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THE “DISORDERLY MEMSAHIB”: POLITICAL DOMESTICITY IN ALICE PERRIN’S EMPIRE FICTION

Abstract

Examining the fiction of Alice Perrin, this essay proposes that home and domesticity in English colonial writings on India constitute a “political domesticity” where ideologies of race and empire were played out and reinforced. The placeholder of this political domesticity was the English Memsahib. Reading the colonial social sphere, which is located somewhere between the public and private sphere, the essay examines the role of the Memsahib in arranging home, social events and interactions. It demonstrates how Perrin’s characterization of a “disorderly Memsahib” encodes this culture of political domesticity. The essay argues that in Perrin 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 tragic consequences in the other as well.

Key words

Anglo-Indian women’s fiction; Alice Perrin; political domesticity; colonial social sphere

There’s no such thing as private life for an official, whether civil or military, in India ... I don’t mean to say for a moment that a man who was a duffer at his work would get plums of office just because his wife was well bred and charming, – though I admit that has happened. But if there were two fellows with pretty equal capabilities, and one had a lady for his wife and the other – well, didn’t – the man with the lady would probably be given preferment and quite right too. The women count for a great deal in official life out here.

Alice Perrin, *The Charm*, 108–109

English writers like Bithia Maria Croker, Maud Diver and Alice Perrin produced what has been categorized as “Anglo-Indian domestic novels” dealing mainly with courtship and marriage, the Anglo-Indian household and the Anglo-Indian community in colonial India. More recent revaluations have examined the role of these novels in offering a more complex negotiation of both empire and the English woman’s identity (Sainsbury 1996, Bilston 2001). To see these as only romances (Stieg 1985) is to ignore the political subtext to even themes of courtship, marriage and domesticity. Anglo-Indian domesticity and the household, as commentators have noted, were sites where imperial ideologies inflected family relations, social ties and attitudes (Rosemary Marangoly George 1993–4; Betty Joseph 2004). India became, notes Elizabeth Buettner, “a family affair in which ‘wife and babe’ were also core participants” (2004: 4–5). Even love and marriage, as Sainsbury notes in the case of some novels, were subordinated to the imperial service and the imperial cause (173).

Writing about the English Memsahib in India, Rosemary George identifies a “public domesticity” in Maud Diver and other colonial writers. She writes:

Novel after novel suggests that it is the daily construction of the home country as the location of the colonizer’s racial and moral identity and as the legitimization of the colonizer’s national subjecthood that made possible the carrying out of the work of Empire (1993–1994: 107)

Rosemary George points here to the centrality of the English “home,” and by extension the Memsahib’s prescribed role, in the construction of Empire and imperial relations. What Rosemary George focuses on is, however, the interracial and rulers-ruled relations that play out in this space of public domesticity.

Some contexts to the study of English domesticity in the colony are essential here. As early as the 1770s India was a “home” for several thousand Englishmen and women. Smaller towns like Meerut or Jabalpur had cantonments with family lines and barracks for both Indian and British soldiers. The railway colony was a common feature of many towns. Geographically, the space of the town was racially organized: the White Town represented the space of the English and the Black Town the space of the natives. This would also change a bit and very often, especially towards the last years of the nineteenth century in the Punjab area, where wealthy Indians built palatial houses – and rented them out to *British* officers for low rents (Glover 2004: 64). The British home in India, with Memsahibs asserting control over the space as well as native servants, generated an “imperial discourse of domesticity” (Blunt 1999: 426; also see Rosemary Marangoly George 1993–4). The bungalow, the club, the garden thus become sovereign English spaces within an “alien” landscape, a locus of English culture embedded within a “foreign” cultural setting.

The English women in India led limited lives in the “station,” maintaining contacts primarily with other British in the area. Their only contact with natives was with the working classes and servants and occasionally, with slightly upper class

ones at formal gatherings. This spatial separation (cantonment versus black town, for example) was the equivalent of the social separation of races and cultures. The physical distancing, as Thomas Metcalf has noted, was central to the preservation of the “ruling class” ethos (1994). When the English woman steps into the bazaar, or mixes with the natives, she transgressed not only a spatial boundary but also a social one – and Perrin’s *The Woman in the Bazaar* offers, in Rafella, the best instance of this transgression that the British fought hard to prevent. Appearances of comfortable, pure English domesticity and sociality were therefore emphasized in instructions manuals (as I shall demonstrate). It was also deemed significant that such domestic arrangements of the English households and social ones such as the Club would add aesthetic value to the colony. Thus, as early as 1795 HT Colebrooke had proposed that allowing Englishmen to own lands and settle homes in India would be a good step.

European families residing longer in India, and enjoying the affluence there; will adorn the country, and increase its stock, with useful and ornamented buildings. Their taste for the elegant superfluities of life, will give encouragement to the industry of the laborious classes of the native inhabitants. Numbers of the natives sharing in the riches, which will again flow into India, will constitute a class of opulent individuals ... it is certain that they are sufficiently disposed for gratifications, which tend to encourage ornamental arts. (Colebrooke 1795: 103–104)

The cultivation of the garden became, especially from the 1850s, a visible sign of inscribing English authority over the Indian landscape. Advice books on gardening in India, such as *Indian Gardening* (1872) and W. W. Johnstone’s popular *Gardening, a Guide for Amateurs* (1903) offered suggestions on how to develop English-style gardens with Indian plants, thus suggesting both an indigenization of English culture as well as a careful assertion of control over colonial space. What is evident from the above discussion is the centrality of “proper” domesticity in the colony – domesticity which conveyed imperial authority, efficiency and moral virtue. It was always, in other words, a visible and “public domesticity.”

This public domesticity is *political*, not merely because interracial relations are worked out here but because *English* social and official identities are constructed in this space. I argue that the political domesticity generates a social sphere – a concept developed by Denise Riley to describe a feminized space that is an extension of the domestic into the public, but often works in antagonism to and in competition with the masculine public space (1988: 51). The social sphere assimilates into itself the features of both the public and the domestic, thus converting the hitherto private space of domesticity into what I am calling political domesticity. Political domesticity is the transplantation of mundane Anglo-Indian domesticity into the social sphere, thereby investing it with greater official and political – imperial – weight. Political domesticity is the domesticity character-

ized by the participation of the colonial social sphere in the household, and the extension of the household into the social.

This essay examines the gendered nature of Anglo-Indian political domesticity. It argues that Alice Perrin's fiction – *The Anglo-Indians* (1912, hereafter *A-I*), *Government House* (1925, hereafter *GH*), *The Woman in the Bazaar* (1926, hereafter *WB*) and *The Charm* (1910, hereafter *TC*) – depicts the erosion of English womanhood in India by mapping the failure of the English woman at this political domesticity. Perrin, I suggest, in her depiction of the “disorderly Memsahib” (Indrani Sen's term, 2002: 16) implicitly signals the “true” Memsahib as one who adroitly moves across the domestic and the social sphere. In the process Perrin depicts an “informal” Empire where the social sphere seeks to develop a normative English womanhood for India, but avoids situating the erosion of this womanhood in the Empire *per se*, opting to locate its teleology in the *individual* English woman.

The Colonial Social Sphere

The colonial social sphere emerges when the political intrudes very clearly into familial relations and even determines and frames them. It is the domain of social practices which are inflected by political overtones and considerations, and blurs the borders between private and public. The social sphere is a conduit through which power moves between public and private. It is in the social sphere that norms of domestication (such as governance or control) and the arrangement of domestic spaces (gardens, household management) are instituted.

Sara Mills notes how colonialism troubled the private/public distinctions in terms of spatial organization (1996). For instance, the club was a space where the public and private boundaries blurred, functioning as a colonial public sphere, but positioned between “both metropolitan and indigenous public spheres” (Sinha 2001: 492). But there was another kind of space where the domestic and the public merged, informally, temporarily, but was no less politically charged for that. Nupur Chaudhuri points out that festivities that would have been private in England became public ceremonies in India, as a result of which extra-familial demands of colonial society invaded the memsahib's private domains (1988: 520). “At Homes,” birthday parties, dinners, balls and festivities constituted a colonial social sphere where favours were curried and bestowed, marriages and alliances made, and officials discussed politics. Protocols of behavior and social interaction were adhered to and hierarchies respected. For newcomers such a social sphere functioned as an introduction to and instruction in colonial life. It was a space where such newcomers, young men and women, but in particular wives, sisters and daughters were *monitored*.

The sense of a sovereign exclusive space was effectively captured in the institution of the English club in the colony. “The club is open,” wrote a member of the Himalaya Club in Charles Dickens' magazine, *Household Words*,

To the members of the civil and military services, to the members of the bar, the clergy, and to such other private gentlemen who are on the government-house list, which signifies "in society" (*Household Words* 15 [1857]: 365)

Meant as a space where, as Jan Morris puts it, in the English club "the Right People [were made to] feel more important, and ... the Wrong People [made to] feel small" (1982: 200), the English cultural practices were retained with as much "purity" as was possible. Hence the English woman's behaviour at the Club was a determinant of her qualities as a Memsahib (as we shall see, this is where Rafella's first transgressions occur).

The social sphere, in spaces such as the Club, was the political masked as entertainment. The Memsahibs have a certain semi-official status, as Mrs Jackson puts it in *TC*: "I always like these semi-official entertainments ... They are so amusing, and I'm sure it ought to give one a sense of reflected pleasure to see how the betwixt-and-betweens enjoy themselves" (*TC* 209). At the fête organized by the Governor's wife, Lady Rochford, writes Perrin,

people flocked to spend money who would have contributed nothing had a simple subscription list been circulated ... a fine opportunity ... for the big-wigs to display zeal in the cause of charity, and for the humble folk to curry favour with them by assisting with officious energy. (*GH* 98)

Lady Rochford even markets photographs of the Governor (99) here, and they are a sell-out. Social ranking and even the nature of domestic arrangements and relations would be writ large in the social sphere. When Annabel and her ward, Billie, are escorted into the conservatory area of the Government House by the Governor himself, Miss MacTarn notes that they "saw [her] coming away from the Inner Circle" (*GH* 112). Eventually, of course, it is this access to the "inner circle" that becomes concretized in the form of Annabel's entry into the family itself. There are political gains to be had from behaving appropriately in the social sphere, suggests Perrin.

Camp-life might be considered a social sphere rather than a truly public one because the families of the men went with them and set up residence in tents. In *A-I* Perrin maps a luxurious camp of the Fleetwoods. The necessity of luxury is explained thus:

Official dignity must be maintained, especially among a people who revere and respect ceremonial and state. It was necessary to carry a good deal of furniture, since the Commissioner was supposed to entertain when he passed through stations in his division (80–81)

Once again, the social sphere serves an important function. The domestic here, out in the tent and the camps, serves as an imperial spectacle. The domestic is

also a part of the process of imperial political communication where the native subjects understand, “revere and respect” their rulers.

The colonial social sphere was a space where Englishness had to be defined and reinforced. It had to reflect the glory of both race and Empire. Social events within the “public” intimacy of an Anglo-Indian household had to, therefore, embody this Englishness.¹ This entailed keeping in touch with English fashions, English products, and English cultural practices.

Mrs. Taylor and Mrs. Rice wore “garden-party confections recently acquired from England, the other mothers had competed locally to the limit of their purses,” writes Perrin (*GH* 102). Marion and Isabel in *A-I* “have such a craze for English life, and for everything English” (20). Mrs Cardale collects curios which are described as “a heterogeneous collection of china ornaments, electro-plate graven with storks and bamboos ... so English!,’ he [Mrs Cardale] said proudly” (*GH* 34). Meeting natives at such purely English “dos,” Mrs Cardale informs Anabel, might not be quite acceptable to the English (*GH* 62), conveniently eliding the fact that the “do” was possible because the native servants slaved away.²

In this emphatically *English* social sphere the English Memsahib had to fit in. Her clothes, dancing skills, social etiquette, ability to get proper meals, organize festivities for children, behave with a consciousness of rank and hierarchy were all under scrutiny in the social sphere. Whether she would be a good, true Memsahib was determined in the social sphere. Her household itself was drawn into the social sphere, even as the social sphere intruded into her home. The necessity of a “correct” domestic arrangement that fits the *social sphere* of Anglo-Indian life is hinted at – and this leads us directly into the argument on domesticity – by Mr Banister in *TC* when he warningly tells Mark of an Englishman who had married a Eurasian:

He couldn’t accept big stations because of the memsahib – she was totally unfitted for any sort of social or official position – and they just grubbed along in small places eating too much *dal* [lentils] and rice and curry, and taking too little exercise... (75–76)

Banister spells out what he actually means a little later in the passage that constitutes the epigraph to the essay. It was not, Banister adds, “a question of colour out here nearly so much as that of class” (109). When Teresa complains that she does not quite like the “semi-official” engagements in the community (*TC* 209) she has discovered that she does not approximate to the idea of the Memsahib. She had fitted in before, in Calcutta, “where people would be gay and friendly,” but here in Koranabad, “she felt so awkward at the entertainments provided by the class to which she was now supposed to belong” (214). When Teresa socializes with the Malleet family, she attracts opprobrium and Eve validates the Banister comment about class superseding race as a social category when she asks Norah: “Would you feel anxious to be on intimate terms with English people like that? – there are plenty of them” (216). Everybody at the social gathering notes that Mark, Teresa’s husband, was embarrassed and unfortunate in his choice of wife.

The domestic arrangements of this "unfortunate" Englishman, suggests Banister, had disastrous consequences in the public as well as the social sphere. In other words, when in India, one could not, if one were an ambitious Englishman, hope to keep the domestic out of the public because the intervening social sphere would entail a blurring of boundaries, for which the Memsahib had to be suited.

The social sphere was discursively constructed in formal practices in the form of advice books such as Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner's *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* (1888) and Maud Diver's *The Englishwoman in India* (1909) that suggested ways and means of becoming a true Memsahib and running the household as efficiently as an Empire. "An Indian household," write Steel and Gardiner, "can no more be governed peacefully, without dignity and prestige, than an Indian Empire" (1909 [1888]: 11). The Anglo-Indian social sphere was also a space where an *informal* pedagogy routinely asserted itself to instruct the newcomer Englishwoman. Several instances of this informal pedagogy that was intended to mould the new arrival into a Memsahib are to be found in Perrin's fiction.

Every potential Memsahib has an advisor who instructs her as to norms of conduct: Annabel for Lady Rochford (*GH*), Eve Lancaster for Teresa (*TC*) and Mrs Greaves for Rafella (*WB*). Rafella in *WB* is advised by Mrs Greaves about servants, ayahs, and running the household in India at a badminton match – one of those social spheres common to Anglo-Indian life (50–53). Perrin writes of Mrs Greaves' efforts at

imparting to her all she knew herself concerning household management in India and Anglo-Indian customs and rules. All about calling and precedence, and dusters and charcoal, and stores and prices, including the error of supposing that a memsahib need never go near her kitchen, or bother about the milk and the water, and pots and pans. (54)

Rafella acquires these and other social skills, soon metamorphosing into a fashionable lady "taught her for the most part by admiring subalterns" (54). She begins to wear her hair differently, and wore "elegant frocks" and "white linens." More significantly, "there came a gradual moderation in Mrs. Coventry's scruples, significant signs of a self-confident conceit," which included "bestowing good advice on erring young men, inviting their confidences" (56). Eve Lancaster seeks to train Teresa in the ways of station life (*TC* 206), and tries to indicate to Teresa that she should be careful in public, and there was every risk that she, Teresa, "might forget herself – forget what was due to her position as Mark's wife; for him a hundred little humiliations might ensue" (*TC* 214). Perrin suggests that the Anglo-Indian community does try to instruct its "difficult" or ignorant new brides. This socializing and its informal pedagogy was the route to womanhood for the English woman who has come out to India (Bilston 2001). Norms of domesticity, fashion, rearing children, camp life, gardening and cooking are articulated here, and with the intention of ensuring that the newcomer "fits in." As Steel and Gardiner put it in their work:

Those who have recently gone out to India generally have plenty of kindly eyes watching them, and kindly hearts only too glad of an opportunity of doing something for those who in most ways have gone beyond the reach of practical sympathy. (215)

The social sphere therefore must be seen as a colonial project where the woman is tutored in colonial ways of life. The woman is a collective social project here and the social sphere is therefore a politically significant space where the future Memsahib is moulded into efficiently handling both home and imperial responsibilities. Perrin's emphasis on this informal pedagogy of the Empire proposes that a collective duty is fulfilled by the members of the Anglo-Indian community. The advice, as we have noted, is for both domestic and public lives. This suggests that the social sphere is the domain in which Anglo-Indian domesticity finds its standards of behaviour and operation. The social sphere, in other words, is a crucial cog in the imperial machinery.

Having established the colonial social sphere's political domesticity and discursive constructions of the ideal Memsahib, I now turn to Perrin's portrait of the disorderly Memsahib, one who fails despite the instructional function of the social sphere.

Political Domesticity and Disorderly Womanhood

The Anglo-Indian wife in Perrin's fiction is no colonial Angel-in-the-House. The Victorian era had inaugurated the discourse of the angel-in-the-house where the woman would secure the domestic economy against the uncertainty of the world – a theme extensively visible in Victorian fiction. In the case of the colony this discourse persisted, as evidenced by the instructional tracts on running a good home in India, all of which emphasized the woman's role in this economy. Political domesticity is the politics of home-making and "home" in the Anglo-Indian context is what intersects with the social and vice versa.

Perrin's fiction portrays the disorderly Memsahib as the Englishwoman who fails in the domestic domain as well as in the social. Thus in the case of Lady Rochford, Mrs Fleetwood, Mrs Cardale, Teresa and Rafella the inability to secure the domestic economy – emotional stability, financial security and comfort – in the home is mirrored in their failures in the social realms as well. This failure on the domestic front and the social front suggests that all domesticity in colonial India was political domesticity because its disruption introduced debates about the functioning of women in the imperial set-up. Perrin suggests that there can be no "mere" domesticity in Anglo-India: the Memsahib had to ensure that both the domestic and the social spheres were equally well negotiated.

While other writers presented India as a potential space for the white woman's burden, Perrin's focus is on domesticity as the space where the English woman has a more-than-domestic role. Documenting the failures of the Rochfords, Tere-

sas, Cardales and others, Perrin offers us a different vision of India: a space where Englishwomen fail if they are not of the right temperament. This enables Perrin to escape addressing the question of community or inimical sociality. Thus, the failure is not attributed to the flawed discourses of domesticity and the social, pedagogy or communitarian cooperation, but to a flawed personality.

Women who do not quite make the grade in acquiring Memsahib skills are the subjects of Perrin's novels, which therefore implicitly signal the ideal Memsahib as one who is at ease in both domains. This attitude toward the English woman was engendered through instruction and advice manuals such as Steel-Gardiner's *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* and Maud Diver's *The Englishwoman in India*. Diver would write: "Circumstance is, after all, the supreme test of character, and India tests a woman's character to the utmost ... constant, personal supervision [is] the one weapon that can never fail (1909: 35). She had to hold herself up as a role model. Here is Diver's prescription for the "proper" Memsahib:

it lies with the Englishwoman in India to prove, by the simplicity and uprightness of her own way of life, that a woman, being free in all things, may yet refrain from using her liberty as a cloak of vanity and folly; that tender womanliness and self-effacement may, and do, go hand in hand with an unrestricted outlook upon the world at large. (88–89)

Such advice books firmly located the Empire's dignity in the Englishwoman's behavior and ability to move from the domestic into the social sphere.

There is no attempt in any of these novels to critique the English man's role in the slow collapse of the domestic front. In Perrin's fiction the men are simply unavailable for any kind of support. Temple Rochford in *GH* is busy with his work and his scholarly pursuits. As his wife puts it: "India first, of course; the study of old creeds and customs second; lastly *me!*" (169, emphasis in original). Cardale, in the same work, is another version of Rochford. Mark Rennard in *TC* has little patience with his stepson or the workings of his home. Coventry in *WB* and Fleetwood in *A-I* have little to do with their homes either. Clubbing and shooting, with their emphasis on male camaraderie, constitute an escape from domesticity for the men. When the Fleetwoods return to England, Mr Fleetwood misses his India days, especially the shooting and the hunt (164). Despite his straitened circumstances, he cannot give up his Club ("he must have something," 187).³ The women, on the other hand, remain domestic-centred even on return.⁴

The constant oscillation between the domestic and the social is characteristic of Perrin's portrait of the disorderly Memsahib. Several instances of the socially "unsuitable" Memsahibfigure in Perrin.

Take, as an example, Rafella. That Rafella as a new bride in India does not fit into the land or the Anglo-Indian society is first brought home to us when Perrin describes the inappropriateness of her clothes:

Deluded by the perpetual sunshine she had worn summer garments to start with, her husband's advice to the contrary; but now she sat wrapped in a cape that, though useful and warm, was unbecoming both in colour and style. (48)

This is Rafella's first entry into the social sphere of Anglo-India, and it is indicated that she does not quite fit in. Steel and Gardiner warn "we do not advocate any sloppiness in dress" (216), but that is exactly what Rafella represents. Her adaptation to the social sphere is also first signaled by the change in material cultures: her new hair styles and her clothes (55). The very idea of "unbecoming" when attached to her costume reflects more than just a concern with Rafella's taste: it is a reference to the social validation or rejection that is central to Anglo-Indian society. Her dress code appears completely out of place in the social domain.

Lady Rochford, "an engaging example of human sophistry" (*GH* 143), is a disaster in her public/social role as well, and seeks Annabel's help with "letters and the study of reports in connexion with native women's hospitals, schools, colleges, all the associations of which the Governor's wife had been elected president" (175). She thus fails as a wife and mother, as hostess, as a socialite and as the Governor's wife. She had, before Annabel, simply "muddled along" (176). Her party is marked by confusion "a seething mass of dandies and rickshaws, natives yelling abuse, buffeting, fighting in their efforts to get forward" (109). She cannot, even at social gatherings, remember the names of the people present (142).

Rafella in *WB* first sets herself up as a do-gooder memsahib: "I wish to do good," she tells Mrs Greaves (52). Slowly, she takes on a different role. Befriending, in the role of an advisor, the many bachelor subalterns around her, she "delude[s] herself and the susceptible youths" that she is "their mother-confessor and friend, their safeguard against the wicked temptations and wiles of the world" (56). Rafella's efforts here are compared to that of missionaries when she "takes on this gender-specific responsibility of rescuing and deterring men from immoral conduct, which in turn offers her a sense of purpose in the colonial context," according to one critic, and becomes "a legitimate means for her to participate in the public sphere" (Jagpal 2009: 260).⁵ However, the question remains: is it the public sphere of colonial India – characterized by administration, commerce or the military – that Rafella participates in? There is no indication that she has any interest whatsoever in the colonial machinery, the debates or her husband's work in India. It seems more useful to read the informal spaces of colonial interaction as social, somewhere between the public and the private.

Rafella's domestic problems spill over into the social realm and vice versa because she is unable to assimilate the norms of gender roles for a white wife in India. Her friendship with Kennard, which eventually leads to the break-up, is a disruption in the domestic arrangements but is mirrored in the conflicts she produces with Mrs Greaves and other Anglo-Indians in the social realm. When she dances endlessly with Kennard at the Club (93) it becomes symptomatic of the disruption in her household, even as this social event becomes the source of

disruption. When Mark Rennard dances with Eve Lancaster at a social event he realizes that his domestic life is fraught and that his true love "had slept under the drug of his passion for Teresa" (*TC* 178). Eve's "purity" and appropriateness for the Memsahib role become clear to Mark at this social event.

These disorderly Memsahibs also, of course, mismanage their domestic spheres. The domesticity theme has another twist to it. Rosemary George has proposed that the Englishwoman in the colony was expected to combine domesticity with other imperial responsibilities (115–118). Perrin shows how the Englishwoman who has little or no sense of the significance of domesticity seems to fail in the social sphere as well. The social sphere, as already noted, is a space between the public and the private. Bad domesticity, Perrin's fiction suggests, results in bad social roles as well, and vice versa.

Mrs Fleetwood visits her kitchen, like a "conscientious mem-sahib" in order to ensure "cleanliness, regularity, and order throughout her household arrangements," but is otherwise a woman who has little control over the domestic economy (55). Mrs Cardale in *GH* is described as "erratic" and unable to cope with any kind of control over her home and children. Even when Annabel works to teach Billie Cardale (the Cardale's son), "Mrs Cardale constantly undermined it with foolish indulgences" (36). "Rosie blows her nose in her frock ... Jim licks his plate ... George and Tiny run about naked after their baths... Then he [Billie] would agree reluctantly with Annabel that such behavior was unworthy of sahib-people" (*GH* 37). Lady Rochford ignores her children too: "the education of Pamela and Elizabeth was a secondary consideration compared with her own requirements" (176). Howard Klint mocks his sister Teresa for her lack of social skills: "Now, Teresa, you a hostess, and not joining the invitation – you did not learn hospitality in Calcutta – whatever else they taught you there!" (*TC* 45). Mark Rennard in *TC* discovers that his Eurasian wife, Teresa, lacks organization, ability or even interest in running an efficient household. Mark, writes Perrin, "went to endless trouble in his endeavours to help and improve his wife":

He urged her to exert herself and take more exercise. He subdued her taste in dress and persuaded her always to wear white, he liked her in it best. He tried to inspire her with an emulative spirit in the management of her household, but it was solely that he might be made more comfortable and have things as he wished that she studied cookery books, and asked questions of other ladies, and attended personally to details she had never troubled herself about previously... (127)

He warns her that "the people you meet here are not quite like the people you knew in Calcutta" (196). He would feel, he realizes, "a sense of humiliation" when he had to introduce Teresa to Koranabad society and Eve Lancaster, while Teresa herself finds it "irksome" (213).

Political domesticity marks the transformation of the Anglo-Indian woman, from just a housewife into an icon of English respectability and authority. When

the children, as in the case of *GH*, are badly dressed or ill-mannered, it is not simply a failure of the family, but symbolic of a blot on the imperial escutcheon itself, Perrin suggests. What was at stake in the “proper” behaviour of the Memsahib was the Empire’s dignity and authority itself. The Memsahib, write Steel and Gardiner, must practice “economy, prudence, efficiency,” and “try to set a good example” (1909: 5). Each of the women described above fails to practice any of these “virtues.”

The manner in which the English woman deals with the native servants, for example, becomes symptomatic of either English domination, or imperial embarrassment. Steel and Gardiner had warned:

The first duty of a mistress is, of course, to be able to give intelligible orders to her servants ... The next duty is obviously to insist on her orders being carried out ... The Indian servant is a child in everything save age, and should be treated as a child: that is to say, kindly, but with great firmness. (Steel 1909: 2–3)

Mrs Cardale in *GH* has absolutely no control over the native servants, and is overtly racial. The result is that the children are badly behaved (as already noted) and can be controlled only by Annabel. The Rochford home runs in a “machine-like order” because of Lady Rochford’s “complete indifference as to the amount spent in purchasing domestic peace” (158). Teresa in *TC* has no idea about the way her servants function. Teresa, having no cook to assist her, tries her hand at cooking, but is a complete disaster (128, 136).

Mrs Fleetwood does not regulate her expenses while in India. Her friend Mrs Bullen is worried that the amount the Fleetwoods spend on social events should be used to secure their retirement lives in England:

“Why should you give it, Emily? ... You’ll want all the money you can scrape together when you have to retire next spring.”

To which the impractical Mrs Fleetwood responds:

“It’s our last season, and I shouldn’t like to go away and say good-bye to all our friends without doing something.”

And Mrs Bullen retorts:

“But on an average you’ve given a large dinner-party every week, as well as an At Home, not to speak of luncheons and picnics and the children’s fancy ball...” (*A-I* 22)

Here, Mrs Fleetwood’s emphasis on the social role of her family ignores the strain it places upon her domestic economy – even though her friend points it out

in no uncertain terms. Rafella in *WB* assumes that her social role is innocent and cannot be open to misinterpretation: "The boys are just like brothers to me. They miss their women relations at home, and I can give them advice, and listen to their troubles, and often help them very much" (78–79). Here, again, what we see is the over-emphasis on a social role that directly affects the domestic.

The political domesticity of these novels suggest that Perrin, rather than being concerned with the interracial Other (the native), was more concerned with the intra-racial Other – the Englishwoman who could not keep a household properly English or adapt to the life in the Anglo-Indian community. When Banister warns Mark that it is less about colour than class, we see the beginnings of a different kind of Other – one from *within* the racial-national grouping. Perrin seems to make the English household at once a microcosm and an extension of the Empire, but solely the English woman's responsibility. When the English woman fails, the household fails, and as a result the imperial icon is defaced just a little bit.

Perrin locates the cause of domestic trouble in the individual English *woman's* class, upbringing, psychology and temperament rather than in the Anglo-Indian society or the colonial set-up. Indrani Sen reading Anglo-Indian romance fiction argues that the construction of the "disorderly Memsahib" marks a colonial anxiety of the bad influence of India upon the English women who step out of the domestic sphere. The disorderly Memsahib, argues Sen, was contrasted with the moral ideal of the Englishwoman in England (2002: 17). Perrin, however, presents the teleology of the disorderly Memsahib within the individual rather than the context of colonial India.⁶

Rafella in *WB*, when chastised by Mrs Greaves for her flirtatious behaviour, retorts: "India is a wicked place! ... full of gossips and scandalmongers and evil-minded people" (81). Mrs Greaves corrects this impression:

India is no worse than any other part of the globe that is inhabited by human beings. Out here we are all necessarily thrown a great deal together, and women of our class associate with men much more than is usual or possible for us to do at home. If we are sensible it does the men no manner of harm, rather the reverse. If we are fools, it may turn our heads... (81)

The onus, Mrs Greaves suggests here, is on the individual English woman to keep up the imperial grandeur by strengthening her character. Perrin, through Mrs Greaves, emphasizes the nature of the colonial set up within which English domesticity attains a certain different valence and therefore places different burdens and responsibilities upon the Memsahib – which she must fulfill. Rafella criticizes the Anglo-Indian society for its narrow-mindedness, but Mrs Greaves suggests that it is every Englishwoman's job to keep her head. This argument is underscored when in a later conversation with another Memsahib Mrs Greaves says:

She is a typical example of the kind of girl who deteriorates rapidly in India; and then people at home, who won't try to understand, think India is to

blame. She would have been the same in England, or anywhere else, if she had been pitchforked into a different kind of lifestyle. (*WB* 95)

In Rafella's case it is a matter of inducing tastes and habits "in direct opposition to the one in which she had been reared" (*WB* 55–56), thus suggesting that Rafella is *inherently* incapable of acquiring the necessary Memsahib-qualities.

The emphasis on a properly "English" civil life in Perrin's fiction is aligned with an emphasis on the English woman's responsibility in this project. The English woman herself is a project, as we have seen, groomed and instructed into "fitting into" the imperial structure. Perrin's criticism of the disorderly Memsahib is articulated through tales wherein all the "misfit" Englishwomen in them come to grief: Rafella is forced into prostitution (*WB*), Lady Rochford and Mrs Cardale die in India (*GH*), and Teresa the Eurasian is forced to abandon her Indian identity and beliefs (*TC*).⁷ The critique implicit in her portraits of Rafella, Teresa, Fleetwood, Cardale and Lady Rochford suggests that the Englishwoman must ensure that the domestic is regulated to perfection so that the social – that space open to the entire community – is also equally well regulated.

The household life of the Memsahib was charged with social import in Perrin's political domesticity. 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. Imperial households in Perrin clearly embody a political domesticity in her portraits of the disorderly Memsahib.

Notes

- 1 John Plotz has argued a case for a cultural portability in the Victorian age where English cultural practices, events and material objects were imported into the colony so that a "cordon of inattention" was drawn around the English, separating them from the native subjects and India (2007).
- 2 The Memsahib lived surrounded by servants, and had really very little to do except instruct them on various activities and errands. Isabella Fane, for example, found the large numbers of servants ludicrous and comments: "The number of servants my father keeps, who wait upon him and me, is sixty-eight, and this is reckoned a *small* number for the commander-in-chief" (1985: 101, emphasis in original).
- 3 Elizabeth Buettner notes that upon arrival back in Britain many Englishmen and women who had served in India, stood out from their surroundings, despite proclaiming that they have "returned home" (18, see also chapter Five). They sought very hard to continue their India connections with other such families – Mr Fleetwood's desperation to retain some of the Indian life is an index of this condition.
- 4 Georgina Gowans argues presciently that in colonial repatriation narratives (of the return to England after service in India), the woman is the object of return, of never having left, because she returns to domesticity in England as well, whereas the man loses his masculine public spaces of India and returns to England (2001: 256).
- 5 The presence of European prostitutes in the Indian bazaars was a source of considerable embarrassment for the English (see Ballhatchet 132–134).
- 6 In the case of Teresa, Perrin seems to suggest that it is the mixed blood that produces a poor

- Memsahib. Mark’s embarrassment grows more and more acute with each passing day, climaxing in his refusal to take her with him to camp (TC 249). This refusal becomes a public admission of the breakdown of domesticity itself.
- 7 Rafella becoming a prostitute and a concubine to a native becomes the limit-case of transgression by the British woman. Ann Laura Stoler notes that racial discourses permeated the regulation of sexualities, both colonial and that of the subject races (1996, 2002).

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