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The White Woman's Gaze

The nineteenth century was, perhaps, the greatest period of travel writing. Under Queen Victoria, Britain became the greatest power in the world with political and economic control over her colonies spread all over the globe, from Asia to Africa and the Caribbean Islands. Many British travellers and missionaries went to the colonies to take up what Kipling called the "White Man's Burden" – to "civilize" the "barbaric" races of Asia and Africa. Kipling urged them to take on the responsibility of ruling the Empire in his poems:

Take up the White Man's Burden –
Send forth the best ye breed –
Go, bind your son's in exile
To serve your captive's need;
To wait in heavy harness
On fluttered folk and wild –
Your new-caught, sullen peoples,
Half-devil and half-child.

- The White Man's Burden, 1899

These were Englishmen who saw the East "as an inferior, degenerate, erotic place which requires the guiding light of Western civilization" (Laishram 27). The East offered them a chance to escape boredom, failure and poverty in England. India and the East also offered an opportunity to secure wealth and adventure, prestige and identity. Ram Chandra Prasad, in his work on early English travellers to India, differentiates between the attitudes of the early travellers and the ones who came later: "The European travellers of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries continued to approach India in a mood of child-like wonder, without the least sense of racial superiority. Until

the whole of the country was traversed and laid open by European travellers, India remained a part of those regions where everything was gorgeous and splendid" (Prasad Introduction). While the white man performed his very "masculine" burden of ruling the Empire, the "Memsahibs" or Western women were expected to play a subordinate role. Though they did not hold positions of power or authority within the colonial machinery, they performed their roles as "unofficial ambassadors":

> "It is not her wealth, it is not her government or her official representatives that have made Britain's name respected the whole globe around", wrote one newspaper reporter. "It is her unofficial ambassadors, ordinary men or women who obey the impulse of our race and wander out into the world, and who, whenever they encounter other people…….learn as much as they can about them, but all the time rigidly hold to their British nationality (qtd. in Birkett 113).

The maintenance of a proper distance from the natives was considered to be both socially and politically necessary; those who attempted to cross the limits of race and gender aroused great concern. But as Kumari Jayawardena points outs, not all foreign women in South Asia were "women of the Raj" who thought of Asians as "half-devil, half-child". Some of them went to the colonies neither with the intention to govern, nor for power and a place in history but because they were motivated by duty and love. There were numerous foreign women who were linked to nationalist, socialist, reformist, missionary and medical projects in South Asia. All these groups of white women had their origins in the reality of the New Woman who was asserting herself on all fronts.

One of the fields in which the New Woman was asserting herself was that of travel. Travel writing involves issues of identity and sometimes, it even involves transformations of identity. As Susan Bassnett says, travel, in many cases, appears to have provided the space necessary for them to assert themselves, a space denied to them within the conventions of British society (Bassnett 11). They challenged the Victorian middle-class ideal of womanhood, the idea of the 'Angel in the House'. Dea Birkett voices a similar view when she observes that many women began to question who and what they were, and where they could find a role and meaning for their travels (Birkett 73). As one-woman traveller writes, "I craved to go beyond the garden gate, follow the road that passed it by, and to set out for the unknown". Thus, across the "border of

gentility", the woman traveller was allured by the power, authority and self-esteem promised by the "savage land". As white women trapped by the shackles of gender, they saw in these far off lands an escape from the cloistered and cramped life at home. So, the land of magic and wonder, of ivory palanquins, of elephants and snake-charmers beckoned them and these women travellers prepared themselves for their journeys into the exotic lands as painted in the books written by their male predecessors. Dea Birkett observes, "These provided the ingredients for the imaginary arenas in which they could act out their most daring dreams and adventures, and forge a picture of themselves as travellers" (Birkett 20).

For women travellers, travel constituted a means to overcome the barriers not of class or race but of gender. They might have entered the field of travel late but they looked at these peoples and lands from a different perspective, sometimes with jaundiced eyes and at other times with a sympathetic gaze that made them seem new and strange. Dea Birkett rightly points out, "Awkward participators in the tradition of white male exploration, they moulded an image of these distant lands from their own particular, feminine perspectives" (Birkett 142). Through travel and travel writing, they not only unravelled the enigma of the noble savage but also fulfilled their dreams and ambitions in a man's world. Muniba Sami has drawn a difference between the societal expectations of a male and female traveller:

> Men were assumed to possess characteristics such as energy, independence and intellectual prowess, to be used in the public space and any writing would be in harmony with societal expectations. On the other hand, for a woman, travel meant leaving the private female space of domesticity or at best limited community. Women travellers would feel the conflict between conformity to cultural expectations which designated them as weak, passive, 'other' and their adventure, perhaps freedom, in a terrain of difficulty and danger. (Sami 41).

This new-found interest in the writings of women travellers has raised potent questions like "Is there a difference between the male and female gaze?", "Did western women perceive their eastern sisters differently from western men?" The fact that women travellers saw their eastern sisters differently can be amply proved. For the male traveller, the eastern woman was either an exotic object of desire or a sati, a devoted wife, who is ready to sacrifice her life on the funeral pyre of her dead husband. This depiction shows the native male as the agent of oppression and

the native woman becomes the object of both native oppression and colonizer's rescue. Almost all the male travellers to India, from Reginald Heber to G. T. Vigne, have written about the evil practice of Sati and have given graphic details of it. In this connection, Kate Telstcher makes an interesting observation:

> There are two main methods of sati which the travel accounts record: one where the widow sits or lies down next to her husband's corpse on the unlit funeral pyre, and a second where she leaps into an already blazing pit. Many of the illustrations of sati show the widow jumping into the funeral pyre rather than lying next to her husband. This is of course partly because the leaping version creates a more dramatic visual image…(Telstcher 56)

Bernier is ambivalent in his opinion of sati and describes it as a heroic, sacrificial or socially conditioned act. Gayatri Spivak has described this as the attempt of the white man to save the brown woman from brown men. In short, for the western man, the Indian woman becomes an object of desire, a fantasy woman in an imaginary land, the archetypal Other. The secluded life led by Indian women made them a novelty and these daughters of Nature were seen as more feminine than their British counterparts with whom an encounter would be enjoyable.

For the women travellers, Indian women were their doubly marginalized counterparts (as women and Orientals) whose identities had suffered both at the hands of colonialism based on race and that of patriarchy based on gender. This notion of "double colonization" is significant in this context. And as Sindhu Menon points out, "It is also necessary to note that the situation is extra complex when the representation was carried out by the *women* of a colonizing race, since they were inscribed as "colonizer" by race and as "colonized" by gender" (Menon 101). Thus, for the white woman, the Indian woman was a racial Other who had to be emancipated. As a philanthropic traveller, Mary Carpenter writes, "…the system… degrades morally and intellectually…and keeps women bound in moral thralldom. Until she is emancipated and brought to her true position in society, the Hindoo nation cannot become what they were intended to be by the father of all" (Carpenter Vol. 1 70). This desire to emancipate is at the same time an identification at the level of gender. Fanny Parks, an Orientalist traveller says:

> A man may have as many wives as he pleases, and mistresses without number; - it only adds to his dignity! If a woman takes a lover, she is murdered, and cast like a dog into a ditch. It is the same all the world over;

> the women being the weaker, are the playthings, the drudges, or the victims of the men; a woman is a slave from her birth; and the more I see of life, the more I pity the condition of the women. (Parks Vol. 1 156-157).

She had strong feelings about the position of women and the inferior education given to them. Like her, Mary Carpenter deplores the social evils of child marriage and female illiteracy. After visiting a girls' school, she came to the conclusion that under good female instruction, Hindoo girls are quite equal to their English sisters. An interesting point that can be seen in her account is that the kind of education provided to women in this school was intended to prepare them for their future roles as wives and mothers, their education being restricted to needlework, singing and all kinds of household work. It is paradoxical that these women travellers were confronted with the same situation that they were trying to escape from.

Mary Carpenter's sympathy and concern for Indian women and their education prompted her to visit India. In her book, she describes her visits to jails and asylums. She hoped to move the British Government in India to work on the issue of social reform. Carpenter's efforts had an inspirational effect on Indians for whom she was the embodiment of the enlightened Western woman who, with her feminist consciousness, was more likely to expose the evils plaguing the patriarchal social structures of both Britain and India than her male counterparts had succeeded in doing.

While all the travellers to the East, men as well as women, wrote about the climate, the social and religious practices, it was the harem that remained an enigma and an object of interest for the Western eyes. The male travellers, however, had limited access to the *zenana* or the harem. In his description of the fort at Delhi, Francois Bernier was forced to omit the harem: "I now wish I could lead you about in the Seraglio, as I have done in the rest of the Fortress: but who is the traveller that can speak of that as an eye-witness?" (qtd. in Telstcher 42). Apparently, the only occasion when Bernier entered the seraglio, his eyes were covered with a scarf and he was led "like a blind man" by a eunuch (qtd. in Telstcher 42). One of the ways in which men could have access to the *zenana* was as a doctor. It was this curiosity about the *zenana* that was satisfied by women travellers because they had easy access to the women's section of the house. Christina Sinclair Bremner attempts to clear certain misconceptions about the *zenana* and actually goes on to describe it at length:

> A good deal of misunderstanding seems to exist in England about the

> seclusion of Indian women in the zananahs. Even the word zananah is often not understood, a recent visitor to India explaining to the inhabitants of Bristol that the word zananah means the bazaar…In all probability the reverend gentleman never saw a zananah; his sex would bar entrance to that part of the house reserved to the use of women. In a poor house where no special part is set aside for them, the whole house may be called the zananah and into it no Indian would bring a man who was not related to him or his womenfolk…they flatly decline to appear in public and present themselves unveiled to the vulgar gaze (Bremner 113).

Meeting native women in the *zenana* was, therefore, high on the agenda of the British women travellers to India. They were welcomed by their Eastern sisters who felt honoured by the white woman's sympathy for them. As Mary Carpenter writes:

> …They received me in the kindest way, with the remark, "We are very glad you spent your own money to come to see us;" and were evidently gratified by my assurance that many English ladies took a warm interest in them, as well as myself, but had not had an opportunity of showing it. I promised them, however, that on my return home I would endeavour to excite the sympathy of my countrywomen for them. (Carpenter 247).

The women travellers have described the life in the women's quarters in detail. The women did the usual household work which were considered to be a woman's duty. Cut off from the rest of the world, they amused themselves in their own ways within the four walls of the *zenana*. Generally, these women did not receive any education but there were some "enlightened" women who did not let their knowledge and experience be limited by their social and physical circumstances. In her book, *Wanderings of a Pilgrim in Search of the Picturesque*, Fanny Parks tells us about Baiza Bai, a Maratha queen, who could read and write, accomplishments which were uncommon among the Maratha ladies, "it being the system of eastern nations to keep their women in ignorance, imagining it gives them greater power over them" (Parks 113). But in their own mild and quiet ways, these women tried to break free of the shackles in which their gender bound them. Parks talks about another queen who indulged in the very masculine sport of hunting and devised a novel way for it by going out in a native carriage. In this way, she could

safely hunt, being completely secluded from the profane eyes of men. These women satisfied their curiosity about the outside world when they met white women. As Fanny Parks mentions, they were very inquisitive and inquired about her husband and children and asked a thousand questions. Instead of fantasizing the *zenana*, Parks paints an authentic picture of the lives of Indian women and the restrictions she felt both women in the East and West suffered in common: "We spoke of the severity of the laws of England with respect to married women, how completely by law they are the slaves of their husbands, and how little hope there is of redress" (qtd. in Dalrymple 57).

Mary Carpenter laments over the fact that at times, effective communication was hampered because of the lack of understanding of each other's language but the native women did not let language be an obstacle in their interaction with their more educated and experienced Western sympathizers. At other times, the women travellers had to overcome the shyness of native women but both the parties crossed these barriers in their attempt to reach out to each other:

> At first I can get nothing out of them, one and all covering their faces shyly with their sarees; but when I have proved myself tame by the sacrifice of a few silver coins, they become more communicative, and, approaching closely, proceed to make a minute examination of my dress; upon which I request them to show me their jewelry, these daughters of Eve being heavily laden with massive silver ornaments, in the shape of bangles, ear-rings, anklets, and *ceintures* round the neck and waist, from which the usual amulets are suspended, containing sacred relics. (Mazuchelli 218-219).

While to the male travellers, the Oriental woman was an exotic object and a model of Eastern chastity whom they could only observe from a distance, the women travellers could actually observe them from close quarters and delve deep into their condition. They were not just passive observers but sympathizers of their Eastern sisters. In the writings of these *memsahibs* or white women, we hear the note of empathy again and again. In her travel accounts, Nina Mazuchelli laments, "…in this country, a woman is nothing socially, a *kooshnae*, which being interpreted means *nothing*" (Mazuchelli 331). In her mild tone, she disapproves of the existing system:

> I am by no means one of those strong-minded females who advocate what is mis-called 'woman's rights'; on the contrary, I believe women

> have tenderer, sweeter, purer, if not nobler, rights than such advocates would approve of – rights best suited to the gentler nature of her sex, and hidden deep in the sweet and gentle life of home; but there are limits to the depreciation of womankind in the social scale, and on behalf of my Oriental sisters I object to the above order of ideas. (Mazuchelli 331)

Thus, the "mute, powerless, non-evolving entity" of the Oriental woman finds a voice in the "superior" Western world. In the course of their interactions with native women, the women travellers came up with interesting facts. Nina Mazuchelli writes about a matriarchal society in India, among the Kasia Hills in Eastern Bengal, where women rule over men who are reduced to domestic drudges, look after the children and where property is inherited by women – an Eden where "the boys are kooshnaes and the girls, for once, are everything, and have it all their own way!" (Mazuchelli 332).

To these Western women, their "Oriental sisters" were a mystery they longed to unravel. Mazuchelli, while observing her maid says:

> There was a reserved grace and dignity about her occasionally, at which I marvelled in one of her class, and in spite of her little caprices and laughing eye, her face would assume a sad and pensive expression, as though there were thoughts and feelings within her, to which she longed but could never find words to give utterance, till the yearning became almost painful. Her mind was like a rich but uncultivated soil, whose depths I longed to open, and she became, if possible, an object of greater interest to me each day. (Mazuchelli 165-166)

The Oriental Renaissance had generated interest and enthusiasm in the West to study, travel and write about South Asia. The spread of university education for women in nineteenth century Europe together with their new-found freedom and mobility gave rise to women scholars, writers and travellers with an interest in the study of texts and societies other than their own. Curiosity about Asian societies also produced women travellers and sympathetic women philanthropists. These women were neither unwilling exiles nor short-term visitors. Most of them were wives and daughters of civil and military officers who made their home the country they visited.

It is true that women travellers, on several occasions, voiced the same opinion as their male counterparts through language or attitudes, and often oscillated between their sympathy as well

as derision for these foreign lands, on the whole, they succeeded in resolving these apparently irresolvable conflicts of interest. These white women, in their unique ways, were able to catch a world with their feminine eyes that was shut to the male gaze. The male travellers mostly looked at the East from the points of view of religion and politics. As George D. Bearce observes, "Vigne's attitudes towards Indian society, government and religion were typical of the times. He condemned sati, criticized the Hindu prohibition against the killing of cows, and insisted that the caste system must be abolished" (Bearce 252). The women travellers' perception of the East was definitely different from their male counterparts. This perception was influenced, to a great extent, by gender ideology as how they saw things was determined largely by discourses of femininity dominant at the time. In their writings we see how race, gender and culture help in constructing their image of other cultures and how that image changes over time. The Western woman's overhaul of the stereotypes gives them a unique, independent identity and place in an otherwise predominantly male domain.

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