



### Research Article

## Beyond Tokenism and Exoticism: British Women in the Native Literature (1858-1947)

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### Abstract:

This paper primarily examines the imagery of British women in Colonized Literature from 1858 to 1947 to demonstrate that their portrayal was not limited to tokens of difference or seen solely as exotic figures. Moving beyond the memsahibs as exotic symbols and markers of difference reveals a complex, layered persona, as interpreted through five texts discussed in this article: *Nil Darpan* (1859) by Dinabandhu Mitra, *Inglonde Bango Mahila* (1885) by Krishnabhabini Devi, *A Visit to Europe* (1902) by Trailokyanath Mukerjee, *Ghare Baire* (1916) by Rabindranath Tagore, and *India Calling* (1935) by Cornelia Sorabji. By exploring themes beyond exoticism and tokenism, this article also highlights how the representation of British women in Colonized Literature is redefined, with stereotypical notions surrounding the memsahibs being continually challenged and questioned.

**Keywords** - Exoticism, Tokenism, British Women, Native Literature, Colonial Period

**Funding:** No funding was received for this research and publication.

**Conflicts of Interest:** The author declared no conflicts of interest.

**Article History:** Received: January 2, 2025. Revised: August 26, 2025. Accepted: September 20, 2025. First published: September 28, 2025.

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**Publisher:** Critical Gender Studies Network (CGSN)

**Citation:** Rudra, R. (2025). Beyond Tokenism and Exoticism: British Women in the Native Literature (1858-1947). *Critical Gender Studies Journal*. 2(1). DOI: <https://doi.org/10.21659/cgsj.v2n1.07>



## 1. Introduction:

Colonial Indian Literature, especially from 1858 onward, experienced a rise in documenting the perspectives of the colonised, particularly regarding their views of British personnel and their womenfolk. The initial perception of the British in the minds of the colonised was that of icons and exotic beings, owing to their pristine aura and distinguished personalities. However, sustained interaction, particularly with the memsahibs, was gradually reduced to symbols of difference—a marker that fostered feelings of superiority or inferiority among Indians concerning their culture, ethos, politics, and economy. The projection of exoticism and tokenism was common on both sides, reflected through literature from various perspectives. Nonetheless, this article focuses on examining the British personnel and memsahibs in colonised literature beyond the binary portrayal of them as exotic or merely symbols of differentiation, instead presenting them as complex, nuanced human figures that challenge simplistic binary notions of saviour and victim. Moreover, this study aims to debunk exoticised representations by highlighting writings that contest these portrayals by Indian authors. These questions ultimately lead to the broader issue of the reconfiguration of gender representations in colonised literature during the colonial period, resulting in the dismantling of stereotypes that persisted from that era to today.

## 2. Literature Review:

During the colonial period, literature served as a crucial platform for both the British and the native populations to record their perspectives on each other and the ongoing socio-political, cultural, and economic shifts within the country. Several works address notions of anti- and pro-exoticism and tokenism, including Pat Barr's "The Mem Sahibs: The Women of Victorian India" (1976), Margaret MacMillan's "Women of the Raj" (1988), Indrani Sen's "Women and Empire: Representations in the Writings of British India 1858-1900" (2002), JK Stanford's "Ladies Under the Sun: The Mem Sahibs' India 1790-1860" (1962), Indira Ghose's "Women Travelers in Colonial India: The Power of the Female Gaze" (1998), and others. Works by Pat Barr, Indrani Sen, and Indira Ghose depict British women or memsahibs who did not always portray themselves as superior or exotic beings confined to a bungalow. Pat Barr's "The Mem Sahibs: The Women of Victorian India" (1976), for instance, challenges stereotypes of memsahibs as rude, exotic beings secluded from society. While memsahibs often shared responsibilities for improving colonial India, their portrayal was nuanced—showing they were not always pristine, nor did they completely avoid interactions with natives. Similarly, Indrani Sen's and Indira Ghose's works portray British women eager to explore and understand India beyond stereotypes, presenting complex gender relations that challenge the idea of British women as uniformly exotic or superior. Sen's "Women and Empire" (2002) and "Gendered Transactions" (2017) highlight the interactions between memsahibs and native women, revealing vulnerabilities and close bonds that contradict the stereotype of racial or cultural superiority. Likewise, Ghose's "Memsahibs Abroad" (1998) and "Women Travelers" (1998) depict British women's desire to experience authentic India and their genuine interactions with locals, emphasizing individual perspectives over simplistic symbolism. Conversely, works such as Margaret MacMillan's "Women of the Raj" (1988) and JK Stanford's "Ladies Under the Sun" (1962) portray British women as believing India was an exotic land to be explored and tamed, often depicting their fear of alienation, though these views do not fully capture their actual

engagements. These women interacted with local natives, especially their servants and ayahs, revealing a more complex picture than the stereotypes suggest. British women travelled and engaged with the Zenanas and even gained access to the natives' inner quarters, as earlier works mention. Beyond these texts, contributions from scholars like Tapan Raychoudhury, Srimonti Sen, Sujata Chatterjee, and Sripantho focus on portraying British women from a native perspective. Notably, these scholars do not treat British women as exotic beings but present their imperfections as well. Srimonti Sen's and Sukla Chatterjee's works, "Travel to Europe: Self and Other in Bengali Travel Narratives, 1870-1910" (2005) and "Women and Literary Narratives in Colonial India: Her Myriad Gaze on the Other" (2018), include the writings of Krishnabhabini Devi, notably 'Inglonde Bangomahila,' where Krishnabhabini Devi both praises and criticises the attitudes, behaviour, and culture of British women in their natural habitat, presenting the British women as humanized, layered individuals with multiple dimensions beyond mere exoticism and difference. Sripantho's "Keyabat Meye" (1988) primarily criticises Western-educated Bengali women, but one chapter is dedicated to critiquing British women for their culture and ethos; this critique does not claim that British women were fundamentally different from natives, but instead criticizes Western culture overall. Recent works such as those by Chaiti Mitra and Ipshita Nath focus on humanizing the Memsahibs rather than portraying them as extraordinary beings or simply as representatives of the British Empire, emphasizing their voices—something Raza Rosemary also highlights in her work. Chaiti Mitra's "Boudoir to Bibighar: Memsahibs and the 1857 Mutiny Narratives" (2020) depicts British women during the Mutiny of 1857 in various lights—sometimes as symbols of honour, tools for suppressing natives, or as figures of innocence and purity. However, they are also shown as terrified of the natives and sometimes needing native assistance to survive, diminishing their exoticism and sense of superiority. These narratives generally treat them as symbols of the British Empire's honour, but the primary aim was often to suppress natives rather than to portray British women as fascinating and noble. Ipshita Nath's recent "Memsahibs: British Women in Colonial India" (2022) challenges the idea of Memsahibs as confined to bungalows enjoying luxury; instead, she offers fresh insights into their adventurous side—highlighting their interactions with native counterparts, their solo travels, or journeys with male companions like Fanny Parkes and Hon Emily Eden. While there is tension and sadness, these feelings often stem from the absence of Western modern comforts, presenting them as human rather than merely symbols of imperial politics. Similarly, Raza Rosemary's work echoes Ipshita Nath's emphasis on the authentic voices of the Memsahibs.

### **3. Viewing the British Women: An Analysis of *NilDarpan* and *Inglonde BangoMahila* in the 19th century:**

Bengal, since the beginning of the 19th century, has been a hotbed of socio-political-cultural changes. As Bengal was the capital of British rule until 1911, the natives of this area interacted with British personnel and Memsahibs more frequently. Initially, the Bengali natives found the Memsahibs fascinating, owing to their pristine aura, but as interactions increased and due to contemporary socio-political-cultural shifts, perceptions began to change — at least for a section of the Bengali population. An excellent way to document this change is through Bengali literature from that period. Texts like *NilDarpan* and the travelogue *Inglonde BangoMahila* reflect the shifting perspectives towards the Memsahibs, offering a new perspective on them.

### 3.1 Dinbandhu Mitra's *NilDarpan* (1859):

This drama is set against the backdrop of the Indigo Rebellion that occurred immediately after the 1857 Revolt. While the focus is on the oppression of indigo farmers by the planters, the portrayal of British women is quite flawed, lacking charm, despite the evident cultural differences between Bengali and British societies, owing to their distinct cultural ethos. From the outset, the flaws of the Memsahib named 'Kutir Bibi' are deliberately depicted, notably through characters like 'Aduri'. She critically examines the cultural shock experienced upon encountering British women, which diminishes the alluring aura of the Memsahibs. Her words reflect her reflection on Kutir Bibi.

*"Aduri/Bibire Ami dekhichi, Nojjao nei, Sorom o Nei..Jyalar Hakim Marchetok Shaheb, koto Nangapakri, Teronal Firti thake – ...Ai Saheber songe Ghora chepe Byarati elo"* (Dinbandhu Mitra, *NilDarpan*, Prothom Anko, Chothurtho Gorvanko, 1859, p 17.)

(Translated into English)

The dialogues spoken by Aduri indicate a decline in the shame and decency expected of a lady. At the same time, the Kutir Bibi freely walks with Magistrate Myachertok despite being another person's wife.

These lines, as mentioned earlier, discuss cultural shock; however, Memsahib is not depicted as an exotic or unusual figure. Instead, she faces criticism for her improper behaviour when she socialises with someone other than her husband.

But her other statements regarding Kutir Bibi challenge the idea that all Memsahibs were distinct from the natives and had limited interaction with them. The lines attest to one such occasion where Memsahibs freely engaged with lower caste individuals, which was significant for people like Aduri.

*"– keshar kaki ghore Bhandarir songi hese kotha koielo,tai loke koto nojja dele."* (Mitra, *NilDarpan*, 1859, p.17).

(Translated into English)

She talked with Keshar Kaki and Bhandari, who were supposedly lower caste people, so that's why other villagers started badmouthing behind her back.

In the lines mentioned above, Aduri criticises Kutir Bibi for associating with individuals from supposed lower castes like Bhandari. This also demonstrates that the British woman was not always a symbol of differentiation, and native lower caste persons did interact with the British ladies amicably without being charmed or mesmerised by her.

Like Aduri, another prominent character in the play, Khetrmoni, instead of being awed by the exoticness or fascinating behaviour of Kutir Bibi, vehemently critiques her sense and choices. Here, Kutir Bibi's dressing sense can symbolise the difference between native women and the Memsahibs, but nowhere is Kutir Bibi regarded as a fascinating lady by the native women of the village. Khetrmoni's comments on the dressing sense of the Memsahibs, when her husband lovingly assures her he will get her dressed like a Memsahib, are met with her staunch refusal.

“...Pora Kapal Bibir Poshaker Chot pore thaki Seo bhalo tobu jeno Bibir poshak porti na hoi” (Mitra, NilDarpan, Ditiyo Anko, Trittiyo Gorvanko, p. 40).

(Translated to English)

It is far better to wear clothes made out of jute rather than Bibir dresses.

This statement exceeded the expected exoticism found in this text and similar ones, as presented by Khetramani's husband, who was in awe of the dressing sense of the Bibi or the British wife of the Indigo Planter. However, as mentioned earlier, she was not entirely captivated by the dress and aura of the Memsahibs. While the dress sense of the Memsahibs is often portrayed as a symbol of difference, it also prompts us to explore the broader question of rethinking the gendered portrayal of British women, which illuminates the nuanced characterisation of Bibis, famously called by the native inhabitants of Colonial India. This layered and humanised depiction of the Memsahib becomes increasingly evident as the play unfolds, when villagers praise Mrs Wood, the wife of Mr Wood, who helped the natives by recommending native subordinate officials to better positions. Although such acts of generosity were rare, they did occur, and they reveal that Memsahibs did not always express distance from the Natives. The native officials' words echo the same warmth and kindness received from Mrs Wood.

“...Ami jokhon ardali chilam dekhayachi, Wood Saheber bibir khub doya,ekkhani chitite a garibke jailer jomadar koriya diyachen” ( Mitra, NilDarpan, Chothurto Anko, Trittiyo Gorvanko, p. 54).

(Translated to English)

When I was ardali I saw with my own eyes the kindness and empathy Wood Sahib's Bibi possessed. With one recommendation letter, she employed this poor fellow as an official of the jail.

This whole phenomenon of seeing the Memsahibs beyond the exoticism and as a token of dissimilarities reflected in the drama NilDarpan continued through the writings of the late 19th century, and one of the finest examples of it is Krishnabhabini Devi's *Inglonde BongoMahila*, where Krishnabhabini Devi viewed the British women in their natural habitat, England.

### **3.2 Viewing the Other: KrishnaBhabini Devi's *Inglonde BongoMahila* (1885)**

Contrary to the views of rural natives of Bengal, the opinions of urban elites, especially those residing in Calcutta, regarding British women, were quite different. Understanding their perspectives is vital because these elites' mental frameworks were shaped by the Colonial system of education, whether formal or informal. Numerous writings by Bengali upper-class men about the Memsahibs, both in the colony and in their homeland, England, exist. However, this article diverges from the writings of Bengali elite men and focuses on the views of Krishnabhabini Devi, a Bengali Bhadramahila, who directly observed her Colonial counterparts' actions and attitudes in their homeland. Her travelogue, '*Inglonde BongoMahila*,' marks a notable departure from the usual portrayal of British lands and their people, including women, as enchanting and fascinating. Her critical perspective is conveyed through her observations on the dressing style of British women visiting the church, which, rather than captivating her, seemed to her an exaggeration.

She believed their attire was primarily meant to charm the youth, a sentiment Krishnabhabini Devi did not favour.

“...Bishesoto aaj Striloker poshaker boro ghoti. Bridha, Jubati, Sokolei Porichhod Loiya Bhayanok Basto, ar abibhahita Juboti ra ki koriya onner opekha aijonne pranpone chesta koriteche ....Strilokera nanaprokarer porichhod poriya chaliteche, purushder bostre kono aarambor nei, sokoler kaler poshak; Amader desher onek Purusher moto akhnakar Strilokera beraite jaoar somoy Fulbabu saje” ( Krishnabhabini Devi, *Inglonde BongoMahila*, Sostho Adhyay, p.82-83).

(Translated into English)

On this particular day, ladies dress extravagantly, whether young or old, and all are very busy, especially unmarried girls competing. Unlike our menfolk, the men here wear their usual attire when going to church. Similar to our gentlemen, the ladies here dress splendidly when going out.

Krishnabhabini Das's tone and tonality towards the excessive dressing style of the women of England was not one of being awestruck and enchanted; rather, she was sarcastic about the over-the-top fashion choices of British women for a simple occasion like going to church. Interestingly, she placed the Bengali Bhadrakal and the British women on the same pedestal when comparing their fashion styles. This indicates that while describing the dressing styles and culture of the British, there was an underlying difference that was reflected, but the expressions did not suggest exoticism or portray British women as something unusual. However, as the narrative progresses, this distinction begins to fade when Mrs. Das starts comparing the horse-riding Memsahibs with the Indian goddess Chamunda. Although this comparison reveals her admiration for the long and strong ladies of England and their activities, it is noteworthy that in her travelogue, the British ladies are not depicted as embodying a difference, but rather as humans with certain activities she liked and others she did not.

“...Inglonde oirup dirghakritibishista o bolbati Strio dekhiyachi; ar tahara jokhon beshbinayas koriya ghorar upor choriya oti drutobege chole tokhon tahadigke juddodata Chamunda bolia bodh hoi..” ( Devi, *Inglonde BongoMahila*, Soptom Adhyay, p. 87).

(Translated to English)

In England, I have also seen tall and strong ladies, and when they ride horses in full force, all decked out, they look like Goddess Chamunda going to war.

The above lines serve as a dual testimony to two concerns of this article - i) The colonised people did not always view the British women as exotic and symbols of difference; with shifting socio-political and cultural dynamics, the native perspective changed. ii) These kinds of portrayals also lead to reconfiguring the gendered depiction of the Memsahibs in colonised literature.

Time and again, Mrs. Das's Travelogue highlights the decline of the ideas of exoticism and tokenism associated with British women by depicting both their positive and negative traits, thus humanising them. This is well illustrated in Mrs. Das's travelogue when she observes the Memsahibs in their habitat, England.

“...sutrang Bharatborsiyera tahader drishtanto dekhiya Engrej Strilokematrokei “Babu” mone koriya thaken.Ek समय amio somosto Engraj Strijatike alosh boliya bhabitam kintu akhane adyopanto sob dekhiya amar se bhrombisas ekebare dur hoiyache..Engraj Mohilara binoyboti o aatitheyi noi.Kono bektir sohit kotha kohibar समय ihara shistachar purbak alap korite jane na abong kono abhargoto bekti barite asile Bharatiyamahilader moto ihara nijer aahar tyag ba agrahyja koriya abhagoto bekti ke bhojon koraithe agrosor hoina”. (Devi, Inglonde Bongo Mahila Saptam Adhyay, p. 150).

(Translated to English)

That is why English women are called Babu by the colonised. There was a time when I also thought Memsahibs were quite lazy, but observing them fully here in England changed my view. Ladies here need to be more hospitable. They do not show proper decency towards guests, and when visitors arrive, like Indian women, the hosts do not rush to serve them, often forgetting their own needs.

Therefore, although there were innate differences between the cultures and behavioural patterns of the colonised and British women reflected in the travelogue ‘Inglonde Bongomahila,’ exoticism and tokenism did not feature in this account. The British ladies in their natural setting were depicted in a nuanced, human manner that contributed to reconfiguring the gendered portrayal traditionally associated with the Memsahibs, a depiction that persisted in the portrayal of the Memsahibs during the first half of the twentieth century.

#### **4. Gazing the Other: British Women in the Colonised Literature ( 1900-1947):**

By the turn of the 20th century, there had been significant changes in the socio-political-cultural dynamics of the country, and these shifting dynamics had a profound influence on the perception of the Other—particularly the British, and especially British women. These changes in perception were vividly reflected in the literature of the colonised during this period. Similar to the 19th century, 20th-century colonised literature also featured multiple texts that moved beyond the exoticism and tokenism associated with the Memsahibs. Among the most notable examples illustrating a humanised and layered portrayal of British women are ‘A Visit to Europe’ (1902) by Trailokyanath Mukerjee, \*Ghare Baire\* (1916) by Rabindranath Tagore, and Cornelia Sorabji’s \*India Calling\* (1935).

##### **4.1 The Colonised Elite Gaze: T.N. Mukerjee's A Visit to Europe:**

Much like the 19th century, the 20th century, especially up to 1947, witnessed a rise in layered and nuanced documentation about British women within the colonial context, rather than the stereotypical depiction of British women both in India and in their homeland, England, where colonised elites began visiting from the 19th century onwards. In this endeavour, one of the earliest memoirs is Trailokyanath Mukerjee’s *A Visit to Europe* (1902), which portrayed images of British women in their natural environment, moving beyond the exotic demeanour of the Memsahibs and recognising British women beyond superficial differences. From the very start of his travelogue, he highlighted the welcoming nature of British women, contrasting with the stereotypical portrayal of Memsahibs in colonial literature. His observations demonstrate that not all British women were rude or snobbish, especially in their native setting, so much so that he

explicitly compares them with Indian women and suggests that Indian women could learn from them.

“....Give us mothers like English mothers to bring up our boys, and young girls to spur impetuous youth onto noble deeds, wives to stir our manhood safely through the whirlpool of life, and elegant ladies to refine, revive, invigorate our rotten society.” ( T.N. Mukerjee, *A Visit to Europe*, Chapter II: First Impressions, p. 53).

The documentation about the British women in this travelogue aimed to reshape their portrayal in colonised literature by depicting them beyond exoticism and assigning them greater responsibility rather than merely being symbols of difference. His comments on British women as true companions emphasise that British women, too, shared the same roles and responsibilities as Indian women in their natural environment, and they were not some unusual or privileged group in their homeland.

“In England, wives take upon themselves far greater responsibility than they do here. The husband only earns money and does all the heavy work. All details are taken care of by all ...In the country, she also helps her husband in traveling instead of being an encumbrance of the most trying description as Indian Ladies are ... This is possible because Europe is inhabited by civilized people, where every man feels it is his duty to sacrifice his comfort and convenience to help a lady”. ( Mukerjee, *A Visit to Europe*, Chapter IV: Some Notes and Observations,p 157-58).

Throughout the narrative, although there is an underlying contrast highlighted by constant comparison with British women's activities and habits, British women are never portrayed as exotic. Although rarely, T.N. Mukherjee also pointed out the vices of the British women, demonstrating that they were not held to be superior or supreme to the colonized.

“...Such a habit in a man is very much deplorable, but it is shocking distressing to see women, the mother of humanity, the object of worship in Europe her who ought to be the embodiment of all that is good meek and modest rendering herself incapable in the public streets and the next day figuring in the police courts. Vice of any kind in a woman looks so unnatural that it becomes doubly painful to one not accustomed to such sights.” ( Mukerjee,*A Visit to Europe*, p.187).

Though in the prima facie, it seemed that T.N Mukherjee overly glorified the British women which seemed to be an expression of exoticism and tokenism when we dig deep into the travelogue it can be discerned that it was much more than as he critiqued the habits of the British women and highlighted in the diverse role they were engaged into similar to the Indian women than only being the token of differentiation.

#### **4.2 Beyond the Exotic: Rabindranath Thakur’s Ghare Baire**

From the early decades of the 20th century, perhaps one of the most compelling fictional texts to support our argument about Colonial women, such as the Memsahibs, is Rabindranath Thakur’s *Ghare Baire* (1916). Although the novel tells the story of the trio—Nikhilesh, Bimala, and Sandip—and how their lives interconnect within the context of the Swadeshi movement, our focus is on the portrayal of British women in a humanised manner, rather than as symbols of difference and exoticism. This approach prompts us to reconsider the broader questions of gendered

representation in Colonial India, especially from the native perspective. Although the entire novel is narrated through the monologues of Nikhilesh, Bimala, and Sandip, Bimala herself expresses Nikhilesh's views regarding Miss Gilbi, the newly appointed teacher of Bimala.

"...Ai Jonnei Tini Jokhon Gilbike Amar Songini ar Sikhok nijukto korlen tokhon Ghore Baire Joto Rosona Chilo tar somosto Ros Bish hoye uthlo tobu Amar Shamir Jedh Bojai Roilo." (Thakur, Ghare Baire, Bimalar Atmokothe, p.5).

(Translated to English)

When he appointed Miss Gilbi as my companion and teacher at that time, both inside and outside the house, all emotions changed, and relatives started behaving rudely.

The above lines highlight two contrasting perspectives: those of the relatives and Nikhilesh, Bimala's husband, regarding Miss Gilbi, the Memsahib. When all the relatives and the community, both inside and outside the household, became angered by Miss Gilbi's presence, Nikhilesh remained firm in his decision to allow her to stay. This indicates that, for Nikhilesh, Miss Gilbi was a companion and a teacher to his wife, Bimala, and he did not hold preconceived notions that Colonial women were inherently different from Native women or that they could not mix. In contrast, the relatives and surrounding community viewed Miss Gilbi as a distinctly different person. Interestingly, while the relatives' words and attitudes clearly reflected their sense of separation from Miss Gilbi, this differentiation was absent in Nikhilesh's attitude and, initially, in Bimala's as well. It was rare at the time for Native Bengali women like Bimala to be so unperturbed by the ethnicity of British women. Her statement clarifies her initial view of the Memsahibs, which starkly contrasts with that of the other relatives and challenges the common notion that Memsahibs epitomised difference.

"...Miss Gilbi jokhon Amader Antohpure Asechilo tokhon tai niye khub golmal cholechilo. Miss Gilbi Engrej ki Bangali anekdin sekotha amar o mone hoini"<sup>24</sup>. (Rabindranath Thakur, Ghare Baire, Bimalar Atmakatha, p.28).

(Translated to English)

When Miss Gilbi came to the inner chambers of the household, problems arose. But for a very long time, Miss Gilbi was English or Bengali, which didn't come to my mind.

But this was only Bimala's initial perspective, because as time went on, the underlying difference between Miss Gilbi and herself, rooted in ethnic distinctions, surfaced, causing her perceptions to shift. Here, Nikhilesh's views on Miss Gilbi are particularly interesting. His comments below suggest that colonised Bengalis had, at least in part, moved beyond the idea that British women were exotic and merely symbols of difference, and instead fostered a shared sense of humanity towards them, thus transforming the image of British women in colonies like India.

"...Tini Ratre ese bollen,dekho, Miss Gilbi ke kebolmatro Engrej bole jhapsa kore dekhte ami pari ne . Atodiner porichoye ki oi namer berate ghuchbena ?O je tomai bhalobase". (Thakur, Ghare Baire, Bimalar Atmokothe, p.28).

(Translated to English)

He said that at night, just because Miss Gilbi is British, we can't view her from a dubious and ambiguous viewpoint. Can't the barrier of the name be diminished due to long-term acquaintance? She is very fond of you.

These lines not only reveal the shared humanity nurtured by Nikhilesh but also challenge the idea that all British women had a superiority complex and despised the natives, and vice versa. As the story develops, we see that Nikhilesh's perspective is different because, for him, Miss Gilbi was first a lady and then a member of his household, and her ethnicity was not the reason he stood up against his relative Naren when he disturbed Miss Gilbi on her way to church.

"...Ekdin Girjei jaoar jabar somoy pother modhye amaderi ekjon dur somporker attiyochhele take dhil chure mere opoman korle. Amar Shami atodin sei cheleke palan korchilen-tini take tariye dilen". (Thakur, Ghare Baire, Bimalar Atmokotha, p.28).

(Translated to English)

One day, while going to church, a distant relative of Nikhilesh threw stones at Miss Gilbi and harassed him. Her husband Nikhilesh was taking care of the relative, but now he evicted his relative Naren because of his deed.

These statements also shed light on the shared humanity and empathy Nikhilesh nurtured towards the British woman Miss Gilbi, which was a source of resentment and anger for many, including Bimala, his wife. Her statement, however, reveals the inherent differences and the binary between the colonisers and the colonised. Her comments on the British women did not highlight the exoticism associated with the Memsahibs; instead, she was very critical of them and praised Naren for his act of displaying arrogance towards a British lady.

"...Amar Shami Nijer Garite kore Miss Gilbi ke station e niye giye garite tule diye elen. Seta amar boro barabari bodh holo....Miss Gilbir prati Naren ki onnay koreche na koreche se ami Janine kintu aajker dine ta niye sdichar korte paratai lojjar kotha .Je bhaber theke Naren Engrej Meyer prati oudhotto korte pereche ami take kichutei domiye dite chaine." (Thakur, *Ghare Baire*, p. 29-30).

(Translated to English)

My husband accompanied Miss Gilbi to the station and made every arrangement for her return, but I felt that my husband's involvement in the whole scenario was excessive. I don't know the magnitude of Naren's mistake towards Miss Gilbi, but debating this in the current situation is shameful. The way Naren showed arrogance and superiority towards the English lady, I don't want to subdue or suppress him.

These lines of Bimala, Nikhilesh's wife, exhibit a strong critical attitude towards the British woman Miss Gilbi, as she is even unaware of the gravity of Naren's mistake against Miss Gilbi, simply because of her ethnicity. This also indicates that British women were regarded as symbols of difference by individuals like Bimala, yet her expressions showed no trace of exoticism in her voice. Her dislike for Miss Gilbi was not rooted in exoticism but in her growing awareness of the Nationalist movement. Therefore, Miss Gilbi might represent a symbol of difference for Bimala. Nevertheless, her views extended beyond exoticism, as she never found Miss Gilbi to be unusual, fascinating, or deserving of awe. Similar to Bimala's perspective and in stark contrast to Nikhilesh's

was Sandip's view of British women. Sandip, a devout supporter of Swadeshi and early Nationalist movements, despised the very existence of the Memsahibs; he was far from fascinated or enchanted by them. His outlook on the Memsahibs was highly critical and deeply rooted in recognising differences.

"...Ar amader hostel er kache je firingi meye chilo je amar upore rag korle;ek-ekdin mone hoto se amake rege jeno chire fele debe". (Thakur, *Ghare Baire*, Sandiper Atmakatha ,p. 95).

(Translated to English)

A Firangi Lady who stayed near our hostel was so angry with me once that I sometimes felt she might destroy me in anger.

Therefore, such lines by Sandip and the novel *Ghare Baire* by Rabindranath Thakur collectively clarify two viewpoints: i) notions of exoticism and tokenism associated with the Memsahibs varied from person to person, and ii) the reshaping of the portrayal of Colonial Women in colonised literature, which extended well beyond the stereotypical depiction of British women - it was much more humanised, layered, nuanced, and continuously overlapped the thin line of exoticism and tokenism, and went beyond that. The second viewpoint is more clearly depicted in our last text.

## 5. Interpreting the British Women in mid-20th-century Colonized Literature

In the mid-20th century, amidst a variety of texts, two works concerning the Memsahibs in Colonised Literature were published: Cornelia Sorabji's *India Calling* and *The British*. Published in 1935, both texts depict the British, particularly the British women, beyond exoticism and tokenism, thereby redefining the gendered portrayal of the Memsahibs in colonised literature.

### 5.1 Cornelia Sorabji's *India Calling* (1935)

Published in 1935, Cornelia Sorabji's memoir *India Calling* is one of the finest texts that transcends exoticism and tokenism, portraying British women as humanised and nuanced individuals. Born into an Anglo-Indian family, Sorabji received her higher education in England, which enabled her to observe the Memsahibs in their natural environment. At the very beginning of her memoirs, she states that she had two homes—India and England—implying that despite being an Anglo-Indian woman, she had enriching experiences in England, which she recalls while describing her time there. What is intriguing is that her narrative contains no hint of fascination or enchantment with British women, and she does not regard them as superior.

"...friends in England and Somerville College, Oxford (Lord and Lady Hobhouse and Miss Madeleine Shaw Lefevre being the ringleaders in this conspiracy of kindness), had offered me a "substituted scholarship" which, with what we could add to it, made the English adventure immediately possible". (Cornelia Sorabji, *India Calling*, p. 21-22).

This demonstrates that not all British ladies and gentlemen harboured resentment towards the Anglo-Indians, and they fostered a shared sense of sympathy and empathy towards them, although such sentiments were uncommon. It also offers a different portrayal of British ladies within their setting. Another significant aspect highlighted in her memoirs is the pragmatic

contribution of British women, particularly in the field of education in England, which extended well beyond merely presenting themselves as symbols of colonial superiority. Her remark regarding her warden, and a woman named A.M. Bruce, is worth mentioning because it illustrates the crucial role British women played in shaping the educational paths of individuals from colonies like India, at least in some cases.

"...nor can I forget the kindness of everyone, from the Somerville student - A. M. Bruce- who "adopted" me as her special Fresher, and taught me the ropes, to the Heads of Houses themselves....he Warden took me in her arms and said, "My child, this is a great honour." And in my ignorance, I wondered if that were a traditional Oxford custom when aged cherubs with white hair were polite to foreigners. I was not long in realizing what she meant by". (Sorabji, p. 21-22).

Here, Cornelia acknowledged her lack of understanding about these women and the misconceptions she harboured. Her frequent emphasis on the contribution of British women to education highlights a shared commitment between Indians and their British counterparts, where women across various sections dedicated themselves to the benefit of family and society, much like the British women. She often spoke of the hospitality she experienced in England, which offered glimpses into the mutual humanity fostered by British women towards Anglo-Indian ladies, even though, in rare cases, it subtly presented the British women as human—rather than placing them within exotic or tokenistic portrayals.

"..Julia Peel was acting hostess for her father at the time. I had met her and her brothers at Oxford, and she was wonderfully kind to me: would apprise me of exceptional debate". (Sorabji, *India Calling*, p.36).

Although Miss Sorabji's interaction was limited to the upper class of British society, the central concern here is the shared empathy that British women felt for someone coming from India who was not entirely British. However, the most intriguing aspect of this text, when considering British women beyond exoticism and tokenism, is reflecting on the marital conditions of both British and Indian women, where she found no significant differences.

"...Till the English Married Women's Property Act, indeed, Hindu women might be said to have had greater rights than English married women. Incidentally, the difficulty was, and still is, in getting into touch with those rights." ( Sorabji, *India Calling*,p 85).

Throughout her professional career, she consistently emphasised the shared empathy between British and Indian women, thereby placing them on equal footing. Moreover, through her memoirs, she also highlights the vital contributions made by British women both within the colony and in their native environment, such as the initiatives of Annie Flora Steel and the efforts of British women in the Rukhmabai Case, which expanded their scope beyond mere fascination or expressions of superiority and differences. The memoir\* *India Calling*\* thus serves as a testament of a converted Christian woman who regarded the Colonial mistress as an equal, demonstrating that the role played by British women was far more than projecting an image of purity and difference. They undertook meaningful and purposeful activities both in the Colony and at home, often overlooked and underestimated, which can lead to perceptions of them as indifferent, rude, and snobbish- reducing their complex personality to a single facet within the Colonial context.

## 6. Conclusion

From the above interpretation of the texts, limiting the imagery of British women as exotic personalities and expressions of differences is their one-dimensional portrayal in Colonial historiography. However, the colonised literature offers a different perspective because the texts in this article demonstrate that the Memsahibs were represented in a layered and nuanced manner, despite embedded differences. Additionally, the works discussed in this article also illustrate the reconfiguration of the typical portrayal of British women during the Colonial period by highlighting their shared humanity and empathy, which are often overlooked and underestimated. Therefore, the interpretation of the texts in this article reveals a multidimensional portrayal of British women, where it was difficult to identify overt tokenism, as the layered and nuanced imagery of Memsahibs often overshadowed the exotic stereotypes and presented them as human beings.

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