

Indrani Sen, *Gendered Transactions: The white woman in colonial India, c. 1820-1930* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 2017), 216 pp., ISBN: 9780719089626, £75

Flora Annie Steel, the ‘unconventional memsahib’ par excellence, who is enjoying a resurgence of interest, considered the ‘gendered transactions’ that form the basis of Indrani Sen’s new book to be the key to ruling the Indian Empire. For her, ‘It is between the women of England and the women of India that the solution of the problem “how to rule and be ruled” lies.’¹ Sen’s work, a new instalment in the ‘Studies in Imperialism’ series, interrogates this important relationship and builds on the research examining the dynamics of the imperial home in India by those such as Alison Blunt.² Sen is asking in more detail, how the relationship between European and Indian women worked and was imagined on both sides, especially within the colonial home of the nineteenth century.

The first part of Sen’s book, building on previous work on memsahibs, is focussed on women’s writings in India. These sections are on missionaries, Flora Annie Steel and Indian women’s writings in English. The second section then moves to white women’s domesticity and the use of power within the colonial home. Sen looks at the power dynamics between *ayahs* (female domestic servants) and *dai* (wet nurses and midwives). Her final two sections examine the question of women’s health in India, both physical and mental and its representation in colonial medical writings.

Sen’s work explores important aspects of ‘Returning the colonial ‘gaze’’, by using Indian women, Shevantibai Nikambe, a High Caste Hindu wife who converted to Christianity, and Krupabai Saththianadhan, a second generation Christian convert. Using these writings, a novel and an

¹ Mortimer Menpes and Flora Annie Steel, *India* (London: Adam & Charles Black, 1905), p. 203.

² Alison Blunt, ‘Imperial Geographies of Home: British Domesticity in India, 1886-1925’, *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers*, Vol. 24, No. 4 (1999), 421-440 (p. 429); Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (London: W. Heinemann, 1890), pp. 421-440.

autobiography respectively, Sen brings out a perspective that is often doubly neglected in writings on India: the voice of colonised women. These are the ‘gendered transactions’ that tend to be studied from the perspective of Western sources. Sen explores how the colonial mission was received on a personal level, albeit by two converts who could be expected to be reasonably accommodating to the British. Sen’s research shows that, nevertheless, these women were certainly not passive recipients of the ‘civilising mission’; they had their own critical viewpoints and complex reactions to it.

The dynamics of imperial power within the colonial home are carefully considered in Sen’s work. In this context this book’s contributions on *ayahs* and *dai* are particularly significant, focusing on the often problematic ambiguity of the *ayah’s* position and how her surrogate motherhood was a frequent source of tension with memsahibs. Similarly, as the Raj progressed in the later nineteenth century, Sen emphasises new medical arguments in this tension. ‘Racialized pathologies’ could represent the *dai* as sources of disease to white children and were considered ‘dishonest, untrustworthy, unhygienic.’

Sen’s research uses an impressively wide array of sources, which is particularly apparent in her work in the colonial archives digging up medical manuals. This work on the medical writings in the Raj is probably the most significant aspect of the research. Looking through the manuals available to colonial doctors, Sen demonstrates how resolutely imperial and prescriptive of women’s roles they were. They recommended that the climate of India necessitated, even more so than in England, an almost completely sedentary lifestyle. Attempting to reinforce women’s position as colonial wives, these manuals were a method of bringing Europeans in remote areas under Western medical control. Her chapter on the ‘female malady’ expands this point, revealing the dynamics of contemporary views concerning the extent to which women were affected by the climate and vulnerable to the exoticism of India. Nevertheless, Sen’s work would have

benefitted from the use of other sources for white women in India. A consideration of European prostitution in India especially would have deepened the range of her colonial gendered transactions.

Susmita Roye's edited collection, *Flora Annie Steel: A Critical Study of an Unconventional memsahib* (2017) also appeared in this year and brings together a number of essays on her, particularly focussed on her literary output. Sen's book is a welcome addition to this, concerning, as it does, Steel's writings on female education in India, particularly a selection of short stories, and Steel's work as an inspector of girl's schools in the Punjab in the 1880s. Often classed as an 'Unusual Memsahib' for her range of experience in Indian life and the breadth of her writings, Flora Annie Steel is a revealing figure, especially when considered outside of her much discussed novels. Sen follows much of the historiography on Steel in remarking how complex her relationship with imperialism was, staunchly supportive of the British imperial position, but fascinated by Indian culture. Nevertheless, Sen adds a significant dimension to our knowledge of Steel and her views on white women's relations with Indian women by discussing her interest in Zenanas and their representation in her work.

Sen admits one limitation of her work, recognising that despite her work on white women's position and how this was controlled through medical discourse, she underemphasises how misogynistic most male discourse in India was. Her contribution would also have benefitted by expounding a more explicit theoretical basis for the 'Gendered Transactions' which she is analysing. For a book that is attempting to establish a new basis for discussing the interactions across race and gender in India this is largely implicit rather than expounded fully. How, specifically, were these encounters altered by their gendered nature? That said, the analysis of these transactions is useful and revealing. Sen's work is a good reminder that white women in India did not work and live entirely separately from Indian life. They were also, crucially, not the

only ones who were imagining the world around them, and Sen's work on 'Returning the 'gaze'' across the racial divide is particularly welcome. The use of medical manuals largely as tools for 'marginalising' memsahibs and regulating their behaviour in another manner also brings to light more clearly areas where the white woman in India was placed; enjoying power and privilege through her race, but disadvantage because of her gender.

James Watts

University of Bristol