The Female Colonial Gaze in the Northeast: Politics of the Picturesque

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Abstract

Colonial discourses by White women were greatly informed by the conventions of the picturesque. Women coming to the colonies in the imperial era were stuck in positions of ambiguity. Privileged on grounds of race, and yet victimized in masculinist politics of deprivation, White women, in their writings, manifested both complicit and contradictory approaches to the policies of the Raj. In their writings on the picturesque, on one hand, women made wide references to pictorial landscapes, wild scenes and exotic sounds, presenting the East as a commodity for consumption by the West, and on the other, evoked idioms of 'plunder' and 'exploitation' to flaunt reservations against the Empire's utilitarian schemes, causing destruction of virgin lands. The cult of the picturesque, as manifested in women's discourses in Northeast India, depict how women viewed these frontier regions from a distinct perspective, offering critiques on dominant power-policies of the Empire, and subverting stereotypical ideas with regard to the Other's land.

Key Words: picturesque, White women, gender, Northeast, Other.

Introduction

The significance and implications of gender in the study of discourses of power have been widely reiterated in the wake of the emergence and elaboration of the field of feminist historical sociology over the last few decades. The "false effect" of male domination in history has been pointed out with the assertion that women who did not get the opportunity to taste power were nonetheless, important "makers of history", although their views and experiences were never recounted in official narratives and discourses.[1] This has necessitated the urgency of reclaiming unexplored writings by women throughout the eras of history, in order to envision major events of history and their intricacies from a new gender perspective. In such efforts towards

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a gender reconstruction of history, postmodernist theorists have focused particular attention on the existing lacuna in the field of researches on discourses of White women during the colonial period, and on the necessity to retrieve these lost voices. White women coming to the colonies during the imperial era were stuck in positions of ambiguity. The colonial power-matrices, founded on the ideological premise that imperialism as a symbol of power and hegemony was a male domain, confined women to situations of marginality. Excluded from vital administrative structures, and yet compelled to adopt the image of an English 'memsahib', White women saw their essential individuality being lost in the interstices of colonial power-politics. When White women took to writing their narratives, they found an apt platform to challenge the gender-power dimensions of colonial representations, forged by the colonial masters to subsume the personality of the White women under that of the imperial men, and restrict them from proving their agencies in the Empire. Writing proved for the White women a medium to carve out a unique female Selfhood which was obscured under the haughtiness of masculine ideologies. Women's visions, filtered through the distinct 'female' gaze, subverted existing paradigms of imperial power policies, offering alternative perspectives on the 'Other', and debunking prevalent colonial myths with regard to the colonies and their people. All the same, writing, as a mode of articulation, remained fairly a male-dominated preserve till the nineteenth century, causing women's crucial voices and perceptions to be either effaced or elided, or registered with distorted manipulations in male-governed metanarratives.

In the wake of the emergence of gender studies in historiography, such neglected voices have begun to be reclaimed from the peripheries, in order to open up exciting and unknown terrains in colonial and gender studies. White women's writings on the picturesque, in particular, have been found to provide interesting studies in imperialism, depicting not only how women perceived the world differently from men, but also offering deeper implications for debates on such issues as women's roles in colonialism. The picturesque, in the imperial era, was a well-designed medium to shape British accounts of colonial landscapes and cultures.[2] In Victorian Britain, landscape paintings had become a fashion with the elite, and White women's attempts to fall back upon the art of the picturesque was an intended politicized move on their part to associate themselves with the privileged elite at a time in history when they themselves were a deprived group in their nation. White women coming to the colonies were highly preoccupied in a search for the sublime and the romantic. Full of anxieties about the new lands they visited, women

developed curious interest in the dresses and customs of indigenous groups, and in the pictorial landscapes of nature generated by vibrant skies and scenic lands. The exotic trees and mountains, enchanting sounds and inimitable flora – all went into the promotion of the feeling of the picturesque, which provided a benign aesthetic mode for the apprehension of the alien. Women's discourses on the picturesque were motivated more by feelings of emotion and sensitivity than by notions of materialism as advocated by William Gilpin and other early theorists of the picturesque. Gilpin, one of the greatest amateur artists of the eighteenth century, had conceived of the picturesque as a 'materialistic' mode of appropriation of the world. Through a series of "uninspiring landscape sketches" Gilpin had stressed that the picturesque essentially called for an introduction of an element of ruggedness and irregularity.[3] Following the notions and ideologies of Gilpin, a later theorist, Uvedale Price, even produced a list of items which he considered suitable for the picturesque. These included – antique cottages, broken temples, ruined castles, haunting landscapes, dilapidated huts, shaggy hovels, worn-out goats and cows, ill-clad children and beggars – anything that evoked the sense of ruggedness and defied any feel of the beautiful.[4] Such undercurrents regularly surfaced in male ethnographic accounts, reinforcing the imperial myth of the colonies as 'unfurnished' lands of heathens and barbarians, which could be sublimated and 'cultured' only with British intervention. With White women, the picturesque took a new shade, and moved more towards a romantic sensibility and a compassionate perception of the colonized land and its people. Themselves marginalized at the hands of men, women found it difficult to adopt the hegemonic imperial voice which conceived of other countries and people as 'savages' for justifying domination over them. White women's discourses manifested a rather "instinctive empathy" and defensive attitude towards the 'Other' and his virgin territories.[5] Impressions of beauty were regularly apparent in White women's depiction of the colonized landscape, demonstrating an implicit desire on the part of White women to collude with the Other as co-victims in the politics of deprivation. Colonial strategies of penetration of virgin territories were disputed upon on the grounds that these schemes were leading to rapid vanishing of beautiful landscapes. In the female colonial vision, even the rocky cliffs evoked a romantic sense of the picturesque. Such stances on the picturesque were grounded on specific ideologies of gender and feminism. All the same, gender was never the sole determinant of women's subjectivity. Women's personalities and perspectives operated along multiple axes, of which race and class were two other major determinants. Standing at the crossroads of feminist, racial and colonial

ideologies, White women frequently articulated views which were not contradictory but complicit with the policies of the Empire. Portrayal of distasteful approaches towards the natives now and then exposed how the feminine picturesque gaze was equally grounded on an implicit sense of power and hierarchy. Women's involvement with the cult of the picturesque in the colonial era, thus, never operated from a single perspective. Similarly, it was not just a passive means for disseminating or compiling information, but a mode for illuminating the larger themes of power, gender and culture that were in operation.

When British colonialism spread to the peripheral Northeast frontier regions of India, the parameters of the picturesque underwent multiple nuances. In a land where, on one side, were frightening encounters with strange, tattooed beings, scary witches and sorceresses, indestructible Naga head-hunters, uncanny cults and eerie rituals, dense forests, harsh climate and hostile routes, on the other hand, were mellow visions of pretty Manipuri girls, patronizing 'Maharajas' and 'Senaputtis' with their posh costumes and pleasing attire, charming hillsides and pastoral agricultural fields, which inspired the sense of romance and beauty. Experiences of hardships in the frontier regions provoked feelings of awe and disdain towards the 'strange' natives and their land, but the compassionate gaze of the marginalized Victorian wife developed complicit feelings towards the 'Other' world, its landscape, its cultural traits, inducing a pleasant feel of the picturesque. Ethel St. Clair Grimwood, who accompanied her husband on a political mission to Manipur, was highly charmed by the exoticism of the region and its natural sights and sounds, which seemed to be capable of offering the greatest delight to the eyes and ears, and deserved to remain steeped in their pastoral simplicities, away from the commercialized meshes of a modernized world:

> A pretty place, more beautiful than many of the show-places of the world; beautiful in its habitable parts, but more beautiful in those tracts covered with forest jungle where the foot of man seldom treads, and the stillness of which is only broken by the weird cry of the hooluck, or the scream of a night-bird hunting its prey.[6]

Preferences for the serene, un-trodden 'jungle' over beautiful 'show-places' symbolized White women's rejection of the fakeness of modernization and utilitarianism which accompanied colonialism and was responsible for the disappearing of many natural habitats of the world. Northeast India, which had come under the grips of British colonialism very late, had still much of its

pastoralism and naturalness intact. The glorification of delicately preserved rural scenery and life were attempts on the part of White women to idealize the old order of rural beauty and pastoralism vis-à-vis the new order of industrialism, mechanization and social elitism. Such contestations of colonial domination over nature also operated as sites of resistances to male domination over the feminine self. In male discourses, nature was encoded as 'feminine', to be dominated and subordinated by a 'manly' colonizing culture. Domination of the native landscape was equated with a voyeuristic consumption of the female. White women challenged such masculinist assumptions from a feminist perspective, defying the Empire's policies of exploiting virgin nature and landscape which they saw as male's devouring of the female:

> Villages buried in their own groves of bamboo and plantain-trees dotted the plain, and between each village there were tracts of rice-fields and other cultivation. The whole valley looked rich . . . [7]

Narratives of White women in Northeast India recurrently flaunted anti-utilitarian perspectives, denying the technical commercialization of agriculture which was a hallmark of the imperial project but responsible for destruction of the old peasantry. Elsewhere, the women writers went on to negate the cult of hunting which was another arch symbol of imperial expansionism, but also a weapon for destruction of many rare and exotic species. The violence of hunting was read as a violence of the male over the female:

> In two days once my husband got eighty-two ducks and thirty geese. He did great execution with an eight-bore he had, and generally knocked over half a dozen or so at a time with it . . . I never liked it when we had caught them and they used to be consigned to my husband's boat, as I could not bear to see them killed . . . it seemed butchery to shoot them.[8]

All such sentiments were reflective of women's responses to the then ongoing trends of transformation of natural landscape, and Britain's huge intrusions into the rural countryside for commercial pursuits. Ownership over the virgin lands and properties of the natives was looked upon as a pre-condition of colonial power. White women moved away from such capitalist strategies, and idealized the natural landscape and its inmates under threat by 'civilizing' forces and colonial power. In their attempts towards such idealization, White women often went to the extent of rendering the Other's

land as an abode of unparalleled beauties, the destruction of which would be a gruesome act. In Northeast India, the virgin, mountainous sceneries produced an irresistible appeal for the White women and provoked them to develop feelings of adoration for the region. To Ursula Graham Bower, the uncorrupted, nature-clad ambience of the region presented an ethereal experience:

> One behind the other the hills stretched away as far as the eye could see, in an ocean of peaks, a wilderness of steep fields and untouched forest, of clefts and gulfs and razorbacks which merged at last into a grey infinity. That landscape drew me as I had never known anything to do before, with a power transcending the body, a force not of this world at all.[9]

Similar sentiments were also experienced by Mary Mead Clark during her sojourn in the region, when every sight and sound of nature seemed to stir the mind towards romanticism, making her wonder how such beauties of nature languished in ignorance:

> On and on we went, up and down the lower hills, crossing mountain streams, through forests of stately trees with delicate creepers entwining their giant trunks, their branches gracefully festooned with vines, and orchids swaying in the breeze. For all ages past, unobserved and unappreciated, this wilderness of beauty has budded and put forth, only to delight the eyes of Him, who makes even the desert to blossom as the rose.[10]

White women's fascination with the region was also occasioned by pleasing visions of the tribal folk, whose lives, steeped in innocence, far away from the fakeness of commercial culture, moved the heart towards a longing for the same unspoiled simplicity. Often, the White women were stuck to admiration at the sight of the colourful costumes of the tribal folk, which appeared very picturesque in their eyes:

> Some of the Manipuri girls are very pretty. They have long silky black hair as a rule, and fair complexions, with jolly brown eyes. They cut their hair in front in a straight fringe all round their foreheads, while the back part hangs loose, and it gives them a pretty, childish look. They dress very picturesquely in bright-coloured striped petticoats fastened under their arms, and reaching to the ankles. Over this a small green velvet zouave jacket is worn, and when they go out they wear a very fine muslin shawl over their shoulders, and gold necklaces and bracelets by way of ornament.[11]

All the same, while on one hand, there were ample instances to induce feelings of admiration for the region, on the other hand, the extremely hostile climate and geographical conditions, supplemented by flies, pests and diseases, often disturbed the "smooth facade of the picturesque", leaving way for disdain and regret.[12] On such instances, White women adopted the hegemonic masculine gaze, sketching the colonized 'Other' and his country as apathetic to every trace of aestheticism and hygiene:

> This heavy precipitation . . . causes excessive vegetable growth and decay, and induces, as would be expected, such malaria and fever . . . we passed a comfortless night with rats and cockroaches, and in wakeful fear of snakes and centipedes.[13]

The politicized gaze was perceptible on many other occasions. Since the female gaze worked within the colonial system, it was continually influenced by its power-politics. In the imperial era, images of the 'Other' as threatening, devious and even 'fiendish' were reinforced to serve as a foil to the European Self, and help in the consolidation of the Western rationalized Self. As Indira Ghose maintained: "The philosophical self-creation of Europe was thus dependent on the constitution of the other".[14] Similarly, Jean-Paul Sartre observed: "the European has only been able to become a man through creating monsters and slaves".[15] The imperial desire to 'degrade' and control the 'Other' defined the female colonial gaze too, resulting in White women's 'constructions' of the tribal warriors and hill-men in fearful and awesome images:

> A group of hillmen scattered before us and stood on the roadside, staring . . . The sight of them was a shock . . . Bead necklaces drooped on their bare, brown chests, black kilts with three lines of cowries wrapped their hips, plaids edged with vivid colours hung on their coppery shoulders. Tall, solid, muscular . . . [16]

In the same way, White women expressed 'shock' at the eerie rituals and cults holding sway over the natives of the land. To Helen Barrett Montgomery, the practice of head-hunting appeared to amount to the extreme limits of human indecency and barbarism, leading her to term the natives of the land as "animists", who were fit only to be dominated and tamed by stronger hands:

> On the mountains and in the forests are the many tribes of primitive people, the Garos, Nagas, Mikirs, and others, savage and blood-thirsty. In the old days their fierce marauding bands made life insecure to dwellers in the plain, and the Garo and Naga head-hunters wore with pride their necklaces of cowrie shells, each shell of which represented the head of a human victim they had slain.[17]

Head-hunting, however, did not carry identical connotations for all the White women. To some, it symbolized the 'archaic' and primordial custom of the native civilization which was under threat of being swept away by the advancing culture. Ursula Graham Bower spoke of the encroaching effects of colonization on the tribal culture, where head-hunting was celebrated "unabated", "in elaborate rituals".[18] Women's stance on headhunting at such times approached close to the philosophy of Felix Padel, who contended that in the eyes of many 'civilized' people looking on the native culture, the tribal societies seemed neither "backward" nor "less fully evolved", but only a culture whose evolution had "a different emphasis".[19] To the White women, at times, even the frightening Naga warriors with their fearful war-accessories carried a picturesque appeal:

> Dressed in the gayest colored cloths, caps of bear skins and of bamboo splints decorated with feathers, quills, boar tusks, tufts, and tassels of bamboo shavings and monkey tails, their appearance is most fantastic. Spears and battle axes, brightened for the occasion and glittering in the sun, and newly decorated war shields add much to the picturesqueness of the scene.[20]

White women's writings on the picturesque were also informed by the tenets of Orientalism. Notwithstanding the fact that women were practically amateurs in the professionalized field of Orientalism, which was a highly politicized and hegemonic school of discourse, White women's narratives revealed a desire on the part of the 'memsahibs' to uncover the ancient and classical heritage of India to the West. An image of antiquity was sought for, to place India in contrast to a progressing Western civilization. In *A Corner in India*, Mary Mead Clark attempted to re-discover and illuminate the ancient architecture, archival remains and other remnants of the bygone nobilities of the region before the Western world:

> That portion devoted exclusively to the royal family, embracing an area of many acres, was enclosed by two parallel brick walls, within which were the king's palace, treasury, and guard house. Their arched roofs, outer and

> inner walls, and floors are of heavy brick masonry, noble relics of ancient days . . . A little outside the walled enclosure, located on the embankment of an excavated lake, is a fine temple of chaste, symmetrical proportions . . . Joy-hagor, *hagor* meaning ocean, really Joy's ocean . . . Surrounding this was a high wall, within which there were enacted plays, games and contests with wild beasts for the entertainment of the royal family.[21]

Elsewhere, by speaking of the region as a land where even "unicorns once roamed", Clark evoked an Orientalist image of the region as a timeless entity, primeval, surreal, and 'fantastical'.[22]

The picturesque gaze, in this manner, operated from different vantage points. Often, the simultaneous appeals of sensuality and spirituality evoked such admiration in the hearts of the women that they looked upon themselves as pilgrims to the region. Mary Mead Clark was overwhelmed by the picturesque visions unravelled by the "perpetual snow-capped peaks kissing the heavens", like the "son of Brahma", reminding of a "passage" from earth to the heavens "through the ethereal dome".[23] At other times, extreme veneration gave way to commercial considerations, and White women again appeared as agents of the Empire, gauging the lovely, pastoral fields of the region as nothing else but commodities, and potential sources of resources for exploitation:

> An alluvial plain of great fertility, about fifteen hundred miles in length, with an average breadth of fifty miles . . .[24]

Another significant hallmark of the picturesque was the 'capturing' of native sights of the East for the purpose of serving as 'trophies' in the archives of the West. Although such acts implied a 'plundering' of the essence of the East, they were an integral part of the imperial project, and White women often took pride in their roles in such projects:

> After the party had explored my room, we used to rejoin the others, and take them all out into the garden, allowing them to pick the flowers, and decorate each other, and then my husband would photograph them.[25]

White women's discourses on the picturesque, wrought with contradictions, reflect women's genuinely ambiguous and contradictory

position in the Empire. Marginalized within the male-dominated power regime, White women had developed empathetic perceptions towards the land which was also under domination. However, the obligation of 'duty' towards the Empire made them suspend all feminist ideologies in favour of colonial sentiments, and appear as mouthpieces of the Empire, proclaiming the supremacy of the imperial regime by putting the land and environs of the 'Other' in contrast to British sophistication:

> As I looked for the first time into the hard faces of these hill people . . . how little I thought that soon our commodious, pleasant bungalow, with its garden and its flowers, situated on the bank of the artificial lake at Sibsagor (Sib's or Siva's Ocean), would be left for a home in a small bamboo mat house in the mountain wilds.[26]

All the same, despite ambiguities, it remains evident that White women, in their narratives on the picturesque, left much valuable accounts on the native culture and ambience, which can serve to unfold an entire discourse on ethnography in Northeast India from a gendered perspective. White women in the colonial era resorted to writing primarily in order to contest male domination in the sphere of 'production' of knowledge. The picturesque served for the White women as a frame within which they could fit their contributions to the domain of knowledge, and question the hegemony of 'official' facts and policies. The picturesque, likewise, helped the White women overcome many sub-continental threats and colonial anxieties by amassing them within an aesthetic frame. Filtering of multiple visions and perspectives in the female discourses helped demolish the flat, one-dimensional image of the 'cold' memsahib as branded about in male discourses, and uncover the 'memsahib' in the image of a complex human being with her own exclusive visions and perspectives. What was most significant about these White women was that unlike the European officials and planters, these women came to the colonies not in a search for fame or fortune but only to bear the torch of civilization and solace in a savage land. As Marian Fowler remarked, those 'first ladies of the Raj' went to the colonies "willingly, motivated by duty and love. They went to India not to govern, but to give, looking not for power and a place in history . . . ".[27] Undergoing multiple pangs of loneliness, despair, hardships, these women carried out their existence in the frontier lands with unbeatable courage and heroism. The pastoral fields and pristine ambience of the frontier regions opened up a totally new world of uncorrupted simplicity before them from which they could never detach themselves, and this was what made

them develop an instinctive sense of affinity with the regions. In fact, so great was this association that even years after their return to England, White women reminisced fondly upon their experiences in the region, speaking of their eternal bonds with it:

> We had come home; what could be the matter? How could one explain that home was no longer home, that it was utterly foreign, that home was in the Assam hills, and that there would never be any other, and that for the rest of our lives we should be exiles? [28]

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