



## SHAPING THE PAST: BRITISH NOVELISTS AND THE REINTERPRETATION OF THE 1857 UPRISING

Subhadra S Nair

### RESEARCH ARTICLE



**Author Details:** First Year Student,  
B.A., LL.B. (Hons.), NALSAR  
University of Law, Hyderabad,  
Telangana, India

**Corresponding Author:**  
Subhadra S Nair

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### Abstract

This research article examines the reinterpretation of the 1857 Indian Uprising in British colonial literature, focusing on how mutiny novels shaped and reflected the ideological underpinnings of empire. By exploring gendered and racialised tropes, particularly the portrayal of Indian women as loyal subordinates or treacherous adversaries, the analysis reveals how these narratives strengthened British colonial dominance while managing imperial anxieties. Works such as *Seeta* and *On the Face of the Waters* illustrate the manipulation of literary forms, including the picturesque and sacred aesthetics, to feminise and domesticate India, erase its revolutionary potential, and legitimise British rule. These portrayals expose the deep contradictions in the colonial project, blending moral authority with exploitative representation, and highlight the enduring impact of such narratives on contemporary understandings of identity, power, and history. This paper combines close readings of primary texts with critical insights from gender studies and post-colonial theory, highlighting how these narratives both reinforced and complicated the colonial project. Through this lens, the article uncovers the legacy of these works in shaping contemporary understandings of empire, identity, and resistance.

**Keywords:** 1857 Indian uprising, British mutiny fiction, Gendered colonial narratives, Racial hierarchies, Feminisation of the empire

### Introduction

The British colonial era in India, mainly the 19<sup>th</sup> century, was marked by intense cultural exchanges, political upheaval, and the reconfiguration of identities. Among the most significant events of this time was the 1857 Rebellion, often referred to as the First War of Indian Independence by Indian historians or the Sepoy Mutiny by British accounts. This event not only shook the foundations of British rule in India but also left an indelible mark on the cultural and literary landscape of the time [1].

British mutiny fiction emerged prominently after the 1857 Rebellion and played a crucial role in shaping and reflecting the colonial psyche [2]. These works of fiction, which often dramatised the events of the mutiny, were not merely stories of adventure and conflict but deeply embedded with British colonialism's ideological underpinnings. They served as a means to justify the British presence in India, to reinforce notions of racial superiority, and to construct narratives of loyalty and betrayal.

Central to these narratives was the portrayal of Indian women, who were often depicted in binary terms – either as loyal and virtuous allies of the British or as treacherous and dangerous figures who needed to be controlled. The 'loyal Indian woman' trope became a powerful symbol within these stories, representing the ideal colonial subject who accepted British rule and sought to protect it [3]. In contrast, Indian women who defied this narrative were portrayed as embodying the threat of rebellion and chaos.

Moreover, these literary works frequently contrasted the depictions of English and Indian women, using their portrayals to emphasise the British's supposed moral and cultural superiority. English women were often depicted as paragons of virtue, courage, and moral fortitude, starkly contrasting the supposedly exotic, mysterious, and potentially dangerous Indian women. These depictions not only reflected contemporary gender norms but also reinforced the racial hierarchies that underpin colonial rule.

Examining these literary representations makes it possible to uncover the deeper ideological currents that flowed through British society during the colonial period. The narratives constructed within mutiny fiction did more than entertain; they served to reinforce the legitimacy of British rule, promote a particular image of the Empire, and manage the anxieties of an empire under

threat [4]. However, these narratives were also fraught with contradictions and complexities, as they revealed the colonisers' deep-seated fears and insecurities.

This analysis seeks to delve into the various tropes and constructs within British mutiny fiction, mainly focusing on the portrayal of Indian women and their role in the colonial imagination. By dissecting these narratives, we can gain a more nuanced understanding of how literature was used as a tool of empire, how gender and race were intertwined in the colonial project, and how these historical portrayals continue to influence perceptions of identity and power today.

### **Discourses of 'Gendered Loyalty': Indian Women in nineteenth-century 'mutiny' fiction – Indrani Sen**

*'... the construct of the 'loyal Indian woman' in this discourse is a politically loaded one, which, deployed against the backdrop of the Rebellion, assumes complex, ideologically loaded signification.'* [2] The first reading of this literature review is a piece by Indrani Sen on the various tropes that Indian women were put into in mutiny novels, specifically those in the pseudo-historical genre, to project the desired narrative of the relationship between the British and the Natives [2]. This genre had extensive popularity, reaching its peak in the 1890s. In the Indian context, they projected the conflict between the colonisers and the colonised along racial lines. Indians were shown as treacherous and lustful as opposed to the gallant British. Sen shows us how this discourse fed into the colonial myths regarding race, culture, gender and power.

Sen discusses the idea of the 'loyal Indian woman' and how most of the tropes portray the 'loyal Indian woman' to reinforce the myth propagated by the British that the natives wanted their British overlords [3]. This idea became even more strategically relevant in post-rebellion insecurities and uncertainties. Therefore, it was necessary to depict grand stories of British heroism. She hypothesises that this was an effort by the British to reinforce the overall perception of their might in the Indian colony.

### **Race, Gender, Sexuality, and Fidelity: Interconnected Dynamics**

Sen's discourse highlights the inherent differences in portraying women based on race [3]. English women were consistently represented as figures to be safeguarded, revered, and avenged, embodying an institution vulnerable to violation. Historically, gender became intertwined with the concept of 'nation' within the imperial narrative, where the protection of women symbolised the defence of national honour. This could explain why the British felt the need to constantly assign menial character tropes to the native women as opposed to the admirable picture painted of the white woman. This differential treatment based on race is also evident from the studies on gender at the time, which focused on white women and neglected Indian women of different classes. Even when they are studied, it is exclusively the elite section of Indian women. This is an example of how colonial narratives and power dynamics systematically marginalised native women and entrenched racial hierarchies. The selective representation and study of women reinforced the colonial ideology and shaped the socio-political structures that continued to affect post-colonial societies. The erasure and misrepresentation of native women contributed to a skewed historical record and perpetuated stereotypes that justified colonial rule and exploitation. By understanding these historical portrayals and their implications, one can better appreciate the complexities of gender and race in the context of colonialism and its lasting impact on contemporary gender relations and racial perceptions.

Indian women, regardless of their class status, were generally portrayed as treacherous, promiscuous creatures who were often responsible directly or indirectly for violence against the British Colonial overlord. Fidelity is portrayed as a non-existent trait in the natives. This makes it easier to justify colonial rule as the natives are shown as having no loyalty to any particular side. This allows the English men to project themselves as the knights that rescue the primitive, infighting natives from a path to self-destruction.

Sen also dissects the concept of 'native fidelity'. This negative construct includes three central tropes of native women: the loyal courtesan or dancing girl, the faithful concubine, and the wife of the English protagonist, the latter of which is the rarest [2]. These characters are shown as exceptions to the usual treacherous natives. The character tropes examined in this writing all fall under this classification.

Expanding on the earlier mentioned link between gender and the nation, the colonial mindset tended to view colonisation as a quasi-sexual activity. The conquests of the 'libidinally eroticised' female entities waiting to be mastered by the 'manly' colonising nations symbolised the assertion of dominance and control. This framing reinforced the patriarchal and hegemonic ideologies that underpin colonial rule, portraying colonised lands and peoples as passive, feminised subjects in need of the civilising influence of the powerful, masculinised colonisers.

### **The Trope of the Loyalist Dancing Girls**

From the eighteenth century to the 1840s, Nautch and the Nautch girls formed an intrinsic part of British social life in India, primarily when hosted by wealthy Indians [3]. However, the British were highly uncomfortable with the notion of a female public performer existing outside the controlled confines of the marital home. This, combined with their proximity to the power centres and agency, made the British view them as a threat to colonial domesticity. Thanks to Evangelism, it was frowned upon as sensual and seen as culturally destabilising. With the Europeanisation of the elite Indian lifestyle, the nautch became a thing of the past by the mid-nineteenth century [3]. I found it interesting how they continued occupying the British literary discourse. Even though they denounced the 'obscene' dance form, the soft sensual power the Nautch girls wielded still occupied their fancies long after they drove the Nautch out of Indian society.

The revolt of 1857 further complicated the already complex social image of the Nautch girls. At the epicentre of the revolt, in Meerut, the Nautch girls spurred the sepoy (other than the eighty-five rebel sepoys thrown into jail) into revolt by taunting their courage.

Another section of women grouped into this category is the Tawaifs (courtesans). Traditionally, they are skilled in poetry, music and dance. However, the British, with their lack of knowledge of the social hierarchy, grouped them with Randis (prostitutes). This blow to their reputation led to them harbouring anti-British feelings, eventually supporting the rebel cause in the 1857 revolt. They offered their Kothas (salons) as meeting places for rebels. This open show of rebellion led to the confiscation of many of their properties once the British put down the revolt.

All these events led to the repositioning of the Tawaifs and Nautch girls from the colonial perspective [3]. They were widely portrayed in novels as being supportive of colonial rule. In Sen's words- '*...this forms part of a textual strategy to contain and incorporate a sexually and politically subversive figure. Moreover, it also marks an attempt to rewrite history and erase the memory of the courtesan/Nautch girl's adversarial role during the Rebellion by projecting her as a British collaborator.*' [2]

This repositioning highlights a stark hypocrisy within the British colonialists. On the one hand, they were quick to dismiss and stigmatise the art form of the Tawaifs and Nautch girls as obscene and disturbingly sensual. This condemnation served their purpose of moral policing and enforcing Victorian values in the colonies. They saw the Tawaifs and Nautch girls as embodiments of moral decay and threatening their civilising mission. On the other hand, when the colonial powers recognised the influential position these women held within Indian society, they did not hesitate to manipulate their portrayal for their benefit. By projecting Tawaifs and Nautch girls as supporters of British rule, the colonialists attempted to undermine their earlier roles as symbols of resistance and independence during the Indian Rebellion of 1857. This rewriting of history served a dual purpose: it helped to legitimise British authority by suggesting that even the most culturally significant and influential figures supported their rule, and it erased the rebellious legacy of these women, diminishing their historical significance as adversaries to colonial power.

The colonial strategy of co-opting and rebranding the image of Tawaifs and Nautch girls illustrates a broader pattern of control and manipulation. It reflects the British tendency to exploit cultural and social symbols to reinforce their dominance while imposing their moral judgments and standards. This dual approach of vilification and appropriation underscores the inherent contradictions in colonial policies and attitudes. It reveals how the British were willing to bend their own moral and ethical stances when it suited their political and administrative interests, thereby exposing the underlying hypocrisy of their colonial enterprise.

An exciting example of this can be found in Hafiz Allard's *Nirgis: A Tale of the Indian Mutiny* (1869) [5]. The 15-year-old dancing girl in the story is openly loyal to the British cause. This loyalty is shown as based on gratitude. However, Nirgis's portrayal is more nuanced than most other texts of the time. She also supports the Mughal Emperor's family and enjoys free access to the palace and its quarters. Even though her loyalty to the British cause doesn't waver at the novel's end, she faces internal conflict and a sense of divided allegiance.

Nirgis's multifaceted character challenges the simplistic binary of loyalty and betrayal often imposed by colonial narratives. Her gratitude towards the British stems from personal benefits and protection. Yet, her deep ties to the Mughal court and its members signify a lingering allegiance to her cultural roots and heritage [5]. This duality in her portrayal reflects the complex realities of individuals caught between opposing forces and even questions the moral righteousness of the British Cause – despite remaining essentially loyal to the British.

### **Miscegenation in Mutiny Novels**

Miscegenation was yet another fantasy of the British, which is reflected in the mutiny novels. The British overtly display their intentions to objectify Indian women through this concept. While inter-race marriage alliances were standard at one point, they ended by the middle of the nineteenth century. However, a 'native' mistress or concubine covertly continued in practice, primarily due to the obsession of the British with the idea of erotically subjugating the colonised woman as well as the land.

Another reason the British were fascinated with this concept could be the image of the Indian 'Pativrata Nari' (devoted wife). As Sen writes, '*The female paradigm of the modest, patient, faithful Hindu wife who traditionally worshipped her husband and even followed him to death through the act of widow immolation or sati was something they found strangely alluring.*' [2] Mutiny literature often employed this trope to highlight the support for the British. One example is *Seeta* (1872) by Phillip Meadow Taylor, where Seeta, a learned Sanskrit scholar with an inquisitive mind, is married to an English administrator. Seeta's support for the British, especially with her intellect, is meant to imply that the British colonial system was aligned with the virtues of the ideal Indian wife [6]. In this narrative, Seeta's adherence to the values of devotion and loyalty is presented as a reflection of the positive impact of British influence. This portrayal not only reinforces the British view of their own moral and cultural superiority but also serves to validate their colonial presence by showcasing an Indian character who thrives under British governance.

One interesting aspect to note about this trope is the short-term nature of these inter-race relationships [6]. Most of the texts end with the death of the loyal concubine/ wife or, in some cases, the death of the white man. This shows the underlying anxieties about the long-term effect of interracial relationships based on racism and the threat of cultural destabilisation of colonial identities.

### **The trope of the 'Faithful Ayah' in Mutiny novels**

*'Nineteenth-century colonial discourse located the Indian woman along the twin axes of sensuousness and loyalty. The ayah, the most prominent of the 'faithful Indian women' in mutiny discourse, fitted into the latter category.'* [2] Due to the limited interaction of white women with people from other races, the Ayah was often shown as the link between the women of the household and the world of the 'natives'. The dynamic between the Ayah and the Memsahib (the lady of the household) is interesting to dissect. It mainly revolved around the children of the house. The Ayah became a kind of surrogate mother to the European children, which led to the children speaking the local languages more fluently than English. To no one's surprise, this evoked colonial anxieties, resulting in the practice of sending children away to study in England after age five or so. The revolt temporarily skewed these dynamics, as the white families depended on their servants' cooperation for survival. Many servants offered their humble huts as sanctuaries for their masters, as recorded in several first-person accounts, memoirs, and diaries maintained by the memsahibs. However, there were also non-literary writings that fed into the myth of the 'ungrateful' and 'disloyal' Indian, writing about servants deserting during the sieges that took place during the rebellion.

One of the reasons for this phenomenon could once again be colonial pride and how the narrative that the lowly Indian women were one of the primary reasons for their survival could not be digested by the British. The discrediting of the Ayah's roles could be one way in which they nursed their wounded pride about the rebellion.

The majority of the accounts echoed the construct of the loyal Ayah [3]. There were several cases where the servants warned their masters about the impending rebellion as they were aware of its coming, such as the circulation of the chapatis or the passing of a lotus from village to village. One other way in which the actions of the ayah end up helping the survival of the Britishers is due to them teaching the children the local vernacular, which allows them to pass off as Indian. Sen points out how the closeness of the children to the Ayah, which was the source of anxiety for their parents, ended up being vital for their survival during the revolt in a scenario where the parents didn't necessarily manage to do so.

### **Interracial Friendship in Mutiny Novels**

This is yet another trope that played out far more differently in novels than in real life. Interracial interaction was non-existent among women by the mid-nineteenth century due to the restrictions of purdah and caste. The only exceptions were missionaries who had access to the women's quarters.

However, the eruption of the 1857 rebellion led to episodes of interaction between the Indian women and English women. Forced by their circumstances, the white women had to leave their luxuries behind and blend in with the 'natives'. They fled through the countryside, dressed in Indian garments, enduring the heat of the summer months, diseases and other physical hardships. The nature of these interactions varied from transitory, bitter, hostile, and sympathetic. One thing to note is that these interactions would have been limited since they had no common language.

The concept of male-female friendship is also used in several cases to depict the contrast between female and male spaces. While violence and chaos reign over the latter, the former is undisturbed and dominated by understanding and gentle domestic activities. Male spaces are depicted as arenas of violence, chaos, and competitive dominance. These spaces are often associated with public life, work, and external conflicts. On the other hand, female spaces are frequently portrayed as realms of tranquillity, understanding, and nurturing activities. These spaces are typically connected to the domestic sphere, where cooperation, emotional intelligence, and gentle care take precedence. This trope reinforces the stereotypical, patriarchal view of women as 'pacifists' and men as 'aggressors'. It portrays the Rebellion as a violent conflict in the male-dominated 'outer' world while depicting the secluded, female 'inner world' as a sanctuary of peace.

The Indian woman was often symbolically equated with the land itself, leading to a perceived need to 'colonise' her through textual representation by depicting her as 'loyal'. Various portrayals of Indian women, such as ayahs, dancers, and the Englishman's Indian concubines and wives, were strategically utilised in texts to gain support for the British during the 1857 Rebellion. These depictions emphasised feudal loyalty and allegiance. Rooted in the politics of race, gender, and representation, this trope advanced colonial agendas by presenting British rule as desirable and boosting morale amid the political insecurities following the 'Mutiny'. Paradoxically, while this portrayal was meant to reinforce the empire's dominance, the image of the loyal Indian woman also diluted the prevailing 'mutiny' myth of the 'barbaric' and 'cruel native'. Thus, while intended to legitimise British imperial claims, this trope of female loyalty inadvertently created a narrative that contradicted the construction of 'native' treachery, undermining the very mythology upon which the empire was built.

### **The Mutiny Novel: Creating the Domestic Body of the Empire- Aishwarya Lakshmi**

This essay focuses on how the mutiny changed the view of the Indian colony from a space of adventure to a domestic space of the empire [4]. The most apparent cause is the governance transfer from the East India Company to the Crown. Lakshmi also dissects how this concept was gendered, especially in novels. The colonies, in this case, were feminised and subservient to the masculine West, comparing it to an unequal marriage. Lakshmi's analysis shows that mutiny novels played a significant role in shaping the cultural imagination of the British Empire, particularly in how they constructed and maintained the idea of a domestic body that was both threatened by and superior to the colonised 'Other'. These novels thus contributed to the broader project of imperialism by using domesticity as a critical element in the narrative of empire.

Lakshmi also points out how literary critics have primarily focused on the fascination with the 'gothic' aspects, and even when the gender aspect is analysed, it has been in terms of just Indian women. She aims to focus more on the racial divide and the figuration of the land in the empire that influenced these. Lakshmi extends the concept of 'national space' to include India, showing how British feminists co-opted this idea to argue for the 'uplift' of Indian women. This was done under the guise of a civilising mission, which positioned Indian women as passive figures in need of rescue and reform. Lakshmi draws a powerful analogy between the portrayal of Indian women and the Indian land, both of which were feminised and depicted as passive yet vital to the imperial and feminist projects: *'Thus, just as the passive figure of the Indian women lent a dynamism to the feminist discourse, the figuration of the feminised Indian land from 1860 onwards lent mobility to the colonial discourse.'* [1]

The Indian land, depicted as fertile yet untamed, became a site for colonial intervention, cultivation, and control. Both the land and the woman were seen as resources to be managed and reformed by the imperial powers, their passivity a justification for the active presence of the British. In this way, Lakshmi shows how the feminisation of both Indian women and the Indian landscape served to reinforce and legitimise colonial and feminist narratives that sought to dominate and reshape the subcontinent. By focusing on these intersecting representations, she reveals the complex ways in which racial and gendered ideologies were embedded in the literary and political discourses of the time. The essay dissects two mutiny novels- *Seeta* by Phillip Meadows Taylor and *On the Face of the Water* by Flora Annie Steele [6, 7].

### **Creating Gendered and Domesticated Space**

Lakshmi first examines Queen Victoria's proclamation announcing the transfer of the Company's powers to the crowns. The document has undertones of maternalism, as the queen addresses the subjects in a forgiving tone, willing to take them back despite their misbehaviour. Lakshmi labels this as misleading and disingenuous as no fair trials were offered to those accused of reason.

Sen points out that the proclamation and trial appeared to predate the mutiny, retroactively creating the legal conditions for all the prominent leaders, mainly the Mughal Emperor Bahadur Shah Zafar, who was the symbolic figurehead of the mutiny around whom the sepoys rallied, to be put on trial for treason. She condemns the trial, which she argues was a sham that was put up by the British to legitimise their usurpation of power from the Emperor. Thus, the British used the symbols the rebels had rallied around – such as the Mughal throne, the concept of sovereignty, and the idea of justice – to further their imperial aims. By staging a trial that was, in essence, a legal farce, they sought to erase the legitimacy of the rebellion and reassert their authority.

Thus, the trial becomes a microcosm of the more extensive process by which the British sought to stabilise and solidify their empire, turning symbols of resistance into instruments of imperial control. This connects to the title by showing how these legal and symbolic acts were instrumental in constructing the 'domestic body' of the British Empire. This empire was built on military conquest and the redefinition and control of cultural and legal narratives. For example, the novels started portraying India as a land of gendered, domestic space compared to the land of adventures, chaos and overall, a disordered space. Racial aesthetics play a huge role in this transformation.

### **Seeta (1872)**

Written by Phillip Meadow Taylor, *Seeta* is written from a perspective that is relatively uncommon and, to a point, even condemned in the post-mutiny period [6]. The element that stands out the most in this novel is the depiction of interracial marriage between the two protagonists- Seeta and Cyril. As was the case with all novels depicting interracial marriages, the story ends with Seeta dying, because the long-term consequences of interracial marriages were something that the British found too unsettling and threatening to their ideas of racial purity and colonial dominance. The death of Seeta, like many similar characters in the literature of that era, serves to reinforce the notion that such unions were unnatural and doomed to fail, ultimately upholding the colonial order and the superiority of the British race. This tragic ending reflects the deep-seated anxieties of the British about maintaining their power and control in a colonised land, where any challenge to the rigid racial boundaries was met with resistance and fear.

The novel employs the picturesque to transform India into a domestic space, subtly reinforcing the distinction between the British and the Indians [4]. By framing the Indian landscape to emphasise its aesthetic appeal rather than its inherent cultural or historical significance, the narrative minimises the legitimacy of the Indian people's connection to their land. This artistic portrayal subtly delegitimises the Indians' claim to the land, suggesting that the British, as the civilising force, have a more rightful place in shaping and controlling the territory. The picturesque imagery romanticises the colonised landscape, making it a backdrop for British authority while undermining the native population's sense of belonging and sovereignty.

The novel contrasts two distinct aesthetics within the landscape: the picturesque, often depicted through British journals and sketches, and the sacred space, which encompasses various styles such as Mughal and courtly designs. The panoramic view, shaped by British perspectives, presents the landscape in a manner that emphasises its visual charm and orderliness. In contrast, the sacred space is marked by non-realistic and hieratic depictions, reflecting a more spiritual and symbolic representation of the land. This duality highlights the differing perceptions and values attributed to the landscape by the colonisers and the native culture. The reification of this idea takes place in the last act of the novel when the picturesque and the native are pitted against each other, and as expected, the sacred loses. Lakshmi draws parallels between this scene and the trial of Bahadur Shah Zafar, where both the losing parties have their fates decided before they even take the stage; the trial is just a show.

In a pivotal trial scene near the novel's end, a subtle but significant connection is drawn between the visual appreciation of the landscape and the assertion of ownership over it. Seeta, Cyril, and Grace find themselves together in a temple situated on a hill with a picturesque view. While Seeta is absorbed in worship, Cyril and Grace indulge in the aesthetic enjoyment of the landscape, engaging in activities like gazing and sketching. Only Cyril and Grace can 'truly appreciate' the land through their picturesque observation, as Seeta remains focused on her religious rituals. When Seeta eventually stops worshipping, she becomes the subject of Grace's sketch, which Cyril [6].

This scene underscores a colonial dynamic in which visually consuming and artistically rendering the landscape becomes a metaphor for the colonial claim to land ownership. Cyril and Grace's ability to appreciate the land through picturesque gazing and sketching manifests their colonial authority and entitlement. Their aesthetic engagement with the landscape signifies control, as they translate the land into something to be owned and enjoyed rather than something with intrinsic cultural or spiritual significance.

On the other hand, Seeta is engaged in an entirely different act – worshipping – highlighting her connection to the land as one rooted in spiritual and cultural traditions rather than ownership. When she ceases her worship and becomes the subject of Grace's sketch, she transforms from an active participant in her culture into a passive subject of colonial representation.

The scene suggests that the colonial power structure privileges the visual and artistic appropriation of the land – activities associated with ownership and domination – over the indigenous practices and beliefs that connect people to the land in non-material ways. By completing Grace's sketch of Seeta, Cyril reinforces this power dynamic, asserting the colonial right not only to the land but also to the people and their representations.

It also implies that the partnership between an Englishman and an Indian woman, irrespective of her intellectual prowess, can never be that of intellectuals. It also means that Seeta needs to be moulded into a proper companion worthy of an Englishman. This scene is intended to imply that despite Cyril's efforts to do so, Seeta cannot be 'tutored' into picturesque gazing. It instead unites Cyril and Grace and shows them as the 'legitimate pair' [6].

Lakshmi highlights how Taylor attempts to distort the memory of the 1857 Rebellion by portraying it in a way that aligns with British interests [4]. In Taylor's narrative, Shah Gunje, the story's fictional setting, is depicted as a town that joyously welcomes the re-establishment of British rule after the uprising is quashed. However, this portrayal is far from reality. In truth, the so-called 'liberation' of areas from rebel control was often accompanied by severe consequences for the native population, resulting in significant loss of life and destruction of property.

This narrative twist by Taylor is more than just a minor distortion; it fundamentally alters the event's historical significance. The true power and potential of a revolutionary moment lie not just in the event itself but in how it is remembered and interpreted by those who witnessed or experienced it. By rewriting the public reaction to the British reconquest, Taylor effectively erases the possibility of the rebellion being remembered as a legitimate and impactful resistance. Instead, he recasts it as a futile disturbance, quickly and willingly overcome by a grateful populace. This kind of narrative manipulation diminishes the revolutionary potential of the 1857 Rebellion in historical memory, reducing it to a mere footnote in the larger story of British imperial dominance. This version expands on the consequences of Taylor's narrative choices and clarifies the broader implications for how history is remembered and understood.

The spectatorial aspect is drastically altered, and the Indians aren't even given a first-person narrative. Their gaze isn't even considered for the entirety of the plot. Even Seeta, the exemplary, accomplished, civilised subject of the empire, isn't given the right to spectate. This reveals the problematic mindset that the colonisers carry, reducing native people to objects within the colonial gaze.

Taylor employs the picturesque to depict the land as an appealing object, thereby highlighting the undesirable or passive nature of the Indians' use and engagement with it. This approach genderises and confines the social body from within regarding its ability to move independently.

### **On the Face of the Waters (1896)**

*On the Face of the Waters* was written by Flora Annie Steele, who spent 22 years in India and was a staunch supporter of imperialism [7]. Her writing reflects traces of racism, more evident than in *Seeta*. The book was critically acclaimed when released during the height of British imperialism and was praised as the first serious novel about the mutiny. The story centres on Kate Erlton, who is unhappily married to Major Erlton, who is having an affair with Mrs Alice Gissing. While covering up her husband's affair, Kate meets the hero, Jim Douglas. When the rebellion breaks out, she flees with Douglas, and the British conqueror of Delhi eventually rescues them. The novel also includes a subplot depicting the Indian side of the story, focusing on the love affair between the widowed Farkhoonda Zamani and the Mughal Emperor's son, Prince Abool-Bukr. The two affairs end differently: Kate and Jim find happiness when they are reunited, while Major Erlton conveniently dies in battle. In contrast, the Indian couple meets a tragic fate when Abool-Bukr is treacherously killed by Major Hodson (a historically accurate event), leaving Farkhoonda destitute with only a small income from teaching at a girls' school.

Unlike Taylor, Steel sparingly uses the picturesque to describe the Mughal palaces and buildings. Steel portrays everyday Indian spaces as oppressive and unappealing to Western perspectives, attributing this oppressiveness to a dual absence: a lack of

morality and a lack of form. These perceived deficiencies enable Steel to advocate for the British as the essential ‘bringers of form’ and moral authority. These twin lacks best emerge in the following description of a village:

*‘The winter rains had come and gone, leaving a legacy of gold behind them. Promise of future gold in the emerald sea of young wheat, guerdon of present gold in the mustard blossom curving on the green, like the crests of waves curve upon a wind-swept northern sea. Far and near, vast as the eye could reach, there was nothing to be seen save this - a waving sea of green wheat crested by yellow mustard. But in the centre, whence the eye looked, stood a human ant-hill; for the congeries of mud alleys, mud walls, mud roofs, forming the village, looked from a little distance nothing else. Viewed broadly, too, it was simply earth made plastic by the Form-bringer, water, hardened again by Sun-fire; the triple elements combined into a shell for labouring life. It is a scene which to most civilised eyes is oppressive in its self-centred isolation, its air of remoteness. The isolation of a community self-supporting, self-sufficing, the remoteness of a place that cares not if there is a world beyond its boundaries.’ [4]* The description of the village, with its ‘human ant-hill’ of mud structures, conveys a sense of stagnation and isolation. The town appears static, shaped primarily by natural elements—earth, water, and sun—without evident higher human influence [7]. This portrayal emphasises the village's self-sufficiency and detachment from broader societal developments. This scene's ‘oppressive’ nature reflects a Western perception of isolation and lack of progress, highlighting a contrast between the natural world's unchanging quality and human dynamism.

Water, described as the ‘form-bringer,’ is depicted as the primary agent shaping the physical environment rather than human activity. This suggests that while natural forces create the physical form of the village, human agency is perceived as limited to mere labour. The reference to the village's creation as a ‘shell for labouring life’ underscores this perception, presenting the villagers’ contributions as elemental rather than transformative. In contrast to the static village, the Mutiny represents a force of change and dynamism. The anticipation of the ‘word’ that would ignite the rebellion introduces a sense of movement and possibility.

Another extract from the novel that has exciting undertones to be analysed is: *‘Jim Douglas felt an odd thrill. He had never thought of that before. Someone, of course, must always give the word, the speech which brought more than speech. What would it be? It was soul-stirring, no doubt; for Humanity had a theory that an angel must trouble the waters and give it a righteous cause for stepping in to heal the evil.’ [4]*

The ‘word’ signifies a conscious human act that initiates historical change. This interpretation aligns with a Western historiographic view of history as a series of deliberate actions shaping future events. The ‘latent, unuttered future Word’ reflects that reality encompasses possibilities beyond the immediate, with the Mutiny representing a potential shift in historical trajectory. The narrative suggests this ‘word’ embodies a transformative potential aligned with divine or prophetic guidance. The rebellion is depicted not merely as a spontaneous uprising but as a historical event with profound implications, capable of breaking stagnation and opening new trajectories for the social body and history. The passage draws on biblical imagery, such as the ‘Spirit of God moving upon the face of the waters’ from Genesis, to frame the rebellion as a divinely inspired act of creation and transformation. This allusion to divine intervention positions the Mutiny as a pivotal moment in which a higher power influences human history. The reference to ‘Humanity’s theory’ and the angel troubling the waters invokes a biblical image, suggesting that rebellion might be seen as a divine or righteous act that justifies intervention. Similarly, references to prophets like Elisha and the centenary prophecy underscore the idea that the rebellion could fulfil a predestined role in altering the course of history. Thus, the rebellion is framed as both a divinely inspired event and a significant historical moment that could change the course of future events, aligning with Dostoevsky’s idea of reality being partly constituted by latent, unspoken possibilities.

Steele’s portrayal in *On the Face of the Waters* reinforces imperialist ideologies. It frames the Mutiny as a significant historical event capable of breaking the perceived stagnation of the Indian landscape. The contrast between the static village and the dynamic potential of the rebellion highlights the novel’s underlying arguments about the role of the British in shaping history and morality in colonial India.

Both novels construct a gendered domestic image of the empire. Still, the significant shift from the early 19<sup>th</sup>-century romantic and picturesque portrayals of India is the absence of the ‘gaze’ upon the land, except for a self-reflective one. This change continues to feminise the land and bind it more closely to its people. It also reflects a desire to erase the revolutionary potential of the Mutiny and imagine a post-1858 India with no remnants of the past. This shift parallels other contemporary discourses that sought to create a blank slate for India. While memories of the picturesque and sacred aesthetics are obscured, the Mutiny Novel still employs these forms in altered, historicised ways. This historicist aesthetics, which predate the Mutiny in the book, obscure their early 19<sup>th</sup>-century origins and become ‘evidentiary,’ proving the historical necessity and inevitability of British victory and Indian defeat during the Mutiny. By the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, this aesthetics had become markers of historical winners and losers, a perspective that continues in post-colonial India. In the 1880s, as proto-nationalist visions of India emerged, the picturesque was used to craft a mythological, sacred landscape. In post-colonial India, retellings of the Mutiny depict the holy as indicative of a limited imagination, unable to adopt a progressive view of history. At the same time, the picturesque continues to shape nationalist sentiment.

## **Conclusion**

In concluding this comparative analysis, it becomes evident that both essays offer nuanced perspectives on the role of colonial literature in shaping and reflecting the socio-political dynamics of British India. While each essay approaches the subject from

different angles, they converge on the understanding that literature was not merely a form of entertainment but a powerful tool in the hands of the colonial administration.

The first essay delves into the portrayal of Indian women in British mutiny fiction, highlighting how these narratives reinforced the racial and gender hierarchies that underpin British rule. The emphasis on the 'loyal Indian woman' as a symbol of ideal colonial subjugation, contrasted with the depictions of English women as paragons of virtue, underscores the profoundly ingrained biases that these works perpetuated. This analysis reveals how literature was used to justify and legitimise the colonial enterprise while also managing the anxieties of the British population about the stability of their rule in India.

On the other hand, the second essay examines the broader impact of British constitutional and administrative reforms on Indian society, particularly in the context of legal changes and grassroots mobilisation. Though framed as progressive reforms, introducing the rule of law and centralising power often entrenched British control and disrupted traditional practices. This essay sheds light on the complexities of these reforms, which, while bringing about specific modernising influences, also sparked resistance and laid the groundwork for the eventual rise of nationalist movements.

These essays illustrate the dual function of colonial literature and governance as control instruments and catalysts for resistance. They show that while British efforts to impose their rule through cultural and administrative means were often unsuccessful in the short term, they also sowed the seeds of discontent that would later fuel the struggle for independence.

This comparative analysis underscores the intricate relationship between literature, law, and colonial power. It highlights how the realities of their colonial experience shaped British narratives. Reflecting on these historical portrayals, we must recognise their lasting impact on contemporary understandings of race, gender, and power.

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