
Book review:
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Memsahibs by Ipshita Nath

800-1000 words.

Inpshita Nath's *Mamsahibs* aims examine the lives of white British women in India as they experienced it, and in doing so challenges some of the entrenched stereotypes which developed in post-colonial popular culture. Like many in both India and Britain, Nath grew up surrounded by certain (mis)representations of white British women, often called memsahibs, during the colonial period and became increasingly 'frustrated to see repetative and limiting representation[s]' of these women. Building therefore on postcolonial and feminist histories which questioned if women could speak, Nath instead argues that they have not been heard. Utilising both published and archival narratives, Nath examines the lives of memsahibs during the entire period of colonial rule, from the early expansion of the mid-eighteenth century to the mass exodus of Britons following Indian independence.

Initial Thoughts

- A good entry point to the story of the memsahibs, opens the way for works by Indrani Sen and Nurpur Chaudhuri.
- Perhaps unknowingly/unintentionally makes the case to explore other women of empire and their influence on the colonial experience and development (i.e Indian women, who aside from their role as servants are largely hidden in narratives)
- Considers many aspects of memsahib's lives/identities. In doing so, Nath expands beyond memsahibs to servants, children, soldiers, officials, and local communities. In addition, topics move beyond the domestic to public health, housing, social etiquette, security, politics, travel, etc.
- She goes some way to acknowledging the complexities of relationships – initially outlined in the work of Indrani Sen. Duality of 'insider' and 'outsider' – perhaps aspects that could have been drawn out a little further.
- Little new to scholars of the field, but excellent for those new to the study of colonial India.
- Aims to dispel some popular myths – does so.
- Using the words of women – Eliza Fay; Mary Martha Sherwood; Emma Roberts
    - Recognises the ambivalence of the women's words. 'They cried, complained, appreciated India, and denounced it all at the same time." P.31.
- Recognises the social construction of 'memsahib' and the need for women to follow certain restrictive rules in order to qualify for the title. It was as much a performative act than an identity or state of being.
- The history of memsahibs is the history of the colonial community

Chapters

1. Prologue

Outlines motivation for the research and writing of *Memsahibs*. Nath, like many in Britain and India grew up with certain (mis)representations of memsahibs in popular culture. She discusses how she became 'frustrated to see repetitive and limiting representation'. Building on works postcolonial and feminist histories that questioned if women could speak, Nath argues they have not been heard. As a result, Nath bring the writings of women to the fore, resting her narrative and analysis on these, often well known, writings.

2. Journey to India

Following her focus on the women's words, Nath begins where many memsahibs did, on a journey to India. Emphasising the harsh realities of sea and land travel, especially in the early decades of the nineteenth century as well as the importance of this journey for establishing relationships and social expectations. Though in relying on women's narratives we see the first glimpse of the nuance Nath offers – the expectations v realities of life at sea and relationships which were formed. Courting opportunities, ship engagements, temporary entanglements all under the veil of propriety and chaperones.

Arrival in India is also considered – the diversity of perspectives of amazement and horror reflecting the diversity of British women travelling to India and their reasons for doing so. Some seeking adventure and excitement of colonial life, others were reluctant and seeking a marital match (de Courcy).

Seeking a husband was a single-minded task for many women travelling to India. Relentless in their pursuit – the process of securing a match revealed the gendered expectations of British-Indian society – domestic qualities reflecting Victorian middle-class values – sobriety, chastity, subservience. Yet, their journey to India had already revealed there was more to many of these women than met the eye – their sense of adventure, adaptability, and bravery were all core elements of their experience.

3. Becoming a memsahib

The next chapter follows the lives of women after their marriages and their adjustments to life in India – fashion, location, home design and management and climatic conditions – were all focusses of women's adjustments to their new lives. The management of servants is also covered in the chapter – elements of the ambivalence within this relationship is noted, the appreciation of their support, but complaints as to the 'difficulties' and expense of managing them. Nath also notes the safty/threat dichotomy that has been considered in recent works examining the master/servant dichotomy of the colonial home (Servant's Past & Dussart). Complex and multi-layered relationship.

Also the importance and complexity of navigating the Anglo-Indian society (here referring to Britons in India, rather than those of mixed heritage). Highlighted the stratified nature of society and the predominance of middle- and upper-class women's narratives produced. Husband's rank was the determining factor in the hierarchy of memsahibs and a want to maintain British customs that were central to the collective identity of the community.

4. Nostalgia, boredom, marital strife

Nath then discusses the seclusion and loneliness felt by many memsahibs, especially those in the *mofussil.* With limited communication with Britain there was an anxiety about being forgotten by loved ones. There is derision of this in postcolonial literature where memsahibs are presented as miserable, lonely women, but underneath this mockery were real women struggling with their new lives – depression and lack of purpose plagues women. Nath brings a human quality to this discussion and acknowledges the hardship, rather than continue the narrative of derision that has persisted.

Also uses examples of financial and domestic difficulties women could find themselves in Minnie Blane is used to show how difficult it could be and the responsibility that was often placed on women's shoulders when their husbands were travelling. This inevitably became a large part of their narratives and letters which has served to portray them as 'winey' and 'entitled' rather than accepting difficulties of life.

5. Bungalows

Discusses the difficulties of travel and accommodation situations highlighting the resilience displayed by Memsahibs who were often called upon to set up home and move regularly (with

children). Many remained unphased by travel and enjoyed elements – despite it being unpleasant and at times particularly dangerous (Dak bungalows are used as an example of this).

6. Camping, hunting and the outdoors

Similar to previous chapter, this one highlights that some memsahibs enjoyed the adventure and difficulties of a life of travel whether travelling with the 'camps' for the wives of military men or those who accompanied their husbands on hunting trips.

7. Dirt, Disease and disorderly memsahibs

Memsahibs were involved in the spread of western medicine on a micro-level, using western techniques they were familiar with to treat family and servants when medical care was not available (as in many rural parts of the country). Some women prided themselves on their medical care and extended to the local community. But also understood the dangers facing them and again showing the resilience of women.

Pregnancy, childbirth and miscarriages were particularly dangerous for women and can be considered 'the white woman's burden'. It was an important imperial role to fulfil but was the bane of many women's lives and again therefore often featured in narratives.

8. Hills, sunsets and scandals

Memsahibs and hill stations are synonymous in popular culture. British women enjoying the social life, comforts and extravagance of hill stations during the summer months – their frivolities, parties, and insipid socialising is a common trope. But Nath argues this is misleading, in fact memsahibs were participating in (and in some cases leading) the well organised system of imperial culture. Shimla, for example, was a seat of imperial power and actions/behaviours displayed in this setting were essential to wider depictions of imperial dominance and propriety. What Nath captures in this chapter is the excitement of hill station life (especially compared to the *mofussil* but also the challenges, duties and hardships facing those participating in the system. The lives of memsahibs and by extension their family's were nuanced and contradictory.

9. Motherhood & Ayahs

As with pregnancy and birth, childhood came with many risks. As has been outlined by Nurpur Chaudhuri, *ayahs* and memsahibs could have a very strained relationship, and one that was often ambivalent. Discusses the perceived necessity of sending children away and the emotional (and financial) hardship this presented to mothers.

10. Indian Rebellion

There have been lots of assessments of women's experiences of the violence of 1857. Nath adds to this existing body of work highlighting the shift in public rhetoric of memsahibs during the period – previously treated with derision, but now became symbols of British virtue, fortitude and forbearance. This element did not remain constant in the popular memory of memsahibs, aside from those directly involved in the uprising. Women consciously participated in the writing of this history, and perhaps this is why their legacy has remained despite the widespread mutilation of memsahibs' reputation more broadly.

11. Post-Independence – going or staying.

Challenges facing memsahibs when it came time to leave, despite a yearning for Britain there was a developed connection to the land and people of India. Their relationship was far more complicated than has always been credited.