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Memsahibs' Writings and the Discourse of Social Reform in Late Colonial India: Frieda Hauswirth Das's *Purdah* and *A Marriage to India*

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Abstract:

This article purports to study how the writings of the *memsahibs* contributed to the emerging discourse of social reform in late colonial India. In particular, it attempts an analysis of the works of Frieda Hauswirth Das, a Swiss *memsahib* who married Sarangadhar Das and moved to India and Orissa. Her positioning as a non-British *memsahib* enabled her to view the imperial project with remarkable skepticism. She critiqued the British policies as one-sided and corrupt and approved Gandhi's massive movement for *Swaraj*. However, the article argues that like other British *memsahibs* of the time, Hauswirth too imagined the women of the colonized world as awaiting 'rescue' from certain rigid customs, thus legitimizing her role as a self-appointed rescuer. Her attempts at 'civilizing' colonial womanhood were rooted in Western feminist modernity, which evolved its own notion of the White Woman's Burden.

Keywords: *Memsahib,* Frieda Hauswirth Das, Social Reform, Indian womanhood, Imperialism.

This paper attempts to examine the discourse of social reform that gained ground in late 19th and early 20th century India with special emphasis on the writings of the *memsahibs*. In doing so, it intends to highlight the overlaps between the categories of gender, race and class in the context

of imperialism and burgeoning nationalist sentiment. In particular, it makes an interdisciplinary endeavour to contextualize the works of Frieda Hauswirth Das (1886-1974), a Swiss woman who married Sarangadhar Das (1887-1957), an eminent nationalist enthusiast and political leader from Dhenkanal, Orissa. Hauswirth's works, notably *A Marriage to India* (1931), *Purdah: The Status of Indian Women* (1932), and the articles she contributed to the *Calcutta Review* significantly shaped the discourse on Indian womanhood that became one of the visible indicators of civilizational inferiority. An ardent Indologist and activist, Hauswirth took avid interest in social reform and women's education. Frieda Hauswirth Das is a prominent name in the context of colonial Orissa for several reasons. An extraordinarily bold woman, she flouted conventions and married an Indian man, Sarangadhar Das and travelled to India and Orissa. Although she is remembered mostly for her paintings and her well-known portrait of M.K. Gandhi, her interest in social reform and women's education has been instrumental in shaping Odia modernity. Her work cannot be ignored while making conclusive statements about the construction of womanhood in 20th century Orissa. Her work paved the way for the Women's Movement in Orissa, and had immensely influenced pioneering women leaders like Sarala Devi.

Frieda Hauswirth carved out a strategic role for herself in the imperial context, where the narrative of Indian cultural backwardness, Western civilizational advancement, and the dire need to uplift Indian womanhood was unquestionably implicated in Western intervention. Like other *memsahibs* of the time, Hauswirth too imagined the women of the colonized world as awaiting 'rescue' from certain rigid customs, thus legitimizing her role as a self-appointed rescuer. Her attempts at 'civilizing' colonial womanhood were rooted in Western feminist modernity, which evolved its own notion of the White Woman's Burden.

I

A heterogeneous group of European women, the *memsahibs* accompanied their White husbands on their journey to the colonized domain chiefly to provide for the acute paucity of accomplished wives. European women started arriving in India as early as the 17th century and the term "*memsahib*" an appellation used mostly by servants and *ayahs* is an indicator of both their racial apartness and authority as wives of British officers. They had a highly problematic status within the strictly hierarchized colony. They alternated between positions of power and powerlessness simultaneously—as White women and wives of British officers, they had a privileged position within the colony, but as women they were subjugated within the patriarchal set-up of imperialism. Their attitudes towards the pressing political concerns of the day were equally ambiguous. They refrained from engaging directly with political questions, but addressed important socio-cultural concerns through their activism and writings.

The figure of the *Memsahib* in the Indian context has been the subject of a number of critically competent works. The *Memsahib*, embodying a sort of an in-between, interstitial space between the colonizer and colonized, was tactfully a part of both cultures. Works such as Sara Suleri's *The Rhetoric of English India*, Kenneth Ballhatchet's *Race, Sex and Class under the Raj: Imperial Attitudes and Policies and their Critics, 1793-1905* and Ronald Hyam's *Empire and Sexuality: The British Experience* offer novel theoretical insights on the intersections of the categories of race, class, gender and sexuality in the context of British imperialism. Indrani Sen's *Memsahib's Writings: Colonial Narratives on Indian Women* and *Women and Empire* bring to the fore hitherto understudied archival material and attempt to contextualize them. Nupur Chaudhuri and Margaret Strobel in their *Western Women and Imperialism: Complicity and Resistance* theorize the double-bind most of the White women were caught up in as they

attempted to reconcile their roles as imperialists and feminists. The *memsahibs*, most of whom were influenced by First Wave Feminists, were primarily interested in the uplift of the Indian woman. The narrative of the backwardness of Indian woman, which had already gained ground in feminist periodicals, gave them a role in the predominantly masculine project of imperialism. Their presence in India and interaction with 'natives' at close quarters (often in terms of the imbalance of power) gave them an opportunity to assert their superior cultural and social positioning by engaging actively in the propagation of reform. The late 19th and early 20th centuries witnessed the unprecedented rise of feminist awareness in England, which in turn greatly influenced the colony. The campaigners of the suffragist and suffragette movements demanded greater rights and freedom for women. This period saw the increased presence of women activists in the English public sphere, which enabled them to widen their domain of action by extending their activism to the women of the colony. They imagined the women of the colonized world as awaiting rescue from certain rigid customs and therefore eagerly stepped into the roles of self-appointed rescuers. The feminists conceived women of colour not as equals but as unfortunate sufferers in need of help from their white 'sisters'. Their strong repulsion for the practice of child marriage, widow immolation, and nautch performances is blatantly articulated in their writings. Thus, the 'Indian' woman handcuffed to the stifling domestic sphere became a recurring motif in feminist periodical literature:

> Feminist periodical literature from 1865 to 1915 featured scores of items about Indian women, many of which depicted them as the special imperial burden of the Englishwomen and, more particularly, of British feminists. Relying on the subjection of "the Indian woman" as evidence, many feminists of the period imagined… that the larger world of women was an imperialized one. The repeated invocation of Indian women as

> enslaved, degraded and in need of salvation by their British feminist 'sisters' indicates how pervasive imperial assumptions were among middle class feminists. (Burton 145)

The White woman's concern for the women of India was imbricated in the discourse of imperialism. This zeal gradually transformed itself in to a justification for the continued presence of the British in India. British feminist ideology was, therefore, shaped to a large extent by the imperial assumptions of the day. The interest of 19th century *memsahibs* in India and their consistent involvement in the debates on the condition of Indian women show how the categories of race and gender intersected with each other, often working in a tandem to perpetuate subordination. As Barbara Ramusack maintains, the *memsahibs* assumed several roles simultaneously:

> Finally, should these British women be labelled cultural missionaries, who preached the gospel of women's uplift based on models evolved in Britain; maternal imperialists, who wanted to socialize immature Indian daughters to their adult rights and responsibilities; or feminist allies, whose effectiveness depended on their own personalities and skills, the institutional and personal alliances they formed, and the state of women's movement in India when they were active? (Ramusack 120)

II

For Hauswirth, Indian womanhood and its "essence", rooted in a glorious past are as unchanging as her notion of the unchanging "essence" of the spirit of India. Her book *Purdah: The Status of Indian Woman* is an attempt at the legitimization of her unshakable faith in the greatness of the "Indian" spirit. This fundamental essentialization crucially informs Hauswirth's understanding of Indian womanhood. Hauswirth believes that real emancipation of the women of

India meant restoring them to their lost "Vedic status" (112).

> …no woman in all antiquity stood higher, or was surrounded by a richer mental and spiritual background, than the Aryan woman of ancient India. though she stands today degraded, amidst clashing influences, old and new, from East and West, the Indian woman's fate and future, while stimulated by the recent reflux of ideas and customs from the Occident, does not depend on that, but is deep-rooted, traceable, and predictable in the light of Indian history alone. More than in the case of any other people, the Indian woman's development has its roots in, is now feeling after, and will continue to express itself within, the currents of the ancient, exalted, religious and ethical conceptions of her race. (Hauswirth 12-13)

Critics like Uma Chakravarti have argued how the national imaginary constructed the chaste, upper-caste Aryan woman as a "counter to the real existence of women in the humiliating present" (39). This prototype of the enlightened woman of a Vedic temporality was conceived as a corollary to the dominant stereotype of the backward Indian woman. Hauswirth subscribes to this ideology that originates in Orientalist thought. She subscribes to the then popular Orientalist view that though great at one point in history, Indian womanhood has been subjected to a certain spiritual degradation over the years. The Muslim interregnum initiated a phase of backwardness for Indian women, who were once spiritually elevated in the Vedic past: "after the crystallization of woman's position in the home during the Moghul period, it remained practically static for hundreds of years…Woman's position seemed the final proof of the existence of an 'unchanging East'" (101). She links the emancipation of women with "social reconstruction", "nation-building", "national consciousness" and "national freedom"—where she seems to be echoing the dominant nationalist ideologies of her time. However, it is not only the earth-shaking influence

of Western modernity, but also the deep-rootedness of the spirit of womanhood in India that is responsible for their recent awakening. She perceives models of enlightened femininity like Pandita Ramabai, Sarojini Naidu and Lady Abala Bose, among others, as embodying the spiritual essence of ancient Indian womanhood. She puts them at par with Vedic prototypes like Gargi, Maitreyi and others.

While condemning the ancient practice of dedicating infant girls to temples as *Devadasis*, a subject that has received much disfavour from the British administrators, Evangelical missionaries and Indian social reformers as a euphemism for the flesh trade, Hauswirth suggests that this practice of generating income for the temple through the institution was by no means exclusive only to India. In an unprecedented attempt, she cites parallel instances from European and American churches where church affairs either depended on or supported brothels. For Hauswirth, the *Devadasi* institution is as profane or profound as the religious practices of the Europeans. She refrains from a biased, one-sided condemnation of Indian cultural practices, and does not share with other European and British commentators the moral indignation with which they criminalized native cultural traditions. Much like the infamous Katherine Mayo, Hauswirth is highly critical of the tendency to idolize women in rhetoric, which dominated the nationalist imaginary:

> Never has man dug a deeper pit for himself than did the Hindu when he worshipped Goddesses and degraded woman, when he adored the mother and slighted the wife. His own hope of release from this self-forged frustration lies in purging the poison from the holy sources of life; in respecting sex, not in the abstract, but in the concrete form of the wife…unreal mother and devi-worship must make room for real and living respect of the female mate. (111-12)

III

Historians of colonial India show how the *memsahib* becomes the self-proclaimed harbinger of change in superstition-ridden India of the early 20th century. Hauswirth's self-perception as an enlightened Western woman responsible for stirring the much-desired waves of social reform and awareness across the country, breaking all taboos and challenging orthodoxy is crucial to *A Marriage to India,* a memoir detailing her tryst with India and her frustrated attempts at getting assimilated into the conventional Indian familial set-up. During her stay in Cuttack, the Odia men in her circle depend on her for bringing about revolutionary change. Cases of early marriage of child brides, marriages to older men, marriages without consent, are all brought to her for intervention. The Western woman's exposure to liberal ideas, education and higher level of emancipation authorizes her to intervene in native customs and practices without any qualms. In an episode where she decides to help Vimala, a young child bride trapped by convention to attain independence, she claims that her Western upbringing legitimizes her role as an ardent social reformer: "If I could not stretch out my hand to help this Hindu girl who was caught in the meshes of custom and struggling to get free; if I, a free Western woman who disbelieved with her heart and mind and soul in the continuance of Purdah, was not to lift my finger, then what was I doing here? What was I in India for?" (64-65).

Hauswirth's unsparing critique of the imperialist tendency for material gain is unambiguously evident in the way she blames the British for not being able to stir India spiritually:

> At its core, the Hindu goal of life has never been material possession, but spiritual perfection. That was the reason why Buddha, swordless could sweep through India like a sea, but why on the other hand Britannia, with all the might of her physical supremacy,

> could capture India's imagination for but a fraction of one of Brahma's seconds, and could not hold it, for she had gone to India with no spiritual aim… England's principal aim in coming to India had been material gain, not the desire to sweep India, as Buddha once had done… (119-20)

She is unsparingly critical of England's attitude to Indian social evils like widow immolation or *sahamarana* and widow remarriage. She condemns the British policy of cultural non-interference as indifference and petulance. Like many nationalist thinkers with a cosmopolitan outlook, Hauswirth believes that England's imperialist domination was detestable, whereas its cultural influence was welcome. She draws a neat comparison between the still-living traces of cultural ethos in India and the technologically advanced West. Here, as in many other parts of her work, a binary is built between the mystic, spiritual East and the materialistic West. During her visit to the caves and fresco paintings of Ajanta and Ellora, she remarks that Indian culture is endowed with "strength, dignity and persistence" and that it was "vitally living". She contrasts this with the "ghastly hours", "rude jostling", "vile sensational dailies" and "utter trash" that the West had come to symbolize (202-203).

Whereas other *memsahibs* were not openly expressive of their disapproval of imperialism and its ideologies because of their positioning in the empire as wives of British officers, Frieda Hauswirth is relatively free from such inhibitions. She articulates her intolerance for the imperialist urge to economically exploit the colony. Other *memsahibs* of the time either refrained from making involved commentary on the political equations between England and India or articulated their critique of the Empire is mostly indirect terms. Hauswirth directly condemns imperialist policies and exposes its limiting tendencies. One of the things she is most intolerant about is England's lack of interest in bringing about genuine social reform in India. Its policy of

cultural non-interference prevented it from directly intervening in obsolete, retrogressive social practices such as Sati or child marriage.

IV

Commenting on the Western woman's interest in the predicament of the supposedly "backward" Indian woman, Joana Liddle and Shirin Rai argue how such representations tend to reproduce a "hierarchy of knowledge". These Western women acknowledged Western sources to support their view that change and emancipation were being directed towards the East from the West. In their prejudice, they ignore the several initiatives of Indian origin that have targeted the backwardness of Indian woman. Such reproductions involve

> …exchange of Orientalist power between the author and her source, in the process of which the Indian woman who forms the subject of the discourse becomes objectified. Within this exchange, a hierarchy of knowledge is constructed as the authors confirm and corroborate each other in the production of legitimated knowledge at the same time, as eroding the validity of the subject's perspective…(513)

Frieda, however, dismantles this hierarchy of knowledge by citing, analyzing, and critiquing the stirrings of reform from within India and also from within the communities of women. Chandra Talpade Mohanty has shown how the "production of the 'Third World Woman' as a singular monolithic subject" in Western feminist texts (333) leads to a kind of essentialization that erases the heterogeneity of the experience of the subject. The unequal power relations between Hauswirth's own country and India problematize our interpretation of her views in any straightforward manner. These power equations resist, challenge and unsettle our uncritical interpretation of Hauswirth's apparently avuncular, magnanimous interest in social reform. What

appears to have fascinated Hauswirth, a Swiss woman educated in America, was the prevalent Orientalist images of India and Hinduism that widely circulated in both Western scholarship and popular imagination.

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