



EVERYDAY LIFE IN THE EMPIRE: REPRESENTATION OF THE SERVANT CLASS IN FLORA ANNIE STEEL

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Abstract

White memsahibs residing in India were obliged to keep quite a few native servants for the proper maintenance of their household. In fiction, it is only on rare occasions that these servants are represented as individuals in their own right. This paper will examine the representational mechanism through which Flora Annie Steel (1847-1929) depicts her servant characters while keeping intact her ambivalence attitude towards everything Indian. These native servants were in close contact with the ladies of the house and their mutual relationship has shaped our understanding of the empire and its people. Although affording servants was not a luxury, it was a sort of necessary and unavoidable evil which all Europeans had to bear up with. In her fiction Steel invests servant characters with importance but shows a negligent attitude towards them. Thus, while on one hand their proficiency and skills are acclaimed and admired, on the other hand they are shown to suffer if not deserve torture, neglect, and racial hatred as a means of keeping them in their place. This paper will try to examine this authorial ambivalence towards her fictional servants vis-à-vis their moral economy and sexual vulnerability.

Keywords: *Female Caregivers, Colonial Servants, Employers and Domestic, Domestic Servants.*

Everyday life in the empire entailed the presence of native servants in colonial houses. Literary works written by memsahibs residing in India due to their marriage to English soldiers or civil servants make constant reference, though very briefly, about the role of domestic servants in their lives (Chaudhuri, 1988). Whereas British men invested their energy in building up a desired image of the empire in the colony, their female counterparts took on the role of doing the same in their domestic spheres (Blunt, 1999). So, it would not be wrong to say that the British home in the colonies served as an extension of the empire by recreating in miniature the service relationship between colonial master and native servant. The life of white women was mostly a leisurely one that revolved around their home, motherhood, domestic duties or sometimes outdoor social activities. Thus, the domestic sphere turned into a contested space for the memsahib who was invested with the responsibility of sustaining this microcosm of imperial authority by maintaining a healthy family life. According to Jenny Sharpe, the domestic space is an epitome of 'racial purity that the colonial housewife guard[ed] against contamination from the outside'(1993:92). While interacting with their servants the memsahibs saw them as potential mediators of the colonial world since the possibility of knowing the orient through one's own experience was limited and restrained.

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A properly managed house with well-disciplined servants is a testimony of imperial success. Flora Annie Steel (1847 – 1929) was a memsahib (married a civil servant) who lived in India for twenty-two years in her advice manual *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (1907) states that ‘Housekeeping in India, when once the first strangeness has worn off, is a far easier task in many ways than it is in England’. Such manuals recreate the domestic space as an environment of power and authority that the memsahibs are able to rule and manage efficiently. Texts that explore domestic issues and servant narratives in the colony often pose questions regarding power, class, and allegiance. For centuries the master servant relationship has been a challenging one characterised by rifts and power struggles. The conduct of these lower classes of people in many cases depended on the behaviour of their master (Blunt, 1999). Unable to understand the intricacies of the Indian caste system, its religious prejudices or gender concerns memsahibs often misinterpreted their domestic helps. Representing servants within the interior of the colonial home was fraught with tension and problems.

Although affording servants was not a luxury, it was a sort of necessary and unavoidable evil which all Europeans had to bear up with. So, there are often mentions of laziness on the part of the servants and how their presence made the life of the British complicated (James, 1898:372). They are also portrayed as treacherous, disloyal and unreliable. Yet, native servants are also praised for their work productivity and allegiance towards their colonial masters. Thus, even though white servants were preferred more than natives by the memsahibs yet in many instances, European servants failed to take proper care of the child/house inmates. Hence, while on one hand, the proficiency and skills of native servants were acclaimed and admired, on the other hand, they are shown to suffer if not deserve torture, neglect, and racial hatred as a means of keeping them in their place.

This ambivalence regarding the servant class is critically debated in the texts of Flora Annie Steel. She mentions instances of servant beating in her autobiography the *Garden of Fidelity* (1929). But she is also seen praising the help given by her *ayah* Fazli during her stay in India. This blending of guilt and appreciation towards the servant class makes the narratives of Steel interesting to read. Sometimes the natives are portrayed as childlike and innocent, at other times they are seen as potential threats for the whites. So, Indian servants are depicted as having “an acute sense of justice” who “must be treated like children, kindly but very firmly” (Luzac, 1909:56). Again there are instances of faithfulness shown by native servants in the time of the Mutiny and how they gave up their lives in order to save their white masters but on the other hand there are also depictions of servants being beaten for misbehaviour or treachery during times of crisis.

The servant characters always remain in the periphery of the narrative. An acute sense of mistrust and ambivalence lingers in the minds of the colonial masters against this class of people (servants) and there is very little representation of their life or their speech in colonial narratives. Their behaviour, attitude, or their activities are never represented in the first person but are always filtered through the viewpoint of the author or some other character. In order to recreate the life of this always absent labour class, a detailed understanding of their situation is necessary. In a few of Steel’s texts servants are present who are shown to be following and maintaining the prescribed rules of class and hierarchy. An in-depth assessment of the servant characters such as Iman Khan in the short story “Salt Duty” from the collection *The Mercy of the Lord* (1894) and “Heera Nund”, Dhurm Singh from the short story “For the Faith” in *Flower of Forgiveness* (1894) will facilitate an understanding of the reality of their lives. In Steel’s narrative male servants are rarities, though not entirely absent. In these above-mentioned texts Steel places lowly, poor old servant characters at the centre of her narratives to expose the social, cultural and imperial prejudices prevalent in society.

The servants are shown as an integral part of domestic life, sharing a confidential as well as reciprocal relationship with the master. Although they share the same compound/dwelling with their master, their humble quarters, shabby life style, poverty, and degrading existence makes clear the difference between the ruler and the ruled. Even though they constitute a part of the house, they always remain an ‘outsiders’.

So, we can say that the servants are incidental to the colonial concern of the author. Stereotypical images of servants in the narratives become an essential means of sustaining and keeping intact the balance of inequality between the ruler and the ruled.

The short story "For the Faith" in *Flower of Forgiveness* (1894) revolves around Indian religious ideas, age old customs and Western scepticism regarding the superstitious and passive Eastern cultural models. The narrative begins with a reunion between an old servant Dhurm Singh and his long-served Sonny Baba whom he meets after a long period of separation. During the Mutiny, Dhurm Singh had saved the life of the sahib and now desires to be in his service for the rest of his life. He takes up the charge of a care giver to his master from the beginning till the end of the story. The white man being young of age and without any prior understanding and knowledge about the native world switches between various professions and ultimately decides to work as a missionary to take care of the downtrodden people of India. Dhurm Singh remains associated with him in all aspects taking ample care of his master's daily needs such as food, basic care and even helping him to make medicines. When the master remained busy with his missionary work, Dhurm spent his time making powdered medicine with his mortar and pestle and stored it for later use. As the story proceeds, we see that sahib falls severely ill. The servant in this situation too takes all measures to cure his master from the ailment. The sahib with the kind help of his servant and by taking his hand made medicines slowly recovers. But unfortunately, Dhurm Singh falls ill with the same fever and the powder he had used for the sahib does not work in his case and he dies. The English doctor, who happens to know both the master and the servant surprises all by declaring the "truth" about Dhurm's medical expertise. The powder made by the faithful servant was not quinine or any western medicine but a native concoction. It was Dhurm Singh's faith or belief in the efficacy of his native medicine that miraculously cured his master. In the end, we see that the doctor vehemently condemns such stupid behaviour on the part of the servant whose death brings a sense of relief, closure and colonial justice to the narrative.

Dhurm Singh the old faithful servant who saved the life of the sahib during the mutiny is situated at the centre of our investigation. But the erstwhile Sikh soldier's religious sentimentality or belief in native medicines is ridiculed by the "civilized" and "educated" English people in the story. Throughout the text it is Dhurm Singh who takes care of the sahib but in the end, he has a doomed future. His belief in the traditional processes of cure using indigenous medicines is seen as an outcome of illiteracy, superstitious and passive native thinking. Death seems to be the only alternative that remains available to the author to re-impose colonial superiority and authority onto the whites. The text highlights the difference in religious ideas, understanding and belief systems of the master and his servant. But the story underscores how even though the master failed to perform his responsibility towards the servant, Dhurm Singh performs all his duties towards his master and emerges as a winner even in death.

The next short story "Heera Nund" in *Flower of Forgiveness* (1894) discusses in detail about the plight of a gardener. A garden could provide a supply of crops but it could also be a place of domestic retreat. A well-maintained garden shows the value of nature, indicates taste, and invites appreciation. The garden is more than an extension of the house, and coupled with a responsible and dedicated gardener is the story of Heera Nund from the short story collection the *Flower of Forgiveness*. Encouraged by the sahib, the servant covers the lawn with flowers, plants beds of exotic vegetables, oriental fruit trees and other essentials. The master on most occasions is kind to him and his daughter Droupadi. The garden for the small child and her father becomes a life force and brings unconditioned pleasure to them. The small child whom Heera calls the true 'malin' becomes a part of the nature and his work.

The garden is the place of peace and retreat for the servant. Being an old man, he is not loved by his young wife who secretly kept lovers. He knew well enough that the girl Droupadi was not his own daughter but still she was the apple of his eye. So, we see the girl as well as Heera's vegetables grow simultaneously with continuous nurture and care. His wife neglected both the house and the small child and is repeatedly thrashed by the husband. The liaison does come to an end after the interference of the

sahib. The old servant suffered inwardly and falls ill and was sent to an asylum by the sahib for proper treatment. But the scenario changes completely when the sahib has to return to England due to his ill health. On his return after six months he is shocked to learn that his gardener Heera Nund has been hanged for murdering his young wife. Apparently the wife's neglect of the child had led to her being bitten by a snake and Heera Nund could not control his anger and killed his wife in retaliation.

The dedication of the gardener is appreciated by the sahib and also by the author (a lover of nature). The garden becomes the tranquil meeting point for both master and servant. The gardener is projected as an amiable servant but he too has a doomed future. So, we see that a servant who fulfils all his duties toward his master, is not saved by the him in the end. Indrani Sen states that the colonial home was not only the site of imperial power, but also a site of imperial anxieties and insecurities (Sen, 2009). The text remains ambivalent to the death of the servant but in the end, we see the sahib is questioning the sanity of the British law and legal system. The thought process of the sahib shows that he gives human status to the servant which is absent in other texts.

Iman Khan in "Salt Duty" from the short story collection *Mercy of the Lord* (1914) had earlier served royalty but is now serving his late master's Eurasian family. He is fond of the children and very much attached to the household members. He takes special care of the eldest daughter Elfida Norma and even succeeds in arranging a marriage for her with a sahib. Iman Khan acts as an all-in-one caregiver of the house, sometimes as the head cook making a perfect English dinner for the family and on other occasions takes on the role of an ayah for the needy children. He remains engrossed in his work both inside and outside the house. His services changes with time and he even performs the role of an ayah to the eldest daughter Elfida and her siblings. His sexual vulnerability does not produce frustration in the readers but creates a comical environment. He desperately indulges in plotting and planning to initiate a love affair between Elfida and the sahib with the motorcycle. His plan in the end works positively and we see him proudly making the icing for the wedding cake. The couple leaves the scene to begin a new life and the story ends without any further mention of Iman Khan. The servitude, the duty done by him to make the life of his master comfortable is not only praiseworthy but also exceptional. However, his fatherly affection towards Elfida is not reciprocated by her nor is given much narrative attention by the author. She leaves to begin a new life and the author ends the story without mentioning anything further about the man who was responsible for her future happiness. The narrative brings out the selfishness, negligent attitude and thoughtless behaviour of Elfida Norma, her husband and all the other members of the family including the author herself. The character of Iman acquires relevance only as far as he is essential in bringing the narrative to a happy close but once that purpose has been fulfilled the author falls silent and nothing more is said about him.

So, we see that the difference between the master and the servant is vividly presented in these narratives. It is clear to the readers that the intimacy and closeness of the rulers with their servants change into hatred or enmity at the slightest pretext. Despite their familiarity, there is a lingering sense of inequality and difference to be found in all the three stories. The frankness or openness shown by Heera Nund or Iman Khan in doing good deeds for their masters is both exceptional and praiseworthy. The kindness and love shown by Dhurm Singh in caring for his Sonny Baba during illness attracts the readers' attention. All the three servants are down-to-earth and warm in their dealings with their respective masters but the prevalent class system and racial hierarchy prevented the latter from reciprocating. Instances of kindness are rare but still can be seen in the behaviour of the sahib in the story Heera Nund. But as expected the rulers perceive their servants as debased objects and their deaths are deemed to be their ultimate prescribed fate. Steel uses an atmosphere of illusion and ambivalence to camouflage the real British attitude towards the servant class. She may give them a limited voice and identity but in the end is unable to do justice to them. It seems that the prevailing attitude is that servants should learn to wait and labour for the master class with a clear understanding of their eventual fate.

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