

Replicating the Empire at the Home Front: Introduction of the Guidebook for Housekeeping in India and the Politics of Representation

Adrija Guha (guhaadrija@yahoo.com), Ph. D. Research Scholar

Department of English, Visva-Bharati (a Central University), Shantiniketan, West Bengal, India



Copyright: © 2023 by the authors. Licensee [The RCSAS \(ISSN: 2583-1380\)](http://www.thercsas.com). This article is an open access article distributed under the terms and conditions of the Creative Commons Attribution Non-Commercial 4.0 International License. (<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/by-nc/4.0/>). **Crossref/DOI:** <https://doi.org/10.55454/rcsas.3.08.2023.004>

Abstract: *In the late nineteenth century, after India came directly under the rule of the Queen of England, i.e. precisely after 1858, and after the opening of the Suez Canal, the number of travellers from England increased. Most of the travellers were government officials, missionaries, social reformers and explorers. When they came, they brought their wives, sisters and daughters. In their narratives, the women writers carved a definite identity and distinct voice to tell the tales of their adventures in unknown lands, of foreign scenes and manners, of other discomforts and dangers, to claim a recognition of their 'being'. But should their accounts be read as another example of the representation of the Orient or only as narratives by women travellers? Were they innocent of their status of White women or did they also comply with the Empire's policy? This paper would try to explore these questions with special reference to Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner and their book on housekeeping in India.*

Keywords: British Raj, Colonialism, Travel Guidebooks, Housekeeping in India

Article History: Received: 20 August 2023; Accepted: 26 August 2023; Published/Available Online: 30 August 2023;

Introduction

During the period of high imperialism, that is from the mid-nineteenth to early twentieth century, many English women travel writers went to colonised countries and penned down their experiences. During a time when women lived a life full of restrictions and were forbidden from travelling, these women broke the norm and were thus looked upon as fearless. No doubt they were fearless but most of the time they travelled under compulsion as wives or daughters of officials who worked under the aegis of the company in the colonised countries and more often than not, they detested it totally but were left with no other option. They had to choose between loneliness in their own country (as their husbands would be in another country) and fear and boredom in another country (where at least they would be there with their family members but away from their known surroundings) and quite naturally, they opted for the latter option. Murray's travel guidebooks for India and a few other colonised countries were for the company officials who went to those places. The guidebooks have information on various routes to the countries, on dress, diet, health, the best season for a visit, weights and measures, and a few important Hindi words, phrases, and sentences which were important in everyday life. But hardly there is any information on how to maintain the household, manage the servants who, in most cases, do not know any other language than the vernacular, and run the house. In *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* on housekeeping during the British Raj, written by Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner, each the wife of a British civil servant in India, the writers claim to provide practical advice to "THE ENGLISH GIRLS TO WHOM FATE MAY ASSIGN THE TASK OF BEING HOUSEMOTHERS IN OUR EASTERN EMPIRE" (Steel and Gardiner, Title Page). If the company published travel guidebooks, especially for the officials who came to India, then this was a guidebook for the wives of those officials who travelled along with their male folks in an unknown land. In this paper, I would try to find out how this book offered help as a guidebook and whether is there any politics behind the information the book provides.

The Formation of *Firingheepara*

1857 is an important year in the history of India. In this year the Company rule was abolished and through the 'Queen's Proclamation' on November 1, 1858, the direct responsibility of the administration of India was assumed by the British Crown. Besides, the railway operations in India received a boost in the years following 1857. Henceforth, to strengthen British control over the country, many soldiers and officials were sent to India. Among the presidencies, Fort William, in Bengal, was emerging as the official governing base for British India. The Charter Act of 1833 converted the post of Governor-General of Bengal into

"Governor-General of India" which was further converted into the post titled "Viceroy of India" after the revolt of 1857, through the Government of India Act, of 1858. Fort William played an important role in the 1857 uprising. The immediate cause behind the revolt was the introduction of the Enfield rifle. To load the rifle, sepoys had to bite the cartridge open to release the powder. The grease used on these cartridges was rumoured to include cow and pig fat and hence irked the religious sentiments of both Hindus and Muslims. Irrespective of the warnings by some of the Company officials, in August 1856, greased cartridge production was initiated at Fort William, Calcutta, following a British design. Undoubtedly, in the next few years, Fort William became a centre for the official work of the Empire and hence, places around the Fort, at least within 1 or 2 kilometres, were developed as per the requirements of the English people. The British and the European population in Calcutta, at that time, was straddled along the eastern banks of the river Hooghly spreading northwards after the Fort William along the Strand and the Chitpur Road. It was only after 1781 after the new Fort William was built in its present location, the city began to grow due south and up to Belvedere where the Governor General stayed. Park Street, within a kilometre of Fort William, was a road of lesser importance and hence was chosen for this work. It was Lord Wellesley, Governor General of India from 1797 to 1805 who ordered the remodelling of Park Street in European style. Gradually the area of Chowringhee and Park Street became more defined and more European. So much so that the Park Street – Camac Street area came to be known as 'firingheepara' among the natives as it was mainly inhabited by the English, Scottish and other Europeans who came to Calcutta as traders and businessmen to help strengthen the British power in India. After 1857, more officials arrived and as a result, houses, offices, churches, cemeteries, and other necessary things were built.

Flora Annie Steel, Grace Gardiner and *the Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*

Born in 1847, Flora Annie Steel got married to Henry William Steel, a member of the Indian Civil Service at the age of 20 and shifted to India where she lived for the next 21-22 years, chiefly in the Punjab region. In their book, *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook*, Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner give detailed directions to European women on all aspects of household management in India. The book begins with the duties of the mistress and they state that housekeeping in India is "a far easier task in many ways than it is in England, though it none the less requires time, and, ... phenomenal patience" (Steel and Gardiner 1). In the very beginning, they make it quite clear that "it is not necessary, or in the least degree desirable, that an educated woman should waste the best years of her life in scolding and petty supervision. Life holds higher duties, and it is indubitable that friction and over-zeal is a sure sign of a bad housekeeper" (Steel and Gardiner 1). Nineteenth-century England promoted and maintained the concept of the 'angel of the house' where the Victorian lady is expected to be unselfish, graceful, gentle, simple, noble, and virtuous, whose life revolves around the house and its members, who may not have a story of her own but shines like a beacon in a dark world. On and from the eighteenth century, conduct books were published for the ladies to be more lady-like, to learn a woman's duty to her husband and home more acutely, and act accordingly. Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner were the first and foremost Victorian women, placed in an unknown country. No doubt they would be implementing their concepts of Victorian household here as well. Thus, if the Murrays provided a guide to the men, Flora Annie Steel and Grace Gardiner guided the women to maintain the Victorian household even in an unknown country. First and foremost they say that though housekeeping is easy in India, the "personal attention of the mistress is quite as much needed here as at home [England]" (Steel and Gardiner 2). The Indian servant, according to them, has some qualities which their English counterparts lack: they are "true, learns more readily, and is guiltless of the sniffiness"; but "a few days of absence or neglect on the part of the mistress, results in the servant's falling into their old habits with the inherited conservatism of dirt" (Steel and Gardiner 2). They go on to list the duties of the mistress of the house on how to handle the Indian servants: 1) she should be able "give intelligible orders to her servants" and "therefore it is necessary she should learn to speak Hindustani"; 2) she should "insist on her orders being carried out"; 3) she should make rules and exert them whenever necessary; 4) she should remember that the "Indian servant is a child in everything save age, and should be treated as a child; that is to say, kindly, but with the greatest firmness" and thus their "first faults should never go unpunished" (Steel and Gardiner 3). Regarding punishing the Indian servants, they came up with an excellent "system of rewards and punishments" which was practical and fruitful. According to them the best way to punish the Indian servants was by "engaging [the] servants at so much a month—the lowest rate at which such servant is obtainable—and so much extra as *buksheesh*, conditional on good service"; from it "small fines are levied, beginning with

one pice for forgetfulness, and running up, through degrees of culpability, to one rupee for lying. The money thus returned to imperial coffers may very well be spent on giving small rewards ; so that each servant knows that by good service he can get back his own fines” (Steel and Gardiner 3). The Indian servants were so childish that they accepted this plan gladly; so much so that there was an atmosphere of “fault-finding” in the house among the servants (Steel and Gardiner 3). Among the other duties of the mistress, she is also responsible for “the decency and health of all persons living in her service or compound” which includes the servants as well (Steel and Gardiner 4). Thus, “once or twice a week at least she should go a regular inspection round the compound, not forgetting the stables, fowl-houses” (Steel and Gardiner 4). Steel and Gardiner informed their readers that a “good mistress in India will try to set a good example to her servants in routine, method, and tidiness. Half-an-hour after breakfast should be sufficient for the whole arrangements for the day; but that half-hour should be given as punctually as possible. An untidy mistress invariably has untidy, a weak one, idle servants” (Steel and Gardiner 5). Therefore their advice was to “Never do work which an ordinarily good servant ought to be able to do. If the one you have will not or cannot do it, get another who can” (Steel and Gardiner 5-6). If the mistress shows “a little reasonable human sympathy” towards her servants then it would become very easy for her to perform her duties (Steel and Gardiner 7). Ultimately, they talk about the objective, the goal behind all these: “the end and object is not merely personal comfort, but the formation of a home—that unit of civilisation where father and children, master and servant, employer and employed, can learn their several duties” (Steel and Gardiner 7). Immediately we realise that her *home* is a micro empire that she runs just like her male counterparts run the country. Our knowledge of nineteenth-century England and the plight of middle-class White English women within the patriarchal set up make us feel bad for them. Time and again feminists have written against their conditions. In her essay, *Professions for Women*, Virginia Woolf repeatedly asked to *kill* the images of the *angel* and the *monster* to free the real woman from the patriarchal images. These women were barely conceived as *masters* like their male counterparts. In the context of colonialism, they are seen as “symbols of home and purity” but not as active participants in the company's policy (Mills 3). Even in the umpteen number of travel accounts they have written, they are looked upon as individual women, in an unknown country, battling against “the social conventions of the Victorian period” (Mills 3). Their accounts are barely read for “colonial material” and are not thought to have a connection to “larger discursive structures” (Mills 3). According to Mills, this is because of the “social conventions for conceptualising imperialism, which seem to be as much about constructing masculine British identity as constructing a national identity per se” (Mills 3). Moreover, there is a problem from our side as well: we, the readers have homogenized the group ‘White English women’ without taking into consideration that each one of these adjectives actually points out a position, an identity and each person, irrespective of his/her gender, stands at the crossroads of various identities which influence and, in turn, fashion their self. Middle-class White English women also have such multiple identities. In her seminal work *Discourses of Difference*, Sara Mills comments on how “women’s travel texts are produced and received within a context which shares similarities with the discursive construction and reception of male texts, whilst at the same time, because of the discursive frameworks which exert pressure on female writers, there may be negotiations in women’s texts which result in differences which seem to be due to gender” (Mills 6). Steel and Gardiner’s *The Complete Indian Housekeeper and Cook* is not an exception. Their consistent emphasis on ‘routine’ is a sign that proves that they had not let an unknown place make them “lethargic and sloppy” (Macmillan 171). This also ensured that “the dirt and disorder” of the country were successfully kept away from herself and her family. Besides, this was a testament to the fact that they had been successful in keeping alive Britain in a colonised country. In this twenty-first century, many people travel to other countries for jobs, education, and various other things and we have seen how the more a person goes away from his/her country the more desperate he/she becomes to retain his culture and its values. The same thing happened for these women travellers as well. In England, many educated women were voicing their protest against the concept of *the angel of the house*. At the beginning of their book, Steel and Gardiner tell their readers that “it is not necessary, or in the least degree desirable, that an educated woman should waste the best years of her life in scolding and petty supervision” but went on to describe the household duties of the mistress in great details along with the comment that “an Indian household can no more be governed peacefully, without dignity and prestige, than an Indian Empire” (Steel and Gardiner 9). Thus they tried to uphold the image of Victorian womanhood only. Moreover, the way they described how a mistress should treat her servants (who are all Indians) shows that they considered the servants their subjects and subjects should be kept under control otherwise they might revolt; thus, they came up with the whole

system of punishment to keep them under control. Thus they implemented the same system that they had been a victim of. On one hand this shows how they internalized the patriarchal system of their country and on the other hand, how they complied with the masculine British identity of that of the Coloniser. Interestingly, though they thought that keeping an eye on everything was their duty and thought the natives to be lazy, the Indian women thought them "shockingly lax, for buying their flour and their spices ready-ground" and for hiring men of low-caste to cook food for them, as the Indian women did all these work themselves (Macmillan 171). This is the basic difference of point-of-view that always existed between the coloniser and the colonised. In fact, the description of food and the numerous recipes that they had given in the book only point out the fact of how much they tried to maintain their culture. To cater to their needs only the Firingheepara was formed and maintained with such gusto. Parashuram's short story *Ratarati* has a mention of an Anglo-Moghlai hotel. About the hotel the writer writes:

“খোপে খোপে নানা লোক খাইতেছে, কেহ একলা, কেহ সদলে। দরজার পাশে একটা ডেস্কের সামনে ম্যানেজার কখনও বসিয়া কখনও দাঁড়াইয়া চারিদিকে নজর রাখিতেছে এবং মাঝে মাঝে হাঁকিতেছে-তিন নম্বরে এক প্লেট কোর্মা, ছ নম্বরে দুটো চা, চারটে কাটলেট শিগগির, পাঁচ নম্বরে আরো দুটো ডেভিল ...” [Many people are eating in different places, some alone, some in groups. At a desk by the door, the manager stands, sometimes crouching, sometimes standing, keeping an eye on the charades and sometimes yawning—one plate korma at number eight, two teas at number six and four cutlets soon, two more devils at number five ...].

The writer goes on to mention some of the innovative delicacies of the hotel like 'Murgir French malpoa' and 'Double Dimer Radhaballavi.' Published in 1963, a few years after the country gained independence, the food items and the concept of the 'Anglo-Moghlai hotel' shows how British Culinary practices influenced the Bengali culinary culture. It is said that when people move to other places, they do not move alone; they take their culture along with them and food is considered to be a very important part of a culture. It is often seen as a means of retaining one's cultural identity. Food is not just about consumption. What we consume and how we consume it, who prepares it, and how the food is prepared – all these questions are steeped into the rich cultural base. These questions help us to discover people's attitudes, practices, and rituals surrounding food, and shed light on our most basic beliefs about ourselves and others. Food is, thus, as said by Roland Barthes, multidimensional, something that shapes us, our identities, our cultures, and our society, at large. Thus, we cannot dismiss this book as consisting of some English recipes only. The fact that this book went for seven editions is proof of how these women tried to impose their food habits and their culture on the Indians and thus, this can be called an equivalent of culinary colonialism.

Conclusion

The rise and formation of the middle class, especially after the revolt of 1857, constituted the members of the new colonial government who were western educated, salaried people, working under the aegis of the Company, directly in offices, and socializing with them in clubs and restaurants. Though they were never considered at par with the English by the English, they nonetheless adapted their lifestyle, their language, their dressing, their food habits, in short, their culture. Just as the travel guidebooks, though written for the English officials initially, became popular among a section of the society, known as the *Bhadralok* class, similarly, this guidebook on housekeeping, though written for the English women who came to India, became popular among the women of the *Bhadralok* class; from tips on housekeeping to new recipes, this book provided them everything that they needed to be baptised into the elite class. Thus we can see how the colonial interaction brought a change in the culture of the colonised.

References/Works Cited

- Macmillan, Margaret. *Women of the Raj: the Mothers, Wives and Daughters of the British Empire in India*. Thames & Hudson Ltd. 1988.
- Mills, Sara. *Discourses of Difference: An Analysis of Women's Travel Writing and Colonialism*. Routledge. 1993.
- Steel, F.A. & Gardiner, G. *The Complete Indian Housekeeper & Cook*. William Heinemann. 1909.
- Ray, Utsa. *Culinary Culture in Colonial India: A Cosmopolitan Platter and the Middle-Class*. Cambridge University Press. 2015.

Author's Bio-Note

Adrija Guha is a Research Scholar at the Department of English, Visva-Bharati (a Central University), Shantiniketan 731235, West Bengal, India. She has received her M.A. degree from the University of Calcutta and M.Phil. degree from Jadavpur University. At present she is pursuing Ph.D. from Visva-Bharati. She is a bilingual writer and her articles have been published in a number of English and Bengali journals and edited volumes of eminence. Her areas of interest are Gender Studies, Translation Studies, Language Studies, Travel writings and Cultural Studies.