

## INTRODUCTION

The idea behind this book is to explore colonial gendered interactions, with a special focus on the white woman in colonial India. It examines a wide range of both literary and non-literary colonial narratives which offer a rich site for studying constructions of inter-racial interactions as well as gender representations against a grid of colonial transactions. My primary aim is to capture the multiple facets, the contradictions as well as the complexities in white women's experience in colonial India in the course of the nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. The three groups of white women whom I seek to focus upon are memsahibs, missionaries and, to a certain extent, ordinary soldiers' wives. In order to do this, I examine a diverse range of writings – memoirs, letters, personal accounts, literary narratives, housekeeping manuals and medical guide books – authored largely by white women, but also by western-educated Indian women and by white, colonising men as well.

As is by now well recognised, throughout the colonial period, the dominant category of the white woman (that is to say, the middle-class memsahib) occupied an ambivalent position, enjoying both power and privilege by virtue of her race, while simultaneously suffering gender disadvantage with regard to men of her own community. This book tries to explore in its two parts these ambivalences, examining the spheres in which she ostensibly exercised power as well as the areas in which she was disadvantaged, while at the same time noting the ambiguities, overlaps, slippages and fluidities that sometimes blurred the distinctions between the two situations. Part I broadly explores areas of white women's 'power': their participation in the 'civilising mission' (specifically, female education), their encounters with 'native' women, their 'imperial gaze' – but also a return of the gaze. In Part II the focus is on the white woman's gendered disadvantage in the colony, her anxieties and insecurities about the colonial home, her health problems as well as the colonial misogyny that undergirded writings by white men, such as powerful colonial physicians.

### *The memsahib in colonial India: historiography*

The subject of the middle-class white woman in British India has been the focus of a great deal of research during the last two decades of the previous century. Nevertheless, it still continues to be a topic that

## GENDERED TRANSACTIONS

needs to be unpacked in many of its dimensions, such as the representation of white women in medical texts, or the recovery of the virtually forgotten 'native' writings of the memsahib-novelist, Flora Annie Steel, who was praised in her time as a female Rudyard Kipling, in her close knowledge of 'native' life.

Research on the white woman (specifically the middle-class memsahib or administrator's wife) began in all seriousness with Pat Barr's *The Mem Sahibs: The Women of Victorian India* (1976), which projected the memsahib as the victim of a male-centric colonial enterprise.<sup>1</sup> To a large extent, this perspective continued through the 1980s, epitomised by Margaret Macmillan's *Women of the Raj* (1988).<sup>2</sup> However, from the 1990s onwards the research on gender and empire became more sophisticated and nuanced, beginning with the path-breaking *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (1992), a collection of wide-ranging and incisive essays edited by Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel, followed by Clare Midgley's edited study, *Gender and Imperialism* (1998).<sup>3</sup> Both these important collections of essays presented the European woman in India in a nuanced manner, as *both* victim *as well as* beneficiary of colonialism. While the white woman was shown to be a beneficiary of imperialism, enjoying the race and class privileges of belonging to the ruling elite group, she was shown to also undoubtedly suffer marginalisation and gender disadvantages with regard to the men of her own community. In addition, these two latter studies opened up the category of 'white woman' further and subjected to critical scrutiny other groups such as missionaries. Around the same time, studies such as Anne McClintock's path-breaking *Imperial Leather* (1995), followed by Anne Laura Stoler's *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* (2002) unpacked the issue of female sexuality as it played out in imperial discourses.<sup>4</sup> Both these studies focused on the intertwining of colonialism, race, sexuality, gender and power.

In her *Women Travellers in Colonial India* (1998) Indira Ghose explored the colonial, 'female gaze' in the specific context of white women's travel writing in colonial India. Underlining their heterogeneity, she argued that these narratives display a 'wide spectrum of gazes' which are 'frequently mutually contradictory and shifting'.<sup>5</sup> Rosemary Raza's *In Their Own Words* (2006) importantly scrutinised white women's writings of the earlier part of the nineteenth century, while Nancy Paxton has looked at literary narratives of the late nineteenth century in *Writing under the Raj* (1999).<sup>6</sup> However, the two works that have scrutinised the category of the white woman through a study of literary representations, historical documents, newspaper reports as well as archival materials have been two studies which focused on the white woman in India, namely, Mary Procida's *Married to the Empire*

## INTRODUCTION

(2002) and my own *Woman and Empire* (2002).<sup>7</sup> Procida's comprehensive, landmark study essentially argued that British women in colonial India were active masculinist imperialists, rather than the stereotypical frivolous party-goers that had become, since Kipling's time, a part of the mythology of empire.

In *Woman and Empire* (2002) I focused on the heterogeneity of the white woman living in colonial India, by probing the tensions, contradictions and diversities in the construction of the white woman in colonial discourse. I unravelled how she was perceived as both the 'tragic exile' in a faraway land, but also, at the same time, as the 'disorderly memsahib' who enjoyed freedom from the ideas about 'acceptable' feminine conduct prevailing in the metropole. I demonstrated how colonial discourse was undergirded by submerged colonial anxieties about the memsahib's sexual power being exercised in society, thereby threatening to destabilise sexual power equations within the white community in India. Hence, colonial discourse was rife with hostile constructions of the white woman as a shallow, frivolous social butterfly who was busy enjoying the power of her sexuality and neglectful of her domestic responsibilities.

Furthermore, in collating primary texts for my anthology, *Memsahibs' Writings* (2008) I sought to capture in the words of white women the interactions that they had with Indian women – in their diverse roles: as memsahibs, missionaries, travellers, novelists, journalists, physicians and even as converts to Hinduism.<sup>8</sup> I tried to present through these white women's narratives, the fascinating nuances in their gendered encounters which took place against a complex backdrop of caste/class, religious and regional diversities. I also sought to present how these enormous diversities inflected their inter-racial encounters and perceptions of nautch girls (dancing girls), ayahs (female domestic servants), wet-nurses, middle-class zenana women (women living in seclusion), princely women and western-educated women graduates (college educated).

### *Themes and concerns of this book: white women in colonial India*

The three groups of white women whom I address in this book are memsahibs, missionaries and, to a certain extent, ordinary soldiers' wives. While the middle-class European women's experience is presented through their own writings, poorer class white women (notably soldiers' wives), who have left behind barely any written records, can only be represented at second hand. Indeed, one of the points that I aim to underline in this book is that the category of the white woman

## GENDERED TRANSACTIONS

in colonial India was never a socially homogeneous one. Instead, it was constituted of diverse social classes – including middle-class and upper-middle-class memsahibs (wives of civil administrators or military officers), missionaries of largely lower-middle-class origins, and lower-class soldiers' wives, besides other poor whites, 'European marginals', including vagabonds and prostitutes.<sup>9</sup> Moreover, these women came from various regions of Britain, and included Irishwomen, Scotswomen, as well as Englishwomen, although they all went by the generic title of 'Englishwoman' or 'European' woman.<sup>10</sup>

In order to widen the scope of the enquiry, I foreground not only the middle-class memsahibs (which is of course the category of European women most widely discussed in studies on the subject), but also include other categories of white women in the colony, such as female evangelicals and barrack wives. In fact, one of my efforts in this study is to bring out the heterogeneity of the 'white woman in India' in terms of class contradictions, and also probe the internal divisions and disentangle the various strands that constituted this gendered community.

The 1820s is set as the starting date of this study since it was from around this period that more and more European women started coming out to India and writing about their Indian experience.<sup>11</sup> The majority came out as brides, accompanying husbands who were colonial administrators, military officers, judges, doctors, planters or other non-officials. During the next two decades, which were dominated by Utilitarianism and Evangelicalism, Indian society came to be perceived as decadent and in urgent need of reform, with the abolition of social evils as well as the introduction of English education being seen as key objectives.<sup>12</sup> Nevertheless, such attitudes co-existed with East India Company officials and their wives being encouraged to keep *munshis* (clerks) to learn Indian languages. Besides, there was vibrant cross-cultural mixing across race, with social life including visits to the homes of wealthy Indian zamindars (landowners) where they were entertained with music and dance in the form of nautch.

Following the Rebellion of 1857 and the takeover by the Crown, the policy adopted by the imperial government was that of social distance and imperial aloofness.<sup>13</sup> Government policy also encouraged the larger presence of resident wives and the setting up of British style homes for a new generation of administrators, with the objective of furthering an 'imperial identity'. For the first time, middle-class English women came out in large numbers from around the 1860s and formed an important segment of the colonial community.<sup>14</sup> The term 'memsahib' (i.e. 'madam sahib'), which came into greater usage during this time, signified colonial power, privilege and status, and wives

## INTRODUCTION

were ranked according to their husband's official status and rank in a highly hierarchical colonial society.<sup>15</sup> However, as this book seeks to show, memsahibs simultaneously suffered gender disadvantage, being subjected to enforced idleness, limited sources of recreation, and most of all, separation from their children who were sent away to study in Britain.

By the early decades of the twentieth century, the domestic lifestyle of the white memsahib remained more or less the same. However, growing anti-imperialist sentiments as well as nationalist politics alienated them further from the colonised.<sup>16</sup> The early years of the twentieth century was a period of anti-imperialist struggle, and the nationalist politics of this period strengthened memsahibs' co-opted entry into an imperialist discourse.<sup>17</sup>

### *Colonial gender constructs and the memsahib*

Colonial society was never a cohesive, harmonious entity, but a fractured space undercut by a web of race, class and gender ambivalences and contradictions.<sup>18</sup> In a colonial enterprise that was often perceived as a 'manly' activity rooted in aggression, control, competition and power, the white woman was negatively viewed as some sort of obstruction to this enterprise. Indeed, an important issue that underpins this study is that the middle-class memsahib was constructed in colonial discourse in three principal ways: first, that of the pleasure-loving, social butterfly immersed in a hectic social life; second, that of the tragic exile separated from her children; and third, the construct of the co-opted imperialist.<sup>19</sup> Of course, these constructions varied in their emphases and in their negativity. For instance, while the construct of the social butterfly was rooted in colonial misogyny (examined in Chapter 5), the construct of the tragic exile which ostensibly sympathised with the white woman, was actually undergirded by the idea of the colony as 'no place for a woman' (seen in Chapter 6). And the construct of the memsahib as imperialist and as reformer, sought to co-opt her into the imperial project (seen in Chapters 1, 2 and 4). Thus, in this book we get a glimpse of all three types of constructions.<sup>20</sup>

As I have discussed in *Woman and Empire*, the construct of the 'disorderly' memsahib was an overwhelming one in colonial discourse.<sup>21</sup> It was consistently buttressed by newspaper reports, periodical articles, memoirs, prescriptive manuals and literary writings – and indeed, by the bulk of colonial medical writings as well, as I argue in Chapter 5 of this book. Gender prejudices clearly underlay the construction of the memsahib as an irresponsible, 'disorderly' socialite, betraying anxieties and insecurities about European female sexuality and the threat

it posed to the male colonial order.<sup>22</sup> The fears about female sexuality were further reinforced by the numerical sex imbalance in colonial India, where, at the highest point, men outnumbered women 3:1, a situation that created a critical stress in society.<sup>23</sup> This also resulted in considerable stresses in colonial Indian marriages, given the frequent separations that were unavoidable, as well as the problem of adulterous liaisons between married women and single men. Indeed, anxieties about this problem of adultery were frequently voiced in colonial discourse and the preoccupation with a woman's 'morality' took the form of exhortatory writings in Anglo-Indian journals, newspapers and books.<sup>24</sup> These focused on the moral responsibilities of the English woman in India, in both her gender relationships and her imperial duty as wife and a member of the ruling class – all of which informs my discussion of colonial medical discourse in Chapter 5 of this book.

### *Memsahibs and the colonial home*

In recent years there has been a growing scholarly interest in the colonial family and in the role of the white woman as mother in the colonial home. Increasingly, the family is being identified as an important analytical unit for probing the cultural history of colonialism. Following upon Anne Laura Stoler's *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power* (2002) and Elizabeth Buettner's *Empire Families: Britons and Late Imperial India* (2004), there has emerged a new thrust on the family, on colonial motherhood as well as on colonial childhood and child-rearing.<sup>25</sup> More recently, in studies such as Esme Cleall's *Missionary Discourses of Difference* (2012), and Emily Manktelow's *Missionary Families* (2013), this interest has been expanded and extended to include the complexities entangling missionary family lives in colonial India.<sup>26</sup> Stoler's path-breaking work on colonial domesticity essentially focused on lower-class colonials, co-habitation with 'native' female servants as well as the problem of the mixed-race household in the Dutch East Indies. By far the most incisive as well as comprehensive exploration of memsahibs and the colonial home in the context of India has been made by Alison Blunt in her article, 'Imperial Geographies of Home: British Domesticity in India, 1886–1925', where she focused on the colonial home in India and the power relations between the memsahib and her domestic servants.<sup>27</sup>

By the late nineteenth century, child-bearing was presented in colonial discourse as a woman's 'main function in life' and women were increasingly projected as progenitors of future generations for the sake of empire and the job of nation-building.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the importance of the colonial home led to the appearance, from the second half of the

## INTRODUCTION

nineteenth century onwards, to housekeeping manuals authored by memsahibs which gave advice on the running of the colonial home, on bringing up children, handling 'native' servants and providing recipes for daily meals based on 'Anglo-Indian' food. Then again, there were medical handbooks written by male colonial physicians which gave stern advice on subjects such as mothering, reproductive and maternal health as well as children's diseases. I shall be examining aspects of the white woman as mother in Chapters 4 and 5 – extending the discussion to analyse memsahibs and the colonial home, as well as medical exhortations by male physicians in medical handbooks about responsible mothering.

### *Female missionaries in India*

Missionaries form an important part of this book as a whole. In the initial years evangelical activity was perceived to be a male activity and female missionaries were generally the wives of missionaries.<sup>29</sup> From the 1860s, however, following a shift in evangelical policies, unmarried female missionaries from the more educated middle classes started to be sent out to India primarily on zenana work. From this period onwards, evangelical activities in India became feminised; so much so, that by the end of the century, there was a predominance of female over male evangelicals in India.<sup>30</sup> In addition, towards the end of the century, as part of a new evangelical strategy, missionaries who were trained physicians started to be sent out to provide medical care to purdah women (women in seclusion) who refused to be treated by foreign, male doctors. Healing thus came to be intermeshed with proselytisation, as 'Clinical Christianity' was deployed to gain access to the most orthodox zenanas.<sup>31</sup>

In this rigidly hierarchical colonial society, class distinctions were sharp within the white community. A wide gap, for instance, separated missionaries from memsahibs primarily due to the latter's social superiority based on their husbands' official status. Female evangelicals consequently tended to be markedly deferential towards white administrator's wives. Moreover, their practice of mixing closely with 'natives' and 'living as nearly as possible on the same lines' as the local populace was frowned upon because it was considered damaging to British prestige.<sup>32</sup>

### *Barrack wives*

One rather neglected section of the white colonial community whom we shall briefly discuss in this book is the common soldiers' wives

## GENDERED TRANSACTIONS

– a subject that has been rather marginal in the histories of the colonial armies. Besides Myna Trustram's classic study, *Women of the Regiment* (1984), Douglas Peers' *Between Mars and Mammon* (1995), and very recently, Erica Wald's *Vice in the Barracks* (2014) have highlighted the plight of soldiers' wives in the barracks.<sup>33</sup> Building on their work, I shall examine in Chapter 6, the problem of addiction and the mental condition of 'barrack wives' (as they were called), seeking to draw connections between their mental health and the degree of degradation to which their lives were reduced. A wide class gap separated memsahibs from soldier's wives, and virtually no connection existed between them – except when the latter worked as a mid-wife for officer's wives, or carried out some other chore in the cantonment.

There was no clear government policy on soldiers' wives; marriage for British 'other ranks' was discouraged as a rule and soldiers tended to live with 'native' women and Eurasians. Although inter-racial marriage was taboo for officers, it was encouraged for soldiers, and 'unofficial marriages' frequently took place between them and local women.<sup>34</sup> In cases where the wives were European, they were given higher amounts in matters such as pension for widows. Only wives of British birth became eligible for widows' pensions, which automatically ruled out Eurasian wives.<sup>35</sup> Moreover, while soldiers' wives in Britain were usually required to cook, sew and launder for the entire regiment, in India, 'native' servants did many of these tasks, since it was considered harmful to British prestige. Nevertheless, inside the barracks the conditions for the women were utter degradation, consisting of alcoholism, wife-beating, desertion by husbands, poverty and squalor, along with high female and child mortality. Commenting on the 'misery and degradation' of soldiers' wives in the colonies, one young soldier remarked in Burma during the 1840s that 'of all the lives of misery in this world a married soldier's is the worst' and warned his 'poor deluded countrywomen who are continually marrying soldiers' against taking 'such a step'.<sup>36</sup> Barrack wives had little contact with memsahibs and interactions with officers' wives were primarily confined to their role as seamstresses or as midwives. Midwifery was, according to Myna Trustram, 'an important function which a few wives performed in a regiment'. Some regiments had a regular midwife who was paid out of the regimental fund.<sup>37</sup> Some of these women were trained by army medical officers in midwifery at various army hospitals, where they 'attended the wives of both officers and men'.<sup>38</sup>



## INTRODUCTION

### *White women's writings*

Much of this monograph (although not all of it), examines white women's writings authored by two categories of European women: missionaries and memsahibs. For middle-class memsahibs, writing was a very important activity in colonial India. As demonstrated by Rosemary Raza's *In Their Own Words* (2006), long hours of female leisure and enforced inactivity in a colonial set-up, especially in the earlier years of the nineteenth century, resulted in them writing long letters to friends and family members back in Britain. These women penned memoirs, maintained diaries and wrote letters which they subsequently published in the form of books.<sup>39</sup> Most of them wrote on topics pertaining to their lives, such as their domestic and social experiences. One important subject which preoccupied these women was the daily difficulty that they faced in the course of running their homes and in negotiating colonial domesticities. They voiced their anxieties in rearing their small children in India, handling tropical diseases and 'controlling' their domestic servants, including female servants, such as the ayah and the wet-nurse.<sup>40</sup> Thus, in these personal writings the average memsahib turned a critical 'colonial gaze' upon low caste/class women with whom they were the most closely associated.

In addition, from the second half of the nineteenth century onwards, experienced middle-class memsahibs started to write housekeeping manuals and handbooks, which sought to address the difficulties of young brides who were arriving in India and to guide them on household matters. They outlined the duties of the ayahs, gave advice on how to run the colonial home, raise small children, and especially on how to control and administer their huge retinue of servants.

However, it was missionaries who were the most prolific writers – of newsletters, periodical articles, biographies, personal accounts and sometimes novels. Considered most knowledgeable on the subject of the zenana, female evangelicals took upon themselves the task of disseminating information about it to the wider, western public. They wrote authoritatively on it, generally constructing it negatively as a prison, a site of disease, idleness, ignorance and sensuality. They also sometimes wrote novels specifically meant to be read aloud to women inside the zenana to bring about a cultural transformation among them, recasting them along exemplary western lines.

By late nineteenth century, colonial administrators' wives had also emerged as popular novelists and writers of short stories. While the overwhelming majority of them wrote 'station romances', delineating only the British community in India, there was a handful of memsahib-writers who delineated Indian life, locales and characters in their

## GENDERED TRANSACTIONS

fiction.<sup>41</sup> Flora Annie Steel (1847–1929) was one such leading writer. Her writings, as we see in Chapter 2 of this book, focused on ‘native’ women from both urban and rural Punjab and delineated encounters with school-going Muslim girls as well as the sufferings of peasant women.

White women’s narratives thus not only became an important source of information on Indian women but revealed much about their own perceptions and prejudices. Indeed, sometimes their writings displayed a cultural superiority, overt as well as unspoken, especially during the period of social reform and at the height of the ‘civilising mission’. In other words, these female writers’ narratives contributed to circulating stereotypes about the abject condition of ‘native’ women and producing colonial knowledge about the ‘Other’.

### *Gendered encounters*

As the title indicates, one of this book’s central tropes is gendered encounters across race. This is something that I examine in a number of the book’s chapters. As noted earlier, it was women missionaries who mixed most closely with ‘natives’ of various classes, their greatest advantage being their ability to speak the local languages fluently.

However, as far as memsahibs are concerned, in contrast to the inter-racial socialising of the earlier decades, most contacts with Indian women dwindled after the gap between the races widened following the establishment of empire and the adoption of an imperial policy of aloofness. Thereafter, this inter-mixing dwindled down to day-to-day encounters with female domestic servants, such as ayahs (and sometimes the wet-nurse), as we see in Chapter 4. Occasionally they also made formal, mutually disliked ‘purdah visits’, with their ayahs acting as interpreters since they were ignorant of the language; or they would catch a glimpse of ‘native’ school-going girls when invited to be the chief guest at some school function (as we see in Chapter 2).<sup>42</sup> Or sometimes, a memsahib in a big city would invite school girls to her house to tea, as we see in a Mumbai-based novel in Chapter 3. Obviously these kinds of interactions (purdah visits, as well as school functions) were a mere formality, almost a social ritual precluding any genuine interaction.

By the turn of the century there were further shifts in the relationship between European and Indian women, especially those belonging to the middle classes. One was the emergence from purdah of the educated *bhadramahila*, the genteel, middle-class Bengali woman. During this period European women also interacted with the ‘New Indian Woman’, a new generation of middle-class Indian women, educated

## INTRODUCTION

and westernised, some of them educationists themselves.<sup>43</sup> Moreover, the early twentieth century was also the period of the Indian National movement.<sup>44</sup> Cross-cultural encounters too began to change in society, and the old type of purdah visits came to be increasingly replaced by 'purdah parties': all-female social gatherings organised by white women for their secluded, elite female guests.<sup>45</sup>

With regard to gendered encounters, it is also important to unpack the colonial category of the 'native' woman, as this study seeks to do. I seek to scrutinise how these cross-racial gendered interactions were inflected by regional diversities, and wish to bring across the complexity of the category of the 'native woman'. Far from being a monolithic category, it was inflected with variations of class, caste, religion and cultural practices, involving regions as culturally distinct and geographically separate as Bengal in the east, Bombay in the west or Punjab in the north.

### *Social reform in the nineteenth century*

The nineteenth century was an age of gendered social reform; the 'Native Female Social Amelioration' programme focused on eradicating 'native' patriarchal practices such as sati (widow immolation), female infanticide, child marriage, polygamy, the oppression of high caste widows, enforced female illiteracy and the practice of purdah (female seclusion). While in the first half of the century, reform had been sought through legislation with the help of male Indian reformers, there was a shift in strategy following the Rebellion of 1857.<sup>46</sup> Reform measures thereafter assumed the form of gradual change – especially through female education and the gradual eradication of purdah. For this purpose, there was a widespread induction of white women into the reform agenda. The vast majority involved in reform activities in the second half of the nineteenth century – notably female education – were female evangelists. As noted earlier, they established schools for girls from the early part of the century and taught both in the regular schools as well as in the zenana classes held for grown women inside Indian homes.

Very rarely, however, did memsahibs or wives of British colonial administrators show any interest in this subject of social reform.<sup>47</sup> One striking exception was Flora Annie Steel whose writings we examine in Chapter 2. Steel, the wife of an administrator, not only wrote on topics related to gendered social reform, but was actively associated with female education, starting schools for girls in remote parts of Punjab and later, taking up the government post of Inspectress of girls' schools in the province. Besides, she also revealed in her short fiction

## GENDERED TRANSACTIONS

a reformist's preoccupation with the abject condition of Indian women and an interest in female education.

More indirectly, the English woman was incorporated into the process of cultural imperialism by being projected as a role model for the Indian woman who was emerging from the veil. Underlining the grave imperial responsibilities of all middle-class white women, *The Calcutta Review* intoned in 1886 that 'the future of India's women' was tied with 'the unsuspected influence of the lives and characters of their more privileged English sisters'.<sup>48</sup> Such an exhortation simultaneously served a double purpose. On the one hand it urged a western model for the 'New Indian Woman' to follow. On the other hand it deployed notions such as 'British prestige' and the 'white woman's burden' to control the *white* woman's morality and any possible disorderliness or deviations from the norm.

### *Part I: The white woman and the 'civilising mission'*

As noted earlier, the first three chapters which make up Part I of this book focus on aspects of the white woman's role as imperialist and as participant in the 'civilising mission'. Narratives authored by European female missionaries, memsahibs, as well as Indian women, such as memoirs, short stories, novels, newspaper and periodical articles are examined in order to probe their representations of gendered interactions with the 'native' female across race and class. This section is informed by the intertwined themes of the female 'colonial gaze' and the 'civilising mission'. By focusing specifically on issues related to gendered social reform, such as female education and 'colonial modernity', I seek to explore how diverse categories of women (both white and Indian) participated both as proponents and as targets of the colonial 'civilising mission'.

One way in which different groups of white women – social reformers, educationists, evangelists or even incorporated wives – participated in this 'civilising mission' was by writing about Indian women and turning a critical 'colonial gaze' upon the 'abject', 'native' woman. Indeed, the concept of the colonial 'female gaze' suggests that women were complicit in colonialism and its structures of power.<sup>49</sup> In other words, by circulating stereotypes about the abject condition of 'native' women and producing colonial knowledge about the 'Other', these female writers effectively performed the role of colluders in the colonial enterprise.<sup>50</sup>

In Chapter 1, 'The missionary "gaze" and the "civilising mission": zenana encounters in nineteenth-century Bengal', I examine missionary writings (both personal accounts by female evangelicals, as well as

## INTRODUCTION

missionary novels), their delineation of zenana education visitations, their construction of the oppressed purdah woman, as well as their projection of the zenana as a site of disease, ignorance and idleness. Simultaneously, while presenting themselves as rescuers of Indian women, they also projected the figure of the Victorian genteel woman as a female paradigm to be emulated.

The theme of education and the criticism of 'native' patriarchies provides an interface between the first chapter and Chapter 2, 'Flora Annie Steel, social reform and female education in late nineteenth-century Punjab', which focuses on gender problems in colonial Punjab. Flora Annie Steel (1847–1929), who was a major figure of her time, exercised considerable influence over her generation. While she resembled the missionaries in attacking patriarchal practices in Indian society (e.g. female infanticide, child marriage and polygamy), she sharply critiqued evangelical methods of schooling as well as their objective of culturally transforming Indian women on a western model. Thus, her critical gaze on the missionaries and on 'native' patriarchal practices presents an intertwining of seemingly oppositional strands: while echoing female evangelicals (in their shared critical gaze directed at gendered social evils in Indian society), she is simultaneously positioned in critical opposition to the missionaries.

Giving a voice to the educated 'native' female and presenting her perspective on issues of female education and westernised role models, is Chapter 3, 'Returning the "gaze": colonial encounters in Indian women's English writings in late nineteenth-century western India'. This chapter discusses two literary narratives authored by the earliest generation of educated Indian women who wrote in English. These two Indian female authors, who also happened to be Christian converts, focused in their writings on 'native' female schooling, besides offering a critique of missionary schooling. In their responses to 'colonial modernity', we study the interface between the missionary agendas of education, reform, conversion to Christianity and the manner in which reformist programmes were received by Indian female converts. Thus, this chapter serves to provide a counterpoint to the writings by colonising women, and is in an important sense, a case of 'reversing the gaze', providing a counter-viewpoint, a critical 'native' perspective on European women in the colony.

### *Part II: Colonial domesticity, white women's health and gender disadvantage*

The chapters in Part II of this book focus on narratives which underline the disadvantaged position of the white woman in India. At the

same time, one notes the fluidities and overlaps that exist between Parts I and II. For instance, while the colonial gaze defined and united the chapters in Part I, it was simultaneously shown to be subverted by the 'native' female gaze. In Part II, the colonial gaze is undermined and subverted by the context of domesticity in colonial India. Mem Sahibs, in turn, are subjected to the gendered medical gaze.<sup>51</sup>

Chapter 4, 'The ambivalences of power inside the colonial home: memsahibs, ayahs and wet-nurses', introduces the theme of the white woman's disadvantaged position in the colony. This chapter scrutinises memsahibs' writings and their constructions of 'native' female domestic servants as dishonest, sensual and unhygienic – revealing thereby profound anxieties and insecurities. The colonial nursery emerges as a contested site where the memsahib's authority was constantly undermined by these 'native' females in a daily power-struggle over emotional authority over the white children. At the same time, this chapter takes forward the theme of the 'colonial gaze' from the earlier three chapters – in this case, both the memsahib's gaze as well as the return of the gaze by the ayah.

The remaining two chapters of this book further develop the theme of the disadvantaged position of the white woman in colonial discourse through the lens of women's health issues. Chapter 5, 'Marginalising the memsahib: the white woman's health issues in colonial medical writings', seeks to unravel the gender politics that undergirded colonial medical handbooks which were authored mostly by male colonial physicians. These handbooks subjected the memsahib to a critical 'medical gaze', and sternly set out the agenda of gender control under the guise of medical advice. Admonishing the memsahib and critiquing her mothering skills, these handbooks also laid stress upon the vulnerabilities affecting her health and critiqued her as an 'irresponsible' imperial mother. While examining the medical advice on white women's health, we shall unravel the race/class/gender ideologies which underlay colonial medical discourse.

The themes of the white woman's medical vulnerability and the colonies being perceived as 'no place for a woman' are further developed in Chapter 6, 'The colonial "female malady": European women's mental health and addiction in the late nineteenth century'. This final chapter focuses on yet another aspect of female health in the colony, namely mental health. Taken up for discussion is the perceived occurrence among middle-class memsahibs of the fashionable ailment known as 'tropical neurasthenia'. In addition, we probe, in the case of the lower-class soldier's wife, the problem of 'delirium tremens'. The projection of white women's 'mental unfitness' and vulnerability to the tropical climate, the conditions of middle-class domestic and

## INTRODUCTION

social life as well as economic hardships in the case of poorer white women will be examined. Both colonial realities as well as perceptions are examined in this chapter.

Regarding the historical time-frame of this book, the period c.1820–1930 is a broad framework within which this study is set. While it follows a thematic structure, historical chronology is also largely maintained. Thus the earlier three chapters broadly focus on the second half of the nineteenth century while the later three chapters go down to the early decades of the twentieth century. At the same time, we note that periods in history are not watertight divisions – but consist instead of overlaps, shifts, changes, fluidities as well as continuities. I have therefore deliberately avoided adopting a mechanical, linear, straight-line time-frame. Instead, the idea is to capture the tensions and contradictions, shifts and continuities that marked perceptions, attitudes and perspectives. Hence, in some instances the time span is wide and extends to almost a hundred year period. For instance, my discussion of memsahibs' writings on ayahs (in Chapter 4) reveals an almost seamless continuity in their race/class prejudices towards domestic servants for almost a hundred years. Similarly, in Chapters 5 and 6, we see how colonial medical writings displayed a continuing gender prejudice among the medical fraternity towards both white colonial maternities and female mental health in the colony, prejudices that were visible well into the early decades of the twentieth century. This also suggests that in many instances, despite all the historical shifts and changes, certain perceptions and constructions lingered on for decades, and there was often a curious sameness to be found in the position of the white woman in India and in the attitudes to her throughout the colonial period.

### Notes

- 1 Pat Barr, *The Mem Sahibs: The Women of Victorian India* (London, Secker and Warburg, 1976).
- 2 Margaret Macmillan, *Women of the Raj* (London, Thames and Hudson, 1988).
- 3 Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel (eds), *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* (Bloomington and Indianapolis, Indiana University Press, 1992), Clare Midgley (ed.), *Gender and Imperialism* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1998).
- 4 Anne McClintock, *Imperial Leather: Race, Gender and Sexuality in the Colonial Contest* (London and New York, Routledge, 1995); Ann Laura Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power: Race and the Intimate in Colonial Rule* (Berkeley, University of California Press, 2002).
- 5 Indira Ghose, *Women Travellers in Colonial India: The Power of the Female Gaze* (Delhi, Oxford University Press, 1998), p. 158. For a recent, generalised discussion see Susmita Roye and Rajeshwar Mittapalli (eds), *The Male Empire under the Female Gaze: The British Raj and the Mem Sahib* (Amherst, Cambria, 2013).
- 6 Rosemary Raza, *In Their Own Words: British Women Writers and India, 1740–1857*

## GENDERED TRANSACTIONS

- (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2006); Nancy Paxton, *Writing under the Raj: Gender, Race and Rape in the British Colonial Imagination, 1830–1947* (New Brunswick, NJ, Rutgers University Press, 1999).
- 7 Mary Procida, *Married to the Empire: Gender, Politics and Imperialism in India, 1883–1947* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2002), and Indrani Sen, *Woman and Empire: Representations in the Writings of British India, 1858–1900* (New Delhi, Orient Longman, 2002).
  - 8 Indrani Sen (ed.), *Memsahibs' Writings: Colonial Narratives on Indian Women* (New Delhi, Orient BlackSwan, 2008). During the anti-colonial movement around the early twentieth century, there were 'Indianised' European women who embraced Hinduism, such as Margaret Noble or 'Sister Nivedita' (1867–1911), and Madeline Slade or 'Mira Behn' (1892–1982), a follower of Gandhi.
  - 9 Wives of civil administrators occupied the highest social position, followed by wives of military officers, with the wives of non-official British, such as planters, located much lower in the hierarchy. For a discussion of the different classes of white women in India, see Macmillan, *Women of the Raj* and especially Indrani Sen, 'Between Power and "Purdah": The White Woman in British India, 1858–1900', *The Indian Economic and Social History Review*, 34:3 (1997), pp. 355–376. For a discussion of vagabond and destitute whites see Sarmistha De, *Marginal Europeans in Colonial India: 1860–1920* (Kolkata, Thema, 2008), and Harald Fischer-Tine, *Low and Licentious Europeans: Race, Class and 'White Subalternity' in Colonial India* (New Delhi, Orient BlackSwan, 2009).
  - 10 In colonial India the terms 'European', 'English', or 'British' were generic terms loosely used for white colonialists, including people of Scottish, Irish or Welsh origins (in some cases, Canadian, Australian or American origins as well). In keeping with this usage, I use these terms interchangeably throughout this book. In addition, I use the term 'white woman' to refer to colonising women across diverse social classes. Moreover, I use the term 'Anglo-Indian' in its original sense of a British colonial residing in India.
  - 11 Prior to that, a handful of Englishwomen did come out to India as early as the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries but they were very few in numbers because of the rigours and hardships of the seven-month long sea voyage around the Cape of Good Hope. For details see Dennis Kincaid, *British Social Life in India 1608–1937* ([1938], London, Routledge and Kegan Paul, 1973) and Ketaki Kushari Dyson, *A Various Universe: A Study of the Journals and Memoirs of British Men and Women in the Indian Sub-Continent, 1765–1856* ([1978], New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2002). For a more recent account written for a general readership, see Joan Mickelson Gaughan, *The 'Incumberances': British Women in India 1615–1856* (New Delhi, Oxford University Press, 2013).
  - 12 The Utilitarian, James Mill, harshly condemned Indian culture as inferior, in *History of British India* (London, Baldwin, Cradock and Joy, 1817), while T. B. Macaulay's 'Minute on Education' dated 2 February, 1835, in *Bureau of Education. Selections from Educational Records, Part I (1781–1839)*, edited by H. Sharp, *Calcutta: Superintendent, Government Printing, 1920* (Delhi, National Archives of India, 1965), pp. 107–117, talked about the inferiority of Asian culture, and the need to bring in English education. During this period many East India Company officials took an interest in evangelical activities. Julia Maitland and her husband who lived in Madras in this period set up schools for 'heathen' children in the hope that they would embrace Christianity. However, they also mixed closely with Indian elites.
  - 13 See Kenneth Ballhatchet, *Race, Sex and Class Under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics, 1793–1905* (New York, St. Martin's Press, 1980).
  - 14 This increased presence was further encouraged by the reduced journey-time from England, following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869 and the introduction of the steamship.
  - 15 The word 'memsahib' (i.e. 'madam sahib'), used to denote a married European lady, came into popular usage from around the 1850s onwards. See *The Oxford English Dictionary*, Vol. VI ([1933], Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1961), p. 332. For a



## INTRODUCTION

- discussion of this term see also my article, 'Memsahib', in Bonnie G. Smith (ed.), *The Oxford Encyclopaedia of Women in World History*, Vol. 1 (New York, Oxford University Press, 2008), pp. 206–207.
- 16 Anti-imperialist sentiments in the early twentieth century, such as the swadeshi movement following the partition of Bengal in 1905 as well as the outcry after the Jallianwallah Bagh massacre at Amritsar in 1919 (firing on an unarmed crowd and killing many by General Dwyer) all added to tensions.
  - 17 Mary Procida notes how, 'By the inter-war years, Anglo-Indian women could no longer be depicted as ... helpless creatures ... In order to be fully integrated onto British imperialism in India, Anglo-Indian official wives had to reject notions of women's helplessness and dependence ... Anglo-Indian wives met the perceived challenge of violence to the Raj by integrating themselves into the culture of imperial violence, not as passive victims but as active, assertive, and assured defenders of the Empire', in Mary Procida, 'Married to the Empire: British Wives and British Imperialism in India, 1883–1947', PhD thesis, University of Pennsylvania, 1997, p. 267.
  - 18 See Sen, *Woman and Empire*.
  - 19 For a more detailed discussion, see Sen, 'Between Power and "Purdah"'; and Sen, *Woman and Empire*.
  - 20 The memsahib as imperialist is discussed in Chapters 2 and 4 of this book, the memsahib as a social butterfly is addressed in Chapter 5 and the construction as the tragic exile can be seen in Chapter 6.
  - 21 See Sen, *Woman and Empire*.
  - 22 For details see Sen, 'Between Power and "Purdah"', pp. 364–369. In colonial fiction the 'disorderly memsahib' is epitomised by the ubiquitous figure of the married flirt who poses a threat to lonely males. See also Sen, *Woman and Empire*, Chapters 1 and 3.
  - 23 While, at its highest point, the male:female ratio among Europeans in colonial India stood at 3:1, women in Britain demographically outnumbered men 1,050 to 1,000. For population figure for India, see Macmillan, *Women of the Raj*, p. 16; for population figures for England see Patricia Hollis (ed.), *Women in Public, 1850–1900: Documents of the Victorian Women's Movement* (London, George Allen & Unwin, 1979), p. 33.
  - 24 Two newspapers can be cited here. While *The Madras Mail*, 29 April (1869), critiqued the commonly found 'penchant for another man's wife', the Calcutta-based *The Friend of India* (12 June 1875), p. 551, censured the "'flirtations" ... between married men and married women' which all too often ended 'in separation and the Divorce Court'.
  - 25 Stoler, *Carnal Knowledge and Imperial Power*, Elizabeth Buettner, *Empire Families: Britons and Late Imperial India* (Oxford and New York, Oxford University Press, 2004).
  - 26 Esme Cleall, *Missionary Discourses of Difference: Negotiating Otherness in the British Empire* (Basingstoke, Palgrave Macmillan, 2012), and Emily J. Manktelow, *Missionary Families: Race, Gender and Generation on the Spiritual Frontier* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2013). Another recent study, Dianne Lawrence's *Genteel Women: Empire and Domestic Material Culture, 1840–1910* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 2012), explores the setting up of homes and genteel housekeeping values in the empire.
  - 27 Alison Blunt, 'Imperial Geographies of Home: British Domesticity in India, 1886–1925', *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, New Series, 24:4 (1999), pp. 421–440.
  - 28 See Anna Davin, 'Imperialism and Motherhood', *History Workshop Journal*, 5:1 (1978), pp. 9–66.
  - 29 Initially, the East India Company did not allow evangelical activity in the country but finally, under growing pressure at home, missionaries were allowed into India from 1813 onwards.
  - 30 Jane Haggis, 'Professional Ladies and Working Wives: Female Missionaries in the

## GENDERED TRANSACTIONS

- London Missionary Society and Its South Travancore District, South India in the Nineteenth Century', PhD thesis, University of Manchester, 1991, p. 157.
- 31 For details see Patricia and Peter Sherlock, 'Women and Cultural Exchanges' in Norman Etherington (ed.), *Missions and Empire* (New York, Oxford University Press, 2005), p. 184; and especially Rosemary Fitzgerald, "'Clinical Christianity": The Emergence of Medical Work as a Missionary Strategy in Colonial India, 1800–1914', in Biswamoy Pati and Mark Harrison (eds), *Health, Medicine and Empire: Perspectives on Colonial India* (New Delhi, Orient Longman, 2001), pp. 88–136. See also Antoinette Burton, 'Contesting the Zenana: The Mission to Make "Lady Doctors for India", 1874–1885', *Journal of British Studies*, 35 (July, 1996), pp. 368–397.
  - 32 Maud Diver, *The Englishwoman in India* (Edinburgh and London, William Blackwood & Sons, 1909).
  - 33 Myna Trustram, *Women of the Regiment: Marriage and the Victorian Army* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 1984); Douglas Peers, *Between Mars and Mammon: Colonial Armies and the Garrison State in Nineteenth Century India* (London, I. B. Tauris, 1995), and Erica Wald, *Vice in the Barracks: Medicine, the Military and the Making of Colonial India, 1780–1868* (London, Palgrave Macmillan, 2014).
  - 34 Douglas Peers, 'Imperial Vice: Sex, Drink, and the Health of the British Troops in North Indian Cantonments, 1800–1858', in David Killingray and David Omissi (eds), *Guardians of Empire: The Armed Forces of the Colonial Powers, 1700–1964* (Manchester, Manchester University Press, 1999), p. 34. Peers also quotes an army officer: 'Half caste women are frequently chosen by the British soldiers for their wives and I believe they make extremely good ones', *ibid.*, p. 35. For the condition of barrack wives, see 'Englishwomen in Hindustan', *The Calcutta Review*, 4:7 (1845), pp. 96–127. For a discussion on Indian companions of soldiers see Durba Ghosh, *Sex and the Family in Colonial India: The Making of Empire* (Cambridge, Cambridge University Press, 2006), pp. 206–245.
  - 35 Douglas Peers, 'Privates Off Parade: Regimenting in the Nineteenth-century Indian Empire', *The International History Review*, 20:4 (December 1998), p. 846.
  - 36 Letter of Lance-Corporal David Banham of the 94th Regiment of Foot, Moulmein, Burma, to a friend in England, dated 1 August, 1845, from the National Army Museum, London, [www.nam.ac.uk/exhibitions/online-exhibitions/wives-sweet-hearts/women-regiment/lives-misery-transcript-1](http://www.nam.ac.uk/exhibitions/online-exhibitions/wives-sweet-hearts/women-regiment/lives-misery-transcript-1) (accessed 26 August 2016).
  - 37 Trustram, *Women of the Regiment*, p. 114. Trustram further points out that in 1868 a scheme was begun in Dublin 'to train wives as midwives so that each regiment would have a trained woman ... The Army Medical Dept urged medical officers to use wives who had completed the Dublin course to attend childbirth and general sickness amongst women in preference to untrained women. By 1881 500 wives had been trained: many had been posted to India with their husbands where they attended the wives of both officers and men', in Trustram, *Women of the Regiment*, p. 114.
  - 38 *Ibid.*
  - 39 For details see Raza, *In Their Own Words*. Julia Maitland's *Letters from Madras during the years 1836–39, by a Lady* ([1843], London, John Murray, 1846) were based on letters to her mother; Emily Eden's *Up the Country: Letters Written to her Sister from the Upper Provinces of India* ([1866], London, Oxford University Press, 1930) were based on letters to her sister, and Anne Wilson's *Letters from India* ([1911], London, Century, 1984) were originally written as personal correspondence. Emma Roberts' *Scenes and Characteristics of Hindostan, with Sketches of Anglo-Indian Society*, vol. 1 (London, W. H. Allen, 1835) originally appeared as separate papers published in the *Asiatic Journal*. Mary Frances Billington's *Women in India* (London, Chapman & Hall, 1895) was based on articles she wrote for the *Daily Graphic*; Maud Diver's *The Englishwoman in India* (1909) was based on her articles that had appeared in the periodical *Womanhood*.
  - 40 Of course, returning 'home' was fraught with mixed feelings, regrets and nostalgia

## INTRODUCTION

- as they turned from 'somebodies' into 'nobodies' – a transition skilfully delineated in Buettner, *Empire Families*.
- 41 The few other memsahib-writers who occasionally delineated Indian characters and themes include, Maud Diver (1867–1945), Alice Perrin (1867–1934), and to a lesser degree, Sara Jeannette Duncan (1862–1922). For a discussion on nineteenth-century colonial fiction, including the station romances, see Sen, *Woman and Empire*, Chapter 3, pp. 71–103.
  - 42 For discussions on the zenana see Janaki Nair, 'Uncovering the Zenana: Visions of Indian Womanhood in Englishwomen's Writings, 1813–1940', *Journal of Women's History*, 2:1 (Spring 1990), pp. 8–34.
  - 43 Some of the Indian universities too, such as the Universities of Bombay and Calcutta, had been opened up to women – in fact, soon after London University.
  - 44 As the anti-colonial movement gathered momentum, it saw the involvement of highly educated, intelligent and articulate Indian women such as Sarojini Naidu, as well as 'Indianised' European women, such as Margaret Noble or 'Sister Nivedita' (1867– 1911), Annie Besant (1847–1933) and Madeline Slade or 'Mira Behn' (1892–1982), a follower of Gandhi.
  - 45 Seclusion from males would be maintained and upper-class women from both races would mix on a footing of some degree of equality.
  - 46 These legislations included the Act banning sati in 1829, and Hindu Widows' Remarriage Act of 1856. Indian reformers like Raja Rammohan Roy and Ishwarchandra Vidyasagar spearheaded these reforms respectively.
  - 47 An unusual reformist memsahib was Annette Akroyd (1842–1929), who started schools for girls in Calcutta in 1873. However, her involvement in female education came to an end with her marriage to Henry Beveridge, an ICS officer.
  - 48 J. E. Dawson, 'The Englishwoman in India: Her Influence and Responsibilities' (Part II), *The Calcutta Review*, 83:165 (1886), p. 362.
  - 49 As Indira Ghose mentions, the female colonial gaze, which at some level shows 'their collusion in colonialist structures of power', also serves to 'circulate stereotypes and images of the other and actively participates in the production of knowledge and the dissemination of the effects of power', Ghose, *Women Travellers in Colonial India*, pp. 160, 2.
  - 50 The concept of the 'imperial gaze' has been theorised by several, including Mary Louise Pratt, *Imperial Eyes: Travel Writing and Transculturation* (London and New York, Routledge, 1992).
  - 51 Chapters 5 and 6 refer to the 'medical gaze' which is based on Michel Foucault's concept of the depersonalising 'medical gaze' or 'clinical gaze', whereby the physician exercises power/knowledge over the patient. However, it is given a more gendered colouring in my work. See Michel Foucault, *The Birth of the Clinic: An Archaeology of Medical Perception*, trans. A.M. Sheridan Smith (London, Tavistock, 1973).