

**Rumour, Gossip, and Loneliness:
the *Nautch-Girl* and her *Other* in *The Romance of a Nautch Girl* and *The
Woman in the Bazaar***

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Abstract:

This paper is a culmination of an elaborate study on the fictional writings by women authors from the British Raj in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. The present study follows a close-reading and comparative study of two novels written by two women authors from the British Raj – Frank Penny’s (1867-1934) *The Romance of a Nautch Girl* (1898), and Alice Perrin’s (1847-1939) *The Woman in the Bazaar* (1914). The paper provides a reflective analysis of subversive domesticity through a study of the tropes of rumour mills and gossip in the households of the Raj through a close-reading of the two novels. The paper makes an argument that the novels demand a *humane* reading, empathetic to the cause of the woman (whether the native or the colonizer). The excess of rumour, gossip, and a certain mystery that surrounded these women characters like Minachee, Deva, and Rafella in the novels lead to their ultimate fall. The “exoticization” of a woman can be mentally and emotionally draining as is demonstrated by the characters of these novels. The novels highlight complexities in the lives women both in the empire and in their colonies. These characters in the novels are pushed into loneliness, isolation, and into extreme steps of prostitution. The women characters may either represent the colonized spaces or may belong to the spaces of the imperial powers, yet the challenges of subversive domesticity and the need to balance the expectations of the family and the empire, can emotionally drain any woman – whether she is a European courtesan or an Indian Devadasi. These novels hold a key to counter-reading of grand narratives of colonial discourses in the light of the contemporary times. The emotive terrains of women, their biological setup, and the demand for them to perform in certain ways in the socio-cultural systems of their own cultures, might be universal in some ways and maybe counterproductive to the well-being of any woman irrespective of their racial identities. Through a reading of these novels, we argue that literary history and criticism could treat these women protagonists and women authors of the Raj with more compassion than they were treated in the last century, after the memories of both the colonial and the post-colonial times have subsided in the fine pixels of the collective unconscious of the twenty-first century.

Keywords: Narratives, Gossip, Rumour, Women’s Novels, Colonial Politics, *Memsahibs*, Raj Fiction, Modernity, Tradition, Devadasis, Comparative Literature

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Between the Bungalow and the Brothel

The position of women in the South-Asian literary traditions is complex -- largely connected to the historical-cultural processes that have evolved through the centuries of colonial and postcolonial traditions. This study focuses on a close-reading of two novels written by women authors from the British Raj – Frank Penny’s (1867-1934) *The Romance of a Nautch Girl* (1898), and Alice Perrin’s (1847-1939) *The Woman in the Bazaar* (1914).¹ The attempt is to understand the tacit connection between colonial politics, the narratives that surround women protagonists, and the issues of gender in the fictional writings of the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries through a reading of these texts. The two novels selected for this study are based on women protagonists and the narration is by women authors of the British Raj. These novels demand a *humane* reading, sensitive to the cause of women in the colonial narratives of the nineteenth and early twentieth century -- whether they are native or are a part of the colonizer’s supremacy. Women across colour and racial demarcations faced violence, and were subjected to alienation during the colonial era. This paper tries to critically evaluate the nuances of fictional texts written by women authors of the Raj, beyond the obvious parameters of reading these fictions based on the Oriental/Occidental grand-narrative.² We intend to present these authors and their characters as highly complex, possessing an ambivalent outlook towards the colonizer-colonized, ruler-subject binaries of their times. The subversive “politics of domesticity” in the colonial setup, is far more intricate when it comes to these lesser-known stories of the women authors. Their stories remain buried in the metaphorical sands of Time. These novels have been lost under the carpet of colonial legacy, being mentioned only on rare occasions as “minor” voices in literature. A corpus of writings by the women writers of the Raj went into complete oblivion while some of the writings of their male contemporaries have survived through centuries.

The paper provides a reflective analysis of subversive domesticity through a study of the tropes of rumour mills and gossip in the households of the Raj through a reading of *The Romance of a Nautch-Girl* and *The Woman in the Bazaar*. Through the tropes of gossip, rumour mills and their connection to alienation and loneliness in the fictional texts, the attempt is to focus on the complex nature of human relationship that challenge the simplistic binaries of colonizer/colonized model. The study argues that a subliminal nexus between gossip, rumour, and loneliness (stereotypes ascribed to female characters of the modernist

sensibilities of twentieth century) have a subtle role to play in the shaping of perception and image building of these women protagonists and their authors. These novels reveal multifaceted layers of *in-betweenness* of being the Victorian “good wife”, the *Memsahib*, the European “madame”, *vis-à-vis* the “native” Indian woman domestic subject, such as the nautch-girl, and the Devadasis. These character “types” found in the novels not only make the tales gripping, replete with constructed Oriental eroticism, but they also provide a glimpse into the liminal spaces of domesticity and their connection to the larger politics of the Raj. The voices of the European women authors of the Raj reflect an “ambivalence” bordering on resistance towards the machinations of the Raj (Ramusack&Burton 472).³

In these spaces of being the British wife, the *Memsahib*, and the Indian wife-subject, there is also the “in-between” space inhabited by the “native prostitute” (courtesans and Devadasis as denominated in these writings) which are explored through the fiction of these women writers. The body of the “other” (the native woman courtesan) was a receptacle for disease and death, and the effect of the Indian Mutiny of 1857 was massive on both Indian and British women. Subject of sexuality was firmly pushed into the liminal spaces of the “home” and into the “sanctified” bed of matrimony and racial hierarchy after the Indian mutiny. As per Victorian standards, European “white” women were expected to epitomize chastity and carry the legacy of the empire forward. Indian women were doubly colonized, by imperial authority as well as by their domestic circumstance of physical and psychological exploitation. In “Imperial Geographies of Home” Alison Blunt remarks on the significance of “legitimizing” the home in the expansion of the Raj: “British homes in the empire could only be established and maintained as ‘legitimate and natural’ when they housed British wives and mothers” (Blunt 421-422). The *Memsahib* had to adhere to the roles of being “good wives” and these were reinforced through structured lifestyle as well as unstructured role-plays of gossip and rumour.

In this process of legitimizing gender roles, the empire had to construct a series of “otherness” by relegating certain professions such as the courtesans to the category of “prostitution”, generating further stigma for the women practitioners of these vocations. Penny’s *The Romance of a Nautch Girl* narrates the story of Devadasis through the characters of Minachee and her mother Deva who had to go through a difficult transition from being the “wives of the gods” to deteriorating into challenging times when the local Zamindar

discarded them for younger *Dasis*, and when the curious British men such as William started to meddle with local customs and rituals of Chengalem. Perrin's *The Woman in the Bazaar* is a narration of the tragic fate of Rafella Forte who marries Captain Coventry and moves to India from a British countryside. She becomes the target of unkind gossip and extreme restrictions of her husband. This ultimately drives her into taking up prostitution in the Indian bazaars. While Minachee is an "Indian" courtesan, Rafella is a European girl who is forced into prostitution, serving native Babus and lives a tragic destiny.

Stephen Legg in "Stimulation, Segregation, Scandal" argues that the process of segregation of the cantonment and the native settlements was a kind of "spatial and governmental mind set" (Legg 1462) and that the prime function of the governments during Raj was to protect the military regiments from venereal disease (Legg 1461). This led to isolation and alienation of both the settlers as well as the natives, leading them into suspicion of one another. Harald Fischer-Tiné argues that European women's prostitution was suppressed because they were seen as "eroding native respect for the ruling class" (Fischer-Tiné 165). These women characters, the European women courtesan/prostitutes could only be located in the pages of novels and as 'gossip' figures in the circle of the *memshaibs* in the cantonment clubs. In the major ports of entry in India like Bombay and Calcutta, there is an intricate connection between body and the politics of the Raj; "Since 'blood and sex' were regarded as important markers of difference between rulers and colonial subjects,' these contradictions become perhaps most obvious in the case of the European prostitutes plying their trade in British India" (Fischer-Tiné 165). The European women pushed into prostitution as well as the Indian nautch girls were relegated to the footnotes of colonial fiction and to the annotations of uncharted histories.

Gossip and the Untranslatable in *The Romance of a Nautch Girl*

Mrs. Frank Penny's novel *The Romance of a Nautch Girl* (1898)⁴ is the story of a British civil surgeon and his encounter with cultural customs in the Southern part of India through the Devadasis of a local temple in Chengalem. Penny's *The Romance of a Nautch Girl* focuses on the complex relationships between British officers and a special class of Indian women called the *Devadasis*. The story focuses on untranslatability of indigenous customs

and traditions, bordering on dangerous consequences for those Europeans who tried transgressing

native rituals. The trope of “gossip” plays an important role in the narrative loop of the text. Gossip works as tool to subvert the role of Indian Devadasis and to create a suspicion in the minds of the colonial masters regarding these women dancers who are looked with suspicion due to their adherence to certain rituals and traditions.⁵ The casual gossip regarding the Devadasis in the novel lead to tragic consequences in the lives of the characters.

The geographical landscape in Penny’s novels are distinct when compared to her contemporaries like Flora Annie Steel (who has been by far the most acknowledged woman writer of the time). Penny wrote forty-six novels during her life, mostly covering the landscape of Deccan and the Malabar regions where she spent most of her life. Srilekha Bell in her paper “Mrs. Frank Penny’s *A Mixed Marriage*” provides a lucid biographical sketch of Penny.⁶ Penny’s novels like *The Romance of a Nautch Girl* and *A Mixed Marriage* (1903), present complex gender roles in the Indo-British ties. She provides a keen insight into the domestic spaces of Indian households as well as the British cantonment.

The Romance of a Nautch Girl highlights the various shades of relationship between the *Devadasi* Meenachi and her mother Deva, a British doctor Felix Manning, and his brother William Manning. The novel starts with Felix Manning, the Civil Surgeon of “Chengalem, in the Tinnevely district of South India” (11) searching for his brother William, who seems to have gone missing from the town after witnessing a local ritual in the form of a ‘Devil-Dance’. Penny draws her characters in this novel from the service group that worked for the empire such as doctors and police officers. This novel deals with human relationships within the British community, highlighting the dangers of rumour mills when they spread between two disparate cultures of the Britishers and the Indians. The story also narrates the tension between the two Manning brothers when Beryl Holdsworth, a British girl in the community gets attracted to the younger brother William. Thus, it has both inter-cultural and intra-cultural tales as the crux of the narrative. William’s curiosity and his keen interest into the customs and traditions of the “natives” of Chengalem form the subtext of the novel. William mysteriously disappeared from the medical quarters after witnessing a sacrificial night, a dense ritual that involved sacrificing animals to propitiate the goddess by the natives of Chengalem. His elder brother, Felix Manning harbours a suspicion that the *dasis* of the local

temple are somehow connected (“involved”) with the disappearance of his brother from the seclusion of the cantonment area.

The opening page has a sketch of a handmade map of Chengalem (Illustration1) clearly showing the strict lines of demarcation between cantonment and Indian settlements within the town. These demarcations between the cantonment and the “native” Indian houses needed to be respected. The characters in the novel could observe one another from a distance, but they had an unspoken pact of keeping their distance from the customs and traditions of the “other”. However, both Manning brothers somehow transgress this unspoken sacrosanct demarcation between the natives and the colonizers. William violates the demarcation because of his curiosity for native rituals and cultures of the temple. Felix, on the other hand violates the demarcations owing to his responsibility as the local medical doctor.

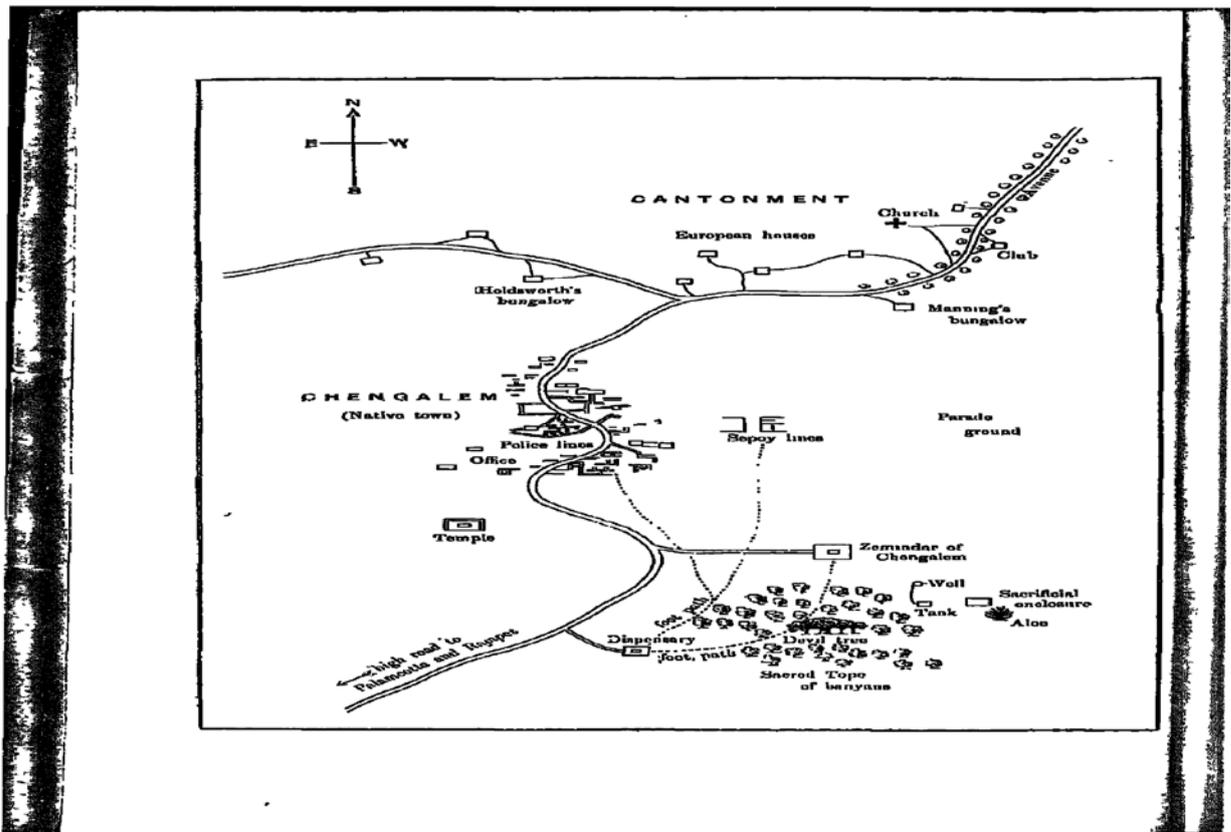


Illustration 1: A map drawn by F.E. Penny at the onset of the novel. The town has clearly two clusters of “native” houses and “European” houses that demonstrate the cultural and social lines of demarcation.

While there is an interest to learn about each other’s cultures and social practices, it was also expected that the colonizer and the colonized maintain a respectable distance. The affairs of the Chengalem temple and its resident Devadasis, for instance, generates an interest for the “exotic” Indian women among the British officers. However, transgressing the unseen boundaries could spell trouble for both communities, as it happens in the case of William. A particular character Major Brett, who is a friend and confidante of the Manning brothers, conveys this clear sense of distrust of the natives among the British officers; “He disliked and distrusted natives, and was too often obliged in his capacity, to study the worst side of their nature” (61).

The lack of understanding of customs and rituals of devadasis and a severe lack of empathy is pronounced as the story unfolds. Deva, the mother of “Dasi” Minachee’s reveals the secret of William’s death towards the end of the novel stating that he transgressed the demarcations; ““He was at the devil-dance that night. He dared to touch the tree, and the spirit drank his blood”” (346). She portrays William as an “outsider” and a transgressor who enters into the sacred groves of the belief systems of the Devadasis and infringes their privacy. Their loneliness is a part of their sacred customs and William invades that space and has to pay for his extreme adventure and his lack of understanding of the local customs. Deva is the symbol of a belief system of sacrosanct customs. She is not understood by the White European officers and she too does not understand the sensibilities of William and Felix. These are untranslatable spaces of cultural transactions.

On the other hand, a local Zamindar provides a counter-narrative of William’s death to Felix Manning. He recounts the story as narrated by a servant based on a conversation with Minachee’s mother: “You do not see the drift of her story. The spirit drank his blood. That is how the people talk of the goats they kill in honour of their swami. I do not believe in these sacrifices. I am an educated man” (346). The Zamindar works for the British officers, and in spite of being a local chieftain plants the seeds of suspicion in the minds of Felix Manning regarding the Dasis. The narratives at both ends of the spectrum of the Dasis and Mannings,

are woven by here-say and an assumption that the rituals of the natives have something to do with the “lack of education”. Gossip becomes the only means of translating the untranslatable layers of the civilized/ savage binaries. The death of William in the novel directly relates to the complex ideological clashes within layers of Indian and European civil society of the

times. William transgresses the boundaries set by the “civilized” society of the British cantonment, and suffers the consequences of his extreme curiosity in the rituals of the natives. He does not understand their customs or their traditions, but he is interested in the untranslatable aspects of the native rituals. William’s death remains a puzzle, while his brother Felix follows the fragments of this puzzle by piecing together conflicting narratives of the British officers and the Devadasis. He forms a collage out of these narratives and creates his version to solve the mystery of the death of his brother. Rumour and gossip within the cantonment ladies circle and between the local communities of Chengalem are some of his major sources, other than eye-witness accounts. Felix Manning keeps highlighting the unreliability of these narratives in his search for the “truth” and the records tracing his missing brother to the last couple of hours spent with the Devadasis watching their secret ritual.

William and Felix have completely different attitudes. Doctor Felix Manning is presented as a “responsible, hardworking” civil surgeon who tries to help people out from diseases and works on the natives to cure them from “superstitions” like ghosts and demons (there are rampant beliefs in Chengalem of the demon king of the tree); “He loved his profession for itself, and not as a means of filling his money-bags” (310). Felix is a rationalist in his professional disposition, and treats the “natives” with kindness:

He had done well in following the medical profession; success had attended his studies, and he had taken high honours. He loved his work, and was held to be one of the cleverest doctors in the South. It was a good appointment, as there was a great deal of private practice to be had amongst the richer natives; and for this he was eminently suited, as he knew the language thoroughly, and understood the character of the people. (12)

William Manning is a British civilian, not working, financially dependent on his elder brother. He enjoys watching the rituals of the natives, horse-riding, and looking at the flowers of the local temple. He is courting a British girl Beryl Holdsworth, but both Beryl and

William keep delaying a discussion about engagement or wedding. Felix is fond of Beryl, but he does not interfere between her and William. In fact, he gets angry at William for delaying the engagement. In the first few chapters of the novel, Penny gives an insight into the well-established social norm that young British girls were sent to India in order to find prospective matches in the British community of India. As a result, courtship was common in the small towns and within the cantonments. Felix advises William that it is not a gentleman's ideal to make a girl wait: "“I like to take my own time about it”, said Will, shifting uneasily in his chair. He did not relish this cross-questioning at all. “You have been long enough, in all conscience” (20).

The complex network of relationship between William, Felix, and Beryl is the main text of Penny's novel, but the more powerful subtext is the life of *Devadasis* and the attitude of the empire towards this special class of people in Chengalem. The gossip surrounding the lives of these temple dancers, become the staple of the novel. Their rituals, their struggle to remain relevant in a fast changing world, and the exploitation of these girls in the hands of the local Zamindar as well as temple priests are significant tropes of the novel. The native customs and traditions of the *Dasis* are presented through the lenses of the colonizer; “The Hindu with his strange creed and code of morals must ever be an inscrutable being to the Briton and the Briton with his strange Philanthropies equally incomprehensible to the Hindus” (348). In the novel, Felix Manning gathers information regarding Minachee and her mother from the gossip circles of the local Zamindar. He gets to know that the Dasi Minachee and her mother Deva live under constant pressure to be artful and appealing in their demeanour and in their performance. They are constantly under the threat of being replaced by younger, and more beautiful Dasis. As a result, Deva (the mother of Minachee) keeps performing rituals and sacrifices to propitiate the local deities so that their profession and their relevance for the Zamindar is retained: “It was quite true that Minachee and her mother had received their dismissal. The evil day had fallen upon them in spite of the pooja, so elaborately carried out in the banyan grove. The new dasi had come; and on her arrival mother and daughter were obliged to go” (93).

When Deva is faced with an imminent criminal proceeding for poisoning the Zamindar's young *dasi* and also for killing William, she is afraid of losing her caste and class with the physical touch of the “white” police, more than the death penalty (354-356) itself.

Major Brett warns Felix about Minachee; “Look here, Manning, don’t you let that girl hang about you too much. Half our troubles with savage and semi-civilised countries begin with women” (296). Felix treats his subjects with utmost care, but he also fears the “dark” corners of the native world. For example, his preference for Minachee and allowing her to help in the

hospital gives him an illusion of being an “evangelist” to the native world. However, the Indian apothecary who assists Felix in his dispensary is uncomfortable at the doctor’s preference for the Devadasi’s help in his work (236). The framework of patriarchy on both ends of the empire and the colony is complex as depicted in the novel.

The life of a dasi is presented as intricate and is coloured with Oriental hyperbole in the novel. Deva’s description proves the norm of presenting native women in the novels of the time with both hyperbolic exoticism, as well as acute suspicion.

Deva belonged to the class of women known as dasis, who are attached to Hindu temples. They are the wives of the gods, and their profession is dancing amongst other things. At an early age they are married to the idol in the temple; or to some demon supposed to haunt a particular tree. Deva was the wife of the devil in the big banyan tree in the tope. (40)

The native gossip-mongers such as the local Zamindar and the - apothecary narrate in hyperbole to Felix about the excess in jewellery, extravagant sarees, and the silks that are bestowed on *Devadasis* by kings, priests or Zamindars. They also discuss the poverty and infamy that awaits these dasis when they are past their youth and beauty are highlighted. The more vibrant a dasi in her mannerisms, more is the revenue that is generated for the temple through her: “She became the life and soul of each festival. The temple authorities were pleased that it should be so, for it brought them wealth”. (42) The lifestyle of the dasis within the temple premises is described from a European point of view – this does not take into account their devotion or their deep spiritual union with the deities of the temple. The dasis have to live according to the demands of the astute service requirement and that they are initially enlisted to serve as the foremost servants of the gods of the temple. The novel speaks of their modest circumstances of life; being laden with gifts and jewelleries only by their “secret admirers”. This adds a mystery to their personalities. They are betrothed to the gods and their life is contingent upon the fame of the temple and the *Zenana* that they serve (133).

The novel presents a complex picture of the “local” where gossip mongers and favour seekers have a role to play in the “othering” of the dasis.

The passionate relationship between a dasi and a “white” British colonizer is marred with jealousy and anger at both ends of the ruler and the ruled. The power equation between the native and the colonial authority can be that of pity, empathy, or of kindness, but never

that of an equal. Minachee is envious of the growing intimacy between Beryl and Felix after the disappearance of William. The novelist colours the pages of intimacy between Felix and Minachee with hyperbole. At a juncture in the novel, Felix comes to suddenly realize Minachee’s intense love for him when she comes to him in the dispensary in the darkness of the night: “The cold English girl with her barren friendship faded and was lost in the torrid colours. Of the Oriental passion which blazed before his dazzled vision” (315-316).

Penny also underscores the trope of gossip and rumour mills as a psychological feature of the circles of British women in clubhouses and bungalow verandas in *Romance of the Nautch Girl*. While the bazaar was perceived as a space to fear by the white settlers especially the *Memsahibs*, the clubhouses on the other hand, were thought to be positive recreational spaces. The gossip mills in the clubhouses involved man-woman relationships, illicit attractions between the native and the colonizers, and the fates of the newly wed British wife or young unmarried girl in search of a husband in India, in addition to political events like a new officer in the town or change in administration or events like the Indian mutiny. When Beryl Holdsworth comes to live in the town with her mother and she is attracted towards William rather than towards Felix in her initial days at Chengalem, the British officers’ wives remark: “It has always surprised me”, said her sister, “that Miss Holdsworth should be attracted by the younger brother, instead of the elder” (120). The gossip circles of the wives in the cantonment do affect Beryl and Felix after the disappearance of William, to an extent that Major Brett harbours a suspicion that Felix may have killed his own brother due to his secret admiration for Beryl. Gossip in the clubs of the colonial cantonment is connected with isolated lives that the European wives are subjected to in the small towns and structured cantonment spaces of the British colonies in India. Felix leaves the city of Chengalem after coming to know about his brother’s death on the night of the “Devil-dance”. The author simply states that Beryl leaves after a few days for England and that Felix gets married to her in England, as if to subscribe to the final moral resolution of the Victorian

novels. Felix Manning departs from the town without bitterness for the people; “I am sorry to leave the people. They love me, I know. But their love for me did not save my brother’s life...” (357). The novel concludes without a happy ending.

E. M. Forster’s novel *A Passage to India* (1924), written much later than *Romance*, narrated overwhelming impressions of Indian rituals on the European settlers. These rituals in the Marabar caves appalled Adela Quested after which she escaped from the caves thinking an attempt to outrage her modesty was made by Dr. Aziz. Forster discussed the complete lack of perception and the racial opacity between people in India and Britain. Penny also narrates some of these dark spaces of cultures in the form of the life of *Devadasis* and the animal sacrifices that were rampant in nineteenth century India, years before Forster wrote his book. She narrates the rituals in the chapter “A Devil-Dance” as if these events were from a photograph or from a personal experience; “A Devil-Dance of South India is a terrible affair. The unbeliever may smile, but there is no other word for it; it is a terrible affair” (46). The severity of some of the customs prevalent in those times is narrated:

The poojari, holding the sword aloft, ready to strike, watched the animal intently; it did not stir. A second time Deva cast the water upon it from her cupped palms, and the goat shook its head. The sword flashed in the yellow light of the cressets; the head was severed in one blow, and the bleeding body fell to the ground, where it lay in a crimson pool. (50)

An intense sense of alienation and fear of the *other* takes its toll on Beryl, William and Felix. While Beryl survives, but falls sick, William dies under unknown circumstances and is accused of interfering with the rituals of the natives. The important aspect of Penny’s craft is her descriptive style and the fact that she can negotiate with the rituals associated with locals of Deccan, with almost an anthropological clarity. She documents each episode with clear and crisp narration. In the novel, rumour is a pervasive theme, working in the gossip networks of the cantonment and in the circles of the Devadasis. It is extreme rumour that indirectly contributes to William’s death in the novel, and it also leads to increase the troubles in the lives of Minachee and her mother Deva. The “untranslatable” nature of rituals and cultural motifs of two different cultures, add to the dense tropes of rumour and miscommunication. Felix is lead into isolation after his brother’s death, his love for the “natives” or his compassion for Minachee could not help him survive in Chengalem. He had

to leave for England by the end of the novel. Minachee too disappears while she is being transported to Palamcottah (359). She remains untraceable and disappears towards the end of the narration: “The bird had flown. Minachee had disappeared” (359). The mystery and exoticism in Minachee, the “other woman”, the Devadasi remains indefatigable to the end of the novel.

The Romance of a Nautch Girl gives a penetrating insight into the rituals and lives of the “native” Devadasis through Penny’s critical reflection. It is a rare novel that provides insight into the life of a native Devadasi through a British woman author. The novel has its shades of exoticism and Oriental hyperbole that was the feature of the narratives written during the era of Victorian narratives. However, it also has a documentary kind of approach towards writing fiction that may record native Indian traditions and cultures.

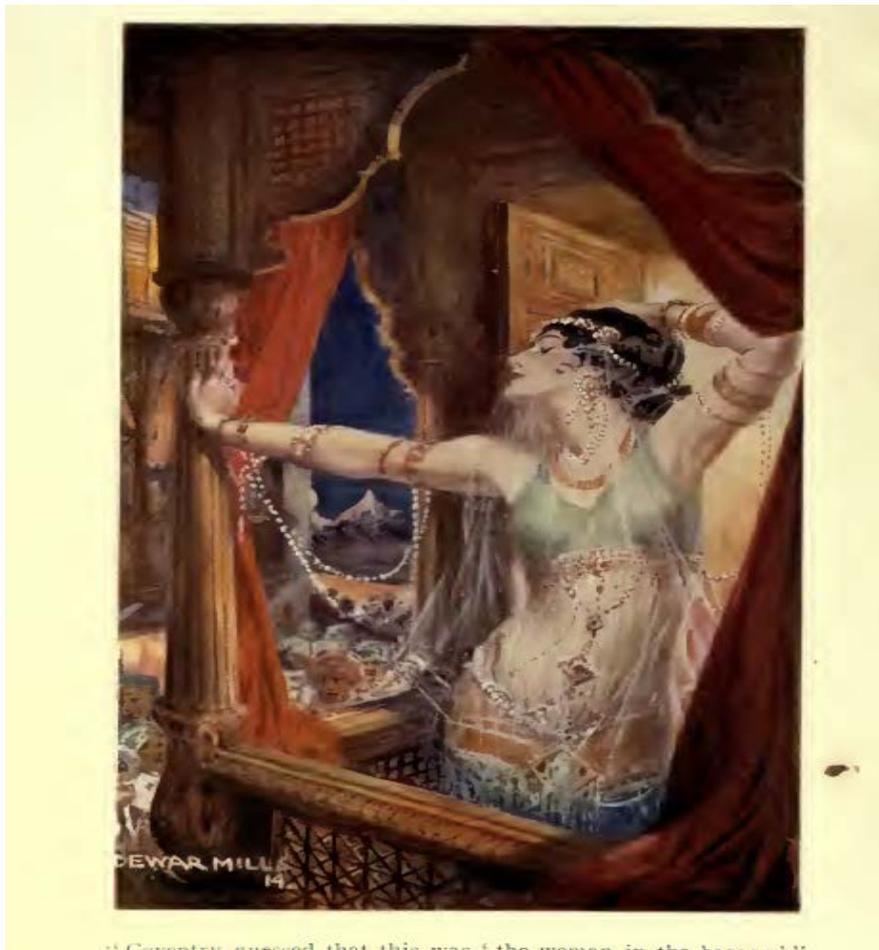
In the next section of this paper, the focus is on rumour and loneliness surrounding British wives of colonial offices, the extremes of which that might have forced them into prostitution in India during the colonial regime.

Rumour and Loneliness in *The Woman in the Bazaar*

Alice Perrin’s novel *The Woman in the Bazaar* (1914) challenges the stereotypes of women’s racial purity portrayed in the Victorian narratives.⁷ In the novel, Perrin presents a rare probability of European women pushed into “prostitution” while negotiating through the extremes of both domesticity, climate of the tropical landscapes like India, and the overarching anticipations of preserving imperial dignity as the soft-ambassadors of the British empire in India.⁸ *The Woman in the Bazaar* is perhaps the only Eurasian novel that acknowledges the presence of European “white” women courtesans who served native Indian subjects during the nineteenth century and earlier. Indrani Sen in her book entitled *Gendered Transactions: The White Woman in Colonial India, c.1820-1930* (2017) discusses the silence of economic and sexual transactions in the gender spaces of the Raj and their impact on women’s psycho-social health in the colonial era. She has highlighted the role of subtle power in the imperial homes of the Raj. In her study on prostitution in India, Ashwini Tambe reflects on the importation of European white prostitutes to India and the presence of European prostitutes in the major shipping ports of India like Bombay (Tambe, “The Elusive Ingénue” 160–179). Anjali Arondekar specifically mentions this unique novel of Perrin in her

analysis of Anglo-Indian literature, “English female prostitute in India, a white woman openly servicing the native babus and soldiers” (Arondekar, “Too Fatally Present”152). The novel presents several aspects in the lives of European women courtesans in India in the late nineteenth century.

In *The Woman in the Bazaar* Perrin advances the idea that there might have been some European officers’ wives who could have taken to prostitution in India in the wake of a failed marriage and extreme financial needs. The novel has a powerful plot and storyline and it stands out in the series of novels written by “New Woman” writers. The novel reveals the culmination of a fear of the corruption in Indian bazaar of the colonials (Johnson 172).



“Coventry guessed that this was ‘the woman in the bazaar!’”

Illustration 2: The frontispiece from Alice Perrin’s novel *The Woman in the Bazaar* by J.W. Mills. The illustration shows a European woman being subjected to the native man’s gaze in the bazaar.

The Woman in the Bazaar narrates the story of Rafella Forte and Captain George Coventry. Rafella is a Vicar's daughter growing up in a countryside village, Cotswold at Under-edge in England. Captain Coventry, a British officer in India marries Rafella during his short vacation trip to England. For Coventry, the ideal of "womanhood" had to be well within the

limitations of social structures that focused on the heteronormative standards of an 'obedient' wife, a 'good' daughter, or mother of "genteel" upbringing; "His ideal of womanhood was modelled on the type represented by his mother and his aunts and his spinster sister, ladies whose sole charm lay in their personal virtue..." (6). Rafella was the free-spirited dreamer who had grown up taking care of her father in isolation of the vicarage. Marrying Coventry and moving to India from England marked the turning point in Rafella's life. The story moves through the winding lanes of domestic spaces of British officers in India and articulates the story of the intricacies of their lives in India; "Domestic separation is only a part of the price that is paid for service in the country, but it is a part that is by no means easy to bear" (38). Rafella's lack of adjustment to the new life in India and Coventry's extreme strictness and beliefs on an "ideal womanhood", leads to the moral crisis of the novel. The young couple are forced to 'act' under the demands of social norms of British cantonment spaces in India that focused on "social intermingling" in the clubs and gymkhana circles only. They are forced to perform as per the gossip circles of the club verandas and as per the demands of stern wives of senior officers. Rafella constantly gets torn between the need to be a "perfect" wife, an appropriately mannered *Memsahib*, and a free-spirited country girl who had married Coventry for love.

The story presents the paradigmatic cultural shift for several European women who lived in the colonies. While many *Memsahibs* were unaccustomed to the tropical weather of India or to the luxury of having many attendants in their own country, they were suddenly expected to "manage" and control entire households full of native attendants in India. The narrative presents a layered picture of the European household in India:

"But you must remember," admonished Mrs. Greaves, "that we are living under totally different conditions out here. The servants won't do each other's work, on account of their caste. We have to keep such a lot, not for our own

convenience but for theirs. And you must have an ayah, unless you don't mind the menservants attending to your bedroom." (42-43)

Rafella thus faces the dilemma of being a “good” wife and a *Memsahab*, until she is able to take it no longer and vanishes from the cantonment. She talks to other British officers like Mr. Kennard, and her friendships are not taken kindly by ladies like Mrs. Greaves (a senior British lady in Rafella’s social sphere who guides and trains the new European wives that

arrive in the town) and later by Coventry. Rafella becomes the subject of rumour-mills and gossip circles for her constant free-spiritedness and her refusal to adhere to the norms set by the civilized society of the cantonment areas.

The bungalow and the ball room are spaces that open the private world of Coventry and Rafella’s life for public scrutiny of other officers’ wives and push Rafella into the epicentre of moral discussions (83-86). She constantly gets isolated and pushed into extremes of performance of being an “upright” British wife. She becomes a loner in the cantonment spaces. Coventry keeps adding to her insecurities with his constant expectation from her to behave according to the Victorian moral high-grounds. Coventry’s suspicion of her friendship with Kennard, and his expectations from Rafella, intensifies her insecurities. The kindness that she expected from Coventry is not reciprocated. She finds Coventry as a stern officer who is there to “tame” his wife. The woman’s body and her soul is expected to be colonized by only one master, just as the colonial land is expected to be under the subjugation of one master. The narration moves through various stages of intrigues in Rafella and Coventry’s marital relationship until she elopes from Coventry’s house and seeks refuge in the bazaar among natives. For several years, she remains a missing name, and transforms into a chimeric mention in the gossip circles of British clubs.

Coventry gets married a second time to a young (much younger in age) British girl, Trixie (the daughter of Mrs. Ellen Munro) after sixteen years of his divorce with Rafella. It was evident that even the name of Rafella was wiped out from the slate of his memory and from public memory. Trixie goes through a similar fate as Rafella, when Coventry becomes suspicious of her friendship with other officers (especially the young nephew of Mrs. Greaves, Captain Guy Greaves) in India and behaves sternly with her. It appears as if the fear, apprehension and yet the charms of an “alien” land where the British wives had the compulsion to socialize within their community, is the harbinger of a set of complexities:

"India rather frightens me," said Trixie, "and yet I get fits of fascination that make me feel as if the country had bewitched me. It all seems so old and so cruel, and yet so alluring. I felt the spell of it this evening on the river, and still more strongly when we were waiting in the bazaar for the procession to pass. (125)

After several years Rafella reappears in front of Coventry in an unprecedented form of a courtesan in the *bazaar*. Colonel Coventry observes that Rafella is serving native *Rajahs and Babus* in her profession as a courtesan in the Indian bazaars. After leaving Coventry's home, she had found shelter with the courtesans in the bazaar and has become a part of their lives. He is transfixed by the sight of his former wife as the "woman in the bazaar". There is a sudden change in Coventry's personality after that episode of witnessing Rafella riding away with a native in the bazaar. There is a transformation in Coventry's personality. He becomes more perceptive to the anxiety and loneliness that Trixie might be through in India after he finds Rafella in this unthinkable state. The appearance of the woman in the *bazaar* after (shown in illustration 2) sixteen years, in "native dress and tinselled veil" and with "thick paint" (194) on her eyes and cheeks, comes as a shocking discovery for Coventry. He realizes that she is indeed his first wife and gets a sudden realization of the loneliness and alienation that she must have encountered in her marriage with him and in her life in the bungalow. The lewd comments of the men on the streets for Rafella leave Coventry paralyzed with shock.

It was then that full recognition struck at George Coventry's heart like the stab of a knife. The woman in the bazaar, who lived in the street of the dancers and suchlike, who now drove away in the Rath of Babu Chandra Das, was Rafella, his wife of the years that were over and dead. (196)

Rafella's character also underscores the silence of historical discourses about the existence of the "White" woman courtesan in India. While the European government on the one hand encouraged "cantonment prostitution" for Indian girls, there is a complete denial and even silence regarding the condition of European courtesans. Perhaps, the British Raj went out of its way to prevent European women to serve native men, and may have even tried to prevent European prostitution on the grounds of upholding racial superiority and 'purity'. In the novel, Markham states that the government tried to help the "woman in the bazaar" and

attempted to “interfere and pay her home, but didn’t succeed” (176). These women characters exist as stories in the unverified account of popular narratives. In a study on the intimate connection of prostitution and politics titled “Venereal Disease: Prostitution and the Politics of Empire: The Case of British India,” Philippa Levine states that the connection between venereal diseases like syphilis, prostitution and politics have been ignored by historical studies for a long time (Levine 579). She argues about the coerciveness that the colonial

practices unleashed through the passing of the venereal diseases acts in India (Levine 580). In another remarkable study, *Out of Bounds: Anglo-Indian Literature and the Geography of Displacement* (2011), Alan Johnson offers a reading of the intersection of spatiality and identity in the context of Anglo-Indian writers. The Indian bazaar, he argues, serves as a nefarious site of insurrection in Mutiny literature, a space for illicit behaviour and for physical and psychological “pollution”. The bazaar is a free-carnavalesque space that allows the existence of the Indian as well as the European courtesan. It permits nefariousness and breaks the tyranny of “official” expectations of behaviour of the Raj. The European courtesans were considered as sullyng agents of European respectability because of their contaminated interactions with the “native”.

It appears as if the memory of these women has been wiped out from the historical landscape of the Raj; “as if these women are physically erased from the landscape, appearing only on rare occasions, in the guise of figures such as Rafella, acting primarily as cautionary textualized reminders of the horrors of such a possibility” (Arondekar 154).⁹ The figures of European women courtesans in India pose more questions and bring out awkward silences in colonial histories. It must be also noted that Rafella serves native clients like Babu Chandra Das, thus opening a completely distinct chapter of “white degeneration”.

Markham also mentions another British woman, a “mentally” challenged British lady by the name of ‘Miss Grey’ who frequents the bazaar and is sometimes discussed in the gossip circles of the cantonment. Miss Grey’s family is said to have been destroyed in the Indian mutiny and the trauma of their death affects her sanity through her life:

Nobody knew who she was, and the poor thing couldn't tell them because she was out of her mind, and she had never recovered her reason. She had been handed on to these people by the missionaries they succeeded, and by others before them and there she had been living for over fifty years, perfectly

harmless, costing very little, and only insisting on being dressed in grey and in the fashion of the Mutiny time. (174)

Rafella struggles with the moral rigidity of Coventry and tries to find her identity in the spatial gaps between the empire and the home. Miss Grey on the other hand is torn between histories and memories, trying to find her place in the memory of a mutiny that her family succumbed to in 1857. Women across the two races suffered the scars of political and

imperial aggression. In his analysis of Perrin's fiction, reflecting on Rafella's moral transgression and ethical break in *The Woman in the Bazaar*, Pramod K. Nayar argues about the ulterior imperialistic motifs in Perrin's thoughts:

Perrin seems to suggest that only those Englishwomen who fit perfectly into the norms of the English social sphere have successful domestic spheres and any disruption in either of these spheres has severe, and tragic, repercussions in the other as well. (Nayar 136)

Further, it may be noted that Rafella or Trixie do not submit to the Victorian morals of Coventry. Their presence is driven by their individualism and their extreme internal dilemma to break the limitations set by socio-cultural norms of European and Victorian ideals. Rafella is an equal victim of a destiny that she had hardly foreseen for herself. She has succumbed to the politics of domesticity, and to the fault-lines of rumour-mills that usually envelop a new face in the seclusion and severity of cantonments. Perrin's only attempt at providing a moral commentary is through the characters of Mrs. Greaves. She does talk about what is "required" to be a "proper" *Memsahib* in the colonial setup. For Mrs. Greaves, the "modern girl seemed to be a problem" (99). Perrin is quick to point out that Mrs. Greaves' life is comfortable yet "dull" (95). In spite of the moral advices of Mrs. Greaves, Coventry finally mends his ways to make himself more accommodating for Trixie -- "his conscience cried the bitter truth that always must he owe the saving of her love, and of her trust, to the woman in the bazaar" (214). Coventry does not forget that Trixie wins his love because of Rafella.

Perrin's novel maybe read as an extraordinary quasi-historical document that presents the "woman in the bazaar" as a unique identity reflecting the domestic and political conflicts within the colonial landscape.

Counter-reading of the Grand Narratives



To conclude, a text-intensive analysis of these fictional writings of late nineteenth and early twentieth century highlight the complexities in the lives of women both in the empire and in their colonies. The excess of rumour, gossip, and a certain mystery that shrouded these women characters like Minachee, Deva, and Rafella, lead to their ultimate fall. The “exoticization” of a woman can be mentally and emotionally debilitating as is established with a reading of the characters of these novels. They are pushed into loneliness, isolation,

and maybe into extreme steps of prostitution. These characters reveal the interconnectedness of historical processes and the causal relationship between the colonial times and postcolonial perspectives. Novels such as *The Romance of a Nautch Girl* and *The Woman in the Bazaar* are steeped in the language of Oriental exoticism. On the one hand, *The Romance of a Nautch Girl* focuses on the consequences of gossip and rumour leading to professional degeneration of Devadasis like Minachee and Deva, on the other hand, the story of *Woman in the Bazaar* focuses on the pain of a European wife Rafella who is forced into prostitution in a completely unknown world because of her domestic misfortune and her separation from her husband Coventry. In a certain sense, a parallel maybe drawn between the fate of the European woman and the Indian woman. The pain that they undergo because of casual rumour and gossip and the perception that is built around their lives, affect the course of their relationships and their identities in the novels. These novels hold the key to provide a counter-readings of grand narratives of colonial discourses in the light of the contemporary times. These novels may prove to be templates to learn about the emotive state of women beyond the colonizer/colonized, fiction/reality binaries. The genre of fiction opens these liminal spaces of complex domestic politics that are connected to greater domains of the politics of the Raj. The emotive terrains of women, their biological setup, and the demand for them to perform in certain ways in the socio-cultural systems of their own cultures, might be universal in its effect on their emotional well-being.

To conclude, literary history and criticism could treat these women authors of the Raj and the women protagonists from Indian subcontinent that feature as characters in their novels, with more compassion than the ways in which they were treated in the past century, now that memories of both colonial and the post-colonial times have settled in the fine pixels of the unconscious.

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Endnotes

¹ All the primary texts in this paper have been procured in soft format as archived and put for public consumption under Creative Commons licenses in Archive.org. This paper is a culmination of an elaborate study on the fictional writings by women authors from the British Raj in the late nineteenth and early twentieth century, pursued as a research project at UNT Dallas, under the supervision of Professor Sura Rath in February to September 2014. Brief parts of this paper have been presented at the 69th Rocky Mountain Modern Language Association Annual Convention (held in October 2015), and at the XVII International Theory Conference organized by the Centre for Contemporary Theory, Baroda in December 2014.

² For recent studies on the impact of women authors of the Raj and their layered role in the subversive politics of the colonial Raj, see Indrani Sen's dense feminist historiography of the complex layers of interactions between the European and Indian women of colonial India between 1820s and 1830s in her book *Gendered Transactions* (2017). Sen has presented a nuanced analysis of the transactions and complex experiences that European women and Indian women had during that era. She speaks of the "medical gaze" as a defining ground in this subversion of the colonial gender equations. Also, see Susmita Roye's edited volume entitled *Flora Annie Steel: A Critical Study of an Unconventional Memsahib* (2017) for a detailed study of Flora Annie Steel, known as the "female Kipling" for a detailed reading of a significant voice of women's writing from the corpus of Victorian women's writing of colonial India. Roye argues that the subject of gender and gender based performance are inextricably linked in the colonial writings of the women writers from the Raj, and particularly in Flora Annie Steel's writings (102).

³ See Barbara N. Ramusack & Antoinette Burton's review of literature on feminism and its relation to race and Empire building in "Feminism, imperialism and race: a dialogue between India and Britain".

⁴ All references in this paper to F. E. Penny. *Romance of the Nautch Girl*, London: Swan Sonnenschein & Co. Ltd, 1898.

⁵ For an understanding on the historical and psycho-social evolution of “Gossip” and its appropriation in gender stereotypes see Patricia Meyer Spacks volume entitled *Gossip* [1985], and a counter discourse of gossip as a defense mechanism in Louise Collins paper on “Gossip: A Feminist Defense” in *Good Gossip*.

⁶ Bell describes Penny’s place in the literary canon:

Penny had a passion for writing. In the course of her life, she wrote forty-six novels, most of them set in India. The last novel was published in the year she died—1939. Although the Victorian period was fecund with female novelists, Penny's novels were unusual in their curiosity and interest in the Indian people and things Indian. (Bell 30)

⁷ Alice Perrin was born in India in 1867. She was the daughter of Major General John Innes Robinson, of the Bengal Cavalry, and Bertha Beidermann Robinson. After her education in England, Perrin married Charles Perrin (d. 1931), an engineer in the India Public Works Department, in 1886. The couple lived in India for seventeen years. She published seventeen novels in her entire career and her short-story collections like *East of Suez* (1901) were very popular. See Melissa Makala’s website dedicated to Alice Perrin, her biography and her works. Also, see Alice Perrin’s biography at *Victorian Secrets.com*.

⁸ All references to Alice Perrin’s *The Woman in the Bazaar*, London: Cassell and Company, Limited, 1914.

⁹ From Ann Stoler, quoted in Anjali Arondekar, ““Too Fatally Present”: The Crisis of Anglo-Indian Literature”, p.154.

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