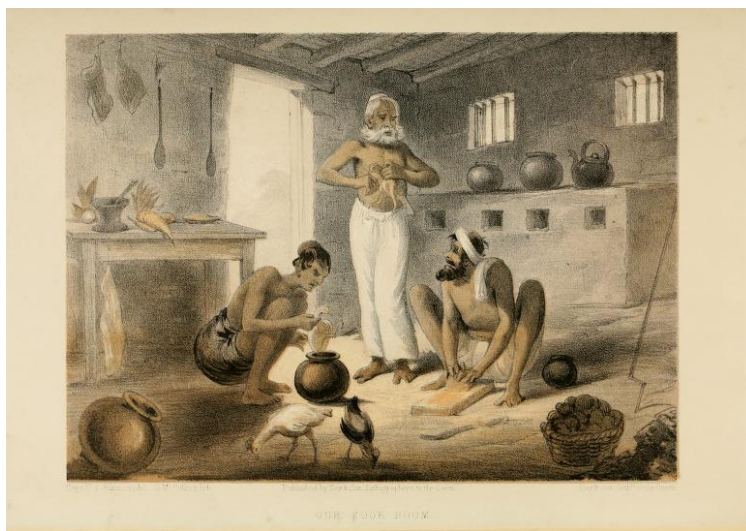
550; Procida 87). Earning the loyalty of the domestic help and nurturing a healthy, hierarchical relationship with them, in this context, was imperative to running the Anglo-Indian household and, subsequently, to the survival of the ruling race in India.

While their obedience meant that the imperial housewife was successful in civilizing her servants, any misdemeanours conversely suggested an insubordination that “had public as well as private import” (Procida 88). For this reason, British women’s relationships with their servants “were a complex mixture of intimacy and trust counterbalanced by feelings of fear and suspicion” (98). Many Anglo-Indian women, for example, revealed that it was difficult to keep a watch over servants all the time, and that they reverted back to their uncivilized ways when the Memsahib was not there to supervise (96). The anxiety over disobedient servants surfaces more strongly in fictions of the *fin de siècle* than in nonfictional writing. It is in fiction that Anglo-Indian female writers subtly express doubts about the Memsahib’s ability to govern the colony (the Anglo-Indian home) and its subjects (the native servants).⁶³ In these narratives, the rebellious nautch girl, who seeks to usurp the British woman’s rule, is readily the instigator of this domestic disorder. Correspondingly, in *The Potter’s Thumb*, the courtesan Chandni repeatedly provokes the disloyalty of various servants (those from her own hometown in Hodinuggur as well as from the more colonized areas of Rajpore and Simla) who help her wreak havoc on the British community in India. Whether out of genuine loyalty, a bribe, or fear, the servants assist Chandni by lying to, stealing from and spying on their British rulers, creating a

⁶³ The heartless betrayal of servants is narrated, for example, in James Grant’s *First Love*, in which “the ‘kitmutgar’ who tricks the unsuspecting Polly into accompanying him to the palace ... is ‘one who had been her father’s most trusted and faithful since they had landed in India’” (qtd. in Sen 101)

household populated by untrustworthy natives in league with the Indian female rebel rather than the imperial mistress.

In featuring disloyal domestic servants who are in alliance with the Indian courtesan, Steel's novel borrows from earlier writings that shared a similar concern, particularly Mary Martha Sherwood's *The History of George Desmond*. The nautch girl Amena's accomplice and lover in this novel is a cook by the name of Shamshoon, who is conveniently a servant in George's home. Not only does he pollute George's body by feeding him Indian food, but he also aids in poisoning Emily, George's wife. Reacting to such fears, Anglo-Indians went out of their way to procure a trustworthy cook. After all, culinary hygiene was a prerequisite to the maintenance of racial and cultural purity in India (Procida 95). The British were constantly anxious of consuming harmful, foreign ingredients due to the cook's neglect in handling their food and drinks. Many guidebooks told horror stories about the unsanitary methods used by the kitchen staff in the preparation of meals: they used their socks as strainers, their armpits to shape fish patties, their toes to hold rissoles, and their chest to knead dough (Macmillan 163). In Sherwood's novel, Amena wreaks havoc on



the Anglo-Indian home not only by securing the loyalty and allegiance of Shamshoon, but also of the ayah, who is “a near relation of

Fig. 32: Atkinson, George. “Our Cook Room.” Lithograph from *Curry and Rice*. 1859.

Internet Archive. University of Toronto, 2009. Web. 12 Aug 2009.

Amena's, and had been brought up with her in the same line of life" (265).⁶⁴ The ayah was a key servant in an imperial family; she served as a personal maid to women of the house and often even nursed their children. However, rather than protecting and caring for her mistress, the ayah of Sherwood's novel, under the nautch girl Amena's direction, and along with Shamsun, helps poison the Memsahib Emily to eliminate the threat of the English housewife. Predating Steel's novel, *The History of George Desmond* thus represents the threat of unruly servants who ally with the nautch girl and contribute to the contamination and disruption of domesticity in India.

Steel is writing about fifty years after Sherwood; yet, in her novel and many others written at the *fin de siècle*, the nautch girl's influence over the domestic servants still reigns strong and jeopardizes the security and functioning of the Anglo-Indian home. More specifically, Chandni manipulates the servants into participating in her anti-colonial schemes, particularly in gaining, skewing or suppressing information as she deems necessary. Of all the natives in India, the servants are the most knowledgeable about what transpires within the walls of the Anglo-Indian residence, including the comings and goings of its owners and its visitors—even uninvited intruders such as Chandni. Hence, in order to guarantee the success of her multiple domestic invasions, the courtesan's first and primary task is to win (or buy) the servants' silence, which she does from the onset of the novel. When Gwen asks George for the Ayodha pot, Chandni sees an opportunity to profit from the Memsahib's greed. She disguises herself as Azizun's mother (the real owner of the pot) and visits George at his bungalow, receiving money for an item that does not

⁶⁴Considering her own Ayah used to be a nautch girl, Sherwood blurs the line between these female servants and the courtesan, as in *Ayah and Lady: An Indian Story*, where the mistress of the house returns home one evening to catch her ayah dancing.

even belong to her. To keep the servants quiet, she cunningly “brib[es] the *chota sahib*’s servants with his own rupees” (75). She “speak[s] to the factotum”⁶⁵ (75) before she leaves and, dropping “fifteen chinks” into his hand (75), informs him, “You have seen nothing, you are to say nothing” (75).

In addition to buying their silence, Chandni is able to procure knowledge from the servants who hear and see the most private of British affairs. Steel is responding, here, to the recognition that “privacy could not exist in the imperial home” (Procida 66) since servants roamed through every hall, into every room, with open eyes and ears. The Punkawala, for example, often sat just outside each room as he pulled the strings of the ceiling fan (66). Other servants often entered rooms unannounced; according to Procida, “the servants’ dark skin and habit of not wearing shoes allowed them to glide silently in and out of the shadows while attending to their employers’ needs” (67). Even the most private quarters of the house were constantly invaded. One woman characterized her sleeping chamber as “a section of a street with a bed in it,” awakened each morning to find “a couple of bearers bringing in lamps and a curious-looking *bheestie*, or water-carrier, filling my bath from a black buffalo skin; another man bringing hot water, a fourth with *chota hazeri*, or small breakfast of tea and fruit” (qtd. in Procida 66). Therefore, privacy was not possible even during the most personal situations, such as a bath which required assistance from multiple servants who heated the water, poured it in the tub, and then emptied it once the bath was complete (66). The uncontainable presence of the domestic staff in the Anglo-Indian home left government and family secrets susceptible to public exposure, making the British anxious that the “most intimate

⁶⁵ a servant with diverse responsibilities.

details of one's life would be bruited about the native bazaar via the servant grapevine" (67).

Chandni takes full advantage of the servants' extensive knowledge of all that transpires in the sanctity of the Anglo-Indian home. Dan Fitzgerald even catches her "gossiping" (Steel, *Potter's Thumb* 332) to his gardeners, trying to squeeze out whatever information about the British inhabitants that she can. Through the help of the *khitmutgar*,⁶⁶ for example, she learns when Gwen first discovers the jewels (110). Chandni even retains contact with Gwen's ayah who, like the ayah in *George Desmond*, cannot be trusted. Rather than performing her duties, she looks for opportune times to secretly smoke her hookah, and she holds onto the memsahib's letters in case she has to bribe her into forgiving her transgressions (108). Not only does she fail to keep guard of the Memsahib's chambers as she sleeps, but she also converses with Chandni on various occasions. Chandni is pleased, for instance, that "the *mem's ayah* had let out that the big *Huẖoor* Fitzgerald *sahib* was the greatest friend the *mem* had...And the big *sahib* was going to Delhi, the most likely place in which jewels would be sold" (122). By allowing this secret information to leak out, the ayah helps Chandni track Gwen's every move, and plot ahead to ultimately blackmail the British woman into submission.

Of all the disloyal servants, the ayah's betrayal would have been the most anxiety-provoking. Indeed, considering she was the only Indian female in the Anglo-Indian household, the ayah was often the only servant Memsahibs befriended. Ideally, she became "the wife's 'staunch ally' in her daily struggle to regulate her

⁶⁶ the servant who often waited at tables and performed household chores

household along imperial lines” (Procida 100).⁶⁷ In Fanny Emily Farr Penny’s novel, *The Romance of a Nautch Girl*, Beryl Hordsworth’s ayah, unlike Gwen’s, even sides with her mistress when the enraged devadasi, Minachee, “force[s] her way into the house” in order to confront “her rival” (265). Yet, even when ayahs are loyal, as in Penny’s novel, they cannot curtail the destructive energies of the nautch girl who uses another weapon besides bribery—that is, fear—to manipulate the domestic staff. Likewise, Beryl’s “loyal ayah” (265) retreats from Minachee because she “fear[s] to bring ill-luck upon herself and her family” (265), since a “dasi [devadasi] of the temple” was presumed to have “supernatural powers” (265).

In *The Potter’s Thumb*, a similar fear is expressed by the servants employed by the Prince of Hodinuggur, Dalel Beg’s, new Eurasian wife when they are asked to make Chandni, an intruder, leave the Simla premises. Instead, they try to pacify her advances through carefully-chosen, respectful words: “Come, come, Mother Chandni. .. This is no place for thee now. These are *mems*” (258). Clearly, like Minachee, Chandni uses her reputation to her advantage, knowing that the servants are aware of her frightening power. She warns Dalel’s wife, “Lo! Ask thy servants who Chandni the courtesan is, and what she has been—aye, and will be, if she chooses!” (258). Thus, when Dalel’s new wife desperately yells for the aid of her servants, no one is willing to “touch Chandni the courtesan” (260) and “turn her out!” (260). Likewise, when Chandni enters uninvited into Gwen’s bedroom in Simla,

⁶⁷The author of *Indian Outfits*, for example, reports that her devoted ayah “was most tender and careful in sickness, nursing me through several severe illnesses; never took the value of a pin’s head from me, and would, were I to return to India tomorrow, come back to me, if she were alive and serve me as faithfully” (qtd. in Macmillan 173).

the Memsahib tries to “leave the mad woman to the servants” (272), but no one comes to her rescue.

Chandni’s power over servants extends to those who labour in the bazaar, making it difficult for the Memsahib to do anything without the nautch girl’s knowledge or manipulation. In fact, “Chandni’s spies” (123) are everywhere. When she finds out that Gwen has asked Dan to take the jewels to a Delhi jeweller by the name of Moti Lal, for example, Chandni knows how to track his actions. For Chandni, this information is not “hard to discover—just a word to the general merchant who sold everything the heart could desire in the shop below the balcony” (331).

Because she is able to invade, destroy, and take charge of British domestic spheres, Chandni eventually wins the battle for control over Hodinuggur, a battle that involves her triumphing over her female rival: Gwen Boynton. The narrative closes with the British giving into Chandni’s intimidation and manipulation, and retreating from the irrigation plan. As a female freedom-fighter for India, she successfully wins the natives back their rights: the right to their natural resources (water) and the right to their material resources (the Hodinuggur jewels). In terms of personal achievement, she secures political, financial and social power of her own, serving as adviser to the new ruler of Hodinuggur.⁶⁸

The Nautch Girl Wins:

Rethinking Steel’s Imperial Feminism

Flora Annie Steel’s representation of the rebellious and independent tawaif in *The Potter’s Thumb* necessitates a re-evaluation of her alleged collusion with imperial

⁶⁸ I revisit the conclusion of Steel’s novel, and specifically Chandni’s many gains, in Chapter 3, where I also address the significance of another female character, the New Woman Rose Tweedie.

feminist politics. Drawing from the burgeoning scholarship on British women and the empire, many scholars (such as Jenny Sharpe, Nancy Paxton, Rosemary Mangaly George, Indira Sen, Hugh B. Urban and LeeAnne Richardson) have defined Steel as an imperial feminist who, both in her personal life as well as her writings, remained faithful to the colonial cause by justifying imperial attitudes. In his work on colonial representations of Indian sexuality, Hugh B. Urban argues, for example, that Steel “held fast to the belief in the moral superiority of the British and the need to rule this potentially dangerous people with a firm hand” (114). Likewise, Nancy Paxton suggests that, as wife to a senior British administrator, she took “evident pleasure in exercising what she regarded as her legitimate authority as memsahib” (“Complicity and Resistance” 163). As Indira Sen notes, in both her domestic and public work, she epitomized “the self-assertive imperious/imperialist memsahib who brooks no nonsense from ‘natives’ of all classes” (135). Similarly, according to Rosemary Mangaly George, female writers like Steel complied with imperialism through the assertive tone of their guidebooks and the racial superiority of their fictional characters. Thus, these scholars agree that, having vested interest in imperial politics and hierarchies, Steel actively promoted “the white woman’s burden” in India, both in her public activities and her writing.

In embracing the “white *woman’s* burden,” Steel was not only driven by her race but also her gender. In fact, according to Nancy Paxton’s study of the novelist, Steel interpreted many of her activities in India “as evidence of her feminism” (“Complicity and Resistance” 159). This self-identification as a feminist surfaces, for example, in her autobiography, *Garden of Fidelity* (1930), in which she classifies herself as a suffragist and an ardent supporter of the fight for women’s rights. Hugh B.

Urban also characterizes Steel as a New Woman in India, especially considering the state in which she accompanied her husband on various imperial jobs: “remarkably bold, she enjoyed camp life in India and found great satisfaction in riding with her husband; she cut her hair short and wore knickerbockers” (114). More importantly, scholars who classify Steel as an imperial feminist point to her colonial work with Indian women. Like many of her contemporaries, Steel participated in the “white woman’s burden” to improve the alleged plight of Indian women, who she vowed to know intimately and who, she claims, could benefit from the support of their more fortunate English counterparts. For example, as a nurse, Steel felt it was her duty to oversee the adequate delivery of medicine to Indian women in isolated rural areas and, as a teacher, to promote the education of her illiterate Indian “sisters.” In addition to establishing girls’ schools in Kasur, she served briefly as the inspector of a girls’ public school in Lahore.⁶⁹ She also fought against female infanticide and established an orphanage for Indian girls, called “Victorian female Orphan Asylum,” and served as its Vice President. As Indira Sen notes, considering her concern for the troubles of supposedly enslaved Indian women, Steel was “unconventional for a ‘burra memsahib’⁷⁰ of her social position” (133).

In my own (re)reading of Steel and her fiction, I do not deny her compliance with imperialism and her self-serving adherence to imperial feminist rhetoric—a rhetoric that, after all, situated the white woman higher up on the scale of female emancipation than Indian women. Where I do differ from the above scholars, however, is in my desire to expose those moments in which this generalized claim

⁶⁹ Much to the disapproval of the Indian Civil Service, she had to live apart from her husband, who was transferred to another post, for a year to complete the term as inspector.

⁷⁰ See note 1 for the definition of “burra” Memsahib.

falls apart, those moments when Steel (like many *fin-de-siècle* female writers) expressed a doubt about her inherent racial superiority. This doubt surfaces most strongly in her fictions, especially those that feature the British woman's encounter with the home-wrecking nautch girl. As one of her lesser-known novels, *The Potter's Thumb* thus prompts a reassessment of Steel's imperial politics, especially considering it has been overshadowed by scholarly interest in her more popular novel, *On the Face of the Waters*, as I will detail briefly here.

Although Steel was a prolific writer, *On the Face of the Waters* has received a disproportionate amount of attention and been recognized by scholars such as Jenny Sharpe as "the most popular mutiny novel of them all" (87). Set in Delhi during the turmoil of the revolt, the novel features the recently widowed Memsahib Kate Erlton and the spy Sahib James (Jim) Douglas. Brought together by the tumultuous circumstances of the rebellion, the two of them assume native disguises and live together on an Indian rooftop for much of the narrative, during which time Kate gradually develops into an ideal Memsahib who demonstrates endurance, self-confidence and independence. Kate significantly shares the rooftop with two Indian women, the courtesan Zora and the zenana woman Tara, both of whom willingly serve Jim (their saviour) after he supposedly rescued them respectively from the Indian institution of prostitution and the Indian custom of sati. The typical reading of the novel magnifies Kate's heroism in contrast to the plight of these Indian women and stresses her suitability as a partner to the male imperialist. Alison Sainsbury, for example, reads the romance alongside the standard Anglo-Indian novel in which an interracial relationship is introduced only to end in the demise of the Indian woman and her replacement by the natural, more favourable

Englishwoman. According to Jyotsna Singh This is true of most novels set in 1857: “the plots of the mutiny novels call for the deaths of the native women, however virtuous or desirable, so that suitable British women may replace them” (114). These novels end by restoring faith in the benefits of a white nuclear family by “erasing the Indian from the text” (Sen 84).

Recognizing this moment of erasure as integral to Kate’s self-development, Jenny Sharpe appropriates and transfers Gayatri Spivak’s postcolonial feminist critique (in her seminal article, “Three Women’s Texts and a Critique of Imperialism”) of Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre* to Flora Annie Steel’s *On the Face of the Waters*.⁷¹ Just as Jane Eyre’s empowerment necessitates both the presence and the removal of Bertha Mason from the novel, Kate’s agency is measured against the relative passivity of Indian women who are eventually expunged from the narrative. (Suffering from an untreatable disease, Zora dies from the gradual deterioration of her health, while Tara commits suicide, jumping off of the ledge of the rooftop.) Moreover, in both works, Sharpe argues, “true love is the just reward for female courage, self-awareness and independence” (103). More importantly, by “demonstrating that Englishwomen [in contrast to Indian women] need neither protection nor saving” (101), Steel’s novel promotes and celebrates the English heroine’s development into a New Woman at the expense of the Indian female characters.

Jenny Sharpe thus reads *On the Face of the Waters* and, by extension, interprets Steel’s agenda through Spivak’s postcolonial, feminist critique of nineteenth-century fiction. Using a similar methodology, LeeAnn Richardson, Jennifer L. Otuski and

⁷¹ For example, Sharpe compares Bertha Mason’s suicide in *Jane Eyre* to Tara’s in *On the Face of the Waters*.

Revathi Krishnaswamy situate their analysis within burgeoning imperial feminist scholarship and, like Sharpe, stress Steel's use of passive, victimized Indian female characters as a deliberate foil to the relatively emancipated Englishwoman. Whether through recycling Gayatri Spivak's reading of *Jane Eyre* or Antoinette Burton's understanding of British-Indian female relations at the turn of the century, the majority of Steel's critics use imperial feminism as the dominant lens by which to interpret her representation of native women. Not only are these scholars devoted to an imperial feminist understanding of colonizer-colonized female encounters in their reading of *On the Face of the Waters*, but they also position this novel as representative of Steel's politics without an examination of her lesser-known and -studied fiction. By overlooking Steel's characterization of strong, independent Indian women, scholars inadvertently pose the danger of cementing the very stereotypes they are attempting to dismantle.⁷² Through omission, they imply that British women were always certain of their superiority over their Eastern sisters and never faced moments of self-interrogation.

Piya Pal-Lapinski shares my concern with the reductive approach to Steel's fiction in current scholarship: "Recent analysis of Steel's work has mostly centred around *On the Face of the Waters*. While commentators such as Jenny Sharpe and Benita Parry have acknowledged the contradictory attitudes toward imperialism in her writing, Steel's Indian women tend to be read as passive racial stereotypes" (66). However, an analysis of Steel's Indian dancing girls—featured diversely in *The Potter's Thumb* (1894), *Tales of the Punjab* (1894), *Flowers of Forgiveness* (1894), *In the Permanent Way* (1897), *Voices in the Night* (1900), *The Host of the Lord* (1900), *Guardianship of God*

⁷² In Chapter 2, I offer an alternative reading of the courtesan Zora's death as well as Kate's growth into a New Woman and colonial adventuress.

(1903), *A Sovereign Remedy* (1906) and *A Prince of Dreamers* (1908) illuminates an important alternative reading. Significantly, these courtesans deviate from the stereotype of the passive, oppressed Indian woman who is in need of British rescue. In *The Potter's Thumb*, for example, Chandni is a powerful female rebel who, when placed alongside the Memsahib Gwen Boynton, emerges as the stronger of the two female types and, subversively, projects the relative disempowerment of the English domestic woman.

By uncovering such examples of the ferocious nautch girl whose threat to colonial domesticity overpowers the Memsahib, I offer not only an alternative reading of the British-Indian female encounter to the one scholars substantiate through a reading of *On the Face of the Waters*, but also propose that even a revered Memsahib like Flora Annie Steel could experience doubts about her success as imperial housewife—doubts that are expressed (however subtly) in the space of her fiction. Indeed, writing in omniscient narration, Steel makes it (deliberately) difficult to locate where her sympathies lie.⁷³ This obscurity allows her to grapple with the insecurities and apprehensions often felt by the imperial housewife, insecurities and apprehensions that do not appear in her housekeeping guides which, considering their purpose and her audience, are written with a more assertive and authoritative tone. I have focused here exclusively on Steel because of the large scholarly interest her work has recently received, and because I will be analyzing more of her novels in the next chapter. However, the authors I have introduced thus far, and will explore

⁷³ Many scholars, like Rosemary Montgomery George, who comment on Steel's role as a Memsahib study her housekeeping guides alongside her fiction, without any consideration for genre distinctions. However, the guidebooks differ drastically in tone from the omnisciently-narrated novels; whereas the former is more assertive, Steel's voice and opinions are not as traceable in her fiction and open up space for her to (however secretly) grapple with her own doubts about the white woman's inherent racial and cultural superiority.

in subsequent chapters, express similar doubts about the purported superiority of white women in India. As I have traced above, Sherwood, Perrin and Cross (albeit in different ways and with varying intentions) all consider the nautch girl to be a threat to the Englishwoman's domestic power.

In the next chapter, I continue with an analysis of Steel's courtesans—particularly in the way that these comparatively liberated women intensified the white woman's growing dissatisfaction with a domestic identity. Steel herself endured an unhappy marriage and often felt that her feminist aspirations conflicted with her supposedly more important duties as an imperial housewife. Considering nautch girls were free from the conventional domestic duties of wifedom and motherhood, Steel, along with other writers like Alice Perrin, seems to communicate not only a fear but also a secret envy or admiration for these women. It is in their fictions, then, that Anglo-Indian women not only contemplate their failure to guard the domestic sphere against the intrusion of the nautch girl, but also contemplate the possibility of leaving their domestic lives altogether for the more enticing life of a courtesan in the bazaar—they contemplate the possibility of “going nautch girl.”

CHAPTER 2

“Going Nautch Girl” in the *Fin de Siècle*:The White Woman Burdened by Colonial Domesticity⁷⁴

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

⁷⁴ This Chapter is a revised version of an article appearing in *English Literature in Transition, 1880-1920* 52.3 (2009): 252-272.

In this chapter, I trace and explore Anglo-Indian fictions by *fin de siècle* women writers that engage with this very possibility, specifically the possibility of Memsahibs leaving their domestic lives for the more liberating lifestyle offered by the nautch girl in the bazaar. Thus, in addition to challenging the assumption that the adoption of nonwhite cultural practices and behaviors was inherently degenerate, I suggest that these assimilative tendencies were not exclusive to men; women were also susceptible to “going native.” In exploring this susceptibility, I reassess the term “burden” in the catchphrase “the white woman’s burden,” which is so readily used in imperial feminist scholarship to describe the various ways that British women participated in and were empowered by the civilizing mission in the empire.⁷⁵ As I detailed in the last chapter, one of the many burdens British women took on in the colonial context was to police racial and cultural boundaries through their ties to imperial homemaking. They were responsible for nurturing a colonial domesticity that would not only reproduce a microcosmic England in India but, more importantly, deter men from “going native.” In this chapter, I suggest that it is this very responsibility that weighs on them. Fed up with their iconic roles as “Angels in the House,” they seek a release from their domestic lives by succumbing to the very temptations that purportedly haunted their husbands. They feel burdened rather than empowered by their imperial responsibilities, burdened by their gender-specific obligations that restrict them to the domestic sphere at a time when more and more

⁷⁵ The phrase has gained particular popularity after the publication of Antoinette Burton’s seminal article, “The White Woman’s Burden: British Feminists and the Indian Woman, 1865-1915” in 1990, which was followed by her book, *Burdens of History: British Feminists, Indian Women, and Imperial Culture, 1865-1915*. Since then, a number of scholars have utilized the term in their studies on colonial women in the empire, such as in Kumari Jayawardena’s *The White Woman’s Other Burden: Western Women and South Asia during British Rule* (1995) and in Dea Birkett’s “The ‘White Woman’s Burden’ in the ‘White Man’s Grave’: The Introduction of British Nurses in Colonial West Africa” (1992). Like Burton, these scholars consider the encounter between Western and colonized women or people as one that substantiates the former’s racial superiority.

women were entering the public arena. Thus, I share Thomas Metcalf's observation that "the English woman, within the private sphere she presided over, bore the unenviable responsibility—what one may call the 'white woman's burden'—of both representing the virtues of domesticity and extending the authority of the Raj" (391). Seeking freedom from this "unenviable" burden to cultivate and guard English civilization in British India, English heroines in *fin de siècle* novels entertain the prospect of "going native," or more precisely of "going nautch girl"—of adopting the appearance, dress, food, activities, or living space of the relatively more emancipated Indian dancing girl or courtesan.

In my exploration of these fantasies of "going nautch girl," and their implications during the rise of imperial feminism at the turn of the century, I examine two works in particular: Flora Annie Steel's *Voices in the Night* (1900) and Alice Perrin's *The Woman in the Bazaar* (1914). In the first, Memsahibs experience the pull of the nautch girl (specifically, the strong-willed and rebellious Dilaram) in the bazaar and, although they resist her seductive call, their susceptibility reveals a deep-seated discontentment with their domestic lives. In Perrin's novel, written fourteen years after Steel's, the English heroine Rafella Forte experiences what Steel's female characters can only imagine. She escapes an unhappy domestic life and the demands of her overbearing husband by running off to the heart of the Indian city where she begins a new, more promising life as a tawaif. Written in the *fin de siècle*, both novels present British women who are dissatisfied with their domestic lifestyles and thereby

enticed by the thought of “going nautch girl”—of living in the bazaar, wearing the courtesan’s clothes, performing her dance, and sharing in her power.⁷⁶

The Call of the Bazaar:

Memsahibs Imagine “Going Nautch Girl” in Flora Annie Steel’s Fiction

As I suggested in the first chapter, Flora Annie Steel was (at least outwardly) an archetypal Memsahib who wrote extensively on housekeeping in India. Married in 1867 to a member of the Indian Civil Service, and having lived in India for twenty-two years, she was an imperial housewife who upheld the colonial bungalow as a site for female empowerment in the colonial context. Yet, in her devotion to domestic labour, Steel exemplifies the white woman’s paradoxical search for a position of authority in the manly work of empire and her accompanying confinement deeper and deeper into the womanly sphere of the home. That is, like many of her fellow Anglo-Indian women, she negotiated for “domestic power within a discourse that reproduce[d her] subordination” (Sharpe 8), working “within a finite range of gender roles that constitute[d] the cultural norm” (10). To meet imperial ends, she (however hesitantly at times) accepted and recycled the iconic image of the domestic angel.

Consequently, Nancy Paxton, in her study of the novelist, recognizes that Steel was often “constrained” rather than empowered “by her role as the wife of a British civil servant under the raj” (“Complicity and Resistance” 161), forced “into a position of complicity” (161) on numerous occasions. In one of these occasions, colonial administrators encouraged her to forfeit her role as an inspectress of a native girls’ school in Lahore when her husband was transferred to a new post; they

⁷⁶In this Chapter, I concentrate specifically on domestic women’s attraction to the lifestyle of Indian female performers; in Chapter 4, I examine how aspiring *fin de siècle* dancers (who embody New Woman qualities) express their modern femininity by “going nautch girl” on the stage.

thought it problematic for a Memsahib to live apart from her husband, neglecting his wellbeing while jeopardizing hers.⁷⁷ Despite such resistance, Steel spent a year in Lahore alone to complete her term at the school while her husband accepted his new promotion. She was eventually forced to terminate the position when agitated natives, who disapproved of the burgeoning reforms for Indian women's education, launched threats of her assassination (164).

Such incidents suggest that Steel experienced firsthand the obstacles and frustrations resulting from a Memsahib's ambitions to pursue public work in the empire, instances in which her identity as a domestic woman often overrode her desire for non-domestic forms of (colonial) labour. As Indira Sen aptly argues, "Steel who came out to India as an ICS wife always remained in her perceptions and attitudes first and foremost a memsahib [not always by choice, I would add] and only, secondary, if at all, a 'feminist'" (135). LeeAnn Marie Richardson further notes, it was difficult for women who lived as a part of the ruling enclave in India to secure power independent from their male partners. "Because women had no institutionalized political power," she argues, "they were largely dependent on their husbands" (132). Margaret Strobel makes a similar conclusion by proposing that "wives of colonial administrators in particular suffered the problems of 'incorporated' status; that is, a wife's own status and position derived nearly entirely from her husband's place within the hierarchical structure" (xii).

In addition to the resistance she met in her public activities, Steel endured a domestic life that was far from ideal. To begin with, she suffered from a loveless

⁷⁷ It is important to note, here, that (due to their marital status) Memsahibs, like Steel, were "not permitted the same liberties as their English sisters who came over as social reformers" (Sharpe 95).

marriage.⁷⁸ In her autobiography, she writes, “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” (*Garden of Fidelity* 1). Her experience with motherhood was no real compensation for this lack. While she lost one daughter to a miscarriage, she was separated from the other when she was sent to England to be raised by her grandmother.

It is perhaps not surprising then that, while in her nonfictional works she appeared as a content housewife and a faithful advocate of colonial domesticity, Steel’s fictions betray her mounting dissatisfaction and frustration with marital life in the colonies and her enduring hope for a fruitful change. Her works often feature unhappy domestic women who, constrained by their roles as housewives, are drawn to their female antithesis: the nondomestic, emancipated nautch girl. In this chapter, I focus primarily on her little known and under-studied novel, *Voices in the Night: A Chromatic Fantasia* (1900), but, first, I want to revisit her most famous novel, *On the Face of the Waters* (1897), which I introduced briefly in the previous chapter.

In this novel, Steel introduces an unhappy Anglo-Indian woman who is momentarily released from the constraints of domesticity through her physical connection to a nautch girl. In fact, unlike the generic Anglo-Indian romance that devotes much narrative space to the courtship between the hero and heroine and ends in their marriage, Steel’s novel is a post-marital consideration of the heroine’s life. At the start of the novel, Kate Erlton, in her “cult of home” (22), is the ideal housewife who nevertheless endures a miserable marriage to Herbert Erlton, an

⁷⁸ Nancy Paxton argues that Steel compensated for her marital problems by enjoying her status as the wife of a leading colonial administrator and as the manager of an imperial household run by a handful of servants (162)

unfaithful and unloving husband. Herbert notifies Kate that he wants a divorce so that he can marry his lover, Alice Gissing, the mother of his unborn child. Clearly, despite her devotion to imperial domesticity, Kate's domestic life is far from ideal. "The futility of her life," Jenny Sharpe concludes, "is summed up in her passionless marriage to Major Erlton, her absent son at school in England, and her inability to improve her situation" (97). Arguably, in this regard, Kate's frustrations with domestic life in the colonies resemble Steel's own; the fictional heroine thereby provides the author an outlet for her emotions and, more importantly, offers the hope of a more promising future.

This hope materializes when Kate is suddenly widowed during the turmoil of the 1857 revolt and forced (for her own safety) to step outside the bounds of the domestic sphere into the native bazaar. Once there, to avoid recognition by the rebel forces, she assumes a disguise as a tawaif and lives incognito on a rooftop (a kotha) for much of the narrative. With the help of a British spy named Jim Douglas who masquerades as her lover,⁷⁹ she adorns herself in the full attire of a deceased nautch girl, Zora, and even dyes her hair and darkens her skin colour to resemble a woman of the bazaar. Rather than fear or repulsion, she experiences "an odd thrill" (Steel, *On the Face of the Waters* 285) when she touches Zora's belongings, such as her bracelet. She is at first hesitant but soon "bec[omes] interested despite herself" in wearing the Indian woman's jewelry (285). In fact, after she adopts the full costume, Kate is exhilarated by her bodily likeness to a dancing girl: "Everything amuses me, interests me. It is so quaint, so new. Even this dress; it is hardly credible, but I

⁷⁹It was not uncommon for a tawaif to carry on a monogamous relationship with a single patron of her choice, as Zora did and as Kate presumes to do with Jim.

wished so much for a looking-glass just now, to see how I looked in it" (284).⁸⁰

Despite the cultural stigma attached to "going native," Kate embraces the identity of a nautch girl because it is "new" and "quaint"—a welcoming change from her domestic life. She even seeks to authenticate this transformed self visually, by gazing at and internalizing her reflection in a "looking glass," a reflection of an altered exterior that perhaps more adequately represents her interior.

Thus, by disguising herself as a nautch girl, Kate Erlton experiments with a "new" identity that deviates drastically from her previous one; turning courtesan allows her to imagine a route out of her restrictive domestic role and towards greater female emancipation. In understanding Kate's transformation in the novel, I deviate significantly from current scholarship that concentrates on the death of Steel's Indian female characters as a necessary step in her advancement (see Chapter 1).⁸¹ These readings fail to recognize that Kate's momentary release from her domestic identity, a time in the narrative when she feels most free and empowered, materializes only because of her temporary transformation into an Indian courtesan. That is, Kate's survival and happiness in the nondomestic space of the bazaar is contingent on "going nautch girl."

⁸⁰ British women long held a fascination with a tawai's wardrobe. As far back as the 1780s, Sophia Plowden, the wife of an East Indian Company servant, showed interest in collecting Persian songs and performing them while attired in a courtesan's clothes (Woodfield 171). As Plowden writes in a letter to her sister Lucy, she even appeared at a masquerade ball in Calcutta in 1783 costumed as a nautch girl and accompanied by a troupe of white men impersonating Indian musicians.⁸⁰ The disguise appealed to Plowden because it "had never been attempted and therefore had the recommendation of *novelty*" (qtd. in Woodfield 172). In her letter to her sister, she devotes much space to describing this costume, a costume that "[gave her] a compleat Indostani [sic] appearance" (173).

⁸¹ I discuss this reading more fully in Chapter 1. See, for example, Jenny Sharpe's *Allegories of Empire*, Jennifer L. Otsuki's "The Memsahib and the Ends of Empire: Feminine Desire in Flora Annie Steel's *On the Face of the Waters*," Revathi Krishnaswamy's "Imperial Feminism in an Age of Homosocial Colonialism: Flora Annie Steel's *On the Face of the Waters*," and Hsu-Ming Teo, "Romancing the Raj: Interracial Relations in Anglo-Indian Romance Novels."



Fig. 33: Brown, Robert. "Bayaderes (Professional Dancers) of Calcutta." *Peoples of the World*. 1892.

"nautchlater." *Columbia.edu*. Columbia, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

In order to comprehend the author's complexity, this novel needs to be read not in isolation (as it tends to be in current scholarship) but alongside Steel's other novels that feature strong, independent nautch girls whose lifestyles attract British women. It needs to be read alongside novels like the *Voices in the Night: A Chromatic Fantasia*, a narrative in which Memsahibs imagine turning courtesan in the Indian bazaar and experiencing an alternative, non-domestic life. This novel introduces a fictional tawaif by the name of Dilaram who (much like Chandni from *The Potter's Thumb*) possesses a fiercely independent personality and threatens both patriarchal and colonial rule in the fictional town of Nushapore. Significantly, she frequently identifies herself through the urban space she occupies. "We of the Bazaar," she asserts, "lead the world by the nose."²⁴ Dilaram is one among many of Steel's courtesans who repeatedly use this form of self-address ("we of the bazaar") to

articulate her bold, confident and defiant spirit. Her use of the first person plural (“we”) suggests that she draws strength from a collective female identity that is inseparable from the public arena (“the bazaar”) she inhabits. Personifying its very fears and fascinations, she embodies the spirit of the Indian urban landscape in which her female ancestors have been raised and which endures despite colonial efforts to contain it.⁸²

The endurance of the non-colonized bazaar presents a potent threat: the threat that it will pull British men and women into its tight grip. This was a concern felt by many Anglo-Indians throughout the nineteenth century who thought of the space of the Indian city and the women who inhabited it as dangerously seductive. As Rudyard Kipling describes in his short story “The City of Dreadful Night” (1890), there was “never a sign of a European” in the depths of the bazaar in fear of the “thick, greasy night [that] shuts in everything” (64). This limitless abyss ensnared English inhabitants into its dark recesses, where they were lost forever or, more fearfully, where they assimilated into Indian culture. The women who lived at the heart of the Indian urban landscape, such as the women living in the Muchua Bazaar of Kipling’s story, were deemed to be the root of its magnetism. In *The History of George Desmond*, the tawaif Amena, who is the cause of George’s cultural and moral degeneration (see Chapter 1), likewise lives in a kotha located “where most Europeans do not go” (205). In light of such colonial representations, Benita Parry in *Delusions and Discoveries* suggests that the bazaar was “a metaphor for pleasure and

⁸² In *The Underworld of India*, George MacMunn conflates the anti-colonial spirit of the bazaar with the women who lived at its core. He argues that nautch girls played a “prominent” “part in the underworld of India” (275)—the ever-mysterious bazaar from whence colonial uprisings often emerged. Accordingly, they lived in its depths: “down below the latticed verandahs that overhang the streets, and into the arched courts,” he observes, one “may find a famous dancer holding her salon” (275-6).

vice, the repository of India's corruptions drawing weak white men and women into its vile embrace" (96).

Benita Parry's language—in its use of words like "corruptions" and "vile"—thus paints the bazaar as a degenerative space that only "weak" British subjects succumb to and that leads to their inevitable deterioration. I would like to rethink this prevailing conflation between "going native" and degeneration, however, by suggesting that the bazaar offered dissatisfied Anglo-Indians a much-needed release from their constraining imperial identities—a release that they may have feared because of the cultural betrayal it assumed, but more so a release that they desired. To many, life in the depths of the Indian city appeared more fulfilling and liberating than life in the austerity of British residential areas. In "The City of Dreadful Night," Kipling articulates this belief when he insinuates that colonial "men follow [a] double, deleterious sort of life" in India whereby they uphold "excessive virtue by day, tempered with the sort of unwholesome enjoyment after dusk" (60)—referring, among other activities, to their visits to the courtesans' kothas in the Indian bazaar. Kipling, in other words, recognizes that Anglo-Indian *men* live in a cruel hypocrisy; they find release from the "excessive" demands of their day-to-day imperial activities by balancing them with the "enjoyment" they experience nightly in the Indian city.

Although an overlooked notion in current scholarship, late-nineteenth-century fiction increasingly rendered the realm of the bazaar as not only enticing to men, but also to women—women who, arguably even more so than the men Kipling speaks of, lived in "excessive virtue" on a day-to-day basis. Unlike their male counterparts, Memsahibs did not have the same opportunities to live a "double" life, to live hypocritically and roam the Indian bazaar at night in search of personal

enjoyment to relieve themselves of their daily domestic labours. As Mary Procida confirms, “Most Europeans, particularly women, avoided prolonged excursion to the Indian area of town” (62). After all, as I have detailed in Chapter 1, it was the British woman’s duty to protect her English femininity at all costs; she was the “Angel in the Colonial House” responsible for fostering insular Anglo-Indian communities and segregating the civilized colonizers from the uncivilized natives. In order to protect this virtue, she was to remain sheltered in her bungalow, away from the possible detrimental effects of the Indian environment—both its hot weather that was considered to hinder a woman’s reproductive potential and its seductive cultural environment that posed the danger of “going native.” The bungalow, in this respect, was “a space of containing female sexuality,” of “imposing a ‘chastity lock’ on the female body through domestic confinement” (Sen 2).

Yet, despite the cultural limitations placed on their physical mobility, British women in turn-of-the-century fiction still feel the lure of the bazaar, a lure that finds them because they secretly seek it; it seeps through their bungalows as they perform their day-to-day domestic routines and momentarily unleashes their repressed longings. Correspondingly, in *Voices in the Night*, the call of the nautch girl travels from the depths of the Indian bazaar to the British residences, and reaches the ears of the female inhabitants who reside behind these porous walls. It reaches the ears of Grace Arbuthnot, who of late feels unsatisfied with her life as an imperial mistress. As an outwardly archetypal Memsahib, she “came, to begin with, of an Anglo-Indian family which had written its name large on the annals of Empire,” and as “an only daughter, she had kept house for her father, the Lieutenant-Governor of his time” (16). Now married to Lieutenant-Governor George Arbuthnot, residing in the

fictional city of Nushapore, she grows restless with her day-to-day mundane existence as a domestic woman. More specifically, Grace undergoes fits of self-pity as a wife and mother who is still in love with her ex-fiancé and son's biological father, Jack Raymond.

As is customary of Steel's writing style, in dealing with such taboo subjects which expose the hypocrisy of Victorian marriages, she remains deliberately ambivalent and indirect. The paternity of Grace's son, for example, is implied rather than explicitly stated by the physical resemblance between her son and Jack Raymond, and their strong bond in the novel. Grace also marries George Arbuthnot shortly after breaking her engagement with Jack, and hence likely maintains her reputation by disguising her premarital pregnancy. Steel's own attitude towards Grace's premarital relationship and the false legitimacy of her child are conveniently clouded by her omniscient narrative voice. Yet, it is not unlikely, as a *Memsahib* who herself felt burdened by her domestic duties and roles, that she would sympathize with her heroine and share in her desires to "go nautch girl."

After all, as Piya Pal-Lapinski notes, due to this discontentment with her present life, Grace (like Steel) holds "a strange connection or affinity with the courtesans or dancing girls in the bazaar; an affinity that interrupts her regulated life as imperial wife and mother" (67). Resembling Kate, she conveys a subtle attraction to public women like Dilaram who roam freely in the native bazaar. Craving a similar emancipation and authority, Grace is susceptible to the hypnotic music of the bazaar that "like the quickened throb of a heart" reaches her precariously fortified bungalow without the slightest warning, coming "faintly, indefinitely, from the distance and darkness of the city" (140). These throbbing sounds successfully disturb the body of

the female listener, accelerating her own heartbeat and making her throb for release; they “rous[e] a perfect passion of reckless unrest in her own [heart]” (144). Grace is drawn not merely to the sound of drums, which awaken hidden desires, but, more so, to the “picture” of “the environment whence it rose”: the bazaar (140). At the centre of it all is “the shrilling voice or posturing figure of a woman” (142)—that is, the figure of a dancing courtesan in her iconic dance pose (see fig. 34). Enticed by the image of this figure, Grace fears that she will unleash repressed female yearnings: “This time it was a fear of her own self that came to Grace Arbuthnot as she listened—a fear of her own sex” (144).⁸³

Significantly, Steel repeats the word “own” (in “her *own*” heart, “her *own* self,” “her *own* sex”) to suggest that, despite the distant origins of the music, the “passion” that Grace feels is not externally produced. In other words, the sounds and images of the bazaar do not generate a hitherto non-existent sensuality in this imperial housewife, but instead are stimulants that bring pent-up emotions to the surface, to the brink of release. The intrinsic nature of Grace’s sensuality thereby undermines the binary of sexual innocence and sexual depravity that was often used to separate British from Indian femininities, the Englishwoman from the native woman, in colonial discourse. That is, Steel does not displace blame for the Memsahib’s arousal

⁸³ Comparable to *Voices in the Night*, Margaret Peterson’s *The Lure of the Little Drum* (1913) features a Memsahib, Mrs. Hamilton, who is aroused by the sounds of the bazaar while performing domestic duties. Peterson describes the sounds of the bazaar as far-reaching and relentless, and, significantly, as frightening for the buried female desires that they bring to the surface: “from somewhere far below them came the sound of life, native music borne to them from the huddled bazaar. As always that persistent sound of beaten tom-toms brought a feeling of fear to Mrs. Hamilton” (54). Here, the “lure” (as Peterson terms it in her title) of these drums originates from their “persistent” “sound of *life*”—an enticing vitality that Mrs. Hamilton “always” senses, yet fears.⁸³ Originating “from the far-off bazaar,” the beats of the “tom-tom” nevertheless symbolize “throb[s] of triumph” (56)—successfully breaking the reserve of the imperial housewife, who reacts to the sounds despite imperial efforts to regulate her bodily sensations. At the core of Mrs. Hamilton fear, like Graces, is her troubling realization that, rather than being disgusted by Indian sounds, she is instinctively attracted towards the space of the bazaar. She fears the “persistent” existence of her own sexual desires, desires that constantly seek release.



Fig. 34: Weeks, Edwin Lord. “East Indian Dancer.” 1880.
 “nautchlater.” *Columbia.edu*. Columbia, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

onto a purportedly demonic nautch girl who concocts spells and uses witchcraft to seduce British inhabitants like other authors, such as Mary Martha Sherwood (see Chapter 1) and Fanny Emily Penny (see Chapter 3), do. Rather the sounds and images of the bazaar rouse her preexisting, if latent, sexual energies.

It is the release of these emotions that Grace paradoxically both desires and fears as a Memsahib who knows such bodily sensations are forbidden, particularly because they associate her with her alleged antithesis: the nautch girl. The image of the “posturing figure” that Grace conjures in her mind after overhearing the music of the bazaar is the catalyst of her arousal. This Indian female performer ignites a fire in the British female spectator (or, in this case, imaginer)—a fire that has homoerotic implications. While recent scholarship has explored cross-race, male homoeroticism in



Fig. 35: Belnos, Mrs. “Nautch Girl sitting at the feet of two Memsahibs and singing.” Drawing. c.1820.
 “nautchlater.” *Columbia.edu*. Columbia, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

British literature of the Raj,
 parallel discussions about
 cross-race, *female*
 homoeroticism is virtually non-
 existent, an absence that speaks
 to the larger neglect of female-
 authored Anglo-Indian texts.

Yet, in many of the novels I
 address in this dissertation, the
 encounter between Memsahibs

and dancing girls transpires in a sexually-charged environment that often
 accompanies a female-on-female gaze (in which the British woman is spectator, and
 Indian(ized) woman spectacle). In this respect, *fin de siècle* novels prompt a
 reconsideration of the prevailing heteronormative approach to the erotic appeal of
 the nautch, one that was to some extent confirmed by early travel writers. Writing in
 the 1830s, Emma Roberts, for example, seems to dread the fact that, purged of all
 erotic elements, the nautch performances when presented to a female spectatorship
 were “dull and decorous” (1.252) and “exceedingly tiresome” (2.229). “[I]n the
 presence of ladies,” she goes on, the nautch “is circumscribed within the bounds of
 propriety” (2.229) while it is not so “dull” (2.229) when “the audience [is] exclusively
 masculine” (1.252-3), when “addressed to male eyes alone” (2.229). Emma Roberts
 suggests, then, that the site/sight of the eroticized Indian female dancer is restricted
 to men.

The Anglo-Indian heroines featured in turn-of-the-century fictions seem to want to break free from such regulations on their optic power and to enjoy the sensual display of these dancers as much as their male counterparts do. While, in my new historicist approach, I do not offer a queer reading per se of such scenes, I nevertheless want to entertain the possibility that these authors introduce a cross-race, female homoeroticism in their novels (however subtly and unconsciously) to stage a tension within their fictional Memsahibs and, by extension, themselves: the tension between their female-specific desires that transcend cultural boundaries and their imperial obligations that reassert these racial barriers. In this respect, homoerotic attraction in these novels holds the promise of intimacy not only between women, but between cultures. It holds the promise of nurturing female relationships or communities that put their needs as women before their respective duties to their nation.⁸⁴



Fig. 36: Two tawaifs in a kotha. n.d.
 “Bring on the Dancing Girls.” *Chhotabazri*. Trisha Gupta,
 n.d. Web. 1 Oct 2010.

In their representation of same-sex desire, these *fin-de-siècle* writers may be drawing from an awareness of lesbian relationships within female performing communities in India and Europe. In her study of the tawaifs in twentieth-century Lucknow, Veena Talwar

⁸⁴ Such an analysis is comparable to the treatment of the cross-race, homoerotic friendship between Dr. Aziz and Mr. Fielding in EM Forster’s *A Passage to India*.

Oldenburg, for example, reports that, within the secrecy of their female-dominated kothas, courtesans pursue homosexual relationships with one another.⁸⁵ Considering that, as Oldenburg argues, the rebellious lifestyle of twentieth-century courtesans was largely inherited from their predecessors, it is not improbable that homosexuality persisted in the kothas of the nineteenth century as well. Whether or not Anglo-Indian writers like Steel would have been aware of or speculated on these same-sex relationships, however, is difficult to ascertain. Nevertheless, they likely would have been familiar with similar concerns circulating in Europe in the late nineteenth century about female performing artists who, due to their time together in close quarters (especially in dressing rooms), purportedly engaged in sexual acts with one another. In his 1901 study of lesbianism, Havelock Ellis quotes a “friend” who confirms this observation:

Passionate friendships among girls, from the most innocent to the most elaborate excursions in the direction of Lesbos, are extremely common in theatres, both among actresses and, even more, among chorus- and ballet-girls. Here the pell-mell of the dressing rooms, the wait of perhaps two hours between the performances, during which all the girls are cooped up in a state of inaction and excitement, in a few crowded dressing-rooms, offer every opportunity for the growth of this particular kind of sentiment. (qtd. in Gever 77)

⁸⁵Oldenburg rather forcefully claims that “the courtesans have logically ‘constructed’ lesbian existence as a legitimate alternative” to heterosexuality (“Lifestyle” 54), as a *conscious* act of resistance. Her argument has not been substantiated by others working on tawaif communities, and I am skeptical of her claim that these homosexual relationships were an *intentional* strategy on the part of courtesans to defy a heteronormative society as opposed to a natural occurrence among closely-knit female relationships.

Similar yet less-explicit insights were voiced earlier, in the 1880s, by an advocate of the Ormiston Chant campaign, a campaign to abolish British music halls. The critic reported, “It is not so much the stage itself which is a bad school for the morality of ballet-girls, as the room in which they are herded to dress together” (qtd. in Christensen 195).⁸⁶ These speculations about homosexuality among female performing communities, whether in India or Europe, gave rise to an anxiety over the possibility that women might benefit emotionally as well as physically if they turned to one another for comfort rather than to men. They might build healthier (social and sexual) relationships if they worked together, overcoming differences in their racial, national and social backgrounds as well as their dependency on the opposite sex.

Steel’s fictional Memsahibs seem to crave yet simultaneously fear this transnational connection when they envision or witness nautch performances. Such is the case in *Voices in the Night* since the image of a “posturing figure” leaves Grace throbbing for release. Considering the source of Grace’s evident excitement is a person of “her own sex,” the twenty-first-century impulse, here, is to offer a queer reading, but the sensuality awakened in Grace should not be read exclusively as a desire *for* the nautch girl. In the context of the *fin de siècle*, it is also a desire *to be like* the nautch girl, the desire to embrace her lifestyle and thereby gain access to the liberties she, and women like her, enjoy. Likewise, evidently dissatisfied with her current life, Grace experiences a growing urge to escape her imperial burdens, burdens that restrict her bodily freedom in India, and to become her Other: the public, sexually autonomous woman in the space of the bazaar. Yet, such a

⁸⁶ See footnote 131 in Chapter 4 for further information on homophobia in the performing arts at the turn of the century.

transgression anticipates that she put her “own,” female-specific desires before cultural dictates, that she relinquish her ties to Englishness to satisfy her innate longings as a woman.

Whereas in the last chapter I suggested that the male imperialist’s intimate encounters with the nautch girl posed his danger of “going native,” here it is the Memsahib who faces this risk of “cultural contagion” (Suleri 92) after hearing the call of the bazaar and feeling the pull of the nautch girl. At the core of Grace’s “fear,” then, is a fear of a reverse cultural colonization, a fear that she will become Indian-like if the intense sensations provoked by the bazaar overtake her. Such concerns over the contagious quality of the Indian courtesan’s sexuality were voiced earlier in the century, and may explain why women only received a “dull and decorous” version of the nautch, as Emma Roberts contends. In her study of early nineteenth century travel writings, Nandini Bhattacharya claims that any sign of the Englishwoman’s “sexual potential” in India was attributed specifically to the nautch girl’s “transgressive female sexuality” (127). As a Memsahib indoctrinated in colonial domesticity, Steel’s heroine is not ready to recycle this “transgressive female sexuality” and risk endangering her racial and cultural purity. Confronted with the possibility, Grace desperately attempts to restore a sense of her womanly obligations when “she clasped her mother’s hands tight, and thought of her own boy—of the spirit of the race” (Steel, *Voices* 146). She reminds herself of her maternal duties that are so critical to the eugenics movement in the late nineteenth century, so critical to biologically, culturally, and socially reproducing “the spirit of the [white, imperial] race.” In other words, despite her momentary lapse, she ultimately returns to the cultural and gender norms that govern her life as a Memsahib.

In *Voices in the Night*, therefore, the call of the bazaar is felt by the Memsahib but not embraced: Grace succumbs momentarily to the sensations awakened by the nautch girls but she nevertheless finds her way back to her domestic duties by convincing herself that she has larger responsibilities to the nation and the empire, responsibilities that require her to suppress her physical urges. It was these very responsibilities that weighed on Steel and contributed to her sexual repressions. As Hugh B. Urban claims, in her daily life as a Memsahib, Steel exhibited “dispassion and strict control of desire” (115). Likewise, Nancy Paxton argues that she “unsex[es] herself” to epitomize bodily discipline in the colonial arena (“Disembodied Subjects” 404). This discipline gave her imperial authority in India since the British constantly feared British women’s susceptibility to an allegedly contagious Indian (female) sexuality, one that was supposedly embodied by the nautch girl (as I have addressed above). Ideally then, Anglo-Indian women were supposed to, in action and in thought, resist and denounce the sensual display of courtesans’ performances. Such is the discussion that ensues in William Henry Giles Kingston’s *The Young Rajah* (1878) between Reginald Hamerton, who is the mouthpiece for the moral purity campaigns against the nautch, and Captain Burnett. Upon witnessing a “barbarous” performance at a Rajah’s palace, Reginald vows to have such entertainments abolished and, in his justification, claims “No English lady would like to see her sex so degraded by being compelled to exhibit themselves as these poor girls are” (304).

Steel’s novels, however, undermine the certainty of claims, such as the one voiced in *The Young Rajah*, which universalize Englishwomen’s disapproval of nautch performances. Her novels reveal her “ambivalent attitudes toward sexuality” (Hughes 114)—her interest in exploring it even as she condemns it. Paxton suggests that, due

to her passionless marriage at an early age and her adherence to imperial gender norms, Steel never really explored her own sexuality (“Complicity and Resistance” 161). For this reason, despite her outward “dislike of the sensual side of life” (Steel, *Garden of Fidelity* 1), Steel uses the space of her fiction to subtly consider pleasures she could not and did not (to our knowledge) experience in her own life—but pleasures that the nautch girl, on the other hand, could and did. Representative of herself, her Anglo-Indian female characters are not immune to the physical sensations evoked by the Indian courtesan; they are not void of sexual urges. Kate Erlton from *On the Face of the Waters* feels the “thrill” personified by Zora’s clothes, and Grace Arbuthnot from *Voices in the Night* recognizes a “restless” “passion” in her “own heart” after hearing the throbbing sounds of the bazaar drums.

Grace is not the only Anglo-Indian woman to feel an attraction towards the courtesan’s sensual lifestyle in this novel. So does Lesley Drummond, Grace’s governess, specifically during an intriguing moment in the novel when the two of them sit sipping tea in the gardens of the Arbuthnot residence—a garden that once belonged to Indian courtesans who entertained Mughal kings (see Chapter 1). Despite being the epitome of female discipline in the novel, Lesley is instinctively attracted to the sensuality awakened by these gardens: “It appealed instantly to something deep down in her woman’s nature; for this had been a woman’s garden” (Steel, *Voices* 236). Here, the Indian courtesans dominate the space of the garden (as opposed to the bazaar), an Indianized and feminized site that is all the more dangerous due to its proximity to the British residences. The lingering spirit of these women is so intense that it rouses female desires within Lesley—repressed desires that rest “deep down” within her, deep underneath a hard exterior that so strongly

upholds English feminine ideals. Comparable to George Desmond of Sherwood's narrative (see Chapter 1), Lesley's senses are overwhelmed by the lure of the gardens: "The radiance of it, the brilliance of it, dazzled the eyes; the dimness, the misty dreaminess of it clouded the brain. She felt drugged, hypnotized out of realities" (98). Her "eyes" and "brains" cannot resist the all-consuming intoxication of these gardens, which invade and take over her body. Even more so than Grace, Lesley pulls herself out of this temporary slip by endorsing British standards of female decency, by "shut[ting] her eyes," and reminding herself that she is a "good girl" (236). Upon returning to her former dutiful domestic self, Lesley is plagued with guilt at "the remembrance" of her momentary lapse, which "ma[kes] her recoil spiritually" (236). She is shocked and disgusted "from the mere suggestion that it could appeal to anything in *her*" (236)—in a woman who so strongly epitomizes English imperial femininity.

Despite the seductive imagery associated with the gardens, Steel's language suggests that the sensuality of this courtesan-dominated space does not generate but instead exposes Lesley's own repressed sexual longings. Like Grace, she only fears the pull of the garden because it "appeal[s]" to something "in *her*," because it draws out her deeply-guarded physical needs. It is out of this fear, in turn, that she dismisses such pleasurable sensations as abhorrent. The tension that both Grace and Lesley feel between their instinctive physical responses to the sensual appeal of the courtesan's lifestyle and their learned cultural responses captures Steel's own struggles as an outwardly asexual Memsahib who nevertheless wrote so often about sexual matters in India. In other contexts, Hsu-Ming Teo and Benita Parry have traced a similar ambivalence marking the colonial writings of western women. In her

study of British female travel writings about exotic dances at the the turn of the century, Teo, for example, argues that, through their subject-matter, the writers explored their “own prurient, sexual fascination” but “cloaked [it] in respectable disgust” (“Women’s Travel” 390). That is, they used the space of their writing to “express interest in sexual matters and describe with explicit detail these highly sexualized dances” while at the same time “distancing” themselves by disapproving such shameless displays, “refusing to accept a direct and overt expression of women’s sexual desire” (390). It is only through (feigned) conformity to cultural expectations that these writers—like Steel—could delve into such taboo topics. Similarly, Benita Parry in her discussion of the devadasi’s sexuality in Ida Alexa Ross Wylie’s novel *The Daughter of Brahma* suggests that the female author “condemn[s] as unseemly and immoral that which stimulates and excites her” (*Delusions* 84). She recognizes that her “fascination with” the sensual “clashes with her sense of propriety” (84), and that to maintain her status as a “good girl”—to use Lesley’s words—she must denounce the Indian female performer. Steel’s female characters follow a similar pattern of denunciation, recognizing that as Anglo-Indian women they (like the author herself) must not openly voice or embrace their attraction to the nautch.

Thus, mirroring her own frustrations, Steel’s Memsahibs will not and cannot “go nautch girl,” despite their longings to do so. Even Kate Erlton from *On the Face of the Waters* who dwells for some time in the bazaar eventually returns to a life in the bungalow with Jim Douglas by her side, resuming her racial and domestic identity after the turmoil of 1857 subsides. Perhaps in an attempt to compensate for the

restrictions imposed on her fictional Memsahibs in *Voices in the Night*, Steel transfers their fantasies to a safer source: an Indian woman, specifically the Begum (Indian princess) Sobrai. Sobrai resembles her British counterparts in her resentment towards prescribed gender roles. Yet, whereas these Anglo-Indian women can only imagine the liberating experience of dancing in the expansive bazaar to break free



Fig. 37: “Nautch Dancer.” Print. 1888.
 “nautchlater.” *Columbia.edu*. Columbia, 2010. Web.
 20 Sept 2010.

from these roles, Sobrai literally “goes nautch girl.” A fiercely outspoken woman, committed to attaining freedom from the plights of a domestic life, Sobrai prefers to live as a courtesan like Dilaram in the depths of the city rather than as a princess in a palace. After realizing that she “could not remain ... within four walls all her life,” she “make[s] her push for freedom” (136). She joins the female performers

of the bazaar to flee her destined life as a princess, one that she witnesses vicariously through her foil Noormahal, a zenana woman who passively endures emotional and physical abuse from her husband, the Nawab of Nushapore. In a crucial scene in the novel, Sobrai relishes in her first taste of independence: with “a sudden dare-devil delight” and a “gleam of pure mischief,” she boldly sings and dances in the bazaar before a male audience, experiencing “the only bit of fun she had had in a fortnight’s freedom” (161).

Steel's fascination with the princess-turned-courtesan draws from a proliferation of historical and fictional examples of Indian women favouring (however temporarily) the lifestyle of Indian female performers to their own. Writing



Fig. 38: Rousselet, Louis. "Bayadere or Dancing Girl of Mewat." Engraving from *India and its Native Princes*. c.1860.

"nautchlater." *Columbia.edu*. Columbia, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

earlier in the nineteenth century, Fanny Parkes, in her journal, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in the Search of the Picturesque during Twenty-Four Years in the East* (1850), describes one particular scene in a zenana where an eminent Begum instructs and dances with a group of upper-caste Indian women, experiencing a sense of exhilarating release and playfulness during the performance precisely because it is forbidden. As Parkes writes, "Music is considered disgraceful for a lady of

rank, dancing the same—such things are left to the nautch women" (385). The late nineteenth century saw a proliferation of such narratives, in which Indian housewives masqueraded as nautch girls to gain access to liberties otherwise denied them. In his poem "The Rajpoot Wife" (1880), for example, Edwin Arnold introduces a brave and loyal Hindu wife, Neila, who alone, among many men, can rescue her husband from his Muslim kidnappers. Her plan of action necessitates turning courtesan, becoming "all in dress a Nautch-girl" (106)—wearing the "tinselled sari of a dancing Kunchenee" and fastening "a hundred silver bells" around her anklets (106). In this

disguise, she locates the site of her husband's imprisonment, seduces his Muslim captor with her performance, and stabs the man to death the first chance she gets. A similar plot comprises Steel's short story "The Ruby Prince," in which an Indian princess hires a nautch girl to train her in the seductive art of dancing so that she can rescue her kidnapped husband. Alluding to the plot of *Salome*, her husband's captor grants her a wish for her stunning performance: "O unknown dancer, ask what you will, and it shall be yours" (296), and she asks for the release of her husband. Along different lines, in *The Religions and Hidden Cults of India* (1931), George MacMunn reports incidents of widows becoming nautch girls to escape their awaiting fate under Indian customs (178). These incidents inform the plots of Sydney Owenson's *Missionary* and Philip Meadows Taylor's *Tara*, in which widowed upper-caste Brahmin women, who are prohibited from remarrying, take up the profession of a devadasi. In his poem "The Last Suttee" (1889), Rudyard Kipling also introduces a recently widowed zenana woman, but one who "disguise[s]" herself as "the King's favourite dancing-girl" (63) to "[pass] through the line of guards" (63) and to "defy the orders of the English against Suttee" (62). In other words, rather than fleeing the practice of widow immolation, the Indian woman of Kipling's poem masquerades as a courtesan to return to outlawed Indian customs.

Collectively these examples expose Indian women's desires to turn courtesan in search of freedoms unavailable to them as domestic women, and these prevailing desires have been verified by subaltern historiographers in their research on nineteenth-century communities of Indian female performers. According to Veena Talwar Oldenburg, the tawaifs "opened their arms to those who were rejected by all others" ("Lifestyle" 134). They welcomed many women who left bad marriages or

homes to find solace in a system run by and serving women. Like Sobrai, these women felt that a position as a respected and upper-class courtesan was a more promising lifestyle than that afforded by their status as wives, widows, daughters, or mothers in a patriarchal household. Sumanta Bannerjee has made a similar conclusion in his study of the popular culture of nineteenth-century Bengal. Although his work focuses on a lower economic-social group than the tawaifs, Bannerjee, like Oldenburg, presents factual evidence of married, widowed and unmarried women fleeing their restrictive domestic lives for a life founded on greater economic, intellectual and sexual liberty. Bannerjee further outlines how the growth of these female communities was met with much objection, particularly by the English-educated Bengali male elite (known as the Bhadrakalok) who considered these women and their cultural productions to be “a pernicious influence” on Bengali wives and daughters (128). Similar attitudes were directed towards the nautch at the turn of the century, when many educated Indian men supported the anti-nautch movement on the grounds that it disrupted domestic stability. Steel’s characterization of Sobrai, therefore, is rooted in a historical reality, one that permeated British fictional and historical accounts. Together, these examples suggest that Indian domestic women were drawn for varying reasons to the lifestyle of nautch girls, and in Steel’s novel this fascination (as I will discuss in more detail later in this section) significantly aligns Sobrai with her British counterpart, Grace.

While most colonial and postcolonial discussions of Indian women “going nautch girl” have concentrated specifically on these women’s threat to indigenous patriarchy, their threat to colonial rule and ideologies (with the exception of Kipling’s “Last Suttee”) remains relatively unaddressed. In Steel’s novel, the tawaif captivates

Sobrai not only because of her anti-patriarchal commitments but also her anti- or pre-colonial spirit. This spirit saturates the space of the bazaar that Dilaram occupies, a space that continually resists British civilizing (or colonizing) impulses. Steel's novel is set in the latter-half of the nineteenth century when the Contagious Diseases Acts were in effect in the colonies, implemented to monitor the bodies of public indigenous and European women suspected of carrying venereal disease. In the 1860s, following regulations set in Britain, the imperial government established "a system of licensed prostitution" in fear that sexual relations with these women would "weaken the British military substantially by transmitting venereal disease and other infections" (Pal-Lapinski 68). As Indira Sen notes, the passing of the Contagious Diseases Acts therefore made it possible for British soldiers, specifically those who were not married and resided in the cantonments, to engage in sexual intercourse without endangering their health (46). These Acts were more strongly enforced in the colonies than in England: policy-makers used the rationale that the survival of the empire relied on the health of its soldiers and the health of its soldiers relied on establishing safe outlets for their sexual urges. Their bodies needed to be protected at all costs, especially in a climate that was allegedly infested with venereal disease, and where indigenous women were inherently its carriers. In her analysis of the novel, Piya Pal-Lapinski notes that *Voices in the Night* responds to such anxieties about the spread of contamination in the colonies, and captures the constant British terror of contracting a disease and the accompanying obsession with rigorously disinfecting public Indian spaces (68).

However, Steel's narrative projects the futility of these efforts since, as one of the characters from the novel articulates, it is "uncommonly hard to make a bazaar

healthy” (*Voices* 152). It is “uncommonly hard,” in other words, to contain the rebellious spirit of the Indian city. Dilaram, as a woman of the bazaar, embodies this rebellious spirit: she resists the medical examination of her body, metaphorically the colonization of her body, and accordingly practices her profession in the non-colonized spaces of the bazaar rather than succumbing to the regulations of the military cantonments. In her representation of her fictional Indian courtesan, Steel once again draws from a historical actuality. Supported by nationalist leaders, tawaifs along with devadasis protested against the Contagious Diseases Acts. As Philippa Levine concludes in her study of prostitution in India, “Nautch women, in particular, argued that the system misunderstood their place in society, and that they should not be required to register” (*Prostitution* 220). Despite the fact that some courtesans did relocate to regimental brothels due to a drastic loss of patronage in the latter half of the nineteenth century,⁸⁷ most were reluctant to undergo medical inspection and many, particularly in the cities of Lucknow, Rawalpindi, and Madras, succeeded in achieving exemption from these new laws. In turn, this success, as Levine aptly puts, “was seen as a measure of native recalcitrance to British rule” (591). At the heart of these protests was the devadasis’ and tawaifs’ resistance to the classification of their profession as prostitution. Instead, these women and their supporters tried to reassert class distinctions and hierarchies between their profession as courtesans and the lifestyle of common prostitutes (J. Singh 113). More specifically, they challenged

⁸⁷After the exile of Wajid Ali Shah in 1856 in northern India, and the death of Raja Sivaji II in 1855 southern India, courtesans faced a drastic decline in patronage (J. Singh 112). The subsequent financial strain led some into regimental brothels.

the British desire to contain the active sexuality of a non-domestic woman within a narrowly-defined system of exchange: sex for monetary gain.⁸⁸

British women, namely Josephine Butler, Elizabeth Andrews, and Katherine Bushnell, actively involved in the repeal of the Contagious Diseases Acts confirmed such class distinctions, but also exposed cultural distinctions in the treatment of public women. During her campaign to abolish these acts in late-nineteenth-century India, Josephine Butler, for example, recognized the Indian dancing girls as a more modest and respected class of entertainers than any of the prostitutes found under British jurisdiction. In her journal, *The Dawn*, she writes:

I am convinced that the life of these Nautch girls is by no means so degrading and wretched as the lives of poor English and Indian women, doomed to be under any form of Contagious Diseases Acts. There is a certain amount of decency observed even in their profession, and they are not made as European women are, mere chattels or instruments ... none of the Indian races would tolerate prostitution as organized in European cities. (6)

During their investigation of British-sanctioned prostitution in India, Elizabeth Andrews and Katherine Bushnell note a similar distinction between Indian courtesans and the women they encountered in regimental brothels: “We found no nautch girl,” they claim, “among all the hundreds of prostitutes we interviewed who were living in cantonments. The profession of a nautch girl implies so much training

⁸⁸ As Nandini Bhattacharya concludes, the “colonial policy eroded the powers of subversion and resistance of such organized female communities by [attempting to] allocate[e] the courtesans for the sexual services of British soldiers in a brutally systemic way” (145). These attempts saw a “gradual debasement of an esteemed cultural institution” into “common prostitution” (145). “Women who had once consorted with kings and courtiers, enjoyed a fabulously opulent living, manipulated men and means for their own social and political ends, been the custodians of culture and the setters of fashion trends,” Bhattacharya argues, “were left in an extremely dubious and vulnerable position under the British” (145). Likewise, Jyostna Singh claims, “the official definition of their roles jettisoned their aesthetic accomplishments and function” (113).

of voice and muscle and ensures so large an income that she feels far above the position of the degraded woman consorting with the British soldier” (qtd. in Levine, *Prostitution* 220). In their use of language, Butler, Andrews, and Bushnell subtly draw attention to an interesting irony: as the so-called “civilized” nation, Britain was more barbaric in its dealings with public women than India. Unlike the “decency” characterizing the lives of nautch girls,⁸⁹ Butler argues, the “poor” women registered under the Contagious Diseases Acts live a “degrading,” “wretched,” and “doomed” life, becoming mere “chattels” and “instruments” to serve white male desires. Interestingly, the “Indian races” would never “tolerate” an equivalent victimization of their women. Along the same lines, Andrews and Bushnell report that the nautch girls, who live in affluence as trained artists, confidently perceive their own lifestyle as “far above” that of “degraded” licensed prostitutes who provide companionship to British soldiers. In fact, this lifestyle could not exist within the highly-commodified system of sexual exchange practiced in regimental brothels. As Judy Whitehead suggests, “prostitution in England had always been a commodified interchange and prostitutes themselves were proletarianized sex-workers. This legislation was inserted into a somewhat less commodified upper class/caste conception of prostitution in India” (49).

Recreating these cultural variances in her novel, Steel juxtaposes the long-existing profession practiced by Dilaram to the new British establishment run by an

⁸⁹This irony persisted throughout the nineteenth century. Contrary to imperialist hierarchies, European prostitutes were described as “more sensual, shameless, and indeed inferior to her colonial counterpart” (Sen 16). There was, Indira Sen notes, a “frequent privileging of the ‘native’ over the European prostitute in terms of ‘female modesty’” (15). In 1893, Bishop Thoburn’s observed that “It is a striking fact that the shameless character in the city are not Indian but persons imported from Europe” (qtd. in Sen 16). Flora Annie Steel shared his reflection: “in sexual matters ... the standard of national morality is far higher in India than in England. Vice may thrive, but it is silent .. there is nothing to suggest sex in an Indian city .. there is outward decency at least” (qtd. in Sen 16).

Indian woman named Miss Lizzie, whose anglicized name emblemizes her assimilation to Western institutions. Miss Lizzie's brothel resembles one of many located in the Lal Bazaars, the areas of licensed prostitution, in nineteenth-century India. Serving white patrons and located near the cantonments, these regimental brothels were closely monitored by British officials and medical authorities, and so is the area in which Lizzie serves her clientele: in "that particular bazaar, being a favourite lounge for the dwellers in the barracks round the corner, the orders regarding its cleanliness were stricter" (147). Because increased cleanliness accompanies greater restrictions, Steel insinuates that Dilaram's lifestyle in the non-regulated areas of the bazaar offers greater mobility and liberation.⁹⁰ Sobrai is the mouthpiece for this preference: on first leaving the zenana, Sobrai makes arrangements to work for Miss Lizzie because she naively believes that such a profession, which "was countenanced even by the Huzoors [the British]" (36), was the pathway to freedom. However, soon after her first encounter with the stifling rules and regulations of the regimental brothel, she realizes that "Dilaram and the old ways were the best" (158). The tawaif is a stronger model for aspiring feminists like herself: "Dilaram enjoyed herself more, and so would she, Sobrai Begum of the King's House" (159). In fact, because Sobrai is "dangerous to the discipline of cantonments" with her "evil tongue" and "shrill assertions" (149), even Miss Lizzie associates her unruly nature with the "unlicensed" areas of the bazaar occupied by women like Dilaram. "Thou hadst best go back to the city and Dilaram, fool!", she tells Sobrai, "My house hath a good name ... So if thou wilt not obey, go! There be

⁹⁰ Steel articulates a similar preference for Chandni's profession over the licensed prostitutes in *The Potter's Thumb*. As Indira Sen notes, "There is a privileging of the class factor when the tawaif is contrasted to ordinary bazaar prostitutes of the new bourgeois order in *The Potter's Thumb*" (153).

plenty of that sort, unlicensed, beyond the boundaries. But we are different; we are approved!" (149). Although "approved" by the British with a "good name," regimental brothels like Miss Lizzie's were based on "obedience" to patriarchy, and thereby thwarted rather than nurtured women's desire for independence. In contrast, Dilaram and "her sort" provide hope of securing greater female emancipation because they live "beyond the boundaries," beyond colonial and patriarchal power structures that regulate female sexuality in the bazaar.

Considering in *Voices in the Night* the lifestyle of an Indian rather than British woman offers an outlet for domestically strained women, and considering this potential escape transpires in the urban Indian landscape rather than the civilized British areas, Steel uses the space of her fiction to contemplate the possibility that India not England is the catalyst for the liberation of women. In this respect, within the safety offered by an omniscient point of view, Steel (temporarily at least) overlooks her mindset as an imperialist in order to consider the mistreatment of Indian women under colonial practices. Comparable to Butler, Andrews and Bushnell, she launches a built-in critique in her novel of the devastating effect of British regulations on the lives of public women in India, regulations that attempt to disempower these women solely to serve the sexual needs of colonial men. In this respect, Steel, like many of her contemporaries, reveals the insincerity of "altruistic imperialism," the propagandistic claim "that Britain ran their Empire not for their own benefit but for the benefit of those they ruled" (J. Richards 14). Indeed, rather than nurturing improvement, Miss Lizzie's British-influenced establishment is a system of corrupt patriarchal power, while the "old system"—the pre-colonial,

Indian system embodied by the courtesan Dilaram—is “better” for the liberties it offers female performers.

It is due to these liberties that the Indian dancing girl in Steel’s novel provokes the potential for a cross-class, cross-race, cross-gender seduction, a contagion in which Anglo-Indian and Indian women alike experience the desire (however explicit or implicit) to be a nautch girl, to be like Dilaram. In fact, by introducing the character of Begum Sobrai, Steel aligns the imperial housewife with the zenana woman in her novel since both feel stifled by their dictated domestic roles and fantasize about being a non-domestic and liberated dancing girl. On route to the Government House, Grace vicariously experiences the emancipation resulting from “going nautch girl” when she catches sight of the Begum dancing in the boundless bazaar. Her desire deepens as her fantasy becomes visible; she now “s[ees] in the flesh what she had seen in her mind’s eye,” a “woman’s figure centring a circle of eager men’s faces” (Stee, *Voices* 162). As Pal-Lapinski argues, at this moment “Sobrai’s revolutionary exhibitionism intensifies and actualizes the allure of the unsanitized space, providing a momentary glimpse of an unregulated female body drawing its energy from the ‘contamination’ of the overcrowded bazaar” (70). Grace confirms, in other words, that, in contrast to the orderly bungalow with its finely demarcated space, the “unsanitized” bazaar produces an “unregulated” female body like Sobrai’s that holds sway over her male audience.

By aligning the zenana woman with the Memsahib in her novel, Steel significantly disrupts the racial hierarchies on which imperial feminist rhetoric relied. She does not follow the common discursive pattern in female colonial writings; she does not render the Indian housewife as a helplessly suffering victim against which

the western woman can define her relative emancipation. As Antoinette Burton concludes, in turn-of-the-century white feminist rhetoric, “seclusion was thought to be the equivalent of degradation, and harem life ‘dull and vacuous to the last degree’” (66). Following from this racial stereotype, British women perceived it as their personal burden to rescue these Indian women from their plight. As Maud Diver aptly articulated in *Englishwoman in India*, “If the conquest of administrators of India be essentially the work of England’s men, the enlightening of her wives and daughters is, as essentially, the work of England’s women; and it cannot be said that they have neglected their share of the white man’s burden in the East” (128). Comparable to other imperial feminist writings at the turn of the century, Diver, first, positions British women as more enlightened or advanced than Indian “wives and daughters,” and, second, considers the “burden” of these white women to be a benevolent intervention, a rescue mission that constructs the native woman as “an object to be saved” (Sharpe 30). In *Voices in the Night*, both these self-serving portrayals, however, are undermined.

Rather than reinforcing a hierarchal distinction between the English housewife and the Indian housewife, Steel projects an underlying similarity between these women. Grace parallels Sobrai in the many restrictions imposed on her mobility and visibility in the empire. This parallel, in fact, exposes an underlying anxiety felt by British women throughout the nineteenth-century. As Jenny Sharpe argues in *Allegories of Empire*, the Indian practice of sati (widow immolation) was really not that different from “the Victorian doctrine of female self-immolation,” in the form of “absolute devotion to her family” (14). Specifically, Sharpe recalls that, during the 1857 revolt, British women were expected to prove their loyalty and

virtue, much like Indian widows, by committing suicide rather than submitting to the sepoys' advances.⁹¹ In addition to being sacrificial, the Anglo-Indian woman was comparable to the Indian woman because they both endured domestic seclusion, one in the bungalow the other in the zenana. This reciprocal victimization of British and Indian domestic women was detrimental to imperial ideology. As Sharpe points out, "any resemblance between the two patriarchal systems threatens the East-West difference on which the social mission of colonialism is based" (Sharpe 96)—as it does in Steel's novel.

Steel's novel tests imperial rhetoric not only by positioning the Memsahib as the zenana woman's double but also by positioning the nautch girl as the model of female emancipation for both, as the figure against which these housewives measure their liberation. Sobrai recognizes that her way out of the veil—a nineteenth symbol of seclusion—is to dance: "If one comes to dance, what matters a veil?" (Steel, *Voices* 22). Her progress, in other words, relies on "going nautch girl," not on emulating western women. The figure of the Indian courtesan, not the Memsahib, provides a potential source of rescue for unhappy domestic women like herself and, by association, like Grace. That is, reversing imperial feminist rhetoric, the novel places the life of the tawaif Dilaram as an enticing alternative to the lives of both colonial and colonized wives—an enticement that appears in the work of other female Anglo-Indian authors, most notably Alice Perrin.

⁹¹ Sharpe points specifically to the events of 1857: "A code of conduct that sanctions female suicide during times of war thus comes dangerously close to the orthodox Hindu position on sati, namely that widow's self-immolation is her sacred duty" (Sharpe 102).

From Angel in the House to Woman in the Bazaar:

The Memsahib “Goes Nautch Girl” in Alice Perrin’s Fiction

Steel was perhaps the first but not the only *fin-de-siècle* writer to experiment with the idea of Memsahibs-turning-nautch-girl in her novels. Another prolific writer of Anglo-Indian romances, Alice Perrin, was a Memsahib who spent many years in India, first as a daughter to a general of the Bengal army and then as a wife to a member of the Indian Public Works. She was born in India into a family who had long established themselves within the highest ranks of Anglo-Indian society. As was customary, she was sent to England for an education, and she returned to her country of birth following her marriage to Charles Perrin. Despite her literary success, biographical information on Alice Perrin is scarce. We do know that she showed interest in colonial work by accompanying her husband on his duties, and Sowon S. Park suggests that she was active in the women’s movement, particularly the fight for suffrage (101). Comparable to Steel, her often conflicting ambitions as an imperialist and feminist find subtle expression in her work. While we know little about her own marriage, Bhupal Singh argues that her novels and short stories (*The Woman in the Bazaar* (1914), *Separation* (1917), *Star of India* (1919), and *Government House* (1925) leading among them) focus predominantly on “unhappy married life in India” (86). “The common theme” in these novels, he claims, “is the tragedy of Anglo-Indian marriages in the *mofussil*⁹²” (122). I am interested in the function of the Indian female performer in these novels as a potential corrective to these tragic marital experiences, a potential cure for domestic heartache, holding the promise of a better life for burdened Memsahibs.

⁹² the suburban or rural areas of India

My main focus, here, is on Perrin's little-known novel *The Woman in the Bazaar*, which seems to echo the plot and reintroduce some of the motifs pervading Steel's *Voices in the Night*. What distinguishes Perrin's narrative from Steel's, however, is that the Memsahib *does* leave the domestic and colonized realm of the Anglo-Indian bungalow for the public, non-colonized realm of the native city, she *does* leave her life as an "Angel in the House" for a life as a "Woman in the Bazaar." Before I delve into the specifics of this bold transformation, I want to first trace the author's explorations of the fantasy of "going nautch girl" in an earlier novel, *A Free Solitude* (1907). This work is comparable to Steel's in articulating and strengthening the British woman's attraction to the nautch vis-à-vis the domestic woman who dances. The novel features an interesting friendship between the British Katherine Rolland and the upper-class Eurasian Myra (formally, Pymara) Chandler. During their first encounter, Myra exhibits her knowledge of the nautch, which she acquired from her ayah who, in her youth, had been a courtesan in the bazaar. As she "sat and listened," Katherine is pleasantly "surprised at the quality and richness of the girl's voice" and "fascinated" by "the slender swaying figure with the strange eyes and floating hair" (131). In fact, the image of Myra's seductive dance and song entrenches itself in her mind and follows her to bed: "The voice, the gestures, the fantastic charm of the little scene, remained with Katherine" as she prepared for bed that night (132). The homoerotic implications of the scene become even more evident as Katherine "f[alls] asleep and dream[s] of Myra's singing and swaying in her pink dressing-gown by the dull light of the wall lamp" (132). The sensual display of Myra's body physically affects Katherine, so much so that she reproduces the vision of the performance in her sleep.

As I discussed earlier in my analysis of *Voices in the Night*, the British woman's infatuation with the female performer derives partially from an attraction to her revitalizing emancipation. Katherine's fascination with the performance, in other words, is contingent on her own needs at this point in the narrative: the need to experience a similar moment of exhilaration. As an orphan newly arrived in India after her uncle's recent death, Katherine "dream[s]" of Myra's performance to escape her present miseries; for once, she does not "[lie] awake troubled with fears of the future" (132). The nautch, in other words, excites her because it promises an alternative to her dissatisfying life, as it does in a subsequent scene in the novel. Recalling both *Voices in the Night* and *The Lure of the Little Drum*, Katherine sits near an open window as "a plaintive little native song" reaches her. She is instantly reminded of Myra, who had sung her the very same song that night: "and as she heard it, she thought of Myra, wild, undisciplined, beautiful, swaying to and fro in the pink dressing-gown, swaying her supple brown hands, chanting the weird minor melody .. the song of the Nautch-girl" (334). Myra's "wild" and "undisciplined" nature entices Katherine precisely because it is a counterpoint to her tame and disciplined life as a Memsahib.

Written seven years after *A Free Solitude*, Alice Perrin's novel *The Woman in the Bazaar* actualizes what British women in other novels can only imagine. That is, "going nautch girl" materializes in this work of fiction through the Englishwoman's ultimate act of betrayal: her decision to flee the sequestered British bungalow, the sanctity of imperial Englishness in India, for the expansive and noncolonized space of the Indian bazaar, where the nautch girl reigns supreme. Perrin's female

protagonist, Rafella Forte,⁹³ is an imperial housewife who turns courtesan after a bitter divorce from a jealous husband. Over the course of the narrative, she undergoes a drastic transformation from the sheltered daughter of an English vicar to the confined wife of a British officer in India and finally to the independent courtesan of an Indian aristocrat.

When we are first introduced to Rafella at the start of the novel, she epitomizes domestic virtue as the dutiful daughter of the local vicar of an “isolated little Cotswold village” in England (1). Adhering to the dominant Victorian ideology of the Angel in the House, she immediately attracts Captain George Coventry during his timely visit to his homeland, satisfying his orthodox beliefs about a woman’s proper role: “His ideal of womanhood was modelled on the type represented by his mother and his aunts and his spinster sister, ladies whose sole charm lay in their personal virtue, the keynote of whose lives was duty to the home” (6). Having lived a sheltered life, Rafella indeed is the epitome of female virtue: “innocent, guileless, unacquainted with evil—white and unsullied in thought and experience” (15). In fact, this “innocent,” “white,” and “unsullied” Englishwoman is the perfect candidate for marriage to an Anglo-Indian like George since (as I have detailed in the first chapter) officers in the colonial outpost were encouraged to wed domestic angels like Rafella, particularly following the mutiny of 1857 when the desire for racial segregation intensified. Such wives, it was hoped, would nurture the much-needed cult of domesticity in the colony and deter men from succumbing to Eastern temptations (particularly sexual ones) that jeopardized the survival of the imperial race (Stoler 33). George, therefore, is the mouthpiece in Perrin’s novel of a patriarchal imperialism

⁹³ It is interesting that Perrin chooses this name for her character. Its non-English quality might be a deliberate choice to foreshadow, or justify, Rafella’s deviation from British Victorian gender norms.

that upholds “English family structures, which restricted women to the home, as a sign of national virtue and superior morals” (J. Singh 92).

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

Rafella had discovered a pleasanter method of doing good to others, that of bestowing good advice on erring young men, inviting their confidences, using her pure and virtuous influence—deluding herself⁹⁴ and the susceptible youths with the notion that she was their mother-confessor and friend, their safeguard against wicked temptations and wiles of the world. (Perrin, *Woman in the Bazaar* 47-8)

By positioning herself as a maternal advisor to men experiencing relapses in their behaviour, Rafella enacts the typical role performed by many female missionaries who entered the colonies. As Anna Johnston suggests in her work on the “coalition of imperialism, gender, and domesticity” (38), evangelical discourse engendered women as innately more spiritual than men because they inhabited the private sphere—a sphere that supposedly was removed and protected from the vices permeating public spaces (45). Leonore Davidoff and Catherine Hall arrive at a similar conclusion: “All were agreed that domestic seclusion gave a proper basis for a truly religious life and since women were seen as naturally occupying the domestic sphere this was one of the reasons why women were seen as more ‘naturally’

⁹⁴ The narrator’s satirical word choice may suggest Rafella is “deluding herself” by thinking that she can make a difference in the moral outlook of depraved men and she is “deluding herself” in thinking that these men are genuinely interested in her teachings, and not in her.

religious than men” (90). Male imperialists, in contrast, were deemed readily susceptible to temptations pervading the public world, in constant danger of “going native” and hence desperately in need of British women’s moral intervention. As a “mother-confessor and friend,” Rafella takes on this gender-specific responsibility of rescuing and deterring men from immoral conduct, which in turn offers her a sense of purpose in the colonial context. As Johnston puts it, “colonial environments provided white women with a new kind of emancipation in terms of their integration of the roles of domesticity and work outside the home” (49). Likewise, Rafella values her womanly burden to civilize British men because it is a legitimate means for her to participate in the public sphere.

However, Rafella’s pride in her public ambitions is short-lived. Her husband fears that her close interactions with men of ill repute, particularly the notorious Mr. Kennard, might taint her virtuous character and thereby damage her symbolic role in India as the repository of morality and civilization. Rafella feels stifled by her husband’s jealous behaviour, which is at odds with her newfound desire to fulfill her imperial responsibility in India. The conflict between Rafella and George enacts the common tension in the *fin de siècle* between the need to keep the Anglo-Indian woman isolated in her bungalow and the growing female aspiration to work outside the home, a tension that, for example, Flora Annie Steel often felt, as I have detailed above. It enacts the problematic position of the Memsahib who, in entering the public sphere, immediately compromised the very foundation of her claim to authority: her domestic virtue. Indeed, as Thomas Metcalf argues, “by pitting against each other the extremes of decorative seclusion and vigorous activity, the female roles set out within the Raj enforced upon the White Woman exceptional tensions of

race and gender” (109). According to her race, the Memsahib had an imperial duty to perform as a colonialist, but according to her gender she had a more important domestic duty to perform as a housewife. Ultimately, the British woman in India—as George himself would maintain—was a “convenient [icon] to be valued, yet protected and segregated” (J. Singh 81). Upholding the Memsahib’s iconic role as the Angel in the House, in other words, often took precedence over providing her with imperial activities outside the home. Thus, while her role as advice-giver to “erring men” is potentially empowering for Rafella, it is also potentially contaminating in the eyes of the male imperialist who fears her moral deterioration.

Coming to recognize her domestic identity as more of a burden than a gift, Rafella resents George for his unfounded distrust and accusations: “George’s hostility towards Mr. Kennard had aroused all the obstinacy in her nature. Her self-esteem was wounded. It was positively insulting of George to question her conduct” (Perrin, *Woman in the Bazaar* 69). Yet, as the archetypal patriarch, George Coventry “could contemplate matrimony only under conditions of supreme possession, mental as well as physical” (16). The severity of his jealousy culminates in his threat to kill Rafella if she continues to meet with Mr. Kennard. In a desperate attempt to save herself from his unbridled anger, Rafella “flee[s]” and “run[s]”⁵ (198) from her husband and the house that epitomizes her imprisonment, as she frantically tries to open “the door that had been bolted by him as they entered” (92).

In fleeing from her husband and the bungalow, Rafella rejects colonial domesticity for its direct opposite: the public life of a tawaif in the Indian bazaar. Years after their final encounter, her ex-husband witnesses her standing confidently and happily on the balcony of a kotha located at the heart of the city, “in the street of

the dancers and such-like” (196). At this point, Rafella has undergone a complete transformation from the Angel in the House to the Woman in the Bazaar; she has relinquished the bungalow in the Anglo-Indian community for the kotha in the Indian city.

After hearing the “unsavoury rumour” of the Englishwoman in the bazaar, the police officer in Perrin’s novel asserts, “that sort of thing isn’t so uncommon as you’d think” (176). His words gesture towards the many, albeit historically repressed, examples of British women “going native” and renouncing their ties to England to find solace in a foreign culture—perhaps the most troubling being the case of Ulrich Wheeler, daughter of General Wheeler, who was originally glorified in accounts of the mutiny as the epitome of female courage and virtue⁹⁵ yet later discovered “living quietly” in a native bazaar married to a sowar who presumably saved her life (Sharpe 72).⁹⁶ Along similar lines, H. Hervey’s *The European in India* (1913) documents the example of Mrs. Beathe who started a new life in the bazaar under the alias Perdita, finding financial and emotional relief in her newly adopted culture after being rejected by her own (ctd. in Nevile, *Love Stories of the Raj* 177). Flora Annie Steel recounts comparable tales about women drifting into prostitution in two of her short stories: “Glory of Woman” from the collection *In the Permanent Way*, and “At a Girls’ School” from the collection *From the Five Rivers*.

⁹⁵ The well-known tale about Miss Wheeler recounts her fierce courage in murdering her abductors, and then committing suicide to avoid any dishonour to her feminine virtue. See Jenny Sharpe, *Allegories of Empire*, and P. J. O. Taylor, *A Star Shall Fall*.

⁹⁶ Bithia Mary Croker’s novel *Mr Jervis* (1894) features a female character modeling Miss Wheeler. As Indira Sen notes, Croker “scripts the shameful ignominy attached to ‘Mutiny’ ladies who married their rescuers. In Croker’s novel, such a lady, hidden away in the native quarters and now leading a life of a ‘native’ widow is revealed to be a ‘mutiny’ lady”—a term used to place their transgressions within their historical specificity (99).

Perrin draws on these historical and fictional examples in her portrayal of Rafella, who “drift[s] into one of the big bazaars” (*Woman in the Bazaar* 176) in search of an alternative lifestyle after the divorce shatters her faith in marital happiness. By deliberately fusing real worlds with fictive ones, Perrin is able to safely address these otherwise unspoken female transgressions in her novel, to create a space in which to gossip about incidents that rupture the facade of marital order and women’s discipline in Anglo-India. She recognizes that Englishwomen went native in the bazaar more often than the British were ready to admit since these women’s willing conversions to a supposedly inferior religion and culture was a blow to the male imperialist’s ego. Understanding it as a threat to his own authority, George, likewise, is haunted for much of the narrative by “a whisper, a rumour, that a woman, an *Englishwoman*, was living in a certain quarter of the bazaar [my emphasis added]” (126). The major source of anxiety, here, is not that a “a [white] woman” but specifically “an *Englishwoman*” has drifted into the bazaar. While (as I have implied above in my discussion of the Contagious Diseases Acts) female prostitutes of European descent regularly occupied the regimental brothels in India, Englishwomen did not (Strobel 28-9). In fact, the “visibility [of Englishwomen] at ‘native’ bazaars [was] a source of mortification” (Sen 15) for the British, as it is for George.

Considering the pervasive appeal of the bazaar, it is not surprising that Captain George Coventry’s second wife, Trixie, is also “awfully interested and amused” by the spectacular city when she first witnesses “a native procession, a wedding, or a festival of some kind” (123). Indeed, India’s urban landscape has an intoxicating effect on her senses:

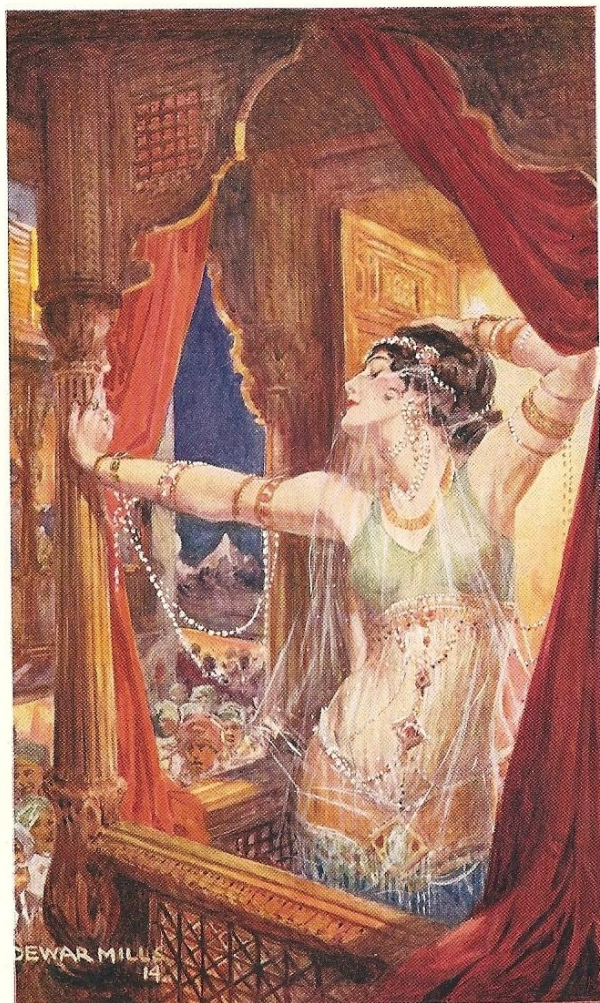
India rather frightens me ... and yet I get fits of fascination that make me feel as if the country has bewitched me.... I felt the spell of it this evening on the river, and still more strongly when we were waiting in the bazaar for the procession to pass. That big city, full of people, we really know nothing about, with all sorts of weird things happening in it that we never hear of. I think the bazaar is quite wonderful. (125)

Frightening yet fascinating, weird yet wonderful—the bazaar is an exhilarating place that offers infinite possibilities to a “modern girl” (99) like Trixie. For that reason, her very presence in this nondomestic site, where her body is on public display before male natives, makes her husband anxious: “It recurred to him unpleasantly, increasing his annoyance that his wife should have been exposed to the gaze of a crowd of excited natives in company with a man who was not her husband. In his opinion, the less Englishwomen were observed of Orientals the better. His determination strengthened that in future Trixie should have no escort but himself” (127). In his second marriage, George once again desires to monitor the mobility of his wife in the public sphere. In order to protect her virtue, he wants to keep her sheltered, away from the possible detrimental effects of the Indian environment. George upholds imperialist rhetoric that stressed the importance of keeping Memsahibs isolated from Indian culture and people; Anglo-Indian women were to “barricade themselves” from the influences of a decadent India by hiding deeper in their bungalows and “shield[ing] their consciousness against Indian encroachment” (Parry *Delusions* 6). As Benita Parry argues, there was a “neurotic concern with protecting their identity from pollution by strange, unwholesome and deviant India” (6).

George is less successful in safeguarding his ex-wife who, by embracing the life of a nautch girl, secures freedom from the confined space of the Anglo-Indian home. She reigns supreme in the bazaar where George, in contrast, feels out of place, unable to navigate his way through the unruly chaos of the “stifling city” (197).

Entering the densely populated city one night in search of a shortcut to his destination, George is incessantly interrupted by Indian processions and by relentlessly bumpy pathways. From every rooftop “rose faint sounds of music and the murmur of voices” (190). As he travels down the “main street of the city,” he sees “rough string bedsteads set outside the shops and dwellings, figures, scantily clothed, sprawling upon them” (191). He also encounters a procession that includes “a gaudy group of nautch girls singing, twirling” (192). And finally, in order to find his way through the overly crowded bazaar, he is forced to enter the heart of the city, “the street ... of the dancing women and such-like” (192), where nightly entertainments transpire in the kothas: “Some of the balconies were silent and deserted, others held shadowy shapes; one or two interiors were ablaze with light, and the sound of tinkling music floated from them” (193). Clearly, dancing girls and musicians assume an overpowering presence in the nondomestic(ated) and noncolonized space of the bazaar, a space that completely escapes George’s control and threatens to engulf him for good. In fact, “It seemed to him that he had been driving for hours through this fetid wilderness of bricks, as if he should never emerge into air that was pure and untainted” (191).

When he reaches the heart of the inner city and his pony stumbles in a pothole, George is forced to stop beneath a terrace where he finally encounters “The Woman in the Bazaar” who, in “native dress and tinselled veil,” “emerged onto a



“Coventry guessed that this was ‘the woman in the bazaar’”
(see page 194).

Fig. 39: Mills, J. Dewar. “Frontispiece” to *The Woman in the Bazaar*. 1914.

Perrin, Alice. *The Woman in the Bazaar*. London: Cassell and Company, 1914.

balcony above, and stood looking down on the group” (193). The frontispiece to the 1914 edition by J. Dewar Mills (see fig. 39) vividly captures the self-satisfied spirit with which the Memsahib-turned-naught-girl embraces her new identity and claims ownership of her opulent surroundings.⁹⁷ Amidst a crowd of male admirers, Rafella catches sight of her distressed ex-husband and expresses amusement and mockery, rather than fear, over the male imperialist’s utter lack of authority in a domain where she holds sway: “softly the

woman laughed—not only laughed, but threw something down⁹⁸ that landed, lightly, at his feet. A hoarse murmur of comment went up from the onlookers; one of them, a weedy youth, picked the object up and tendered it to the sahib, exclaiming with insolent politeness: “Thou art favoured, heaven-born”” (194). By facetiously selecting

⁹⁷ A reproduction of this frontispiece appeared in *Bookman* alongside a review of the novel. See *Bookman* 47.279 (Dec 1914): 95.

⁹⁸ a garland of jasmine

him, Rafella reverses the position of power that George once held over her, when he ventured into the “isolated little Cotswold village” (1) in England and selected her as his bride. She exercises the authority in this public site, not as a dependent wife but an independent courtesan.

While her presence in the bazaar empowers her and threatens British imperial culture, Rafella expresses an even stronger defiance to colonial domesticity by pursuing a sexual relationship with a native. Moments after he recognizes her, a stunned George watches as Rafella descends from her balcony, enters a lavish “scarlet-hooded vehicle” owned by the “rich” Babu Chandra Das and leaves southwards to live as his mistress (195). By accepting an Indian man as her lover, Rafella subverts one of the main roles prescribed to British women in India: the maintenance of a racial and cultural divide between the British colonizers and the colonized natives. In the popular British imagination, an Englishwoman’s body was a synecdoche for the nation, making any “invasion” of her body by a nonwhite male a direct attack on Britain itself and a danger to the eugenical reproduction of the imperial race.⁹⁹ However, as Gail Cunningham concludes, “by the *fin de siècle* several writers were producing romances showing English women willingly entering sexual relationships with Indians” (xvii).¹⁰⁰ In a culture that placed British women as the “repositories of morality” and “the ultimate symbols of western refinement and high culture” (Cunningham 42), such interracial liaisons posed a strong challenge to imperial authority and provoked the fear of a reverse colonization. Likewise, in choosing Babu Chandra Das as her lover, Rafella commits the ultimate act of “going

⁹⁹ Particularly following the accusations of rape that emerged during the rebellion, Memsahibs were deemed to be “in need of protection from lascivious Indians” (Ballhatchet 5). See Chapter 1.

¹⁰⁰ See, for example, Victoria Cross, *Anna Lombard*; Victoria Cross, *Life of My Heart*; Ida Alexa Ross Wylie, *The Hermit Doctor of Gaya*; and Alice Eustac, *A Girl from the Jungle*.

native”: she prefers a partner of native rather than British descent and invites a bodily contamination that jeopardizes her racial purity.

In the course of the narrative, Rafella thus transforms from the archetypal imperial housewife to the rebellious public courtesan. An appalled George recognizes that “The woman in the bazaar, who lived in the street of the dancers and such-like, who now drove away in the *rath* of Babu Chandra Das, was Rafella, his wife of the years that were over and dead” (Perrin, *Woman in the Bazaar* 196). Rafella creates herself anew by stepping outside the bounds of her bungalow and embracing the spirit of the city, by renouncing her role as the Angel in the House for the more favourable one as “the woman in the bazaar.” The boundlessness of the bazaar rather than the sanctity of the home provides her route to female emancipation. As a courtesan, she chooses her lovers, lives lavishly, is well respected by her admirers, and roams freely in the expansive space of the city.

Nautch Girl to the Rescue:

Testing Imperial Feminist Formations

Flora Annie Steel’s *Voices in the Night* and Alice Perrin’s *The Woman in the Bazaar* are two prime examples of *fin de siècle* fictions that introduce the prospect of Memsahibs “going nautch girl.” Both writers make use of a common generic form—the novel—to communicate the growing resentment of their female characters toward the “white woman’s burden” in the colonial bungalow and a subsequent fantasy to relieve themselves of their domestic duties by turning courtesan. In *Delusions and Discoveries*, Parry devotes a chapter to the study of best-selling Anglo-Indian “novelettes”¹⁰¹ written by women between the 1880s and the 1920s and faults

¹⁰¹ It is unclear why Parry consistently refers to these novels as “novelettes.”

many of them (including Alice Perrin) for their ungrounded and purely fantastic representation of India: “The fictional India compounded of banal guesses and clichés, of inaccuracies and half-truths which the romancers fashioned won them an avid readership. Their fantasies met with and satisfied the reader’s needs, their distortions served as valid insights.” “The romantic writers,” she goes on to conclude, “reveal themselves rather than India” (98), projecting their own fantasies and desires onto an Indian landscape and people.

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

physical freedom that was inevitably attractive to British women in India who felt burdened by their imperial domestic roles.

Indeed, in the British imagination the public dancing girl or courtesan seemed to enjoy a relatively autonomous lifestyle—an observation that was disseminated through a large body of nineteenth-century fiction and nonfiction (as I have traced in more detail in the Introduction). By securing an education in literature and the arts, a generous income, the rights to property, and even the pleasures of nonmarital sexuality, the nautch girl was an anomalous Indian woman who lived more freely and happily than the white woman sequestered in her Anglo-Indian bungalow (and analogously the Indian woman sequestered in the zenana). It is not surprising, then, that this apparently autonomous lifestyle would attract those Englishwomen in India, like Flora Annie Steel and Alice Perrin, who may have felt constrained by their domesticity. After all, unlike the non-domestic and non-marital lifestyle of the tawaif, the (racial) empowerment of the Anglo-Indian female in the colony was contingent on epitomizing and performing the very role—the Angel in the House—that was the source of her confinement.

It is in their fictions, then, that these authors implicitly articulate their frustrations with the white woman's burden in the colonial home and present domestically burdened Memsahibs who would rather “go nautch girl.” “Going nautch girl” in these narratives therefore not only challenged the Victorian cult of domesticity in British India but, more importantly, subverted the racial hierarchization of womanhood that was at the heart of the civilizing mission. In other words, fictions that introduce British women imaginatively or literally turning courtesan, such as Steel's *Voices in the Night* and Perrin's *The Woman in the Bazaar*,

offer a much-needed alternative reading of the British/Indian female encounter, one that does not merely recycle, and inadvertently cement, the dichotomy of the emancipated British woman and the oppressed Indian woman. Instead, subverting imperial feminist rhetoric, these Anglo-Indian novels render the independent nautch girl as a foil to the domestically subjugated white woman in India. As Flora Annie Steel admitted in one of her nonfictional works, “the Western Woman has quite as much to learn from the Eastern woman as the Eastern woman has from the Western” (Steel and Menpes, *India* 105)—and it is this reverse emulation of Indian rather than British standards that surfaces in these novels and opens the door for Memsahibs to experiment with a non-Western model of female independence that promises to liberate white women from the burdens of colonial domesticity.

It is through their willingly seduced female characters that both Steel and Perrin express doubts of their given racial superiority in the international women’s movement of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries; instilled with the belief that they belonged to the most emancipated of all female types, they experience a moment of self-interrogation when confronted with evidence of the nautch girl’s relatively more autonomous lifestyle. This interrogation continues in *fin de siècle* novels that feature a New Woman in India—a woman who is committed to female empowerment in the empire until she meets her opponent, the Indian dancing girl, who scares her back into the domestic sphere.

CHAPTER 3

The New Woman's (Mis)Adventures in India: Encounters with the Recalcitrant Nautch Girl

The investigation of women's desires for liberation in *fin de siècle* literature must take into account a key female figure of the 1890s: the New Woman. Likewise, colonial representations of the nautch girl at the turn of the century must be considered alongside the growing anxiety and hope embodied by this female icon. This consideration necessitates rethinking and problematizing the arbitrary boundaries separating the genre of New Woman fiction from Anglo-Indian fiction. Although receiving minimal interest in current scholarship, many New Woman writers set their fictions in colonial India, and conversely many Anglo-Indian novels written at the turn of the century featured New Woman characters. The novels I discuss in this chapter, particularly Fanny Emily Farr Penny's¹⁰² *The Romance of a Nautch Girl* (1898), lie in this intersection between New Woman and Anglo-Indian fiction, and more importantly introduce an Indian model of female independence—the nautch girl—into this generic space.

The insertion of the nautch girl into this space, I believe, is strategic—a means by which the female writers gauge the aspirations of the New Woman against the similar desires of the Indian dancing girl, whether tawaif or devadasi, who in the popular British imagination possessed the very liberties that many Western women were increasingly seeking in the *fin de siècle*. In juxtaposing these two female types,

¹⁰²Penny's full name was Fanny Emily Farr Penny, but she published under Fanny Emily (F.E.) Penny; hence, in subsequent mentions of her name, I will drop her middle name, "Farr."

the authors arrive at a common conclusion. The New Woman's search for independence and emancipation in India is short-lived, resulting in her return to the domestic sphere and to prescribed gender roles, while in contrast the nautch girl remains relatively free and powerful as an unmarried courtesan who dominates the public sphere and escapes the British colonization of her body. In this chapter, I concentrate primarily on one key novel that illustrates this pattern: Fanny Emily Penny's *The Romance of a Nautch Girl*. I examine the ambitions of the New Woman, Beryl Holdsworth, alongside the two nautch girls, Deva and Minachee, dwelling in the fictional town of Chengalem. Both types of women share a common goal, the desire for female empowerment. However, it is the nautch girls in the narrative who prove to be more persistent and successful in securing this power. In fact, Penny's novel ends with an uneasy admission that the naive Anglo-Indian woman, although inspired by a temporary thirst for adventure, is no match for the non-colonized Indian dancing girl. Like the generic ending of a New Woman novel, the memsahib realizes (ironically quite early in the novel) that she is better off remaining sequestered behind the sheltered walls of the Anglo-Indian home.¹⁰³

It is her Indian counterpart, conversely, who bears hope of an alternative lifestyle for women. In contrast to Beryl who is slowly socialized into a conventional domestic woman, culminating in her marriage, Minachee gradually grows from a loyal British subject to a freedom-seeking devadasi who recycles her mother's (Deva's) resilient spirit. In my re-reading of Penny's novel, I therefore disclose a hitherto unrecognized double ending, an ending in which Penny's more liberal

¹⁰³ In this respect, Penny's novel shares the boomerang-style narrative of famous New Woman novels like Grant Allen's *The Woman Who Did*—which W.T. Stead referred to as “A Boomerang of a Book” (qtd. in Ledger, *The New Woman* 16)

readers may have celebrated in Minachee's triumph while her more conventional readers may have been relieved by Beryl's eventual retreat. I locate a similar ambivalent conclusion in other novels of the *fin de siècle*, and argue that collectively these works seem to position the nautch girl as a wish-fulfillment for New Woman readers who cannot derive equivalent pleasure from the downward spiral of the English female characters featured in the fiction of the period. It is the Indian nautch girl, not the English New Woman, who better maintains the goals of the women's movement in these turn-of-the-century texts.

The New Woman and the Politics of Empire:

Reinvestigating Anglo-Indian Fiction at the *Fin de Siècle*

The last two decades have seen a rise in New Woman scholarship and an ongoing struggle to define the contours of the woman's movement at the turn of the century.¹⁰⁴ Scholars agree that the stereotype of the Girton College graduate who rode a bicycle, wore rational dress and smoked cigarettes is far too simple a classification for such a multi-faceted, complex and contradictory figure. As the editors Angelique Richardson and Chris Willis assert in their Forward to their collection of essays on *The New Woman in Fiction and in Fact*, the "New Woman," both in fiction and in fact, was (and remains) a shifting and contested term" (xi). In her article "The New Woman and the Crisis of Victorianism," Sally Ledger makes a similar claim: "The New Woman as a category was by no means stable: the relationship between the New Woman as a discursive construct and the New

¹⁰⁴ See Ann Ardis *New Women, New Novels: Feminism and Early Modernism* Gail Cunningham, *The New Woman and the Victorian Novel*, Sally Ledger *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* Lyn Pykett *The 'Improper' Feminine: The Women's Sensation Novel and the New Woman Fiction*, Elaine Showalter *Sexual Anarchy: Gender and Culture at the Fin de Siècle*, Ann Heilmann, *New Woman Strategies: Sarah Grand, Oliver Shreiner, Mona Caird*.

Woman as a representative of the women's movement of the *fin de siècle* was complex, and by no means free of contradictions" (Ledger, "New Woman and Crisis" 23).

These complexities and contradictions permeated various aspects of the movement, including the New Woman's relationship with the racial and imperial politics at the *fin de siècle*. The New Woman emerged during "Britain's so-called 'Age of Empire,'" or what has been termed the age of New Imperialism,¹⁰⁵ when "notions of 'race'¹⁰⁶ abounded in the intellectual culture of the period" (Ledger, "New Woman and Crisis" 31). According to Patrick Brantlinger, this fixation on the imperial race was a reaction to the turbulent climate of the 1890s, a time when "the British found it increasingly difficult to think of themselves as inevitably progressive; they began worrying instead about the degeneration of their institutions, their culture, their racial 'stock'" (230). More importantly, their "doubts about the continuation of the British Empire" fuelled the increasing need to "breed[...] a strong, pure English 'race'" (Ledger, "New Woman and Crisis" 31)—and this goal necessitated the participation of women. Under the burgeoning science of eugenics, women, with their reproductive potential, on the one hand, offered hope of regenerating a stagnant England and, on the other, potentially contributed to the nation's decline. This posed the subsequent question: which women were considered "fit" enough to breed? More specifically, was the New Woman a suitable mother? The answer to this question, both in non-fiction and fiction, was ever-changing, multiple and

¹⁰⁵This period saw a heightened territorial rivalry between the leading imperial nations of Europe, resulting in a series of conflicts: the Anglo-French war in West Africa, Anglo-German rivalry in East Africa and Samoa, the Anglo-Portuguese conflict, among others (Roy 100). Under constant threat of losing their territories, European nations invested more energy into building not only military but also cultural and racial strength (which were viewed as prerequisites to physical prowess).

¹⁰⁶Theories about race in the nineteenth century justified imperial and national hierarchies; as Indira Sen notes, the Victorians "conceiv[ed] of a hierarchy of races that reflected levels of physical, intellectual and even moral advancement, with the white races located at the top, Asians in the middle, and the Africans at the bottom of the heap" (Sen 6).

contradictory. Indeed, depending on the perspective, the New Woman was seen simultaneously as an anti-maternal degenerate and a “racial supermother,” the “symptom and agent of decline” and “the agent of social and/or racial regeneration” (Richardson and Willis xii).

Interpreting any attack on Victorian patriarchy as a simultaneous attack on Victorian imperialism, critics of the New Woman often represented her as “a danger to the continuance of the ‘race’,” as “a potential mother of physically weak and mentally feeble children” (Ledger, “New Woman and Crisis” 31). Intelligent women in particular, they claimed, were to blame for the lowered birth rate, not only because they de-prioritized motherhood but more so because their mental pursuits led to infertility (Sen 4). Even when they could reproduce, the resulting offspring showed signs of degeneration. Among these opponents was the medical professional Henry Maudsley, who in 1874 feared that women who “live[d] laborious days of intellectual exercise” would breed “a puny, enfeebled and sickly race” (qtd. in Ledger, “The New Woman” 18). In 1894, his contemporary Charles Harper similarly argued that a “learned or muscular woman” took “revenge[...] upon her offspring,” giving birth to “stunted and hydrocephalic children” (18). The New Woman’s obsession with an education, he asserts, will result in the “ultimate extinction of the race” (18). As Ledger points out, both Maudsley and Harper employ eugenic discourse to push their anti-feminist stance, and conveniently “voice” their “fears” “at the exact moment when Britain’s interests abroad seemed to be increasingly under threat” (18)—at a time when locating fit mothers was of paramount importance to the future of the imperial nation. Playing off of this anxiety, other critics rendered the freedom-seeking white female as analogous to the rebellious colonized subject, using “epithets

like Wild Women and Shrieking Sisterhood [to] explicitly link[...] feminist women with unruly natives” (L. Richardson, *New Woman* 3).

However, like the burgeoning scholarship on late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century imperial feminism, many scholars have reconsidered the New Woman as a participant in colonialism. Both in her book *The New Woman: Fiction and Feminism at the Fin de Siècle* and her article “The New Woman and the Crisis of Victorianism,” Sally Ledger exposes the irony that while indeed many critics attacked the New Woman on grounds that she was unfit for, and disinterested in, motherhood, various feminists in contrast celebrated their role in the eugenical reproduction of the British race. “Middle-class feminists of the 1890s themselves,” Ledger argues, “had a considerable ideological investment in notions of empire and in the continuance of the ‘race’, with many of the New Woman writers championing motherhood and ardently supporting purity campaigns” (“New Woman and Crisis” 32).¹⁰⁷ They complied with the racial theories of their time, and were just as preoccupied as their critics with delineating between the civilized and the barbaric, the natural and the unnatural, the progressive and the regressive—positioning themselves on the favourable side of these binaries. They claimed that they were working towards rather than against the survival of the nation and the empire. Angelique Richardson similarly proposes that “Eugenic feminists such as Sarah Grand, Ellice Hopkins and Jane Hume Clapperton sought to rewrite love along racial lines, excising passion and privileging desirable offspring”—what she calls “the

¹⁰⁷ Like many other scholars, Ledger points to Olive Schreiner, famous for her writing on South Africa, as a chief example of imperial feminism.

eugenization of love” (185).¹⁰⁸ As such scholars have collectively suggested, the New Woman’s relationship to the politics of empire was indeed varied, complex and contradictory.

Not surprisingly, perhaps, this complicated relationship between the New Woman and imperialism found expression in the fiction of the period, fiction that significantly blurred generic categories. One of the few scholars to draw out a relationship between colonial adventure novels and New Woman narratives is LeeAnne Richardson. In *New Woman and Colonial Adventure Fiction in Victorian Britain: Gender, Genre and Empire*, Richardson recognizes that “imperialist and feminist discourses existed in tandem” (6) at the turn of the century, and hence explores the interrelationship of two subgenres that “developed relationally—in reaction to one another, as well as in response to cultural anxieties” (5). She “argue[s] that the imperial adventure novel is the twin star of the New Woman novel; that both revolve around one another, affected by the other’s gravitational pull” (4). In drawing out this relationship, she rereads Olive Schreiner’s classic New Woman narrative, *The Story of an African Farm*, for example, as a feminist rewriting of male imperial adventure fiction, or conversely investigates the appropriation of the New Woman figure in male imperial romances, like Mina Harker in Bram Stoker’s *Dracula* (3). At the heart of Richardson’s study is a reinvestigation of turn-of-the-century novels as hybrid forms that draw from multiple genres, and therefore as works that should be examined relationally rather than in isolation.

¹⁰⁸ However, while admitting that many New Women adhered to the popular Galtonian eugenics of the time, LeeAnne Richardson problematizes a monolithic reading of the imperial New Woman by revisiting the writings of Mona Caird and upholding her as anomaly among her contemporaries. Unlike the Eugenic feminists, Caird, she argues, was refreshingly anti-eugenic in her stance, believing that the biological narrative of eugenics forced women into narrowly-defined roles that privileged national duty over individual aspirations, and the future of the nation over women’s lives in the present (207).

In her article “*On the Face of the Waters*: Flora Annie Steel and the Politics of Feminist Imperialism,” Richardson accordingly reinvestigates Flora Annie Steel’s famous mutiny novel as a fusion of generic modes. The novel, she argues, “represents Steel’s fraught negotiation of the models presented by colonial adventure writers and New Woman novelists” (119).¹⁰⁹ Thus, by questioning the arbitrary categorization of novels into distinctly different genres, Richardson provides impetus for investigating those novels of the *fin de siècle* classified as Anglo-Indian alongside those classified as New Woman. Sarah Bilston is one of few scholars besides Richardson to open up the existing field of New Woman studies to include novels falling under the umbrella of Anglo-Indian fiction. In her article “A New Reading of the Anglo-Indian Women’s Novel (1880-1894): Passages to India, Passages to Womanhood,” she observes that “The Anglo-Indian woman’s novel and feminist New Woman text in fact took shape approximately at the same time” (321). She explores a series of Anglo-Indian novels, including Alice Perrin’s *Into Temptation*, Bithia Mary Croker’s *Pretty Miss Neville*, and Fanny Emily Penny’s *Caste and Creed*, all of which emerged at the close of the nineteenth century and share a “kinship with New Woman writings” (323). Bilston argues that the female protagonists of these works “voyage out” to India anticipating the fulfilment of their desire for action, agency and freedom on colonial soil (325). Feeling stagnated and repressed by conservative English society, they foresee their maturation into New Women on the promising terrain of Britain’s most prized colony. In these narratives, she argues, “India is projected as a means of escaping a limited British experience and gaining greater independence” (321). I will take up Bilston’s argument more thoroughly in

¹⁰⁹ Jenny Sharpe, likewise, recognizes that in *On the Face of the Waters* “the past [specifically, the 1857 Rebellion] is made to accommodate the ‘New Woman’ of the post-Mutiny era” (88).

my analysis of Penny's novel, but it is important to note that 1) she restricts her analysis to English-born and -bred heroines, newly arriving on Indian soil, while my analysis will include those female characters who are Memsahibs, residing in Anglo-India, from the onset of the narrative and 2) she does not analyze those novels that feature a nautch girl alongside the New Woman.

Nevertheless, it is in consideration of this blurry line between New Woman and Anglo-Indian fiction that I approach *fin de siècle* novels that present a New Woman and nautch girl within the same generic space. These fictions reposition the New Woman (who is usually identified as a Memsahib) in colonial India and narrate her encounter with the rebellious nautch girl as a moment of anxious revelation: the Indian dancing girl is more powerful and liberated than she can ever be. Prime among these works is Fanny Emily Penny's *The Romance of a Nautch Girl*.

The Supernatural, the Inscrutable Indian Dancing Girl:

Female (Mis)Adventures in Fanny Emily Penny's

The Romance of a Nautch Girl

In the latter half of the nineteenth century, an allegedly strange Hindu ritual—known as the devil dance—was fast becoming a Western curiosity. Among the few British women who wrote about this mysterious pagan custom at the *fin de siècle* was Fanny Emily Penny. Having lived in India for over twenty years, Penny (like many of her male contemporaries) attempts to describe the bizarre affair in her 1914 history on *Southern India*. In hopes of alleviating the rampant spread of disease in the village, the townspeople gather at midnight and form a circle around a banyan tree (presumed to be the devil incarnate) and attempt to appease him through a series



Fig. 40: Lady Lawley. “Devil Dancer.”
Watercolour from Fanny Emily Penny’s
Southern India. 1914.

Penny, Fanny Emily. *Southern India*. London:
A & C Black, 1914.

of offerings (particularly, animal sacrifices).¹¹⁰ As a crucial component of this ceremony, the body of one of the many male worshippers, often a priest in costume (see fig. 40) becomes a vehicle for the devil to communicate with his followers. The possessed body engages in a wild, hypnotic dance—the so-called devil dance¹¹¹—to the sound of ferociously beating Indian drums.

After giving such a vivid description,

Penny declares that access to the devil dance was restricted to Hindu participants who barred the entry of non-believing

Europeans. She goes on to report one incident out of many when the British, disregarding these restrictions, tried to satisfy their insatiable curiosity:

Some years ago the curiosity of two English boys, the sons of an old missionary, was roused by what they had heard, and they were determined to see one of these orgies. They hid themselves in an ancient banyan tree, under which a dance was to take place after sunset ... the trunk was hollow, and into this they crept, climbing to a cleft from which they had a good view

¹¹⁰ In *Southern India*, Penny understands the devil dance to be a process of exorcism. “Disease among Hindus and Muhammadans,” she argues, “is believed to be the direct work of an evil spirit” (83). The dance is held to “cast out devils and control them” (83).

¹¹¹ This ritual is formally referred to as *Teyyam* or *Teyyamar*, and is practiced predominately in the Cannanore and Kasargod districts of India (Varapande 53). The British demonized the practice by misrepresenting the worship of an Indian deity as devil worship.

without being seen. It was a dangerous exploit, for if they had been

discovered ... the consequences might have been fatal to the boys. (144)

The prevailing British desire to see the devil dance “without being seen,” to visually access the innermost secrets of Indian culture without being “discovered,” was the inspiration for Penny’s 1898 novel, *The Romance of a Nautch Girl*. What makes this novel, however, different from typical nineteenth-century renderings of the devil dance is the deliberate inclusion of women: first, an Indian woman as the devil dancer and, second, a British woman as voyeur. Indeed, the novel, set in the fictional village of Chengalem in the Tinnevely district of South India, features a Memsahib by the name of Beryl Holdsworth who accompanies two half-brothers, William and Felix Manning, on their attempt to hide in the banyan tree and witness the mysterious devil dance. Rather than one of the village men, the event is led and performed by the local devadasi (or “dasi,” as Penny calls her) named Deva. Whether as a British spectator or an Indian body-on-spectacle, both women desire greater female empowerment during the devil dance, but it is the nautch girl Deva who exhibits greater authority, emerging as the stronger of the two women.

As a budding New Woman, Memsahib Beryl Holdsworth longs to unveil (thereby colonize) the mysteries of India, specifically the devil dance in which Deva participates. In representing a dangerous journey into the heart of India’s secret religious practices, Penny’s narrative borrows from but also modifies the typical traits of a colonial adventure novel. As I have briefly outlined in Chapter 1, according to Ghatum Chakravarty, the post-1857 “project of colonial knowledge” (180) was to make all corners of India transparent. This salient concern with the surveillance of every aspect of Indian life coincided with the rise of colonial adventure fiction,

fiction that frequently featured British protagonists who were heavily immersed in detective work and crime inspection, and committed to the “heroic penetration of the rebel world” (145). These novels desired “a panoptic knowledge of the indigenous society” (159), a desire for complete mastery over the “Underworld of India” (to use George MacMunn’s words) that still operated undetected and undeterred by British authorities. The devil dance was one of many of these colonial underworlds. An 1876 article entitled “Devil Dancing in Southern India” confirmed, for example, that “It is an extremely difficult thing for a European to witness a devil-dance” (374). In her history on *Southern India*, Penny goes further to explain how the villagers and priests involved in the ritual “are very jealous of allowing their dances to be seen by strangers, the reason being that the afflatus will not rest on the dancer except in the presence of true believers” (143). She draws a similar conclusion in her novel since the British community at Chengalem is aware that “the people would never tolerate the presence of a European” (*Romance of Nautch Girl* 115), that they “will not stand any espionage with their religious functions” (115-116). The poojaris, she claims, are “uneasy on the score of a European’s presence in so sacred a spot” (163); with ironic reversal, the Indian population seeks to maintain the purity of their religious sites and activities by keeping contaminated British bodies outside set parameters.

Yet, because the devil dance is an Indian custom yet to be unearthed by the ruling race, it provides a worthy source of adventure for the fictional hero of an imperial romance. Penny’s novel introduces a potential heroine amidst this predominantly “masculine business” (140) of surveillance, a heroine who, like the typical New Woman adventuress in India, seeks emancipation from domesticity by

venturing into unknown colonial lands. The late nineteenth century genre of colonial adventure novels saw the rise of the female adventuress who partook in the exploration and colonization of foreign lands alongside the male imperialist. As I have suggested above, scholars such as Sarah Bilston and LeeAnne Richardson have explored the correlation between the emergence of the New Woman novel and the female heroine in colonial adventure fiction. Bilston argues that the female protagonists who “voyaged out” to India in many of these works anticipated the fulfillment of their desire for action, agency and freedom on colonial soil (325). In this respect, Penny, like many other female Anglo-Indian writers of her time, rewrites the male-dominated spy-narrative by including Beryl Holdsworth in the adventure. Indeed, Beryl is curious about the temple and wishes to unveil “its dark mysterious secrets known only to the poojaries, and the dasis, or dancing girls” (*Romance of Nautch Girl* 25). Accompanied by two male companions, she relishes in “a delightful adventure” (245) “with the courage of the persistent woman” (257) when she hides in the hollow trunk of a banyan tree, the manifestation of the devil himself. During this escapade, she is “fascinated by the scene below” (252), and tries to maximize her visual consumption, “dr[awing] [her]self up to [her] point of observation” (252). Like her male counterparts, she seeks panoptic power.

However, rather than celebrating a successful venture into a forbidden realm, Penny’s novel is one of many at the turn of the century that presents, as Gautum Chakravarty claims, an “ironic reversal of the themes of colonial adventure and espionage” and is “alive to the problems of ‘pacifying’ and administering foreign territory” (7). Indeed, Beryl’s “delightful adventure” results in the disappearance, or rather unseen murder, of William Manning, who, after being startled by a snake in

the banyan tree, impulsively escapes the trunk only to be caught and slaughtered by the “mad” crowd of worshippers.¹¹² Along with Felix, Beryl survives but, nevertheless, is punished for her ambitious desire to visually penetrate the non-colonized areas of India, a punishment that simultaneously weakens her resolve to explore new lands and new selves.

To begin with, during her escapade in the Banyan tree, she loses rather than gains female independence by reasserting male supremacy. A terror-stricken Beryl relies heavily on the physical strength and calm logic of her male companion Felix Manning, the surgeon at Chengalem. As an exemplary imperialist, Felix is “above the average human being” (354), endowed with a “stronger and calmer mind” (7) than most, but also skilled in the manly imperial sports of “cricket and football” (23). Befitting his image, he maintains physical and emotional discipline during the misadventure in the Banyan tree and lends the distressed Beryl much-needed help. As she “turn[s] away in horror, feeling sick and faint” (253) after witnessing the dreadful devil dance, Beryl “stretche[s] out [her] hand to Dr Manning for support” (253). He holds her “firmly,” in an “iron grip” (253), and she, in turn, “[clings] to him in the dark like a frightened child” (255). She places her trust in his “stronger will” (254), thereby validating his masculinity while revealing her own weakness (254).

Due to his medical background, Felix is also the one to cure Beryl of her subsequent ailment, to restore her back to her former health, her proper self. This treatment involves purging her of the lingering effects of the devil dance on her now-aroused body. Beryl has been affected, or rather infected, by the hypnotic eroticism

¹¹² Much of the rest of the novel follows the futile mission of solving William Manning’s mysterious disappearance.

of the dance, which has a spell-binding influence on all those who watch or listen (except the disciplined Felix, that is). Penny describes this all-encompassing lure in *Southern India*, since the dance seduces everyone in proximity of it: the “excitement increase[s] and spread[s]” (146), awakening “evil spirits” within all the spectators. The “frenzy increase[s],” she goes on, like an “infection” that cannot be contained (146), as more and more “[join] in the dance” and the “circle,” tearing “their hair, clutch[ing] wildly at their garments, rending them and throwing them aside, until they [are] left stark naked” (147). Resembling an orgy, the sexual energy of the performance spreads and excites the crowd, soliciting their participation. Similarly, Penny renders the devil dance in *The Romance of a Nautch Girl* as a contagion slowly engulfing all those who dare watch or listen. “The pervading passion” of the dance “thrilled through the breasts of the onlookers, and stirred their inmost souls” (52). “Madness,” she claims, “seemed to have come upon the audience as well as upon the performers” (53).

As a voyeur, Beryl is just as susceptible as the natives to the sensations awakened by the dance and dancer, sensations that plague her for the next few days. When Felix pays her a visit the following morning, she is “hysterical” (11) and “talks quite wildly” (11) in her delirious state. The sexual connotations of her condition are evident: with a “wild look” in her eyes (7), Beryl lies “moaning” (7), suffering from a “very unusual attack of nerves” (33). Not knowing where she has been, her mother and her ayah suspect her condition to be caused by the stifling Indian heat. Despite their miscalculation, they recognize that a British woman’s exposure to the Indian environment (both its physical and cultural environment) jeopardizes her health. In this respect, Beryl’s physical response to the devil dance reinforces the separate-

sphere ideology on which patriarchal imperialism relied, suggesting that when a Memsahib steps outside domestic boundaries, she becomes vulnerable to the advances of a degenerate India.¹¹³ Because the Englishwoman is upheld as a synecdoche of the nation, any potential invasion of her body poses a direct threat to Britain itself. It represents the possibility of a reverse colonization in which the white female is contaminated by a purportedly pre-civilized and demonic India, a contamination that in turn endangers the eugenical reproduction of the imperial race. Like Grace and Lesley in *Voices in the Night*, these sensations therefore frighten Beryl, and she welcomes medical attention from a male authority who places her back on the correct path, restoring her domestic English femininity—a restoration that accompanies her eventual marriage to her male saviour, as I detail later.

Thus, the English heroine's desire to master the "masculine business" of surveillance in Penny's novel is short-lived because it is detrimental both to her health and the survival of the British Raj. By the end of the novel, Beryl realizes her escapade was motivated by "the rashness and thoughtlessness of the child" (257) rather than the courage of a female heroine. She dismisses her own ambitions, in other words, as immature and irrational, as outside her natural abilities as a woman. She is now afraid of the non-colonized, pagan underworlds of India; her "curiosity [is] more than satisfied" (253). She prefers to return to the security of the domestic sphere, the Anglo-Indian home, which guards against the encroachment of a demonic India. At a time when the women's movement was urging Anglo-Indian women to leave their bungalows and participate in the colonial enterprise, Penny's

¹¹³ By using the word "hysterical," Penny highlights the gender-specificity of Beryl's condition. As Indira Sen notes, "The Victorians called hysteria the 'daughters disease' and believed that women were more, prone to mental illness than men because of their reproductive system" (32).

novel thus justifies their self-imposed isolation, and this retreat back into the imperial home accompanies a corresponding admission, or willing acceptance, of a lack of colonial knowledge. Beryl, in other words, chooses not to participate in colonial surveillance alongside her male counterpart. Instead, she chooses to remain “ignorant of the strange customs of the Hindus living around her” (259).

In contrast to Beryl’s eventual return to and containment by domesticity, Deva puts up a strong fight against those who attempt to contain her power. She draws this strength not only from her role as a temple dancer but also a devil dancer. Penny informs her readers that it was “not customary for the dancing girls to take part” (56) in the devil dance, that “dances of the temple are not present as a rule” (56).¹¹⁴ Correspondingly, in *Southern India*, her description of the devil dance makes no mention of devadasis. Yet, despite this absence, she presents the temple dancer Deva as an integral part of the Hindu ritual; she characterizes her as the devil’s wife who not only organizes the midnight ritual but also performs the sacred dance. Her conflation of the tradition of temple dancing with devil dancing, in other words, is not a result of misapprehension but a deliberate narrative choice. Arguably, like Steel whose tawaifs occupy the non-colonized spaces of the bazaar, Penny situates her nautch girl within a realm that bespeaks her power. By conflating the prevailing practice of devil dancing with the recalcitrant spirit of devadasis, Penny is better able to capture their potent and continual threat to British colonial rule and ideologies. More specifically, her reason for positioning the devadasi as a leader of this religious rite is two-fold: one, the nautch girl, like the devil dance, remains unknowable and,

¹¹⁴Kaley Mason suggests otherwise, tracing female involvement in *Teyyamar* in Kerala. See “Marginal Feminine Musicianship in Kerala, South India: Telling Stories of Singing from Subaltern Locations.”

two, she remains uncontainable. Mirroring the devil dance, she threatens the civilizing project in India because of her perpetual inscrutability and recalcitrance.

As I mentioned above, a part of the British colonial project was to amass information on Indian lands and people. The nautch girl upset this drive for colonial knowledge and instead personified the inscrutable and ineffable aspects of India. As Jyotsna Singh argues, the performance of the nautch upset the ethnographic gaze because it “could not be easily domesticated by the colonizing ‘imagination’” (110). It generated a crisis in representation, whereby the British could neither understand nor describe the performances that they witnessed:

Images of courtesans performing appeared frequently in a variety of British journals and memoirs, revealing an interpretive and epistemological crisis in the viewers who witnessed a spectacle of excessive availability, yet did not have the terms of intelligibility to know the aesthetic, intellectual or social codes of the nautch. (106)

The British often faced difficulty translating the dances (in addition to the Indian songs) that constructed a narrative through a language of hand, facial and body gestures. “The otherness of the courtesan’s world,” Singh explains, “disoriented the British” because their cultural codes were not easily recognizable to colonial spectators and listeners (106). Penny confirms this disorientation in *Southern India* when she argues that the lifestyle of a dancing girl “is difficult for a European to comprehend” (131). The nautch girls featured in fictions of the period heighten this “interpretive and epistemologic crisis” by actively misleading and baffling their British rulers. Like Chandni in *The Potter’s Thumb* and Lalun in “On the City Wall,” Deva uses her perceived impenetrability as a weapon, intentionally setting up



Fig. 41: Lady Lawley. “A Hindu Dasi, or Nautch Girl.” Watercolour from Fanny Emily Penny’s *Southern India*. 1914.
Penny, Fanny Emily. *Southern India*. London: A & C Black, 1914.

red-herrings to misguide British authorities who are attempting to solve the murder mystery in Chengalem. Felix Manning, for example, recognizes that her “cunning [... is] not easy to fathom” (39), and consequently he “[knows] not what to believe. Was she lying? Or was she telling the truth in such a way as to leave him purposely under the impression that she was lying” (39). The indecipherability of the devadasi leaves the male imperialists of Chengalem perplexed, undermining their ability to demystify India. As Benita Parry

argues, “India’s intractable but ‘sublime’ mystery was ... unnerving to the British” (*Delusions* 66); its evasive quality broke down the logic of colonialism, the logic that knowing India meant ruling India. Anindyo Roy recognizes that the inability to comprehend the nautch girl meant the inability to govern her. “The impossibility of ‘reading’ such powerful women and comprehending their ‘nature,’” he argues, represents the larger challenges faced by the British to epistemologically rule colonial India (91). This inability to know or to represent women like Deva anticipates their more serious threat to the Raj: the inability to contain them.

In *Southern India*, Penny reports that the sacred Hindu ritual of the devil dance continued every Friday night in Tinnevely (143). The persistence of this pagan custom parallels the survival of devadasi traditions despite continual British efforts to contain them. Likewise, Deva is committed to securing “freedom ... at any price”

(*Romance of Nautch Girl* 330). Like Chandni and Dilaram of Steel's narratives (see Chapter 1 and 2), she is always "planning schemes of vengeance" (330) against her perpetrators, using her power as a devadasi and a devil dancer to her advantage. Even in her dying moments, Deva emerges as super heroic: she dies from the venomous bite of a cobra, but not before she "vicious[ly] ...br[eaks] its spine" (339) in a final attempt to free herself. Penny presents the devadasi's battle with the lethal snake as a foil to Beryl's hysterical response to the "harmless," "sluggish tree-snake" (339) she encounters in the Banyan tree. "That cold, scaly body sliding over my neck," Beryl tells detective Major Brett, "was fearful beyond description" (254). While the Memsahib retreats in terror over a harmless reptile, Deva "giv[es] out a scream of rage" (339) and seeks revenge on the cobra whose "fangs penetrate[...] her flesh" (339). The phallic symbol now lies "writhing impotently" in her iron "grasp[...]," a "disabled reptile" who "ma[kes] no further attempt to strike its victim" (339).

Deva's vengeance on the phallicized cobra embodies the defiant spirit of devadasis throughout the nineteenth century. In fact, Penny captures a historical reality here in representing the temple dancer's relentless struggle to safeguard her independence. She writes her novel about twenty years after the devadasis successfully fought against the medical inspection of their bodies under the Contagious Diseases Acts (see Chapter 2) and a few years after the failure of the anti-nautch movement of 1892, which attempted to abolish the devadasi tradition on grounds that it was a prostitution sanctioned by religion. Albeit under-emphasized in current scholarship, the movement met resistance from the British and Indians alike,

and hence (at least in its initial stages) ultimately failed.¹¹⁵ Opponents of the abolition campaigns voiced their scepticism in Anglo-Indian and British journals of the day. They were particularly critical of the universalizing claim that all Indian female performers were prostitutes, and instead offered the opinion that the nautch was a more virtuous art form than the British dances of the time. A writer in *The Statesman*, for example, vehemently argued, “This agitation against the Nautch girl seems purely nonsensical...Before we advocate the abolition of the Indian Nautch let us taboo public dancing among our people and make the ballet or the serpentine dance rigorously penal” (qtd. in “The Nautch Girls of India” 420). Adversaries of the anti-nautch movement, in other words, advised the British to look in their own backyard before pointing fingers at the purported lewdness of Indian dance practices. A similar debate ensues in William Henry Giles Kingston’s *The Young Rajah* (1878) when Captain Brunett speaks against Reginald Hamerton’s views of Indian performances (see Chapter 2). Upon hearing Reginald’s resolute decision to eliminate the profession of Indian female entertainers, Brunett retorts, “I suspect the performances at an English opera-house can scarcely claim a higher position than the nautch” (127). Subverting cultural hierarchies, Victoria Cross, in her short story “Six Women,” more forcefully compares the dance of the Deccan performers to ballerinas at the Alhambra and the Empire and claims that “to the eye of the artist, there was nothing coarse or offending” in the dance of nautch girls; it was marked with a “harmony of motion” and “a poetry, a refinement” unequalled by Western dancers (18).

¹¹⁵ See the Conclusion for more on the anti-nautch movement and its eventual success.

Living in India for several years, and married to a well-known missionary, Penny would have been aware of the failure to contain the nautch girl under the campaigns of the 1890s, as well as of their earlier exemptions from the Contagious Diseases Acts. Writing during the rise of the women's movement, she would have also recognized the threat their disturbingly emancipatory lifestyle posed to colonial gender ideologies. Deva embodies this threat: she is no passive victim of colonial and native power structures. She is a rich, educated, sensual, politically active Indian female who occupies the public sphere and fights hard to preserve her liberties. She also defies the important British binaries that separated the spiritual realm from the sexual, analogously the domestic woman from the public. As I suggested in Chapter 2, the separate-sphere ideology was integral to evangelical discourse that defined the space of domesticity as sacred and pure. As *Angels in the House*, domestic women guarded and embodied this spirituality because ideally they were unsullied by outside influences. Devadasis disturbed these binaries because they were at once pious and erotic (a concept I revisit in Chapter 4). They fused sensual energies with religious worship, "liv[ing] in the space of the inbetween ... between the sacred and the profane in the colonial imagination" (Paxton, "The Temple Dancer" 84). Deva's participation in the devil dance (a rite that unleashes both spiritual and sexual ecstasy) heightens this position of liminality.

Penny's decision to demonize Deva, to represent her as the devil's wife, therefore is informed by a knowledge of the devadasis' almost-superhuman inscrutability and recalcitrance. Like her historic counterparts, Deva lies beyond human measures of control, and her supernatural power provides a rationale for why the British continually failed to know and contain her. She is demonized precisely

because of her enigmatic nature—since the British often “elided inscrutability with barbarism” (J. Singh 107)—as well as her indomitable strength which is attributed to her alliance with the devil.

The Romance of a Nautch Girl tests late nineteenth-century discourses of imperial feminism by pitting Beryl Holdsworth (the initially ambitious memsahib) against Deva (the almost invincible devadasi). Penny suggests that the Anglo-Indian woman’s temporary thirst for adventure and self-empowerment in India is inconsequential next to the insurmountable power of the Indian dancing girl—a power that Beryl cannot match and a power that scares her back into the security of the Anglo-Indian home. This power persists despite Deva’s eventual demise. In the conclusion of the novel, although she is physically dead Deva lives on spiritually through her daughter Minachee, who at an early age was “educated” “carefully” by her mother in the arts of the temple dancer (*Romance of Nautch Girl* 42). After some initial reluctance, Minachee embraces her inherited profession and recycles her mother’s independent spirit, signalling the survival of yet another generation of devadasis.

To Marry or Not to Marry?:

Rethinking the “Happily Ever After” in Anglo-Indian Fiction

Following a common pattern in Anglo-Indian narratives, Penny’s novel concludes with the long-awaited union of the Memsahib Beryl Holdsworth and Doctor Felix Manning. In the final few pages of the novel, after facing numerous obstacles and much reservation,¹¹⁶ the two protagonists finally confess their love for

¹¹⁶ Penny delays the romance between Felix and Beryl in several respects: his brother William had a deep affection for her and had intended to marry her, hence Felix refers to her as “sister” throughout

one another in an emotionally-charged scene: “Each found the haven of bliss in the other, and was in rest and in peace” (358). Shortly after this declaration of love, they depart for a six-month visit to England where they get married. Penny’s novel hence, at least on the surface, seems to recycle the typical “happily ever after” ending of the Anglo-Indian novel that focuses “on the process of love and courtship, ending in marriage” (Sen 73). According to Margaret Stieg, the generic plot of these “romances”¹¹⁷ is as follows: “There are scandals and gossips at the club regarding [the memsahib’s] ‘doings,’ interlaced with love-rivalries and misunderstandings and finally everything ends in a happy marriage” (Stieg qtd. in Sainsbury 165). The “happy marriage” with which the novel concludes, according to various scholars, is imbued with much significance. It marks the heroine’s ultimate transition into “memsahib-hood” (Sen 74), her assimilation into Anglo-Indian society and her subsequent role in “maintaining gender hierarchies, power relations and social order in the colony” (75). In other words, the institution of marriage in the imperial context reaffirms the “colonial status quo” which “require[s] women’s continued exclusion from the public sphere” (Sainsbury 168) and their willing participation in colonial domesticity. According to this understanding, by settling down to marriage, Beryl recovers from her initial transgressions by choosing a more acceptable role as colonial memsahib.

This adherence to matrimony becomes even more critical when the plot presents a potential love triangle, in which the third party is a native, such as the

the first half of the narrative (creating an incestuous undertone to their relationship), and Beryl is misled to believe that Felix has affections for Minachee.

¹¹⁷ Alison Sainsbury refers to the genre as “Anglo-Indian domestic novels” (Sainsbury 165). The focus on “love and marriage” in these novels, she argues, “has led to their characterization—one that is meant as a denigration—as ‘romance novels’” (165).

nautch girl Minachee in Penny's novel. As Deva's daughter and Felix's assistant at the local clinic in Chengalem, Minachee poses the threat of miscegenation, posing a "simultaneous ... threat to the empire" (Sainsbury 172). By competing for Felix's love, she intervenes in the union between two ideal British imperial citizens: the hero Felix Manning, who is "above the average human being" (Penny, *Romance of Nautch Girl* 354) for his unwavering devotion to the civilizing mission, and the heroine Beryl Holdsworth, who is the epitome of female purity "with the English roses still in her cheeks" (14). Nevertheless, Minachee uses all her faculties (both body and mind) in an attempt to win over the white man's affection. This battle becomes physical at one point when she throws a rock at Beryl, intending to injure and intimidate her into submission.¹¹⁸ Later, Minachee even convinces the Memsahib that she and Felix are romantically involved. After storming into Beryl's bungalow uninvited, she confronts her in her bedchamber with an "impertinent little laugh" of rebellion (269), reminiscent of Chandni (see Chapter 1), and "t[akes] out several trinkets of manifestly European make" (269). Using her skill at verbal manipulation, she fools Beryl into believing the "trinkets" are gifts from Felix, tokens of his affection. In this competition with Beryl, she adamantly asserts, "He shall be mine! He shall be mine!" (236).

While clearly Minachee is the more aggressive opponent in the rivalry for Felix's love, it is Beryl, not she, who ultimately wins his hand in marriage—marking the survival of a nuclear white family in the colony, the survival of the British race that competently fights off potential miscegenation. Felix's actions near the

¹¹⁸ The rivalry between the nautch girl and Memsahib culminates in violence in other novels as well, including Mary Martha Sherwood's *The History of George Desmond*, Flora Annie Steel's *The Potter's Thumb*, Emilia Blake's *My Only Love*, and (subversively) Victoria Cross's *Six Women*.

conclusion of the novel are integral to ensuring this survival. According to Anindyo Roy in *Civility and Empire: Literature and Culture in British India, 1822-1922*, Felix chooses the angelic, civilizing love embodied by the Englishwoman over the demonic forces of passion embodied by the nautch girl. Nevertheless, suffering from Beryl's recent rejection and the discovery of his brother's dead body, Felix is deeply tempted by Minachee's advances, almost "lost in the torrid colours of the Oriental passions which blazed before his dazzled vision" (316). However, he exercises sexual restraint by resisting the "spell" (316) that entices him, a sexual appeal that he attributes to "the power of the devil" (317). He prefers Beryl, with her "ignorance" about sexual matters, to the erotic invitations of the devadasi.

Roy, then, reads the ending of the novel as a standard celebratory moment for imperial British identity. The novel wraps up neatly with the Memsahib's triumph over the nautch girl, who disappears altogether from the narrative. His reading coincides with the analysis of other Anglo-Indian novels in which the threat of an interracial relationship is thwarted by expunging the Indian woman from the narrative (usually through death) so that the subsequent union of the ideal Englishman and Englishwoman can take place. In her study of Anglo-Indian fiction of the 1857 rebellion, for example, Jyotsna Singh argues "the plots of the mutiny novels call for the deaths of the native women, however virtuous or desirable, so that suitable British women may replace them" (114). In many of these narratives, then, the Memsahib represents a civilizing force who (as I have detailed in Chapter 1) saves the male imperialist from "going native," from disturbing the much needed boundaries between the white rulers and their colonized subjects. In this respect, as Elizabeth Buettner aptly puts it, white women are "designated as the only

appropriate partners for male colonizers, entrusted with upholding a domestic regime that prevented men from ‘going native’ and allowed the European community to reproduce itself, literally as well as figuratively” (6). The union between Beryl and Felix, likewise, promises to reproduce the insularity of the Anglo-Indian community at Chengalem, to fortify the barriers between the two races and prevent racial mixing.

Although Beryl triumphs in the battle for Felix’s love, her victory is not necessarily a moment to celebrate. It marks the end of her New Womanness, the loss of her adventurous spirit (as I have discussed in the previous section). Her marriage to Felix only serves to heighten this loss. In this respect, Beryl epitomizes the typical Anglo-Indian heroine who, as defined by Sainsbury, desires colonial knowledge at the onset of the narrative but ultimately conforms to domestic seclusion that extinguishes her initial fire. Marriage functions in Anglo-Indian novels, then, as “‘ordering any potential disorder’ in the Anglo-Indian station and by extension the empire” (Sen 74). “The management of the white woman,” Indira Sen notes, “becomes part of a discursive strategy of maintaining gender hierarchies, power relations and social order in the colony” (75). Beryl is likewise contained by existing power structures in the empire. Rather than a move towards emancipation, Beryl takes a step backwards towards conformity.

In the novel, her loss is magnified by Minachee’s relative gain. The last two paragraphs of the novel capture Minachee’s full development into an independent, self-reliant devadasi who recycles her mother’s rebellious spirit: “when [Felix] departed she took wing to other scenes, where the drumming of the tom toms and the orgy of the heathen pooja filled her wild heart with a gladness that made her life

complete” (*Romance of Nautch Girl* 359). Minachee is described as a “bird” (359) who takes flight to more promising lands where she will carry on the devadasi tradition with pride and contentment. She develops into an uncontrollable, “wild” Indian female who escapes the imperial authorities who attempt to cage her, to contain her power. That is, she does not passively adhere to Felix’s last request to the detective, Major Brett: “I want you,” he tells Brett, “to see that the girl is placed in proper hands. I have made arrangements for her to be taken into the mission house at Palamcottah” (354). Writing in the context of the anti-nautch movement of the 1890s, Penny represents Felix as an advocate of the rescue of purportedly helpless temple dancers like Minachee who are suffering from a “degrading life in the temple” (355). However, Minachee undermines his supposedly charitable role as a male imperialist since she recognizes that life in a mission house would lead to her forced conversion to Christianity and the subsequent loss of her current liberties. Penny’s novel subtly reveals, in other words, that at the heart of the anti-nautch campaign was the attempt to disempower, not save, these female communities, an attempt that ultimately failed because, as in the case of Minachee, it was not “likely that a dasi would thus tamely change the tenure of her life” (359), especially when the “curious license” offered by the “heathen temple” is “life and breath to her” (359).

In offering this reading, I deviate notably from Anindyo Roy’s analysis. Whereas he suggests that the novel ends with the containment of Minachee and the subsequent reassertion of the male imperialist’s authority, I interpret her final disappearance from the narrative in a contrary light: the persisting recalcitrance of these women who once again defy imperial efforts to civilize (more so, colonize) them. In his study, Roy draws a similar conclusion about Anglo-Indian novels that

feature a New Woman and those that feature nautch girls. He argues that (like the New Woman) the Indian dancing girl endangered the power of the male colonialist in India, and is regularly featured in “Anglo-Indian Romances,” predominantly those written by men, only to restore a threatened masculinity to a position of superiority. Nautch girls, he claims, “serve as the medium through which imperial men re-envisioned their authority and consolidated the very power that was perceived to be threatened by the rise of the aggressive ‘new woman’” (99). In other words, male authors drew on the perceived empowerment of Indian dancing girls to feed their own “fantasy” in these narratives, to “manipulate female agency in order to serve the ends of a colonial patriarchy” (99). Among the novels he examines,¹¹⁹ Roy interprets the nautch girl Minachee in Penny’s *The Romance of a Nautch Girl* as serving this very end, as reinstating Felix Manning to a position of power.¹²⁰

Although Roy’s analysis is useful in opening up discussion about the recurring appearance of the nautch girl in late nineteenth-century fiction and her associations with the New Woman, he deeply generalizes the function of these powerful indigenous women in problematic ways. First, he treats fiction by Anglo-Indian women as the same as those by men, suggesting that Penny (the only female novelist comprising his study) is committed, like her male contemporaries, to restoring the authority of a threatened masculinity. I would argue that Penny presents a relatively more in-depth characterization of her female characters, both

¹¹⁹ Roy examines Rudyard Kipling’s *Naulahka*, Charles Johnston’s *Kela Bai*, and F.E. Penny’s *The Romance of a Nautch Girl*

¹²⁰ Roy’s analysis of Penny’s novel is comparable to that of others who suggest imperial romances, particularly those by men, present a fantasy of male supremacy: the white, imperial hero substantiates his masculinity by ultimately defeating, and proving himself more powerful than, the threatening New Woman. As LeeAnne Richardson explains, such “romances—especially those set in India or Africa—were seen as revitalizing the male, whose virility was threatened by the usurpations of the New Woman’s new roles” (*New Woman* 8). Scholars often cite the heroine of H. Rider Haggard’s *She* as a prime example. Roy makes a similar claim about the nautch girl in colonial adventure fiction.

Indian and British, in order to explore their fantasies over those of men. Second, and more importantly, the nautch girls in various *fin de siècle* fictions are not contained by the conclusion of the narrative, but instead continue to threaten the dual forces of patriarchy and imperialism. These fictions represent the uncontainable, recalcitrant power of the nautch girl alongside the retreat of the Memsahib, positioning the Indian woman, not Englishwoman, as more committed to securing female liberation.

The conclusion of Penny's narrative likewise presents, in contrast to Beryl's regression into a conventional colonial housewife, Minachee's maturation into an independent, rebellious nautch girl, a transition that is (ironically perhaps) made possible due to her growing detachment from Felix, who represents both a patriarchal and imperial authority in her life throughout the narrative and delays her growth into a devadasi. When she is in Felix's company, she shows more signs of submission and dependency (much like Beryl during her experience in the Banyan tree). In contrast, in remaining unmarried, Minachee shares more affinities with the New Woman than Beryl does. After all, in the popular British imagination, the "woman of the period" was "identified as a single woman" (Ledger, "New Woman and Crisis" 23),¹²¹ a woman who was educated, financially independent and self-reliant and, thus, no longer in need of a male life partner (22). Critics argued that this modern woman "posed a threat to the institution of marriage" (23). The devadasis were targets of similar attack. Because they were unconventionally wed to inanimate objects and disturbed the nineteenth-century ideology of separate spheres, they were

¹²¹Not all New Woman novels rejected marriage per se, but instead advocated for reforms. As Carolyn Christensen Nelson argues, "rather, they believed that it should be constituted on entirely different terms than it presently was: marriage should be freely chosen rather than imposed on women by social and economic forces" (x-xi). One place where the controversy over the "Marriage Question" was articulated was the *Daily Telegraph*. Initiated by Mona Caird, the paper asked "Is Marriage a Failure?"—a question that permeated the British imagination throughout the *fin de siècle*.

a “profound threat to Victorian readings of the marriage contract” (Levine, “Multitude” 161). Minachee embodies this threat. She relishes in the freedom of her non-marital lifestyle, recognizing that she can “speak with whom [she] choose[s]” because she has “no husband to beat [her]” (*Romance of Nautch Girl* 88). More importantly, it is only after Felix’s departure and his marriage to Beryl that Minachee fully embraces the liberties of her lifestyle. In this respect, Penny’s novel might seem to celebrate the eventual union of Felix and Beryl but it ends with the simultaneous liberation of Minachee which, in the context of the late nineteenth century woman’s movement, arguably is a more satisfying conclusion. After all, as the title suggests, this is “the *romance* of a *nautch girl*,” not that of a Memsahib.

This is not the only novel of the *fin de siècle* to present such a romance that ends with the New Woman’s retreat to the domestic sphere, culminating in marriage, and the simultaneous empowerment of the uncontainable dancing girl. Flora Annie Steel’s *The Potter’s Thumb*, like much of her fiction, features an aspiring feminist, Rose Tweedie, who relinquishes her independent status after falling in love with the Anglo-Indian Lewis Gordon.¹²² For the first half of the narrative, the sport-loving, highly educated, and adventurous Rose Tweedie embraces her New Woman energies. She exceeds many of the men in the novel in tennis, horse racing, and even in proficiency with the native language. She also “sneers against men’s women” (88), women like Gwen Boynton who depend on men to fulfill their every need; more importantly, she resents the “old-fashioned theory that marriage was ... the whole of a woman’s [life]” (60). Indira Sen shares my observations that “at the beginning of the narrative ... [Rose] signifies the turn-of-the-century New Woman in her fierce

¹²²As LeeAnne Richardson confirms, “many of Steel’s women characters are like New Women ... independent, rebellious, critical of prevailing gender and sexual codes” (120).

competitiveness with men and in her anti-marriage stand” (283-84). However, like Beryl, Rose eventually “admits to the ‘superior wisdom’ of men and quite meekly settles down to an average memsahib’s lifestyle” (79), and is shown performing maternal duties in the final pages of the novel. “The narrative, in effect,” Sen argues, “succeeds in taming the feminist shrew in the colony” (79). She follows a similar pattern to Beryl: she is ultimately domesticated, fulfilling her destiny as an imperial Memsahib. Piya Pal-Lapinski makes a similar argument. “In the end, Rose,” she claims, “... surrenders to the dictates of domesticity in the service of empire, allowing herself to be transformed into the ideal colonial wife” (72). In *The Potter’s Thumb*, like much of Steel’s narrative, the Anglo-Indian woman relinquishes her feminist desires to take up the white woman’s burden.

In Chapter 1, I addressed how Steel stages a battle between Gwen and Chandni, one that the latter asserts, “I mean to win” (211), and one that culminates in their physical encounter in the Memsahib’s bedchamber. Gwen is not Chandni’s only rival during this battle; Rose Tweedie comes to Gwen’s rescue and forces Chandni to retreat through physical intimidation, having a “grip of a strong, healthy hand, made vigorous by constant use” (273). Despite her temporary victory, Rose is still no match for Chandni who hails from a long-enduring tradition of strong, independent women. In fact, Rose’s “bitter contempt” only strengthens Chandni’s resolve, “rous[ing her] innate savageness”—her thirst for victory over this colonial rival: “After all, she was the mistress, and this girl, despite her courage, was in her power; what is more, she should learn it” (273). Rose does learn it; she learns that her ambitions are premature in comparison to Chandni’s, who will remain the “mistress”

of Hodinuggur while Rose is first and foremost a wife to the male imperialist, burdened with bearing his children.

In direct contrast to Rose Tweedie, therefore, the tawaif Chandni rises to a position of political and economic power in her hometown of Hodinuggur without having to resort to marriage with the local rajah, Dalel Beg. Like the devadasi of Penny's narrative, Steel's tawaif, in fact, prefers her non-marital identity to the possibility of living in a zenana. "She was not going to marry a fool," she asserts, "in order to wear a veil and live with a lot of women" (254). She instead wants to dwell and reign in the male-dominated public sphere, and does. As Piya Pal-Lapinski notes, "Chandni ends up with three thousand rupees, priceless stolen pearls and a position of power in the world of bazaar and court intrigue" (72). In fact, Chandni's "dreams" come true since near the start of the novel she envisions a day "when she would have the upper hand in Hodinuggar," when "a woman's hospital" would be opened, and when there would be access to "water every year" (91). This dream materializes by the conclusion of the narrative when Dalel, her lover, is appointed king after his father's death, and she is given "a recognized position" (315). Because she is "a very clever woman," with more wits than Dalel, she is made "chief adviser" (315).¹²³ Moreover, the city is granted a "constant" "water supply" (315). Using her powers of manipulation, Chandni also blackmails the Anglo-Indian community for her personal economic gain. She warns them that she will disclose the truth about George Keene's suicide, causing a scandal among the community, unless her silence is bought. She has a specific prize in mind, "three thousand rupees and the pearls," the famous Hodinuggur pearls that were once in the possession of Gwen Boynton (see Chapter

¹²³ In her characterization of Chandni's political success, Steel may be drawing on historical examples of nautch girls turning rulers (see Chapter 1).

1). Thus, not only does she escape punishment but she is rewarded politically, financially and socially. Unlike Rose whose worth is now tied to her domestic duties as imperial housewife and mother, the unmarried Chandni remains free “to come and go as she pleases” (319).

Writing later than Penny and Steel, the eminent Anglo-Indian George MacMunn in *Azizun the Dancing Girl, and Other Indian Stories of Love and War* (1934) confirms the pattern evident in Penny and Steel’s novels. Challenging Roy’s assumptions, MacMunn does not seem to be invested in the restoration of a threatened male imperial authority, but more so in exposing how the nautch girl challenges the power of both imperial men and women. In his collection of stories about life in British India, Azizun (the tawaif) is featured in the opening story as well as a few others, stories that trace the progression of Azizun from a child to a mature courtesan. Echoing Penny’s plot, in the frame story (“Azizun, the Dancing Girl”) the narrator feels obliged to rescue the nautch girl, still in her youth, from a profession that he surmises will end in her ruin, and places her in a missionary school. However, like Minachee, Azizun cannot be contained by this rescue mission. She prefers the life of a nautch girl. She stays for three to four months but then “disappear[s]” (10) because she is unwilling to relinquish the freedoms afforded by her profession. She tells the narrator, “I love the power” (19), and by re-embracing her lifestyle as a tawaif she and her celebrated troupe of nautch girls prosper financially and socially.

The character of Azizun reappears in a subsequent short story, “Spring Fret,” that introduces a New Woman by the name of Miss Phyllis Rattray and her misadventures in India. A “daughter of a distinguished engineer” (117), Phyllis is a “graduate at Oxford” with a strong anti-patriarchal stance: she “had sat at the feet of

an advanced feminist, and had imbued from that lady a dislike and contempt for man” (117). With this training, she travels to India, specifically Kashmir where she visits a lady doctor named May Merryfield, “a friend of much the same type” (117). India offers the English-born New Woman infinite opportunities: “The good things of the world abounded at Srinagar, tennis and boating to the heart’s content, masses of fruit blossoms in the gardens, serious work if you wanted it in your role of advanced feminist, and Phyllis was enjoying herself immensely” (120). According to MacMunn, however, these feminist energies must subside since “in India you can’t keep such ideas long” (133)—foreshadowing Phyllis’s upcoming transformation. This transformation occurs enroute to the local rajah’s costume dance party. Phyllis chooses the “burqa” (121) as her disguise and, much to Captain James Cartell’s (her admirer’s) dismay, she insists on going unescorted to the houseboat that would transport them to the evening’s entertainment, asserting with bitterness, “I don’t know why men always think women want to be fetched or can’t look after themselves” (132).

Ironically, however, the boat ride proves just that—that Phyllis is unable to “look after [hers]self” during her misadventures in the dangerous Indian landscape. She is mistaken for a zenana woman due to her disguise and departs on the wrong boat, identical to her own. On route, the boat runs into “some sunken stakes” and begins to sink, but Azizun comes to her rescue (136). Calling out to the distressed Englishwoman, she calms her down, telling her, “Don’t be afraid, *Bibi*, come into my boat, see, yours is filling with water” (136). In contrast to Phyllis, the nautch girl takes immediate control of a treacherous situation in the turbulent waters, “throw[ing her burqa] off to shout orders to her boatmen” (136). In an authoritative voice, she

commands them to “row our paddles, you silly sons of owls, and steady her” (136). Due to a sudden “jamb of boats” (137), Azizun is unable to transport Phyllis safely to the dance, and instead offers to take her to the “Feast of Spring,” a Hindu festival taking place that very night. “Come with me,” she urges her English companion, and “I will take care of you” (137). Phyllis is comforted by the woman’s strong presence, and agrees, “if you will take care of me, I will come” (137).

Comparable to Felix’s relationship with Beryl, Azizun assumes the position of guide and protector to Phyllis during this venture into the heart of Hindu rituals. Although they travel side-by-side, representing the strongest females of their respective cultures—“Azizun, the dancer and courtesan of notoriety, and Phyllis, the Oxford graduate and determined feminist” (137)—the tawaif emerges as the stronger of the two within this particular context. During the ritual, Phyllis is frightened rather than empowered by her position as spectator. She “shudder[s] and grip[s] her guide” (139), begging her to “[t]ake me away, Azizun, take me out of this” (140). She relies on Azizun’s firm authority, who as a public Indian woman is more equipped to handle dangers specific to India. Like Beryl and Rose, Phyllis ultimately learns a lesson: she is not an authority on Indian customs and people, and that she can benefit from relying on the expertise of someone who is. Faced with this disillusionment, when Captain James Cartell finally locates her, Phyllis does not resist his offer to take her safely home. He now replaces Azizun as her rightful protector, and future husband who provides her with much-needed comfort: “Tired and rather frightened, and in a very chastened mood, with a sob not far away, she almost nestled against Cartell in the *shikara* cushions” (143). Like Penny and Steel’s novels, MacMunn’s short story partakes in managing the New Woman in the empire who

eventually embraces her destined role as imperial housewife. The nautch girl, in contrast, grows in strength, a strength that is highlighted *vis-a-vis* the Englishwoman. Their journey together into the hazardous sphere of Hindu religious rites subverts the racial hierarchies on which imperial feminism relied, placing the Indian courtesan as the saviour, leader and protector of the British woman. That is, their journey provides an alternative understanding of cross-cultural female encounters in India at the *fin de siècle*: it reverses the tradition flow of knowledge and action so that the colonized female verbally and physically guides the female colonizer, not vice versa.

(Re)locating the New Woman in Anglo-Indian Fiction

Whether it be in Fanny Emily Penny's *The Romance of a Nautch Girl*, Flora Annie Steel's *The Potter's Thumb* or George MacMunn's *Azizun, the Dancing Girl and Other Stories*, the introduction of the New Woman alongside the nautch girl in fictions of the *fin de siècle* establish a common pattern: the New Woman is contained by the close of the narrative while her Indian counterpart is not. These works begin with the Englishwoman's assertion of her New-Woman-like independence in India, her rejection of domesticity for the "manly" world of colonial adventure and politics. They end with an epiphany in which the English heroine willingly embraces her "natural" and purportedly more fruitful role as Memsahib, as the domestic(ated) Anglo-Indian woman. The eventual containment of the New Woman in these fictions appears in conjunction with the increasing emancipation of her Indian counterpart—the nautch girl, a woman who in contrast maintains marital, political, financial and physical freedom in the public spaces of India, whether the temple or the bazaar.

In punishing the Englishwoman's transgressions, these works reinforce the archetypal conclusion of both Anglo-Indian and New Woman narratives, narratives that cannot yet envision the white woman's successful break from patriarchal power structures. As LeeAnne Richardson argues, in New Woman novels "social roles have not caught up with the new attitudes, so there is no 'happy' ending possible for women who defy conventions" (*New Woman* 135). This pessimism also pervades Anglo-Indian works that prototypically indoctrinate Englishwomen into Memsahibhood. As Indira Sen notes, "The focus is clearly on the *process* of shaping and educating the young heroine for 'memsahibhood' and marriage in the colonial context. In other words, it deals with the '*making* of a memsahib'" (74). The novels are didactic in nature, providing lessons that "target an Anglo-Indian *female* readership" (74).

However, I argue that these novels find a way to transcend this generic pattern through the introduction of an Indian model of female independence: the nautch girl. Befitting the *fin de siècle*, a "transitional period" marked by a "collision between the old and the new" and "a time fraught both with anxiety and with an exhilarating sense of possibility" (Ledger, "New Woman and Crisis" 22), these fictions find a way to simultaneously satisfy and disrupt generic conventions, to restore Victorian gender norms while paving the path to a modern femininity. In other words, I propose that the endings of these works are more ambivalent than hitherto suggested, and it is in this ambivalence where hope for the women's movement resides. Juliet Gardiner argues that New Woman novels "testified to the power of fiction as an alternative means of exploration and a manifesto for change" (qtd. in Richardson and Willis 24). They were a "notable force for social and political

change” (Richardson and Willis 28). The fictions I discuss above seem to reposition this hope for change from the New Woman to the nautch girl, perhaps because it is safer to do so. While they end typically with the New Woman’s return to prescribed gender roles, they simultaneously envision a sort of feminist utopia via the nautch girl.

This transference may provide *fin-de-siècle* writers and readers an outlet for their feminist fantasies and, at the same time, may confirm a deep-seated anxiety that the leader of the women’s movement was not an English, but an Indian, woman. Arguably, Beryl abandons her pursuit of New Womanhood because she fears resembling her female antithesis—the nautch girl. Deva’s potential contagion extinguishes rather than incites Beryl’s feminist energies since the latter assumes her dictated role as the guardian of cultural and racial boundaries.

Because women like Beryl, Rose and Phyllis are not able to, or ready to, “go nautch girl,” in these novels white women lag behind in the movement for female liberation. So what happens when New Women characters do entertain the possibility of turning courtesan, of positioning the nautch girl as a model to emulate? I address this question in the next Chapter, where I look specifically at New Woman characters who achieve a modern femininity on the stage during a climactic moment: they perform the nautch.

CHAPTER 4

White Bodies, Indian Dances: “Going Nautch Girl” in the Performing Arts

Focusing predominantly on Fanny Emily Farr Penny’s *The Romance of a Nautch Girl*, the last chapter introduced Anglo-Indian novels featuring a strong-willed nautch girl alongside the adventuress Memsahib. Written within the context of the New Woman movement, these *fin de siècle* works ultimately, I argued, positioned the Indian female dancer as the stronger of the two female types. While the nautch girl managed to escape the clutches of colonial patriarchy, the white colonial female, in contrast, lost her drive for personal liberation when (often out of a fear of resembling the nautch girl) she retreated back to a conventional life in the colonial home. She relinquished her search for female independence when she succumbed to her prescribed role as imperial housewife who safeguarded cultural and racial boundaries. This chapter explores several Anglo-Indian novels that feature New Women characters who are passionate and talented dancers. These narratives offer an alternative, more daring, ending for the white female performers, one that does not result in their eventual containment but instead in their willingness to “go native,” or rather “go nautch girl,”¹²⁴ a term I use to describe white female performers who adopt the appearance, dress, art or spirit of the Indian dancer on the

¹²⁴ “Going nautch girl” is a term I introduce in Chapter 2 to define Memsahibs who, feeling burdened by their domestic duties, desire to turn courtesan in the Indian bazaar. While there I apply the term specifically to women looking for a way out of domesticity and who conceive the space of the bazaar as a favourable alternative to the bungalow, here I apply the term to female dancers with a pre-existing modern femininity that they solidify through their performances of the nautch.

Western stage. With an undying commitment to achieve a modern femininity, they embrace Indian dancing traditions, willingly jeopardizing their national and racial purity for the larger goal of personal, female liberation.

This chapter explores two of these novels in depth: first, Bithia Mary Croker's *The Company Servant: A Romance of Southern India* (1907) and, second, Ida Alexa Ross Wylie's *The Hermit Doctor of Gaya* (1916). Both works, although with different intents and to differing degrees, draw on the figure of the nautch girl as a measuring tool for their female characters' level of emancipation. In both novels, the female performers reach their pinnacle of liberation, freeing themselves from Victorian social mores, when they come to resemble their Indian counterparts. By masquerading as a nautch girl (whether physically, artistically or in personality), these white female bodies reinforce and embrace their New Woman status. Hence, these narratives render cultural (or even, at times, racial) hybridity, as opposed to purity, as a prerequisite to achieving New Womanhood. Written in the first two decades of the twentieth century, and at the onset of the modernist movement, they suggest that allegiance to an English national identity inhibits rather than nurtures new, modernist ideas. Instead, the route to a modern femininity for performing artists necessitates a simultaneous route out of English femininity and into a native one, one in which the nautch (particularly devadasi) tradition becomes a model for white women to emulate.

New Women, New Dances:

Exoticism in the Performing Arts

The novels I will discuss in this chapter respond to a historical actuality: in the *fin de siècle*, a number of female performing artists from Europe and North

America were expressing their revolt against patriarchy by associating themselves with the powerful figure of the Indian nautch girl, particularly the devadasi.¹²⁵ Before I delve into the specifics of nautch-influenced Western repertoires, it is important to draw out the increasing conflation between dancers (and, to a lesser extent, singers or actresses) and the New Woman at the turn of the century. Indeed, regularly associated with the New Woman, the figure of the dancing female reached unprecedented popularity at the turn of the century, saturating the artistic, literary and theatrical scene. As Hsu-Ming Teo asserts in her article (“Women’s Travel, Dance and British Metropolitan Anxieties, 1890-1939”), “Modern young women were, quite simply, women who danced” (375). To accommodate and reinforce this new dance craze, major metropolitan centres saw a rise in public dance venues (including halls, tea rooms and restaurants), professional dancing schools, and cabaret performances (370). Both as dancers and choreographers, women from across the globe, such as Maud Allan, Kate Vaughan, Loie Fuller, Isadora Duncan, Anna Pavlova, Martha Graham, Josephine Baker and Ruth St. Denis among a handful of others, became the forerunners of the modern dance movement—a movement that abandoned the ballroom traditions of the Victorian period and revolutionized the art of dancing to suit the goals of the women’s movement in numerous ways.¹²⁶ Indeed, women’s fight for “rational dress,” sexual liberation,

¹²⁵ The devadasis were particularly influential to western performers because many of them were touring Europe and North America in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, feeding the West’s prevailing interest in the spectacle of Indian spirituality. Nevertheless, other dance traditions (such as the movements of the tawaifs) were still influential in shaping the *fin de siècle* dance movements.

¹²⁶ Judith Lynne Hanna claims that dance practices sometimes rehearse or subvert the gendered ideologies informing the society in which they are produced: “Dance may be understood as a medium through which choreographers, directors and producers manipulate, interpret, legitimate and reproduce the patterns of gender cooperation and conflict that order their social world” (40). Because of this dialectical relationship between culture and dance, she explains, “When moving images created by dancers violate expected male and female roles and their conventional expressions, the novel signs

financial independence, and personal recognition were all embedded within and imagined through the new dances of the period.¹²⁷ To begin with, whereas music hall performers and ballerinas were almost always of lower social standing prior to the late nineteenth century, the new dances encouraged participation from “respectable,” middle-class women. By dancing publicly, these women symbolized their revolt against the separate-sphere ideology that dictated their place was in the home, not on the stage—within the private, not the public, sphere. As Gaylyn Studlor states in her study of New Woman performances, “Dance ... was associated in the early twentieth century ... with a feminine desire to escape bourgeois domesticity’s constraints and to create other, transformative identities that were convergent with those qualities of the New Woman that disturbed social conservatives” (106).

As a necessary step in this transformation, female performers at the turn of the century secured and articulated a newfound independence. They were working women whose profession offered them both economic security and social status. This self-sufficiency was embodied in their self-choreographed and solo-performances. Women of the *fin de siècle*, in other words, desired to dance alone, dared to dance without a male partner. Many of these female performers drew inspiration from Salomé, the femme fatale of Oscar Wilde’s popular tragedy of 1891 whose Orientalist “dance of the seven veils” became a symbol of female empowerment and was appropriated copiously by the growing body of female

on stage charge the atmosphere and stimulate performers and observers to confront the possibility of altered lifestyles” (xiii). The same could be said about the new dances of the *fin de siècle*.

¹²⁷ Some of these included the burlesque, the skirt dance, the tango, the two-step, the Brazilian maxixe, and the fox trot.

performers and choreographers at the turn of the century.¹²⁸ Maud Allan was among the most influential of these performing artists, choreographing a seductive, strip-tease-like routine known as *Vision of Salomé* that was widely imitated by women of all classes who desired to explore their sexuality. As Studlor notes, “women’s newly realized social and sexual freedoms were crystallized in the figure of Salomé” (106). Whether featured in music halls, cabarets or theatres, women’s self-choreographed and solo-performances, like “the dance of the seven veils,” departed from Victorian traditions because the female dancers took command of their own bodies. As “autonomous and active” performers, they “made rather than bore meaning” (Hindson 41). No longer was the female body on stage a mere puppet in a routine orchestrated by male choreographers. Known by name, they were authors of their own artistic creation, demanding the attention of their audience and inviting their gaze. Their burlesque-like performances represented their independence from and manipulation of men, both on and off the stage. New dances that did require a male partner often reflected an “increased casualness in male-female relations” (Wagner 257). Unlike the reserved formality characterizing classical dances such as the waltz,¹²⁹ in new routines the dancers moved with less rigidity and regularity, allowing for spontaneity and randomness that personified the *fin de siècle* desire to upturn prescribed gender roles (255).

The stage became a site in which white female performers refashioned not only their bodies but also their movements. Indeed, the “rational dress” movement found expression in the theatre as much as it did in popular culture. Middle-class

¹²⁸ This consuming interest in Salome saturated theatrical, artistic and literary representations, as Britain witnessed a decade of “Salomania.”

¹²⁹ Ironically, the waltz was considered anything but conventional when it was first introduced to the British public, and was instead condemned as scandalous and shameless.

women articulated their rejection of the traditional Victorian dress consisting of tight bodices, corsets, and long full skirts by appearing on the stage in shorter, flowing skirts and with bare feet—in a manner that allowed for greater mobility (Teo, “Women’s Travel” 376; Wagner 254). These wardrobes both highlighted the sensual appeal of the performers, accentuating the curves of the female body, and, at the same time, revealed a more androgynous physique admired for its athleticism (Studlor 112). Indeed, the New Woman, as dancer, was simultaneously athletic and sensual. Influenced by the Delsarte movement (named after the music teacher Francois Delsarte), the rigorous training professional dancers underwent produced a body that could bend, move, jump, balance in ways that the average female could not (Desmond 259).¹³⁰ At the same time, this all-too-visible and mobile body was strongly associated with an active female sexuality (367). In her discussion of New Women and dance at the turn of the century, Studlor claims that “To many conservatives, modern women were the metaphorical daughters of Salomé because they were increasingly destructive and dominating in their sensuality” (116). Deviating boldly from the iconic image of the “Angel in the House,” these women exhibited a female sexual energy on the stage that was disruptive to conventional ideas of female decorum (40).

Embodying female transgression in various ways, these new dances of the *fin de siècle* were thus intricately linked to the women’s movement—a movement in which a large number of dedicated performers from across Europe and America participated. As Sally Banes argues, collectively these female performers were “the

¹³⁰ As Jane Desmond notes, “American proponents of Delsartism stressed relaxation techniques, ‘energizing’ exercises, rhythmic gymnastics, ‘natural’ movement based on spiralling curves, statue-posing and pantomime” (260).

first generation of women in dance history to rebel as a group against both choreographic traditions and society's gender expectations" (123). "The forerunners," she goes on, "served as an entire cohort in breaking the rules, both of their art form and of cultural norms for women, by claiming (if not always realizing) liberty for the female dancing body—freedom from corsets and shoes; freedom from the marriage plot; freedom to create new expressive vocabularies of movement" (123).

Not surprisingly, the conservative population of England perceived these new dances and dancers as degenerate for defying time-honoured traditions.¹³¹ Much of this anxiety was articulated as and reinforced by the foreign quality of many of these dances. The general consensus was that the "frenzied, jerky, angular movements" of such dances were not part of a European heritage, but instead the influence of non-Western practices (Teo, "Women's Travel" 371). The music hall, in particular, was seen as a breeding ground for Eastern dance forms (369). Such was the case, for example, with Maud Allan. As Teo explains, "comparisons were inevitably made between Allan's interpretation of Oscar Wilde's play and the highly sexualised, Oriental genre of 'posture dancing' from which she claimed to draw inspiration" (69). An 1875 article titled "Dancing as a Fine Art" generalized the extent to which such *fin-de-siècle* performers appropriated Oriental routines, claiming that "The vast majority of modern dancers are mere posture-makers" (qtd. in Fellom 13). In *Modern Dancers and Dancing* (1912), J. E. Crawford Flitch even traced the

¹³¹ Many opponents attributed this degenerative quality to the alleged homosexuality of female performers. Drawing from their self-proclaimed independence from men, and their time together in close quarters (especially in dressing rooms), these critics suspected ballerinas of carrying on sexual relations with one another (see Chapter 2). These homophobic speculations culminated in 1918 with Captain Harold Spencer's accusation against Maud Allan. In a sensationnally-titled article, "The Cult of the Clitoris" (published in the tabloid *Vigilante*), he argued that Allan was a sexual pervert: a lesbian with an "enlarged and diseased clitoris" (qtd. in McLaren 9).

popular “Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay” dance (promoted by the music hall dancer Lottie Collins) to African roots (Teo, “Women’s Travel” 369). Inspired by ragtime and jazz, the dance craze in America purportedly incorporated the “torso, hip, shoulder, and head movements” belonging to black traditions (Wagner 254). In her study of nineteenth-century operatic performances, Piya Pal-Lapinski further concludes, “all female bodies on the operatic stage were ‘exoticized’” and opera “had become exoticism’s double” (114).

Many of the new dances, hence, were exotic(ized), suggesting that performing artists were tired of and disappointed with the traditions of their own society and looking elsewhere for alternative models. Indeed, several female performers experimented with distinctly non-English art forms to create new innovations that reflected their current ideologies. In her article “Embodying Transgression,” Karmen Mackendrick suggests that it was not uncommon for dancers to express their defiance against social norms by performing routines that boldly departed from what society deemed acceptable: “only what is conspicuously novel, committedly marginal and deliberately disturbing” (40), she argues, can create “a rebellious response to, and more precisely against, some culturally imposed ‘limit’” (40). Likewise, by performing non-Western dances, modern female dancers intended to shock their conservative audience and publicly reject the traditions of English femininity. As Teo explains, their “participation in non-western dance was a bold and transgressive act” (“Women’s Travel” 379). At the same time, it was a liberating experience because they discovered a new terrain of possibility outside “the social mores of metropolitan Europe” (376). In this way, the New Woman dancer’s attack on gender constraints emerged alongside a distaste for national and racial boundaries

that inhibited personal growth. Hence, those dancers who successfully performed their new womanhood also willingly embraced the art of other cultures. They readily “went native” physically, artistically, and ideologically.

It is within this permissive atmosphere that many female dancers at the turn of the century symbolized and confirmed their New Woman status by “going nautch girl.” The current scholarly focus on Middle Eastern- and African-inspired dance routines has overshadowed and downplayed the influence of the nautch on the performing arts at the *fin de siècle*.¹³² This oversight might be partly due to the fact that the interest in the nautch was by no means new at the turn of the century. In fact, the nautch girls, particularly devadasis, had a long-existing, wide-reaching impact



Fig. 42: “Bayaderes of Pondicherry.” Print. 1870.

“nautchlater.” *Columbia.edu*. Columbia, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

on the performing arts across Europe and North America throughout the nineteenth and into the twentieth century. As early as 1838, the European desire to witness the exotic spectacle first-hand rather than through mediated representations

led to a visit from five Indian devadasis (named Tille Amal, Amany Amal,

Saoundiroun, Ramgoum, Veydoun) and three male musicians from Pondicherry,

¹³² This oversight might partly be due to the fact that, as Sally Banes suggests, Middle Eastern posture dancing and the Indian nautch were often conflated or confused (Banes 90). This happens, for example, in the fiction of the period, such as in Flora Annie Steel’s *Voices in the Night* when the Memsahib Grace conjures up the image of a posturing dancer as she hears the seductive music of the bazaar enter her bungalow. The conflation continues today, in fact, in representations of the nautch, as in Mira Nair’s film adaptation of *Vanity Fair*.

who performed on both the Parisian and London stage.¹³³ Rather than generating fears of contamination and ruptured cultural boundaries, the entry of these Indian performers (the Les Bayaderes or Dancing Priestesses of Pondicherry, as they were known¹³⁴) onto the Western stage was an event to be celebrated, a pivotal moment in the theatrical arts. Europeans revered the nautch girls for their “originality and diversity,” as well as their “moral virtues” that distinguished them from “the more lewd men and women around the theatre” (Mackenzie 193).¹³⁵ Not only did they receive widespread acclaim but these nautch girls also sparked a burst of creative energy and experimentation in Western dance. Embellished with Hindu gods, temple settings, and Indian costumes, the nautch became a frequent feature of the European theatrical scene after this moment of contact. Since the early nineteenth century, then, as John Mackenzie makes clear, “Orientalist subjects were the catalyst for wholly new body movements and lines in dance, for fresh and exciting rhythms, for an erotic and sensual approach, a raw and abandoned quality which filled the theatres and took the artistic world by storm” (198). In other words, cultural boundaries were loosened in the performing arts to achieve the more desirable goal of generating artistic creativity, of experimenting with radically fresh and distinctly non-Western art forms that opened up new terrains of possibility.

While nautch-like performances continued throughout the century, both in popular and high culture,¹³⁶ *fin-de-siècle* representations of the Indian dance differed notably from earlier ones, specifically due to the rise of the women’s movement.

¹³³ For further reading see Janet O’Shea, *At Home in the World, Bharata Natyam on the Global Stage*.

¹³⁴ The term bayadere derives from bailadeira, the Portuguese word for female dancer, and was most often used by the French to describe devadasis.

¹³⁵ For more reviews see Kusum Pant Joshi’s article, “1838: South Indian Dancers Tour Europe.”

¹³⁶ For example, *Le Dieu bleu* or *The Blue God* (1912), *Bayaderka* (1877), *Kajania* (1889), *The Nautch Girl; or, the Rajah of Chutney-pore* (1891).

Performing the nautch at the turn of the century, in other words, was increasingly associated with New Womanhood, with the staging of a modern femininity, considering (as I have outlined in the Introduction) in the British imagination devadasis held various liberties Western women were seeking at the turn of the century. They were economically prosperous, held politically empowered roles, were highly educated in both secular and sacred traditions, were respected as artists and poets, owned and inherited property, and engaged freely in sexual intercourse without facing social stigma. As a relatively emancipated female community, these Indian female performers provided Western women with a model of femininity that closely suited the goals of the woman's movement.

By publically performing the nautch, western female dancers thereby symbolized and confirmed their New Woman status. While prior to the late nineteenth century the desire to publicly masquerade as a nautch girl was restricted to the lower-class ballerina, near the end of the century more and more "respectable" women participated in the dance craze. Spurred by the women's movement, they revolted against the cult of domesticity and publicly performed their modern femininity. According to Priya Srinivasan, "Oriental dancers like Ruth St. Denis and Maud Allen, to mention a couple, used Indian forms among other Asian techniques to emerge as public performers at the turn of the nineteenth century into the twentieth century" ("Dancing Modern" 5). In other words, these women owed much of their financial, social and cultural success as dancers to the Indian dancers they modelled. A number of women became international celebrities through their nautch-inspired innovations. For example, the English Letty Lind and the Irish Kate Vaughan became pioneers of the skirt dance in the 1870s; the rapid twirls, bellowing

skirts, and undulating fabric of the dance recalled the classical movements of the devadasi and tawaif dance traditions (see fig. 43 and fig. 44) and became a common feature in many of the *fin de siècle* dance innovations (Spear and Meduri 443).

Vaughan even performed as a nautch girl in *The Forty Thieves* (1880)¹³⁷ and in *Excelsior* (1885). “Miss Kate Vaughan,” one reviewer reported, “tantalizes her audience into wishing for ever more,” especially her “most becoming nautch posture” (qtd. in Fellom 97).



Fig. 43: “Letty Lind performing skirt dance.” Photograph. 1890. “Letty Lind.” *Wikipedia*. Wikimedia, 2010. Web. 25 Sept 2010.



Fig. 44: “A Nautch Girl and Musicians.” Picture Postcard. c.1900.

“nautchlater.” *Columbia.edu*. Columbia, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

Influenced by the skirt dance, Ruth St. Denis, one of the major forerunners of modern American dance, created a series of Nautch-inspired repertoires (namely Radha, Cobras, Incense, and East Indian Suit) that were internationally known and performed, and that drew inspiration from the burgeoning skirt dances of the day.

¹³⁷Significantly, Morgiana, the nautch girl, in *The Forty Nights* achieves acclaim as a dancer because she can perform diverse national dances. Her performance is described by Ghem, one of the characters, as “very Nautch-y, but nice” because she “knows reel, jig, or gavotte! ... Waltz or cachucha” (qtd. in Fellom 97). A similar appreciation for the nautch girl’s knowledge of international dances appears in *The Nautch Girl, or The Rajah of Chutney-pore* (1891). Hollee Beebee, the principal dancer, performs a myriad of European dances (the German Waltz, the Spanish Cachucha and the English Burlesque) during the song, “If We Travel.”

Priya Srinivasan, in her study of St. Denis's Oriental dances, suggests that St. Denis's nautch performances "set the stage for white women to enter the public sphere without using the moral motherhood rhetoric" (52). St. Denis was "hardly the epitome of the middle-class white woman when nude and/or scantily clad on stage" (52). Instead, in her exotic-erotic performance, she deliberately exuded a feverish sexuality, one which was simultaneously celebrated as spiritual (as I discuss more fully in my analysis of Wylie's novel). Although she was an American, St. Denis was known world-wide for her innovations and a key figure in (re)shaping the international dance scene. Not only was her work readily referenced in popular dance magazines of the day, but she also gained popularity in England after her three-year tour (1906-1909) to Europe. She later opened up a well-known and influential dance school in Los Angeles, known as the Denishaw, to train her pupils in her Oriental dances (23).

Like Ruth St. Denis, the celebrated Russian ballerina Anna Pavlova took interest in the nautch and even toured India to become better acquainted with Indian art forms, bringing them back to a western audience. During her career, she showed her appreciation for the nautch traditions by dancing with as well as encouraging the fame of many Indian performers. Through their experiments with the nautch, Kate Vaughan, Ruth St. Denis and Anna Pavlova—dancers who I revisit intermittently throughout this chapter—became household names, recognized for their artistic ability and their independent lifestyles across the Western hemisphere.¹³⁸ By

¹³⁸Significantly, they used their celebrity status to question and transform existing gender norms. As Catherine Hindson notes in her study of female performers at the *fin de siècle*, "During a period when ideas about gender were contested and challenged, the high-profile female celebrity performer—simultaneously a product of and a contributor to commodity culture—became a significant and

masquerading as their Indian counterparts, they asserted their New Womanhood and earned respect as artists, a respect that devadasis held within their own country. The novels I discuss below recognize that the nautch contributed to the rise of the new woman as dancer in the *fin de siècle*.

“She Has Got All She Wanted!”:

The Rise of Rosita Fountaine in Bithia Mary Croker’s *The Company’s Servant*

The stage was not the only space in which the correlation between a modern femininity and the nautch was articulated. A growing body of fictional works at the turn of the century, especially New Woman narratives, introduced heroines who were passionate participants or observers of the new dances.¹³⁹ Anglo-Indian writers drew inspiration from this growing interest in the modern female performer, and often recognized and disseminated the idea that female performers could benefit from cross-cultural encounters.¹⁴⁰ Leading among the female authors of these fictions was Bithia Mary Croker, a rather understudied yet prolific writer of novels

powerful figure” (3). She used the space of the popular stage to challenge traditional female roles while creating new ones.

¹³⁹For example, Victoria Cross’s *Paula* (1908), *Six Chapters of a Man’s Life* (1903), *Six Women* (1906), and *The Life of My Heart* (1905), George Egerton’s “A Cross Line” (1894), and Mona Caird’s *Daughter of Danaus* (1894).

¹⁴⁰The link between the desire to turn Indian courtesan and the desire for female emancipation is aptly expressed in George MacMunn’s collection of short stories, *Azizun, the Dancing Girl, and Other Indian Stories of Love and War* (1934). “The Jadu-Wallah: A Spring Adventure” introduces a masquerade ball in England to which everyone is to “wear an Eastern costume” (200). One of the female characters in the story, Marian O’Brien, “love[s]” (202) India, and thus is rather excited about masquerading as an Indian dancer. The costume brings with it a desire to “go native” for a day—to absorb herself in the habits and attitudes of being a courtesan: “Oh,” she exclaims, “what wonderful Eastern thoughts these clothes had brought” (204). In fact, her clothes bring with them an astounding skill in and passion for dancing that is acknowledged by those attending the ball: “By Jove! Mrs. O’Brien,” said Dennis, “you can dance” (206). Considering a female talent in dancing was increasingly associated with a modern femininity at the turn of the century, Marian’s choice of costume symbolizes her aspirations. Published within the same short story collection, George MacMunn’s “Spring Fret” is set in India, where the young Rajah of Srinagar “the heir to the throne, had ordained a fancy dress ball, to which he had invited the English visitors in the valley” (120). Among them is the New Woman May Merryfield who chooses “a Persian dancer’s loose trousers of silk tied in at the ankles” (121). These “loose trousers” in fact, respond to and reinforce May’s support of the rational dress movement, especially considering the tawaiif’s trousers (worn at times in place of their full skirts) resembled the notorious bloomers of the *fin de siècle*.

and short stories set in India.¹⁴¹ Having lived in India for fourteen years, Croker gives deep insight into the daily routines, struggles and the innermost thoughts of Anglo-Indians. As Bhupal Singh suggests, “Mrs. Croker’s Indian books take the reader practically all over India; they show great powers of observation and a vast range of experience” (11). Written in the context of the new woman movement, Croker’s fictions often present exoticized Anglo-Indian women committed to their personal liberation, a commitment that is articulated and reinforced through their passion for dancing (along with, to a lesser extent, singing and acting) and through their association with their Indian counterparts: the nautch girls.

Indeed, a number of Croker’s novels feature New Women who, in their zeal for theatrical performances, resemble the nautch girl. In *Her Own People* (1903), for example, Dominga Chandos discovers and exhibits her New Woman status and her accompanying distaste for conventional gender roles when she performs the nautch. A similar conflation between (Indian) dancing and New Womanhood exists in *Pretty Miss Neville* (1883), “To Let” (1893), *Mr Jervis* (1894), *Angel: A Sketch in Indian Ink* (1901), *The Cat’s Paw* (1902), and *In Old Madras* (1913). While many of Croker’s fictional works introduce daring and bold European women who turn to dancing to express their desires for emancipation, *The Company’s Servant* (1907) deserves particular attention for acutely capturing the climate of the *fin de siècle* and the contemporary trend of white bodies performing the nautch on the western stage. This novel features the fearless, ambitious character of Rosita Fountaine, a budding New Woman and femme fatale who scorns domestic duties, resists motherhood, and

¹⁴¹Croker wrote approximately fifty novels, with twenty or so set in India, and with some shorter pieces published in *Cornhill Magazine* and *Belgravia*. Her work was read internationally; she wrote to a friend in 1895 that her novels “secured the attention of readers in England, America, Australia, Germany, and side stations” (qtd. in Kapila 220).

uses men for her personal advancement. Residing in a small Indian town known as Tani-Kul, Rosita holds high hopes of becoming a professional dancer and takes any actions necessary to fulfill her undying aspirations for fortune, fame, and freedom. By the conclusion of the novel, she indeed succeeds. Her journey ends in triumph as she performs a nautch-inspired routine before a large western audience at a celebrated theatre in Paris. By “going nautch girl,” she procures physical, financial, social and psychological gains.

By staging her talents in and passion for the performing arts, Rosita simultaneously cultivates and consolidates her modern femininity. In her solo, self-choreographed performances (the first at Tani-Kul, and the second on the Parisian stage), she participates in the revolutionary dances of the *fin de siècle*, specifically the skirt dance. She is a “captivating rose-skirted dancer” (143) who, when she “execute[s] a wonderful *pas seul* of her own invention” (131), displays the same thirst for artistic experimentation as embodied by *fin de siècle* dancers like Kate Vaughan and Alice Lethbridge. She furthermore immerses herself completely in her art, dancing with “abandon” (131, 318)—a term that was used often to describe female entertainers at the time who full-heartedly surrendered themselves to their performance. Likewise, when Rosita sings, she “thr[ows] her soul into the words, and s[ings] with an abandon and a passionate challenge that swept the most prosaic off their balance” (131). In other words, following the doctrine to “never be afraid of letting yourself go” (131), she unleashes her rawest emotions on the stage, laying them bare for the audience to witness and to feel. She lets the spirit of the music guide her movements: “She seemed to be blown and wafted about the stage, and flitted to and fro as if her spirit was in her feet” (131). As was customary in dances

of the late nineteenth century, she thus breaks free from conventions by performing with spontaneity rather than to an already scripted routine, and meanwhile demonstrates great athleticism in her “supple ... movements” (131). More importantly, by performing a skirt dance before an Anglo-Indian audience, Rosita asserts her “newness,” her aspirations to perform a modern womanhood. As Croker suggests in another one of her novels, *Mr Jervis* (1895), “skirt-dancing was as yet in its infancy” and a “lady figurante was a rare spectacle on an Indian stage” (184). Rosita, likewise, is “rare” among the community of Memsahibs at Tani-Kul, classified as an anomaly for her knowledge and display of the new dances.

In her moving performance, Rosita also exhibits an active female sexuality, as was characteristic of the New Woman and the new dances of the *fin de siècle*, especially (as I have detailed above) in their connection to Salome, the femme fatale who used her eroticized body-on-spectacle to seduce men for personal gain. Likewise, described repeatedly as a “siren” (142), Rosita unleashes her sexual desires on the stage without inhibition and, in this respect, resembles “The modern woman [who] was condemned for the ‘shameless abandon’ with which she danced” (Teo, “Women’s Travel” 372). Her “movements embod[y] the voluptuousness of passion—the lure of the enchantress” (Croker, *Company’s Servant* 318) and have a spell-binding effect on respectable men from Tani-Kul and neighbouring areas, holding even Jack Vernon (formally Talbot), the epitome of English virtue, “in its grip” (136). Indeed, over the course of the narrative, she has many “victims” (319) who fall prey to her charms, specifically Jack Vernon, his best friend Charlie Booth, and the Duc de Dindon. They all willingly “yield up love, money, honour, morals and life” (319) in hopes of securing her affection. In her discussion of “the station flirt”

(Sen 81) in Anglo-Indian romances, Indira Sen describes the subversive potential of the Memsahib's sensuality as follows:

Deeply embedded in these narratives there appears to lie a sense of this figure [the "flirt"] as an empowered woman, where sexual power threatens to disturb the hegemony of the white man in the colony as well as the social equilibrium in the station, by creating a temporary inversion of gender hierarchies and power relationships. (82)

Described likewise as a "shocking flirt" (197), Rosita uses her sexually enticing performances in Tani-Kul to disturb male solidarity and to gain the upper hand in the male-female battle for power. By experimenting with the skirt dance, dancing with abandon, and exuding a female sexuality, Rosita thus resembles the New Woman dancers of her day.

More importantly, Croker suggests that Rosita reaches her pinnacle of new womanhood when she expresses a kinship with her Indian counterparts: the devadasis. Indeed, there is "a vague reminiscence of the East" in Rosita's "swaying, undulating movements" (Croker, *Company's Servant* 141). Her "gauzy skirts," "glancing feet" (136), "curved arms," and especially her "voluptuous and enticing attitudes" are "in nearer affinity to the postures of a Temple nautch girl" (141) than to the traditions of Western dance. She even wins over a large Parisian crowd in the final pages of the novel by performing in "true Nautch-girl fashion!" (318). Croker is suggesting that the revolutionary dances executed by Rosita, especially the skirt dance, are not a British invention but instead appropriations of devadasi traditions—a conclusion that was made by many of her contemporaries. For example, Thomas Bland Strange, an army officer born in India, argued that at the turn of the century

“the renaissance of the skirt dancer ... is only a return to that ancient Eastern source of graceful movement, the Nautch girl” (59). Likewise, “Mme. Hermann [who was the wife of the famous magician Alexander Hermann] declared that all skirt dances were variations on Nautch dancing” (Ballet Caravan 70). By repeatedly articulating a connection between Rosita’s performances and the artistry of the nautch girl, Croker therefore undermines the originality of the so-called modern dances, exposing their non-Western roots.

Rosita, in fact, owes her social and professional advancement to these nautch-inspired performances. Indeed, by the end of the novel, Rosita achieves what so many Western female performers at the turn of the century sought but devadasis already had: to be recognized as artists. During her triumphant performance in Paris, “she danced with the abandon, the buoyant grace, the daring emphasis, of a finished artiste (she also held the palms of her hands upwards in true Nautch-girl fashion!)” (Croker, *Company’s Servant* 318). Croker suggests that achieving the status of a “finished artiste” for Rosita means not only performing with “abandon,” “grace,” and “daring”—qualities that define the New Woman dancer—but more importantly performing like a nautch girl. It is only through this resemblance that she achieves “a thing of supreme art,” “the poetry of motion” (318). After all, Rosita is performing in the first decade of the twentieth century, during a transitional period in the performing arts when the skill level and passion of such performers as Anna Pavlova, who incidentally were willing to experiment with non-western dance forms, helped raise the status of ballet to high art (Thomas 54). These dancers fought against its poor reputation throughout the earlier nineteenth century. For example, Rupert Christensen, in his study of ballerinas in Victorian England, suggests “the native-

born ballet girl” was “the lowest caste of theatrical life” and “struggled to hold herself at the level of respectability granted a flower-seller” (195). Known as “leggy girls,” the skimpily clad ballerinas were shunned for their sexually provocative performances, which were dismissed as “a debased art” within the narrow parameters of Western ideology (200). Performed before a mass (male) audience, the ballet was deemed “a more rough-and-tumble affair,” folkish rather than formal art (201). In Paris, where she resembles her Indian counterparts, Rosita transforms her self-image from a mere entertainer to an artist appreciated for her talents.

In addition to gaining public recognition as an artist, Rosita resembles her Indian counterparts by achieving financial success, living lavishly with “a splendid flat, half a dozen motors, [and] magnificent jewels” (Crocker, *Company’s Servant* 317). In fact, the very last pages of the novel report that Rosita inherits a large fortune after the sudden death of the Duc de Dindon (who was her husband for a brief time) in a train accident. Resembling the fictional dancing girls featured in Fanny Emily Penny’s *The Romance of a Nautch girl*, Flora Annie Steel’s *The Potter’s Thumb* and George MacMunn’s *Azizun, the Dancing Girl* (as I discuss in Chapter 3), Rosita remains uncontained by the close of the narrative, escaping the domestic constraints of marital life while enjoying increased financial and social status.¹⁴² This recognition, in turn, gives her a renewed sense of importance and esteem. While she felt exhilarated while she danced at Tani-Kul, “looking lovely, and calmly self-confident” (130)—like so many New Woman dancers did—in Paris, this rebellious spirit strengthens: “her face [is even] harder and more self-confident” (318). She is all the more self-assured

¹⁴² Rosita is comparable to Indira Sen’s description of the station flirt: “Rendering men helpless with her devastating charm, the flirt wields complete power over her own body, which remains ever-inaccessible to the man she rules over” (Sen 82)

and focused. As other characters in the novel confirm, by the close of the narrative, Rosita indeed “has got all she wanted!” (319): she is a “star,” “the most outrageously extravagant and popular danseuse of the day” (317). Like her historic counterparts, she benefits—financially, socially, physically and artistically—from bringing the artistry of the nautch onto the western stage.

In her maturation from an aspiring performer in a small Indian town to a well-acclaimed celebrity in one of the most metropolitan cities in Europe at the time, Rosita contrasts significantly to the more conventional Memsahibs introduced in the novel. While, like Rosita, these female characters—specifically, Mary Holland and Beatrice Arminger—initially hold aspirations for greater female empowerment, unlike her, they lose sight of their hopes after conforming to a conventional English femininity. For example, like many women seeking education and employment in the *fin de siècle*, Mary Holland receives “hospital training” (46) in England and thereafter sets sail for India to pursue a profession as a nurse. Her medical career, however, ends after her marriage to a civil servant in Tani-Kul and her subsequent transformation into the archetypal Memsahib. She becomes the epitome of British discipline and orderliness in Tani-Kul, the ideal domestic woman whose “house, and everything connected with it, [is] in spotless order, her dress and appearance simple but exquisitely neat” (44). Not surprisingly, then, as the domestic(ated) woman and the mouthpiece for British conservatism, Mary does not participate in the frivolous entertainments put on regularly at Tani-Kul and disapproves full-heartedly of Rosita’s cunning and seductive ways.

In her critical stance towards Rosita, Mary Holland shares much in common with the moral purity campaigners in England who sought the abolition of female

performers due to their alleged promiscuity. As Hsu-Ming Teo suggests, “Women’s dance activities ... were resisted in the British metropolis by conservatives hostile to the apparent looseness of behaviour, questionable sexual morality, and the very visibility of women’s bodies in public spaces” (“Women’s Travel” 367). Recalling Indira Sen’s observations about the station flirt, Mary, likewise, perceives Rosita as an “alluring enchantress” who poses a danger to the survival of a male-run empire because she “tempt[s] all these hard-handed, hard-working men” (Croker, *Company’s Servant* 140). Mary’s criticism of the female performer resembles that of Laura Ormiston Chant, a social purity campaigner who in the 1890s sought the abolition of burgeoning music halls, cabarets and burlesque houses in England. She framed her cause—known as the Ormiston Chant Campaign—as a fight against the prostitution of female artists; she and her fellow protestors suspected female performers of not only selling their entertainment but more problematically their bodies to eager male spectators.¹⁴³ In this respect, the moral outrage towards music hall dancers or ballerinas was akin to the mounting attack against the nautch in the same decade. According to Teo, “conservative London reviewers reviled music hall dances which drew inspiration from the more sexualized elements of non-Western dance, while non-Western dance was subsequently derided in terms of the vulgarity of London music halls” (“Women’s Travel” 369). Thus the mounting attack against the practice of the nautch in the late-nineteenth century both fuelled and was fuelled by similar campaigns against burgeoning entertainment centres in England.¹⁴⁴ As the ideal

¹⁴³The campaign, like the anti-nautch campaigns of the 1890s, ultimately failed due to a lack of public support.

¹⁴⁴The conflation between Indian and British types of entertainment surfaced in various *fin de siècle* works. For example, Flora Annie Steel draws a parallel between the nautch and turn-of-the-century British performances in *The Potter’s Thumb* when the courtesan Chandni sings the catchy lyrics of a

imperial housewife, Mary Holland is the voice of British conservatism—“always supercritical” (Croker, *Company’s Servant* 194)—in the novel whereas her foil, Rosita, is the voice of liberalism. Yet, as her foil, Rosita projects Mary Holland’s relative disempowerment and discontentment in India. Not only does the Memsahib relinquish her initial desires for independence after marriage, but now lives a mundane existence void of intellectual satisfaction and purposeful activity, especially considering she has married outside her class. She tells Jack Vernon that, despite her husband’s best efforts to make her happy, “mine is naturally a discontented nature—always craving for the impossible” (194). She craves greater female liberation while upholding conventional Victorian roles and attitudes.

The English heroine of the novel, Beatrice Arminger, demonstrates even stronger desires for female liberation but nevertheless follows a similar pattern of eventual containment. When she is first introduced into the narrative, Beatrice, in her vow to never marry, has run away from home and specifically from a betrothal arranged by her father. As an avid rider and daring adventuress, she hesitates to take on domestic duties that will restrict her freedom. Her sentiments slowly change after she meets and falls in love with the novel’s hero, Jack Vernon. In the last chapter of the novel, which is set a few years after the previous chapter, the revelation of Jack and Beatrice’s marriage appears conveniently alongside the revelation of Rosita’s success in Paris. As a member of the audience, Beatrice witnesses Rosita’s rise to fame and her staging of a modern femininity. With envy, Beatrice acknowledges that

popular music hall song, “Ta-ra-ra-boom-de-ay!” (31) from her rooftop in the Indian bazaar. This conflation also finds subtle expression in Marcus B. (Jenny) Fuller’s *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood* (1900), W. H.G. Kingston’s *The Young Rajah* (1878) as well as Lady Dufferin’s travel writings (1884-9). In fact, throughout the nineteenth century, the term nautch was used interchangeably with the ballet. For example, the *Hobson-Jobson: A Glossary of Colloquial Anglo-Indian Words and Phrases* defines the nautch as “a kind of ballet-dance performed by women” (Yule and Burnell 620) and, conversely, identifies the ballet as a “European nautch” (680), fusing the two cultural practices.

Rosita, who knew she would “go far,” “seems to have arrived” in Paris (339). In contrast, Beatrice is a mere spectator rather than a participant in this women’s movement. With “eyes fixed on the dazzling figure” (339), she admires the female performer from afar. This juxtaposition between the active performer and the passive spectator is even more evident when Jack and Beatrice, exiting from the theatre, witness Rosita riding away in her “triumphal car” (320) after the show. The acclaimed dancer facetiously flaunts her achievements:

Rosita leaned forward and kissed her hand, and as the couple stood motionless, gazing at the big blue Berliet, a little scented handkerchief was waved out of the window. It fluttered there until the luxurious vehicle turned a corner, and noiselessly disappeared. (320)

In her fixed position, Beatrice stands alongside Jack “motionless,” once again merely “gazing” at the vision before her. In contrast, uninhibited by conventions, the ever-fleeting, ever-moving Rosita “flutter[s]” away like her handkerchief and “noiselessly disappear[s]” like her vehicle to roam freely in the public arena. In fact, Rosita’s quick “disappearance” (320) mirrors the conclusion of nautch girl narratives (such as *The Potter’s Thumb*, *The Romance of a Nautch Girl*, and *Azizun, the Dancing Girl*—see Chapter 3) that culminate with the Indian dancers’ escape from patriarchal and/or colonial power structures.

Like Beryl Holdsworth in *The Romance of a Nautch Girl*, in their return to a conventional femininity, Mary Holland and Beatrice Armingier ultimately fail to achieve the status of a New Woman. In their (eventual) acceptance of the institution of marriage in Anglo-India and its racial insularity, these women thereby forego the benefits of intercultural contact. As Mary Holland recognizes, her conventional

nature, her “supercritical” attitude, is a “terrible drawback” (194). Rosita, in contrast, advances into a New Woman because she is willing to deviate from a conventional, *English* femininity. Only as a hybrid(ized) body, in other words, can Rosita explore alternative femininities from those offered by Victorian culture. Only through her exotic(ized) performances can she assert her unconventionality. Thus, underlying the development of Rosita’s character is Croker’s recognition that she must draw on non-English traditions to progress, she must let go of cultural biases and claims to racial purity in her commitment to “newness.” In this respect, she resembles her historic counterparts. According to Gaylyn Studlor, in her research on American concert dance, the stage “became one place where the emblematic value of the Orient as locus of release from repression could be safely acted out with pagan abandon” (106). With “*pagan abandon*,” *fin de siècle* dancers relinquished bodily discipline, the discipline not only of their sexual desires but also of their cultural affiliations.¹⁴⁵ In other words, their dances “unsettled gender norms and solidified a cultural fantasy revolving around the Orient as the locus of decadent passion” (116). Likewise, the “abandon” with which Rosita dances emblemizes her willingness to “go native”—her willingness to forego cultural, not only emotional, restraints for the greater achievement of female liberation.

Rosita’s deviation from a conventional British femininity becomes apparent not only through her non-English performances but also her non-English heritage. Although she lives among and as a member of Tani-Kul’s British community, Rosita

¹⁴⁵ Under growing modernist ideas, this “pagan abandon” materialized through dance since “its source material—bodies—existed prior to words and was thus closer to the raw and basic elements of being that modernist artists sought to expose” (Foulkes 35). It revealed one’s “natural instincts and feelings” (35), a revelation that allegedly occurred more readily in women because they were more in tune with their bodies.

is markedly Other; she is not an Englishwoman but, “a beautiful little French Eurasian” (Crocker, *Company’s Servant* 8). This racial hybridity, in turn, anticipates, as well as makes possible, her transgression of gender and cultural norms.¹⁴⁶ Rosita’s non-British identity—both in its Indian and French roots—is the catalyst for her New Woman performances. She is “a *born* actress [my emphasis added]” (140) who “dance[s] by *nature* [my emphasis]” (340) on the stage, “breathing, so to speak, her *native* air [my emphasis]” (139). She taps into and begins to display these non-English origins on the stage, origins that are a prerequisite to achieving a modern femininity. Significantly, her exotic performances earn her celebrity status in France, where she becomes known as “La Sauterelle”—“the dancer that all Paris is going mad about” (317). France is coupled with India in its relative liberalism, as a space in which a modern femininity can be explored and embraced. Known as the “pleasure-capital of Europe,” Paris, in fact, became the zenith of experimentation in the performing arts at the turn of the century (Reynolds-Ball 127). It housed the most famous music halls and cabarets of its time, including Folies Bergere (1872), Montmartre or Le Chat Noir (1881), and Moulin Rouge (1889). Aspiring dancers, such as Ruth St. Denis, Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan, all gained wider acclaim by attending the International Paris Exhibition of 1900, an exhibition that encouraged and welcomed exotic performances and performers from across the globe. Thus, Rosita’s advancement is contingent on her locating and embracing her non-English heritage—her Indian and to a lesser extent, her French, roots.

¹⁴⁶ Such is the case with the freedom-seeking, promiscuous Eurasian, Dominga in *Her Own People*, who is juxtaposed to her English-bred, conservative sister. Dominga’s passion for the nautch is a reflection of her biological make-up, the Indian blood running through her veins.

While the heroine of Croker's romance is Beatrice, and Mary is upheld as a sympathetic character, Rosita is nevertheless admirable for her resilience and her hard-earned success. These split sympathies make it difficult to locate where Croker's own intentions lie. Like Fanny Emily Penny, she offers a double ending to her novel, one that adheres to New Woman generic conventions by containing the rebellious spirit embodied by Beatrice and fulfilling the romantic plot between the hero and heroine, while providing hope of an alternative outcome for the New Woman through the uncontained Rosita. In her study of another of Croker's novels, *In Old Madras*, Shuchi Kapila suggests that this ambiguity, which is so characteristic of Croker's conclusions, is purposeful. Croker, she argues, simultaneously "offers her readers the thrill of vicariously experiencing transgression, yet returning to the safe haven of the familiar" (230). The more conventional readers can relish in the restoration of colonial domesticity, while at the same time the more liberal-minded can retrieve pleasure from the triumph of a rebellious woman. Likewise, in *The Company's Servant*, readers return to the safety of the "familiar" through Jack and Beatrice's union while experiencing "transgression" through Rosita. In the transgressive side of this dual narrative, Kapila continues, "India functions as wish-fulfilling world, a corrective to empty and regimented English domesticity rather than as the rejected other of English culture" (227). Comparably, India provides a route to emancipation for Rosita, a route that cannot be found in the stagnating and conventional culture of England.

Croker's split endings may capture her own conflicts as an Anglo-Indian female writer: she was expected to maintain and protect colonial domesticity in her fiction while driven by the need to explore alternative female identities through

cross-cultural encounters. In fact, her exploration of hybrid and unconventional characters might even trace back to her own transnational identity; she had lived in various geographical locations throughout her life, including Ireland, England, France and India. Her sympathies for non-English identities might also derive from her own Irish roots. As one reviewer said about her fiction, she had “‘two strings to her bow,’ Ireland and India, the first acquired by birth and the second by long residence in India” (qtd. in Kapila 219). Despite her status as a member of the ruling elite in Anglo-India, Croker had just as much in common with the French-Indian Rosita (considering her background) as she did with the purely English heroines of her novel.

As another transnational female writer, Ida Alexa Ross Wylie likewise explores the possibility that non-English and hybrid women, particularly those who appropriate Indian dances, hold more potential of reaching New Womanhood. However, as a woman who did not live in India, her work is more assertive in its sympathies with the modern, rather than Victorian, woman than Croker’s.

“Oh my Art, the Greatest Art of All!”:

Nautch as Therapy in Ida Alexa Ross Wylie’s *The Hermit Doctor of Gaya*

Ida Alexa Ross (I.A.R) Wylie was a prolific writer of *fin de siècle* fictions characterized by adventurous and romantic plots in non-British lands, including India.¹⁴⁷ Having lived in Australia, England, Belgium, Germany and America at different stages of her life, she was an avid traveller whose transnational identity shaped the content of her novels. Her works circulated throughout Europe and

¹⁴⁷For example, *Colonel Tibbit Comes Home* (1920), *Daughter of Brahma* (1912), *Children of Storm* (1920), *The Native Born or the Rajah’s People* (1910), *The Silver Virgin* (1929), *Five Years to Find Out* (1914), *The Foreign Legion* (1913), and *In Different Keys* (1911).

North America, and several were even adapted into popular Hollywood films in the 1920s through to the 1950s.¹⁴⁸ Although many of her novels and short stories are categorized under the rubric of Anglo-Indian fiction for their vivid Indian settings, themes and characters, Wylie never herself resided in India. She was influenced instead by representations of India circulating in the European imagination, and by an Anglo-Indian girl named Esme¹⁴⁹ who she befriended during her attendance at Cheltenham Ladies College and who later accompanied her to Germany where the two of them pursued further education (Parry *Delusions* 267). In her autobiography, *My Life with George: An Unconventional Autobiography* (1940),¹⁵⁰ Wylie reports that Esme was crucial in shaping the content of her first novel, *The Native Born, or the Rajah's People* (1910): “At the end of my first year Esme rejoined her parents in India but she left behind her enough sahibs, memsahibs, Bo-trees, ayahs and compounds to furnish me with all the necessary ingredients for an Anglo-Indian novel which I wrote when I was twenty-one” (129). Thus, unlike other Anglo-Indian writers—namely Flora Annie Steel, Alice Perrin, Fanny Emily Penny and Bithia Mary Croker—Wylie did not have personal contact with Indian culture and people. She was not part of the ruling enclave in India, and subsequently did not seem to face the same pressures to espouse an imperial femininity as her counterparts in the colony did. This detachment and distance from British India seems to allow her to express her fascination with both the East and with New Womanhood more overtly.

¹⁴⁸ About thirty of Wylie's novels were adapted into films under new titles. *Stronger than Death* was the film adaptation of *The Hermit Doctor of Gaya*, and was released in 1920. Wylie also became a screenplay writer in the later years of her career.

¹⁴⁹ Wylie does not provide Esme's last name in her autobiography.

¹⁵⁰ Wylie is alluding to George Washington, and correspondingly much of her autobiography recounts her experience in America.

Wylie wrote boldly about strong-willed female characters striving for female liberation, and these narratives often reflected her own aspirations. She was an avid participant in the Women's movement, as noted by critics like Miriam Schneir and Betty Friedan, and as she projects in her autobiography. Later in her career, Wylie turned to nonfiction as an outlet for this dedication,¹⁵¹ and her productivity even earned her recognition in 1946 from the Women's National Press Club, which declared her as one of eleven most successful women in America. Having never married, she shared a large house in Princeton with other accomplished single women. There has been speculation by some scholars that she enjoyed a long-term lesbian relationship with one of these roommates, the paediatrician Sara Josephine Baker (Peiss et al. 133).

Reflecting both her passion for travelling and her commitment to the women's movement, I.A.R. Wylie's novel *The Hermit Doctor of Gaya: A Love Story of Modern India*¹⁵² (1917) features a professional European dancer and New Woman by the name of Sigrid Friesen. Sigrid, who suffers from a mysterious, unnamed illness, ventures out to India with the intention of enjoying her last days among exotic cultures and people. To her surprise, her willingness to embrace India proves therapeutic. She dances one night in the ruins of a local Hindu temple, thinking that she will be performing for the last time, ready to face the inevitable: death. Instead, her devadasi-inspired dance miraculously cures her of her illness. This supernatural moment in the novel responds to the fascination with Indian spirituality at the turn of the century, and the modernist belief that Eastern religions could heal a dying

¹⁵¹ Wylie wrote mainly in support of the suffragist movement, and contributed regularly to the *Sunday Evening Post*, *Good Housekeeping*, *Collier's*, *Ladies Home Journal*, and *Harper's Bazaar* (Kunitz and Colby 1112).

¹⁵² Also published under the title *Tristram Sahib*

West—a West corrupted by materialism, war, and religious hypocrisy. More importantly, it recognizes the spiritual empowerment of devadasis whose very gender and profession placed them in closer proximity to God; their moving bodies were vessels for accessing and transmitting divine knowledge. Analogously, Sigrid taps into this gender-specific power when she performs as a goddess in an Indian temple, and subsequently revitalizes her own body and spirit.

Wylie's novel cannot be understood without a deeper contemplation of both the turn to Eastern, especially Indian, spirituality at the turn of the century and into the post-First-World-War period, as well as how this affinity for non-Western belief systems found expression on the stage—specifically through the spiritual choreographies of dancers like Anna Pavlova, Isadora Duncan and Ruth St. Denis who, as I have suggested earlier, appropriated devadasi traditions to express their modernist sentiments. Critical of Western ideologies and practices, and disappointed with Western religions, many Europeans and Americans at the turn of the century “were increasingly turning to Asian goods, philosophies, arts and cultures” to define themselves and their modernist sentiments (P. Srinivasan, “Dancing Modern” 3). Under this motive, movements like Theosophy, Transcendentalism, and Occultism gained ground, and promoted the values of eastern spirituality over western materialism. Theosophy was among the most popular, spreading internationally in the late nineteenth century through the work of scholars such as Max Muller, and the leadership of Henry Steel Olcott, Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Annie Besant. These theosophists elevated ancient civilizations to a utopian world, a counterpoint to the turmoil, change and scientific scepticism marking the urban landscape of Europe and America. Of particular interest were ancient Hindu beliefs, specifically

those from the Vedic period and scriptures, that offered westerners hope of curing contemporary ills, of reinvigorating European culture through contact with the more benign faiths of Eastern cultures.¹⁵³ Accordingly, Jeffrey L. Spear and Avanthi Meduri in their study of the cultural encounter between nautch girls and the west suggest that many Indian reformists “selectively linked social and moral progress with the recuperation of an idealized past” (436). This past, generally speaking, was tied to the devadasi custom, since the practice of temple dancing was revered as a Vedic tradition (Nevile, *Nautch Girls* 25). The Hindu belief that God was immanent was particularly attractive to Westerners seeking a more egalitarian world; it promoted the connection of humankind across race, gender, class, and age, and renewed an appreciation for nature and animals. As Benita Parry suggests, the East offered “spiritual experiences more inclusive and transcendent than any known to the West” (*Delusions* 82).

As many scholars have noted, some supporters of the woman’s movement at the turn of the century also benefitted from the turn to Eastern religions. Priya Srinivasan, for example, argues that “Protestant Christians, particularly women, turned away from a patriarchal, restrictive God to a more benign God thought to be present in Asian spiritual practices like Hinduism, Buddhism, and others” (“Dancing Modern” 5). Similarly, Joy Dixon has conducted a study on *The Divine Feminine: Theosophy and Feminism in England* in an “effort to understand the place of spirituality in general, and theosophy in particular, in the English feminist movement” (xi). To a large extent, under the leadership of Helena Petrovna Blavatsky and Annie Besant, the movement of Theosophy was grounded in India. “Theosophists,” Dixon argues,

¹⁵³ Theosophists were inspired not only by Hinduism but also Suffism (from Persia).



Fig 45: “Anna Pavlova as Radha.” Photograph. c.1920.

Ignica. n.d. Web. 10 Oct 2009.

“—and particularly women within the Theosophical society— drew on the immanentist teaching of the One Life to oppose liberal definitions of the distinctions between individual and community, secular and sacred, and public and private” (xiii). These relatively more egalitarian teachings hence provided feminists with a way out of the dichotomies underlying

British gender constructions.

This growing female interest in an alternative Eastern religion also found expression on the stage and influenced professional performing artists, such as Anna Pavlova, Isadora Duncan, and Ruth St. Denis. According to Priya Srinivasan, such dancers “used Indian philosophies and spirituality ... to assert their modernity” (“Dancing Modern” 3). Among them, Ruth St. Denis was perhaps the most avid choreographer of exotic routines, many of which, such as “Radha,” “Indian Suite,” “Nautch” and “Cobra,” were inspired by Indian dance traditions. In developing these routines, Ruth St. Denis did meticulous research on Hinduism and Indian dance history. To begin with, she was inspired by the multiple performances of the nautch by devadasis who toured America in 1881 and 1906, as well as the performers comprising the “Hindu Village” at Coney Island, an amusement park in New York, from where she later recruited Indian dancers and musicians to join her troupe

(Shelton 200). Not only did she avidly follow the works of theosophists like Sir Edwin Arnold,¹⁵⁴ but she also, through the help of Swami Paramananda, became a scholar of the Vedantas (Shelton 94; Banes 84). Ruth St. Denis additionally performed in the 1905 English version of the legendary Sanskrit play *Shakuntala* by Kalidasa. Another major influence in her Indian repertoires was Leo Delibes's French opera *Lakme*, the music to which she set her breaking role as the goddess Radha in 1906. Early in her career, Ruth St. Denis therefore developed a fascination



Fig. 46: "Ruth St. Denis as Radha."
Photograph. 1906.

"Amour Fou." Aug 2010. *Web*. 3 Sept 2010.

for Hinduism that she put to practice on the stage.

The nautch offered dancers like Ruth St. Denis and her followers a way to experience and articulate a new spirituality. In fact, Ruth St. Denis was instrumental in devising a new theory of dance at the turn of the century that reconceptualised the female performing body as divine rather than depraved, a theory she put into words in "Temple-Theatre of the

Scriptures."¹⁵⁵ Responding to the decline of spirituality in the West, where people were either abandoning their faith altogether or following the corrupt teachings of hypocritical priests, Ruth St. Denis upheld dance as a means of reconnecting to God.

¹⁵⁴ His poem, "Light of Asia," was particularly important in disseminating a connection between the art of the nautch and the sublime experience offered by Hinduism.

¹⁵⁵ A copy of this short piece (not dated) written by Ruth St. Denis is stored at the Beinecke Rare Book and Manuscript Library at Yale University.

As Janet Lynn Roseman suggests in her study of *Dance was her Religion: The Spiritual Choreography of Isadora Duncan, Ruth St. Denis and Martha Graham*, St. Denis and her contemporaries perceived their physical forms as sacred, whereby their bodies housed a spirit that could be awakened through dance. According to the Jungian Psychologist John Dexter Blackner, “The dance itself becomes, for a moment, the vessel into which sacred energies may flow, a vehicle for the manifestation of the gods” (qtd. in Roseman xvi). The dance, in other words, becomes a sacred script, a physical manifestation of internal spiritual experiences.¹⁵⁶ Within this analogy, the stage becomes a temple and the female body on the stage the prophet. Retrieving and translating divine knowledge, this body-as-text is the source of disseminating “basic truths” (“Temple-Theatre”). In this respect, Ruth St. Denis reworked traditional gender constructs to her advantage, celebrating the commonplace assumption that women were naturally more spiritual and nurturing than men in her reconceptualization of the dancing female body.

Modern dancers like St. Denis not only celebrated the female body but also the religions of Eastern civilizations as inherently more spiritual, leading to a feminization of Eastern spirituality (Dixon xi). In other words, British notions about the inherent “wisdom” of the East combined with women’s inherent moral instincts helped consolidate the image of the Easternized female performer as divine (Desmond 263). For this reason, Ruth St. Denis regularly appeared as Eastern goddesses on the stage, voicing her desire to return to a time when performance was uplifting, not a “market place where decadent goods were sold to the highest bidder”

¹⁵⁶ St. Denis believed that “each gesture and pose should objectify an inner emotion state,” and *Radha* accordingly was comprised of “an elaborate network of spatial and gestural symbols” (Shelton 62) that conveyed a range of feelings.

("Temple-Theatre"). She equated this return to a renewal of non-Western religions. "In other ages and people," she argues, "the theatre was the mouthpiece of truth as well as joy and it is on this plan that I propose to found a Temple-Theatre of the Scriptures" ("Temple-Theatre"). St. Denis is alluding here to the performance history of India, among other countries, where dancers were respected as conveyers of truths that crossed racial, gender, and class boundaries. Such an idea complied with not only theosophist but also the modernist understanding of the dancing body as natural and candid. As Ted Shawn, St. Denis's life-long partner, suggested, "The spontaneous movements of the body cannot lie ... all human beings move under the government of universal laws, and gesture is the universal language by which we can speak to each other with immediacy, clarity, and truth, and which no barrier of race, nationality, language, religion or political belief can diminish in communicative power" (Desmond 260).¹⁵⁷ In its uninhibited form, therefore, dancing provided hope of engendering a new religion, one that knew no boundaries and relied on the language of truth.

Published in 1916, a decade after Croker's *The Company's Servant*, Wylie's novel *The Hermit Doctor of Gaya* is acutely aware of these emerging theories in the performing arts, and is devoted to a similar rereading of the female body as a vehicle to access great spiritual knowledge, a knowledge that presents a possible cure for western ills. In fact, her novel communicates the twentieth-century resentment towards Western materialism and the subsequent desire to return to a more natural self. Throughout the novel, Wylie conveys her distaste for Christian missionaries and

¹⁵⁷ Because under modernist thought the Orient was inherently closer to nature, it provided an "aesthetic counter to vulgar materialism" (Studlor 103). In contrast, "beauty" in the West, according to St. Denis, was "blurred and deadened by the monotonous and heavy interpretation of its ministers" ("Temple-Theatre").

for British prejudices towards Indian people and culture. The story is set in the fictional town of Heerut, a town that reflects the *fin-de- siècle* tension between Victorian conservatism and Modernist liberalism. The leading hero and heroine of the novel embody modernist sentiments in their rejection of Western values for a more authentic life that turns to Indian culture and people for inspiration. The male protagonist and native doctor, Tristram Sahib, for example is described as a “hermit,” an anomaly among the conservative Anglo-Indian residents of Heerut. Separating himself from this narrow-minded community that so strictly guards itself from Indian people and culture, he instead resides with the natives in the less colonized town of Gaya, adopting their lifestyle and values.

Newly arrived from Europe, the heroine Sigrid Friesen is Tristram’s female counterpart and likewise departs from the racist attitudes of other Europeans in the novel. Sigrid is a recognizable New Woman in the novel not only because she smokes cigarettes, performs the “latest American [dance] distortion” (339), and exudes an active female sexuality, but more so because she loves to travel and to explore alternative selves through cross-cultural encounters. As I discussed in the previous chapter, colonial fictions featuring a New Woman character readily represented “The Orient as a site for daring female adventure” (L. Richardson, *New Woman* 109). In her unescorted travels and her willingness to encounter and embrace non-Western artistry, Sigrid proves herself to be a female adventuress, an identity that was assigned to many women in her line of work. Indeed, Sigrid realizes that her widely-perceived image as an “adventuress” is “partly an act of [her] profession” (Wylie, *Hermit Doctor* 66). This conflation results somewhat from the knowledge that dancers at the turn of the century were widely travelled, touring across Europe,

America and the East to reach ever-larger audiences. Wylie, however, is alluding not only to physical but also metaphorical journeys here. The modernist dancer welcomes the exploration of new terrains of being by performing radical routines that are often inspired by foreign cultures and people. Likewise, for Sigrid, her “art [is] an adventure—the greatest” (67), one that allows her “to explore an unknown country” (67). Thus, Sigrid is by no means an embodiment of English femininity. In fact, even though her national identity is English, she adopts her mother’s Swedish last name “because there never has been a great English dancer, and in England what hasn’t been can’t be” (49). Sigrid, in other words, recognizes that her New Woman status necessitates her departure from English norms. Like Tristram, Sigrid vocalizes this unconventionality by asserting that she is a “sentimentalist—a ‘freak’” (77). As an “artistic freak” (450), she prefers to “dance[...] against the background of an alien thought and art” (434)—where she finds “beauty” and “perfection” that does not exist in her own (434). She is willing to transgress cultural boundaries to achieve self-liberation and advancement.

In holding these liberal attitudes, Sigrid incites much scorn from the more conservative population at Heerut. Her biggest critic in the novel is Anne Boucicault, the epitome of Victorian femininity who (comparable to Mary Holland in Croker’s *The Company’s Servant*) upholds a dichotomous understanding of womanhood: “For in Anne’s catalogue of humanity there were as yet only two varieties of her sex, the sexually virtuous and the sexually immoral” (447), the “Good woman or bad woman” (447). In Anne’s eyes Sigrid falls into the latter category; she “isn’t a good woman” because she is “vulgar and horrid” (30) and “has no faith, no ideals” (92). Yet, Wylie continually undermines Anne’s derogatory representation of the New

Woman dancer at the turn of the century. To begin with, Anne is not a likeable character, and her prejudices are ill-founded and self-motivated. In fact, Wylie suggests that her animosity towards Sigrid originates from a deep-seated fear of her own impending demise, specifically the “pass[ing] of the Victorian Woman” (447) due to the rise of “one of those others” (447), the New Woman. In other words, because Sigrid threatens the survival of the domestic woman in India, Anne perceives her as a “dangerous” “foreigner” (30) who holds the potential to “poison” (92) the insular society at Heerut. Challenging Anne’s assumptions, Wylie instead renders the art of dancing, particularly in its contact with foreignness, as therapeutic. It is only through cross-cultural encounters that Sigrid can grow and heal. Thus, when Anne continues to denounce Sigrid for her liberal attitudes, Tristram defends her by asking, “What better thing can any of us do” (322) but “venture” (322)? Venturing contributes to a dancer’s development, and likewise Sigrid’s role as a temple priestess “suits [her] better than feting prima ballerinas in London restaurants” (151).¹⁵⁸

Unlike these “prima ballerinas,” Sigrid, resembling her historical counterparts such as Ruth St. Denis, embodies both spiritual and sensual energies. According to scholars like Priya Srinivasan, “The turn to Eastern spirituality ... enabled white female performers to break with the norms present during the time in attempting to remove the sexual stigma in favour of a spiritual spin” (“Dancing Modern” 6). However, Wylie suggests that the “turn to Eastern spirituality” was not so much of a removal of the sexual as it was a fusion of the sexual with the spiritual. As Janet Roseman suggests, this “sacred dance form ... could align the body with the spirit

¹⁵⁸ His opinion reflects the reputation of ballet dancers as of the earthly, physical, world as opposed to a divine one.

through movement and speech” (xvi). Because dance was a gift from the gods, it was a “potent expression of spiritual worlds on earth” (xvi). This body-based spirituality shared much in common with devadasi traditions, as Wylie recognizes. In her own rendering of the nautch, Wylie deviates from the typical split in writings about the temple dance. That is, throughout most of colonial history in India, the devadasi’s dance received a mixed reception: it was at once perceived as something vulgar for its sexual exhibitionism, and as something pure for its spiritual grace. Those who argued for its abolishment could not see beyond their Western understanding of the female-body-on-spectacle as inevitably tied to sexual availability, specifically prostitution. At the same time, others saw in the performance something graceful, spiritual and divine, nothing that suggested immorality. In reality, however, the devadasi performance represented both in ways that contradicted British understanding of gender norms, and it was the reconciliation of these conflicting forces that appealed to many Western performers who wanted to exhibit an active sexuality while embodying a new spirituality. That is, the nautch reconciled age-old Western binaries between the private and the public sphere, the separate sphere ideology that was the basis of the angel/whore construction of womanhood. While in the British mindset, the moral centre of Victorian society was the pure domestic woman, and her antithesis was the promiscuous public woman, the devadasi rested in between these two dichotomies, occupying a space of liminality. Their profession required that they narrate the stories of their gods, stories that were simultaneously religious and erotic. As Nancy Paxton aptly summarizes, “The devadasi disrupts prevailing nineteenth century British perceptions about femininity ... because she literally embodies what Sir William Jones identifies as Shakti, or ‘divine feminine

energy’, the power generated when spiritual and sexual love are combined” (Paxton, “Temple Dancer” 84). In Hindu mythology, devadasis were thought to be the earthly counterparts of angels known as apsaras, women who mated with the gods. Hence, as wives to the idols of the temple, Devadasis symbolized a spiritual and physical union with the deities they worshipped when they danced. By reversing the image of a nautch girl from an immoral to a moral figure, the performance seems to evoke a pre-colonial perception of the Indian dancer as spiritually inclined even while she was sexually liberated—synthesizing the opposites of sex and religion in ways that the colonialists in India had always found troubling (Spear and Meduri 437).¹⁵⁹

Ruth St. Denis’s choreographies articulated this union. In her performance of “Radha,” for example, the temple setting was offset by the highly eroticized performance in which she voluptuously caressed her body. In her work on St. Denis, Jane Desmond, for example, provides a close analysis of the choreography of this performance. She emphasizes its orgasmic nature, as clear from her following description: “After the ‘foreplay’ of the preceding episodes, the ‘delirium of the senses’ section unfolds, the music quickening to a frenzied tempo. Spinning, possessed, Radha whirls with her skirts swishing wildly until she suddenly falls to the ground, and ‘writhes and trembles to a climax, then lies supine as darkness descends’” (qtd. in Desmond 259). This moment of physical pleasure is rendered analogously as a moment of spiritual enlightenment and purification. As Desmond claims, “The lights come up on a chastened Radha... transformed by *samadha*,¹⁶⁰ self-realization” (258). Dancing provides a physical and psychological catharsis; it is the

¹⁵⁹ Later in the twentieth-century, however, theosophists such as Anne Besant became devoted to “restoring” the virginal status of the temple dancer—returning to a supposedly more pure devadasi of the Vedic period (see Conclusion).

¹⁶⁰ the highest state of meditation, also referred to as *samadhi* or *samadhi*

catalyst for a much-needed release. Because Ruth St. Denis's transformation and self-development go hand-in-hand with the exploration of her sexuality, they respond to the changing attitudes towards sex at the turn of the century. Under sexologists like Henry Havelock Ellis, sex was rendered as a "natural human instinct rather than a pathological force that needed censorship" (Leiblum and Perrin 5), an instinct to be enjoyed rather than repressed by men and women equally. Correspondingly, according to Joseph Allen Boone, modernist "narratives of [female] sexual emergence" (69) often suggested that the release of these pent-up desires was therapeutic. Accordingly, Ruth St. Denis imagined the temple-theatre as a place in which "to symbolize spiritual perfection, to heal, and to enlarge life" ("Temple-Theatre"). A woman's sexual awakening and her spiritual and psychological growth worked in tandem, and this realization shapes I.A.R Wylie's representation of her New Woman heroine in *The Hermit Doctor of Gaya*.

As mentioned earlier, in a crucial moment in the narrative, Sigrid, much like St. Denis,¹⁶¹ performs as a "priestess" (or devadasi) in "full skirts" (435) at the local Hindu temple in Heerut. Deviating from English femininity, Sigrid recognizes the healing powers of the East and participates in the modernist attempt to return to the body's natural, uncontaminated form, a form that was purportedly embodied more often by non-Western cultures because they were inherently closer to nature (Roseman xvi). Hence, she dances from "instinct" (Wylie, *Hermit Doctor* 436) at the temple with the intention of reconnecting to a pre-colonized, historic India and its wisdom. She dances with "abandon," losing herself to emotions and motions that are divinely inspired. Recalling St. Denis's performance of Radha, the dance builds to a

¹⁶¹ St. Denis likewise felt she was "truly the priestess in the temple" (Desmond 261).

climax, to the height of both religious and sexual ecstasy—a pinnacle moment that is witnessed by her love interest in the novel, Tristram Sahib:

She was breathing deep with the foretaste of ecstasy. He knew, too, for what she waited—for the bar of music¹⁶² which should set her free. It came at last. He heard it rush down through the stillness. It caught her up on its crest and swept her down the path of silver towards him. ... Its delirious beauty poured through his blood. And even if his instinct had not seized it she would have taught him. Her movements, her hands, her feet, her body sang it to him. (435-436)

By dancing as a devadasi, Sigrid finds a much-needed release: her body and her spirit take flight, and her movements cease with an eventual climax, as she “came like a leaf blown before the wind and like a leaf sank slowly to the ground” (437-8).¹⁶³ So “frail and white” (437-8), Sigrid interprets this orgasmic moment as the “end” of her life, as proof that she is “dying” (440). Instead, the reader learns that she has undergone a “miracle” (305) and is cured of whatever illness haunted her through most of the narrative. In fact, Wylie reverses the more conservative theories at the turn of the century that suggested that women’s exposure to non-white cultures, their active sexuality, and their affinity for dancing caused a deterioration in their health. Such transgressions purportedly led to “cancer, venereal disease, and the ‘deterioration of the brains, bones and muscles’” (qtd in Teo, “Women’s Travel” 372). This is not the case, however, for Sigrid. On Indian soil, on Hindu sacred ground, her dying body

¹⁶² The source of music is (perhaps deliberately) unknown, adding to the mystical quality of the temple.

¹⁶³ The orgasmic nature of the nautch is articulated also in Fanny Emily Penny’s *The Romance of a Nautch Girl*. In another of her descriptions of St. Denis, Desmond reports that in *Radha* she (comparable to Sigrid) “whirls with abandon, ending in the seductive vulnerability of a deep back bend before she falls to the ground” (Desmond 259).

transforms into a “perfect human body with an inspired soul” (Wylie, *Hermit Doctor* 305). She realizes that in this moment she “was the soul and the body; the perfect union” (305)—the fusion of the sexual and the spiritual. She resembles modernist dancers of her time who “listen[ed] to the pulse, breath, rhythm, and blood flow, of their physical instruments as key into what was behind and beyond form” (Roseman xv).

At the same time as she finds physical release, Sigrid uncovers a new “religion” (436) and reaches an “apotheosis” (437), a moment of divine revelation. Dancing in the ruins of a temple, “upon the grey, time-defaced columns” (436), Sigrid returns to the art of a pre-colonized Vedic India, one that, as I have discussed earlier, many theosophists rendered as the height of civilization, as a sort of utopia for modernists. As Tristram recognizes, through the transcendental nature of her dance, Sigrid becomes one with this Indian art form, whereby the devadasi’s dance reflects her own modernist values and fuses her with a much-needed revitalization:

He knew that this was something that his generation had never seen. It was the final word of a great art, often debased, now lifted to the heights where the soul pours through the body to triumphant expression ... And it was a religion. Amongst the shades of departed worshippers she was the living spirit. She called them back from their dust-strewn oblivion to the rites of their mystic faith. She leapt the barriers of time and race. The ruined Hindu temple, its towering sikhara¹⁶⁴ rising up over its holy mystery to the stars, identified itself with her; she became its priestess, it became her natural background, the splendid shrine of her genius. (436-7)

¹⁶⁴ literally translates to “mountain peak” but more generally refers to the rising tower of Hindu temples

Crossing the barriers of race and time, Sigrid is able to corporeally access the deep wisdom rooted in ancient Hindu practices, and subsequently owes her miraculous recovery from an unknown terminal illness to this body-based spirituality. It is this ability that reinvigorates her since, as John Dexter Blackner suggested, “No experience is as fully alive as having that god-like energy move through one” (qtd. in Roseman xvi).

Sigrid’s journey, however, is not merely personal but communal. According to Janet Lynn Roseman, it was the “Dancer’s responsibility to act as a conduit between worlds of spirit and matter” (Roseman xvii), to not only undertake a personal journey but to instil a similar self-realization in her audience.

Correspondingly, as he watches her dance, Sigrid “open[s] new doors for [Tristam] and new worlds” (83). As the above quotation suggested, Tristam’s gaze on Sigrid’s body affects his own “blood.” Reversing earlier theories about female sexuality as passive, she “teache[s]” him how to experience physical rapture. While Tristam derives erotic pleasure from viewing the female-body-on-spectacle, he also raises this body to a divine stature. His adoration for her is “sheer worship” since he “sees something miraculous—divine in [her]” (244); he “[sees] God in her” through “[her] art” (244). At this point of the narrative, Sigrid in fact holds the power of restoring Tristam to his former self. After his dutiful marriage to Anne, he has “become so civilized” (340), now living among the community at Heerut as an Anglo-Indian and losing ties to his original “religion”(340) that was bred in his day-to-day contact with the natives in Gaya. Sigrid, unlike Anne, offers Tristam a spiritual and physical renewal when they “[stand] together” (441) at the temple. Their physical proximity coincides with and strengthens their modernist beliefs in non-Western religions. This

dance, hence, is a pivotal moment in the novel, a life-giving force that contributes to Sigrid's physical survival, as well as the rejuvenation of her New Womanness, of a Hindu religion, and of the love between her and Tristram.

White Bodies, Indian Dances:

Rethinking Orientalism on the Western Stage

By tracing both fictional and historical examples of New Women dancers “going nautch girl,” I do not intend to create a false impression that these western performances were authentic renderings of the Indian dance or dancer—both of which were inherently plural and transient. As I have discussed in the Introduction, Indian female performers and their dances varied across space and time, and hence it is impossible to retrieve and articulate a single, authentic version of the nautch. More importantly, as they experimented with the different variations of the nautch available to them, western women were not replicating Indian art forms but hybridizing them. Even Bithia Mary Croker and Ida Alexa Ross Wylie were aware that their female characters fused Eastern with Western artistry in their performances. While Rosita Fountaine, for example, purportedly dances in “*true* Nautch-girl fashion [my emphasis]” (218), Croker describes her as a “prima-donna” (142) who performs a “*pas seul*” (140) that ends in a “curtsy” (141) and that is accompanied by a French song. Likewise, Sigrid Friesen is influenced by her classical training in music and dance; her routine at the temple, set to the music of Beethoven and Brahms, combines ballet steps with Indian hand gestures. Both novels, thus, seem to recognize that the newness or modernity of the nautch on the Western stage was attributed to what resulted from a collision of East and West. In fact, according to Sally Banes, “Modern dance itself was born, at the turn of the century, in a

crucible of hybridity” (260). The “modernist imperative to ‘make it new,’” she goes on, was the catalyst for increasing cross-cultural encounters in the performing arts (258). Dancers like Ruth St. Denis, Anna Pavlova, Loie Fuller and Isadora Duncan, among others, participated in and emerged from this culturally hybrid space. Priya Srinivasan argues that “St Denis was able to successfully market herself as a ‘new’ spiritual and mystical Oriental dancer precisely because of her turn to Indian dance practices” (“Dancing Modern” 6). Far from being authentically Indian, however, her choreographies, such as *Radha*, were an amalgamation of the skirt dance, ballet routines, the Delsartean movements, and Indian gestures (Desmond 258).

Despite the hybridity underlying these performances, many critics of modernist exoticism have agreed that these Western dancers were inevitably constructing or stabilizing an image of the non-Western Other through their exotic performances. In assessing this possibility, critics of the modern dance movement have drawn on Edward Said’s groundbreaking work *Orientalism*. Said uses the term Orientalism to characterize the cross-generic, interdisciplinary body of Western-produced knowledge on the Orient—a discursive practice that enabled the West (the Occident) to discover, define, imagine, invent, and ultimately rule over the East. Borrowing from Michel Foucault’s theory of discourse as a mode of establishing and maintaining power, Said identifies Orientalism, in other words, as a process by which Europeans discursively “manage—and even produce—the Orient politically, sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively” to serve their own ends (3). Through acts of discursive repetition and a process of Othering, they construct a reductive image of the Orient by speaking and acting on its behalf.

Said's theory about colonial discourse has increasingly become a lens through which to approach the prolific use of the exotic in the performing arts. A standard reading of dancers like Ruth St. Denis and her nautch-inspired performances, for example, argues that her act of cultural appropriation is as an act of violence that inhibits dialogue and open exchange between cultures. The body that performs a vision of the East, like the pen, is white and inscribes an Orientalist text that imagines and invents the East for its own purpose. In his study on Modernist musical theatre and its appropriation of the exotic, Anthony Sheppard argues that this "transaction of 'influence' is often an active and conscious rather than passive or subliminal experience; it is also a highly selective engagement with the other—one likely to involve a misreading of the exotic model in order to satisfy certain preconceptions or interests" (11). Similarly, in representing the East as an enticing foil to the West, white female performers who performed Indian dances at the turn of the century were possibly constructing a certain stable, albeit often contradictory, representation of India, one that fed their desire for a utopian world that was at once spiritual and sexual. As Rossen reports, "many of [Ruth St. Denis's] dances tapped into a turn-of-the-century colonialist fascination with the East, which, to Western eyes, represented unbridled sexuality, the exotic and the possibility of cultural renewal" (5). Desmond likewise argues that "the 'unchanging' nature of the East," particularly at the *fin de siècle*, "was seen as source of regeneration for a Western world caught in an unsettling rise of industrialism and materialism" (Desmond 262).

These critics further suggest that, by marketing the Indian dance on the stage, western women profited both financially and socially from their Orientalist performances at the expense of devadasis who were denied self-representation. The

nautch was imported and domesticated, absorbed into the modern dance movement, to benefit Western not Indian women (P. Srinivasan, "Dancing Modern" 4).¹⁶⁵ Such critics read the nautch girl as a subaltern whose deliberate absence from the site of representation allowed white women to claim authorship of the performance. In fact, "Caucasian women," Priya Srinivasan claims, "could keep up the artifice of the Orient in better ways than the tangible bodies of female Nautch dancers" ("The Bodies Beneath" 27). The white female dancer's empowerment, in other words, accompanied and necessitated the absence of the colonial other, the erasure of the colonized female body. The violent exclusion of the subaltern's corporeality, which speaks a discourse of its own, is intentional and self-serving, according to Srinivasan: "When the nautch is danced or presented by a female Westerner the resulting Orientalist paradigm can reaffirm the West's superiority, as it takes a Western woman to understand and represent the essence of the East" (34).

While I agree that Western representations of the nautch were inherently partial and subjective, my own reading deviates from an Orientalist paradigm that renders all Western productions of the East as violent, hegemonic and inauthentic. To begin with, such readings endorse a cultural essentialism by suggesting that only Indian women can claim ownership to the nautch and that their performances are naturally more pure. Not only does such a reading downplay the diversity of Indian dance traditions throughout time and space, but it also ignores the reverse influence that Western routines had on the evolution of Indian dance, especially at a time of

¹⁶⁵ Yet, the idea that they benefitted from their exotic performances while the tradition of the nautch was being degraded comes from hindsight. At the time that Ruth St. Denis was dancing she endured much ridicule, humiliation, and mean-spirited reviews for her transgressions. Far from being renowned as the mother of modern dance, she was called a "Jersey Hindoo" (Roseman xviii), and, on numerous accounts, she was considered to be void of morals and virtue: "After watching her performance as an Indian goddess, clad only in ceremonial dress, one audience member declared she was indecent" (Roseman xviii).

unprecedented interactions between performers from across the globe. As I suggested in Chapter 1, nautch girls themselves were appropriating the arts of Western cultures, and proving that hybrid innovations were not uni-directional. More importantly, in their use of a Saidian paradigm, the above interpretations of modern exoticism in the performing arts consolidate a monolithic understanding of East-West encounters. While Western women, due to their visibly white bodies, inevitably engage in acts of colonial violence, Indian women are rendered as the passive victims of this epistemic violence. By retrieving examples of helplessly violated Indian women at the expense of counter-narratives, I would argue that such readings inadvertently and misleadingly recycle rather than impede colonial discourse about Indian womanhood.

Instead, I favour, in fact urge, a more context-specific analysis, one that rethinks the contours of the women's movement at the turn of the century through the numerous examples of white bodies "going nautch girl." In this chapter, I have suggested that, by performing exotic dances, such as the nautch, New Woman dancers, both in fact and in fiction, reinforce and embrace their New Woman status. More importantly, within a growing international movement for female liberation in the performing arts, western women aspire to a non-English model of female independence, perceiving an Indian, not Western, woman as the source of their advancement. This reverse emulation confuses rather than confirms the hierarchical relationship between the Occident and Orient. EM Collingham claims that colonialists "grounded their authority in the bodily difference between ruler and ruled; thereby ensuring the body became the central site where racial difference was understood and reaffirmed" (8). This is not the case, however, for female bodies that

went nautch girl on the Western stage. These bodies publically masqueraded as Indian dancers to align themselves with, not against, the Other, blurring the line between the Occident and the Orient, between those who were purportedly empowered and those disempowered by the act of representation.¹⁶⁶ Symbolizing a transcultural space, the resulting body was at once “white and nonwhite, Western and Eastern” (Desmond 266). As Desmond argues, “If ideologies are based on binary constructions of difference necessary to the maintenance of hegemony, performance thus indicates the ambiguity of such binary constructions and their dialectical function in the production of meaning” (Desmond 267).

Not only did white female performers who performed the nautch upset these binaries but they also willingly relinquished their ties to a national or racial identity for the greater goal of female liberation. By tracing such historical and fictional examples of white bodies “going nautch girl,” I thus offer a much-needed alternative reading of the British/Indian female encounter that is not as easily contained within imperial feminist rhetoric.

¹⁶⁶ The rupturing of the East-West binary, according to David Spurr, was a common modernist phenomenon: “the colonizer’s traditional insistence on difference from the colonized establishes a notion of the savage as other, the antithesis of civilized value. And yet the tendency of modern literature and science has been to locate the savage within us, in our historical origins and in our psychic structure” (7).

CONCLUSION

Rethinking Cross-Cultural Female Encounters:

Feminisms at the “Contact Zone”

As this dissertation attests, the nautch girls featured in several Anglo-Indian novels at the turn of the century challenged imperial feminist rhetoric, whether through their threat to the Memsahib’s imperial role in the Anglo-Indian home, their seduction of burdened Anglo-Indian domestic women, their terrorization of the British female adventuress, or their appeal to *fin-de-siècle* dancers searching for a modern femininity. Collectively, the body chapters thus trace and expose a particular image of tawaifs and devadasis, one that projects their relative liberties and power in juxtaposition to British women at a key historical moment: the women’s movement at the close of the nineteenth- and the onset of the twentieth-century. In other words, through a close examination of a subgenre of female-authored nautch girl novels, I locate moments in which British women feel comparatively inferior to the Indian female performer (whether fearing or envying her lifestyle) to offer an alternative reading of Indian-British female encounters than those falling under the now-dominant paradigm of imperial feminism. Such a reading is integral to destabilizing our own reductive assumptions of the turn-of-the-century women’s movement and to opening up the possibility that a class of Indian women (however indirectly or imaginatively) may have impacted British women’s newly emerging identities during this turbulent, transitional period.

While I have purposefully focused on the subversive potential of nautch girls throughout this dissertation, I do not intend to create a false impression of these women's lives that essentializes or nostalgically glamorizes their lifestyle during the British Raj. Such a reading would downplay evidence of their victimization under colonial and patriarchal practices—a victimization that had real long-term consequences. As Judith M. Bennett suggests in her discussion of the history of feminism, we must not think of an individual's place in the agent/victim binary as fixed but rather as fluid and informed by geographical and temporal variations:

... to emphasize either one without the other creates an unbalanced history.

Women have not been merely passive victims of patriarchy; they have also colluded in, undermined and survived patriarchy. But neither have women been free agents; they have always faced ideological, institutional, and practical barriers to equitable association with men (and indeed with other women). (qtd. in Chauduri and Strobel 4)

It is with this complexity in mind that I feel the need here to problematize my own reading throughout this dissertation, a reading that might inadvertently be imagining the tawaifs and devadasis as “free agents.” As Jakir Nair has cautioned, “We must not exaggerate the power enjoyed by devadasis, who despite their relative autonomy nevertheless remained dependent on that triad of men within the political economy of the temple, the priest, guru and patron” (3161). In “How to Read a Culturally Different Text,” Gayatri Spivak voices a similar concern in her critique of Amrit Srinivasan's study of devadasis:

[Srinivasan] is surely right in noticing the interests of the men of the group in pushing through colonial reforms so that the devadasis' economic 'power'

could be broken. But to perceive these forces as supervening upon a freely functioning structure seems unconvincing. In fact the devadasi structure was subsumed in a general patriarchal structure. As Gail Omvedt puts it: “Can any special section of women be free of patriarchy in a patriarchal society?” (140)

I would like to add that, turn-of-the-century tawaifs and devadasis were not only struggling against patriarchal but also colonial power structures. As I trace below, there is much evidence to suggest that they suffered from the motives of Indian nationalists as well as British colonialists, and that both British and Indian women were often complicit in their victimization.

The Changing Perception of Nautch Girls:

From the “Miracle” to the “Ruin” of India

And I tell you, that if she was to appear again in the temple and call our people to arms in her name, the miracle would spread over India like a flame over dry stubble. No hand that could hold a sword would hang idle. The Englishmen and the traitor princes would be blotted out. Do you think that I dream? At the heart of our country there is a force which we dare not neglect—a weapon which we must use before the accursed ones have blunted it. (Wylie, *The Daughter of Brahma* 309)

The “weapon” of which Rama Pal from Ida Alexa Ross Wylie’s *The Daughter of Brahma* (1912) speaks is the devadasi Sarasvati, and he seeks to exploit her influence for the sake of attaining India’s independence. Becoming a pawn in Rama Pal’s plans, Sarasvati does speak, but not out of her own accord; rather, she succumbs to mounting pressure from the Hindu community who are in midst of organizing an

attack. This passage from Wylie's novel captures the sacrificial role that some devadasis were expected to play during the Indian nationalist movement.

While *The Daughter of Brahma* suggests that the *fin de siècle* nautch girl was the potential catalyst for a nationalist movement, many British and Indian writers were increasingly influenced by anti-nautch rhetoric. Hence, they advocated, first, a return to ancient vedic forms of the devadasi tradition and, second, a replacement of the allegedly tainted devadasi with the more chaste, upper-caste Brahmin woman. Throughout most of the first half of the twentieth century, British imperialists, Indian reformers, Indian nationalists, Western female performers and upper-caste Brahmin Indian women all wanted their share in redefining the nautch and in deciding who did and did not have the right to perform—especially considering the female performer was so strongly embedded within the “women's question.” As Judy Whitehead argues, “Since the honour of women was associated with the honour of the nation in both British and Indian nationalist discourses, the notion of female participation in nation-building became linked with female respectability” (42). In other words, “The status of women in India, and their respectability, became a highly charged symbol of the level of India's ‘civilization’ or ‘decadance’” (57). Under this logic, existing devadasis and tawaifs (particularly because of their increasing association with prostitution) became a source of national shame, a disgrace to India and in need of abolishment.

Amrit Srinivasan has conducted extensive research on the devadasi community in Tamil Nadu and has traced the history that led to their abolition, paying particular attention to the activities of evangelical-based campaigners and theosophists—who respectively contributed to the devadasis' reform and revival. As

I mentioned briefly in the Introduction, female missionaries did self-servingly partake in the construction of nautch girls as victims in need of saving, a construction that in turn buttressed imperial feminism. In *The Wrongs of Indian Womanhood*, for example, Jenny Fuller reads the plight of devadasis as symptomatic of the backwardness of Indian men, of “the heartless cruelty of man to woman” (123). Using the rhetoric of “sympathy,” she asks, “what if your sisters and daughters were among these [devadasis]? What then?” (124). For missionaries like Jenny Fuller, writing about the horrible treatment of devadasis in the hands of Hindu priests was crucial in substantiating their own rescue narratives.

British men and women participated in the erasure of present-day devadasis, and by extension tawaifs, by promoting not only a reform of existing traditions but also a so-named revival of old ones. As Amrit Srinivasan argues, paradoxically, “While the reformers presented the Hindu temple dancer as a ‘prostitute’ in order to do away with her, the revivalists presented her as a ‘nun’ in order to incarnate her afresh” (1869). These theosophy-influenced revivalists imagined the vedic period of India as the height of Hindu civilization, a golden age when Indian women were treated with respect and were deemed equal to men, and accordingly as the zenith of the devadasi tradition. For example, while interpreting present-day temple dancers as degraded prostitutes, Annie Besant romanticizes the lifestyle of those living in ancient India. “Originally,” she argues, “there existed in connection with the Temples a band of pure maidens, vestal virgins, through whose unsullied lips, from time to time, a God or a great Rishi would speak, warning or teaching the worshippers” (68). Upholding Victorian and Christian models of womanhood, she celebrates the sexual innocence of these women, arguing that “Only a pure virgin could serve as such a

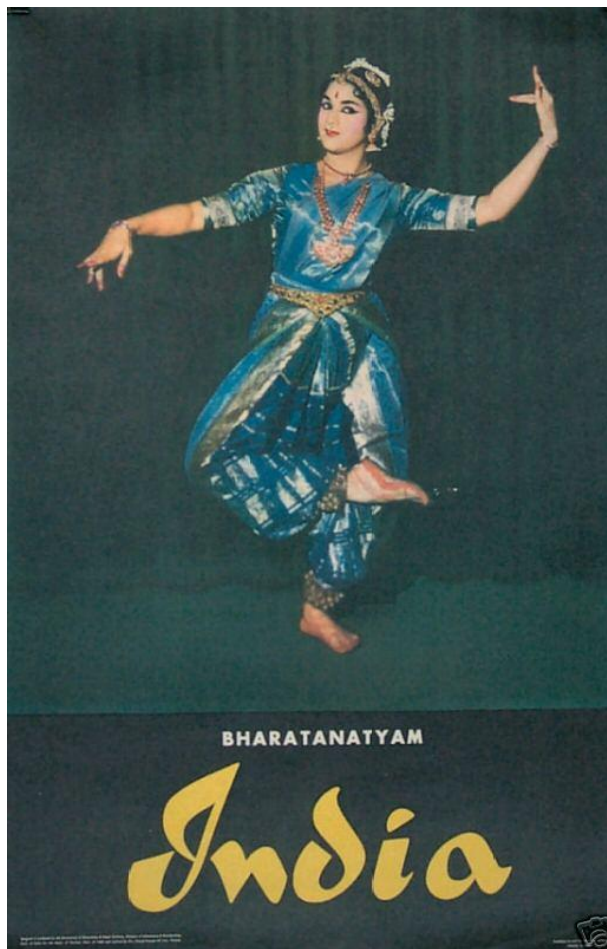


Fig. 47: Government of India. "Bharatnatyam India." Postcard. 1962.

"nautchlater." *Columbia.edu*. Columbia, 2010. Web. 20 Sept 2010.

vehicle, for the temporary embodiment of a great One whose physical body was far away" (69). "These virgins," she asserts, were "guarded with the greatest care" from the advances of lascivious men and "looked on with the greatest reverence" (69). Besant was one of many women at the onset of the twentieth century to participate in developing a utopian image of the pre-colonial devadasi. Fuelled by the nationalist movement, these western women advocated a return to Indian "traditions" in an

attempt to resist the modernization or Westernization of India, and its subsequent degeneration. These theosophical beliefs led to the revival of the so-called classical dance of India, known as Bharatnatyam.

As Avanthi Meduri and Jeffrey Spear suggest, this marginalization of existing Indian female performers and the accompanying "revival" of the *Natyashastra* of Bharata, albeit initiated by British men and women who attempted to regenerate a so-called stagnant India, was simultaneously a Western and Eastern undertaking: "The story of how the devadasi, the temple dancer of South India," they write,

“comes to be abjected, consigned to the abyss, while her Vedic ancestor was being celebrated, is part of an ironic interplay between Eastern and Western ideas about the dancer and her dance” (437). Among those Indian reformers who ardently supported the abolition movement was Keshub Chunder Sen, and his demonizing description of the nautch girl is worth quoting at length:

That hideous woman dances, and she smiles as she dances! And she casts furtive glances! Apparently a sweet damsel, a charming figure. But beneath that beautiful exterior dwells—what? Infernal ferocity. Hell is in her eyes. In her breast is a vast ocean of poison. Round her comely waist dwell the furies of hell. Her hands are brandishing unseen daggers ever ready to strike unwary or wilful victims that fall her way. Her blandishments are India’s ruin. Alas her smile is India’s death ... Such is the Nautch Girl of the East ... Let it not be said that this nautch is an innocent and respectable entertainment. Innocent forsooth! It sends the fire of lasciviousness all through the land. And respectable!—it brings an unclean and infamous courtesan, a public prostitute into the mansions of patronizing millionaires. (Sen qtd in Punjab Purity Association 3-4)

Sen depicts the nautch girls as satanic seductresses who deliberately endanger the nation itself, spreading “disease,” “ruin” and “death” among their innocent male victims (3-4). Discrediting their art by highlighting the sexuality of the women, he is one of many Indian reformers at the turn of the century who labels the tawaifs and devadasis as a lethal influence that needed to be eradicated. Such re-representations of nautch girls as symbols of an uninhibited Eastern sexuality increasingly gained prominence while overpowering other aspects of their identity, and this inflated

promiscuity had serious repercussions. For example, prostitution became a self-fulfilling prophesy since, as I have outlined in Chapter 2, many relocated to the cantonments due to a significant decrease in aristocratic patronage. More generally, under the change in their social and cultural status, they struggled to retain the liberties they previously held.

The degradation of communities of Indian female performers and the so-called revival of classical Indian dance happened relationally. Under the influence of the *Natyashastras*, the texts that supposedly inscribed the vedic form of the nautch, the Bharatnatyam was “revived” and played a key role in the nationalist movement. It is in the 1920s, Spear and Meduri suggest, that “Madras Brahmans saw in [the Bharatnatyam] an opportunity to express a new nationalist agenda and build an opposition to English rule” (438). This movement was not without its class/caste prejudices, and placed the upper-caste Indian women as the real repositories of the feminine power of shakti, transferring the dance from the bodies of “unrespectable” to “respectable” women who were deemed more worthy representatives of the nation. Amrit Srinivasan recognizes the influence of western ideals on this shift:

Given the upper-class Christian religious biases of the Theosophists and the deep influence of evolutionary theories on their ‘science’ it was the model of the ancient temple dancer as a pure and holy, sexually chaste woman which was stressed in their programme. By thus marking her off from the ‘living’ devadasi, they hoped to attract the right sort of clientele for the dance ... The modifications introduced into the content of the dance-style were a consequence not so much of its ‘purification’ (as the revivalists liked to see it) but its rebirth in a more ‘proper’ class. (1875)

Western female performers like Anna Pavlova played their part in stimulating this rebirth by encouraging Indian performing artists like Rukhmini Devi to study the dance of their own nation, subsequently shifting the site of performance of the temple-based *sadir* to the stage, where it became the *bharatnatyam*.

Above I have problematized the apparent “agency” of nautch girls by exposing their struggles under nineteenth- and twentieth-century colonial and patriarchal power structures. While it is important to recognize the limitations placed on these women and the hardship they endured outside of their control, it is just as important to illuminate their modes of resistance, especially considering scholarship on *devadasi* and *tawaif* communities tends to read their history predominantly through an awareness of their eventual abolishment and abjection. Such a reading downplays the recalcitrant nature of nautch girls, and dismisses the possibility that these Indian women could influence the identities and thoughts of British women at the turn of the century, at a time when they were struggling to (re)define themselves in the midst of changing gender roles.

Feminisms at the “Contact Zone”

Mary Louise Pratt defines the contact zone as “social spaces where cultures meet, clash, and grapple with each other, often in contexts of highly asymmetrical relations of power, such as colonialism, slavery, or their aftermaths as they are lived out in many parts of the world today” (34). Her concept of the “contact zone” is useful in assessing the moment of (imaginative) encounter between British women and nautch girls at the turn of the century. That is, the contested, multivocal space of Anglo-Indian fiction becomes the site for such cross-cultural exchange—an exchange that impacts British writers and readers during a rather turbulent,

transitional period. In exposing this possibility throughout this dissertation, I have attempted to counteract the general assumption reigning in current scholarship that the historical contact between first and third world women resulted in a uni-directional flow of ideas, in the success of cultural imperialism whereby Eastern women internalized western ideals while British women celebrated their inherent racial and cultural superiority. This assumption is the basis of the burgeoning scholarship on imperial feminism.

While I am indebted to the work of postcolonial feminists such as Chandra Talpade Mohanty, Antoinette Burton, Reina Lewis, Margaret Strobel, Nupur Chauduri and Gayatri Spivak among others for illuminating the Eurocentricism informing much of feminist history, what is missing from their Saidian-influenced outlook on cross-cultural female encounters is the recognition and recovery of moments where British women interrogated and revised their sense of self *vis-à-vis* non-Western women. Such moments can be located in a neglected subgenre of Anglo-Indian fiction, a subgenre in which British female writers grapple with the recalcitrant figure of the Indian nautch girl. These novels and short stories stage a *fictional* “contact zone” between British and Indian women—specifically the imagined encounter between Anglo-Indian women and devadasis or tawaifs—that affects not only the female characters in the narrative but the female readers and writers themselves, prompting them to question their existing identities and possibly fashion new ones. As I suggested in the opening to this dissertation, it is in their fictions, then, that several *fin de siècle* Anglo-Indian writers (who were coincidentally writing during the rise of the New Woman movement) acknowledge that they can “learn” from strong and independent Indian female communities, such as from the tawaif

Chandni featured in Flora Annie Steel's *The Potter's Thumb*. Such an acknowledgement, in turn, questions the success of the white woman's burden in India, which was founded on the colonized female learning from the female colonizer not vice versa. Instead, with an awareness of the nautch girl's relative freedom and power, the Anglo-Indian writers of these works, however subtly and however unconsciously, seem to relocate the feminist movement, and its leadership, to India itself. They contemplate the possibility that it is the tawaifs and devadasis, not they, who are relatively more empowered, and thereby more suitable leaders of the women's movement at the turn of the century.

It is my contention that, by illuminating such moments of resistance and subversion, critics can help counteract the legacies of imperial feminism. That is, by questioning and complicating our own understanding of British feminist and colonial histories, we can begin to rewrite and re-imagine cross-cultural female encounters today. The recovery of counter-narratives can help undo still-prevailing beliefs about Indian womanhood generally and western-Indian female encounters more specifically. In *Burdens of History*, Antoinette Burton convincingly argues that studying feminist history is useful in understanding current feminist politics. "Perhaps it can help change patterns of domination and racist thought in the present," she claims, "by revealing that the past is, for better or worse, our inheritance" (x). That is, by raising awareness of the co-dependency of feminist and imperialist movements in history, she aims to expose the lingering legacy of such rhetoric, which she feels still informs western-eastern female relations in a (post)colonial world.

With a similar understanding of how the past might haunt the present, I want to end this dissertation by urging a reinvestigation of contemporary cross-cultural

female encounters. But, whereas Burton seeks to raise awareness of the persistence of imperial feminist rhetoric in Western women's practices and writings, I seek to unveil moments in which this rhetoric is subverted. I advise critics to record and celebrate those moments when marginalized feminisms, still working under the shadow of Western-based models, contest and inform dominant ones. It is by continuing to locate and expose such incidents that we can start dismantling the hierarchies and boundaries separating First World from Third World feminisms. As a Punjabi-speaking Indo-Canadian, informed by both western and Indian models of womanhood, I have an invested interest in studying feminisms at the contact zone. While this dissertation is limited to what transpires during the contact between British women and nautch girls, I feel that the burgeoning scholarship on western women and imperialism could benefit greatly by continuing this line of investigation.

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